

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives'
cohort study update

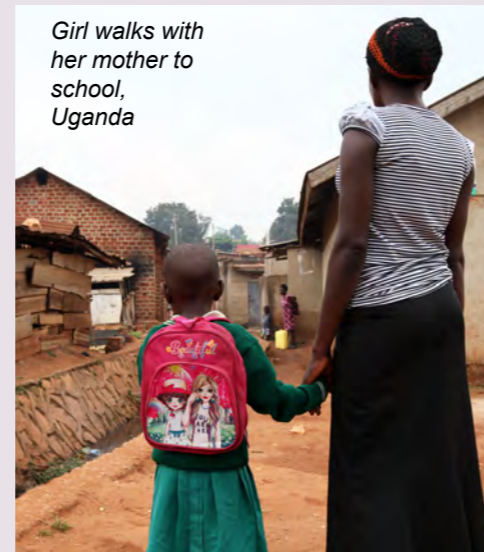


Starting out in life: 'Real Choices, Real Lives' looks at roles and responsibilities within the family

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study is a multi-country longitudinal study through which Plan's researchers are examining, in detail, a range of issues affecting girls during the first nine years of their lives. The study is following a core group of 142 randomly selected girls from nine countries and uses in-depth interviews, focus groups and annual surveys to uncover the reality of their lives. Members of 115 of the families taking part were interviewed this year; others had migrated or were unable to take part due to work commitments. Sadly, six of the girls from the original cohort have died since the study began. Lillian from Benin, Aisosa from Togo and Nicole from the Philippines all died as a result of accidents; Nasiche from Uganda died from malaria and Omalara from Benin from an undiagnosed illness. Even when taking into account the accidental deaths, it can be argued that poverty, including poor housing and lack of sanitation, is the underlying cause of their deaths.



Girl raises her hand in class in Vietnam



Girl walks with her mother to school, Uganda

All the girls in the research group were born in 2006. This year, they reach their fifth birthdays. What is happening in their lives now, particularly as they start their formal education, will have consequences throughout their lives. Their parents are generally committed to, and interested in, their daughters' education. However, in this year's interviews the pressures, both in terms of the families' financial circumstances and their daughters' state of health, are increasingly evident.

The majority of the girls are now either attending a pre-school facility or are already in their first year of primary school. The girls' parents express great pride in their progress through kindergarten, with several



Girl in Cambodia



Girl and her family, West Africa

parents showing a clear understanding of the progression from pre-school to primary school and the importance of establishing the building blocks of learning and social skills in a pre-school setting. In Benin, Jacqueline's mother explains that her daughter "used to be shy. But since she started school she is no longer shy. She can sing, recite poems, dance, play and she is learning to read." Chesa's mother in the Philippines says that her daughter "now knows how to write and can identify colours. When she gets home, she shows me what they did in school. She is very talkative. Her papa and I are amused when she tells us what happened in school, because she does it with actions."

However, the educational prospects of several of the girls have been affected by their poor health. In Togo, Ala-Woni is unable to attend school regularly; Nakry in Cambodia missed her enrolment day due to illness and therefore missed a year of school. Many parents also expressed their concerns about the quality of the education their children are receiving. They are worried about children repeating classes, the lack of adequate teaching staff and class sizes. They explained that if they were able to afford it, or if their daughters were able to travel further on their own to school (as boys are), they would want to send them to better schools. In Uganda, Miremba's siblings are in classes of more than 200 students. Her parents are ambivalent about sending

Miremba to this school, but as it is the only one nearby which is free, they have little choice.

Lack of money remains an issue for all the families; the economic circumstances of the vast majority of those taking part in the study remain unchanged. A minority have seen their incomes increase but many reported higher food prices and a difficult growing season. They are at the sharp end of a global financial downturn and the impacts of climate change. More families have also reported either a 'hungry season' or difficulty in affording food during part of each month. In the Philippines, Jasmine's mother explains her priorities: "I don't want to spend on non-essentials. I want to spend our money on food for our kids. When it comes to food, I don't hold back. That's the reason I work hard – to have something for my children... When they ask for food and I cannot give it to them, they cry. So I really save money for their food so they won't have to cry."

As we showed in last year's 'Because I am a Girl' report, migration remains a reality for many families. In the Dominican Republic, Saily lives with her grandmother, because her parents have migrated for work. "Is her mother thinking about coming [back] here? Not to live, she lives in the capital," her grandmother explains. "Once people get used to something, it is very hard to go back. She lives with her husband and they are happy."



Girl and her family, East Africa

As the families grow (at least 14 of the girls have had new siblings since the study started), they are beginning to feel the financial pressure of educating all their children. Larger families, in particular, have explained how difficult it can be to keep their children in school and to pay for healthcare when they become ill. Lara's mother in Togo says: "We spend a lot on our health. I had one still-born child and Lara's father spent a lot during my pregnancy. All the money he earned for the benefit of the family was spent. Presently, he is suffering from malaria. In case of emergency, we borrow money from the neighbours."

The girls' health is also a major concern. Most of them have had minor illnesses in the past year, requiring a visit to a local health centre for treatment. The girls in Benin, Togo and Uganda suffer regularly from malaria. In Cambodia, several have been seriously ill with dengue fever and tuberculosis, which has meant continuing medical attention and a strain on the family finances. In the African cohort in particular, parents have mentioned the ongoing expense of having to take their daughters to health centres and hospitals for medical treatment.

As the study progresses, we will be exploring the impact of the girls' health on their education. Some families are already reporting disruptions to school attendance. Combined with domestic responsibilities, this is likely to affect the girls' ability to attend school regularly and to learn when they do attend.



Girl and her mother, Benin



A girl and her father, Southeast Asia

Father figures: protector and provider

"Of course I want them to remember that I took care of them, that their father struggled for them to complete school even if he doesn't have a job and is poor."

Jocelyn's father, Philippines

This year we are looking particularly closely at the way the girls' families view gender equality in relation to what happens in their own homes. What are these five year olds already learning about the differences between them and their brothers? Are they valued equally? What is expected of them as girls? We also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with the girls' fathers (or in a few cases, their uncles or grandfathers). Finding out more about the men's lives and experiences provided a valuable insight into family life.

The power of family

The reality of family life for the girls taking part in the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study is in no way uniform. Michelle in the Philippines lives in a household where both her mother and father strongly believe that household tasks should be shared, and that girls and boys should be raised equally. By contrast, in Togo, Mangazia's father is raising his children according to a strict set of social boundaries around what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy. Rebecca and Nimisha in Uganda are actually stepsisters, living in a polygamous family. Their mothers are raising the girls and their other children on their own as their father lives elsewhere for most of the time; yet he is the one who makes all of the important decisions for their families. Rebecca is currently staying with her stepmother upon the

Research summary

Research teams interviewed 86 fathers of the cohort girls from nine countries taking part in the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study. The interviews are life histories, designed to examine how the men's attitudes as adults have been shaped by their experiences as boys and teenagers. Despite researchers' attempts to interview fathers in all the families included in the study, many chose not to take part or could not be contacted in time. In fact, in the Latin American cohort (Brazil, El Salvador and Dominican Republic), the majority of the girls do not live with their fathers and often have no relationship with them. Some of the fathers who were interviewed were emotional about having the opportunity to reflect on their childhood, as they had never done so before.

Life as a boy

The majority of families taking part in the study are poor, and the fathers reported being just as poor when they were boys. Most lived either in rural or semi-urban villages or towns. Their memories of boyhood largely involved supporting their parents

with agricultural work. Some of the men reported, "Boys help Dad, girls help Mother." These divisions of labour, based on gender, have remained an abiding memory for the men and have heavily influenced how their own households are now managed.

Life as a teenager

When asked about an abiding memory from this period of their life, most remember an incident that involved them being a victim of violence – at the hands of a childhood friend, teacher or, in most cases, parent. Almost all of the men named male role models, ranging from archetypal males like the local buffalo hunter to teachers who were kind and taught well. Many of the men reported having friends with whom they expressed their feelings openly.

Life as a man

Almost all the men reported that important family decisions are made by them, although many stated that they also consult with their spouses. They saw themselves as providers and protectors. They work hard for their families, though that might mean missing out on family life.

instructions of her father. He believes that it is important for his children to get to know one another even if they have different mothers. Although Rebecca's mother, did not want her young daughter to leave home, she followed her husband's wishes.

What families do have in common, though, is how influential they are. This year's research demonstrates quite clearly that attitudes learned in childhood resonate down the generations.

This is particularly reflected in three key areas:

- decision-making within the family
- the division of labour
- the incidence of domestic violence.

1. The head of the household: "fathers have the last word"

The role of the father as the head of the family, the chief decision-maker and protector, comes out clearly from our interviews. There are instances when decision-making about daughters is delegated to the mother, but by and large it is the father who "has the last word". This decision-making role is obviously crucial. The attitudes of the household's decision-maker have an immediate impact on the opportunities of girls in the household, as they include decisions about whether girls should go to school, how long they should remain in formal education and when they should get married. In some countries, the



Girl and her mother, West Africa

He who pays the piper calls the tune: focus group discussions with families from Brazil, Uganda and the Philippines

In Uganda, the majority of teenage boys and their fathers said that it was the father who made important decisions. The father is viewed as the head of the family, the one who pays, the one who decides where children will go to school, and when and where the girls will be married. Fathers from both Uganda and the Philippines related decision-making to income. One father from the Philippines said: "It is us fathers [who make decisions], because we are the ones who work and earn the family's keep." And a Ugandan father explained: "[it is] the man who has the primary responsibility to decide where [a] child will study, because he's the one who knows how much money he has." Another father in Uganda added that "It would be irrelevant for the woman to decide, when she is not contributing anything." Even when the teenage boys in Uganda did think that they had some input in decision-making, it was still felt that their "fathers have the last word". Many of the girls and women who took part in the discussions have internalised this view, as 12 year-old Eliza from the Philippines explained: "The father is the head of the family and his big responsibility is to protect the family, not only the girls."

In Brazil, on the other hand, the majority of parents said that mothers and fathers have influence in different areas of family life. One of the fathers explained why mothers decide when girls go

to school: "It is difficult for a man to find time... the fathers are not very worried about these things... I have to make a living, provide for the family." Another said, "It is the mother, because she takes more care of children than the father... because the father sometimes is very busy, and the mother is more able to organise things."

The discussion moved on to how decisions are made about matters like marriage. One of the fathers from the Philippines explained how much things are changing: "In the past, even as a child was being conceived, his/her marriage was already being arranged. Now there is no need for that. It used to be that touching the hand of a girl would require a man/boy to marry her; now, even if girls are already pregnant they don't get married." Rubylyn's mother from the Philippines said, "It will depend on the readiness of the child if she decides to settle down. Before, there were instances when the parents decided when their children should get married. But now, some girls or boys marry at their own will and preference." In fact, all of the Brazilian participants said that it would be bad for someone else, even a parent, to make such decisions. One father said that "it is better when the person has the power of choice". Another explained: "If, when we choose the person we marry it may not work out right, just imagine when someone else does it for us..." However, the Ugandan parents were quite clear that parents, most often fathers, should guide decisions about when girls marry.



*Girl and her father
Southern Africa*

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girls taking part in the study will be the first generation of girls with access to free education, an important opportunity for them to change their families' future.

In Benin, Catherine's father explained how social pressure dictates decision-making in his family: "In Africa, it is the father who makes the main decisions. But sometimes the mother happens to make some decision because we are a couple." He then outlined how his personal actions are somewhat different. When asked who takes care of the children in the family, he explained: "I become the mother to my children when their mother is not there. I can do it all."

And that "what a man does, a woman can also do". In Brazil, Juliana's father said that as a couple he and his wife make the decisions together, but he has the final word – a view reflected by the majority of fathers interviewed.

Although attitudes about who makes decisions differ within and across the countries taking part in the study, all the adults interviewed have a polarised view about the roles women and men, and girls and boys play. The girls' fathers perceive their role to be the provider for the family, a decision-maker, an authoritarian and a protector. The girls' mothers are considered

to be the carers of the family. The fathers interviewed routinely described their spouses using words like 'respectful', 'innocent', 'well-behaved' and 'courteous', indicating the submissive role of the women in their families.

Such a clear distinction in male and female roles influences girls' continuing education, particularly beyond the primary years. Some parents are less willing to invest in a girl's post-primary education as they consider that the risk of early pregnancy or marriage will mean a low return on their investment. Better, some think, to spend the money on their sons. One Ugandan father said, "You may invest a lot of money in her and she disappoints you by getting pregnant." Another wondered, "[A man]'s daughter got pregnant in Senior 5 [fifth year of secondary school]. Do you think if he had invested in a boy he would have reaped big(ger)?" Margaret's father in Benin explained, "If it were up to me, I would choose to have four boys and two girls. When the girls grow they will join their husbands; the boys will remain here and make the name of the family survive eternally."

In general, the families continue to



*Girl and her father,
Southeast Asia*

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express mixed views about investing in girls' education. Most of the Brazilian respondents defended equal education opportunities for girls and boys, justifying investment in girls' education with comments such as "the girl must study so she won't always be dependent on others". Or: "[without education], she will become a person without knowledge, and will always depend on her husband". In the Philippines, Dolores's father explained that "a girl should be given priority to study because girls have more chance to graduate". Another father from the Philippines did not decide on the basis of his children's gender: "The oldest child, whether girl or boy, is the one we strive to support through completion. Then we expect that child to help support the younger ones. The support that we give depends on [our] financial capability as well as on the interest of the child."

On the other hand, some of the Brazilian fathers believed that "it is important to give more attention to the boys, because the girls are becoming more advanced than the boys", and "the boys have to be more incentivised because they have more opportunity to become someone in life. Men are smarter than women." One of the teenage girls from Brazil explained how these attitudes manifest in real-life decisions: "Education must be equal for boys and girls; our rights must be equal, too, but this doesn't happen. Often, we want to take a professional course, but the community doesn't offer it. Our mothers never let us take a course outside the community because normally the school is far from home and they are afraid of sexual violence and harassment. The boys want to go too, and there isn't enough money for both, so the boys end up taking the course..."

However, on the whole, the parents interviewed across the study have shown great ambition for their daughters' education and future – more than half would like their daughters to pursue careers that would involve post-secondary education or training. One of the major challenges many of these families will face is access to sufficient resources for their daughters to have even a post-primary education.



Girl carries water with her mother, Benin

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2. The division of labour: "I have started training her"

The words of Ladi's mother quoted above show us just how early on girls learn that they have domestic work to do. Girls and boys are both consciously and unconsciously initiated into a world where the primary responsibilities of the girl within the home will include cooking and cleaning, fetching water, gathering fuel and caring for others. In Uganda, Miremba's mother explains how five year-old Miremba helps her: "She supports me in domestic chores, especially fetching water in a five-litre jerry can and washing plates with her sisters. She is always sent to bring firewood to me in the kitchen and other items like plates."

"Ladi is still a little girl and she doesn't have any [household] responsibilities yet," says her mother in Togo. "However, I have started training her to wash a few dirty dishes." One of the teenage girls who took part in a focus group discussion in the Philippines¹ explained that "boys are assigned heavy tasks. Very few boys would perform household chores because of the thinking that those who do are gay." Many of the fathers interviewed in the Philippines and in the Dominican Republic expressed a similar sentiment.

Almost all of the girls in Uganda, and many in the Dominican Republic and the

Philippines, have daily chores to fulfil, including sweeping and washing dishes. These roles are then replayed outside the family – when girls go to school it may be assumed that they will help to clean the classroom.² Most of the girls in the other countries taking part in the study do not have daily chores, but all of them spend much of their playtime mimicking the work of their mothers and the older girls around them. Their older sisters and other female relatives report having regular household chores. For example, in the Dominican Republic, Rebeca's nine year-old sister cooked the family meal the day before the interviews. In focus group discussions, these older girls spoke openly about their daily work and how boys have more free time and time for study. Girls from Brazil explained that "at home, the girls have to sweep the floor and do the washing while the boys watch television", and "the girls sweep the floor, wash the dishes and cook the food. This happens because of prejudice: people think that the domestic chores are more suited to women."

The household work that girls do is perceived to have no monetary value and remains unpaid, unlike the tasks handed over to boys. As well as having less to do in the home, boys are generally tasked with supporting their fathers as the family's breadwinners, often acquiring skills they will go on to use as adults, and socialising boys to be producers of wealth.³ Teenage boys we interviewed in the Philippines confirmed this – when asked who contributes to the



Girl washes clothes, Cambodia

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Girl helps her older sister with chores, Dominican Republic

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family's income, one of them said "me, and my father". Susana's father in El Salvador explained that when he was younger, he did not help with household tasks or caring for his younger siblings, but he "supported the family with money", having left school at the age of 15. The mothers and fathers we interviewed explained explicitly how this gendered assigning of roles and responsibilities happens. In Brazil, Bianca's father explained that "domestic chores are the girls' responsibility. Fishing is a typically male activity."

Many recent studies show that the division of labour in the home has a major influence on girls' ability to remain in school and progress to secondary education.^{4,5} The impact of this will become clearer as the study progresses.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action clearly outlines the importance of the government's role in encouraging gender equality in the home: "The equal participation of women and men in all areas of family and household responsibilities, including family planning, child-rearing and housework, should be promoted and encouraged by governments. This should be pursued by means of information, education, communication, employment legislation and by fostering an economically enabling environment, such as family leave for men and women so that they may have more choice regarding the balance of their domestic and public responsibilities."

Governments are increasingly following the lead of Latin American and European states with progressive legislation on issues like parental leave. National strategies to provide comprehensive family planning services are also becoming more widespread.⁶

Like father, like son?

The interviews with the girls' fathers reveal how their own experiences as boys and young men have informed their attitudes regarding the division of labour in their families and what they expect from their children. Boys were largely expected to behave like and work alongside their fathers and other male adults, although there were some exceptions. In Benin, Margaret's father was brought up by his own father after his parents' divorce. As a result, he expected men to take on household tasks the way his father had done. Several other men had the opposite experience, that of being brought up only by their mothers. They explained that being raised without a father figure meant that they took on caring roles as part of their domestic responsibilities; they continue to do so in their homes today. In fact, where the men are happy to play with their children, help with their homework and support their wives with domestic work, their mothers are usually strong role models for them. In Brazil, Florencia's father explained how when his mother found a job outside the home, he stayed at home to look after his younger siblings and was responsible for doing all the domestic chores – cooking, cleaning the house and taking care of the children. He had very little time left to play and relax.



Girl is responsible for looking after her younger brother, East Africa

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**“These changes are going too far”:
focus group discussions from Brazil, Uganda
and the Philippines⁷**

The vast majority of the families acknowledged that changes between the sexes had taken place. A Brazilian father had this to say: “Before, women couldn’t even get out of the house, and now we see women driving lorries, working as mechanics, being important executives...” Another added, “The more time passes, the more attitudes change. Here in Brazil, women have achieved many important things...” One father felt that the changes had gone too far: “Women have won too many rights. Nowadays, if you have a wife and she doesn’t want to have sexual relations with you, she can denounce you to the police. This is good because it recognises the woman’s right. The problem is that women might want to overcome men and men are always stronger. That’s why I think that these changes are going too far.”

Girls and women across the three countries had a somewhat different perspective, not convinced that much has changed. One of the teenage girls from Brazil explained that “not everyone respects us, and when we ask for respect, they call us rude”. A Brazilian mother said, “People say a woman is like an infectious disease; society has a lot of prejudice against us.”

Many of the mothers and fathers were keen to talk about changes in the way children and parents communicate. A Brazilian father noted, “I talk to my daughters about their studies and about whom

they are involved with. Nowadays, parents are more affectionate than before... they care more about the children. We didn’t use to talk a lot, we only used to work.” One of the Filipina mothers went on to explain, “Before, girls and boys were easy to talk with. They could understand easily. They were passive. Now, they understand but they keep on asking and reasoning. They are able to express themselves. They know their rights.” A Ugandan teenage girl felt strongly that these changes present an opportunity: “Changes will start with those who have got the opportunity to speak and express their views in their communities.”

Fathers from all three countries said that they felt that “children no longer respect their parents”. “In my time,” one of the Brazilian fathers explained, “I respected my parents. Now children don’t respect their parents anymore, they even want to beat them up...”

Freedom could be interpreted positively or negatively, as described by one Brazilian father: “These days, anyone can pass by and ‘take’ our daughter away... in my time, no girl would leave the house without the parents’ authorisation... they could only go out with their parents and the siblings, especially the girls.” One of the mothers from the Philippines embraces the new freedom girls have, however: “Nowadays, girls are courageous. It used to be that they couldn’t go on their own to another place: now they are confident as long as they have mobile phones with them.”

3. Violence in the home: “the strictest person was my father”

“I spank them with one stick of raffia broom. I just hit them once, but when I’m really angry, I give them three hits.”

Christine’s father, Philippines

The lives of many of the girls taking part in the cohort study have already been touched, either directly or indirectly, by violence. In their own homes and communities, gender-based violence is by no means rare: some of the men we interviewed were very much in favour of violence as a means of disciplining their children.

Interviews with cohort fathers show how violence that was integral in their own upbringing is now shaping their notions of masculinity – almost all of them were beaten as children, either by their own parents, by

other relatives or by teachers. Discussions with the girls’ fathers illustrate how boys can become conditioned to the idea that married men are expected to control their wives and punish their children. Many of them reported that violence was part of their parents’ relationship and that violence was often the



*Girl and her father,
Southeast Asia*

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*Family fishes together,
El Salvador*

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most important memory of their childhood. Jacqueline’s father in Benin explained that “the strictest person was my father. He was the one who often beat us. I did not like to bathe and one day I ran away and hid myself under the bed where he discovered me. Then he beat me severely.” In El Salvador, Gabriela’s father told of how he watched as his grandfather attacked his mother.

For many, this routine masculine violence was troubling, and several sought out role models who offered an alternative view of the world. Elaine’s father in Benin looked up to a teacher who did not beat his students: “Mr G was the teacher who taught me in sixth form of primary school. He was patient and did not use a stick to explain things to us.”

SUPPORTING FRAMEWORKS

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action outlines clearly what is needed to challenge traditional gender roles and the issue of violence against women and girls: “Parents and schools should ensure that attitudes that are respectful of women and girls as equals are instilled in boys from the earliest possible age, along with an understanding of their shared responsibilities in all aspects of a safe, secure and harmonious family life. Relevant programmes to reach boys before they become sexually active are urgently needed.”

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines the responsibilities of governments: “States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.” The African Charter on the Welfare of The Child goes further, outlining the need for protection from “all forms of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment”.

Yet families also play the primary role in protecting girls and ensuring that their rights are respected. Focus group discussions with the girls’ parents show a clear role for fathers within the family as protectors of their daughters. This protection, however well meaning, also plays its part in emphasising the ‘weakness’ of girls, discouraging independence and putting men firmly in control.

A growing number of governments are legislating against violence against women and girls. Brazil’s Maria da Penha Law on Violence against Women (2006), for example, was the culmination of a lengthy campaign by women’s groups, regional and international bodies. It has been cited as one of the most advanced in the world. The law provides a variety of legal protections, including special courts; preventive detentions for severe threats; increased penalties for perpetrators; and affirmative measures to assist women, including vulnerable domestic workers, and to educate the public about the issue and the law. Several laws have recently been passed specifically directed at preventing violence against women and girls, including a number promoting positive attitudes towards women and girls, and the need for shared responsibilities for safety in the home. Some of the legal progress includes guidance for promoting gender equality in schools and pre-schools.⁸ The Brazilian five year olds in our study will grow up with strong legal protection in a society with a growing awareness of gender equality.

“Girls should really be protected” – values and attitudes about protecting girls from violence

In focus group discussions about the role of the family in protecting girls from violence, a father from the Philippines explained: “They should really be protected.

They are our flesh and blood. They are weaker than our boys. For example, in terms of abuse, more girls are being abused than boys.” Dolores’s father (the Philippines), added: “I am the one who will protect my girl, especially from those who may put her in danger.”

The girls’ fathers in Uganda felt that mothers were “too soft” to protect their children. The Brazilian fathers echoed this view: “The father... the man... [is the one responsible for protecting girls]. I think he has a more authoritarian presence, and people respect him more...”

The majority of the men in Brazil who joined the discussions justified the necessity of protecting the girls. One father noted: “It’s not that I’m sexist, but women are more helpless, they have a fragile side.” Ugandan fathers felt that ‘weakness’ even extended to will-power – one respondent adding that “[girls’] hearts and heads are too weak to resist some temptations”. A Brazilian father added: “Girls are very easily influenced.” Another Ugandan father commented: “These days girls are seduced by the older men who have the resources. They no longer go out with friends of the same age.” A Brazilian father explained that “girls must be more protected because they are women... and there is the issue of virginity”.

Some women taking part in the discussions have internalised this attitude by explaining that “girls have something to treasure [purity of a person] but for the boys this is not a big deal” (Edwina’s mother, Philippines).

These values are passed on to children – boys from the Philippines echoed this language, saying that girls are “weaker than boys” or “easily



Girl, Brazil



Girl in Uganda



Girls with you the Philippines

abused”. In the focus group discussions in the Philippines, teenage boys said that girls are subjected to violence in their community because they are “looked upon as the weaker sex”. Others stated that they believe that girls are subjected to sexual violence because of the way that they look: “Nice body, legs are displayed, smooth skin.” Although some took a different view of protecting girls, their attitudes remain informed by this view of girls being weak and vulnerable. According to a teenage boy from the Philippines, “It’s good that it’s the mother [who protects the girl child] because the mother knows well what the girl needs. They know their weaknesses.” Jocelyn’s mother presents a different view: “Most of our husbands cannot control their emotions if our children ever commit mistakes. This sometimes leads to physical abuse. Thus we can say that it is more the responsibility of us mothers to protect our girl child.”

The girls’ parents discussed further the importance of a mother’s protection. The father of Rosamie (Philippines) explained: “In the family, of course it is the mother [who protects the girl]. The mother takes care of the child, and she knows what the child wants.” Another father from the Philippines said: “It is the mother’s responsibility [to protect the child] because fathers are usually not around because they are working outside. Girl children are most often with their mothers, more than with their fathers.” One of the Brazilian fathers commented: “When it comes to the girls, it is the mother who must provide the care. Men taking care of daughters is a little

strange...” Another explained, “The mother must take care of the daughters, because she’s a woman... for us, it’s more complicated to talk to them.” One Ugandan father said of his relationship with his daughter: “We men are sometimes like lions

in the home; how do you expect her to tell you her secrets?”

Family matters

“The world is changing and soon everybody will understand that we should not treat them [girls] in a different way [from boys].”

Barbara’s father, Benin

Now aged five, the girls in our study are beginning to “learn their place”. Although there is a lot of variety between individual families and between the different countries, it is clear from the interviews that gender discrimination is handed down from one generation to the next. Without some positive intervention, the girls will have little choice but to become the carers and cleaners, rather than the decision-makers, of tomorrow; seen as in need of protection. By starting with the family, and addressing the obstacles and barriers girls face at home and in their communities, it is possible to disrupt this cycle.⁹ It will be very hard, though, to do so without male support. The family decision-maker, the father, is a crucial ally. Change, as Barbara’s father says, is

happening. There is, of course, some ambivalence about this and some disagreement between the generations and between the sexes. However, many families are beginning to value girls’ education. Progress in this area is being held back by poverty as much as prejudice. Treating girls and boys differently is now being questioned, not just accepted. There is a greater recognition that discrimination is having a negative effect on boys’ as well as girls’ lives, and on the wider success of their families and communities.

In Section 1 of the report we discussed the price men and boys pay in terms of living up to the idea that they must be tough. Many recognise the richness that gender equality can bring to their relationships with partners, friends and children. The father of Darna from the Philippines, for example, is obviously aware that he has missed out on family life and his daughter’s childhood: “I would like my children to remember most the good things that I did for them... that their Papa came home late because he was working for us.”



Girl and her father, South America



Girl with her family, Southeast Asia



Girl and her family, Cambodia



A family reads together, the Caribbean

All names have been changed. Photos in this report are not of the cohort girls

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives' Cohort Study Update

