PLAN INTERNATIONAL

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CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

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Girls' Everyday Resistance

Findings from Real Choices, Real Lives

Technical Report

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a small number of girls have garnered global attention with their activism. From Malala Yousafzai demanding every girl gets the opportunity to go to school, to Greta Thunberg mobilising millions of her peers to demand action on climate change, to Autumn Peltier demanding justice for Indigenous communities, girls and young women are now very publicly leading a number of social causes. Yet, we also know that the majority of girls are still excluded from any formal political participation - they can't vote, they're not allowed to join political parties, and for many, speaking out on topics they care about may even come with serious risks. Instead, many girls choose more informal ways of being political in their everyday lives, in ways that don't necessarily garner the attention of international media. Despite Yousafzai, Thunberg, Peltier and their peers succeeding in shining a light on girls' political participation, we still know very little about how most girls 'do' politics in their everyday lives. Are they able to speak out about injustice? Do they question, or even disobey, unfair rules? What kind of change would they like to see? Are adults in their communities listening?

In this report, we explore these questions, drawing on Plan International's unique study with girls and their caregivers in nine countries. By exploring in-depth the experiences and views of girls over the course of their childhood and adolescence, we can understand how 'everyday' girls, who may or may not identify themselves as activists, engage in informal forms of politics in their daily lives.

1.1 Real Choices, Real Lives

Real Choices, Real Lives is a research study by Plan International that has been following the lives of 142 girls in nine countries from their births in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024. Located across three regions, these countries are: Benin, Togo and Uganda in Africa, Brazil, Dominican Republic and El Salvador in the Americas, and Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam in Southeast Asia. As a longitudinal and qualitative study, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has provided rare access to girls' daily realities, opportunities, and challenges; their experiences of gender and social norms over the course of their childhood and adolescence; their opinions; and their aspirations for the future ***in their own words*.**

The core *Real Choices, Real Lives* research methodology is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with girls and their caregivers, conducted annually. From when the girls were born until they turned seven years old in 2013, interviews were conducted solely with one of the girls' parents or caregivers - usually their mother, but in some cases the father, grandmother, an aunt, or other family member who shared the same household with the girl and was responsible for her care. From 2013, the cohort girls themselves were also interviewed annually, which included the use of participatory and age-appropriate activities such as drawing and play exercises.

Real Choices, Real Lives has a distinct commitment to understanding the root causes of gender inequality by asking questions about beliefs, values, and expectations which aim to uncover how gendered social norms and behaviours are created and sustained or shift over time. Very few studies have followed 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. By speaking to girls directly, *Real Choices, Real Lives* research provides unique access to girls' opinions, beliefs and recommendations for how we create a more equal world in their own words.

In this research, we analyse the views of 104 of the girls and their caregivers from all nine countries who were still participating in the study when the girls turned 15 in 2021.[1][2] By doing so, we are able to explore how their views about gender inequalities evolve over the course of their childhood and adolescence.

1.1.1 Learning from girls around the world

Despite growing up in very different contexts, the girls in the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort study shared many common experiences during childhood and early adolescence across a range of different themes. One thing they all share in common is that they were invited to participate in the study because they were from one of the poorest households, or poorest communities, in their context. Therefore, despite cultural and contextual differences, the girls seemed to experience certain gender inequalities in similar ways.

We have found over the years that the girls in this study are extremely time poor. From their early years, girls have high levels of **unpaid care responsibilities**, often to 'help' their mothers with care work whilst their brothers are not required to do so. These responsibilities mean they often do not have enough time for their education, to develop skills for their futures, to spend time with friends, and to take care of their wellbeing.

Across the cohort, we found that girls were lacking in comprehensive sexuality education, with caregivers reluctant to discuss sex with the girls and instead placing tight restrictions on their behaviour. Caregiver-adolescent dialogue is an essential factor in **girls' experiences of SRHR and wellbeing** - an experience heavily influenced by social norms. Caregivers across the global cohort see the beginning of menstruation as marking an immediate shift from girlhood to womanhood, whereby girls' behaviours and sexuality are to be strictly controlled. We also learnt that the cohort girls were socialised to believe that **gender-based violence** is expected and is something they must take responsibility for protecting themselves from: by age 11, 91 per cent of the cohort girls had reported experiencing some form of violence, and in early adolescence, 68 per cent believed that male violence was 'natural' or 'just the way things are.'

Climate change has had a profound impact on girls globally, including on their education. Girls are missing school because of extreme weather events, whilst climate change impacts have led to livelihood losses and deepened deprivation for cohort families that rely on farming and fisheries for their income. The cohort girls report their parents have struggled to pay for school fees or have pulled the girls out of school to take up paid work. By the end of the study, nearly one in four of the girls were not in any form of education, employment or training.

Across these themes, the barriers and **gender rules** faced by girls as they get older are dramatically different to those of their male peers. In 2019, however, we began to see some evidence that girls were questioning, or even beginning to disobey, these rules. In this research, we explore girls' everyday resistance, by which we mean all the ways their views and described behaviours question or directly challenge gender inequalities and gender roles in their communities.

The purpose of this research is to listen to girls' views and their everyday experiences, and to better understand how adults and organisations can support girls to fully participate in their communities, shape their own lives and the environment around them for the better, and feel empowered to make choices that support their own and their families' wellbeing. We want to understand the barriers that prevent girls from doing all of these things - many of them imposed by adults - and the kinds of change that girls would like to see.

To do this, we set out a framework for understanding girls' everyday forms of resistance to gender inequalities. While not every girl can, or wishes to, address the UN or lead a protest, many girls are beginning to question norms and behaviours in their communities and some even start to resist. Many more are calling for adults to do more to address the challenges that girls face. By listening to the

[1] While the researchers tried to stay in touch with every girl involved in the study, some chose to stop participating, migrated away from the area, or, sadly, died during childhood. In Vietnam, the researchers were unable to carry out interviews with ten girls living in one province in 2023 and 2024, and so we have chosen to include only the nine girls from another province, who participated in the study until the end.
[2] For a list of participating girls, please see Annex 1.

views of girls across nine different countries and over 18 years, we can see clear areas where girls need greater support to make their voices heard and effect change.

1.2 Outline and summary of findings

We start by reviewing the existing research on girls' - and more broadly children's - politics, drawing inspiration from a small but growing body of work exploring how girls resist inequalities in their daily lives. We then explain the key concepts used in this research, defining what it is we mean by terms such as "girls' everyday politics", "girls' everyday resistance," "agency," "power," and "empowerment." We put forward an analytical framework that we have found useful in exploring different forms of girls' resistance, from questioning norms, through to overt behavioural resistance.

The following sections set out our findings, drawing on in-depth analysis of 18 years of interviews with girls' caregivers and, from the age of seven, with girls themselves. We start by exploring **caregiver views on gender**. While caregivers on the whole were **fully supportive** of girls accessing basic rights, such as education, and were strongly opposed to violations of girls' rights, such as early marriage, the research still showed that most caregivers held views on a number of topics that ultimately prevented girls from accessing many of their basic rights. This included commonly held **essentialist views** that certain roles and behaviours were assigned to men and boys, or women and girls, because of inherent natural qualities, or because they had been designed that way by the god the family believed in. This frequently led to very unequal divisions of labour within the household, with girls spending large amounts of time on unpaid domestic work; a view that men were the heads of household and decision makers; a perception that girls were capable of, and responsible for, making mistakes, but not mature enough to be trusted to make positive decisions; a perception that boys are badly behaved by nature; strict rules about girls' behaviour and mobility, especially once they started menstruating; and the threat, or use, of violent punishment should a girl fail to conform to expected behaviours. Despite clear expressed support for equality of opportunity, we found that many caregivers' views represent a **barrier** to girls fully participating or being able to access those opportunities.

In the following sections, we explore **girls' resistance** to the many gender inequalities they face, following the different types of resistance identified in our framework. We start by showing how the girls of the *Real Choices Real Lives* cohort have **strongly egalitarian views**, believing in equal access to education and equal freedom for boys and girls, and being fully supportive of women's economic empowerment. We then go on to explore how they **question gender norms** in their community, including questioning essentialist claims about how men and women, boys and girls behave. In the section on **attitudinal resistance**, we show how some girls take this further, not just questioning gender norms, but expressing a view that they are unjust, or even threatening to disobey them.

In the section on **articulated resistance**, we explore all the ways that girls support the idea of resisting gender inequalities, or ask for adults to do more to create gender equal societies, even if they do not feel able to actively resist or disobey themselves. This includes expressing a desire to be involved in decision making, or asking adults to provide much needed support for girls, including in the form of better sex education.

Following this, we explore the many forms of **secret resistance** the girls undertook, including secret friendships and relationships, and even, for one in eight of the girls, secret jobs and earnings. Next, we examine more **overt acts of resistance**, finding nearly half of the girls were engaged in these at some point during their childhood and adolescence, including refusing to conform to expected behaviours and dress codes; refusing to do chores; or saving money in order to take some control of their own finances.

In the final section of the analysis, we look in-depth at **three case studies** of girls whose resistance became stronger over time. We are able to do this thanks to the longitudinal nature of the study, and the inclusion of both caregivers and girls. We explore how Juliana[3] in Brazil successfully gained a bit more **freedom** for herself, resisting her grandparents' strict rules on playing football and socialising

[3] All participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy, and specific locations have been removed.

with boys and eventually persuading them to allow her to play. We look at how Thea in Benin begins to **question gender roles** in the home as she grows up, asking why it is that women and girls do all the chores and becoming increasingly resistant to this. We then analyse Reyna's story of growing up in a very homophobic and conservative family in the Philippines, but increasingly **questioning both her gender expression and her sexuality**, eventually introducing her girlfriend to her parents. In each case, we explore what the **enabling and constraining factors** were that made it possible for these girls to create change, acknowledging that for many girls, such behaviour might come with too many risks.

Finally, we build on these conclusions to suggest a number of recommendations for governments, NGOs and allies, to provide girls with the **support and resources** they need to challenge inequalities.

Firstly, **governments and authorities** should strengthen and enforce legal frameworks that challenge gender norms and promote equality. They should also fund education and community initiatives to support girls' leadership and equality of opportunity. Additionally, they should support, resource, and partner with civil society, NGOs, local authorities and community leaders on promoting awareness of gender equality.

Secondly, **NGOs and civil society actors** should work with caregivers and community members to raise awareness about gender norms and challenge them. They should also support girls by helping them develop skills, connect with peers, and take part in decision making and community activities.

As well, **local authorities** should support initiatives led by girls and ensure public services are accessible and responsive to their needs. They should create spaces where girls can share their ideas and help shape decisions in their communities, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

Finally, **schools** should create safe spaces for girls, ensure policies reflect the different needs of students of all ages and genders, provide staff training and curricula that support everyone, and foster an inclusive environment where mixed-gender activities are respectful and girls can take on leadership roles.

2. Girls' resistance: what we know so far

While the celebration of girl activists in media and development discourse is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is already a substantial body of research we can draw on in understanding how girls' activism is currently understood and portrayed, and also, how that might differ from the activist aims of girls themselves or reinforce restrictive ideas of what girls' resistance looks like.

2.1 Children in global politics

Research on childhood in global politics has identified how children's lives, and their suffering, are frequently politicised, even as children themselves are rarely afforded political agency.[1] Images of children's suffering have been used to capture global attention and pity, or to spur international action on a particular crisis, but the children featured in these images are rarely given the chance to speak.[2][3] [4][5] While we know that children do take on any number of 'adult' roles, including labourer, migrant, soldier and parent, they are still frequently seen as too young to contribute to 'adult' decisions.[6]

Girls in particular face additional exclusions because of gender, with girlhood in the Global South frequently still depicted and understood in terms of victimhood. [7] Though not directly related to the experiences of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort, we can draw from research with current and former child soldiers in rehabilitation and peacebuilding initiatives to understand the many ways in which girls' roles in global politics are overlooked. This work has shown that girls are "triply silenced agents": as children they are silenced by societal perceptions of age; as girls, they are silenced by societal perceptions of gender; and as child soldiers, they are silenced by dominant understandings that associate this category with boys alone.[8] All of which leads to them being excluded from peacebuilding and rehabilitation efforts, while simultaneously being excluded from post-conflict initiatives for child civilians.

The case of child soldiers is also illustrative of a further theme identified in the literature on children's participation in global politics: that children and young people are either attributed no agency at all (as 'victims'), or negative agency (as 'threats' or 'problems to be solved'), but never positive agency, as capable of contributing meaningfully to resolving a crisis or building peace[9][10] While some more recent depictions of individual girls have begun to challenge this, as discussed in the following sections, overall, much work remains to be done in framing girls as being able to make a positive contribution.[11] Children are seen as either objects to be rescued or protected, or subjects to be feared. As a clear example of this, researchers cite the many jurisdictions where children can be tried in court for committing a crime at a much younger age than they are able to sit on a jury; or are able to sign up to serve in a military years before they can vote for the government that will send that military to war.[12][13][14][15]

2.2 Media discourse

In many ways, the recent rise to prominence of a number of girl activists challenges this focus on children as having only negative agency, with some media depictions showing girls as capable of achieving great political change. Media discourse on girls' activism has varied between multiple different types of representation, and researchers have identified a number of patterns to the coverage. While there does seem to be a shift towards more positive depictions of agency, many of these representations still differ greatly from the messages girl activists themselves are trying to convey.

For example, analyses of the media portrayals of the Pakistani girls' rights activist Malala Yousafzai have shown that in the wake of her shooting by the Pakistani Taleban, she was portrayed in a way that made her seem younger than she was, a helpless victim, and in need of rescue by the West. These studies showed how media representations reproduced gendered, Orientalist discourses of Muslim women as in need of saving[16][17][18][19] Despite the fact that Yousafzai was a blogger for the BBC from the age of 11, has written multiple books, given countless speeches at international institutions and established her own educational fund, media coverage of her story focused almost exclusively on what was being said about her. One study found that in British media coverage of the aftermath of her shooting and her move to the UK, Yousafzai herself was the 'expert' quoted in articles about her story just 11 percent of the time, with journalists instead choosing somebody else - frequently male doctors and politicians - to explain the significance of her story. And despite her making the journey to school by herself day after day, in full awareness of the threat against her life, journalists pondered who would save "little Malala" and "who will take her back to school?"[20] Even seemingly celebratory coverage of her story served to constrain Yousafzai's agency.

Some media coverage has shifted towards seeing girls as having positive agency. Research has identified a discourse of 'spectacularisation' of girls in recent years, that is a portrayal of girls as having spectacular talents and abilities, and the ability to "change the world all on their own".[21] Spectacular discourses adopt a celebratory tone, suggesting that thanks to feminist gains, girls can now achieve anything, indeed almost everything, by themselves. However, there are multiple critiques of this portrayal. The first is that not all girls get to be spectacular. These depictions frequently focus on certain kinds of girls, that is, ""the impossibly high-achieving heterosexual white girl who plays sports, loves science, is gorgeous but not hyper-sexual, is fit but not too thin, learns from her (minor) mistakes, and certainly will change the world someday".[22] In recent years, celebratory coverage of the likes of Greta Thunberg and her peers as having the potential to change the world showed a genuine shift in how girls are perceived, and the suggestion that at least under some circumstances, publics are starting to take girls seriously as political actors. However, many girls do not get the kind of media coverage that Thunberg would leverage, and Black girls, disabled girls, queer girls and girls of the Global South are notably absent from these depictions. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is when a photo of Thunberg and her peers at Davos went viral after it emerged that Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate, the only Black member and the only African activist in the group, had been cropped out before the image was published in the press.[23]

Secondly, spectacular depictions make invisible the support and resources that girls need in order to make their voices heard, and the many power structures that make it almost impossible for an individual girl to create change. They make it seem as though girls are capable of addressing international forums, mobilising millions of their peers and indeed, changing the world, all by themselves. This links to a third critique of the spectacularisation of girls - that hopeful coverage of girl activists can frequently have the opposite effect on viewers and readers to the one the girls intended, by reassuring them that the crisis is already on its way to being solved. While girl activists themselves are asking for adults to step up, to demand political and structural change, and to end decades of political inaction on causes they care about, paradoxically, spectacular media depictions have a demobilising effect on adults, in reassuring them that young people will come up with the solutions.[24] So while recent shifts in media discourse to acknowledge girls as serious political actors are a welcome change from past depictions of girls as passive victims, they still differ greatly from the kinds of messages girl activists themselves would wish to convey.

2.3 Development discourse

Since the late 1990s, international development discourse has also shifted to a much more positive view of girls' agency, with multiple high-profile campaigns making the case for investing in girls in the Global South. This development occurred alongside a move towards 'positive images' in international development campaigns more generally, in response to widespread criticisms of the use of shocking and highly distressing imagery of humanitarian crises in fundraising campaigns of the 1980s, promoting what has been labelled a 'politics of pity'.[25] This imagery frequently focused on images of starving children and mothers as passive victims of political phenomena beyond their control.[26][27] Similarly to media depictions, some charity advertising relied on assumptions about children and women as totally removed from politics in order to portray them as innocent victims, and thus motivate viewers to donate.[28][29]

After much reflection in the aid industry, many organisations now choose to feature more positive imagery of those impacted by their operations, with a move towards “happy and empowered” images of people in the Global South. [30] Alongside this development, there has also been a “girl powering of international development”, in which a number of organisations, international institutions and transnational corporations have seized on the clear evidence that when given the opportunity to earn money, girls and women invest more of that money in their families and communities than their male counterparts, to make the case for programming targeted at girls.[31] [32]

Similarly to concerns raised about spectacular depictions of girls in the media, some scholars and activists have questioned whether these seemingly positive depictions of girls’ capabilities may go too far in presenting the very real dangers and inequalities that girls face as already in the process of being solved; in other words, girls in the Global South have gone from being depicted as victims to heroines.[33][34] When positive messages about girls’ capabilities are simplified to create marketing campaigns, they can serve to reinforce gender roles by portraying girls as altruistic saviours who look after their families, go to work, lift entire communities out of poverty, while boys simply play or keep their earnings to themselves[35]Many such campaigns focus on patronising ideas about rescuing girls and women of the Global South through ’savvy’ investments, rather than solidarity with fellow girls and women and a commitment to ending the injustices they face.[36] Girls’ ‘voices’ are amplified in international development to complement existing narratives and programmes which can serve to discourage any critical analysis of unequal global socio-political and economic relations underlying global poverty.[37][38]

There are a number of critiques from scholars and activists alike of ‘girl power’ discourses in international development. The first, is that the case made for investing in girls’ basic rights such as education is made in instrumentalist terms, on the grounds of all of the other development outcomes they will go on to achieve for everyone else: contribution to GDP; fewer children; reduced infant mortality and so on. The critique is that these discourses are seen as promoting girls as ‘development on the cheap’.[39][40][41] Plan International recognises its involvement in these discourses and continually revises its practices through reflection and learning, striving to advance good-faith arguments about the economic benefits of empowering girls.

Secondly, as represented in campaigns and marketing materials, girls’ empowerment initiatives frequently present girls as untapped resources and as economically inactive, ignoring the huge contribution they make to national and global economies through their domestic labour. If programming also fails to take this into account, there is a real risk that supposed empowerment initiatives focused on education and employment simply add to the already huge burden on girls’ time.[42]

Thirdly, the frequent focus on girls as potential human capital, that is future earners and contributors to the economy, often leads to a narrow focus on education and economic empowerment, ignoring the many factors beyond those arenas that might promote or hinder girls accessing their basic rights, including sexual and gender based violence; girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health care; household labour, roles and decision making.[43][44][45][46][47] Rather than seeking to address the underlying political and economic causes of poverty, girl power discourses seek to exploit harmful gender norms - that require girls and women to be more altruistic than their male family members - in order to make communities more resilient to that poverty.[48]

Finally, feminist critiques also highlight the risks of focusing on individual agency and choice without challenging the discrimination and dangers that girls face.[49] For example, one study followed girls participating in a martial arts self-defence programme in Uganda, and found that the girls were actually subjected to greater violence and harassment after taking part, because they were perceived to be engaging in subversive behaviour.[50]

In summary, while there has been a noticeable shift towards more ‘positive’ portrayals of girls and their agency, there remain a number of concerns about the burden that is being placed on girls’ shoulders and the types of empowerment these portrayals promote.

2.4 Research with girls themselves

While the research on girls’ activism is relatively recent, some studies with girl activists can help us to understand how their experiences might differ from portrayals in media and development discourse.

Research with girl activists participating in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women - each supported to participate by girls' rights INGOs such as Plan International - found that many participants felt disempowered by the highly managed nature of their involvement and by adult responses top their contributions that seemed tokenistic or scripted.[51] This echoes other scholars' findings showing that even adults who consider themselves to be allies often attempt to politely temper young people's radical activism to fit within boundaries of what is considered appropriate in adult-led forums.[52] One study with girl activist members of the UN Foundation's Girl Up campaign found that girls consistently came up against adult-imposed barriers on their activism, and felt unable to live up to the spectacular depictions of girls in campaign promotional materials. Rather than wanting to make change all by themselves, the girls were calling for greater adult support to achieve their activist goals.[5354] The girls saw themselves as undertaking a process of learning and growth that is open to all youth.[55]

Research has also found that girls favour collective forms of activism, unlike the frequently individualistic depictions in media and development discourse. Research with girl activists in the Americas found that interactions with other activists were crucial to their sense of hope in what they could achieve.[56] Similarly, one study in the US, UK and Malawi found that girls were engaged in collective efforts to challenge gender inequalities in their communities, and that the girls in Malawi in particular were engaged in a form of *Ubuntu* feminism, in which their activism centred around girls' collective rights as part of, and inseparable from, concerns for wider community wellbeing.[57]

While these studies included girls who were taking part in organised activism, whether through their own activist clubs, or through international campaigns such as Girl Up, scholars also highlight the need to broaden our understanding of what it means for girls to 'do' politics, given their historical and ongoing exclusion from formal politics, and the fact that even many girls involved in activism themselves do not necessarily describe themselves as 'political'. Taft lists the many informal forms of politics the girls in her research were involved in, including online blogging, standing up to domineering boys and men, mentoring other girls and media-making, alongside more formal participation in social movements and human rights organisations.[58]

Research on the politics of 'everyday' girls has highlighted how girls in a range of different contexts challenge the inequalities they face in seemingly mundane and unspectacular ways, which may not meet a more 'formal' definition of political participation, but nevertheless show how girls are resisting injustices and seeking to gain greater freedom for themselves and their peers. This body of research highlights the care girls give to intersectionality in the forms of activism they undertake.[59] Examples from the field of Girlhood Studies include Indigenous girls' decolonial resistance in Canada; Black girls' resistance to racism in the US school system; young women advocating for undocumented migrants in the US; Malawian girls supporting one another to advocate for change for girls; and young women carving out new models of leadership in Asia and the Pacific. [6061626364] In our own previous analysis of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* data set, we highlighted how girls were challenging gender inequalities in nearly every aspect of their lives; questioning tight controls on their movement, behaviour and friendships with boys; and identifying adults as the cause of many gender inequalities and asking them to do better in combating them.[656667] In all of these studies, researchers have shown how everyday acts, from strategic silence to overt confrontation, from questioning the present to hoping for or imagining a different future, can constitute forms of girls' activism.[68]

2.5 Our approach to this research

Drawing inspiration from these bodies of research, and acknowledging that to date, we still know little about the everyday forms of resistance of girls outside of formal political spheres, in this research we seek to understand how girls question inequalities as they progress through childhood and adolescence, and whether they are able to create change. The girls in the study come from a range of very different contexts, and they do not necessarily identify themselves as activists, which allows us to understand some of the ways in which girls around the world create change, even if they do not see themselves as 'political'. The unique longitudinal nature of this data set also allows us to explore how girls' agency develops over time and to understand that agency in the context of their family situation and their caregivers' views.

The research offers hopeful insights for those who wish to act as allies to girls, but we also try to be careful to avoid forms of false hope.[6970] In a context of an increasing rollback of some of girls' and

women's most basic rights, we acknowledge that for many girls around the world, it can be dangerous to exercise any form of agency. [7172] Rather, we seek to understand what forms of activism they are already engaged in, what barriers they experience, and the kinds of support they are asking for from adults in making the change they wish to see in their communities. We aim to understand, and take seriously, the "specific and unique desires" of girls, even where they may not necessarily match the priorities that girls' empowerment campaigns frequently attribute to girls.[73] In order to do this, we needed to devise an analytical framework that goes beyond simplistic understandings of agency as resistance, and maps the complexities of girls' acceptance of, and resistance to, gender norms.

With the Grain

Acceptance of Gender Norms

Behavioural Enforcement

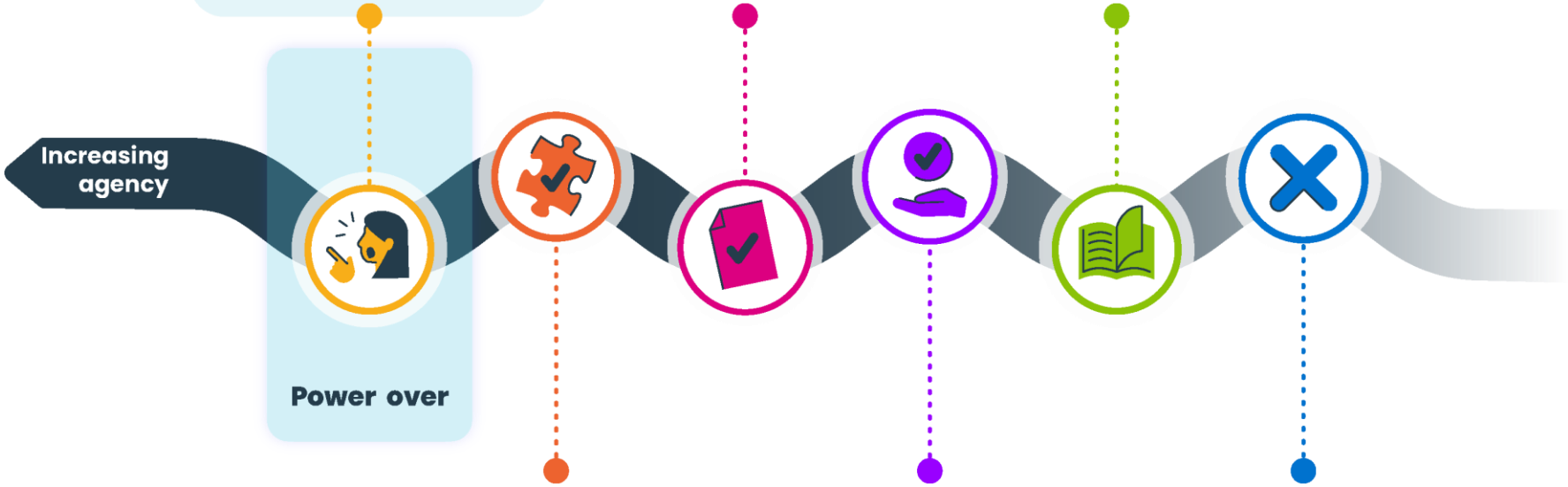
- Enforcing gender norms on others.

Attitudinal Acceptance

- Agreement with gender roles, wouldn't change them;
- Essentialist views *(e.g. these roles come from 'nature' or God).*

Observes Norms

- Notices gender roles/inequalities but does not question them.



Behavioural Acceptance

- Strong acceptance and behaviours in accordance with gender norms;
- Complying with them without having to be asked.

Altruistic Acceptance

- May show some understanding of the unfairness of gender roles and question them;
- Accepts them nonetheless to benefit family, community, or women more generally.

Gender Unawareness

- Does not see gender differences.

Against the Grain

Girls' Everyday Resistance

Egalitarian Statements

- No supporting described behaviours;
- Support for women accessing basic rights.

Questioning Norms

- Notices gender norms and starts to question if they need to be that way;
- Questions whether they are "natural" or God-given.

Attitudinal Resistance

- Clear expression of view that gender roles should not be the way they are;
- Expression of sense of injustice or dislike of inequality.

Articulated Resistance

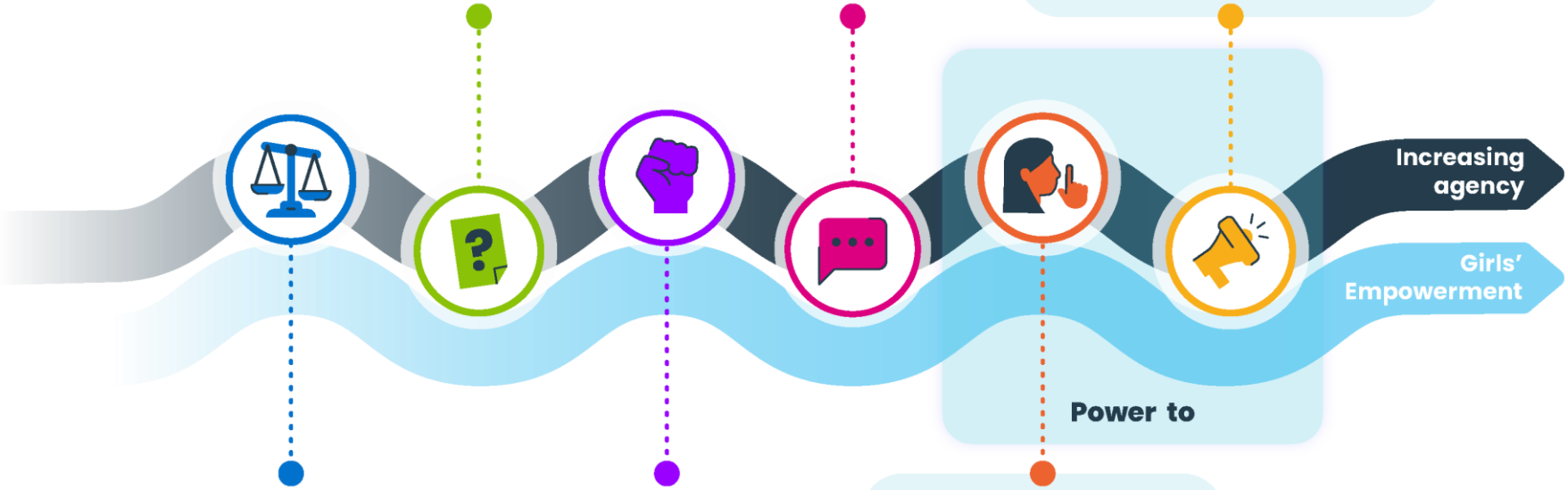
- Support for the idea of girls challenging norms *(e.g. in vignettes);*
- Calling for others to do more to tackle inequalities.

Secret Behavioural Resistance

- Knowingly disobeying expected behaviours and keeping those behaviours secret from parents and other elders.

Overt Behavioural Resistance

- Knowingly and openly disobeying expected behaviours;
- Working collectively to make change, envouraging others to resist.



3. Girls' Everyday Politics: An Analytical Framework

3.1 Politics, agency, resistance, power

In seeking to understand girls' everyday politics, we have used the methodological strategy of reading the data 'with' and 'against' the grain, which involves looking for girls' words, views and experiences that do or do not follow dominant understandings. While these dominant understandings vary across the cohort, and are dependent on cultural, historical and religious contexts, we do see certain views of gender emerging consistently across all nine countries. These include a belief that men are the breadwinners and financial decisions makers, and women are supposed to carry out housework and care work in the home; a tendency for men to own property and control income in the family and favouring of sons when it comes to inheritance; prevalent sexual and gender based violence, which is seen as resulting from 'naturally' aggressive qualities in men; a view of girls as constantly at risk of becoming victims of men's behaviour, and tight restrictions on their mobility as a result; limited employment opportunities for girls and women; unequal political representation in favour of men; gendered perceptions of appropriate career choices for men and women; lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and comprehensive sexuality education; and a limited role for girls and women in decision making and positions of authority. While it is beyond the scope of this report to conduct a full literature review of gender politics in each of the nine contexts, we have included brief summaries of existing research on girls' rights and activism in each country in the appendixes. Our understanding of 'the grain' of gender inequalities across the nine countries is informed by this literature, alongside discussions with Plan International teams working with girls in each context, and caregivers' views and descriptions of norms in their communities over the years.

Girls' everyday politics as an overarching topic might encompass instances where girls go 'with the grain' in accepting, endorsing, conforming to, or even imposing those behaviours on others; or indeed go 'against the grain', by beginning to question, overtly criticising, or outright refusing the roles and behaviours that are expected of them. [74][75][76][77] Within this overarching topic of girls' everyday politics, we label all those opinions and described behaviours that go 'against the grain' as "girls' everyday resistance."

It is important not to fall into the trap of conflating agency and resistance or to assume that girls are only exercising agency when their views and behaviours go 'against the grain'.[78] Taking inspiration from work on young women's leadership, we define girls' agency as their capacity to make decisions, shape their own life trajectories and influence the environment around them.[79] Under this definition, it would therefore also be entirely possible to exercise agency in a way that upholds gender norms. For example, a girl might decide she would like to quit school in order to help look after a niece or nephew, so that the child's father, her brother, can work to earn more money for the family. Nothing about this challenges gendered patterns of labour and opportunity, but it may be a highly agentic and informed decision.

Therefore, our analytical framework shows agency increasing in both directions from a central point on a scale (see Figure 1). At the centre, somebody might not notice gender inequalities in their community, or give a vague statement that there should be gender equality, without showing strong attitudes in either direction, or describing behaviours that enforce or challenge gender norms. As we move in either direction, however, we see stronger opinions and corresponding behaviours. For example, a simple statement of 'of course boys and girls should have the same chores' would be classed as an egalitarian statement and does go 'against the grain' of what we know to be gendered patterns of labour worldwide, but as a standalone statement with no related questioning of norms or described behaviours, does not show a great deal of agency in resisting. Indeed, in many cases we

found parents would make statements like these, then elsewhere in the same interview, describe giving their boys and girls entirely different chores. Similarly, while 'there is no difference between the chores given to girls and boys' would be coded in this framework as 'gender-unawareness' and going 'with the grain' because it represents a failure to notice the clear gendered patterns of labour emerging from the data, it does not imply an attitudinal acceptance of gender roles or an intentional enforcement of them. By contrast, enforcing the gendered division of chores through violent punishments would be classed as 'behavioural enforcement', while a girl openly refusing to do her chores or even encouraging others to do so would be 'overt behavioural resistance' and both would be deemed to be highly agentic, even though one goes strongly 'with the grain' and one strongly against.

As we read the data, we coded excerpts against this framework. Clearly, however, the same interviewee might express views that go from 'with the grain' to 'against', from decreased to increasing agency, from one sentence to the next and from year to year. Girls, and their caregivers, "dynamically slip among and between positions of resistance, vulnerability, and complicity".[80] In coding excerpts, we were not seeking to define an interviewee's entire stance on gender as 'with' or 'against' the grain on any given year. Rather, it was precisely the changes in views, the contradictions between their positions on one topic and another, or from one year to the next, that we were interested in analysing, in order to understand the complexity of girls' experiences of growing up as girls, and where there might be room to challenge inequalities.

In reading 'against the grain', we also understand that both silence and secrecy can be agentic.[81] While for a long time, agency was seen as inherently tied up with 'voice', there is an increasing acknowledgement in the research on women's resistance that for many women who find themselves in contexts where speaking out is very dangerous, silence can be employed as a form of resistance.[82] Rather than automatically assuming that silence represents disempowerment, some researchers call for acknowledging how girls' and women's silence may be a source of strength, a challenge to those in positions of power, or a means of negotiating survival.[83] In our data set, it is very difficult to analyse meaning in silences. Silences occur most frequently in the early years and it is difficult to know whether the girl's silence is a form of resistance, or perhaps a sign that she is unsure how to answer the adult interviewer's questions. If it was a form of resistance, it would also be impossible for us to tell over a decade later whether that silence representsed a form of resistance to the interview itself, to development organisations more broadly, or to society more generally. However, something we can analyse and do see frequently in the data is secretive resistance - where girls knowingly disobey gender norms while remaining silent on them. We see this as highly agentic, even if it does not involve openly questioning the rules.[84]

In our framework, with increasing agency comes power. In going 'with the grain', in its most extreme forms, participants might describe having 'power over' others; that is, they not only behave in accordance with gender norms, but they enforce them on others, sometimes violently. By contrast, in going 'against the grain', participants might exhibit 'power to', that is power to question and refuse expected behaviours, to gain greater freedom for themselves, or even to make their environment more equitable for everyone. [85] In our analysis, we looked for examples of opinions and behaviours across the full spectrum of girls' everyday politics, going with and 'against the grain '. However, in this report, we focus on those behaviours and views that go 'against the grain', which we call "girls' everyday resistance," because our aim is to ultimately find ways to support areas where girls want greater equality and greater control.

3.2 Girls' empowerment

While agency and empowerment are frequently used interchangeably, it is again important to set out how they are understood as distinct yet interrelated terms in this research. Naila Kabeer sets out a definition of empowerment which sees it as a process by which those who were previously not able to make choices about their lives become able to do so.[8687] Agency is central to empowerment, but agency alone cannot bring about empowerment, and, in relation to gender inequalities, agency can also be exercised in disempowering ways. Empowerment requires positive agency, in the sense of making and acting on life choices in a way that challenges existing power relations.

Kabeer advocates exploring empowerment in relation to three dimensions: agency, resources and achievements. Our framework explores girls' agency in questioning and challenging gender

inequalities. However, we are also interested in our analysis in understanding whether girls have the resources available to them to make the kinds of change they would like to see in their communities. And we are also interested in the outcomes of their agency; or their achievements. This goes beyond simplistically assuming a particular outcome is a sign of progress and seeking to understand the degree of agency behind it.[88] For example, while a girl gaining employment may suggest a positive outcome for her economic empowerment, there is clearly a difference between a girl choosing to take a job she enjoys, to learn a new skill or buy herself some luxury supplies, and a girl being forced to leave school and take any paid work she can find because her family are facing extreme hunger. The two cases imply very different degrees of agency, with the lack of agency closely related to a lack of resources. In the analysis in this report, therefore, we seek to understand what resources girls need in order to exercise agency and what the enabling and disabling factors are when it comes to them achieving change.

3.3 The framework

Below, we explain each of the categories used during the analysis of the girl and caregiver interviews, with an example of the kinds of behaviour or expressed opinions we are identifying for each one.

Behavioural Enforcement

This refers to girls or their caregivers not only believing that the current gender roles are as they should be but actively taking up those roles and enforcing them on others. For example, over the years, Ala-Woni in Togo did not just accept that girls should do chores, she would enthusiastically take them on and teach her little sister how to do them as well.

Behavioural Acceptance

This refers to accepting a particular norm around gender and actively conforming with it. For example, in 2014, Amelia in Uganda said she did not play with boys because her mother didn't allow it. Similarly, many of the caregivers, including Jocelyn's mother in the Philippines, said that their daughters did chores without even being asked as they grew up, which would also be an example of behavioural acceptance.

Attitudinal Acceptance

This denotes an attitude that the current gender roles in society are either attributable to natural qualities and differences between the sexes (gender essentialism), or were determined by a god, both of which result in a view that they cannot be changed.[89] For example, in 2023, in response to a fictional story about a girl who might have to drop out of school to look after a young child in the family, Camila in Brazil told the interviewer that a boy could not look after a child, so the only potential solution would be if the mother stayed at home while the father went out to work.

Altruistic Acceptance

We use this term to refer to instances where a girl or parent complies with gender roles in order to ease the pressure on others (especially women) or to enhance the wellbeing of their family overall. They may or may not identify these roles as unfair, or question whether they are determined by biology or by a god. For example, in 2018, Tan in Vietnam said her favourite time of the week was doing chores because it helped to stop her mother feeling so tired.

This code is in part inspired by the scholarship of African feminists and womanists, who have argued that African women's feminism is often misunderstood or overlooked because it manifests in collective and altruistic forms, linked to communitarian values that see individuals as inherently tied, and having moral obligations, to their communities, their ancestors and their environment in ways that do not translate easily into Western, liberal and individualistic framings of rights.[90] [91] Key to this is the idea that no single member of a community can be 'empowered' until the whole community has the agency

and resources it needs. An individual girl cannot be empowered if the means to 'empowerment' require her to abandon her obligations to her family, who are struggling with poverty.[92934]

Observes Norms

This denotes a girl or caregiver noticing a difference in how men and women, boys and girls are expected to behave but not expressing any particular views on it. While she is not necessarily expressing views that endorse the current state of affairs, we identify a lack of questioning of gender roles as going 'with the grain', because if everyone were to adopt this stance, they would never change. For example, in 2018, Bianca in Brazil alternated between saying that she and her sister were expected to do more chores than her brother and sometimes saying everyone did the same amount of housework. She never seemed to express a sense of injustice or question the expectation.

Gender-Unawareness

This refers to someone asserting that there are no differences in how men and women are treated or are expected to behave. Again, if everyone held this view, then the many gender inequalities we know do exist would never be addressed, so despite being a form of egalitarian statement, we see this as going 'with the grain'. For example, in 2021, Kim's mother in Vietnam said there was gender equality nowadays and girls did not face any challenges. This, and the following category, are the centre of our framework, representing the categories with the least agency and/or strength of opinion.

Egalitarian Statements

This code was used to denote vague statements in favour of equality, without any accompanying described behaviours that challenge gender norms. While acknowledging that a statement in favour of gender equality goes 'against the grain', we attributed little agency to this if not accompanied by a more critical questioning of current gender roles in the family and wider community or actively challenging unequal behaviours. For example, Sylvia's father in Uganda said on multiple occasions that he and his wife made joint decisions about the family and its finances. In other years, however, he contradicted himself by saying that he was the main decision maker. His egalitarian statements can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of calls for women's equal participation in decision making, and perhaps some tentative support for this idea, but the agency of this should not be overstated, given that in other years he contradicted himself and revealed more patriarchal practices.

Questioning Norms

This code was used whenever a girl or caregiver started to question a particular gender norm, without necessarily explicitly stating they thought it was unfair. This could include starting to question whether patterns of behaviour were determined by nature or by a god. For example, in 2021, Saidy in the Dominican Republic noticed that boys were given much more freedom than girls in her community. Unlike many caregivers and some girls that year, who explained that girls were at greater risk of violence, she simply said she did not know why it was this way.

Attitudinal Resistance

This term denotes a girl or caregiver expressing a view that gender roles or expectations are unfair or expressing a dislike for inequality. Karen in El Salvador was often angry at her mother when she was assigned chores (2020), although then went on to do them anyway. These are not always views the girls would feel comfortable expressing outside of a confidential interview, but we nonetheless see this as an important form of questioning and resistance.

Articulated Resistance

By 'articulated resistance,' we mean instances where a girl supports the idea of resisting gender norms, even if she does not feel able to do so herself. For example, she might react very positively to a vignette the interviewer reads about a girl speaking out on girls' rights, or she might identify some of the ways that adults are not currently doing enough to ensure girls' basic rights, and call for them to

[4] This category has been a difficult one to place within our framework. Complying with gender norms in order to help other women is a highly agentic move. And it can be coupled with a critical awareness that these chores should not all fall to women. Yet, as a behaviour, it serves to reproduce existing gender relations.
[4] Reference to Uganda report where this is analysed in full.

do more. In 2024, Yen in Vietnam said that adults should listen to girls' opinions and girls should be trusted more to make decisions about their own lives.

Secret Behavioural Resistance

This refers to girls knowingly disobeying gendered rules about their behaviour, but keeping their disobedience secret. For example, Alice in Benin had a job in 2023, but kept her employment secret from her father who would not have approved.

Overt Behavioural Resistance

This refers to girls openly disobeying expected behaviours. For example, in 2016, Ly in Vietnam said she would only do chores if her mother paid her, while Raquel in El Salvador only did the chores she liked to do (2021).

3.4 A note on normativity

In adopting this framework, it is important to state that we do not see a goal for feminist organisations in moving every girl towards overt behavioural resistance. While the aim of this research is to identify ways to help make all girls feel safe and able to challenge gender inequalities in their communities and beyond, the framework is not intended to be read as implying that moving towards the right-hand side of the chart would be beneficial and desirable for all girls. As our analysis of caregiver views in this report demonstrates, for many girls, this would be impossible or indeed dangerous. Rather, we are interested in understanding where during the life course girls feel more comfortable to be agentic, and what about their environment (including access to resources) enabled them to be agentic? Overall, we found that articulated resistance was far more common than secret or overt behavioural resistance. This suggests a huge potential to listen to girls who support the idea of girls' resistance, but do not yet feel able to resist themselves, in order to better understand what adults and organisations can do to support them and in many cases, how adults might stop placing barriers in their way.

4. Caregiver views over the years

The enabling/disabling environment for girls' resistance

The views of the girls' caregivers provide us with a crucial understanding of the enabling, or indeed, disabling environment for girls' resistance to gender norms. Overall, we found that while caregivers were overwhelmingly supportive of equality of opportunity, their beliefs in the supposedly "natural" or god-given qualities and roles of men and women often prevented their daughters from accessing opportunities. Many caregivers saw men as naturally the breadwinners and decision makers in the family, and saw boys as naturally badly-behaved and beyond control. They saw girls as capable of making the wrong decisions, but rarely saw them as having the ability to contribute positively to family decision making. They enforced strict rules on girls' behaviour and movements after they reached puberty, and girls who did not conform to expected behaviours were frequently subject to physical forms of punishment.

4.1 Gender equality or gender essentialism

It is important to start by stating that across the cohort, parents struggled among very challenging financial circumstances to provide opportunities for their daughters. Most of the parents believed passionately in equal access to education, and where that education was not state-funded, they were working often long hours to pay for their daughters to attend. As Christine's mother in the Philippines said in 2017, "While we're alive, as long as we can find means to earn a living, just so they will finish school". Similarly, Justine's father in Uganda told the interviewer:

> ***"Justine loves studying so much and she always tells me that she would like to become a doctor, I think life will be fine for her in the future because she loves studying and she is a bright girl. Therefore as long as I am alive, I will struggle so much to see that she attains her dream."***
>
> - Justine's father, 2018, Uganda

Although very few caregivers questioned the assumption that their daughters would eventually become a wife and mother, there was widespread hope that the girls would delay this until they had finished education, with many parents aspiring for careers for their daughters as well.

Relatedly, parents were vehemently opposed to child marriage. They frequently made reference to changes in national legislation to make marriage under the age of 18 illegal, but their opposition seemed to be much stronger than a desire merely to avoid prosecution. For example, in response to a vignette about a girl whose family cannot afford her education and wish her to marry at the age of 14, Lelem's grandmother in Togo said, "I'm not happy as these days every parent should want their child to go to school more than they did, but these parents want to give their child in marriage" (2021). Reacting to the same vignette, Natalia's mother in Brazil said:

> ***"I feel sad and I think it's wrong, because she's very young ,right? And they want her to marry him because he has something to offer her, being an old gentleman, he must be old enough to be her father. And she doesn't want to, she will lose her youth. I wouldn't accept it."***
>
> - Natalia's mother, 2021, Brazil

Across the cohort, parents believed strongly that girls should have access to an education and that this should not be compromised by early marriage or union.

However, many caregivers' views in relation to household roles, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and community and family decision making undermined their support for girls' basic rights. They frequently expressed essentialist views that see certain traits, qualities and capabilities as naturally male or female, biologically determined, or assigned to men and women by their god. These essentialist views meant that in many cases, although they supported equality of opportunity in childhood, they were oblivious to the ways that their different expectations of girls' and boys' behaviour made it impossible for girls to access the same opportunities as their brothers.

When it comes to the division of labour in the household, a number of parents expressed egalitarian views that directly contradicted the description of how the chores were divided up and the reasoning for this division elsewhere in the interviews. For example, in 2019, Davy's mother in Cambodia stated that she agreed with the statement "Boys and girls should have the same household responsibilities," because in her words, "I agree with this statement because both boys and girls can help to do the housework and outside work such as farming". And yet, elsewhere in the same interview, she explained that Davy did more chores than her brothers because, "I sometimes get tired and ask her to do the dishes. I tell her that it is female work." She went on to explain that she did allow Davy "to do farming even with her brothers," meanwhile "My sons do nothing. They just go to school, eat, and hang out. I sometimes asked them to do chores, but it is a rare case." She again expressed very strong support for Davy's education, even saying that if the family were running out of money, she would support Davy's education over her brothers' because Davy studied harder than them, but seemed unaware of the way that 'women's work' might impede Davy's performance in school.

Similarly, in 2017, Bianca's mother in Brazil explained that girls and women have to do most of the chores, and seemed to suggest this is as it should be, before then stating that men and women should have equal rights:

> **Interviewer:** But is this mostly the responsibility of girls and boys?
> **Bianca's mother:** Girls.
> **Interviewer:** Right. What about here?
> **Bianca's mother:** Here it's mostly the girls' responsibility, especially the eldest.
> […]
> **Interviewer:** What do you think could be different?
> **Bianca's mother:** I think girls should do more than boys.
> **Interviewer:** But is this what you think or what you notice?
> **Bianca's mother:** My friend, this is what I think!
> **Interviewer:** What you think. Right.
> **Bianca's mother:** Because what I see is kids just running around, doing nothing.
> **Interviewer:** Right. Ah... Do you think the way these responsibilities and chores are shared is fair? When it comes to household chores, right? Do you think girls have more responsibilities than boys at home, so they do more than boys? Do you think this division of chores is fair?
> **Bianca's mother:** I don't know. I think it should be the same, because our rights are the same, right? So I think it should be the same.
>
> - Bianca's mother, 2017, Brazil

Her contradictory response could suggest that she had not thought in much depth about this topic before, but had been repeating what usually happens in her community. When the interviewer continuously posed the question, she gave a more egalitarian view, just as many parents did when asked to respond directly to an attitudinal statement on equality. In the context of the interview and the overall research project, she and other caregivers may have felt an expectation to answer in a way that showed support for gender equality. Yet, in practice, they often described practices that went strongly 'with the grain' and assigned many more chores to their daughters than their sons. Similarly, Thea's mother in Benin told the interviewer that in her house, chores were divided 'fairly', and yet she also said, "I can say that girls are generally busier at home than boys. It's normal because it's a way for preparing them to be good wives and mothers, and know how to keep their own home" (2015). In El Salvador, Gladys's mother stated in 2020 about chores, "In my house they are the same [for boys and girls]" and yet in later years of the study, Gladys was taking care of her younger siblings, an incredibly time-consuming role that Gladys's brothers did not seem to be asked to do.

We can see similar examples where caregivers expressed egalitarian views on family decision making, but these were contradicted by their views elsewhere. For example, in 2011, Namazzi's father in Uganda stated that he and his wife made joint decisions because they all "contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of the family". And yet, in the same interview, he said that there should be more men than women in government, "because it is the man who is the head right from the home." In 2015, when asked again about decisions within the family, he stated:

> **Interviewer:** Who makes decisions about money in your family?
> **Namazzi's father:** Is me, as the household head.
> **Interviewer:** Why?
> **Namazzi's father:** Because [I] am the head of the family and this is my family.
>
> - Namazzi's father, 2015, Uganda

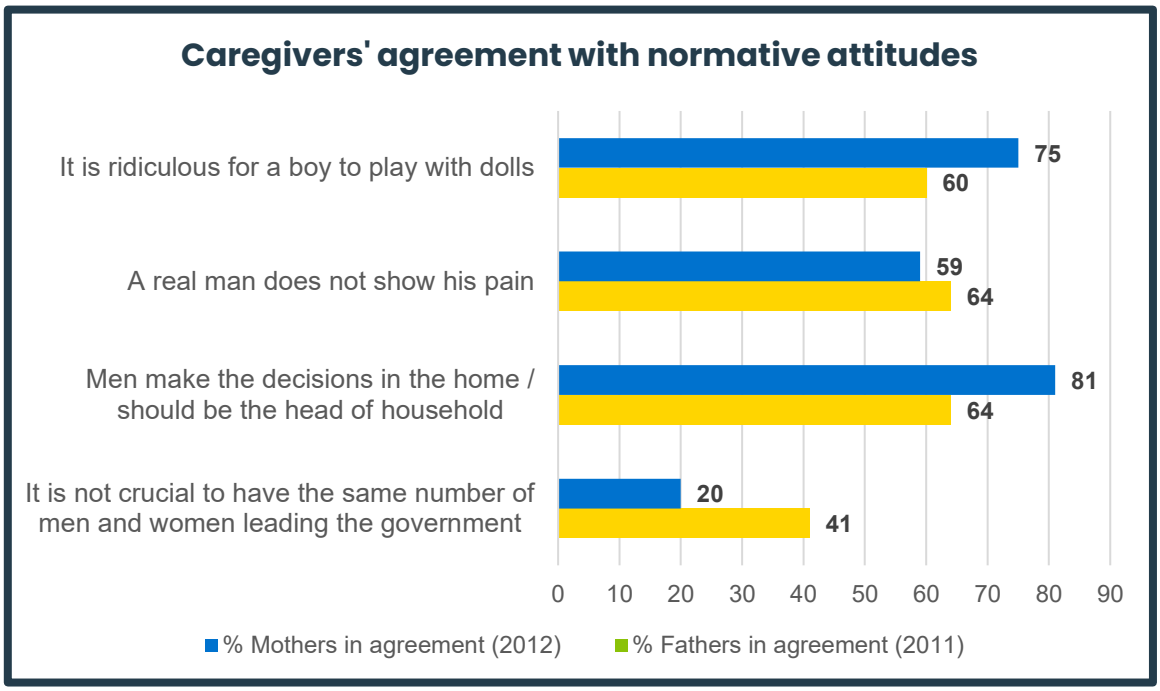
In other cases, parents stated they supported equal access to education, but when financial resources were stretched, they prioritised sons. For example, in Vietnam in 2010, Huong's parents told the interviewer, "The need of study is the same for boys and girls. We have to support her to study as much as possible. Society is developing and the girls should be educated to be able to work." Yet, in 2017, Huong's mother explained that she had started saving for Huong's brother to go on to higher education, justifying this by saying that when he eventually got a job, he would support Huong's education. However, in the same year, she explained that Huong's brother did not take his studies as seriously as Huong: "Last year, at Grade 7, he wasn't ranked as good pupil, I felt sad. I knew the reason. Because of the computer, he became lazy to study." And in 2018, she described Huong's learning as "better than her elder brother." Despite taking her studies more seriously and achieving better grades, Huong had to rely on her elder brother, who was described as "lazy," completing a degree, gaining a job and honouring his commitment to her if she was to have the same educational experiences as he had.

Finally, some caregivers explicitly stated that parents no longer have a preference for sons in their communities, however, this was again contradicted by behaviour and views elsewhere, or was expressed in strongly essentialist terms, for example in stating that parents prefer girls because they are better behaved or more caring towards their families. One interesting example is in Tan's family in Vietnam. In 2012, when Tan's family consisted of the parents and two daughters, when asked if she enjoyed having sons or daughters more, Tan's mother replied, "The same. They are all my children." The parents expressed egalitarian views and planned to leave all of their inheritance equally between the two girls. However, in 2016, the mother told the interviewer: "I have given birth - a baby boy so my family is so happy." The couple chose to have a third child, despite the two-child limit in Vietnam at the time, because they wanted a son, resulting in the family being fined. The parents now planned to leave all their land to the son, in accordance with local customs: "If we have money, I will divide three of them. But my daughters will get married and stay with her husband so my son will own the house and land." Tan's mother no longer had time to look after her two daughters, who instead were charged with cooking their own food and helping to look after their younger brother as the years went by. In 2017, the mother threw a big first birthday party for her son: "I invited my relatives and neighbours. We cooked 15 trays of food." But when asked if she organised a party for either of her daughters, including Tan, who was then 11, she said no because "the economic family's not good so we did not make it."

By 2021, Tan described feeling exhausted from trying to juggle her schoolwork alongside her chores and looking after her younger brother. She described not having time to shower, and said she felt sad because "My eyes have a lot of dark circles, so my friends keep calling me a panda." In 2024, Tan's mother again expressed an egalitarian view, saying "now, people just give birth, not differentiated [by wanting] boys or girls" yet she seemed oblivious to the ways that her and her husband's decision to keep having children until they had a boy, and to then treat that boy differently to the girls, had impacted on Tan.

Mothers showed strong support for equal political representation and for girls having opportunities to engage in stereotypically masculine activities such as playing 'rough' sports. Yet the majority of mothers also agreed with the essentialist view that real men do not show their pain, and showed a strong disapproval for the idea of their sons playing with dolls and engaging in caring and nurturing forms of play. Fathers also supported equal political representation and girls' participation in sports, although to a lesser extent, and agreed that men should not show pain and boys should not play with dolls. This again demonstrates some support for equality of opportunity, but also the ongoing

dominance of norms that see girls and boys, women and men as inherently or naturally different and needing to perform different roles, even in their childhood play.



In summary, many of the parents expressed egalitarian views over the course of the study and many of them strongly supported equality of opportunity. However, they were not always aware of, or did not question, gender norms in their community that see girls and boys taking on different roles and having different 'natural' qualities. They tended to see girls as needing to be more obedient and carry out more chores, and saw their sons as their heirs and future breadwinners. These essentialist views meant that many girls struggled to access, or succeed in, the opportunities their parents were so keen to provide for them.

4.2 The use of violent punishments to enforce gender norms

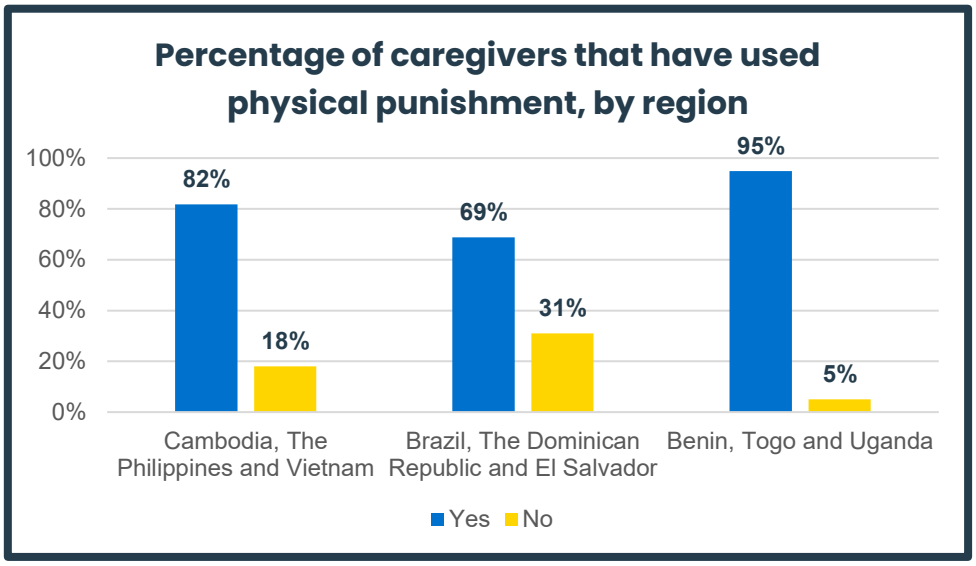
In many cases, if girls questioned or refused the roles that caregivers saw as 'natural' for girls, they faced harsh punishments, including physical violence, especially if they refused to do their chores. Given that we know that girls across the cohort are given more chores than their male siblings and cousins, this represents a gendered form of violence, in which girls are punished for not conforming to expected behaviours of a girl. For example, the caregivers of Layla in Benin, Rebecca and Joy in Uganda, Chesa in the Philippines and Yen in Vietnam all described hitting their daughters, including with sticks and whips, if they did not do their chores. In 2018, when asked what behaviours would make him hit his child, Nimisha's father in Uganda replied, "If I send or call her [to do a chore] and she jeers at me. I beat her because those are not good manners". Several caregivers, such as Nakry's mother in Cambodia, Eleanor's mother in Benin and Jocelyn's mother in the Philippines, said that they beat their daughter but not their sons. Jocelyn's mother explained that this was because her sons were bigger than her.

Other girls were specifically threatened with violence if they broke rules around going out and socialising with boys. Jacqueline's mother in Brazil said she would hit her daughter if she got any male friends, and in response to a vignette about a girl whose caregivers hit her severely for going out late with boys to nightclubs, Sofia's mother in Brazil said she was OK with hitting children in some

circumstances, “because it depends on the way… the children act” (2019). In Togo, Azia’s responses about what makes a ‘good girl’ revealed a threat of deeply gendered patterns of violence and abuse:

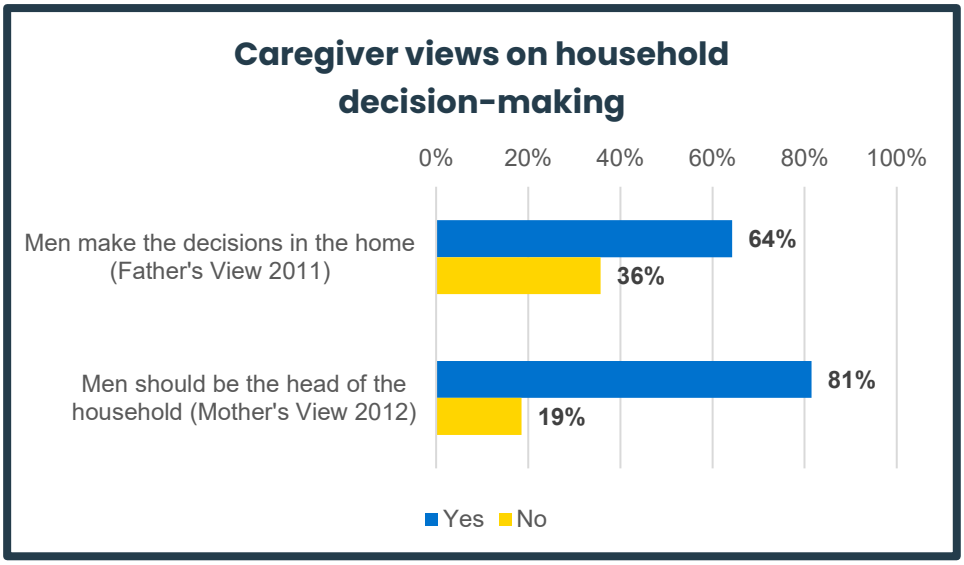
> **Interviewer:** How do you think girls should behave with boys? How do others expect girls to behave with boys?
> **Azia:** I think girls should behave themselves with boys and get on well with them. I think everyone thinks this.
> **Interviewer:** What happens when you break the rules, and you aren’t a “good girl”?
> **Azia:** I get beaten and don’t get any food. (2018).
>
> - Azia, age 11 (2018), Togo

Across the cohort, we saw that physical forms of punishment were widely used, with some regional variation, as shown below. Nevertheless, in all three regions, physical punishment was a clear threat for those girls who did not conform to expected behaviours.



4.3 Norms in favour of men as household heads

Despite egalitarian views on access to education, and widespread support for girls and women seeking employment, the caregivers remained overall supportive of the idea that men are the breadwinners and the heads of a household, and that they are better placed to make decisions in the family. In 2019, 43 per cent of caregivers agreed with the statement that ‘men should make the financial decisions’. We also have an insight into how these attitudes break down according to mothers and fathers, as illustrated by the graph of caregiver responses to attitudinal questions on this topic below.



In 2018 in Togo, Ala-Woni's father explained, "The father, the man is the one who takes the decisions. The women however make decisions when the man is absent from the house." In some cases, even when the mother was earning more than her husband, he was still seen as the head of the household and the main decision maker. This seemed to be the case in Annabelle's family in Benin, despite significant shifts in the family's situation over time. In 2009, Annabelle's mother said that only her husband contributed to the family's income, through his work as a taxi driver. In 2010, Annabelle's sister said her father made decisions about schooling and marriage in the family, noting that "he has to take our mother's opinion into account," but "he has the final word." In 2012, Anabelle's father described his wife as the family's main earner through her work selling beans. In 2015, he had the following interaction with the interviewer:

> **Interviewer:** Tell me more about how the family earns their living?
> **Annabelle's father:** The family earns his good living thanks to the activities my wife and I. As the leader of the family, I do ensure the big household expenses and there is no big consequences in the sense that there is a consensus between us before I take the decision as a family leader.
>
> - Annabelle's father, 2015, Benin

At this point, Annabelle's father told the interviewer that his work as a taxi driver earned him roughly US$16 last week, while his wife earned US$40 through selling crops. Despite at this point earning less than half of his wife's weekly wage, the father still described himself as the 'leader' of the family.

A similar situation can be seen with Kyla's family in the Philippines. Kyla's mother was an ordained pastor and was appointed as pastor in charge of a church. She earned a high income and the church provided for a lot of the family's expenses because of her role. She had a bachelors degree and by 2016, she earned three times the income of the father, who was a licensed, but not ordained, pastor. In 2012, she described herself as the decision maker of the family, explaining " Mostly I am the one who decides, because I am older. And I am used to deciding even when my husband is not here. But before I make a decision I do consult him." In 2016, she repeated these views, saying:

> **Interviewer:** Who makes the decision for large expenses?
> **Kyla's mother:** I do, since I am senior.
> **Interviewer:** Why? Senior by age?
> **Kyla's mother:** By age and I was first to be a pastor. I paid for his studies when we were married.
>
> - Kyla's mother, 2016, the Philippines

And yet, even she still expressed a view that men are the heads of the household, as can be seen from the following extract from 2012:

> **Interviewer:** The man is the head of the family. What can you say about this?

Kyla's mother: Yes, of course, it is [the man]. That's why their surname is the one carried by the family.

- Kyla's mother, 2012, the Philippines

4.4 Caregivers' views of boys' behaviour

Despite this view that men are the heads of the household and the decision makers, caregivers consistently described what they perceived to be naturally masculine behaviours in overwhelmingly negative terms. They described their sons as out of their control, lazy, impossible to reason with, and sometimes a danger to themselves and others.

Caregivers often used adjectives such as "unruly", "lazy" and "wayward" to describe their sons, using this as a justification for giving them fewer chores - because they would not do them anyway - and giving boys greater freedom - because they would not obey restrictions on their movement anyway. For example, Justine's father in Uganda said in 2018 when asked what makes a good boy:

"Most boys are disobedient, whenever you ask them to do something they might dodge around so what makes a child to be a good boy is when he is obedient. Let me give you an example of my two boys, the young one is active and creative while the older one is very lazy and prefers to just sit down."

- Justine's father, 2018, Uganda

Rebeca's aunt in El Salvador felt that "girls have to be more decent", but "boys are like little men […] they can be immature or crazy when they're young [laughs]" (2020). Rebeca's aunt's comments highlight not only the different expectations of girls' and boys' behaviour, but also how these are seen as directly linked to the behaviour of adult men and women, with boys, expected to be "immature" and "crazy" even though, or perhaps precisely because, they are already "little men."

And yet, despite these perceptions of boys as less studious, less hard-working and less community-minded, or in some cases, because they are seen to need greater incentives and encouragement, boys were frequently given more opportunities than their sisters. For example, in 2018 in Brazil, Sofia's mother contemplated what she would do if she couldn't afford both her children's education:

Interviewer: If you had the choice of your children… if you had to choose who was going to attend school, who would you give priority to access to education? Why?
Sofia's mother: Then it'd be difficult, right? I would send the boys.
Interviewer: Why?
Sofia's mother: Because these boys are like that, they just want an excuse not to study, and if we don't, if we don't encourage them, they won't, right? I see my boys, ah, today I don't want to, they're saying they don't want to.
Interviewer: So, if you were to choose, you would choose to send the boys to school and leave her at home?
Sofia's mother: Yes. Maybe for her it would be more… it would be difficult, but since she likes to study, she would study online.

- Sofia's mother, 2018, Brazil

In this hypothetical scenario, Sofia's studiousness is seen as justification for prioritising her brothers' education, because they cannot be trusted to study on their own, but she can.

In 2024, Reaksmey's mother in Cambodia explained that her daughter had had to leave school because of the family's financial situation, after Reaksmey's father died and her mother got injured. Reaksmey felt "upset and frustrated". She was by this time married and had a child. By contrast, Reaksmey's brother was described as being out of school because he was "going anywhere with his friends, collected something in household to sell for buying cigarette, he does not help to do housework, spending his time with only phone." Reaksmey's mother worried that he hung around with friends who used drugs. It is implicit in this interview that while Reaksmey's brother was not attending

school when he had the opportunity, nor was he helping at home. Meanwhile, Reaksmey was not able to attend because the family couldn't afford it. Much like Huong's story before, boys were frequently given the opportunity to go to school, sometimes in an attempt to control their wayward behaviour. Meanwhile, girls who were studious and obedient, missed out because the family could not afford to educate both.

Boys were seen as naturally less easy to control, and caregivers felt they could not force boys to do things they did not want to do, even though, as is discussed above, girls were often forced to do chores through violent means. This perception had very real consequences for girls. For example, in Benin in 2012, Alice's father described that both Alice's brother and sister had had to repeat a year at school after failing the required grade. He explained that for Alice's sister, this was because "the domestic tasks weighed on them for mum was always travelling for her trade", in other words, she was so overburdened with chores that her school performance was suffering. Meanwhile, Alice's father said that Alice's brother failed the school year because of "laziness; he didn't work." Boys were frequently seen as lazy for both their studies and the housework, while girls were seen as industrious for both. Rather than demanding that their sons do a fair share, many caregivers expected their daughters to juggle a heavy burden of domestic work alongside school.

Caregivers' views on boys' behaviour are best illustrated by a number of contradictory examples. For example, in 2019, Miremba's mother in Uganda said that she would have fewer worries about boys than she would about girls, even though she saw girls as naturally being better behaved. Bianca's mother in Brazil described boys and men as 'complex', and told of her disappointment that two of her sons had recently dropped out of school, but went on to say that it would be too much responsibility for a woman to run a country (2019). And Anti-Yara's mother in Togo said that girls are better behaved, but men should make financial decisions (2019). The caregivers' view of masculinity was consistently negative, and yet this did not seem to lead them to question whether men and boys should be entrusted with all of the opportunities and responsibilities at family, and indeed sometimes national, level.

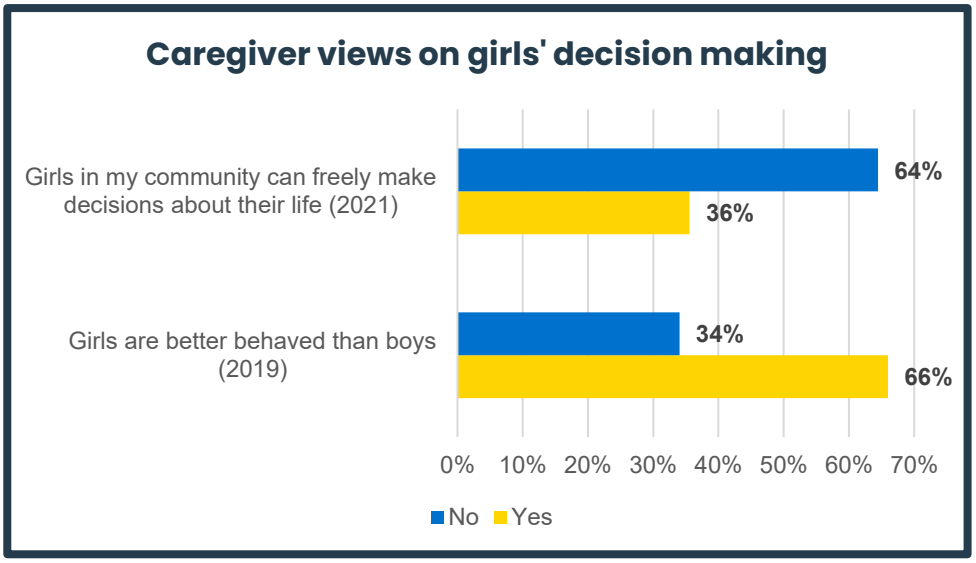
Beti's father in Uganda addressed the contradictions in parents' views directly when asked in 2019 if he agreed that boys should have more freedom than girls:

> **Beti's father:** I strongly agree. Most of the time, parents grant boys a lot of freedom. This explains the reason why so many boys have gone astray compared to the girls. When you threaten or scold a girl, she is so quick at getting her life in line.
> **Interviewer:** Do you think of any means to aid the boys also live their lives in check?
> **Beti's father:** That still fails us as parents (he laughs). We give the boys so much freedom yet we suppress those of a girl because she is more vulnerable.
>
> - Beti's father, 2019, Uganda

In 2019, 65% of caregivers agreed with the statement "girls are better behaved than boys" . And yet, their response to the 'naturally' bad behaviour of boys (engaging in substance use, hanging around in public places, attempting to seduce girls, dropping out of school) was to place greater restrictions on girls in the name of protection.

4.5 Girls' perceived negative agency

Relatedly, despite being perceived to be naturally well behaved, girls were not seen by caregivers as capable of being trusted to make decisions about their own lives.



Across the cohort, we consistently saw girls being held responsible for the *wrong* choices they might make in the eyes of their caregivers (negative agency) but rarely entrusted with the responsibility to make the *right* choices or to influence their own lives, their families or their communities for the better (positive agency).

This was especially evident in relation to the topic of girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. Girls were consistently seen as to blame if they fell under the influence of the "wrong" friends, dressed "inappropriately", stayed out late, or engaged in sexual relationships, but they were very rarely given the information and healthcare needed to manage their own health and wellbeing. For example, in 2019 when Ly in Vietnam was aged 13, her mother expressed her disapproval of Ly's classmates having boyfriends, telling the interviewer, "I said to her that I would kill her if she had a boyfriend." Yet in the same year, Ly's mother and the interviewer had the following exchange:

> **Interviewer:** What about other things such as pregnancy, sex, do you think that she knows about that?
> **Ly's mother:** I guess that she knows because she has already studied
> **Interviewer:** Did you talk with Ly?
> **Ly's mother:** (smiled) No, I did not talk.
> **Interviewer:** Was she shy when she was talking this with you?
> **Ly's mother:** No, she did not talk and was not shy
> **Interviewer:** Did you try talking with her about these things?
> **Ly's mother:** Not yet, I have not ever talked about pregnancy or [birth] with her because she is still very little and has not known much.
>
> - Ly's mother, 2019, Vietnam

As with many of the cohort caregivers, Ly's mother would consider Ly responsible if she made the 'wrong' choices of engaging in a relationship, but does not see her as responsible or old enough to learn about her body and what such a relationship might entail.

Similarly, in Togo, Ala-Woni's family were consistently supportive of her education, but expressed a very gendered fear that she would not complete it because of the risk of pregnancy. Her father said in 2016: "If she is impregnated or she early marries, she won't go further in her studies." These were framed as potential 'bad' choices that Ala-Woni herself might make. However, three years later, Ala-Woni's mother told the interviewer that her daughter did not know anything about sex and puberty, "I haven't yet spoken to her about puberty or sexual and reproductive health because I think she's too young to learn about these things." By 2023, Ala-Woni was pregnant and was getting married, something which she did not frame as a choice: "I'm pregnant this year, which is why I got married. [...] it was pregnancy that made me get married. I wanted to be mature before I got married." Once again, in the eyes of caregivers, a girl is seen as capable of making the wrong choices but not to be trusted to make the 'right' ones. In Brazil, reflecting the responses of many of the caregivers across the cohort, Bianca's mother consistently said in 2021 and 2024 that it is a girl's responsibility to

protect herself from violence and abuse, and yet in 2023, said Bianca could not be trusted to make her own decisions in case she did something “stupid.” As well as directly preventing girls from making decisions, caregivers’ constant references to girls’ negative agency and their incapability of positive agency are unlikely to support girls in developing the confidence in their own abilities to play a role in decision-making.

4.6 Menstruation as a key turning point in girls’ participation

While girls did have some opportunities to take part actively in their communities during childhood, it is clear that these opportunities were greatly reduced once a girl started her periods. Menstruation came up consistently across all nine countries as a key moment in a girl’s childhood or adolescence, where parents expressed strong views about activities she should no longer take part in, or about behaviours that were now expected of her.

These ranged from traditions and superstitions to very gendered fears and restrictions, and tended to focus on girls’ interactions with boys, their movements and exercise, bathing practices and diet. Many of the cohort girls were told that they were not allowed to play with boys once they started their periods. Amelia (Uganda) was instructed at age 11 to stop socialising with boys, while Darna’s mother (Philippines) informed her daughter that she should no longer laugh too hard at what boys said. Doris in El Salvador was told not to let anyone touch her.

Numerous girls and caregivers reported an introduction of restrictions on their mobility. Many girls were told not to run, while others - like Kim (Vietnam) were instructed not to exercise at all, and Raisa (Dominican Republic) was told not to play. Bathing and swimming became forbidden for many girls in the Philippines once they started menstruating, and Darna reported that she snuck away to her father’s house to bath without her aunt knowing.

Caregivers also introduced new dietary restrictions on the girls at the beginning of menstruation. Girls in Vietnam and Dominican Republic were warned against eating sour food, while Gabriel and Stephany (El Salvador) were instructed to avoid fish and eggs.

Alongside a range of misinformation with clear implications for the girls’ health, we can clearly see that caregivers expect girls’ social lives and participation in their communities to shrink when they start menstruating. They are expected to go out less, socialise less, exercise less and laugh more quietly.

4.7 Caregivers resisting norms and reinforcing them at the same time

In some cases, mothers or female caregivers did show signs of very courageous forms of resistance themselves, although they rarely saw these forms of resistance as available to their daughters, or in some cases, actively reinforced the same gender norms they were questioning in their expectations of their daughters’ behaviour.

For example, many of the girls lived in a female-headed household at times during their childhood and adolescence, including Isabelle in Benin, whose aunt was described as head of the household. While this in itself challenged norms around men as heads of household, which caregivers themselves mostly supported, many female household heads still enforced a gendered division of labour within the home, with Isabelle being required to do more chores than her male cousins. Similarly, as described above, Kyla’s mother in the Philippines earned significantly more than her husband, and described herself as the family decision maker, and yet, in 2015, she described not giving any chores to Kyla’s older brother because “he’s the only son.” In the Dominican Republic, in 2020 Nicol's mother had enrolled in a university course despite having a young family, but this meant that she left Nicol to look after her younger sibling while she was out. In Vietnam, Ly’s mother was a single parent after Ly’s father died, and struggled financially to support herself and Ly entirely through her own income,

and yet, when asked about inheritance practices, she told the interviewer that if she had a son, she would leave her land to him.

In Vietnam in 2017, Sen's mother shared some fascinating reflections with the interviewer:

> ***"Personally I don't keep silent. Basically, people think that I am uneducated, insolent to my husband if you speak out your mind but I am not insolent, I have to speak out. He was wrong yesterday so he didn't say anything to me."***
>
> - Sen's mother, 2017, Vietnam

She went on, "I am a woman but my personality is just like a man's." Despite clearly resisting expected behaviours of women in her community, in 2018, when asked what hopes she had for her daughter, Sen's mother replied, "I also hope she will be docile and good-natured."

In Uganda, Nimisha's mother described an act of extraordinary bravery in standing up to an attempted mugging on the street by three men, in which she undressed publicly to challenge their claims that she has money hidden under her clothing. The men eventually ran away. And yet, she concluded that such an act would not be possible for a young woman, who would have been at risk of rape, and she continually restricted Nimisha's movements because of this perceived threat.[94]

In summary, while the caregivers held a range of often contradictory views and certainly supported equality of opportunity, or even questioning of norms in some areas, they very rarely saw girls as capable of making decisions about their own lives or old enough to be trusted to question these norms themselves. Sometimes, even mothers who resisted themselves still enforced norms on their daughters and there seemed to be limited intergenerational support for girls' resistance. Many families lacked the resources to support girls' full participation in their communities, and many gender roles were exacerbated by poverty and a lack of infrastructure. However, caregivers' attitudes are also an important resource in creating an enabling or disabling environment for girls' resistance. The following sections on girls' views and behaviours must therefore be read in the context of an overall lack of support for girls overtly challenging gender norms. While some girls did manage to resist openly, many adopted more subtle and strategic forms of resistance, and through the use of our framework, we have been able to identify some fascinating examples with clear implications for how we support girls to make change.

5. Girls' everyday resistance across the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort

We will now turn to the girls' views and actions. In particular, we focus on girls' views and actions that resist gender norms and go 'against the grain' of expected behaviours, which we are calling "girls' everyday resistance." Following our framework, we look at examples of where girls are exhibiting the following different types of resistance: **Egalitarian Views; Questioning Norms**; **Attitudinal Resistance; Articulated Resistance; Secret Resistance; Overt Behavioural Resistance**.

5.1 Girls' egalitarian views

Firstly, we turn to how girls are challenging gender norms by sharing broad views about gender equality, but without a more critical questioning of current gender roles or exhibiting behaviours and actions that actively challenge inequality. This is a key first step in understanding girls' resistance to gender norms, whereby we can recognise a gap between girls' interest in the idea of equality and the actions they take to challenge inequality. Although many girls expressed these egalitarian views, as we will see in further sections of the report, not all of them felt able to act on their beliefs.

5.1.1 Belief in equal access to education

Over the course of the study, we heard from girls about their own wishes to be educated, but also the importance they placed on equal access to education in general. This goes against traditionalist views that girls should prioritise the domestic sphere and their roles as future wives and mothers, over being educated; it is a view that several caregivers across countries held, such as a number of parents in Benin who had concerns that education comes with greater freedoms for girls who will in turn become disrespectful.

We asked girls in 2018 to respond to the question, 'Should boys and girls have equal access to education?' with 99 per cent of girls responding in agreement. We also asked whether they thought it was more important for girls or boys to go to school or if it was same, whether they agreed that it was important for girls to go to school, and why. Every girl who was asked agreed that it was important for girls to go to school, but it was notable that 13 per cent of girls were unable to articulate a reason for this importance. This reflects where we have placed 'egalitarian views' on our framework - it clearly shows some degree of support for equality, but is not always accompanied by more agentic questioning of existing norms.

Some girls expressed support for the instrumentalist view of girls' education, by which it is seen not as a basic right of girls, but as a useful tool in helping them to fulfil roles that predominantly fall to women. In 2018, girls shared views which indicate they saw education as a means to ensure girls will care for their parents ("so they can be useful and help their parents" - Nini-Rike, age 12, Togo) and be obedient daughters ("so that she becomes a disciplined girl" - Beti, age 11, Uganda) - a view that reinforces the normative role of women and girls as caregivers. As Essohana in Togo said, "Girls must go to school to learn lots of things and acquire knowledge so they can help their parents when they're older" (age 12, 2018).
Similarly, though agreeing with education as equally important for girls and boys, Rebecca (Uganda) saw education as important to deter boys from 'bad behaviours' which is also rooted in gender normativity, with boys seen as inherently aggressive.

> ***"Because if boys do not study they start doing things which are not good, like taking alcohol, drugs and smoking."***
>
> - Rebecca, age 12 (2018), Uganda

However, some girls made the case for the importance of girls' education in itself, not as a means to better fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, but rather as a means of being literate, participating in public life and the workforce, and opening up possibilities for future participation.

> ***"Because that's how we get a diploma, then when we grow up we can be whatever we want, become a lawyer, doctor, secretary, all those things, in contrast if you don't go to school you don't know anything …"***
>
> - Valeria, age 11 (2018), El Salvador

By 2023, we heard more views on the importance of girls' education. In El Salvador, Gladys explained the value of girls' education: *"because they learn new things and studying in the future will help them."* Likewise, Essohana in Togo said that girls' education is valued highly in her community because their parents did not study, and they want to see girls attend school and have secure futures. Essohana said*:*

> ***"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 16 (2023), Togo

Essohana's statement shows how her views on education grew over time, she recognised that girls have the right to learn and achieve what their parents did not have the chance to.

5.1.2 Career aspirations and economic empowerment

In the later years of the study, we were able to hear from girls on their views around women's economic empowerment, and their support for the idea that women should seek out financial autonomy and move into career domains that are traditionally male dominated. In 2024, we asked girls to respond to a vignette[5] that concerned a girl who wants to study farming techniques and is encouraging her female classmates to enter this field too, despite this being a male-dominated space in her community.

Responding to the vignette, Tan said:

> ***"I think now that it's changed, women can do more like men, they can do more than men. Women now have many financially independent people who are not dependent. So, I think some of people think that way and some of people will think in old-fashioned way, not keeping up with the level of culture now. I think those guys think the old way and [the girl in the vignette] thinks positively. Self-change is ultimately about changing one's own life."***
>
> - Tan, age 17 (2024), Vietnam

Tan's poignant views on equality and women's financial autonomy were shared across the cohort, with girls across the countries resonating with the story.

Firstly, many girls focused on the qualities of fictional girl herself, with Fezire (Togo) saying she is 'courageous'. In Cambodia, Mony described her as brave to share her goal and Kannitha shared that she saw herself in the story from when she was persistent in studying law:

> ***"The girl is good, clever and will be success if she can do it…. she is believed in herself, brave and strong to win other word that people said girl cannot do agriculture."***
>
> - Kannitha, age 15 (2022), Cambodia

[5] For the vignette in full and the accompanying questions, please see page 83 of the 2024 *Real Choices, Real Lives* Technical Report, **'Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls'**

Alice, Annabelle and Isabelle in Benin and Dariana and Raisa in the Dominican Republic all shared similar views around girls and women being able to do anything and that should not restrict female economic empowerment. For example, in 2024, we heard from Isabelle that "there's nothing a man can do that a woman can't do. If a woman is determined, she can do anything like a man" (age 17) and from Raisa that women should not be belittled for what they study and it "shouldn't limit her ability" (age 18). These views indicate they admire the tenacity of a young woman who is in pursuit of occupational parity.

The girls' views on this topic mirror girl power discourses that position girls as capable of achieving whatever they want to, as long as they try hard enough. For these girls, women can do anything a man can, as long as she is "courageous," "brave and strong," "determined" and thinking "positively" about "changing one's own life." While these statements go 'against the grain' in terms of believing in equality of opportunity, they do not show a more critical questioning of gender norms in the girls' communities, or of whether a woman really can do anything a man can do in the girls' communities, given the many barriers and attitudes she might face along the way.

This belief in equality of opportunity, but lack of more critical questioning of the roles that men and women usually play in their communities, was also reflected in the girls' own career aspirations. While many of the girls aspired to having a career and earning their own money, many of these aspirations revolved around traditionally feminine or female roles. Most of the cohort girls have - at different stages of their lives - aspired to a career in a care profession, including as nurses, midwives, other healthcare occupations, or as teachers.

> ***"I want to be a nurse […] to be able to help other people."***
>
> - Jasmine, age 14 (2020), Philippines

> ***"If I do well at school, I can become a midwife, that's my dream."***
>
> - Fezire, age 17 (2023), Togo

Care professions are associated with helping others - which was a key gendered virtue instilled in the girls over the years through their unpaid care responsibilities. In this way, we can see the influence of gender norms in shaping girls' aspirations.

By 2024, at least 20 per cent of the girls wanted to be either teachers, midwives, or nurses. Eight girls - all from the Africa cohort - expressed a wish to be a seamstress or go into tailoring, while five other girls aspired to go into various beauty and fashion professions. Though these girls very much supported equality of opportunity in terms of pursuing careers after school, their choice of careers did little to challenge gendered perceptions and practices of caregiving.

Other girls, however, shared aspirations that show they can imagine women - particularly themselves - in workplace sectors that are typically not women-dominated. 13 per cent of girls talked about being business owners, accountants or studying economics. Several girls wanted to be police officers or go into criminology, Dolores (Philippines) wanted to become a firefighter, and Kannitha (Cambodia) and Beti (Uganda) both wanted to be lawyers. 39 per cent of girls shared aspirations of going into STEM-related careers[6], including six medical doctors. However, few of these girls seemed to question whether girls were equally able as boys to pursue such careers, and many of their aspirations changed as time went by and they continually reassessed the opportunities available to them and observed the behaviour of female role models. Overall, the girls felt strongly that they wanted to have careers and earn money. However, few questioned the kinds of careers aspirations typically deemed appropriate to women and girls or expressed a sense of injustice at the opportunities available to them.

5.1.3 Equal freedom

As the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls grew up, their freedoms became notably restricted in multiple ways. Caregivers feared for girls' personal safety as they reached adolescence, and thereby curtailed girls' mobility and access to public spaces. There were expectations from caregivers and the girls

[6] Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

themselves that they should be obedient ‘good girls’ who base their activities around the domestic sphere (i.e. chores), which limited what girls can do compared with boys .

In 2021 and in 2024 we asked girls about their agreement with the following statement: “Boys should have more freedom than girls”. In 2021, 59 per cent girls disagreed and in 2024, this jumped to 81.5 per cent - indicating that a majority believed in equal freedoms for boys and girls.

We also learnt of girls’ reasonings for why they believed in equal freedoms, with many girls saying that boys and girls should have the same rights, because “we’re all equal” (Raisa, age 15, 2021, Dominican Republic).

Across countries, girls told us that it should not just be men and boys with freedoms:

> ***“It's not just because they are men that they can do what they want. We also have the right to go out.”***
>
> - Karen, age 14 (2021), El Salvador

> ***“A girl should be able to do what she wants. Not just the boys.”***
>
> - Darna, age 15 (2021), Philippines

> ***“Boys and girls should have the same liberties; they are both humans and have the same rights.”***
>
> - Folami, age 15 (2021), Togo

> ***“Boys and girls are equal, so we shouldn't think that boys have more rights than girls. What boys do, girls can do, too.”***
>
> - Tan, age 14 (2021), Vietnam

Shifa in Uganda, provided an alternative, ‘with the grain’ view: freedoms should be gender-equal but restricted for children (“none of them should be given freedom to do as they desire because they are all children and must be [guided]” age 15, 2021).

When asked this again in 2024, girls maintained their strong sentiment that “girls and boys must have the same rights" (Fernanda, age 18, Brazil) and that it “should be equal now” (Jocelyn, age 17, Philippines), because "boys and girls are human beings and we [are] the same" (Yen, age 18, Vietnam). Isabelle in Benin agreed with the sentiment of the statement but reflected that boys and girls having equal freedoms is not reality: “parents don't hold the boys as tightly as they do the girls" (age 17, 2024).

Sheila, Sylvia, Nimisha, Dembe, Beti and Amelia in Uganda all said that they disagree on an alternative basis - that boys having more freedom means they will cause increased danger for girls. They made the case for equality between boys and girls, but justified it with essentialist statements about how boys and girls behave. Once again, the girls expressed strong agreement with egalitarian statements, but did not all take this further into questioning gendered patterns of behaviour.

Overall, most girls expressed support for equality of opportunity and a belief that they should also be able to do what boys and men are able to do. While in general girls did not question whether they could access and realise these opportunities as a result of the barriers that may stand in their way, these findings highlight that girls want to grow up in an environment where this would be possible.

5.2 Questioning norms

Moving across the framework, we turn to instances where girls question gender norms. This includes questioning why a particular role or rule is what it is, or questioning whether it is necessarily dictated by nature, perhaps even wondering if it could be different, without going so far as to say that it is unfair.

This mostly came in the form of questioning essentialist views of gender, whether explicitly, or implicitly through their behaviours. This included simple actions such as not noticing, or openly disregarding, norms around childhood play that would dictate toys or certain games to be coded as

either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. For example, in 2014, when asked which toys she likes the best, Christine, aged eight, in the Philippines answered dolls, and also trucks.

In some cases, the questioning was more overt. For example, in 2016 at the age of ten, Ayomide in Togo noted that “boys are allowed to play football,” and when asked how that made her feel, she said, “It makes me feel uncomfortable and I ask him ‘why do you forbid me to play football?’” It isn’t clear from the interview transcript whether Ayomide was referring here to a male relative or teacher, or to the boys themselves, who perhaps did not let the girls join in. However, it is clear from Ayomide’s words that she had begun to question gendered rules around play, not just to herself, but also to the boy or man who was preventing her from playing.

Similarly, Dariana (Dominican Republic) and Essohana’s (Togo) respective reflections both indicate how they question the reasoning behind widespread parenting practices that allow boys more freedom than girls:

> ***"Because if they make a rule for one, they should make it for both. In other words, they shouldn’t be given so much freedom just because they’re boys, more freedom than a girl. Both pose risks."***
>
> - Dariana, age 18 (2024), Dominican Republic

> ***"Because it was not written anywhere that boys should be free"***
>
> - Essohana, age 18 (2024), Togo

Here we can see that Dariana and Essohana have noticed, and are starting to question, the differences in how boys and girls are treated, and reject the idea that this is simply the ‘natural’ state of things.

Girls also questioned to a much greater degree the supposed natural qualities of boys and girls. In particular, many of the girls questioned whether men and boys are naturally more violent. In Brazil, Bianca reasoned that men are not inherently violent "because they are not born that way, it will depend on the way they were raised" (age 15, 2021) and Camila similarly said “they learned to be violent from the world” (age 15, 2021) - both indicating their recognition of gender roles as internalised from external factors and performed. In a similar light, Mariel (El Salvador) and Quynh (Vietnam) reasoned that the statement is not true and not all men are violent.

> ***“Because not all boys and men are aggressive towards women, because there are several men who do respect women and perhaps depending on how they have been brought up with values.”***
>
> - Mariel, age 14 (2021), El Salvador

> ***“Men are more aggressive than women, mostly in the past, but now they are equal, boys still play with girls as usual, without violent or aggressive activities.”***
>
> - Quynh, age 14 (2021), Vietnam

In 2021, a number of girls recognised the fact that women can be aggressive or violent too. This included Juliana and Sofia (“I think there are also women who are very aggressive, more than men” age 14) in Brazil, Karen (women can have a “strong character” age 14) in El Salvador, and Tan in Vietnam, aged 14: “I think there are cases where women are more aggressive, e.g., like me. (laughed)”.

Though in agreement with the statement that “men are naturally violent and aggressive compared to women”, Darna said “Men are really arrogant. Sometimes they say, ‘Oh, girls can't do what men do’." (age 15, 2021). This is indicative that Darna did not accept the framing of men as aggressive as natural or women’s roles as unmovable.

We asked this statement again in 2024, and saw how girls’ views may have changed over time. In 2021 (when aged 14 and 15 years old), 32 per cent of the girls disagreed that boys and men are by nature more aggressive and violent than girls and women, and by 2024 (when aged 17 and 18), 38 per cent questioned the statement.

More girls than before gave recognition to the fact that male violence depends on “what they learn at home” (Rebeca, age 18, 2024, Dominican Republic) and “if they are taught to be [aggressive], then they will be” (Gabriela, age 17, 2024, Brazil). Madelin in the Dominican Republic noted that if they “see what their father does” they will copy that (age 18, 2024). The broader recognition for violence as learned, rather than inherent, meant more girls also recognised that women could be violent: “I think they (girls and boys) learn [violence]” (Valerie, age 18, 2024, Dominican Republic).

> ***“Because not all men are aggressive, some women are violent too"***
>
> - Reine, age 17 (2024), Togo

> ***“I think everyone can be aggressive and violent, not just men."***
>
> - Ly, age 18 (2024), Vietnam

> ***"Around me, I see that most of the males are aggressive, but 35-40 per cent females also are."***
>
> - Yen, age 18 (2024), Vietnam

As before, we saw girls reason their disagreement because they see around them that “not all men are aggressive and violent” (Christine, age 18, 2024, Philippines). Quynh told us how her family dynamics diverged from this idea:

> ***“I don't think it's true, for example, at home, Dad is quiet, but I'm more afraid of my mom because she is very serious. And my brother is gentle. He would take care of cleaning the house and even cooking well"***
>
> - Quynh, age 17 (2024), Vietnam

By reflecting on the world around them, and seeing how, in reality, the people in their lives deviate from gender normative ideals, girls were questioning the gender essentialist norms they were taught. Therefore, it is important to ensure that girls are growing up in an environment where they can safely question the gender norms around them, as although not openly resisting these norms, this is an important step in beginning to question whether gender roles have to be the way they are and for many of the girls, this questioning led to more agentic forms of resistance.

5.3 Attitudinal resistance

We now move to girls’ expressions of attitudinal resistance to gender norms, where we see girls expressing a strong dislike for, or sense of injustice at, gender roles. A key characteristic in attitudinal resistance is, however, that they may not feel able to challenge gender norms in a more overt way, like voicing their views outside of a confidential interview or openly disobeying their caregivers.

5.3.1 Girls describing household roles as unfair

Around the world, more than three quarters of unpaid care work is performed by women and girls, owing to gender norms in society that dictate it is a feminine role or household dynamics that lead it to be taken up by female members of the family. Across the study cohort, girls spent an average of five hours 15 mins per day on unpaid care work, whilst their brothers and other male peers had far fewer chores than they do.[95]

Many girls not only questioned the division of gender roles and expectations, but recognised it to be unfair and in favour of boys. Girls particularly expressed a view that current arrangements around household chores are unfair.

By 2017, Sylvia (Uganda) had noticed that girls do more chores at school than boys and thought this was unfair. Anti-Yara (Togo) similarly expressed frustration about the division of chores in 2019 and 2021, as did Ladi (age 15, Togo) in 2021 about her brothers: "they still carry out agricultural work and dislike housework, they say it’s girls’ work which annoys me." Catherine in Benin noticed the

differences in how boys and girls spend their time, calling it “unfair” (age eight, 2015), as she realised she didn’t get to play as much as other children her age, and sometimes had to go help her mother.

Throughout the years (2015 to 2019), Gabriela, Bianca and Camila in Brazil all told us that it was unfair that boys did fewer chores and spent more time playing than girls. For example, Camila’s brother did less housework than her, and she said:

> ***“Because [women] have to do it, it’s their home, but when we ask them, they cry. Men don’t do anything, just watch, I don’t know if this is cool.”***
>
> - Camila, age 12 (2018), Brazil

Reflecting on this division, Camila felt sad that boys could enjoy playing while she couldn’t (“I feel sad, I just have to obey.”).

A number of girls in Cambodia shared their frustrations about the division of chores. In 2016, Nakry complained that “boys collect water while girls clean around the house because boys are lazy” (age ten). Sothany, also in 2016, thought it wasn’t fair that boys were not helping their parents, in the same ways girls were expected to do: “I think it is not fair. I feel that it is very bad that boys don’t help their parents. I realize that only a few boys help their parents” (age nine). In 2018, age 11, Mony described the split of tasks by gender, recognising it to not be equal, but that it would be “equal when men help do female work.”

At six years old, Darna in the Philippines told us about her anger about the way things were. Darna got angry when her brother played basketball instead of doing chores and disliked boys being rowdy and destroying girls’ things at school (2012). In 2020, Darna questioned - and even expressed some frustration with - how protective her brothers and father were of her. She wanted to go out more with her friends but she couldn’t, including doing group schoolwork with them:

> ***“When we have a class project, sometimes we need to go to the house of our classmates to make the project but my brother will not allow me especially if the house is far from ours. I don’t like it when he does that.”***
>
> - Darna, age 14 (2020), the Philippines

Darna said her father was stricter with her than her brothers “because I’m a girl” and “my older brothers can do whatever they want” (2020). Darna continued with these views into 2021, by which time, Darna had progressed towards articulated resistance, calling for adults to share chores more equally between boys and girls; teach boys not to be violent; listen to girls’ views; and give boys and girls equal freedom. At age 15, she said, “girls should have freedom. A girl should be able to do what she wants. Not just the boys” (2021).

5.3.2 Girls describing differing expectations of boys and girls as unfair

In 2021, 14-year-old Gladys in El Salvador reflected on how differently girls and boys were expected to act, and the tendency for boys to be given much more freedom. Responding to the vignette shared that year about a girl advocating for girls in her community to have greater access to sport facilities, she shared that at her school::

> ***“[teachers] didn’t let [my female friends] play, only the boys could play, and they went to see the teachers and that was it, they said they could play and everyone was allowed to play”***
>
> - Gladys, age 14 (2021), El Salvador

Gladys also observed other aspects where boys were allowed to do things that girls weren’t, including playing football and being able to go out: “boys can go anywhere, but girls aren't, they have to be at home all the time.” She thought it was unfair “It seems strange because it shouldn’t be like that, everyone should be treated equally” (2021).

In 2016, Gabriela in El Salvador said it was unfair that her uncle did not help with chores, and she didn’t like that boys annoyed girls by touching them without their consent or calling them ugly. In 2021,

Gabriela also told us that she wished boys would stop saying girls can't play football and in 2024 she thought it was wrong that women weren't involved in decision making processes in the community.

Jasmine, in the Philippines, told us that "it isn't fair that women don't seem to be involved in decision making. Most of the leaders are men. It's not fair" (age 18, 2024). In Vietnam, Yen's attitudinal resistance to gender norms was also strong like Darna and Jasmine's, as she told us about the need to educate people that girls are important, as to "eliminate the idea of favouring boys over girls" (age 15, 2021).

5.3.3 Girls threatening to disobey

A step further from expressing frustration, we heard from Karen in El Salvador about her anger at her caregivers. Karen would challenge her mother's orders, with her mother telling us that Karen got angry and that "It's harder for me to get her to do these things now" (2020). Notably, at the same time, 13-year-old Karen shared that she didn't feel listened to, "You are telling them, you are telling them things, but they don't listen to you, they don't pay attention to you and when you have a tantrum they hit you, something like that" (2020). By 2021, Karen explained that she was punished when she was not allowed to get out, which relates to what her mother said the year before. "When I don't do my homework, when I don't do my household chores, sometimes when I have to wash my clothes, I can't go out" (2021). Karen explained "I get angry. I try to negotiate with my mum" (2021). Karen's story is an example of how girls are resisting the norms imposed by their caregivers, this time through being noticeably angry. While she doesn't outright refuse to do her chores or disobey her mother, which would be a form of overt behavioural resistance, she expressed her resistance to them through her attitude of anger towards her mother.

In a similar way, Ly in Vietnam and Doris and Gabriela in El Salvador would threaten to disobey their caregivers as a means to resist the expectations they were held to. Ly told us in 2015 that girls were made to do more because they're obedient and that was unfair:

> **"I feel tired and find it unfair. Girls must do more because girls are obedient, so they do more… *Boys do not have to do housework. They just go to play."***
>
> - Ly, age nine (2015), Vietnam

This is notable because by 2016, she said that that she didn't care what would happen if a girl didn't follow elders' advice, indicating her threat of disobedience and increasing resistance.

On a few occasions over 2020, aged 14, Gabriela would tell her father that she was going to her grandmother or aunt's homes without asking permission. Her father noticed her getting ready to go out, saying "Ah, I see that sometimes she wants to disobey me", however Gabriela would stop short of actually leaving the house. This is a form of attitudinal resistance, even if Gabriela did not feel able to overtly disobey her father's rules for her behaviour. Gabriela's father thought that "She wants too much freedom [...] but no, because when I say no, it's no. And then, she calms down. So, sometimes, how can I say, she has these whims" (2020). Gabriela continued to hold her attitudes about freedom and resisting caregivers. In 2024, age 17, Gabriela told us that she believed girls should have equal freedoms and girls should be able to decide freely outside of parental influence: "Because most parents want [girls] to live according to what [parents] they want." With these insights, we can see that girls expressed a sense of injustice at gender roles and expectations, an important form of attitudinal resistance.

These findings reveal that girls engaged in attitudinal resistance are not happy with the behaviours and roles expected of them, yet they do not feel able to voice these feelings openly nor do they feel that adults are listening to them. Therefore, adults need to create an environment in which girls feel safe and free to express their sense of injustice and/or dislike at gender inequalities.

5.4 Articulated resistance

We use the term articulated resistance to describe all the ways that girls were supportive of the idea of girls' resistance, or were calling for others to do more to support gender inequality, without necessarily engaging in overt and behavioural resistance to gender inequalities themselves. We see

girls identifying adults' role in creating gender inequalities as an important form of resistance, not only to the inequalities themselves, but also to dominant discourses in the media and in many girls' empowerment campaigns that position girls as capable of achieving gender equality all by themselves. Listening to the ways that girls are calling for change is clearly also a crucial step for adults and organisations wishing to support girls' resistance.

5.4.1 Girls calling for boys to do more chores

Some girls took their sense of injustice at the division of chores - or attitudinal resistance - even further, and began to articulate a need for chores to be more evenly distributed. It is important not to overstate this finding, given that the research has consistently found over the years that although they were overwhelmed and exhausted from the many different demands on their time, girls were frequently proud of the contribution they make to their households through chores.[7] However, we did see some girls who were initially accepting of the gendered division of labour in the home begin to call for change as they got older.

For example, in 2017 aged 11, Tene in Togo told the interviewer that a good girl "must do everything they tell me to in the house," while a good boy "respects his mother and father and works in the fields." In 2020, she said that she was responsible for washing dishes, fetching water, cooking and sweeping both at home and at school. When asked if she enjoyed her chores, she replied, "Yes, I like doing all those things because they're good for me." She went on to say that there were no chores she wished she didn't have to do. However, in 2021, in response to questions about how girls' and boys' time use has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, she said, "My brothers haven't changed the way they spend their time; they go to work in the fields but they don't like doing housework. I think that they should do housework; I help them in the field but they never want to help me with my chores". She had started to notice the inequality and was calling for boys to do more.

Similarly, when seven years old, Justine in Uganda said in 2014 that she washed plates, swept the compound and fetched water, and when asked what she felt about the amount of work she did at home, she replied, "nothing." However, by 2018 and aged 11, she appeared to have quite strong feelings about the situation. Throughout her childhood, Justine consistently aspired to becoming a doctor, and aged 12, she seemed to have identified the division of domestic work as a potential barrier to that. In particular, she noted that both men and women do subsistence farming ("going to the garden"), but it is the women who have to go early in the morning, so they can also fit in time to come home and do all their domestic chores.

> ***"It's not fair because you both go to the garden but remember it's the woman [who] come back and make sure food is ready on time so for you to be able to do you have do extra work you go to the garden very early so that you come back to take care of the home needs . It's not fair because it would be okay for the men also to do the chores and cooking as the women also look for money."***
>
> - Justine, age 11 (2018), Uganda

Justine is starting to express a desire for change, stating that "it would be okay" for roles to be shared out more equally.

In Dominican Republic, many of the girls initially accepted their roles within the house, however by the time they reached adolescence, they began to call for change. At age 13, Griselda said that "boys should have the same duties as girls! [...] "[they don't] because they're lazy" (2019). Dariana wanted her brother to do more, "[its not right] because even though he is a boy, he also has to do chores" (age 13, 2019). Nicol even made the link between the unequal division of chores between boys and girls, and men's lack of engagement in domestic labour: "because that's how they get used to it, when they grow up and get married and never do anything" (age 13, 2019).

In the Philippines, Reyna described how, aged 12, some of the boys in her class tried to bully her into doing their chores for them. While she did not feel able to stand up to them herself, she reported them

[7] For more information on our findings about girls' unpaid care responsibilities, please see our 2024 'Out of Time' report here: **https://plan-international.org/publications/out-of-time/**

to her teacher, placing the responsibility on the adult to address the inequality, an important form of articulated resistance.

> **Interviewer:** Are there times when other kids bully you?
> **Reyna:** Yes.
> [...]
> **Interviewer:** Are they groups of girls or boys?
> **Reyna:** Boys.
> **Interviewer:** Boys ask you to do those things?
> **Reyna:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** They don't like to do the tasks the teacher gave them and instead they ask you to do it?
> **Reyna:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** Do you tell your teacher about it? What do you usually do about it?
> **Reyna:** I tell our teacher about it.
> Interviewer: What does she say?
> **Reyna:** She calls them and scolds them. She asks them to do all my tasks in addition to their tasks.
> [...]
> **Interviewer:** Aren't you afraid to tell your teacher about it?
> **Reyna:** No.
>
> - Reyna, age 12 (2018), the Philippines

In this example, Reyna showed great courage in reporting the bullies to the teacher, and she potentially risked a backlash from them for doing so. She clearly felt able to do this, and had confidence that the teacher would act on the reported behaviour. A supportive teacher is one of the resources she needed to be able to make change. Without this resource, many girls may not feel able to report unfair behaviour or may simply feel there is no point.

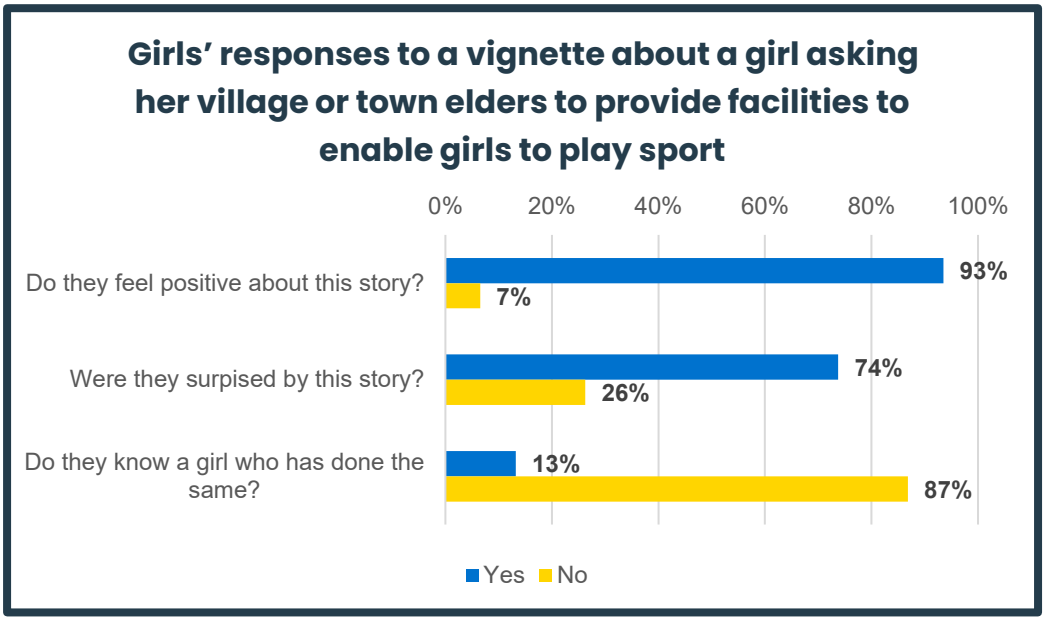
5.4.2 Girls asking for better provisions for their peers

In 2021, the research team asked for girls' responses to a vignette about a girl asking her village or town elders to provide facilities to enable girls to play sport. This was because we had observed in 2019 that many of the girls were beginning to question gender inequalities and some were disobeying rules on their behaviour, but few appeared to be openly speaking out about girls' rights.[8] We wanted to understand girls' views on girls' leadership better. We purposefully centred the vignette on girls' ability to play sports that are typically seen as boys' sports - depending on cultural context, this was either football or basketball. The vignette was very similar in all nine countries, with some tweaks for cultural and contextual differences. In it, a 15-year-old girl is told she isn't allowed to play football because the playing field is dark and afar away, and it's only boys who play. She approaches the elders in her community and asks them to provide a safe space for girls to play football and other sports (see Annex 2).

The girls were then asked about their feelings about the story, whether they were surprised by the girl's actions, and whether they knew any girls who had done similar (with some girls choosing not to answer all three questions).

[8] For more information on our findings from 2019, please see the 'Girls Challenging the Gender Rules: Synthesis Report' here: **https://plan-international.org/publications/girls-challenging-gender-rules-synthesis/**

The results clearly show that of the girls who gave an emotional response to the vignette, 93 per cent gave a positive reaction, expressing support for the girl and her bravery. However, 74 per cent of girls found the girl's behaviour surprising and 87 per cent of girls said they did not know a girl who had done similar in her community. These views are shown as percentages in the chart below.



These responses clearly illustrate what we mean by articulated resistance - the majority of girls support the idea of resisting gender inequalities, and are able to articulate that support in a one-to-one interview with a girls' rights NGO, but found the girl's behaviour surprising and were unlikely to know a girl who had done similar. This shows a clear need for trusted adults to listen to girls and to find out which kinds of resistance they would like to engage in, or which facilities they feel adults could provide for girls. Despite clear support for girls creating change, the responses suggest that very few girls knew any girls who were able to do so themselves.

Just two girls across the cohort responded by saying they had done something similar to the girl in the vignette described above. Darna in the Philippines said that she challenged her sports teachers to be more inclusive at school:

Interviewer: How did you feel about what Ana did?
Darna: What Ana did was okay.
Interviewer: What can you say about Ana in the story?
Darna: She wants to be fair to everyone. She's brave.
Interviewer: Were you surprised with this kind of girl?
Darna: No.
Interviewer: Why?
Darna: We've already tried something like this.
Interviewer: What do you mean "we've tried"?
Darna: A while back in school, they chose representatives they could send to the badminton competition. There were two students who the teacher said would be chosen as representatives in this badminton competition because they've been to other competitions so they're sure that these guys are good. The teacher wanted to get them again because these two have trained already. But we told the teacher if everyone who wants to try out can be allowed to do this to see who should be sent to the competition. To see who's really good.
Interviewer: Were you the leader then?
Darna: There were a couple of us.
Interviewer: Then?
Darna: The teacher said, "Okay." So there was a competition. The teacher said okay so I was able to join the team because I was chosen to be a representative.
Interviewer: What were the results?

Darna: Many were encouraged to try out and they supported everyone who wanted to join to see who's really good.
Interviewer: What do you feel now that you yourselves give suggestions, then the teacher complies and the results were like that?
Darna: I would like to do it again. For example, there's a similar situation where the teacher or the elder won't allow (them), (I) shouldn't be afraid to express my opinion because I may be right.

- Darna, age 15 (2021), the Philippines

Tan in Vietnam identified strongly with the girl in the vignette, but said she was surprised by the girl's behaviour and that she would feel too "shy" to ask elders for anything. However, she did go on to give an example of how she stood up to some bullying boys by hitting them back. Although this is a very different example of resistance to the one in the vignette, Tan clearly saw it as linked, and despite feeling too shy to speak to adults, she still challenged boys on their behaviour. She described telling some boys who were bullying girls:

"You are a boy… why are you so cowardly? You don't know what will happen later if you try to do it again."

- Tan, age 14 (2021), Vietnam

After that, she said, the boy didn't dare hit the girls again. Tan's responses illustrate some of the complexities of girls' responses to the vignette. She admired the girl, but was surprised by her actions and said she would not be able to do the same. However, she then went on to describe herself engaging in physical violence - a potentially much riskier form of resistance - towards boys as a form of self-defence or retaliation. Most girls, however, simply reported that although they would like to do something similar to the vignette girl and ask adults to do more for girls, they did not currently feel able to and they did not know any other girls who did either.

5.4.3 Girls asking to be involved in decision making

Despite clear norms amongst caregivers that saw men as the heads of households, and girls as not capable of making decisions about their lives, a small number of girls in the cohort did have the opportunity to participate in family decision making. For example, in 2023 at 17 years old, Sofia in Brazil said that she helped to make decisions relating to food, education and how money is spent. When asked how she felt about this, she said "Normally, if they didn't ask for my opinion I would be very sad." Unsurprisingly, in 2024, she agreed that girls should be able to make decisions freely about their lives, and she told the interviewer that women's participation in community decision making was important, "because it's not only men who should [be there], you know?"

Similarly, Nakry in Cambodia, aged 14, agreed that adults listen to girls, because "girls have good opinions," and went on to say that "girls can make a decision on their own, have rights to life, to development and to freedom" (2021). Yen in Vietnam said she thought it was "reasonable" for adults to listen to girls' opinions, so that they "would know the difficulties girls are facing," and said that girls "should make decisions ourselves but we should also consult with others and think carefully to choose the best path for ourselves" (age 15, 2021).

Decision making emerged as a strong theme of articulated resistance for the girls in the Philippines cohort, with several girls not only expressing support for girls' participation, but also a sense of injustice at their current exclusion from decision making forums. For example, in 2022 at 16, Dolores identified widespread littering as one of the most important issues affecting young people in her community and expressed frustration that "only young people take action to solve the garbage issue compared to the elderly." She was strongly in favour of women political leaders, telling the interviewer, "Women and young women leaders are intelligent because I can see that they're aggressive, active and they can easily resolve the concerns of the girls." In response to a question about whether she intended to vote "when you are old enough," she replied that "age should not be the basis in voting. As a child, we also want changes in leadership in the community."

When she was 13 years old, Kyla said in 2020 that adults should trust children more. In 2022, at 15, Reyna said that she would like to be a leader in future and participate in marches and political campaigns, but for this to happen, adults needed to support girls and "speak for us," by conveying

girls' views to those in a position of power. At 16, also in 2022, Rosamie said that she would find it "embarrassing" to talk to local politicians about issues affecting youth and she would find it "tough because I don't know what to do yet." However, she went on to say that there should be "an organisation or group and discuss what can be done to be ready when we approach who's in charge," and the main hindrance would be "if there is no support and guidance for us."

In this context in particular, then, girls expressed a desire to be involved in decision making at a community level, and identified forms of support that adults could provide to enable them to do so, including groups for girls to discuss these topics effectively and opportunities to communicate their concerns directly to decision makers. By identifying what it is that adults need to do to enable girls to participate more fully, girls are articulating a form of resistance - both to gender norms that shut them out of decision making, and to girl power representations that position girls as capable of creating change all by themselves.

5.4.4 Girls asking adults to do more to prevent Sexual and Gender Based Violence

In our previous analysis of the study data, we found that across the cohort, caregivers consistently saw rape and sexual assault as a constant threat in the lives of girls, and largely saw this as an inevitable risk the girls must navigate as a result of what they perceived to be natural aggression in boys and men.[96] Caregivers' response to the threat of GBV was largely to restrict their daughters' movement and their friendships with boys. By contrast, we saw that girls were beginning to question adults' role in failing to prevent GBV in their communities and calling on adults to make communities safer and to shift responsibility for violence onto perpetrators rather than victims. Bringing this analysis up to date, we can see that the girls continue to do this by questioning whether aggression is really a 'natural' quality of men and boys, and by calling for adults to take action.[97]

For example, in 2021 at the age of 14, Annabelle in Benin strongly disagreed with the statement that it is girls' responsibility to protect themselves from violence and abuse, telling the interviewer, "girls can't do this alone. It's up to the police to protect them." In 2024, aged 17, she took this further. When asked what the biggest challenges facing girls in her community were, she replied "girls face sexual harassment in my community. If boys call you, and you refuse, they'll tell you that if you behave this way, you won't find a husband." She said that "girls should talk to adults so that we can raise awareness among the perpetrators," and suggested that they could start by talking to the village chief, who could then take the issue to his "superiors" if needed. Finally, she added that boys "need to change their mentality to be able to help them and avoid making advances". She clearly saw SGBV as an issue that required action from the whole community, with a focus on addressing the behaviour of perpetrators, and not the behaviour of girls.

At 15 years old, Bianca in Brazil rejected the idea that it was girls' responsibility to protect themselves, saying in 2021, "they shouldn't be alone, the community must help as well." By the following year, her critique had sharpened into a call for accountability. She named sexual and gender-based violence as the most urgent issue in her community, pointing to the constant fear girls live with in public space:

> ***"It's… the lack of safety that we… girls, women, have to face. When we go out on the street at night, we are afraid because we're not sure of anything. There are a lot of bad people out there and we feel threatened, like… afraid of something happening, of… of a possible rape happening, or anything."***
>
> - Bianca, age 16 (2022), Brazil

But, in the same interview, she explained "they don't teach [these issues] at school." When asked why, she replied, "It must be because they don't want us to know more about them, to know our rights." Bianca had started to identify not only adults' inaction, but also their silence, as factors in perpetuating violence against girls and women.

In Vietnam, Ly learnt to defend herself from boys' aggression from a young age. In 2015, aged nine, she told the interviewer, "I am often bullied by friends. Huynh (a boy's name) often bullies me. I dislike being bullied. When being bullied, I never cry, I fight against at once." In 2017, she repeated this sentiment, "I make friends with everyone. I hang out with them but if they tease me, I will hit them." And in 2019, aged 13, she told the interviewer, "everyone in my class are scared of me because I'm so aggressive." And yet, interestingly, in 2024 at 18 years old, she said it is not girls' responsibility to

protect themselves from violence and abuse, showing that she is starting to see GBV as a community, and not an individual, problem. She explained, “It depends on everyone’s thoughts and actions, if no people are thinking about violence, there are no people who have to protect themselves. So I think it is better to correct those who have bad intentions.” Again, Ly’s views shifted as she progressed through adolescence, to a view that adults and communities need to address the behaviour of perpetrators rather than expecting girls to protect themselves. This shows a clear understanding of some of the factors that enable male violence to continue, and girls clearly articulating a need for adults to do more to address them. Although she was not describing overtly disobeying norms around expected behaviours, Ly identified ways in which adults needed to do more to create a safer and fairer community.

5.4.5 Girls asking for better sex education

A final, recurring theme of articulated resistance was in girls asking to receive more, or more comprehensive, education on sex and pregnancy. Many girls felt uncomfortable discussing this topic and few implied that they would openly ask their parents for more information. In this way, this finding epitomises our concept of articulated resistance - girls articulate a need for adults to do better, even if they may not feel able to ask adults themselves. Over the course of the study, 83 per cent of girls stated a desire at some point for more and better SRHR education. Yet, very few caregivers discussed the topic openly with their daughters. Caregivers consistently expressed discomfort or disapproval at discussing the topic with their daughters. Many feared that talking about it would encourage girls to become sexually active or felt that the topic should be handled by schools or religious institutions instead. When conversations did happen, they were usually vague or framed as warnings rather than explanations - focusing on what *not* to do rather than teaching girls about their bodies. Girls, by contrast, wanted to be better informed about their bodies, with a focus on managing menstruation and preventing pregnancy. For example, while Alice’s father in Benin said that Alice received all the information she needed about sexuality from sermons at church, Alice herself said (age 17), “I’d like us to set up a group in my community called the ‘girls’ club’ to learn about good practices for avoiding pregnancy” (both in 2024).

The contrast between caregiver and girl attitudes is perhaps best illustrated by the case study of Doris in El Salvador. When aged 12, Doris told the interviewer that her mother had told her that once she got her period, “I must look after myself, that no one can touch me” (2019). Doris added that she did not know anything about sexuality but that it would be important for girls to learn about it, “so that they don’t get pregnant” (2019). This same year, Doris’s mother said that she had not talked to Doris about sexuality but had warned her “that pregnancy is a commitment, I tell her to be careful, because they leave us... I tell her she can have a boyfriend when she’s older” (2019). In 2020, when asked if she talked to Doris about SRHR, her mother again stated, “I tell her she has to be careful, yes” (2020). By 2021, 14-year-old Doris still stated that she had not been taught about sexuality and puberty but she thought it was important for girls to learn about it. By the following year, Doris was pregnant. In 2024, 17-year-old Doris still stated she did not know much about puberty and menstruation. She again stated that she felt it was important for girls to be taught about the topic, and particularly about contraceptives, “so they don't get pregnant, because raising children is hard, this life.” When asked who should talk to girls about sex and pregnancy, she replied, “The mothers, because the mothers have to be truthful with them” (2024).

There is no indication that Doris felt able to discuss this topic with her mother, or to ask her for more information. For many of the girls, the taboos surrounding the topic are too strong. However, in one-to-one interviews, many girls identified a lack of information about their bodies as a challenge for girls in accessing their rights, and wished for adults generally - and caregivers especially - to address this lack.

The findings indicate that girls have identified the role of adults in reproducing the gender inequality that exists in their communities and are asking adults to do more to address these issues, and to support girls in bringing about change they would like to see. Importantly, girls often did not feel able to express their views openly, implying the need to create spaces where girls feel able to share their thoughts and discuss what is troubling them in their community. The fact that so many girls engaged in this form of resistance reveals that this is an area where adults and organisations can expand the power of girls to make change without having to engage in behavioural forms of resistance.

5.5 Girls' secret resistance

In this section, we discuss all the ways that girls secretly resisted gender inequalities or subverted the behaviours expected of girls. We distinguish this from overt behavioural resistance because in many cases, caregivers or teachers are not aware that the girl is resisting. While the girl may strategically gain a little more freedom for herself this way, if her resistance goes unnoticed, it may do less to challenge gender norms in her community than overt behavioural resistance might. Many of the examples below nevertheless show great bravery and creativity and provide fascinating examples of how girls are sometimes refusing to take up the roles expected of them.

5.5.1 Subversive behavioural resistance

We use the term subversive behavioural resistance to refer to the ways in which girls might appear to be conforming to expected behaviours, but this conformity might mask or distract from ways in which she is actually rebelling. In a few cases, girls told interviewers that they strategically, and often enthusiastically, carried out some roles in order to gain a bit more freedom in another way.

For example, both Justine and Sheila in Uganda told the interviewer that they like going to fetch water from the borehole because as Justine said, "after I have pumped my water I can play a bit from there." Sheila also said "we play when we go to fetch water." For these families, living without access to running water in their homes, the journey on foot to collect water was a time-consuming task that needed to be carried out multiple times a day. However, for these two girls, it also provided a rare opportunity to stay at a distance from their caregivers and take time to play without risk of being assigned more chores. Both girls even went so far as to describe fetching water as their favourite part of the day.

Similarly, Christine, age 14, in the Philippines told the interviewer in 2020 that she enjoyed cooking, because "when we're cooking, I'm not able to do other chores." When asked which chores she was keen to avoid, she replied, "when I need to take care of my brother." In some cases, girls even lied about needing to do other chores in order to get out of something they did not want to do. For example, in 2020, Thea's mother in Benin complained that her daughter said she needed to do schoolwork in order to get out of going to church, but then did not do her schoolwork until the following day anyway.

Other girls referenced intentionally being very obedient with chores in order to gain something from caregivers, often essential supplies or small luxuries. For example, Isabelle in Benin said in 2016 "I'm happy to do anything to encourage my mother to buy me whatever I need" (aged nine) and similarly, Layla in Benin said "girls my age should have respect for grown-ups so that they buy them clothes, especially for feast days" (age nine, 2016). Camila in Brazil talked about helping her aunts with cooking and cleaning so that they continued to help buy her school supplies. While there is a limit to how subversive this form of resistance is, and the girls inevitably still ended up carrying out a great deal of domestic work in ways their brothers were not expected to, this is clearly a strategic and highly agentic move in order to earn a bit more freedom elsewhere.

5.5.2 Secret jobs and earnings

A number of caregivers expressed concerns about or a strong dislike of the idea of their daughters earning money. In some cases, caregivers did not want girls to get jobs because they worried about the impact on their education. In other cases, caregivers preferred for girls to stay at home and do care work or domestic chores. In a small number of cases, caregivers expressed very gendered fears about what would happen if a girl got a job, for example in 2010, when Justine's grandfather in Uganda told the interviewer that "girls who have studied, when they want to get jobs, bosses have to first sleep with them before they are given jobs. In the end they get infected by those who are sick, they infect others." Nevertheless, many girls found forms of work regardless, with one in eight girls (13 per cent) earning money without their caregivers' knowledge.

This emerged as a particularly strong finding in Benin and Uganda, where a total of nine out of 23 girls were engaged in earning money at some point in their adolescence without their parents' knowledge. For example, in 2024, when asked if Sheila had carried out any paid work in the last year, her mother replied, "No please. She wanted to but I had refused her to work." By contrast, Sheila told the interviewer in the same year that she had gone to work for her stepfather in his shop:

"My father had a boutique and also used to work in another location where he used to sell clothes. He therefore used to leave me to support at the boutique. Whenever he returned from the other selling point, he would give me 5000shs".

- Sheila, age 17 (2024), Uganda

She said that she enjoyed the work and described it as a "good job". It could, however, be that Sheila's mother is in fact aware of the paid work, but does not regard it as paid work as this is perceived as Sheila simply "helping" family instead.

Similarly, when asked if 16-year-old Alice in Benin had done any paid work in 2023, her father replied "No." However, Alice told the interviewer, "I collected sand on the road and sold it. I used to sell a basin for 150 FCFA in the dry season and 100 FCFA in the rainy season. They use this sand for construction" (2023). When asked who decided she would do this work, she said, "I decided to do this job to earn money," and then "I take this money to buy my clothes and shoes." Alice said that she learnt a lot from the experience: "I have learned to economise with the money I earn."

Thea in Benin used the opportunity of helping with her mother's shop to earn a bit extra: "When mummy goes out and I have to look after the shop, I increase the price of the Bazin material so that I make a little bit on top of the price, 500-1000F. It was my older brother's idea" (age 14, 2021).

While this was a strong theme across these two countries, we also saw evidence across the cohort of parents not knowing their daughters were earning, or not recognizing what they were doing as paid work. For example, by 2024, Yen in Vietnam had started buying products online, recording promotional videos for them, and selling them on at a profit, yet her mother thought she did not earn any money. While in Sheila's case, her mother is explicit about forbidding her daughter from earning, in many other cases, it is unclear whether caregivers were unaware of their daughter's economic activities, or whether gender norms around male breadwinning are so strong that they did not perceive these activities to be paid work.

5.5.3 Secret friendships with boys

In our analysis, we found evidence that at least 40 of the 104 girls had friendships with boys that they hid from their caregivers or that went against their caregivers' wishes. In these cases, a girl told the interviewer that she had male friends, despite her caregiver stating in the same year or a previous year that the girl did not have friends who were boys, they forbade her from having friends who were boys, or they strongly disapproved of mixed-sex friendships.This figure may be an underestimate, because girls were not specifically asked if they kept these friendships secret and we have had to deduce this by contrasting girls' and caregivers' responses. However, what is clear is that a significant number of the cohort girls, across all nine countries, disobeyed rules that see them as needing to avoid socialising with boys altogether once they reached adolescence.

In Togo, Fezire's mother told the interviewer in 2020 that a 'good girl' was expected "to be polite and respectful towards their parents and older people, to concentrate on their studies and to avoid boys." In the same year, 14-year-old Fezire told the interviewer she had made friends with the male class monitor, as a strategic move: "I tell him not to write my name on the list of chatter boxes." In Uganda, Beti's father told the interviewer in 2019 that he did not need to worry about Beti when she was at school, because "you wouldn't expect her to play around with boys. That's among the reasons why I really do not worry so much about her […] When she is through with her chores, she goes to fellow girls and they chat/play together." In 2021, when Beti was asked to list the people that made her feel happy, she started with her friend Eli, telling the interviewer, "I help him with class assignments. […] He is my friend. I spend most of my time with him" (aged 14). In Benin, Isabelle's aunt strongly disapproved of mixed sex friendships, telling the interviewer in 2020, "she mustn't go out with boys because that could ruin her future," and in 2021 asserting, "she doesn't have any friends who are boys" and in 2024, "She doesn't hang out with boys in the local streets." In 2021, Isabelle stated that she did not have male friends herself, but her friends chat to boys on Facebook. By 2024 aged 17, she listed eight friends, including one boy: "I only have one boy among my friends because he's the only one who agrees to have fun with us girls. We're all in the same class and we have a study group."

In Vietnam, Huong's father described her friendships with boys as "dangerous," saying that "I worry the most about this. But I also remind her not to play with male friends now" (2021). Huong

continuously had male friends throughout childhood, and in 2019, told the interviewer that boys and girls should be able to play together "because I think it should be equal for both boys and girls" (age 12). Unlike many parents who viewed mixed-sex friendships with increasing anxiety as the girls approached adolescence, Reaksmey's father in Cambodia forbade them from a very young age. In 2011, when Reaksmey was only five, he said, "it is not right that a girl playing as a boy and the same as boy playing as a girl," while in the following year, her mother agreed that "girls should not play football as it is the boy's game and boys should not play the dolls." However, in 2014, seven-year-old Reaksmey described a boy named Uy as her closest friend. Playing with him and her other friends made her "feel happy," and when asked if there were any toys or games that boys could play but girls could not, she replied, "I don't know."

In El Salvador, Doris' mother described repeatedly punishing Doris because she would not stop going out to play with a boy, "so I told her I would not let her go out" (2019). In Dominican Republic, Chantal's father described boys as "a bit dangerous […] Right now boys are little devils" (2019). And yet, in the same year, 13-year-old Chantal described playing tag and baseball "[with the boys] and with the girls as well." In Brazil, Larissa's mother even expressed anxiety in 2018 about girls and boys being in the same classes at school, saying, "I think that in the past, boys and girls together, there wasn't much trouble, but nowadays we see a bit of trouble if you're not watching them all the time, a lot of boys and a lot of girls together is a little worrisome." In the same year, Larissa clearly rejected the idea that boys and girls needed to play separately or play different games:

> **Interviewer:** And do you have friends who are girls and friends who are boys?
> **Larissa:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** You do? And do you like the boys and the girls the same way?
> **Larissa:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** Here in your community, at school, do the boys play together with the girls?
> **Larissa:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** Do you always play together? And what do you play?
> **Larissa:** Ah, hide and seek, catch, ball, flying kites.
> **Interviewer:** Do you fly kites, too? And do you play ball?
> **Larissa:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** And do they play with your dolls with you?
> **Larissa:** They do.
> **Interviewer:** Do they play house?
> **Larissa:** They do, too.
>
> - Larissa, age 12 (2018), Brazil

In 2020, Larissa's mother again expressed discomfort at the idea of Larissa playing with boys, saying that as they reach puberty, girls "must be more reserved, not to expose themselves, do you understand?" When asked if Larissa obeyed this rule, she replied, "Look, in front of me, in front of me, because we never know what they do behind our backs, when she's with me she's well behaved." In the same year, 14-year-old Larissa told the interviewer she still had male friends and when asked if she had best friends who were boys, she replied, "I do."

Research shows that platonic, mixed-sex relationships play an important part in adolescents' development, including their communication, their ability to question and break free from gender stereotypes and segregation, and to establish a sexual identity and sexual orientation.[98][99][100] However, for at least 40 of the cohort girls, these friendships needed to be kept a secret from their caregivers, for whom all male-female interactions in adolescence were perceived as risky.

5.5.4 Girls' secret relationships

We cite both having a secret relationship or a crush as challenging preexisting gender norms that expect adolescent 'good girls' to maintain modesty and their sexual purity or hold no romantic desire[101]. Given that girls are constantly perceived by caregivers, and more widely in development discourse, as 'at-risk' of being seduced, getting pregnant and failing to live up to their potential, we see girls' crushes – even if they are only able to talk about them in the context of a confidential, one-to-one interview – as a form of subversive behaviour.[102] [103]

We have identified 23 girls in the cohort who at some point during the study had a secret relationship or crush. Again, this might be an underestimate. There are likely many cases where a girl chose not to tell the interviewer about her relationship. Further, caregivers were not necessarily asked whether their daughter was in a relationship, meaning that in some cases where a girl talked openly about it in her interview, we may not know if the caregiver was aware or not. The list of 23 girls therefore includes only girls who specifically stated that they had not told their caregivers, lowered their voice to ensure a nearby caregiver did not hear, or whose caregivers disclosed that they had found out she was in a secret relationship. The 23 girls come from eight of the cohort countries - all excluding Togo.

The idea of girls being in relationships as adolescents was generally frowned upon across cohort caregivers. In Benin, Margaret's aunt complained in 2023 about Margaret's behaviour, saying she was:

> ***"not telling the truth, she steals my money to give to the boys and spends as she pleases when she goes to sell my items. She has a boyfriend called Judicael who is a senior in high school. Eight days ago, a friend of [name]'s spoke to my daughter [Margaret's sibling] and revealed that she gives him money. I have always asked Margaret if she has a boyfriend and she has always said no. After receiving the information from my daughter, I pushed hard before Margaret admitted that she had a boyfriend."***
>
> - Margaret's aunt, 2023, Benin

Margaret, however, did not mention the boyfriend to the interviewer.

By contrast, in the Philippines, Rosamie clearly wanted to confide in the interviewer about a new relationship of hers:

> **Interviewer:** In relationships, what changes?
> **Rosamie:** *(Laughs)* I already have a boyfriend.
> **Interviewer:** Are you new?
> **Rosamie:** Quite some time. Only this year. *(Paused and smiled)*
> **Interviewer:** How are you?
> **Rosamie:** I am grateful to him because he came into my life. *(Laughs)*
> **Interviewer:** Can you talk about your feelings in the new chapter of your life?
> **Rosamie:** *(Shakes head)* No, I'm shy. I'm just happy.
>
> - Rosamie, age 18 (2024), the Philippines

However, the interviewer noted in their observations, "she also used eye language that connotes that she does not want to talk details about her boyfriend and would be silent once her mother pass by."

Some girls shared having to keep relationships secret, even when they felt those relationships were having a very positive influence on their wellbeing. Raquel in El Salvador described her relationship with a boy in very positive terms. She described her boyfriend and relationship in 2024:

> ***"The truth is that he came at a time when I was sad and he really helped me with a lot of things, I felt free to tell him everything that happens to me and so on […] The truth is that he has made me feel very sure of myself and many other things."***
>
> - Raquel, age 18 (2024), El Salvador

These relationships can be a positive and formative experience for the girls, however the need to keep them secret from caregivers comes with great risks.

Secret relationships emerged as a stronger theme in Dominican Republic and El Salvador, where the interview data suggest 11 out of a total of 24 girls had secret boyfriends during their adolescence. In the context of a lack of information and healthcare surrounding sex and relationships, this had lifelong consequences for many of the girls, including early marriage or union, pregnancy, and potential exposure to sexually transmitted infections and forms of GBV. For example, in 2020, Griselda's father in Dominican Republic suspected that his daughter had a secret boyfriend, and by 2021, at the age of

15, Griselda had a baby and had moved in with her 22-year-old partner.[9] Katerin in the Dominican Republic and Hillary in El Salvador were in secret relationships at age 15, which resulted in them both cohabiting and having children before the age of 18.

Although the girls might have been resisting unfair and gendered restrictions on their behaviour, it is important to note that their secret relationships also exposed them to many risks, including sexual relationships with much older men, before they were able to legally consent to engaging in sex. Yet, a culture of taboo, strict moral codes, and silence on SRHR meant that girls were forced to keep their relationships secret from their parents, but were not equipped with the information and healthcare they needed to understand healthy relationships and to protect their own wellbeing. This is fuelled by parents' ongoing reluctance to discuss SRHR with their daughters in anything other than vague threats and warnings. As a result, those girls who did get into secret relationships were at great risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, with many unaware of how to protect themselves from these risks even as they entered into early unions. Many of the girls in Dominican Republic and El Salvador became pregnant as a result of these secret relationships.

Another significant risk to secret relationships is the repercussions for the girl if her parents found out. Tan in Vietnam attempted to keep a relationship secret from her parents and was punished as a result. She explained in 2021:

> **Tan:** Yes, sister, one thing is, a few months ago, I and a friend got love to each other, my parents knew, so my parents yelled at me.
> **Interviewer:** Did your parents scold you?
> **Tan:** Yes. Smashed the computer.
> **Interviewer:** It was broken down
> **Tan:** Yes.
> **Interviewer:** How are you and your friend now?
> **Tan:** Yes, my friend and I have known each other since we were in 1st grade. My friend and I also expressed our affection for each other. After that, my parents knew, because my teacher in my extra class was worried that… she taught tutoring, she called my parents to talk about it, and then my father smashed the computer.
> **Interviewer:** When that happened, how did you feel?
> **Tan:** I'm scared, I also felt that my parents were worried about my future, about me, so I cried a lot, my eyes were swollen, then I apologized to my parents. Now, my friend and I are still close, we still talk but less often.
>
> - Tan, age 14 (2021), Vietnam

Tan's mother only stated that the parents had "cut off" the internet for the sake of the children's learning, and that the computer they had bought for Tan's schoolwork was now "broken." While girls discussed experiences of their parents removing, or even destroying, the devices they used to communicate with boys, in many cases the threatened consequences may be more severe. It is perhaps unsurprising that Ly in Vietnam was not among those girls with a secret boyfriend, given her mother stated in 2019, "I said to her that I would kill her if she had a boyfriend."

Finally, moving in with these boyfriends might also risk exposing the girls to domestic violence. In the most extreme case in the cohort, Joy in Uganda ran away to live with a boyfriend. When she was 15, her grandmother stated that the family did not know where she was: "I think right now she is staying with that boy but I do not know where exactly she is." Without Joy being able to openly discuss her relationship with her caregivers, she left them altogether, and the research team were unable to follow up with her in future years to find out how she was. The need to keep the relationship secret may have exposed her to serious harms, including unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, maternal mortality, and domestic violence.

Girls' forms of secret resistance to gender norms show bravery in the face of potentially severe consequences. Many of the girls across the cohort engaged in secret acts in order to gain a bit more freedom for themselves or to have the opportunity to learn more about themselves and others. However, the fact that they had to keep these acts secret exposed them to risks: of exploitation or

[9] The age of consent to sexual relations is 18 in Dominican Republic, and marriage is prohibited before the age of 18 in any circumstances, however the country has the highest rate of CEFMU in the Caribbean, with informal unions also very prevalent.

harassment at work; of parental violence if they were found out; and of the many health risks known to be associated with early unions. Rather than glamourising these secret acts of resistance, therefore, we wish to acknowledge the important forms of agency that girls show in navigating their caregivers' often restrictive views of girls' capabilities and freedoms. And we wish to highlight the need for girls to be able to openly learn, grow and explore as they progress through childhood and adolescence, with support from the adults around them.

5.6 Overt behavioural resistance

Over the course of the study, we found evidence that some 49 out of a total 104 girls engaged in one or more of the kinds of resistance we discuss below, overtly disobeying expected behaviours or refusing to take on the roles girls are supposed to in their communities. This is especially significant given that this cohort of girls were not selected because of their, or their caregivers', political views; indeed, when the families first joined the study, the girls were babies and many of their caregivers, as discussed in the section of this report on caregivers' views, held strongly conservative and essentialist views about gender. Yet, by the time they were adolescents, nearly half of the girls were challenging these views in some way. While many of these forms of resistance are small-scale, and none of the girls discussed being involved in more formal forms of activism, they show that many of the girls were openly resisting gender norms.

5.6.1 Girls' dressing and behaving how they wanted

Ten of the girls, or their caregivers, made reference at some point to the girl behaving or dressing like a boy. In many cases, this emerged in the context of a caregiver complaining that they were unable to persuade their daughter to wear more feminine clothes, showing clear norms that girls were expected to dress and behave in certain ways and a clear dislike from parents of not conforming to these expectations. For example, in 2018 in Brazil, Fernanda's father suggested the family have been arguing over Fernanda's clothing choices and Fernanda had even been the subject of homophobic abuse:

> **Interviewer:** Have you noticed if she dresses differently now, is she more interested in her appearance?
> **Fernanda's father:** No. We argued with her because she only wanted to wear shirts like that one.
> **Interviewer:** Football shirts, right?
> **Fernanda's father:** Yes. Football shirts.
> **Interviewer:** With sleeves?
> **Fernanda's father:** Yes. So, her mother argues with her. My daughter, try to wear nice clothes, girls' shirts.
> **Interviewer:** By girls' shirts you mean tops?
> **Fernanda's father:** It's common.
> **Interviewer:** She prefers wearing boys' shirts?
> **Fernanda's father:** Yes. Shirts, because she likes playing ball a lot, and people started saying things.
> **Interviewer:** About her shirt?
> **Fernanda's father:** Yes, because she only wanted to wear that, and then I said, my daughter, you're a big girl now, try to wear nice clothes. Because the other girls started talking, kept teasing her, like, hey, girl, are you going to be a [homophobic slur]. And she got angry.
> **Interviewer:** So, she dresses differently from other girls her age?
> **Fernanda's father:** Exactly. Yes. Shorts are normal, she wears all kinds of shorts, but the tops, she doesn't like to show her midriff off, no. She only wears t-shirts.
>
> - Fernanda's father, 2018, Brazil

This extract clearly shows Fernanda's father's discomfort that Fernanda did not choose to wear 'nice clothes', and felt that the response to the homophobic teasing she was receiving was to dress like other girls, including choosing tops that "show her midriff off." However, throughout the following years, Fernanda continued to play a lot of football, despite being one of few girls to do so, and to dress as she chose. By 2024, in a story that is strikingly similar to the vignette about girls' football

from 2021 (see Annex 2), 18-year-old Fernanda told the interviewer that she "talked to my uncle about girls being less valued in football, I've talked to him. And he tried to organise a street tournament here, and give away prizes, you know? Last year the prize was even smaller, but this year it was the same for girls and boys." Despite pressure to be more feminine, Fernanda continued to dress the way she wanted to, and to advocate for girls' equal participation in supposedly masculine sports.

In Vietnam, Huong's family showed increasing discomfort as their children did not conform to gender roles as expected. In 2011, Huong's father disagreed with the statement that it is ridiculous for boys to play with dolls, stating instead, "children can play whatever they want." And yet, as their children reached adolescence, both he and Huong's mother expressed concerns about their children's behaviour: "[Huong's older brother] is very gentle so I'm afraid that he's bullied at school. […] I'm worried about my daughter being so active. I think if she falls, she will not be as strong as the others" (2019). Similarly, in 2021, Huong's father said, "For my son, I am worried that he is too gentle, difficult to compete with society. For my daughter, she communicates too much, it is difficult to confirm what is right and what is wrong. Because she is active in team activities, she participates everywhere, so I do not know where is good and where is bad." While Huong's brother was a gentle and thoughtful child, this caused the parents concern because they expected him to be loud, confident and very active. Meanwhile, Huong's love of sport and her confidence caused them concerns because they expected her to be shy and gentle.

In 2017, aged ten, Huong herself told the interviewer that there were "a lot of dresses in our wardrobe," however, "I don't like dress. I think I am a boy." By 2019, 12-year-old Huong said that most of her friends were boys. She was also beginning to question other expected behaviours of girls. For example, despite saying in previous years that she thought she would marry a man, in 2019, she said that she did not want to get married, because "being alone is happier, I'll be more independent. If I had a husband, I would have to do a lot of things and do everything according to my husband's wishes."

5.6.2 Girls playing football

In many other cases, and several more countries, girls continued to play one particular sport that was frequently associated with boys, even if this was not specifically framed as "behaving like a boy." As well as the girls in Brazil, Vietnam and the Philippines discussed above, a number of girls in Benin, Uganda, Togo, Cambodia and El Salvador continued to play football, despite frequent perceptions that it is a boys' game. For example, despite several girls in Togo saying that it was forbidden for girls to play football, several of the girls did play at various points in their childhood, including Fezire, who was described as playing football in 2019 (age 13) with her younger brothers, and in 2021 (age 15), reacted to a fictional story about a girl asking for a safe space to play football by saying, "It's a good story, it's good that girls want to play football."

Four girls out of 13 in Uganda played football, along with five out of nine girls in Vietnam, while in Cambodia, half the girls (five out of ten) played the sport. In Uganda, Sheila's family on her father's side strongly disapproved of her playing football. Her father stated in 2011 that "I would think that football is not good for girls because it's too physical. Girls only play netball and not football." After her parents separated, Sheila lived with her paternal grandmother, who beat her severely and forbade her from playing football. However, by 2020 aged 13, Sheila had run away to live with her mother's family, and described herself as spending "my time playing football with boys."

In El Salvador, several of the girls described boys in their community being allowed to go to play football on the beach or at the community football pitch, but girls not being allowed because of perceived risks to their safety. However, Karen continuously played football throughout her adolescence. In 2019, when aged 12, she told the interviewer she played football despite "my friends [telling] me I am a boy, because I play football." By 2024, at 17 years old, she was still playing weekly: "Yes, I like it too, because my dad likes it, I inherited it from him." Karen had clearly been encouraged and supported by her father, which allowed her to continue enjoying playing football. From Karen's story, it is possible to see how it is the responsibility of supportive adults, using positive parenting practices, to listen to and encourage girls' voices.

While this evidence suggests some norms around football as a boys' sport are beginning to shift, we saw enough evidence from caregivers and other girls to suggest that this was still a commonly held perception, and to therefore identify these girls' ongoing enjoyment of the sport as a form of overt

resistance.

5.6.3 Girls resisting heteronormativity

In the Philippines, five out of 14 girls are described at some point as dressing or behaving like boys, despite frequent homophobic and conservative views expressed by parents about children's play and clothing. For example, in 2011, Mahalia's father agreed that it would be ridiculous for boys to play with dolls, stating, "That cannot be with my boys because they will become gays." In 2013, Mahalia's mother told the interviewer she was now happy with Mahalia's teachers, "unlike before," because "their teachers used to be gays." In this context, Mahalia said in 2017 that girls needed to be pretty, "fair-skinned" and "have long hair." However, by 2020, Mahalia's mother said, "I don't know with Mahalia because she seems like a tomboy […] Because she behaves like a boy." In the Philippines, the term "tomboy" is frequently used as slang for a lesbian. When asked how Mahalia behaved like a tomboy, her mother replied that Mahalia sometimes "would do the task that's intended for a boy," such as "fetch water, carry something heavy," and also that Mahalia would not wear dresses.

By 2024, at the age of 17, Mahalia told the interviewer, "I have a girlfriend now [smiling]" and when asked how this made her feel, she replied several times "happy," and described her girlfriend as an "inspiration." In the same year, while Mahalia's mother seemed to express some discomfort that "they are both women," she also said, "If her girlfriend makes her happy, if she's really happy with that, we just let it go." Mahalia is one of just two girls in the cohort who are openly dating a girl during the study, both are in the Philippines (the other, Reyna, is discussed below). Despite growing up in a household where dressing or playing games associated with the opposite sex is strongly disapproved of, she gradually questioned whether she needed to conform to this over the course of childhood and adolescence, eventually finding happiness both in terms of expressing her own gender identity, and in a relationship with another girl.

5.6.4 Girls hitting back

We saw some evidence in girls' and their caregivers' responses of girls resisting bullying and harassment from boys by hitting back. This did not emerge as a strong theme across all countries. We saw some evidence of this in Dominican Republic, where Leyla's aunt told the interviewer in 2016 that Leyla would hit any boy who touched her, and Katerin's mother stating in the same year, "If anyone touches Katerin, she will break one of his eyes!". In El Salvador, Raquel felt it was important for girls to be strong in order to defend themselves, but did not describe hitting anybody herself (2017).

We saw this theme emerge most strongly in data from Vietnam and the Philippines. In Vietnam, six of the nine girls were described as hitting boys at some point in the study. It is perhaps unsurprising that these two countries were also where girls were most likely to be questioning their gender expression, dressing or behaving like boys, suggesting that despite parents' sometimes conservative and homophobic views, girls there felt most able to behave in unexpected ways. In 2019, 13-year-old Ly said that she did not see any differences between boys and girls, "because I look like a boy," and when asked if her personality had changed over the past year, said, "Yes, I'm more aggressive." She went on to say that everyone in her class was afraid of her because she was so aggressive.

In the Philippines, three girls described responding to male harassment or bullying with violence. Perhaps the most striking example is that of Rosamie, who described being teased by boys at school in 2014 as follows:

> **Interviewer:** Does anyone hit you in school?
> **Rosamie:** My classmates, boys, who tease me. I also fight them.
> **Interviewer:** Why do they tease you?
> **Rosamie:** I have no idea. I don't know why they tease me.
> **Interviewer:** How many times have they teased you?
> **Rosamie:** When we have class. Everyday they tease me. Even my teacher, he also teases me.
> **Interviewer:** Even when there is a teacher?
> **Rosamie:** Once, I punched the one who teased me.
> **Interviewer:** Whom did you punch?
> **Rosamie:** Sir [teacher's name].

- Rosamie, age eight (2014), the Philippines

At just eight years old, Rosamie had developed a strategy for fighting off boys who were bullying her, and had even carried this strategy out on a teacher who was teasing her. She did not state whether there were any repercussions for this retaliation. However, it is also clear from Rosamie's later interviews that eventually she did begin to feel the pressure of gendered expectations and to stop defending herself in this way. Just three years later, she had the following exchange with the interviewer:

Interviewer: Is it difficult to be a good girl?
Rosamie: When my classmates are bullying me.
Interviewer: Do you also bully them?
Rosamie: Not really.
Interviewer: How do you say you're not being a good girl when that happens?
Rosamie: I lost temper easily when they do that.
Interviewer: When you lose temper, what do you do?
Rosamie: I just get angry.
Interviewer: Is it easy to be a good girl or not?
Rosamie: It's not easy.
Interviewer: Why?
Rosamie: Because they bully me sometimes.
Interviewer: How do you confront them?
Rosamie: They are naughty sometimes, especially when the classes ended, I'm just packing stuff and they would tease you
Interviewer: Why do you think your parents would want you to become a good girl?
Rosamie: To become good, and not to have fights with other children.

- Rosamie, age 11 (2017), the Philippines

Aged 11, Rosamie understood that she was not expected to retaliate physically when boys teased or bullied her. She stated this in the context of being asked about the behaviour of a "good girl". She also stated that "it's not easy" to live up to this expectation, but also seemed to suggest that she mostly did, because this year, she said she would "just get angry" but made no reference to punching back. This mirrors some of our findings from previous years, when we found that in early years, before adolescence, some caregivers expressed admiration or even pride for their daughters who hit boys back, but by adolescence reverted to strongly gendered expectations that girls would remain non-violent, no matter how much violence they were being subjected to by boys.[104]

5.6.5 Girls refusing to do chores

As this and previous reports on the *Real Choices Real Lives* study have found, there was not widespread resistance to the uneven distribution of labour within households, nor to the frequent requirement for girls to carry out a great deal more household chores than their brothers.[105] However, we did note some cases in which girls were questioning the division of chores, or even openly refusing to do chores. This was the case for 15 of the 104 girls at some point during childhood and adolescence, and took various forms.

In El Salvador, Susana's mother complained in 2019 that "she doesn't do the chores," while Valeria's grandmother said in 2021 that Valeria "doesn't like doing chores" and was "disobedient," and Raquel's grandmother said in 2021 that Raquel only did the chores she "likes" to do. In Brazil, Larissa's mother described her in 2024 as sometimes refusing to do her chores and instead playing on her phone.

In Uganda, several of the girls supported the idea of not always doing what they were told by their parents, especially if they felt the required chores were unfair. While several parents referenced their daughters being lazy about chores as they got older, the most overt form of resistance came from Amelia, who stated when asked if she had undertaken any paid work that year, "No but just that my brothers usually ask me to do laundry for them yet I am busy. So, if any of them wants to engage me, they must pay for my service [laughs]" (age 17, 2023). In Togo, when asked what she would do if her parents asked her to do something she did not want to, 11-year-old Azia replied, "I wouldn't do it because I would lie and say I was ill" (2018).

In the Philippines, Darna described hiding to get out of doing chores. In Vietnam, aged just ten, Ly had already decided that she would only do housework "if mother gives me money." In Cambodia, 12-year old Lina said in 2018 that while her mother always told her to do housework, she sometimes instead went to "collect potato by myself because I want to earn some money for buying snack, and keep some money for my mother [laughs]". So while she still intended to help her mother, she was taking control of what form that help took, and choosing to earn money rather than stay at home and carry out housework.

5.6.6 Girls saving money

Despite strong norms in favour of men as financial breadwinners and decision makers, some of the girls still found ways not only to earn money, but also to save money for themselves. This was only possible for some girls. In some families, women did not participate in financial decision making at all, while in others, even where a mother may participate in financial activities, she may not deem these to be appropriate for her daughter. For example, in Uganda, by the later years of the study, Sheila lived with her mother, who was the sole breadwinner for the family. Despite challenging norms in many ways by fighting to regain custody of Sheila from her husband's family after his death and by acting as the household head, Sheila's mother still imposed some gender norms on her daughter, including not letting Sheila work or save money. When asked about this in 2024, Sheila replied as follows:

> **Interviewer:** Are there activities or groups in your community that you would like to be part of?
> **Sheila:** I only hear about the village savings and loans groups and supporting each other in burial times.
> **Interviewer:** Why do you not take part in these activities?
> **Sheila:** Sincerely when you look at me! [She laughs] maybe mom is the one who should be part of those groups.
> **Interviewer:** Why do you say it should be your mother to take part?
> **Sheila:** Because my mom is an adult. There is no where I am going to get money, to save.
>
> - Sheila, age 17 (2024), Uganda

So while participating in an established community or school savings group may not seem like a radical act of resistance, we see it as an overt form of resistance to gender norms, in that some of the girls were managing to take control of money and choose for themselves how they used it, where for many girls such a choice would not be possible.

For example, in Uganda, Jane aged 18 told the interviewer that she regularly went to dig and labour on other people's farms for money and when asked what she did with the earnings, she replied, "I tell mom that this is mine" (2024). We found examples of girls in Uganda, Togo, Benin, the Philippines and Vietnam who had joined savings associations for women and girls. In 2023 aged 16, Justine in Uganda said, "at school we have a group where we save our money and I am the treasurer and it's a big responsibility".

In 2021, Ladi in Togo explained that she and some friends had even set up a savings group together, although interestingly, all the other friends were male:

> ***"I have school friends who are boys; we play and study together and also have formed a savings group together."***
>
> - Ladi, age 15 (2021), Togo

Similarly, Alice in Benin in 2021 told the interviewer she and some friends had set up a savings association together:

> ***"I give the money [from her earnings] to my mother to look after and I use some to pay for my breakfast rice and the rest I pay into a savings club we have at school. I save 50F per day. I do it with my friends. […] When we first created the savings club, we decided to take it in turns to collect the money."***
>
> - Alice, age 14 (2021), Benin

Interestingly, in 2023, Alice's father was unaware that she was earning money. Yet this quote from 2021 would suggest that Alice had already been earning for at least two years and managing to save some of her profits, in full knowledge of her mother, who also benefited from the earnings.

In some contexts, savings associations were provided for the girls by banks and local NGOs. This was true in the Philippines, where five girls out of 14 were involved in them. Christine told the interviewer in 2024 that the savings group was helpful and Michelle said in 2022, aged 15, "we had an organisation that teaches how to save money. It really helped us especially when there were sudden and important events when we would need to use money." In Vietnam, Uyen used a savings account to help protect herself from the precarity of her family circumstances. Uyen's mother had both physical and learning disabilities related to Uyen's grandfather's exposure to agent orange during the Vietnam War. Uyen's mother was not capable of looking after Uyen by herself and frequently disappeared for long periods during Uyen's childhood, while the family were unsure who Uyen's father is. Uyen's grandparents both received pensions for former soldiers and took care of the girl, but their health deteriorated as she grew older. When Uyen's grandmother passed away in 2021, the family income was halved and Uyen increasingly needed to take care of her elderly grandfather. Uyen's grandfather repeatedly expressed concerns about who would take care of her in future: "When I die, her aunts are in charged to bring her up. I worry that I die early. I hope that I can live till she is 20 years old. At that time she can cook. I can live to that time or not. I don't know."

By 2019, and from then onwards, Uyen clearly felt a need to start earning money and saving, with the help of a cousin:

> **Uyen:** If some of my friends want to buy something online, I can buy it and then sell it to them.
> **Interviewer:** Where did you buy things and how to buy them?
> **Uyen:** My cousin bought for me, then I sold them to my friends. She said, "If you need anything, tell me and I will buy it for you to sell."
> **Interviewer:** How long have you been selling such things?
> **Uyen:** It has been a long time
> **Interviewer:** Can you get paid for that job?
> **Uyen:** My cousin only helps me buy things, then I sell them to my friends, I will get all the profit from selling things, my cousin does not take it.
> […]
> **Interviewer:** Do you think children of your age should do this job?
> **Uyen:** It is normal
> Interviewer: Why?
> **Uyen:** Because my cousin said I should sell things to save money, she would make me a savings card in the bank
> **Interviewer:** Well ... So do you have a savings card in the bank?
> **Uyen:** Yes
>
> - Uyen, age 12 (2019), Vietnam

For Uyen, the support of a cousin and the ability to open a bank account were crucial in enabling her to at least take some control in what was otherwise an extremely precarious financial position. She was able to save a small amount of money to support the costs of her education.

It is important not to overstate the empowering effect of saving money for these girls. Many of their families lived in poverty throughout the study, and some girls were called upon to use their savings to support families through financial shocks. Even where they were able to keep savings of their own, they often used them to make up for their families' inability to afford their own basic needs, such as buying sanitary towels or school supplies. Individual savings accounts could not solve the underlying financial precarity the families, and wider communities, were facing. Nevertheless, for some girls, the ability to save their own money did represent one way to gain a bit more control, and to challenge norms that see men as the financial decision makers.

More broadly, nearly half (47 per cent) of the cohort girls were openly disobeying gender norms in some way. Few of them had access to formal groups or organisations for girls, although some expressed a desire to. For example, Rosamie wanted an organisation for girls to discuss politics; Alice wanted a club to discuss SRHR; and Sheila wished she could participate in a savings association if she had an income. For those that did have access to a savings association, this was described as an

important form of support. However, for the most part, while these girls showed great agency, they frequently lacked the resources and supportive environment needed to achieve significant change.

5.7 Girls making change

In this section, we discuss the case studies of three girls in particular whose resistance grew with time, and who succeeded to some degree in gaining a bit more freedom. While they are fascinating case studies of hugely brave and agentic resistance, they also can tell us a great deal about the resources and enabling environment girls need in order to create change, and the constraining environments which may be preventing girls from achieving the change they would like to see.

5.7.1 "A girl can play ball just like a boy": Juliana in Brazil

In many countries around the world, the practice of women playing football was - and to some extent still is - considered a subversion of gender norms.[106] In 1941, Brazil joined a number of other countries, including England and France, in banning women's football because it was considered to be against women's 'nature'. The prohibition in Brazil, which lasted until 1979, was explicitly linked to a concern that playing football would negatively affect a woman's "physiological equilibrium" and compromise her reproductive capabilities.[107] While the Brazilian women's national football team has become recognised as one of the best in the world,[10] games are widely televised, and star players have used their platform to advocate for an end to discrimination against women in sports,[108] Brazilian female footballers still endure gender bias and prejudice when playing at recreational and competitive levels.[109]

Juliana grew up in an urban area in the north-eastern state of Maranhão in Brazil. Her mother was 15 years old when she gave birth to her, and her younger sister followed two years later. From an early age, Juliana was raised by her maternal grandparents, after her mother moved away with her stepfather and half-brothers. Juliana's grandparents were born in the early 1970s, while women's football was still illegal, and the legacy of the ban cast a long shadow. In 2011, when Juliana was four years old, her grandfather explained:

> ***"It is not normal [for girls to play football]. Girls have to practice sports which are more adequate for them."***
>
> - Juliana's grandfather, 2011, Brazil

That same year, he acknowledged that *"laws are changing everything"* and *"now women have the same rights as men,"* however seemed to be ambivalent about this fact. Growing up, differing gendered norms and beliefs were often a source of friction between Juliana - who often questioned and challenged prevailing social 'rules' that governed girls' behaviours and beliefs - and her grandparents, who held more traditional views and expectations. A key site of their negotiations was on the topic of girls - and specifically Juliana - playing football.

From a young age, her love of football appeared to be the entry point for Juliana beginning to question gender norms and the expectations placed on girls and boys. In 2016, aged 9, she shared that she liked playing football with her brother and with her neighbour, and the following year she noted that "there are girls who like playing ball games" (2017) like boys did. This made Juliana start to question her grandmother's rule that she wasn't supported to play with boys. In 2017, Juliana's grandmother shared that "I never liked that she had many friends, that she played with boys," and the following year Juliana explained that her grandmother forbid her from playing with her friend's brothers who lived in the neighbourhood.

> ***"She says I shouldn't be around boys. And when they come to play with us, I'm supposed to quit playing"***
>
> - Juliana, age 11 (2018), Brazil

[10] The Brazilian women's national football team has ranked in the FIFA top ten in nine out of the last ten years (https://inside.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/BRA?gender=women)

Despite her grandmother's disapproval, and the fact that her grandfather "likes me to behave well… and he likes me to play girls' games" (2018), Juliana continued to play with boys - and continued to play football.

Juliana became more outspoken in her resistance against prevailing gender norms, and - in 2019 - she responded with anger to a vignette about a girl who wished to play football with the boys but was punished (sometimes physically) by her parents for doing so. Juliana called the vignette girl's parents "a bit sexist" and said that the girl should defy her parents and continue to pursue her dream of playing football.

> ***"I think she should continue playing, because what her parents think is a bit sexist. […] Yes, because one day she could be a player, if she wants to, because her dream is to play ball, just like mine."***
>
> - Juliana, age 12 (2019), Brazil

Relating her circumstances to that of the vignette girl's, Juliana spoke about the opposition she faced when trying to play football. In addition to her grandparents' objections, Juliana explained that she also faced backlash from her friends about her passion for football - demonstrating the ways in which children internalise, reproduce and enforce gender norms. Juliana's response to her friends demonstrates how powerfully she pushed 'against the grain'

> ***"[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

A few years later, Juliana was asked to reflect on a vignette about a girl who was advocating for a place for girls to play sport in her community. Juliana expressed admiration for the girl because "[she] knows how to go after her rights," and reflected that she had faced similar challenges in the past when she had wanted to play football "and the boys wouldn't let us because it was a boy thing" (2021). That year, when she was 15, Juliana shared that she was glad this issue "doesn't happen anymore" and the boys now always included her in games.

By the time she was 17, Juliana had also won her grandmother over, illustrating how girls going 'against the grain' of gender norms can influence the attitudes and beliefs of their caregivers. In 2024, Juliana was going through a difficult period, and her grandmother was worried that she was suffering from "the beginning of depression." For her part, during this time Juliana seemed to only find joy in football, saying "what makes me happy is just playing [football]" (2024). While Juliana's grandmother had previously been totally opposed to Juliana playing football, she came to recognise the positive impact that playing the game she loved had on Juliana's wellbeing, saying:

> ***"When she's with her friends, playing ball, she lets go. She has fun."***
>
> - Juliana's grandmother, 2024, Brazil

Because of this, and in a complete 180-degree shift from her earlier attitude, Juliana's grandmother started to support and encourage Juliana to make time to play football and said that it was "something I won't take away from her."

Juliana's love of football appears to have been a gateway to questioning and challenging other gender rules. When she was younger, Juliana's attitudes about girls' appearance and demeanour tended to go 'with the grain' of gender norms. At age ten, when asked if it was important for girls to be beautiful, Juliana responded, "[Yes], because if they were ugly the boys would not like them" (2017) - highlighting the powerful relationship between gender norms, beauty standards for girls and women, and heteronormativity. She felt that boys should not play with dolls, girls should not play with cars (2016), and boys shouldn't sing and dance like girls did (2015).

> ***"I think girls should behave like ladies and boys like gentlemen… [Girls should] dress better, fix the hair, keep the legs crossed."***
>
> - Juliana, age ten (2017), Brazil

Yet as she pushed back against those who opposed to her playing football, Juliana began to challenge other social expectations - likely due to maturation and being exposed to other influences. In 2019 Juliana reflected that her clothing style had changed and she was now dressing "more masculine." That same year, Juliana said that "for me, appearance doesn't matter" which represents a significant departure from her earlier views.

Juliana's story shows incredible bravery and Juliana's increasing agency in questioning unfair restrictions that would prevent her from playing the sport she loved. The story also suggests a number of possible enabling factors that make it possible for her to actually achieve change, besides Juliana's own temperament in dealing with the situation; namely, a change in her grandparents' attitudes that eventually allowed her to keep playing.

The first enabling factor is the legislative change in Brazil that meant that Juliana, unlike her grandparents when they were children, was able to play football without breaking the law.

The second enabling factor might be changing norms and attitudes in Brazil more broadly, with more and more people starting to take an interest in the country's very successful women's football team, and some 59 million people worldwide tuning in to watch the team's match against France in the 2019 World Cup.[110]

A third enabling factor is the fact that Juliana has access to a facility where she is able to play. While she clearly experienced resistance from friends and her grandparents for this choice, there was a pitch where she was able to go and play, and she was not outright forbidden from going there.

Finally, a fourth enabling factor was her grandparents' openness to reconsidering their views in recognition of the importance of sport for her health and mental wellbeing. Despite misgivings and conservative views, Juliana's grandmother clearly listened to her granddaughter over the years and was prepared to be influenced by her views. And above all, she prioritised her granddaughter's wellbeing over gender norms.

5.7.2 "Women do all the domestic work": Thea in Benin

Gender norms in Benin firmly situate unpaid care work as being the domain of girls and women, with women spending more than eight times the number of hours on care work than men.[111] Overall, women in Benin spend around 17 per cent of their day on tasks including cooking, cleaning, fetching water, caring for children, and shopping at the market - while men spend just two per cent of their day on the same activities.[112] Girls are inducted into household care work from a young age - and their time spent on these activities increases exponentially as they enter adolescence and begin to be seen as being 'in training' to become wives and mothers. By contrast, unpaid care work for boys in Benin decreases as they grow up.[113] This gendered division of labour in Benin has wide-ranging impacts on girls' education,[114] employment prospects,[115] and wellbeing.[116] However, evidence from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort in Benin shows that girls are pushing back against these restrictive gender norms.

Thea grew up in a single-parent household in Couffo, Benin with her mother and four older brothers. Her father sadly died when Thea was an infant, leaving Thea's mother in the uncommon position of being a female head of the household and main breadwinner for the family.

> ***"It's only me who provides for everything in the family since my husband deceased."***
>
> - Thea's mother, 2015, Benin

Thea's mother also shared other views that went 'against the grain' of gender norms in Benin: having left school in the second year of high school *"because of lack of support"* (2012), Thea's mother shared that she hoped that Thea would have more opportunities than her, and praised recent advances for girls which meant that *"girls are more and more attending school"* (2012).

Over time, her views about women's right to participate in household decision making also grew. In 2012, Thea's mother stated that men should make decisions for the household (because it is *"his house"*), and she had only taken on the role of decision maker because her husband had died. However, by 2015 she criticised the situation for other women in her community who were not able to have a voice and agency.

"In the majority of the families surrounding us […] only men make decision; women just have to eat food, bear children and shut up. If you refuse to conform yourself to the silence required from you, you can be sent away from your husband's home."

- Thea's mother, 2015, Benin

Yet despite the family's unique circumstances and her progressive views in some areas, Thea's mother's views about the gendered division of unpaid care work remained 'with the grain' of gender norms. Perhaps as a result of her greater role outside of the home, working as a trader, Thea's mother shared that her elder sons took on responsibility to "provide care of the little ones" (2011) including feeding them and helping them with homework - something that was quite uncommon across the rest of the Benin cohort. However, as soon as Thea became old enough to participate in household labour, she began to do chores such as sweeping and washing dishes - and her care load increased each year.

By the time Thea was eight, she and her female cousin who had come to live with them were participating in cooking, cleaning the home and serving meals, and the boys in the household seemingly no longer contributed to household chores. In 2015, Thea's mother reflected on the division of labour in her home, saying work was "divided fairly" and that she didn't need to change things.

"It's normal because it's a way for preparing [Thea and her cousin] to be good wives and mothers and know how to keep their own home."

- Thea's mother, 2025, Benin

Yet from an early age, Thea resisted against this gendered expectation. At age seven, Thea shared that she didn't like washing dishes - a complaint which in and of itself went 'against the grain' of gender norms for girls in Benin, who were expected to happily and obediently comply with care norms. The following year, although she said that she enjoyed sweeping because she liked "for my home to be clean and neat" (age eight, 2015). Thea had begun to show attitudinal resistance to her disproportionate amount of labour.

"I spend more time than boys for domestic chores. Because when they work a bit they would leave it and say it's women's job […] It's unfair because boys leave to girls a lot of work to do."

- Thea, age eight (2015), Benin

A year later, she again showed attitudinal resistance, saying that although she enjoyed cleaning her bedroom and making it look beautiful, "I don't like sweeping the courtyard because it makes me late for school," and "I hate cleaning the latrines because of the smell" (2016).

A few years later, as she entered adolescence, Thea appeared to be influenced by her mother's beliefs, explaining that a *"good girl"* is *"one who does all her domestic chores."*

"Women do all the domestic work because men are heads of the family."

- Thea, age 11 (2018), Benin

That same year, Thea stated that "there is no difference in the type of work done by boys or girls" - which almost exactly mirrored her mother's comments. This was despite the fact that Thea's mother stated that Thea did 2.5 hours of chores per day, compared with 1.5 hours for her sons. Thea explained that her mother told her that she required her to do housework "to prepare [her] to become a good housewife" (2019) - which Thea seemed to be content with - and in a few years later shared:

"Mummy told me that people would laugh at me when I marry for taking six minutes to sweep the courtyard, so now I do it in three minutes."

- Thea, age 15 (2021), Benin

Yet that same year, Thea again appeared to be questioning norms relating to the gendered division of care work, and the impacts that this was having on other areas of her life.

> ***"I would like to finish my household chores faster so that I could spend more time studying; it now takes me longer to understand and complete the exercises I have to do. I don't see my friends as much as I have too much to do at home."***
>
> - Thea, age 15 (2021), Benin

Her education had always been incredibly important to Thea. At the age of five, Thea took the extraordinary step of registering herself in school:

> ***"One day she followed her older brothers on her own initiative to go to school and was enrolled. She told the headmistress that she wanted to start school. The latter called me to tell me that my daughter wants to go to school."***
>
> - Thea's mother, 2013, Benin

Since then, Thea regularly expressed her desire to complete her education, which she said was *"important because I wanted to become someone important when I grow up"* (age eight, 2015).

> ***"I would like to go as far as university and gain a doctor's diploma. I dream about becoming a doctor because this is what my mother had started to study before becoming pregnant; she had to abandon her studies. I would like to make her proud of me."***
>
> - Thea, age 13 (2020), Benin

It is therefore notable that when her unpaid care responsibilities began to impact her education, Thea began to push back. At age 17, she said:

> ***"Yes, when it comes to my studies, I want everything to be good. I want to do less housework so that I really have time to study."***
>
> - Thea, age 17 (2024), Benin

However, in the same year, she reported spending three hours per day on sweeping, washing up and cooking, and just one hour per day on her homework. Meanwhile, her mother said in 2024 that Thea "cooks well now and even if I'm not at home she can prepare food," suggesting that this was a positive development and a sign that Thea was becoming more mature. Thea's mother said it was her who decided Thea should learn to cook, "as she's a girl and needs to know how to prepare a meal."

Thea showed a great deal of agency and tenacity in taking control of her education from the age of five, by enrolling herself in school. As an adolescent, she started earning money to support her own school costs. While Thea's mother aspired for Thea to be a midwife from a young age, Thea herself dreamed of becoming a doctor. And yet, she felt a strong sense of injustice that her chores got in the way of her time studying. Despite increasing attitudinal resistance to this from Thea, we can see that by the age of 18, she still had to spend more time on chores than on homework, and she consistently did more chores than her brother, because her mother saw this as an important part of her training to become a wife.

In this case, there appear to be two factors that prevented Thea from being able to change her circumstances, despite her clear questioning of norms and her agency in advocating for, and taking control of, her education.

The first constraining factor is her mother's ongoing essentialist views that see girls, but not boys, as needing to be trained for roles they will inevitably take on as wives and mothers in adulthood. Despite being a head of household herself, Thea's mother did not question the idea that domestic labour is a core part of Thea's future, but not her sons'.

The second disabling factor is the family environment, in a single-parent, female-headed household. While Thea's mother succeeded in earning enough to support them all, the family did not have access to expensive time-saving devices and the need to fetch water, wash dishes and laundry by hand all contributed to a heavy burden of chores that must be shared by everyone. While Thea's mother distributed these chores in very gendered ways, creating an unfair burden on Thea, without dramatically higher income and improved local infrastructure, it is difficult to see how Thea could have avoided spending significant amounts of time on this kind of work.

5.7.3 "She's a *tomboy*": Reyna in the Philippines

There is a long history of acceptance of diverse sexual and gender identities in the Philippines, dating back to before colonisation and widespread conversion to Catholicism.[117] Although Spanish colonisation put an end to a more fluid understanding of sexuality and gender, the legacy of pre-colonial thought is evidenced in Filipino language, which is largely gender-neutral.[118] Filipino culture has no local terms for sexual orientations, and instead, the construction of language around sexuality in the Philippines is embedded in the language of gender, with gay men referred to as *bakla* (tying homosexuality to femininity) and lesbian women referred to as *tomboys*.[119] Other terms now used to describe LGBTQIA+ identities in the Philippines are borrowed directly from English. The pre-colonial legacy is also seen in the Philippines's comparatively supportive views on the LGBTQIA+ community, including that homosexuality is not illegal in the Philippines.[120] Yet, it is recognised that the LGBTQIA+ population experiences severe discrimination across a number of domains, including the prohibition of same-sex marriage[121]. Though there are no national-level legal barriers to freedom of expression or association[122], there are consistent reports of LGBTQIA+ individuals, including young people, who have had these rights compromised in public spaces, such as in universities and workplaces.[123]

Across the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort, two girls shared with the interviewers that they were in same-sex relationships: both of these girls were from the Philippines. One of these girls was Reyna. Born in a rural area of the island province of Masbate, Reyna was the youngest of seven children, with five older sisters and one brother. Over the years, her siblings would move out of the house, younger male cousins would move in, as would her nieces and nephews. In the early years, we heard multiple times from her parents about their happiness to have a son after having several daughters first ("we waited long to have a son", Reyna's mother, 2012). Reyna's father believed having sons is favourable to help with heavy chores, and he expressed pride about his children by their adherence to gender normative ideals of girls as obedient and boys as encouraged to behave badly.

> ***"With my boy, he is good at hiding his naughtiness. With Reyna's sister (one of his daughters), she's really intelligent and obedient. When she was still in grade one, she would just disappear while playing and we will find her reading her books."***
>
> - Reyna's father, 2011, the Philippines

We learned from Reyna's father he held his homophobic and gender normative views at a young age: he beat his brother up for playing with a doll and proudly told the interviewer this was why his brother had not ended up being gay. When asked about whether he would do this to Reyna's brother, he replied:

> ***"I will tell him not to, but if he continues, there's a rod that will be waiting for him."***
>
> - Reyna's father, 2011, the Philippines

Reyna's father would threaten physical punishment if his son was gay, and he even provided a reasoning for his homophobia: "Most of them are disrespectful." He did, however, believe men should show their emotions and recognised when he needed to cry.

We continuously heard about her parents' homophobic concerns about Reyna and her siblings being gay; in the early years it continued to be in reference to Reyna's brother:

> ***"Yes, sometimes he plays with dolls and we immediately tell him that he might become gay (Laughs). Sometimes he wants to play with his sisters' toys."***
>
> - Reyna's mother, 2012

Both her father and mother, however, said that girls can play basketball, though it is implied it is "just okay" (Reyna's mother, 2012) for them to do so. In the same interview, her mother also said that men should be the head of the household.

The subject of playing 'boys'/'girls' games and gendered toys was recurringly brought up by Reyna's parents and later Reyna herself. In her early years (2009 - 2010), Reyna played with her neighbour, a four-year-old boy, with her parents' permission. Reyna played with dolls as well as what her parents

regarded as boys' games. In 2013 and 2014, she continued to have both male and female friends, and played chasing games and said girls could play with toy guns. By 2015, aged nine, Reyna was no longer friends with boys, but often played 'boy' games with her female friends and contradictorily said that boys did sometimes join in. This continued into 2016, when she also said she sometimes borrowed boys' slingshots to play with.

It was in this period that Reyna began to conform to gender norms. For example, in 2014, Reyna shared that she teased her sister by calling her a 'tomboy'. She said she did so as her father called her sister a 'tomboy' too, and her uncle called her a 'toto' (meaning 'dear little boy'). These names can be taken to be a derogatory way of labelling Reyna's sister as a lesbian, and we can see how Reyna had been influenced by the homophobia of the adults in her life. Yet, notably, when talking about this instance, she said both her parents recognised her sister was a 'tomboy' and were not angry about this.

In 2017, aged 11, Reyna told us about the kind of person she wanted to be when she was older - pretty, sexy, a teacher, and a mother - reflecting normative beauty ideals as well as nurturing and caring roles seen as traditionally feminine. She also told us that a good mother cooks, a good father works. By 2018, Reyna told us that she wanted to have two children, the girl would cook and the boy would help in the farm. In this period where Reyna's views went mostly 'with the grain', we learnt a lot about how her parents were controlling her interactions with boys: her mother wouldn't let her play 'Piko' anymore (playground game) because only boys should play it; she said Reyna shouldn't go out when there are boys around; and she shouldn't laugh too hard at what they say. Reyna's father said girls couldn't be friends with boys after the age of ten, and stopped her playing with a specific male friend.

Aged 13, Reyna told us in 2019 that boys couldn't wash clothes or spend time with girls, because people would think they were gay. In the same interview, she said it was acceptable for girls to have friends who were boys if they "are good and not troublemakers", thereby going against her parents' wishes. At this time, her parents were concerned about Reyna getting a boyfriend and not finishing her studies. Despite some early questioning of gender roles, in early adolescence, Reyna appeared to have reverted to sharing her parents' gendered and homophobic views.

In 2020, Reyna shared with us that her older sister was gay, though she did not give detail on how she or her parents felt about this or her sister's experiences. Reyna also at this point had male friends at school, and talked about having a crush as a recent positive development in her life, and feeling resentful when her father scolded her for wanting to go out. However, she once again expressed gender normative views, including that boys don't cry because they'll be called gay. In the same year, her mother was concerned about Reyna taking care of her appearance and having a boyfriend ("I'm afraid she'll have a boyfriend" Reyna's mother, 2020), and she monitored Reyna's texts to her friends.

When we returned to Reyna in 2021, we learned that she had a secret girlfriend - though Reyna herself did not tell us this. Her father told us that Reyna shared with her mother she thinks she is a 'boy' (meaning a lesbian). In the same year, he reflected multiple times on this development, indicating much of his homophobia and transphobia:

> ***"I don't believe she's like that, but I can't do anything if she's really being like that (lesbian) but as much as I can change her, I'll do it . Because people like that ha… you can change whether you are a man or a woman, that disease is in your mind."***
>
> ***"Well maybe she just followed her sister who is also a lesbian."***
>
> ***"I can't do anything if they really are like that... But I told them, in the future, who's going to suffer? Them. If you have money and that's your gender, how will you grow old? Who will take care of you if you don't have children?"***
>
> *- Reyna's father, 2021, the Philippines*

From this, we learned that Reyna bravely shared her feelings with her mother, but her mother then told her father. She was sadly in a household with caregivers that had breached her trust, undermined her sexuality as copying her sister, and regarded being trans as a mental illness. From 2022, we no longer heard from Reyna or her family about her sexuality.

Reyna's case study is notable. While her father credited himself with discouraging his brother from becoming gay as a child through violence, and he still vowed in 2021 of his daughter "as much as I

can change her, I'll do it," neither Reyna nor her parents referred to her being punished for having a girlfriend. Her father said repeatedly, "I can't do anything if she's really being like that." She had not caused an overt change in her caregivers' views and she was still living within a strict and heteronormative environment where her gender expression and sexual orientation were not respected. However, she had bravely resisted norms within this household and at the very least, had not been punished severely for that resistance. Reyna's father remained still deeply sexist, homophobic and transphobic and it is important not to overstate any shift in his attitude. However, the fact that he did not use violence to enforce heteronormativity, in a way he did as a child and threatened to do to his son in early *Real Choices, Real Lives* interviews, is hugely significant in Reyna's life and the life of her sister.

There are a couple of possible enabling factors that might have made this shift possible. The first is the general level of tolerance for LGBTQIA+ rights in the Philippines. While clearly widespread homophobia exists, homosexuality is not illegal and there is some degree of tolerance to people openly questioning heteronormative behaviours.

The second possible enabling factor is the bravery of Reyna's older sister, who openly identified as a lesbian before Reyna, paving a way for her sister to be able to be more open about her own sexuality.

Reyna's brave and agentic actions may achieve even greater change with the resources and support needed, including awareness raising campaigns for parents and caregivers on positive parenting and LGBTQIA+ rights, along with a stronger legislative framework to protect children from caregiver violence and "conversion therapies".

6. Conclusion

From these findings, we are able to draw a number of conclusions, both about girls' current forms of resistance and the kinds of resistance they would like to be involved in, with important implications for programming and policy in support of girls' activism.

6.1 Girls' current forms of resistance

Support for equal opportunities

The majority of girls themselves express egalitarian views, particularly in relation to access to education; aspiring to have careers, even if their career choices are frequently gendered; equal freedom and mobility; and women's economic empowerment. Caregivers are also largely supportive of equality of opportunity, including in access to education and to some extent, equal political representation. However, the majority of caregivers still hold essentialist views that see certain roles as 'naturally' belonging to men or women. This often involves associating women with the domestic sphere and men with breadwinning and decision making. Many caregivers are unaware of how these views **contradict and undermine their support for equal opportunities.**

Questioning norms

Many girls start to question norms around gender, including questioning whether the gendered division of chores, restrictions on girls' mobility and friendships, and male violence were all linked to natural or inherent qualities in men and women, and beginning to suggest they may be the result of **social factors and expectations**. The findings indicate that they were much less likely than their caregivers to consider gender roles as fixed and impossible to change.

Attitudinal resistance

Some girls show signs of attitudinal resistance to gender norms, beginning to describe gender roles as **unfair, including feeling a sense of injustice** at being given more chores than their brothers, and feeling anger at the lack of women's participation in decision making. Some girls get angry with their caregivers and even threaten to disobey them. For some of these girls, however, expressing a dislike for gender roles is **as far as they feel able to resist** - despite threatening to disobey, these girls still actually conform to the behaviours expected of them. For example, over the course of their childhoods, many girls described disliking the division of chores in the home, but few actually refused to carry out the chores assigned to them.

Articulated resistance

Many girls articulate a need for change. They call for boys to do more to help girls with their overwhelming burden of domestic labour; for adults to provide the needed support and facilities for girls' participation; for girls' opinions to be listened to; for adults to do more to tackle SGBV; and for better sex education. 83 percent of girls wanted more and better sex education.

These findings suggest the vast majority of girls are able to identify ways in which **adults could do more to make their communities safer and fairer for girls.** However, their responses to vignettes about girls speaking out on girls' rights show that 87 percent of them do not know a girl who has felt able to do so herself. Therefore, while articulated resistance was both prevalent and highly agentic, these were not necessarily views that girls felt able to share outside of a one-to-one interview, and these girls were not all openly challenging norms around these topics. This suggests there is important scope for **adults and organisations to do more to listen to girls' views and help to make the changes they would like to see.**

Secret resistance

Many girls engage in secret forms of resistance. One in eight girls in the cohort is earning money without her caregivers' knowledge. At least 40 of the 104 girls has a secret friendship with a boy at some point during her childhood or adolescence. 24 girls kept relationships secret from their caregivers. While this is a **highly agentic form of resistance** to conservative rules on their behaviour, in the context of a lack of sexuality education and access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, it also **represents a significant risk to girls' wellbeing**, with a number of girls becoming mothers before the study is over and making it clear that they had not intended to become pregnant. Some girls face threats and damage of their property, or restricted access to technology, when parents discover their secret relationships. Many girls face violent repercussions for disobeying expected behaviours.

Overt resistance

Nearly half of the girls engaged in a form of overt resistance to gender norms including behaving or dressing in ways that did not conform to expectations of girls; defending themselves from bullying and violence; refusing to do chores; and taking control of their finances by saving money.

Some girls use violence and aggression to protect themselves from unwanted male attention, however, as they progress through adolescence, many feel pressure to conform more to feminine norms of passivity. Clearly, engaging in aggressive behaviour also presents its own risks to the girl's safety.

6.2 Girls' desired forms of resistance

Few girls were engaged in collective forms of resistance but many would like to be. In attempting to achieve change on their own, **many girls experience barriers and inaction from adults.** Girls' suggestions of solutions included establishing girls' clubs, where girls could discuss the political, social and economic issues affecting them and then communicate their views directly to decision makers, and setting up savings associations for girls that would allow them to take more direct control of their finances.

93 percent of girls also supported the idea of girls speaking out on girls' rights issues in their communities, even though they did not know of girls who had already done so.

The findings suggest that in order to achieve significant change, even those girls displaying high levels of agency **require resources and support**. Forms of support identified in this research include: groups, clubs and savings associations for girls; community level awareness raising about gender inequalities and about girls' rights; promotion of positive parenting of both boys and girls; strong legislative frameworks in support of girls' equal participation in communities alongside legislation banning corporal punishment and the use of conversion therapies; initiatives aimed at reducing the unpaid care load of families, including improved access to key infrastructure and time saving devices; and safe community facilities for girls to exercise and play. In the following section, we set out key recommendations for relevant stakeholders that would create an enabling environment for more girls to engage in more agentic forms of resistance.

7 Recommendations

We recognise that these recommendations are being made at a time when civic space is shrinking and women's and girls' rights are being rolled back worldwide. This reality poses serious risks for those engaged in activism; and speaking out and resisting openly can be particularly dangerous for girls. Ultimately, for many girls around the world, it can be dangerous to exercise any agency at all.

Against this backdrop, our recommendations are not intended to suggest that we should encourage girls to engage in more overt forms of resistance. Rather, our aim is to better understand the everyday acts of resistance to gender inequality that girls are already practicing, the barriers they face, and the kinds of support they are asking for from adults to create change they wish to see in their community. We are especially concerned with how girls' environments and access to resources shape their ability to exercise agency, and how in many cases, adults might stop placing barriers in their way. By listening to girls, we can identify what is necessary for genuine empowerment, which requires agency, resources, and achievements.

By listening to girls, we seek to expand the category of "power to": the power to question and refuse expected behaviours, to seek greater freedom, and to make their environments more equitable for everyone. Girls who engage in behavioural resistance, whether secretive or overt, already have the power to shift norms within their communities. We aim to expand this further so that even girls who are able to articulate, but not act on, forms of resistance to gender norms, have the 'power to' make positive change. In practice, this means placing responsibility on adults to create spaces where girls can talk about the changes they want to see, and ensuring there are mechanisms for trusted adults to communicate these discussions to decision makers and ensure they are acted upon. Ultimately, our goal is for girls to have the power to influence change in their communities without needing to rely solely on behavioural resistance.

Therefore, through these recommendations we want to ensure that girls and their communities are aware of gender inequality, that they are equipped with the skills to identify it, and can access the resources and safe environment to act and engage in resistance in the forms they choose. Our proposals are designed to complement the diverse forms of everyday resistance girls are already engaged in:

Governments and Authorities

- Act urgently to **enshrine gender equality in law**, removing discriminatory legal norms which prevent girls from accessing their rights, and establishing and strengthening **l**egislative and policy frameworks which ban corporal punishment, the use of conversion therapies and other harmful practices, alongside resources to guarantee the implementation and enforcement of this legislation.
- **Ensure an open civic space**, where all people have the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly.
- **Invest in quality and inclusive gender-transformative education**, with a strong focus on integrating this into educational curriculum; ensuring there are safe and supportive spaces in school to discuss gender equality and how to safely be an activist for change; and implement programmes that strengthen equality of opportunity, including on financial literacy for girls and young women, and on pathways for girls to enter higher education and STEM-related careers.

- **Invest in tackling gender norms** which uphold gender inequality through funding safe, community-based programmes and initiatives that support girls' empowerment, leadership, and rights awareness.
- **Create trusted forums for girls to share views on issues affecting them**, with mechanisms to feed those views into local and regional decision making.
- **Commission research** consulting girls on why they do not feel able to or are choosing not to take up opportunities, including in education, employment and beyond.
- **Support, resource and partner with civil society and NGOs - including girl-led organisations and groups,** community leaders and local authorities to promote awareness of gender equality; and facilitate the creation of these girl-led organisations and groups
- **Reduce the burden of unpaid care work for families** by investing in essential infrastructure for families to access running water, electricity and time-saving devices.

NGOs and Civil Society

- **Promote positive parenting** through workshops that challenge behaviours and views that reinforce gender norms; seek to change social norms around physical punishment of girls and on the 'naturalness' of male violence, providing methods to teach boys not to be violent.
- **Provide awareness raising workshops directly with girls** on how current gender roles prevent them from accessing opportunities that should be available to them; on workers' rights and workplace sexual harassment; and on financial literacy.
- **Provide awareness raising workshops with key groups in the lives of girls**, including caregivers, men and boys, and religious and community leaders, to explore positive role models, champion successful cases and recognise girls' ability to act as decision makers in their own lives and in their households.
- A**dvance SRHR educational campaigns,** equipping girls with knowledge on how to reduce the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection and engage parents and teachers so that trusted adults are informed to have SRHR conversations with girls.
- **Provide employment, vocational and training opportunities for girls**, supporting girls to envision themselves in a variety of fields, including those traditionally dominated by men, and to see themselves as breadwinners and capable decision makers.
- **Provide training to girls and young people on the use of social accountability tools**, allowing them to track and evaluate the performance of government services, and build the skills to suggest improvements to these services
- **Increase access to savings associations** where girls can safely keep their earnings.
- **Establish and strengthen girls' consultations and councils,** in which girls can safely discuss what they find unfair in their daily lives, what they need to achieve change, and how NGOs can facilitate and support girls.
- **Establish informal girls' groups and safe spaces**, including online spaces, where girls can connect and share their experiences of resistance with one another, combined with educational elements on collective action.
- **Resource girl-led organisations and groups** through financial and non-financial resources
- **Connect girls and authorities** through facilitating girls' forums and ensuring there are mechanisms to feed those views to local, regional and national decision makers. Where girls are asking to lead, NGOs should work with and fund girls' groups as equal partners when driving change.
- In their campaign and awareness-raising materials, NGOs should **celebrate a wide variety of forms of resistance**, recognising that not all girls are able to engage in overt and visible forms of activism and resistance and celebrating girls' everyday and silent acts of resisting gender inequality.

Local Authorities and Community Leaders

- **Ensure girls have the facilities and information they need to be safe**, including special attention to online safety for girls.

- **Support and facilitate the establishment of girl-led initiatives** such as savings associations and girls' football clubs.
- **Establish consultations with girls** to listen to where girls would like to see changes in the roles expected of them; what girls need to access and realise opportunities such as education and employment; and where girls feel the need to engage in secretive behavioural resistance, to ensure girls can openly grow, learn and explore with help from trusted adults around them.
- E**stablish safe spaces for girls** where they can talk collectively about topics that are troubling them, the facilities they would like, and how they feel they can resist, without placing pressure on individual girls to speak out and take risks. Responsible adults should provide guidance and support to girls in these spaces and mechanisms should be established to feed this into decision making, where girls' wishes are communicated to those in positions of power and are acted upon.
- **Engage girls in local and community leadership and decision making** through initiatives like listening sessions with girls, advisory panels, and other forms of youth representation, to ensure that girls have the opportunity to shape the communities in which they live.
- **Broaden access to social assistance** at the local level by ensuring it has a gendered lens, and reduce the unpaid care load of families through improving access to key infrastructure and time-saving devices.
- **Make visible girl-led actions and concerns** through meaningfully including girls in speeches and on the agenda of local meetings, in direct consultation with girls and civil society organisations.
- **Ensure that a gender focus is integrated throughout their operations**, ensuring that access to services is sensitive to gender and age.
- **Ensure measures are created and implemented to address GBV**, including the enforcement of laws around violence, the training of law enforcement officials, improving reporting mechanisms and providing survivor-centred support at the community level.

Schools and Educators

- **Establish clubs and safe spaces for girls to discuss topics important to them** and share ideas on relationships, friendships, sex, and chores in a safe way. This should also provide a space for girls to learn about what leadership means, leadership skills, and positive role models.
- **Establish or strengthen spaces where mixed gender activities can occur** in a safe and respectful environment, including sports, play and toys, and teamwork, ensuring both boys and girls can participate. Ensure girls burdens' are reduced at school, placing greater emphasis on learning, play and rest than on chores.
- **Incorporate building soft skills** into the curriculum, in which children are taught about leadership and activism in the school setting.
- **Provide sessions where girls can think of, discuss and share the future they want**, through creative and age-appropriate methods like drawing or writing to help girls imagine and articulate the futures they want.
- P**rovide sensitisation of gender and age to the teacher and governing body** to ensure they are equipped to lead on gender empowerment and implement special measures needed to realise gender equality within their schools.
- **Engage with men and boys** to challenge GBV, providing initiatives to reduce instances of violence, bullying and harassment within schools, and promoting boys as champions of girls empowerment.
- **Provide comprehensive sexuality education** that covers girls' changing bodies, healthy relationships, consent and sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- **Ensure that girls have access to school leadership positions** and can meaningfully contribute to shaping their school environment.
- **Provide training outside of the formal school setting**, in order to ensure marginalised and hard to reach girls who may not be in traditional education can have access to and participate in educational and skill building sessions.

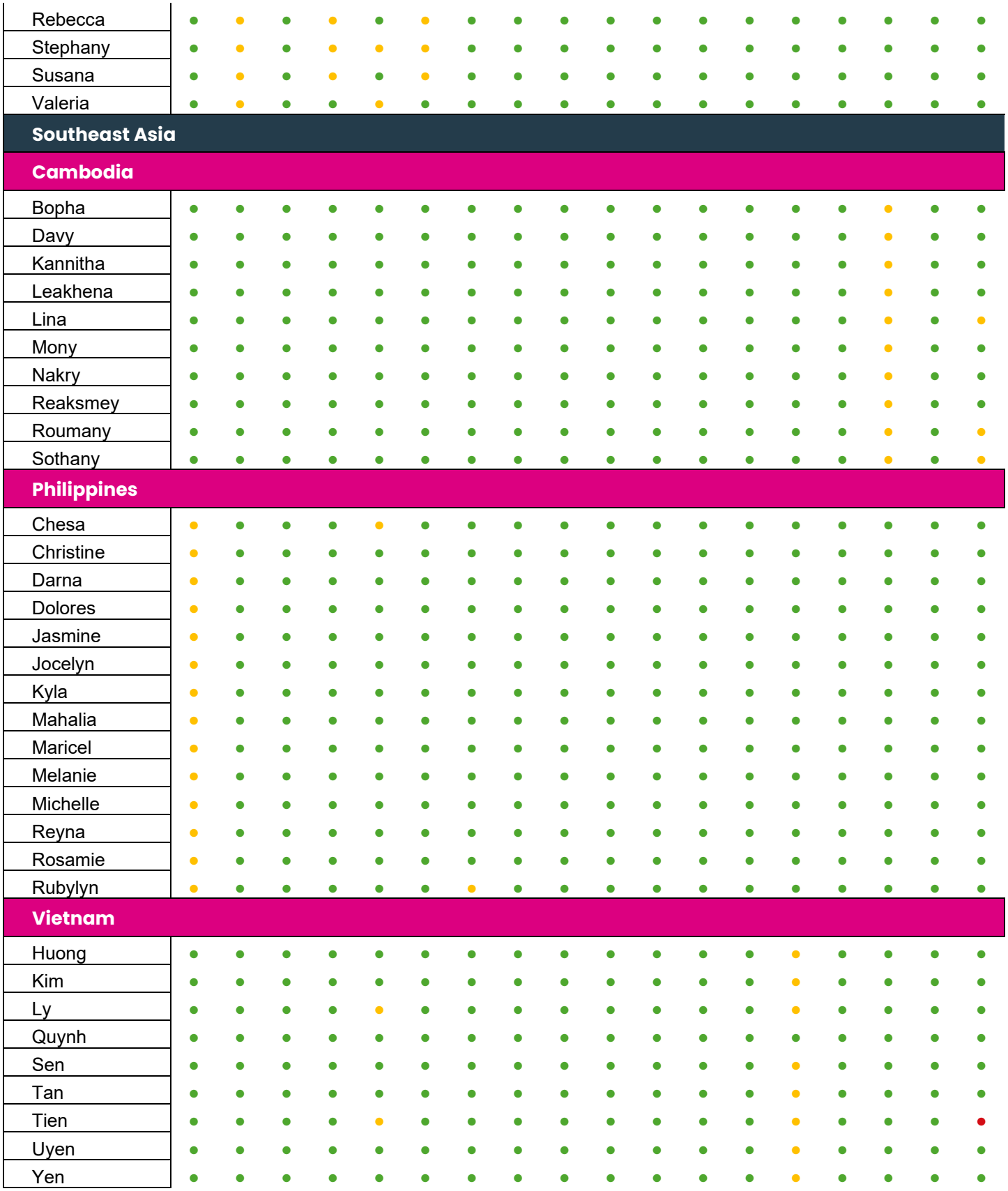
Annexes

Annex 1

● Participated ● Temporary Absence ● Not Part of the Study ● Left the Study

NAME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Africa																		
Benin																		
Alice	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Annabelle	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Barbara	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Catherine	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Eleanor	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Isabelle	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Jacqueline	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Layla	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Margaret	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Thea	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Togo																		
Ala-Woni	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Anti-Yara	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ayomide	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Azia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Djoumai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Essohana	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Fezire	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Folami	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ladi	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Larba	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lelem	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mangazia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Nana-Adja	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Nini-Rike	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Reine	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Tene	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Uganda																		
Amelia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Beti	
Dembe	
Jane	
Joy	
Justine	
Miremba	
Namazzi	
Nimisha	
Rebecca	
Sheila	
Shifa	
Sylvia	
The Americas	
Brazil	
Gabriela (Formerly Amanda)	
Bianca	
Camila	
Fernanda	
Juliana	
Larissa	
Natalia	
Sofia	
Dominican Republic	
Chantal	
Dariana	
Griselda	
Katerin	
Leyla	
Madelin	
Nicol	
Raisa	
Rebeca	
Saidy	
Sharina	
Valerie	
El Salvador	
Bessy	
Doris	
Gabriela	
Gladys	
Hillary	
Karen	
Mariel	
Raquel	


Rebecca
Stephany
Susana
Valeria
Southeast Asia
Cambodia
Bopha
Davy
Kannitha
Leakhena
Lina
Mony
Nakry
Reaksmey
Roumany
Sothany
Philippines
Chesa
Christine
Darna
Dolores
Jasmine
Jocelyn
Kyla
Mahalia
Maricel
Melanie
Michelle
Reyna
Rosamie
Rubylyn
Vietnam
Huong
Kim
Ly
Quynh
Sen
Tan
Tien
Uyen
Yen

Annex 2

The girls' football vignette, as told to *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls in 2021 (Philippines version):

> So, this is my story. There is a girl named Ana, she's fifteen years old. She lives in a faraway barangay and she likes to play football. She noticed that most of the time all of the football players are boys and she's not allowed to join because they said, "You're a girl." But Ana knows that there are many girls who really like playing football. There are many old people in their area who say that girls shouldn't play football because the playing field is dark, far away, not safe for girls and all her playmates are boys so why should they play football. Ana said to herself that it's not equal, "It's not fair that boys can play football but us girls aren't allowed." Ana thought and mustered the courage to talk to the elders of their barangay.
>
> She started by talking to her parents, next she talked to her teachers and barangay officials. She suggested that girls need a safe space to play football and other sports. Now, many girls heard that she did a dialogue, other girls also talked to many parents and the latter agreed with them. Until the barangay officials discussed that they would find a safe area to play football and other sports so girls in the barangay can play. Now Darna, how did you feel about the story?

Annex 3

Benin

Real Choices, Real Lives cohort girls live in the Couffo department in central south region of Benin, 120 km from the capital of Cotonou. It is semi-urban area, characterized by agriculture and poultry farming. Adja is the most spoken language in the area and the main religion is the endogenous religion followed by Christianity.

Girls' and Women's Rights in Benin

In 2004, Benin reformed the 1931 Family Law that was codified by the French colonial authorities and based upon customary law. The changes equalised the legal minimum age for marriage (18 for men and women); gave men and women equal rights in divorce, child custody and inheritance. The new law forbade the practice of levirate (in which a brother is obliged to marry his brother's widow), repudiation and polygamy. It also allowed women to add their maiden name to their husband's name, a practice that was not previously permitted.[124]

More recently, in 2021, a series of reforms offered strengthened protections for women and girls. An overhaul regarding sexual health ensured that services would offer sexual and reproductive information, modern contraception, prenatal and postnatal health, access to safe abortions, and support to GBV survivors. Separately, the definition of GBV was expanded and criminal sentences were increased or instituted for sexual harassment, rape, child marriage and FGM. From 2022, the government began the cross-country rollout of free education for girls in upper secondary school.[125]

The Government holds a comprehensive Children Code which addresses the prohibition of a range of harmful practices such as forced marriage, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation and cutting, trafficking, exploitation of children for domestic purposes, infanticide, illegal and prolonged detention, early pregnancy and using children as beggars.[126]

Highly restrictive social and gender norms for girls in Benin mean they experience a range of discrimination and violence.[127] More than 50 per cent of men uptake decision making on behalf of women, regarding the woman's healthcare and investments for the household.[128]

In Benin, women's decision making is limited in the private sphere and in public economic and political life. Women are primarily seen as caregivers and responsibly for unpaid household labour, which has implications for their ability to access decent work opportunities. From 2019, women's labour force participation was at 69.3 per cent, having risen from 57 per cent in 1990, though they are overrepresented in the informal sector compared to men (95.5 per cent vs 86 per cent).[129]

Five women occupy the 23 ministerial positions available in 2021, in which women represent seven per cent of the National Assembly.

Historical Context

Benin, named Dahomey until 1972, gained independence from France in 1960. In the pre-colonial era of the 19th Century, women held roles as queens, warriors and in governmental positions. French colonisation saw a sharp decline in women's roles in public life, with few women able to hold positions of authority as before. Upon Benin's independence, women have strived to regain their roles in public life. The transitions towards democracy in Benin in the 1990s, and greater educational access, has slowly recuperated women's roles in Benin. [130]

Girls' and Women's Resistance

Women's groups in Benin are actively seeking to empower their positions in land ownership and agricultural entrepreneurship. The 2016 project "Initiative for Empowering Women Farmers in Benin - "Miguézé!" has helped rural women in Benin access land, build agricultural and technical skills, establish women's Savings and Loans Groups, and encourages income-generating activities to boost food productivity and security.[131] A network of women politicians working to improve women's rights and leadership - as the Union des Femmes Élues Conseillères Communales (UFeC) - support women through the administrative processes to obtain land rights and to advocate for their legal rights.[132]

Brazil

Four of the girls live in São Luís, the capital of Maranhão province, and four live in Codó where three live in a rural area and one in a semi-urban community. All had close access to school but the Covid-19 pandemic and strikes greatly affected their education. Some families rely on agriculture for a living and the rest have informal jobs such as selling products at the market, painting, unregistered employees, and government assistance.

There are a high number of child marriages and teenage pregnancies in these two areas. The girls who live in São Luis have access to the internet, although this is precarious, and the girls in Codó do not have access to a mobile phone because there is no signal in the region, which has high levels of economic deprivation.

Girls' and Women's Rights in Brazil

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by Brazil in 1979. Yet, in a breach of CEDAW, it was only men who were able to be legally recognized as the head of household until 1988.[133]

The re-democratisation phase of the 1980s opened up discussions about the legitimate need for greater political participation by women, and in the 1990s political representation was given greater recognition. [134] The 1995 quotas for women candidates in politics was first established in 1995, with now at least 30 per cent of women candidates to be nominated by political parties. Despite this quota, this is not always enough to promote a change in those elected. As of 2022, women represent 18 percent of congress members,[135] 15 percent of legislators and 11 percent of ministers in Brazil.[136] In Brazil, 81 percent of sitting congresswomen and 75 percent of women running for mayor in 2020 experienced political violence.[137] In response, a 2021 law was enacted to prevent, repress, and combat political violence against women.[138]

From 2017, Brazil's Labour Code prohibited gender discrimination during the hiring process and in 2023, it was further amended to require gender pay equity.

Historical Context

The republic constitution of 1891- born out of the First Brazilian Republic - did not strictly prohibit women's right to vote but did not recognise women as citizens and individuals with voting rights. Though women were not legally deprived of the right to vote, those who tried to register to vote were denied this right. Brazilian feminists of the time were influenced by the suffrage movements of the United States and Europe. Their advocacy was purposeful, and sought to win over their claim to public life by arguing the domestic sphere would not be affected. The right to vote was actively extended to all women in 1932, but they only gained full equal voting power when their vote would be compulsory - like men's - in 1945.[139]

In the early Twentieth Century, White landowners controlled much of economic and political life and women's social positions were limited. Poor and Black Brazilian women had poor access to education and difficult working conditions - as domestic servants or textiles workers - in the face of rapid urbanisation. By the 1980s, feminist groups emerged out of leftist parties, women's social movements and Indigenous movements to articulate the dimensions of social class, race, and gender as structuring social relations in Brazil.

Girls' and Women's Resistance

Various modern girl-led acts of resistance are apparent in Brazil, and often intersecting issues of gender equality, climate, race, and class. Girls and young women are participating in calls by education networks that demand quality and inclusive education in Brazil.[140]

The feminist and anti-racist NGO, Criola in Rio de Janeiro has worked with Black women since 1992 to focus on women's and children's rights, grassroots movements for housing and healthcare, LGBTIQ+ issues and anti-racism. The youth-led organization called *Engajamundo* empowers Brazilian youth to participate in local, national and international political processes, particularly concerning their socio-environmental impact.[141] The Feminist Activism among Youth in Brazil (FAYB) project is girl-led and uses creative and arts-based approaches to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) among young women (ages 16-24) in Brazil's favelas.[142]

Cambodia

Girls are from villages across the Tbong Khmom province and the Siem Reap province, respectively. The population mostly follows Buddhism and the largest ethnic group is Cambodian. Most of the village population are farmers (rice farm, rubber plantation, core, casava and sale labour).

Girls' and Women's Rights in Cambodia

Khmer culture of Cambodia entails that women are expected to take up caregiving roles and orientate their lives around the domestic sphere. Much of Cambodian culture is based upon the Chbap Srey, or 'law for women', an informal set of rules passed down intergenerationally based on a centuries old poem. The rules instil highly regarded gender and social norms on how wives should honour their husbands and on the importance of boys 'education over girls'. Though it was previously taught in schools through the national curriculum until 2007, it is recognised some schools still teach the Chbap Srey.[143]

The 1993 Constitution which followed the fall of Khmer Rouge enshrined equal rights between men and women, including for employment, pay parity, and in the value of household labour. Yet, in its first democratic election in the same year, only five of the 120 seats in the National Assembly were won by women (4 per cent). By 2021, women held 26 per cent of seats in the National Assembly.[144]

Though Cambodia strengthened SRH laws in the 1990s with the the Birth Spacing Policy in 1995 and the Abortion Law in 1997, contraception access is limited in rural areas. The 2017-2020 National Strategy for Reproductive and Sexual Health by the Ministry of Health sought to improve sexual health service access.[145]

Penal Codes from the 2000s provide a range of legal provisions to protect women and children against violence, including marital rape and domestic violence and human trafficking and sexual exploitation.[146]

In 2019, a draft legislation on the Law on Public Order was circulated in which women dressed 'inappropriately' would be fined or prosecuted. Women's national rights groups protested this, but recognised that circulating the draft was a positive step towards public consultation. [147]

Historical Context

Following the Cambodian Civil War, from 1975 and then until the end of the genocide in 1979, there was a deficit of male labourers which resulted in women taking on some manual labour positions. From the 1990s, many rural women migrated to urban areas for work in garment factories. Today, 90 per cent of Cambodia's garment workers are women and the garment workers unions have led successive workers' rights protests over recent years.[148] The Khmer Rouge regime imposed radical changes, considered to be the most gender-equitable time in Cambodia's history. In the wake of the regime's fall, many Cambodians wished to return to pre-Khmer Rouge traditions, leading to a revival of the traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity, including the Chbap Srei.[149]

Girl's and Women's Resistance

Cambodian women often bear the brunt of land grabs and dispossessions and therefore are involved in activism and resistance to these practices.[150][151] Often these women have adopted campaigns of nonviolent protest, using their position as wives and mothers to morally shame police when they are beaten.[152] Equally, women, known as the "Friday wives", marched through the streets of Phnom Penh to picket courts and international embassies to demand the release of family members imprisoned for political opposition.[153]

Dominican Republic

Girls live in two broad areas of the country: in communities outside of Azua (southern area of the country) and in communities across San Juan, in the Valle Region.

These communities are all rural and purely agricultural areas, and the girls come from low-income families. In Azua, the livelihoods depend on agriculture especially tomato and banana cultivation, while one of the communities is a coffee growing area. In San Juan, men of the communities involved in this study are engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry and the women in domestic work. In this area the most cultivated products are onions, pumpkins, beans, maize, avocado, among other minor fruits.

The predominant religion is Catholicism and, more broadly, Christianity.

Girls' and Women's Rights in the Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic (DR) sexism remains present throughout society and culture, reproducing patriarchal practices both within the home and in the public sphere.[154] The Dominican Republic has one of the lowest rates of gender equality in the LAC region.[155] Traditional gender norms still hold strong influence over the expectations of gender roles within Dominican society, with just 41.4 per cent of adolescents favouring normative egalitarianism between genders.[156] This means that in historically male dominated spaces, such as in politics or in the workplace, equality is not desired.

Gender stereotypes of women as mothers and belonging in the household are reinforced by the coupling of machismo with conservative Roman Catholicism.[157] These traditional gender norms are reflected in the attitudes of caregivers towards girls' behaviour. For example, it was found that Dominican families consider adolescent pregnancy as girls' responsibility exclusively.[158] This occurs in the context of little access to sexual and reproductive rights, and the criminalisation of abortion under all circumstances.[159]

Women and girls in the DR face high levels of violence, with 2.9 women per 100,000 victims of femicide.[160]

Historical Context

As other countries in the LAC region, the DR was colonised by the Spanish until independence in 1844. The DR has a small population of 10.7 million people.[161] Among the Dominican population, 45 per cent identify as '*indio'* (comparable to '*mestizo*' or mixed-race), 33 per cent as '*moreno*', '*mulato*', or Black (signifying some level of African descent), and 18 per cent as white.[162]

Girls' and Women's Resistance

Historically in the DR women have participated in resistance efforts despite the prevalence of *machismo*. Women have been part of the wars and revolutions that brought an end to colonialism, they have resisted dictators and protested military rule.[163] As a result, many of these women remain as symbols of feminist movements in the region. This includes the Hermanas Mirabal from the DR, who opposed the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo and organised activities against his regime.[164]

Moreover, Dominican women are part of regional feminist movements such as the *Ni Una Menos* collective (Not One Woman Less), demanding an end to the pervasive issue of femicide and seeking to combat the multitude of ways in which sexist aggressions manifest.[165]

El Salvador

The girls participating in the study live in the department of La Libertad in El Salvador. Some of the families live in remote rural communities, in mountainous areas that are difficult to access during the rainy season. Others live on the outskirts of La Libertad (semi-rural). The families are located in the coastal area which means the girls are more prone to trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, forced pregnancy, school dropouts, and this is aggravated by the pandemic that mainly affects children and adolescents.

Girls' and Women's Rights in El Salvador

Within the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, El Salvador has one of the lowest rates of gender equality, according to UN Women.[166] With high levels of machismo, paternalism, and conservative Roman Catholicism, gender norms and stereotypes that position women as natural mothers and their place as within the household are reinforced and maintained. Furthermore, abortion under any circumstances is illegal, same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption remains forbidden. This is despite the equal protection of, and the prevention of the denial of, civil rights based on nationality, race, sex and religion inscribed in law.[167]

Women and girls in El Salvador contend with high rates of violence, with a femicide rate of 1.6 per 100,000 women.[168] One source of this violence is gangs and crime, within which girls have been victims of rape and homicide.[169] Girls also grapple with insecurity within the home, where they can face sexual and intrafamilial violence.[170] Poorer women can be especially vulnerable to this violence due to their lack of resources.[171] Moreover, physical punishment of children by caregivers can be present within familial relations, and was found to be more socially accepted than other forms of violence.[172]

Historical Context

El Salvador is a relatively small country, with a population of 6.3 million.[173] According to the VII Population Census and IV Housing Census 2024, 45 per cent of households were headed by women, signifying a transition in family dynamics.

While El Salvador has a diverse population, the Salvadorean state identified that the majority of the population are *mestizaje*, which refers to people of white and Indigenous mixed-race.[174] There is also a small population of African descent in El Salvador, which according to the VII Population Census and VI Housing Census 2024, conducted by the Central Reserve Bank (BCR), officially registered 25,690 people of African descent (0.4 per cent of the population). It is important to mention that this sector began to be recognised by the Salvadoran State in the 2024 census, which was a significant change in providing official data on its existence. On the other hand, only 1.2 per cent of the Salvadoran population identified themselves as Indigenous, representing a total of 68,148 people. However, this represents an increase compared to the 2007 census, which showed only 0.2 per cent.[175]

El Salvador has contended with high rates of violence and insecurity, with a homicide rate of 107 per 100,000 people in 2015.[176] It has been argued that the historical violent colonisation, 12 years of civil war which ended in 1992, a lack of employment opportunities for former combatants, access to weapons, lack of services to minorities, and a disregard for human rights contributed to a violent context in which crime is a means of making a living.[177][178]However, since the “state of exception” to combat the high levels of crime and violence, the homicide rates have fallen to 7.8 per 100,000 people in 2023.[179] These efforts have enjoyed large public support although rights-based organisations have highlighted concerns.[180]

Girls’ and Women’s Resistance

In the face of gendered inequality and violence against women, women in El Salvador continue to be active and mobilise as part of powerful and visible feminist movements across LAC.[181] Originating in Argentina, the *Ni Una Menos* collective (Not One Woman Less) has spread throughout the whole region, protesting the pervasiveness of femicide and the multitude of sexist aggressions that women face in the region.[182] In El Salvador specifically, feminist movements are built on the values of sorority, sharing experiences of discrimination and injustice, hopes of imagining a more equal and harmonic society and a push towards democratic changes.[183]

The Philippines

Girls come from two broad areas of the Philippines: they are either located in north-east on the Masbate Island Province in South-eastern part of Luzon Region or in the Northern Samar Province located in the Eastern Visayas Region. Across the areas, the population is mostly Catholic. In Masbate, girls are in a rural, coastal village and primary sources of income in the area are corn, rice, fish, coconut and livestock. The region where the province of Masbate is located is highly vulnerable to typhoons, floods, drought and susceptible to climate change hazards. Similarly in Northern Samar, the main income source is also agricultural. Main agricultural products include coconut/copra, rice, root crops, corn, abaca, fish and vegetables. Main livestock were cattle, swine, poultry and carabao. Many areas in Northern Samar province have been affected by decades of conflict between government forces and armed groups.

Girls’ and Women’s Rights in the Philippines

The proportion of female elected officials in the Philippines is 31 per cent as of 2022.[184]

The State, "recognizes the role of women in nation building and shall ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men”, as is indicated in the 1987 Philippine Constitution. The Magna Carta of Women of 2009 is a comprehensive women's human rights law - based on international law - that seeks to eliminate discrimination through the recognition, protection, fulfilment, and promotion of the rights of Filipino women.[185] It holds that "the state realizes the equality of men and women entails the abolition of the unequal structures and practices that perpetuate discrimination and inequality”.

Various laws in the Philippines address gender-based violence and have been held for decades:

- The Anti-Sexual Harassment Act of 1995 - though applying to all persons - offers particular provisions on protection of women and children and includes the issue of sexual harassment committed in employment, education or training environment.
- The Anti-Rape Law of 1997 stipulates that sexual acts committed through force, threat, coercion or grave abuse of authority will be punished.
- Rape Victim Assistance and Protection Act of 1998 declares it is State policy to provide necessary assistance and protection for rape victims.
- The Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004 recognizes the need to protect the family and its members particularly women and children, from violence and threats to their personal safety and security.

Laws in other areas of public life are also key indicators of women’s rights in the Philippines. In 1995, assistance for small-scale women entrepreneurs was legally guaranteed by Republic Act 7882, as it sought to provide all possible assistance to Filipino women in their pursuit of owning, operating and managing small business enterprises. The 1989 Republic Act 6725 prohibits employment

discrimination on the basis of sex, and the 2019 the Expanded Maternity Leave Law extends paid maternity leave to 105 days.

Historical Context

In the early twentieth century, women continuously lobbied at Senate hearings in pursuit of women's suffrage. Though a 1919 bill was approved, it was not enacted into law. Women's Suffrage was formally recognised in September 1936, born out of an attitudinal shift brought on by successive women's groups' advocacy. When then-President Quezon signed the Woman's Suffrage Plebiscite Bill, he declared that "…it is essential and even imperative that the right to vote be granted to Filipino women if they are not to be treated as mere slaves".[186]

Various legislative measures in the late twentieth century have ensured women were represented in local and national politics.

The Philippines became independent from the United States in 1946, having previously struggled under Spanish colonialism from the 16th - 19th Centuries. It is in this time that Catholic religious norms became deeply embedded in Filipino culture. The pervasiveness of Catholic religious norms have informed the status of abortion rights in the Philippines. Having first been criminalised in an 1870 Penal Code.

Girls' and Women's Resistance

Within the Philippines there are a number of examples of girls' and women's resistance. One is the Gabriela Coalition, a non-profit movement umbrella that consists of a number of organisations including Gabriela, a National Alliance of Women, founded in 1984,The Gabriela Women's Party,a political party founded in 2000 that served to organise against the Marcos dictatorship, Gabriela Youth, founded in 2004, and other organisations that serve the needs for women workers, migrants, and indigenous women.[187]

In the era of Duerte's presidency (2016 - 2022), female political leaders and journalists were persecuted, including though violent sexual imagery, and 66 women were victims of extrajudicial killings, many of whom were women human rights defenders.[188] Gabriela's political party and CSOs remain under heavy surveillance. Women's organisations in general continue to face long term reduced funding and limited local government cooperation.[189]

As for youth-led activism, Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines raised awareness of climate change impacts and demanded accountability from national leaders, such as through a 2025 climate strike.[190] 2023 research by Plan International found that there is a wide pool of active youth and youth-focused organisations, and many more individual advocates across different regions exercising their right to political participation. While there are government-mandated provisions recognising the role of youth in shaping development outcomes and institutionalising their participation, open pathways to decision making spaces are not always a guarantee. Girls and young campaigners we spoke to focused either on, or a combination of, climate change, gender equality, and SRHR, and they told us about the barriers they face: particularly lack of financing and being underestimated or receiving backlash due to gender social norms in their community.[191]

Togo

Real Choices, Real Lives girls are from the Tem, Peulh and Kabye communities, respectively, and Islam is the dominant religion.
They live in rural areas that are heavily based on agriculture. The level of education is low, droughts are increasingly more common, and small conflicts arise in the area.

Girls' and Women's Rights in Togo

In 2022, Togo ranked 127 out of 144 countries on the SDG Gender Index.

2006 reforms to the Labour Code ensured a number of protections for women's employment: prohibited dismissal of pregnant workers; mandated equal remuneration for work of equal value; prohibited gender discrimination in employment; and alongside legislation protecting women from

sexual harassment in employment by providing civil remedies; it no longer broadly prohibits the dismissal of pregnant workers.[192]

Under customary law in Togo, women did not have the right to own land, which were prevalent in the Persons and Family Code. Limitations in the Code prevented women from choosing where to live, from getting a job without their husband's permission, and from being named head of household in the same manner as men. The 2012 - 2014 reforms to the Persons and Family Code upturned these discriminatory measures, driven by decades of advocacy by women's civil society organizations who engaged a wide variety of stakeholders, including the government and the international community. Yet, as of 2014 (latest data on the indicators), after the reforms, only 29.4 percent of women participated in three major decisions in the household: namely, their own health care, major household purchases, and visiting family (World Development Indicators).[193]

In 2022, Togo legislative reform across areas of social protection, family law, civil rights and criminal law can potentially bring about greater employment protections and rights claims for widowed and divorced women. In particular, widows could thereby inherit their husband's estate, and the 2018 Code foncier et domanial (Code on Land and Estates) grants equal land tenure rights to women and men.[194] Women held 18.9 per cent of seats in parliament in 2024[195], which is likely the outcome of the Electoral Law of 2013 amendments in which candidate lists were required to include equal numbers of men and women.[196] Legislative changes towards social protection, inheritance and criminal law have signalled progress towards women's rights. Protections against gender-based violence were also emboldened, following amendments of the penal code through the Gender Equality Law and revisions to the family code (equalizing rights to divorce and remarry).[197] In 2022, greater protections for students experiencing GBV in schools - through defining prevention procedures and victim support measures - also indicate strengthening of women's and girls' rights in Togo.[198] Yet, the level of implementation of such reforms, indicate that much progress is still yet to be made.[199]

Historical Context

Togo became independent from the French Union on April 27, 1960, following 113 years of colonial administration by successive German, British, and French administrations.[200] These regimes stood to restructure social and gender norms, which reoriented preexisting ideas for women to be custodians of the household towards being marginalised and restricted in their education and economic access.[201] In this period, women stood alongside nationalists during the struggle for independence (1946-1960) and as members of the National Women's League of Togo (l'Union nationale des femmes du Togo, or UNFT).[202] In 1963, Togo became a member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union) and two years later subsequently joined the renewed Joint African and Malagasy Organization, which provided for economic, political, and social cooperation among French-speaking African states.[203]

From 1967 to 2005 - the period of President Gnassingbé Eyadéma's rule - women's rights and political participation remained limited. Yet, in the 1990s, Togo began to embrace democratic reforms, which allowed for women's organizations to become more prominent. In 1995, the National Council of Women of Togo (CNFT) was established to promote women's rights and empowerment through advocacy, education, and mobilization.[204][205]

Protests in the 1990s saw violent government responses, which led to Togo being cut from economic aid from the European Union between 1993 to 2008.[206] Upon becoming president in 2005, President Faure Gnassingbé, sought to restore multilateralism and secure better development outcomes in Togo, including improvements in the status of women in general. These factors led women's rights to gain more traction on the political agenda in the 2010s.[207]

Girls' and Women's Resistance

There are various instances of how women's groups have pushed for greater rights and towards addressing overall economic inequality in Togo. Though women's formal participation in politics is low, local civil society organisations have long been instrumental in changing persistent discriminatory provisions in laws, and, with the support of the international community, have put pressure on the government to pass reforms for greater equal rights, such as in the amendment of Code of Persons and the Family in 2012 and 2014.[208]

89.9 per cent of women are engaged in vulnerable forms of employment - compared to 72 per cent for men.[209] Working in the market is a common form of employment for Togolese women and it is these

market women who are largely responsible for financing the opposition to then-President Eyedema; they were said to have faced retaliation from the establishment where it is claimed their building have been burnt down.[210] The Let's Save Togo women's organisation held a sex strike in 2012 to persuade men to take a stand against President Gnassingbé.

Where women account for 50 per cent of agricultural jobs in some regions[211], many women are using resilient or climate adapted agricultural approaches to gain a foot in male dominated spaces.[212] Pushes for women's land rights are underway with the cross-country implementation of Planned Agricultural Zones (ZAAPs) to promote sustainable family farming, by facilitating access to land for those who don't usually have it.[213]

Uganda

Girls in Uganda came from the Kamuli district, which is part of the Busoga Kingdom. All of the girls belong to the Basoga ethnic group.

Girls' and Women's Rights in Uganda

Uganda has a robust legislative framework for protecting the rights of girls and women, strengthened by several laws and policies introduced in recent years.[214] This includes promoting universal primary education, raising the sexual age of consent to 18, a ban on child marriage, protections for children from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and female genital mutilation/cutting.[215][216][217] Furthermore, women's political representation has increased as a result of a national affirmative action policy. Yet, within the Basoga community in Uganda, where the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort live, there are a number of practices which hinder girls' accessing their rights. Men tend to be considered the head of the household and hold ultimate decision making power within the household, from finances to the size of the family.[218] Girls take on a large burden of unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, completing chores and raising younger children. Parents express a preference for having sons, and men eat first and are served more food.[219][220]

Girls face many barriers in accessing their education, they face dangers travelling to and from school; harassment, abuse and GBV in school; parent's son bias in paying school fees; a lack of provision for pregnant girls and mothers; and a lack of sanitary facilities.[221][222] Additionally, girls have limited access to land or resources, unequal inheritance, and limited employment opportunities.

Social norms see adolescent girls transitioning to adulthood at puberty that places pressure on girls to marry and move away.[223] Girls face gendered practices such as tight restrictions on their mobility, sexual abuse, step-parent abuse in polygamous households, forced and early marriage. [224][225][226] There also exists a near total ban on abortion, lack of access to contraceptives and stigma around their use, a lack of sexuality education, and high rates of maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy, and HIV among teenage girls.[227][228][229][230][231][232]

Historical Context

In precolonial Uganda, there were many examples of women leaders, as queens and as chiefs, and women were frequently given economic and social responsibilities.[233] However, a combination of patrilineal traditions, the legacies of British colonialism, and the influence of both Christianity and Islam on gender norms mean that women frequently struggle to access their rights today. Women's resistance has been present throughout Uganda's history, from activism during the colonial era through to the present day.[234][235][236]

Girls' and Women's Resistance

Uganda has one of the most developed and powerful women's movements on the African continent.[237] The movement has had particular success in advancing girls' and women's access to education and in efforts to secure women's rights to own and inherit land and resources.[238][239][240]

Vietnam

The *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls in Vietnam live in the Quảng Ngãi (South Central Coast) province.[11] The girls are all from the ethnic majority group, the Kinh people (ethnic Vietnamese)[12], and live in two rural inland communes each roughly an hour away from the province's largest city, Quảng Ngãi City. Nearly all of the girls in the Vietnam cohort come from **farming families.**

Girls' and Women's Rights in Vietnam

In 2024, Vietnam ranked 49 out of 139 countries worldwide on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Gender Index rating and has seen positive progress in improving its Gender Index score since 2015.[241]The country ranks second in Asia for gender equality, after Singapore.[242] Vietnam ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1982,[243] and the country's Constitution guarantees "equal gender rights and opportunities."[244] Despite these promising indicators, **gender inequalities persist in Vietnam**. Although Vietnamese law, in theory, enables women equal access to land ownership and inheritance, customary practice and male preference often serve to **restrict women's property claims.**[245] In patrilineal agricultural households in Vietnam, ancestor worship has been practiced for centuries, and family lands have deep significance as the site of ancestral spirits.[246] Among the ethnic majority Kinh, kinship is patrilineal and - because sons continue the family line - they also carry responsibility for the family alter where ancestors are worshipped and caring for ancestral graves.[247] While some families no longer adhere strictly to these traditions, and recognise the role of daughters in worshipping ancestors, the practice of ancestor worship remains an important consideration in whether a son or daughter would be given access to family lands.[248] Furthermore, laws regulating succession exclude children of non-registered unions, making women and children of these unions vulnerable.[249]

Women have a high **labour force participation** rate in Vietnam, at 73.8 per cent, and men in Vietnam are more likely than women to be engaged in informal employment.[250] However, women in Vietnam are mainly engaged in low-paid, poor quality jobs and paid less than men for work of equal value.[251] Women are overrepresented in the category of contributing family workers (primarily in agriculture) and in domestic labour, which make them extremely vulnerable to exploitation.[252] Furthermore, only 17 per cent of large businesses are run by women.[253]

Women's disproportionate responsibility for **unpaid care work** is a barrier to their careers, and 93 per cent of women felt that their domestic responsibilities prevented women from achieving leadership positions in their industries.[254] On average, women in Vietnam spend 275 minutes per day on unpaid care work, while men spend only 170 minutes per day.[255] Despite heavy care work responsibilities, women in Vietnam have increasingly taken on roles in garment factories, many of which have relocated to rural areas encouraged by government incentives. This has given women greater opportunity to earn an income independently from their husbands.[256]

This improved **economic independence** has supported women to challenge gender roles in the home, particularly on the issue of the distribution of unpaid care work.[257] Additionally, compared to many of the other focal countries, women in Vietnam has historically had a greater say in financial and other **decision making in the home**, which has been further supported by increases in their earnings.[258] Significant progress has been made in advancing women's **political participation** in Vietnam, with women holding 30.26 per cent of seats in the National Assembly,[259] and representing 33 per cent of members of the Vietnam Communist Party.[260] However, women are less likely to vote in elections than men - particularly in village elections - and both women and men report that they prefer to vote for male candidates, especially for senior executive positions.[261]

Efforts have been made to improve **SRHR** education and service provision in Vietnam, including for adolescents.[262] The majority of women in Vietnam report being able to make their own informed decisions about sexual intercourse and the use of contraception, however autonomy is lower among ethnic minorities and those with no education.[263] Contraceptive use is high among married women,

[11] In June 2025, Vietnam's National Assembly adopted a resolution to reduce the number of provincial units from 63 to 34. While Quảng Ngãi has been expanded to incorporate other provinces,it has retained it's original province name and administrative centre. (https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/vietnams-government-introduces-official-plan-for-provincial-mergers.html/)

[12] Kinh are the ethnic majority of both the Quảng Ngãi province and Vietnam at large.

but 40.7 per cent of unmarried sexually active women reported have an unmet need for family planning, and only a quarter of adolescents reported using contraceptives.[264] A notable barrier to adolescents' SRHR information is that girls are not educated about these issues by their family members due to social norms, and rural schools often lack adequate training to deliver SRH education.[265]

A quarter of ever-partnered girls and women in Vietnam have experienced **intimate partner violence** (IPV),[266] and nearly two-third of women have experienced some form of either physical, sexual, emotional or economic violence.[267] Concerningly, 51.8 per cent of women felt that men were sometimes justified in beating their wife, and these views were even more widely held by women in rural areas and among those with no or low formal education.[268]

Vietnam has a very high primary school completion rate, at 98 per cent, with girls having a slightly higher completion rate than boys.[269] The gender gap widens in secondary school, with 65 per cent of **girls completing upper secondary** compared with 51 per cent of boys.[270]

Historical Context

Vietnamese women have historically been involved in resistance and participated in wars of independence against French and USA colonial rule.[271][272] Women not only engaged in combat, but also acted as nurses, repairing roads, and as cooks.[273] While women have been celebrated for their role in wars of independence, traditionally Vietnamese women were expected to follow strict patriarchal Vietnamese Confucian values that relegate women to the domestic sphere and must obey their father, husband and eldest son.[274]

Girls' and Women's Resistance

As mentioned, Vietnamese women were active in resisting colonial rule, yet their resistance extends beyond the battlefield. During the Vietnam war, women in urban South Vietnam established the Vietnamese Women's Movement for the Right to Live, campaigning for peace and women's liberation.[275] Vietnamese women working in garment factories take on leadership positions in organising and strikes, especially women who were older and experienced workers would inform women who had been newly hired about protests and what basic rights they are entitled to.[276]

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