

# Because We are Girls

## Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study

As 'Because I am a Girl' will show, discrimination against girls and young women remains deeply entrenched and widely tolerated throughout the world. Many of the challenges girls will face start from the moment they are born; in fact in some parts of the world, girls are the target of a social preference for boys even before birth.

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study was set up to follow 135 girls from birth until their ninth birthday, in 2015. Every year, researchers will visit the girls and their families to talk to them about what they eat, how healthy they are, their education, and over time will build up a picture of how the fact that they are girls impacts on their lives. Findings from the study will be published in each of Plan's 'State of the World's Girls' annual reports.

**1. Born in July 2006, Elna lives in Benin. She was born in a local health centre and is lucky enough to have been in good health throughout her first few months of life. The infant mortality rate in Sub-Saharan Africa is 101 per 1000 live births. Elna's mother has only ever been to primary school and is a market trader. There is a striking correlation between under-five mortality rates and the educational level attained by a child's mother.**

**2. Lhi is the daughter of Vietnamese farmers. She was born in the local hospital with the help of a midwife in February 2006. Uniquely for Vietnam, Lhi's mother has had more years of schooling than her father. This should place Lhi at an advantage.**

The girls are from nine countries around the world. Some girls are from two of the poorest countries in the world – Benin and Togo. Others

are from rapidly growing economies, such as Vietnam. Some are from countries where the government has invested heavily in social programmes to benefit poor families, like Brazil.

**3. Bessy celebrated her first birthday at the beginning of March 2007. Her family lives in a village in El Salvador. Bessy was born at home, with no trained birth attendant or midwife for support. She has been ill with an ongoing chest infection, as well as occasional diarrhoea. Bessy's mother is herself still a girl. She is 14 years old. Bessy is her mother's second daughter.**

**4. Rosamie was born in February 2006 at home with the help of a birth attendant. She lives with her family in a poor village in the Philippines. Rosamie's mother takes care of the home and her father is a farmer. There is both an early years centre and a primary school in their village. The family has access to a hand pump which supplies them with water.**

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study will examine several key issues of importance to children, and in particular to girls who, as the report outlines, are increasingly vulnerable to a series of risks because of the position girls occupy in society:

- What is the family's access to quality services like?
- Is education girl-friendly?
- What about early years' provision, and the general needs of girls before adolescence? • How are girls faring alongside their male

siblings? What roles do they have to fulfil in the home?

**5. Davy was born in August 2006 in a Cambodian village. She is the daughter of farmers. Davy was born at home with the help of a birth attendant – there is no local health facility. The family uses a well for water and have no sanitary facilities. There are no schools in the village.**

**6. In a small village in Togo, Larba was born in February 2006. She was born at home, with her grandmother assisting the birth. Larba's parents were educated up to primary level. Her mother takes care of the family and her father is a farmer. There is no local health centre nor is there a secondary school locally. The family use a well for water all year round.**

So why do a study on girls' lives?

- **There is a need for qualitative information about why girls continue to face discrimination.** An eight year study will provide the opportunity to talk to girls and their families about their attitudes and opinions on the girls' upbringing. Surveys often focus more on issues that are easy to measure, such as the number of girls in school, and less on how girls may feel about their school environment.
- **Information on girls is often segmented,** as we have seen in the research undertaken for this report. There is some good information about their education or about aspects of their health. This has not been brought together to produce a comprehensive picture of what is going on in girls' lives over a period of time.
- **The life cycle approach** taken in the report, provides an important lens for examining girls' rights. As the study will

cover several important stages of the girls' lives over eight years, evidence of pervasive issues and critical points of vulnerability should start to emerge.

**7. In her short life, Achen has already had a bout of malaria. Malaria is the biggest killer of children under the age of five in Sub-Saharan Africa, often leaving those who survive with persistent anaemia. Achen was born in May 2006 in Uganda. She was born at the local health post with the assistance of a midwife. Achen's mother went to secondary school. She now farms together with Achen's father. There is both a primary and secondary school within reach of their home.**

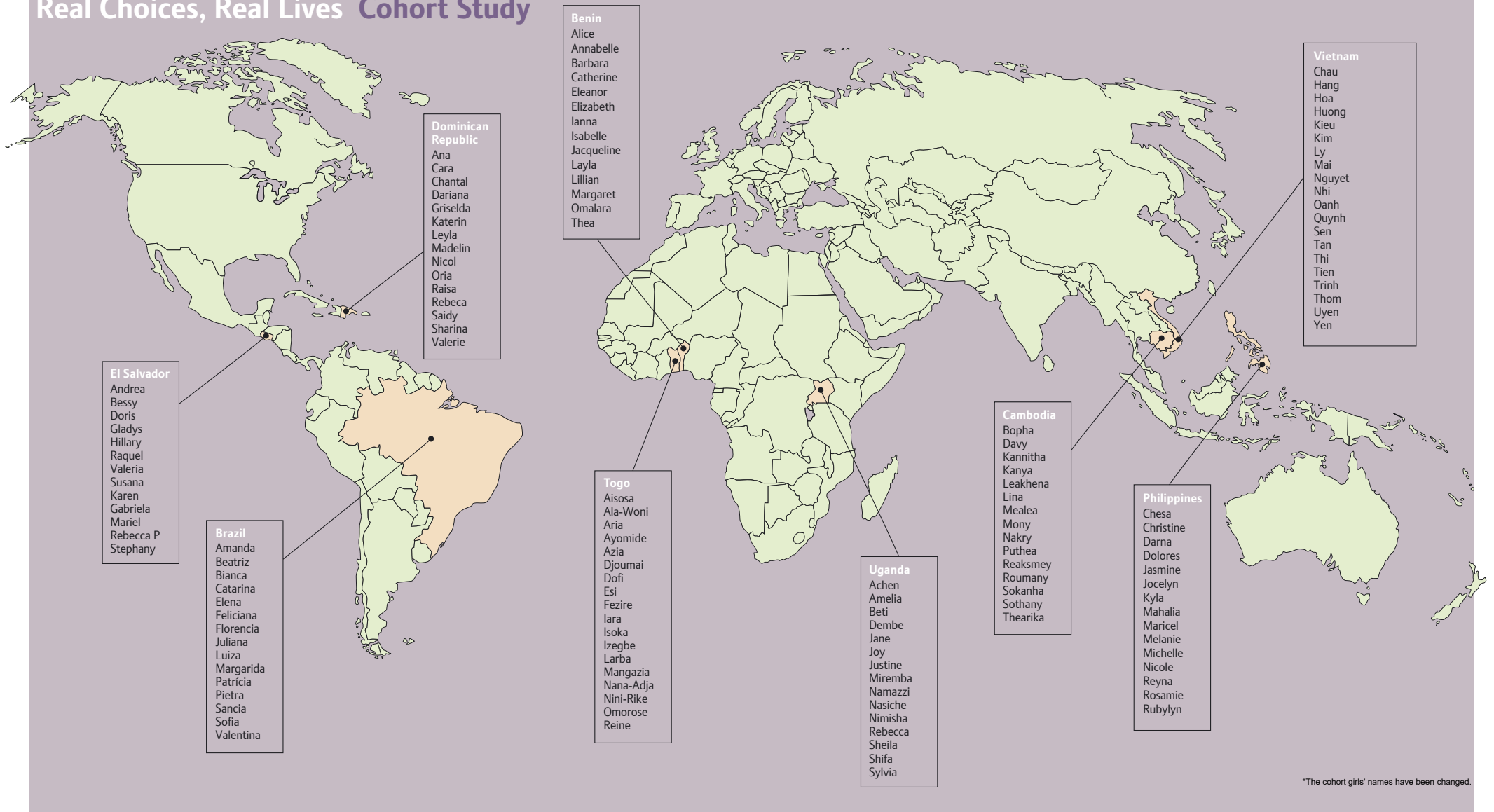
**8. Catarina was born in July 2006 on the outskirts of a Brazilian town. She is being brought up by her mother who has only completed six years of schooling. There is no local secondary school, which will massively limit Catarina's chances of attending school beyond primary level.**

This year's report has introduced you to eight of the girls taking part in the study. Over the next eight years, the lives and challenges of the other girls and their families will form part of this annual publication.

Despite living thousands of miles away from each other, what these girls all have in common as they grow up is their experience as girls. This will unite them in the choices they can or cannot make about their lives.

# Because We are Girls

## Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study



# Introduction

*"I am sure that all of you will agree with me that when our societies generate immeasurably more wealth than at any previous period, it is unacceptable that so many human beings continue to live in miserable circumstances – economically marginalised, unable to secure their own or their families' basic needs, and living under the recurrent threat of violence and conflict. This is particularly true for women and girls."*<sup>1</sup>

Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

***"I think girls MUST have the full freedom to do what they want. Girls know they can make it. Just keep your head high and keep moving on."***

Girl, 16, India.<sup>2</sup>

Girls are getting a raw deal. Despite having the same rights as their brothers, they face discrimination even before they are born. There are an estimated 100 million missing women because of the practice of female foeticide. As they grow up girls suffer more from malnutrition, because families feed boys first, affecting girls' well-being for the rest of their lives. They are less likely to go to school: almost two-thirds of the children of primary school age out of school are girls. They are more likely to be subject to violence: millions of girls are subjected to daily violence in the home and at school, which should be places of safety. Underinvestment in girls can hold back the economic development of some of the world's poorest countries; girls have a real contribution to make.

'Because I am a Girl' is the first of a series of annual reports focusing on girls and young women in the world. Produced by Plan, the reports will be published every year from 2007 to 2015 – the 20th anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. This report will provide a wealth of secondary data and case study material on the major issues of concern

for girls. It will also demonstrate what is being done at local, national and international levels, as well as highlight the concerted effort needed for real progress.

In order to monitor girls' development and bring to life the inequalities buried in global statistics, the report introduces a cohort of approximately 135 girls in 9 countries, born in 2006. The baby girls include Omalara from Benin, Rebecca P from El Salvador and Thuy from Vietnam, as well as baby girls from Uganda, Togo, Brazil, Philippines, Dominican Republic and Cambodia. Plan will follow these girls for the next eight years and report on their progress and development throughout the report series.

So why a report on girls and young women? Girls and young women, who make up almost a quarter of the world's population, probably face the greatest discrimination of any group of this size in the world. In most societies and families, traditional gender roles and power relations place women and girls in disadvantaged situations relative to men and boys. This is true throughout the life cycle; female babies in many countries are aborted or simply go 'missing'; adolescent girls often have few rights over their own lives and their own bodies; they are 'owned' by their father until they are married and then by their husband. Subjected to early marriage, female genital cutting, more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and given less basic nutrition than their brothers, girls are also less likely to be educated and more likely to be poor than boys of the same age.

In the North, it would seem that gender equality has been achieved. Girls are doing as well or better than boys at school, young women are out there in force in the workplace, and they share childcare with their partners. However, women are still less likely than men to reach positions of power when they grow up, they still do more of the housework, and they still do not earn as much as the boys they studied with. This

## 6 out of 8 Millennium Development Goals are in jeopardy

### **MDG 1 Eliminate extreme poverty and hunger**

**Target: Reduce by half the number of people living on less than a dollar a day**  
**Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger**

The majority of those living on less than \$1 a day are female. Girls and young women are not fulfilling their potential and this is impacting on the world's poorest economies in particular. An extra year of education can boost a girls' eventual wages by between 10 and 20 percent.

### **MDG 2 Universal Primary Education**

**Target: All children will have a full primary schooling by 2015**

This target will not be reached unless MDG 3 is met and initiatives that encourage girls to remain in school are implemented. 62 million girls are out of school.

### **MDG 3 Promote gender equality and empower women**

**Target: Ensure gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005**

Although there has been some progress towards reaching this goal, the target was not met by 2005.

### **MDG 4 Reduce infant mortality**

**Target: Reduce by two-thirds by 2015**

Despite girls' natural resilience at birth, more girls than boys die before the age of five in many parts of the world. If action is not taken, MDG 4 will not be met. An important factor here is that the preference for boys is a major concern in the two most populous countries on earth, China and India.

### **MDG 5 Improve maternal health**

**Target: Reduce by three-quarters by 2015 the maternal mortality rate**

Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among young women aged 15 to 19 in the developing world. The younger girls are when they give birth, the higher the risk of complications that could lead to death.

### **MDG 6 Tackle HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases**

**Target: Halt by 2015 and reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases**

Young women have less knowledge than young men on HIV infection, yet are more at risk of becoming infected in the first place. Reversing the spread of AIDS is dependent on reducing the infection rates of young women and tackling the gendered behaviour which determines their lack of choice in decisions about sex.

will not improve as they get older. In the UK, a recent report found that women are “woefully under-represented” in the country’s boardrooms, politics and courts and that in some areas the situation is getting worse rather than better. It also pointed out that although the pay gap between young men and women is only 3.7 per cent, it rises to 10.7 per cent for those in their thirties, when they become parents.<sup>3</sup>

There are a number of international laws and agreements that relate to girls and young women, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action (see table 1 in Section 2) and the Millennium Development Goals. Many of their aims for girls have not been achieved and most are breached on a daily basis. Even where there is legislation at national level, young women have few opportunities to appeal when their rights are not upheld by the state.

Economically, it does not make sense to neglect girls and young women. Lack of progress by girls is stopping the world’s governments meeting the Millennium Development Goals. As this report shows, girls have a very real contribution to make to society as daughters, mothers, wives, sisters, students and also as workers. Under-investment in girls can hold back the economic development of poor countries. And no country has yet emerged from poverty without investing in education, including that of its girls. Evidence from Burkina Faso shows that if women farmers had as much access to resources as their menfolk, agricultural productivity would increase by 20 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

There are large gaps in data on girls and young women. While statistics now exist in some areas for women and for children, there is very little – except at a micro level – that relates to girls and young women, and statistics are rarely disaggregated by age as well as sex.

UN agencies, international NGOs, governments and academics all publish

research on different aspects of the subject, and studies on girls in particular countries. There are global studies on women and on gender and on children, most recently UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children 2007 report, but nothing comprehensive on girls and young women. Despite evidence of specific threats to development arising from the neglect of girls’ rights there has been no systematic approach to looking at how these challenges are being overcome.

‘Because I am a Girl’ takes a rights-based approach to girls’ situations at different stages in their lives. It examines why the combination of continuing gender discrimination, and the neglect of the particular needs of girls, have meant that girls all over the world have fewer opportunities than their brothers. And by also taking a lifecycle approach to girls’ development we can identify the different needs of girls at the various stages of their lives, as well as the pervasive issues across the life cycle, such as lack of access to services or vulnerability to violence. Finally, we call for a series of initiatives and interventions focused on the particular needs of girls and young women.

Investment in girls bears fruit. If in doubt consider the experience of some of the girls and young women featured in this report: girls such as Nagina Habib from Pakistan, who has found a new confidence through her community school, or Marleni Cuellar, who at the age of 20 has built a new youth movement in the Caribbean to combat violence.

To tackle gender discrimination at its roots, action is needed at every stage of a girl’s life – from the womb, as babies and toddlers, at school and as adolescents. Specific programmes looking at girls’ needs are vital. These must be sustained and broadened and should be looked at not just over the short years of childhood, but over two or three generations. Action is urgently needed to change the attitudes that underpin discrimination and violence against

girls and young women. Much has already been achieved, but much more has to be done.

**Chapter one** looks at discrimination which begins at, or even before, birth, and how this continues throughout a girl’s life. **Chapter two** examines how attitudes to girls are rooted in negative family experiences based on tradition. **Chapter three** looks at the efforts being made to improve girls’ education and the benefits that are reaped from this by society as a whole. **Chapter four** looks at aspects of health particular to girls and young women – not just reproductive health but other areas where they are worse off than boys. **Chapter five** covers the changing – and sometimes unchanging – world of work, where young women still work longer hours and are paid less than boys. **Chapter six** looks at girls in particularly vulnerable situations – either because they have disabilities, are from minority, indigenous or other groups that make them doubly or even triply discriminated against, or because they are affected by disasters, or conflict. Each chapter highlights specific priorities for action and the final chapter makes overall calls for change.

#### Who is a girl?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. A young person is defined as someone between the age of 10 and 24. An adolescent is between 10 and 19, divided into ‘early adolescence’ (10 – 14 years) and ‘late adolescence’ between 15 and 19. For the purposes of this report, a girl is anyone up to the age of 18 and a young woman up to 25.

#### Sex and Gender

While sex is the biological difference between women and men (what we are born with), gender is the set of roles, behaviour patterns, values and responsibilities women and men, girls

#### Global discrimination against girls and young women<sup>5</sup>

- In Asia, at least 60 million girls are ‘missing’ from the population, despite laws banning sex-determination testing and sex-selective abortions.<sup>6</sup>
- An estimated 121 million children currently do not attend primary school. The majority – 54 per cent – are girls. So are the majority of illiterates: about 57 million young men and 96 million young women aged 15-24 in developing countries cannot read or write.
- An estimated 7.3 million young women are living with HIV and AIDS compared to 4.5 million young men. Two-thirds of newly infected youth aged 15-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa are female.
- Despite a shift toward later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now aged 10 to 17 will be married before their 18th birthday, despite laws forbidding this in many cases. More than 70,000 teenage girls are married each day.<sup>7</sup> In some countries, the majority of girls still marry before their 18th birthday. These include India (50 per cent), Nepal (60 per cent) and Niger (76 per cent).
- Worldwide, some 14 million girls and women between ages 15 and 19 – both married and unmarried – give birth each year. That is 40,000 every day. Pregnancy is a leading cause of death for young women aged 15 to 19 worldwide, with complications of childbirth and unsafe abortion being the major factors.
- Girls aged 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as those in their twenties. Girls under age 15 are five times as likely to die as those in their twenties.
- Younger women and adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence. Nearly 50 per cent of all sexual assaults worldwide are against girls 15 years or younger.<sup>8</sup>
- An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted as a result of childhood protein-energy malnutrition.<sup>9</sup>

and boys have learnt or end up playing in their family, community and in society at large. These gender specific roles are socially constructed and therefore changeable as they depend on historical, cultural, political and social contexts.

This report is not just about girls as victims of abuse and discrimination. It shows how in many places, given support, girls and young women – sometimes in conjunction with boys and men – defend their rights and fight the age-old traditions and attitudes that harm them. Girls and young women are the best defenders of their rights, but they need support and encouragement to speak out, and role models to show them how it is done.

As one British girl aged 15 put it: “We can show [everyone] what girls can achieve if they put their minds to it: we can, somehow, lift the notion that girls are a burden! We have to let the females of the... world have a voice! A voice that can be heard across the globe, a voice that will be listened to by those good people of our society, a voice that will bring change into their lives.”<sup>10</sup>

Plan has worked with an advisory panel and a group of partners – UN agencies, international NGOs, organisations made up of girls, and other organisations working to secure girls’ and women’s rights – to develop this report, and to gather the latest data and information on girls’ rights from around the world. In compiling this report it has become clear to us that girls and young women need to be given the opportunity to secure their human rights. While they are marginalised, they will have little capacity, courage, and confidence to participate in decisions about their lives and about the society in which they live. This report gives us a chance to learn about how girls across the world can change their own world.

### Plan International and girls

Founded 70 years ago, Plan is one of the largest child-centred community development organisations in the world. Plan works in 66 countries on programmes and initiatives that address the causes of poverty and its consequences for children’s rights and their lives.

This means working in partnership with children, their families and communities, and at national and international levels, to bring about sustainable change. At a local level, we work directly with all groups in a community to identify the priority issues affecting children. We actively encourage girls and boys to analyse their own situations and raise their awareness of the fundamental rights to which they are entitled. We then support the community to build the skills and access the resources it needs to implement programmes that will lead to positive change in children’s lives.

Plan campaigns for both girls and boys to achieve their rights, and we work at national and international levels to influence policy decisions that will lead to improved resources for children and their communities. In this way, we create and maximise all opportunities for children to speak out on their own behalf and participate in decision-making that affects their own development.

Plan believes that we cannot realise our vision for the rights of girls and boys without working towards gender equality. We believe that gender inequality is a key obstacle to the achievement of children’s rights and that it is therefore central to achieving Plan’s mission and vision.<sup>11</sup> The process of compiling the data for this report has helped us to examine our own practices, for example, routinely disaggregating data by gender. Just as Plan has learnt from others through the process of this research, we will be working in partnership with UN agencies, other international NGOs, national governments, local organisations and communities, girls and boys towards this goal.

## Legal Opinion: Governments’ obligations to girls

### The Status and Effects of Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a gender responsive treaty, so that its provisions are to be dynamically applied to enhance the entitlements of the girl without stereotyping or marginalising either gender. Although the Convention omits the word girl this does not mean that the treaty is gender neutral as this implies that concealed in the treaty’s text is the philosophy that gender is irrelevant. It is important to dispel such an erroneous conclusion, which risks robbing girls of the potential of a powerful treaty designed to combat sex discrimination against the girl.

In article 2 the Convention prohibits in the strongest terms sex discrimination and implies that girls as well as boys should enjoy all of the rights provided for in the Convention on an equal basis and in their totality. This is necessary because eradicating stereotypes of the boy contributes to the raising of the status of the girl.

Article 2 has been described as one of the four general principles of the Convention.<sup>1</sup> Although the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has not issued a General Comment defining discrimination, the definition of sex discrimination appropriate to girls can be developed by building upon the definition in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979.<sup>2</sup> Sex discrimination is discrimination, which offends the human dignity of the girl and includes any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose, whether hidden or overt, of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of children’s rights by girls irrespective of their status, on a basis of equality of boys and girls. Thus article 2 enshrines the tripartite goals of seeking to achieve formal equality, equality of opportunity and equality of results.

The areas in which girls suffer sex discrimination can be classified into five grounds. Firstly invisibility, and this includes pre-birth gender selection, lack of birth registration and public environments, which are unsafe for girls, marginalising them and discouraging their visibility. Secondly capacity which affects the full ability of girls to benefit from all of their Convention rights. Impaired capacity is contributed to, for example, by educational curricula, which reinforce negative gender stereotyping, and by preferential access to nutrition within families for boys. Thirdly, physical and mental discrimination, which includes gender based violence and trafficking, temporary marriages, and judgemental attitudes to sexual activity of girls, limiting their access to preventative measures and other health services including HIV/AIDS. The fourth ground is in the area of family and household