

# Real Choices, Real Lives

## Research Study Methodology

### About *Real Choices, Real Lives*

*Real Choices, Real Lives* is a longitudinal and qualitative research study that has been tracking the lives of more than 100 girls in nine countries around the world since their births in 2006. Through annual in-depth interviews with the girls and their caregivers, the study explores the girls' daily realities, attitudes and aspirations for the future. The study aims to document the social, economic, cultural and institutional factors that influence girls' lives and their opportunities. *Real Choices, Real Lives* has a distinct commitment to understanding the root causes of gender inequality, and to exploring how girls' attitudes and behaviours are influenced by their families and communities at different stages of their development. By asking questions about beliefs, values and expectations, the study aims to uncover how gendered social norms and behaviours are created and sustained or shift over time.

Data on the study has now been gathered since 2007, giving a unique insight into the life cycle of girls and the choices, decisions and realities that shape their lives. We carry out the research with a level of depth that many larger quantitative studies cannot always replicate; it has allowed Plan International to track and monitor girls' different experiences of gender norms across their lifespans, as well as the attitudes and behaviour of the families and communities they are part of. Over the years, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has generated rich and nuanced material about girls around the world which has been used applied more broadly to girls across the nine countries at the national level, and even globally.

The study has gathered data and [published reports](#) on a vast array of topics and themes, including education, health (including sexual and reproductive health and rights), hunger, protection and violence, girls' activism and participation in civic spaces, climate change, the ways in which girls are challenging gender norms, and many others.



Girls at school in Cambodia  
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The cohort girls are from nine countries around the world: from Benin, Togo and Uganda in Africa; Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam; and Brazil, Dominican Republic and El Salvador in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Apart from Brazil and the Dominican Republic, all of the cohort girls are situated in low- to lower-middle income countries (LMICs), while Brazil and the Dominican Republic are considered upper-middle income economies. However, all girls within each of the nine countries were sampled to be from among the poorest households within each country.

A unique feature of *Real Choices, Real Lives* is that we are afforded the privilege of hearing from girls in their own words about their daily realities, their experiences, their choices and opportunities, their aspirations for the future, and how they have navigated gender norms throughout their lives. In this report, we hear directly from girls around the world about how they spend their time and what influences this; the impacts of their time use on their education, economic participation, health and wellbeing, and aspirations; and their recommendations for change.

## Methodology

As a qualitative, longitudinal study, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has been tracking the experiences of girls and their families around the world from their births in 2006, until when they will turn 18 by the end of 2024. The study aims to document the social, economic, cultural and institutional variables that influence girls' lives and their life chances, through the perspectives of girls in their own words. Through longitudinal analysis of an 18-year dataset, *Real Choices, Real Lives* data provides a rare and insightful evidence base for exploring girls' everyday realities and how gender norms and other factors have influenced changes and trends in their lives across their childhood and adolescence.

The core *Real Choices, Real Lives* research methodology is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with girls and their caregivers, conducted annually. From when the girls were born in 2006 until they turned 7 in 2013, interviews were conducted solely with one of the girls' parents/caregivers – usually their mother, but in some cases the father, grandmother, an aunt, or other family member who shares the same household with the girl and is responsible for her care. Since 2013, interviews and participatory and age-appropriate activities have also been conducted with the girls – including drawing exercises and interactive play activities.

For the purposes of longitudinal analysis, we regularly use the same data collection tools covering the same themes and topics (typically every second year). These questions concern the same themes and use similar language to allow us to compare each year of data collection and analyse for change over time.

These themes include education; household make-up and changes, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), girls' time use, including household responsibilities, leisure time and social networks, gender norms, attitudes and behaviours, violence and safety, and girls' aspirations for the future.



A girl in Vietnam does her homework  
Plan International



Girl with her mother in Benin  
© Plan International



A girl in El Salvador does a jigsaw puzzle  
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A girl in the Dominican Republic  
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As the girls grow up it has been important that the tools are age-appropriate and include wording, vignettes and activities that reflect their development stages and are relevant for their maturity levels. All interview tools for the study involve semi-structured interviews (SSIs). Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, SSIs employ a mixture of open and closed questions, accompanied by follow-up ‘why?’ or ‘how’ questions that prompt the respondent to expand on their answers.<sup>i</sup> The benefits of SSIs are numerous: they are more relaxed and engaging – which is an ideal format for interacting with young people – and because of their open nature, the dialogue can meander around topics (allowing a respondent time to warm up, or become comfortable with talking about the issue), or can venture into unforeseen areas that provide exciting and invaluable insights that would not have otherwise been uncovered.<sup>ii</sup> As well, if necessary, SSIs provide a space for the participant to bypass a sensitive subject if they are feeling uncomfortable, which allows us to prioritise the wellbeing and comfort of the cohort girls.

SSIs also allow for a reciprocal exchange of information during an interview – which is a key method that feminist researchers have explored as a means to reduce the power imbalance inherent in research. Reciprocity within an interview means providing the time and space for participant to ask questions of the researcher about their life and experiences,<sup>iii</sup> or to seek other information from the researcher - like asking educational questions (for example, during 2023 data collection, some of the cohort girls used the opportunity to ask for more information about climate change).

In addition to interviews, the study uses a household inventory tool to capture information about household composition, income, illnesses, and changes over times; and an observation tool which captures the interviewer’s reflections on family dynamics, the girl’s demeanour, and important environmental and contextual information about the girl’s daily life.

In alternate years, instead of the longitudinal tools, *Real Choices, Real Lives* conducts deep-dives into specific themes or topics that have emerged through historical analysis of the dataset – though these tools still allow for longitudinal analysis to follow the girls’ experiences of gender norms. For example, in 2023 the data collection focused on the cohort girls’ experiences of [climate change and the impact on their education](#). This thematic focus came about as a result of longitudinal analysis of the dataset which revealing an increasing trend of girls mentioning (unprompted) extreme weather events and disruption to their schooling. For this research, we developed specific interview tools designed to explore girls’ knowledge about, experiences of, and ideas of how to adapt to climate change.



## Research Ethics

Plan International receives external ethical approval for the *Real Choices, Real Lives* research study from a certified IRB, and from national ethics boards in relevant focal countries. The most recent ethical approval for data collection was provided by the global affairs think tank, ODI, in February 2024. All research activities for the study are undertaken in line with [Plan International's ethics, safeguarding and data privacy policies and procedures](#).

Principles of confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence, justice and informed consent are always applied, with parents/guardians asked for consent on an annual basis and girls asked to give their assent. All of the cohort girls' identities are anonymised – the girls are all assigned a pseudonym, and information about their location is removed from the dataset.

In the first six years of data collection on the study (2007-2012), informed consent was sought from the girls' caregivers for their participation. From 2013, *Real Choices, Real Lives* has interviewed the girls themselves in addition to their caregivers – and therefore the girls were asked for their assent to take part after their caregiver had provided consent. If a girl declined to participate then her lack of assent would overrule the caregiver's consent – recognising that children have agency which should be respected. In 2024, roughly a third of the cohort girls were 18 years of age at the time of data collection. These girls and their caregivers were individually and separately asked for their consent to participate in respective data collection activities. Whether either party consented or declined did not influence whether the other was interviewed, for example, if the parent declined but the girl consented, we would still interview the girl but not the parent (and vice versa).

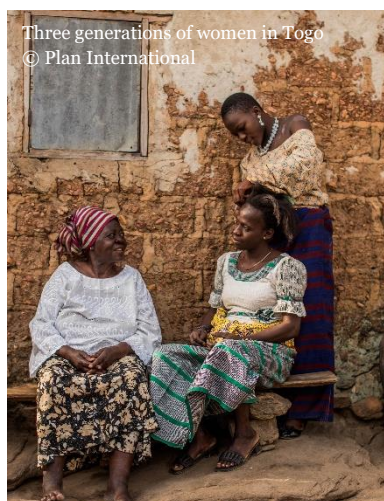


## Feminist research principles and praxis of *Real Choices, Real Lives*

Plan International is committed to ensuring that all research activities are informed by feminist methodologies, which prioritise principles and praxis of do no harm, reflexivity, reciprocity, and centring the voices of girls and marginalised groups.<sup>iv</sup> The principle of Do No Harm calls on researchers to consider how the research activities could be perceived by the participants, any potential harms they could experience, any political, social or economic impact of their participation, and what risk mitigations need to be put in place.<sup>v</sup> Practicing do no harm in the context of interviewing adolescent girls means celebrating and emphasising agency and autonomy of girls, respecting their views and perspectives, and not attaching stigma or judgement to things that they share. We do not dictate what gender equality or the resistance against gender norms should look like (for example, telling girls that they shouldn't do so much housework) – as we recognise that this is antithetical to decolonial praxis. Rather, we encourage the cohort girls to complete their education and be equipped to make informed choices, and we report on the ways in which they interact with and explore gender norms they experience.

Reflexivity refers to the need for researchers step back and identify power relations (hidden or otherwise) that are at play in a research project, and which researchers might otherwise take for granted or overlook due to their assumptions and biases (informed by their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities).<sup>vi</sup> Reflexivity also calls on researchers to endeavour to minimise power imbalances between researchers and participants.<sup>vii</sup> *Real Choices, Real Lives* has taken many steps to minimise power imbalances and biases; one example is that we ensure that all interviews are

conducted by researchers from each respective focal country (i.e. a girl in Togo would be interviewed by a Togolese researcher who lives and works in Togo – ideally in the local area of the girl) and conducted in the girl’s local language (for example, Ewé<sup>1</sup> rather than French). Not only does this help ensure the comfort of the girl and promotes greater cultural understanding, but it also works to reduce power imbalances.



Reciprocity is another key element of a feminist research methodology that is employed by *Real Choices*, *Real Lives*. This refers to exploring a new relationship between the researcher and researched, and challenging traditional power dynamics in interviews where the interviewer ‘extracts’ knowledge from the participants. Reciprocity is practiced in *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* interviews by ensuring that the interviewers provide meaningful and helpful information to the girls; for example, if a girl asks questions about her sexual and reproductive health rights, then the interviewer will share information with the girl to help advance her knowledge.

It is also our intention that evidence informs Plan International’s programming and advocacy work in the girls’ local communities, thereby directly benefiting the cohort girls, their families, and their peers. For example, findings from *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* exploration of [SRHR in adolescence](#) highlighted that the cohort girls were keen to receive more information about their sexual health and wellbeing from their caregivers – however their caregivers were unsure of how to initiate this dialogue. Plan International Benin used evidence from *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* to partner with local youth to [co-produce radio shows about SRHR issues](#) to encourage healthy dialogues between adolescents and their caregivers. The radio shows were aired in the same communities that the cohort girls and their families live in, ensuring that the information shared by the girls was used to benefit the research participants directly.

Critically, the girls and their families are compensated for their time - recognising that their time is valuable, and honouring the generous contribution that they are making to the research. Each year, the girls and their families are given relevant and culturally appropriate compensation (as determined by the respective Plan Country Office teams) - for instance, girls still in school may be provided with school supplies they need to support their ongoing education.



<sup>1</sup> One of 44 languages spoken in Togo.

Finally, a feminist research methodology centres the voices of women and marginalised people in order to make visible the experiences, perspective and daily realities of people whose voices have historically been seldom heard in research.<sup>viii</sup> This is why the key method employed by *Real Choices, Real Lives* is semi-structured interviews, as this allows the girls to voice their experiences in their own words – which provides more insights about their lives that generalised data sets about girls can. As much as possible, in all *Real Choices, Real Lives* publications we aim to quote directly from the cohort girls, rather than paraphrase, to ensure that their voices are centred and heard. *Real Choices, Real Lives* works to ensure that all [programmes and interventions](#) intended to support girls to claim their rights and agency are informed by the views and experiences of girls themselves.



Plan International is committed to decolonising the aid and development sector, which requires radically examining and challenging the dominant approaches of aid towards involving and elevating the people, systems and methods that have been historically marginalised and oppressed by colonialism and white supremacy.<sup>ix</sup> Centring the voices of girls and using participatory methods is a component of a wider and more complex effort by Plan International towards decolonising aid.

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<sup>i</sup> Adams, W. (2015) Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews, in Newcomer, K.E. et al (ed) Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation, Hoboken, N.J.: Jossey-Bass, p. 493. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301738442\\_Conducting\\_Semi-Structured\\_Interviews](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301738442_Conducting_Semi-Structured_Interviews). Accessed: 24/05/2024.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Oakley, A. (1981) Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms, in Roberts, H. (ed) *Doing Feminist Research*, London: Routledge.

<sup>iv</sup> Catterson, C. (2022) *Multiplicity and Mess: The Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation in Somaliland*, Sydney, Australia: The University of Sydney, pp.51-63. Available at: [https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/27540/Catterson\\_CM\\_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/27540/Catterson_CM_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). Accessed: 28/05/2024.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, pp.62-63.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, p.56.

<sup>vii</sup> Skinner, T. et al (2005) Methodology, feminism and gender violence, in Skinner, T. et al (eds) *Researching Gender Violence: Feminist methodology in action*. London: Routledge.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Plan International (2022) *Thoughts on Decolonising the Aid Sector – Part 1*. Available at: <https://planinternational.org/blog/2022/03/22/thoughts-on-decolonising-the-aid-sector-part-1/>. Accessed: 02/06/2024.