REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES: GIRLS CHALLENGING THE GENDER RULES

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, we have been tracking the lives of over 120 girls across nine countries in three regions.[1] Our qualitative longitudinal study, *Real Choices, Real Lives*, provides insights into the choices, decisions and realities that shape girls' lives as they grow up in a gendered world. In the first of a three-part series of regionally-focused reports, we draw from in-depth longitudinal analysis of 37 girls going through early adolescence in the three Sub-Saharan African Cohort countries – Benin, Togo, and Uganda. Subsequent reports will focus on Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador) and South East Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam).

Progress, alongside persistent barriers to gender equality

Since the study began, the focus within the international development community on girls' rights and understanding of what gender equality brings to wider society, has greatly increased. The Sustainable Development Goals have gender equality embedded at their heart, more girls are enrolled in primary education than ever before, and campaigns against early marriage, genital mutilation, and gender-based violence have gathered force. However, much further progress is still needed. Gendered social norms – the 'informal rules of the game' that establish expectations about 'appropriate' behaviour for males and females – continue to underpin and reproduce inequitable practices that ultimately result in girls and boys (and women and men) enjoying differential access to resources, as well as unequal opportunities and outcomes. Despite growing emphasis on supporting interventions that aim to transform gender relations, understanding of *how* and *why* gendered social norms can shift remains limited.

'Glitches' in the gender socialisation process

Previously, our analysis has explored the ways in which age, gender, and poverty interact, highlighting the (often-negative) outcomes of gender socialisation – a process beginning from birth, in which individuals are raised to conform to an allocated gender role. This has included looking at the violence experienced by the Cohort girls, or the unequal burden of domestic work they do. In this report, we explore instead *where*, and *when* – and, more significantly, unpack *how* and *why* – girls demonstrate 'disruption' to, or 'glitches' in, the gender socialisation process. The longitudinal view of our data, and its emphasis on girls' own experiences, provides a unique perspective – highlighting markers of where there is potential for gender norm transformation if, and when, the broader social, economic, and political conditions align. The evidence provides a valuable contribution to existing knowledge in considering the timing, duration and scope of interventions aimed at transforming gender inequality. As such, it is aimed at international development practitioners and policy makers, as well as the development research community.

All of the girls in Benin, Togo, and Uganda are noticing, questioning, or rejecting expectations around their behaviour and roles in at least one area of their lives. This ranges from views about household work and division of responsibilities, through to what is considered acceptable female behaviour and future aspirations. We explore the most prominent areas where the girls demonstrate these 'glitches' in the gender socialisation process:

- **girls' interactions with boys**
- **girls' obedience and deference**
- **girls' future roles**
- **girls' domestic responsibilities**

Delving back into our longitudinal data we were able to map *when* as well as *where* the girls do this and identify the different ways they express these 'glitches'.[2] The context of the individual girl's life, her own personality and capacity, the attitudes of those around her and the political, legal and economic situation of her country, and her family represent a complex interchange of influences, opportunities, and barriers. Through three in-depth case studies, alongside the broader data, we explore how the varying and fluctuating influences across a girl's life-course may play a role in her expression of 'glitches' – or the beginnings of 'disruption' – to gendered norms.

A girl in East Africa.

A girl walks to school in East Africa.

KEY FINDINGS

1 All 37 girls from the Sub-Saharan Africa Cohort show some level of 'resistance' to gendered norms and to what is expected of them, demonstrating the potential for gender socialisation to be disrupted.

2 Adolescence is a key point in the girls' lives: gendered expectations about behaviour are reinforced, alongside increased expressions of 'resistance' to what is considered appropriate/acceptable.

3 The process of disrupting gendered expectations – the 'glitches' that occur – is not linear, it varies and fluctuates across time as well as across different aspects of girls' lives.

4 Social Level influences (household dynamics and the wider community) are significant in forming or breaking gendered social expectations, including the importance of key female role models as well as extended family members.

5 Persistent concerns related to the risk of gender-based violence and corporal punishment restrict progress in relation to 'disruption' of gendered social norms.

Adolescence: a critical and dynamic stage in the life-course

Adolescence represents a critical stage in the life-course. For the girls across Benin, Togo, and Uganda, expectations around their appropriate behaviour and roles, for example, in relation to the acceptability and 'dangers' of interacting with boys, are reinforced.

> **"…she has to change her ways and be more careful because if she now plays with any man [she can] get pregnant because she is now a woman, and this worries me."**
> Amelia's mother, Uganda, 2017

While it is also clear that gendered expectations in relation to domestic responsibilities begin from an earlier age, adolescence and the onset of puberty often marks a shift in girls being regarded less as children, more as young women, emphasising their domestic roles as preparation for their future as women – 'wives' and 'mothers'.

Notably, we see that, for the Sub-Saharan Africa Cohort girls, the process of noticing and contesting gendered distinctions is not linear and is subject to fluctuation – both across different aspects of a girl's life, as well as across time. These 'glitches' shift across the life-course: we see that norms, which are at one point adhered to unquestioningly, subsequently become questioned or contested. However, there are also indications that this process can revert, or disruption be 'stamped-out'. For example, Margaret refuses to do what she is asked to do at home in 2016. She is sent away to live with her aunt due to her unacceptable behaviour and, when she returns, says she would do what she is asked:

"Sometimes I cry when I don't want to do it. No, I always do it in the end. I realise that it's not too much for me, but sometimes I wish I could have more time to play."

"I would make the effort to do [what they asked] because I wouldn't want my parents to think of me as disobedient."

2014   **2015**   **2016**   **2017**

"Our mother gives us our jobs but the boys refuse to do any domestic chores so it's me and my sister who have to do it."

"I don't do anything in the house. I don't do the tasks my mother gives me, I do what I want."

5

Further, whilst girls may display some degree of resistance to gendered expectations around their behaviour in some areas of their lives, they may simultaneously conform in others. As such, there are clear opportunities to influence these expectations – alongside evidence which highlights the case for this to be done early enough and over a significant enough duration.

The importance of role-modelling and the wider social context

There are clearly strong **Individual Level** capacities amongst the girls, with indications that where their voice and agency is fostered (for example, through parent-child communication) this can translate into them being able to voice opinions and engage in negotiation related to expectations around their roles.

> **"I would refuse to do it and calmly explain my reasons."**
> Essohana, Togo, 2017

Additionally, there is evidence that broader **Structural Level** factors are also significant, not only in underpinning gendered norms in the case, for example, of limited access to contraception, but also that shifts in public discourse may be having an impact on individual willingness and ability to 'speak out.' This appears to be the case in Uganda where there are marked differences in terms of how girls describe saying "no" – expressed often in relation to morality.

> **"I don't do anything [my parents ask me] against my heart and can't be forced to do things I don't want to, whatever I do, it's my decision."**
> Justine, Uganda, 2017

Changing educational opportunities may also be influencing what girls consider to be possible. However, differential provision and limitations on access to education between regions within countries limits the potential for this to be translated into a reality. This can be seen in the case of Benin where nine out of 10 Cohort girls and their families aspire to attend university, but where progress on tertiary education attainment remains disparate in terms of urban/rural, richer/poorer regions, and male/female.

Across the three Sub-Saharan African countries, it is evident that **Social Level** factors, including household dynamics and social institutions, are the most significant influencers in forming and breaking gendered social expectations. Indeed, we see indications that behaviours which go against or transgress the expected norm are increasingly concealed by girls as they get older and, in some cases, this concealment shifts from the domestic sphere to the public sphere. At the same time, there are suggestions that school and the wider community may be places where gendered expectations of behaviour are less strictly policed. However, this is an area that requires further exploration.[3]

> **"I don't play with boys at school like in the house."**
> Essohana, Togo, 2013

> **"My parents and big brothers don't like me playing with boys, they tell me off and sometimes smack me if I do. So, at school, I like playing with my friends who are boys but not at home."**
> Essohana, Togo, 2017

For the girls in Benin, Togo, and Uganda, household dynamics are fluid and changeable but have a significant influence on their lives in many different ways. For example, we see 'glitches' amongst a number of girls in cases where their mothers also speak out against gendered divisions or reflect alternative ways of doing things through their actions:

A girl with her school books in East Africa.

"Previously, during rainy seasons, we would say only girls or only boys should do this or that, but we discovered that it affects them. Now if I say that only girls cook, it seems so unfair but previously it was that boys are not supposed to cook. As for me, I noticed that it was unfair, so I decided that everyone should get involved."
Beti's mother, Uganda, 2015

"No [it's not fair]…Because the chores women do are more as compared to those done by the men." (How do you think there could be more balance?) **"By teaching the children discipline and also by telling them to do all kinds of chores, [whether they are] a boy or a girl."**
Beti, Uganda, 2017

However, our evidence about the role of the extended family is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, girls are sent to aunts to reinforce gendered expectations of behaviour, whilst on the other hand aunts are the 'go to' people for information that is socially taboo, in particular anything related to sexual and reproductive health. They also often provide an encouraging perspective on the possibilities open to girls in the future.

"When I observe my daughter Margaret, I think of moving her to Cotonou, to stay with my senior sister. Because when I speak to her, she doesn't listen, she's not obedient and she doesn't fear me. When she was on holidays in my sister's home at Cotonou, she used to be very obedient and nice."
Margaret's father, Benin, 2014

"I hope that Margaret progresses well in her studies, so she can find a good job and be financially independent so that she can take care of herself and her children even if her husband can't."
Margaret's aunt, Benin, 2017

A girl at school in Uganda.

This creates a situation where wider female household members are both transmitters of gendered expectations as well as potentially contributing to consciousness raising and shifting perceptions.

The importance of key female role models is also evident in relation to the wider context, where women in prominent positions –
for example the Speaker of the House in Uganda and female MPs in Togo – are seen to inspire not only the girls' aspirations towards 'something different', but also their parents and care-givers' perceptions of what is possible or acceptable for a girl's future role.

"My role model is the Rt. Hon. Kadaga. I admire her because she has a lot of money and she knows English."
Nimisha, Uganda, 2017

"If you have a woman minister, should you wait for her to come back from her work to cook for you? No! You can't wait for your minister wife to come home and cook. Everything that men do, women can also do and vice-versa."
Alice's father, Benin, 2017

A girl does chores in Southern Africa.

A girl with her goat in West Africa.

These factors point to the significance of the social context – not only the household but the wider community – to provide spaces and opportunities for girls to engage in activities that facilitate the translation of 'glitches' into disruption, rather than reinforcing gendered norms.

Persistent barriers to disruption of gendered social norms

Conversely, where the wider social network is not supportive, the degree of change is limited. It is clear that persistent concerns related to the wider context – such as the risk of (gender-based) violence and sex and pregnancy related to 'dangerous' interactions with males – remain a significant barrier to change and limit girls' opportunities and their freedom.

"I don't think it's a good idea to encourage friendship between boys and girls as it invariably leads to sex and an unplanned pregnancy could ruin a girl's future…"
Eleanor's mother, Benin, 2016

"Some other people think that girls and boys should move together, even when they go to bath, but others think that when you bath together the boys can rape you."
Justine, Uganda, 2017

Indeed, we see that 'glitches' can reverse, or fall short of translating into disruption where this is met with opposition from the wider household or social network.

In many cases, the limitations on a girl's expressions of 'deviant' behaviour are linked to fear of corporal punishment and deference to older – and in particular male – household members. Corporal punishment is considered a way to maintain order and there are indications from the girls that they fear the repercussions of going against their elders: **"I would do it or they would smack me."** (Ladi, Togo, 2017). As we have seen in the comments by Margaret's father in Benin (p.8) this fear may be considered desirable or reflect the 'correct' state of affairs. Overall, while there are signs of fathers verbally supporting change – for example, to make divisions of work more equal between boys and girls – there are fewer indications that they support this happening in practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of existing efforts, and drawing specifically from the evidence and analysis presented from our data, these two sets of recommendations are aimed at donors and practitioners to: 1) support the integration of gender transformative approaches across sectors, through considering the types of interventions to fund (timing, duration, design/scope); and 2) point to a number of more sector-specific components to take into account in specific interventions (for example, education, gender-based violence).

Types of intervention

- **Intervene earlier:** recognising that gender socialisation processes commence from a very early age, efforts to influence adolescents' development and opportunities must begin in childhood.

- **Commit to sustained, long-term interventions throughout adolescence:** recognising that social norm change takes time and is unlikely to be accomplished in short-term project cycles.

- **Employ adaptive programming approaches that allow for risk, failure, and learning:** recognising that social norm change is complex and non-linear and that interventions will need to be responsive to changing dynamics.

- **Invest in and allow time for formative research:** to aid understanding of which norms are most relevant for particular behaviours, who are the key reference groups, and which norms may be most susceptible to influence or change.

- **Continue to support authorities to make wider policy and practice changes:** identifying those that have an impact on realising gender equality outcomes such as, for example, enabling access to education and paid employment opportunities

Programme components

- **Support interventions which introduce role models into girls' lives:** thus, expanding their aspirations and conceptions of what is possible. This may be done through school engagement, for example, or wider public campaigns.

- **Create opportunities for co-educational activities:** encouraging those that allow for and permit positive interaction between girls and boys, in addition to single-sex safe spaces.

- **Ensure interventions facilitate communication and dialogue between spouses and within households:** promoting and enabling shifts towards more equitable distribution of labour and decision-making.

- **Promote communication at both family and community level:** addressing both gender-based violence and corporal punishment. Encourage discussion in households, communities, and schools that interrogate male behaviour and the impact, or perceived risks, of violence on girls and young women.

A girl with her school work in West Africa.

ENDNOTES

1. Based on the data collection completed in 2017, there were 128 girls actively participating across the study. The original sample in 2006 included 146 girls, however, there were a number of deaths in the first year and there have been drop-outs. Further, over the years, some girls and/or their families have been unavailable (for example, through migration).

2. The nature of our qualitative interview data means that we mainly observed discursive, attitudinal, and described behavioural 'glitches', that is, where the girls verbally express either noticing gendered differences in expectations; attitudes which criticise these gendered expectations; or descriptions of their own behaviour which deviate from these norms.

3. The wider literature points to schools as potential sites for social change, but also highlights that they can be sites where gender inequalities are perpetuated (for example, through corporal punishment, sexual violence as well as peer violence).

Plan International UK

In 2006, Plan International UK began a study following a group of 146 girls from nine countries across three continents. '*Real Choices, Real Lives*' will follow the lives of the girls involved from birth until 2024, when they reach the age of 18. The study is undertaken across Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Togo, Uganda), South East Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam) and Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador). The information from the cohort study provides real insight into the daily experiences of girls and their families 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.

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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Photographs in this report are not of the cohort girls.

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