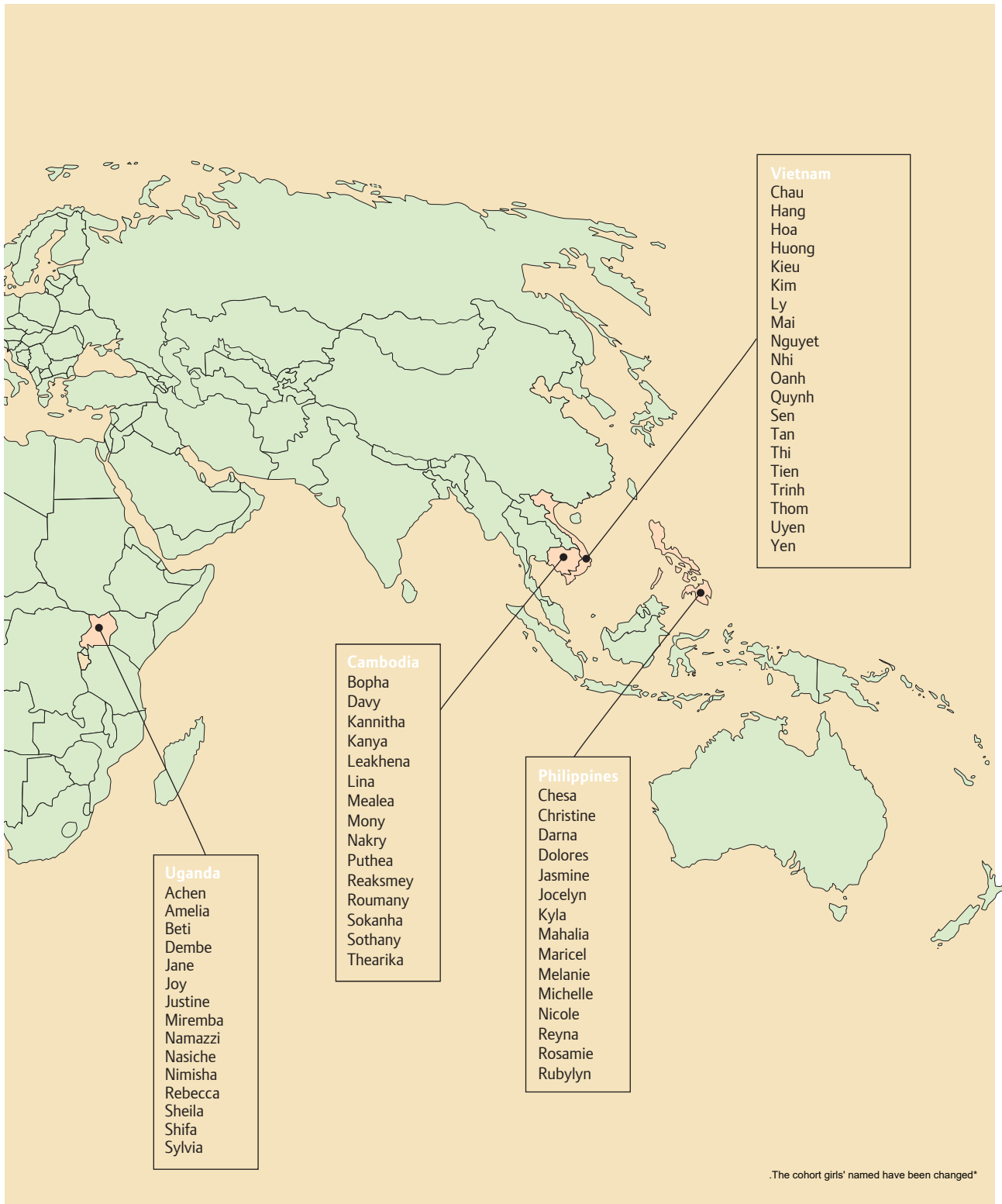


# Because We are Girls

## Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study Update





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## Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study Update Special Focus: Benin

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 their health, their education and their daily lives. Over time they will build up a picture of how the fact that they are girls impacts on their lives. The girls are from nine countries around the world – Brazil, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Benin, Togo, Uganda, Cambodia, Philippines and Vietnam. This year our special focus is on the girls from the small West African state of Benin, currently ranked 163 out of 177 by the United Nations in terms of the well-being of its people:

**Barbara • Catherine • Ianna • Elizabeth  
Elaine • Annabelle • Margaret • Eleanor  
Layla • Lillian • Jacqueline • Lana  
Omalara • Ange • Alice**

Just 19 months old, Annabelle is the youngest of three daughters born to an illiterate mother, and a father with a primary school education who drives a taxi.

Layla, age 1, has a teenage mother who had to leave primary school as a young child when her family was unable to afford to continue to send her to school.

Judith, one of the youngest baby girls in the study, was just one day old when she was first visited by researchers.

The good news is that all the baby girls in our study have survived into their second year, in a country where the infant mortality rate for children under one year is 89 for every 1000 children. Despite passing the major hurdle of their first birthday, their next challenge is now to survive beyond the age of 5. In Benin, 150 children in every 1000 will die before they are five, mostly from preventable diseases. As we reported in the first *Because I am a Girl* report, whether a

girl fulfils her potential is largely in the hands of the family, the community and country into which she is born. All of the girls in this study were born either in a local health centre or their birth was assisted in some way by a trained birth attendant. This alone would have helped to secure their immediate survival.

And the early years of a girl's life are crucial for her future – the first three years are the most crucial for her survival and for her to thrive. The babies currently spend their days close to their mothers or within their extended families, surrounded by other children. When well nurtured and cared for in their earliest years, girls are more likely to survive, to grow in a healthy way, to have fewer illnesses, and to fully develop thinking, language, emotional and social skills. When they go on to school, their prospects for performing well are improved. And as teenagers, they are likely to have greater self-esteem, crucial for teenage girls to be able to demand protection from HIV infection, for example. Although HIV prevalence rates are relatively low in Benin, at 1.8 per cent of the population, it is girls who are most at risk of infection when they hit their teens.

### BARBARA

**Barbara's mother is still angry that her father refused to send her to school when she was a child. "He said that when you send women to school they become dropouts. They become spoiled." Today, Barbara's mother cannot read or write. She has four children of her own – two girls and two boys. She is determined to send all her children to school, including her youngest, Barbara. All three of Barbara's older siblings attend school, including her 12-year-old sister. As long as the family have the financial capacity to**



send the children to school, Barbara will learn to read and write, Barbara's mother says. "I have seen what literate women are doing. They have a better future." Barbara's father, makes a living with his sewing machine. He is also adamant his daughters will go to school. "If they grow up and get the highest level of education, I will be very happy." Barbara's father spends much of the day with Barbara at his side, as he makes and repairs clothing in what is normally the living area of their modest home. He warns that many young girls in Benin still face an uphill battle when it comes to getting an education. He knows that the payoff for sending girls to school is equally as important as sending boys to school. "Other men do not think this way. They are ignorant."

Early years' stimulation provided in a community-based setting can provide children, and particularly girls, with the stepping stones for the future. Girls living in societies where they are particularly disadvantaged can benefit more than boys from interventions that foster their physical, cognitive and emotional development. For example, in Nepal, children from disadvantaged families who had the opportunity to attend non-formal pre-school were 20 per cent more likely to attend school than those who did not. But for girls, the effect was even greater: they were 36 per cent more likely to enter school. There is currently no pre-school provision in the community in which these girls live.

#### ALICE

Alice's brother, 14, is proud of his baby sister, Alice, who is 12 months old. He truly believes she will be able to do whatever she sets her mind to when she gets older. But Alice's brother also knows it won't be easy. In his class of 55 children at school only 14 are girls. "My sister's life will be different from other girls," Alice's brother says, adding that he has another sister that already goes to school. Parents are starting to realise the importance of letting girls go to school, says Alice's father. "At the lower grade levels, some classes have more girls than boys."

#### ELEANOR

Eleanor isn't even 2 yet, but if she follows in her sister's footsteps she will be married by 13. Eleanor's mother, has six children – three girls and three boys. She says she regrets the decision to marry off her oldest daughter, now 25. Eleanor will not be married so young, she promises.

Early marriage not only robs children of their childhoods, it limits girls' futures. There is no time for school if they are having babies and caring for their families. "Before I didn't appreciate it. Now I understand. I watch it happen," she says. Eleanor's mother was 17 when she married. She never attended school and every day struggles with the inability to read and write. She swears Eleanor will have a better future. "Today, the girls can be doctors, presidents. They can do whatever they want."

'Real Choices, Real Lives' is a longitudinal study of 135 girls from nine countries, all born in 2006. The study will run for nine years and its main goals are to:

- Provide qualitative information about why girls continue to face discrimination;
- Provide segmented information about a small group of girls, with qualitative data about their education, healthcare and well being; and
- Examine girls' lives through a life cycle approach with a focus on their early childhood – the first nine years of their lives.

The study will enable Plan to examine several key issues of importance to children, and in particular to girls who are vulnerable to a series of risks because of the position they occupy in society:

- What is the family's access to quality basic 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?

For more details of the study and to track the girls' progress, visit [www.becauseiamagirl.org](http://www.becauseiamagirl.org)



Images used in this report are not of the cohort girls