



**PLAN**  
INTERNATIONAL

# **Real Choices, Real Lives**

## **Final Report:**

**Findings from 18 Years of a Global Study  
with Girls from Birth to Adulthood**

**Summary Report**

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*“This [Real Choices, Real Lives] interview always broadens my thinking. Sometimes, even the things I could not imagine thinking, it draws me to it.”*

*Amelia, age 17 (2024), Uganda*

*“I think it’s great that you could hear my opinions on some things about society and everything. I like to participate in this study.”*

*Juliana, age 17 (2023), Brazil*

Front cover: Girl, 16, is a leader of change in her community in El Salvador © Plan International  
This page: Members of the health club in a primary school in Uganda © Plan International



# Foreword

**Reena Ghelani Chief Executive Officer, Plan International**

**Over the past two decades the world has seen progress in many areas. Extreme poverty has more than halved in a single generation, and the global gender gap in education has narrowed significantly, with girls' enrolment in primary and lower secondary school now approaching parity in most regions.**

However, this progression is not equally spread. In many places girls have not benefited and things are getting worse. It's a challenging landscape, but we know that listening to girls over their lifetimes provides the answers.

For eighteen years, the girls at the heart of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* report have trusted us with their stories. They have shared their hopes, their dreams and challenges. They have also shared what support helps them move forward. This report reflects what we have learned from them across every part of their lives. It shows the real changes they have

experienced, and the remarkable gains compared with the generations before them. It also introduces a cohort of girls who are pushing against long-standing beliefs about what girls should or should not do and who are insisting that their voices matter.

Yet the forces shaping girls' lives remain stubborn. Gender norms continue to limit opportunities for girls. Public systems meant to protect and support girls are stretched and under-resourced. And the progress made so far is fragile. Anti-rights movements are growing stronger at the same time as communities face rising economic pressure, increasing conflicts and worsening climate impacts.

This report shares the stories of girls who are challenging the ideas that limit their opportunities and insisting that their voices are heard. When girls have the right support, they thrive. We owe it to them – and to every girl who will come after them – to act now. To safeguard hard-won gains, confront emerging threats, and create a world where every girl can realise her rights and shape her own future.



# The cohort girls in 2025

when we closed out the study with them

The study has run in **9 countries**

It ran for **18 years**

From the girls' birth **in 2006**

to their 18th year **in 2024**

## El Salvador

As of 2024, five girls had finished secondary school and two girls had graduated. Four girls had left school.

*"Maybe, God willing, I'll be studying for a degree, a career with a lot of opportunities that's also well paid. [What would you like to study?] It's called ... foreign relations."*

Gabriela, age 14, 2021

## Dominican Republic

Seven girls had graduated from secondary school, and five had progressed to university. Three girls were married but hoped to resume their studies or learn a trade.

*They say that it's like talking to people about their problems... that makes me happy."*

Saidy, age 15, 2021

## Cambodia

Five girls were completing their secondary school education, and one had graduated and enrolled in university.

*"I would like to be a teacher (like my aunty) to share knowledge with the younger generation."*

Nakry, age 14, 2021

## Vietnam

All eight girls who remained in the study were completing their secondary school education and had ambitious dreams for their futures.

*"I want to continue my education [...] I chose the Da Nang University of Economics."*

Kim, age 17, 2024

## Benin

Six girls were completing their secondary education, one girl had progressed to higher education, and one had started an apprenticeship.

*"I'll be happy when I've successfully finished my studies, and opened my own [midwifery] practice"*

Jacqueline, age 12, 2019

## Brazil

Six girls were in secondary school and two had graduated. All girls had plans to attend university or clear career aspirations.

*"I'd like to be a strong, determined person, who doesn't give up on her dreams, who persists until she gets what she wants."*

Bianca, age 17, 2024

## Togo

Three girls were completing secondary school. Four girls left school but hope to return or learn a trade, whilst three girls were in vocational training.

*"My life will be different from my mother's because I will have my own shop which I will manage [...] I will get married like my mother, but I won't have lots of children like her."*

Djoumai, age 11, 2017

## Uganda

Seven girls were completing their secondary school education and one was studying an apprenticeship. Four girls left education hoping to return or to learn a trade.

*"My goals for the future haven't changed, I have always wanted to be a doctor from childhood and I still dream of the same... I would like to become a paediatrician."*

Justine, age 17, 2024

## The Philippines

11 girls were finishing secondary school, and two had graduated, with all 13 girls sharing strong hopes to continue into higher education. One girl had left school due to pregnancy but hoped to complete her education.

*"I want to be a nurse [...] to be able to help other people."*

Jasmine, age 14, 2020



# Introduction

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

**Bianca<sup>1</sup>, age 17 (2023), Brazil**

Over the last 18 years, Plan International’s *Real Choices, Real Lives* study has been following a cohort of girls from birth to adulthood. The research, which gathered data annually from both the girls and their caregivers, offers the chance to look closely at the progress made and the challenges faced at different stages of their lives. The girls taking part in the study come from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds and from nine different countries: Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam. Across countries, the girls are predominantly from rural farming communities, and many families are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. Very few studies have traced the lives of the same group of children for so many years - and *Real Choices, Real Lives* is the only one of its kind that has focussed solely on girls.

- **142 girls participated in the study, and 92 remained when the study ended in 2024.<sup>2</sup>**
- **65 per cent of girls were completing or had completed secondary education by 2024.**
- **Nine per cent were attending university.**
- **13 per cent of cohort girls were married/in unions by 18.**
- **Girls spent an average five hours 15 minutes a day on unpaid care work.**
- **91 per cent of cohort girls reported experiencing violence by the age of 11.**

Girls’ voices are at the heart of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study: as they grow up, their stories are told in their own words. Participation in the study was not only about answering questions, it was about expressing themselves, being heard, reflecting on the world around them, and contributing to conversations that shape progress toward gender equality.

1 All of the cohort girls’ names have been changed to protect their privacy.

2 Over the course of the study, some participants chose to withdraw, migrated away from the study area, or, sadly, passed away during childhood. In addition, there have been changes to the geographical scope covered by Plan International’s Country Offices, which has also affected the continuity of participation

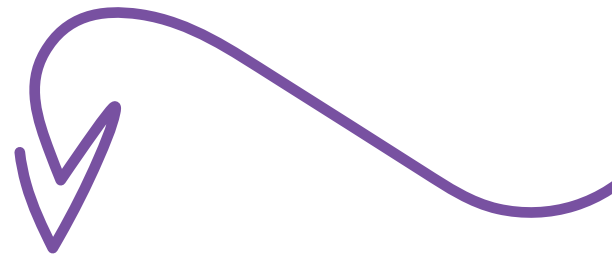
“I am happy with this study because I have the opportunity to speak what I have never said before.”

**Kannitha, age 17 (2023), Cambodia**

“[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**

The study provides unprecedented access to the experiences of girls during childhood and adolescence: It is girls’ voices, experiences, and recommendations for change we hear, offering unparalleled insight into their lives, their opinions and their hopes and dreams.



## Methodology

*Real Choices, Real Lives* is grounded in feminist research principles and has developed a strong participatory approach - meaning that girls’ recommendations for change and justice are centred and amplified, not only in the work of the study, but in the work of Plan International more broadly.

The core *Real Choices, Real Lives* research methodology was based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with girls and their caregivers, conducted annually, from when the girls were born in 2006. Each year we interviewed one of the girls’ parents/caregivers and then, from 2013, interviewed the girls themselves. Over the 18 years, we used a range of different research methods to ensure the girls engaged with our interviews in an appealing and age-appropriate way. For more on our research methods, please see the full report [here](#).

## From birth to adulthood

“I feel very happy because I can share many things with [*Real Choices, Real Lives*] and my sharing can help in child protection.”

**Sen, age 18 (2024), Vietnam**

The *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls were born into a more optimistic time: growing up in an era where gender equality was a key area for action by the international community and national governments, and girls’ rights were becoming a particular focus. We can see how this environment has shaped the lives of girls in the study.

There have been real wins, for example in girls’ education, with many more, compared to previous generations, staying in school and going to college. This was the case for the cohort girls too.

Additionally, gender equality, or inequality, has, over the last 18 years, been very much a talking point and this greater awareness is also reflected in the family and community lives of the girls in the study.

There has been progress but this is often set against the real challenges thrown up by poverty, conflict, climate change, the cutting of AID budgets, and a global political shift towards conservative values that are rolling back girls’ and women’s rights. Progress is hard won and subject always to pushback.

This report presents 18 years of research. Over the years we have talked to girls about many different areas of their lives. To look closely at the progress and challenges they have described we have divided our findings, what they are telling us, into clear sections: education, resisting gender norms, unpaid care work, health, experiences of violence, agency, employment, and climate change. We highlight the progress made for girls’ rights - including where girls are actively challenging established gender norms

- and the ongoing issues that threaten these hard-won gains. The girls, now young women, taking part in the study have provided us with a way forward: where we can build on the progress made, what needs to change and where to target action in order to mitigate the growing threats to girls' rights.

Evidence across the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort shows that change is possible. We must galvanise efforts to ensure that all girls around the world can realise their rights and fulfil their potential.

“I’ve learned many different things [from *Real Choices, Real Lives*] ... about the stories of many girls from different places.”


**Griselda, age 18 (2024),  
Dominican Republic**



Girls in the Dominican Republic enjoy learning about menstrual health during peer-led education session © Plan International

## 1. Education

The area of girls' education is one where international efforts have generated real progress. Over the duration of the study, girls' global primary and secondary completion rates have increased to match boys'.<sup>i</sup> Despite this, however, the experiences of the cohort girls tell us that their access to and completion of education is still threatened by a lack of resources and by gender norms.<sup>ii</sup>



"Girls' education is useful because girls also have the right to learn and find work in the future, and as our parents didn't go to school, we have to go."

**Essohana, age 17 (2023), Togo**

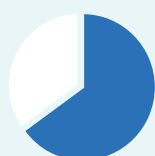


**Almost all girls, and most caregivers, valued and supported girls' education.**

We heard about under-resourced schools, poorly trained teachers, and the use of violence. Girls who experienced corporal punishment told us that this led to a waning interest in going to school.

*"I want them to study, so they don't end up like me; knowing nothing about studying. I want them to be professionals and have a good life."* **Nicol's father, 2009, Dominican Republic**

Most girls surpassed their mother's education levels, showing positive progress across generations.



**65%**  
of cohort girls were completing or had completed secondary education.



**9%**  
had already progressed to university.



**Across countries, girls and caregivers reported their concerns over the quality of education.**

We heard about under-resourced schools, poorly trained teachers, and the use of violence. Girls who experienced corporal punishment told us that this led to a waning interest in going to school.

*"The teacher sometimes beats me and that makes me sick."* **Ladi, age seven (2013), Togo**

Most girls surpassed their mother's education levels, showing positive progress across generations.

**Travel was a key factor in girls' ability to safely attend school.**

In the early years, some parents could not sacrifice working hours and responsibilities to accompany their daughters to school, and so they did not enrol them in pre-primary or early primary education. As girls got older, they themselves reported that traffic, dangerous motorbike driving, and the impact of extreme weather frequently hindered their journeys to school.

*"There are [schoolchildren] who sometimes have to cross rivers, when the river is overflowing, that is, they can't cross because of the current."* **Stephany, age 16 (2023), El Salvador**

Most girls surpassed their mother's education levels, showing positive progress across generations.

**Household duties and financial constraints were major barriers.**

While some caregivers reduced girls' chores to support their studies, a number of girls dropped out due to costs and the need to support the family at home. Under pressure, boys' education is prioritised.

*"I think she is expected to leave school at grade six or seven because I cannot support her further education. If I can afford it, I will support her to pursue higher education."*

**Davy's mother, 2015, Cambodia**

Many girls took on paid work to contribute to the household income, some working part-time some leaving school entirely.

*"I have a responsibility to earn money to support my family after my father passed away... I feel so sad because I want to study like other girls."* **Reaksme, age 16 (2023), Cambodia**



In 2023, girls told us about how their families' financial difficulties and food scarcity meant they struggled with their mental health and how worries about their families had an impact on their school work.

*"I can't focus [on studying] because my mind is on my family and if they're okay. I'm also thinking about our daily meals."* **Christine, age 17 (2023), the Philippines**

**Several girls left school as a result of unplanned pregnancy and early marriage.**

Many failed to return, due largely to **stigma** and lack of **childcare**.

*"I want to study but there's no one to take care of my child. I really want to finish senior high."*  
**Melanie, age 17 (2024), the Philippines**

## Folami's Story

Folami's story is not unusual. She lives in a rural area in Togo. Her family struggled financially for most of her life. Food was always hard to come by and affording school fees often impossible. Folami, the oldest daughter, began taking on household responsibilities at age nine, which meant her mother could try and find work. As her domestic responsibilities grew, attending school became increasingly difficult. At 15, she got pregnant and the stigma of this, combined with the economic pressures, meant she left school for good.

*“I'm not going to school now because I've had a baby... It was my decision because I was ashamed of my pregnancy.”*

**Folami, aged 17, (2023), Togo**

Already behind in her education, Folami could not face the classroom but she was exploring the option of learning a trade. Money was still in short supply. As her story illustrates, poverty, caregiving, and stigma can derail girls' education, pushing them into making decisions which will limit their opportunities for life.



Girl plays hopscotch at a school supported by Plan International in Uganda © Plan International

## 2. Resisting Gender Norms

The last 18 years have seen considerable debate about gender equality – attaining it has been a target for both the Millenium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. So far, the goal remains out of reach but it has been very much talked about and this in itself has encouraged questioning, changed behaviours, and brought the subject of girls' and women's rights out into the open.

This has had an impact on the girls in the study and on their families. Girls are still taught gendered expectations of roles and behaviours right from

their infancy, throughout childhood and adolescence and across different areas of their lives – where they should go, what they should do and how they should look. But these “norms” no longer go unquestioned. While some girls conform to what is expected of them, others challenge. Currently, gendered expectations are on the rise again – anti-rights actors are creating a political change that aims to confine girls to the margins once again. Amid this increasing hostility towards girls' and women's rights, it is essential that girls are fully supported to engage in the forms of resistance they choose.



“ [My school friends] make fun of me, they say I'm a tomboy, that I'm always playing ball, with the boys... then I tell them that this is sexist, because a girl can play ball just like a boy. ”

**Juliana, age 12 (2019), Brazil**

Girls in El Salvador play football as part of the Champions of Change project © Plan International



**Over the course of the study, half of girls had rejected and questioned gendered expectations.**

The cohort girls shared strong views about the importance of education, studying at university, and career prospects.

*“This is the era of equality. Boys and girls can both go to school. There is no discrimination like in the past that boys could go to school while girls couldn’t.” Hang, age 12 (2017), Vietnam*

**15 per cent of girls, at some point in their lives, either questioned the division of chores or openly refused to do them.**

*“My parents prefer the boys to concentrate on field work and the girls on household tasks. I don’t find this fair: the boys could also do some housework as we girls have to go to the fields to help with the planting and the harvest.” Eshohana, age 10 (2016), Togo*

Others called for chores to be evenly distributed between girls and boys. At age 13, Griselda said that *“boys should have the same duties as girls! [...] “[they don’t] because they’re lazy”* (2019).

**As they got older, girls challenged expectations, based around social constructs of accepted ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’.**

Many rejecting parental ideas of how girls should behave including which games or sports to play, and what clothes to wear. Again, as they got older, girls were forbidden from mixing with boys. Many kept relationships, frowned on by parents, secret – in itself a form of rebellion but one not without risk. A number of girls also had jobs without their caregivers’ knowledge.



**Gender norms are proving hard to shift. Excessive unpaid care work, restricted mobility and unplanned pregnancies continue to confine girls to domestic spaces.**

Girls’ access to public spaces and their mobility is an area that is proving particularly difficult to challenge. Parents, caregivers, and often the girls themselves, perceive public spaces as being unsafe for girls and women.

**The current political climate is also inhibiting girls’ ability to challenge the gender norms they have grown up with.**

An increased hostility to gender equality and girls’ and women’s rights is energising a pushback into clearly defined roles of masculine and feminine and limiting girls’ opportunities yet again.

**Over the years the research indicates that parents, mothers in particular, have often been supportive of girls’ rights and want them to make different decisions and have a different life from theirs, but in practice this comes up against many barriers.**



# 3. Unpaid Care Work

Unpaid care work is a key driver of inequality – as they grow up girls are increasingly time poor which restricts, educational opportunities, skills training, and time to socialise and rest – all of which detrimental to their health and wellbeing. It is a gender norm which, as both the global statistics and our interviews illustrate, is proving hard to challenge. There are no indicators from the research that this is likely to change.



**“It would be shameful for a man to be seen sweeping the courtyard.”**

**Nini-Rike’s mother, 2017, Togo**

**Across the study, 95 per cent of the girls reported doing unpaid care work, with the average time spent on this work being around 5 hours and 15 minutes per day – more than adult women globally.**

This does not apply to the girls' male relatives who are assigned fewer and less-time consuming chores.

*"I don't think it's right because if we girls do them [chores], the boys should do them too"* Raisa, age 12 (2018), Dominican Republic

It has been clear throughout the research that girls are prepared for their futures as wives and mothers from a very early age.

*"She supports me in domestic chores, especially fetching water in a five-litre jerry can and washing plates with her sisters."* Miremba's mother, Uganda, 2011

Domestic chores mean that girls are consistently stretched for time. Many struggle to balance school with household responsibilities.

*"I ended up being expelled by the Headmistress because I couldn't keep up."* Eleanor, age 17 (2024), Benin

Girls' care responsibilities also have broader impacts on their well-being: many cohort girls appear to be sacrificing their hobbies, and are unable to spend time socialising with friends and family.

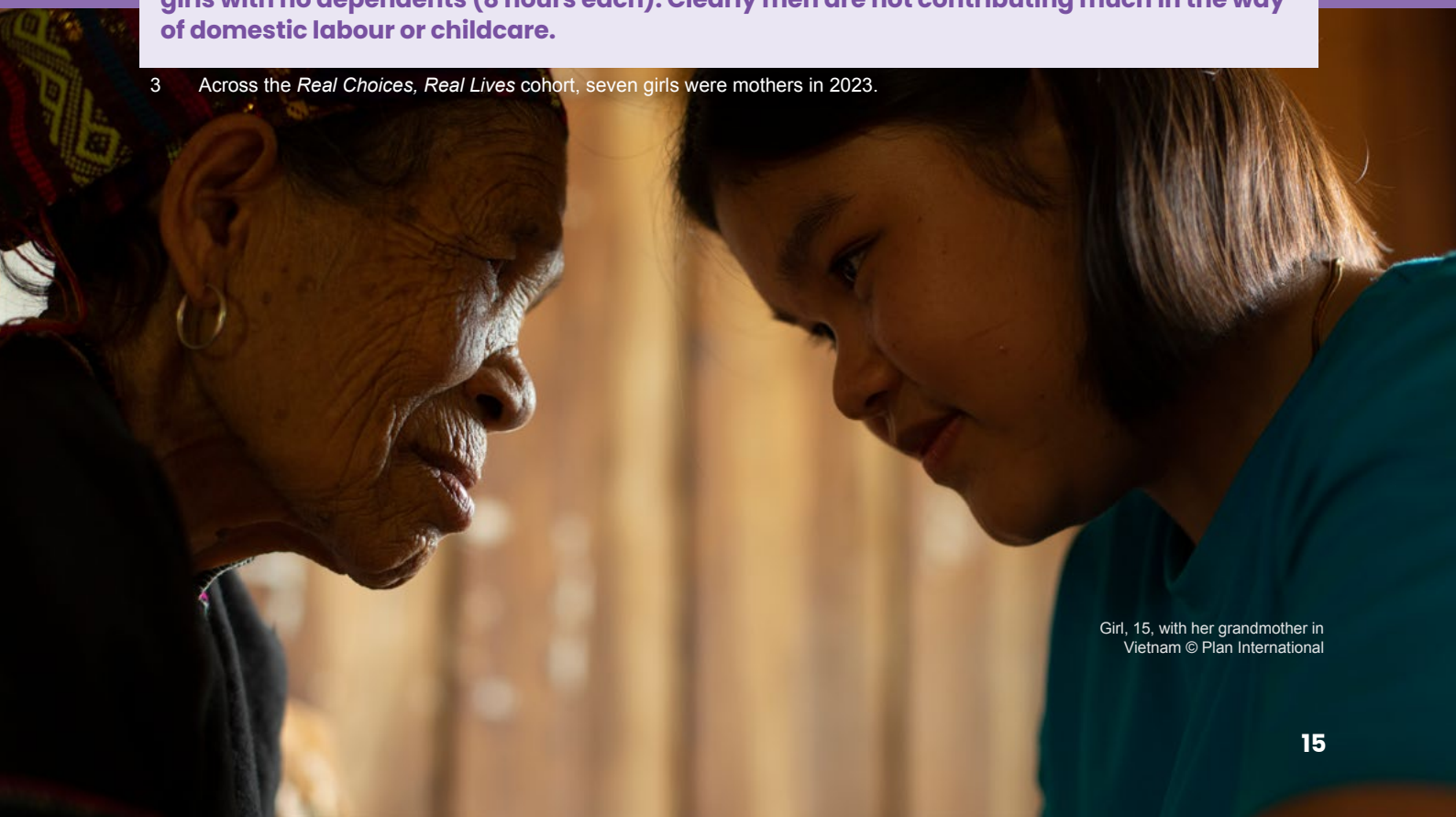
*"I can't walk around and talk to my friends. I'm busy now with my school assignments and taking care of my nieces and nephews."* Reyna, age 16 (2023), the Philippines

When girls dropped out of school, their responsibilities multiplied, meaning they still didn't have the time to develop vocational skills for the future.

*"I want to spend less time on housework and more time on my workshop [because I want] to master sewing."* Nini-Rike, age 17 (2024), Togo

**Shockingly, the care load for the cohort girls who are married or in a union and have one or more children<sup>3</sup> is nearly 1.5 times that of girls who are single mothers (around 14 and a half hours), and the amount of care work performed by single mothers is the same as married girls with no dependents (8 hours each). Clearly men are not contributing much in the way of domestic labour or childcare.**

3 Across the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort, seven girls were mothers in 2023.



Girl, 15, with her grandmother in Vietnam © Plan International

# 4. Health and Wellbeing

The availability of vaccinations, and some public health improvements have seen progress over the 18 years of the research. Families also report finding awareness raising campaigns around health and nutrition helpful, but poverty, social norms, gender, and age continue to play a critical role in shaping access to timely and quality healthcare. This has played out over the years for cohort girls who have faced serious health conditions, including malaria, tuberculosis, dengue fever, malnutrition and anaemia.

Doctor gives a baby immunisations © Plan International



**Over the study, we saw proactive action and better knowledge on girls' health and nutrition.**

Despite high costs of treatment, many of the cohort caregivers clearly articulated that their children's health is a priority.

*"... take the children to have tests frequently, have regular check-ups three times in a year in the Military Hospital." Sen's mother, 2015, Vietnam*



**Access to quality health care is often limited.**

Some families reported that there were health clinics nearby, but poor quality of care or limited services provided forced them to travel long distances in order to obtain comprehensive care at hospitals or larger clinics. Four girls died of malaria in early childhood, having not accessed treatment in time.<sup>4</sup>

*"The clinic is pretty far, it's about two-hours walk from here. We have to carry the children, and if people are really sick we carry them in a hammock" Hillary's mother, 2013, El Salvador*

**Healthcare costs are prohibitive for some families.**

14 per cent of cohort girls were affected by undernutrition and stunting, which many families could not afford to treat in the early years. The lifetime rate of illness among girls reported as stunted or underweight in infancy was greater than among the rest of the cohort.

*"We don't have money to get checked up... we're just waiting for money so I can get a check-up."*

**Maricel, age 16 (2023), the Philippines**

The cost and overall availability of medication was a particular barrier for many of the cohort families, and this was frequently reported by the caregivers in Uganda.

*"In most cases there are no medicines in the hospital after you have queued since morning to midday and then they tell you no medicine. So maybe you even don't have enough or no moneys... to be able to afford to buy medication." Amelia's mother, 2018, Uganda*

Low availability of malaria medicine was a key concern. On average, each girl contracted malaria nine times in their first 18 years of life. Ten girls suffered from malaria more than once by the age of five - including cases of convulsive malaria.<sup>5</sup>

**A lack of staff, equipment, and medicine at clinics and hospitals was reported across the global cohort.**

*"The doctor has to send us back home because there isn't any medicine, there isn't a band-aid for a dressing." Natalia's mother, 2018, Brazil*

**Healthcare staff are chronically under-trained.**

Costs and poor-quality healthcare led some families to use traditional medicines and home remedies.

*"I'm not in the habit of taking my children to the hospital as it is costly [and] I know what herbs are needed to treat them." Eleanor's mother, 2016, Benin*

While some sought traditional healthcare due to costs of clinic visits, others' health-seeking behaviours were influenced by fear or mistrust of institutional healthcare. Lack of health education - and particularly poor awareness of mental health conditions - also led some caregivers to interpret symptoms as signs of 'traditional sicknesses,' or demonic attacks.

4 The risk of death from malaria is greatest within the first day of infection, making timely diagnosis and appropriate treatment urgent: the WHO recommends that treatment should occur within one day of symptoms. A lack of access to healthcare facilities is therefore life-threatening in malaria-prone areas.

5 Convulsions are a common symptom of cerebral malaria, but can also occur in other forms of severe malaria.



**Despite public health campaigns many of the cohort families had limited information and education on health.**

There were 15 cases of typhoid among ten cohort girls - all in the Africa and Southeast Asia focal countries. In all these cases the families reported sourcing water from untreated wells and pumps, and many did not report boiling the water before use.

**Many conditions affecting girls could have been treated early or prevented, but ongoing personal and social barriers continue to hinder access to care.**

18-year-old young mother in Cambodia attends the opening of a new community health centre © Plan International



# 5. Sexual and Reproductive Health and CEFMU

Globally, rates of Child Early and Forced Marriage and Unions have fallen, which is reflected across the RCRL cohort too. However, information about sexual and reproductive health is in short supply. Girls need, and articulate wanting, information about menstruation, contraception and sexual health but the advice given is mainly about staying away from boys.

*“My mother told me] that you have to take care of yourself very much, very much when you get your period ... [that] we have to be careful with our body because of the drunk men.”*

**Valeria, age 11 (2017), El Salvador**



Once girls start their periods they are viewed as young women, meaning caregivers prioritised protecting girls' virginity and controlling their behaviour to avoid pregnancy. The girls were given strict instructions that they shouldn't play with boys anymore, that they should act like ladies, and they should abandon childish activities.

*"I told Nakry, 'You are mature, so you have to look after your body'. I tell her to wear bra, but she can't. I told her not to be childish anymore. Local villagers tell their daughters to wear bra, too. I am afraid that Nakry will be raped."*

**Nakry's mother, 2017, Cambodia**

Girls' idea of SRH information, learned from their parents, was focused on a need to avoid contact with men and boys to protect themselves from harm. Sexuality was framed as something to be controlled and minimised. Girls were led to believe it was their sole responsibility to protect themselves from unplanned pregnancy and even sexual violence.

Many in the cohort had received no formal SRHR education - and only ten per cent had received comprehensive sexuality education.

Although girls wanted sexual health information, in all nine countries, caregivers felt uncomfortable, ill-informed and ill-equipped to have conversations with their daughters about these topics beyond abstinence-only messages, and it was considered shameful for fathers to be involved.

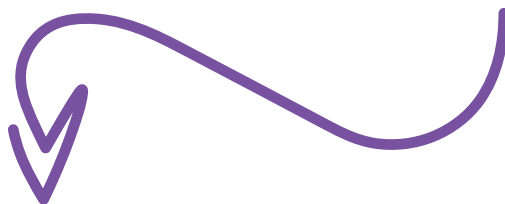
*"Most parents are shy when it comes to those things and other parents themselves have less information to share with their daughters [...] we are less informed about such issues."*

**Justine's mother, 2021, Uganda**

*"I'd like more information on sexuality, it would help me when I start to go out with boys. I would know how to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases."*

**Thea, age 15 (2021), Benin**

**SRHR is a crucial area for girls and more information and less embarrassment about these issues is vital to sustain progress in girls' rights, and to safeguard their opportunities and their health.**



## Talking Points: Community Radio in Benin

Cohort girls told us that they were keen to receive more information about their bodies and healthy relationships from their caregivers. However, many caregivers felt unsure about how to bring up these topics - and lacked confidence in their own knowledge of SRHR.

In response to this, in 2023, in partnership with Cardiff University, we sought to design and broadcast radio programming to promote positive dialogue between girls and their caregivers about adolescent SRHR - based on girls' recommendations.

The radio programme, aimed at a family audience, encouraged parents to discuss topics with youth to "enable our young people and teenagers to have responsible sexual and reproductive education."

The learnings from this programme, launched in Benin, serve to inform future similar initiatives towards healthy and positive intergenerational dialogue about SRHR. These findings are shared in our Guidance Note.

*"I now have a better understanding of hygiene during menstruation."*

**Female workshop participant, age 14 (2023), Benin**

## Generational progress in CEFMU

The global decline of child marriage rates is one of the few bright spots in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Laws in place have helped but in many of the cohort communities it seems to be older women driving the change. Girls' caregivers, especially their mothers, oppose child marriage often based on their own experiences of, and regret for, the practice.

**13 per cent of cohort girls were married or in unions by 18, compared with 46 per cent of their mothers**

Caregivers referred to child marriage as abusive and recognised where it breached legality in their communities.

They wanted better for their daughters, and saw child marriage as a barrier to their education and future careers.

Girls too were opposed to child marriage, particularly where it involved abandoning education or being forced into a union for financial reasons.

*"I think my life will be different [from my mother's] because I won't start dating soon, I don't think so."* **Fernanda, age ten (2017), Brazil**

*"I mean, not to end up like she did - she only studied until Grade 8; unlike her I want a career, a good life, etc."* **Leyla, age 11 (2018), Dominican Republic**

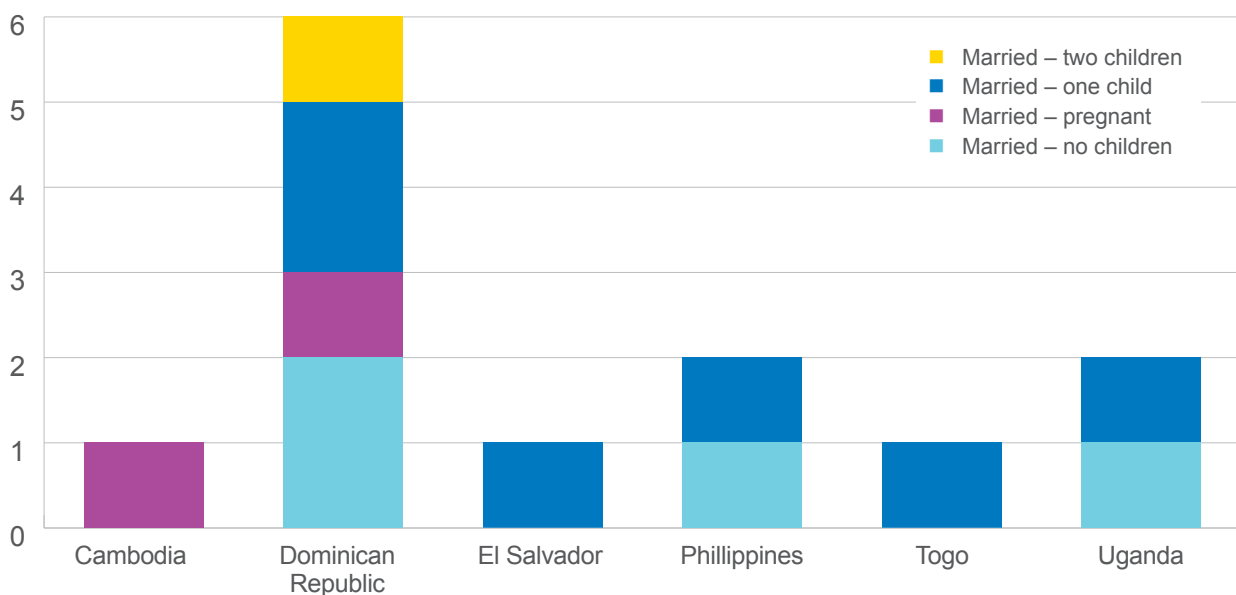
By the middle of 2024, when the cohort girls were 17 and 18 years old, 12 were married or in unions.<sup>6</sup> Seven of the girls had become mothers, with an additional two girls reporting being pregnant. One girl had two children by 2024.

*"If [Margaret] hurries into a marriage without finding a job first, she will suffer enormously...Her life will be different from mine, I don't want her to suffer as I do."* **Margaret's mother, 2020, Benin (age of marriage not disclosed)**

*"It's a very big mistake [to marry your daughter at age 14], because a person getting married at 14 years old... is practically ending their life."* **Bianca's mother, 2021, Brazil (entered a union age 14)**

*"People say that their children were a mistake, but my children weren't a mistake [...] As long as my children have everything, I don't have anything to worry about."* **Katerin, age 18 (2024), Dominican Republic (married age 15)**

Married girls across the cohort, including number of children



<sup>6</sup> The following girls were married or in unions before the age of 18: Chantal, Griselda, Katerin, Leyla and Valerie in the Dominican Republic, Reaksmei in Cambodia, Hillary in El Salvador, Melanie and Rubylyn in the Philippines, Ayomide in Togo and Namazzi and Joy in Uganda - 12 of 93 girls. 92 girls participated in data collection in 2024, and an additional girl was unable to be reached but her caregivers provided an informal update to the Plan International focal country team informing them that their daughter had entered a union and was living with her partner. It is possible that additional girls of the 155 who participated at some point over the 18 years could also have married before the age of 18. However, once girls migrated or we lost contact with them, we were no longer able to collect information about their life circumstances.

# 6. Violence and Protection

An estimated 840 million women – almost one in three – have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at least once in their life - 30 per cent of women aged 15 and older. This figure, which does not include sexual harassment, has remained largely unchanged in the last two decades. Women who have experienced violence are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety disorders, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, with long-lasting consequences.<sup>iii</sup> The girls taking part in the study talked about the violence they had experienced, with online violence as an emerging threat.



An overwhelming **91%** of girls reported experiencing violence by age 11.

**“We have the right to speak out and we have reason enough to speak.”**

**Davy, age 17 (2024), Cambodia**

Girl, 19, in the Dominican Republic left school early due to pregnancy and now works at a hotel after a participating in a work training programme © Plan International



### Girls are speaking out, recognising that the prevalence of violence is unacceptable.

Many commented that men and boys are often socialised into violent and aggressive behaviours, and that this can be unlearned.

*“Because the way parents treat their children influences their thinking, the way they act, the way they think, how they can develop during their childhood and throughout their lives.”* **Gabriela, age 17 (2024), El Salvador**

As they grow up, the cohort girls demanded the same right to freedom and access to public space as boys, recognising that it is not only up to girls to be responsible for their safety.



### Violence is endemic

Incidents occur at school, home, and in their communities. New laws may exist in many cohort countries but do not have a real impact on girls' lives.

School was the most common site of violence, often involving harassment and abuse from male peers.

*“I have no male friends because they are stupid and like rolling up a girl's skirt. I won't make male friends as I feel nervous and afraid of them.”* **Nakry, age 11 (2016), Cambodia**

Violence at home was also prevalent, with girls facing punishment for behaviours deemed inappropriate, such as playing with boys or leaving the house, often under the guise of protecting them from external threats.

Experiences of sexual violence in the community were increasingly reported by the cohort girls as they entered adolescence.

*“When I was little... I came home alone [from school] ... 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**

As the girls got older and gained access to social media, many experienced online violence, such as seeing distressing content or receiving unwanted communication and media. Although the internet can be a source of support, it is also yet another space where girls are bullied and sexually harassed.

*“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**

The interviews with the cohort girls paint a bleak picture: caregivers, intent on protecting girls' sexual purity impose harsh restrictions that limit girls' lives. Over the years, exposure to GBV - together with pervasive social norms - have led the majority of the girls to blame themselves for male violence and to internalise a belief that it is their own responsibility to protect themselves from abuse. Many avoid going out alone, refrain from forming friendships with boys, and adopt behaviours that they hope will reduce their risk of experiencing violence. Ultimately, many felt they had no choice but to sacrifice freedom for safety, limiting their opportunities and threatening their overall wellbeing.





**Many expressed feeling let down by the institutions that are supposed to protect them.**

*“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*

Conflict, displacement and poverty all increase VAWG and the current backlash against girls and women’s rights encourages behaviour in both private and public life that puts girls and women at greater risk of violence – emotionally, physically, and mentally.

## Gabriela’s Story

Gabriela is from Brazil and is in her final year of secondary school and wants to study veterinary medicine. She lives with her mother, sisters, and a two-year-old niece whom she helps care for.

Living in the city of Codó, crime and violence are a regular feature of Gabriela’s life, with high rates of robbery, gang violence and murder. Her mother is the only caregiver in the Brazil cohort who rejected placing responsibility for protection on girls: her attitude was a big influence on Gabriela. While others expected girls to change their behaviour to stay safe, Gabriela’s mother insisted that: *“I think everyone is responsible [for girls’ protection].”*

Gabriela was aware of the safety risks facing girls in her community and, like her mother, she staunchly pushed back against gendered social norms about violence and protection. She rejected the notion that boys are naturally prone to violence and aggression.

*“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)**

She was also outspoken against victim-blaming rhetoric that shifted accountability from offenders to girls and women.



Young mother with her daughter in Brazil © Plan International

# 7. Agency, Leadership and Participation

Globally, political leadership and representation remain heavily male-dominated.<sup>iv</sup> This in itself makes it much harder for girls and women, worldwide, to see themselves as leaders.

As of January 2025, globally, women represent 22.9 per cent of Cabinet members heading Ministries. There are only nine countries in which women hold 50 per cent or more of the positions of Cabinet Ministers leading policy areas.<sup>v</sup>



**“When I know I’m right, I don’t cry. I also learned from my parents because if you cry, you will be repeatedly oppressed, and you should have the courage to defend yourself to other people.”**  
**Christine, age 16 (2022), the Philippines**

Girl, 15, from Cambodia teaches young people about menstrual health © Plan International

Everywhere girls face significant barriers to engaging in public life which include:

- social and gender norms that discourage girls' political participation
- not being listened to or taken seriously
- the fear of repercussions if they have a public profile
- many public platforms are inaccessible.

Despite the barriers they face, many of the cohort girls are determined to have their voices heard.

**“When I know I’m right, I don’t cry. I also learned from my parents because if you cry, you will be repeatedly oppressed, and you should have the courage to defend yourself to other people.”**

**Christine, age 16 (2022),  
the Philippines**

### Girls in the study expressed an interest in politics and intended to vote as soon as they could.

*“I watched [online] what’s going on in our country, political issues about who’s the strong contender for the presidency... and what’s going on in the war in Russia and Ukraine.”*

**Chesa, age 16 (2022), the Philippines**

Girls across the cohort actively contribute to community life through environmental campaigns, youth unions, and pandemic response efforts - giving them confidence in their ability to actively engage in their communities.

A number of girls, like Thea in Benin, showed a clear understanding of their rights and how to exercise them to influence local decision-making.

*“Yes, at school we were taught that we also have rights. So, I can go to the delegate to give my opinion on a decision we have to take... If I go to the delegate and he has not listened to me, I can look for my fellow students who have the same worries as me and we will go together to the head of the district.”*

**Thea, age 16 (2022), Benin**

While most girls did not initially see themselves as future political leaders, those who did expressed a strong desire to use leadership to benefit their communities.

*“I’d like to be a strong, determined person, who doesn’t give up on her dreams, who persists until she gets what she wants.”* **Bianca, age 17 (2024), Brazil**

*“I want to become a leader... when I’m of the right age to be elected. I want to be able to provide the needs of the people and help those who are sick. I will implement giving free medicine to those who are sick”*

**Rubylyn, age 15 (2022), the Philippines**

For Essohana, who wished to be a local councillor, a woman leader’s contributions were particularly important:

*“To help my community and to make my country evolve; and because when a woman takes the lead in something, it always works out well and it’s good to know, she is valued and respected.”*

**Essohana, age 16 (2022), Togo**



**Most girls in the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort had no experience with formal political engagement.**

Girls told us they feel shut out of politics because of their age and gender: decision-making is frequently viewed as a male domain, with women relegated to household matters. This division reinforces the idea that men are more active and influential in community affairs, shaping girls' perceptions of their own future roles and discouraging political ambition.

*"Men are the ones I see active when it comes to political matters here in our area."*

**Mahalia, age 15 (2022), the Philippines**

Girls are also aware of the unfair and much higher standard to which women politicians are held in comparison to men: this double-standard meant that a number of girls were put off political participation by fears for their safety.

*"If a male leader and female leader make the same mistake, the female leader will be blamed more."*

**Hang, age 16 (2022), Vietnam**

Girls feel their opinions would not be valued and also reported that political systems are not designed to include young voices: that they could not engage in formal political processes because it was hard to get access to the places and spaces where these processes were carried out. They are unconvinced that any demands made by young people would be heeded.

*"They think we're too young to talk about it, that we don't know anything"* **Gabriela, age 15, (2021), Brazil**

**Girls and women have a right to be heard, and wider research indicates that involving women in decision-making makes for better decisions made. It is disheartening to see how girls are drawing back from participation in public life, which will have an impact on what they do as adults. With shrinking civic space, and girls' and women's rights being reversed globally, it is essential for girls' visibility in public life to be protected and encouraged.**



Girls in Vietnam taking part in a team building activity to improve leadership skills © Plan International

## 8. Aspirations and Pathways to Decent Employment

As they got older, we talked with the girls in the study about their dreams and hopes for the future – there is no lack of ambition among the group and this, in itself, is encouraging. So many had real determination to make something of their lives and to help others. They wanted to go onto further education, become a psychologist, a lawyer, a photographer, a translator - to work in health, education,

international relations, to develop skills in tailoring, hairdressing, farming.

If we continue to hold girls back, we lose a generation of leaders and changemakers. The cost to society is staggering - a recent UN Gender Snapshot<sup>vi</sup> report estimates that gender inequality is costing the global economy \$10tn - but the personal loss of unrealised dreams is incalculable.

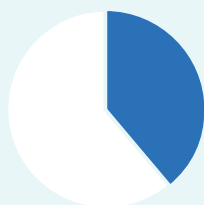


“If I do well at school, I can become a midwife, that’s my dream.”

Fezire, age 17 (2023), Togo



Many girls told us they can imagine themselves in careers that are typically not women-dominated.



**39%**

of girls shared aspirations of going into STEM-related careers<sup>7</sup>, including six medical doctors.<sup>8</sup>

#### Girls' dream jobs:

- In 2022 Nhi from Vietnam wanted to be a photographer, and hopes that she “*will have a stable job... I will be able to become a leader and be praised by many people.*”
- Gabriela in El Salvador wanted to study International Relations and English so that she can become a translator or work in foreign relations.
- Azia from Togo told us in 2022 that she wanted to be the Minister of Health, “*[I wish] to help and care for people in my community and country*”
- In Brazil, Bianca's career aspirations were based around helping others:

*“[In five years I would be] working, going to university, living with my mum... having a bike, a better house... The fact that I want to major in psychology...for a while now I've had this dream of helping people [who] have a problem with self-esteem, anxiety...” Bianca, age 15 (2021), Brazil*

It was clear from the girls' stories, that for them to believe that their aspirations are feasible and achievable, they must be supported to prioritise their education, have female role models around them, and have the ability to make purposeful decisions about how they spend their time.



#### Gendered expectations shape - and limit - girls' aspirations.

As the girls are encouraged to take on unpaid care work, and grow up with norms that value caring for others as part of being a girl, helping others is seen as a key behaviour to exhibit, and a suitable career choice.

By 2024 at least 20 per cent of girls wanted to be either teachers, midwives, or nurses.

*“I want to be a nurse [...] to be able to help other people.”*

**Jasmine, age 14 (2020), the Philippines**

Girls who leave school or cannot focus on their education or training due to high levels of unpaid care work tend to reduce the scale of their ambitions in response to their perception of what is now feasible and achievable.

*“I feel bad because sometimes my customers need something like a design that I have no idea about but if I was at school I could be able to learn about it.”*

**Namazzi, age 17 (2024), Uganda**

<sup>7</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

<sup>8</sup> 40 per cent of the global STEM workforce is filled by women, too. (ILO, 2023)

## Rebecca's Story

Rebecca is from Uganda, her childhood dream, at age 11, was of becoming a nurse, and later, at 15, she wanted to be a lawyer. The family struggled financially and Rebecca's mother encouraged her to leave school. Rebecca resisted for a number of years but dropped out of school at the beginning of 2024 when her family found it impossible to pay the fees. Afterwards, she tried to train as a hairdresser but again had to quit as the training fees also proved too expensive.

Her mother kept her close to home out of fear of pregnancy, and Rebecca, by age 18, would spend around 11 hours a day on unpaid care work, as dictated by *"both my parents [...] they decide for me how my day should be like."* Despite this, she still hopes to open a hair salon and practices on relatives. Her story highlights how poverty and gender norms can ultimately limit which aspirations girls can realistically pursue.



## 9. Climate Change and Food Insecurity

Climate change has had a massive impact on all our lives in the last 18 years but, in particular, on the lives of those already struggling with day to day living. Its impact on the girls in most of our study countries can be overwhelming.

Evidence from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls has found that climate change and food insecurity have disrupted girls' education, undermined their health and wellbeing, and increased their exposure to harm.



“We’re supposed to harvest but due to the heavy rains lately, the rice we got it empty. We’re losing money because the fertiliser is expensive. It’s sad ... We are trying. Of course, it’s hard when there is no money to pay for your needs, whatever you do and that’s it. The only important thing is to have something to eat.”

**Rosamie, age 16 (2022),  
the Philippines**

Most cohort girls' families rely on farming and fisheries for their income and food source. Girls told us their families' food shortages and financial stress affected their mental health, while hunger made it hard to focus at school.

*"No fun, no rests and not enough food - I become frustrated, I shut down, scowl and I am not happy." Annabelle, age 14 (2021), Benin*

In addition, floods and storms - brought on by climate change - destroyed roads and damaged school buildings.

*"The changing weather affects my studies. It's always raining... we missed a lot of lessons." Darna, age 17 (2023), the Philippines*

Some schools are taking positive steps to adapt to climate change. Despite having to close in the event of extreme weather, girls reported that their schools would make up for the lost learning with online or additional classes.

*"When it rains and there are a lot of absentees in class, the teachers redo the lessons because they know the track is not in good condition to be used by the students when it rains." Alice, age 16 (2023), Benin*

Girls are keen to do what they can to combat climate change. Some are learning about adaptation skills in the classroom, and are applying this in their communities. However, several of them expressed dissatisfaction with the level of climate change education they are receiving.

*"I want us to learn about the damage that can be done and also about many of the things that climate change creates, but we don't go into them in depth in school lessons." Annabelle, age 17 (2023), Benin*

The girls also recognised, as Juliana from Brazil stated, that "my actions alone can't solve [climate change]." There are actions that they can take, but they should also call for change from decision-makers.

Despite the difficulties they are facing, many of the girls in the study demonstrate resilience, and a determination to help. Nevertheless, it is clear from the interviews that climate change could be the additional tipping point that pushes gains for girls into reverse. It brings with it increases in poverty and the potential collapse of communities. Any progress made - in education, in challenges to gender norms, reductions in CEFMU rates and in the slow breaking down of taboos around sexuality, sexual health and mental health - will ultimately be threatened

## Reyna's story

Reyna grew up in a farming family in a coastal area of the Philippines. Over the years, her family's farming income declined as crops failed due to increasingly extreme and unpredictable weather patterns.

*“ Sometimes, I cannot eat because the product is damaged due to bad weather.”*

**Reyna, age 16 (2023), the Philippines**

Struggling to pay for food, her parents had to take on extra work. Reyna was left responsible for taking on chores and caring for five nephews: she often missed classes and had little time to study at home.

When she was at school, Reyna learnt about what action she should take to withstand the effects of climate change, but felt it was insufficient to help her family. She appealed for government support for poor farmers to help them withstand climate shocks.

*“ I think the best solution right now to better prevent crop failures is to have money. Because if there is money, there is more fertiliser, there is more irrigation and there are enough funds to supply the needs at home and at school while waiting for the harvest.”*

**Reyna, age 16 (2023), the Philippines**

# What We Have Learned

Despite all the efforts made towards gender equality over the last 18 years, it is clear that girls are still being left behind. They may be better off than their mothers were, but, at every stage of their lives, gender norms have remained hard to shift and continue to curtail girls' rights and opportunities. The girls in the study have, in many instances, shown themselves capable of, and keen to, fightback. But they cannot do this alone.

## Education

Girls have exceeded their mothers' education levels, marking significant intergenerational progress. However, girls still face major barriers to completing quality secondary education. Chronic underfunding in their communities means many attend poorly resourced schools and face unsafe travel conditions, putting their education at risk.

Girls have told us what works: investment in schools and local infrastructure, strengthened teacher training, options available to mitigate lost learning.

## Unpaid Care Work

Our findings tell a familiar story - faced with dwindling livelihoods, girls, not their male relatives, shoulder even more household responsibilities - often from a very young age. This unequal burden leaves girls with little time for schoolwork, until their education no longer seems worth the costs to the family and they leave school.

Girls have told us what works: support from caregivers through programmes that promote the value of education; flexible learning options so they can keep studying; government cash transfers to reduce financial barriers; and the freedom to decide how to balance education, skills, and other activities shaping their future.

## Health

Over the course of the study, serious health issues - malaria, typhoid, malnutrition - were common. These problems were largely avoidable: stemming from limited access to timely healthcare due to physical and financial barriers, and girls' health needs being seen as less important compared to male relatives. While global health has improved and some caregivers adopted positive behaviours, poverty, social norms, gender, and age continue to significantly undermine girls' health. In the last year we interviewed the girls, 11 - around one in eight - reported poor mental health issues.

Girls have told us what works: awareness-raising initiatives in the community to provide informed health education, available, affordable, and local healthcare clinics.

## SRHR

It is a similar story around sexual health where there is also a lack of accessible services and attitudes are informed by restrictive gender norms. Girls told us they want more information on sexual health and don't know where to find it. Caregivers, who often believe it's too early to discuss these topics, and feel poorly informed themselves, cannot provide guidance beyond warning girls against going out with boys.

Girls have told us what works: accessible and age-appropriate services and community programmes, that engage caregivers and young people, to promote positive and open intergenerational dialogue about SRHR.

## CEFMU

The rates of CEFMU have decreased globally and this is also reflected in the cohort study. Among those married before 18, CEFMU was either a cause or a consequence of school dropout. Seven girls were also mothers, and we found they were prevented from returning to school because of a lack of childcare, limited alternative learning options, and social stigma..

Girls have told us what works: comprehensive and implemented legal frameworks that set the minimum age of marriage at 18; girls' access to justice and education, including comprehensive sexuality education; holistic community programmes addressing root causes of CEFMU.

"As the years go by, I have gained more knowledge. And I'm letting go of my shyness. My participation in this study also gives Plan Togo the opportunity to hear from me."

Nini Rike, age 17 (2024), Togo

## Violence and Protection

Violence against women and girls casts a long shadow. It occurs at school, at home or in the wider community. Too often it is fears for their safety that holds girls back: parents worry, girls themselves are often fearful of going out when they reach puberty, and many end up isolated. Girls are taught that protecting themselves from violence and abuse is solely their responsibility, that it is somehow their fault.

Girls have told us what works: initiatives that challenge girls' internalisation of harmful social norms, as well as challenging the existence and public support of gender norms, shifting the blame/ burden of protection and promoting greater awareness of GBV.

## Participation

Girls want to be involved in community politics and organising, but there were few opportunities to engage in decision-making and girls are often not listened to. Girls are keen to change the gender norms they live under and they are resisting in diverse ways. Yet, growing hostility toward girls' rights puts them at real risk. Their desire to speak out is tempered by fear - by becoming too visible, they are apprehensive about being targeted, both in the community and online.

Girls have told us what works: girls' leadership opportunities, accessible and safe decision-making spaces, and visible female role models.

## Aspirations

Despite challenging socio-economic backgrounds, over a third of girls reported wanting to go into a STEM related career. However, as the years progressed there were also many for whom gender expectations and unpaid care work were curtailing their ambitions, and defining what they saw as feasible.

Girls have told us what works: this fading of aspirations points to the need to tackle prevailing gender norms, to work with parents, caregivers, and community leaders to challenge attitudes, and raise awareness of the impact of their domestic responsibilities on the futures that girls choose.

## Climate change

Climate change-induced weather events are having an ever-increasing impact on girls' lives: increasing domestic responsibilities, and also causing schools to close, with girls' schools often lacking the resources to provide catch-up classes or remote learning. In addition, poverty can also drive families into coping strategies like early marriage for their daughters in order to alleviate demands on family incomes. Across countries, girls want to learn how to adapt to unpredictable weather patterns as they watched their family's livelihood dwindle each season, but climate change education in school was found lacking.

Girls have told us what works: government support for family incomes, improved climate curricula in schools, opportunities for collective climate action in the community like recycling, tree planting, and advocacy.

"I'm happy because [Real Choices, Real Lives] checks on me, asking what's going on with me, and checking if I'm okay."

Melanie, age 17 (2023), the Philippines

# Conclusion: Looking Back and Moving Forward

***Real Choices, Real Lives* has shown us how a lifetime of social exclusion, strained public services, and gender norms interplay to limit the opportunities and resources that girls need to achieve their aspirations. Despite significant intergenerational progress - such as improved educational attainment and reduced child marriage - girls' rights remain fragile and uneven. Research shows that systemic gaps in services throughout their lives are leaving many girls behind. Most critically, any gains are vulnerable to reversal. Rising economic pressures, escalating climate shocks, and a global shift toward conservatism is reducing funding, and the political will to uphold girls' rights is in decline. Protest is becoming increasingly difficult and while girls demonstrate resilience and ambition, the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort - and future generations - face real barriers to maintaining any progress towards gender equality, despite international commitments and national legislation.**

Longitudinal, multi-country research studies like *Real Choices, Real Lives*, provide valuable insights into what is needed for the next generation of girls to be able to live fulfilled and useful lives. More initiatives like this would help protect progress made and help keep government policies and international development programmes and initiatives focused on girls' rights.

Plan International is committed to safeguarding girls' rights and freedoms, with a holistic approach which supports girls to complete their education, access healthcare, exercise bodily autonomy, live free from violence, access decent work opportunities, and have a say in decisions that affect their lives. We are honoured that the 142 girls in nine countries participated in our study. In return, we are committed to safeguarding the progress made in their communities and ensuring their voices and experiences shape our future work, leaving a lasting legacy.

***"I'm happy to participate [in *Real Choices, Real Lives*] because before, I couldn't express myself but by answering your questions, now I can speak in front of a grown-up."***

**Thea, age 17 (2023), Benin**



Girl, 16, uses her sewing machine provided by Plan's vocational training programme in Benin  
© Plan International

# Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are based on the experiences of the girls taking part in the research study, and on what they have told us.

## For all actors

- Fund and implement multi-sector action and policy towards gender equality: deliver well-resourced community programmes that address the root causes of CEFMU, recognise girls' unpaid care work, invest in the care sector, and celebrate diverse female role models.
- Meaningfully involve girls in designing and implementing policies and programmes: these should address the issues affecting them across communities, schools, governments, CSOs and INGOs and other international bodies.
- Invest in and conduct future longitudinal research initiatives with girls: ensure that their voices are meaningfully heard, and the findings directly inform future policy and programming at all levels.

## For Governments

- Counter the rollback on girls' rights: enshrine gender equality and human rights in legislative and executive policy, overriding discriminatory customary or religious laws, especially those permitting marriage under 18.
- Take a cross-sector approach: coordinate across health, education, social protection, and climate adaptation sectors to address the root causes of poor health and educational outcomes by:
  - investing in geographically accessible healthcare sites that are appropriately staffed and resourced.
  - ensuring quality and accessible education, which delivers strengthened CSE.
  - prioritising disaster planning efforts and investments in school infrastructure and safe access routes.
- supporting initiatives that mitigate lost learning due to weather impacts or other disruptions.
- Provide school supplies and financial grants: to support education access, and deliver financial support for families whose incomes have been affected by climate change.
- In partnership with civil society, NGOs, local authorities, schools and community leaders, governments should deliver awareness-raising initiatives and public campaigns to challenge gender norms and address knowledge gaps: for example, funding and implementing awareness initiatives which highlight safe and informed health-seeking behaviours in the community, strengthen relationships between young girls and their caregivers, emphasise the equal value of girls' education, and promote men and boys' greater involvement in care.

## For NGOs and CSOs

- Build community knowledge: implement workshops and programmes that build caregiver knowledge, promote non-violent disciplinary methods, and foster intergenerational dialogue to challenge harmful social and gender norms.
- These efforts must also engage boys and men in caregiving and violence prevention to support girls' safety in public spaces.

## For local authorities and community leaders

- Strengthen public services to support at-risk girls, particularly in education and healthcare: local authorities should expand quality alternative education options and promote community-led learning initiatives so that girls have a better chance of continuing their education. In parallel, health authorities must co-design inclusive, age-appropriate health education programmes with communities, to improve outreach and information sharing.

## For Schools

- Make schools gender-inclusive and champion girls' leadership: provide staff training and curricula that meets pupils' diverse needs and equips pupils to understand and exercise their civic rights, within an inclusive environment
- Embed curricula that meets girls' needs: deliver climate change education, which staff are trained to deliver effectively. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) must be fully resourced, culturally relevant, and engage caregivers to build support and encourage open conversations on relationships and wellbeing.

## Endnotes

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**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.**

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