



Until we are all equal

We Shouldn't Have to Walk with Fear

Case Studies from Real Choices, Real Lives

About Us

Real Choices, Real Lives is a qualitative and longitudinal research study that has followed a cohort of more than 100 girls in nine countries around the world – Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam – from their births in 2006 to when they turned 18 in 2024.

Real Choices, Real Lives has a distinct commitment to understanding the root causes of gender inequality by asking questions about beliefs, values and expectations, which aim to uncover how gendered social norms and behaviours are created and sustained or shift over time. The study provides us with rare access to girls' daily realities, opinions and aspirations in their own words, ensuring that girls' voices around the world are heard, and that their demands for change and gender equality are amplified.



★ Learn more about Real Choices, Real Lives
[plan-international.org/
publications/real-choices-real-lives/](https://plan-international.org/publications/real-choices-real-lives/)

Case studies from **Real Choices, Real Lives** demonstrate how girls internalise and reproduce harmful social norms that limit their opportunities and self-belief – and how girls can be supported to challenge these mindsets and demand gender equality.



Gender-based violence against girls and women is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world, affecting girls and women in every corner of the globe and in multiple different settings in their lives.



Adolescent girls are uniquely vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV). They experience distinct forms of violence, which can have lifelong impacts. GBV is deeply rooted in gender and social norms, and findings from Plan International's **Real Choices, Real Lives** research study highlight how these pervasive expectations are internalised by girls as they grow up.



Adolescent girls are taught to believe that male violence is natural, and - because of this - it is their own responsibility to keep themselves safe from harm by restricting their movements and adhering to rigid social expectations about how girls should behave and act.



★ Read the research brief
'We Shouldn't Have to Walk with Fear' to learn more.
plan-international.org/publications/real-choices-real-lives/





Jasmine's Story

Born in 2006, Jasmine* grew up in a small coastal village in Masbate, the Philippines. Her father was a fisherman, and her mother stayed at home raising Jasmine and her three older siblings. Most of their neighbours were relatives and the community was close-knit.

- From when Jasmine was as young as 3, Jasmine's mother expressed **concerns about the risks of sexual assault and abuse** that her daughters might experience - a fear that only intensified as her daughters grew up. By the time Jasmine was 13, her mother - like 86% of the Real Choices, Real Lives caregivers in the Philippines - thought that girls were more at risk of violence than boys.
- As Jasmine entered adolescence her mother **forbade her to go down to the beach or the pier** - areas that were commonly frequented by fishermen. Jasmine had previously been allowed to walk to school and around her community by herself and so expressed her frustration with the new restrictions - commenting that boys (unlike girls) were still allowed to "escape" and go to the beach when they liked.
- A few years later - when Jasmine was 15 - her mother felt that **the burden of girls' protection responsibility rested firmly with girls themselves**. In order to keep safe, Jasmine's mother advised that girls should be modest and obedient to their parents, advising that if they didn't then "bad things will happen to them."
- The influence of caregivers is powerful in shaping girls' attitudes, and - as she grew up - we can see that Jasmine **began to take on her mother's fears** about gender-based violence. Although initially frustrated by her reduced freedoms, Jasmine quickly came to agree with her mother that boys and men were naturally inclined towards aggression and thought that girls should avoid male-dominated spaces.
- By age 15, Jasmine felt that girls should be **forbidden from playing basketball** as this would bring them into close contact with boys and, although she was interested in participating in a church singing group, Jasmine said that she had not joined "because I don't want to leave the house" due to safety concerns. She also advised that girls "shouldn't wear short clothes" because this may provoke unwanted male attention.
- These gender norms continued to strengthen and solidify throughout Jasmine's adolescence, and by 18 she firmly believed that girls "can't defend themselves" from violence. In order to stay safe from harm, Jasmine said

“[Girls] really have to protect themselves because they have something to lose.”

- Jasmine's mother, 2021

“[Boys] are not easily harassed. It's not easy to harass them compared to women because they are men.” - Jasmine, age 18 (2024)

“Girls shouldn't wear short clothes”

Jasmine's story illustrates the powerful influence of social norms in shaping girls' attitudes and beliefs about violence and their protection.

By internalising the protection fears of her mother, and the harmful social norm of shame and stigma associated with a potential sexual assault, Jasmine had not only become fearful of boys in her community but demonstrated a belief that male violence is natural and inevitable - with the only way to avoid it through girls' taking preventive measures to protect themselves.

The impacts on her life are significant: by limiting Jasmine's access to public spaces and losing faith in her decision-making ability, this may undermine her further education and career prospects, her civic participation and ability to build social networks and leadership skills, and, ultimately, her belief in a more gender-equal future.



Gabriela's Story

Growing up in the city of Codó, Brazil, crime and violence were a regular feature in Gabriela's* life, with high rates of robberies, gang violence and murders.

- When she was 6, Gabriela's mother shared that she **tried to keep her children sheltered from danger** by keeping them at home as much as possible with the front gate locked. Gabriela was not allowed to walk to school alone due to the risk of "irresponsible boys" who might harm her; her mother's greatest concern was sexual abuse and felt that this was something that girls and women were "always at risk of."
- Yet despite her fears, Gabriela's mother was the only parent among the Real Choices, Real Lives caregivers in Brazil to **state that girls should not be responsible for their own protection**. While other parents placed the onus on girls to modify their behaviour and restrict their movements in order to keep safe, Gabriela's mother argued that society at large was responsible for girls' protection.
- This view reflected Gabriela's mother's **broader attitude about gender equality**: over the years, she expressed beliefs that boys and girls should have the same rights to inheritance, quality education and opportunities. Although her partner demonstrated some controlling tendencies at times, Gabriela's mother never let herself be walked over, stating "I always stand by my decisions" (2016).
- Like her mother, Gabriela was **aware of safety risks facing girls** in her community. When she was 14, she noted that men often "want to abuse [girls]" - and suggested that male violence was deeply rooted in a 'natural' tendency of men to be domineering and commanding over women. However, her mother's belief in gender equality and her refusal to blame girls for the violence they experienced also appeared to have had a powerful impact on Gabriela, who felt strongly that everyone in the community was responsible for protecting girls from harm.
- By age 18, Gabriela was **staunchly pushing back against gendered social norms** about violence and protection. She strongly rejected the notion that boys "naturally prone to violence and aggression, saying instead that boys "are taught to be that way" and was outspoken against victim-blaming rhetoric that shifted accountability from offenders to girls and women.
- Gabriela also **challenged other harmful norms** the limited girls' rights and opportunities. She expressed frustration that boys had greater freedom of movement than girls, saying that - unlike girls - boys "[can] go everywhere, because they say that they're men, nothing will happen, whatever, so they go." Instead of accepting the status quo, Gabriela spoke out for equal rights, demanding that girls and boys have the same opportunities, saying: "we have to have equal rights, and if [boys] can do something, so can we." (2024)
- Supported by her mother, Gabriela was **determined to attend university and make a bright future for herself**. She felt glad that her mother listened to her and supported her decisions and thought that all girls deserved the same thing: to be listened to and respected by adults on all issues that affected their lives.

“I think everyone is responsible [for girls' protection].”
- Gabriela's mother, 2021

“Girls have to live their lives the way they want to, not because someone wants them to live a certain way.”
- Gabriela, age 18 (2024).

“We have equal rights”

Gabriela's story illustrates the strength of her mother's influence in helping her to question dominant discourses.

Her mother's progressive views appear to have been critical in supporting Gabriela to challenge victim-blaming discourse about girls' protection responsibility and become an outspoken proponent of gender equality. Whilst the

internalisation of these gendered social norms can have serious implications for girls' mobility, agency and decision-making, Gabriela's personal journey demonstrates that girls can be supported to challenge prevailing gender and social norms.