

# Real Choices, Real Lives

## Research Study Methodology

### About Real Choices, Real Lives

*Real Choices, Real Lives* is a longitudinal and qualitative research study that has tracked the lives of 142 girls in nine countries around the world since their births in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024. Through annual in-depth interviews with the girls and their caregivers, the study has explored the girls' daily realities, attitudes and aspirations for the future. The study aims to document the social, economic, cultural and institutional factors that influence girls' lives and their opportunities.

*Real Choices, Real Lives* has a distinct commitment to understanding the root causes of gender inequality, and to exploring how girls' attitudes and behaviours are influenced by their families and communities at different stages of their development. By asking questions about beliefs, values and expectations, the study aims to uncover how gendered social norms and behaviours are created and sustained or shift over time.

Data for *Real Choices, Real Lives* was gathered for 18 years - giving a unique insight into the life cycle of girls – through their entire childhood and adolescence - and the choices, decisions and realities that shape their lives. We have carried out this research with a level of depth that many larger quantitative studies cannot always replicate, and this has allowed Plan International to track and monitor girls' different experiences of gender norms across their lifespans, as well as the attitudes and behaviour of the families and communities they are part of. Over the years, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has generated evidence and findings about girls around the world that has been used to support programming, advocacy, fundraising for girls' rights initiatives, and much more – in both the nine focal countries and globally.

*Real Choices, Real Lives* has gathered data and published reports on a vast array of topics and themes, including education, health (including sexual and reproductive health and rights), hunger, protection and violence, girls' activism and participation in civic spaces, climate change, the ways in which girls are challenging gender norms, and many others.



## Longitudinal research

Longitudinal research follows participants over a specified time period and collects data at specific intervals. This type of research measures change in the participants over time, rather than comparing groups of participants against one another. Longitudinal cohort studies follow a group of participants who all share a common experience or demographic trait – for example, the year of their birth. They aim to follow all participants from this ‘starting point’ forward to see how their trajectories do or do not differ over time – and to understand the impact of different variables (in this case, gender norms) on their life courses. As a qualitative, longitudinal study, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has been tracking the experiences of girls and their families around the world from their births in 2006, until they turned 18 in 2024.

### The cohort

The *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls are from nine countries around the world: from Benin, Togo and Uganda in Africa; Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam; and Brazil, Dominican Republic and El Salvador in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

The cohort girls were recruited for participation on the basis of their year of birth, that they lived in communities in which Plan International already had an active presence (and were therefore logistically able to conduct the study), and that they came from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds within each country.



### Methodology

The study aims to document the social, economic, cultural and institutional variables that influence girls' lives and their life chances, through the perspectives of girls in their own words.

The core *Real Choices, Real Lives* research methodology is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with girls and their caregivers, conducted annually. From when the girls were born until they turned 7 in 2013, interviews were conducted solely with one of the girls' parents/caregivers – usually their mother, but in some cases the father, grandmother, an aunt, or other family member who shared the same household with the girl and was responsible for her care.

From 2013, interviews and participatory and age-appropriate activities with the cohort girls were introduced – including **drawing exercises and interactive play activities**. For example, in 2016 (when they were 9 and 10 years old), the girls were asked to draw maps of their communities. As they drew, the girls were asked to describe their pictures, including the places that they visited, places boys were allowed to go but they weren't, locations where decisions were made and who was permitted to participate in decision-making. These interactive activities provide rich insights into the contexts in which the girls were growing up, as well as their attitudes and beliefs about the world around them.



Image: Rebecca's drawing of her community (Uganda, 2016)

*Real Choices, Real Lives* also employed the use of **vignettes** to engage with the cohort girls, using stories and language that reflected their development stage and maturity level. The interviewers would tell the cohort girls a story of a fictional girl facing some kind of gendered barrier or potentially unfair situation and ask the cohort girls to respond with their reactions of how they felt about the story. This provided significant insight into the cohort girls' attitudes and beliefs – as well as critical nuances in the ways that they might support gender equality and the idea of a girl challenging gender norms in her community, even if this was not reflected in the cohort girls' own actions and behaviours.

**Semi-structured interviews** were employed throughout all years of the study with both girls and caregivers. Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, this method uses a mixture of open and closed questions, accompanied by follow-up prompts to encourage the respondent to expand on their answers. Semi-structured interviews are an ideal format for engaging with young people - because of their open nature, they are more relaxed and informal and allow for digression into unforeseen topics that can provide exciting and invaluable insights. Semi-structured interviews also allow for participants to bypass sensitive questions or topics if they feel uncomfortable, which has allowed *Real Choices, Real Lives* to prioritise the wellbeing and comfort of the cohort girls.

For the purposes of longitudinal analysis, *Real Choices, Real Lives* regularly used similar data collection tools covering the same themes and topics. This repetition allowed the study to compare the girls' and caregivers' answers over the years and analyse for change over time. Themes that were regularly explored included education; household composition; sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); girls' time use - including household responsibilities, leisure time and social networks; gender norms; violence and safety; and girls' aspirations for the future. However, the flexibility inherent in the qualitative approach means that the study has also been able to explore new lines of enquiry in each round of data collection, reflecting and building on issues present in girls' lives as they grew up and encountered new experiences and challenges.

In addition to interviews, the study has also used a **household inventory tool** to capture information about household composition, income, illnesses, and changes over time; and an **observation tool** which captured the interviewer's reflections on family dynamics, the girl's demeanour, and important environmental and contextual information about the girl's daily life.

## Research Ethics

Plan International has received external ethical approval for the *Real Choices, Real Lives* research study from a certified Institutional Review Board, and from national ethics boards in relevant focal countries. The most recent ethical approval for data collection was provided by the global affairs think tank, ODI, in February 2024. All research activities for the study have been undertaken in line with Plan International's [ethics, safeguarding and data privacy policies and procedures](#). Principles of confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence, justice and informed consent were always applied. In the first six years of data collection on the study (2007-2012), informed consent was sought from the girls' caregivers for their participation.

**"It is good to be heard.  
To know people care  
about girls."**

– Bianca, age 17 (2023), Brazil

**"I am happy with  
this study because I  
have an  
opportunity to  
speak what I have  
never said before."**

– Kannitha, age 17 (2023),  
Cambodia

From 2013, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has interviewed the girls themselves in addition to their caregivers – and therefore the girls were asked for their assent to take part in addition to their caregivers' consent. If a girl declined to participate then her wishes were respected, and she was not interviewed – recognising that all children have agency which must be respected.

All of the cohort girls' identities have been anonymised – the girls were each assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy, and information about their location has been removed from the dataset.

## Feminist research principles and praxis

Plan International is committed to ensuring that all research activities are informed by feminist methodologies, which prioritise principles and praxis of do no harm, reflexivity, reciprocity, and centring the voices of girls and marginalised groups. The principle of **Do No Harm** calls on researchers to consider how the research activities could be perceived by the participants, any potential harms they could experience, any political, social or economic impact of their participation, and what risk mitigations need to be put in place. Practicing do no harm in the context of - interviewing adolescent girls means celebrating and emphasising agency and autonomy of girls, respecting their views and perspectives, and not attaching stigma or judgement to things that they share.

**Reflexivity** refers to the need for researchers step back and identify power relations (hidden or otherwise) that are at play in a research project. Reflexivity also calls on researchers to endeavour to minimise power imbalances between researchers and participants. *Real Choices, Real Lives* has taken many steps to minimise power imbalances and biases. For example, all data collection activities were undertaken by interviewers from the girls' local areas or countries and conducted in local languages.

**Reciprocity** was practiced in *Real Choices, Real Lives* interviews by ensuring that the interviewers provide meaningful and helpful information to the girls in exchange for the wealth of information that they provided to the study. For example, if a girl asked questions about her sexual and reproductive rights, then the interviewer would share information with the girl to help advance her knowledge. Furthermore, our intention is that evidence collected from the cohort informs programming and advocacy work in the girls' local communities, thereby directly benefiting the cohort girls, their families, and their communities. The girls and their families were also compensated for their time with relevant and culturally appropriate gifts - recognising the value and generosity of their contribution to the research.

Finally, a feminist research methodology centres the voices of women and marginalised people to make visible the experiences, perspective and daily realities of people whose voices have historically been seldom heard in research. This is why the key method employed by *Real Choices, Real Lives* is semi- structured interviews, as this allows the girls to voice their experiences in their own words.

**Plan International is committed to decolonising the aid and development sector, which requires radically examining and challenging the dominant approaches of aid towards involving and elevating the people, systems and methods that have been historically marginalised and oppressed by colonialism and white supremacy. Centring the voices of girls and using participatory methods is just one component of a wider and more complex effort by Plan International towards decolonising aid.**

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