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## Understanding girls' everyday acts of resistance: evidence from a longitudinal study in nine countries

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars of girlhood studies have begun to focus on the long-overlooked topic of girls' political agency and activism. This endeavor has increasing urgency since several prominent girl activists have come to the attention of politicians, the media, and international institutions. Girls' political agency is more visible than ever, and yet, in media and in policy, it is still understood in narrow terms, concentrated almost entirely on the Global North. The focus on Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg and their books, tweets, marches, and speeches frames girls' activism as the high-profile work of a few spectacular individuals, ignoring the many everyday ways in which girls do politics. In this article, we analyze data from a longitudinal study with girls across nine countries in the Global South to show one way in which they are resisting conservative discourses about girlhood: through their friendships with boys. While the girls may not themselves identify as political, or indeed as feminists, we argue that they are gradually and subtly negotiating more opportunities for themselves in their communities and challenging sexualized discourses about their bodies. The findings offer insights into how we might begin to theorize girls' everyday acts of resistance in feminist international relations scholarship.

**KEYWORDS** Girls; politics; agency; development; Global South

### Introduction

Over the past ten years, scholars of girlhood studies have begun to focus on the long-overlooked topic of girls' political agency (see for example Bent 2013; Taft 2014). This endeavor has increasing urgency since several prominent girl activists have come to the attention of politicians, the media, and international institutions. Girls' political agency is more visible than ever, and yet, in media and in policy, it is still understood in narrow terms. The

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focus on activists such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg risks framing girls' politics as the high-profile work of a few spectacular individuals (Vanner and Dugal 2020). The many informal, everyday ways in which girls exercise agency and do politics are ignored. In this article, we take the approach of "reading against the grain" (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 2016) in a longitudinal study with girls and their caregivers in nine countries in the Global South, to analyze girls' everyday acts of resistance that we argue constitute a form of feminist politics. We focus on one particular area where the girls – aged 15 at the time of publication – are currently resisting conservative discourses about girlhood: their friendships with boys. We argue that some of the girls are, over the years, gradually negotiating more freedoms for themselves as well as challenging sexualized discourses about their bodies.

The topic of girls' agency has historically been under-theorized in politics, youth studies, international development (where girls are often studied as the subjects of intervention), and feminist international relations (IR) (where girls are often studied as the subjects of problematic discourses). We draw on a feminist poststructuralist conceptualization of agency, which moves beyond a dichotomy between agency and victimhood, and recognizes the many and conflicting ways in which girls and women can exert control over their lives from within patriarchal structures of power (Gonick et al. 2009). Drawing on the insights that girlhood studies can bring to feminist IR, it is possible to explore how girls act politically in their everyday lives while still recognizing that girls are frequently marginalized from political institutions and movements (Bent 2013, 175). To do so, we need to look to the many informal ways in which girls engage in politics (Taft 2014, 263).

There is a rich debate in feminist IR around "everyday conceptualisations of resistance," which are "entangled in dynamics of power" (Liinason 2020, 6) and which go beyond simplistic binaries between victimhood and resistance (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018). However, this debate has so far not focused on the resistance of girls, let alone girls in the Global South, who are still largely discussed in the context of powerful problematic discourses produced in the Global North (see for example Berents 2016; Walters 2016). In this article, we focus on how the Global South girls in this study resist dominant discourses that see girls' bodies as inherently risky and forbid male–female friendships between adolescents. We argue that this represents a form of everyday feminist resistance that researchers and organizations alike need to understand better in order to act as allies to those girls.

The data that we analyze is taken from *Real Choices, Real Lives*, a Plan International qualitative longitudinal study that follows the lives of girls in nine countries: Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda, and Vietnam. Through annual in-depth interviews exploring the attitudes of the girls and their caregivers toward gendered norms, *Real Choices, Real Lives* provides a unique data set for this analysis.

In 2019, the focus of the study was on “Girls Challenging the Gender Rules” (Plan International UK 2019), and this article expands on one of the many topics explored within that analysis: girls’ friendships with boys.

We start by situating our analysis within a discussion of the recent literature on girls’ political activism, as well as discussions within development studies about young women’s agency. We then set out the methodological approach of *Real Choices, Real Lives*, as well as the theoretical framework for the analysis presented here – namely, a poststructuralist and feminist approach informed by postcolonial theory. Then, through analysis of the interviews with parents and caregivers, we go on to demonstrate that in all nine country contexts, dominant discourses place restrictions on girls’ interactions with boys. However, in our final section, we show how girls challenge those discourses, questioning sexist rules, or even openly continuing their friendships and suffering (sometimes violent) consequences as a result. Our findings suggest a rich new field of research in feminist IR exploring girls’ everyday acts of resistance, which can inform the work of activists and academics alike.

## Girls, agency, and resistance

Girls’ participation in politics has frequently been overlooked in the academic literatures on politics and youth studies (Driscoll 2002, 11). Where studies have explored girls’ political participation, they often focus on their potential to become future political actors and not their current political engagement (Bent 2013, 174). However, the recent rise to prominence of high-profile girl activists has led to what we will call here a “girl powering” of international politics. Powerful actors, from politicians to celebrities, and from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to international institutions, have embraced girl power discourses in recent years that see the likes of Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg as capable of saving the world, precisely because they are girls (Calkin 2015; Desai 2016).

It is no coincidence that this girl powering of international politics comes after nearly two decades of “the girl powering of international development” (Koffman and Gill 2013, 86), in which international institutions, national governments, NGOs, and transnational corporations have embraced girl power discourses that see girls as the solution to world poverty. The argument central to this logic is that when a girl is given the money to stay in school, or an investment to start a business, she will work hard and provide for her family, marry later, and have fewer children, and those children will be healthier and better educated themselves. If we invest in girls on a national, or indeed global, scale, the argument goes, we will improve the economies of whole countries and even the world. The critiques of the girl powering of development are too extensive to summarize here (see Walters 2018, 480–

481, for a summary), but they center on the tendency to position individual girls as the solution to collective problems and place a great deal of responsibility on their shoulders (Chant 2016, 316). Claims about girls' bodies and the benefits of delayed motherhood are made in relation to issues far beyond the lives of the girls themselves, including about the health and education of their future children and of the economy of entire communities and countries (Switzer 2013). Girl power discourses in development risk reproducing conservative discourses the world over that see teenage girls' bodies as risky and in need of control (Potvin 2019).

While emerging from different institutions and in different contexts, the girl powering of international politics – seen on the platforms and in the media coverage devoted to girl activists like Thunberg and Yousafzai – and the girl powering of international development have similar underpinnings and consequences. Both draw on essentialist discourses that see girls as more responsible and hard working than their male counterparts (Chant 2016, 315–316); both center on individual girls and not girl activists as a collective (Caron and Margolin 2015); both serve to alleviate adult fears by positioning girls as the embodiment of hope and salvation (Taft 2020); both de-radicalize the demands being made by girl activists and by feminists; and both place huge responsibilities, from lifting communities out of poverty to solving the climate crisis, on the shoulders of individual adolescent girls (Chawansky 2012, 474).

Recent scholarship on girls' politics seeks to emphasize girls' collective struggles and the role that adults can play in supporting them (see for example Bent 2020; Haffee et al. 2020), girls' visions of leadership that challenge dominant power structures (see for example Cook 2020), and the role that intersecting oppressions play in some girls' activism being interpreted as excessive or aggressive while that of others is celebrated (Silva 2020). A recent special issue of the journal *Gender and Development* explores the many ways in which young feminists are challenging mainstream development discourses and the instrumentalization of girls' bodies (Davies and Sweetman 2018). Yet, this debate has so far largely been limited to girlhood studies and development studies.

In the analysis that follows, we aim to contribute to this emerging body of literature – and to show its relevance to debates about agency and resistance in feminist IR more broadly – by exploring girls' agency in the *Real Choices, Real Lives* data. We do so by discussing girls' resistance to dominant discourses in nine different contexts and by investigating a further aspect of this topic that remains largely unexplored: how girls' agency to resist such discourses might change with time (Neale and Flowerdew 2003, 196–197). Reports from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study in 2019 analyzed girls' resistance to gendered norms concerning multiple different topics across and within the three study regions of South East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and

Latin America and the Caribbean (Plan International UK 2019). The girls' resistance to restrictions on their friendships with boys emerged as a recurring theme in the data across all three regions. In this article, then, we have chosen to explore this topic in more depth, focusing on the similarities among the different contexts and drawing out the theoretical implications of these findings. This article thus aims to begin to answer the following research questions:

- What are the dominant discourses in these nine communities about girls' friendships with boys, and what limitations do they place on their movement and behavior?
- How do girls negotiate or resist those discourses, and what barriers remain to girls' acts of everyday resistance?
- How does that negotiation change with time as the girls progress through adolescence?

In the following section, we describe in greater depth the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study and the analytical choices that we made in order to explore these questions.

## Research design

Plan International is a leading global children's charity, working to support equality for girls across the world. Plan's qualitative longitudinal study *Real Choices, Real Lives* has been following the lives of girls in nine countries (Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda, and Vietnam), from when they were born in 2006.<sup>1</sup> The initial cohort comprised 146 girls. However, some have withdrawn from the study, migrated, or died. In areas where a large proportion of the original girls have migrated, additional families have been recruited. In total, 156 girls and their families have been involved in the study at some point, and a total of 106 girls were actively participating in 2020, ranging from between 10 and 15 girls in each country (Plan International UK 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Data collection takes place annually and involves in-depth interviews, initially just with parents and caregivers and, since 2013, also with the girls themselves. Interviews are facilitated by Plan International staff in the relevant countries, in the girls' first language, and conducted by someone familiar with the community. While new research tools are developed each year to reflect the girls' age and probe emerging thematic areas, the same data collection tools are implemented across the nine participating countries. The in-country research teams adapt the tools to be contextually relevant and appropriate, including adapting language and terminology beyond the initial translation process, approaching certain topics sensitively, and using

relevant cultural references during interviews. Interviews have drawn on a range of participatory methods, such as drawing, social network mapping, and storytelling, as well as including siblings and members of the girls' wider families at various points in time. Parents or caregivers are asked about topics including the girl's education, their behavior, and gender roles in their communities, as well as any changes in the make-up, income, employment, health, and overall welfare of the household. Although the sample size within each context is small, the depth of engagement with each family over the past 15 years allows us to draw from the data some fascinating insights about how girls are negotiating growing up in a gendered world.

The data is transcribed and translated by Plan International staff in the relevant country office or by consultants recruited by that office. A team of coders working in NVivo code the data collected each year according to analytical themes derived from the relevant literatures while also producing updates for each individual girl. The result is a vast matrix of patterns visible across the data for all 106 girls and their families, as well as material constituting a rich exploration of each individual girl's story and views.

We adopt a broadly poststructuralist and feminist theoretical framework, combining these lenses with a sensitivity to postcolonial theory, a combination that "recognizes that global inequalities that are gendered and racialized remain entrenched" (Koffman and Gill 2013, 85). We conceptualize discourse as a shared understanding that appears to be "natural" or "common sense" and that makes possible alternative understandings of a topic seem illogical or irrational (Doty 1993, 302). In turn, this understanding of a topic or subject shapes the possible ways of being available to us (Hall 1997, 6). However, poststructuralist feminism is also concerned with how subjects might be constructed in alternative ways, opening up the possibility for all humans to live free from the roles assigned to them according to their sex category (Kearney 2009, 13). Although not explicitly analyzing Global North–Global South power relations, this article is informed by postcolonial theory in that we – as white, middle-class British women – have endeavored to reflect on our own position in the research and the very real risk of reproducing the "axioms of imperialism" (Spivak 1999, 114) through attempts to "rescue" the Global South woman (Mohanty 2006, 15). In choosing to analyze how the girls challenge dominant discourses, we hope to contribute to the body of postcolonial feminist scholarship that has "taken us beyond media narratives that produce the silent brown/oppressed subaltern Muslim [and more broadly Global South] woman, mobilized to serve different opportunistic causes" (Kumar and Parameswaran 2018, 352).

Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies are an excellent way to gain an understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations. However, such studies are rare, owing to the considerable time and resources required to conduct in-depth interviews with a cohort over the course of years

(Thomson and McLeod 2015, 245). The use of QLR in *Real Choices, Real Lives* allows for an in-depth engagement with girls' realities now, while also situating that engagement within the context of their recent past and their unfolding adolescence. The temporal analysis involved in QLR allows us to understand "how the personal and the social, agency and structure, the micro and macro are interconnected and how they come to be transformed" (Neale and Flowerdew 2003, 190).

Historically, studies concerning young people's resistance to hegemonic discourses have tended to focus on young men and to "represent and discuss girls as conformist rather than resistant" (Driscoll 2002, 11). One methodological strategy that has been developed to explore girls' agency, particularly in studies with a postcolonial theoretical lens, is "reading against the grain" (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 2016; Walters 2017). Reading against the grain entails "tracing that which evades the dominant discourse" (Khoja-Moolji 2016, 9). An example of the use of this strategy can be found in scholarship about Pakistani girls' rights activist Malala Yousafzai. Studies have shown that representations of the story of Yousafzai's shooting by the Pakistani Taliban have been subsumed into wider gendered and Orientalist discourses about East/West, Islam/Christianity, and rescuing Muslim women (see for example Berents 2016; Olesen 2016; Thomas and Shukul 2015). By contrast, Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2015) and Rosie Walters (2017) have used the strategy of reading against the grain to explore how Yousafzai herself counters these depictions in her autobiographies, making "different kinds of knowledges possible" (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 552). Reading against the grain, therefore, offers a useful strategy for exploring the everyday interactions of girls that we argue constitute a feminist form of politics.

In the sections that follow, we adopt the strategy of reading against the grain to explore girls' negotiation of, and occasional resistance to, dominant discourses that see their friendships with boys as inappropriate or even dangerous. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a growing body of literature on girls' political agency.

## **Risk and girls' interactions with boys**

While parents' expectations surrounding girls' interactions with boys vary among country and family contexts, one dominant discourse across all nine contexts is an association between girl-boy friendships and risk. This mirrors the largely Western-centric academic literature on adolescent health and relationships (see Lansford and Bornstein 2011, 88), which tends to focus on mixed-gender friendships as a variable for predicting other "delinquent" or "risky" behavior, including substance abuse, smoking, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school (Giordano 2003, 257; Le and Kato 2006, 289). While there is a consensus that adolescence is a time when young



people start to expand their social networks beyond the family and draw on (both same- and mixed-gender) peer relationships for emotional support (Dijkstra and Berger 2018, 626; Sippola 1999, 407–408), the literature is divided on the influence that those friendships have on young people's behaviors. While some studies find that mixed-gender friendships increase the risk of "delinquency, serious violence, early onset of sexual behaviour and substance use" among girls, with no discernible impact on the behavior of boys (Poulin and Denault 2012, 1489), others have found the direct opposite, with only boys' behavior being influenced by their peers (Sanchagrin, Heimer, and Paik 2017, 818), and others still remain inconclusive (Dijkstra and Berger 2018, 633; Fearon et al. 2015, 71–72). Nevertheless, across all nine contexts in this study, parents were certain that their daughters' friendships with boys would lead to pregnancy and crime.<sup>3</sup>

In most cases, we found that this perception of risk led to adolescent male–female friendships being forbidden. For example, in an interview in Brazil in 2017, Bianca's mother stated, "I don't think it's right. Because my friend, the boys are too smart, they don't respect the girls, they keep doing things, I don't let Bianca play with boys" (Bianca's mother, Brazil, 2017). The language used here is illustrative of the essentialist discourses that we identify across different contexts. The parents saw boys as aggressive, coercive, and manipulative; they were seen as a danger to girls because they were "too smart." Girls, meanwhile, were passive; they were seen as incapable of deciphering or resisting coercive behavior. They were the subject of both boys' advances and parents' rules. Two types of risk dominated parental concerns: the risk of violence and the risk that girls would form a sexual relationship with a boy.

Parental concerns about girls' vulnerability to male violence were frequently linked to perceptions of boys and men as innate perpetrators of sexual violence against females. For example, Tatiana's mother in Brazil explained that "[Girls are more at risk of violence] because girls, women are more ... They [boys] like it too much ... Men, rapists, they like to rape girls, women" (Tatiana's mother, Brazil, 2018). In this quote, Tatiana's mother describes boys as out of control, following their every desire ("They like it too much"). While she does not finish her sentence describing girls, they are once again constructed as passive, the victims of boys' violence and sexuality. Across the research regions, parents consistently described boys and girls in line with essentialist discourses of violence and victimhood. Their words did little to challenge such discourses or suggest that they might be changed. This was also reflected in the language used by some of the girls themselves:

Boys tease [girls], they are headstrong and violent ... [If my parents saw me playing with boys, they would tell me off. (Djoumai, Togo, 2017)

I won't play with boys because I [am] afraid of injury ... [Parents are] afraid they [will] rape and kill us. (Nakry, Cambodia, 2018)

As well as the threat of sexual violence, in all nine countries, parents expressed concern that their daughters might engage in consensual sexual relations with their boy friends. Their concerns focused on how a pregnancy would impact a girl's prospects – both in terms of accessing education and employment and her social reputation:

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

I think [girls interacting with boys] is unsafe. I worry that they would have sex and unintended pregnancy. (Sen's mother, Vietnam, 2018)

A notorious girl will spoil her own future, but it is not the case for boys. (Davy's mother, Cambodia, 2018)

The understanding that pregnancy is an inevitable outcome of girl-boy interactions highlights the heteronormative social norms across all nine contexts and suggests that sexual and reproductive health education was not considered by parents as an effective means for mitigating this "risk." Where parents discussed their concerns with their daughters, they did so in a way that positioned girls as the passive victims of male desire: "I keep on telling her that she must not be that silly girl who lets herself be taken in by someone else so that she doesn't fall into that trap [of pregnancy]" (Hillary's mother, El Salvador, 2018).

Parental concerns about their children's behavior were deeply gendered. While parents feared their daughters might become pregnant, they feared their sons might become involved in drugs, gambling, and violence as they grew older. If girls maintained friendships with boys, therefore, parents feared that they too might become involved in criminal behavior. Again, the dominant discourse here is of the passive girl who is led astray by a delinquent boy. The parents were largely silent on girls' own desires or on the possibility of a male friend being a good influence on a girl. When asked whether girls and boys could be friends, Essohana's mother in Togo stated, "Such friendships can lead to pregnancy and crime" (Essohana's mother, Togo, 2016). The parents' concerns were not framed in terms of the girls' own wellbeing, which might have led to a focus on providing them with the information and resources that they needed to keep themselves safe and healthy or working with men and boys in the community to tackle the root causes of sexual violence. Instead, many of the parents seemed to take on the role of sexual gatekeeper for their daughters, prohibiting friendships with boys to mitigate the perceived risk of delinquency that could ensue.

In some cases, parents were clear that they were not concerned so much about the girls' actual friendships with boys but rather by how they would be

perceived by the community. Many of the girls were verbally chastised or punished for engaging in supposedly masculine practices with their male friends, such as Andrea in El Salvador: “We scold her so much; we tell her not to hang out with boys, it’s like she’s a man. She puts herself in the hands of those males and she goes off to play football with them, she loves that” (Andrea’s grandmother, El Salvador, 2016). Already at the age of ten, Andrea was beginning to experience restrictions on playing the sport that “she loves” with her friends in case it might have appeared to others that “it’s like she’s a man.”

In some cases, parents did not prohibit girls’ interactions with boys outright because certain factors seemed to reduce the perceived risk for them. In this regard, the most prominent condition cited by parents was age:

She has friends from school, and she has friends who are boys. I’m not bothered about this for now, as they are still children. (Layla’s mother, Benin, 2017)

[Male–female friendships are acceptable because] I think the kids at this age are innocent, and they do not know anything apart from studying. (Mai’s mother, Vietnam, 2017)

When Rebecca goes beyond this age, I will not permit it at all to play among groups of boys. (Rebecca’s father, Uganda, 2017)

Both direct and indirect references to menstruation indicated that much of the risk was associated with an understanding that physical maturity renders girls the objects of male desire. Again, the dominant discourses do not seem to prioritize a girl’s own safety and wellbeing, given that pre-pubescent girls are all too frequently also the victims of (sexual) violence by male peers or relatives. Once they reached physical maturity, parents placed a strong emphasis on girls’ responsibility to protect themselves from supposedly innate and unchangeable male behavior:

She has developed now; I tell her that once a girl has her period, she has to look after herself ... [W]e have to tell them that they have to look after themselves. (Sharina’s mother, Dominican Republic, 2018)

She has to change her ways and be more careful because if she now plays with any man, [she can] get pregnant because she is now a woman, and this worries me. (Amelia’s mother, Uganda, 2017)

In some cases, parents used harsh verbal punishment and violent discipline against girls who did not adhere to the conditions placed on girl–boy interactions:

I’ve heard her with her [female] cousins, talking about boyfriends with her [female] friends, ... I hit her, and she wrote a letter she was going to send to her grandfather, she was going to live with her grandfather because I don’t let her have a boyfriend. (Leyla’s mother, Dominican Republic, 2018)

For girls, discourses about risk and interactions with boys shape their everyday behavior, leading to strict rules and harsh punishments for disobeying them. Yet, they do still find space to challenge those rules. In the following section, we explore how some girls across the nine contexts negotiated discourses linking their behavior with risk, both in the words that they used and the behaviors that they described.

### **Girls' everyday acts of resistance**

We identified three ways in which the cohort girls challenged the dominant discourse surrounding girls' interactions with boys: by questioning why friendships and play with boys is regarded as unacceptable; by continuing to interact with boys despite the potential repercussions; and by reacting to male behavior with protective violence rather than avoiding interactions or restricting their movement. Longitudinal analysis of the study data found that every participating girl had questioned gender norms in some way. Here, we focus on friendships, which was an area where girls in all nine countries expressed some level of resistance. It is important to note that this analysis does not represent the views of all of the girls. Rather, the examples that we present offer insight into the varied ways in which girls were resisting these norms. While we have conducted a more in-depth, cross-country contextual analysis elsewhere (Plan International UK 2019), in the analysis that follows, we discuss patterns emerging across the whole data set, illustrating our argument with examples of individual girls' views and those of their parents and caregivers over time.

#### ***Girls questioning the rules***

Some girls questioned the idea that girl-boy interactions are unacceptable. Furthermore, some girls suggested that perceptions of the unacceptability of girl-boy friendships are rooted in gendered discourses about the type of activities or sports that are regarded as appropriate for girls to take part in, rather than due to the risks that interactions with boys pose.

For example, in El Salvador, Andrea's family reported using harsh verbal punishment to dissuade her from playing football and other "masculine" activities with boys (quoted above). However, Andrea herself suggested that a girl who is physically punished by her parents for going to play football with boys should "ask them what's wrong with playing [football] with boys" (Andrea, El Salvador, 2018). Similarly, Juliana in Brazil explained that her grandmother, who is her main caregiver, told her to avoid boys completely: "[S]he says I shouldn't be around boys. And when they come to play with us, I'm supposed to quit playing" (Juliana, Brazil, 2018). Juliana loved playing football, which also drew criticism and bullying from her peers: "They [my

school friends] make fun of me, they say I'm a tomboy, that I'm always playing ball, all the time, with the boys." Juliana was clear that these attitudes are unfair to girls: "[T]hen I tell them [my peers] that this is sexist because a girl can play ball just like a boy"; "I think [a girl punished for playing football with boys] should continue playing because what her parents think is a bit sexist." The 2020 interview with Juliana's grandmother suggested that Juliana was slowly succeeding in gaining more freedom:

Juliana's grandmother: Look, you know that I don't even scold her ... like that, because Juliana, she really likes to play with boys, a lot, she does. Yeah, she plays ball here, sometimes she plays here for hours, and I also don't forbid it. ... And then these boys are playing catch, then I get like, "What is this business about playing hide and seek?" [laughs], and the girls are with the neighbour's daughters, they are all playing, you see, so everybody is equal.

Interviewer: So, for you, boys and girls?

Juliana's grandmother: Yes [pause] I just watch, just warn them.

(Juliana's grandmother, Brazil, 2020)

In 2018, Juliana clearly made the case that restrictions on girls playing certain sports and games are "sexist." Although she was "supposed to quit" football when the boys started playing, she clearly did not do so, as, in 2020, her grandmother described how she still played "for hours" (Juliana's grandmother, Brazil, 2020). Although we do not know what conversations happened between Juliana and her grandmother in the years between these interviews, it is interesting that in her most recent interview, Juliana's grandmother used the language of equality to describe girls and boys playing together: "[E]verybody is equal" (Juliana's grandmother, Brazil, 2020). Her words suggested that while she still very much perceived Juliana's interactions with boys as risky – something about which her granddaughter needed to be warned – Juliana had succeeded in persuading her grandmother, either through an argument based on equality and fair treatment or through persistence, that it was not behavior worth punishing or forbidding. In this way, Juliana had won the freedom to play the sport that she loved.

### ***Girls continuing interactions with boys despite repercussions***

Some girls even risked violent repercussions to continue their friendships with boys. Essohana in Togo demonstrated awareness of the dominant discourse in her context and even suggested that she shared this attitude in her use of "we": "[W]e do not accept that girls and boys play together in our community" (Essohana, Togo, 2015). In response to a story about a girl whose parents

used physical punishment to chastise her for playing with male friends, Essohana told the interviewer: “The parents in the story were right to tell her off and even to smack her in the hope that she would stop playing with boys. Her parents want what is best for her” (Essohana, Togo, 2018).

Essohana reported some of the reasoning given by her parents for restricting her interactions with boys: “[M]y mum and dad do not like it at all that I keep company with boys; they say that boys aren’t any good” (Essohana, Togo, 2016); “[I]f mum sees me having fun with the boys, she beats me, saying ‘Have you ever seen the girls playing with boys?’” (Essohana, Togo, 2015). However, Essohana consistently reported having, and playing with, male friends from 2015 onwards, despite opposition from her community, parents, and brothers and the risk of violent repercussions: “[M]y parents and big brothers don’t like me playing with boys; they tell me off and sometimes smack me if I do” (Essohana, Togo, 2017).

One strategy that some of the girls used was shifting or confining their interactions with boys to alternative spaces. When her family punished her for playing with boys, Essohana adapted rather than stopped her behavior: “[S]o, at school, I like playing with my friends who are boys, but not at home” (Essohana, Togo, 2017). This strategy seemed to be working for Essohana; in 2019, as in previous years, she told the interviewer about her friendships with both boys and girls, saying, “I feel happy, and I get on well with my friends.” Her mother, by contrast, when asked about male–female friendships, said:

I do not want her to be friends with boys as they could trick her into pregnancy which would ruin her future. She doesn’t have any such relations with boys as she is not allowed to leave the house to go to video clubs or evening dances. (Essohana’s mother, Togo, 2019)

By identifying spaces where girls’ behavior may come under less scrutiny, the girls rejected the dominant discourse but were limited in their capacity to change it. Indeed, for some girls, even school was not a safe space in which to interact with boys: “I can have friends who are boys, but the problem with this school is that when others see you playing with boys, they think of other things” (Ruth, Uganda, 2017). Here, Ruth suggests that the issue is not with the activity – “playing” – but with the people who “think of other things.” Valeria in El Salvador explained that her preference for playing traditionally masculine games meant that her family “tell me that I am a boy,” leading her to hide, but not change, her behavior: “[S]ometimes when there’s no one around, I get two little cars and start playing at home” (Valeria, El Salvador, 2017). These examples show how some girls creatively and bravely navigated restrictions on their behavior, finding ways to continue their friendships with boys, or their love of “masculine” games, despite the possible consequences.

Hang in Vietnam also felt that she must hide a recently developed friendship with a boy from her family. She was aware of how her parents would react:

Their first saying will be, "Surely you are falling in love!" [She imitated her parents' voice.] My parents worry about me too much, so their first saying must be "love affair" ... It is probably because I am a girl, so they ... Boys have nothing to lose, but girls ... um ... girls have only one time. That's why my parents respond like that. (Hang, Vietnam, 2020)

At the time of the interview, Hang explained, she and the boy had "just become close friends," but he was already someone whom she felt able to confide in: "I tell him both my happiness and sadness." Hang decided to keep this secret for now, saying that she would wait until she and the boy were "very close" before telling her parents. She was confident, then, that she would be able to change their views: "[I]t will be OK after I explain to them" (Hang, Vietnam, 2020). While she was aware of her parents' disapproval and the perceived risk of her friendship, she confidently told the interviewer that she thought the friendship would only grow closer and that when it did, she would be able to persuade her parents that it did not pose a risk to her safety or reputation. The girls rejected the idea that mixed-gender friendships are inherently risky, adapted their behavior to conceal their friendships from their families, or even challenged their parents and caregivers outright.

### ***Girls resisting with violence***

While the cohort girls generally did not question the construction of boys as inherently violent, some of them challenged perceptions of boys as stronger than girls and restrictions on girls' behavior based on that view. In the Dominican Republic, for example, Katerin and Rebeca stated that girls need to be strong and fit, "because when a boy hits me, I can hit him back" (Katerin, Dominican Republic, 2016), and "so that we can defend ourselves if someone tries to do something to us" (Rebeca, Dominican Republic, 2017). Raquel in El Salvador also thought that physical strength is important for girls "because if a boy wants to hit her, a girl has to learn things" (Raquel, El Salvador, 2017). Here, the girls demonstrated awareness of the risk of violence that they faced as girls but did not accept that this makes them victims.

Interestingly, several parents did not oppose their daughters reacting violently to unwanted touching or violence from males:

In this sort of situation, Leyla is rebellious. [She might say] "No, because he touched me ... I hit him." (Leyla's aunt, Dominican Republic, 2016)

[I'm not worried about her] because it's actually the boys who are afraid of her. (Chesa's mother, Philippines, 2017)

If anyone touches Katerin, she will break one of his eyes! (Katerin's mother, Dominican Republic, 2016)

In these cases, parents appeared to prioritize the girls' self-defense and protection from male violence over adherence to acceptable femininity. These girls were, however, framed as anomalies – not the kind of girls that parents needed to worry about, unlike their peers. Parents' tolerance of violent behavior does not challenge the dominant discourses that normalize male violence and associate girl–boy interactions with risk, and they still frame the issue as girls' rather than boys' responsibility to address.

The changes in girls' attitudes and negotiation of discourses over time were particularly notable in the case of Leyla in the Dominican Republic. She explained in 2016 that she avoided playing with boys "because they are always hitting a lot" and responded to their violent behavior in kind: "[I]f they hit me, I hit them back, and that's it" (Leyla, Dominican Republic, 2016). Leyla's aunt (quoted above) did not criticize this reactive violent behavior; instead, the concern that built in Leyla's family from 2016 onward was the risk that Leyla was, or would soon become, involved in a romantic relationship with a boy. In 2018, Leyla questioned this concern, stating that relationships between males and females are an inevitable part of girls' futures: "We have to get used to being friends with each other because we're not going to be spending all our time with girls; one day we'll have to get together with boys" (Leyla, Dominican Republic, 2018). Here, it appears that Leyla was partially reiterating the dominant, hetero-normative discourse that links mixed-gender friendships with romantic or sexual relationships. However, her statement makes no reference to risk or negative outcomes as a result. Rather, she seemed to be arguing that friendships with boys at her age are a healthy experience that will help girls in their future adult relationships with men. Perhaps her attempts to be strong and to "fight back" were a way for her to be able to have those friendships with boys, which she saw as so important for her future.

The freedoms gained from the self-defense approach may be short lived, however. By 2019, Chesa's mother seemed to have abandoned any support for male–female friendships:

- Interviewer: Do you have any concerns about her health?  
 Chesa's mother: Yes. She should avoid boys; not to be too near them because she's a young lady now.  
 Interviewer: How often do you tell her?  
 Chesa's mother: Often. Every time she goes to school, I remind her.  
 (Chesa's mother, Philippines, 2019)

Chesa's mother's relaxed approach in previous years had shifted as Chesa had progressed toward adolescence, and Chesa now faced daily warnings from her mother about the dangers of being "too near" to boys. Nevertheless, in her interview, Chesa said, "Sometimes when we girls fight, I approach my male friends" (Chesa, Philippines, 2019). This statement in itself challenges



essentialist discourses about how girls and boys play, which groups fight, and which play together harmoniously. However, Chesa's physical aggression became less effective in assuaging her mother's fears as she got older. Perhaps for Chesa's mother, violence was not acceptable behavior for a "young lady," or perhaps she was simply worried that as they reached adolescence, the boys would overpower Chesa. Either way, Chesa's words suggested that she ignored her mother's warnings and continued to have friendships with boys.

While in many cases they are subtle, the examples in these three sections show how girls find ways to challenge discourses that associate their bodies with risk and that limit their friendships and relationships. Many of these actions are necessarily covert – expressing an oppositional stance to the dominant discourse in an anonymized interview with a researcher or spending time with boys in locations where parents cannot monitor them. There is a limit to how subversive most girls can be without the support of adult allies and communities. However, the analysis demonstrates the agency that girls showed across all nine contexts in negotiating conservative discourses that would limit the opportunities available to them.

## Conclusion

Like any analysis conducted partway through a longitudinal study, the findings presented in this article are incomplete (Thomson and Holland 2003, 237). There is always the possibility that "the next wave of data can reveal twists and turns in circumstances and subjectivity" (Edwards and Weller 2012, 208). There is still much scope to develop the temporal analysis of this topic, exploring how girls' willingness to challenge rules about their behavior might change as they mature.

Our findings relating to parental attitudes about mixed-gender friendships reveal a worrying trend in which girls are forbidden from developing meaningful, platonic relationships with boys. Such friendships have been shown to have important developmental implications for adolescents, helping boys and girls to learn to communicate better with one another (Sippola 1999, 412), to break free of gender-segregated environments that can serve to reinforce gender stereotypes (Mehta and Strough 2009, 202), and to "[establish] a sexual identity and sexual orientation" (Bahrami et al. 2018, 1). There is clearly important work to do in addressing dominant associations between mixed-gender friendships and risk or delinquency and in creating safe spaces for adolescents to break free from gender segregation. This work needs to take place not only at a community level but also at the level of international development policy and discourse, in order to challenge dominant girl power representations that position girls' bodies as the greatest threat to the fulfillment of their potential.

Similarly, it is clear from this analysis and the wider study findings (Plan International UK 2019) that there is still a great deal of work to do in ensuring that all young people have access to the information and services that they need to engage in healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex. While parents appreciated the need to talk to young people about relationships and sexuality, this was largely focused on giving vague warnings and threats about what might happen to girls if they broke the rules. Opportunities are being missed for important conversations with girls and boys about their bodies, their rights, and how to protect themselves and each other from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

The findings presented in this article make a compelling case for the study of girls' agency in international development scholarship and, more broadly, in feminist IR. Although some scholars have begun to focus on this topic, there is much work still to do in understanding how girls – in both the Global North and the Global South – challenge dominant discourses that constrain their behavior as they progress through childhood and adolescence, whether those discourses come from parents and communities, or international development institutions and the media. Our analysis shows that girls are aware of conservative discourses about their bodies and find diverse ways to negotiate them. Sometimes, they question or speak out against restrictions on their behavior that they see as unfair; sometimes, they continue with “unacceptable” forms of behavior and suffer the repercussions as a result; and sometimes, they adapt to essentialist discourses about masculine aggressors and feminine victims by making themselves more masculine, positioning themselves as able to fight back. This negotiation varies across different contexts and within groups of cohort girls in the same contexts. Some feel able to question the rules while others do not.

This analysis contributes theoretically to the small body of research that is reading against the grain and challenging depictions of girls – especially those in the Global South – as the passive recipients, or reproducers, of dominant discourses. It adds to the emerging literature on the political lives of girls by exploring their everyday acts of resistance. What is clear from this analysis is that girls are already keenly aware of the possibilities for resistance against patriarchal discourses in their day-to-day lives. They negotiate these carefully, finding ways to push back against restrictions on their behavior. In revealing how they are doing so – within the constraints placed upon them, and often in subtle ways – our aim is certainly not to contribute to girl power discourses that would see girls as capable of achieving gender equality all by themselves. As our analysis shows, they face many barriers. On the contrary, we hope to spark a discussion about how researchers and organizations alike might support these everyday acts of resistance, starting from a respectful engagement with what girls already know about their communities and the possibilities for change within them.

## Notes

1. From 2006 to 2021, the study was managed and coordinated by Plan International UK. Since July 2021, the study has been managed and coordinated by Plan Global. Our ability to explore boys' perspectives on cross-gender friendships is limited by the study design, which does not involve in-depth interviews with boys. Now that this theme has emerged from the data, this would make for a fascinating subject to return to in the future with the girls' brothers and/or male friends.
2. Although in some cases, the girls or their family members may have taken part (or continue to take part) in Plan International programming activities, it is important to note that the families were not initially selected for participation in the study based on Plan engagement. In some communities, the organization continues to implement activities, while in others, they have completely or partially phased out at different points over the study's lifetime. The study was never intended to provide evaluative data on the impact of Plan's programming in these communities, and while the girls and their families are likely to have been influenced by programming on some level – whether government or (I)NGO implemented – this did not emerge explicitly in the data. This would, of course, be a fascinating area for further analysis.
3. Clearly, there are important cultural differences across the nine contexts (for detailed analysis across the three study regions, see Plan International UK 2019). However, our findings match relevant literatures on the global dominance of discourses that see adolescent behavior as a threat to the reputation of the family as a whole (Le and Kato 2006, 289; Van Horn and Marques 2000), sexual taboos that prevent open communication about sex and relationships within families (Igras, Diakité, and Lundgren 2017, 910; Miller et al. 2018, 168), gender roles that emphasize the need for adolescent girls to be obedient and virtuous (Alampay and Jocson 2011, 170; Ngo, Ross, and Ratliff 2008, S205), and a perception that adolescence is a period requiring increased parental surveillance (Araúz-Ledezma, Massar, and Kok 2020, 10).

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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