



**Real Choices,
Real Lives**

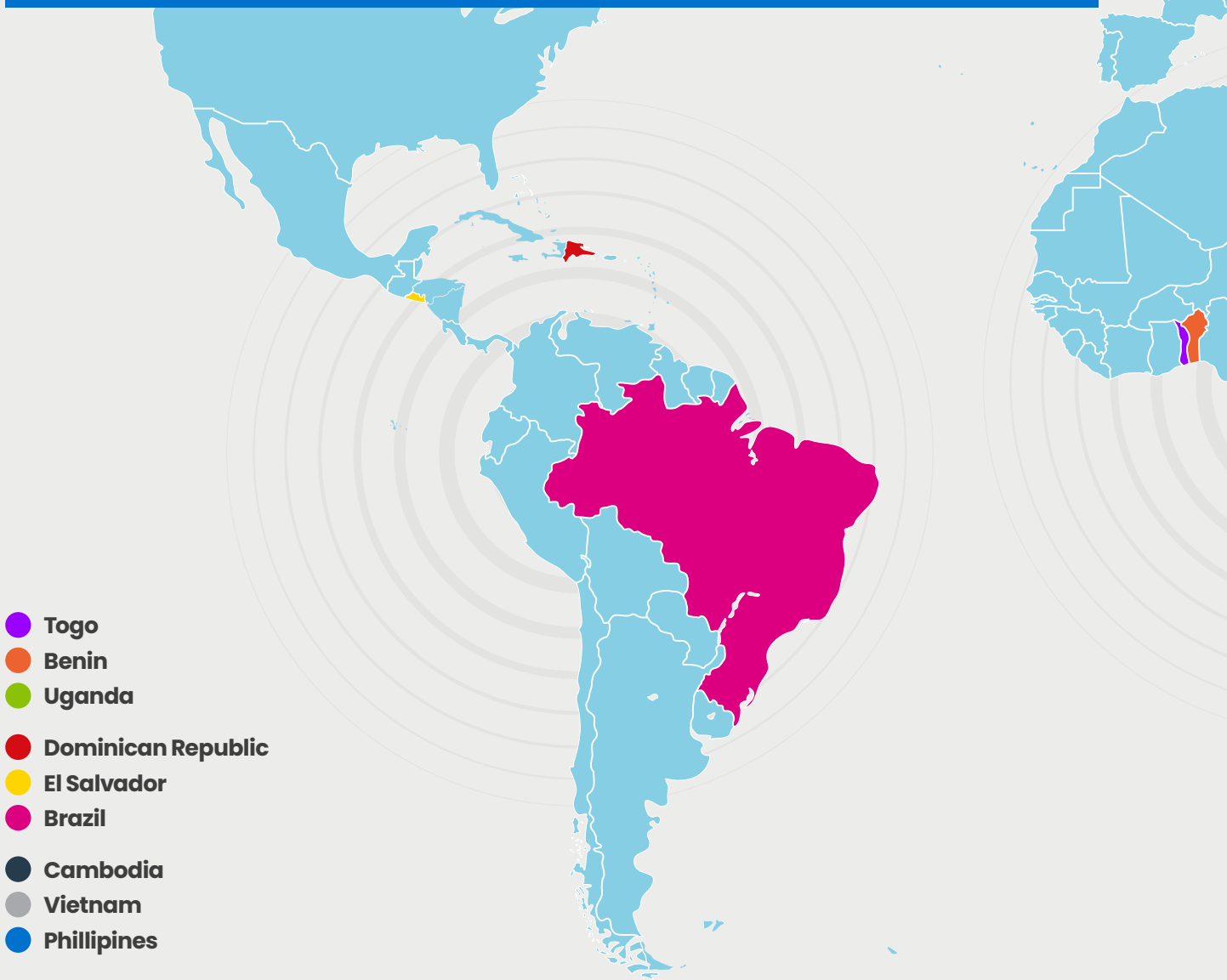
Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls

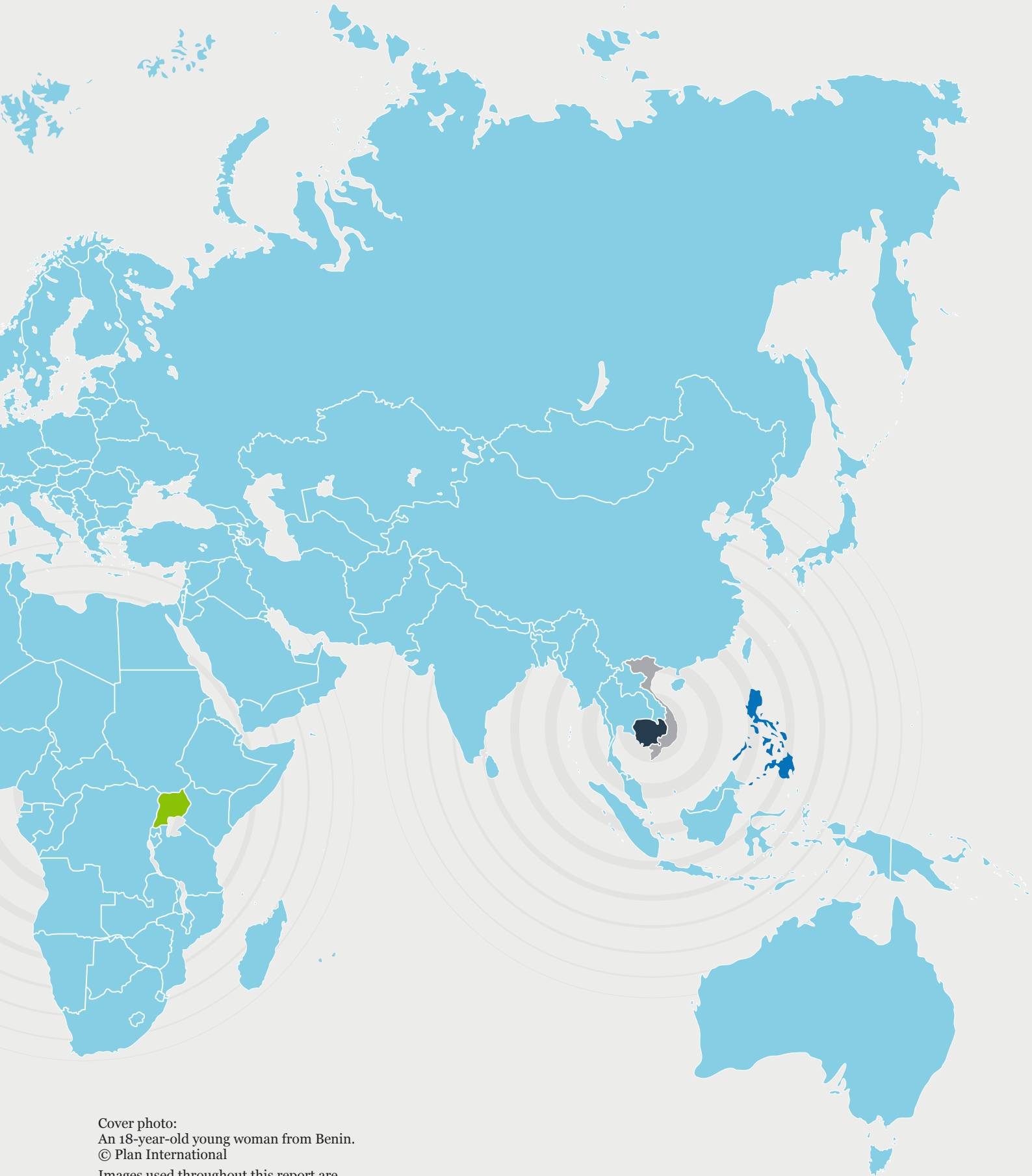
Summary Report



FIGURE 1 Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study Map

Since 2007, Plan International’s *Real Choices, Real Lives* study has been following a cohort of girls from nine countries: tracking their lives from birth in annual interviews with family members, and – once they reached the age of five – with the girls themselves, using age-specific methodology. This unique longitudinal study, with its detailed insight into the daily lives of the girls and their families, has focused on examining the intersecting vulnerabilities of poverty, gender and age. Every year, Plan International publishes a summary of the annual interviews and the longitudinal trends explored in the research. This year the analysis and the interviews have centred on time use. Over the years the study has demonstrated that, in most families, from a very early age, it is the girls who “help” their mothers: they look after their siblings, cook, clean and often work unpaid in any family business. How do they feel about their role in the family? Are their domestic responsibilities increasing and, if so, what effect does this have on their efforts to study, socialise and prepare for a future career?





Cover photo:
An 18-year-old young woman from Benin.
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Images used throughout this report are not of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls. The girls' names have also been changed to protect their privacy.

A 14-year-old girl and her
9-year-old brother fishing in Brazil.

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This is a summary of the report, *Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls*. The full technical report, and French and Spanish translations of both the full report and the summary, can be found [here](#).

Introduction

In 2007, Plan International began a unique research study following a group of 142 girls from nine countries across three continents. The aim of the study, *Real Choices, Real Lives*, was to track this cohort of girls from birth to the age of 18 in order to have a better understanding of the reality of their daily lives and, through this, examine how gender shapes their expectations and the opportunities available to them.

Over the years, the study has conducted annual in-depth interviews with girls and their caregivers and documents in detail the experiences of the girls, their individual families, and the environment they live in. We are privileged to hear from the cohort girls in their own words and the study contains a wealth of information describing not only their daily routines and experiences but their hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

This detailed long-term analysis of girlhoods and family life shines a light on the root causes of gender inequality: the research clearly demonstrates how girls across countries and cultures are socialised into gendered social norms that shape, and restrict, their opportunities, behaviours and attitudes.

Girls' voices, including their recommendations for change, provide a unique insight not often gleaned from large-scale quantitative studies and inform Plan International's work around the world. This year, our research with the cohort girls focuses on the topic of time use. We hear from girls around the world about how they are dividing their time across their various activities and responsibilities and what motivates and drives their time use. By drawing on 18 years of historical data we provide a nuanced picture of the complex ways in which girls' time use and care responsibilities change over the course of their childhoods and adolescence, and the impacts of this on their lives. Critically, we learn from girls in their own words about what supports they require

as they navigate their late adolescence transitions: from childhood to adulthood, and from school to employment; and to be well-prepared to achieve their aspirations and goals.

“I'd like to be a strong, determined person, who doesn't give up on her dreams, who persists until she gets what she wants.”

– Bianca, age 17 (2024), Brazil

As they navigate these transitions, adolescent girls experience many competing demands on their time. This has been the case since early childhood but at this time in their lives it has become particularly pressing, as it deeply impacts their completion of education, progression to economic participation and future outcomes. Girls around the world are juggling a desire to stay in education, paid work to develop skills for the future and increase their economic independence, and unpaid care work for their families and communities. They are also trying to find the time for friends and a social life and time to rest and recuperate to support their health and wellbeing.

These conflicting demands mean that many girls around the world are deeply time-poor. Yet, in most of the girl's households, little thought is given to the consequences of girls' work in the home. Though their contributions are often taken for granted, the gendered care divide has profound impacts on their education, their future careers their health and wellbeing, and their aspirations for the future.

In 2024, the research undertaken for the *Real Choices, Real Lives* report on girls' time use is based on interviews with a cohort of 92 girls and their caregivers in nine countries.^a Having followed the girls' lives since their births, we can reflect back on the earlier stories and experiences that the girls and their caregivers have shared. By doing so, the study can explore the drivers and the key motivators, that have shaped girls' time use throughout their lives.

a. Over 18 years girls have inevitably left the study for a variety of reasons – one of the most common reasons being migration.

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES

Patterns of girls' unpaid care responsibilities are established in early childhood as they observe and imitate the gendered divisions of care work in their homes. Over the years, gender norms about girls' unpaid care work are reinforced – and so many girls come to believe that it is 'natural' that girls should do more in the home than boys. As they take on more and more care work, there is a growing cost to girls' educational attainment, future careers, social development and wellbeing, and hopes for the future.

“I used to have more time but now I have more household responsibilities because my brother and sister aren't living here. I am always late for school as is evident because I had to retake my class.”

– Anti-Yara, age 15 (2021), Togo

Unpaid care work

Unpaid care work is the time that individuals spend performing tasks in the home, including cooking, cleaning, collecting water and fuel, and caring for others such as children, ill or older family members – and many more.¹ Motivated by its focus on investments in the development and wellbeing of others,² care work is essential for individual, community and societal wellbeing; it sustains our standard of living and maintains the fabric of relationships within families and communities.³ However, pervasive gender norms mean that this work is overwhelmingly performed by women and girls.

Unpaid care work includes both direct and indirect activities: direct activities are those that involve direct care of persons (such as feeding or bathing a child, supervising others), while indirect care includes domestic work that serves an individual's care needs (for example, cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood/water).

It is *unpaid* because it arises out of these relational and social obligations; it is *work* because it requires time and energy from those who provide it; and it is *care* because it serves people and their wellbeing.⁴



Three generations of women in Togo.

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“Just the way things are ...”

It is clear from the experiences of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls that they are inducted into gender roles of unpaid care from an early age, and often internalise unequal divisions of labour in their homes as being 'natural' or 'just the way things are.' Unpaid care work is done everywhere primarily by women and girls: the amount of work varies from household to household, according to economic circumstances and family composition, but it is rare to find one where domestic responsibilities are not gendered.

Social norms, often unquestioned, dictate how labour in the home is divided, and sets the expectation that this work should be done by women and girls. The way that girls spend their time influences their aspirations, confining them to expectations of a domestic and caring role as they lack the role models - and often the support - to dream of different futures.. A lack of leisure time, and in many cases a lack of sleep, contributes to stress and burn-out. And because this workload is unfairly gendered, the impact is greater for girls than it is for boys.

Our research finds that the issue of unpaid care work stems less from the nature of the work itself, but from the amount of this work, and from its unequal gendered division – and the impact that this inequality has on women and girls' ability to spend time on other pursuits.

“I do a lot sometimes. Especially when there is no school. I frequently get orders ... [I get asked to do] things at the farm. The lifting of rice. Then I get water from here and deliver it to those working in the fields. Or maybe cook food and then deliver it to the farm. When I cook, I also do the laundry. Then, I run when I get ordered on the farm.”

– Jasmine, age 18 (2024), the Philippines

“I have enough time to study English and do more housework [...] but I don't have much time to meet my friends ... Some of my male relatives do not do any housework and don't study hard too.”

– Davy, age 16 (2023), Cambodia

This report tracks girls' time use through the words and experiences of the cohort girls. What is expected of them, what do they do, how do they feel about it and how will it affect what they can do with their lives?

Drawing on our own research and that of others, Plan International recognises that unpaid care work overwhelmingly affects many aspects of girls' and women's lives throughout the lifecycle. We believe that unpaid care work must be formally recognised and appropriately valued as work, and investments must be made in infrastructure and public services such as education, healthcare and social protection in order to reduce the level of care work performed by girls and women and minimise the impact of this work on their broader time use.

Plan International believes that social norms change which redistributes the responsibility of unpaid care from girls and women to boys and men is essential to achieve gender equality, and that we must centre the voices of girls and women in conversations about unpaid care work and gendered time use more broadly to ensure that their needs and interests are represented and their recommendations for change are amplified.⁵



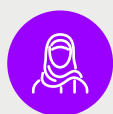
Two 11-year-old girls return from collecting water from the river in Cambodia.

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Our approach^b

The core *Real Choices, Real Lives* research methodology is based on in-depth interviews with girls and their caregivers, conducted annually to allow for comparison and analysis of trends, and of how things have changed for the girls over the course of their childhoods and adolescence.

Each year we use the following approaches:



01 Girl interviews

In-depth interviews with girls exploring their education, household dynamics, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), attitudes and opinions about gender norms, and many other topics.



02 Caregiver interviews

These interviews, usually with one of each girl's parents, cover similar topics to the girl interviews and provide context to the girls' experiences, as well as highlighting generational trends in beliefs and behaviours.



03 Household inventories

This tool captures a 'snapshot' of the girls' households. These have been collected in some format since 2018, allowing for comparison and analysis of changes over time. The inventories include questions on household make up, income, expenditure, food security, school attendance, and occupations.



04 Observation

Notes from the interviewers form part of the data. This includes observations on girls' tone, body language and non-verbal communication. These are used very sparingly as observations are subjective.

One of the **data collection tools** that we used in 2024 was a time use exercise. It covered a 24-hour period in 60-minute slots, with space for 'primary' and 'simultaneous' activities.^c This allowed us to understand the proportion of time that the girls spend on each type of activity that they perform, as well as how many simultaneous tasks they undertake while doing the primary activity.

In 2024, as part of the family interviews, we also asked the girls' caregivers about the girls' time-use – this allowed us to compare parents' and


caregivers estimates about the girls' activities against what the girls themselves were reporting.

Ethical approval for 2024 data collection for *Real Choices, Real Lives* was provided by the global affairs think tank, ODI, in February 2024; national level ethics approval was received in relevant focal countries where required. All research activities were undertaken in line with Plan International's research ethics and safeguarding policies and procedures⁶ – and feminist principles of research guided all data collection activities.

b. For the full methodology, please see the Technical Report of the same name, available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/out-of-time/>

c. Where a girl listed one activity in an hour block, this is represented throughout this report as her spending 1 hour on this activity; if the same activity is listed in 3-hour blocks then this is reported that she spends 3 hours on this activity. Where multiple activities were listed in the same block, unless otherwise recorded by the girl we have interpreted this as the hour being equally divided between the activities; for example, if two activities were listed then this is reported as 30 minutes having been spent on each. Simultaneous hours are recorded as additional time: for example, if a girl records 24 hours of main activities, and then a further 2 hours of simultaneous activities (e.g. supervising a child while doing laundry), then 26 hours of activities are recorded. Because of this method of calculating girls' time use, there may be cases in this report where a girl's reported time use appears to add up to more than 24 hours in a day; this is by design and demonstrates the considerable multi-tasking and resulting time-poverty experienced by many of the girls.

Setting the scene



An 18-year-old girl from the Philippines has to make long and challenging treks each day to find clean water sources.

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Around the world, more than three quarters of unpaid care work is performed by women and girls.⁷

Girls interviewed for this research talk of being overwhelmed and lack of time is a significant factor in the way they describe their daily lives. **It is a pattern reflected across numerous studies which reveal the imbalance between how women and girls spend their time compared to men and boys.**

There are multitudes of activities and responsibilities to be fitted into the day, including education, paid work, socialising and building social networks, hobbies and leisure time, community and volunteer work, rest and personal care and unpaid care work.

“It’s a big change compared to previous years. Right now, I can’t walk around and talk to my friends. I’m busy now with my school assignments and taking care of my nieces and nephews.”

– Reyna, age 16 (2023), Philippines

Definition:

‘Time use’ refers to the activities that people are engaged in over a 24-hour period: ‘girls’ time use’ therefore means an exploration of the activities that girls are engaged in on a daily basis.

Women's work

Globally, girls spend 160 million more hours per day on household chores than boys their age.⁸

In total, girls aged 5-14 around the world spent 550 million hours every day on domestic care work, with 14-year-old girls spending an average of nine hours per week on care responsibilities.⁹ By the age of 19, girls spend between three and four hours a day on domestic and caring work.¹⁰

Feminist research has explored what drives an unequal and gendered division of unpaid care work, with studies revealing that the way care work is shared in the home and in communities is shaped and enforced by gender norms in society that say certain roles are 'feminine' and certain roles are 'masculine'.^{11,12} Other factors also influence the amount of unpaid care work in a home – such as the technology and infrastructure available to and in the household (such as a gas stove, or mains-supplied water), the availability and cost of substitutes to undertake or outsource care work (like childcare services), the make-up of families, and the control and decision-making power that members of a household have – especially about how income is spent.^{13,14}



A 13-year-old from Vietnam hangs up washing at home.

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The climate crisis and unpaid care

The impacts of climate change on households can intensify girls' care work responsibilities. Climate change can cause additional direct care work (caring for people injured during extreme weather events, or for those who become ill as a result of malnutrition or climate-related disease outbreaks) and indirect care work relating to agriculture damage and disruption, food and water insecurity, and household livelihood losses.¹⁵ These shocks and stressors intersect with gender norms, meaning girls are often required to replace their mothers' role in the home when a loss of livelihoods forces the mother to seek alternative (or increased) paid work outside of the home. This risk is particularly high in countries with low levels of social protection, and in multi-generational households where there are young children, ill relatives or older people in the family who require care.¹⁶

In 2023, *Real Choices, Real Lives* shared [the story of Reyna](#) – a 16-year-old girl from the Philippines whose father, a farmer, has struggled with the harvest due to increasing extreme and unpredictable weather patterns. As a result of livelihood losses, Reyna's parents have had to take on additional work to compensate, leaving Reyna responsible for taking care of her siblings, her nieces and nephews, and for taking care of the housework. Reyna says that this left her with limited time to study and socialise, worried about her school performance, and depressed about the number of responsibilities she must carry.¹⁷ Reyna's increased unpaid care labour can be linked directly to the impacts of climate change – and also to the damaging influence of gender roles.

Studies have found that girls are more likely to be engaged in care activities in the home, such as cooking, cleaning and childcare,^{18,19} as this is considered to prepare them for the responsibilities they will hold as adolescents and adults.²⁰

Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to be tasked with outdoor chores like collecting firewood or herding animals, and this is less likely to be framed as training them for their future responsibilities.²¹ Studies have also found that boys tend to be relieved of domestic chores as they get older²² – and particularly once they are engaged in paid employment – whereas as girls get older their share of household responsibilities increases, regardless of whether they also have a job outside of the home or not.^{23,24}

Critically, the work that girls perform in the home is often not recognised as care or labour – instead, it tends to be described as ‘help’ or an everyday part of childhood. This minimises and undermines the value of girls’ contributions – and makes it more likely that girls themselves will not recognise the extent of the care work they are doing.^{25,26}

“I help my mother to do the cleaning chores, to pick up the mess and clean the tables, to pick up my brother’s clothes.”

– **Stephany, age 8 (2015), El Salvador**

Gender norms about the roles for girls and boys are introduced and reinforced for children within the home: from an early age girls are taught that chores are an inevitable part of being a girl. As they grow up, they observe their parents’ dynamics, and are often assigned a greater share of chores than their brothers. When these patterns are established in early childhood, they are assumed to be ‘natural’ – making them difficult to question or challenge.



A 10-year-old from Cambodia helps her mother with their family’s vegetable garden.

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Gender norms, child marriage and unpaid care work

Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) is a significant driver of girls’ unpaid care work, with studies suggesting that girls who are married or in a union spend more than twice as much time on unpaid care work than their unmarried peers.²⁷ CEFMU is deeply embedded in gender inequalities and harmful social norms that devalue and restrict women and girls’ agency and decision-making and preserve patriarchal power structures.²⁸ It is also driven – and exacerbated – by poverty, a desire to control girls’ and women’s sexuality, disasters and humanitarian crises, and weak legislative frameworks.

Globally, one in five girls around the world is married before the age of 18,²⁹ with rates highest in West Africa and Central Africa (39 per cent), in fragile settings (35 per cent) and among girls from the poorest households.³⁰ Among the nine *Real Choices, Real Lives* focal countries, three have CEFMU rates greater than 30 per cent (Benin, Dominican Republic and Uganda), a further three have rates greater than 25 per cent (Brazil, El Salvador and Togo), and the remaining three countries have rates higher than 15 per cent.^{31,32}

CEFMU is also associated with higher rates of adolescent pregnancy and early motherhood, which has implications for care responsibilities: married girls are more likely to begin childbearing earlier than their unmarried peers, and to have less time between their pregnancies.³³ Girls who are mothers become responsible for the direct care of their children – such as feeding and bathing – as well as indirect care associated with routine homework.

What the girls have told us

As the cohort girls, now aged 17 and 18, transition from childhood to adulthood and from secondary school to higher education and economic participation, their time use has changed and evolved. They come from nine very different environments and face diverse pressures on their time, but one thing that they all have in common is feeling overstretched.

A young girl carries her baby brother on her back in Vietnam.

© Plan International



Many of the girls are juggling their education, paid work outside the home, significant unpaid care and domestic work at home, and often further unpaid work contributing to family businesses or family farms. On top of this, they are trying to find time to socialise with friends, engage in hobbies and leisure activities, participate in community life, take care of their health and wellbeing, and get enough sleep.

Where the time goes

Education

56 of the 92 girls who took part in interviews in 2024 are in secondary school completing their education.

All of the cohort girls in Vietnam who remain in the study are currently in secondary school, as are 13 of the 14 taking part in the Philippines. Among those still in secondary school, the average time spent on their education per day is nearly nine hours, including two-and-a-quarter hours spent on homework.

“I study full-time. I study every morning and 6 sessions per week. Besides, I have extra classes. I take extra classes throughout the week [...] maybe every day I have 2 extra lessons, each lasting 1 hour and 20 minutes.”

– Yen, age 18 (2024), Vietnam

12 girls in the cohort have graduated from school, including six from the Dominican Republic and three from Brazil. Across the cohort, eight girls who have graduated from secondary school have gone on to university or to university bridging courses. They are studying a wide range of disciplines – from midwifery to electromechanical engineering, to literature.

“I’m currently in my first year of midwifery school after obtaining my BAC^d [...] it was difficult for me at first to live on my own without my parents. But over time I got used to it, because they taught me to live on my own and make decisions on my own.”

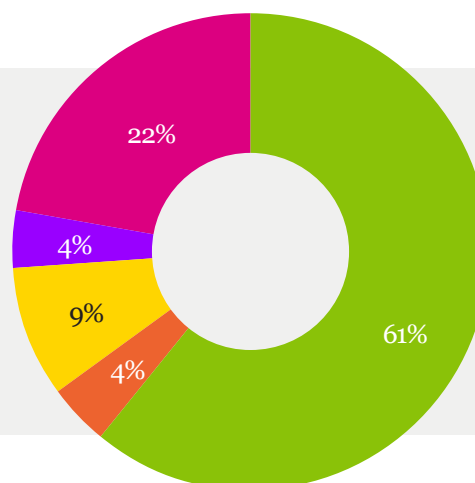
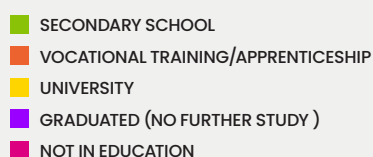
– Annabelle, age 17 (2024), Benin

Of the 24 girls who have dropped out of school, one, Griselda in Dominican Republic, has been taking weekend classes to gain her high school qualification, and four others have progressed to vocational education and training programmes in tailoring and fashion design.

“I enjoy tailoring ... I believe that the money I get from it will be able to sustain me.”

– Namazzi, age 17 (2024), Uganda

Figure 2 Cohort girls’ education status in 2024 (%)



d. ‘BAC’ refers to the Baccalaureat, the secondary school leaving exam and qualification in Benin

Employment

28 girls in the cohort are engaged in paid work – 11 girls work fulltime, and 17 balance their jobs with their studies at school or university. For the most part, the girls' jobs include work on market stalls, farm work, waitressing, or working in a family member's business.

Ten girls are engaged in unremunerated work.^e It often involves similar activities to the ones listed above, but the girls do not receive an income – and it is differentiated from unpaid care work because it is usually work done outside the home, in a family business or on a farm, and does not, directly or indirectly, involve caring for other people. Four of the girls do unremunerated work alongside their secondary school studies, but for three girls it is their main activity. Margaret (Benin), for example, works 12 hours per day to help her family's business although she would prefer to be doing an apprenticeship in dressmaking.

“I didn't do any work that made me any money myself – I just helped my aunt sell her cosmetics ... I go out two or three times every five days from 7am to midday to sell the cosmetics. I also go to the field and do the weeding with my aunt and cousin.”

– Margaret, age 18 (2024), Benin

Unpaid care work

Eighty-seven of the ninety-two girls taking part in the study report doing unpaid care work as part of their usual daily activities. The average time spent on this work is around 5 hours 15 minutes per day – more than double the average time allocated for school set homework among the girls. Comparing this against global averages we can see that **the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls have a higher average care load than their peers around the world.** In fact, the cohort girls spend slightly more time on care work, on average, than adult women globally.³⁴ This workload could be attributed to poverty as the girls taking part in the study come largely from the poorest households in their countries.

Over 94 per cent of the girls taking part in the study report spending an average of five hours 15 mins per day on unpaid care work.

There are seven girls in the cohort who are now mothers, and these girls spend the greatest number of hours on unpaid care work. They perform a significant amount of direct care, including breastfeeding, bathing and changing their babies, as well as an average of over 5 and a half hours per day of indirect care activities: often conducted simultaneously with direct care tasks – such as cooking while also supervising a child.

“Now the child is a bit older, now he asks me for anything, I have to bathe him and be on time to change him when, when he gets wet [...] I have to change him so that he doesn't get sick, ok? I have to wash his clothes, all the little things like that.”

– Hillary, age 17 (2024) El Salvador (married, mother of 1)

Shockingly, the care load for the cohort girls who are married or in a union and have one or more children is nearly one-and-a-half times that spent by girls who are single mothers – suggesting that single mothers receive more support from others in their family and networks than girls with partners.

Among girls in the cohort who are not mothers, most of the unpaid care work performed is indirect care work. These tasks vary from country to country, but predominantly involve cooking, cleaning dishes, collecting water and/or firewood, sweeping, and doing laundry.

“It's tiring because I'm busy at school, and when I get home, I cook and take care of my sister's children. My sister is busy because she is a teacher.”

– Reyna, age 17 (2024), the Philippines

e. The girls may be compensated for their work in other ways – for example, goodwill, favours, or in exchange for room and board – but they do not receive an income for this work.

Rest and leisure

Rest and leisure activities are essential for wellbeing, for children’s development, and for girls’ ability to develop agency and leadership capabilities. The majority of the cohort girls – 80 out of 92 – say that they have enough time for at least 1 hour of leisure activities per day: the main activities described include socialising with friends and family, scrolling social media on their phones, playing sports, or watching television. The girls in Brazil have the most time for leisure activities – around 6 hours per day – but this tends to be among the girls who have graduated or attend school part time. Girls in Togo report having the least time for leisure – less than 2 hours a day.

The cohort girls get an average of seven hours 24 minutes of sleep per night. Thirty of them get less than 7 hours sleep, which is below the recommended level for teenagers and young people. For Justine (Uganda), Reine (Togo), Quynh and Sen (both Vietnam), the reason for their sleep deficit is staying up late studying, while for Ayomide (Togo) caring for her daughter means that she only gets 5 hours sleep per night.

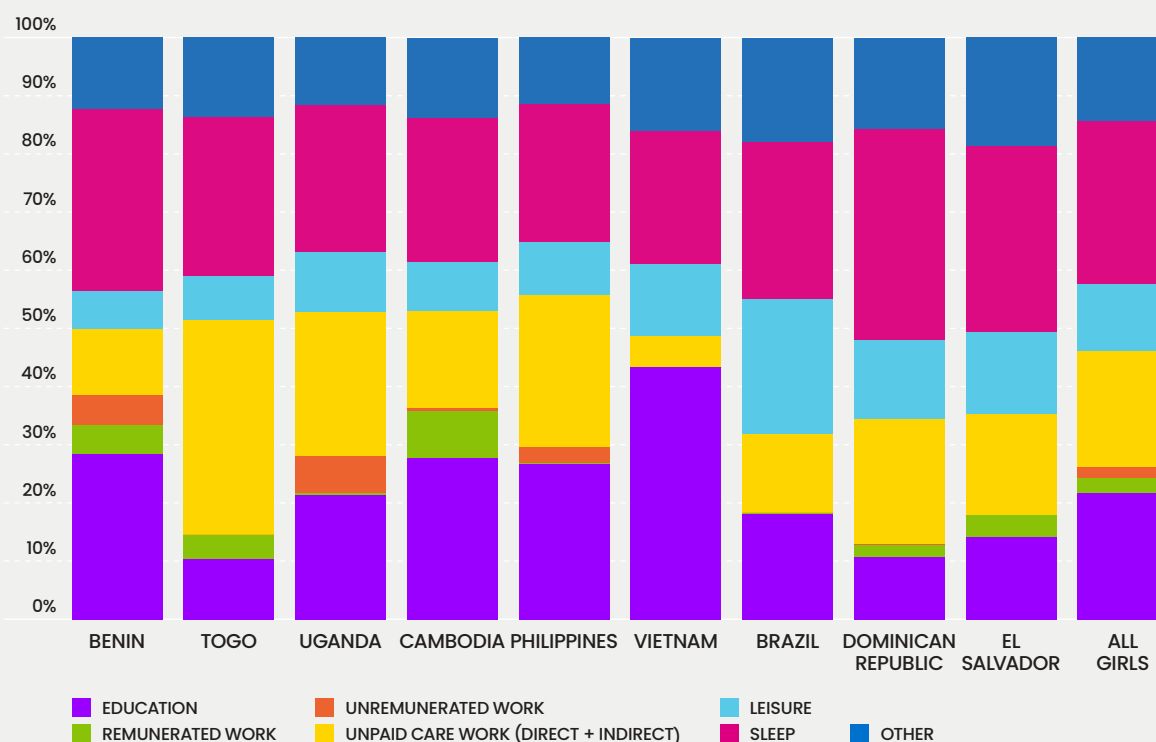
Multi-tasking

Overall, we can see that many of the girls have extremely busy schedules and appear to be juggling a number of different priorities and responsibilities: some of the time use diaries were so packed with activities that they were writing in the margins of the page and cramming numerous items into individual hour blocks. When summarising their daily routines, it is quite clear that there are not enough hours in the day.

71 of the girls report spending at least four hours per day multi-tasking on one or more activities, with unpaid care work being the most commonly reported simultaneous activity. For some girls, including Jasmine in the Philippines, Ayomide in Togo, and Beti in Uganda, almost their entire day is spent multitasking: juggling chores and childcare with education, paid work, unremunerated work, leisure, and personal care.

When care work is done simultaneously alongside other activities it can become ‘invisible’ – and this can contribute to girls’ time poverty.

Figure 3 Average proportion (%) of day spent on various activities, per focal country (all girls)



*Other activities include personal care (such as bathing and eating meals), travel (for example, taking the bus to school) and religious observance.

Who does what and why?

“It’s nature”: gender norms and unpaid care work

Through historical analysis of *Real Choices, Real Lives* interviews we can observe the household dynamics that the cohort girls grew up with: the gender norms that influenced their mothers’ time use, and the examples that were being set for the girls.

Girls learn and internalise norms from an early age as they observe family dynamics in their homes. The examples that their parents set, the division of labour, and their attitudes about roles for women and men therefore set the scene for expectations of girls’ future time use.

For the most part, the girls’ caregivers acknowledged that care work in the home was overwhelmingly done by mothers – with the justification given that women do the majority of this work because their husbands are engaged in paid work outside the home.

“I change their diapers, I make their food, I bathe them and watch them, that’s what I contribute because [Raquel’s father] brings in the money.”

– Raquel’s mother, 2012, El Salvador

Many do not question this, describing it as being ‘natural’:

“We women are meant to do housework and the men go looking for money. Its nature.”

– Sheila’s mother, 2012, Uganda

These attitudes and practices are held in place by wider family dynamics, with older male relatives in the girls’ homes performing very few chores. **From an early age, the girls have commented on this gendered division of labour in their households.** In 2013, when she was 7 years old, Jasmine (Philippines) said that her mother does all of the cooking in their household, and her father only cooks if her mother is not around, while Rebeca in the Dominican Republic observed, aged nine: “my dad doesn’t do chores, he only sleeps and eats.”

How, then, do these ideas about ‘natural’ time use for women and men influence behaviour? As girls spend time with their mothers in their early years they observe, absorb and internalise information about different roles and behaviours for women and men, girls and boys. In Togo, Azia’s mother reasoned that Azia is tasked with sweeping the house because “it’s an automatic activity for a girl” (2024). Azia’s care work can be seen to be shaped by her mother’s attitude. When Azia was young, she spent the majority of her time with her mother and grandmother: not only observed them washing dishes, sweeping, taking care of babies and performing other tasks, but also exposed to her mother’s view that chores are natural or inevitable pastimes for girls. Unsurprisingly, Azia’s mother shared that Azia had started asking to join in with chores from the age of 6; that same year Azia said that sweeping the yard was one of her favourite activities.

‘Playing house’ often reveals the ways that girls have internalised gender norms about the roles of girls and women. Barbara (Benin) and Bessy (El Salvador) reported at 6 and 5 years old respectively that their preferred game was pretending to sweep the house, while Bopha in Cambodia told researchers when she was ten years old that one of her favourite activities was “playing cooking”.

As the girls get older, chores-as-play transform into something else: chores-as-training for their futures as wives and mothers.

In Benin, in 2015, Thea’s mother reflected on the division of household tasks among her children, most of which fall to Thea and her sisters, as “normal because it’s a way for preparing them to be good wives and mothers and know how to keep their own home”. This training to become wives and mothers is accepted by many of the girls: in 2019, aged 13, Azia in Togo explained that “the most important thing for woman is to know how to cook for her family”, and in 2022, at 15, Chesa told researchers:

“I do the laundry, wash the dishes, and clean the house. It’s okay with me because of course I’m the woman so I’m obliged to do the housework.”

– Chesa, age 15 (2022), the Philippines

The girls' parents also describe unpaid care responsibilities as being **essential for ensuring that their daughters grow up to become virtuous and respectable young women**. In 2024, Anti-Yara's father said that his daughter did household chores *"because she's a big girl and people will think badly of her if she doesn't look after the house"*. The girls themselves appear to have subscribed to this gendered notion of housework as 'good': at age 11, Alice in Benin aptly described this gendered notion of the requirements of a 'virtuous girl' saying:

“A good girl must know how to do housework for her mother and pay attention to the advice from her mother and father. I am a good daughter to both; I can do domestic chores and I listen to their advice, and I am respectful.”

– Alice, age 11 (2018), Benin



Three generations of women from Benin wash dishes at their home.

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Over the years some parents in the cohort have also commented that they feel that unpaid care work keeps girls out of trouble – by spending time doing chores in the home they are less likely to be spending time with a “flirty boy” (Hillary’s mother, 2017, El Salvador).

The cohort girls and their parents often talk about the girls’ responsibilities in the home in terms of ‘help’ to their mothers – not as ‘work.’ Describing the work that girls perform in the home as ‘help’ instead of recognising it as care or labour undermines and minimises the value of girls’ contributions.³⁵ This in turn **leads girls themselves to not recognise the labour perform in the home as ‘work’ and not consider themselves as ‘caregivers’** despite the amount of care work they perform.³⁶

Maricel's story

Maricel (Philippines) has helped her mother with chores since she was little. From a young age she was responsible for collecting water, washing clothes, and helping with cooking. Her brother, on the other hand, wasn't expected to do many chores because "he doesn't like washing clothes" (Maricel's mother, 2020). In 2017, when Maricel was 10 years old, her father stated that "Girls are just assistants, anything you ask them to do", and later in 2020 her mother said that "it's difficult to ask my son for help unlike Maricel who is always there to help".

Fast-forward to 2024 and Maricel is spending eight hours a day on unpaid care work. It is not something she questions. For her, it appears, it is not work, but just 'help.' She doesn't want to change how she spends her time because: "I'm happy helping my mother." She has reduced the time she spends on her paid work to continue helping at home.

Her mother had previously stated a commitment to her children's education, and hoped that her daughter would go on to college after school:

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

– Maricel's mother, 2021, the Philippines

But the realities of daily life and the power dynamics in the family have eroded this understanding. In 2024, when asked if her daughter had time to develop skills that she needs for her future, Maricel's mother's hopes for her daughter to attend college appear to have been diminished:

“If you know about housework, it will be easier for her to find [a similar] job. Like how she helped me sweep here at the resort, she already knows how to do such jobs.”

– Maricel's mother, 2024, the Philippines

Her daughter identifies with her mother's life, and is circumscribed by her father's attitudes. When asked if she prioritises cleaning or homework, Maricel shared that cleaning is what she needs to do first – that, or look after her nieces.

This example is critical in revealing the connection between parental attitudes and the beliefs and behaviours of their children – over the years, like Maricel, the cohort girls are learning and internalising gender norms from their parents.



A young woman from the Philippines helps her younger sisters with their schoolwork.

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Framing girls' unpaid care work as 'help' also sets the scene for girls to gradually replace their mother's unpaid care work in the home as their mother's engage in paid work outside the home, unremunerated work on subsistence agriculture, or as they age. According to the cohort girls, this is a key driver of their unpaid care work.

“I look after my younger brothers and sisters when my mummies are working in the fields.”

– Nini-Rike, age 13 (2020), Togo^f

Another way that girls' unpaid care work is minimised is by caregivers failing to recognise the extent of girls' contributions. Among the cohort girls who perform unpaid care work, their **caregivers dramatically underestimated the amount of time that their daughters spend on care activities**. In Brazil, Gabriela's mother – who recently gave birth to a baby daughter – says that Gabriela “*doesn't look after anyone*”. In contrast, Gabriela reports performing 3 hours of unpaid care work per day:

“While my mother is taking care of the baby, I do chores ... when she's doing chores, I take care of the girl.”

– Gabriela, age 18 (2024), Brazil

Similarly, in the Philippines, Jasmine's mother greatly understates the amount of time her daughter spends on unpaid care work. While Jasmine reports doing around 11 hours per day^g of indirect care work, like preparing meals, running errands for her grandmother, and doing work on the family farm, her mother said that she could not estimate the time Jasmine spends on housework because she “*only helps*” with some tasks, and does “*just a little*” around the house. When asked about her daughter's contribution to farm work, Jasmine's mother said that Jasmine “*just tags along*”. This tendency to underestimate the number of hours of care work that girls do makes their essential contributions to the running of their households invisible and taken for granted.

The gender norms that drive and inform girls' unpaid care responsibilities also shape the attitudes and behaviour of boys in their families. The cohort girls

observe that their **brothers and other male peers have far fewer chores than they do**. In Togo, Djoumai – then 10 years old – observed that in her family: “*the boys do not work at home at all. They only go to farm and also keep livestock*” (2016) while Sheila in Uganda said that “*boys spend less time on their chores and girls spend more time on the chores*” (2019). In Brazil, Bianca also observes that men and boys are too busy with paid work to be able to do tasks in the home:

“[my father and brother] don't do chores at home because they already do other, so there's no way for them to do anything here.”

– Bianca, age 17 (2024), Brazil

Alice and her parents, who live in Benin, identify another norm that informs gendered time use – the construction of **normative ideas of masculinity, and the shame and stigma attached to deviation from these gender rules**. In 2017, Alice said, “*my mother always draws the water my father has never done it because the women cannot stand by and watch the men doing it*”. She said that it would be shameful to both her mother and father. Alice's mother also spoke about this in 2015:

“It's because he [Alice's father] is the head of the household and in our culture men who are heads of families must not go fetch water ... It would be a shame for himself and his whole family. He's the chief of the family and a chief doesn't do household chores.”

– Alice's mother, 2015, Benin

This idea that unpaid care work is a threat to masculinities is shared by girls and their families across the cohort. In the Dominican Republic, a number of girls and their mothers comment on a perception in society that unpaid care work is associated with homosexuality or femininity. In 2017, Chantal said that generally in her community, boys can sweep and tidy but are not expected to cook or wash clothes, because “*they will call him gay*”, while Sharina's mother explains that she doesn't make her son do chores “*because he tells me he isn't a girl*” (2017).

f. Nini-Rike belongs to a polygamous household: her father has multiple wives, whom Nini-Rike refers to as her “mummies”

g. Some of Jasmine's activities are performed simultaneously

“My brother doesn’t do the housework because there are so many of us girls in the house”: household make-up and gendered time use

Housework is, nearly everywhere, emphatically women’s work and gender norms also interact with household make-up to inform girls’ time use.

Girls who have sisters, or who live in households with multiple women talk about sharing the cooking and the chores, and report feeling less time-poor. Chantal in the Dominican Republic explains that between her and her two sisters they keep the house tidy, while Anti-Yara in Togo reports that her housework has reduced because her younger sister has now started doing chores:

“My tasks have diminished. My little sister started working. I used to wash the plates, fetch water and prepare the food. But now, [my sister] washes the plates and helps me fetch the water.”

– Anti-Yara, age 18 (2024), Togo

More girls in the household doesn’t necessarily mean less work; in fact – in some cases it guarantees that the men and boys will do no housework. Nini-Rike, in Togo, has 13 brothers and has had a significant amount of chores since the age of 5. Now at age 17, she wakes up at 4am each day to make sure she has enough time to get everything done.

“My brother doesn’t do the housework because there are so many of us girls in the house.”

– Alice, age 17 (2024), Benin

Girls in the cohort who are the oldest daughters tend to perform the greatest amount of direct and indirect care work over the years – particularly when there are babies and small children in the house. Reyna, in the Philippines, who lives in a house with five nephews under the age of ten, performs four hours of direct care per day.



A young woman from Togo takes care of her 230 hens.
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Another way that girls’ time use is influenced by household composition is when other family members – particularly their mothers, older sisters and other female relatives – spend more time outside the home. Kannitha, in Cambodia, shares that her chores have increased now that her older sister is busy in her salon and her other sister is pregnant, and Sylvia in Uganda explained in 2023 that she now must do the cooking and cleaning because her mother is out working.

“As a girl, I have to cook, especially if mom has gone to the garden and left me home. I have to keep the home clean so that she returns when the place is neat, and food has been prepared. I also do laundry for her.”

– Sylvia, age 16 (2023), Uganda

Money matters

There is a clear link between poverty and girls' time use. Poverty contributes to excessive time spend on unpaid care work due to a lack of access to infrastructure like water mains, and an inability to afford time- and labour-saving equipment and services, like childcare.

10 of the 12 cohort girls in Uganda, and nine of the twelve in El Salvador report spending time collecting firewood or fetching water, sometimes several times a day.

“Here in the village, we use firewood to cook food and normally [Justine] goes and collects them and brings at home without even being asked to do so. She can also use our bicycle to fetch water from the borehole and brings it home without being asked.”

– Justine's mother, 2024, Uganda

Poverty also influences girls' time use in other ways – a number of the girls in the cohort have **taken on paid work in order to contribute to the household income**. Many of the cohort girls come from farming and fishery families – and in 2023 reported that [climate change had led to deepening deprivation in their communities](#). In Cambodia, Kannitha, Mony and Nakry all first began working in order to contribute to their household incomes which had been affected by climate change. In 2023, Kannitha said that she started picking cashews and growing garlic during February to May in order to help support her mother and sister, and to be able to pay for school; while Nakry reports in 2024 that she picks cashews when she is not at school and contributes all of her income to her mother to help with household costs.

Gender norms intersect with poverty to inform how girls spend their time. Poverty may increase the amount of labour required to cook, clean and provide a family with drinking water, but again it does not dictate how this additional labour will be allocated and shared: boys are not similarly expected to perform time- and labour-intensive chores.

The pervasive influence of what is seen as 'normal' drives the division of labour and this means that, whatever the family circumstances, it is girls who pick up the domestic slack.



A young woman from Uganda pours corn into her basket to separate the chaff.

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Counting the cost of the gendered care divide

The way that the cohort girls decide, or are directed to, divide their day across their different caring activities has direct implications for the amount of time that they have available for other pursuits. This in turn will have far-reaching consequences for their overall development and well-being.

- By spending 8 hours doing unpaid care work per day, a girl may not have time to do her homework or engage in skills-training activities that would further her ambitions for the future.
- Girls who are overloaded with numerous responsibilities and who report being time-poor also report having little time to socialise with friends, family and their wider communities to build important social networks.
- They also report having fewer hours for sleep and rest, and higher levels of stress.
- The way the girls split their time influences the scale of their ambitions, the types of career aspirations they have, and their optimism for their futures.

Education: the first casualty

High levels of unpaid care work can cause girls to miss school, be unable to complete their homework, fall behind in their lessons and perform poorly on tests, and ultimately drop out of school altogether.

In the Philippines, many of the girls said that their care responsibilities interfere with their education. Since the age of 9, Rubylyn has missed the occasional day of school in order to take care of her baby brother, while at age 17 Mahalia said that she is sometimes late to school because all of her chores must be done before she can leave the house. Michelle, at 16, said that she doesn't have time for homework because of her chores, and, at 18, Rosamie says that she is stressed about school because she doesn't think she has enough time to study.

“Of course I regret it, because instead of just studying, my time is divided between my chores at home.”

– Michelle, age 16 (2023), the Philippines



The impact of girls' unpaid care work on their education does not appear to be recognised by their parents. Reyna's father (Philippines) estimates that household chores and cooking take up “20 per cent” of Reyna's day; this would equate to a little under 5 hours per day. When asked what chores and care work Reyna performed, her father said, “I don't know, but she also helps her sister”. When asked how much time Reyna spends taking care of siblings or other family members he reports “it's seldom” – speculating that perhaps Reyna does this only on Saturdays and Sundays.

By contrast, Reyna herself reports spending 11 hours per day taking care of her nephews, doing chores and cooking. Reyna says that she only has time for one hour of homework in the evening, which she does at the same time as helping her nephews with their homework. The total amount of unpaid care work she performs represents 46 per cent of Reyna's 24-hour day; more than double her father's estimate. Unsurprisingly, Reyna performed poorly in some recent school tests. Her father says he was disappointed and could not understand why this had happened.

“It's not easy being a student and doing a lot at home.”

– Reyna, age 17 (2024), the Philippines

Unpaid care work has caused some of the girls to abandon their education altogether. In Benin, Eleanor and Margaret were forced to drop out of school because of poor results. In both cases, their parents failed to recognise that heavy housework loads were significant contributing factors to the girls' poor performances.

“I ended up being expelled by the Headmistress because I couldn't keep up.”

– Eleanor, age 17 (2024), Benin

“No-one is going to look after the child”

The unpaid care work associated with marriage and motherhood has a significant impact on the education of the cohort girls who are now mothers. Doris dropped out of school when she became pregnant in 2022, and says that it would be too difficult to return to her education “because no one is going to look after the child”. Melanie, in the Philippines, dropped out of school when she became pregnant in Grade 10^h and although she wants to return to school to finish her education, she feels like it is too difficult because her child is so young.

Hillary’s story

For some girls, we can see the strong influence of unpaid care work, undertaken as much younger children, on their current time use as mothers. Hillary, in El Salvador, grew up in an area plagued by violence with few livelihood opportunities for her parents. Her father worked odd jobs over the years, and her mother was busy raising Hillary’s younger siblings; so from a young age Hillary became her mother’s helper. At 8 years of age, Hillary in El Salvador collected water three times a day with her brother, and by the following year she was responsible for a lot of household chores and for taking care of her younger sister, which she enjoyed doing. At 13, she was taking time off school to help out around the house, and her mother shared that year that she did not want to send Hillary to school anymore because she thought the journey was dangerous and Hillary would be safer at home.

By age 15 Hillary had dropped out of school altogether to get married. She described doing housework for her new mother-in-law, as well as continuing to care for her infant brother. Hillary became pregnant, aged 15, and gave birth to a son in late 2021. In 2022 she told researchers that she had too much care work to return to school.

“I really want to study but there’s no one to take care of my child. I really want to finish senior high.”

– Melanie, age 17 (2024), Philippines



A 19-year-old Vietnamese mother and her 1-year-old son wash vegetables before she cooks them.

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“Yes, it’s like taking care of the baby, bathing him, dressing him, taking care of him, rocking him so that he sleeps enough. While he sleeps, I manage to do a lot of things around the house, in other words, the housework.”

Hillary, age 15 (2022), El Salvador

The experiences shared by Doris, Melanie and Hillary highlight the urgent need for comprehensive sexuality education, access to sexual and reproductive health services, and for quality, accessible and affordable childcare, to allow for adolescent girls to complete their education.

h. Melanie was 15 when she dropped out of school

A 13-year-old from El Salvador wants to live in an equal society.

© Plan International



“ Sometimes, I can't go to class because I help Mama and Papa at the farm [...] I'm worried that I might be unable to keep up with the class because I'm absent. ”

– Mahalia, age 17 (2024), Philippines

Extended hours spent on remunerated or unremunerated work also has a critical impact on girls' education. Fezire (Togo) and Namazzi (Uganda) both dropped out of school because they wanted to devote their time to earning money to help support their families – Fezire now works at a market stall and Namazzi is doing an apprenticeship in tailoring.

In the Philippines, unremunerated work on her family's farm means Mahalia misses days of school and fails to complete assignments which causes her a lot of anxiety. Mahalia says that sometimes she tries to negotiate with her parents to only help on the farm in the morning so that she can attend school in the afternoon, however she feels that working for her parents is essential, *“because life is hard. We have to work together”* (2024).

The reality of navigating the demands of school, homework, chores, unremunerated work on family farms and care responsibilities means that girls' time to learn is seriously compromised. It is not surprising that their academic performance suffers.

In turn, a lack of academic progress – particularly when the costs of school fees are already difficult for families to meet – discourages girls from continuing with school, and their parents from supporting their education.



A young woman from Uganda works in a tailoring shop to earn money to support herself and her family.

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“ I usually stop, get my notebook, write my dreams down, think a little. ”

– Camila, age 18 (2024), Brazil

In El Salvador, Gabriela has developed a clear roadmap for her future, and said that she has been devoting her time to studying hard at school and doing more homework so that she can go to university.

“ I want to study international relations [which is about] foreign relations [and] has to do with language ... knowing English you get some of the jobs that there are here in El Salvador and a good salary. [I could] serve as a translator. ”

– Gabriela, age 16 (2023), El Salvador

Working towards the future

As the cohort girls reach the age of 18, many are transitioning from secondary school to their next steps – whether that be higher education or the world of work. Some of the girls are able to dedicate time to develop skills, undertake vocational training, and take on remunerated work that supports their economic independence.

In Cambodia, Kannitha has taken on paid work in her sister’s salon, and she also continues to do agricultural work that she started in 2023. While Kannitha originally took on this work in order to help contribute to the household income and support her studies, she says that taking on paid work has helped her to develop valuable skills that will be helpful for her future.

“ I learn about time management between working and studying. Furthermore, I manage my income for my study too. ”

– Kannitha, age 16 (2023), Cambodia

A number of the cohort girls in Latin America and the Caribbean report having time to plan for their futures and take concrete steps towards developing the skills they need. In Brazil, Camila shares that she is able to make time during her schedule to reflect on her future and her goals.

At this time in their lives, as they reach their end of their school years and look to what lies ahead, they must make crucial decisions. But for many of the cohort girls studying for exams, developing the skills they need, and making plans for their future, is just not possible. The demands of their daily lives leave no space for thinking about tomorrow.

Namazzi in Uganda has plans but sees little chance of fulfilling them. In 2024, she reports that she has completed the first level of tailoring and wants to study the second level, “so that I can learn more skills” but she does not have the time: Namazzi does five hours of unremunerated work digging and 13 hours of unpaid care work per day.ⁱ Her care work involves cooking for her family, cleaning, and taking care of her four-year-old niece. Although she tries to practice tailoring privately, Namazzi is frustrated that her tailoring skills are not developing faster – and says that she is losing potential income as a result.

“ I feel bad because sometimes my customers need something like a design that I have no idea about but if I was at school I would be able to learn about it. ”

– Namazzi, age 17 (2024), Uganda

i. Some of Namazzi’s activities are conducted simultaneously

An 11-year-old washes clothes at her home in Cambodia.
© Plan International



All work and no play

Studies show that individuals are more likely to compensate for increased time spent on work and education with less sleep or leisure time, rather than with less childcare or housework:³⁷ many of the cohort girls appear to be sacrificing their hobbies, socialising with friends and family and time spent participating in community life.

The majority of them say that they do have some time in the day for leisure activities, but 12 girls report having no time for hobbies or socialising, and a further 12 say they only have one hour per day for this. Ayomide who juggles paid work at a market stall with caring for her two-year-old daughter, sums up the impacts of time-poverty on her life, and on her ability to benefit from her social networks:

“I want to have more time to look for money and also to chat with friends and give each other advice. I’d also like to have more time to be with my family, to help my grandparents more, and get their advice too.”

– Ayomide, age 17 (2024), Togo

In Benin, Annabelle, who is studying midwifery at university, says that she does not have time for leisure or socialising “because my studies come first”. She reports that when she gets back from her classes, she stays “locked up in my room to study”.

Similarly, Kannitha (Cambodia), Namazzi (Uganda) and Bessy (El Salvador) have all shared over the years that they no longer have time for hobbies.

“I used to play most times, but I now play less and do more house chores like cooking and washing.”

– Namazzi, age 13 (2020), Uganda

A number of the girls report that lack of time is having a damaging effect on their ability to nurture and invest in their friendships. In the Philippines, Jasmine’s overloaded schedule means that she must spend much of her day multi-tasking – she juggles unremunerated work on her family farm, and chores, and tries to keep up with her studies while she takes a temporary break from school.

“I do everything at the same time ... It’s sad because I can’t do things I like, like bonding with my friends. I rarely do that.”

– Jasmine, age 18 (2024), Philippines

“Why does life keep drowning me?”

The girls in the study make frequent references to stress. In the Dominican Republic, Nicol says that she has lost a lot of weight over the last year because she lost her appetite.

“sometimes I don’t feel like eating [...] [because of] “stress, like too many classes, and too much work to do.”

– Nicol, age 18 (2024), Dominican Republic

Another common complaint among the cohort girls is that they wish that they had more time to rest. In Vietnam, Huong says that she wishes that she had “*more time to sleep, spend more with my family, and study a little less*”. She spends 6 hours a day at school and a further 5 hours doing homework and studying but said she struggles to keep on top of her workload, and asks jokingly, “*why does life keep drowning me?*” (2024).

The cohort girls in Brazil report having the most time for leisure activities; they appear to be supported by their caregivers to prioritise having fun in order to take care of their wellbeing.



A girl plays football in Brazil.

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Juliana’s grandmother has been very worried about her granddaughter in the last year, saying the Juliana has become withdrawn as a result of her grandfather’s alcoholism and abusive behaviour in the home. Football is Juliana’s release and escape; she plays games with friends after school; her grandmother said that “*when she’s with her friends, playing ball, she lets go. She has fun.*” While her grandmother has historically been disapproving of Juliana playing football, she now recognises its importance for Juliana’s mental health and says that it is “*something I won’t take away from her*”. Juliana’s story demonstrates the importance of hobbies and leisure time in promoting wellbeing and safeguarding girls’ mental health: football allows her to ‘let go’ and relax.

“When I grow up ...”: dreams and ambitions

The cost of unpaid care work is also counted in girls’ aspirations and how they imagine their future. Their experiences and comments highlight the powerful influence that their time use is having on their attitudes and beliefs about their role in life: on what is suitable for girls and women and what they are capable of – and the impact that this has on the careers they feel are available to them.

Over the years, many of the girls have aspired to careers in care professions – which reflects their perception of the options available to them based on:

- accepted gender roles
- the role models they observe in their communities
- their own patterns of time use.

Azia, in Togo, would like to be a district nurse – and identifies a particular nurse in her community who she thinks of as a role model and someone she would like to be like in the future. Azia’s aspirations have remained the same for her most of her adolescence: at 15 she wanted to “*look after sick people and look after my family*” (2021).

From the age of 6, Nakry, in Cambodia, expressed a desire to have a career like teaching through which she can “*help others*”. At 14, she demonstrated an in-depth awareness of her aunt’s responsibilities and duties as a primary school teacher and expressed a wish to follow in her footsteps.

“I would like to be a teacher (as my aunty) to share knowledge with the younger generation. She can teach extra classes at night from 5 pm to 6 pm for grade 2 to 6 students.”

– Nakry, age 14 (2021), Cambodia

Over the years the idea of caring, helping others, has been instilled in the girls as a key feminine virtue. Gender norms in the home, the girls’ time use, are clearly shaping, and limiting, their aspirations.

We can see the importance of role models. It can be assumed that girls like Azia and Nakry have made a judgement that the role models around them had access to the same resources and opportunities that they themselves do, making their dreams of becoming nurses and teachers seem realistic. Unfortunately, not all girls are provided with the support they need to achieve their aspirations.

Without an enabling environment – namely caregiver support and role models to follow – over time, girls tend to take on more and more unpaid care work. This is exhausting, confidence sapping, and means that at a crucial time in their lives to determine their future, their opportunities diminish. Many are left with few options open to them, apart from the familiar domestic role they have played from an early age.

Margaret's Story

Margaret, from Benin, has been doing chores around the house since she was five years old: at that age, she was responsible for sweeping some of the rooms in her house. By the time she was ten, she was responsible for collecting water for the household, and cleaning dishes – and she had noticed inequality in the division of chores in her household. While the girls in her family were required to collect water, boys of the same age were considered too young and were allowed more free time: *“boys are often allowed to play more than girls”* (2016).

When Margaret was 13, her mother commented that she was trying to ensure that Margaret was prepared to be a *“good wife for later on”*. By 16, Margaret had dropped out of school because of her household duties.

“[I dropped out] because I don't find time at home to learn my lessons. When I come back from school, my aunt gives me too much housework to do; she tells me to fetch water, cook, that's why I decided to drop out of school.”

– Margaret, age 16 (2022), Benin

Now 18 years of age, Margaret is working 12 hours per day helping her aunt to sell cosmetics and working in the fields; she does not get paid for this work. When she was younger, Margaret wanted to be a police officer, and later a nurse. Now, she wants to learn to sew – she would like to do a dressmaking apprenticeship but doesn't know when, or if, she will be able to.



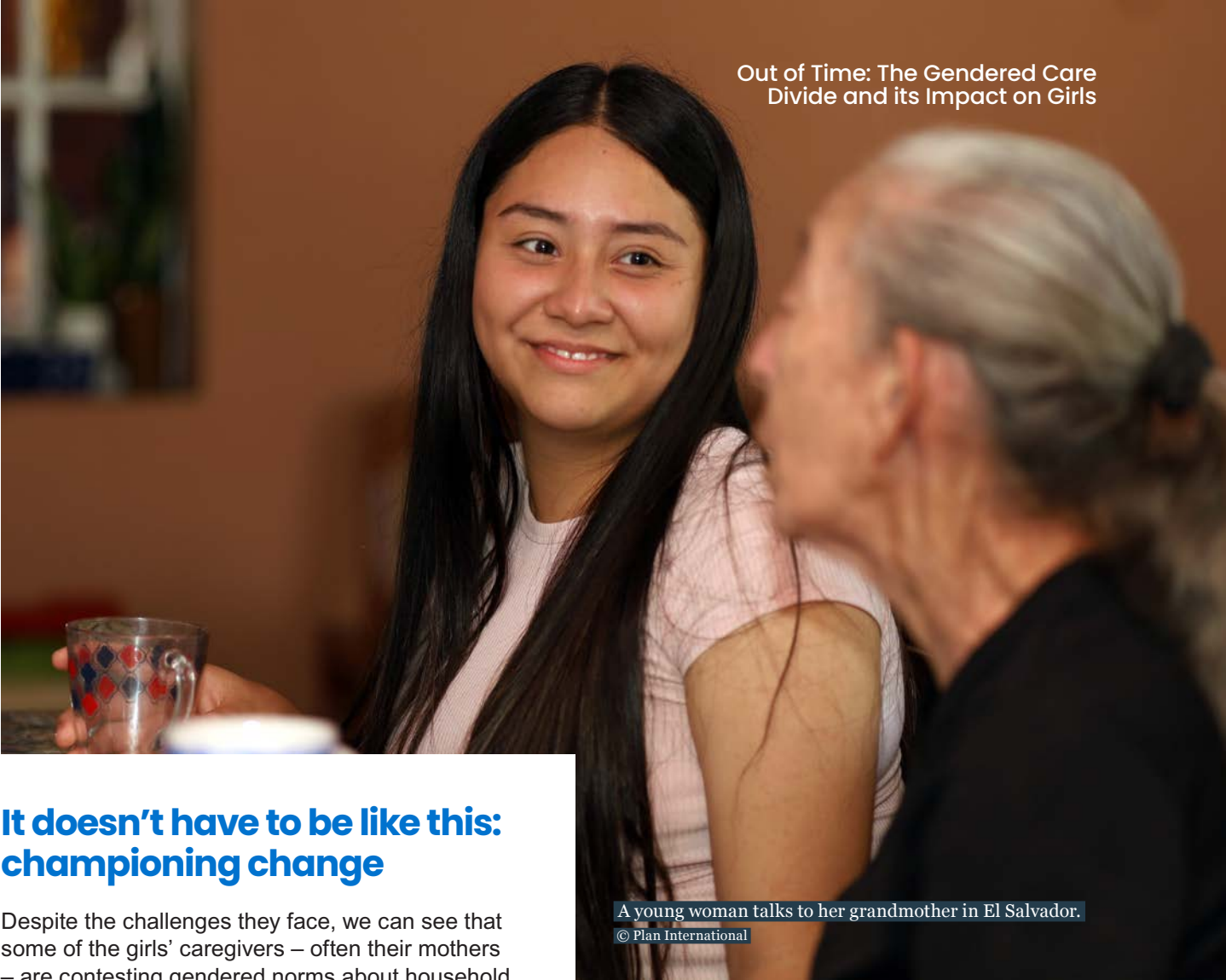
Two sisters from Benin carry water back to their home.
© Plan International

“Today, it hurts because I dropped out of school because I thought that if I dropped out, they would immediately put me into an apprenticeship, but that's no longer the case.”

– Margaret, age 18 (2024), Benin

Unsurprisingly Margaret can see little point in planning for her future: *“it won't do any good”*. She doesn't have the time to learn new skills or do an apprenticeship.

Margaret is one of many girls in the cohort where we can see clearly the impact of both the lack of overall support for her education – caused by poverty and gender roles – and of the consequent time use over the course of her childhood. The opportunities now available to her are limited by time constraints, lack of any control over her life and a recognition that she has sacrificed her future to help her family.



A young woman talks to her grandmother in El Salvador.

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It doesn't have to be like this: championing change

Despite the challenges they face, we can see that some of the girls' caregivers – often their mothers – are contesting gendered norms about household divisions of labour and the broader picture of how women and men spend their time and what they can do and be. The research tells us that this has a powerful impact on their daughters' time use and their aspirations.

It is in Vietnam that we see the greatest number of families sharing unpaid care work between girls and boys, and women and men. In 2015, Quynh's mother explained that everyone in her house is responsible for contributing to household chores:

“If my eldest daughter goes to school, I and my husband will do housework. If I come back home early, I will do outside housework, breeding and help my eldest daughter. Anyone who is not busy will help the others.”

– Quynh's mother, 2015, Vietnam

In 2018, Huong's mother said something similar:

“My husband also does the chores when he comes home after and finds the chores I haven't done. So do I. I also do what he has not done yet. We do not discriminate between men's and women's duties.”

– Huong's mother, 2018, Vietnam

Out of the nine cohort countries, girls in Vietnam report doing the least amount of unpaid care work – an average of roughly an hour and 20 minutes compared with the global average of five hours 15 minutes.^j The importance of parental attitudes and most significantly the example set within the home, cannot be over-estimated.

j. These averages (both Vietnam and global) are inclusive of all girls, including those who report doing no unpaid care work (0 hours). When only looking at the number of hours of girls among girls who report doing unpaid care work, the girls in Vietnam still report doing around 3.5 fewer hours of care work than the global cohort average (1 hour 50 minutes versus 5 hours 34 minutes).

“It’s not fair ...”

Like some of their mothers, many of the cohort girls are resisting gender rules in their everyday lives – something that, over the years, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has explored and documented in detail.³⁸ For some time, the girls have expressed their frustration and sense of injustice about the way that unpaid care work is divided in their households

At 11, Mirembe in Uganda said “it is not fair” that women do all of the cooking while “*the man just seats waiting to eat*”. In the Dominican Republic, Raisa shared similar thoughts:

“I don’t think it’s right because if we girls do them [chores], the boys should do them too.”

– Raisa, age 12 (2018), Dominican Republic

A different way of doing things: strategies for change

Tan, in Vietnam, is an important example of how parental attitudes influence girls’ perspectives of gender equality and the opportunities available to women. Tan’s mother believes that women and men should be “*very equal*.”

“If I go to work, my husband stays at home with cooking. He took care of everything, and when I came home from work at night only to eat and then shower and go to bed.”

– Tan’s mother, 2024, Vietnam

Tan’s mother’s attitude and her parents’ behaviour in sharing the responsibilities for housework depending on paid work commitments have influenced Tan’s views on gender equality and her ambitions for herself.

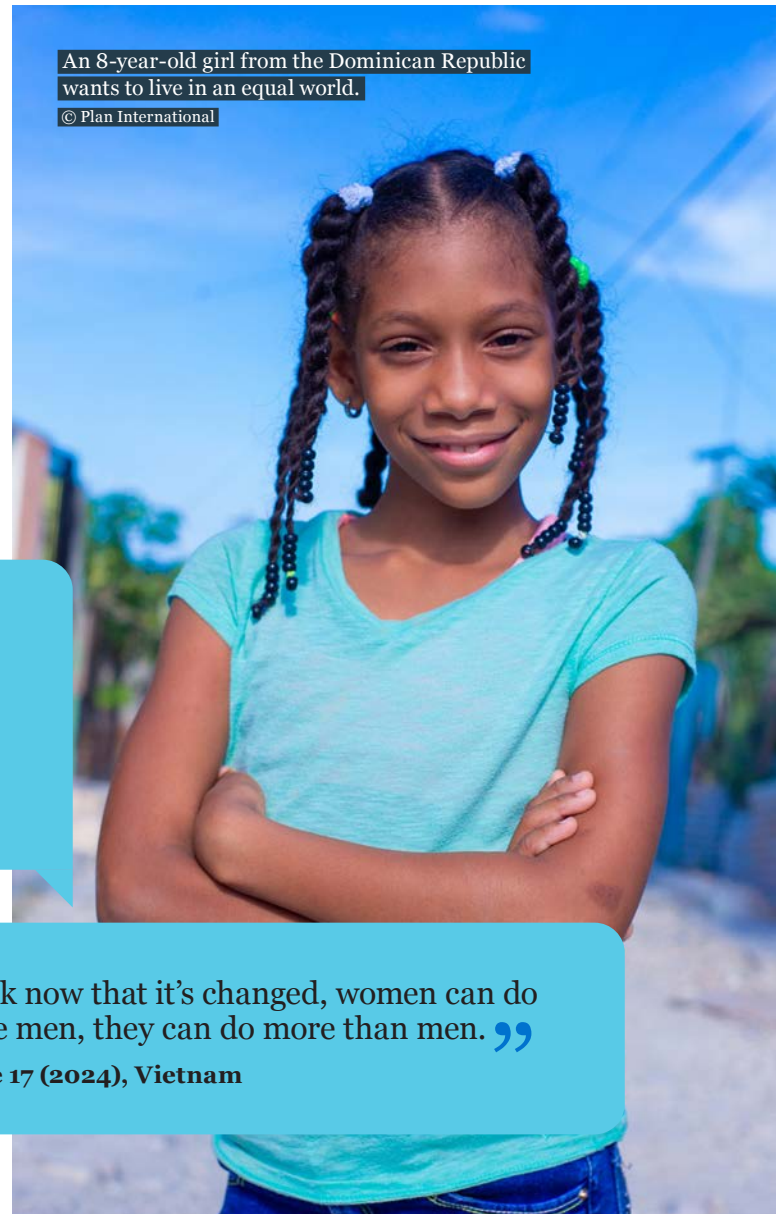
Amelia, in Uganda, reported in 2023 that she has begun charging her brothers for doing their laundry in order to demonstrate that this is work that she is performing for them. She laughed as she explained her set-up:

“My brothers usually ask me to do laundry for them, yet I am busy. So, if any of them wants to engage me, they must pay for my service [she laughs].”

– Amelia, age 16 (2023), Uganda

An 8-year-old girl from the Dominican Republic wants to live in an equal world.

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“I think now that it’s changed, women can do more like men, they can do more than men.”

– Tan, age 17 (2024), Vietnam



A young girl from Vietnam busy studying at her home.

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Tan is determined not to be held back just because she is a girl. Her aim is to study economics at university and she works towards this goal by spending roughly 12 hours per day at school or doing homework. She attends extra classes on Saturday afternoons, and reports spending all day on Sunday studying.

Her parents support Tan to prioritise her studies; her mother has directed Tan's younger siblings to take over cooking rice so that Tan can dedicate more time to studying.

Annabelle in Benin is also supported by her parents to reduce her unpaid care responsibilities in favour of her studies. At first, she was allowed to drop housework when she had classes, or to prioritise doing her school homework first before doing chores. In 2022, she said “[my schedule] only changes when I have homework at school; I drop my housework to attend school.” By 2023, Annabelle had been able to significantly reduce her duties at home.

“As far as my responsibilities are concerned, everything has changed because I have too many subjects to study to be able to do housework. I don't do any housework; I do my studies.”

– Annabelle, age 16 (2023), Benin

Annabelle's ability to split her time in a way that supported her education allowed her to graduate from high school; she now attends university in Cotonou and is studying midwifery. In 2024, Annabelle's mother reflects on why it was so important for her to allow Annabelle to prioritise time for her education:

“Where I come from, we don't like girls going to school. For example, in my family, me and my older sister went to school but with the rumours in the village, our parents got discouraged and neglected our schooling. But my older sister was lucky enough to get her CEP^k and I stopped at CE1.^l That left a void in me today. If we were boys, our parents weren't going to leave us because of the rumours in our village [...] If I could change anything, I would advise and encourage girls to go to school.”

– Annabelle's mother, 2024, Benin

Like Annabelle, many of the cohort girls in Vietnam have been supported by their parents to reduce their care responsibilities in favour of spending more time on their studies. Sen currently reports doing no unpaid care work, and instead spends 13 hours a day on her education.

“I study at school every morning from Monday to Saturday. In addition, there are also some extra classes.”

– Sen, age 18 (2024), Vietnam

Annabelle, Tan and Sen's stories demonstrate the importance of an enabling environment for girls to be able to manage their time-use in such a way that they can prioritise their education. A more equal division of care work between mothers and fathers appears to have powerful implications for the role that girls are expected to play in the home – and consequently, the time they are able to give to other activities: enhancing their opportunities and enabling them to make meaningful choices about their future lives.

k. Benin primary school exit certificate

l. Third year of primary school in Benin

Conclusion

The experiences shared by the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls provide us with critical insights into the factors influencing how adolescent girls split their time as they navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood, and from school to further education, training or employment.



A 13-year-old advocates for girls' rights in the Dominican Republic.

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The girls' stories and reflections demonstrate that gender norms remain a key driver of girls' time use: from an early age they are expected to take on unpaid care responsibilities and conform to what are seen as appropriate roles for girls and women. Together with household composition and poverty, these factors influence how much time girls have available for study, vocational training, earning their own money, socialising, relaxing and planning for the future.

As the girls taking part in *Real Choices, Real Lives* reach 18 they provide first-hand, descriptions and reflections on the routines of family life and how they spend their time.

This testimony reveals that, for many, unpaid care work takes up more and more hours in the day. The consequences of this for the girls' lives and opportunities are far-reaching and damaging.

- Chores take precedence and they miss school or drop out altogether as their academic performance plummets.
- They lose out on opportunities for economic empowerment and developing skills for their futures.
- They have little to no time for rest and leisure, and this can lead to stress, loneliness and isolation.
- They start to identify their role in life as purely domestic and lose confidence in their ability to do anything else.

However, this is not the whole story. The research also demonstrates that some girls are able to prioritise the way they spend their time in order to pursue their goals.

To do this, girls need role models in their communities who demonstrate what opportunities are possible, supportive environments provided by parents that allows girls to make autonomous decisions about their time use, and a recognition in their communities and societies that domestic work can and should be shared between girls and boys, women and men.

The report highlights the drivers and influences that motivate how the girls split their time between their various activities and responsibilities, and demonstrates the effect that this has on their education, economic independence, leisure time, health, wellbeing, and aspirations for the future.

The insight provided by *Real Choices, Real Lives* is unique. While time use studies provide valuable quantitative information on the gendered division of unpaid care work, we are seldom given access to the views and experiences of girls in their own words – and particularly not dating back over their entire childhoods. With this rare access to their voices and everyday realities, we are granted a nuanced picture of girls' time use, the complexities behind how they balance responsibilities, and how the drivers and impacts of the way girls spend their time have changed and compounded as they have grown up.

The evidence from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study both lays out the problem of gendered time use and, as we support girls in the transition from school to their next steps in further education, paid work, and navigating the future, points towards some potential solutions.

Recommendations

How do we create a world where gender inequality is properly addressed, and girls can exercise their rights to education and fulfil their potential? The *Real Choices, Real Lives* research demonstrates clearly that tackling girls' time use, and the unfair distribution of unpaid care work, is key. Building on the contributions of feminist economists and activists around the world, the recommendations below have been developed directly from the research findings, including the ideas, opinions and recommendations from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls themselves.

The recommendations are also guided by the 4 Rs Framework which emphasises the need to **recognise**, **reduce** and **redistribute** unpaid care work, as well as the need to **represent** girls and women's voices in policy and decision-making that impacts their lives and their time use.³⁹

RECOGNISE girls' unpaid care contributions

The significant amount of unpaid care work performed by girls must be recognised and valued for its critical importance to individuals, families, and society. This recognition must happen at household, community and policy levels.



Recommendations for governments

- Governments at all levels should take proactive steps to **include measures of unpaid care work in national statistics**. Supported by international agencies and INGOs, governments should conduct gender- and age-sensitive time use studies with women, men and children to better understand how care work is shared within households and communities.
- Governments must **set specific targets on gender equality and empowerment of girls and women** that uphold their rights to the completion of twelve years of education, vocational training and decent employment. Governments should **monitor and evaluate the implementation of gender transformative policies** and wider social protection strategies.
- Governments should **pay care workers a wage that recognises the importance of care**, in order to increase the status and value of care work, both paid and unpaid, in society.



Recommendations for employers

- Businesses and the private sector have an important role to play in the care economy by providing **decent care jobs**, investing in the professionalisation of the care sector, and implementing care policies that further gender equality in the workplace – such as paid maternity, paternity and shared parental leave.



Recommendations for communities

- Community leaders should create local and contextually specific **social awareness campaigns and discussions** about the value of care work in society, the necessity of gender-equal divisions of labour, and active male involvement in all forms of care work.

REDUCE
the disproportionate
amount of care
labour performed by
girls and women

Reducing unpaid care work is essential – and can be done through investing in time- and labour-saving services, technology and infrastructure. Reducing time spent on unpaid care leaves more time for education, paid work, leisure, rest and decision-making.



Recommendations for governments

- Governments at all levels must **invest in improved physical infrastructure**, including piped water, electricity access, sanitation, and safe transport to reduce time spent on caring activities. Governments should also provide cash or in-kind benefits or other demand-side financial support to allow households to purchase **labour-saving devices, infrastructure or services** that would reduce time spent on care in the home – for example, gas stoves or childcare vouchers.
- Governments must invest in **cross-governmental national care systems and instruments** to deliver universal childcare and care for older people and people with disabilities. These care systems should fulfil and protect the universal rights to quality healthcare and social security such as pensions and child benefits. Governments should ensure that these care systems are resilient and prepared to respond to complex and interconnected crises including climate change, conflict and pandemics. The UN system has a critical role to play in supporting countries to develop and implement comprehensive care systems – through **mapping care systems, and providing technical assistance to governments** as they design and implement policies and programmes to promote decent work in the care sector.



Recommendations for schools and early learning centres

- Early education centres should **align their services with the needs of working parents**, providing full-time hours, and flexibility on days per week.
- Recognising that girls are often time-poor and have little time for leisure, schools should ensure that **time for play and rest are built into curricula**, and expectations about homework and private study are reasonable and in line with the realities of girls' daily lives.



Recommendations for employers and workplaces

- Businesses must recognise the value of care work and sustain the wellbeing of workers by providing flexible arrangements to ensure that that parents of young children can **manage and prioritise their care responsibilities around their work**.

**REDISTRIBUTE
unpaid care work
in a fairer and more
gender-equal way**

There is an urgent need not only to reduce unpaid car work, but to redistribute the responsibility, labour, mental load and cost of this work. This must be shared more equally within families and communities, and with the state and private sector.



Recommendations for governments

- In partnership with CSOs, the private sector and community and traditional leaders, governments should challenge harmful norms and **foster social norm change** to better balance the allocation of unpaid responsibilities among girls and women and boys and men in societies and households. Governments must invest in resources to challenge harmful norms, including through public campaigns and communication strategies that emphasise the value of care for society, and promote and **support men's involvement in care work**.
 - National care systems must include legislation that protects and promotes **paid maternity leave and shared paid parental leave** that includes a period of use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave. Governments should commission studies on parental leave to understand and effectively address specific barriers to access.
 - Governments should respect, fulfil and protect girls' and women's right to economic participation by **investing in policies and social protection systems** to create an enabling environment for young women to enter and thrive in the formal labour market.
 - Governments and education ministries should invest in **gender transformative education from early learning through to secondary** as a key strategy to address harmful gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate disproportionate and unjust levels of care work for girls and women.
- Governments must legislate to protect the rights of all care workers, ensure they have access to appropriate training, and are able to benefit from collective bargaining. Governments should also support the transition of care workers from the informal to the formal economy. In partnership with care employers, governments should **invest in understanding employees' childcare needs**, promote **equal participation of women and men in care professions** and ensure pathways to women's promotion to senior positions in care occupations.



Recommendations for schools

- Education providers must address barriers to girls' completion of education through inclusion programmes that provide pregnant girls and adolescent mothers with support and flexibility to continue their education. **Financial support, adequate sanitation, vocational education and careers guidance should also be provided to girls to support them to complete their education.**

REPRESENT
girls' voices and
experiences in
decision-making
at all levels

Girls do a significant proportion of unpaid care work, but too often they are shut out of decision-making spaces. Girls must be able to represent their interests and demands in their own voices and participate in decision-making at all levels.



Recommendations for governments

- Governments at all levels should **consult and include women and girls** in the design of social service and community service policies to ensure that gender considerations are factored in their design, implementation, and monitoring. Women and girls' voices should be central to assessments of whether transport, infrastructure and care services are compatible with balancing home and work responsibilities.
- Governments must facilitate the **participation of unpaid carers and care workers in decision-making** fora and processes at all levels to ensure that their needs and interests can better inform policymaking.



Recommendations for schools

- Schools should **consult adolescent girls** on what support they need to manage their education and other competing responsibilities and activities.
- Schools should provide opportunities for girls to **develop their leadership skills** through after school clubs, debating teams, and other activities.



Recommendations for INGOs and international agencies

- INGOs and international bodies like the UN must **centre the voices of adolescent girls** in the design, implementation and evaluation of programming, campaigns and interventions aimed at supporting their late adolescence transitions from school to employment.

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A 14-year-old tends to crops in the community garden in Brazil.

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Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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