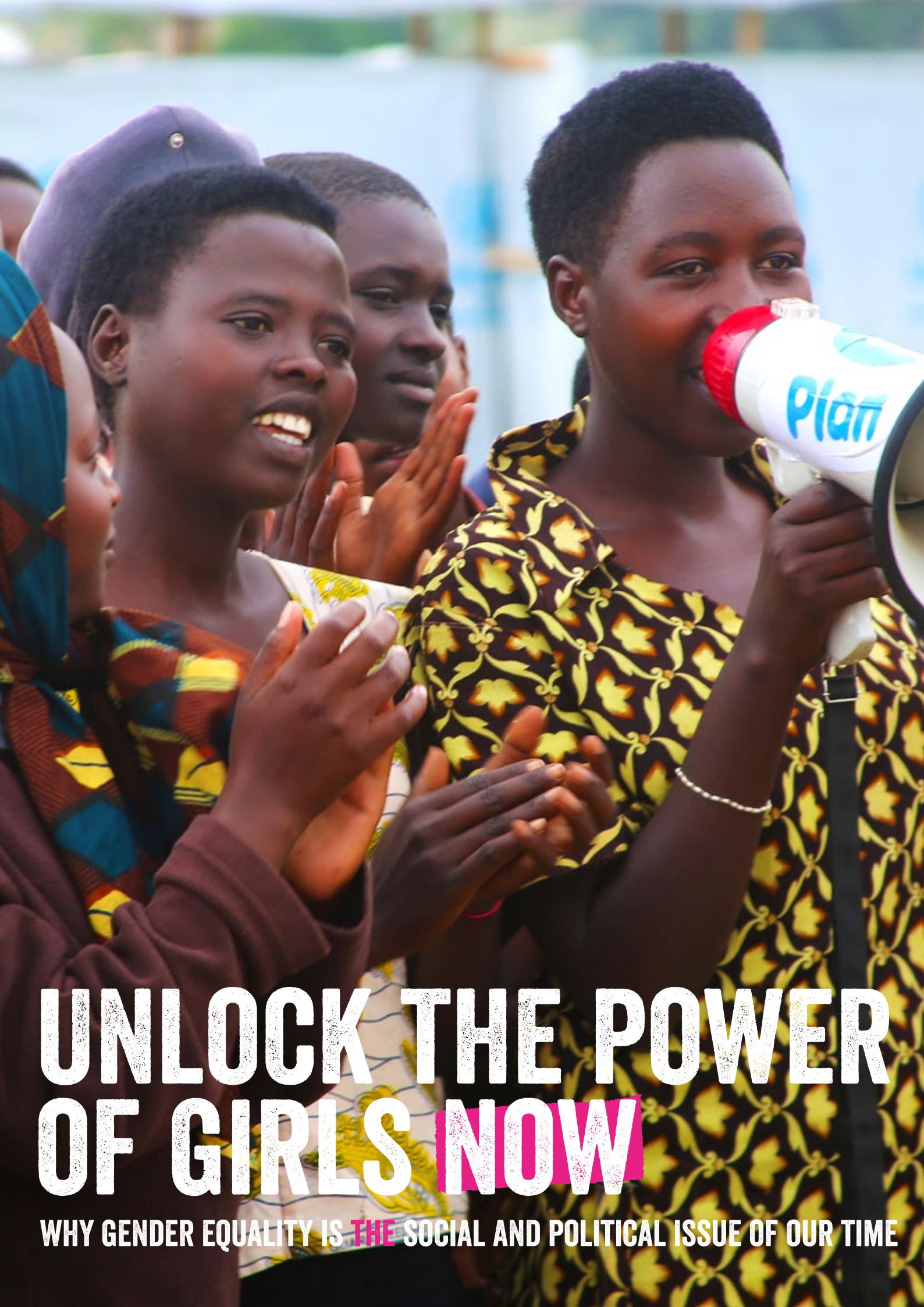




# UNLOCK THE POWER OF GIRLS NOW

WHY GENDER EQUALITY IS **THE** SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUE OF OUR TIME



# UNLOCK THE POWER OF GIRLS NOW

WHY GENDER EQUALITY IS **THE** SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUE OF OUR TIME



# CONTENTS

## FOREWORD: BEYOND EMPOWERMENT ..... 04

By **Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen**,  
Chief Executive Officer, Plan International

## PART 1: IN GIRLS' OWN WORDS ..... 06

We analyse the lessons to be learnt from the increasing evidence, from girls themselves, about the reality of their lives at home and in their communities.

- Studying the lives of girls ..... 08
- Families and equality ..... 11
- Creating transformation ..... 12

## PART 2: VOICES OF HOPE ..... 13

Three new primary research studies look at how to advance gender equality.

- Research findings from Colombia  
and Uganda ..... 14
  - Using stories to uncover attitudes... 18
- Research findings from Spain ..... 25
- From hope to real change ..... 28
- Conclusion ..... 30

## PART 3: RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 32

We call for a political and social revolution: one that advances gender equality, tackles violence against women and girls, and draws on allies across government, business and society.

Names of research participants have been changed to protect their identities

COVER PHOTO: Plan International youth campaigner interviewed at the National Congress, Honduras.  
© Plan International / Ulises Alvarado

PHOTO: Girls take part in child rights awareness activity in a refugee camp in Rwanda.

## FOREWORD

# BEYOND EMPOWERMENT: GIRLS CANNOT CHANGE THE WORLD ALONE

*By Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, Chief Executive Officer, Plan International*

**N**o matter what their circumstances, girls worldwide face a wall of resistance in their struggle for gender equality. Despite laws, policies and global targets all put in place to advance change, the pace of progress remains alarmingly slow.

Research undertaken by Plan International this year in Spain, Uganda and Colombia shows gender inequality is still very much part of the fabric of our society. The evidence is fascinating and horrifying in equal measure, uncovering a complex thread of discrimination and violence at all levels of society. It points to a world where adolescent girls work hard to bring about change in their lives, yet are constantly thwarted by prejudice, aggression, and poverty. These obstacles limit girls' opportunities and operate, both at home and in the wider community, as barriers to progress. The key to equality is to challenge the widespread perception that girls are worth less than boys: a label attached at birth that follows them into their adult lives. As one young woman in Uganda commented:

*"The parents only favour the boys. They even say that a [girl] child is a curse – if you start a journey and the first thing you meet is a girl and you're a man, it's considered as bad luck so you have to go back [home] until you first meet with a boy."*

**MERCY, 16, UGANDA**

Those taking part in our research – both girls and boys – understand the real issue: power. They know that empowerment is not enough. They understand that only with the significant support of those in positions of power in families, communities and nations (who are predominantly men) will real, lasting change take place. It's a lesson all

of us involved in promoting gender equality need to learn, and goes to the heart of the commitments made in 2015 by the international community through the Sustainable Development Goals. The Sustainable Development Goals promise to transform our world by 2030, tackling the root causes of poverty, hunger, and climate change. Goal 5 promises to deliver "gender equality and to empower all women and girls". To achieve the ambition of the goal we will all need to play our part.

*"There is something more to be united. Not alone, alone, alone... in groups is the right thing, it's how it should be."*

**DANIEL, 14, SPAIN**

In all the research we have conducted over the last four years, girls have made it abundantly clear that they want to lead on transforming society and their own lives. They want more opportunities and do not want to be confined to the domestic sphere, nor to be valued less just because they are girls. But they won't be able to change the world on their own. We all have responsibilities to challenge and break down the power structures, policies and traditions that keep girls and women in their place.

*"We start telling little girls not to lead at a really young age and we start to tell boys to lead at a very young age. That is a mistake. I believe everyone has inside them the ability to lead and we should let people choose that, not based on their gender, but on who they are and who they want to be."*

**SHERYL SANDBERG<sup>1</sup>**

For the last decade Plan International has recognised the importance of focusing on gender equality and girls' rights.

SDG icons<sup>3</sup>

We are committed to making girls truly visible: acknowledging their power and potential and not turning away when they are exploited, discriminated against and silenced. Girls who are seen and heard and who become active citizens will themselves bring about significant and sustainable change, of that I have no doubt. But they need allies. It is the rise of active grassroots movements in communities, led by women and girls – but supported by those who hold power over people’s lives and influence their behaviour – that will help us reach the tipping point for gender equality.

There is mounting evidence from young people about the realities of girls’ lives: the discrimination that starts at home, and the violence they experience there and in their wider community. There is evidence from girls too about what must change and how to accomplish it. In pursuit of gender equality, work with adolescent boys is making inroads into ‘machismo’ in many communities. Programmes like Plan International’s “Champions of Change”, discussed later in this report, are helping young men to redefine what it means to be a ‘real’ man: “Blows don’t fix things, you fix them with love.”<sup>2</sup>

Achieving gender equality is a long and slow process and those who step forward to challenge the status quo are often threatened and stigmatised. Girls, and all champions of change, need to be resilient and to gather strength from working together. It is time too for the entrenched power dynamics which underpin the whole of our society to be challenged and changed. Not by girls working alone but by everyone reacting to the injustices they live with and acting to put them right. We must form powerful partnerships; not least with girls themselves, whose ideas and opinions matter most. Only by acting collectively can we build a social movement for real change – and only then will delivering on all the promises of the global goals sit within our grasp.



PHOTO: A Plan International Spain Youth Advisory Panel member addresses the Spanish Parliament in Madrid.

## PART 1

# IN GIRLS' OWN WORDS:

## REFLECTIONS FROM TEN YEARS OF TESTIMONY

By Jacqui Gallinetti, Director, Research and Knowledge Management, Plan International

"If I were President, I would enact a law for equal rights, a law saying that women and men could do the same things. If she cleans the house, he can do it too; and if she cooks, he can do it too!"

LANA, 16, BRAZIL<sup>4</sup>

Since September 1990 when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force, there has been an acceptance of the notion of child rights, if not always a conformity with what this means in practice, in almost every profession or discipline and across society as a whole. A child is defined as anyone under the age of 18, which creates the impression that children are a homogenous group regardless of age, experience, context or gender. Too little attention is paid to understanding the different aspects and stages of childhood and the implications of these differences in relation to rights. Too often, greater attention has been paid to improving the lives of younger children, and while impressive progress has been made, for example, in reducing infant and child mortality, adolescents are frequently overlooked.<sup>5</sup>

*"Somewhere between the status of young child and that of young adult we find the stage of adolescence or youth: the period during which we 'grow up', become independent, assume responsibility for our own choices and sense of direction. If adolescence is a time of increased autonomy, however, it is also a time of particular sensitivity and vulnerability, a time characterised by doubt, mistakes, and the making and breaking of relationships with others."*<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the word 'children' is also gender blind and, despite the evidence of widespread discrimination against girls, there

was initially little real effort to either understand or tackle this injustice. Attitudes have changed over the last two decades and there is now a much greater focus on supporting girls. However, an improved awareness of the particular inequalities faced by girls, and of the gender discrimination that lies hidden in the word 'children', has not yet translated into effective, sustained or transformative programmes or projects that pay particular attention to girls' rights and specific needs.<sup>7</sup> The differentiation between girls and boys needs to start from an early age but it is perhaps at puberty when the experiences of 'children' begin to diverge most. At adolescence a boy's world begins to open out, for too many girls it closes in.

*"For many girls in the developing world, their opportunity to move freely in the community becomes limited at the onset of puberty. This may be a well-intentioned protective measure, but the effect can be to limit girls' opportunity to form strong social networks, gain the requisite skills, and learn how to be full members of their community."*<sup>8</sup>

In order to understand the scale of the discrimination that defines the experiences of girls, Plan International began, in 2007, to monitor "The State of the World's Girls" and increasingly to campaign on the issues that affect adolescent girls and young women: education, early marriage, violence in school, the burden of domestic responsibilities and economic empowerment. Girls and young women suffer ill health, disadvantage, discrimination and limited life opportunities simply because they are female. Over 30% of girls in developing countries are married before they are 18 and complications in pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death for girls aged 19 or under.<sup>9</sup>

# STUDYING THE LIVES OF GIRLS

In recognition of the need to work towards the specific realisation of rights for girls, over the past four years Plan International has undertaken three major studies – *Hear Our Voices*, *Girls Speak Out* and *Counting the Invisible* – that focus on examining the attitudes and perceptions of adolescent girls and boys in many different parts of the world. This approach has continued in the latest study, *Voices of Hope*, carried out this year and reported on later in this publication. Young people have told us how their opportunities are limited by notions of femininity and masculinity that are kept in place by violence and censure. Many have also made it clear that they are ready to lead change and that in some places education and empowerment are already making an impact. The findings of this body of research – what girls and boys have told us regarding their lives, perceptions and opinions – present a real opportunity to help transform girls' lives. Those in power must listen to what girls have to say and act upon it. It is clear from the evidence we have that unless the harsh realities of family and community life are tackled the concept of girls' rights means nothing. It is within the family, right from the beginning, that these rights are either realised or denied.



## HEAR OUR VOICES

"Girls want to have more self-confidence to not feel afraid or ashamed to express their feelings and needs."

ANDREA, 15, ECUADOR<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of *Hear Our Voices*<sup>11</sup> was to put girls' voices at the heart of the evidence gathering in order to help families, communities and outside agencies to identify and understand some of the most pertinent issues that adolescent girls experience in relation to child rights and gender equality. The study spoke to over 7,000 adolescent girls and boys in 11 countries – Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Egypt, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Benin, Cameroon and Liberia – all from communities in which Plan International was working.

Some of the most striking findings were:

- Adolescent girls have difficulties claiming their right to express themselves and discuss their concerns in front of men and boys. Over half (51%) of girls involved in the study said that adolescent girls 'never' or 'seldom' say what they think when a boy or man is around.
- Mothers who were forced into early marriage often do not want the same fate for their daughters. Some girls feel supported by their families to control if and when to get married but many are forced into marriage due to poverty, economic exploitation, sexual harassment and abuse; 39% of girls claimed that they were 'never' or 'seldom' allowed to make decisions about their own marriage.
- Violence against girls is frighteningly routine – girls expected to be victims of violence, and the levels of violence that they experienced, at home, in communities and at school, were seen as normal; 80% of girls in one area in Ecuador and 77% in one area in Bangladesh claimed that they 'never' or 'seldom' felt safe in their community.

The unfair distribution of household chores was another key concern and while it was acknowledged that many of these findings are not new, it was their extent that was so poignant and disturbing. The sheer scale of the similar responses across numerous countries drove home the consistency and embedded nature of the inequalities and injustices that so many girls face in their daily lives.

> [plan-international.org/publications/hear-our-voices](https://plan-international.org/publications/hear-our-voices)



## GIRLS SPEAK OUT

“I would encourage girls to complete their education and to be aware of pregnancy, to not hold back their dreams.”

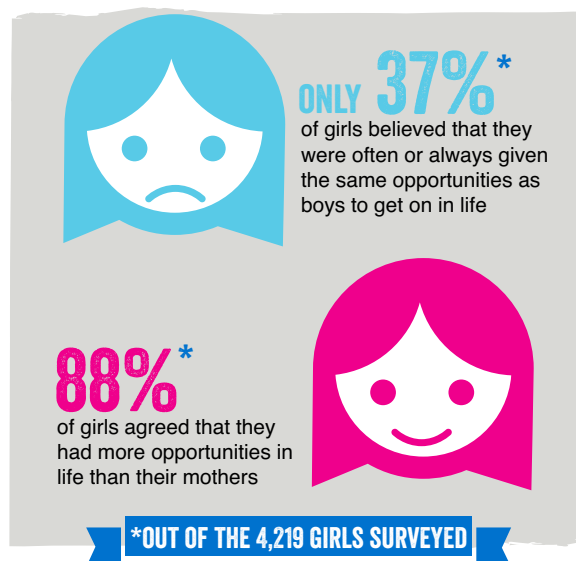
**LILLIAM, 17, NICARAGUA<sup>12</sup>**

The following year, 2015, the four-country *Girls Speak Out*<sup>13</sup> study built on the findings of *Hear Our Voices*. This second study focused on examining adolescent girls’ suggestions for improvements to their lives. How would girls themselves deal with barriers to equality, including issues of gender violence and early pregnancy? In doing so, the study surveyed 4,219 girls, randomly selected, in Ecuador, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, four of the countries that had taken part in the earlier research.

Across all four countries large numbers of girls stated that they have little control over the decisions that determine their fate, that they need more information to avoid early pregnancy and marriage, and that they lack the confidence to stand up for themselves. Only 37 per cent of girls surveyed believed that they were often or always given the same opportunities as boys to get on in life. Again, violence or the fear of violence dominated the study’s findings: in Central America, for example, girls felt pressured to take part in sexual activities with their boyfriends and did not feel safe walking to school.



PHOTOS: *Girls Speak Out*



It was not all bad news. Girls also stated, very clearly, that they were more valued in their communities than they used to be and an overwhelming 88% agreed that they had more opportunities in life than their mothers.

The girls interviewed demonstrated a solid grasp of the constraints in their lives but also of the solutions that will bring about real change. They want their families to support and value them more; the state and their local communities to recognise and tackle the problem of violence; and, again and again, they spoke about the value of education and of dialogue: communication that means they are really heard.

“The community should value a girl’s education and have equal job opportunities for them... Girls should be taught how to speak out and be heard in the community.”

**KAYLA, 16, ZIMBABWE<sup>14</sup>**

Sharon Goulds and Sarah Hendriks, writing on the study, note that throughout the research, it is “striking that girls see the key to changing their lives for the better to be the responsibility largely of themselves and their families, rather than of the government or community and religious leaders... it is the education of girls, their own empowerment, which is seen as driving progress and unlocking change. This perspective is in many ways heartening, but it nevertheless reflects some lack of understanding of the structural and institutional barriers that have impeded the progress of gender equality for generations. It is society, not just girls, that needs to change.”<sup>15</sup>

It was this structural inequality and need for societal change that led to the next instalment of research with adolescent girls.

> [plan-international.org/publications/girls-speak-out](http://plan-international.org/publications/girls-speak-out)

## COUNTING THE INVISIBLE

"I want my husband to stop beating me. I want to support my family. I want my husband to support my baby as well."

MELISA, 18, ZIMBABWE<sup>16</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) hold great promise for achieving gender equality. The various goals, targets and indicators take into account, as the Millennium Goals did not, the systemic barriers, the socially embedded customs and norms, that affect the well being of women and girls and impede their access to equal rights and opportunities. The crucial importance of the task of strengthening national data systems and gathering the relevant evidence has been recognised: "*Honouring the commitment to 'leave no one behind' will require much more and better data to track the progress of women and girls, and the most marginalised social and economic groups, for each target*".<sup>17</sup>

With this in mind the three-country *Counting the Invisible*<sup>18</sup> study was designed to investigate a set of issues related to the SDGs and to gather evidence into advancing the rights of adolescent girls. The aim of the study was not primarily to understand the day-to-day experiences of the girls interviewed, but to gain insight into their thoughts and ideas about what would improve their lives, aligned this time with tracking progress against certain SDG targets. The study sample was relatively small – a total of 413 girls and boys across the three countries – carefully chosen to be as diverse as possible.

One striking finding can be singled out at the start. Asked whether they thought they should have more opportunities to get on in life and achieve their life goals, the girls interviewed in all three countries overwhelmingly answered "yes". There were a number of other common threads across the three countries:

- **Building self-confidence** – adolescent girls already know how they want their lives to unfold. What they need is support from their families and communities, particularly from those holding power within them, to develop self-determination, decision-making skills and self-confidence.
- **Economic instability is a fundamental barrier to girls' rights** – families often feel it is not worth investing

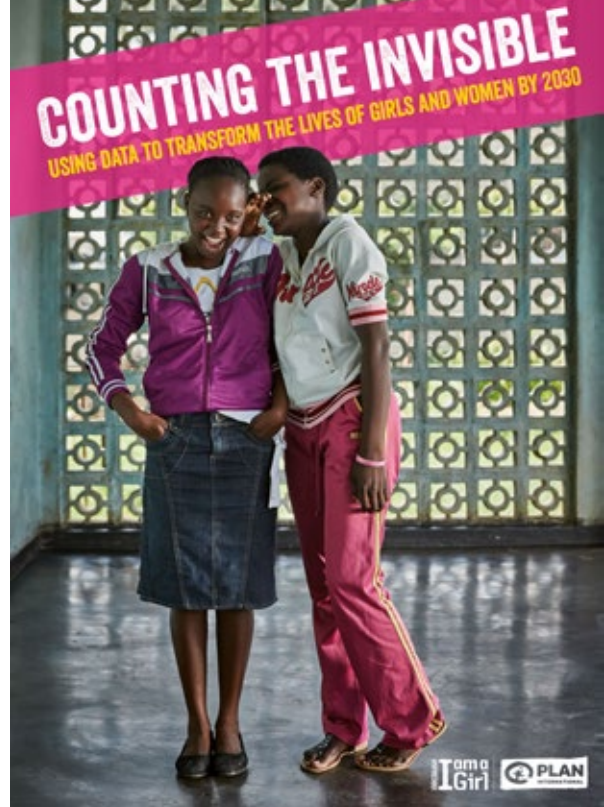


PHOTO: *Counting the Invisible* report

financially in girls' education, as they expect them to marry young and to get pregnant. In fact, when families are in difficult economic circumstances girls are often under pressure to marry so that the family has one less mouth to feed.

- **Encouraging families to value their girls means working with men and boys** – girls live with sexual, physical and emotional violence within their families and expressed feelings of constant insecurity and loneliness. Lack of trust meant that they did not report violence, including rape, to family members. Violent behaviour is 'normal' and adolescent boys' understanding of their role in contributing to violent attitudes and behaviour in their homes and communities is limited. The study makes it very clear that engaging families and convincing boys and men to promote the benefits of more gender-equitable relationships is integral to improving the situation for adolescent girls.
- **A source of strength** – having someone to talk to about their problems was very important to girls. They valued supportive relationships and found great comfort in being able to discuss their problems and receive advice. The majority of girls said that they talked to their mothers, aunts or other female relatives and referred to them as a source of support and strength. Girls also want their communities to support them, as they do boys, towards a future where they have some autonomy over their own lives and decisions.
- **Girls want a better life** – as the findings clearly illustrate. But they struggle to overcome many barriers, including poverty and violence. Their determination to achieve their goals, stay in school, finish their education, find employment and generate income to transform their lives and "become somebody" was passionately articulated.

> [plan-international.org/because-i-am-a-girl/counting-invisible-girls](http://plan-international.org/because-i-am-a-girl/counting-invisible-girls)

**If another generation of girls and young women are not to lose a lifetime's opportunities we need to work harder and faster to achieve the transformative change promised by the 2030 Global Goals.**

# FAMILIES AND EQUALITY

"I would make a system in which girls can raise their voice."

**ZAINAB, 17, PAKISTAN<sup>19</sup>**

Over the last ten years since Plan International has been focusing on girls' rights, and on adolescent girls in particular, tackling discrimination against girls and promoting gender equality has been increasingly at the heart of the work of many NGOs. It is of course a human rights issue but gender equality is also promoted as the key to ending or reducing poverty. This work, whatever motivates it, must be led by the experiences and expert testimony of girls themselves and that testimony leads us into the heart of the family:

"There is no communication or trust with parents."

**CRISTELLA, 15, NICARAGUA<sup>20</sup>**

One message that has come over unmistakably, in all the findings over four years of research, is that the discriminatory attitudes and behaviour entrenched in family and community life, where power is wielded almost entirely by men, keep gender stereotypes alive. This deep-seated bias which views women and girls as inferior is the greatest barrier to ending inequality. It must not be ignored simply because it has proved so difficult to change.

Girls have told us that, working together, they can lead change. They know what needs to be done: they need to be valued from birth; they need protection from physical and emotional violence; they need time, space and self-confidence. It is not primarily governments or public organisations that will provide this but the first institution they encounter – the family. It is their mothers, fathers, brothers, local and religious leaders, friends and teachers that girls identify as allies – and oppressors. This dichotomy was clearly expressed in the 2016 research by one young woman in Zimbabwe:

"My husband takes me for a punching bag each and every day... My mother-in-law told me to be silent, this was how marriages are... My mother-in-law is my comforter. She helps me in my life."

That is not to say that governments too are not responsible. States must ensure that structural and systemic discrimination is addressed and removed. In doing so they must recognise that discrimination and gender injustice predominantly take place within the family, in the privacy of people's hearts and homes. Policies and laws must not shy away from intervening in this traditionally protected private sphere.

If the underlying assumptions about the inferiority of girls and women are not challenged and eradicated girls everywhere will remain undervalued and their rights largely ignored. The stories that they have told us of the reality of their lives paint a vivid picture of how fundamentally society needs to change and what governments, communities and individuals must do to deliver on the commitments to girls' rights. It is the responsibility of everyone, at all levels of society, to follow the evidence that is out there.

And this is happening, but not fast enough. Increasingly there is legislation to protect girls' rights, there is more funding for girls' programming, and more policy and advocacy efforts that focus on girls – because we have the evidence, systematically and professionally collected, from girls themselves telling us about their lives and about what goes on behind closed doors. If another generation of girls and young women are not to lose a lifetime's opportunities, we need to work harder and faster to achieve the transformative change promised by the 2030 Global Goals.

**Capturing and analysing the views, perceptions and experiences of girls ensures that efforts to end gender discrimination are relevant to the realities of girls' lives.**

# CREATING TRANSFORMATION

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS COLLECTION OF RESEARCH

Research with adolescent girls has value for many reasons: until recently girls' voices and opinions remained almost completely unheard and girls were barely visible in development discussions. In this collection of research girls tell us what needs to change and how they see that change happening. There is now a solid body of evidence, including the latest findings from Uganda, Colombia and Spain, that can be used to demand and design change for girls. The calls to action identified by them should be led by them. There are, however, a couple of points to be made about girls' leadership:

1. Despite children, and in this case adolescent girls, being afforded the rights to participate and be independent agents we must be mindful of context and individual capacities. Girls should be the ones to lead the change that they see the need for, but this doesn't have to be as activists. They can lead change by taking part in research which will influence policy, advocacy and programme interventions. They can lead change by working on changing gender norms through interventions like Champions of Change both individually and collectively (as discussed later in this report) and they can also participate as active citizens in public campaigns and public forums.
2. Any blanket recognition of girls' capacity and ability as responsible and active citizens fails to take into consideration the differences between them as well as the huge diversity of contexts in which they grow up and the resources available to them. It is critical, as previously noted, to recognise that children are not a homogenous group.<sup>21</sup> Differences that exist between them based on ethical, cultural, historical, social, economic or religious

backgrounds – including sex or gender – might have a more significant effect than age on whether young people are truly autonomous.<sup>22</sup>

The research with adolescent girls, conducted so far, provides valuable insight into their individual circumstances and their own sense of autonomy. Adolescent girls are able to say for themselves whether they have the necessary voice, space and agency to be truly independent responsible citizens and to become leaders. It is important, if girls' rights are to be realised, to avoid making assumptions about 'leadership' and 'empowerment' without a clear analysis of the barriers to this which girls themselves are articulating.

It is precisely for this reason that the fourth study in this collection, *Voices of Hope*, was undertaken: how do adolescent girls themselves view their ability to act and lead change and what enabling factors need to be in place in order for them to do so? Capturing and analysing the views, perceptions and experiences of girls allows them to provide evidence-based solutions to the challenges they face and ensures that efforts to end gender discrimination are relevant to the realities of girls' lives and accountable to them.

There is energy and hope, not least from young women and young men committed to change and willing to lead it. Listen to their stories. For many years gender equality has proved elusive. We need to grasp this opportunity, take the evidence and run with it.

**PART 2**



PHOTO: Girl leader of a hygiene group hosts a meeting, Uganda © Plan International / Richard Wainwright

# VOICES OF HOPE:

**NEW RESEARCH INTO ADVANCING  
EQUALITY FOR GIRLS**

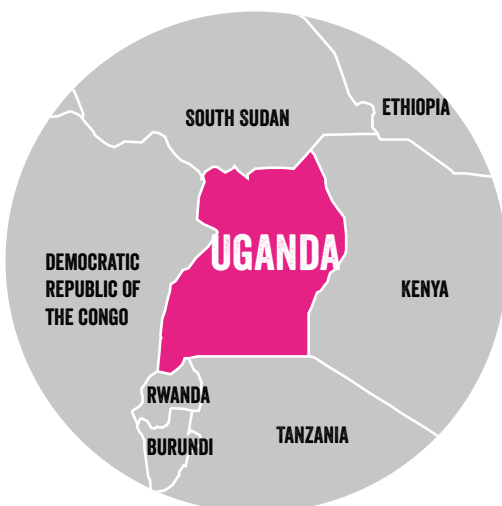


PHOTO: Girl leader of a menstrual hygiene club set up by Plan International at a school in Eastern Uganda.  
© Plan International / Quinn Neely



**Gender equality is not a task for “lone rangers or superheroes”, but will be built progressively, by us all.<sup>23</sup>**

This year Plan International conducted two further in-depth research studies with young women and men in nine communities in Uganda and Colombia and an additional study with young people in Spain.<sup>24</sup> The findings in Uganda, and particularly in Colombia, point to a progressive understanding from the participants of the difficulties they, and all of us, face in advancing gender equality. They advocate some key strategies for bringing about change. In Uganda and Colombia girls taking part in the study no longer see themselves as solely responsible for transforming society. They are looking for allies. This is a clear change from evidence collected in earlier research when bringing about change was seen as very much the responsibility of girls and their mothers. The marked differences between the Ugandan and Colombian girls and the participants in Spain, who still see the whole issue as the responsibility of women and girls, can be attributed to the work on gender discrimination carried out by the Champions of Change programme in these two countries. This in itself points a way forward which involves partnership, collective responsibility and an analysis of power.



# RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM COLOMBIA AND UGANDA

Research participants in Colombia and Uganda, 100 in each country, were selected from young people who are, or had been, involved in Plan International's Champions of Change programme: a project which aims to advance gender equality by engaging girls in a process of empowerment and by working with boys to challenge dominant masculinities and to support girls' empowerment.

Champions of Change supports young people to actively examine and reflect on how rigid roles and behaviour are imposed on them because of their gender and to understand how power imbalances play out in their own lives. It aims to create a youth-led social movement that challenges social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls' rights.

It is now building champions, both female and male, in many different countries. It works through dialogue and the creation of safe spaces in which young men and women interact and learn to develop critical thinking on issues that affect them. The programme uses a series of 'hooks' to retain participants, creating connections through sport, arts and music, using these interests as the basis for community outreach activities. Participants learn that it is crucial that everyone – boys, girls, women and men – join in the struggle for gender equality and jointly reject discrimination and stereotyping.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCH SEEK TO FIND OUT?

The overarching objective of the study was to concentrate on identifying the enabling factors and conditions that positively contribute to social change at the individual and collective levels.<sup>25</sup> Its primary purpose was not to ask young people to describe the issues they are grappling with and the circumstances they live in. Research over the years

with adolescent girls points to their feeling, and being, less valued than their brothers, more likely to be pulled out of school, to be married against their will and best interests, to experience violence at home and in their communities and to have little control over their lives and the choices available to them. How can these experiences which are viewed as 'normal' – an accepted part of being a girl – be transformed and who can help bring about this transformation? Boys, too, have stereotypes to conform to, and the young people in our research sample had already spent some time thinking about how to bring about change and alter the rules they live by at home and in the wider community. What this new research in Uganda and Colombia has enabled us to do is to come very much closer to the private spaces of girls' lives and follow change as they see it happening.

## HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The study was based on qualitative research with a sample of adolescent girls and boys in five communities in Colombia and four in Uganda. Respondents, who were selected on the basis of their current participation in Plan International's Champions of Change project, either took part in in-depth interviews or were involved in a participatory workshop session designed to encourage open debate.

The research sought to connect the pathways towards female empowerment and gender equality with a social norms analysis and was designed to examine how gender power relations either drive or impede social change.

## SETTING THE SCENE

"For me, it is people who have beliefs about what a girl or a boy should do, because it is difficult to contribute to a change since those people have a closed mentality. You learn but they do not let you change things because they have their own beliefs and say there are things we cannot do because we are boys and in the case of girls they cannot do heavy work because they are girls. It can be an obstacle for us who are agents of change."

**DIEGO, 17, COLOMBIA**

During the research it was clear that in both countries girls and boys were subject to the constraints of social norms, a powerful force within the family, community and the wider cultural environment that impeded any sustainable progress towards gender equality despite their own best efforts and expressed wishes.

In both Colombia and Uganda the research participants identified a series of interconnecting issues within their communities which included family and economic

disadvantage, and widespread violence, affecting girls and boys in different ways. Boys in Colombia discussed the threat and fact of physical violence on the streets, the issue of gangs and drugs, while girls talked about the threat of sexual violence, rape and sexual harassment that they face every day. This everyday fear of violence both inside and outside the home was discussed in Uganda too, with family dynamics appearing to become increasingly complex as girls grow up.

Poverty and economic hardship were part of the everyday reality of those taking part in the research and again gender plays a part in how this affects their lives: in Colombia girls worry about the impact on their educational opportunities while boys can get drawn into gangs and selling drugs – attempting to ‘solve’ the problem of poverty but creating more hardship as they become drug dependent. In Uganda too poverty has a greater effect on girls’ continuing education and the lack of money can force them into transactional sex with older boyfriends who provide money for everyday items from sanitary pads to school fees.

### What do we mean by social norms?

“What is required of you to be accepted or valued? You have to respect big people; you have to believe in whatever the community believes in because it’s their rules and regulations so you have to follow them. So if you go by that, they won’t take you as a bad person.” Doris, 18, Uganda

Social norms – the informal understanding that governs the behaviour of members of a society – are one of the most studied motivators of human actions. The power of social expectations and the drive ‘to belong’ can be so strong that people conform even where these rules of behaviour contradict their personal beliefs and attitudes.<sup>26</sup> They are recognised as important factors in maintaining unequal gender relations and impeding efforts to promote gender equality. They come into particular play at key stages in life, for example adolescence.<sup>27</sup> Gender norms are specifically related to gender differences and stem from a society’s beliefs and perceptions about what it means to be a woman or a man. Connected to this are the gender roles that define what is considered appropriate male and female behaviour, and largely circumscribe the actions of men and women, girls and boys, in any given situation.

“Other situations at home force her to fall into relationships and such things... [this] can force the girl to fall into love.”

*[Interviewer] “So should we say that if a girl gets a boyfriend, her problems will have been solved?”*

“At the moment she can be thinking that that’s the best solution she is having. But she ends up with an end result that’s disastrous.”

**EDITH, 16, UGANDA**

Just over half of the female interviewees in Uganda were already mothers, most first becoming pregnant at 13 or 14 years old. They presented a mixed picture of the support that girls have received from their parents. Many of the girls who took part in the research described ‘harsh’ parents, a general lack of support and a lack of engagement from parents in shaping their lives. This general neglect contributes to patterns, such as early sexual debut, early pregnancy and transactional relationships, which perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of household poverty and further entrench attitudes in which girls’ bodies and sexual activity are commodities to be bartered.

“I think the village people have strong desire for young girls. Raping young girls is not [a challenge] for them. The other issue is that some parents are drunkards. So while they are taking the alcohol, they begin discussing exchanging girls for alcohol. When he finishes taking the alcohol and gets back home, he begins chasing you out of the home. He gets *pangas* [knives] to send you away to go and marry the son or the particular person who bought the alcohol. What happens is that even the girls run away [eventually], even if not with that particular boy or man but finds one of her choice, because when your parents surrender you, nobody can come in to help.”

**KISAKYE, 17, UGANDA**

## POWER AND EXPECTATIONS

“I think men and women suffer a lot as we live in a sexist society.”

**DANIELA, 14, COLOMBIA**

In both countries girls described their homes and families as a place where gender power relations and gender discrimination affect them on a day-to-day basis. They felt that the way they are expected to behave in the household



and family is very clearly defined and enforced by their parents, brothers and the wider family: stay inside the home, carry out household chores, be submissive and do as you are told. Girls see this as unfair: it limits their time for study, for recreation and rest, and this, in turn, compromises their rights.

“At home I have to sweep, wash the dishes and wash my brother’s clothes. He was brought to the world as a trophy that is cleaned and taken care of and it makes me feel bad. How is it possible that I have to do everything and also have to wash his clothes? He can learn too.”

**PAOLA, 16, COLOMBIA**

At the individual, family and community level boys recognised that power relations are tipped firmly in favour of men and boys. Girls could also see that boys were bound by their parents’ and peers’ expectations. They have more freedom but the pressures to conform also have negative consequences:

“Here they have something like a law: when a boy is 13 he must have a girlfriend or he is gay. It is a law created by the gang members: they agreed on it with all the boys and now it is common for everyone and young people to say ‘you turn 13 and don’t have a girlfriend, you are gay’.”

**LUISA, 14, COLOMBIA**

Boys who don’t have a girlfriend are mocked and talked about, much in the same way as pregnant girls, who are labelled ‘sluts’, are also made the subjects of society’s disapproval. Boys described the expectation of boys and men in their communities as being physically strong, emotionally restrained and heterosexual – a description recognised by girls too:

“Men are taught not to cry, not to be weak, to be strong... They are always told that they are the bosses in the house, on the street, at work and at school, that they should not receive orders from anyone, that they have to progress, they should go out every weekend, and be popular among friends... People say: ‘Be careful you don’t fall in love because if you do, you lose, as women start to give you your orders and take your money away.’ They are also advised to be sexist.”

**LAURA, 16 COLOMBIA**

Girls perceive that their lack of voice and participation in decision-making are shaped by the lower value that

men attribute to girls, including male perceptions of what adolescent girls can or cannot do and should or should not do. Girls believed ‘others’ – parents, men, boys, wider society – expect them to be submissive and silent. This lack of respect from the community was true in both countries and recognised by both girls and boys:

“Girls are not allowed to participate fully in decision-making. The community believes women don’t have good ideas; rather they are good at housekeeping. Boys participate fully in decision-making, they also play a role in influencing decisions because the community values the boys’ ideas [more] compared to that of a girl.”

**BOYS’ WORKSHOP, UGANDA**

During discussions, one girl in Colombia specifically framed this discrimination as going against the Constitution:

“Men always see us as if we were less than them and that is not what the Constitution says. Parents give more freedom to boys... they do not help us feel confident nor have any confidence in us. In the past women were not allowed to vote or to go out to work. They had to stay at home. That still happens nowadays because many men say that women cannot work. They are made to stay at home to cook, clean and do everything in the house. Self-esteem is important because if I have confidence in myself and I live in an environment where confidence is transmitted, I will be able to overcome the obstacles I encounter, everything will become possible.”

**TATIANA, 14, COLOMBIA**

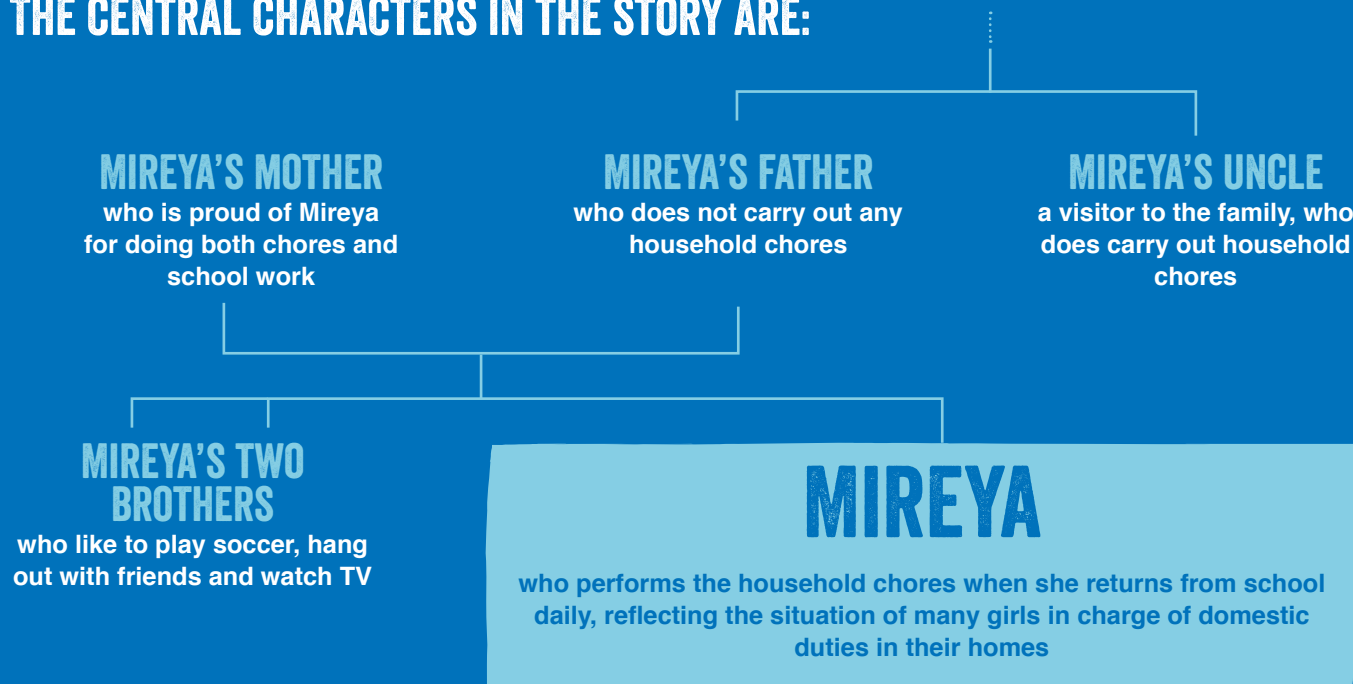
The assumption that girls are inferior to boys emerged also in the interviews with young people in Spain. This notion, that girls and women are much less capable than boys and men, appears to be ubiquitous:

“It’s the boys who are leading in everything. Like in leadership, the bigger posts are being given to the boys. [They believe] that the girls cannot handle such posts. The other thing is that girls cannot do heavy jobs and they are only left for the boys... like engineering. Presidency is not meant for girls. People say that a woman cannot rule a man. Because they assume we don’t have brains that can transform the country.”

**KISAKYE, 17, UGANDA**

# USING STORIES...

## THE CENTRAL CHARACTERS IN THE STORY ARE:



## THE SCENARIO IS:

Mireya begins to question the fairness of the situation she finds herself in – why does she have to complete all the chores and her brothers are free to do as they please? She also recognises that her friends are in a similar situation. Her mother is unaware of, or does not acknowledge, the unfairness of the situation.

Mireya's uncle, her father's brother, arrives to visit. The uncle gets up early, makes the family breakfast, takes the girls to school and divides household work between Mireya and her brothers. Family members have different reactions to these changes: Mireya's brothers are upset because they believe that household work is Mireya's responsibility;

Mireya is happy because she has more time to study and play with her friends; her mother agrees with her uncle and her father doesn't know what to think.

The story continues as the workshop participants are told that after the uncle leaves, her mother continues to divide the household chores equally between Mireya, her brothers and her husband. However, Mireya's brothers sabotage their mother's effort. Because of this, the housework returns to being the sole responsibility of Mireya and her mother. Mireya is very sad and her mother is frustrated as she does not know how to involve her husband and sons in the household responsibilities.

## Did you know?

**550** MILLION HOURS



Globally, girls aged 5-14 spend 550 million hours every day on household chores, 160 million more hours than boys their age spend.

Two key arenas in the struggle for equality are outlined in the stories which respondents were asked to discuss as part of the research process. In Mireya's story the difficulties inherent in changing family dynamics and tackling gender stereotyping at home are clearly expressed and were well understood by the girls discussing the scenario.

"Mothers always say: I am proud of my daughter because she helps me. They are not proud of what we are, but of what we do; it does not matter if one is a good student, the important thing is that one helps at home and does what they want."

**NATALIA, 14, COLOMBIA**

The girls discussing the story of Mireya understood clearly how the domestic rules are handed down from parents to daughters and sons and how this, and the idea of the male breadwinner, holds girls back.

"In the past, if some parents had a girl, they would educate her for raising children; but if we accept it, we are letting go of our dreams and goals. It was also thought that men were the only ones who could have a job and support their wives economically, because women could not work; but this does not really allow women to progress."

**NATALIA, 14, COLOMBIA**

They also acknowledged that, "If Mireya has a girl and two boys, as it is in her family, she is going to teach the same to her daughter." Mireya, and by extension the girls themselves, must change the rules for their own children.

The story of Paul and Mary, or Pablo and Esperanza, told similarly in both Uganda and Colombia, illustrates the other key arena – sexual relationships – where the struggle for gender equality is expressed most clearly. Mary wants Paul to use a condom when they have sex but he prefers not to. If she does not want to get pregnant it is her responsibility to go on the pill and if she really loves him she should want to please him. Mary also tells her girlfriends that sometimes she does not feel like sex but Paul, whom she loves very much, insists. Paul confides in his cousin Adolf when he comes to visit and Adolf tells him that Mary is right – contraception is a joint responsibility and he should respect his girlfriend's wishes more. The discussion that revolved around this scenario was illuminating and both girls and boys were well aware of the double standards involved:

"In this community girls are less valued. When a girl gets pregnant the boy says he is going to be a father and people even give him presents and congratulate him, but girls are kicked out from their house and even are verbally and physically abused..."

**CARLOS, 14, COLOMBIA**

Across the communities in both countries, boys could identify with the situation. However, they expressed a range of responses regarding the responsibility for the use of contraception. While many agreed that the use of condoms is a shared responsibility, some disagreed, suggesting that they would advise their girlfriends to take sole responsibility for avoiding pregnancy and to go on the pill. Many of the boys in the Ugandan focus groups admitted that they do have sex without condoms. In both countries some boys struggled with the idea that girlfriends could demand condom use or refuse to have sex. Many saw agreeing to have sex regardless of protection as a test of love:

"I think Paul and his friends would say Mary doesn't love her boyfriend, that she is not to be trusted. Others would say ladies are not the ones to decide for men and some would just laugh at him and say he is a coward."

**MOSES, 17, UGANDA**

Others felt that irritation or even violence was an acceptable response. In the discussions in Uganda, while the boys identified that communication between Paul and Mary was the only way possible to have a positive outcome, they continued to struggle with the challenge of their own deeply held attitudes towards girls and women and the expectation of male dominance in intimate relationships. Encouragingly, despite the contradictions being expressed within the boys' workshops, the respondents largely anticipated a positive outcome for Paul and Mary's relationship.

In both the story of Mireya and that of Paul and Mary the focus groups identified how much easier it was for an outsider to come in with new ideas and influence change, though they did not underestimate the difficulty of making any changes in behaviour permanent.

The stories also highlight the critical importance of the peer group, both in the way that it supports engrained social rules, and how it can help to challenge them.

"If Mireya and her mum want to change these stereotypes, they must firstly look for help. For example: if this problem happened here, we [the girls participating in the research and in Champions of Change] can find support at Champions of Change, they can help us. In this way, Mireya and her mum would understand the issues relating to stereotypes and gender inequality so that they can change their situation."

**CAMILA, 14, COLOMBIA**

... **TO UNCOVER ATTITUDES**

## MAKING CHANGE

“We have feelings and we can also help our mothers.”

**IVAN, 15, COLOMBIA**

All the young people taking part in the Champions of Change programme had seen many changes in their own attitudes: in renewed self-confidence and in their capacity to influence the lives and opinions of others. For girls, this journey of individual empowerment has led to the recognition that they are valuable, able and powerful. Not, in contrast to what they have been taught about themselves, inferior to their male peers and with limited abilities. Girls delighted in their new role as ‘champions’, in their ability to help other girls and influence the progress towards gender equality:

“I do counsel both the girls and boys because I see I don’t fear boys just because I have to feel small. No, I stand strong and talk to the girls and boys.”

**ESTHER, 16, UGANDA**

Both girls and boys describe challenging the entrenched behaviour and attitudes at home and in the wider community:

“I tried myself, at home, because in our family boys are the ones taken to school. My younger sister got pregnant at school and she [was] abandoned at home, not to study any more. But I took initiative... asked my parents to forgive my sister and take her at least to a vocational skill training school for her survival. My parents agreed and she is now a tailor.”

**ISAAC, 17, UGANDA**



PHOTO: A Colombian girl participates in a peace-building conference.

While the respondents in Uganda did not talk about the importance of role models as such or suggest explicitly that they need more positive role models in the community, there were several mentions of prominent women whom they, and their parents, clearly look up to.

“I will take an example of the Speaker that she is a woman, assuming she is coming like from my village of Irundu, when the community people used to look at her and never imagined she would be a Speaker one day. She becomes a role model and the parents get to realise that even any other girl child can do the same and they get courage to take their girls also to school.”

**DORIS, 18, UGANDA**

Exploring these examples highlights the importance both of knowledge around gender and rights, and of the capacity to discuss and negotiate, as key tools for a transition towards more gender equal relations at home. When girls are explaining to their parents the unfairness of the situation they can frame their protest around the rights of the child. There were many such examples in the interviews: girls regularly referenced sitting their mother, father or both parents down and talking to them, explaining the gender inequality at play and bargaining for fairer treatment.

“So, I told my mum that there should be equality because it was not possible that I had to wash the dishes and my brother came home and got dishes dirty and did not wash anything because he is the man. Then I told her that it was machismo, she began to understand me and we began to talk. So now when I go out I tell her where I am going, if my brother goes out he also says where he is going, so I do not see that inequality any more.”

**GABRIELA, 15, COLOMBIA**

“There are differences at home because my father says that I do not have the same rights as my brothers. I have been talking with my dad and he has understood, so far we are even, he is letting me do the things he didn’t let me do in the past.”

**MARIA, 15, COLOMBIA**

In their attempts to change things at home girls wanted:

- Household chores to be equally distributed between brothers and sisters
- Permissions and freedom of movement to be granted equally to girls
- Girls to be valued for their achievements (educational and others), not according to their gendered responsibilities in the household

- Girls to be given equal space for their concerns to be listened to at home: they have the right to be heard and to participate in decisions that concern them and their family
- Parents to make time to talk and listen to children's concerns and ideas
- To abolish verbal or physical violence in the home
- Their right to education to be respected and promoted: parents must not define their daughters as housewives and mothers, but see girls as capable of high educational achievement and of having good careers.

Both adolescent girls and boys acknowledged some individual success in bringing about more equal power relations at home. But despite this, they felt that a more collective approach which used parent power would have a more profound and wide-ranging effect.

"We must create a school where parents can talk about topics related to stereotypes, inequality and the rights and duties we have, because those are the main problems we face. Families with supportive men should teach other men how to change stereotypes related to gender. We can find happiness in ourselves. We have to accept ourselves, because if we do not, we will always expect someone to do it for us; if we all do it, we will find strength in it."

**VALERIA, 14, COLOMBIA**

## WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE: TACKLING THE WIDER COMMUNITY

When asked, girls were positive about the added benefits of working in groups as a way to influence other girls, the community and parents, and to spread their message more widely. They feel that they are more able to challenge others and discuss the changes they would like as a result of the group work. In some cases, more informal interactions seem to be a good way for young people to approach community leaders and groups of parents at the same time – a space to communicate across the generations.

"During parties or ceremonies, we can go and speak to the parents ... to stop forcing children to marry."  
 [Interviewer] "Why did you think this action of speaking at parties would lead to a positive change?"

"It is because the leaders are always present. So they can listen to our concerns and put in action. The parents are always present. Even the girls who dropped out of school can get the chance to listen because when I speak (and everyone knows

I am a teenage mother), they can accept... when they look at me, [they can see that] I managed [to return to school]."

**KISAKYE, 17, UGANDA**

Both boys and girls also said that working in a mixed group demonstrated to the wider community that everyone can work together for gender equality, which is an issue that affects everyone. This is the case, particularly, where changed behaviour is visible, such as when girls are seen playing soccer with boys.

"Through playing soccer together we have realised that it will be possible to change the community mentality. Men will not see us as weak. Change does not start with a single person, it starts with everyone; working in teams we can attract more attention."

**SOPIA, 15, COLOMBIA**

"From my point of view [improvements are] the freedom of expression we have now and in the way they are treating us. In the past we were less visible because they did not realise that we had the same capabilities – for example, the capacity to represent our school as we are doing now, representing our school in sports just like boys."

**LUISA, 14, COLOMBIA**

In the discussions about community life girls identified their priorities for action:

- Tackle violence and create safe public spaces for adolescent girls and boys: both adolescent girls and boys described living in fear of violent behaviour or attacks and having a lack of safe public and recreation spaces.
- Increase the opportunities for young people's participation and leadership: adolescents advocated for spaces to be created to hold intergenerational dialogue with the community about gender equality.
- Increase efforts to widen girls' participation: make sure that they are included in community dialogue and decision-making and that girls' voices are heard and acted upon.
- Increase the opportunities for adolescent boys and girls to work together to advance gender and social change, and support the strengthening of their networks.

Overall, adolescent girls and boys did not feel that they were as effective at creating change at community level as at home, but their influence as a collective was evident through their visible public presence. This visibility was identified as a positive strategy. Drama and sport were used to encourage community members to both recognise inequality and to promote more equal gender relations. However, adolescents also felt that they needed more support if their efforts were to be successful.

“We should work together in the community for establishing rights for women so that we, women, can have access to public spaces.”

**VERONICA, 15, COLOMBIA**

Girls felt that, although they had ideas about how to tackle gender inequality in the community and hope for the future, their immediate influence was limited: being young and female they were usually excluded from decision-making processes and any effective participation in community matters. One girl from Colombia described her community as “against women and chauvinist” and another demonstrated a clear understanding of how long it might take for this chauvinism to shift, recognising that the process of attitudinal change is neither immediate nor linear:

“The positive thing is that you gradually teach people that things should not be like that, that you have to improve them and work harder to make things better. The idea is to gradually improve. There are people who don’t listen but you can teach them step by step, like a grain of sand at a time until they become interested.”

**LORENA, 14, COLOMBIA**

Work within the community is further advanced in Colombia, where the respondents had been participants in the Champions of Change programme for some time, and their self-confidence and strategic capacity is noticeably more developed. In Uganda, despite the average age of those taking part in the research being older than those in Colombia, girls who were inclined to question the status quo felt more constrained by the pressure not to challenge their families and communities too hard, and by the conviction that they were not listened to. In negotiating for change girls tended to represent themselves as docile and submissive, so perpetuating the very situation they were intent on undermining. It is evident from both studies that any young women daring to be different, and stepping out in public spaces as they know they must, will be risking outrage and may well be ostracised and bullied. It is critical that this bravery is acknowledged and supported.

“...they believed I was submissive and quiet. They thought I would continue like that, but when I started to talk and play they started to say: ‘Soccer is not for you, you are going to be a tomboy, you are going to break a leg, do not play.’ It hurt at first because I did not expect my neighbours to say that or my friends to walk away, but then I understood that if they really loved me we could fix things. I explained that I am not going to become a ‘butch’ by playing with a ball, I am still a girl, even when I play soccer or wear trousers. They did not believe me but over time they realised that I am still a

girl, but with clear ideas and basic knowledge. Lately everyone is talking to me. I feel good.”

**GABRIELA, 15, COLOMBIA**

## GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

In both Uganda and Colombia, and, as we will see, in Spain too, young people also focused on communication strategies, identifying a number of ways to capture an audience who might not normally engage with gender equality issues.

“I would do some lectures, plays and things that draw people’s attention such as movies, series, brochures and things like that because there are people who do not pay attention to newspapers. People focus more on the movies or the internet.”

**JUAN, 16, COLOMBIA**

“One of my proposals is to create a web page because there are parents who are interested in social networks or want to have more interaction with their children by these means.”

**MARIANA, 14, COLOMBIA**

They want to use drama techniques which both entertain and inform and new technology to bring young people together to share information and plan collective action. Public radio and television, newspapers, video and social media all need to be harnessed to the cause of gender equality so that the issue is inescapable and unanswerable.

“I believe my parents are proud of what I am accomplishing because every time I raise my voice in my radio programme I can expand my knowledge and make it possible that other people open their eyes and see that it is not a dream where a Prince Charming comes and rescues you. No one can rescue you, but you can rescue your own inner power that has been lost in those stereotypes, inequalities and sexism in which we live.”

**MARIANA, 14, COLOMBIA**

Adolescents also argue for intergenerational dialogue between community members, both in public forums and in smaller discussion groups. They are particularly keen to raise awareness of the harmful effects of violence and to identify collective action to put a stop to it.

## TACKLING VIOLENCE

Adolescent girls taking part in the research in Colombia clearly hold local and national politicians and state officials responsible for protecting and promoting gender equality and for ensuring that young women are safe from violence. Violence is the primary instrument of power and goes to the heart of societal change. They wanted:

- A safe public environment free from violence against women and girls, and violence against boys and men: the law, the state and local authorities should respond to rights violations and be held accountable for addressing violence against women and girls.
- Age-appropriate, safe and accessible mechanisms for reporting violence: girls identified the need for safe and effective mechanisms for reporting sexual violence so they have confidence to do so without the fear of being subjected to threats of further violence.
- Communication initiatives and campaigns to tackle gender inequality at both local and national levels: publicly addressing and challenging discriminatory attitudes and behaviour that lead to gender discrimination and violence.

“The mayor has more power than us, he can develop projects, campaigns, social mobilisation at schools and talk about equality. They could also show films about gender equality and then discuss it. They could organise contests where men have to cook and women have to play soccer in order to make them understand what the other does.”

**CAROLINA, 16, COLOMBIA**

Additionally young people talked about the role of the media: specifically mentioning soap operas that normalise violence against women and girls. As one 15-year-old boy in Colombia explained:

“Boys see men beating women on the TV and want to do the same thing.”

They were aware that violence also happens in spaces which politicians and the state find hard to reach. They wanted community elders and public institutions to support campaigns against domestic violence, acknowledging that although personal initiatives, like challenging violent behaviour at home and at school, are important it is vital, too, to go public.

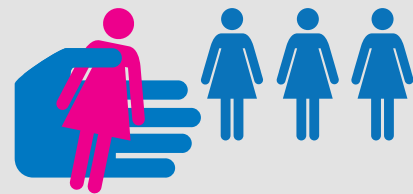
“If I were the mayor, I would enforce the law forbidding violence against women. If people do not respect the law, they will be punished.”

**CINDY, 15, COLOMBIA**

**Violence is the second leading cause of death among adolescent girls globally**

**54,000**

Number of deaths among girls aged 10 to 19 in 2012 **due to violence**



1 in 4 girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide (around 70 million), said they had been the victims of some form of physical violence since the age of 15



Worldwide, more than **700 MILLION WOMEN** alive today were married before their 18th birthday

A STATISTICAL SNAPSHOT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST ADOLESCENT GIRLS: UNICEF, 2014

Women, we must speak out against violence

Safe spaces for women and girls!

Violence against women is illegal

March against violence against women

If a man beats a woman, he must go to prison

## STATE AND INSTITUTIONAL POWER

For the most part adolescent girls and boys felt that their effectiveness in contributing to individual and collective change lay at the household and community levels. Instigating collective change at a national level was not discussed in any detail. Adolescents reported that they did not feel engaged with change at a political or national level on account of the gap between them and any vehicle for communication or negotiation. They also expressed a lack of trust in political institutions and leaders, mentioning corruption as a factor that contributed to this. Discussions also indicated that adolescents felt that authorities at this level were unconcerned with the issues they face in their communities.

Girls noted that women were excluded from political spaces and from taking up political positions:

“It is always men who participate in politics and work in the construction area, and the role for women is to work in a family home and be a housewife. Women should have a greater participation in business and politics – is the strangest thing in the world a man working in a family home?”

**MARIA JOSE, 16, COLOMBIA**

They did look to the state for support in bringing about change, though more in hope than expectation:

“The state could say: ‘everyone has the right to this, be it man or woman’, but it is not what you see, it is not what is happening, there are always stereotypes, beliefs that are always marking us and telling us what men and women should do, and that limits us to do things or fills us with fear.”

**ALEJANDRA, 14, COLOMBIA**

They also saw a role for local authorities in tackling inequality:

“Councillors and representatives of neighbourhoods are capable of generating trust and communication between the people they lead, changing stereotypes and fostering things that could benefit girls. They don’t know yet the things that affect women in our town, but we could tell and help them to develop activities or programmes that benefit the community.”

**TATIANA, 14, COLOMBIA**

## GAINING ALLIES AND BUILDING SUPPORT

In both countries the Champions of Change participants engaged with the research identified a range of potential allies

who were important as supporters in the struggle for gender equality. Starting with the power of parents and ranging from the media to the state they pointed to a clear understanding of both the difficulty of shifting gender inequality and the wide-ranging nature of the challenge involved in changing the established rules of behaviour. Transforming the family was identified as the cornerstone for wider changes.

“[There should be] workshop programmes for parents on early childhood development and gender equitable behaviours. Through these workshops, parents will realise the gap they have between [them and] their children’s lives due to the rules set up by them, the community and the nation.”

**KATO, 16, UGANDA**

“[Parents] can create awareness to the community about the benefits of gender equality. For example, in a family when both girls and boys divide roles in a home it makes work easier to complete a task. The role of the parent is to advise fellow parents why it’s OK to value the boys and girls equally.”

**GEORGE, 18, UGANDA**

Research participants recognised the power of their own leadership, both individually and collectively, in transforming unequal power relations. In Colombia in particular, young people had successfully negotiated positive changes in their families and to a lesser extent in their community. They also acknowledged the role of NGOs in promoting gender equality and identified teachers as being potentially important both in supporting girls’ subject choices and in protecting them against violence in school, though in Uganda in particular they were often the perpetrators. They understood, too, the power of the media and of community and in some cases religious leaders who could open up public spaces for intergenerational dialogue, discussion and information about gender discrimination. Female role models who personify the lifting of barriers through their personal success in male-dominated areas or professions were also targeted as allies. Young people were particularly aware of their lack of access to state and institutional power and were concerned to find support among politicians and state officials.

“Politicians are role models to a number of young people, community and clan members. They can contribute to the situations of girls and boys through chairing community dialogues to discuss with the community how to advance gender equality and also address other challenges in the community. Politicians also can support or provide funds to support youth-led movements to run programmes to challenge social norms.”

**ODONGO, 16, UGANDA**



# RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM SPAIN



## How was the research done?

Participants were selected from those enrolled in youth programmes helping vulnerable adolescents. There were 101 participants between the ages of 13 and 19, with an average age of 15.5 years, and they came from urban and semi-urban areas. Most were in secondary school at the time of the field research, some were in vocational training and others in search of employment. At each research location in Spain, the adolescent girls and boys took part in two workshops, one for girls and one for boys. While this study in no way is representative of the situation across Spain, it provides us with stark insights into the lives of these young people and how gender norms play out in their world.

In addition to the detailed research in Colombia and Uganda, a further study was carried out with adolescents in Spain by Plan International Spain and partners. This research asked several questions: what is gender equality? why is it important? who is affected by it? how can gender equality be achieved and who should act to achieve it?

The similarities with research findings in Uganda and Colombia are striking, but so too are the differences.

## SETTING THE SCENE

As a first step, the young people taking part in the study were asked to define gender equality and reflect on its importance. There were key gendered differences between their responses: girls demonstrated a good understanding of what gender equality is and why it is important for them, while boys, although they could articulate the importance of the concept of gender equality, when probed couldn't explain why it was important or identify what it actually means.

It is also possible that some boys gave socially desirable answers about the importance of gender equality in the setting of the workshops and interviews while others were more forthright:

"Both genders must be equal, men and women have to have the same rights. That's what I understand is necessary to live together. I think that in order to live well there has to be gender equality if there is no gender equality, we will not live well together..."

**LUCAS, 18**

"I don't care about gender equality, it's not my job at all, what happens is that women get a lot of it [gender equality] for whatever they want."

**MANUEL, 19**

Girls attribute high importance to gender equality because, despite living in an ostensibly gender equal society, they still struggle with inequalities and discrimination because they are girls:

"I believe that gender equality is based on the fact that men and women have the same rights, the same opportunities, both can work and have a family. We already have rights but we are not free from discrimination, especially men discriminate, there is also femicide, and the feminist struggle, the demonstrations. I think it's very important..."

**SARA, 19**

Two key issues emerged:

- Girls, as they did in Uganda and Colombia, identified traditional family roles and the gendered division of household tasks as one major disadvantage:

"It makes me feel bad because I have to do everything; that is a fact... I see that my parents still have the mentality that the girls have to learn to do this [the housework] for their future. And my brother, being a boy, hardly knows how to do anything. Just the bed and that's it."

**JULIA, 14**

- Being valued only as accessories and sex objects by boys and men and having to look pretty and fashionable at all times was another major challenge.

“Well, we have to be perfect, I do not know how to explain, we have to be educated, yes that’s true, but we cannot talk too much, we have to be thin, we have to be pretty, we have to be smart, we have to be good with our husbands, boyfriends.”

**SARA, 19**

Even though boys did not identify any gender equality problems for themselves, they too acknowledged the objectification of girls as a concern, emphasising the importance of this issue in Spain:

“The woman has to be beautiful for the man at all times. She has to look good for him. The man can look however he wants, he doesn’t have to change for the woman. The most important thing is that the woman is pretty.”

**MATEO, 16**

## IDENTIFYING STEREOTYPES

Girls and boys clearly understand that society enforces and reproduces stereotypes that perpetuate traditional gender roles. However, while girls identify this as a barrier to social change, boys, on the whole, do not and are happy with the status quo, regarding the conventional masculine persona as something to aspire to. The situation in Uganda and Colombia is not dissimilar to the one noted by young people in Spain.

“We grow up with the idea that the woman has to be the one who stays at home and also that we have to concentrate more on taking care of her because she is the woman. We also grow up thinking that women have to be smaller, that they have to be inferior, instead of being the same, you know?”

**LUCAS, 18**

Girls are expected to take on the main responsibility for domestic chores and caring activities. They are expected to take care of their physical appearance, to look feminine and behave sensibly and responsibly when interacting with other people. Whereas boys are expected to be tough and ‘in charge’.

“Yes, we have to be strong, brave and, in many cases, if we see a girl in distress we have to help her, or always protect the girls and everything, right? Be ‘manly’, we can’t show our feelings or

anything... the parents educate us in this way, to guard our feelings, that’s why, boys, in a group, keep things to themselves, because they are afraid that the group will ostracise them.”

**MARIO, 15**

Both girls and boys recognise the sanctions they face when acting against expectations. Physical violence at home and in the wider community was not referred to at all – unlike in Uganda and Colombia – but there were persistent references to psychological violence in the form of bullying, rejection and harsh criticism. While girls would face repercussions for doing so called ‘male’ things or dressing in a way that did not conform to conventional notions of femininity, boys face hostile criticism for showing emotions like crying, being friends with girls or dressing in clothes and styles seen as not traditionally masculine.

Boys are less inclined than girls to see the necessity of trying to change this. Their peers tend to define themselves, apparently happily, within the gendered expectations and they are inclined to believe that being bullied is not an issue for boys, apart from the few who choose not to conform.

One specific and recurring theme voiced by both girls and boys concerned control. This manifested itself in boys curbing the independence of their girlfriends by placing restrictions on their actions and general behaviour.

“I have friends who control [their girlfriends] a lot, they control how they dress, who they meet or who they text with on WhatsApp.”

**JAVIER, 18**



## CHANGE MAKERS

In discussing how to change conventional assumptions about gender and who should lead this change, both boys and girls agreed that the main responsibility lies with girls themselves as they are the ones most affected. This is not dissimilar to the findings in previous research studies which were discussed in Section One of this report. However, this year in Uganda and Colombia the researchers reported a growing sense from both young women and young men that gender equality, and fighting for it, is in fact everybody's responsibility and should not be left to girls alone.

The adolescent boys and girls also named a variety of adults who could influence positive change, including teachers, parents and public figures.

"They do not realise it but the actions of the teachers are super important, because they are the example you see every day of your life, at a stage when everything will get in your head. I think gender equality should be included in the curriculum."

**MARTA, 15**

The issue of being raised in families where parents reinforce traditional gender norms was a dominant theme and young people hoped, though not with any great expectation of success, that parents would begin to use their influence to free their children from restrictive stereotypes.

"I think that above all there are people who still have a mentality from the past. They will be like that until someone in their family says 'no, that is not

correct, we need to change', otherwise it will just go on... There are parents who prepare their daughters to be housewives, when they could be anything."

**MARIO, 15**

In Spain, to a greater extent than in Uganda and Colombia, adolescents frequently talked about Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter, specifically identifying social networks and social media as possible platforms for change: a space where gender equality issues could be discussed and information could be shared.

## TAKING ACTION

Adolescents identified the family, the community and public sphere and the state as key to advancing gender equality. Their first priority was to underline the importance of girls and boys being brought up without traditional gender stereotypes: they should be given the same opportunities in life. One recurring example, cited by both girls and boys, is how hard it is for girls to play male-dominated sports like football. Difficulties occur either because there are no mechanisms that enable girls to play the sport or because girls who do are bullied for being 'butch'.

"A guy can do whatever he wants, he can play sports... just because he can, because the boys have more strength, more power, women just have to take care of the house. I do not see it as normal."

**ALBA, 13**

Secondly, the study participants felt that the issue of discrimination and inequality should be featured more prominently in the public sphere through talks, marches and conferences in order to strengthen the social movements around feminism and gender equality: collective change can be triggered in this way and by putting pressure on the media to use gender sensitive material. Overall they wanted everyone to know more and to be better educated about gender equality issues.

"Yes, as a woman I can support the feminist struggle, in demonstrations, through social networks, with my relatives, friends, colleagues. And perhaps with organisations too, with all that I can. And if at any time you see something that is not right, say it, do not shut up. I never shut up."

**SARA, 19**

Finally, both girls and boys felt that all institutions, including the government and organisations like the police, should be more active in promoting gender equality in their programmes, policies and communications.



PHOTO: Girls from Guatemala and Paraguay at a Plan International event in Spain. © Plan International / Juan José del Río

# FROM HOPE TO REAL CHANGE

Adolescents across the three research countries all identified the double standards that operate for boys and girls, how families provide the foundations of gender inequality and how the peer group operates to keep discrimination firmly in place. In all three countries girls still struggle with self-esteem. In Uganda and Colombia they talk more about physical violence and about how sexual activity in boys is admired, while for girls it is looked down on. Young people in Spain talk more about psychological violence and about the objectifying of young women, but in all three countries the role of girls and young women is defined primarily in terms of doing the domestic chores and pleasing their men.

There is, according to the research, however, one clear and crucial difference. Among adolescents in Spain gender norms, gender stereotypes and gender inequality are primarily perceived as an issue for girls that should be tackled by girls with boys, perhaps, helping. Even though girls and some boys agree that boys should support girls, they do not see gender inequality as something that also has a negative impact on the lives of boys and men. This is a real difference from the research findings in Uganda and Colombia, where the Champions of Change participants are convinced that boys too are disadvantaged by gender inequality and that they too are responsible for creating a society where expectations, hopes and dreams are not conditioned and restricted by gender. Contributors in Spain, though involved in programmes run by NGOs, have had little or no specific training in gender awareness and if boys are to become real partners in gender equality both girls and boys might benefit from the educational sessions that form part of the Spanish participants' recommended actions for change.

## WHAT WE LEARNT

The research in Colombia and Uganda has been a detailed exploration of the views of young people as they tackle gender discrimination and struggle to embed gender equality into their lives, both as individuals and collectively within their communities and society at large. The research has examined the power of established rules of behaviour that

inhibit change, which has meant a close look at family dynamics and community restrictions. However, despite the hold that these rules have over the lives and opportunities of both girls and boys as they grow up, it is important also to look closely at power – who holds it, how it operates to keep discrimination and inequality in place and how it can be used by young people both collectively and individually to bring about change. This analysis goes further than challenging gender discrimination, and explicitly identifies strategies for supporting power shifts, particularly within relationships, whether intimate, among peers, in families or within communities.

Within the family, power is perhaps less visible, entrenched in patriarchy and established modes of behaviour so insidious that many affected by it do not recognise it for what it is. The formal institutions of the law, the state and the media hold visible power over people's lives and that power too can be hard for young people to challenge. Working together, they can, to a certain extent – through education and information, by building self-confidence and self-esteem – exercise their own power and become leaders of change.

The evidence from the research illustrates clearly that the expectations of and the sanctions faced by adolescent girls are different to those applied to adolescent boys, and are rooted in unequal power relations. It also illustrates how this operates across generations and genders: adolescent girls are expected to do the household chores – a practice enforced particularly by their mothers, boys are encouraged to conform to dominant masculine ideas of what being a 'real man' involves. There are also shared expectations of adolescents among adults and peers that serve to restrict behaviour, particularly with regards to sexuality, firmly within accepted boundaries – boys cannot be 'gay' and girls must keep their boyfriends happy but not get pregnant.

Despite positive reports of the successes to date of the Champions of Change initiatives, it is clear that many Ugandan girls continue to engage from a position that requires them to play roles that support the status quo.



PHOTO: Girl with a sign reading 'eradicate gender-based violence', Honduras.

Girls mentioned that the need to “demonstrate respect” for their parents and elders remains a sticking point for them. In addition, there were reports of girls negotiating space to engage with their communities and their men, by presenting themselves in a non-threatening way. This tends to mean that girls, and this applies in Spain and Colombia also, continue to occupy space that has been given to them by those with power, and continue to play more submissive, less vocal roles.

Both girls and boys in the research identified the critical importance of intergenerational gender dialogue; the need to go beyond the effort to empower and engage young people, and reach out to involve families and communities. Without their support and commitment sustainable, long-lasting social change will remain beyond reach.

“Adults are fundamental in the construction of our lives and personalities. If there are adults who think and act with gender equality... young people will feel more confident.”

**VIVIAN, 14, COLOMBIA**

Both adolescent boys and girls identified their parents and families as holding considerable influence and power to transform discriminatory gender and social norms. However, they clearly acknowledged that working individually with parents and families was not going to bring about widespread

change and more collective action was needed to transform the discriminatory attitudes found at all levels of society. Research participants also recognised the role of economic empowerment for women and girls in addressing gender inequality: another form of structural discrimination which restricts the power and potential of girls and women.

“Most of the men feel they are superior to the women because they still provide them with money. But if a woman had a business of her own, if she was equipped with social survival skills, she'd be able to earn as a woman and not depend on the money coming from her husband. In most cases that is what restrains women from their rights because the man knows he is the sole provider, he is the breadwinner.”

**FLORENCE, 16, UGANDA**

Community leaders, local mayors and teachers were identified as key allies in attempting to bring about collective change. The role of public institutions was also recognised but adolescents found it difficult to identify strategies to influence them and for the most part they felt that institutions were unconcerned with their concerns and realities. On the other hand, adolescent boys and girls were aware that the state has a duty to uphold their rights, and to protect and promote gender equality, and that it was failing them.

# CONCLUSION

The research has demonstrated that in order to transform attitudes and change the rules of society there must be a specific focus on power which remains largely in male hands. The unequal power relations at play often remain invisible and internalised and until they change nothing else will.

It is also crucially important that the balance of responsibility for creating transformational change is shifted. Girls, as we have seen very clearly in the research from Spain, often see gender equality as primarily their problem, but it is a challenge for us all: family and community members and the institutions of the state and the media need to accept liability.

Achieving gender equality means that adolescent girls need to be supported as leaders, not to be restricted to the domestic, but enabled to become visible in male-dominated public spaces. Hearing girls' voices, having girls and women in authority in the groups and communities they belong to, will ultimately demonstrate equality in a way nothing else can.

Young people have identified the family as a critical arena in their struggle for gender equality and cite the importance of intergenerational dialogue, using as many platforms and techniques as possible to get their message across. They recognise that entrenched power and discrimination must be tackled at all levels of society and that attitudes and behaviour which have been accepted as 'normal' for generations will take time, energy and critical understanding if they are to shift. The adolescents participating in this research are equal to the challenge of advancing gender equality. Collectively they feel more confident working at individual and family level but need greater support as they attempt to change the wider community and the institutions of the state. Gaining legitimacy in formal public spaces and structures continues to be a challenge for girls in particular, and for younger people more generally.

"The president, the mayor, the governor and other leaders, they know rights and can create a society where we have equality. They have lived in a world where they know what it feels like. Also parents, because everything starts from home."

**ADRIANA, 16, COLOMBIA**

There are many wide-ranging and thought-provoking ideas for further action that emerge from this research. First of all it must be recognised that there are inherent risks to girls and young women in programming and campaigning that is explicitly political and likely to challenge the status quo. NGOs, researchers, community leaders, activists, politicians and youth groups must all follow Do No Harm principles, ensuring that individuals and communities are not left worse off as a result of campaign or programme activities.

The research participants identified ways to engage their parents and other community members in intergenerational dialogue that would go some way to changing how girls are valued and treated at home. Adolescent girls realise too that they need a better understanding of the bias inherent in the formal institutions of government, if they are to be successful in challenging discrimination in public organisations and forums. Poverty was identified as a continuing factor in the entrenchment of gender inequality: girls' and women's economic empowerment should, according to them, be a key component in the fight for equality. Girls need safe space both real and virtual; they need strong role models and not to be surrounded by images that objectify them and encourage violence against them. They are well aware of the power of the media: online, on radio, in newspapers, films, and soaps which can be harnessed to reduce violence and promote gender equality and girls' rights. They need visibility, solidarity and practical, positive action.



PHOTO: Young people on a peace-building project in Colombia. © Plan International / Johanna Spetz

## PART 3

# RECOMMENDATIONS:

## UNLOCKING THE POWER OF GIRLS

### 1. GENDER EQUALITY DESPERATELY NEEDS A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION.

Governments must step up and intervene in public and private spaces – from homes to boardrooms, to political institutions and in the media – to end violence against women and girls. This needs strong political will. And it will mean effective policing of laws and policies, to bring about the wholesale change in attitudes that will finally see girls and women valued equally with boys and men.

This can in part be achieved by media organisations using more positive images and affirmative language in the way women and girls are portrayed in dramatic content, factual content and advertising, and avoiding stereotypes that promote gender inequality. A gender scan should be automatically applied to public content and media organisations held to account. Allocation of adequate resources for public campaigns is also critical to accompany the implementation of laws and policies and promote attitudinal change. We know the power of properly resourced public campaigning: examples include addressing the spread and stigma of HIV, promoting family planning and tackling drink-driving.

Girls have told us that endemic violence, both psychological and physical, is a key element in their lives at home, at school and in their wider communities. It is a fundamental feature of their lives and used to keep them in their place. Some of this violence stems from the way women are depicted in popular culture and the media, where the objectification of women and sexual violence is all too prevalent. This has got worse with the rise of social media and online platforms. Here perpetrators are often anonymous, companies seem reluctant to accept responsibility for online behaviour that promotes violence and criminal activity, and, overall content is hard to police.

### 2. GIRLS MUST BECOME VISIBLE IN PLACES OF POWER AND INFLUENCE.

They can be empowered and lead change, but they can't do it alone. They need allies. Everyone has to take responsibility to effect the change that is needed for girls to be valued and have equal chances and choices in life.

This can be achieved through partnerships – between girls, between generations and between all committed to gender equality. Build on existing initiatives and create strategic alliances for public campaigning which should be funded by both the private and public sectors. In particular the international donor community should channel resources to states and civil society organisations specifically to advance gender equality. Girls will benefit from affirmative action for women that includes quotas to put women on boards and in parliament. Closing the gender pay gap – which continues to demonstrate that women are worth less – should also be prioritised. Campaigns that promote childcare and domestic work as not just a female responsibility, that undermine the distinctions between traditionally male and female jobs, would also be effective in breaking down the barriers which obstruct gender equality.

Girls have told us that change is slow. They seek solidarity and action with others. Strong role models and increasing girls' visibility in public spaces, so that their rights and capabilities are recognised, will help accelerate the pace of change.



---

### 3. GREATER EFFORTS ARE NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND HOW ADOLESCENTS ACTUALLY LIVE THEIR LIVES

so girls and boys can be supported to challenge the gender stereotypes that are all too present in their everyday experiences. Everyone – governments, civil society, corporate bosses, local leaders, parents, girls and boys themselves – needs to engage critically with gender discrimination and how it defines society. With a better understanding of how discrimination operates, we will be able to identify the changes necessary to inform and implement the public and private initiatives crucial to bringing about gender equality.

---

This can be achieved through working with girls and boys at a grassroots level to challenge the gender norms that are so pervasive in their lives. Interventions like Champions of Change can support young people to reject the status quo, actively seek out change and have confidence in the future. These grassroots initiatives also need to include parents, teachers and community leaders in order to elicit their support.

The use of participatory methods and approaches when addressing gender norms is critical. All who seek to address discriminatory gender practices must work with girls and boys, men and women using effective and innovative communication strategies, public dialogue and research. In order to keep girls' voices at the heart of programme and policy making, we must continue to gather data and use the technology available to create new spaces and innovative platforms for girls and young women to take charge of their lives.

# THE FINAL WORD

Laws and policies that promote gender equality may be nominally in place in many countries. They are, for example, in Spain but the research conducted there illustrates clearly that the concept of equality has not taken root, even in the hearts and minds of the young people interviewed. It is quite clear from all the research that girls are still valued less than boys and for the most part see themselves as worth less. For transformative change to take place, gender equality must become a key social and political issue and power holders must use their authority to challenge the deeply held personal attitudes that perpetuate misogyny, waste talent and impoverish all our lives.



PHOTO: A Colombian girl took over the role of Mayor of Madrid during the girls' takeover events on International Day of the Girl 2016. © Plan International / Ramses Collado

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to all the research participants who has given us their time and insights over the years, particularly the young people in Uganda, Colombia and Spain who took part in this year's research studies. Thanks are due also to Plan International staff and their partners in these countries without whose help the work of amplifying girls' voices would be impossible.

## PRIMARY RESEARCH

Lead researchers and authors: Jean Casey (Colombia), Feyi Rodway (Uganda), Juan Abad Madroñero (Spain)

## REPORT TEAM

Sharon Goulds, lead editor and report author

Jacqueline Gallinetti, contributing author

## FROM PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Madeleine Askham, Policy and Advocacy Advisor, Political Empowerment

Miriam Gauer, Research Manager

Jacqueline Gallinetti, Director, Research and Knowledge Management

Carla Jones, Head of Communications

Sean Maguire, Executive Director of Global Influence and Partnerships

## COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Kirsty Cameron, Davinder Kumar, Danny Plunkett

## DESIGN

Sandra Dudley

# ENDNOTES

1. BBC Radio 4: 30 July 2017: accessed in the Guardian 31 July
2. Kendir, 17, Dominican Republic: (2015) from *The Unfinished Business of Girls' Rights*, Plan International
3. Icons downloaded at <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/>
4. Van Der Gaag, Nikki. (2011) "So, what about boys?" *The State of the World's Girls*, Plan International
5. Ruck, M.D., Keating, D.P., Saewyc, E.M., Earls, F. and Ben-Arieh, A. (2014) "The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Its Relevance for Adolescents." *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. Volume 26, Issue 1, pp16-29.
6. Van Praagh, S. (2005) "Adolescence, autonomy and Harry Potter: the child as decision maker". *International Journal of Law in Context*. Volume 1, Issue 4, pp 335-373.
7. Croll, E.J. (2006) "From the Girl Child to Girls' Rights". *Third World Quarterly*. Volume 27, Number 7, pp 1285-1297.
8. [https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/TABriefs/39\\_SafeSpaces.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/TABriefs/39_SafeSpaces.pdf)
9. *100 Million Reasons: Plan International's Global Strategy 2017-2022*
10. Schulte, J., Hendriks, S., Livesey, A., Jacobs, A. & Gallinetti, J. (2014) *Hear Our Voices*. Woking, Plan International
11. Schulte, J., Hendriks, S., Livesey, A., Jacobs, A. & Gallinetti, J. (2014) *Hear Our Voices*. Woking, Plan International
12. Szyndler, R & Ryan, O (2015). *Girls Speak Out: a four-country survey of young women's attitudes and recommendations for action*. Plan International and Ipsos Mori
13. Szyndler, R & Ryan, O (2015). *Girls Speak Out: a four-country survey of young women's attitudes and recommendations for action*. Plan International and Ipsos Mori
14. Szyndler, R & Ryan, O (2015). *Girls Speak Out: a four-country survey of young women's attitudes and recommendations for action*. Plan International and Ipsos Mori
15. Goulds, S & Hendriks, S. (2015). "Voices of Hope: Charting the Future", *The State of the World's Girls: The Unfinished Business of Girls' Rights*. Plan International
16. *Counting the Invisible: Using Data to Transform the Lives of Girls and Women by 2030*. Woking, Plan International
17. Esplen, E. (2015). "Progress for women and girls in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". *OECD Observer*. Number 303, pp14-16.
18. Casey, J. & Campbell, L. (2016). *Counting the Invisible: Girls' Rights and Reality*. Plan International
19. Szyndler, R & Ryan, O (2015). *Girls Speak Out: a four-country survey of young women's attitudes and recommendations for action*. Plan International and Ipsos Mori
20. Casey, J. & Campbell, L. (2016). *Counting the Invisible: Using Data to Transform the Lives of Girls and Women by 2030: Girls Share Their Views*. Plan International
21. Reynaert, D., Bouverne-De Bie, M. & Vandeveldde, S. (2012). "Between 'believers' and 'opponents': Critical discussions on children's rights". *International Journal of Children's Rights*. Volume 20, pp155-168
22. Reynaert, D., Bouverne-De Bie, M. & Vandeveldde, S. (2012). "Between 'believers' and 'opponents': Critical discussions on children's rights". *International Journal of Children's Rights*. Volume 20, pp155-168
23. Plan International (2015) *The State of the World's Girls: Champions of Change*
24. The full research reports are available online at <https://plan-international.org/voices-of-hope>
25. More detail on research methodology, questions and findings available in the technical reports online at <https://plan-international.org/voices-of-hope>
26. Marcus and Harper (2014) cited in ODI (2015) *Social Norms, Gender Norms and Adolescent Girls: A Brief Guide*. London: Overseas Development Institute
27. ODI (2015) *Support to women and girls' leadership: A rapid review of the evidence*. London: Overseas Development Institute



## About this report

This report, building on research gathered over the last decade, focuses on the testimony of young people, particularly adolescent girls, and on their right to properly participate in decisions that affect their lives at family, community and national levels. It emphasises that girls are almost always denied the opportunity, at home, at school and in their wider communities, to be heard and heeded. Their voices and experiences do not influence or lead change: they are not decision-makers even in matters, like leaving school and getting married, that have a massive impact on their lives. They are largely invisible in public spaces. In this report we are listening carefully to what they have told us about what must be done and how to do it.

---

## About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

---

### Plan International

International Headquarters  
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,  
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155  
Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505  
E-mail: [info@plan-international.org](mailto:info@plan-international.org)

[plan-international.org](http://plan-international.org)

-  [facebook.com/planinternational](https://facebook.com/planinternational)
-  [twitter.com/planglobal](https://twitter.com/planglobal)
-  [instagram.com/planinternational](https://instagram.com/planinternational)
-  [linkedin.com/company/plan-international](https://linkedin.com/company/plan-international)
-  [youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv](https://youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv)

Published in 2017. Text © Plan International

Plan International has obtained permission and the necessary consent to publish the photos contained herein.