

COUNTING THE INVISIBLE GIRLS' RIGHTS & REALITIES

Technical Report – Nicaragua

CONTENTS

Acronyms	3
Glossary	4
Acknowledgement	4
Section 1: Introduction and rationale	8
1.1 Introduction	8
1.2 Background and rationale	8
1.3 Research objectives	9
1.4 Methodology	11
1.4.1 Research sample	12
1.4.2 Characteristics and identities of girls	12
1.4.3 Field data collection	14
1.4.4 Quantitative survey questions	15
1.4.5 Qualitative survey questions	15
1.4.6 Creative and reflective workshops	16
1.4.7 Research task team	16
1.4.8 Data collection and analysis	17
1.5 Ethics	18
1.5.1 Child protection	18
1.5.2 Anonymity and confidentiality	18
1.5.3 Informed consent	18
1.6 Layout of the report	18
Section 2: Girls' aspirations – life goals, barriers and ways to overcome them	20
2.1 Opportunities to get on in life and girls' aspirations	20
2.2 Barriers girls face when trying to realise their life goals	23
2.3 Overcoming barriers to achieving life goals	26
Section 3: The surrounding environment of girls – local culture and gender norms	29
3.1 Miskito culture: cultural norms and traditions	29
3.2 Gender roles and responsibilities in the household: Care and domestic work in the household	32
3.2.1 Time spent on chores and care	33
3.2.2 Attitudes towards gender roles and responsibilities in the household	34
Sections 4–7: Greatest overall challenges that girls face: education, early pregnancy, early marriage and unions, and violence	39
Section 4: Perceptions and experience of education	40

4.2 Attitudes and value of education	41
Section 5: Perceptions and experiences of early pregnancy	44
5.1 Drivers of early pregnancy in Nicaragua	44
5.2 Sharing information and discussions on sex education in the home	46
5.3 Information on sexual and reproductive health and access to health centres	48
5.5 Impacts of early pregnancy on the lives of adolescent girls	50
5.6 Perceptions of boys regarding gender, inequality and drivers for early pregnancy	52
Section 6: Perceptions and experiences of early marriage and early unions	53
6.1 Reasons for early marriage	53
6.2 Perceptions and experiences of decision-making in the household once married	55
6.3 Reflections from married girls and girls living with a partner	55
6.4 Indigenous culture and early marriage	56
6.5 How early marriages and early unions impact girls' lives	57
Section 7: Perceptions and experiences of violence and safety	59
7.4 Perceptions on reporting violence	64
7.5 Perceptions on addressing violence against women and girls	66
Section 8: Summary and analysis of findings	69
8.1 Individual aspirations and opportunities to advance in life	69
8.2 The importance of the family as an enabling environment	69
8.3 The importance of the community as an enabling environment	70
8.4 Women community leaders as role models	70
8.5 Gender norms	70
8.6 Education and pathways to empowerment	71
8.7 Early pregnancy	72
8.8 Early marriage and early unions	73
8.9 Experience and perceptions of violence	73
8.10 The value of exploring intersectionality and intersecting vulnerabilities	74
8.11 What adolescent boys think of violence against women and girls – who is responsible?	75
Section 9: Girls' own perceptions on how to bring about positive change	76
Section 10: Conclusion	80
Section 11: Recommendations	82
Annex	84

ACRONYMS

NEET	A young person who is “not in education, employment or training”
------	------------------------------------------------------------------

RAs	Research advisers
-----	-------------------

RTT	Research task team
-----	--------------------

SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
------	-------------------------------

SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
------	-------------------------------------------

GLOSSARY

Adolescent girl – A girl in the transitional phase between childhood and legally defined adulthood (13 to 18 years of age). The legal definition of an adult varies from country to country but is usually between 17 and 21 years. For the purposes of this report, reference to adolescent girls includes the age range 15 to 19 year olds included in this research sample.

Agency – The ability to make meaningful choices and act upon them.

Basic services – Services delivered by the government, including water, sanitation, electricity, housing and health services.

Civil society – Citizens or groups participating outside formal government institutions. This can be non-governmental organisations (NGOs), organisations in local and community life, union organisations, and business associations.

Condition and position – Condition refers to our material state and daily life. This usually includes access to basic resources such as shelter, food and protection. Position refers to our social status and to the value that society places on us. This includes our ability to control resources and to make the decisions that affect our lives.

Decision-making – The capacity of a person to participate in the process of making decisions that affect their lives.

Empowerment – Power is the ability to shape one's life and one's environment. The lack of power is one of the main barriers that prevent girls and women from realising their rights and escaping cycles of poverty. This can be overcome by a strategy of empowerment. Gender-based empowerment involves building girls' assets (social, economic, political and personal), strengthening girls' ability to make choices about their future, and developing girls' sense of self-worth and their belief in their own ability to control their lives.

Exclusion – Defined as the process through which individuals or groups are partially or fully excluded from the rights, opportunities and resources that are available to others in the society they live in. The term exclusion is used as an umbrella term that covers related terms of marginalisation, at risk of exclusion, discrimination, inequity and others.

Exclusion and discrimination – Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of people on the grounds of their identity. People's identity is shaped by their social surroundings, the multiple facets of exclusion and the vulnerability they experience.

Exclusion and vulnerability – Exclusion can increase a person's vulnerability by reducing her/his ability to overcome shock and adversity. Vulnerability, in turn, can create and reinforce exclusion. Both diminish life opportunities and can result in poverty.

Gender discrimination – Whereby people are treated differently simply because they are male or female, rather than on the basis of their individual skills or capabilities.

Inclusion – A sense of belonging, the feeling as though one is welcomed in an area without feeling threatened or uncomfortable.

Intersectionality and experiences of exclusion – Unpacking intersecting identities is key to understanding discrimination and exclusion. While it can be useful to understand the specific issues that are caused by gender inequality or by each form of exclusion, people do not fall neatly into social groups. Each individual can self-identify with, or be identified by others as, a range of social categories that overlap and intersect such as ethnicity, class and gender. For

example, an indigenous adolescent girl with a visual impairment may simultaneously be dealing with issues of discrimination on account of her age, ethnicity and disability.

Machismo – In Nicaragua, the word “machismo” is used to describe a socio-cultural model of masculinity that, passed on from generation to generation, dictates the attitudes, values and behaviour that men should adopt to be considered men and to feel that they are men. It encompasses not only the way that men relate to women but also to other men and to children in both the domestic and public spheres of life.

Marginalisation – Refers to a process that situates rights holders in a state between “exclusion” and “inclusion”. For example, the marginalised may be those who have partial access to a service or facility, but are unable to make full use of it; or who may be able to speak at a meeting and express an opinion but are unlikely to be listened to or to influence any decisions. However Plan International uses the term exclusion as an umbrella term that covers related terms of marginalisation, at risk of exclusion, discrimination, inequity and others.

Masculinities – Conveys that there are many socially constructed definitions for being a man and that these can change over time and from place to place. The term relates to perceived notions and ideals about how men should or are expected to behave in a given setting.

Partnership/alliances – The coming together of different people, groups and institutions for cooperation, coordination, resource exchange, and the joint solving of problems. They bring together institutional capabilities and human resources in the form of skills, experiences and ideas to tackle common problems that are often beyond the capacity of a single organisation or group.

Public space – Spaces that are open for public use. This includes streets, recreation areas, parks, community squares, etc.

Principal duty bearers – Governments and institutions, responsible for changing laws, policies and services.

Safety – Freedom from the occurrence or risk of injury, danger, or loss.

Social environment – Community use of the space, joint social practices in the area, different groups of people using the space.

Social norms – Informal rules, gender role divisions and the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that regulate behaviour in society, prescribe what behaviour is expected and what is not allowed in specific circumstances, influence beliefs of what to expect of girls’ behaviours, for example.

Sexual assault – Any form of sexual contact (up to and including rape) between two or more people without voluntary consent. Consent obtained through pressure, coercion, force or threats of force is not voluntary consent.

Sexual harassment – Unwelcome sexually determined behaviour, both physical and non-physical, whether by words or actions. Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem. Some examples of physical contact include sexual demand by action, such as touching a person’s clothing, hair or body, hugging, kissing, groping, pushing or pulling, patting or stroking, standing close or brushing up against a person. Some examples of non-physical sexual harassment include sexual demand by words, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, staring (“eve teasing”), “cat calling”, following, chasing, stalking and exposing oneself.

Social groups – Two or more people who interact with each other, share similar characteristics and have a sense of unity. Social groups can come in multiple forms and sizes; individuals can belong to multiple social groups at the same time. Belonging to specific social groups often determines the level of exclusion and inequality that individuals experience.

Violence – The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”.

Violence against women and girls – Any act of gender-based violence, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

This glossary is meant to serve as a guide for reading the report, however please note that the definitions presented are dynamic and subject to change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report was made possible with the advice and contributions of many people. Special thanks are due to the 119 adolescent girls and 20 adolescent boys who took part in the research study in Nicaragua. This study could not have been possible without your involvement.

Thank you to Matthew Carlson (Country Director) and to all the staff at the Plan Nicaragua country office and the staff of the programme units for their in-depth commitment and support in this research project.

Research lead and research design: Jean Casey

Research task team from Nicaragua: Pedro Sanchez, Johana Chevez, Argentina Espinoza, Marisela Kitler, Maribel Flores, Carlos Blanco and Ixel Urtecho.

Research assistants from Nicaragua: Katerin del Carmen Silva Solís, María del Rosario Delgadillo Soza, Marianela de los Ángeles Pulido Loaisiga, Ana Geyling, Kenia Peters, Yoskara Leman, Selmira English, Dina Arthurs and Cora Migdalia Pasquier

Principal authors: Jean Casey and Linda Campbell

Editors: Stephen Mostad and Anna Brown

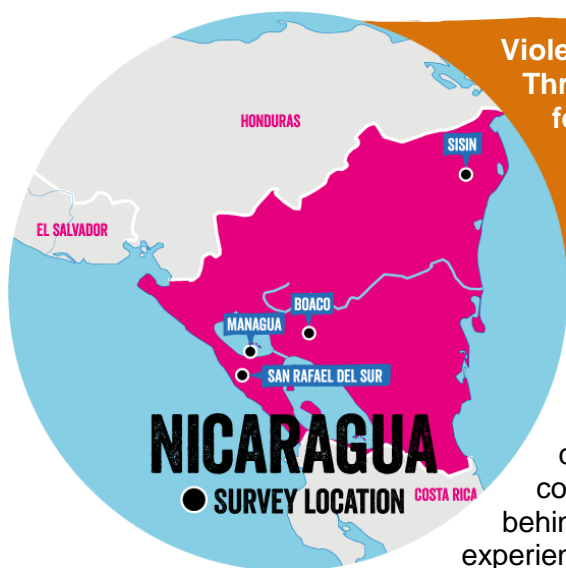
Research advisers: Jacqui Gallinetti, Mary Lagaay and Terry Roopnaraine

Data analysis: Linda Campbell and Jean Casey

Design support: Danny Plunkett and Sandra Dudley.

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE



Violence against women and girls is widespread in Nicaragua. Throughout this research, girls reported that they did not feel safe in their homes, in their relationships and on the streets. Early pregnancy was directly associated with various manifestations of violence, negatively impacting girls' opportunities and wellbeing and restricting their progress in life.

This research seeks to examine how intersecting vulnerabilities shape and determine the opportunities available to adolescent girls and how this, in turn, influences whether they can or cannot realise their rights. Within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which commit to focusing on the poorest, most vulnerable and furthest behind, the research aims to uncover the perceptions and experiences of a group of people at risk of being left behind unless their unique voices can be heard.

1.1 Introduction

In 2016, in an effort to further the global understanding of adolescent girls' rights, Plan International commissioned and undertook a three-country study (in Nicaragua, Zimbabwe and Pakistan) on a set of themes related to the SDGs.

These themes, which can offer insight into advancing the rights of adolescent girls, included: girls' enabling environment, care and domestic work in the home, education quality and value, early pregnancy, early marriage, violence against girls, safety in public places, social relations, and interpersonal communications.

The aim of this research is to understand not only the day-to-day reality for the girls interviewed, but also to gain insight into their thoughts on how things *should* be. Asked whether they thought they *should* have more opportunities to get on in life and achieve their life goals, the girls interviewed in all three countries overwhelmingly answered: "yes".

This technical research report presents the analysis and findings from Nicaragua, the first country where data collection was conducted. Subsequent reports will present the analyses and findings from Zimbabwe and Pakistan.

1.2 Background and rationale

From 2007 to 2015, Plan International published a yearly flagship report called *The State of the World's Girls* (SOTWG). These reports explored the experiences of adolescent girls by looking at varying yearly themes, including education, disasters, the economy, and girls' position and condition in society.

The rationale behind these reports was that little data was available on the experiences of adolescent girls. Their experiences were instead commonly collapsed into those of women,

which resulted in their voices being unheard and their life experiences being out of sight. Because of this, in the era of the Millennium Development Goals¹ it was often difficult to understand how adolescent girls were faring across the goals and which girls were being left behind in the effort to reach the goals.

The SOTWG reports – as well as other research commissioned by Plan International such as *Hear Our Voices*,² *Adolescent Girls' Views on Safe Cities*,³ and *Girls Speak Out*⁴ – shone a spotlight on the experiences of adolescent girls. The reports and research aimed to bring new evidence to the fore to influence national and international policies as well as local and global development programmes. They also aimed to raise awareness more broadly on the urgent need for disaggregation of data, not only on the basis of sex but also age, including a focus on adolescence as a distinct phase in a girl's life.

The final SOTWG report in 2015, *Girls' Rights: An unfinished business*,⁵ paved the way for a new series of reporting on girls' rights in the SDG era. Plan International's 2016 report, *Counting the Invisible: Using data to transform the lives of girls and women by 2030*,⁶ explores the current state of global gender data, identifying some critical approaches to data collection that will be needed in order to reach the SDGs by 2030.

To contribute to the development of meaningful approaches to collecting data about adolescent girls, primary research for *Counting the Invisible* was commissioned to show how rich qualitative research can reveal valuable insights that complement quantitative data. Key research findings from this research were published in *Counting the Invisible*, in October 2016. Technical research reports were also developed for each of the three countries where the research was conducted: Nicaragua, Zimbabwe and Pakistan.⁷

This report presents the full technical research findings from Nicaragua.

1.3 Research objectives

In 2015, Plan International published *Girls Speak Out*, a primary research report focusing on the perceptions and experiences of girls regarding rights issues such as safety in school and public places, decisions and control over their own lives and bodies, and gender-based violence. A total of 4,218 interviews were conducted with girls aged 15 to 19 across Ecuador (1,000), Nicaragua (1,000), Pakistan (1,018) and Zimbabwe (1,200).

Girls Speak Out provided evidence on a large scale regarding the perceptions and attitudes of girls relative to core rights-based issues. In particular, the research showcased how adolescent girls are not a homogenous population. In fact, their daily realities are shaped by a set of intersecting vulnerabilities, including the economic wellbeing of the household in which they live, their marital status, and their parental status.

¹ United Nations Millennium Development Goals (www.un.org/millenniumgoals)

² Plan International (2014). *Hear Our Voices: Do adolescent girls' issues really matter?* Woking, UK: Plan International

³ Travers, K., Ranganath, M. and Livesey, A. (2013). *Adolescent Girls' Views on Safety in Cities: Findings from the Because I am a Girl: Urban Programme study in Cairo, Delhi, Hanoi, Kampala and Lima*. Women in Cities International (WICI), Plan International, and UN-HABITAT

⁴ Plan International (2015). *'Girls Speak Out': A four-country survey of young women's attitudes and recommendations for action*. Woking, UK: Plan International and Ipsos MORI

⁵ Plan International (2015). *The State of the World's Girls 2015: The unfinished business of girls' rights*. Woking, UK: Plan International

⁶ Plan International (2016). *Counting the Invisible: Using data to transform the lives of girls and women by 2030*. Woking, UK: Plan International

⁷ Technical research reports for Zimbabwe available at: planinternational.org/publication/girls-rights-and-realities-zimbabwe, and Pakistan, available at planinternational.org/publication/girls-rights-and-realities-pakistan

Their identities are further defined by factors such as ethnicity, class, race and sexuality. Therefore, it is important to understand their experiences from a perspective of intersectionality, allowing the distinct and specific experiences of a diverse range of girls to be voiced.

The findings of the research in *Girls Speak Out* set the scene for a more in-depth exploration of the diverse experiences and distinct lived realities of adolescent girls, and led to a further set of questions. Of particular interest, for example, was an examination of how intersecting vulnerabilities shape and determine the opportunities available to adolescent girls and how this, in turn, influences whether they can or cannot realise their rights.

This is particularly relevant in the era of the SDGs, which promise to “leave no one behind”. Such research can help uncover the perceptions and experiences of adolescent girls who are marginalised or excluded and, therefore, most vulnerable to being left behind because they are not as visible in their communities, or because they are difficult to access due to social and gender norms that restrict their movement and visibility.

The conceptualisation of Plan International’s 2016 report, *Counting the Invisible: Using data to transform the lives of girls and women by 2030*, offered a timely opportunity for the organisation to explore how qualitative research can reveal valuable insights that complement quantitative data. The purpose of this research was, therefore, to produce meaningful qualitative and quantitative research that captures the experiences and perceptions of adolescent girls on a set of themes aligned to the SDGs, from a perspective of intersectionality.

To support the development of this research, Plan International commissioned a consultant to review SDG targets and indicators and determine available data to track the progress of adolescent girls as well as identify where data gaps exist. Recommendations from that review informed the development of this research through outlining goals, targets and indicators key to advancing the progress of adolescent girls to meet the SDGs.

The overarching research objective was to contribute to an understanding of the diverse perceptions and experiences of adolescent girls related to specific rights-based themes, aligned with SDG goals and targets. The aim was to generate evidence on the following:

- **Dimensions of girls’ empowerment and an enabling environment:** exploring experiences, perceptions and social norms. This theme is related to SDG 5: ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’.⁸ The analysis will contribute to knowledge of how this goal relates specifically to adolescent girls. The findings are especially pertinent to target 5.5.⁹
- **Social and gender norms:** exploring positive and discriminatory social norms and care and domestic work in the home. This theme is also related to SDG 5, contributing to knowledge on targets 5.3, 5.4 and indicator 5.4.1.¹⁰
- **Quality and value of education, including access and completion of education:** exploring experiences, perceptions and social norms. This theme is related to SDG 4: ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote

⁸ United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>).

⁹ Target 5.5: Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.

¹⁰ Target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations; SDG Target 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate; Indicator 5.4.1: Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location.

lifelong learning opportunities for all'.¹¹ The analysis will contribute to knowledge on targets 4.1, 4.3, 4.5, indicator 4.5.1 and indicator 5.6.2.¹²

- **Early pregnancy:** exploring experiences, perceptions and social norms. This theme is related to SDG 3: 'Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages',¹³ contributing to knowledge on target 3.7 and on indicator 5.6.1.¹⁴
- **Early marriage and early unions:** exploring experiences, perceptions and social norms. This theme is related to SDG 5, contributing to knowledge regarding indicator 5.3.1.¹⁵
- **Violence against girls and safety:** exploring experiences, perceptions and social norms. This theme is related to SDG 5 as well as SDG 11: 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable',¹⁶ contributing to knowledge of targets 5.2, 11.2 and 11.7.¹⁷

The research also included a series of additional and inter-related objectives:

- To uncover situations where adolescent girls report experiences of exclusion.
- To contribute to knowledge gaps in the area of adolescent girls' rights and gender equality, to inform Plan International's programming and advocacy.
- To demonstrate how qualitative data can be reputable and add value to measuring the strategic interests and practical needs of adolescent girls.
- To provide opportunities to young female researchers in each country by building capacity in research methods and application, ethics, gender and protection issues and offer a chance to learn more about the challenges that girls in their country face.
- To provide opportunities for Plan International in-country staff to participate in the research process including design, methodology, capacity building, data collection and analysis, and offer a chance to learn more about the specific challenges that girls in their country face.

1.4 Methodology

The research methodology had two clear intents: generate meaningful data and analysis on the situation of girls from a perspective of intersectionality, exploring the challenges that girls face

¹¹ United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>).

¹² Target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes; Target 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university; Target 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations; Indicator 4.5.1: Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated; Indicator 5.6.2: Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee women aged 15-49 years access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education.

¹³ United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg3>).

¹⁴ Target 3.7: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes; Indicator 5.6.1: Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care.

¹⁵ Indicator 5.3.1: Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18.

¹⁶ United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11>).

¹⁷ Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation; Target 11.2: By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons; Target 11.7: By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.

and the quality and equality of opportunities available to them across a set of rights issues; and, by applying principles of participatory action research, to include young female research assistants and Plan International advisers in the research process, in order to build collective and critical knowledge of the areas of research.

In order to generate meaningful data that responded to the research objective, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to the research, focusing more heavily on qualitative methods, as the sample was relatively small compared to many quantitative studies.

The mixed methods approach was designed to measure the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of adolescent girls through quantitative measures but also to capture the complexity and changing realities of their lives through applying qualitative methods in the form of open questions and creative and reflective workshops.

Parallel to the quantitative analysis, the insights derived from the qualitative methods allow the report to go beyond the statistical data and provide insights into social norms within households, community dynamics and social relations.

1.4.1 Research sample

The target sample size was set at 120 adolescent girls in each country. Given the small scale and stronger qualitative nature of the research, a purposive sampling¹⁸ approach was applied. Guidelines were sent to the Plan International country offices in order to frame a selection of girls that aligned with the intersectionality focus of the research. The selection criteria was as follows:

- girls between the ages of 15 and 19
- three diverse groups of identities of girls reflecting intersectional characteristics and/or intersecting vulnerabilities
- three differing locations across the country, including both rural and urban settings.

1.4.2 Characteristics and identities of girls

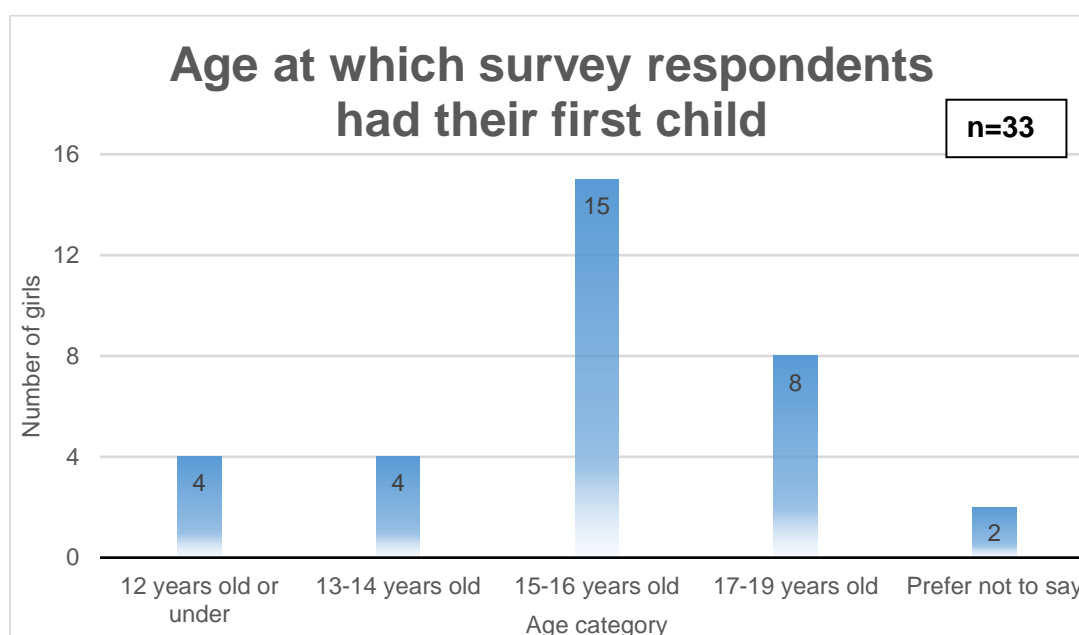
Gender and programme staff from Plan International Nicaragua collaborated with the lead researcher to identify specific groups of adolescent girls in Nicaragua facing intersecting vulnerabilities and risks, such as being marginalised, excluded or discriminated against. The selection of the particular identities and groups of adolescent girls was based on Plan International Nicaragua's current programme evidence and practice. Three target groups were selected:

- young mothers – married and unmarried
- members of the ethnic Miskito group from the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN)
- adolescent girls with intersecting vulnerabilities and facing multiple discrimination: for example, girls from environments where high levels of poverty and a high risk of violence exists, increasing girls' vulnerability and increasing risk of girls' exposure to child labour, informal labour and dropping out of school.

¹⁸ Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling, applied when research targets specific characteristics of people or contexts. It differs from random sampling, as participants are selected on the basis of criteria most relevant to the research questions. Purposive sampling does not allow researchers to generalise findings to a population.

Young mothers: Out of the total sample of 119 adolescent girls, 27 identified themselves as young mothers. However, 31 stated that they had children between the ages of 12 and 18 and two respondents preferred not to identify the age at which they first gave birth, so out of the overall sample a total of 33 adolescent girls had given birth. This disparity suggests that six of the adolescent girls do not currently self-identify as mothers. Possible explanations for this include the death of the child, the child being cared for by another family member, or the child being taken into care by the Ministry of Family. For the purposes of this report, only the experiences of the 27 who identify as young mothers were analysed, however the demographic section below reports on the age at which all 33 respondents gave birth.

The graph below illustrates the young age at which many of the respondents gave birth: four reported that they had their first child at age 12 or earlier, with four more giving birth between the ages of 13 and 14. The highest categories were between the ages of 15 and 16, with 15 respondents, and between the ages of 17 and 19, with eight respondents. Two girls did not want to identify their age when they first gave birth.



Indigenous Miskito adolescent girls: The Miskito are a Native American ethnic group in Central America, mainly residing in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. The group has dances and special meals, which are celebrated as part of the ethnic tradition and culture. They speak Miskito, an indigenous language derived from Misumalpan. Community figures have a great influence on the Miskito culture, including the council of elders, community judges and *sukias* or healers.

Cultural patterns and social norms mean that very few Miskito women assume leadership positions in their community. Participating in community leadership is a further challenge for adolescent girls, who are discriminated against because of gender and age.

The research was conducted in the city of Puerto Cabezas (12 respondents) as well as the neighbouring rural village of Sinsin (21 respondents). Respondents from this group made up 28 per cent of the total sample size.

Adolescent girls facing intersecting vulnerabilities: Two communities – San Rafael del Sur and Boaco – were selected to explore the daily lives of girls who face a range of diverse intersecting vulnerabilities. The conditions in these communities often mean that girls have low levels of

support from their families, face high levels of poverty and are more susceptible to child labour, informal labour and dropping out of school.

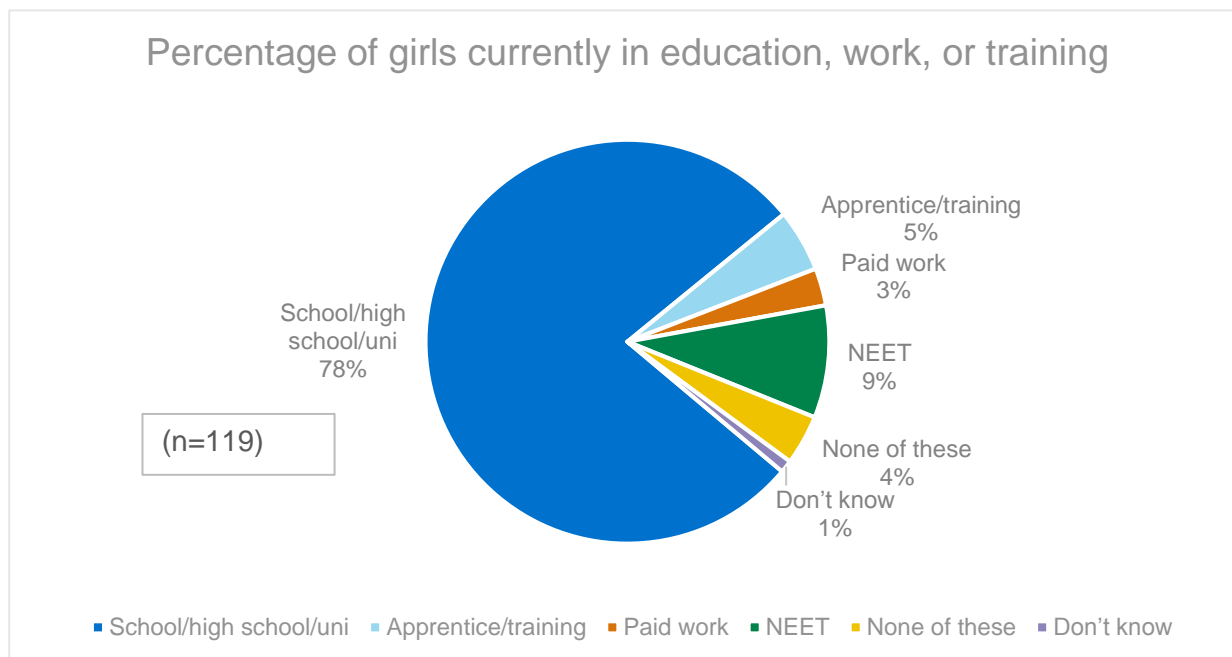
Of the total sample of girls interviewed, 21 per cent (25 girls) came from the community of San Rafael del Sur and 30 per cent (36 girls) came from the community of Boaco.

Additional demographic information:

- Married and/or living with a partner or husband: Out of a sample of 119, 15 adolescent girls reported living with either a husband or partner; 13 identified as married.
- Adolescent girls self-identifying as having an impairment: Four reported a visual impairment; one reported a hearing impairment; two reported a physical impairment; and two reported a mental impairment that led to difficulties with memory or concentration.

Although disabilities were recorded as part of the survey, a specific and separate analysis was not conducted due to the small capture of this group and the limited time available to conduct further analysis. However, where interesting and compelling data was available for this small section of girls, it has been included in the report.

Education: The majority of adolescent girls surveyed (78 per cent) were in secondary education, with others in paid work (3 per cent), an apprenticeship or training (5 per cent) or not in training or education (NEET) (9 per cent) or not in training or education (NEET) (9 per cent).



1.4.3 Field data collection

Once the characteristics and locations of target respondents were identified by gender and programme advisers from Plan International Nicaragua, the country office contacted local offices from these areas and asked to collaborate with local partners in the communities to

mobilise adolescent girls who fit the criteria.¹⁹ With consent from parents and from the girls themselves, they were invited to participate in the research survey.

Adolescent girls who wished to participate in the research were given the date, location and time when the data collection would begin and presented themselves to the research team at the appointed time. After screening to ensure the adolescent girls matched the criteria, they were invited to partake in survey interviews.

A total of 119 adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were surveyed, with an average age of 16. Respondents came from the communities of Boaco (30 per cent), Puerto Cabezas (28 per cent), San Rafael del Sur (21 per cent) and Managua (21 per cent).

In addition to the surveys, 40 adolescent girls participated in reflective workshops and group discussions held at each of the survey locations. Twenty adolescent boys between the ages of 15 and 19 from the areas of Puerto Cabezas and Boaco also participated in reflective workshops. These adolescent girls and boys were identified and invited by local Plan International community staff to participate, based on criteria provided by the research team.

1.4.4 Quantitative survey questions

A perceptions-based survey was conducted with 119 adolescent girls. A Likert-type scale²⁰ was applied to quantify and measure the perceptions and attitudes of adolescent girls through degrees of agreement and disagreement to statements related to the core themes for inquiry. Additional statements were added to gauge the differentiation between how the situation *actually is* for girls and how they perceive situations *should be*. For example, one might say “I have some opportunities available but I *should* have more.” It is important to highlight that the results of this research are not representative of the entire adolescent girl population from each country and should be framed as an insight into a diverse set of experiences and lived realities.

Descriptive analysis of quantitative data is presented in percentages of agreement and disagreement; perceptions of neither disagree nor agree, or don’t know are not specifically presented and the reader should understand the missing percentage as allocated to this category.

1.4.5 Qualitative survey questions

The qualitative aspect of the research included open questions in the survey to complement the quantitative inquiry. This allowed the research assistants to dig deeper into the perceptions and experiences of the respondents, to identify influential factors and relationships, and to capture their ideas and personal reflections.

Open questions provided rich data for the research and facilitated the understanding of topics from the point of view of the adolescent girls. Each country’s research task team and the research assistants, with support from the research lead, designed three country- and context-specific open questions to be included in the survey. The purpose of these questions was to allow the Plan International advisers and research assistants to tailor questions responding to a specific area of inquiry. This allowed for generating data on important issues relevant to

¹⁹ This is similar to the ‘snowball’ sampling technique, where the researcher is interested in a set group of people who can be hard to identify and access by usual methods, therefore the researcher cannot rely on a sampling frame and needs to rely on local networks of people in order to sample hard-to-reach populations.

²⁰ A widely used approach to scaling responses in survey research in which respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement for a series of statements.

adolescent girls in the context, and building knowledge where there were known knowledge gaps.

1.4.6 Creative and reflective workshops

To allow for a deeper understanding of root causes, six creative and reflective workshops were conducted, four with adolescent girls and two with adolescent boys. These workshops were guided by participatory action research principles, which centre around inclusive strategies for gathering information that involve the people directly affected by an issue in learning about or addressing that issue, and then linking that learning with identifying potential opportunities for addressing the issue or taking action.

Activities included drawings to elicit how adolescent girls understand their position and condition in their communities, critical and reflective focus group discursive sessions on the distinct challenges they face as girls comparatively to boys, and constructing poems or songs where girls voice, in their own words, what changes they would like to see to support the advancement of girls' rights.

The design of these workshops allowed the research team to investigate in detail some sensitive and difficult topics that are hard to explore in a survey – such as violence against girls. The same methods were used to undertake creative and reflective workshops with adolescent boys. Two workshops were undertaken in order to explore the perspectives of adolescent boys who live in similar conditions and environments to the adolescent girls surveyed, placing a particular focus on exploring adolescent boys' attitudes and behaviours in relation to violence against girls.

All workshops sessions were recorded and a note-taker transcribed the sessions into handwritten reports. All drawings were photographed and kept in the country office.

1.4.7 Research task team

Research task teams (RTT) were set up in each country to strengthen the participatory action approach of the research. These comprised of Plan International gender and protection advisers, and programme and research advisers from each country where the field research took place. The task team advised on survey content, co-designed and facilitated the creative and reflective workshops. Their experience was invaluable to the research process, helping to strengthen the research project and generate more powerful and meaningful results.

Guided by a commitment to improving opportunities for young women in each country, the team worked with local universities to identify young women from sociology departments who displayed a strong interest in community development and/or gender issues. In Nicaragua, this involved partnering with the Central American University of Managua and the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaragua Caribbean Coast (URACCAN), Puerto Cabezas. No field research experience was required, but some exposure to social research methods and a sociological background was needed.

The research assistants (RAs) were given two days of training on research methods, gender and protection issues, the research project and applying the tools. The RAs were responsible for conducting 120 survey interviews per country with hands-on support from the lead researcher and the research task team. They participated in a collective analysis workshop where initial findings and observations were discussed and annotated. As part of their training they were required to write up a short research report, outlining their analysis of central findings. On completion of the research process they were presented with research certificates acknowledging their participation and contribution to the research. (To learn more about the personal experiences of the RAs in this research process please refer to the Annex.)

1.4.8 Data collection and analysis

Fieldwork was conducted over three weeks in April 2016. Data was collected in five locations, with each location selected on the basis of the prominence of the specific group or identity aligned with our target of participants.

Face-to-face pen and paper interviewing was undertaken for 119 surveys. After quality checking the surveys, the quantitative data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet formatted for exportation into STATA, a data and statistics software package.

The lead researcher trained the RAs on quality control and data inputting. This process was closely supervised to support the RAs to execute the data entry process to a high standard. The data was then transferred to London and subject to further quality control by a qualified data analyst. The data analyst constructed a code list to mirror the data, and descriptive analysis of data was conducted through STATA.

The RAs processed the qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions into Word documents. The content from the reflective workshops was also collated in a Word-formatted memo document. All qualitative data was translated from Spanish to English. Quality control of all documents was undertaken and qualitative data was analysed in London using the Nvivo software. The data analyst and lead researcher co-designed the code list for Nvivo, and data was inputted, coded and analysed.

Sub-analysis was applied to the quantitative and qualitative data. Typical sub-group differences that were analysed included:

- age
- location
- ethnicity
- education (i.e. number of years of schooling completed or in school/out of school)
- marital status
- girls with or without children.

In line with the participatory nature of the research, a collective analysis workshop session was held in each country with the RAs and the research task team (RTT). This was an important process to gain an in-depth understanding of the findings from the perspective of those two groups. It also served as a learning space for the RAs and the RTTs. During the workshop, each person presented their subjective analysis and justified their understanding of what they captured during the data collection phase.

The lead researcher facilitated these sessions and compiled the results into a report. The detail of these results, although subjective, provided an excellent form of cross-checking anticipated versus actual revelations of the findings. The first-level analysis of the data (objective analysis of raw data) was conducted in the UK.

The draft country reports were sent to the RTT and Plan International country director for review and input, with specific responsibility to craft country recommendations. This was an important final stage of the process, ensuring inclusive and participatory approaches were guaranteed throughout the research.

The technical reports were then made available on line for dissemination internally (Plan International) and externally with peers and stakeholders.

1.5 Ethics

The design of this study adhered to Plan International's Research Policy and Standards and was subjected to an ethics review by senior management in the research department. Key ethical considerations included:

1.5.1 Child protection

One of the guiding ethical principles of this research is that no participant comes to harm as a result of the study. To this end, the protection adviser in each country trained all RAs on Plan International's key child protection issues and child protection policies. All RAs also signed Plan International's Child Protection Policy as a pre-condition of engaging in the research process. The RAs were informed of procedures to follow if concerns arose regarding the protection or safety of an adolescent girl while conducting the research. During the training, the RAs were presented with examples of child protection scenarios that have arisen in past research projects and were given guidance on how to respond.

Child protection advisers in each country reviewed all research tools, including the survey and tools for the creative and reflective workshops, as a form of protection quality control to reduce the risk of including any upsetting or disturbing questions that might impact the participants.

1.5.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

The anonymity and privacy of the research participants was respected. Any personal information regarding the participants was kept confidential. All data was stored in Nvivo and STATA with a unique ID and no corresponding information of participants.

1.5.3 Informed consent

Informed consent processes were undertaken for all participants engaged in the study in order to secure the approval of community leaders and school officials, along with primary caregiver informed consent and permission where necessary, as well as the consent of the participants themselves. The consent forms for parents and participants were adapted from Plan International's Girls' Speak Out research and from international guidelines prepared by the World Health Organization.

The informed consent processes included information on the intended purposes of the research, how Plan International would maintain confidentiality of the focus group discussions and data, the anonymity of participants, potential risks and benefits of participating, participants' rights of silence and disclosure, and plans to utilise the research findings. Participants were assured that they had the right to stop or end the interview at any point if they so wished. Participants were also asked to advise researchers where they would like the interview to take place, somewhere within sight of parents or guardians but not within earshot, in order to do the utmost as researchers to assure participants' confidentiality and safety. Researchers were asked to note on each interview sheets if they observed any family member attempting to listen in or to report if the respondent became nervous at any point in the interview. Any such cases were reported directly to the research task team to assess if a participant was at risk or required a follow-up visit by Plan staff. The safety of the participants was the guiding principle throughout the research process.

1.6 Layout of the report

Section two of the report focuses on the perceptions and experiences of adolescent girls regarding the opportunities they have to get on in life. By asking them about their own individual

aspirations and goals in life, the challenges they face, their sources of support, and the type of support they receive, a good insight into adolescent girls' own agency emerges. This helps to highlight some aspects of SDG 5, uncovering the experiences and perceptions of adolescent girls in relation to varying dimensions of empowerment, including: effective participation in decision-making in the home and the community; access to and control of resources; autonomy over their own lives; interpersonal communications and supportive relations; and perspectives of equal opportunities.

Section three focuses on the conditions and environments where girls live, exploring the gender and social norms, and the positive or discriminatory practices and traditions within their communities. This gives particular insight into how some cultures and practices inform and influence decision-making of parents and adolescent girls in relation to early marriage.

The section also explores the gender roles and responsibilities that shape adolescent girls' lives through the lens of care and domestic work, asking what types of tasks and care they carry out, how long they spend on chores and care and whether they believe this is shared equally within the household. This also provides valuable insights into Goal 5 from the perspective of adolescent girls.

Sections four through seven examine the biggest challenges that girls feel they face in their daily lives. These explore the perceptions and experiences that girls report in relation to education, early pregnancy, early marriage or unions, and violence and safety.

More specifically, section four explores perceptions of access, retention and quality of education, including sexual education in the classroom and adolescent girls' own perceptions of the value of their education. In addition, this section examines drop-out rates of adolescent girls and the reasons behind them, providing valuable insights into SDGs 4 and 5 from the perspective of adolescent girls.

Section five explores the drivers of early pregnancy from the perspectives of adolescent girls, including an investigation into their autonomy to take their own decisions on sexual and reproductive health, their experiences of accessing information on sexual and reproductive health, their access to health centres and the impact of early pregnancy.

Section six explores the drivers behind early marriage, adolescent girls' perceptions and experiences of early marriages and early unions, control and decision-making in the household once married or in unions, experiences of early marriages and the impact of early marriages and unions from the perspective of adolescent girls.

Section seven looks at the perceptions and experiences of adolescent girls with relation to violence against women and girls in both public and private spaces and within their familial and interpersonal relations. It also explores perceptions of reporting violence and what can be done to address it. The perceptions of adolescent boys regarding the drivers of violence against women and girls are also investigated.

Section eight offers a summary of these findings highlighting the central points of analysis. Section nine looks at the perceptions of adolescent girls regarding what opportunities exist to improve the situation of their lives and how this could be acted on. Finally, the report concludes with some recommendations for policy and programme work that could serve to improve the condition and position of adolescent girls with diverse identities.

SECTION 2

GIRLS' ASPIRATIONS –

LIFE GOALS, BARRIERS AND WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM

This section explores girls' individual aspirations, identifying their goals in life, the barriers they face in attempting to reach those goals, and the mechanisms and support systems that enable or prevent them from progressing towards achieving their goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals set an ambition of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030. To better understand how adolescent girls can be empowered, it is important to explore dimensions such as their access and control of resources and perceptions of their own agency, which affect their ability to make choices about their future.

Understanding these dimensions of empowerment from the perspective of adolescent girls can help highlight the areas of their lives that they feel they can and cannot influence. Furthermore, through exploring the social relations that girls find important, it is possible to identify where support can best be leveraged. The combination of these two components provides valuable insight into the barriers and supports that either prevent girls from realising their rights or enable them to do so.

2.1 Opportunities to get on in life and girls' aspirations

Girls' opportunities and actions are often determined by the conditions of their communities as well as by the social norms that surround them. As such, girls were asked whether they believe they have sufficient opportunities to get on in life and achieve their goals. The overwhelming majority (95 per cent) of the girls agreed that they do, and 80 per cent agreed that they have the same opportunities to get on in life as boys.

Girls were then asked to share their aspirations for the future, outlining their life goals and the importance behind these goals. The results showed that girls' individual life goals centred around three main themes: education, career and family.

“[I want] to study medicine, to work to give my mother a house. She deserves it. She has always wanted that. I intend to achieve this.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“[I want to] study public accounting or study medicine. I like medicine a lot to help children. [I like] the other career because I would like to work in banks or companies and take care of the money.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“[My goal is to] continue studying, become a nurse and be a good mother to give my child a better life.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“[My goals include] becoming a teacher or becoming a principal to guide children in my community or becoming a doctor. If I achieve that I will be the only one, because there is no doctor in my community.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

To explore their perceptions towards careers and working women, adolescent girls were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the idea that when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women. It was positive to note that the majority of adolescent girls surveyed (63 per cent) disagreed with the statement.

The slight majority (53 per cent) disagreed that a mother should stay at home, look after her children and not take on paid work; 35 per cent agreed with this statement. Some girls expressed a less positive perception of working mothers:

“The most vulnerable girls are those who are more helpless, for example those whose mothers work and their fathers abandon them, so they go out alone and stay home alone taking care of their younger siblings.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

For the young mothers in the sample, life goals centred around providing for their children and giving them happy lives, love and opportunities to succeed.

“One of [my goals] is becoming a teacher to get a decent job and support my son.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“[My goals are] giving my daughter everything she wants, education and social welfare in a good educational environment.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“[My goal is] to give my daughter everything she needs, mainly love.” (Adolescent mother, Boaco)

“I want to give education to my daughter, maybe improve my economy.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

Some explicitly mentioned the lack of support from fathers and how this put increased pressure on them to provide and care for their child.

“If my daughter gets sick I cannot continue studying. But maybe if I had her father's support things would be different.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“In a young family, the guy spends most of his time in the streets and leaves the mother alone with the child... He has 50 per cent of the responsibility of this child, and the baby is his son too.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

One young mother said her goals include supporting other young mothers like herself who are facing similar problems. She also hoped for more positive relationships with her family.

“[I would like to] meet more people who are going through problems like mine and be able to help them... [Also] having a better relationship with my family to fill the void I have inside.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Every girl interviewed had well-defined life goals and understood the importance of having these goals to further their self-development and improve the opportunities available to them in future.

An observation by one of the young female research assistants who undertook data collection exemplifies this:

“The state in which we find many girls living, the different situations and difficulties these girls have had to go through and, above all, their desire to continue with their lives, for their children and for themselves is something that really caught my attention. Despite this, girls have well-defined goals, because as people we should visualise our goals. But often we do not define in a specific moment and space what it is we really want. These aspects ‘shook the floor under my feet,’ as we commonly say in Nicaragua.” (Ana Geyling, Research Assistant²¹)

2.2 Barriers girls face when trying to realise their life goals



Mothers, family, abuse, lack of support and household chores are among the central challenges adolescent girls say they face in achieving their life goals.

When adolescent girls were asked to reflect on the barriers they face in attempting to achieve their goals, 94 per cent of respondents agreed that they should have more opportunities as they have significant challenges to overcome. Only 61 per cent of the adolescent girls sampled agreed that they were able to take decisions concerning their own wellbeing and future, whereas 90 per cent believe that they *should* be able to take decisions concerning their own wellbeing and future.

²¹ Please refer to the annex for further information on the experiences of the research assistants.

The most commonly cited challenges included a lack of family support, early pregnancy, rape and sexual abuse, early motherhood, not completing their education, and economic instability. Many of these challenges were presented as interconnected; for example, early pregnancy was often discussed in conjunction with a lack of family support and/or school drop-out.

Economic problems were cited as a central barrier. In particular, adolescent girls from the communities of San Rafael del Sur and Boaco – who face a range of intersecting vulnerabilities – stressed this as a challenge. Approximately half of the adolescent girls from these communities referred to economic insecurity and poverty as their central challenge.

This was very often connected with the risk of dropping out of school. Common concerns cited from these communities included not having enough money to stay in school, convincing their parents that their education is not a waste of household economic resources, or worrying that the bicycle they need to go to school will increase in price beyond the family budget.

Economic instability was often discussed in conjunction with a lack of support from the family, negative family relationships and the challenge in overcoming these family problems.

“Sometimes my parents think I am not going to finish school and that I am wasting my time and the money we don’t have.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“If there are not possibilities to go to college or to take a course we do nothing, and if the person who supports us is old it is more difficult for him to help us with money.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Getting money and not finding a job in my career [are barriers] because without money I won’t be able to reach my goal. Money may seem useless but it is very useful.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Family problems and bad company [are barriers] because bad company distracts you and takes you down the wrong path. The lack of [family] support makes it difficult for you to make decisions.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

Interestingly, only one adolescent girl from these two groups mentioned getting pregnant as a barrier to achieving her goals. Miskito adolescent girls, on the other hand, frequently reported getting pregnant at an early age as a barrier that would prevent them from achieving their life goals.

“Firstly pregnancy because it delays your education and because some men don’t let you continue studying. [Other barriers are] if I get sick and my economic situation.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

Young mothers in particular talked about struggling to have enough money to support and provide for their children. This was compounded by the lack of childcare and family support on offer, which meant that many had to either temporarily or permanently drop out of school.

“My two greatest challenges are my son – because I cannot leave him since he is very young, which is why I cannot go to study in the city – and economic issues, because I don’t have much support and the little money I get is for my baby.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“My biggest obstacle is my daughter and my mother, because I cannot study. But when my daughter grows up I am going to work and study, get ahead and reach my goals.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“One [barrier] is that I am a mother and it has been difficult for me because I am a teenager.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“My son is very young and I have to take care of him. Being a minor makes it difficult to find a job.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Lack of [money] to pay a course and get ahead [is a barrier]. No one wants to give you work because instead of going ahead we are going backwards.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Adolescent girls reported that health problems or the fear of getting ill posed a challenge to completing life goals. The focus was on health issues associated with early pregnancy in particular, as well as current health issues or the fear of future health problems. Another fear was of the household breadwinner falling ill and therefore being unable to pay for their education.

“The biggest issue I have is my diseases, because the health centre does not have enough pills for the issues I have.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“If I get pregnant everything changes and if I get sick I am not going to continue studying.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

Respondents frequently mentioned negative home environments and problematic relationships as a challenge. They hinted at the lack of support and, for some, the abuse and violence experienced in the home. This contributed to difficulties in making positive life decisions and often led to girls deciding to leave their home and seek a better life elsewhere.

“Family problems... Those would be the biggest challenges I would have to face.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“[A] challenge is that there are misunderstandings. Last year when I was studying someone told my mother that I was with a man and she took me out of class. If we talk about my community, I can say that girls have similar problems to mine, because... there are always money problems or family problems.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

All of these challenges are discussed in further detail throughout the next sections of the report.

2.3 Overcoming barriers to achieving life goals

Supportive interpersonal relations and adolescent girls' own agency were identified as key components to overcoming the challenges they face in realising their goals.



Word cloud of the most frequently cited support mechanisms to address the challenges girls face: help and support from parents, education and employment are all central notions.

Girls told us about the importance of their individual efforts and self-determination, such as applying themselves to their studies or securing work to raise their income. Respondents also highlighted the importance of avoiding any negative influences, attitudes or behaviours of those around them. Less frequently mentioned were financial and practical support, such as parents or relatives taking them to the health centre.

“[Overcoming challenges means] trusting in myself and thinking positively that nothing bad is going to happen to me.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“[To realise my goals I will] fight for the things I want. I would talk to my parents, asking them to help me accomplish these goals that are important for me.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“Regarding my family [problems] I would not ask their opinion. I would get ahead without listening to their negative opinions.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

"I am strong and with the help of my parents and psychologists and teachers here they are helping me to [overcome my problems]." (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“There are obstacles but wanting is power. If you fall you can also get up in life.”
(Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Achieving my goals is the most important thing, I would analyse the problem and find out how to solve it.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“[To overcome barriers I] set my mind to the things I want to achieve. I believe in myself and I think I will defeat economic problems.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“I would devote all my time to school and I would talk to my parents asking them to help me with my education.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

The support of a girl's family featured heavily when thinking about tactics to overcome the challenges they face. They stressed the importance of having someone to talk to and share their problems with and talked about the importance of receiving advice and emotional support as a crucial aspect of their wellbeing.

Respondents most frequently mentioned mothers and other female relatives as their sources of support: 59 of the adolescent girls mentioned their mother and 17 mentioned aunts, grandmothers and cousins. Only five respondents mentioned both parents, and only one mentioned her father in particular. Friends, psychologists and community organisations were highlighted as important sources of support by 31 girls.

While the home environment often seems to fall short of expectations, adolescent girls perceive positive family relationships as integral to their sense of wellbeing.

“[I talk to my] friend, because when I want to make a decision she advises me about the right thing to do, [and my] mother – she gives me her love and understanding, no matter what I do.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“I think there is no better friend than the mother. Other people give you bad advice.” (Adolescent girl, Managua)

“My partner... I tell him all my problems and concerns. He gives me advice and we talk in order to solve my concern. He is part of my life and I can count on him if I have any problem.” (Miskito girl in early union, Puerto Cabezas)

Out of the entire sample, 10 per cent (12 girls) reported having no one to talk to, indicating a level of isolation and risk to their wellbeing. Further analysis of this subset indicated a range of intersecting vulnerabilities including age, early motherhood and marriage and disability. Ten of the girls were under 16 and the remaining two girls – aged 17 and 18 – were both married or living with a partner. One of these girls self-identified as disabled. Four had children and their life goals focused on providing a better future for their children.

“I do not have the support of anyone, but I think I'll make it. Other girls are different because despite everything, they have the support of their mother and if they got pregnant it is because they planned it.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Other girls' problems are different because their lives are not like mine. They have the support of their families.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Those who reported having no one to talk to identified sexual abuse and violence in the home as the biggest challenges that most girls their age face. Given the centrality of family and the importance of family support cited by the majority of girls in the sample, the loss of this support and the incidence of violence in the home is particularly devastating to adolescent girls who feel that they have no one to talk to or turn to.

Although the majority of the adolescent girls surveyed (74 per cent) felt that their opinions and concerns were asked for and considered within their homes, 95 per cent felt they should be consulted more in the home.

“In our homes we can give our opinion but not fully, and we always have to remember that we cannot disrespect our parents with an opinion we give in our home.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

Most respondents did not readily identify the community as a supportive mechanism for addressing the challenges girls face. Only 37 per cent of adolescent girls surveyed agreed that their opinions and concerns *are* heard within the community. Yet 95 per cent felt their concerns *should be* heard and addressed in the community.

Survey responses underscored the importance of having women in leadership positions, as this would help to improve the situation for women and girls in general. Eighty-four per cent of the girls surveyed said there were female community and political leaders in their communities.

When asked if men were better community and political leaders than women, 75 per cent of the girls disagreed and 15 per cent agreed. However, the perceptions of some girls also revealed that although women have the same skills to exercise leadership it is the men who are considered the real leaders of communities.

“I see that when men take leadership positions in the community we don’t progress because they don’t give a good example to the community. But a woman can help develop the community because she will work with everyone and defend the rights of women so we will be taken into account.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabeza)

“As future women leaders it is important that we support and work more for the rights of women because we are not taken into account or defended by men, since men only defend each other.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabeza)

Although adolescent girls have a positive perception towards women’s leadership in communities, it appears there is a lack of meaningful space for them to have their opinions and views heard. This highlights the need for more targeted work at the community level to encourage meaningful consultation with adolescent girls and include them in decisions and issues that affect them in the community.

“Community authorities do not take us into account and exclude us from community meetings. They don’t respect us, or our rights as individuals. At home we can only talk with our mothers but not with our fathers and at school teachers take us into account only a little, but not always.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabeza)

SECTION 3

THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT OF GIRLS – LOCAL CULTURE AND GENDER NORMS

This section explores gender roles and responsibilities through the lens of household chores, gaining insight into cultural and social norms and particularly exploring the perceptions of Miskito girls.

The Sustainable Development Goals have recognised social norms as an important means of advancing gender equality and tackling the discriminatory norms and practices that restrict girls' access to rights and resources. With this in mind, the research set out to explore gender, social and cultural norms in order to reflect adolescent girls' perspectives on whether their environment is enabling or restricting in terms of reaching their desired life goals.

Social norms and gender roles impact the opportunities that girls have, the actions they are able to take and their own beliefs about their capabilities. Norms and roles are, in turn, shaped by the conditions and environment of the community in which they live. For example, the autonomy to choose whom to marry can, in some ways, depend on what is deemed acceptable and appropriate for girls in their community. Equally, a girl's agency with regard to how and where she spends her time can be determined by the gender roles and responsibilities within her household.

This chapter first considers the experience of Miskito girls and then looks at the whole sample of girls surveyed, exploring their perceptions and experiences of household chores and care in order to better understand how these social and gender norms impact agency.

3.1 Miskito culture: cultural norms and traditions

"Miskito girls don't live like other mestizo and Afro-descendant girls because we have our own culture and it is very different to other cultures. For example, our dances, songs, community and beverages are different. Besides, most of us live in communities far from the cities." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

In a focus group discussion, Miskito adolescent girls were asked to reflect on their identity – thinking about what a girl thinks and feels. The results of the discussion are summarised below.

Our rights and protection as Miskito girls are connected with the protection of culture, worldview, land and forest. So it is important and essential that we continue studying, learning more things, and achieve a career for our future to further promote our rights as women at personal, family and community levels. By developing and strengthening our personal and educational development we can help the community to develop more, and thus promote the active participation of women in the community.

A Miskito girl feels sadness when her rights are violated. She feels unloved, undervalued, discriminated against and excluded, mainly by community leaders and the community – who do not take their views into account. Participation at the community level is barely noticed due to the fact of being a woman, so it is important for us to participate more in the projects and lectures so we are taken into account.

It was clear from the discussions that being part of the Miskito culture holds much value and significance for these girls, however it does not come without its challenges. To explore these insights further, the Miskito adolescent girls were asked an additional set of questions within the survey to explore the aspects of their culture they most value, some of the challenges that their culture poses for girls their age and how to overcome them.

Overwhelmingly, and not surprisingly, the girls reported that they hold their culture in high regard, as it is central to their sense of identity and teaches them values such as dignity and respect for each other, for elders, and for their religion, culture and traditions. A traditional practice that emphasises love for others and for the most vulnerable means that no children are orphaned because the community welcomes them. Girls also highlighted local foods, traditional dances and baseball as valuable aspects of the culture.

“I like the culture in terms of traditional dances and food like *rondon*. I consider that as nice and valuable for my life because it’s my own culture.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“[I value the fact] that we are taught to respect and live in harmony with our neighbours and to never forget our customs.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“[What I value is] fear of god, respect, and that I shouldn’t be ashamed of my community... and if I go somewhere else I should not forget my origins.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“I am proud of being indigenous. I don’t deny my identity.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“[I value the fact] that my culture is beautiful. Girls continue studying – despite everything they study. It is also valuable that my culture is humble and I like the traditions we have as indigenous people.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

However, one girl responded that there was nothing she valued about her culture because it promotes attitudes and behaviours that value men over women.

“No aspect is nice or valuable because that’s what has ruined our generation. For example, women teach us to obey men and I think that should be changed because women have the same right.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

Adolescent girls were also asked if they feel there is anything they need to confront in their indigenous culture in order to be accepted by their community and how this has affected them. Most frequently, girls mentioned the discrimination they face on account of being part of a minority ethnic group in Nicaragua in comparison to the dominant Mestizo population. This discrimination was the biggest challenge they felt they needed to confront to be accepted by the wider community and society.

Miskito adolescent girls reported feeling marginalised and excluded. They felt their opinions and concerns were not taken into consideration in community spaces and that they face language barriers when it comes to participating effectively in high school and being accepted by their peers. *(This is discussed in further detail in following sections of the report.)*

Overall they felt that being Miskito deprived them of opportunities that are available to other adolescent girls, for example access to quality education, health services and other resources that are centralised in towns but not accessible to them because of their rural location. These barriers limit their personal development and future opportunities as the below quotes outline.

Girls our age... “need to confront discrimination because of culture in the community... It affects me due to the lack of respect. They reject my opinion and I am discriminated against.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“When we go to places where other people live we feel intimidated because we cannot handle their language. They reject us for being Miskito people. It affects me because it doesn’t allow me to express myself as I would like. I do not dare to participate in other groups and for that reason I lose many opportunities.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“It affects us [because], for example, when a boy sees discrimination against a girl, they learn it and repeat it at home with his sisters.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“It depends on what you do because if you are going down the wrong path they brand you and say you are not a good girl.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“If they get pregnant they have to get married and if they don’t do it they are not viewed well by the community. It has not affected me because at least I have my partner.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“[We experience] discrimination against our skin colour, because of our capacity. We are not valued in other places because we are indigenous. We are affected because if there is work with any project, they leave us outdoors because we are Miskitas. In many institutions they discriminate against indigenous people.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

When considering what could be done in order to improve their situation, Miskito adolescent girls highlighted the importance of educating children and communities on the value of their culture, promoting non-discriminatory behaviour and keeping good communications open between different cultures. These actions were identified as central to tackling discrimination and to bringing about positive change within their own culture and among other cultures.

“In order to make a change we need to teach those who are growing up ... to respect others irrespective of culture and tradition.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“If there is something we don’t like we have to change it so it does not affect the next generation.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“To [bring about change we should] demonstrate our capacity and demand respect and show them that we as indigenous are not insignificant people. We demonstrate intelligence and show good behaviour as human beings so they see we have the same capacity.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

In a group discussion, adolescent girls were asked to reflect on the kinds of risk Miskito girls in particular face because of their culture and whether they feel they face additional or different risks compared to other girls. Discrimination was brought up, as well as the lack of communication and trust they have with their parents and the lack of access they have to adequate information on how to protect themselves. These factors increased the risks of early pregnancy, early marriages and early unions and instances of sexual abuse.

In addition they added: “Miskito women are more beaten at home by men because we do not have higher or quality education.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabeza)

Respondents were also asked to identify any elements in the indigenous culture that protect them.

“Our fathers, mothers, family and community are more protective because they are always keeping an eye on us and never leave us alone. When our parents die we have relatives with whom to stay. People who do not have blood ties with us receive us. In addition, when our parents and community protect our resources they are also protecting us and our future.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion)

Girls identified the practice of *tala mana* as an element of their culture that they feel puts them at considerable risk. This happens when, as a result of rape, a girl becomes pregnant and the parents choose not to report it to the authorities but rather receive animals or money in exchange for the offence. The daughter is then forced to leave her home and live with the abuser.

When considering the situation of Miskito adolescent girls in relation to Miskito adolescent boys, respondents felt that there was a distinct preference towards their brothers. They gave examples such as parents preferring to invest in a boy’s education as he will continue to study, leave the community and go to college. With girls, this effort and support was not viewed as an effective use of the household money because girls will get pregnant.

Girls were also asked about what advantages they felt boys had over girls. They reported that boys have, “more time to play and walk around than us because we only stay at home helping. Our mothers and fathers don’t let us go out much. They say that since they are boys they will not get pregnant so they can do whatever they want. If we go out it is for a short time and we are monitored.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion)

“My mum says that women come after men, so men are more important in the family since even the Bible says so.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion)

3.2 Gender roles and responsibilities in the household: Care and domestic work in the household

Within the SDGs, Target 5.4 calls for recognising the value of unpaid care and domestic work and promoting shared responsibility of household tasks within the household and the family.

The social and gender norms that affect what adolescent girls perceive they should and shouldn’t do are particularly important with regard to the factors that enable or prevent them from progressing and achieving their goals. The household is one environment where discriminatory gender norms are at play, and this can be illustrated by examining the distribution of household chores. This examination reveals the gender-biased socialisation of roles and responsibilities that impact notions of what adolescent girls can be and what they can do.

Household chores and care are the reality for adolescent girls in Nicaragua and the gendered division of labour and attitudes that surround this work illustrate how the dominant gender and social norms operate within a household.

All respondents were asked what household chores they carry out, how long they spend on chores or care, and if they feel these tasks are fairly distributed between the boys and girls in their household.

Time spent on household chores was mentioned as one of the significant challenges that adolescent girls face in attempting to realise their life goals. This is further supported by the fact that one third of adolescent girls acknowledged that adolescent boys have more free time than they do. Just over half (55 per cent) reported that household chores put them at risk or in danger.

On the other hand, many respondents said that they enjoyed domestic work because it contributed to the family's overall wellbeing and kept illness and disease at bay. The girls frequently described domestic work as a means of distraction and keeping busy. Chores were a way to avoid boredom, laziness and commonly described as a way of keeping oneself distracted from one's problems. Miskito girls talked about their domestic chores as a form of socialisation, as it provides them with training for when they get married or go to work as maids.

"I like [household chores] because I get distracted and if I don't do them I get sleepy and... think on unnecessary things." (Miskito adolescent girl co-habiting with a partner, Puerto Cabezas)

"I like doing [chores] because when the house is dirty diseases may come." (Adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

3.2.1 Time spent on chores and care

The amount of time the girls surveyed spent on household tasks in the previous week ranged from a minimum of 20 minutes to a maximum of 30.5 hours, with an average of 5.5 hours.

The most common tasks reported were cleaning (96 per cent) and washing clothes (82 per cent). Tasks such as shopping, collecting water and caring for family members were cited with a lower frequency. More than half (55 per cent) of all adolescent girls reported that they sometimes have to do chores that they feel put them at risk or in danger: girls frequently cited the danger they faced on the street from men, and chores such as collecting water and shopping require adolescent girls to leave the (relative) safety of the house (these risks are further explored in section 7, on violence). These adolescent girls cited cleaning as the task they carried out most frequently, followed by washing clothes and then cooking: they spent an average of 4.5 to 5 hours on chores in the previous week.

In the area of Puerto Cabezas, Miskito adolescent girls were asked for further details on how much time they spent per week carrying out various chores and tasks in the home.²² The data below offers some insight, notably the considerable time spent caring for siblings and washing clothes compared to cleaning, shopping and cooking. On average, Miskito adolescent girls spent more time performing chores and taking care of siblings than the girls interviewed in Managua, Boaco and San Rafael del Sur.

Average times that Miskito adolescent girls spent on chores per week:

Caring for siblings: 240 minutes
Washing clothes: 175 minutes
Cleaning: 89 minutes
Shopping: 49 minutes
Cooking: 40 minutes

²² Please see methodology for further explanation on this point.

Collecting water: 22 minutes
Caring for family: 19 minutes

3.2.2 Attitudes towards gender roles and responsibilities in the household

We asked all 119 adolescent girls if they felt household chores were evenly distributed in their homes between men and women and between girls and boys. The majority of the respondents (77 per cent) agreed that household tasks were shared equally between men and women in their households, with only 19 per cent disagreeing. Of the 22 girls who disagreed, only two adolescent girls were married or living with a partner. The majority of respondents (67 per cent) also agreed that care for siblings and other family members was equally shared, with only 21 per cent disagreeing. Of the 25 adolescent girls who disagreed, four were married or living with a partner.

Although perceptions indicated that household tasks were equally shared, an interesting finding was that 82 per cent of adolescent girls said they still felt the distribution of tasks between girls and boys should be changed. Probing further, discussions around the distribution of domestic work centred on notions of fairness and of contributing to the family's work. Adolescent girls felt that they were obliged to work in the home to help the family, but that they bore too much of the burden. While they reported that adolescent boys do partake in domestic chores, adolescent girls said the time undertaken to do such chores was not always evenly split. This is not surprising, given that more than a third (37 per cent) of the total sample said they do not have as much time as boys for leisure or recreation.

"The time men have is not the same as women, since [women] have to prepare dinner and do household chores and men have fewer obligations, so they have time for playing football and baseball." (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

More in-depth discussion around the division of chores emerged in focus group discussions; adolescent girls reflected on the challenges they face compared to adolescent boys. Household chores were consistently discussed and there was a clear sense from the language used that the distribution of chores was not equal or fair. The adolescent girls expressed a sense of injustice and some connected the unfair distribution of household chores with the prevailing culture of machismo. Some felt that it is up to the mother and father to change this dynamic.

"There must be gender equality between boys and girls and we should not contribute to a violent and macho culture." (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

Adolescent girls felt that their male peers had more freedom and more opportunity to play and be outside the household. Girls, on the other hand, spent longer hours completing chores, restricting their time for leisure and study as well as their mobility and opportunity to spend time with friends and other social networks.

The following conversation took place in an adolescent girls' focus group session in Boaco.

Girl 1: "Girls are woken up early but our brothers stay in bed and get up late and nobody says anything. Brothers make a mess of everything and we are forced to organise and clean everything up."

Girl 2: "Boys, even at age 13, are allowed to go out but [parents] do not give permission to us girls because they say that since he is a boy he has less risk of being hurt."

Girl 3: "When we are already age 15, our parents give us responsibilities and send us to do domestic work outside our home. They prefer we study on Sundays. Boys

are not given any tasks. Despite all the things we do to help, they always treat us badly. They buy everything for boys but they don't want to give us things we like, such as clothes, shoes or earrings."

In focus group discussions with adolescent boys, they too acknowledged that adolescent girls spend longer in the household completing chores than boys do. They offered the explanation that girls carry out lighter chores, such as cooking and cleaning, while boys do tasks that are more masculine and require more strength such as chopping wood, collecting firewood and water, cleaning the yard and helping their fathers in the field.

"Boys and girls are taught that their ways of recreation are different." (Adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Chontales)

"The behaviour of boys is very different from girls since they have more freedom to walk around outside their house. They are also disobedient and lazy but we, in contrast, stay more at home with our mothers doing housework and we are more obedient than them." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

"Girls always have to do housework such as washing, ironing, cooking, sweeping and running errands. Boys are sent to work and study and sometimes they help the family repairing things at home." (Adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Chontales)

Miskito adolescent boys suggested this division of labour was a cultural and ancient tradition passed on to girls.

"Actually she likes domestic work as a custom and part of the culture that comes from ancestral times, with activities such as cleaning the house, washing dishes and pots. They cannot go out without permission, especially at night." (Miskito adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

Boys also acknowledged that they have more freedom and leisure time than girls and more opportunities for play and study.

"Girls do household chores and don't go out much."

"Boys work but they have more freedom than girls."

"Boys have more opportunities to play. They can study what they want and when they want." (Conversation between adolescent boys, focus group discussion, Chontales)

"Girls organise the house, clean, cook and play at home, while boys go fishing, help fetch water and collect firewood and play more sports." (Miskito adolescent boys, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

The picture becomes more complicated when adolescent girls were asked who distributes the domestic chores in their homes. They consistently named their mother or a female relative – aunt or grandmother. This is perhaps not surprising given the gendered division of household tasks in Nicaragua.

Overwhelmingly, adolescent girls felt that responsibility to redistribute chores evenly among sons and daughters should lie with mothers or female carers. They felt that mothers, being the educators of children in the household, have a particular responsibility to change the dynamic of unfair distribution of chores. Some felt a change in roles and responsibility in the household was not possible because of a respect for tradition. For a minority of girls, failure

to tackle this issue meant that mothers themselves were promoting the culture of machismo. A small minority of girls felt that mothers and fathers should share the responsibility to change this dynamic. One girl said it was the father who set the example by taking on an equal role in carrying out household tasks.

“Parents should educate and encourage us that not only women have to do domestic chores.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“The father [is] the person who exercises the behaviour and can change the situation.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Another reason [why household chores are not fairly distributed] relates to ancient customs of ancestors and not being able to go against parents’ wishes. It’s difficult to change something that is already established.” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

Encouragingly, 53 per cent of girls did not agree with the statement that a mother should stay home to look after children and not take on paid work. This indicates that gendered perceptions of women’s roles as carers and nurturers are expanding to include women as workers and providers.

Only 23 per cent of respondents agreed that men should stay home and care for children, while 66 per cent disagreed. This finding needs to be considered in the country context, where girls report that they do not always feel safe in their home environment.

Evelyn: My experience as a live-in domestic worker²³

“My childhood was completely devastating... Terrible,” says Evelyn,²⁴ a 17-year-old domestic worker in Boaco, Nicaragua.

Separated from her parents at the age of two, she was looked after by her grandparents until her grandfather’s death. After that she was sent to live with aunts who did not treat her well. “They used to tell me that I had no parents, no family. I used to tell them who my mother was but they said I had no mother.”

Evelyn is unequivocal about this moment in her life: “I was completely alone.” There was violence too: “They beat me.” When one aunt got married and was no longer there to prepare food for Evelyn to take to school, she started to fall behind in her studies. She was moved to another school, and at that stage was reunited with her mother and father.

Realising she had “a dad, a mum and a family” did little to improve Evelyn’s life, however. Her parents showed no affection for their returned daughter. “I wanted to receive love from my parents and I never did. I am still waiting to receive it.”

In spite of the lack of support, Evelyn successfully finished primary school and moved on to a secondary school in another town. It was here – at age 11 – that she found herself doing housework for the first time. The granddaughter of the woman she was living with had just given birth, so Evelyn was expected to do all the laundry and keep the house clean.

²³ Interview conducted by Argentina Espinosa and Jean Casey, case study written by Daniel Kramb.

²⁴ Names have been changed.

She accepted her fate and understood that, “in order to study I had to do housework.” But the work became “too much” and Evelyn began to feel mistreated.

When her father agreed to let her come home, she found that the work didn’t end – it merely shifted from the house to the field. Evelyn started spending long days helping her father with farming and inevitably her studies started losing out. There was also no time for recreational activities, sports or play. Asked whether she ever played a game, Evelyn says: “No, I haven’t.”

Tensions soon arose with her father, who she noticed treated his children differently. “I had problems as any girl does who does not obey a male. Here in the rural area there is machismo.”

When a cousin falsely claimed that he and Evelyn had slept together, tensions with her father exploded. “He said he was not going to send me to high school because he was ashamed with all the things people were saying. He said he would not give even a penny for my university.” Evelyn received no support from her mother, who was completely submissive to her father. “Sometimes I thought about leaving home or disappearing, but I couldn’t.”

She stayed defiant, however, and did not lose hope. “I told [my father] everything is fine and I will get my diploma and continue forward.” She did just that, and eventually finished school.

For several months now, Evelyn has been working as a domestic maid – cooking, cleaning and doing laundry. Her days are long – beginning at 6am and finishing at 9 or 10pm – but she still manages to attend a technical course every evening. “I have to leave dinner ready at home so I come back only to wash the dishes.”

Her drive to succeed is unwavering. “My idea is studying, moving forward, and having a career and a job.” Her first choice of career, clinical bio-analysis, proved too expensive and time-consuming so she has decided to pursue accounting instead.

Working as a domestic maid helps advance her career ambitions, but she leaves no doubt about what she is missing. “We all want to be free, to go out and hang out with friends,” she says. This is not an option for her, and it can be hard to see others enjoy a freedom she cannot have herself. “We are girls,” she says. “Most of us see other girls enjoy life.”

Her work also comes with risks that she feels are greater for domestic employees than for girls in professions such as teaching, sales or pharmacy. “If there are males, they try to take advantage of us. They think that because the maids come from the countryside they can just take us. If there are males, there are more risks.”

Could such issues be raised in the community? Evelyn says she isn’t sure and becomes a little uneasy when asked. “Maybe some [domestic maids] are ill-treated and they are afraid of losing their job because we all think that if we don’t have a job we cannot do anything else. I think if I stop working, I would stop studying.”

Like many girls in Nicaragua, Evelyn feels she has no choice but to accept the conditions of her work, including the lack of freedom, the lack of recreation, and the perceived risks. “Some girls say, ‘I am ill-treated but I have to do it because I need it.’ Sometimes, people say that because you are needy you let others humiliate you.” And, like many girls, she isn’t sure where to turn to improve her situation. She has no response when asked whom she would need help from.

In spite of all the adversity life has dealt her, Evelyn has managed to keep her focus on studying and moving forward. “I would like for people to say ‘she was a domestic worker and now she has a degree.’ My childhood was not as I wanted it to be,” she says with determination. “But my youth is going to be the way I want it to be.”

SECTION 4

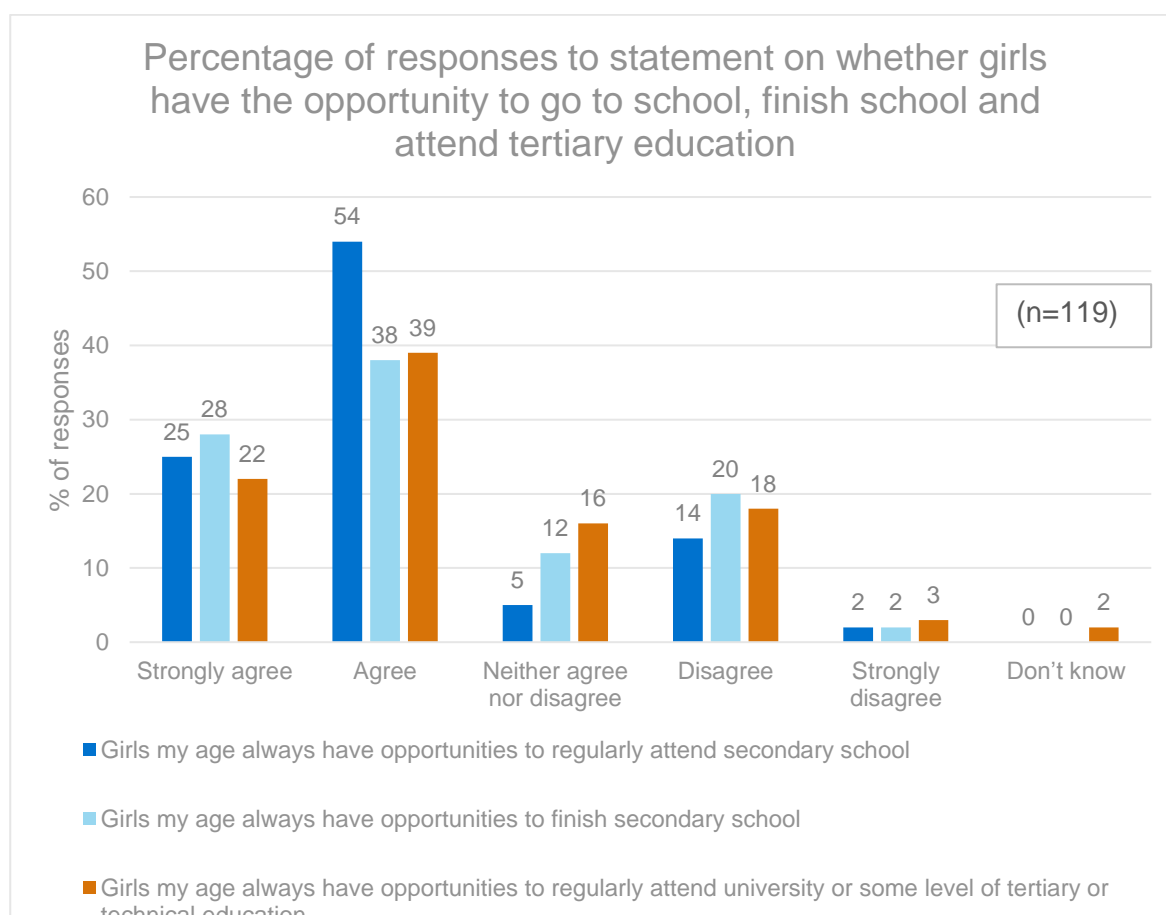
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION

This section explores adolescent girls' access to secondary school and opportunities to complete their education, their perceptions of the value of the education they received, sexual education in the classroom and reasons behind girls having to drop out of school.

SDG 4 corresponds to the importance of inclusive and quality education for all. Access to quality and free primary and secondary education is integral to advancing girls' future life opportunities and securing girls' rights. Overall girls report their experience of education and school as positive, however young mothers and Miskito girls tell of a less satisfactory experience, outlining the particular barriers they face on account of their identity and condition.

4.1 Access to education

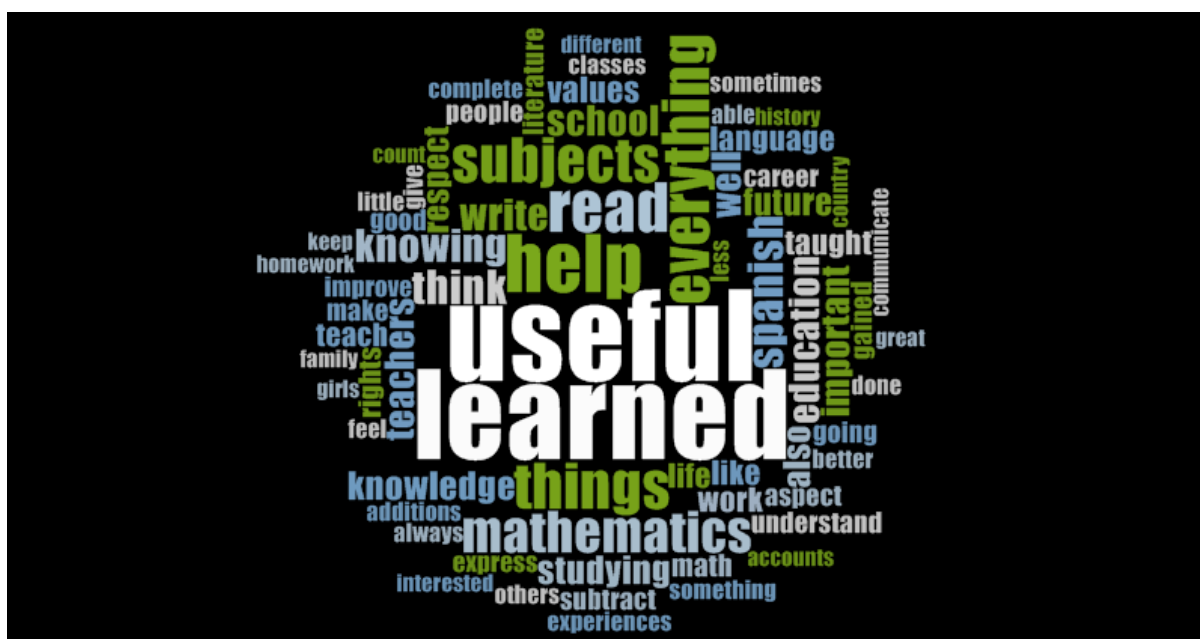
The majority of the adolescent girls surveyed (79 per cent) stated that girls always have opportunities to attend secondary school. However a smaller proportion (66 per cent) agreed that girls always have the opportunity to finish secondary school, and 61 per cent agreed that girls always have the opportunity to regularly attend tertiary education.



4.2 Attitudes and value of education

When girls defined their life goals, continuing education and transitioning to employment or a successful career was a constant reference repeatedly mentioned. Encouragingly, the large majority of girls surveyed were satisfied with the quality of education they received and their access to education (91 per cent). The vast majority of girls (90 per cent) agreed that their education has led or will lead to good employment opportunities.

When asked what was most valuable about their education, respondents mentioned reading, writing and mathematics most frequently. They also valued the increased knowledge and values taught in school and linked education to knowing their rights, feeling more capable and positive, and having better self-esteem. *"I am not shy anymore and I can fully express myself."* (Adolescent mother, married, Puerto Cabezas)



Most frequently used words on the value of education: usefulness, learning, reading, writing, mathematics.

Young mothers connected the value of education to gaining decent work, increased knowledge on rights, and also learning forgiveness.

“We have been taught to have the strength to forgive people who have hurt us and to release our feelings.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Everything [I learned] is useful for my future, for having decent work and feeling proud of my efforts and work.” (Adolescent mother, Manaqua)

“[I value] knowing the rights of girls and young women, and knowing the different types of diseases in the world.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

But young mothers in particular criticised the inability or lack of effort on the part of teachers to understand the problems that young mothers and pregnant girls face compared to other girls.

“Lack of attention of teachers with regard to their students because they often do not realise what their students are going through.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

For the girls from the communities of San Rafael del Sur and Boaco, learning about values was fundamental.

“Even when our parents also teach us values, here at school they are reinforced and they are very important for us to live in peace and to keep a healthy relationship with others.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“In general terms, I think everything has been useful because if I complete school I will be someone in life. It has also helped me to be more positive and think that I am capable and that not only men have that right.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Thanks to my education and to having passed all levels now I can go on with my plans of studying a career.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“[Education] has been useful because in the future I will be a good person.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

Miskito adolescent girls frequently mentioned Spanish and mathematics as the most valuable aspect of their education. They connected learning Spanish with the value of communicating with “other people and society”. Mathematics was important because they recognised that it “helps us calculate numbers” and “keep accounts properly in case I work in a store or as a cashier in the future.” Learning how to count was also seen as an important way to protect oneself against being cheated, “because if you cannot count anyone can fool you”.

This positive perception of satisfaction with education shifts when considering the experience of the indigenous group of Miskito girls. In further discussions about the particular challenges they face, Miskito adolescent girls expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of education they receive, which they felt was of lower quality. They reported problems with teachers’ attendance and language barriers in continuing education.

“When we speak Spanish, our classmates mock us and that is why we don’t continue speaking or trying to continue learning Spanish and that [is why] we cannot progress with our teaching and education.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

“Miskito women are more beaten at home by men because we do not have higher or quality education.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

Furthermore, adolescent girls from the Miskito community feel their access to education and their opportunities to finish secondary education can be restricted by a belief among parents that educating girls is a waste of money as they will get married or fall pregnant. There was a strong sentiment from the Miskito adolescent girls that the education system is leaving them behind, and that their specific needs are not being catered for.

4.3 Reasons for dropping out

While it is positive that so many adolescent girls feel that education is a possibility, discussions of the challenges faced in education brought up a range of issues. These included sexual harassment in school; early marriage and pregnancy that brought education to an end; and the high cost of education.

Just under half of the total sample (62 adolescent girls) reported that at some point they had to stop their education either temporarily or permanently. Approximately one in four (15 out of 62) reported they had to stop due to pregnancy; 15 per cent cited economic reasons. Truancy was

also a factor: three girls reported they had to stop attending school due to sexual violence and harassment.

“Parents do not allow [girls] to study because they lack money or because they have a partner or they are pregnant.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“When it comes to education our parents always prefer that boys go to college outside the community because they say investing in our education is wasting money because we will get pregnant.” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

“Now boys and girls attend school equally, but in high school many girls do not finish because they start to have a partner. There is also sexual harassment to girls in school.” (Miskito adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

“One of the problems I had was that in basic school teachers used to give classes in Miskito but when I passed to high school my teacher used to speak in Spanish and it is difficult for me to understand him.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

4.4 Sex education in the classroom

Given the emphasis that adolescent girls put on early pregnancy as a barrier to completing education, sex education as part of the school curriculum is vital. However, a significant minority of girls surveyed stated that they had not received any sex education in school (18 per cent). Out of the 21 girls who reported they had not received any sex education in school, 11 were Miskito adolescent girls and six were young mothers.

By comparison, only two girls from each of the low- and high-risk groups reported that they had never received any sex education in school. When they had received sex education, the majority of girls (96 per cent) stated that they were taught about different types of contraception and 88 per cent said teachers taught the use of contraception in school. These findings paint a positive picture for most girls, indicating that sex education is being included in the education curriculum. However, Miskito adolescent girls and young mothers lack this critical education. This is particularly important given the weight that the girls gave to information about sex and contraception in preventing pregnancy – which will be explored in detail in the next section.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF EARLY PREGNANCY

One of the main tenets of the SDGs, articulated in Goal 3, is ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages. This section explores some of the factors that prevent girls from living healthy and full lives in adolescence. It unpacks the drivers of early pregnancy, whether there is access to health centres and information on contraceptives, responsibilities around early pregnancy and the desire to discuss relationships and sex with parents.

The impact of early pregnancy is discussed from adolescent girls' perspectives, providing insights into how early motherhood can obstruct the wellbeing of girls and their personal development including the restriction of the types of opportunities that are available to them as young mothers.



Word cloud representing the 50 most commonly used words in response to the question: "Why are there girls in Nicaragua who are pregnant under the age of 13 years?"

5.1 Drivers of early pregnancy in Nicaragua

Discussions with the girls surveyed revealed complex attitudes and perceptions of early pregnancy. The reasons why early pregnancy is thought to happen are multi-faceted, including poverty, rape and sexual abuse, negative family relationships, lack of love and support in the home, loneliness, and a lack of information and advice.

Young mothers in the survey discussed the lack of love, care and support they experienced in their home environments, which negatively affected their wellbeing and life choices. These issues also contributed to girls choosing to marry young. Physical, sexual, verbal and emotional

abuse from family members led to feelings of insecurity and loneliness. The young mothers said that they were not listened to or given good advice, particularly regarding sexuality. In many cases, they said they sought comfort and love outside the home, hoping they could have a better, happier home life with a boyfriend.

“No one tells us anything or explains anything related to sexuality. Girls have problems at home and get a partner or get pregnant to avoid suffering in their homes.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Rape and sexual abuse by family members, boyfriends, and men in the streets were frequently mentioned as a reason for early pregnancy. Rape and sexual abuse were the most consistent causes of early pregnancy discussed by the group of young mothers in Managua.

“They are raped [or] they do not have a family and find a man, thinking that he will help them.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“They were not advised, they took the wrong path, they were abused at home or they had sexual intercourse without protection.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

In many cases, mothers were held to blame for not protecting their daughters from sexual violence or for allowing them to become pregnant. Several girls said that mothers give their daughters too much freedom and do not teach them how to say ‘no.’ While some respondents felt that a mother is responsible for keeping girls inside the house and off the street, others complained that their movement was too restricted by protective mothers and wished for more independence. Mothers were also blamed for withholding information and support from their daughters.

When young mothers were asked if their problems were the same as other girls, one young mother responded that other girls had the support of their mothers. Young mothers in particular frequently discussed the neglect they felt from their own mothers. A strong association was made between a mother’s lack of love, advice and support, and the outcome of a girl becoming pregnant.

“Many girls are raped because of their mothers’ carelessness, and sometimes they are girls who do not think about the consequences.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Due to rapes, they are not advised about what is right and what is wrong.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“They are raped, they do not have a family and find a man thinking that he will help them.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Lack of attention of parents, lack of support, lack of information and they are raped.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

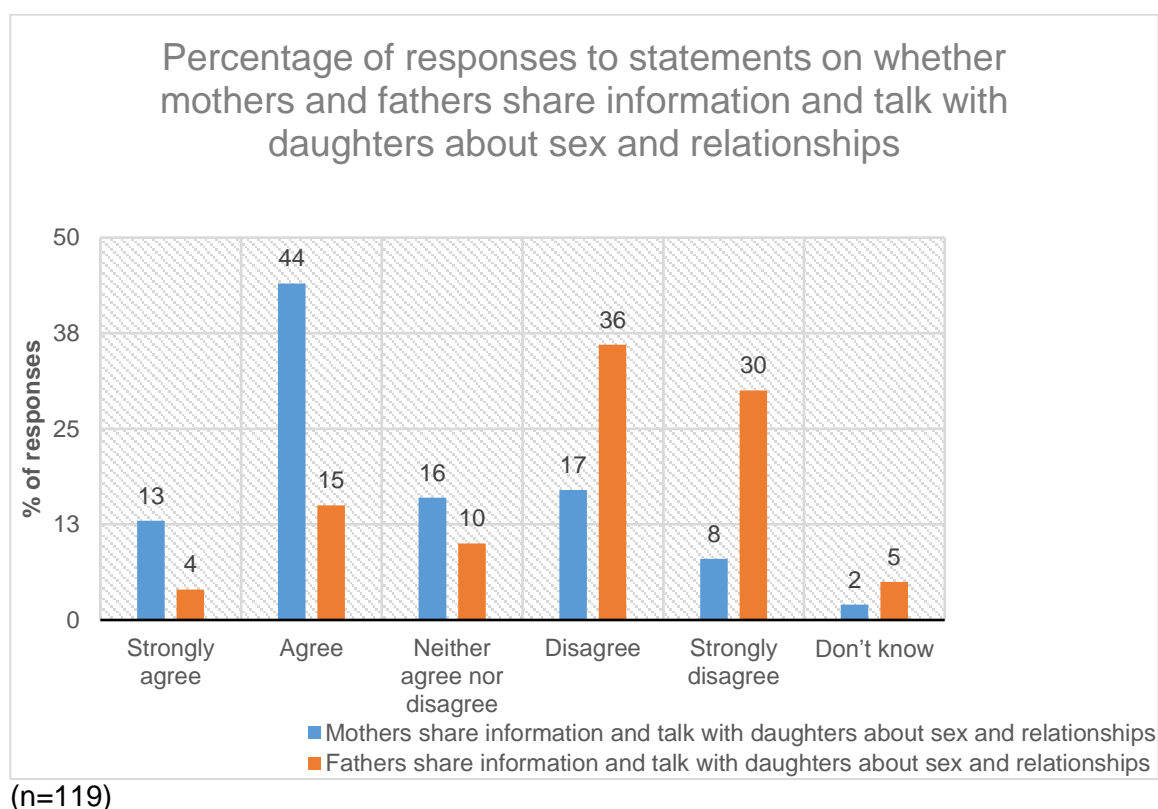
“Lack of information, carelessness of mothers – although sometimes there are mothers who scold them but girls do not listen to them.” (Adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“Maybe they have too much freedom, their mothers do not pay attention to them or they learn to lie.” (Adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

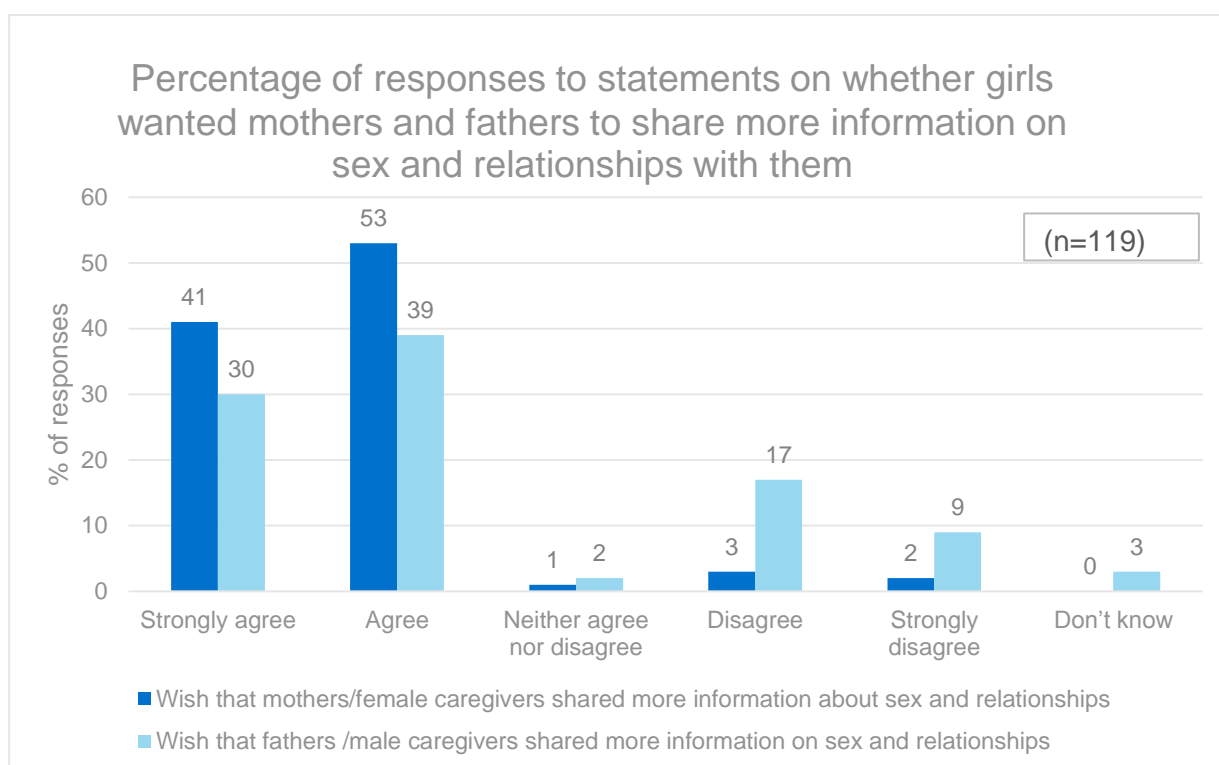
“Because of mothers’ lack of care, they give their daughters so much freedom, and some girls are provocative, they provoke men.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“They do not teach us how to say ‘no’.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

5.2 Sharing information and discussions on sex education in the home



Respondents indicated that mothers were the principal parental source of information about sexual education. Yet early pregnancy was often attributed in part to parental neglect of this and other duties towards their children. A greater proportion of the adolescent girls we surveyed (57 per cent) stated that mothers shared information about sex and relationships. Few girls reported that their fathers did (19 per cent). The overwhelming majority of girls (94 per cent) said they wished they talked more to their mothers or female caregivers. Interestingly, 69 per cent of girls wished their fathers talked more with them about sex and relationships.

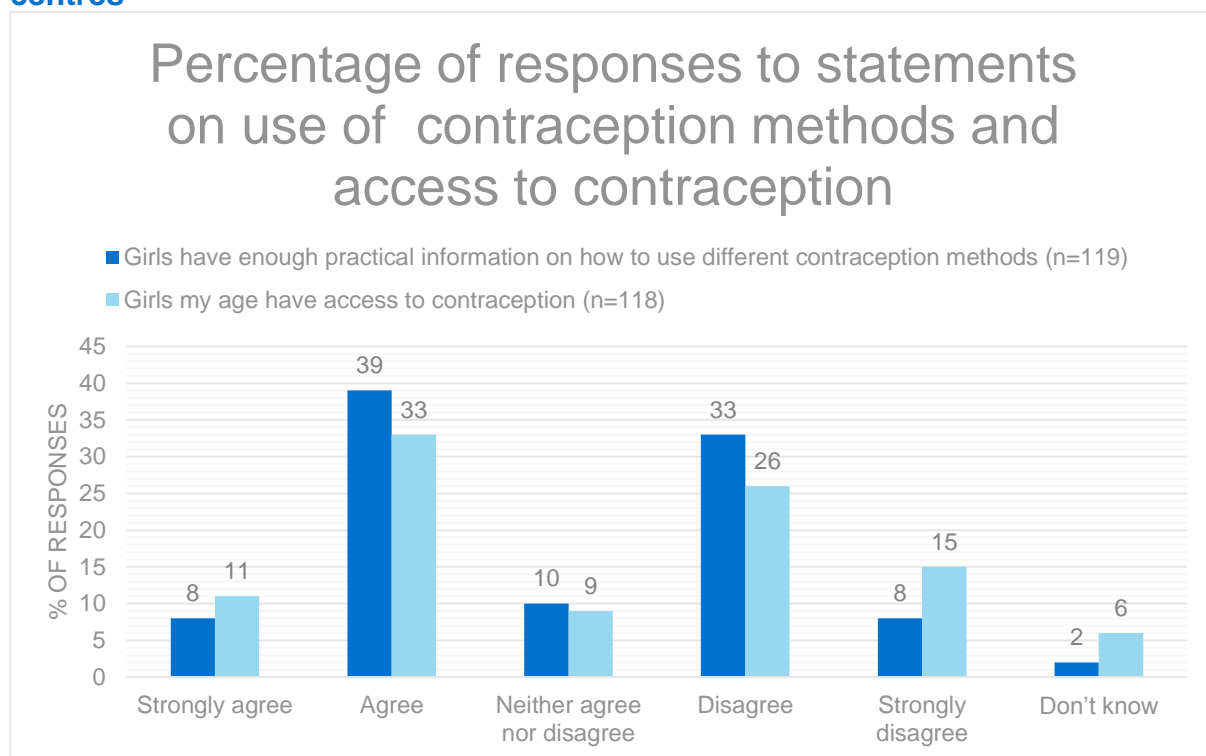


In general, there was a lack of reflection on the accountability of fathers, boys and men in the communities to address and change violent or sexually abusive behaviour. Fathers were also not singled out for the same criticism as mothers in terms of allowing daughters to become pregnant. However some adolescent girls mentioned their fathers' absence as a factor that leads to situations of increased risk.

“Well, I think it happens because sometimes you do not have the support of your father. Maybe when you are the child of a single mother and the mother does not have enough resources and lets her daughter do what she wants.” (Adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

Interestingly, when adolescent boys in a focus group discussion were asked to reflect on why adolescent boys are fathers and adolescent girls are mothers in their community, they shared similar reasons as adolescent girls: lack of information, lack of communication and conversations with their parents about sexual relations, lack of use of condoms or contraceptives, and lack of parental care.

5.3 Information on sexual and reproductive health and access to health centres



While the majority of adolescent girls reported that they received information in school on contraceptive methods and use, more than a quarter (27 per cent) of respondents stated that they did not have enough information on avoiding pregnancy and 41 per cent said that they did not have enough practical information on how to use different contraception methods.

“The [government] provides little information because they are interested in other things and the little information [girls] get is not enough.” (Adolescent mother, San Rafael del Sur)

“Parents do not give advice to [girls]. They do not protect themselves when having sex and the boyfriend starts telling her the things she likes to hear... and they just let themselves go.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Parents don’t tell them about the many contraceptive methods that exist because when girls ask them about it parents think they already want to have sex. In other cases [girls are] being irresponsible because they know how to protect themselves and they don’t do it.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

Forty-one per cent of the adolescent girls surveyed said that girls did not have access to contraception. Furthermore, almost half of those surveyed (48 per cent) said they needed to ask permission to visit a health centre. More than a quarter stated that their health centre did not have suitable information or services for them.

5.4 Responsibility for early pregnancy

The research revealed two opposing views concerning the role of girls and women in preventing early pregnancy. One placed the blame and responsibility on the girls’ shoulders and/or on their mothers’, often subtly. The opposing view called for shared responsibility between men and women for early pregnancy, and for families to protect girls from sexual violence.

“Our mothers say that men can do whatever they want because it is their right since they won’t get pregnant. But since girls will get pregnant, it is the mother’s responsibility to keep girls inside the house and not in the street doing nothing.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

During a focus group discussion, Miskito boys were also asked to reflect on why girls get pregnant. In their responses, responsibility lay clearly with the parents and also with the young girls themselves if they did not listen to the advice of parents. There was a stark lack of reflection on the responsibilities of boys and men in engaging in sexual activity with adolescent girls or young women. Sexual abuse was not highlighted at all in the discussion.

“The biggest reason [girls get pregnant] is because they ignore what their fathers and mothers teach them and they pay more attention to men.” (Miskito adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

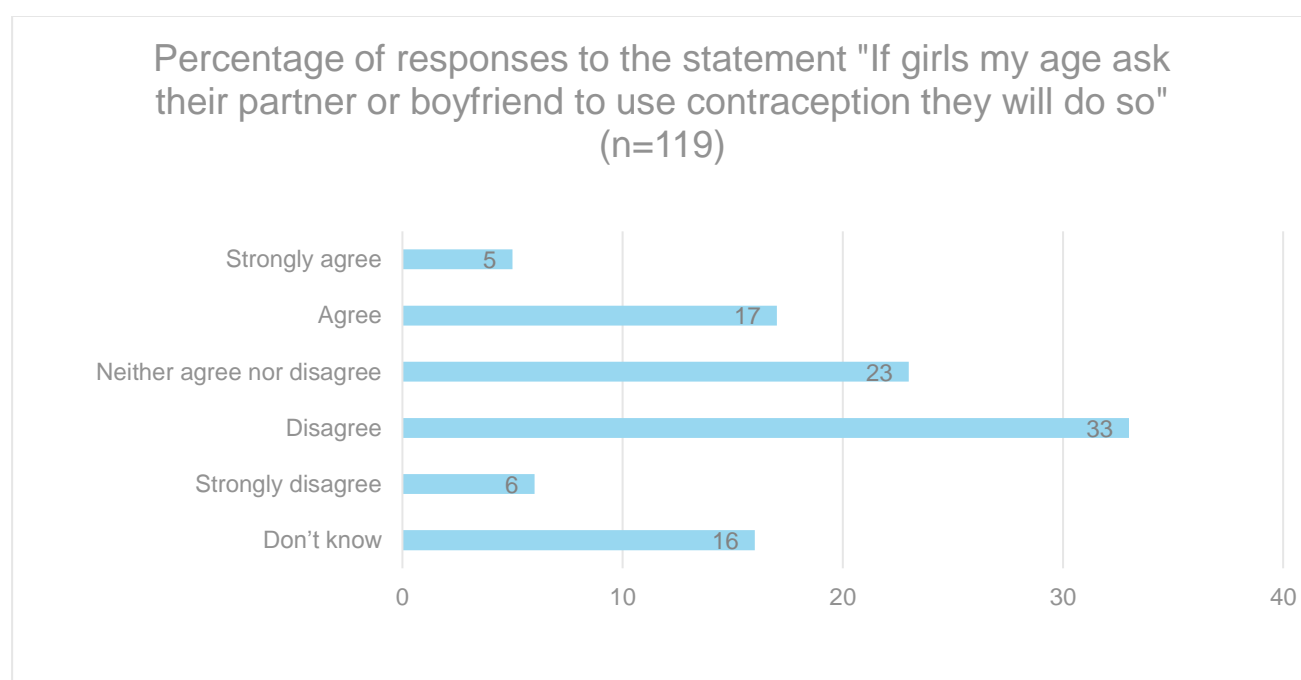
“[Girls get pregnant] because they have bad friends. Many times their fathers and mothers are irresponsible and don’t take good care of their daughters.” (Miskito adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

Throughout the discussions, girls were held responsible for whether or not they got pregnant. Some respondents put these decisions down to the hormonal teenage years, or to the lack of information and support received, while others stated that contraception was hard to access and that girls just made poor decisions despite the knowledge and support they had received.

“Because they make bad decisions.” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Boaco)

“Because they do not plan. They only think about having sex without thinking they are going to get pregnant. They only seek their personal satisfaction.” (Miskito adolescent girl, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

“Some of them because they do not use protection when they have sex.” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)



Men and boys, and their responsibility regarding prevention of early pregnancy, was not widely mentioned by adolescent girls. When it was brought up, respondents discussed how unequal power relations between men and women left them in a difficult situation regarding pregnancy. However, young mothers talked openly about the lack of responsibility that boys and men show in relation to contraception and childcare.

“We cannot leave the boys out. They have responsibility too – we should tell them if you don’t want responsibility, use protection!” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“A pregnancy should be planned.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“It is also the fault of the boys. They do not ask us if we are using protection. We need to use protection also to prevent getting sexually transmitted diseases.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Everything has consequences.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Perceptions around condom use with boyfriends and husbands also reflected a lack of responsibility on the part of boys in sexual relationships. While a minority of the girls surveyed (9 per cent) stated that they could not refuse to have sex with their partner or that they could not ask their partner to use contraception (5 per cent), only 22 per cent of girls stated that if they asked their partner to use contraception, he would do so. Not only were men presented as unwilling to use contraception, they also did not have to bear the effects of unprotected sex – either in terms of pregnancy or in terms of loss of reputation. Therefore the perception is that men have to ‘deceive’ girls into having sex with them. Young mothers themselves attributed early pregnancy directly to male deception and harassment.

“When we are girls, men harass us and since we are girls we accept all the things they say, without knowing or thinking the problem we are going to have. At that age girls don’t know how to use condoms and that is why they get pregnant.” (Adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

“Men harass little girls. They fill their minds with wrong ideas and girls believe all the things they tell them – so many beautiful things. And [men] only do it to get what they want from the girls.” (Adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“Lack of family support, they do not accept their parents’ advice when they are in love and believe the promises of their boyfriends.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

5.5 Impacts of early pregnancy on the lives of adolescent girls

Responses to how having children at an early age impacts a girl’s life were overwhelmingly negative. Overall, the common narrative that emerged was about coming to terms with missed opportunities and sadness over aspirations and dreams that will now not likely be realised. Young mothers mentioned skipping life stages, the loss of reputation, dropping out of education, casting aside their aspirations, a loss of self-esteem and the support of the family, and being thrown out of the house.

“Their lives and goals are blocked and their dreams just stopped.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“If they get pregnant it is because in that case for people that girl is worth nothing, she is of no value.” (Miskito adolescent girl)

“In my case, I already had my plans made. I wanted to go to university [but when I had] my daughter I thought, ‘Here I am... a girl raising another girl’. It was like having a bucket of cold water thrown over me.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“One of the impacts for a girl who gets pregnant is getting sick, because her body is not well developed. [Also] economic issues because if the father abandons the girl she would have to find a way to cover her daughter’s expenses.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“When their children grow up they will not have the moral authority to ask them to study if they [themselves] did not do it. It is a girl raising another girl and that is wrong. Furthermore, they are spoiling their youth.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“In my case, I had a depression so I wanted to take something not to have [my son]. But I reflected and I decided to have [the baby], but I had to give my son to the Ministry of the Family because I was very young. You also have to stop studying because other people can make fun and then you stop going to class.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“[Young mothers] are also more vulnerable to violence... The pressure they feel when they realise that nobody supports them.” (Miskito adolescent girl, married, Puerto Cabezas)

Adolescent girls who experienced early pregnancy feel that certain life stages have been taken away from them. With early pregnancy, many respondents also mentioned the risk of death for mother and baby, as well as birth defects in the baby.

“There are many risks of losing your life at birth. For example, I had heavy bleeding when I had my son when I was 15.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Managua)

“They have problems with diseases or their children are born with diseases and after that they regret what they have done.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

Young mothers discussed feelings of isolation on account of being unable to continue studying and spending most of their time at home with their child, leaving them with little time to get ahead. They reported feeling disconnected from their friends and social circles compared to girls their age who do not have children.

“We do not have a normal life because we think about what has happened to us.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Our self-esteem is not the same.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“We make the men uncomfortable because they have abused someone who comes from the family.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“I would like to fill this loneliness. The family does not give us the love we need.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Another young mother said the biggest challenge girls her age face is problems in the home and the lack of support from the father of the child. She herself is left struggling to provide for her son and is humiliated within her own family.

“They don’t take care of my son. They don’t give me money to buy milk for my son, and all of that humiliates me. This is the biggest problem I have in my home. I want to leave

my home. I want to have my own home and live alone so I don't have these problems anymore." (Adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)



The most commonly used words in a focus group discussion with adolescent mothers in Managua highlight family, love and abuse.

5.6 Perceptions of boys regarding gender, inequality and drivers for early pregnancy

Adolescent boys themselves also acknowledge the restrictions placed on adolescent girls and how internalising the issues they face at home leads them to believe that life will be better elsewhere.

“From the age of 13 the inequality of treatment between girls and boys becomes more apparent. Girls are given less voice. Boys are taught that their ways of recreation are different than girls. Boys tend to be more sociable and learn how to defend themselves [and each other]. They cover each other’s backs and learn to overcome situations on their own.”

“Since girls and women are repressed, they try to find alternatives such as running away from home in search of better conditions. [They think] if they get married they will find a better life with more freedom. They also migrate to live with relatives in the city.”
(Adolescent boys, focus group discussion, Chontales)

“I would say that [girls get married] because of their solitude in their own families, because they are not listened to, or also because they follow the example of their mother, grandmother or sister who marry young.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“I [married] because I did not have the love of a parent or of my family and I looked for love in a man.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Some of them [marry] because they want to and others because they are forced by their parents, etc.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“Girls of my age try to get married because sometimes parents do not have the ability to afford [to keep them] so they think that if [they] get married they will not be a burden for their parents anymore.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“[Girls marry] because they do not want to be with their mothers, because their mothers fight with them.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“Maybe [they marry] because they are victims of domestic violence, mothers do not advise them, and the love they don’t find at home they find with their boyfriends or somewhere else.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

Respondents also told us that parents may force them to marry at young ages out of economic necessity or because a girl falls pregnant. Forty per cent of the girls surveyed agreed that early marriage can reduce a family’s financial burden.

The quality of family relationships, as well as the economic situation of families, plays a crucial role in whether a girl finds herself pregnant or married at an early age.

Considering the importance attributed to the family in earlier sections of this report, these findings suggest the family is a source of strength and vulnerability for a girl – and therefore a potential site for intervention and change.

Girls themselves suggested family interventions, such as “giving lectures to mothers and daughters about trust, projects or plans that involve dynamic activities between mothers and daughters” (adolescent girl, Boaco) as a potential solution.

Girls also spoke of generational attitudes and behaviours – passed down through generations from mothers and grandmothers and replicated by daughters.

“I think it is because their parents experienced the same situation or because they are forced by their parents. They don’t want to be at home, their self-esteem is low and they find a partner.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

Only two girls stated that girls marry early in order to have authority and power over their own lives. A significant amount of discussion was given to the idea that early marriage occurs because of threats, pressure and deception on the part of boyfriends.

“Boyfriends ask girls to have sex and if she says no they blackmail them, saying they no longer love them. The girls accept to demonstrate to their boyfriends that they really love them, which is why early pregnancies happen and they get married.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

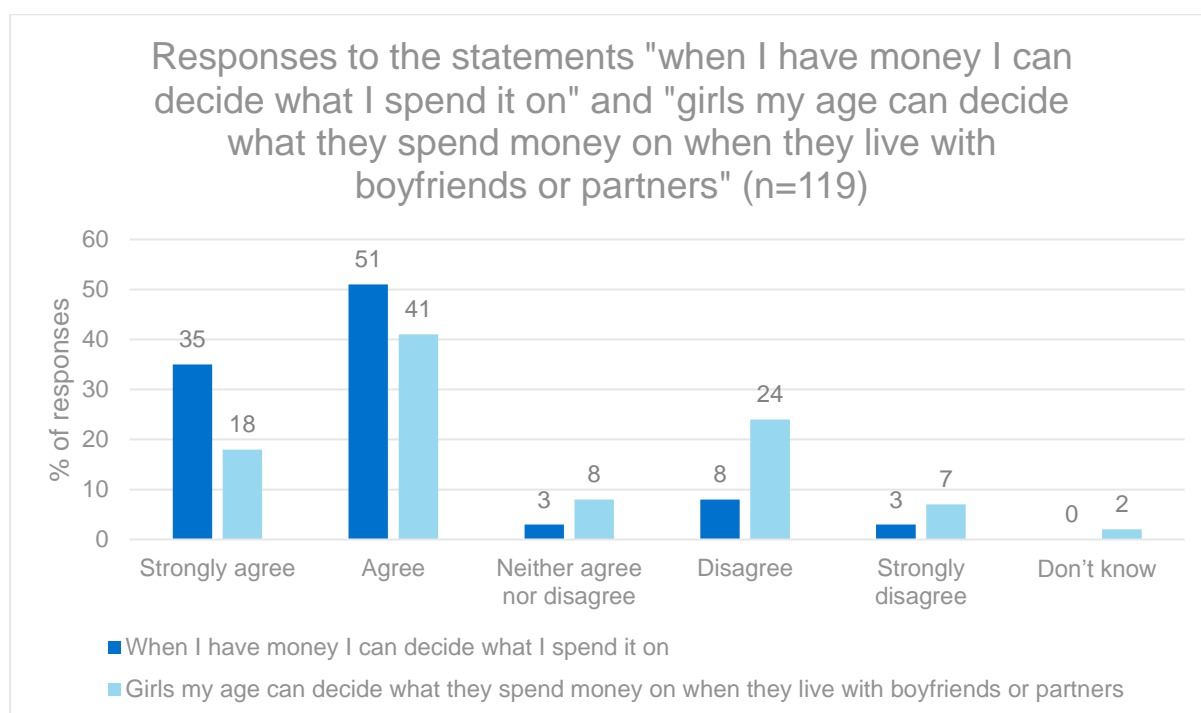
“Boyfriends ask their girlfriends to send them an intimate photo through the cellphone and then they threaten them if they don’t do what they want.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

Whereas adolescent girls suggest campaigns and awareness-raising programmes as potential solutions to problems within the family, there are very few suggestions for solutions to the problems of 'machismo' and inequality – indicating an important potential area for intervention for organisations working with adolescent girls.

6.2 Perceptions and experiences of decision-making in the household once married

Among all the adolescent girls surveyed, there was a perception that marriage involves a lack of autonomy, as well as loss of independence and freedom. The majority of those interviewed (86 per cent) agreed that they can spend their money as they wish. But this perception changes when asked if girls could spend money as they wished when they live with a boyfriend or partner; only 59 per cent still agreed with that statement.

Of adolescent girls who are actually married or living with a partner, only two of the 20 married girls said that they could not spend money as they wished and only three disagreed when asked if girls could spend money as they wished when they live with a boyfriend or partner.



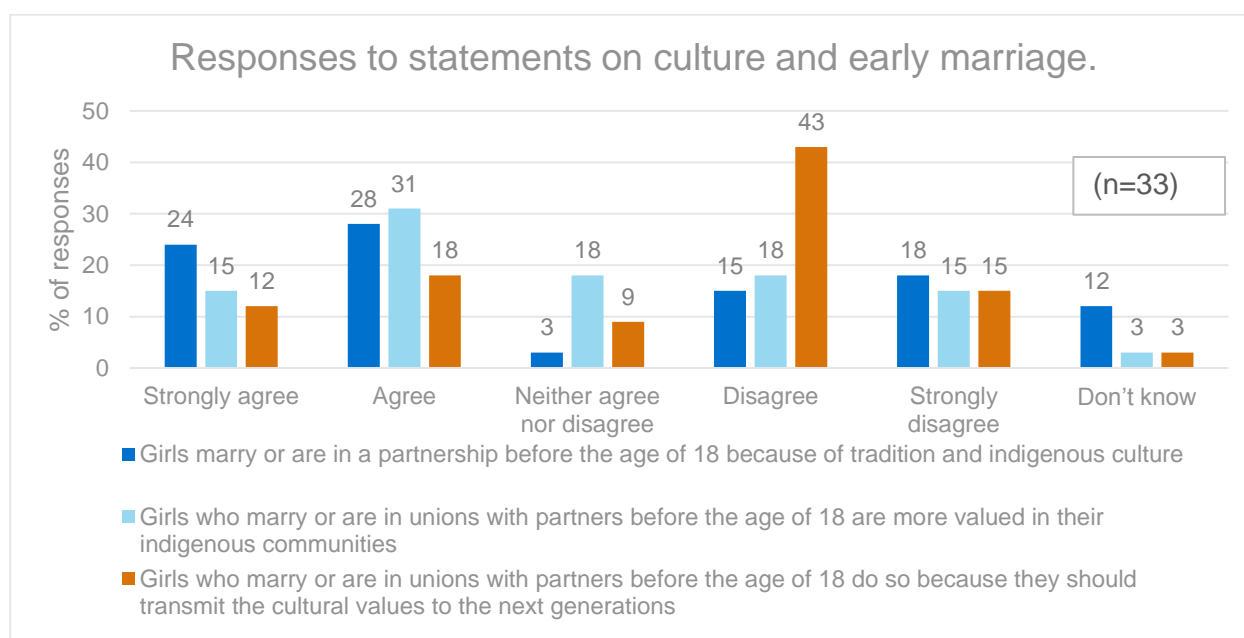
6.3 Reflections from married girls and girls living with a partner

A sub-set of 20 adolescent girls who were married or living with a partner were asked additional questions about early marriage, providing extra insight into their lived experience of being married at a young age.

Only 30 per cent thought that being married early meant that they are more valued by their families, while 55 per cent agreed that they have control over money in their household. However, 80 per cent stated that early marriage meant more violence in the home, and 70 per cent said that living with a partner before the age of 18 meant they would experience more violence.

A thread running through discussions around early marriage, early unions and pregnancies is that many girls perceive they will have a better life and opportunities if they leave their own home. However, they are then faced with frustration, disappointment and internal conflict when they find a lack of suitable alternatives to advance their life goals in their new homes as wives or mothers.

6.4 Indigenous culture and early marriage



Thirty-three of the adolescent girls who were surveyed were from indigenous communities and answered supplementary questions about early marriage and their culture. When asked if early marriage and partnerships were due to tradition and culture, more than half (52 per cent) agreed with this statement. Furthermore, 46 per cent agreed that early marriage and partnerships meant that the girls were more strongly valued in their communities. While this indicated the value of girls marrying in the Miskito culture, 48 per cent disagreed that these early marriages were based on the will to transmit cultural values to the next generation.

When asked why they thought girls got married or lived with a partner at a young age, Miskito adolescent girls responded similarly to other groups and reflected on the lack of support or love at home. More explicit in this group was the financial pressure placed on households, which can result in parents encouraging their daughters to get married to ease some of the financial burden.

Notable as well was the emphasis that adolescent girls put on being talked about in the community. In order to mitigate being the talk of the town, some girls felt the social pressure to marry. This way, their relationship is legitimised in the eyes of the community and as a result they are not labelled a 'bad' girl.

There is familial and social pressure on pregnant Miskito girls to marry in order to be accepted in the community. They also reported discrimination from their own community if they marry someone outside their culture. This often leads them to feel rejected and abandoned by their own family, compromising their support system and leaving them with fewer opportunities to decide.

Respondents said that Miskito girls marry early because they make bad decisions, get pregnant or face economic issues. While this was also true for all other groups of respondents, Miskito girls discussed the impact of a stage in an adolescent girl's life which they referred to as the 'crazy stage' – a reference to the powerful hormones experienced at this age which, at times, renders girls powerless.

"Their hormones are excited and when they see that their friends have a boyfriend they also want to have one." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

"Because of the problems we have at home or because of the duty we have, as women, to have the child of a man." (Adolescent mother, Puerto Cabeza)

"Girls of my age try to get married because sometimes parents do not have the ability to afford their needs, so they think that if we get married they will not be a burden for their parents anymore." (Adolescent mother, Puerto Cabeza)

"Well, I think it is because girls think it is normal and they don't know the problems they are getting into." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

"When they are in love they get married. Sometimes when they have a boyfriend girls get pregnant and parents force them to get married. They also do it out of need, when they do not have their parents' support." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

"It happens because maybe when a girl gets pregnant her mother forces her to get married." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

"Actually our culture advises girls to stay in the church, to stay at school, but girls get pregnant because they disobey their father and mother." (Adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

"When the [Miskito] girl gets pregnant without having been sexually abused she is rejected by the family and forced to live with her boyfriend or partner – and so we have to quit school and dedicate to serving our husband and children." (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabeza)

6.5 How early marriages and early unions impact girls' lives

Sixty-four per cent of all girls surveyed stated that early marriage can impede a girl's education, with 25 per cent strongly agreeing. Of the 15 adolescent girls who answered this question and currently have a child, all agreed with this statement.

Leaving education was a key element when discussing the impact of early marriage, either as a result of pregnancy and the demands of childcare or because their partner forbids them from attending school.

Adolescent girls also mentioned the isolation that marriage may entail, as they are cut off from family and friends. Feelings of loneliness were regularly discussed in focus groups with young mothers. This was further evidenced when exploring the characteristics of adolescent girls who reported that they had no one to talk to when they had a problem. Four of the 12 girls with no support were young mothers.

Of the 20 girls who were married or in early unions, 16 agreed that girls who marry young are more likely to experience violence in the home. These findings, while on a small scale, provide valuable insights into the impact of early marriages and early unions on young women's lives:

an education cut short, facing an increased risk of domestic violence and increased levels of isolation.

6.6 Perceptions of unmarried girls on the impact of early marriage

“Since they are very young they can be victims of violence. Maybe her father and mother reject her and so she also suffers violence. Nobody loves her and everybody is against her.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“Sometimes they get married on a whim and the worst part is that sometimes marriage doesn’t last because they get married too young... Over time they may regret what they have done but it is too late. Some others do it because they are interested in money and when they see that a man has money they decide to get married to live like a queen.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“First, they have responsibilities. Having fun is not the same and they cannot chat with friends.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“They cannot finish their studies and they have to be subject to their partner’s decisions. They have to obey what they say.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

SECTION 7

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

The findings in this section look at issues of safety and violence against women and girls in public and private spaces, including the risks that adolescent girls face compared to boys, their perceptions and experiences of reporting violence, and their reflections on who is responsible for addressing it. Ending violence against women and girls is an important component of SDGs 5 and 11 and integral to the advancement of the rights of girls and women.

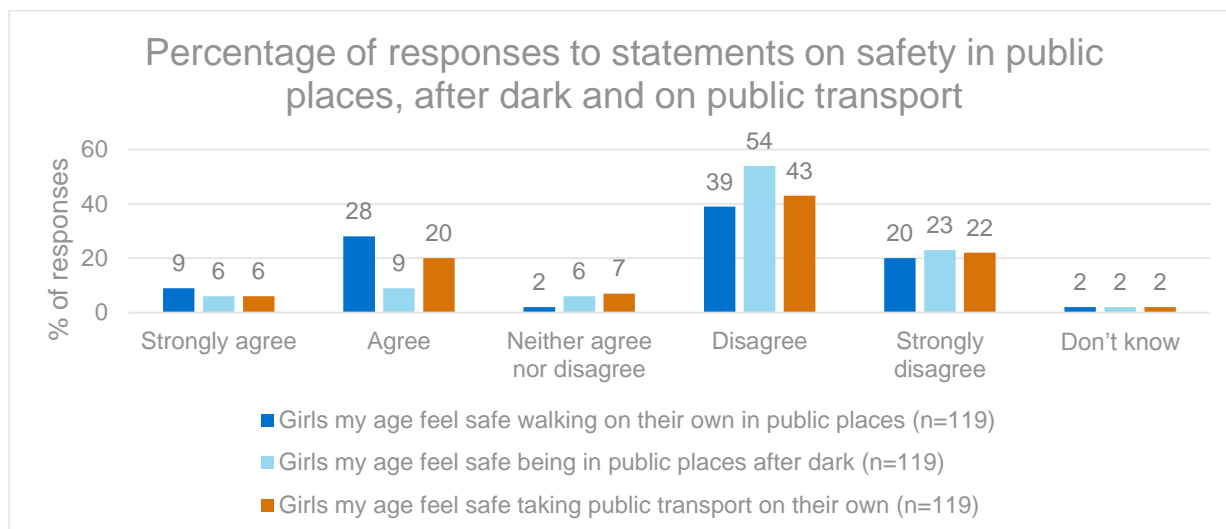
When it comes to safety, the research findings were stark. The adolescent girls surveyed reported not feeling safe after dark, on public transport, or walking on their own in public places. This sense of fear also extended to their relationships and homes.

Violence and safety were consistent and recurring themes throughout the interviews and group discussions with the adolescent girls. They repeatedly cited sexual, physical, verbal and emotional violence, as well as both sexual harassment and rape. Sexual harassment and rape were also identified as some of the greatest challenges that adolescent girls in Nicaragua face.

7.1 Public places were not perceived as safe places

Violence on the streets was a commonly stated type of violence – and sexual harassment and catcalls were frequently mentioned. Adolescent girls told us that some men target naive girls who will believe their lies. The majority of respondents – 59 per cent – said that they did not feel safe walking on their own in public places and the large majority – 77 per cent – said that they did not feel safe in public places after dark. Most – 65 per cent – said that they did not feel safe taking public transport. As a result, the freedom of adolescent girls is restricted; 83 per cent agree that they have to ask permission to take public transport and/or go to public places.

“The biggest issue takes place at school, churches and in the streets because at our age, all men harass us with catcalls.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)



7.2 Violence and the fear of violence in relationships, homes, schools and communities

The most commonly discussed type of violence mentioned by adolescent girls was physical, emotional and verbal abuse from family members. This violence often stems from disputes and misunderstandings.

“In the family they tell us ‘you are good for nothing, you are useless, I do it better.’ In my community girls hear things like: ‘ugly, fat’ or if you are thin they tell you: ‘dried tortilla, dwarf and black’ and if you are white they tell you ‘white bread’.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

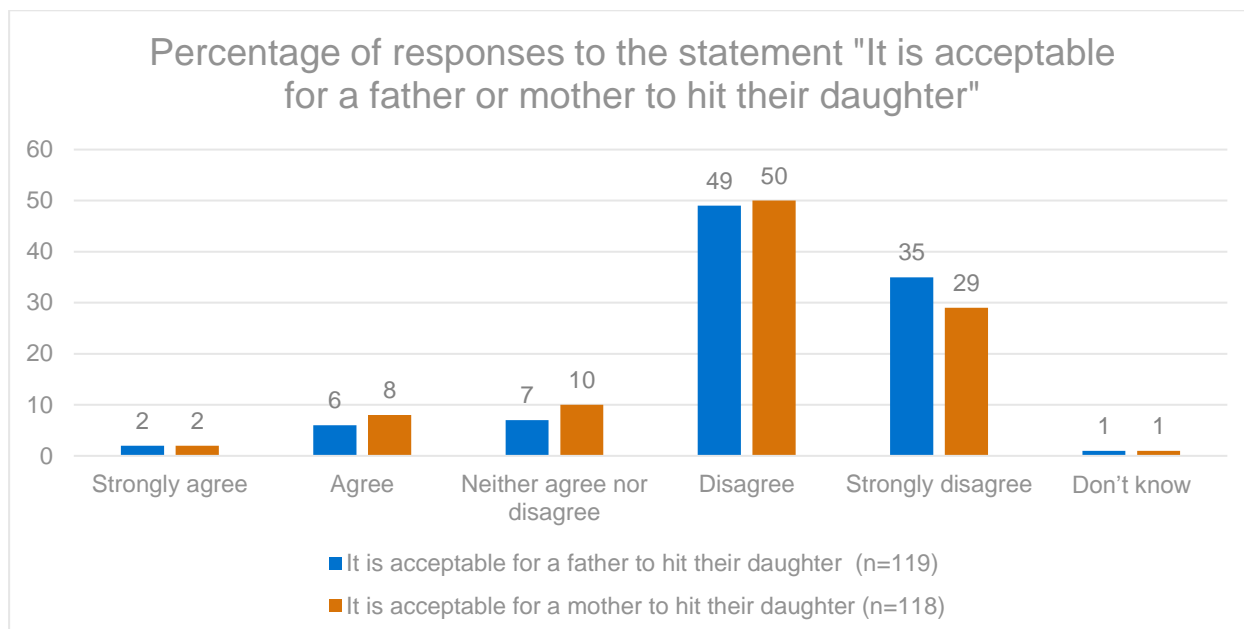
“[Girls] are abused at home and in the community. Some of them are raped and the consequence is that girls start living with a boy and leave home. There is no communication or trust with their parents since when we talk about sexuality they think we are dating somebody or that something may happen (pregnancy).” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

“Living in a house with violence is like hell.” (Adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“Girls suffer sexual abuse, physical abuse and bribery... male teachers offer them money or seduce them to pass their classes and if they refuse, teachers deduct points or make them leave school.” (Adolescent boys, focus group discussion, Boaco)

“They hit us for no reason... they tell me that I do not do things right.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Included in the survey was a question about whether it is acceptable for parents to hit their daughters. The majority of the girls questioned disagreed that it is acceptable for fathers or mothers to hit their daughters (84 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively). The girls who agreed that it was acceptable for parents to hit their daughters felt it was slightly more acceptable for mothers than fathers. Some girls reasoned that being hit by their mothers was a mother's way of demonstrating their love and care for their child.



Tolerance levels increased when considering violence within a relationship. Forty-three per cent of all respondents agreed that it is sometimes acceptable for a boy to hit or use violence against his girlfriend or wife and 44 per cent disagreed, making this question almost evenly split.

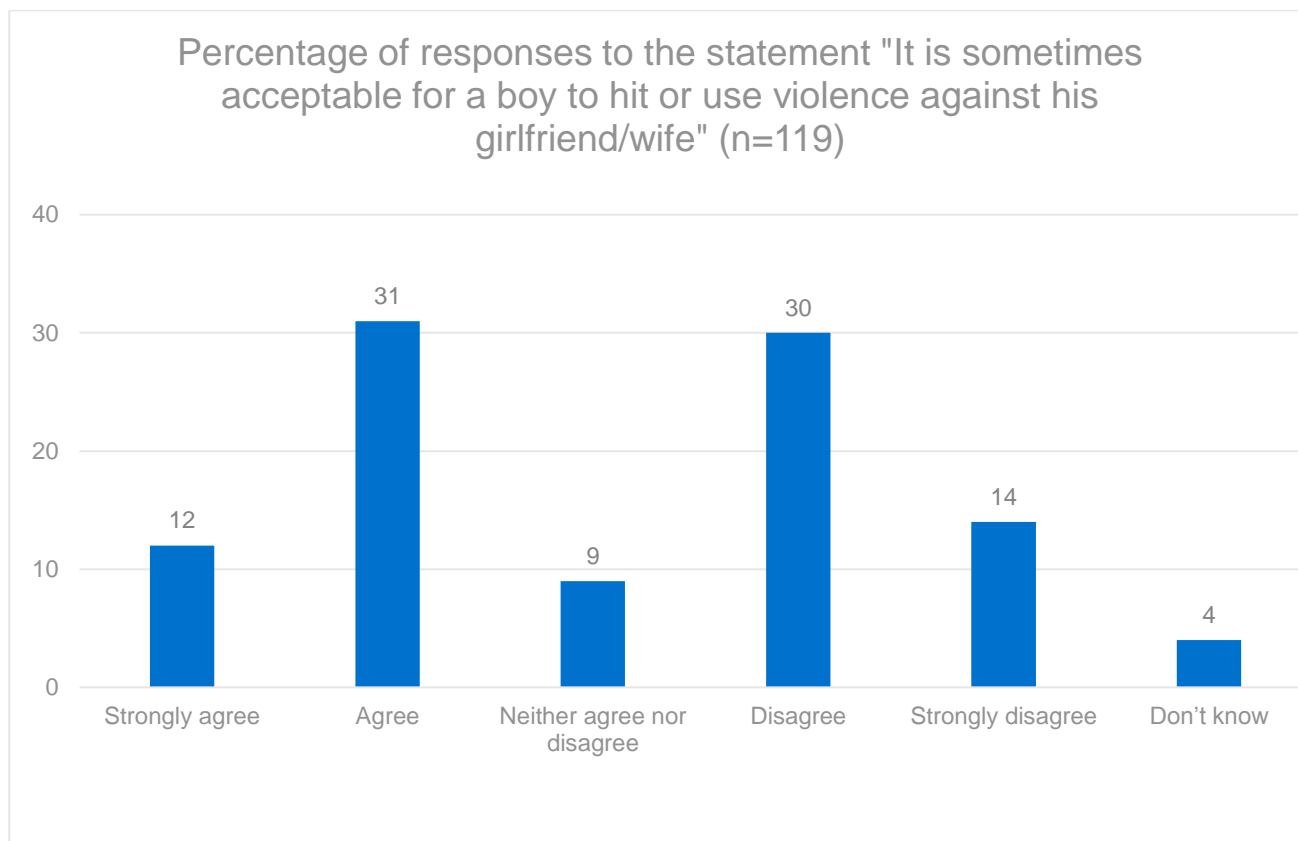
This perception was backed up by the smaller sample of married respondents. Of the 20 married adolescent girls, 10 strongly agreed and four agreed with the following statement: 'Girls who live with a partner at a young age are more likely to experience violence in the home.'

One of the central reasons respondents gave to explain why girls marry young in Nicaragua was to escape violent or abusive family relationships. Sadly, the trajectory of abuse starting out in the family home appears to resurface in the lives of the girls interviewed who are in early marriages or early unions. Although 85 per cent of all girls disagreed that women put up with violence from their husbands in order to keep their family together, verbatim responses from married girls or those in early unions reveal that violence happens and is in fact often tolerated:

"Our greatest problem is when we get involved with a man at an early age and they don't treat us well. They hit us and we stay with him despite all the things they do to us."
(Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

When this respondent was asked further about why she thinks this is the case, and if anything can be done to overcome this challenge, she answered:

"Because we don't think things through and get into trouble for not listening to what our mothers say. For that reason we find a lot of problems. To overcome challenges we must seek the help of older people and find the way to get ahead... Maybe working."



Rape and sexual abuse were mentioned as among the biggest and most pressing challenges that adolescent girls in Nicaragua face. The reasons for this range from men being evil, to girls wearing inappropriate clothing or being where they should not be, to parents not taking enough care of their children or girls not listening to their parents.

Some respondents suggested that rape exists because “this is the way things are,” illustrating a sense of normalisation. In discussion groups, young mothers frequently mentioned rape as a central risk facing girls their age and also referenced the difficulties they have in recovering emotionally from these experiences.

“It is something you never forget... Even when you try to forget you cannot. Memories come back of the times when a member of your family was selling you to other men.”
(Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Rape and abuse from parents are the biggest challenges. They try to touch girls and offend them with vulgar words.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur) When asked if anything can be done to overcome these challenges, the same girl said: “Yes, sensitising men to the fact that if women dress like that it does not mean they are bums and they deserve respect.”

“Being raped by their father, stepfather, brothers, stepbrothers or neighbours.”
(Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Sexual abuse because there are bad men and maybe they commit [sexual abuse] because they like girls or to do evil... This is what happens in these times.”
(Adolescent girl, Boaco)

7.3 Perceptions on the particular risks facing adolescent girls

In group discussions, adolescent boys and adolescent girls were asked to reflect on the comparative risks adolescent girls face relative to adolescent boys. The discussion with adolescent boys made clear that they were aware of the specific dangers that adolescent girls face on account of being female and young. They identified rape as one of the biggest risks, however there was a perception that the risk largely depended on how girls dress and care for themselves. Reflection on the responsibility of boys and men is notably missing.

“Sexual rape depends on [girls’] self-care and clothing.” (Adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Chontales)

“Girls have economic problems, get pregnant and work. That is why they drop out school.” (Adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Chontales)

“Girls have more risks because evildoers may rape them and if they show resistance they can even kill them, while boys have fewer risks.” (Miskito adolescent boy, focus group discussion, Puerto Cabezas)

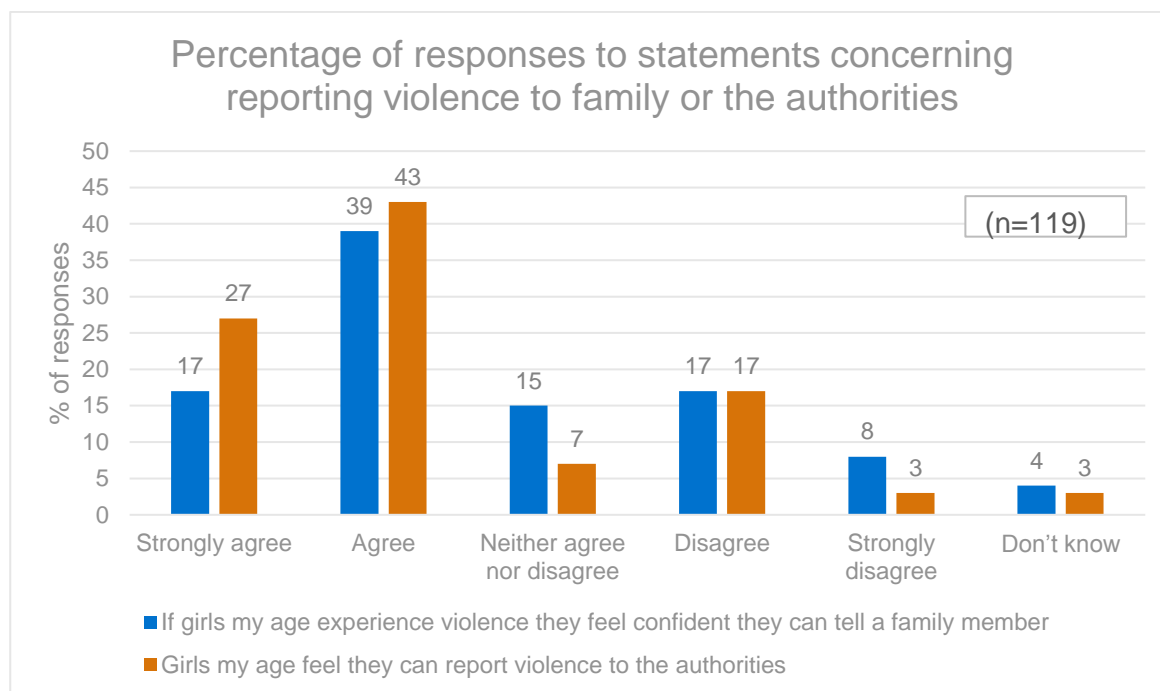
In a focus group discussion with adolescent girls from San Rafael del Sur, respondents reported the types of violence that girls are exposed to compared to boys and why they think this is. Take the following interaction, for example:

Adolescent girl: “They are raped because we do not take care of ourselves and because of our mode of dress – for example, wearing short shorts. Men take advantage of this and they show their sickness.”

Facilitator: “And why are girls more exposed to this type of violence compared to boys?”

Adolescent girl: “Because boys have more rights. Boys receive more support than girls from the family. For example, boys can go out of the house and get back at 10pm, while girls cannot be out later than 7pm. [They] cannot go out to parties or trips and if they do, they need chaperones. Girls are at greater risks in the streets – this has turned to a paranoia transmitted to girls.”

7.4 Perceptions on reporting violence



The large majority of the girls interviewed (85 per cent) agreed that sexual abuse should be reported and that they know where to go in the community to report violence (83 per cent). However, girls felt significantly more capable of reporting violence to the authorities (70 per cent) than telling a family member (56 per cent), indicating a perceived risk associated with telling a family member.

Attributes of girls who did not feel confident reporting violence to a family member

Of the 25 per cent of adolescent girls who disagreed that they feel confident telling a family member if they experience violence (29 adolescent girls of the whole sample) nine were from Managua, three from Puerto Cabezas, seven from San Rafael del Sur, and ten from Boaco. Overall 20 of the 29 girls were aged between 15 and 16, indicating that younger adolescents feel less confident in reporting violence to a family member. It is also worth noting that of the seven who currently have children; three had their child between the ages of 13 and 14, two between the ages of 15 and 16, and two between the ages of 18 and 19.

Although respondents perceive that abuse and rape *should* be reported, this is not always the case. In interviews and group discussions, they told us that in fact adolescent girls do not always report rape because they feel they will not be believed, and worry about the negative stigma of reporting rape and/or potential backlash they might face from family, friends or the perpetrator. While there is recognition that reporting rape is the right thing to do, in practice girls often keep silent.

“When it happens to us we do not tell anyone and we keep it with us. Because the mind of men is quite high, we are not in a safe place. Men do not feel satisfied with their wives and they want someone else. Of course not all of them are like that.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

Asked if anything can be done to overcome these challenges, the respondent said:

“Yes, being able to speak and tell the police and so give a solution to the problem.”

Another respondent added:

“One of the problems is violence at home, at school and in streets. Because now you can see that violence is the trend. Even parents abuse their children and it takes girls to the point of taking their own lives.” (Miskito adolescent mother, Puerto Cabezas)

Asked if anything can be done to overcome these challenges, the same respondent said:

“Breaking the silence and telling other people what the abused person is going through.”

Other girls agreed that part of the solution is breaking the silence and feeling empowered to report the problem when it happens.

“Discrimination in the family, in the street, violence and rape *are the biggest issues girls my age face*. I have faced it, and not only me, all of us have faced violence and discrimination.” In asking if anything can be done to overcome these challenges this girl said:

“Yes, turning to someone, talking to someone, but that someone must be reliable.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Yes, being empowered and making people talk about this in school so they know what to do and how to behave.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

These quotes, considered in the context that the large majority of girls know they should report rape and abuse and where to report it, illustrate the gap between what girls perceive should be happening and what is actually happening.

The practice of *tala mana*

Miskito adolescent girls were asked questions about their culture and traditions, including which practices they feel put girls at risk. In both interviews and group discussions, adolescent girls said they felt the practice of *tala mana*, described by one respondent below, was a risk.

“When a girl gets pregnant as a result of rape, our parents do not make any complaint or follow any process through the courts. They practise the *tala mana* – which means the parents come to an economic agreement with the abuser and so the offence is compensated and not reported to authorities.” (Miskito adolescent girl)

Girls overwhelmingly disagreed with this practice and its continuation and felt that it sent a clear message to communities of the low value placed on girls, which in turn increased their risk in relation to sexual abuse and rape. To avoid or eradicate such negative or harmful practices, adolescent girls spoke of the need to raise awareness of its harmful effects with community leaders and elders. They also discussed challenging the discriminatory attitudes and actions that cultivate a dangerous, harmful and high-risk environment for girls.

“In order to change negative cultural practices such as *tala mana* we need our parents and leaders to be more trained – not just us – and we need to be taught together so that everyone can handle the same information and we can have better communications with our parents.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

Asked who is responsible for protecting girls, respondents said parents, family, the community, leaders and council of elders. Asked if those people were fulfilling their role of protection, they responded:

“Sometimes yes, but sometimes no because there are still families who practise *tala mana* and it affects girls.”

7.5 Perceptions on addressing violence against women and girls

While violence is a clear threat reported by most of the adolescent girls interviewed, it is positive to note that they largely believe something can be done to improve this situation. However, a clear dichotomy emerges in the responses regarding gender-based violence and wider gender norms. Two polar perceptions emerge, one that negates the notion that girls themselves should restrict their movement or monitor how they dress and one that places the responsibility of mitigating violence against women firmly on girls’ shoulders.

On one hand, some respondents challenged the normalisation of violence and advocated for boys, men, the community, schools and the state to actively address gender-based rights violations. Furthermore, they called on these actors to contribute to supportive relationships, spaces, systems and structures that promote equality for girls and women.

“One of the problems is violence at home, at school and in streets because since they are girls their rights are not respected, they are violated... Because now you can see that violence is the trend, even parents abuse their children and it takes girls to the point of taking their own lives.”

Facilitator: When you are outside home: who should protect us or who should be there?

“The police, neighbours, community members.” (Adolescent girls in discussion with facilitator, San Rafael del Sur)

“Report to the police and the Commissioner for Women so that children have a better life.” (Miskito adolescent girl, Puerto Cabezas)

“Giving advice to the community, a meeting in the schools to tell them not to criticise people because all of us make mistakes and nobody is perfect.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Giving lectures to mothers and daughters about trust, projects or plans that involve dynamic activities between mothers and daughters so both of them learn why they are acting that way and find a solution that benefits both of them, so none of them makes a mistake.” (Adolescent girl, Boaco)

“Implementing a law to ensure our safety.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“Workshops can be conducted with all the girls, showing them and giving them assurance so they can talk.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Take or receive psychological treatment to help her forget what happened so she does not continue to be traumatised.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

A contrasting perception places responsibility on girls. Respondents told us that incidences of sexual abuse, violence and risky sexual relations can be avoided if *girls* change by moderating their own behaviour, dressing appropriately, and restricting their presence in public places. Some went as far as suggesting that it is a girl’s own fault for ending up in a violent situation as she did not listen to her parents or mother.

To overcome these problems, respondents said that adolescent girls should take responsibility for themselves and ‘behave’ better, including learning to defend themselves from men, not going out at night, dressing more appropriately and listening to parents. Little was said about changing attitudes regarding the acceptability of violence towards women.

“Parents [should] not let their daughters go out alone in the night.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

“Not having a boyfriend at an early age because it causes trouble.” (Adolescent girl, San Rafael del Sur)

The two opposing attitudes are represented in a song and a poem written by adolescent girls during focus group discussions in San Rafael del Sur.

The poem, written from the perspective of an outside watcher, describes a beautiful woman who – like a flower – should be protected. In the song, the girl is becoming a leader, spreading her wings and calling for an end to sexual harassment.

These two inconsistent attitudes coexist and frame the everyday experiences of these adolescent girls as well as their responses, indicating the shape of the problem that is to be overcome and the outline of its own resolution.

Poem written by adolescent girls during a focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur

*Oh desired woman
Oh lovely woman
When we walk along the streets
They fall in love with you*

*You’re pretty and strong
You deserve the best
You should be treated
Like a pretty flower*

*Sweet and lovely
Admired and unprotected
You are a flower that should
Be protected*

*Sweet as honey
Admired and unprotected
But enchanting as the stars
Those who criticise you
It’s because they see your beauty!*

Song written by adolescent girls during a focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur

Dreaming

*A girl was dreaming, dreaming about poetry, on her way towards becoming the leader of her community
She felt she walking through a profound dream, the girl extended her wings
She wants to be respected by the rest, and they want to help other girls to move forward and not to look back and work together to be free of sexual harassment
We want to stop this
It's for all our safety*

Song written by adolescent Miskito girls during a focus group discussion, Puerto Cebzas

Raise your hands girls, now

It's our chance to decide to change our community

Our beautiful community of Miskito girls and boys

Today we are speaking up and exercising our rights

We are the ones in charge of bringing about change and equal rights.

A discussion group with adolescent boys in Chontales also generated poems and songs to support girls in realising their rights. These illustrated a clear desire from adolescent boys to support girls' rights and gender equality. Also clear is the message that adolescent boys should become allies and advocates for adolescent girls, with the outcome of "everything being more decent," with less violence and fewer tensions within the family.

Poem: "The power of girls"

*The power of girls, more than strength, more than organisation is equality.
A way of thinking, a way to express something tremendous, something notable.
It is about being what we really are and how we want to be.
Without discrimination, with equality.
Without low self-esteem, with courage.
Without timidity, let's fight together.
The power of girls is more than an organisation.*

Song: "Song of equal rights"

If I had the power to change differences between boys and girls everything would be different. Everything could be more decent, when we express ourselves in front of people we could feel a lot a more positive atmosphere, everything in our family wouldn't be so intense, there would be less discussion, less fighting with our fathers and mothers.

SECTION 8

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The findings of this research – covering the themes of enabling environment, household chores, education, early pregnancy, early marriage/early unions and violence in the public and private spheres – provide insight into the lived realities of a diverse set of adolescent girls in Nicaragua. Through examining these themes, exploring both the experiences and perceptions of adolescent girls, a clear sense emerges of the specific challenges they face, and how this impacts on their progress, relationships, life opportunities and their wellbeing. This section presents the key discussion points for each section, along with recommendations.

8.1 Individual aspirations and opportunities to advance in life

The drive and determination of adolescent girls in Nicaragua to succeed in life is highlighted by their ability to clearly identify their life goals and outline what actions need to be put in place to achieve those goals. The adolescent girls interviewed have clear ideas about the progress they would like to make in life. However, they overwhelmingly said that they needed more opportunities to achieve their goals.

They said that they face significant barriers when attempting to achieve their goals and realise their rights, often having to negotiate internal and external factors (relationships, home environment, educational system, lack of economic resources), which either support personal development or block progress.

A strong sense of self-esteem and self-confidence seems to be present among the girls surveyed, contributing to their sense of wellbeing. Their well thought-out and thorough reflections on life goals – by which it is clear that these adolescent girls are aiming to achieve and advance in their lives – indicate that the majority have a concrete sense of agency. These girls know what they want to achieve and why.

However, the challenges they face in achieving these life goals indicate that internal dimensions of the household and the wellbeing of the family largely determine the extent to which adolescent girls can exercise self-efficacy.

8.2 The importance of the family as an enabling environment

Adolescent girls talked about the centrality of family in their lives, and how they placed high value on having a family member to talk to about their problems. On the other hand, many respondents described their home environment as troublesome. They reported being verbally abused and felt they lacked parental love and support.

The impact of these conditions and relationships within the family and household led to some adolescent girls transitioning to early unions, early marriages or early pregnancies against their will or before they felt ready. Respondents further reflected that the impact of these early transitions meant that the barriers and challenges they faced often increased and life became even harder. The young mothers and young wives surveyed made particular note of this.

Respondents clearly outlined that positive and supportive relationships with their parents and family are pivotal to increasing their chances to overcome the challenges they face and to achieve their goals. These supportive family relations are considered by adolescent girls as an effective way to increase their agency.

8.3 The importance of the community as an enabling environment

Overall, adolescent girls did not feel that their communities considered their concerns and interests. Girls from Miskito communities felt this particularly. In addition to feeling excluded because of their gender and age, they felt further discriminated because of their ethnic identity.

Most respondents felt their relationship with their community could be better. Many spoke of a sense of being monitored within their communities; for example, if girls were in public spaces members of the community would report back to their parents on who they were with, how they behaved and how they were dressed. This led to increased pressure from parents for adolescent girls to stay at home. Respondents felt strongly that adolescent boys do not face the same restrictions of movement nor are they exposed to the same level of criticism from the community.

8.4 Women community leaders as role models

Overall, adolescent girls had positive perceptions of female community leaders. While most believed that women make as capable leaders as men, a small proportion still felt that men are the natural leaders. There were positive reflections on the importance of having women community leaders. Adolescent girls perceived women leaders to be more concerned about issues that affect women and girls, particularly in relation to mitigating violence against women and girls in their communities.

The research highlighted that adolescent girls value the political participation of adult women leaders in the community, outlining that there is a better chance that women will represent their interests and concerns, and push for community environments that are more inclusive and supportive for girls to progress. These perceptions highlight the potential of fostering positive relations between younger and older women community leaders. This could provide adolescent girls with increased opportunities to have their concerns heard and acted upon in the community while strengthening intergenerational relationships.

8.5 Gender norms

The experiences and perceptions of adolescent girls regarding household chores and care expose a range of contradictions. Asked if chores were evenly distributed among genders in the household, adolescent girls said yes, acknowledging that adolescent boys also carry out chores. However, further exploration during group discussions revealed that girls feel boys spend far less time than they do on chores and tasks. Focus groups with boys also agreed, saying they spend less time on chores but justifying this by saying that the chores girls do are 'light' while boys' duties require more strength.

Adolescent boys also agreed that because they spend less time on chores they have more free time than girls. This enables them to spend more time with their friends, study and use their time as they please. Boys reported that they are not confined in the same way as girls. Interestingly, one of the reasons boys felt they dealt better with life's challenges was because they had more freedom of movement and more chances to be with their friends, which they felt helped in overcoming problems at home.

Adolescent girls also acknowledged this, saying that boys get over things more easily as they are out with their friends – they can forget about their problems more easily, while this is more difficult for girls because they spend more time at home and are not able to spend as much time with their friends which they felt would serve to alleviate their concerns and pressures.

There was a clear sense in the group discussions that a bias exists regarding how chores are divided among brothers and sisters. When asked who should be responsible for redistributing the tasks evenly, the responsibility was almost always directed at mothers. A smaller group of adolescent girls said it was the responsibility of both parents, and one girl said that fathers should lead by example and start taking on more responsibility in the household.

The message from adolescent girls is clear: chores need to be more equally distributed, taking into consideration time spent, and parents need to take an active role in this redistribution.

While looking at the time spent on chores is an important factor in understanding unequal gender relations in the household, due consideration also needs to be given to the fact that many girls report their homes as spaces that are violent and where relationships result in girls feeling undervalued and unloved. In particular, many young mothers and wives said that escaping their family and home life was what led them to their current situation.

Therefore, an unequal distribution of chores and an unequal distribution of the time spent on chores have a direct consequence on the wellbeing of girls, because chores force them to spend time in environments in which they do not feel safe. These physical restrictions can also mean that adolescent girls lack the same opportunities as adolescent boys to take care of their emotional and mental wellbeing.

8.6 Education and pathways to empowerment

The importance of education at the late adolescent stage of a girl's life was strongly linked to feelings of becoming more capable, self-confident and to the idea of 'being someone.' Adolescent girls acknowledged the value of being taught core subjects such as Spanish and mathematics, and linked this with increasing their knowledge and their opportunities in life. Respondents also linked the value of education to increasing awareness of their rights.

Miskito adolescent girls, in particular, linked the education of women to reducing levels of violence in the home. They also talked of school as an environment where values that might be taught at home were reinforced.

Overall, participants in the survey shared a positive perception of the education they received. However, when exploring the different experiences of adolescent girls according to their identity – as young mothers or as members of the Miskito community, for example – the picture changes.

Young mothers said that they found it difficult to stay in school once they had a child due to lack of childcare. Some found it difficult to attend while pregnant or return after giving birth because of stigma and the negative attitudes of classmates. Young mothers also discussed the lack of understanding among teachers for the particular challenges they face and felt some awareness and understanding would go a long way to making them feel more included and motivated.

Miskito adolescent girls also talked about the barriers that coming from a rural community present. They felt the quality of their education is compromised, referencing dissatisfaction with the State's provision of education for Miskito people, and drawing the conclusion that it is below par compared to the rest of the country.

Furthermore, the rural education system does not provide them with effective teaching with regard to learning Spanish, which is pivotal for comprehension and advancing in high school. This lower level of fluency results in them being mocked and teased. This stigmatised them and made them feel discriminated against, leading to them wanting to drop out of school, and therefore limiting their life opportunities.

Both young mothers and Miskito girls felt their relationship with the educational system – teachers, quality and access – sidelines their specific needs. The one-size-fits-all approach to education leaves them unsatisfactorily catered for. These are important findings for further reflection, as the education system and policies are potentially not adequately catering for diverse needs and instead contributing to relational ways in which exclusion of certain groups is replicated.

8.7 Early pregnancy

A range of factors increases the risk of girls becoming pregnant at an early age, according to the respondents in the survey. This includes cycles of violent relationships, rape and sexual abuse, lack of parental support, feelings of loneliness, and unbalanced power relations that result in girls being unable to successfully negotiate condom use or resist pressure to engage in sexual relations without consent.

The respondents acknowledged that efforts are in place to help reduce the incidence of early pregnancy, such as sexual and reproductive health information provided in schools, information and advice on sexual relations from mothers, and access to health centres where they can get contraceptives. However, adolescent girls felt that the knowledge they receive could be more effective and practical, giving them more clarity on exactly what works well, why and how. Gaining access to contraceptives is also complicated by the stigma that adolescent girls perceive and have experienced if they are discovered making the request at health centres.

However, and very importantly, many of the factors involved in avoiding early pregnancy are not as tangible as access to information or contraception. For example, power relations, sexual abuse and rape and issues of consent need to be at the centre of awareness-raising efforts to reduce early pregnancy. These issues are widely reported by all adolescent girls regardless of their identity or position in society. Such unequal power relations with boyfriends, partners and husbands can be seen in the high proportion of adolescent girls who report that adolescent boys will not use condoms if asked. This is a significant factor when considering the risk of early pregnancy and also of contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

Young mothers strongly advocated for better care, support, advice and communications with their parents (particularly their mothers) and felt that if these positive and supportive relationships were in place, fewer girls would rush to leave home in search of the attention and love missing from their lives. Unhealthy relationships between parents and daughters were clearly identified as a driver for girls to transition to marriage and motherhood before they are ready mentally, physically and emotionally. This early transition results in girls skipping life stages, restricting their life choices and curtailing their dreams.

More urgent and focused work with adolescent boys is necessary with regard to where responsibility lies for girls getting pregnant at a young age. There was a stark lack of reflection from adolescent boys on their own attitudes, behaviours and actions. Girls also reported feeling “tricked” into sexual relations. Working with men and boys in particular on the acceptability of manipulating girls to concede and “prove their love” continues to need more attention in programme work.

8.8 Early marriage and early unions

Relationships and the environment at home were found to be important factors contributing to early marriages and early unions. Girls who feel mistreated, unloved and lonely at home seek ways to flee their home environment and are more at risk of marrying young or getting involved in early unions. The perception that their situation will improve with this new beginning is often more disappointing in reality. The evidence suggests that girls who marry young are more likely to drop out of school and experience violence in the home, perpetuating a cycle of discontent, frustration, isolation and increased exposure to violent relationships.

Generally, the adolescent girls surveyed shared the perception that early marriage and unions restricts a girl's life opportunities, increasing her risk of school drop-out and increasing her risk of experiencing violence in the home. The perception of all respondents, including those who were married, is that things get harder for adolescent girls once they are married.

The idea that marrying young can reduce a family's economic burden is still widely prevalent, particularly among Miskito adolescent girls. Miskito culture and social norms firmly shape adolescent girls' perception of early marriage – with roughly half of respondents in that group reporting that cases of early marriage are influenced by culture and tradition and that marriage means girls are more valued by their community. Some of the Miskito adolescent girls emphasised this value and defined marriage as their ultimate life goal.

More work could be concentrated on the assumptions girls have about what marrying young or entering into an early union will bring to their lives, including what they believe the outcomes will be and what the outcomes actually are.

8.9 Experience and perceptions of violence

The adolescent girls in this research report the threat of violence everywhere: in their communities, homes and relationships. Their attitudes and perceptions regarding why they are exposed to these risks are split. Some adolescent girls assume the blame themselves, saying the way to stay safe is to avoid exposure to violence and not invite it into their lives or homes. These respondents specified dressing appropriately and staying at home and off the streets as ways to avoid getting pregnant. These attitudes strengthen the notion that it is girls who must take responsibility for ensuring their safety and further confirm norms regarding where girls should and shouldn't be.

The contrasting perception provides a more holistic and critical analysis regarding who is responsible for violence against women and why this is the case. These respondents negate the notion that adolescent girls themselves should change and instead challenge the status quo by advocating for boys, men, the community and the State to address gender-based rights violations. Furthermore, they call on these actors to contribute to supportive relationships, spaces, systems and structures that promote equality for girls and women.

An exploration of the perceptions of adolescent boys regarding the different risks adolescent girls face on account of their gender reveals a gap between discourse and critical self-reflection about attitudes and behaviours that contribute to violence. On one hand, adolescent boys articulated their wishes and hopes for girls to live in a world free from violence, where they are treated equally and gender equality becomes a reality. On the other hand, when asked why adolescent girls face risks such as sexual abuse and rape, adolescent boys said these risks could be avoided if girls dress appropriately, take care of themselves, and do not hang around outdoors.

Survey responses made it clear that parents – particularly mothers – are the ones responsible for keeping adolescent girls out of harm's way. There was a clear lack of analysis in relation to the actions and attitudes of boys and men that lead to a threat or actual experiences of violence against women and girls.

The home was frequently mentioned as a site of conflict and danger by many of the adolescent girls surveyed. They specifically referred to the risk of rape and sexual abuse that exists in the home. One sign of this is that girls feel more confident reporting cases of rape to authorities than to a family member. Respondents also said they fear family members will not believe them if they have been abused by a family or extended family member.

Traditional and cultural norms and practices such as *tala mala*, where parents take payments or goods as the price paid for raping their daughter, send a message that violations of girls' rights can be reconciled with a financial offering. Adolescent girls are then often forced to live with the perpetrators of their abuse.

There is a clear disconnect between what girls perceive regarding reporting rape and sexual abuse, and actual practice. This needs to be tackled urgently. Better understanding is needed regarding how best to support adolescent girls who are abused and do not feel they have a safe support mechanism to report incidences of abuse. Exploring the characteristics, conditions and position of adolescent girls who are abused could provide valuable insight into which girls are more or less likely to report rape and why. This could uncover other factors, conditions and relationships that affect the choice to stay silent or speak out by reporting cases to authorities in an attempt to seek justice.

These findings need further exploration in future research; in particular, a focus is needed on what contributes to the two opposite perceptions and attitudes of girls – one that rejects the notion that it is a girl's responsibility to avoid violence and one that assumes this responsibility and cultivates ideologies that normalise violence.

8.10 The value of exploring intersectionality and intersecting vulnerabilities

Although adolescent girls share similar characteristics of gender and age, they are in fact a diverse group with differing experiences, needs and interests based on their identity and life experience. Poverty, class, geographical location, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation are just some of the realities that shape each girl's experiences in life. These determine a girl's position in her community and society. Exploring the specific experiences of girls with diverse identities and intersecting vulnerabilities in this research helped with understanding the specific challenges and barriers these groups face when attempting to achieve their life goals and improve their condition and position in society.

Focusing expressly on the experiences of young mothers as a group provided valuable insights into the home environments in which they grew up and how this affected their sense of self and in turn, impacted their life choices and opportunities. These girls told us of situations where – in trying to escape early experiences of violence – they accelerated a transition to parenthood and/or early unions before they were ready. These early experiences of pregnancy, early unions and marriage can lead to a continued trajectory of violence and increase the probability that girls will drop out of school, ultimately limiting their potential to gain the knowledge, skills and social relations they need to be empowered.

There was a similar exploration of the experiences of adolescent girls in San Rafael del Sur and Boaco – communities featuring high levels of poverty, high risk of school drop-out, as well as informal labour and violence. This helped identify specific challenges these adolescent girls face, what they most worry about, and how violence, the threat of violence and a lack of economic stability impact their decisions and opportunities. In these communities, the differing

perceptions regarding assuming responsibility for sexual violence and reporting cases of violence was stark. One set of adolescent girls used language that implies a passive acceptance of violence in their communities and homes, suggesting that it has become something of a fixed dimension in their daily reality. They talked about how they learned to avoid or negotiate violence, but discussions showed a clear acceptance and normalisation of violence against women and girls. Another set of adolescent girls demonstrated an unwillingness to accept the culture of violence and a determination to challenge the status quo and the culture that results in men exerting their dominance and power by exercising violence against women and girls.

Exploring the perceptions and experiences of Miskito adolescent girls offered valuable insights into the specific discrimination they face because of their identity. They said this was compounded by their rural location, by having reduced access to quality education, and by not being able to learn Spanish to a high enough standard to advance in education. They also talked about being excluded from participating in community matters that affect them because they were young, female and of a different ethnic origin to other members of the community.

These girls also spoke of the positive aspects of Miskito culture and identity, and how respect, caring for one another, family and the community are at the core of their culture. Researchers also learned how some cultural practices and norms mean girls are less valued than boys and, as such, their rights to live free from violence are compromised.

8.11 What adolescent boys think of violence against women and girls – who is responsible?

The adolescent boys interviewed illustrated the tensions that they are negotiating in their daily lives. The results of focus group discussions showed that adolescent boys are conscious of the heightened risks that girls face regarding sexual abuse and rape. The language used in the poems and songs they created show that they stand in solidarity with girls. Adolescent boys want to see an end to the rights violations that girls experience, and instead advocate for a society where boys and girls are equally valued and where gender equality is a reality.

On the surface, this demonstrates a positive opportunity. However, the picture becomes more complicated with regard to the attitudes of adolescent boys towards the causes of violence against women and girls and where responsibility lies. They largely place the burden on girls, mothers and parents for seeing to it that girls do not invite violence into their lives. They gave little consideration to the actual attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of boys and men that lead violence against women and girls.

Their own attitudes are informed by ingrained norms regarding how boys and men should behave. The fact that these ingrained attitudes and behaviours have not been dismantled limits the capacity of adolescent boys to understand their role in contributing to violent attitudes and behaviours in their homes and communities. Much more work is needed to bridge the gap between what boys say and what they do.

SECTION 9

GIRLS' OWN PERCEPTIONS ON HOW TO BRING ABOUT POSITIVE CHANGE

"I want all the girls in the world [to] be protected, safe and free and move forward."
(Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

This section explores girls' perceptions of whether change is possible – whether the situation of girls could be improved, and if so how and who could support bringing positive change for girls. For the purposes of this research, change is considered in relation to the differing dimensions within which girls operate and their relationships as individuals within the family, community and State. This is a chance to revisit the responses given by girls in the first section of the report where they talked about their individual aspirations, reflecting on the challenges they face and how they could overcome these.

9.1 Individual sphere

By exploring girls' perceptions of the opportunities available to them, asking them to identify their life goals and the challenges in achieving these goals, a sense emerged of the girls' ambition, agency and capacity to turn opportunities into actions. When considering how best they could overcome challenges, they focused on their own efforts, hard work and the support of their family. While their own agency was a key component of achieving their goals, the relationships around them and the environment they live in were also essential factors; the combination of all three elements could, they felt, provide the best outcome. Some girls saw the challenges they face not just as individual challenges but as wider challenges that girls face as a collective, including some reflection on the State for not providing enough opportunities or the right conditions for girls to achieve their goals.

"All girls should have the knowledge to move forward in good and in bad times."
(Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

9.2 Family sphere and relationships

The home environment is a space where many girls experience external and internal conflicts. External conflicts are characterised by girls' reports of the poor treatment, lack of support and love they receive from their parents. Internal conflicts are represented by girls' hopes that early pregnancy or early unions will bring them a better life, only to be followed by sentiments of frustration, disappointment and loneliness as they realise this transition to life with a partner or husband, or as a single mother, does not release them from a trajectory of unhappiness at home. Notwithstanding, when asked to assess which relationships are important to them for support and help, the majority of girls mentioned their mothers. Most girls identify their mothers as allies and supporters for their futures and others wish for a supportive open relationship with their mother. Girls also wish that their mothers would talk more to them about relationships and sex. So on the one hand, the home environment and relationships within it are presented as a threat to girls' wellbeing; while on the other it is a potential site for empowerment if mothers and fathers have open communications with their daughters, and provide the advice, love and support that they clearly identify as a catalyst for positive change in girls' lives.

“I would foster a new way of thinking with education from home.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

“Avoid relationships at early age by giving talks to men and women.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

9.3 Discriminatory gender norms in the household

Girls also identified this as a challenge, particularly the unequal distribution of chores resulting in girls having less time as a resource, and less access to public spaces and time to build their social relations. Girls overwhelmingly felt the unequal time they spend on chores is a representation of gender bias and discrimination in the household and this needs to be tackled. Parents should distribute chores more evenly so that brothers and sisters spend an equal amount of time on them. While many of the girls felt that mothers should take on this responsibility as they are the ones who distribute the chores, one girl insightfully suggested that fathers should carry out chores in the household and take responsibility to ensure that time spent on chores are evenly split: “they should lead by example”. Assigning chores that are not related to gender-based perceptions of what boys and girls should do *but rather what they can do* would help to redistribute the uneven load of chores in the household while at the same time serve to challenge gender-biased attitudes in relation to roles and responsibilities in the household.

9.4 Community sphere: the value of girls in the community

Overall girls feel that their community does not listen to their opinions, nor are their concerns acted upon – this was strongly articulated by the Miskito girls. Girls however did tell us that there are women community leaders and they felt this was a good thing as they were possibly more likely to advocate for girls’ and women’s issues – such as women’s and girls’ right to live free from violence. Opening spaces for more meaningful consultation between women and girls in the community with the aim of incorporating more girls into community dialogue could serve as an opportunity for girls to actively engage in communicating their specific concerns and interests, while promoting adolescent girls’ active citizenship in communities.

“All girls should be respected.” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

9.5 Social norms and practices

Miskito girls talked about experiencing exclusion and marginalisation on account of their indigenous identity. When asked what kinds of changes could be brought about to improve the situation, Miskito girls suggested educating children and communities about the value of their culture and promoting non-discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. Recognising that there are some aspects of their culture that they do not support, such as the *tala mala* practice, they suggest keeping good and open communications with leaders in the hope that through challenging these, future generations of Miskito girls will not be subjected to the discriminatory norms and practices that violate girls’ rights.

“All girls should speak out without fear.” (Adolescent girl, focus group discussion, San Rafael del Sur)

9.6 The State

There was a noticeable lack of reference to the State as an institution that girls could envisage changing or influencing. Some girls did acknowledge, for example, that the State as a duty

bearer has a responsibility to reduce levels of violence in public and that the high incidences of early pregnancies at young ages and caused by rape urgently need to be tackled. Increased campaigns and awareness-raising of these issues was mentioned, but overall there was not a clear sense coming from the girls that the judicial system was effective or reliable in tackling these cases. This lack of trust in the judicial system is reflected in the statements of girls who suggest that they do not report rape for fear of not being believed by family and by the judicial system. We did not specifically explore how girls perceive the justice system – if, for example, they find it accessible, effective and just. This would be a very important piece of the jigsaw when trying to understand the scale of the barriers that girls face when reporting cases of rape and sexual abuse.

“If I were mayor I would approve a law to punish them for their bad actions.” (Young woman, Managua)

“If I were president I would demand more information on contraceptives and training to avoid unwanted pregnancies.” (Adolescent mother, Managua)

9.7 Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours of boys

Although only a small number of adolescent boys were interviewed, their insights were of significance to this research. The findings were encouraging in terms of boys advocating for girls to have equal rights as them, to be valued, treated with the same respect and offered the same life opportunities. It was also positive to capture boys' perceptions of violence towards women and girls. They acknowledge that girls face grave risks comparatively to boys, particularly when it comes to rape and sexual abuse. However, when reflecting on addressing violence against women and girls, for them, the central responsibility lay with girls and their parents. There was a lack of analysis of the unequal power relations between girls and boys that are intrinsic features of violent relationships and violent acts. While boys are articulating their wishes for gender equality to advance with their support, their capacity to self-reflect and collectively reflect on how boys can play a part in reducing harmful and violent attitudes and behaviours needs further work. Changing the minds of boys is a positive first step but changing discriminatory and harmful attitudes and behaviours requires systematic and long-term efforts. Girls also suggest that if boys take on their responsibilities and address negative attitudes and behaviours towards girls, this could result in a valuable opportunity to improve girls' lives.

9.8 Attitudes and behaviours of girls – norms and deviations from norms

Girls' suggestions on how to improve their situation, as highlighted previously, fall into two categories. The first are girls who accept their lower position and condition in society, accepting “that's the way things are” and that the gender discriminatory culture cannot be changed as it is tradition and passed down the ages. The alternative group suggests that change is possible and gender-equitable relations and opportunities should be fought for. An opportunity for girls presents itself in challenging girls' perceptions and attitudes as a collective – for example, how and what can be learned from girls who are challenging discriminatory norms and stereotypes and how can the incidence of girls who hold their communities and the State to account be fostered? How can the patterns of generations that cultivate submissive and passive attitudes and behaviours among women be disrupted? An analysis of power relations between diverse identities of girls would also be key in order to cultivate a collective of girls who promote equal relations among themselves and do not promote attitudes that are discriminatory according to class, race, poverty or sexual identity, for example.

“I would demand the use of condom, ask them to spend more time in the schools to avoid too much free time.” (Young woman, Managua)

“Well, men are not always responsible with their children because we, women, are taking care of our children, young or grown up, for them they are just their children.”
(Young woman, Managua)

“I would ask schools to give talks to men so they become more responsible.”
(Adolescent mother, Managua)

SECTION 10

CONCLUSION

10.1 Education is critical for the development of adolescent girls.

When adolescent girls have opportunities to study, they can develop a career, get a good job and help their own families. Going to school means the opportunity to learn, not only through curriculum subjects, but also about values that are integral to their wellbeing. Education also fosters positive relationships with those around them and opens up new opportunities to advance their personal development.

10.2 Violent and unsupportive family environments promote early relationships.

Within families, boys are given preference and enjoy more time for leisure and recreation while girls invest much of their time in caregiving activities. Girls live with sexual, physical and emotional violence within their families, creating feelings of insecurity and loneliness. They seek solace and love outside the home, resulting in early marriages or early unions in which they often encounter other forms of violence.

10.3 Pregnancy and early motherhood are products of the low social value of girls.

Adolescent girls are vulnerable to pregnancy and early childbearing, which forces them to leave school and stunts their development. Sex education is not addressed adequately in school or in families. Girls do not have sufficient opportunities to talk about sexuality in an open or appropriate way. Likewise, because of unbalanced power relations, girls do not always demand the use of condoms from their partners.

10.4 The risks of rape and sexual abuse are everywhere, but girls do not feel confident to talk about these issues.

Rape and sexual abuse damage girls both physically and emotionally, impairing their self-esteem and often resulting in pregnancy. Sexual violence can be experienced in the family, but also in school and is a factor that causes girls to drop out of school. Adolescent girls know that it is important to report cases of rape, but they do not always do so because they fear they will not be believed. If they do report rape, they prefer to report it to public authorities rather than to members of their family, because of a lack of trust within the family.

10.5 The economic problems of families mainly affect girls.

Economic instability is a basic impediment to girls reaching their goals and life plans. Because families believe that girls will soon become pregnant, they often feel it is not worth investing in their education. In addition, for families in difficult economic situations, pressure is put on girls to marry young to alleviate the financial burden of providing for one more household member. For adolescent girls, living in poverty means they are more vulnerable.

10.6 Indigenous girls face greater obstacles than other girls, because of where they live, their language and the exclusion of ethnic groups.

Miskito adolescent girls face the same difficulties as other girls, but being indigenous means they are deprived of some opportunities available to other girls. This further limits their personal development and opportunities for the future. Language, for example, is a barrier that prevents them from effectively participating in school and being accepted by their classmates. In addition, they perceive their schools to be of inferior quality because their communities are harder to access and because there are fewer teachers in these areas. Miskito girls have an appreciation of their culture and feel proud of their cultural identity. A traditional practice that emphasises love for others and for the most vulnerable means no

children are orphaned because the community welcomes them. However, other ancestral practices such as *tala mana* (blood price) expose adolescent girls to violence because offences like rape can be compensated for by the exchange of animals, objects or money and the promise that the daughter will leave her home and join the aggressor. Miskito girls are also pressured to marry men of their own culture, or else face rejection and abandonment by their family.

10.7 Being a mother at an early age limits the possibility to realise personal life plans. A support network is needed.

Young mothers aspire to provide their children with opportunities that they themselves did not have, such as education and good family communication. Many of these young mothers came from violent and abusive families, which pushed them to leave their home. They often became pregnant and dropped out of school as a consequence.

Early pregnancy was partly due to a lack of information, or communication in the family with regard to sexuality. Health centres that offer such information are reportedly not youth-friendly. In addition, adolescent girls report that men do not take responsibility for using contraception.

Being a young mother is challenging because these adolescent girls do not always have the support of their family, fathers do not always assume their paternity, and there are few accessible day care centres. In addition, young mothers do not have enough money to support and provide for their children.

10.8 Boys enjoy family privileges and do not identify their own responsibilities with regard to parenting and in relation to violence.

Boys have more freedom and liberty than girls. They can play, study and leave the house when they want, while girls stay at home in charge of household duties. Boys sometimes help with tasks in the home, such as repairing doors or other activities considered appropriate for men, but these require little time. Miskito adolescent boys attribute the labour division to culture and tradition and furthermore report that adolescent girls enjoy housework.

When adolescent boys become young fathers, it is for similar reasons to girls: a lack of information and communication in their families, and lack of access to contraceptive methods. When considering cases of sexual abuse and rape, adolescent boys failed to identify a man's responsibility for these actions. They said it depended on how girls dress and how they take care of themselves. This point coincides with the perception of many girls, who feel that they should dress and behave appropriately and restrict their presence in public places to protect themselves from becoming victims of violence.

SECTION 11

RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 Strengthen the resources and potential of the girls themselves

Adolescent girls already know how they want their lives to unfold. What is necessary is to strengthen their own agency, and support them to develop self-determination, decision-making skills and self-confidence.

Special programmes are needed for those who are already mothers, to support income-generating opportunities and provide the necessary information to take control over their sexual and reproductive rights.

Projects that recognise the positive elements of Miskito culture are valuable for indigenous adolescent girls, but these should also focus on recognising the human rights of all girls and on supporting them to be active agents; and to generate changes in cultural elements that do not currently favour them.

11.2 Work with families on the importance of supporting adolescent girls

Focus should be placed on working with mothers to recognise the importance of supporting their daughters, since they are the family reference point in whom girls tend to have the most confidence. Working with fathers and other family members is also important to improve the low value that is currently attributed to girls within families.

Families should support girls to exercise their rights to sexuality in a healthy, safe and fulfilled way. Families must accompany girls through this period of change in a way that strengthens their self-esteem and to develop trust and communication as a protective factor against violence.

Sensitising fathers and other male relatives on the importance of supporting adolescent girls can transform power relations, reinforcing the role of positive masculinity in contributing to gender equality.

Adolescent boys should be taught to take responsibility for their sexuality and recognise their role in early pregnancy and violence against girls, as well as their ability to take an active role in generating positive changes.

11.3 Open up and strengthen spaces to amplify adolescent girls' voices and increase their active participation

The organisational capacity of adolescent girls can be developed through opening up spaces for girls to participate, including activities that strengthen their self-esteem, their abilities and their potential for leadership. Working with community leaders can facilitate the opening of these spaces for girls, strengthening their active citizenship within their own communities.

In addition, programmes can focus on developing girls' advocacy capacities so that they can demand change from local and central governments. This change can include improved access and information on sexual and reproductive rights, special programmes for young mothers, violence prevention programmes and sufficient budget to implement specific programmes for the empowerment of girls.

11.4 Strengthen alliances between civil society organisations

Strengthen partnerships between civil society organisations in order to support and advocate for the interests and rights of adolescent girls, to support the development of girls' potential and increase their capacity to advocate for transformative change and gender equality in their communities.

Organisations and networks must have dedicated budgets for programme and advocacy work to transform the low cultural value attributed to girls.

ANNEX

The reflections below outline the thoughtful experiences of three young women research assistants from Nicaragua that participated in the research training workshops and the field research. They share with us their reflections on situation of young women in Nicaragua, the conversations that most impacted them and how this deepened their understanding of the challenges that that adolescent girls face in Nicaragua.



Ana Geyling

From the beginning to the end of this study I could notice that girls suffer great inequalities – many of them circumstantial – where the State is not ensuring the rights of girls in our country. The family unit, a fundamental pillar in the life of human beings, has been gradually weakened and as a result we can see the breaking of ties between parents and children.

We can see how the issue of violence is triggering countless damage for girls, such as early pregnancies, gangs, drugs and so on. All of this is due to the lack of confidence that exists between mothers and daughters and vice versa.

If we look at what the State is doing to alleviate this evil with regard to social investment Nicaragua is one of the countries that invests less in children and adolescents. If the reality does not change it will be unlikely to reach a substantial improvement in the quality of life of children and adolescents.

What caught your attention?

The state in which we find many girls living, the different situations and difficulties these girls have had to go through and above all their desire to continue with their lives, for their children and for themselves.

Another point that really caught my attention is that girls have well-defined goals, because as people we should visualise our goals but often we do not define in a specific moment and space what it is we really want. These aspects 'shook the floor under my feet', as we commonly say.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

Girls do not know about women leaders and it concerns me that they are not aware of this concept since it is key in relation to community issues. It reflects that they do not believe that women can be in community public positions.

The economic issue is one of the outcomes that I did not expect, because they say that when they marry or have a partner they cannot spend the money they have even if it is theirs because they are no longer alone and priorities are not only theirs but are now shared, so they must consult at the time of spending money.

Although they said that women and men should share the household activities, they do not agree that men care for children at home.

Goals are something all of them have in common and they are confident they will reach their goals with the help of their loved ones, the people close of them or by themselves.

Women know about the various contraceptive methods that exist, but they cannot access them due to various factors, especially social ones, such as what people will say. So, only men or boys can buy or request them at the health centre.

What did you learn as a researcher?

That we are in a world where opportunities are few and as professionals we must seize them and influence others to achieve good results in our subjects.

Another lesson learned is that we must have a 'plan B' because not everything goes as planned, and we must be open to what happens next.

Angelica Lopez

What caught your attention?

The fact that women's bodies are seen as purely sexual objects. For example, women are blamed in rape cases and society is led to believe it is their fault because they provoked it. Where female sexuality is associated with the idea of sin, women are responsible for provoking and tempting men. In the 21st century we continue to live in a society marked by machismo where more worth is given to the life of a man than of a woman. We also see a man as a victim of female temptation.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The response of one of the first girls I interviewed, who told me that hitting or physically abusing was a way of demonstrating care and love for her.

What would be the most significant finding that affects the reality of young women in Nicaragua?

In my view, one of the most significant findings that affects the reality of young women in Nicaragua is the fact that women face any kind of violence. Where the same society berates us simply for being a woman, in addition to the way they teach us that men are superior to women and how violence perpetrated against women becomes a strategy of domination and submission.

What did you learn as a researcher?

Mainly that there are girls who are subjected to abuse and violations of their rights as human beings from an early age. The reality of our country is abusive to women who have to face terrible episodes that mark their lives negatively on a daily basis.

And what did you learn as a young woman?

I have learned that this process is based in the need of implementing more severe policies and laws to defend the rights of girls, adolescents and young women who are victims of violence

and different types of violations every day. This is the time to stop and see what we have been doing wrong as a society.

Maria del Rosario Delgadillo Soza

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I had assumed that the majority of girls would answer the question 'Do I have someone to talk to if I am worried about something?' with 'My friend', but they all responded that it was their mothers that they speak to. They expressed this with much certainty.

This is interesting and important for me because actually my mother is my best friend, but when I was a girl and an adolescent I did not consider her as so. It's important because these young girls count on the confidence of their mothers, although some of them have been wronged by their mothers in their lives, always they will want the best for their families.

What are the most significant findings that reflect the reality of young women in Nicaragua?

A very significant finding for me was the young women who fight to overcome their challenges and move forward despite the very few opportunities that exist in the country. These attitudes strengthen their capacities and they become empowered and successful women.

What lessons did you learn as a woman?

I learned to extract from myself a spirit of entrepreneurship. My experiences with young women were a great lesson of life for me because I learned that even being a professional and counting on the help of my family, I am not far from the realities that these girls live or have lived. We can all be badly treated, violated, abused and can end up as single mothers.

The girls we spoke to maintain their spirit to overcome these challenges, and listening to them talk made me say to myself that I cannot fall behind. And sometimes, even though I could hide this in the interview, I felt like an ant in front of these answers so great and interesting from these girls. That has influenced my life in a huge way.