Because We are Girls

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES

Hopes and dreams

1. Happy birthdays

It is Ashlin’s birthday. She is wearing a purple party frock and new sandals with sparkly heels that she keeps by her side even at bedtime. And she loves being the centre of attention when she blows out the candles on the cake that we have brought her. Ashlin lives in El Salvador. She is one of the 142 girls in nine countries that Plan is following from birth until 2015, the target date for the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We hope to gain a better understanding of these little girls’ lives, and the factors that are helping or hindering the achievement of the MDGs for girls from poor families everywhere.

Ashlin’s birthday is more of a cause for celebration than she realises. The first five years are a child’s peak years for development, but most are likely to go to school than their brothers. But we also know that investing in a girl not only increases her opportunities but has a positive effect on her family and her community as well. Plan and the Because I am a Girl campaign support the rights of girls everywhere to a healthy and happy life.

In 2000, the governments of the world promised in the MDGs that girls’ and young women’s chances of being healthy, educated and equal would improve. They recognised that educating and empowering girls is the best way to break the cycle of poverty that all too often is handed down from generation to generation.

So are governments keeping their promises? The global figures show great progress in some areas – 62 countries are on track to meet MDG1 which is about halving the proportion of people who go hungry. The number of under-fives who die is still much too high in many countries, unfortunately not all little girls are like Ashlin. In many parts of the world, girls from poor families are fed less, are more likely to suffer violence and less likely to go to school than their brothers. But we also know that investing in a girl not only increases her opportunities but has a positive effect on her family and her community as well. Plan and the Because I am a Girl campaign support the rights of girls everywhere to a healthy and happy life.

Because the factor that is helping or hindering the achievement of the MDGs for girls from poor families everywhere.

![Image](image.png)

**Under five mortality rates per 1,000 live births, selected countries 2011**

- Vietnam
- Uganda
- Togo
- Philippines
- El Salvador
- Dominican Republic
- Benin
- Cambodia
- Brazil
- United States
- United Kingdom
- Sweden

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The research in this paper comes from Plan’s ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study. We are following a cohort of 142 girls in nine different countries on three continents – Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam.

The girls were all born in 2006 and the study will continue until at least 2015, the year when the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals are meant to be achieved.

Using in-depth interviews with the girls’ families and with the girls themselves, plus focus groups and annual surveys, the study aims to support the research in Plan’s annual State of the World’s Girls reports by bringing to life the reality of girls’ lives around the world. It will help us to understand what works to support girls and their families to move out of poverty. And it will give us valuable insights into what girls need to improve their lives and to take advantage of opportunities that should be theirs by right.

Plan’s 75 years of experience show that unfortunately not all little girls are like Ashlin. In many parts of the world, girls from poor families are fed less, are more likely to suffer violence and less likely to go to school than their brothers. But we also know that investing in a girl not only increases her opportunities but has a positive effect on her family and her community as well. Plan and the Because I am a Girl campaign support the rights of girls everywhere to a healthy and happy life.

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Real Choices, Real Lives

Plan-International.org/girls

can hide the reality of life for the poorest families. That is why Plan is following these little girls as they grow up. We hope to be able to show what will help them to claim their rights and to fulfil their potential – and what will stop them from doing so.

This report gives an overview of what has happened to the girls as they hit the five-year milestone. Perhaps the most important fact, apart from their survival, is that almost all are now in school or pre-school. And most of the parents say they want their daughters as well as their sons to have an education. Many grandmothers and mothers hope that this will give their daughters and granddaughters the opportunities they themselves were denied. For example, Ashlin is looked after by Julia, her great-grandmother, who left school in Grade One and cannot read or write. But she says she believes that education will be the key to a better future for her beloved great-granddaughter.

We will also be looking at other changes across the generations. For example, although their own lives are still a struggle, the girls’ parents believe their daughters will have a better life than they did. They feel that, overall, material circumstances have improved, infrastructure and services are better and more accessible, and that technology will give this new generation access to knowledge and information that they never had. They hope that this will also give the girls confidence, and the knowledge that they have rights too.

The cost of poverty

But following the girls’ families is also showing us that poverty is still a major barrier. Although the majority of girls were immunised at birth, many have suffered from diseases like malaria and dysentery, which are often closely linked to poverty. A large number of families struggle to make ends meet. Julia’s house is built of concrete breeze blocks and has a tidy yard with chickens scratching in the dirt, but she lives on the money sent by Ashlin’s parents. They are both working abroad, and no one else has regular employment.

With the best intentions in the world, choices come down to what is affordable. Traditionally, families invest more in boys than girls and see them as having a higher status, we found that most people in the Plan study, young and old, men and women, see the majority of the changes in women’s lives as positive. Many families mentioned that there was more equality between women and men. Annie’s father from the Dominican Republic says: “Right now, a woman can achieve whatever she wants to; there are many opportunities for everyone.” A group of women interviewed in Uganda said: “Things have changed drastically because of women’s empowerment.”

In all nine countries where Plan is following the cohort girls, there is agreement that life has changed a lot for this generation, particularly for girls and young women. Mercedes, Noelia’s grandmother from the Dominican Republic, says: “The women of today are very different from the women of yesterday. The women of yesterday only spent their time in the home and that was not good. Women now have the right to do everything a man does.”

In Cambodia, Channy’s mother said: “Today, women can travel to work away from their home or country. That was not possible in the past, when women had to stay at home to take care of the children and do the housework.” Wemmily’s mother in Brazil agrees: “The difference is the freedom of movement people have today.”

Despite the fact that, traditionally, families invest more in boys than girls and see them as having a higher status, we found that most people in the Plan study, young and old, men and women, see the majority of the changes in women’s lives as positive. Many families mentioned that there was more equality between women and men. Annie’s father from the Dominican Republic says: “Right now, a woman can achieve whatever she wants to; there are many opportunities for everyone.” A group of women interviewed in Uganda said: “Things have changed drastically because of women’s empowerment.”

Women and girls put on trousers, own public offices, eat chicken, own property and talk in public places – unlike in the past, when these things were for men and boys only.” Traditionally, it was men who not only wore the trousers, but who ate the best parts of the chicken to show their higher status.

However, we are also finding that girls and boys are already both consciously and unconsciously initiated into a world where the primary responsibilities of a girl at home still include cooking and cleaning, fetching water, gathering fuel and caring for others, while boys will do few or none of these tasks. Almost all the girls in Uganda and
many in the Dominican Republic and the Philippines already have daily chores to fulfil by age five. In the other countries, most do not have these chores yet, but all of them spend much of their playtime mimicking the work of their mothers and older girls around them.

“I want to be a teacher when I grow up and I like to wash plates and bowls and help my mum collect firewood,” says Chhea, aged six, from Cambodia.

‘Girls can now climb coconut trees’

“When we were young we were very respectful of our elders. We dressed in a conservative way. We were afraid to show our feelings, we were not expressive. We saw our parents as powerful. But now children are not afraid to express their ideas and opinions.”

A group of women in the Philippines

Many people thought girls today are more aware of their rights. A group of girls in Brazil said: “The change is that women now have more courage and independence.” Cham’s father from Cambodia pointed out that “there are many organisations educating people about the rights of the child, and human rights as well”. He thought this had given girls more opportunities for education and employment. And Gloria’s grandfather, in Uganda, said: “Back then they [women] did not have rights and they could not decide to work.” He added: “It is good that women should have rights.”

Asked what had changed for girls since their day, a group of mothers in the Philippines said: “Girls have more courage and confidence, not just to climb coconut trees but to do many of the things that their brothers do.” They also noticed that girls were less passive than they used to be: “Now they keep on asking, and reason things out for themselves. They know their rights… There’s a big difference.”

In Brazil, a young relative of Elvira noted that things are changing, “because before, the girls were not allowed to do the things the boys did. Now we can play football and other things.” Most of the parents were happy for girls to do sport but less happy for boys to do what were considered ‘feminine’ activities, such as playing with dolls.

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Emily and Roy: an unconventional relationship

Emily is Mikaela’s mother. They live in the Philippines. Unlike most of the other mothers taking part in the study, Emily has had more formal education than her husband, Roy. She trained as a pastor after completing a university degree in theology and post-graduate teacher training.

For some time, Emily was the one who brought home a regular income. Now, as well as taking care of the family’s one hectare rice field, Roy works as a pastor too. He adds: “Sometimes I go [with others] to clean air-conditioning units to have a sideline and earn something to add to the money for expenses.”

Emily says she is the one who takes the lead in making major decisions in her family. She explains: “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 consult him.”

Roy explains how the family shares domestic work: “With Emily’s responsibilities, I share some of the household work, such as cooking and taking care of our children, whenever I am around.” He adds that even before his wife became a pastor, they shared responsibilities in the home. Their five daughters also have household duties and “when my son is here he’s the one who fetches water.”

However, Emily still believes that the man is the head of the household: “That’s why his surname is the one carried by the family.” She acknowledges that although “there are many men in charge in government, sometimes I ask [why]. It should be equal, so that there is equality.” Emily also believes that “both [women and men] have a chance to succeed, because we each have our own dreams.”

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Dancing Doreen

Doreen, from the Philippines, who is five, lives with her grandmother, father and siblings. Her mother has worked in Manila for the past few years. They talk on the phone and Doreen’s mother sends her clothes twice a year. Doreen’s grandmother says she is angry with her mother for going away. But she also says there is a positive side to this: Doreen is becoming increasingly independent. “Sometimes I take her to school, but often she goes with her brother or her classmates. There was a time when she didn’t want to go to school because I couldn’t take her, but now she volunteers to go alone. She is not shy; if her teacher asks her to dance, she will. She does her homework as soon as she arrives from school. I just watch what she’s doing. She’s always reading. Sometimes she sweeps the floor and helps with the laundry. She also goes to the shop on her own. If someone gives her money, she will rush to the shop to spend it.”

family as well as for the woman herself. So it is interesting that Emily, Mikaela’s mother, who is the only mother in the study who is university-educated, seems to have a more equal relationship than most with her husband, Roy.

The good old times?

“‘The difference between this generation and the old times is that young girls’ lives have improved but there are also more dangers... Girls today are exposed to all sorts of problems, like diseases and sexual violence.’”

Fridos Is.’s family, Togo

Like the older generation the world over, parents and grandparents are concerned about the threats posed by a changing world. They worry about the threat of violence and a lack of protection for their daughters and granddaughters as they move away from the security of their immediate family to go to school. They worry about drugs, crime and sex. Lorianny’s father in the Dominican Republic says: “Before, it was a healthy life, now it isn’t. Now it is more complicated with drugs and crime. You have to be very careful.” Doreen’s grandmother in the Philippines says life is more dangerous now: “Most of those into drugs are men and that makes me afraid to let girls walk alone in the dark. I will be very careful.” Doreen’s grandmother in the Philippines says life is more dangerous now: “Most of those into drugs are men and that makes me afraid to let girls walk alone in the dark. I will be very careful.”

While some of this may be the natural worries that every parent has for their child, some young women also expressed their concerns, particularly about violence. Bhea’s teenage cousin says: “There are many bad people around. We don’t like it, but girls are not safe anymore. My friend, after she was raped, she was mercilessly killed. This happened near the house of her grandmother while she was texting.”

Migration and the importance of the wider family

Ashlin’s family, whom we met at the start of this report, demonstrates the importance of wider family and social networks common to most of the families in our study. Although Ashlin is an only child, she is surrounded by several generations of her family. She lives with her great-grandmother Julia, who is 69. Julia had seven children, four of whom are still alive. Ashlin’s grandmother Consuela, who is only 43, has five children, the youngest of whom is only 14. She lives nearby and helps out with Ashlin. And Ashlin’s great-great-grandparents also still live in the neighbourhood.

But two significant people are missing in Ashlin’s life. Her mother and father are working abroad. Though they talk to her on the phone, she has not seen them for some time. She is one of the 20 per cent of cohort girls in El Salvador who are being brought up by relatives rather than their parents.

So Ashlin’s pretty dress and sandals have come at a price. Her father sends $50 a month and her mother sends money when she can, says Julia. “She is quite a spoilt little girl – we find it hard to say no to her!” But Julia adds that there were three months last year when no money was forthcoming. This was hard – she could not buy milk for Ashlin and had to cut down on her own meals.

Over the past 10 years, migration worldwide has increased from an estimated 150 million in 2000 to 214 million. That means that one out of every 33 people in the world today is a migrant. Half are women.” In 2010, eight families taking part in the study reported that one or both parents had either migrated in the previous year or had been absent for a number of years. Six of these live in Latin America. Among the cohort countries, international migration is most common in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and the Philippines.

“‘It used to be much easier to raise children’

“They days children are so big-headed compared to our time because of the freedom that has been given to them by the parents and the government.’”

Ruth’s father, Uganda

Across all countries and continents, one thing that the parents and grandparents of the girls agreed on was that children and young people were no longer respectful of their elders. In one focus group in Brazil, the women said that nowadays young people are difficult, rebellious and sometimes violent. They felt nostalgic about the old times, saying “it used to be much easier to raise children than it is today”. However, on the whole we found that more people were positive than negative:

• 60 per cent thought that the changes were positive for women, and had an effect on their relationships with their husbands, fathers and mothers. “Today’s generation has more access to information, the daughters are ‘more friendly’ towards the parents. Today, there is more dialogue...”

• 20 per cent thought that not much had changed at home, for example: “Boys [still] do very little housework.”

• 20 per cent thought some changes were damaging for women, for example: “Women have changed the way they dress, and this causes sexual violence.”

Connecting to a wider world – the wonders of technology

“Nowadays, children have many opportunities that we did not have previously. They have television, radio and books to cultivate their minds.”

Doreen’s father, the Philippines

Some of the positive changes in young people’s lives are related to technology, which people from almost every country agreed had made a huge difference in their lives. Our study shows that thanks to technology and television, girls are less isolated than their mothers were. Even in the remotest areas they can often access something wider than their community or village. Cell phones in many parts of the developing world are often affordable, even for those on low incomes. Doreen’s father noted: “Now they [the young people] are high tech. We didn’t have cell phones. Now they have access to computers so they learn easily. They are no longer ignorant about life in the city.”

A group of mothers in the Philippines said that having a cell phone had increased girls’ safety and thus their ability to go out. “Nowadays, girls are courageous. It used to be that they could not go on their own to another place; now they are confident thus their ability to go out: “Nowadays, girls are confident enough to go far away.”

And one teenage girl in Benin said she thought ignorance about life in the city."5

Health and the diseases of poverty

“In the past, one had to cover longer distances to have access to healthcare.”

Mariyama’s family, Togo

Most of the little girls already have a better start in life than their mothers. In six of the cohort countries, all the girls had been immunised at birth and 93 per cent have birth registration certificates. In a world where girls’ access to education and adequate healthcare can still be challenged, having official documentation is vital in order to access these services.

Nonetheless, some diseases are still common. Malaria continues to be a problem for the girls in many of the countries, especially in Africa. The World Health Organisation reports that in 2010 in Africa, “malaria mortality rates have fallen by more than 25 per cent globally since 2000, but a child dies every minute of malaria and the disease accounts for approximately 22 per cent of all childhood deaths.”

The girls’ families reported a range of health concerns for their daughters, many related to poverty. These began at birth, from serious illnesses like dysentery and dengue fever, to persistent respiratory illnesses and malnutrition. There have been 34 reported incidences of diarrhoea worldwide, and although access to water and sanitation has improved since their parents’ generation, many girls still lack the basic necessities of clean drinking water and toilets.

Sadly, six of the girls from the original cohort have already died. Emilienne from Benin, Frido Id. from Togo and Mary Joy T. from the Philippines died in accidents; Resty from Uganda died from malaria; Chimene from Benin and Yassimina from Togo died from undiagnosed illnesses. These ‘undiagnosed’ deaths also come back to poverty – they are likely to be related to the cost of medical care and we know that under-five mortality is highest in the poorest households and among less educated mothers.

The really important thing is education

“My parents cannot read and write. They didn’t receive any formal education. My mother forced me to give up school in order to assist my elder sister who delivered a baby in Cotonou. It affected me and I never forgot it.”

Mascon’s mother, Benin

Teur’s pride and determination (expressed in Reaksa’s story on page 12) that her daughters will be educated is reflected across the study. And this is perhaps the biggest change from previous generations: almost everyone now wants girls to go to school – although in fact 39 million girls worldwide are still denied that opportunity, and in all regions of the world apart from Latin America, more boys than girls still finish primary school.

In the cohort families, there has been clear progress down the generations. As the chart below shows, many of the girls’ grandmothers and mothers have little or only basic education. Only 49 per cent of the grandmothers have any schooling at all. In Togo, Benin and Cambodia, they had none. In Vietnam and the Philippines, however, all the mothers and grandmothers have had some education. And although overall 86 per cent of mothers have had some education, most said they left primary school by third grade. We have less information on fathers’ education, but in general they seem to be a little more educated than their wives, bearing out what we know about boys’ schooling traditionally being valued more than girls’.

So the fact that the majority of the little girls are now enrolled is already an improvement compared to their grandmothers and some of their mothers. With support from their families and the wider community there is a good chance that this generation will stay at school longer, and will leave school with the ability to help lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Charolyn from the Dominican Republic has already decided: “I want to go to university.”

Sohaka’s mother in Cambodia says: “When I was a girl, there were few girls at school. My mother asked me to take care of my younger sister, younger brother, the cow, the buffalo and the housework, so I did not have the chance to go to school. But now, so many girls go to school and they have a good education and good jobs. I am strongly committed to sending my child to school.”

Christine’s grandmother in Uganda notes: “The really important thing is education. In my day girls did not have an education but now many do.” And Naream’s father says that when he studied in 1982 in Cambodia, girls made up around 10 per cent of classes. Now there are as many girls as boys.

The mothers in the Philippines agree that there has been a major change: “It used to be that parents didn’t bother about the education of their girl children; nowadays, even if they struggle with money, they try hard to support their education.”

Jael’s mother adds: “Before, boys were given the opportunity to go to school rather than girls because it was believed girls should stay at home. But now, girls and boys have equal opportunities.

Percentage of mothers and grandmothers with some education

http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs094/en/
Real Choices, Real Lives

Reaksa's story

Reaksa is the eldest daughter of Teur and The, farm labourers from Siem Reap province in Cambodia. The family lives in a small thatched house on the outskirts of their village. Her parents explain that like many other families in rural Cambodia, they struggle to earn enough to feed the family. Teur earns the family’s main income and travels 15 kilometres each day to work as a farm labourer. She is paid largely in rice and other food. The gets occasional work earning about $2 a day.

Reaksa was born at home, and was a tiny baby, possibly because Teur was malnourished during pregnancy. Since then, Reaksa has suffered from persistent chest infections and occasional convulsions, compounded by a succession of serious illnesses.

In 2009, she was taken to Siem Reap Children’s Hospital, 50 kilometres from home, where she was diagnosed with multiple infections – meningitis, dengue fever and acute respiratory infection. She nearly died in 2010 due to a bad reaction to her medicines. Reaksa’s younger sister, Sophea, who is four, also suffers from poor health and is unable to walk properly. Teur estimates that Sophea is unwell for three weeks of each month.

Although medical treatment in Cambodia is free for the poorest families, the fact that the nearest hospital is so far away means the costs of transport are high – about $5 per trip. In 2009, Teur ended up owing her employer $50, as she had requested a salary advance in order to visit Reaksa in hospital. “The most difficult part of raising children,” she says, “is to find money to feed them and to help them when they are sick.”

When researchers visited the family in 2011, Teur explained that the family’s situation had improved. Her current job, where she is paid 50 kilos of rice a month, has helped ensure that the family has been better fed. Despite the challenges they face, Teur is fiercely determined that her daughters will go to school. Teur herself was orphaned during the Khmer Rouge genocide, and as a result received no formal education. Reaksa told us that she wants to be a teacher. However, her poor health prevented her from studying.

Girls now enjoy their rights more fully than ever.”

In fact, Togo still has a long way to go before girls can ‘fully enjoy their rights’ – female genital cutting is still common, despite being against the law since 1998, and while 94 girls go to primary school for every 100 boys, at secondary school the figure is only 53 girls for every 100 boys. It remains to be seen if all these little girls will be able to continue in school as their parents say they want them to.

3. A source of pride for all the family – girls’ education

“Whenever she comes back from school she repeats wonderfully all that she has learned. This is a source of pride for the family.”

Mary Joy O, 2012

Most of the girls (84 per cent) taking part in the study have recently started school, and parents of the rest say they plan to send them soon. Most of their older sisters are also in school, which not only provides a good role model but a good sign that the girls too may have the opportunity to carry on with their education.

The majority of girls who are in school report that they are having a positive experience, which is vitally important as they prepare for the rest of their formal education. In Benin, Chantal’s mother says: “When she comes back from school she recites poetry and sings the songs she learnt at school. Sometimes she brings her friends and plays the teacher. She teaches them to read, to sing, to do sport or to line up in the courtyard.”

They must feel good about going to school, as many of the six year olds want to be teachers. Cintia from Brazil told us: “I want to be a teacher, because you have to study to be a teacher,” and Tapenensi from Uganda agrees: “Yes, I want to teach, to be a nursery teacher.”

**I always wanted my children to learn – what parents think of their daughters’ education**

The vast majority of families said that they are satisfied with their daughters’ education. Most parents reported that they thought the teaching was of high quality and that their children were learning well. In Vietnam, Thi My Huyen’s family said:

“Girls are now emancipated. They all are registered in schools. They choose their own partners themselves rather than having them chosen by their parents. Excision [female genital cutting] is forbidden. There is no forced marriage.”

Mary Joy O, 2012

**Also known as female genital mutilation, this is a cultural practice that involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia.**

**In October 2012 Plan will publish its sixth report on the state of the world’s girls, focusing on the role of education.**

For more information on the girl crisis visit plan-international.org/girls

**Note:** EAP data is 2007; All other data is 2009. The 100% rate is a symptom of late entry, grade repetition or enrolment push.

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*Image credits: Reaksa and her father, 2007. Reaksa and her father, 2007. (Image 217x382 to 503x650)*
The education quality is high, the school is well-equipped... the teachers are really kind and love their pupils.” One parent in Benin told us: “I am happy about the teachers, [Marcella] can now understand things better than in the past.”

Families commented on the new skills and knowledge their daughters had acquired. In Vietnam, one family said that their daughter was “more confident, fast and knowledgeable than those who are not going to school”. According to her family in Brazil, Cintia “can already write a few letters, can write the beginning of her name; she knows a few things”.

Many parents and other relatives expressed satisfaction at seeing their children achieve at school when they themselves had been denied an adequate education. In Benin, Albine’s uncle said: “I am satisfied because she will do what I never went to school because my mother was sick and I had to look after her. I used to ask my father if I could go to school but he said no as there was no one to look after my younger siblings, prepare the food for the family and clean the house. I did not have much time to play and relax. I was always busy taking care of my mother.”

Although parents were delighted that their daughters would have the opportunities denied them by their lack of education, this also caused frustration when they could not help their children with their homework. In Togo, Massama-Esso’s father, who cannot read or write, said that he has to ask her brother to help her with her homework. He added that he was pleased with his daughter’s education “because it is good for her future”, adding that he “will not allow them [to] make the same mistake as I did”. Some parents also claimed that they could not express an opinion on their children’s education because they had no experience of schooling themselves, something that should change for the next generation, if their children go to school.

Causes for concern: class sizes, security and teacher absenteeism

A small percentage of parents said that they were not satisfied with the education their children were receiving. Tapenenti’s aunt, in Uganda, said: “The teachers and the teaching are not of quality. The headteacher and the teachers themselves do not care.” Several families highlighted problems with teacher absenteeism, large class sizes and lack of security both at school and on the way to school.

In several countries, parents reported that teachers failed to turn up for class. In Cambodia, Nika’s mother reported that “teachers did not come to teach regularly”. In the Dominican Republic, one family said that while teachers had once taught five days a week, they were now only teaching for three. Although the majority of parents reported good school facilities, in Togo two families were concerned about poor school sanitation facilities. Razakatou’s family said that the school showers and toilets were dirty and there were no separate latrines for girls and boys.

Large class sizes were another cause for concern. When asked if he was happy with his children’s education, Marjorie’s father, in the Philippines, replied: “No, because there are so many students and not everyone is given attention.” Several families also mentioned limited space in schools.

Concerns about lack of security in and around schools was common across the countries, as were busy roads on the way to and from school. Many families mentioned the lack of protective fences and security guards to ensure the safety of the schoolchildren. One mother in Brazil told us that “there are good facilities, appropriate for the number of students, but the school is a little unsafe because there are no watchmen or doormen.”

Gloria’s parents in Uganda say they are worried about her walking to primary school four kilometres away, “not because of the distance but because boys make sexual advances to girls as they walk”. In Benin, Togo and Uganda in particular, a number of the girls’ siblings said they were worried about being hit by the teachers. We know from Plan’s global Learn Without Fear campaign that violence in schools affects around a million children worldwide every day. In Togo, for example, FAWE (the Forum for African Women Educationalists) interviewed children in their last three years of primary school and found that the majority of both boys and girls reported having experienced very high levels of physical violence (over 85 per cent) at school, and 41 per cent of girls reported having suffered sexual violence.
Why girls are not attending school

Of those girls not attending school, their families mentioned distance, illness, or a combination of distance and time, or safety. Heavy rain, flooding and mudslides were mentioned as barriers to going to school regularly in Brazil, the Philippines and the Dominican Republic, although all the cohort girls in these countries are enrolled. For Gloria’s family in Uganda, the distance to the nearest pre-school proved one hurdle too many. Her mother explained: “Taking her to nursery would mean taking her to Kamuli town but it’s expensive. You need to have a relative in town where she can live. So I am praying that my sister will agree to have Gloria to stay with her.”

However, the family have since decided to keep Gloria at home until she enrols in primary school next year and can go with her older sister. Most of the families taking part in the study in Togo cited distance from the nearest pre- school as the reason for not enrolling their daughters. As a result, only 10 per cent of the girls in Togo were enrolled in pre-school.

But given the fact that many of the girls’ mothers and grandmothers did not go to school, it shows real progress that there was only one father who was against his daughter going. Sarah’s father in Uganda said she was too young: “Why waste resources on that one? She will only go there and cry of hunger.” Yet Sarah is so keen to go to school she wakes up in the morning and sees her friends going to school will increase with time.

Costs incurred by families ranged from school fees (more than 40 per cent in Benin and Brazil) to books and stationery, uniforms and shoes, transport and examination fees.

The costs of schooling

Primary education is supposed to be free in all nine countries in Plan’s study. However, in a 2006 report, the World Bank found that in the majority of countries (including Brazil, Benin, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, the Philippines, Uganda and El Salvador) some kind of fee was charged to families, for example uniform fees, community fees and unofficial fees, at primary level. According to the report, there were no fees in Cambodia. The study did not include Togo.

Despite a major shift in attitudes around the importance of girls’ education in all the countries in the study, poverty means that parents struggle to provide for their families, let alone find the extra resources to invest in their children’s schooling. Ninety per cent of families reported some costs involved in sending their children to school.

Many of the girls’ parents have expressed their concern about the costs and other challenges involved in securing a high-quality, affordable education for their daughters. Most of the families taking part in the study are young and growing, meaning the costs of sending their children to school will increase with time.

Percentage of families reporting costs for sending children to school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage of Families Reporting Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Togo</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brenda lives a long way from anywhere. If you do not have a car, to get to her home you have to walk up from the main road for an hour and a half, and then turn down a narrow track that leads through maize fields and then along the river for another hour. The walk is beautiful, with egrets and placid brown cows and people washing their clothes in the river. The hills tower above you. But in winter, the river is flooded, the path is impassable and rocks tumble dangerously down from the top of the hills.

Brenda lives with her older sister Catherine, aged seven, her mother Adina, who is 21, her grandmother, who is 86, her grandfather, and her great-grandmother, who is 93 and in a wheelchair. Their house is made of tin, with a neatly swept dirt floor and a hammock that swings in the shade outside. The kitchen is another tin construction a bit further down the hill. Their water source, a hosepipe, lies about 50 metres away. Dogs laze in the sun and a chicken and her chicks scratch in the dirt. It is a peaceful scene.

Adina says she left school after Grade 3. She had Catherin when she was 14. She is keen for her girls to continue in school, even though it is an hour’s walk away and taking and fetching them uses up four hours a day for the accompanying adult. “I would like to support them through their schooling so that they will become successful adults,” she says.

There are two classes in the school, which goes up to Grade 5. After this there is another school which finishes at Grade 9 – and then what? Adina shrugs. Grade 9 is too far away to contemplate. At the moment she is happy and confident that her girls are improving. Catherin says she likes drawing and writing and Brenda says she likes singing the national anthem. Both girls bring us their exercise books to show us their work.

Brenda, who is shy when asked a question, whispers to her mother that she would like to be a doctor one day. Catherin would like to be a scientist because she knows scientists go to the moon and she would like to go too. But poor nutrition meant that she did not perform well enough and had to repeat the first grade of school. At the moment, just getting to school, let alone reaching Grade 9, seems as distant as getting to the moon for these little girls.
4. In the old days, life was cheaper – moving out of poverty?

“Something that has completely changed is that the cost of living is higher, but it is easier to get things.”

Rosybel’s father, the Dominican Republic

All the girls come from poor families. Their parents can see that many things have changed for the better since they were small, but their own lives often remain precarious. The families often have few assets to fall back on in a crisis. This is in the context where, globally, inequality between rich and poor is increasing, and we find that even poor families are affected by what is happening on international markets. For example, Navan’s father in Cambodia pulled up his cashew nut trees five years ago and planted potatoes instead. Unfortunately, this year the potato price fell sharply from 700 Riel ($0.18) to 200 Riel ($0.05) per kilogram, leaving him with less income than before.

Before we used to live better – the increase in living costs

Almost 80 per cent of families reported that overall living costs have increased in the past year.

Charolyn’s grandfather in the Dominican Republic said: “Before, we used to live better because there was always something to eat. Farming used to require less investment. A sack of fertilizer that now costs about 2,000 pesos ($52) used to be 70 pesos ($1.80).” In Togo, Blandine’s father said: “There has been an increase in the cost of almost all food and goods. Before, I could use 3,000 to 5,000 CFA ($5.80–$9.70) per month, but last year, even 10,000 CFA ($19.50) hardly made ends meet. Apart from selling my farm products, I sometimes go to the south of Togo to work as a labourer in order to support my children.”

In the Dominican Republic, the families of Estefani, Lorainny and Rosybel said that things had got worse since they were young. Rosybel’s family said that drought due to climate change had pushed up food prices. Her father pointed out: “When I was growing up, you could go to the shop with five pesos and buy bread and sugar. Now, you go with 50 pesos to buy bread and sugar and it hardly buys any.” When he was a boy, life “was better than now, we produced lots of cassava, sweet potato, pigeon peas, pumpkin, beans and corn, it grew better, now it’s completely the opposite, when you plant, it all gets lost in the drought, there’s no water.”

Lyca’s father in the Philippines said: “It is harder to make a living, and life is more difficult” – though he also noted that “there were more opportunities”. In Uganda, Christine’s grandmother said: “Generally, when the situation is bad, then it is really bad – now, if you don’t have the basics [food and water] you cannot manage.” Ruth’s family in Uganda said that internal conflict has increased the cost of living.

The hungry season

Some families also reported either a ‘hungry season’, or difficulty in affording food during part of each month. Those families who are farmers depend on a good harvest and sufficient labour. In Cambodia, Chhea’s family say that this year it has been hard because: “The main income of the family comes from buffaloes, rice, cashew and cassava. This year the rice yield is not so good because [Chhea’s mother] is pregnant and cannot work and we do not have much money to hire labour for transplanting and harvesting.”
A closer look at how the families spend their household incomes shows the impact of poverty on the long-term decisions they can make, and how these decisions affect their daughters. The poorer the family, the larger the proportion of their income which is spent on food – more than 90 per cent in Benin and Togo, while the average is 54 per cent. “I don’t want to spend on non-essentials. I want to spend our money on food for our kids,” declares Ailyn. “When it comes to food, I don’t hold back. That’s the reason I work hard – to have something for my children... When they ask for food and I can’t give it to them, they cry. So I save money for their food so they won’t have to cry.”

In rice-growing countries, a family’s wealth is determined by how many months the rice they grow will sustain them. Ideally, they would have enough for the whole year. In the Philippines, Jessa’s family says they grow enough rice only for about six months. But even this is very dependent on rain. When it rains, they can have two crops; when there is none, just one. In Togo, Fadilatou’s family says: “We mainly eat what we produce ourselves on the farm. We buy food in the market during the planting season. Fadilatou’s grandfather is a market gardener, he helps us with his produce. We generally grow maize, yam, sorghum, cassava and rice.” Several families said that they would only buy food if there was a bad harvest or their crops were ruined.

But most families seem to have few assets to fall back on. Twenty-four own animals, chickens, sheep, ducks, pigs, cows and goats. Eleven of these are in Cambodia. Sixteen families have some kind of savings, with the highest number in Vietnam. Huguette’s family in Benin said they kept their savings in an empty tin of tomatoes. Only five families said they had insurance.

**Land and inheritance**

It is not yet clear whether families will be improving their daughters’ futures by leaving them assets in the form of land. In the Philippines, most of the families do not own the land they live on, but have built houses through leasing land or other arrangements. Across the study, the Filipino parents have the most varied views on inheritance – some have decided that their youngest child, regardless of their sex, will inherit any property; others that their eldest child will inherit; and some would like all property to be shared equally among their children.

Two families said that inheritance will go to boys, not girls. Ruth’s father was unique in the Ugandan cohort with his view that: “Even a girl deserves a chance to inherit land, because you never know if her marriage might fail and she comes back to settle at home.”

In Togo, several families mentioned that inheritance decisions are made according to Islamic tradition, where male children inherit twice as much as daughters. Among these families, property is with one exception owned by grandfathers or fathers; mothers sometimes own livestock. In Cambodia, however, the majority of parents have joint ownership of land and livestock.

Many have stated that they have not yet made a decision about which of their children will inherit property.

**Crisis strategies**

Families were also asked to explain what they would do in the case of unexpected expenditure, such as a family member requiring medical treatment. Almost two-thirds in the seven countries from which data was gathered said they would borrow money from relatives, neighbours, friends or their employers. In Togo, Mariyama’s mother said: “The family lives on sorghum and yams that we grow for ourselves and sometimes sell when we are in need of money. In the case of emergencies, the family borrows money from our neighbours for urgent needs and we pay it back. The situation was better when my husband had cattle. We have sold all of them now and some died.” In Togo in particular, 40 per cent of families said neighbours’ donations are common. Only 15 per cent said they had savings.

Ten per cent of families said there is nobody to ask – mostly in Brazil. In the Dominican Republic, Estefani’s family ended up mortgaging their house to pay for medical expenses for her uncle after a motorbike accident. In Uganda, Mirabu’s father said: “We used to own livestock, but they were all sold off gradually to meet the medical expenses of Mirabu’s brother.” In the Philippines, Blac’s mother said: “In emergencies, like when someone gets sick, we borrow money at 10 per cent interest monthly. We don’t borrow for family celebrations, we just butcher some of our chickens.”

**Government support programmes**

In Brazil and the Philippines, families in our study said they benefited from government social protection schemes, which they noted had not been available for previous generations. In 2010 and 2011, 11 families said they received money from such programmes, sometimes known as ‘conditional cash transfers’ because they involve the government...
giving small amounts of money to poor families that are conditional on behaviour such as sending girls to school.

In Brazil, the Bolsa Família (Family Package) programme is aimed at low-income families. It is an allowance of about $40 a month per child, granted on condition that parents send their children to school and have them vaccinated. The government also provides a Bolsa de PETI (an ending child labour allowance) of $15 a month per child, in order to encourage children not to drop out of school in order to work. A number of the girls’ families benefit from the Bolsa Família as they earn only a third to a half of the average national income. For example, Rosane’s mother is a field worker and the little girl lives with her three uncles and her grandmother. None of them has a stable job. In 2010, her grandmother said the family earned about R$200 ($105) from part-time work and R$120 ($63) a month from the Bolsa Família. This barely covers their monthly food expenses, which are R$280 ($147).

Eloiza’s family makes their living by baking and selling cakes. Her grandmother also works as a fisherwoman. There is also a small pension because Eloiza’s father has died. They earn about R$622 ($326) per month, and get R$120 ($63) from the Bolsa Família. Their food expenses are about R$500 ($262).

Iasmine lives with her parents and young sibling. Her father is a bricklayer’s assistant and a farmer, but in 2011 was unemployed and earning some income from sporadic work. Iasmine’s mother takes care of her children and is responsible for the domestic chores. The family relies heavily on the Bolsa Família programme from which it receives R$112 ($59) per month. Their monthly food expenditure is R$100 ($52). Iasmine’s mother says there is no one else she could ask for help in the case of unexpected events.

In the Philippines, the families of Aires, Leah, Jacel and Girlie receive support from the Government’s Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Programme (popularly known as the ‘4 Ps’), which provides conditional cash grants to extremely poor households to improve the health, nutrition and education of children from birth to 14. Unlike the Bolsa Família, this is not specifically targeted at girls. These families say they also receive support from non-governmental organizations like Plan.

Our research, although small scale, seems to be showing that government programmes such as the Bolsa Família currently provide crucial support to some of the girls and their families. But it also reflects some of the critiques of such programmes. Jacel’s mother Analie, for example, worries that if her children do not achieve good enough grades in school they will stop receiving the government money. It remains to be seen whether in future years these programmes will be instrumental in keeping the girls in school.

5. ‘My dream for Jacky’ – what do parents hope for their daughters’ futures?

“‘What is my dream for Jacky? I hope that she doesn’t become like us, who have experienced only hardship in our lives.”

Jacky’s mother, the Philippines

Despite the challenges of daily life, all the girls’ parents have high aspirations for their daughters. More than half want to see them pursue careers that involve further education and training to become doctors, nurses and teachers. In this section we look more closely at their hopes for their daughters’ futures.

Most parents said they thought that education was as important for girls as boys. As we have seen, many, especially mothers, felt very strongly that their own lives had been damaged by lack of education and they wanted more for their daughters. This sentiment cut across all nine countries in the study. Consolata’s mother, in Benin, said: “They say that by educating a girl, you educate a nation. I agree; if I had had more schooling, I would be a professional today. I hope that my daughter is able to complete her education in my place.” In Cambodia, Reaksa’s parents also say they are committed to sending her to school although they are poor, because “we do not want our children to become illiterate people like us”. But few of the girls in the cohort have role models in the shape of secondary-school educated mothers.

There are some exceptions – Mikaela in the Philippines whose mother, Emily, is a university-educated teacher and pastor, and Mirabu, in Uganda, whose mother is a community organizer. Despite, or perhaps because of, their own lack of education, many parents are very ambitious for their daughters. Even if they themselves are farmers, they want their girls to be doctors or judges or teachers, as the chart opposite shows.
Faissatou’s parents in Togo said: “We expect a lot from Faissatou as she is our hope. She will attend both Islamic and public school and she will pursue a career of her choice. We would like her to become a public health officer so that she can take care of patients and mainly people suffering from anaemia.”

Most of the girls are still too young to be able to imagine what they would like to be when they grow up, but when they do talk about it, teaching and nursing come top of the list. Airesh in the Philippines changes her mind all the time, say her parents: “This time she is saying she wants to be a singer when she grows up. Maybe next year, she will want another profession. We will support her anyway.”

Marjorie Mae’s parents in the Philippines say: “We want her to have a better future. We don’t know yet what she will like to do when she grows up; she will choose what she takes up in college… but of course this will depend on our income at that time. This is not only applicable to Marjorie Mae but to all our children. We will support them as long as we can. We don’t want them to experience what we, especially my husband, experienced when we were young. Farming is a very hard work and he doesn’t want our children to end up in farming.”

Leaving home

To fulfil these kinds of aspirations, many parents will probably have to make decisions in the future about allowing their daughters to move to larger towns or nearby cities to study. College or university education is not widely available in the villages in which the girls live, where even secondary schools are often significant distances away, especially if you do not have transport. But in some towns, the situation is slowly changing. As Nataly’s mother said: “Now there are many opportunities, like going to university. Before, this was only possible for rich people. If someone didn’t have family in the capital, they couldn’t study. Now there is a university in almost every big town in the Dominican Republic.”

In Brazil, at least half the families interviewed already have older daughters who have left home, the vast majority either to improve their educational prospects or to work. The sister of one of the girls taking part in the study explains: “I want to finish high school to work, and maybe go to university, and here there isn’t one.”

6. Conclusion: a good future?

“Every mother hopes and dreams that their child will have a good future. We will keep our fingers crossed that our dream for Leah will be granted, God willing.”

Leah’s mother, the Philippines

Although this is only a small-scale study, by monitoring the girls in Plan’s ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study over time, we are beginning to be able to see the evolution of girls’ lives through the generations. We can also point out how and where the goals and investments of the international community are falling short where these little girls are concerned.

Our research is showing that many families still find it hard to make ends meet, and to survive the challenges brought by debt or illness, let alone to find the resources to build a better future for their daughters. We are also seeing how the wider family, neighbours and government programmes can give much-needed support.

What is also very clear is that the girls’ mothers all believe that education is the key to giving their daughters opportunities that they themselves never had. And they are right. Studies show that having an educated mother not only improves her own health and chances of employment, but improves the chances of her children being educated too. And the example of Emily, Mikaela’s mother, gives us hope that it can also lead to more equality between husband and wife. We believe that going to school will allow these girls to break the cycle of poverty and discrimination for their own daughters as well.

Parents also realise that just getting their daughters to primary school is not enough. They know that the girls need to be in education as long as possible – and certainly long enough to do more than just learn to read and write. They need to have the kind of long-term quality education that gives them the skills and confidence to make their way in the world. As Julia, Ashlin’s great-grandmother, says: “I want Ashlin to remember that I took care of her and always loved her. And I want her to have the advantages that I did not, to be a professional and have financial security so that she can support herself.”

Even if they cannot reach the professional heights their parents want them to scale, at the very least the girls will need to be able to find ways of earning a living and breaking out of the cycle of poverty as they grow up. They will need financial security, and the means to pay for medicines, healthcare and schooling for their own daughters and sons.

And what is also clear is that money is only part of the solution. The girls also need a change in attitude – their own and others’ – that tells them they are no longer second-class citizens; that they are valued and have choices in life, whether it comes to whom they marry, or the number of children they have, or how they contribute to the family income.

What we see in the lives of the families we are following will be reflected in the lives of millions more struggling to feed, clothe and educate their children. Many things are improving for this generation of girls. For example, attitudes to girls’ education are changing, so more girls are going to school. But this will be undermined, particularly when they reach adolescence, if they have to drop out because of poverty, or if their education is of poor quality, or they are unable to find work when they grow up.

These girls, and many thousands like them, need the support of all those who are responsible for them – their families, communities, governments and the international community. It is only then that the promise shown in these early years will be fulfilled – and the girls’ and their parents’ hopes and dreams can become a reality.
About Plan

Plan is one of the oldest and largest children's development organisations in the world. We work in 50 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas to promote child rights and lift millions of children out of poverty.

For 75 years we've been taking action and standing up for every child's right to fulfil their potential by:

• giving children a healthy start in life, including access to safe drinking water
• securing the education of girls and boys
• working with communities to prepare for and survive disasters
• inspiring children to take a lead in decisions that affect their lives
• enabling families to earn a living and plan for their children's future

As part of reaching out to those who need it most, Plan’s Because i am a Girl Campaign works to improve the lives of girls and young women who too often find themselves ignored, particularly when poverty means families have to make hard choices. the state of the World’s Girls Report has been published annually since 2007 as part of this campaign.

“Hopes and dreams” was written by Nikki van der Gaag.

Editor Sharon Goulds
Cohort Research Manager Feyi Rodway
Analysis Charley Nussey and Harris Lee with additional input from Keshet Bachan and Lili Harris.

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