



Girls in Cambodia

In 2006 Plan International UK began a research study following a group of 142 girls and their families from nine countries across three continents (Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam). The aim of the study was to track a cohort of girls from birth to 18 in order to better understand the reality of their daily lives. This report is the culmination of the first 10 years of this primary research. The study documents the detailed experiences of the girls, their families and the environments they live in. It helps to put a human face on the available statistics, theories and academic discussions, including the voices of the girls themselves – describing their hopes and dreams and their daily realities. It provides genuine insight into the way family and community shape girls' expectations of what they can do, and be, right from the very beginning.

Plan International UK strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. As an independent development and humanitarian charity, we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

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Photos in this report are not of the cohort girls

Cover image: A girl in the Philippines



Plan International UK

Executive Summary



Real Choices, Real Lives: Girls' Burden of Unpaid Care



Plan International UK



Introduction

In 2006, Plan International UK began a research study following a group of 142 girls from nine countries across three continents. The ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ cohort study was initially set up to bring to life the analysis and statistics being presented in Plan’s ‘Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls’ report series, first published in 2007 with the aim being to follow the lives of the girls involved from birth until the age of 18. The information from the cohort study provides real insight into the daily experiences of girls and their families worldwide and fosters a clearer understanding of the root causes of gender inequality and of the social norms, attitudes and cultural practices, which are embedded at home and in community life.

A longitudinal study of this sort is rare and the analysis is important: first of all to inform how we support girls in our work and secondly, the findings from this study will also enable Plan International to develop wider recommendations for targeting gender inequality at policy and programme level.

2017: Eleven Years Old

The girls in the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study are now 11 years old. Plan International UK has tracked their lives from birth: through their first steps, first words, first experiences of school, their developing independence as they progressed into middle childhood; and now, for the last two years, their transition into early adolescence, their experiences of puberty and their developing understanding of the world around them and their role in it. Alongside the girls, we’ve talked to the families, mostly parents, some grandparents and other relatives, about their attitudes towards parenting and

gender roles at home, and how these have changed – or stayed the same – as we have followed the girls through the different stages of infancy and childhood.

What is new this year?

In addition to the annual updates which relate to education, health and the families’ economic security, or lack of it, this year three key themes stand out and this year’s report and analysis focuses on the following areas:

- **“A curriculum of chores”:** How, and to what extent, established gender roles and social customs are increasing the time girls spend on household chores and care work, and what impact this is having on their opportunities to learn and develop? In most cases their domestic responsibilities have increased every year of the study and our data indicates that the burden of domestic work is perpetuating gender inequality and limiting girls’ opportunities at school and in terms of their economic and social empowerment. As the girls get older, the study will be particularly interested in continuing to track the impact of this curriculum of chores including its potential to increase their vulnerability to violence later in life.
- **Sexual and Reproductive Health:** As the girls move into early adolescence and puberty, we have found that there are varying levels of knowledge and understanding of sexual and reproductive health. The data shows that most of the girls who do report knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, whether it is correct or not, gather their information from female family members. It’s clear that if there is a continued lack of information or

continued misinformation about safe sex practices, then the girls in the study could be at risk of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

- **Violence Against Girls:** In 2017 we conducted a retrospective analysis of the girls’ experiences of violence and found that there has been a marked and worrying trend in the number of them reporting varying levels of abuse as they move into early adolescence from middle-childhood. Our analysis indicates that this is linked to two factors: as they enter puberty, their identity becomes increasingly sexualised – they are no longer seen as little girls – and their increased mobility. They travel further to school, for example, and this potentially puts them at increased risk of violence.

In 2017, 109 11-year-old girls reported incidences of violence either at home, at school or in the

wider community. This compares with 74 girls the previous year – already an unacceptable proportion of the total sample.

This year many of the families, particularly those dependent on rain-based agriculture, have reported a further decline in their economic situation. The impact of this on girls’ opportunities is hard to overestimate: parental commitment to girls’ education is severely tested when not only are they concerned about their daughters’ safety at and on the way to school, but also need them at home to look after siblings, sick relatives or work in the family fields. The inability to pay school fees, or for medicines or medical treatment keeps families trapped in poverty – constrained by lack of education and continual ill-health. sexualised – they are no longer seen as little girls – and their increased mobility. They travel further to school, for example, and this potentially puts them at increased risk of violence.

"Ah, boys study and play, and girls must help their mothers."

Larissa, Brazil

Unpaid care work is having an increasing impact on the lives and opportunities of these 11 year olds. Many, if not most, of the girls in the study are time poor: it is this that differentiates them from their brothers

and other male peers. Domestic chores eat into their time to study and into their social and play time and their household responsibilities are increasing as the girls get older. This will limit them academically and socially, leading to fewer qualifications and skills and poorer job prospects. The idea that girls are worth less than boys, which their role as household

Case Study: Nimisha, Uganda

"(This year we've experienced) poverty that we never expected..."

Nimisha lives in a semi-rural area of Uganda, in one of the poorest districts with her parents and siblings. Over the years, the family have struggled with illness and poverty and the consequences have been serious.

This year, the family reported that Nimisha's malaria was so bad that she had been underperforming at school as a result. They also said that famine had forced them to reduce the family's food intake, leaving Nimisha and her siblings with only one meal a day.

Her father sees a clear link between Nimisha's poor academic progress and the combined impact of poverty, hunger and malaria:

"What I know is that she would have performed better at school than she did if she had not caught malaria. It was very serious and also the famine affected her. Hunger is sickness so these two things are mixed up."

Despite this, Nimisha's parents have high hopes for her education, they want her to progress and go further than they did:

"Nimisha being at school, I hope that if she completes school she can find herself a better life."



A girl and her father, East Africa

Nimisha herself would like to become a nurse.

Nimisha's father, the family's main breadwinner, has an ongoing illness which he has not been able to seek treatment for. He says that the hospital is too far away and too expensive. His illness prevents him from being able to work and is one of the driving forces behind the family's extreme poverty and lack of basic food.

Unfortunately Nimisha's story is a common one. Many girls in the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study, are struggling with a combination of poverty and ill health which affects their academic progress and may continue to have an impact for the rest of their lives.

servant reinforces, also makes girls more vulnerable to violence in all its forms. The impact of the imbalance in domestic life is far-reaching and the rules of behaviour are firmly entrenched in family and community life all over the world.

Not all the girls in our study, however, accept their designated gender roles and our analysis has identified three groups among the girls and their families:

- The 'acceptors' – those who do not appear to question gender norms;
- The 'consenters' – those who demonstrate attitudes which question gender norms but do not feel able or want to challenge them;
- The 'resistors' – those who challenge gender norms both in their attitudes and, in varying degrees, their behaviours.

The girls do not always fit neatly into these categories and we are looking at a multitude of factors which may influence an individual's ability to resist and why they support resistance in some girls and not others. The factors emerging range from the availability of positive role models, to a girl's position in the family, to levels of poverty, as well as the prevailing attitudes in the community and the individual family.

"No, my parents don't expect different things from me and my sisters in relation to my brothers because they want the best for all of us. I think that this is normal... My dream is to become a minister. I have designed my office and I see myself sitting in it arranging my files."

Ayomide, Togo



A girl travels to school in Cambodia



The Fight for Equality

The data collected over the last two years, as the girls enter early adolescence, has emphasised how difficult it is for girls' lives and opportunities to change. When families struggle with poverty they will fall back on tried and tested coping mechanisms which bring short-term gains against a longer term strategy which might eventually bring about a more secure future. It is hardly surprising that, faced with hunger, families prioritise food over school fees. And who is going to support girls' education in times of hardship when patriarchal tradition often dictates that girls go to their husbands' families and boys look after their parents.

However it is also clear from the study data that over the last 11 years, attitudes and in some cases behaviours, have shifted. Parents know it is better to keep their daughters in school even when they struggle to do so. Many of the girls say clearly that

"it's not fair" and some will fight for their equality. Additionally the issue of unpaid care work is being recognised as a key driver of gender inequality and research is starting to highlight girls' experiences.

Girls' rights are also on the agenda in national and international forums and campaigns for their right to be educated, to live free from violence and to be valued equally with their brothers are in the forefront of development campaigns, policy drives and programme design. Violence against girls and women is increasingly recognised, publicised and punished, though so far not effectively enough.

This impetus must not be lost and in understanding the detail of girls' daily lives, 'Real Choices, Real Lives' can help put in place the policy and programme, the legislation and the education which will make a meaningful difference as these 11 year olds grow into young women.

Recommendations

"I want to have no labour division between male and female work. I want boys to help do female tasks such as cooking rice, and girls and women should wash dishes and help do male work."

Thearika, Cambodia

This study has sought to contribute to and enrich the discussion around unpaid care by highlighting in particular the roles and responsibilities of girls. It recognises that patterns of inequality are established in childhood and, in particular, during early adolescence and that the domestic burden taken on by girls and women underpins gender inequality at all levels.

It is therefore recommended that governments and policymakers should support the **recognition, reduction, redistribution and representation** of unpaid care work by:

- Funding data collection, including time-use surveys, that captures and recognises girls', and boys', work.
- Promoting the systematic use of gender-

responsive budgeting and age-sensitive gender-impact assessments.

- Investing in technologies and infrastructure that reduce the burden of unpaid work.
- Shifting social norms that dictate what is women's and girls' work and encouraging more equitable distribution within households.
- Investing in affordable, accessible high-quality care services, including for children, the elderly and the disabled.
- Investing in research around models of care provision.
- Ensuring that carers – including girls and young women – are better able to meaningfully participate in decision-making structures at all levels.

"Girls are not given equal chances as the boys to go school... No, it's not fair... Because the girls are left at home working as the boys go to school."

Miremba, Uganda

