Adolescent girls’ potential to disrupt the gender socialization process: Evidence from Plan International UK’s longitudinal cohort study, ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’

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This brief discusses findings from Plan International UK’s ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ report, which explores factors in adolescent girls’ lives across Benin, Togo and Uganda that may influence them to ‘accept’ or ‘disrupt’ the gender socialization process. The brief focuses on one of a handful of qualitative longitudinal studies addressing the challenges of gender norms in low- and middle-income country settings, providing crucial evidence in these countries to address Sustainable Development Goal 5 on achieving gender equality.

WHY FOCUS ON DISRUPTION OF GENDER SOCIALIZATION?

The outcomes of gender socialization are increasingly well documented thanks to greater consideration of gender and structural inequalities in research, policy and programming. However, it is the gendered social norms – the ‘informal rules of the game’ that establish expectations about ‘appropriate’ behaviour for males and females – which continue to underpin and reproduce inequitable practices that ultimately result in girls and boys (and women and men) enjoying differential access to resources, as well as unequal opportunities and outcomes.

Despite growing emphasis amongst the international development community on supporting interventions that aim to transform gender relations, understanding of how and why gendered social norms can shift remains limited.

The longitudinal view of the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ data – and its emphasis on girls’ own experiences – provides a unique perspective for highlighting markers of where there is potential for gender norm transformation if, and when, the broader social, economic and political conditions align. The evidence provides a valuable contribution to existing knowledge for considering the timing, duration and scope of interventions aimed at transforming gender inequality. As such, it is aimed at international development practitioners and policymakers, as well as the development research community.

METHODOLOGY

Using longitudinal qualitative data

‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ is a longitudinal cohort study run by Plan International UK. It follows over 120 girls from nine countries across three continents from their birth in 2006 until they reach the age of 18 in 2024. The study is undertaken across nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Togo, Uganda), South East Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam), and Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador). In this round of analysis, the focus is on the 37 cohort girls in the three sub-Saharan Africa countries.

The longitudinal study design is a powerful one for understanding complex dynamic processes, such as changes in gender norms, and for tracking disruption over time. This type of data – which collects information on the same child as they age – is well positioned to capture unexpected changes and to attribute causality to those changes. An examination of gender across the life course can facilitate our understanding of multiple
convergences of influences that shape human trajectories and contribute to increasing or decreasing inequalities in changing times and across various contexts. Such analysis can help us understand the complex dynamics and interplay of human agency and the constraints of culture, social institutions and history (Banati, 2019).

Critically, longitudinal research is able to unpack cause and consequence, and to facilitate understanding of determinants or drivers of negative outcomes in society and how these might be transmitted intergenerationally. Identifying and analysing the structural determinants and the causal pathways through which everyday inequalities are reproduced and manifested in homes and communities can better inform programme and policy interventions. By exposing the root causes of gender inequality in society, this type of information is key to identifying effective responses.

In this Plan International study, annual data collection consists of in-depth qualitative interviews undertaken with a key caregiver and, from 2013 onwards, with the girl herself. By focusing on the girl and her caregiver’s attitudes towards, and experiences of, gendered social norms, the study fosters a clearer understanding of the main influencing factors that facilitate the reproduction or disruption of gendered social norms. Tracking back through the longitudinal data enables a mapping of when and in which areas of a girl’s life she demonstrates ‘slippage’ in the gender socialization process (Butler, 1993; Butler, 1996; Butler, 1999). This ‘slippage’ can be anything from a girl noticing that differing expectations and acceptable behaviours exist for boys and girls, to her speaking out or rejecting a gendered social norm in her life.

**IDENTIFYING THE “HOW?” AND “WHY?”**

**The “How?”**

Academic literature around ‘social resistance’ outlines varying levels or typologies that categorize the different ways in which individuals can challenge a norm – from the vocalization of a deviating attitude, to collective social action (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Gal, 1995). Gathered through interviews and interviewer observations, the qualitative ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ data enables the identification of certain typologies of ‘resistance’ to norms: discursive, attitudinal and some behavioural (see Table 1). However, a limitation of the study is in capturing evidence of active behavioural change and collective social change, as the data relies mainly on verbal descriptions of behaviours. In the majority of cases, respondents expressed either: 1) a verbalized recognition that there are differing expectations of and realities for boys/girls and men/women, based on gender; 2) a verbalized attitude that challenges a gendered social norm; or 3) a verbal description of a behaviour that challenges or disrupts a gendered social norm.

**The “Why?”**

Understanding why a girl may verbally or actively challenge a gendered social norm is the principal objective as well as the most problematic aspect of the analysis. Here, the analysis draws on an ecological model to explore the different levels of influence on the gender socialization process – namely **individual** level factors (personal capacities, identity and development); **social** level factors (the people and institutions with whom an individual interacts); and **structural** level factors (the broader social, political and economic context within which an individual lives). The potential ‘drivers’ of disruption to the process have been mapped against this framework, drawing from the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ data. Whilst there are a few instances where the influencing factor in a girl’s challenge of a norm is directly cited, the majority of the analysis points to the potential or likely source(s). In the data from Benin, Togo and Uganda, the influencing factors presented in Table 2 below were the most prominent and identifiable.

**Contextualizing the individual**

Diligent and conscious consideration go the girls’ specific contexts is essential to this analysis. The tendency to use a European/North American lens in understanding gendered social norms would provide inaccurate findings. Only by first identifying the dominant norm within a girl’s context can analysis of her interaction with that particular norm be understood. Similarly, understanding her context in relation to how and why she may challenge a norm is vital for informing context-specific policy and programming that seeks to facilitate social norm change.
## Table 1: Types of resistance to norms captured (and not captured)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>What can be observed in the data?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discursive</td>
<td>Identifying differences “Boys can go where they like but girls can’t.” – Barbara, Benin, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
<td>Verbalized attitudes “My parents prefer the boys to concentrate on field work and the girls on household tasks. I don’t find this fair.” – Essohana, Togo, 2017</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>Described behaviours “As for me I noticed that that was unfair, so I decided that everyone should get involved.” – Beti’s mother, Uganda, 2015</td>
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### What is outside the scope of the data?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual active behaviour</th>
<th>Observed behavioural change on the individual level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Collective active behaviour</td>
<td>Observed behavioural change beyond the individual level (family, social network, community, etc.)</td>
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## Table 2: Overview of different factors of resistance

### Structural level

1. Socio-economic situation, changes in economy and changes in male/female employment.
2. National and regional level policies and laws in terms of education, corporal punishment and gender equality.
3. Representation of women in public life.

### Social level

1. Parent/carer attitudes and behaviours – the girl’s most significant relationships and how they change, contrasting attitudes and behaviours of parents/carers.
2. The presence/absence and behaviour of males in the house including a) adult males and b) male children (brothers/cousins/peers).
3. The use of corporal punishment in the home and/or at school.

### Individual level

1. The girl’s priorities and if she recognizes how they interact/conflict with each other, related to education and leisure time.
2. The girl’s physical and cognitive maturity and awareness of social norms around her.
3. The girl’s repetition of gendered social norms or her level of disruption or general ‘disobedience’ in other areas of her life.
Key Findings

1. All 37 girls from the sub-Saharan Africa cohort show some level of ‘resistance’ to gendered norms and to what is expected of them, thereby demonstrating the potential for gender socialization to be disrupted.

2. Adolescence is a key point in the girls’ lives: gendered expectations about behaviour are reinforced, alongside increased expressions of ‘resistance’ to what is considered appropriate acceptable.

3. The process of disrupting gendered expectations – the ‘glitches’ that occur – is not linear but rather varies and fluctuates across time as well as across different aspects of girls’ lives.

4. Social level influences (household dynamics and the wider community) are significant in forming or breaking gendered social expectations, including the importance of key female role models as well as extended family members.

5. Persistent concerns related to the risk of gender-based violence and corporal punishment restrict progress in relation to ‘disruption’ of gendered social norms.

Girls’ potential to disrupt

Significantly, the longitudinal analysis found that all 37 cohort girls in the sub-Saharan African countries have shown the potential to disrupt gendered social norms at some point and in some area/s of their lives (see Figure1). The main areas where the girls demonstrate ‘slippage’ in the gender socialization process relate to social norms concerning:

- girls’ domestic responsibilities
- girls’ interactions with boys
- girls’ future roles
- girls’ obedience and deference
Figure 1: Overview of ‘glitches’ across girls in the sub-Saharan African countries

MAP 2: IDENTIFYING ‘GLITCHES’ ACROSS THE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Girl Name</th>
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Adolescence as a point of intervention

In wider literature, gender socialization has previously been regarded as a process that happens in early childhood and that is effectively ‘completed’ by adolescence (UNICEF, 2017). However, an increasing focus on adolescence is demonstrating that this period – that has been overlooked in research and programming – represents a critical stage in the life course. Adolescence can be seen as a unique period of life unlike any other, with specificities (both risks and opportunities) that require particular attention. Wide-ranging evidence from neuroscience to psychology to education supports the idea of adolescence representing a unique window of development (Banati and Lansford, 2018). Gender differences emerge during this period and can interact with other forms of disadvantage, leading to accumulated effects. This is evident in the Real Choices, Real Lives data, not only in the changing realities of the girls as they enter adolescence but also in their increasing awareness and critiquing of gender norms at this age – presenting a potential point of intervention for social norm change.

For the girls across Benin, Togo and Uganda, expectations around their appropriate behaviour and roles, for example, in relation to the acceptability and ‘dangers’ of interacting with boys, are reinforced as they reach adolescence.

“…she has to change her ways and be more careful because if she now plays with any man [she can] get pregnant because she is now a woman, and this worries me.”

– Amelia’s mother, Uganda, 2017

Further, while it is clear that gendered expectations in relation to domestic responsibilities begin from an earlier age, adolescence and the onset of puberty often mark a shift in girls being regarded less as children and more as young women. This emphasizes their domestic roles as preparation for their future as women – “wives” and “mothers”; “they train them and then they marry”

– Margaret’s father, Benin, 2016

From 2016, many of the girls have demonstrated increasing awareness of these differing gender roles and the impact they have on how they spend their time, who they interact with, and their future (see Box 1).

Box 1: Girls’ awareness of gender roles from the onset of early adolescence

“My parents believe that girls must do housework, while the boys should look after the cattle. I think that is a bit unfair, because girls have to go to the fields with their mothers to collect wood to make charcoal, so the boys could also do some jobs in the house.”

– Mangazia, Togo, 2017

“It’s not fair because you both go to the garden but remember it’s the woman to come back and make sure food is ready on time. So, for you to be able to do, you have do extra work: you go to the garden very early so that you come back to take care of the home needs. It’s not fair because it would be okay for the men also to do the chores and cooking as the women also look for money.”

– Justine, Uganda, 2017

“The boy is expected to be a doctor.” (How do you feel if your expectation is not the same as for your brother?) “I feel good because when he is doctor and I am a teacher, when I fall sick he is able to treat me, and I can teach him.”

– Shifa, Uganda, 2017

“...if [girls] are not strong and fit they won’t be able to work at the same level as the boys.”

– Alice, Benin, 2017

(Is it important for girls to be beautiful?) “Yes, because when they are clean and beautiful, they attract the attention of boys who call out to them; I’ve seen this in the neighbourhood.”

– Barbara, Benin, 2017

“I would like to be rich. I want to be a nun as I don’t want to get married or have children.”

– Margaret, Benin, 2017
Fluctuation in disruption of the gender socialization process

Notably, the instances of ‘slippage’ that the girls demonstrate do not follow a linear process of noticing-critiquing-contesting, but rather fluctuate both across different aspects of a girl’s life as well as across time.

The data shows that norms, which are at one point adhered to unquestioningly, subsequently become questioned or contested. However, there are also indications that this process can revert, or ‘disruption’ can be ‘stamped out’. For example, this is evident in the case of Margaret who was sent to live with her aunt in 2016 due to her ‘unacceptable’ behaviour and who returned to her parental home in 2017:

2014 – “Sometimes I cry when I don’t want to do it. No, I always do it in the end. I realize that it’s not too much for me, but sometimes I wish I could have more time to play.”

2015 – “Our mother gives us our jobs, but the boys refuse to do any domestic chores so it’s me and my sister who have to do it.”

2016 – “I don’t do anything in the house. I don’t do the tasks my mother gives me, I do what I want.”

2017 – “I would make the effort to do it because I wouldn’t want my parents to think of me as disobedient.”

Further, whilst girls may display some degree of resistance to gendered expectations around their behaviour in some areas of their lives, they may simultaneously conform in others. As such, there are clear opportunities to influence these expectations. This is supported by evidence which highlights the case for interventions to be done early enough and over a significant enough duration to influence adolescent development and facilitate social change.

Influences: Individual, social and structural level factors

The analysis identified clear individual level capacities amongst the girls, with indications that where their voice and agency are fostered (for example, through parent-child communication) this can translate into them being able to voice opinions and engage in negotiation related to expectations around their roles.

“I would refuse to do it and calmly explain my reasons.”

– Essohana, Togo, 2017

Additionally, there is evidence that broader structural level factors are significant in underpinning gendered norms in the case, for example, of limited access to contraception, and that shifts in public discourse may be having an impact on individual willingness and ability to ‘speak out’. This appears to be the case in Uganda where there are marked differences in terms of how girls describe saying “no” – often expressed in relation to morality.

“I don’t do anything [my parents ask me] against my heart and can’t be forced to do things I don’t want to, whatever I do, it’s my decision.”

– Justine, Uganda, 2017

Changing educational opportunities may also be influencing what girls consider to be possible. However, differential provision and limitations on access to education between regions within countries limits the potential for this to be translated into reality. This can be seen in the case of Benin where nine out of 10 cohort girls and their families aspire to attend university, but where progress on tertiary education attainment remains disparate in terms of urban/rural and richer/poorer regions, and male/female.2

Across the three African countries, it is evident that social level factors, including household dynamics and social institutions, are the most significant influencers in forming and breaking gendered social expectations. Indeed, we see indications that behaviours which go against or transgress the expected norm are increasingly concealed by girls as they get older and, in some cases, this concealment shifts from the domestic sphere to the public sphere. At the same time, there are suggestions that school and the wider community may be places where gendered expectations of behaviour are less

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2 For example, the national average of 15–24-year-old females attaining tertiary education rose from 0.5 per cent in 2000 to 2.5 per cent in 2012. However, in the Couffo region, where the cohort girls live, 0 per cent of 15–24-year-old females attained tertiary education in 2012.
strictly policed. However, this is an area that requires further exploration.3

“I don’t play with boys at school like in the house.”
– Essohana, Togo, 2013

“My parents and big brothers don’t like me playing with boys, they tell me off and sometimes smack me if I do. So, at school, I like playing with my friends who are boys but not at home.”
– Essohana, Togo, 2017

For the girls in Benin, Togo and Uganda, household dynamics are fluid and changeable but have a significant influence on their lives in many different ways. For example, ‘slippages’ can be seen amongst a number of girls in cases where their mothers also speak out against gendered divisions or reflect alternative ways of doing things through their actions.

“Previously, during rainy seasons, we would say only girls or only boys should do this or that, but we discovered that it affects them. Now if I say that only girls cook, it seems so unfair but previously it was that boys are not supposed to cook. As for me, I noticed that it was unfair, so I decided that everyone should get involved.”
– Beti’s mother, Uganda, 2015

“No [it’s not fair] …Because the chores women do are more as compared to those done by the men.” (How do you think there could be more balance?) “By teaching the children discipline and also tell them to do all kind of chores [whether they are] a boy or a girl.”
– Beti, Uganda, 2017

However, evidence about the role of the extended family is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, girls are sent to aunts to reinforce gendered expectations of behaviour, whilst on the other hand aunts are the ‘go to’ people for information that is socially taboo, particularly on issues related to sexual and reproductive health.

“When I observe my daughter Margaret, I think of moving her to Cotonou, to stay with my senior sister. Because when I speak to her, she doesn’t listen, she’s not obedient and she doesn’t fear me. When she was on holidays in my sister’s home at Cotonou, she used to be very obedient and nice.”
– Margaret’s father, Benin, 2014

“I hope that Margaret progresses well in her studies, so she can find a good job and be financially independent so that she can take care of herself and her children even if her husband can’t.”
– Margaret’s aunt, Benin, 2017

This creates a situation where wider female household members are both transmitters of gendered expectations as well as potentially contributors to consciousness raising and shifting perceptions.

The importance of key female role models is also evident in relation to the wider context, where women in prominent positions – for example, as referenced by the cohort girls, the Speaker of the House in Uganda and female MPs in Togo – are seen to inspire not only the girls’ aspirations towards ‘something different’, but also their parents’ and caregivers’ perceptions of what is possible or acceptable for a girl’s future role.

“My role model is the Rt. Hon. Kadaga. I admire her because she has a lot of money and she knows English.”
– Nimisha, Uganda, 2017

“If you have a woman minister, should you wait for her to come back from her work to cook for you? No! You can’t wait for your minister wife to come home and cook. Everything that men do, women can also do and vice versa.”
– Alice’s father, Benin, 2017

These factors point to the significance of the social context – not only the household but also the wider community – in providing spaces and opportunities for girls to engage in activities that facilitate the translation of ‘glitches’ into disruption, rather than reinforcing gendered norms.

Obstacles to the disruption of gendered social norms

While the potential of adolescent girls to ‘disrupt’ is evident, the data also starkly highlights that where the wider social network is not supportive, the degree of change

3 The wider literature points to schools as potential sites for social change, but also highlights that they can be sites where gender inequalities are perpetuated (for example, through corporal punishment, sexual violence and peer violence).
is limited. It is clear that persistent concerns in terms of the wider context – especially the risk of (gender-based) violence and the risks of sex and pregnancy related to ‘dangerous’ interactions with males – remain a significant barrier to change and limit girls’ opportunities and their freedom.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to encourage friendship between boys and girls as it invariably leads to sex and an unplanned pregnancy could ruin a girl’s future...”

– Eleanor’s mother, Benin, 2016

“Some other people think that girls and boys should move together, even when they go to bathe, but others think that when you bath together the boys can rape you.”

– Justine, Uganda, 2017

The girls’ instances of ‘slippage’ fall short of translating into disruption, particularly where this is met with opposition from the wider household or social network.

In many cases, the girls link their limited expressions of ‘deviant’ behaviour to fear of corporal punishment and expectations of deference to older – and in particular male – household members. Corporal punishment is considered a way to maintain order and there are indications from the girls that they fear the repercussions of going against their elders: “I would do it or they would smack me” (Ladi, Togo, 2017). When stating, “Because when I speak to her, she doesn’t listen, she’s not obedient and she doesn’t fear me,” Margaret’s father in Benin suggests that this fear may be considered desirable or reflect the ‘correct’ state of affairs (2014, see full quote above).

Overall, while there are signs of fathers verbally supporting change – for example, to make divisions of work more equal between boys and girls – there are fewer indications that they support this happening in practice.

**Implications for policy and programming**

The recommendations below draw specifically from the evidence and analysis of our data and are aimed at donors and practitioners to: 1) support the integration of gender transformative approaches across sectors by considering the types of interventions to fund (timing, duration, design/scope); and 2) point to several more sector-specific interventions (for example, education, and gender-based violence).

**Types of intervention**

- **Intervene earlier:** recognizing that gender socialization processes commence from a very early age, efforts to influence adolescents’ development and opportunities must begin in childhood.

- **Commit to sustained, long-term interventions throughout adolescence:** recognizing that social norm change takes time and is unlikely to be accomplished in short-term project cycles.

- **Employ adaptive programming approaches that allow for risk, failure and learning:** recognizing that social norm change is complex and non-linear and that interventions will need to be responsive to changing dynamics.

- **Invest in and allow time for formative research:** to aid understanding of which norms are most relevant for particular behaviours, who the key reference groups are, and which norms may be most susceptible to influence or change.

- **Continue to support authorities to make wider policy and practice changes:** identifying those that have an impact on realizing gender equality outcomes such as, for example, enabling access to education and employment opportunities, implementing laws that prohibit child marriage, and enforcing provisions on gender-based violence.

**Programme components**

- **Support interventions that introduce role models into girls’ lives:** thus expanding their aspirations and conceptions of what is possible. This may be done, for example, through school engagement or wider public campaigns.

- **Create opportunities for co-educational activities:** encouraging those that allow for and permit positive interaction between girls and boys, in addition to single-sex safe spaces.

- **Ensure interventions facilitate communication and dialogue between spouses and within households:** promoting and enabling shifts towards more equitable distribution of labour and decision-making.

- **Promote communication at both family and community level:** addressing both gender-based violence and corporal punishment and encouraging discussion in households, communities and schools that will interrogate male behaviour and the impact of violence, or the perceived risks of violence, against girls and young women.
Recommendations for future research

- **Build on existing exploration of schools as potential spaces where gender norms and roles may be less strictly enforced**: enabling young people to explore and experiment with alternative identities and behaviours. Investigate how educational programmes can more effectively capitalize on this latent opportunity to foster social norm change.

- **Give greater attention to engaging with the extended family**: noting the significance of practices such as child ‘fostering’, and the ambiguity related to the role of aunts and other female family members in terms of both re-enforcing gender norms and also distributing socially ‘taboo’ knowledge.

- **Explore how cognitive reasoning and the development of (gender) identities**: in adolescence offer opportunities for transformation and then target interventions accordingly.
REFERENCES


