

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives'
cohort study update

PLAN

*Girl reads at school,
Vietnam*

Everything will be different in her life: can the changing attitudes of a generation of mothers help to transform girls' lives?

"This new generation has a chance to access education. I always advise them to study hard."

Thearika's mother, Cambodia

This year, the girls taking part in Plan's cohort study will reach the age of six – quite a milestone in their lives. Most of them are now attending school, so this is the year when influences outside the home start to have a bigger impact on their lives. They will meet a wider range of people and although their mothers will remain the key influences and role models, teachers, friends and older children will also become increasingly important to them.

At home, it is the women of the family with whom the girls spend their time; they are already mimicking female household work while they play and some, even at six, are being set household tasks clearly defined by gender. Davy from Cambodia wants to be a teacher, but also told us, *"I like to wash dishes as well and help my mother to collect firewood"*.

This year we will consider how the life histories, attitudes and actions of the girls' mothers have influenced the girls' upbringing and daily lives so far, and how their mothers' past experiences will shape their daughters' futures.

We have conducted in-depth interviews with the girls' mothers, taking them on the journey from their own childhood, through the life changes and critical decisions made during adolescence, to their lives today as mothers. Last year we spoke with almost 100 of the girls' fathers. The differences



Girl, Cambodia.

between these two sets of interviews are illuminating, particularly in terms of the men's experiences of adolescence. This is when life's opportunities seem to open up for boys and where they close down for girls.

We will focus on four critical areas in this report:

- the early life of the girls' mothers;
- the impact of adolescence on their hopes and dreams;
- the attitudes to gender roles in their homes now;
- their ambitions for their own daughters.

We will also look at the impact of wider societal change in their lifetime.

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES UPDATE

Now in its sixth year, the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study follows 142 girls living in nine countries around the world – Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam. The study aims to achieve a better understanding of young girls' lives through in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with their relatives and others who live around them.

The majority of the girls taking part in the study are now either attending a pre-school facility or are at primary school. A small number of girls are still not enrolled in school, their parents citing distance to school and the girls' poor health as reasons for this.

Generally, parents continue to express pride in their girls' progress in school. At the same time, they are becoming increasingly vocal about the quality of education their daughters receive. Several parents repeatedly asserted that they would send their daughters to better schools if they could afford to do so or if it were safe for the girls to travel on their own to a better school further from home.

Many of the girls have had minor illnesses in the past year, requiring no more than a visit to a local health centre or pharmacy for treatment. As we have reported in previous years, the girls in three countries – Benin, Togo and Uganda – continue to suffer regularly from malaria. In these countries, parents talk about the ongoing expense of taking their daughters to health centres and hospitals for medical treatment as a major constraint on their family finances.

Many of the families taking part in the study have reported that the cost of living has risen over the past year, and many have had to cover additional medical costs. For most, the greater part of their income is spent on food. But for many, raising a young family also means having to cover some of the costs of sending their children to school.

The mothers' determination to send their daughters to school is obvious, as is their acknowledgement that girls and women still face many challenges. Barbara's mother in Benin, talks about how "poverty and misery" have been the most influential experiences of her own life so far. She had no formal education herself, but she is determined that all five of her children do well. She explains how different life could be for her six year-old daughter, Barbara: "I hope she will make progress until she has her degree and a job. Everything will be different in her life."

1 Early girlhood

The earliest memories for most of the women had to do with the dynamics between their mothers and fathers. The majority said that their parents' relationships were respectful and loving, unlike the memories of domestic violence recalled by their husbands when we interviewed them last year. However, some did talk of less harmonious homes. Beatriz's mother, in Brazil, recalls: "It was a relationship where my father gave the orders and my mother only obeyed. Sometimes they fought. There



Girl and her family, West Africa



Girl and her family, Vietnam

was something that made things worse: my father used to drink a lot, and this caused much suffering to our family.”

Uyen’s mother, in Vietnam, says: “My father didn’t pay much attention to my mother. He cared little for my mother. He worked and would hang out for fun. He seemed not to care about his family. However, he never hit my mother.”

The women recalled a mixed picture regarding how decisions were made in their childhood homes. In most families, men made the main decisions. In some households, decision-making was joint and mutually agreed. Only in a few did women have control of family finances and decisions, and these were mainly in female-headed households. Valerie’s mother, from the Dominican Republic explains what it was like growing up with her grandparents: “My grandmother has always taken the decisions. She has been the man and the woman of the house.”

Generally, the girls’ mothers report that the main decision-makers are women only where the households are headed by women.

The majority of the women told of an early childhood where girls’ and boys’ domestic roles were clearly defined. As girls, they noticed early on that they had less time to play and less time for school work than boys did. The strictest gender codes appear to be in Togo. Ayomide’s mother, says: “My father forbade boys household tasks. Women worked in the kitchen. Everybody worked on the farm. The boys were

Girl and her younger brother, Vietnam



Girl, Central America

academically privileged.” Having clearly defined roles was perpetuated both by men and women. Beatriz’s mother, in Brazil explains: “My mother still does everything in the house, but she believes things have been like this since the beginning of the time.”

A small number of the women grew up in households where domestic arrangements were different. Jacqueline’s mother in Benin, explains: “My elder sister and I would both do some domestic chores. But when we had homework from school, my mother would cook and our little uncle also used to help us in our domestic tasks. I used to sweep and to wash clothes. I was not entrusted any great responsibility. So, I had enough time to play, to rest and to do my homework.”

In the main, strict divisions of labour continue to have an impact on the women’s lives today, while men are either unprepared or unwilling to support their families with household work.

Networking

Complex social networks continue not only to provide material support for many of the families taking part in the study, but also include people who act as influential role models and mentors for girls. These networks are made up of people living in the families’ communities, from extended family members and neighbours, to teachers and local politicians. In Uganda, Amelia’s mother explains how her aunt supported her education and how, as a girl, she admired the way her aunt took care of her own family: “My role model was my uncle’s wife, who used to care for her children, even though her husband did not take care [of them]. She would go to relatives to make sure that her children

studied until they gained formal education.”

As they grew up, most of the mothers we interviewed looked up to women outside of their families – teachers, nurses, midwives and businesswomen. Often these were the female leaders in their communities, and for those with access to television and the internet, they might be global personalities such as stars of the music and film world. Kyla’s mother in the Philippines, tells of her admiration for her childhood bible-school teacher, an influence so strong that she is now a university-educated pastor. In Brazil, Juliana’s mother says: “My role model was my mother... I wanted to be a lawyer because I have an aunt who works in this area.”

LÉONORE

Léonore* is six year-old Catherine’s mother in Benin. Léonore’s story shows how the influence of a female role model in a non-conventional career provided her with the drive to achieve a secondary education. She was educated up to the third year of secondary school, the only mother in the Benin cohort to achieve this level of education. Léonore’s father was a photographer but her role model was actually a woman photographer. Her dream, she says, “was to become a journalist”. However, her formal education came to an end when she and her parents disagreed about where she could continue. Léonore wanted to go to school in



A girl with her older sister, Brazil

Cotonou, the capital of Benin; her parents wanted her to stay in the town nearest to the family home. Now, Léonore is a photographer herself. She reflects on what has influenced her life so far and how dropping out of school impacted on her life. Her biggest hope for her daughter, Catherine, is that “she will be better educated than me”. Although she acknowledges that society has strict boundaries around gender roles and responsibilities, she is clear that in her family equal investments are being made in the education of girls and boys. Marie hopes that her children will see the investment that their parents are making in their education.

Most of the girls’ mothers tell of lives lived through interrupted ambitions and failed dreams. Many reported entering domestic service at adolescence. They recalled that this not only had a negative impact on their formal education, but also that many of them were abused and ill-treated, sometimes by their own relatives.

2 Adolescence

“They made the mistake of taking me to another family.”

Leyla’s grandmother from the Dominican Republic

Adolescence brings a particular set of challenges for girls. Many of the women told of becoming increasingly responsible for unpaid household work, including taking main responsibility for younger siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews while their own mothers worked, either in or outside the home.

The teenage girls’ domestic responsibilities, over time, took precedence over their schooling, play and leisure. A smaller number stopped going to school altogether, to take on domestic tasks, to look after their own siblings, or to go into domestic service.

In the Dominican Republic, Valerie’s mother, talks about her early life:

“When I was 10 or 11, my grandmother sent me to the house of one of her daughters. My aunt was the one who knew everything in the house, but she didn’t stay at home. So I was the person who was responsible.

*Name has been changed

Girl washes up in South America



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I had to mop, to cook, to wash clothes, to do everything in the house."

Layla's mother in Benin. She dreamed of being a nurse and looked up to the female community nurse. However, she left school early to look after her younger brother. When she became an adolescent, things changed. "I stayed with my maternal aunt and kept her child for her. [Then] I went to stay with a lady in Cotonou whom I helped sell maize and beans. I didn't like carrying loads on my head to go round and sell because it was very tiring."

Alice's mother, in Benin, tells of her childhood: "I stayed with my maternal aunt not far from my village, where I helped her look after her children. She was not good to me. I used to help some women making groundnut cakes in order to get some money to buy underwear. I didn't have clothes. I could hardly eat and I had to finish everything before getting a little food." Also in Benin, Barbara's mother was never sent to school. She was her parents' youngest child. She explains what her days were like: "I alone did the domestic tasks. I was in charge of cooking the food and cleaning the house. I used to look after my brothers and myself. Sometimes, I found it very hard, but I was obliged to do it." She continues: "I dreamed of becoming rich. I went to Nigeria to work for a household and my wage was \$22 per month. I was 15 when I went. I was in charge of cleaning the house of a childless couple. I didn't experience any difficulty because I was just in charge of the above duty in their house. It was my boss herself who was in charge of cooking."

"I BECAME A LITTLE WOMAN WHEN I WAS SEVEN"

Here is the story of Leyla's grandmother from the Dominican Republic. She was never sent to school and had domestic responsibilities from almost the same age her granddaughter is now.

"I became a little woman when I was seven, because I helped my mother to raise all of the kids after her older children started leaving their children here... I was helping my mother, because I was there looking after the kids, because I was stuck at home. People before didn't care like we do now. Now we make sure that the children go to school.

"I went to my grandmother's house for a while because my dad took me there. There I had to do everything: clean, wash dishes, pluck chickens... because I was young." This was a sad time for her: "I used to dream that they would come and get me, always making excuses for why they couldn't come and take me home. I felt bad. I was often ill. I had a lot of colds and fevers."

But, she adds: "Not everyone gets the opportunity – they chose me. There are many girls who fall by the wayside, as there are parents who in order to give a good life to one child, give a worse life to another. They made the mistake of taking me to another family. [My parents] couldn't give me what I wanted, but they made a major mistake. I am not going to do this with my children."

Girl collects water in the Caribbean



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Girl in West Africa

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There are complex links between poverty, girls' puberty and sexuality, and their education, as is evidenced by these women's experiences. Many parents who willingly send a daughter to school, remove her at puberty for fear of unwanted pregnancy or to marry her off early. Some 82 million girls who are now aged between 10 and 17 will be married before their eighteenth birthday.¹ This situation is reflected in the experiences of the mothers taking part in the study – regardless of level of education reached, the majority of the women stopped school when they either married or got pregnant. For those girls who become pregnant, the school environment becomes an unforgiving place, and pregnancy effectively ends their school career. At the same time, many parents taking part in the study still do not see an economic rationale for investing in their daughters' education, particularly beyond the primary years.

WHY I FINISHED SCHOOL

Jacqueline's mother in Benin, confirms: "I left school when I was 13 years old because I was expelled for non-payment of school fees. It was in 1999." Her aunt, who lived in France, had been supporting the family to pay school fees up until that point.

Tien's mother, in Vietnam, says:

"I finished at the ninth grade at the age of 17 or 18 because my mother had such a hard time to earn money for the family."

Layla's mother in Benin finished school at primary 2 and was tasked with the family's domestic work. "I used to do the domestic tasks alone. My mother was in charge of the food cooking and I would clean the house. I would also look after my younger brother."

In El Salvador, Susana's mother went to secondary school up to Grade 7, but left when her boyfriend suggested it: "He was afraid I would betray him." They started living together when she was 15 years old and she soon had her first child, Susana. By the age of 17 she had had her second daughter. Susana's mother has not considered returning to school.

The majority of the women who reported leaving school prematurely recall that the interruption to their formal education was the most important incident they experienced as girls. Through the women's life stories, we see how adolescence was such a critical time for them. This was when they were given more household responsibilities, which ultimately affected their educational prospects. Several of them, for example, were married at around the age of 14, and this also marked the point at which their formal education stopped.

Girl takes care of her younger brother, Central America



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Girl and her family, Cambodia

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Bianca's mother in Brazil, recalls how she met her husband, and the circumstances of their wedding. "I met him at my grandmother's house, where I was raised. He was a good friend of my uncle. I was still an adolescent and didn't know anything – I was 14. I think it was something crazy, to get married."

She continues: "He decided to marry me because of the suffering he saw in me. He was very sorry for me, for my childhood. He saw how much I suffered, working to survive. When I was living there, he helped me a lot, buying food so I could eat. I think this is why he wanted to live with me."

These stories are quite different from their husbands' recollections of their adolescence, where men largely remembered a time of increased freedom and opportunities for work outside the home. In the Philippines, Jasmine's father remembers how he "started going with my father to fish. We spent nights in the middle of the sea." Puthea's father in Cambodia recalls: "Since I was a boy, I liked to follow my father's activities and ideas because my father was friendly and respected by many of the people in the village."

Djoumai's father from Togo explains: "I had to take care of the sheep and the poultry. I also took the cows to the grazing land with my other brothers." Mealea's father from Cambodia tells how, despite dropping out of school, he was able to fulfil some of his ambitions: "My father was my role model, because I wished to become a medical doctor when I grew up, the same as my father. My dream could not come true after I dropped out of school. Even though I could not achieve his vision, my first job was as a medical worker who treats the people in the village and I always succeeded in saving the lives of those patients. I had medical



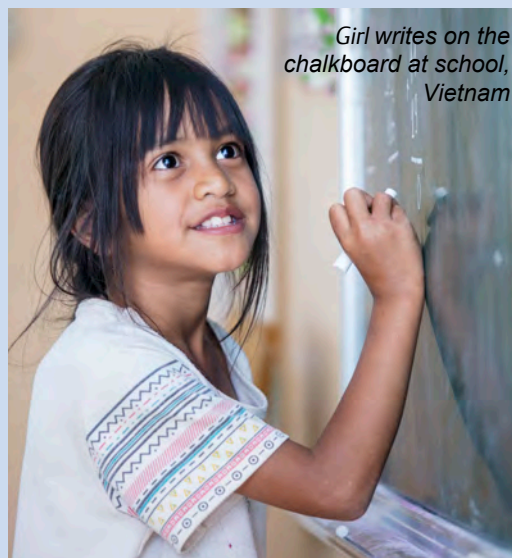
Girl walks to school with her older sisters, Uganda

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knowledge which was transferred by my father but I did not have a formal degree recognised by the government."

When girls continue to attend school through their adolescence, their daily lives are reasonably similar to boys'. School attendance can be an important first step towards an experience of greater gender equality as it brings adolescent boys and girls together to spend their time similarly during a critical phase in their transition to adulthood.² Time-use data from several countries shows how school attendance for girls during their teens also provides them with protection from the heavy burden of domestic work.³ For many girls, continuing with their formal education could have created a very different trajectory, perhaps one like Keira*.

Keira, who is Kyla's mother in the Philippines, demonstrates what is possible for a young woman to achieve when she has access to several assets during adolescence – positive role models, educational opportunity and support from her family. Unlike most of the other mothers taking part in the study, Keira has had more formal education than her husband, who reached the second year



Girl writes on the chalkboard at school, Vietnam

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of the same course as she did. Keira trained as a pastor after completing a university degree in theology and post-graduate teacher training. She is the only mother in the study who has a university degree. Keira recalls being influenced at an early age. "My idol then was the woman who taught us bible study... I admired her from when I was about five years old. She sang well, and she was kind." Keira's ambition was always to be a bible-school teacher and a pastor, and she achieved it. The family now lives in the small parsonage attached to Keira's church. Although Keira holds on to commonly held attitudes about the gender roles in her marriage – "He is the head of this family" – theirs is one of the few families in the study where the burden of domestic work appears to be shared and the power balance appears to be equitable.

3 Family life now

As the girls' mothers became young women and eventually left their childhood homes to get married and have families of their own, they continued to deal with gendered social pressures, for example expectations about paid versus unpaid work, which are inescapable.

Most of the women married young, and their role in marriage arrangements was largely passive. Elaine's mother, in Benin, says: "He wanted us to get married; I agreed. He paid my dowry and we got married when I was 15 years old, according to the rules of the church and the civil code."

Ala-Woni's mother in Togo explains: "It was on a proposal from my mother. She wanted me to get married so I could support her in her old age. Cola nuts and cloths were brought

Girl and her family, West Africa



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Girl does her homework, South America

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and afterwards the religious marriage was celebrated."

The story of Anti-Yara's mother in Togo, is similar: "It was on a proposal from my dad. But it is the behaviour of my partner that I liked. I accepted the proposal of my dad. They brought the dowry and then the cloths and our religious marriage was celebrated."

SEX EDUCATION

Many of the women reported that they have had no reproductive and sexual health education. Some found out about menstruation from friends or older siblings, but most had had no preparation for this critical stage in their lives. In some of the countries taking part in the study – Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Vietnam – women (and men) have joined reproductive and sexual health education classes either in preparation for marriage or childbirth. The experience of Dariana's mother, from the Dominican Republic is common among the Dominican women: "When I was pregnant they gave me a chat telling me all the things that happen to a woman. Before that I had no information. My



Girls chat at school, Southeast Asia

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*Name has been changed



Girl and her father, South America

mother never spoke to me about it. When I was pregnant with the two girls was when they started to tell me."

The women who have taken part in classes are the only ones who reported that they discuss sexual and reproductive health with their partners, an important opportunity for women to have more control of their reproductive rights and to have more say in decision-making in their marriages. Adjoa's mother, in Togo, reports that she is given information about her sexual and reproductive health "when I go for prenatal consultations with the staff of the health centre. I often talk with my husband about this."

While the large majority of women agreed with the statement "the man is the head of the household", a significant proportion added a value statement, acknowledging that a women's role is changing in terms of household power relations and bargaining. When asked about decision-making in the home, most of the women said that while their husbands were responsible for making important decisions, they made some decisions jointly. This appeared to be a move away from their recollection of their parents' relationships, which were much more dominated by men. A small number of the women describe more equitable relationships, where household tasks are shared and decisions are made together. Juliana's mother, in Brazil goes a step further and explains: "Here in our home it's different: I'm the head of the household, because I'm more decisive," but her view is uncommon.

Many of the women reported that their husbands do help care for younger children when their wives are not at home, and in some communities – in the Philippines and in Vietnam – men fetch water and occasionally cook. Some of the men interviewed last year acknowledged the importance of helping and supporting their wives. However, it is clear that the prime responsibility for domestic tasks remains girls' and women's work. Patrícia's mother, in Brazil, explains: "Here at home, I'm the only one who does domestic chores. My husband can't do anything. I think he's not interested in learning."

Leakhena's mother, in Cambodia, says; "If I had a chance to choose, I would like to have two daughters and two sons. The purpose of having an equal number of children in my family would be that they have different tasks, such as girls could help in doing house chores while boys could help in doing farming tasks and other heavy work."

Christine's mother in the Philippines explains how her six year-old daughter reflects what she sees around her: "It's really Christine who tells me, 'Ma, when I grow up I'll be the one to wash the clothes, clean the house'; and her older brother, she says, will be the one who fetches water and helps his father on the farm."

While the women describe clearly defined household divisions of labour – and it is apparent that these male/female divisions are widely followed – what does seem to be slowly emerging is the recognition that school-age girls need extra time for homework, leisure and rest. Saidy's grandmother in the Dominican Republic, says: "I would like them always to remember what I wanted them to be. That they learn, that they study, that I never said: you don't go to school today



Girl collects water, Cambodia



Girl at school, Uganda

because you have to wash the clothes, because you have to wash the dishes, or because you have to do something. No, I left them alone so that they could study."

4 The future

"There is no difference [between boys and girls]. All are human beings and all have the same rights and duties."

Ayomide's mother, from Togo

As women who are mostly in their twenties and thirties, the mothers of the girls have themselves grown up in a time of rapid social change. On the whole, the women acknowledge that they are living in a time of change and that greater opportunities now exist for women and for girls. Many will have taken part in gender equality programmes of some sort, and may also have been exposed to these ideas through seminars, public-awareness campaigns and the media.

Ayomide's mother, from Togo believes that: "There is no difference [between boys and girls]. All are human beings and all have the same rights and duties." At the same time, she says, "Everyone has tasks. Farm tasks for men and sale of 'tchouk' local beer, and housework for women." Her view is typical of the women and this is a critical issue emerging from the research – whether the women will reconcile their ideas of gender equality with their own notions of femininity and masculinity. To what extent will they be able to adapt their own attitudes and actions in the home in order to support their young daughters so that they can stay in school?

Given steady improvements in education in recent decades, the parents of today's girls are considerably more educated than their own parents were. Although their levels of education are relatively low, many of these women are the first cohort of women in their

families to have any formal education at all. This alone has a significant impact on the educational prospects of today's girls. In Brazil, for example, the educational attainment of mothers of school-aged children has more than doubled in the 22 years from 1977 to 1999, where this increase in parental schooling has been shown to account for a substantial proportion of the improvements in school enrolment over the same period.⁴

We are already seeing some of the benefits of girls' education across generations from the changing behaviour and attitudes within the families taking part in the study. The most striking responses overall are the women's overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards girls' education. Almost all of the women interviewed responded to the question "What are your hopes for your daughter's future?" by saying that they would hope for their daughters to be better educated than they were. Some went on to explain that in small ways they are disrupting the status quo in preparing their daughters for a better future. Miremba's mother, in Uganda, explains: "I always think about their future. I have always encouraged them to go to school. I bought goats and chicken for the boys and bought plots of land for the girls, since the boys can always find land at their father's place." Alice's mother in Benin, explains: "What will be different with Alice is that she will complete her studies, get a job before getting married. She shouldn't marry too early."



Girl in West Africa

Six year-old Dariana from the Dominican Republic is definitely picking up on the aspirations of her mother's generation. When asked what she wants to do when she grows up her confident response is, *"I want to go to university"*.

It is clear that the families taking part in the study are committed to girls' education. The majority of the families have little spare cash but they are willing to make the investment in their daughters' education and most report spending on their children's education – see chart (right). Leyla's grandmother, in the Dominican Republic explains: "I used to say that I wanted the best for my daughters. I would have done anything to be able to afford to educate my daughters."

Needless to say, families still have to make complex and difficult decisions about their children's education. It can be argued that economic pressure is now greater, as the poorest families spend a larger proportion of their income on basic needs such as food and shelter than a generation ago.

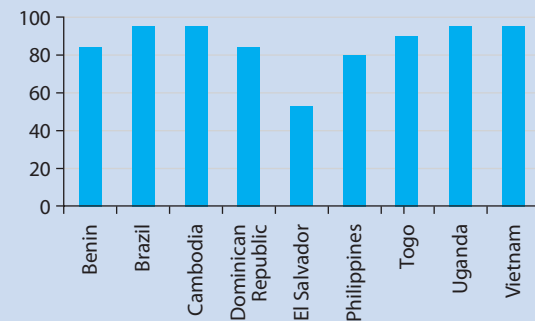
As discussed in more detail in the main report, if education systems are to support development, gender equality and poverty reduction – in other words, to change society – what children are learning should give them the tools and skills that allow them to reach their full potential. The women acknowledge that the education girls (and boys) receive should be of the highest quality and be able to transform their lives. Beatriz's mother, from Brazil, believes that: "Freedom exists for boys and girls. The access of education is better and wider now, and these changes are good."



Girls in the Dominican Republic (L) and drawing by a cohort girl in the Dominican Republic (R)



Percentage of families reporting costs for sending children to school



Many studies have shown how access to post-primary education, in particular, not only leads to learning outcomes but also to a change in attitudes and behaviour that will impact on the girl herself and her children. More educated mothers have more educated children as measured by years in school.⁵

As we have seen year-on-year in the study, the girls' parents have high ambitions for them, most of them expecting their daughters to complete secondary school. However, it is clear from their mothers' experiences that ambition is simply not enough in order for the girls to succeed. Parental, especially maternal, support is critical. Saily's grandmother from the Dominican Republic, explains that things were quite different when she was a girl: "In the past they didn't bother to tell you [about aspirations] like they do today. [Today] people care about their children, because she tells me 'Mama, I want to be a doctor'. So you care because she likes it, and if she likes it, you do too. But, in my time, they didn't say anything to me."

This ambition is evident in the views of the girls themselves, who at age six are aspiring to be teachers, nurses and midwives. Their aspirations are in line with girls the world over. Recent surveys of girls in the final year of primary school in Tanzania and Nigeria revealed that 100 per cent aspired to complete secondary school and 88.5 per cent wanted to continue to higher education.⁶ Shifa from Uganda wants to be a nursery teacher. She will need secondary education but at the moment she is not able to go school, "I stopped. Fees."

The women's responses to questions

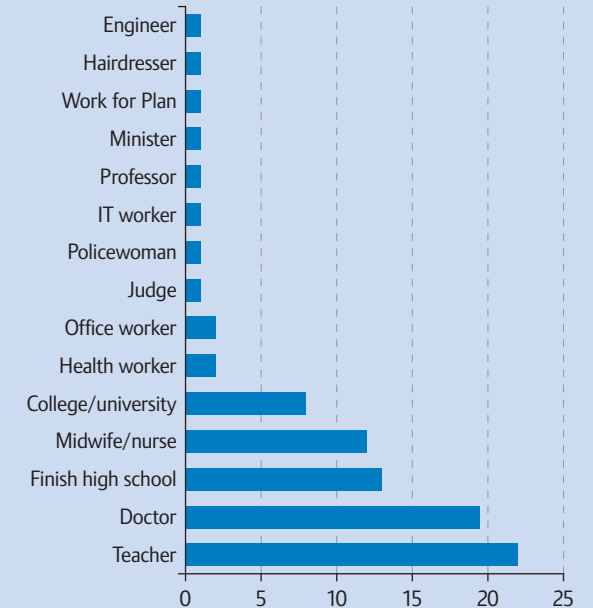
about their vision for the future make it clear that while they recognise that there are real possibilities for the lives of their daughters to be different from their own, most refer back to the practicalities of daily life and defer to the reality of their lives where women and girls occupy the domestic space, and boys and men the external space. This reflects their own experiences as girls and young women. They are emphatic in their responses about the realistic chances of success for a young woman today, citing reproductive and domestic responsibilities as the main barrier for young women. Margaret's mother in Benin, hints that she believes that there are simply lower expectations of girls: "A boy can complete his studies, whereas a girl can give up school."

Nicol's mother, in the Dominican Republic, sums up the general view: "We women would like to be successful in life, but we can't. Look now, I'd like to study, and what stops me? The three children. I can't leave them just like that, abandon them to go and study. I have to let them grow up first and then if I want to do something, I will do it. But men do go away and leave; nothing stops them."

The story of Saily's 53 year-old grandmother, from the Dominican Republic, exemplifies both the challenge and future possibilities for girls' education. Saily's grandmother told us how her focused efforts to educate herself, as well as her son, daughters and granddaughter are paying off. She put herself through night school after having her own children. Her three children are now either in university or are about to be enrolled. She remembers how, even as a girl, she told herself: "When I have my children, I am not going to have ignorant children; my children are going to study... I always used to think about that. I sent my daughter to school at three years old – the one who is studying nursing – and I always wanted my children to learn."

She is clear that things are changing, that not everything will be different but her daughters and granddaughters, if well supported, will have opportunities she could only dream of. "Before, girls had more limitations and did not continue in school. Education has made men and women more equal. By studying, my daughters are able to get paid and put something towards a house. Before, men had more privileges. Now, this is changing."

Family aspirations for cohort girls



Across almost every one of the families with daughters in the cohort study, the recurring refrain "things are changing" is a reason for optimism. Mothers in particular want a different and better life for their girls and see education as being the route to this. Will their commitment be enough to overcome the combined obstacles of poverty and entrenched ideas of male and female roles? Are the changes of attitude coming fast enough and consistently enough to overcome generations of gender inequality? Can these six year-old girls realise their full potential in societies and families where their rights, especially to an education, are respected? As we continue to track the girls through their first decade of life, our optimism will be tested as poverty and discrimination undermine everybody's good intentions.

Girl and her mother, Cambodia



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

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives' Cohort Study Map

