PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Until we are all equal

We Shouldn't Have to Walk with Fear

How Gender Norms Shape Girls' Perceptions of Protection, Risk and Responsibility

Findings from Real Choices, Real Lives

Contents

Content Warning

(!) This report includes references to, and descriptions of, violence experienced by the cohort girls, their caregivers and members of their communities, as well as other sensitive and potentially distressing themes. Please read with care and at your own discretion.

Please Note

(!) All participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy, and specific locations have been removed.

'Be a girl champion' street artwork in the Philippines © Plan International

Acronyms & Abbreviations

CEDAW
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women

CEFMU
Child, early and forced marriages and unions

CoC
Champions of Change

CRC
Convention on the Rights of Children

FGM/C
Female genital mutilation/cutting

GBV
Gender-based violence

IPV
Intimate partner violence

LAC
Latin America and the Caribbean

ODA
Official development assistance

SDG
Sustainable Development Goals

SEA
Southeast Asia

TFGBV
Technology-facilitated gender-based violence

VAC
Violence against children

VAW
Violence against women

VAWG
Violence against women and girls

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) 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 settings in their lives.

Globally, a girl or woman is killed by a man every ten minutes,[1] and one in three girls and women has experienced some form of violence in their lifetime.[2] This amounts to more than **one billion victims and survivors** – or one in eight people on the planet.[a]

Adolescent girls are uniquely vulnerable to GBV. They experience distinct forms of violence, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU). Adolescent girls are also at heightened risk of certain types of GBV, like intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence, and the violence that they experience can have lifelong impacts. The violence that adolescent girls experience[b] happens in the family, in their intimate relationships, in their communities, and – increasingly – in online spaces, where it is taking on deeply concerning new forms.

GBV undermines adolescent girls' health and wellbeing, ability to access and complete their education, decision-making autonomy and civic participation, and human rights. In addition to the human cost, GBV against girls and women imposes significant economic burdens and undermines national investments in health, education and social protection.[3,4]

Deeply rooted in harmful gendered social norms, the scale of GBV and its devastating and long-lasting consequences make violence against girls and women **a global crisis that must be urgently addressed.** Yet, efforts to end violence have long been underfunded.[5]

Now, at a time when investment in prevention is more critical than ever, vital services — including child protection systems, gender-transformative programmes, and humanitarian aid — are facing devastating cuts due to unprecedented reductions in official development assistance (ODA).[6]

- International aid from official donors fell 7% in 2024 and is projected to fall further by 9% and 17% from 2024-2025.[7]
- Several of the biggest donors have cut funding for vital work to end violence against children (VAC). By the end of 2025, an estimated US$406 million in international development and humanitarian aid to end VAC is expected to vanish.[8]
- Catastrophic cuts mean that nearly half of women's organisations are expected to shut down in the next year and 51% have been forced to terminate programmes, threatening life-saving protection services for girls and women.[9]

(!) This means that millions of girls and women around the world are at even greater risk of violence.

Statistics across the globe:

10 min

Every 10 minutes

a girl or woman is killed by a man[1]

1 in 3 girls and women

has experienced some form of violence in their lifetime[2]

1 in 8 people

have been affected, amounting to more than 1 billion victims and survivors[a]

a Plan International uses the term 'survivor' to refer to individuals who have experienced violence, recognising the agency of the survivor and shifting the focus from their victimisation to their strength and resilience. The term 'victim' is used to refer to individuals who have died as a result of the assault they experienced. Throughout this report, where the cohort girls or other sources use the term 'victim' this is faithfully retained.

b While violence also impacts boys and men, GBV – that is, violence based on socially ascribed differences in gender – disproportionately impacts girls and women – particularly those who face multiple, intersecting forms of exploitation and oppression.

Protection from violence: Plan International's position

Plan International **strongly condemns** all forms of VAC and young people and opposes the patriarchal systems that reinforce gender inequality and seek to control the lives and sexuality of girls and women through socially defined norms.[10]

Plan International believes that the acceptance of violence is a **harmful social norm** that must be urgently addressed. Gendered social norms that justify VAC and young people (particularly girls and young women) and norms that place blame, shame and stigma on victims and survivors of violence must be urgently addressed.[11]

Plan International therefore works to **challenge and disrupt harmful gendered social norms** across the lifecycle, tackling the root causes of inequality through gender transformative programming that aims to reshape unequal gender and power relations to achieve the full realisation of the rights of girls in all their diversity.[12]

By exploring historical data from Plan International's ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** research with girls in nine countries around the world (Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam), this research brief looks to understand what views adolescent girls hold about violence and protection, how these attitudes are formed and reinforced during their adolescence, and what impact these internalised harmful social norms have on girls' mobility, agency and decision-making.

We focus on the views and experiences of adolescent girls due to their unique vulnerability to, and experiences of, GBV. We also focus on adolescence because it is a time when gender and social norms are rigidly enforced on and internalised by girls. Because of this, adolescence offers a crucial window for preventing GBV against girls and women.

While there is a significant body of research on GBV, ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** offers the unique longitudinal contribution of exploring how girls internalise harmful social norms about violence and protection as they grow up, demonstrating how these beliefs solidify or fluctuate over adolescence. ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** brings to the fore the views and experiences of girls in their own words and allows for **a more nuanced picture of the complex ways in which internalised social norms about violence and protection impact girls' everyday lives.**

GBV and the Global Goals

Ending GBV against girls and women is **firmly grounded in international human rights law,** including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW)[c] and the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC)[d] – with both conventions imposing obligations on States Parties to address harmful gender and social norms that drive violence. It is also enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with specific targets under **Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls,** recognising that violence against girls and women undermines their human rights, and that gender equality cannot be achieved without the eradication of violence.[e]

However, progress towards achieving SGD 5 has faced significant setbacks – with surging conflicts and violence, reduced access to justice, and high levels of discrimination against girls, which leads to their exclusion from the right to education, health, leisure, expression and participation.[13,14] Despite legislative efforts, FGM/C continues in many contexts, and 12 million girls are estimated to be married every year.[15]

Accelerating efforts to achieve the 2030 agenda will require a significant ODA investment. Governments must uphold their ODA commitments, prioritising initiatives to end violence and promote gender equality.

c While the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) does not explicitly reference violence, the CEDAW Committee has clearly established, through General Recommendations No. 12, 19, and 35, that violence against women constitutes a human rights violation and a severe form of gender-based discrimination prohibited under international law.

d Specifically addressed in Article 19.

e A number of additional targets intersect with the issue, including Target 5.9 on policies and legislation for gender equality, and Target 16.2 on ending all forms of VAC. Elimination of violence also contributes to the achievement of Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being and Goal 4: Quality Education.

Display warning about the dangers of child trafficking in Cambodia © Plan International / Stephan Rumpf

Our key findings

91

91% of Real Choices, Real Lives cohort girls

report experiencing violence from as young as 11 years old.

68

68% of girls

in early adolescence[f], believe that male violence is natural or 'just the way things are' – they think that boys and men are naturally more violent and aggressive than women.

- Over time, adherence to this social norm decreases to 62%.
- As they grow up, adolescent girls become more likely to think that violent behaviour is learned and socialised.
- But despite these positive steps, the majority still believe, at age 18, that male violence is an inevitability.

Why does this matter?

Studies have shown that when girls and women have attitudes that reinforce male dominance, gender inequality and beliefs that violence is natural/expected, they are more likely to experience IPV. [16,17, g]

57

57% of girls

in early adolescence, believe that it is their own responsibility to protect themselves from violence and abuse.

- Girls internalise the belief that they are more at risk of violence than boys.
- This belief that they are responsible for keeping themselves safe strengthens over time, up to 67% by late adolescence, with girls believing that they must conform to social norms about their mobility, behaviour and dress in order to protect themselves from harm.

Why does this matter?

When girls believe it is their own responsibility to keep themselves safe, they begin to restrict their movements and self-police how they dress and with whom they associate.

Over time, they become more likely to believe that boys should have more freedom than them and that girls should not be trusted to make their own decisions.

This has serious implications for adolescent girls' mobility, self-esteem, agency and participation, and decision-making.

f Early adolescence is typically defined as between the ages of 10 and 14 years. For this purpose of this research brief, we use "early adolescence" to describe from when the cohort girls were 11 to 15 years to align with our data collection cycles. "Late adolescence" in this report refers to when the cohort girls were 17 and 18 years of age."

g Studies find a statistical association or correlation between risk factors and women's likelihood of experiencing IPV. Please see Heise (2011) and Caribbean Development Bank (2020) for more information.

But there is cause for hope.

The Real Choices, Real Lives cohort girls demonstrate that some gender and social norms about violence and protection can shift positively over adolescence as girls push back against gendered inequalities.

Over time, girls become more likely to believe violence is a socialised behaviour that can be unlearned, demonstrating that girls are challenging norms as they grow up.

Despite the gendered protection norm, girls recognise they have a right to the same freedoms as boys and believe that a more gender-equal future is possible.

Girls think that adults should listen to their voices when it comes to their protection and safety

We must continue to invest in social norms change and gender transformative approaches that support girls to push back against harmful gender norms.

We must work together for a world free from violence where girls can fully claim and exercise their rights.

We must amplify their call to action!

Setting the Scene

Violence & adolescent girls: the scale of the issue

Adolescent girls stand at a critical intersection of vulnerabilities to violence

They experience violence based on their vulnerabilities as children, and experience gendered violence based on their status as girls and young women.

Globally, half of all children aged 2-17 suffer some form of violence each year.[18]

1 in 3 women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual IPV, sexual non-partner violence, or both in their lifetime.[19]

Adolescent girls are vulnerable to specific forms of violence

1 in 5 girls experience CEFMU.[20]

- By the time they are 19 years old, 1 in 4 ever-partnered adolescent girls have already been physically, sexually or psychologically abused by a partner.[21] Ever-partnered refers to girls and women who have been married or in an informal union at any point in their life (currently or previously).
- Child marriage is associated with high rates of adolescent pregnancy.[22] Additionally, girls face a substantially higher risk of being subjected to violence when pregnant than older women do.[23]

230 million women have undergone FGM/C.

- In many contexts, FGM/C is performed as a rite of passage as girls enter adolescence.[24]

Adolescent girls are at high risk of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), with **58% having experienced online harassment.**

- Adolescent girls are also at greater risk of online violence transitioning to offline violence – including stalking, rape, coercion, trafficking and other forms of abuse.[25]

Context influences girls' vulnerability to violence

Around 40% of adolescent girls in emergency settings have experienced IPV.[26]

Climate change and environmental degradation increase the risks of GBV against girls and women due to displacement, resource scarcity and food insecurity, and disruption to services for survivors.[27]

The impacts of violence on adolescent girls

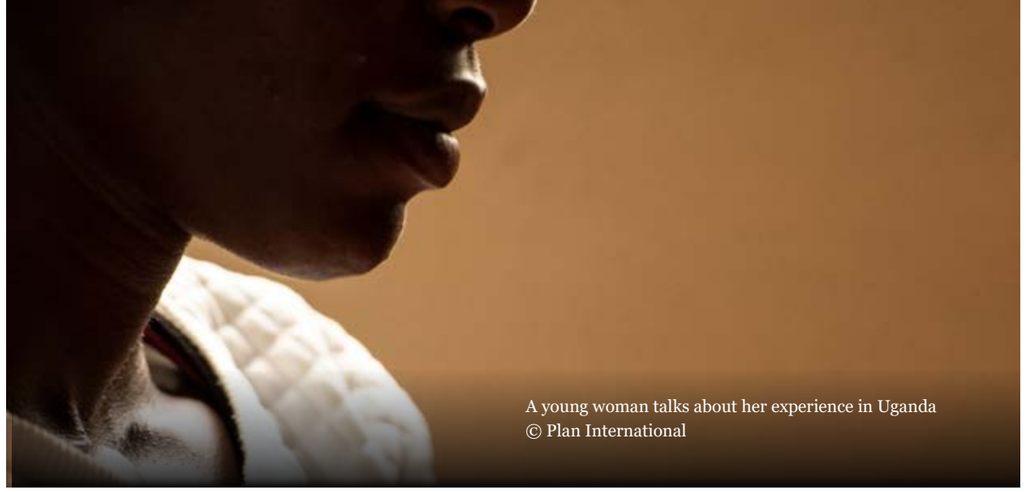
The impacts of GBV experienced by adolescent girls are complex: not only do they experience the same impacts of violence encountered by both children and women – but they also experience distinct consequences in addition to these by virtue of their age and unique stage in life.

Like children, adolescent girls experience severe and lifelong risks to their health and well-being, inhibited personal development and social interaction,[28] and increased likelihood of experiencing IPV as adults.[29]

Like women, they suffer the same physical, mental, social and financial impacts, including injury, mental health issues, unintended pregnancies, isolation, and loss of work.[30]

But as adolescents, they face additional and unique consequences of GBV on top of these, including early and forced pregnancies, which can compromise their health, disrupt their development, and curtail future opportunities. Violence can disrupt and impede adolescent girls' ability to complete their education,[31] and has the potential to limit their mobility, which has a major impact on their ability to develop social networks and support systems.[32] [h]

[h] Despite their unique experiences of and heightened vulnerability to violence, adolescent girls have historically fallen through the cracks between efforts to end violence against women and efforts to end VAC.



A young woman talks about her experience in Uganda
© Plan International

What drives violence against girls and women?

Primary prevention evidence highlights four gendered factors that most consistently predict (or 'drive') violence against girls and women.[33]

1 **Condoning of violence against girls and women** by justifying, excusing or trivialising violence, or by shifting the blame from the perpetrator to the victim/survivor.[34]

2 **Men's control of decision-making and limits to girls' and women's independence in public and private life** send a message that it is men's right to control or discipline girls and women,[35, 36] especially if they transgress from social norms about how a 'good girl' should behave.[37]

3 **Rigid stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity** are associated with higher rates of violence, particularly in contexts where male honour is linked with female sexuality.[38]

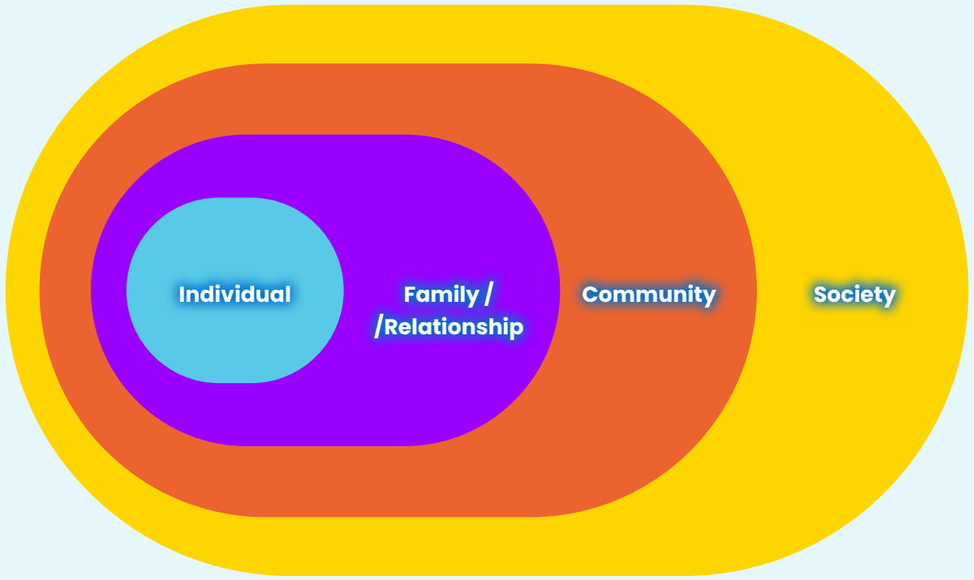
4 **Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control** can increase men's reluctance to take a stand against violence – and can increase their own use of violence.[39]

Gendered drivers of violence intersect with many other forms of structural and systemic discrimination and inequality that influence the prevalence and dynamics of violence against girls and women. These include racism, ableism, homophobia, and many others.[40] Other reinforcing factors that intersect with gendered drivers of violence to influence the nature and severity of violence include poverty, conflict, and climate change.

Understanding violence: the socio-ecological model

The socio-ecological model is an important tool in understanding how the drivers of violence against girls and women operate at different levels of a girl's life to influence her overall risk of experiencing violence.

✦ **FIGURE 1** Socio-ecological model (adapted from Heise 1998[41])



- **At the individual level**, gender norms are internalised by girls and women and reproduced through their acceptance of submissive femininity, victim-blaming and shame, and self-censoring of attitudes or behaviours that violate social norms for fear of social sanctions.[42] An adolescent girl may come to believe that men are naturally better suited to leadership and girls should be submissive, that boys deserve more freedom than girls, that a husband is justified in being violent towards his wife, or that it is a girl's own responsibility to protect herself from violence and harm.
- These filter into **family and relationship dynamics**, which can result in highly controlling or coercive behaviour, limited decision-making for girls and women (particularly relating to finances, property and inheritance), and IPV or domestic violence. This may manifest as boys and men exerting control over girls and women by restricting their movements and dress or otherwise policing their compliance with dominant social norms under the guise of 'protecting them from harm.'
- **At the community level,** highly masculinised sub-cultures (such as gangs) and community norms that promote dominance and control over women contribute to the privileging of boys and men and result in stigma, shame and the silencing of girls' and women's voices.[43]
- **At the societal level**, institutionalised and structural gender inequality — including impunity for violence, a lack of legislative protection, or the perceived legitimation of violence by the laws and policies of the state — create the environment in which adolescent girls are embedded.[44,45] In practice, this might mean that if an adolescent girl contacts a police department about abuse, she may be dismissed or her complaint trivialised.

The importance of understanding social norms to prevent violence

To prevent violence against girls, we must challenge the harmful social norms that underpin the gendered drivers of violence and permeate through the socio-ecological levels.

Understanding and addressing social norms is crucial not only to prevent violence against girls but also to transform the gendered expectations placed on all adolescents — including boys.

This work is most effective when it targets 'injunctive' norms (what people think they ought to do to ensure social approval) rather than 'descriptive' social norms (which refer to a person's perception about what others do).[46,47]

Injunctive norms influence what an individual believes is approved or disapproved by their community and therefore **motivates them to engage in certain behaviour** through the anticipation of being either accepted or punished by the group.[48] These norms can:

- Cause a survivor to believe that she is the cause of the violence[49] and reduce her likelihood of seeking assistance if experiencing abuse.[50]
- Establish the degree to which individuals believe that their culture grants men the authority to control women's behaviour.[51]
- Influence boys' beliefs and self-perception about what they must do to be accepted as 'real men,' which can contribute to the perpetuation of violence.

Descriptive norm

What I think others do

"In this community, men often beat their wives."

Injunctive norm

What I think others are expected to do
What I think others expect me to do

"Men should be permitted to beat their wives when they are disobedient."

There is a direct relationship between the internalisation of these social norms and experiences of violence. Studies have found that women who had attitudes supportive of wife beating had increased odds of experiencing IPV themselves.[52,53] Additionally, women who had beliefs that reinforce male dominance and gender inequality – such as the belief that men should be the head of the family — were more likely to experience domestic violence at some point in their lives.[54]

A critical window for change

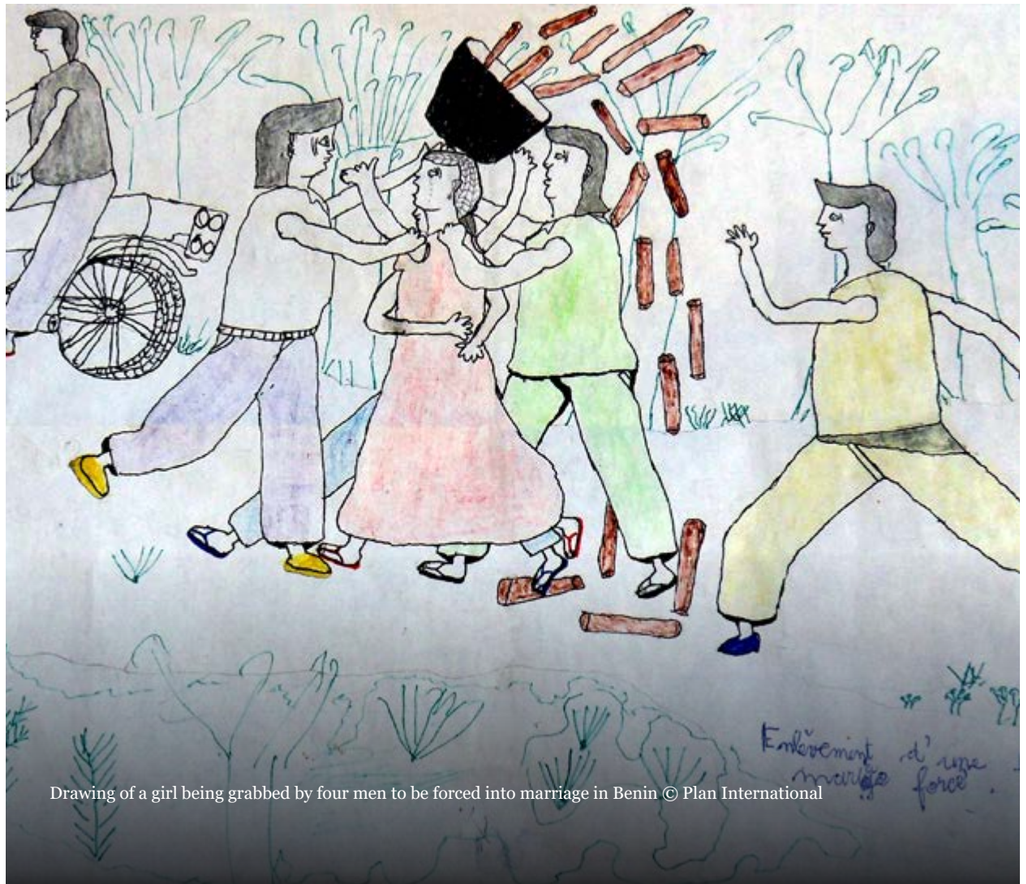
Adolescence offers a crucial window for preventing GBV against girls and women.

Adolescence is a key age range in which social norms cement what gendered roles are socially accepted and expected for children, with these rules sometimes becoming enforced using violence. Prevention efforts that focus on social norms change have the potential to address the poly-victimisation[i] of girls, and to prevent the intergenerational transmission of harmful gender and social norms and the use of violence[55] — thus breaking the cycle.[56]

Through targeted prevention efforts with adolescent girls, programmes have been proven to support girls to challenge harmful gender norms, build girls' agency to create healthy and respectful relationships[57] and reduce levels of physical and sexual violence.[58]

Since early marriage, childbearing, and unwanted sexual experiences increase the risk of violence later in life, supporting adolescent girls to delay sex, marriage, and pregnancy can reduce their chances of experiencing IPV over their lifetime.[59] However, to address these harmful social norms, it is first essential to understand what norms govern adolescent girls' beliefs and behaviours.

i Poly-victimisation is defined as the experience or exposure to multiple types of victimisation.



Drawing of a girl being grabbed by four men to be forced into marriage in Benin © Plan International

Our approach

This research brief draws on evidence from Plan International's qualitative and longitudinal research study, ***Real Choices, Real Lives***, to better understand adolescent girls' beliefs and attitudes about violence and protection, and to explore the implications of the social norms they have internalised on their lives. As a qualitative and longitudinal study, ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** has been following the lives of 142 girls in nine countries[j] around the world from their birth in 2006 to when they turned 18 in 2024. Through annual data collection with girls and their caregivers, the study offers unique insight into the experiences of girls during childhood and adolescence.[k]

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. This research brief draws on data collected from interviews with the cohort girls and their caregivers between 2017 and 2024 – when the girls were aged between 11 and 18 years old – and explores topics and themes specific to girls' and caregivers' experiences of and attitudes about violence, protection, girls' freedom and movement, and girls' agency and decision-making.

Following the ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** girls across their adolescence, our findings are (roughly) structured in chronological order – beginning with the girls' experiences and fears of violence in 2018 (when they were 11 and 12 years old), exploring how their attitudes and beliefs change across the course of their adolescence, and ending with their calls to action in 2024 (at ages 17 and 18 years) on the future free from violence that they wish to see.

j Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam.

k We recognise gender as a multidimensional concept which influences people's identities and expressions in many ways and that gender identity goes beyond a binary field of male and female. However, for the purposes of this study, "girls" and is used as an umbrella term to refer to the cohort participants.


Real Choices, Real Lives
Research Study Methodology

For more information about the Real Choices, Real Lives longitudinal methodology, please see: **plan-international.org/uploads/2024/08/RCRL-Longitudinal-Methodology.pdf**

Limitations

There are a number of limitations associated with conducting a multi-country longitudinal study that spans three regions and numerous languages. The methodology has evolved over time to align with ethical and safeguarding norms that have progressed over the last 18 years, which influences consistency. Positionality and subjectivity are ongoing challenges in any qualitative study, which Real Choices, Real Lives works to mitigate. Finally, as a small cohort, the Real Choices, Real Lives findings are indicative of the experiences of girls in the focal countries with similar lived experiences, and may not be generalisable to other contexts or conditions.

About this map

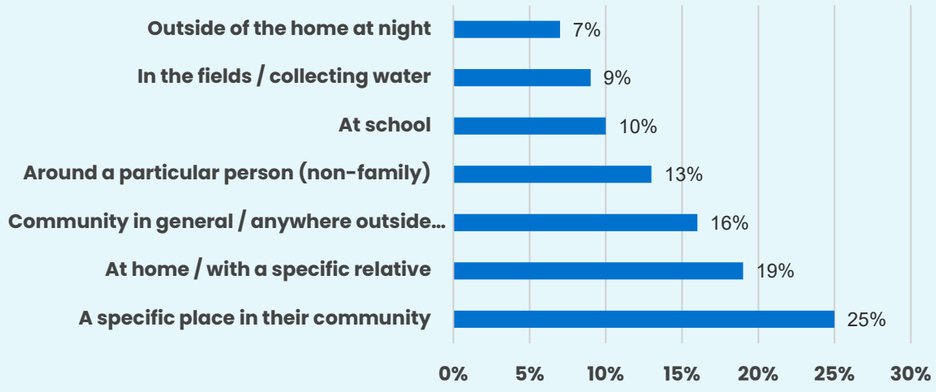
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by Plan International.

Girls in their own words

The threat of violence

The threat of violence and a resulting sense of insecurity and vulnerability have been prominent themes in the cohort girls' lives over the years. In 2018, when they were just 11 and 12 years old, more than half of the cohort girls reported feeling unsafe in one or more places, and 91 per cent reported that they had experienced some form of violence. The most common places that the girls reported experiencing violence were at school (42 per cent), at home (31 per cent), or in their community (28 per cent).[l] Separately, the girls were also asked where they felt unsafe in their communities – with their responses illustrated in ✦ FIGURE 2.

✦ FIGURE 2 Places girls report feeling unsafe (2018)[m]



While some girls – particularly those in El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines[n] — report specific contextual threats to their safety, for most cohort girls, the threat of violence appears to be profoundly gendered.

A common theme among the girls' responses was reports of boys being violent at school. At age 14, Barbara (Benin) shared that "boys start fights much more than the girls" (2021), while Nakry (Cambodia) reported that her school was not safe because of boys fighting.

This had led many girls to become wary of boys, and to avoid socialising with them. When she was 12, Christine (Philippines) shared her concern about playing with boys in her neighbourhood, saying "they don't respect girls" (2018).

Over the years, many of the girls have expressed fears of strange or dangerous men in their communities, street harassment, and a fear of being raped when walking alone or performing chores like collecting water.

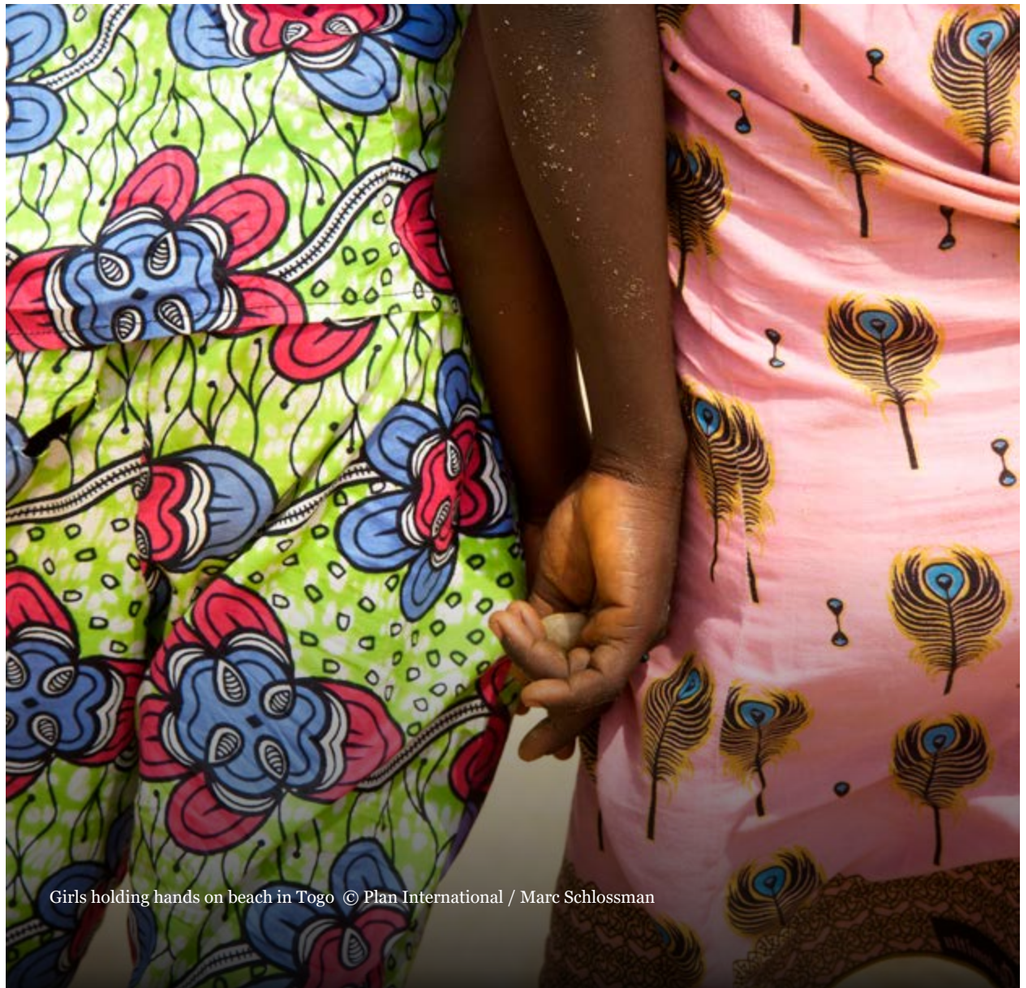
Davy (Cambodia) worried about walking in quiet places, saying "I may be raped or mistreated, and no one can help me" (2018), while Jane (Uganda) reported her concerns about being assaulted when collecting water.

> **"[I feel unsafe] fetching water from borehole at night. […] Because bad men may rape me."** – Jane, age 12 (2018), Uganda

Of the 19 per cent of the girls who reported feeling unsafe in the home, most referred to the threat of GBV.

In El Salvador, Raquel told a story of her male cousin assaulting her aunt and threatening to kill her, while Karen (El Salvador) and Juliana (Brazil) said that they were afraid of their fathers, both of whom were alcoholics and verbally abusive when drunk.

Karen was one of the few girls in the cohort who highlighted the impacts of psychological violence, sharing that her father berated and taunted her when drunk, which she said made her feel unsafe, especially when left alone with him. In Benin, Togo and Uganda, many girls reported being beaten by their caregivers when they made mistakes, such as forgetting to do a household chore.



Girls holding hands on beach in Togo © Plan International / Marc Schlossman

l Some girls reported experiencing violence in more than one setting.
m Among girls who reported feeling unsafe in at least one place. Some girls listed multiple places; others listed only one.
n In El Salvador, gang violence has been a significant threat in the cohort girls' communities for many years. In 2022, President Nayib Bukele launched a "war on gangs", imprisoning over 73,000 alleged gang members and declaring a state of emergency. While the crackdown on gangs has been criticised internationally for violations of human rights, the policy has been widely popular in El Salvador, and the cohort girls have praised Bukele for bringing peace and safety to their communities. The Dominican Republic has one of the highest recorded rates of femicides, and rates have reportedly increased over time. In 2022, in over 34% cases of femicides, the victims were girls and adolescents. Please see https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/s2301023_en.pdf for more information. In the Philippines, many of the girls live in an area with very high rates of crime.

Digital violence

Online violence has also been an emerging issue in the girls' lives as they have gotten older and gained access to social media. Most of the girls in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Southeast Asia (SEA) cohorts either had their own phones or regular access to the internet by the time they were 15. While fewer girls in the African focal countries had their own devices, most had some access or exposure to the internet.

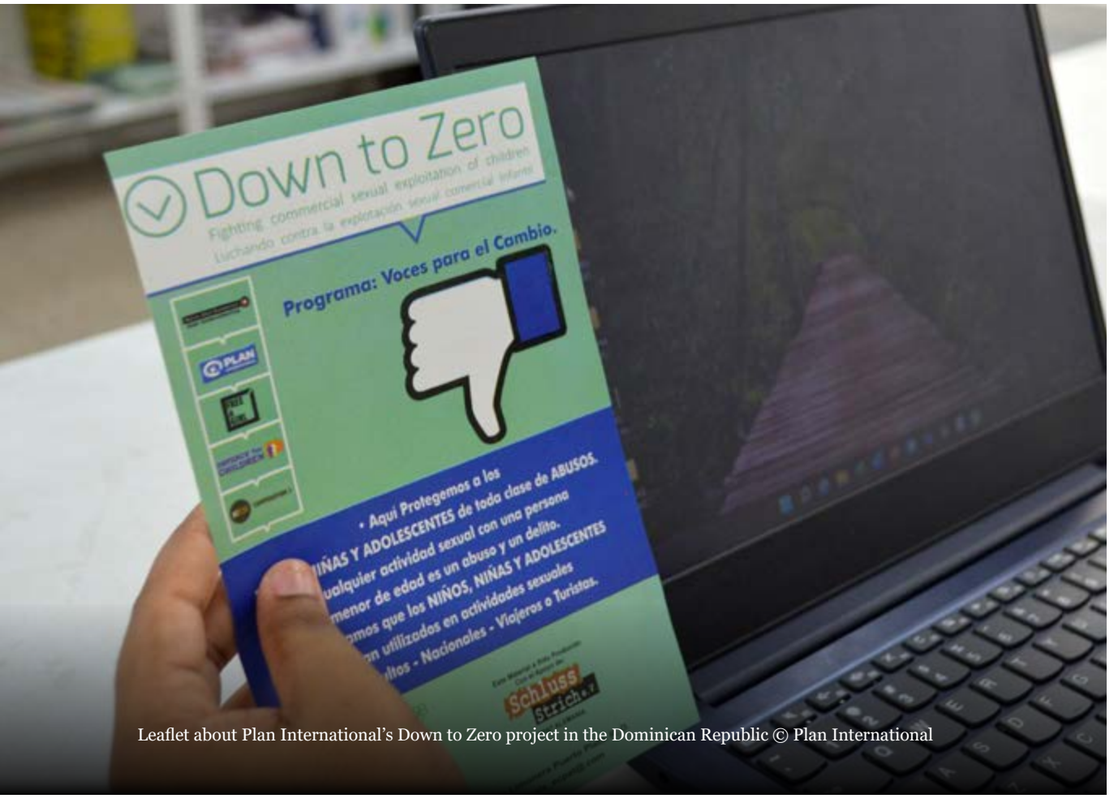
Across the global cohort, many girls have encountered content online that they found troubling, such as pornography and misogynistic content, and a large number have been digitally harassed by men sending them sexually suggestive messages, propositioning them for sex, or sharing explicit pictures or videos.

> **"There is a male stranger [who] chatted to me and used a rude word […] and sent a bad picture to me. I felt angry."** – Lina, age 14 (2021), Cambodia

Their experiences of online violence have also transitioned to the offline world. In El Salvador, Karen shared a frightening story when she was 15 about a man who had contacted her mother online, giving the name of Karen's school and threatening to kidnap her.

By the time they were 17 and 18 years old, a few girls had also shared stories of their friends and classmates experiencing revenge porn.[o]

o Revenge porn is a type of digital abuse involving the online distribution of intimate or sexually explicit photos of videos of another person without their consent.



Leaflet about Plan International's Down to Zero project in the Dominican Republic © Plan International

Risk of rape and unwanted pregnancy

The risk of rape and sexual assault is at the forefront of the girls' minds. Many of the girls have heard terrible stories of rape and abuse from an early age. When she was just 12 years old, Doris in El Salvador was demonstrably aware of grave instances of sexual violence, reporting that she knew of girls her age who had become pregnant as a result of abuse. Some girls also shared their own, at times harrowing, experiences of violence and harassment, which have made them fearful.

> **"I was almost raped one time. Those men had staged themselves and were waiting to rape me! […] I was fortunate that someone who knew me was approaching. I screamed that, 'These men want to rape me!' and he ran first to my aid. We got to identify one of the young men, but he did not reveal his colleagues."** – Sheila, age 17 (2024), Uganda

The **risk of sexual harassment and rape has been an acute concern for the girls' caregivers too,** particularly as their daughters' entered adolescence and began puberty. In 2019, when the cohort girls were 12 and 13 years old, 76 per cent of caregivers reported that girls were more at risk of violence than boys, citing a range of risks for girls including rape, IPV and child marriage.

Caregivers tended to deem girls as too "fragile" to defend themselves from harm (Natalia's mother, 2019, Brazil) and to express a belief that exploitation and rape were greater risks for girls than boys.

> **"Sometimes boys do it to other boys, but girls get raped more often. It doesn't happen to boys as much as it does to girls."** – Madelin's mother, 2019, Dominican Republic

> **"Girls walk about more, selling things, and are in more danger of being kidnapped for a forced marriage. It's not the same for boys."** — Jacqueline's mother, 2019, Benin

Among the girls' caregivers, sexual violence was often framed in terms of the shame that it brought upon the girl and her family – particularly in cases when rape resulted in pregnancy. In Vietnam, Tien's grandfather recounted a horrific case of a 15-year-old girl from their community who had become pregnant as a result of gang rape. Tien's grandfather knew of the survivor's grandfather and said that the man "felt embarrassed about [his granddaughter]," because she had been "violated by three boys" (2018). In Uganda, Amelia's mother explained that cases of sexual violence are seldom reported due to shame:

> **"If a female is raped, they may not report it because it's shameful."** — Amelia's mother, 2017, Uganda

Throughout the cohort, there are clear links between caregivers' attitudes about sexual assault and their daughters' internalisation of the same beliefs. In just one example, Sylvia's mother (Uganda) spoke of the risk of rape and unwanted pregnancy saying such a situation "will cause shame to the family" (2021). That year, Sylvia suggested that if a girl became pregnant because of rape, she "may decide to commit suicide" (2021) to avoid the shame of being raped and becoming pregnant, indicating how deeply gendered social norms about shame and violence are internalised by girls as they grow up.

Is male violence 'natural'?

Common among the experiences that the girls shared is that the perpetrator of violence – or who they expected to be a perpetrator – was male.

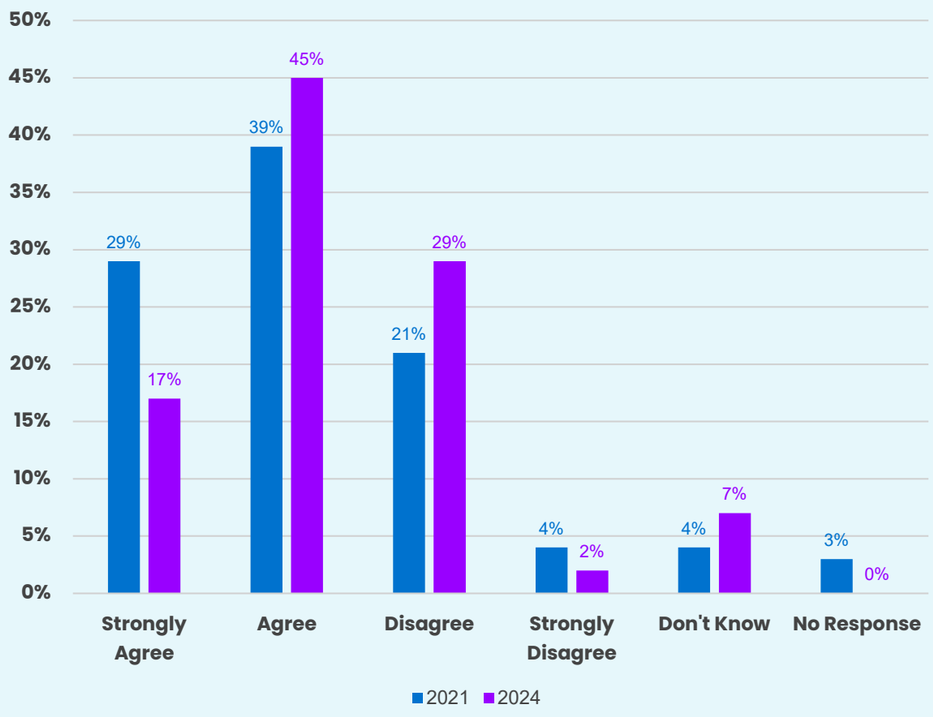
At the age of 14 and 15, many of the cohort girls reported feeling unsafe in their daily lives due to male violent or aggressive behaviours, with some girls blaming male aggression for the challenges that girls face in their daily lives.

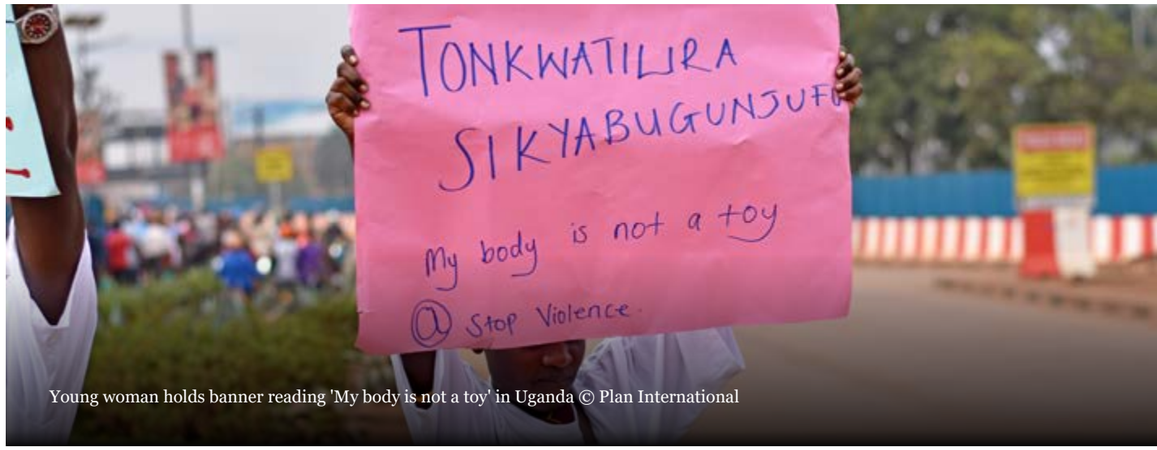
> **"Most challenges girls and women face like violation of human rights i.e. defilement, rape are caused by the men which makes [men] more violent."** – Justine, age 14 (2021), Uganda

It is perhaps then unsurprising, given this clear perception of boys and men as aggressors and girls and women as victims, that **nearly two-thirds of the cohort girls report believing that male violence is natural.**

In 2021 (when aged 14 and 15 years old), 68 per cent of the girls agreed or strongly agreed that boys and men are by nature more aggressive and violent than girls and women, and by 2024 (when aged 17 and 18), 62 per cent had maintained this belief. Whilst it is positive that adherence to this norm decreased slightly over time, it is concerning that most of the cohort girls still thought of violence as natural and gendered as they transitioned into adulthood.

✦ **FIGURE 3** "Boys and men by nature are more aggressive and violent than girls and women" – girls' responses in 2021 compared with 2024.





Young woman holds banner reading 'My body is not a toy' in Uganda © Plan International

Girls' justifications of male violence

Deeply troubling is the fact that many of the girls uncritically provided justifications for GBV. Across the cohort, some of the girls adopt an essentialist view of male violence,[P] and believe that violence is an innate characteristic of men.

> **"Since [men] know they're stronger, there's nothing you can do against them if they do something bad to you."** – Fezire, age 18 (2024), Togo

When she was 15, Melanie (Philippines) explained that men are violent "because they're men" (2021). For some girls, this natural order of things was justified by religion, with Alice (Benin) explaining, "God created men and boys like this" (2021).

Over the years, some girls have attempted to explain this natural state of affairs and have linked male violence to an inability of boys and men to control their emotions. Many girls recounted observations of boys and men acting on aggressive impulses for "trivial reasons" (Sen, 2021, Vietnam) because they "can't control their anger" (Rebeca, 2021, Dominican Republic).

For other girls, male strength and female weakness were provided as explanations for male use of violence to subjugate women. Fezire (Togo) argued that men intentionally use their greater strength to dominate women:

Many other girls touched on this theme of male dominance and female submission. In El Salvador, Susana stated that men "have the power to order women around" (2021), while in Benin, Thea explained that it was natural for men to control women through violence because men "think they're better than girls" (2024).

Some girls make astute observations about the broader social context in which male violence, aggression and dominance are situated. Beti, in Uganda, thoughtfully explained that social norms about male dominance in the family and community provide justification for men to use violence against women (VAW) because they see them as less-than. Using the example of women kneeling to men (customary in Beti's community for women greeting men and when serving them food), Beti explained that such gendered social norms in her community have been a key enabler for men's use of violence.

P Gender essentialism is the belief that women and men have distinct, immutable and natural traits that are determined by their respective genders. According to gender essentialism, the 'essential' characteristics of women and men are universal, shared by all members of the respective genders.

> **"Many men use a commanding language in all they do. I also think that since society has deemed man as the lead, they feel that they are way above everyone and everything. Also the notion that a woman must kneel down for a man, makes them use that excuse, to be aggressive."** – Beti, age 17 (2024), Uganda

The acceptance — and sometimes endorsement — of violence and male domination as the status quo demonstrates that gendered social norms about male violence have been deeply internalised and are being reproduced and reinforced by the girls.

The implications of this are severe. Attitudes that reinforce male dominance, gender inequality, and the belief that male violence is natural are associated with higher rates of IPV among women.

With two-thirds of the ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** cohort girls subscribing to these reinforcing beliefs about violence and gender inequality in late adolescence, **there is a significant risk that many of the cohort girls could experience IPV during adulthood.**

It is therefore imperative that we accelerate our efforts to challenge and deconstruct harmful social norms that drive GBV.

Girl on her way to school in Brazil
© Plan International / Natalia Moura

"It's up to the girl to ensure that she is safe from harm"

The girls' exposure to GBV, together with their conviction that male violence is natural or inevitable, has led girls to internalise a belief that it is their own responsibility to protect themselves from violence and abuse. In 2021, when they were 14 and 15 years old, 57 per cent of girls agreed or strongly agreed with this social norm.

Rather than declining over time (like their belief in the social norm about male violence being 'natural'), this sense of their own protection responsibility solidified and strengthened over time — to 67 per cent in 2024 when the girls were aged 17 and 18 – indicating that it has become deeply rooted.

✦ **FIGURE 4** "It is the responsibility of girls to protect themselves from violence and abuse" – girls' responses in 2021 compared with 2024.

Male youths take part in Champions of Change workshop in the Dominican Republic © Plan International

A lack of faith in protection mechanisms

In both 2021 and 2024, the cohort girls in SEA were the most likely to agree that girls are responsible for keeping themselves safe from harm (72% and 85% in each year, respectively). These girls tended to frame the issue as being about "a woman's right to defend herself" (Christine, 2021, Philippines) as well as a sense that, since no one else will protect girls, they must take care of themselves.

> **"It is girls who can protect themselves, we should not trust other people [to protect us] too much, we should defend ourselves."** – Ly, age 15 (2021), Vietnam

A feeling of abandonment by institutions that were supposed to protect them was also evident among many of the girls in the Dominican Republic and some in Uganda. Many of them spoke of a **deep sense of betrayal by the very institutions that were meant to keep them safe** and felt that they must take responsibility for their own protection as a last resort. Katerin, in the Dominican Republic, neatly expressed this:

> **"Of course she's the one who has to protect herself, because if she doesn't protect herself, nobody else will."** – Katerin, age 15 (2021), Dominican Republic

For some girls, this belief in self-reliance is informed by personal experience of being let down by caregivers, institutions or society at large. In 2021, Rebecca's mother (Uganda) shared about a concerning set of incidents when a man "chased her daughter twice in recent months." When asked whether she took any action to protect her daughter, Rebecca's mother replied:

> **"I did not do anything about it, and I did not even talk to him, but I just talked to my child that if this happens again don't keep quiet while running away, you should also shout for help when he chases you again such that people can come, and we catch him chasing my daughter."** – Rebecca's mother, 2021, Uganda

When asked why she had not reported the incident, Rebecca's mother said that they had to "give it time" because the man was a member of the community, implying that the family did not want to cause trouble.

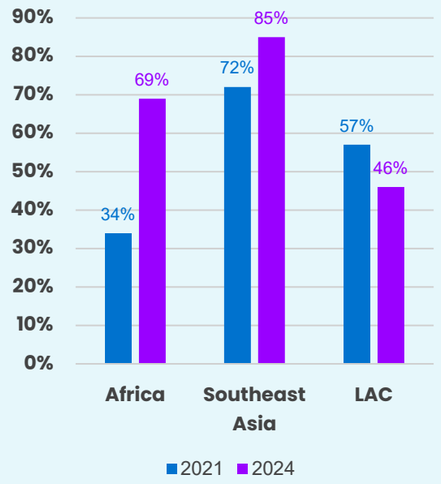
Unsurprisingly, when Rebecca was asked a few years later whether it is girls' responsibility to protect themselves, she responded that if girls were "careless" then they would inevitably experience harm (2024).

Shifted responsibility, ongoing restrictions

In 2021, the girls in the African cohort were most likely to disagree with the notion that their protection was their own responsibility, with 66 per cent arguing that this was not girls' responsibility. Interestingly, however, rather than placing responsibility on institutions or calling for social norms change, the girls in Africa tended to argue that it was parents' responsibility to protect girls from violence by limiting their mobility or always supervising their behaviour because girls were too weak or ill-equipped to protect themselves.
In Togo, Folami recommended that girls should be escorted by their brothers so that *"nothing bad can happen to them"* (2021), while Fezire (whose father had expressed in 2019 that girls *are "easy targets"* for abuse) explained:

> **"Girls can't protect themselves; they […] need their parents to protect them from violence and mistreatment."** – Fezire, age 15 (2021), Togo

✦ **FIGURE 5** Regional comparison of girls who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "It is the responsibility of girls to protect themselves from violence and abuse" in 2021 and 2024



By 2024, there had been a radical shift in responses among the cohort girls in Africa. At the age of 17 and 18, 69 per cent felt that it was their own responsibility to protect themselves from violence and harm, and only 28 per cent argued that it was not. However, through the girls' reports, we can see a continuation of the belief that restricted mobility was a main way to keep themselves safe.

In Uganda, Miremba had very clearly internalised the belief that girls must prevent harm by limiting their movements, saying:

> **"It is the responsibility of a girl to protect themselves by avoiding to moving alone or at night."** – Miremba, age 17 (2024), Uganda

In addition to their mobility, many of the cohort girls in Africa also believed that it is the responsibility of girls to protect themselves from harm by adhering to prescribed social rules about how a 'good girl' behaves to avoid sanctions or punishment for deviating from these gender norms. Alice in Benin spoke about the responsibility of girls to control their behaviour to minimise their risk.

> **"Girls should control where they go and learn how to conduct themselves to avoid becoming victims of violence."** – Alice, age 14 (2021), Benin

Rather than demonstrating a change in attitudes, the significant shift in responses among the cohort girls in Africa shows that, as girls get older, they see the responsibility for policing their behaviour as transitioning from their parents to themselves. This shows how powerfully this injunctive social norm has taken hold during girls' adolescence.

Victim-blaming

When social norms about violence are internalised, they lead to victim-blaming – where the fault is shifted from the perpetrator of the offence to the victim.[60] Across the cohort, we can observe many cases where the girls are quick to blame their peers for their experiences of violence. Although the social norm about girls' protection responsibility was least strongly held by the girls in LAC — and adherence to the norm weakened over time (see ✦ FIGURE 5 above) — their responses indicated a strong internalisation of victim-blaming rhetoric, often relating to girls' clothing and behaviour. In the Dominican Republic, Saidy explained the risk of dressing in ways that don't conform with norms about modesty:

> **"They say that when you wear very short clothes it provokes the boys."** – Saidy, age 15 (2021), Dominican Republic

Not only have the girls observed victim-blaming in their communities, but many agreed that a girl should be blamed if she experiences violence or harm after not adhering to gendered expectations laid out for girls. In Vietnam, Huong used victim-blaming logic to justify a recent case of harassment in her community, explaining that a girl was harassed by boys after passing near them in a ditch when she knew she shouldn't go there.

Rather than suggesting any punishment for the boys, Huong said the girl "should be suspended from school" because she put herself in a dangerous position.

In the Dominican Republic, Sharina said there was "no reason" (2021) for a girl to be walking alone and putting herself at risk.
Some girls across the global cohort – particularly those in Benin and the Philippines – also appeared to believe that access to societal protections was conditional on their adherence to gender and social norms.

These girls expressed that if a girl violated traditional gender roles or displayed 'risky' behaviour, their experiences of sexual violence would be justifiable, and they would no longer be entitled to help or support.

In the Philippines, Chesa argued that when girls transgress from the 'good girl' ideal, they lose the right to the protection of their parents, saying that girls are not protected when they "don't obey their parents" (2019). In Benin, Thea explained that if a girl defied her parents by throwing a tantrum and storming out of the house late at night, she would not be entitled to protection from her community if she were to be harmed.

In other words, only if a girl is deemed to be a 'good girl' or an 'ideal victim' is she entitled to protection.[61,q] The internalisation of victim-blaming norms has significant implications for girls, creating a cycle of abuse and further harm. Not only does it make them more likely to self-restrict and police their movements and behaviour to prevent harm, but it also makes girls more likely to believe that they are the cause of the violence that they experience.[62]

When girls and women believe they are responsible for their abuse, they are less likely to report it,[63] more likely to experience repeated violence and secondary victimisation,[64,65,r] and the time needed for psychological recovery is likely to be much greater.[66] Critically, victim-blaming reinforces male sexual entitlement and right to control women's bodies, thus perpetuating a cycle of violence.[67]

✦ FIGURE 6 Cycle of abuse and harm caused by victim-blaming norms

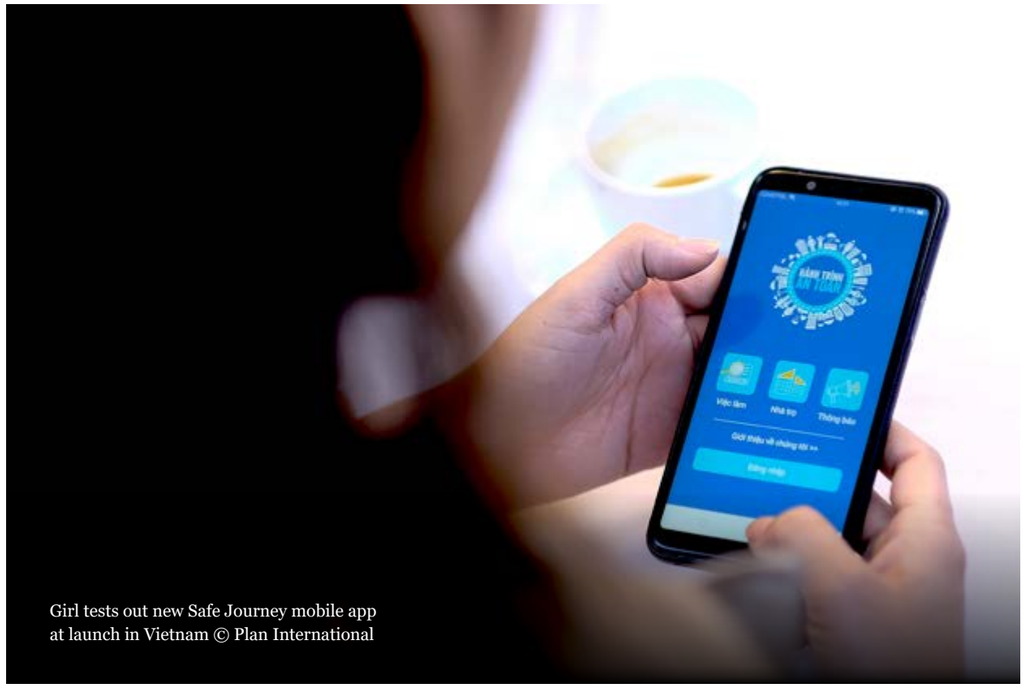
Girls' digital protection responsibility

Unfortunately, online safety does not appear to be a topic that has been much discussed in the girls' schools, communities or by their caregivers. Because of this, **many girls have relied instead on intuition and informal peer support to navigate TFGBV.**

They also appear to have internalised shame and victim-blaming rhetoric relating to online harassment that they have experienced, which has made them less likely to report incidents. When she was 15, Darna (Philippines) "felt ashamed" (2021) when she received sexually suggestive messages and explicit images from a stranger online. She did not report these incidents to her parents or teachers because she feared being scolded and lectured — suggesting an expectation that she would be blamed for the harassment she experienced.

Like Darna, Fernanda (Brazil) had also evidently internalised harmful attitudes about girls' protection responsibility online. At 18, she shared a story of a classmate who had sent a nude photo of herself to a boy who had then shared the photo widely without her consent. There was no punishment for the boy, while the girl "spent a long time without going to school" because she was so ashamed. Fernanda had little sympathy for the girl, believing her responsible for the situation because "[she should] have avoided sending the photo to him" (2024).

Because of the harmful protection norms they have internalised, the cohort girls focused on how girls can change their online behaviour to avoid harassment. When asked what girls could do if they experienced digital harassment, the girls provided comprehensive recommendations – ranging from making social media accounts private, to being more "disciplined" in their internet use (Michelle, 2024, Philippines), to the suggestion that girls should "stop using the internet" altogether (Chantal, 2021, Dominican Republic). Notably, the majority of girls' recommendations did not include accountability for online abusers.



Girl tests out new Safe Journey mobile app at launch in Vietnam © Plan International

The cost of protection norms

Direct impacts on girls' mobility and behaviour

The consequences of girls internalising this protection responsibility are multifaceted. We can observe that this belief has led many cohort girls not only to comment on what other girls should and shouldn't do but has also caused them to limit and police their own movements and behaviour. In 2021, 16 per cent of the cohort girls (mainly from Uganda) gave unprompted examples of how they were modifying their behaviour or restricting their movements to avoid harm or violence. By 2024, this had increased to 41 per cent of girls – including most girls in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines and Uganda. Common examples given by the girls about behaviour change were that they were choosing not to go outside the home after dark, avoiding specific places in their communities, or making sure they were accompanied when travelling to school or collecting water.

> **"When I was little, in grade 3 or 4, I went to a private class, and I came home alone […] It was in the daytime. I went to a bridge and a man came. He got off his motorbike and talked to me in a caddish voice, «Get on my motorbike and I will take you home.» When he got off his motorbike, I ran quickly to home… So, [now] I rarely walk alone."** – Sen, age 15 (2021), Vietnam

> **"I'm afraid to walk alone in the street. […] A man could come along and mug [me], or [I] could… could be, how do you say it… kidnapped, and all these things."** – Natalia, age 17 (2024), Brazil

Taken together, we can see the ways that girls' fears of violence and abuse, and their sense of responsibility for keeping themselves safe, were restricting their ability to freely access public spaces.

Across the cohort, we have seen examples of how this protection responsibility norm has eroded girls' opportunities. In just one example, Sen (Vietnam) shared in 2021 that she no longer attended her private tutoring classes because there was no one to accompany her, and she felt unsafe walking alone following a frightening incident.

Another way that girls were attempting to keep themselves safe was by conforming to the 'good girl' ideals described above.

A specific measure that they were adopting was obedience to their elders, with many emphasising that they took instruction from their caregivers to protect themselves from harm. Thom (Vietnam) bluntly explained the risks of not being obedient:

> **"If I don't listen to my parents' advice, I will get a lot of risks such as being kidnapped, sexually abused, or killed."** – Thom, age 12 (2019), Vietnam

For Ayomide (Togo), this gendered norm of obedience went further, explaining that girls have been taught to expect violence if they do not submit to and obey all boys and men – not just her father. Ayomide explained that if a girl refuses to do as she is told by a boy, "they call you, insult you or beat you" (2024). Similarly, Juliana (Brazil) was critical of women – including her mother – who she thought did not submit to men enough. Juliana used this as an excuse to justify male violence towards 'difficult' women.

> **"There are women who... I'm sorry to say, they're a bit too hard on men and... it doesn't work. [...] There are women who don't... like my mother, she doesn't defer to men, no. She always retaliates in kind."** — Juliana, age 17 (2024), Brazil

In this way, it can be seen that the threat of violence enforces strict gender and social norms on girls, conditioning their behaviour to ensure their safety.

Girls across the cohort, particularly those in Brazil and Uganda, also commented on the importance of chastity and modesty in protecting themselves from violence.

Fernanda (Brazil) explained the risk of 'encouraging' or 'teasing' boys, which she said could lead to sexual assault if boys feel they are entitled to sex.

> **"There are many girls who encourage boys, right? And because of that [...] I don't know why, but they... feel they have the right to [rape them]."** – Fernanda, age 18 (2024), Brazil

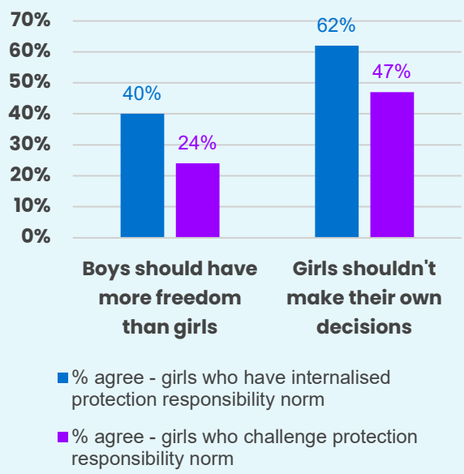
Similarly, Justine (Uganda) was critical of girls who do not say 'no' to sexual activity, stating that if a girl accepts some level of sexual contact with boys, then she should accept the risk that this will lead to sexual violence.

Children take part in event calling for an end to violence against girls in Benin © Plan International

Erosion of agency and self-belief

The power of injunctive norms (what girls think they and others are expected by society to do) about violence and protection is evident in the way they solidify and entrench over time, and in the influence that they have over girls' attitudes and behaviours. A critical finding from our research with the cohort girls is that these deeply-held convictions also make girls more likely to believe that boys should have more freedom than them and think that girls shouldn't be trusted to make their own decisions. When they were 14 and 15 years old, a sizable minority of the girls (40 per cent) who had internalised norms about girls' protection responsibility[6] also felt that boys deserved to have more freedom than girls. This suggests a belief that their protection responsibility is a burden incompatible with the freedoms boys enjoy. The girls provided several justifications for this belief. In Benin, Barbara felt that girls' freedom should be restricted due to the greater dangers they face in their communities compared to boys, while Rosamie (the Philippines) felt that girls had more to lose than boys – saying "a man can do just about anything" but girls should have fewer liberties because they need to "take care of themselves" (2021).

✦ **FIGURE 7** Beliefs held among girls who have internalised protection responsibility norms versus those who challenge protection responsibility norms (2021)



Additionally, many girls in Benin and Togo made links between girls' protection, restricted freedom, and unpaid care work. In 2021, Margaret (Benin) felt that girls should stay at home doing chores "so they don't prostitute themselves in the town," but boys should be able to "go out and about."

Djoumai, in Togo, also thought that girls should be kept occupied at home with chores, asking: "what if we gave the girls more time and something happened to them?" (2024).

This highlights how the 'good girl' myth, the idea of protection, and restrictions on girls' freedom of movement are connected: girls' unpaid care responsibilities are not only a pervasive gender norm,[68] but are also often seen as a way to keep girls out of harms' way by occupying them with 'virtuous' endeavours.

Concerningly, we can also observe a trend where girls who accept that their protection is their own responsibility have also expressed a belief that girls' agency should be curtailed – stating that they should not make their own decisions because of the risk that "the things they choose are bad" (Karen, 2021, El Salvador) which could lead to violence and assault.

In 2021, 62% of the cohort girls who adhered to girls' protection responsibility norms also thought girls should not be allowed to make their own decisions.

We may conclude that the weight of the responsibility to keep themselves safe, or be blamed for the harm they experience, leads girls to doubt their own decision-making capacities. ✦ **FIGURE 7** (next page) illustrates that girls who have internalised norms about girls' protection responsibilities are more likely to believe that boys should have more freedom than them and that girls shouldn't make their own decisions.

Many girls across the global cohort felt that if girls made their own decisions, they were likely to 'make mistakes' or make the 'wrong' decision, which could put them in dangerous situations.

The girls in Benin and Togo felt this most strongly – in both cohorts, the girls unanimously reported in 2021 that girls should not be permitted to make their own decisions. Alice and Eleanor (Benin) both stated that if girls were allowed to make their own decisions, "it would end in chaos" (2021), while Essohana (Togo) thought that if girls were to make their own decisions about their safety and protection they would "ruin their lives" (2021). Notably, Barbara (Benin) echoed notions of the 'ideal victim' in her explanation of why girls shouldn't be permitted to make decisions, explaining that girls who do so without consulting their fathers would forfeit the right to his protection and support if they encountered harm:

> **"If a girl takes a decision but it goes wrong and she has to go and talk to her father, he could say that he is not responsible for the situation as she took the decision alone."** – Barbara, age 14 (2021), Benin

Barbara's words are powerful, showing a clear link between the norm of girls' protection responsibility and girls' decision-making autonomy.

With the threat of victim-blaming and a lack of protection looming, Barbara felt that making her own decisions would be too great a risk.

Worryingly, girls' belief in deferring to others to make decisions for them seems to transfer from their caregivers to their husbands and partners – which has serious implications for their future independence.

In just one example, Valerie's husband (Dominican Republic) said that he monitored her social media use so that "something ugly" (2024) didn't happen – like online harassment.[t] Valerie appeared not to have an issue with this paternalistic arrangement.

This demonstrates that rather than being age-related, these beliefs are deeply rooted in patriarchal social norms that control women's mobility, agency and autonomy.

t The ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** methodology includes an annual interview with each cohort girl and a separate interview with a caregiver. In the cases where the girls had married or entered informal unions, we continued to interview family members or caregivers (even if they did not live with the girl) rather than husbands or partners, so as not to reinforce harmful and paternalising norms that reproduce gender inequality in relationships. In 2024, ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** interviewers reported that it was not possible to conduct the caregiver interview with Valerie's family members privately, as her husband repeatedly intruded and spoke over Valerie's mother and sister.

Campaigners hand out leaflets reading 'How much does sexual violence against girls cost?' in Brazil © Plan International / Thiago Duarte

Girls pushing back against harmful social norms

Girls think violence is socialised – and can be unlearned

As the cohort girls reached later adolescence, positive indicators suggest they had begun to push back against some of the harmful social norms that dictated their views about violence, protection, and their agency.

In 2024, 89 per cent of the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort girls firmly believed that parents could teach boys not to be violent and aggressive.

This indicates that, by age 17 and 18, girls were challenging the notion that violence is innate and gendered — and instead, expressing an understanding that these behaviours are socialised and taught.

Studies have found that as girls are supported to reject rigid gender roles, such as the norm of girls and women performing the majority of unpaid care work, they start to reflect on other topics related to power and gender – including violence.[69]

As we observed in the 2024 report, Out of Time, many of the ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** participants were challenging gender norms relating to care work and their time use.

Please see the Real Choices, Real Lives report Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls (2024): **plan-international.org/publications/out-of-time/**

This broader questioning of harmful norms may have contributed to the girls pushing back against the acceptance of violence as 'inevitable.' The perception that social norms influence boys' behaviour was particularly evident among the girls in LAC (97 per cent in 2024) and was articulated clearly by Gabriela in Brazil:

> **"It depends on their upbringing. [Boys] can be aggressive. If they are taught to be that way, then they will be. But not all boys are like that, even girls can be aggressive too."** – Gabriela, age 18 (2024), Brazil

Many girls referenced boys' upbringing in socialising them into believing that violence and aggression are acceptable.

This includes Rebeca in the Dominican Republic, who said that children "develop their aggressive behaviour based on what they learn at home" (2024). Significantly, some girls also highlighted the power of socialising nonviolence through positive examples.

Gabriela, in El Salvador, explained that "the way parents treat their children influences their thinking," which impacts "how they can develop during their childhood and throughout their lives" (2024).

The belief that positive role models can support boys to embrace nonviolence was strongly held among the African cohort, and particularly in Benin and Uganda. Many of these girls cited the norm of children's obedience to their parents, and remarked that the responsibility therefore lay with parents to take the duty to promote nonviolence seriously.

> **"[Boys] can be taught to stop being aggressive; it's the duty of parents to educate their boys and put them on the right track."** — Catherine, age 17 (2024), Benin

Across all focal countries, girls also highlighted the role of fathers in promoting healthy conflict resolution and emotional regulation. In El Salvador, Gladys said that fathers' behaviour can provide a positive example for boys to copy because boys *"want to follow in their footsteps"* – so if a father uses nonviolent methods to resolve conflicts, then so too will his sons (2024). Dariana (Dominican Republic) also cited the central role of fathers in modelling violent and aggressive behaviours that boys internalise and copy, explaining that boys "*learn from their fathers"* and therefore *"if the father is aggressive, he can't teach his son not to be aggressive"* (2024). Echoing Dariana, Sen (Vietnam) thought that the role of a father was essential in "*regulating their boy's emotions"* (2024). This demonstrates the vital importance of strengths-based interventions that build the skills of parents and caregivers in positive parenting approaches, programmes that engage men in early childhood development, and initiatives that work with boys and men to champion gender equality and non-violent behaviour.

Notably, across the entire global cohort, only Yen in Vietnam spoke about the role of other adults in boys' lives who could help to teach boys not to be aggressive and violent.[u] This suggests an absence of discussions about emotional regulation or respectful relationships education in schools, a lack of public figures or community leaders discussing GBV and its causes, and limited awareness-raising campaigns or media coverage about the issue. In fact, in the discussions about violence over the years, only Fezire in Togo (2024) referenced an awareness-raising campaign about GBV that she had seen run by the Red Cross at her local market.

This is concerning, as we know from the socio-ecological framework that individuals' attitudes and beliefs are shaped not just by their families, but by their communities and the wider society.

Challenging and dismantling complex social norms that are reinforced by a multiplicity of influences in children's lives requires efforts at all levels of the socio-ecology, and cannot be rested solely within the family.

Challenging Norms: Champions of Change

Champions of Change (CoC) is Plan International's strategy for promoting gender equality and social norm change at the community level through youth engagement and peer-to-peer mobilisation. Operating in 43 countries (including the nine ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** focal countries), CoC provides opportunities for group dialogue and safe spaces that allow adolescent girls and boys to critically reflect on gender issues, helping them transform deeply held beliefs and challenge existing power structures.[70]

u While the girls were asked to respond to the statement "Parents can teach boys not to be aggressive and violent" using a Likert scale, Real Choices, Real Lives interviews employ a semi-structured, discursive format – with interviewers prompting and asking follow-up questions following each response. Aside from Yen, in none of the follow up conversations about this topic did any of the girls highlight the role of other actors in socialising nonviolence.

Girls want equal freedoms

Despite restricting their movements and policing their behaviour to protect themselves from violence, over time, the cohort girls came to vehemently reject the notion that boys deserve more freedom than them. While 33 per cent of the girls believed that boys should have more freedom than them in 2021, this proportion had reduced to just 18 per cent in 2024. The belief that boys and girls should have equal freedoms was most ardently held by the girls in Uganda, Brazil and Vietnam. In all three countries, all girls rejected the suggestion that boys should have more freedom than them and framed their arguments in terms of equal rights. In Vietnam, Ly eloquently argued the case for equality:

> **"I see that [freedom] is for both girls and boys. Everyone has that right. Everyone's life is determined by them, which is freedom."** – Ly, age 18 (2024), Vietnam

Natalia (Brazil) expressed similar thoughts, stating that "girls should have the same rights boys have" (2024), while Yen (Vietnam) argued "boys and girls are human beings, and we have the same [rights]" (2024). Several girls also argued that girls deserve the same freedoms as boys because they have the same abilities, with Mariel in El Salvador asserting that girls deserve equal freedom because "a girl can do the same thing a boy can do, there is no difference in terms of ability" (2024). Several girls highlighted the potential harms of inequality in movement and opportunities for girls. Some girls, particularly those in El Salvador and Uganda, highlighted that giving boys more freedoms than girls would only reinforce male dominance and gender equality – which are key drivers of GBV. Susana (El Salvador) expressed concerns that if boys were given more freedom and rights than girls, this would reinforce "sexist" attitudes, leading to boys and men to "think they have to right to tell women what to do" (2021). In Togo, Anti-Yara highlighted the link between freedom for girls and their development opportunities and said that girls' ability to "evolve" was being impeded by inequality and a lack of freedom.

However, many girls acknowledged that, despite their dreams of a fairer world, things are currently not equal. A great number of the cohort girls were adamant that this needed to change. In Brazil, Juliana said:

> **"I think rights have to be equal. But things are not quite like that nowadays. I mean, things have never changed. […] I strongly disagree [with this]."** — Juliana, age 17 (2024), Brazil

Specifically, several girls demanded the right to mobility and access to public space on the same terms as boys. In El Salvador, Karen said that girls should also have "the right to go out" (2024), while Rebeca in the Dominican Republic neatly summarised:

> **"Since they say we're all equal, we all have the same rights, and so we can feel safer when we go outside."** – Rebeca, age 18 (2024), Dominican Republic

Girls play football in Brazil
© Plan International / Bill Tanaka

Girls are demanding to have their voices heard

It is evident that, over the years, the ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** cohort girls have developed clear and strong views about their rights and are demanding to be heard. However, they expressed that a clear barrier was that they felt adults in their lives did not listen to them or consider their opinions. In 2024, only 59 per cent of girls felt that adults in their community listened to girls' opinions. In Togo, Ayomide expressed frustration with this:

> **"The grown-ups in [my community] here, hmmm, when you're a girl and you talk, you're not accepted. They say girls know nothing."** – Ayomide, age 18 (2024), Togo

Among the cohort girls, those in the SEA cohort were the least likely to feel that adults listened to them. In Cambodia, Mony suggested that adults only listen to girls in certain circumstances, depending on whether they agreed with the girl's viewpoint.

> **"Sometimes they listen, sometimes not. It depends on girls' opinions."** — Mony, age 17 (2024), Cambodia

Some girls highlighted the negative implications of not being listened to by adults, especially about matters relating to violence and protection. Tan (Vietnam) commented that she found it "very stressful" (2024) that she was not listened to, because it meant that adults did not know what she thought about these issues. Yen (also in Vietnam) spoke about the importance of a collective response to common problems, noting that girls will never be able to overcome challenges of GBV if there is "isolation of the problem" (2024).

Positively, around a third of the cohort girls made it clear that they are speaking out and are refusing to be overlooked. In Brazil, Natalia shared that she feels encouraged to speak up about safety in her community because "girls' opinions are as important as the boys" (2024), with Davy in Cambodia similarly stating:

> **"We have right to speak out and we have reason enough to speak."** — Davy, age 17 (2024), Cambodia

As well as wanting adults to listen to them, the girls also wished to be able to make their own decisions free of pressure from their caregivers. According to them, girls are experts in their own lives and want to be independent in their decision-making, including about their safety and protection.

> **"[Girls are] the ones who know what they want to do with their lives and how they're going to do it."** – Rebeca, age 18 (2024), Dominican Republic

Across the global cohort, the girls remained optimistic that their voices will be heard and that adults will begin to listen to them. Some of them also highlighted that change was possible. In Uganda, Beti celebrated changes she had seen in her community – including that girls are now being listened to more often.

> **"In olden times, boys were listened to much more than girls, with the notion that boys had the power to build families but right now, even girls have proven to be that strong. So, they are listened to."** – Beti, age 17 (2024), Uganda

Conclusion

Throughout their adolescence, the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort girls have internalised a strong belief that it is their own responsibility to protect themselves from violence and abuse.

Informed by deeply-embedded gender and social norms, the girls' internalisation of this protection norm is an example of how injunctive social norms operate by attaching social rewards or sanctions to normative behaviours or transgressions, and why they are difficult to shift. Their stories demonstrate that the girls believe that if they do not adhere to prescribed rules about their movements and behaviour, they will inevitably experience violence or abuse and only have themselves to blame for the harms they experience.

Consequently, the girls are restricting their movements and modifying their behaviour, which has concerning implications for their ability to pursue educational and development opportunities and to participate fully in community life as equals with boys. There are also wider implications for girls' freedom and decision-making. When girls continually receive a message that they should not make their own decisions about their movements because the result could be catastrophic, this has the potential to erode girls' confidence in themselves to make any decisions about their lives – including their aspirations and career pathways; their sexual, reproductive and relationship choices; and their civic participation.

However, despite strong adherence to gender and social norms about their protection responsibility, there is evidence that girls are pushing back against other harmful social norms about violence.

As they have grown up, most of the cohort have started to demonstrate an understanding that violence and aggression are socialised behaviours that can be unlearned – perhaps influenced by their greater exposure to messages about gender equality and their rights as girls.

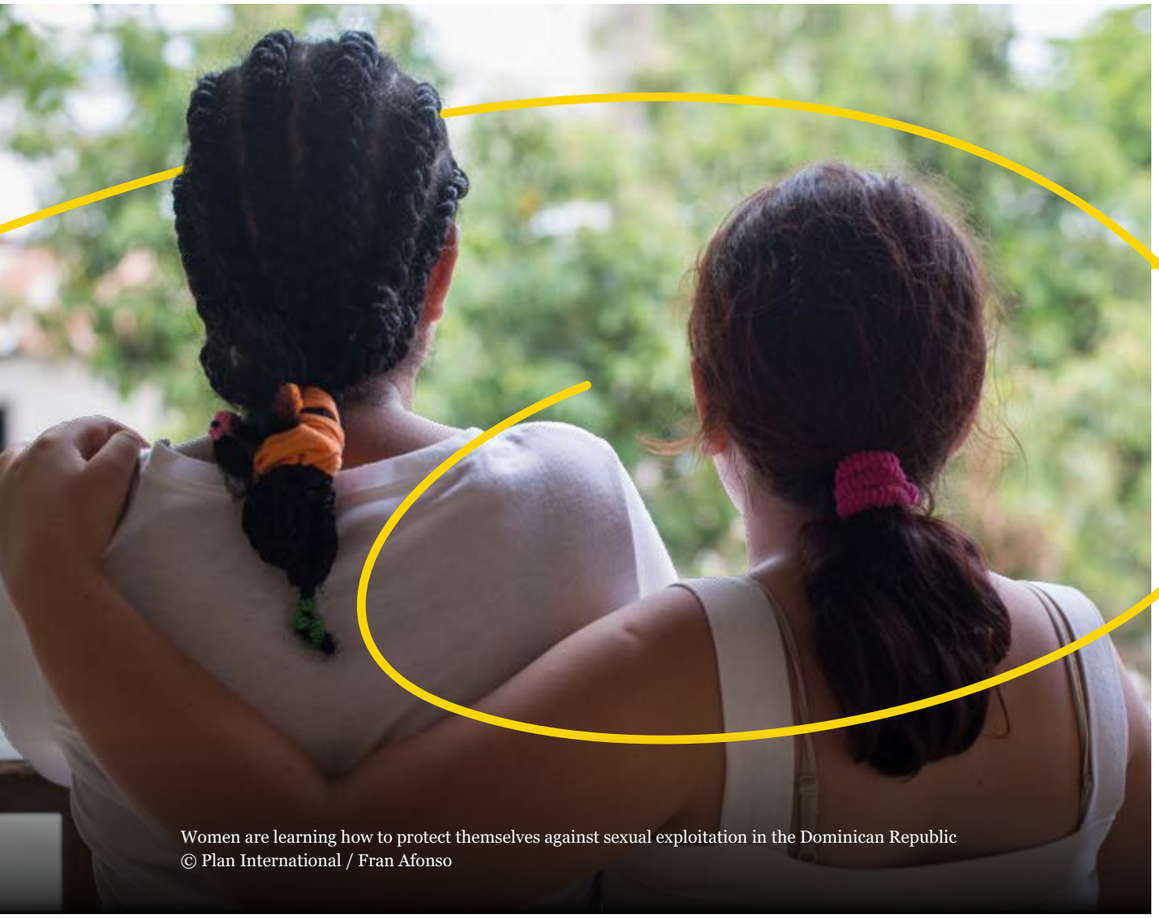
By the age of 18, most girls were vocal in their assertion that they deserve the same freedoms as boys and are calling out for adults to listen to their voices and include them in decisions that affect their safety and protection.

This provides a significant opportunity for engagement and intervention: through challenging harmful gender and social norms, girls can be protected from GBV, supported to claim their rights and ensure their voices are heard.

Recommendations

The critical need to create a world free from gender-based violence is clear: GBV is a global crisis and a profound violation of girls' human rights, and evidence from the ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** cohort girls clearly demonstrates that the burden of keeping themselves safe continues to fall to girls; a norm that they have deeply internalised.

To effectively dismantle these entrenched beliefs and prevent future violence, we must urgently invest in long-term, multi-layered strategies that challenge the social norms legitimising male dominance and violence. Building on contributions from the cohort girls themselves, the recommendations below outline Plan International's roadmap for change towards a world free from GBV.



Women are learning how to protect themselves against sexual exploitation in the Dominican Republic
© Plan International / Fran Afonso

> **"[Girls] can't do it on their own but need support from the parents, local leaders, police and non-government organisations to protect the girls from the perpetrators of violence."** – Sheila, age 15 (2021), Uganda

> **"We shouldn't have to walk with fear, be careful when we walk; but [instead], others have to respect us."** – Gladys, age 17 (2024), El Salvador

Governments

- Governments must **ratify and uphold all relevant human rights conventions and agreements** guaranteeing girls' and children's civil and political rights, and relating to GBV, VAC and Violence against women and girls (VAWG). Governments must budget for, implement and monitor gender-responsive legislation, strategies and policies to ensure all girls, children, adolescents and young people live free from violence, abuse and exploitation.
- Governments must act urgently to **counter the rollback of rights** by enshrining gender equality and human rights in legislative and executive policy, ensuring legislation is fully aligned with global and regional human rights frameworks. States must accelerate efforts to meet all SDGs.
- Donor governments must **uphold ODA commitments** and allocate 0.7% of GNI, prioritising initiatives to end violence and promote gender equality. In addition, the proportion of development funding spent on gender equality, and earmarked for feminist movements, girl- and women-led organisations, and LGBTQIA+ rights groups must be significantly increased.
- Governments must urgently **bridge funding gaps** to address GBV against girls and women, allocating sufficient and sustained funding for primary prevention, essential protection services and data collection initiatives. Governments must recognise the critical value of social services addressing intersecting drivers of violence, including poverty, poor health and the impacts of conflict and climate change. Governments must cease cuts to these budgets and reinvest in social services as a matter of urgent priority.
- Governments, in particular through education departments, **must invest in quality and inclusive gender-transformative education** that drives social norms change. Gender transformative education must be integrated into national curricula from the early years and include respectful relationships education that promotes gender equality and respect.
- Governments at all levels must **implement and scale up gender transformative programmes** that promote positive parenting and gender equity messaging, and that engage adolescent boys and male caregivers to critically reflect on masculinities, build emotional literacy and promote respectful, non-violent relationships with girls and women.
- Governments must **support and strengthen protection systems and reporting mechanisms** for GBV, including providing adequate budget and resourcing to ensure services are age- and gender-appropriate. This must include investment in services for survivors of violence, including psychosocial and legal support for girls and other survivors, as well as investment in mandatory training for law enforcement, social workers and teachers on GBV and combatting gender stereotypes and victim-blaming.

Governments (continuation)

- Governments must **improve disaggregated data collection,** analysis and reporting (by age, sex, ethnicity and other intersectional categorisations) on experiences of GBV as well as perceptions of GBV and gender stereotypes to offer a better understanding of where violence is perpetrated, against whom, and how we can prevent it.
- Governments must **ensure girls, adolescent girls and women are central to all emergency preparedness and response plans,** with child protection and GBV prevention recognised as life-saving interventions across all phases of crises.
- Governments must **partner with and provide sustained funding to Women-Led Organizations,** including those working with girls, to establish survivor- and child-centred coordination mechanisms addressing GBV and child protection in all humanitarian settings.
- Governments must **support the integration of protection with other sectors,** including police, education and health, ensuring all sectors have the necessary resourcing, competencies, and ongoing professional development to prevent and respond to cases of GBV.
- Governments must **consult and include girls** in the design of and monitoring of prevention and protection systems to ensure their voices and needs are centred in efforts to end GBV.
- Governments must **establish and strengthen legal and policy frameworks guaranteeing girls' right to be heard** and included in decision-making, ensuring that these mechanisms are equitable and child-friendly. Governments must girls' and children's capacity, confidence and knowledge to participate in decision-making and ensure that they have access to information about their rights.

> **"It is very good to listen to a girl child. A girl child should be given platform to speak what she is going through and also get solutions for how other girls can be supported especially those who cannot speak for themselves."** – Amelia, age 15 (2021), Uganda

INGOs, CSOs and multilaterals

- INGOs and CSOs should **work with local, traditional and religious leaders** to raise awareness of legal protections for girls, engage grassroots actors to promote the application of national and international legal frameworks, and monitor and influence GBV-related laws and strategies to uphold equality, combat stereotypes and advance gender equality.
- Significant investment is required to end GBV and VAC. Donor organisations, philanthropy and multilateral development banks **must increase their investment in violence prevention, social norms change, and gender transformative programming,** providing multi-year flexible funding to civil society organisations.
- INGOs and CSOs should focus **on social norms change and intergenerational programming,** including addressing the internalisation of harmful social norms with girls through unpacking gender and social norms, shifting the blame/burden of protection and the promotion of greater awareness of GBV. Recognising the role of boys and men in violence prevention, INGOs and CSOs should design and deliver programmes and initiatives that target male involvement in caregiving and engage boys and men in prevention initiatives.
- INGOs and CSOs should **support governments and local authorities to improve protection services delivered and analyse the needs for expansion and scale-up** of services according to local needs.
- INGOs and CSOs should **support governments in defining inclusive and comprehensive guidelines for data collection and evaluation,** and support with the standardisation of mechanisms for collecting and reporting data to support consistency for trend analysis.
- INGOs and CSOs must **meaningfully involve girls in needs assessments** and work with service providers to ensure protection services are age- and gender-appropriate, safe, accessible, and include confidential reporting and referral pathways, with strict safeguarding policies to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.
- UN agencies and committees (such as UN Women, UNICEF and CEDEW Committees) should continue their work with and strengthen partnerships with national governments, INGOs and CSOs to **provide advice and guidance on how to strengthen and coordinate efforts** to end GBV, including sharing data, learning and tools, and best practices.
- INGOs must **work across sectors in partnerships** to share learning and experience, build evidence-based approaches, and ensure GBV prevention, gender transformative approaches and protection are integrated into health and nutrition, education, economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights and other programming.

> **"[Girls] shouldn't be alone in this, the community must help as well."**
> – Bianca, age 15 (2021), Brazil

Local authorities and community leaders

- Local authorities should **ensure that community-based protection programmes are in place,** are linked to the protection system and services, include girl-friendly reporting mechanisms and referral services, and are survivor-centred and informed by lived experience and the voices of young people. Local authorities should create or strengthen community-friendly feedback mechanisms to promote accountability of protection services.
- Local authorities should **strengthen local capacities to collect data on GBV,** ensuring data privacy is upheld, and making use of community-developed tools and procedures for data collection.
- Community leaders should **empower young girls and boys to be active voices and agents of change** by providing safe spaces for children and youth to discuss issues of violence, protection, safety and gender equality.

Technology sector & regulators

- Social media outlets must **implement and enforce clear regulations and guidelines** restricting sexist and misogynistic content, gender stereotyping and hate speech, and actively monitor and remove content that promotes GBV or harmful gender norms to ensure online and digital safety for girls, children and young people.
- Technology companies and regulators should **critically examine whose voices and inputs AI tools are learning from** and establish guardrails to ensure that these models do not reproduce harmful gender stereotypes.

> **"Girls can make decisions on their own, have rights to life, to development and to freedom."** – Nakry, age 14 (2021), Cambodia

Glossary

Adolescence	The phase of life between childhood and adulthood, defined by the World Health Organisation as the age range 10-19 years.
Child, early and forced marriage and unions	CEFMU encompasses any marriage or informal union, whether under civil, religious or customary law, with or without formal registration, where either one or both spouses are under the age of 18 and/or where the full and free informed consent of one or both of the parties has not been obtained.[71]
Domestic violence	Acts of violence that occur in domestic settings between two people who are, or were, in an intimate relationship. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and financial abuse.[72]
Female genital mutilation/cutting	FGM/C comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.[73]
Gender-based violence	GBV is an umbrella term for any act perpetrated against a person's will and is based on socially ascribed differences in gender. It includes acts that cause physical, mental and/or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. Examples include IPV, sexual exploitation and abuse, CEFMU, FGM/C, forced pregnancy, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and sexual violence.[74]
Gender norms	Gender norms are a subset of social norms. They describe how we are expected to behave as a result of the way we or others identify our gender.
Intimate partner violence	IPV is a behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship.[75] It includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (such as coercive control). It may be perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner.[76]
Online violence	Online violence includes acts of abuse that are committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of information communication technologies (ICT). It includes online harassment, cyberbullying and TFGBV.[77]
Physical violence	Physical violence consists of acts aimed at physically hurting or harming someone, and includes acts such as pushing, grabbing, slapping, kicking, biting, hitting, burning or threatening or attacking with a weapon.[78]
Psychological and emotional violence	Psychological and emotional violence includes acts such as the restriction of movement; patterns of belittling, blaming threatening, frightening, discriminating against or ridiculing; and other nonphysical forms of rejection or hostile treatment. It involves both isolated incidents and patterns of abuse over time.[79]
Sexual violence	Sexual violence is defined as any sort of harmful or unwanted sexual behaviour that is imposed on someone, whether by force, intimidation or coercion.[80]
Social norms	Social norms are perceptions about which behaviours are appropriate and typical within a given group of people. They are mainly informal rules, often unspoken or unwritten, that most people absorb, accept, and follow. They carry social implications – i.e. rewards when followed and sanctions when not followed.
Victim-blaming	Victim-blaming occurs when the responsibility for violence or harm is shifted from the perpetrator of the offence to the victim. That is, the victim is held accountable for the maltreatment that they are subjected to.
Violence against children	VAC includes all forms of physical, sexual and emotional violence, neglect, negligent treatment and exploitation.[81]
Violence against women (and girls)	Any act of GBV that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.[82]

Girl paints her street artwork on wall in the Philippines © Plan International

Acknowledgements

We offer our most sincere thanks to:
Each and every girl, family member and community member who has contributed to the ***Real Choices, Real Lives*** research project over its history. Without their insights and time over the years, this research would not be possible. The Plan International Country Offices in Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam have provided oversight of all data collection.

Special thanks to our focal points:
Over the years, many people have been involved in the data collection, most recently special thanks to our focal points on the study: Roland Djagaly in Benin; Ana Lima in Brazil; Vannara Ouk in Cambodia; Olga Figuereo in the Dominican Republic; Julia Brenda Lopez and Celina Rosales in El Salvador; Romualdo Codera Jr. and Manny Madamba in the Philippines; Joseph Badabadi in Togo; David Aziku in Uganda; and Trung Truong Vu in Vietnam.

This research brief was written by:
Dr Kit Catterson and Adèle Pavé.

Special thanks go to:
Debora Cobar, Mélina Froidure, Jacqueline Gallinetti, Consuelo Laso, Claire Mathellie-Marcano, Maria Paula Suarez for their partnership on the development of this research brief. Additional thanks go to Adamu Abubakari, Carin Atterby, Mercedes Barrios, Phanna Chhim, Milena D'Atri, Daniel Molina, Getrude Ndlovu, Kathleen Sherwin and Sarah Vandendooren for their feedback and input on the brief and recommendations.

Funded and managed by:
Since 2021, the study has been generously funded by Plan National Organisations in Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK, and managed by Plan International Global Hub. Prior to 2021, the study was managed and funded by Plan International UK.

Design and Layout:
Sara Mena at Doodlio Studio

Endnotes

1 UN Women (2024a) One woman or girl is killed every 10 minutes by their intimate partner or family member. Available at: www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/11/one-woman-or-girl-is-killed-every-10-minutes-by-their-intimate-partner-or-family-member

2 World Health Organization (2024) Violence against women. Available at: www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women

3 SRSG on Violence Against Children (2025) Building the Investment Case for Ending Violence Against Children. Available at: violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/building-investment-case-ending-violence-against-children

4 Pereznieto, P. et al. (2014) The costs and economic impact of violence against children, ODI Global. Available at: media.odi.org/documents/9177.pdf

5 World Vision International et al (2021) Counting Pennies 3. Available at: resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Counting-Pennies-3-official-development-assistance-end-violence-against-children.pdf

6 OECD (2025) Preliminary Official Development Assistance Levels in 2024. Available at: https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2025)6/en/pdf

7 OECD (2025) Preliminary Official Development Assistance Levels in 2024. Available at: one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2025)6/en/pdf

8 Joining Forces (forthcoming — 2025) Close the Gap: Invest in Ending Violence Against Children.

9 UN Women (2025) At breaking point: The impact of foreign aid cuts on women's organisations in humanitarian crises worldwide. New York: UN Women. Available at: www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/at-a-breaking-point-the-impact-of-foreign-aid-cuts-on-womens-organizations-in-humanitarian-crises-worldwide-en.pdf

10 Plan International (2018) The Rights of Children and Young People to Live Free from Violence. Available at: plan-international.org/publications/the-rights-of-children-to-live-free-from-violence/ p.3-5

11 Ibid, p.5

12 Proteknôn (2024a) Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Children, Adolescents, and Youth (CAY), Especially Young Women and Girls: A Road Map for Plan International, Proteknôn, p. 2-3

13 OHCHR (2025) Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for leaving no one behind. Available at: www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/crc/crc-input-hlpf-2025-logo.pdf

14 CEDAW Committee (2025) Advancing Gender Equality in the SDGs: A CEDAW-Based Framework for Crisis Response and Recovery. Available at: www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/cedaw/cedaw-hlpf-2025-adopted.docx

15 Plan International Canada (n.d.) Child Marriage. Available at: plancanada.ca/en-ca/our-work/why-we-focus-on-girls/child-marriage

16 Heise, L. (2011) What works to prevent partner violence: An evidence-based review, ResearchGate, Available at: www.researchgate.net/profile/Lori-Heise/publication/292047239_What_Works_to_Prevent_Partner_Violence_An_Evidence_Overview/links/5adf81050f7e9b285945d903/What-Works-to-Prevent-Partner-Violence-An-Evidence-Overview.pdf p.13

17 Caribbean Development Bank and UN Women (2020) Intimate Partner Violence in Five CARICOM Countries: Findings from National Prevalence Surveys on Violence Against Women. Available at: caribbean.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/20201009%20CARICOM%20Research%20Brief%205.pdf p.20-21, p.31

18 Pan American Health Organization (2024) Violence against children. Available at: www.paho.org/en/topics/violence-against-children

19 UN Women (2024b) Facts and figures: Ending violence against women. Available at: www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women

20 UNICEF (2024a) Child marriage. Available at: data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage

21 UN Women Europe and Central Asia (2023) Facts and figures: Ending violence against women. Available at: eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/explainer/2023/12/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women

22 Girls not Brides (n.d.) Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage. Available at: www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-health/adolescent-pregnancy-and-child-marriage
23 Plan International (2018), p.37
24 UNICEF (2024b) Female Genital Mutilation: A global concern. Available at: data.unicef.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-a-global-concern-2024
25 O'Brien, M. (2024) Online violence: real life impacts on women and girls in humanitarian settings, Humanitarian Law & Policy. Available at: blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2024/01/04/online-violence-real-life-impacts-women-girls-humanitarian-settings
26 Stark, L. et al. (2021) Gender-based violence against adolescent girls in humanitarian settings: a review of the evidence, The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 5:3. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352464220302455
27 UN Women Europe and Central Asia (2023)
28 Plan International (2018) p39; World Health Organization (2022) Violence against children. Available at: www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children
29 Zhu, J. et al (2023) Adverse childhood experiences and intimate partner violence: A meta-analysis, Dev Psychopathol, 36:2; Fulu, E. et al (2013) Why do some men use violence against women and how can we prevent it? Quantitative findings from the United Nations Multi-Country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok: UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UN Volunteers.
30 World Health Organization (2024)
31 Alheiwidi, S. et al (2022) Adolescent girls are falling through the cracks of violence prevention, UNICEF Innocenti. Available at: www.unicef.org/innocenti/stories/adolescent-girls-are-falling-through-cracks-violence-prevention
32 Plan International (2018) p. 32
33 Adapted from Our Watch (2021) Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (second edition). Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch. Available at: assets.ourwatch.org.au/assets/Key-frameworks/Change-the-story-summary-AA.pdf
34 Ibid, p.6
35 Fulu, E. et al. (2017) What Works Evidence Review: Intersections of violence against women and violence against children. What Works to Prevent Violence: A Global Programme to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls. Available at: www.whatworks.co.za/documents/publications/116-vac-vaw-evidence-brief-new-crop-1/file p. 2
36 Our Watch (2021) p.6
37 Sommer, M. et al. (2018) How gender norms are reinforced through violence against adolescent girls in two conflict-affected populations, Child Abuse & Neglect, 79. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213418300644
38 Fulu, E. et al. (2017), p.2
39 Our Watch (2021), p.7
40 Ibid, p. 8-9
41 Heise, L. (1998) Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework, Violence Against Women, 4:3.
42 Sommer, M. et al. (2018)
43 Fulu, E. et al (2013)
44 Fulu, E. et al (2013)
45 Sommer, M. et al. (2018)
46 Heise, L. (2011) p.14
47 Bicchieri, C. (2005) The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
48 Lillestone, P.S. et al. (2016) Understanding social norms and violence in childhood: theoretical underpinnings and strategies for intervention, Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22:1
49 Sommer, M., et al (2018)
50 McDonnell, K.A., et al (2011) Women's Perceptions of their Community's Social Norms Towards Assisting Women Who Have Experienced Intimate Partner Violence, Journal of Urban Health, 88:2
51 Heise, L. (2011), p.13
52 Ibid
53 Caribbean Development Bank and UN Women (2020), p.31
54 Ibid, p.20-21
55 Proteknôn (2024) p.6
56 Bacchus L.J. et al. (2017) Exploring opportunities for coordinated response to intimate partner violence and child maltreatment in low- and middle-income countries: a scoping review, Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22:S1
57 Fulu E, et al. (2017), p.4
58 Heise, L. (2011), p12
59 Fulu E, et al. (2017), p.4
60 Our Watch (2021), p.6
61 Christie, N. (1986) Ideal Victim, in Fattah, E. (ed) From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the Justice System, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Inunza, M. (2022) The significance of victim ideality in interactions between crime victims and police officers, International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice, 68
62 Sommer, M. et al (2018)
63 de la Torre Laso, J. et al. (2022) The relationship between attribution of blame and the perception of resistance in relation to victims of sexual violence, Frontiers in Psychology, 13. Available at: www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.868793/full
64 Rosaria Juli, M., Juli, R., Juli, G. and Figliuzzi, S. (2023) Victim Blaming: Being a Victim Twice. Comparison of Emotional and Socio-Cultural Aspects, Psychiatria Danubina, 35:2. Available at: www.psychiatria-danubina.com/UserDocsImages/pdf/dnb_vol35_noSuppl%202/dnb_vol35_noSuppl%202_150.pdf
65 Ibid
66 de la Torre Laso, J. et al. (2022)
67 Guedes A., et al. (2016). Bridging the gaps: A global review of intersections of violence against women and violence against children. Global Health Action, 9(1)
68 Plan International (2024) Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls, Technical Report. Available at: plan-international.org/uploads/2024/10/Out-of-Time_RCRL-Technical-Report_final.pdf
69 World Health Organisation (2016) INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children. Available at: iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/207717/9789241565356-eng.pdf
70 Plan International (2025) Champions of Change. Available at: plan-international.org/youth-empowerment/champions-of-change
71 Plan International (2020) Child Early and Forced Marriage and Unions. Available at: plan-international.org/uploads/2022/02/glo-cefmu_policy_brief-final-io-eng-jan21-1.pdf
72 OurWatch (2024) Types of violence against women. Available at: www.ourwatch.org.au/types-of-violence-against-women
73 World Health Organization (2025) Female genital mutilation. Available at: www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation
74 Proteknôn (2024b) Protection from Violence: Intersections between violence against women and violence against children in Plan International's work, p.2
75 World Health Organization (2012) Understanding and addressing violence against women: Intimate Partner Violence. Available at: www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-RHR-12.36
76 Breiding, M.J. et al (2015) Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
77 O'Brien, M. (2024)
78 UNFPA (2021) Prevalence Rates, Trends and Disparities in Intimate Partner Violence: Power of Data in the IPV Geospatial Dashboard. New York, USA: United Nations Population Fund. Available at: www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/IPVDataAnalysisReport_final.pdf p.5
79 Plan International (2018)
80 UNFPA (2021), p.5-6
81 Pan American Health Organization (2024)
82 United Nations General Assembly (1993) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993. Available at: www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience, and knowledge.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

Plan International
Global Hub
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155
Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505
E-mail: info@plan-international.org

plan-international.org
facebook.com/planinternational
twitter.com/planglobal
instagram.com/planinternational
linkedin.com/company/plan-international
youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv