

Exploring the Potential for Gender Norm Change in Adolescent Girls: Evidence from ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ Longitudinal, Qualitative Study Data

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Introduction

The targets outlined by Sustainable Development Goal 5 – to achieve social, economic and political gender equality, eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, and ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and rights – underscore the persistence of gender-based discrimination in almost all public and private spheres, and, despite progress, the scale of the work still needed to realize an equal and equitable society (United Nations, 2015). As global goals, the SDG targets and indicators inevitably lack nuance in terms of implementation, leaving governments and stakeholders space to adapt and implement according to context. However, the notion of gender equality in particular can remain superficial when measured according to female–male ratios and quotas, legal frameworks and quantitative

data – making the SDG 5 indicators relatively limited in terms of reflecting the lived experience of individuals in society.

The negative outcomes of gender inequality which SGD 5 seeks to redress, and which disproportionately affect women and girls, are increasingly well-documented and understood. However, while there is a growing emphasis in the international development community on gender transformative interventions, understandings of the often deep-seated social norms at the core of persistent gender inequalities, and importantly how norms can change, remains limited, hindering progress on the SDG 5 objectives.

Gendered social norms are reproduced during the process of gender socialization which begins from birth as an individual interacts with various social- and structural-level concepts of gender. These are the norms which hold in place the socially constructed set of ‘acceptable’ behaviours for males and females, transgression of which can bring social – and sometimes violent – consequences. Conceptualizations of gender vary between contexts and are often rooted in historical, religious and socioeconomic factors, but in all cases where what is ‘acceptable’ for males and females differs, gendered norms impact individuals’ equal opportunities, treatment and rights in society, reinforcing and perpetuating inequalities. Norms dictating what it means to be ‘masculine’, for example, are increasingly regarded as a core driver of sexual and gender-based violence (Abebe et al, 2018), hence better understanding of the gender socialization process is highly valuable in achieving SGD target 5.2 – to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Understanding gender socialization and facilitating gendered social norm change is therefore crucial to realizing the objectives of SDG 5; however, measuring norm change via quantitative indicators fails to reflect the nuance of attitudes and experiences. The ability of longitudinal, qualitative data to capture shifts in norms over time instead makes it a significantly more effective method of measuring social change and informing gender transformative interventions.

The ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ cohort study

Since 2007, the children’s rights charity Plan International UK has been tracking the lives of over 120¹ girls across nine countries, in three regions: sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Togo and Uganda), South-East Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam) and Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador). The longitudinal, qualitative cohort study, ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’,

intends to follow the girls from their birth in 2006 until 2024 when they turn 18, providing a unique insight into the interaction between gender, age and poverty over a girl's life course.

Unlike SDG 5's large-scale, quantitative indicators of gender equality, the cohort study's qualitative data enables in-depth exploration into the gendered attitudes and behaviours of individual girls and their families and the gender socialization process, while its longitudinal nature is able to capture shifts in social norms. In this way, existing and future evidence from the study is especially valuable in informing programming, policy and research which seeks to facilitate gender norm change and achieve the goals of SDG 5.

Research methodology

Using longitudinal, qualitative data

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study data is collected through annual in-depth qualitative interviews undertaken with a key caregiver for each girl and, from 2013 onwards, with the girl herself. Additional research methods have been used over the course of the study, including story-telling exercises, attitudes assessment, community and social network mapping and creative drawing activities. The design of each annual qualitative research instrument draws from a combination of grounded theory, intersectional feminist theory and the capabilities approach to development. By conducting annual data analysis for every girl in the cohort, the study is able to capture the constants in a girl's life, as well as the important events, changes and shifting relationships during the life course.

The longitudinal design is central to the study's unique value in understanding the complexity of dynamic influences in an individual girl's life, and in tracking disruption of the gender socialization process over time. Importantly, for translating these observations into practical recommendations informing policy and programming, longitudinal research enables an investigation into the causes, determinants or drivers of disruption to the gender socialization process. By mapping the varying levels of influences both of the reproduction of gendered norms and where there is evidence of the gender socialization process across a girl's life course, this research can inform gender transformative interventions in terms of when, through whom and in which spaces girls are already showing the potential for norm change.

Qualitative data presents a particularly effective means to capture the realities of gendered norms, through articulations of attitudes

and descriptions of behaviours which reflect, reiterate or challenge norms. Social norms are difficult to measure in a quantitative sense and attempts to do so overlook the nuance of concepts which can be deeply ingrained. In this way, the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study is able to probe gendered attitudes and behaviours and observe their complexities and frequent contradictions.

Exploring the gender socialization process

Gender socialization – the process of the reproduction, or transferral, of socially ‘acceptable’ behaviours allocated for males and females (gender norms) in any given context – occurs via interaction with various individual, social and structural influences, wherein the individual adapts attitudes and behaviours which adhere to their allocated gender.

Judith Butler (1993, 1999, 2009), among others, argues however that there can be ‘slippage’ in the reproduction of gendered social norms, wherein these ‘acceptable’ behaviours are exposed as social constructions – subject to change – rather than being biological truths.

It is on this understanding that the gender socialization process not only *can* be disrupted but *must* be disrupted in order to achieve social norm change, that the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ longitudinal data has been analysed to identify where there is the potential for this disruption to occur. The markers of where there is the potential for disruption of the gender socialization process are referred to in this analysis as ‘glitches’² (Plan International UK, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), that is, not a direct indication of a shift in gender norms, but where there appears to be a window of opportunity where gendered social norms have not been perfectly reproduced, and gender norm change could be facilitated.

The analysis of the longitudinal, qualitative data of both the girls and their main caregivers sought to identify *when* in the girls’ life – until 2018/19 – she demonstrates ‘glitches’ in the gender socialization process; *where* – in which areas of her life – she demonstrates ‘glitches’; *how* these ‘glitches’ present – either as a verbal comment, critique, attitude, or described behaviour; and, most significantly, to explore *why* this ‘glitch’ may have occurred. All four strands of investigation are valuable for informing gender transformative interventions, and all four depend on both the longitudinal and qualitative nature of this research study.

To investigate the *when* and *where*, longitudinal analysis was conducted for all of the cohort girls still involved in the study in 2017–19, creating a map of ‘glitches’ for each girl. In this way,

commonalities could be observed in each cohort girl, country, region and between regions, as well as evidence of particular circumstances where certain girls demonstrated more or stronger challenges to gendered norms. In categorizing the *how*, social science literature surrounding ‘resistance’ identifies verbal and behavioural, individual, collective and institutional acts of resistance against any given dominant discourse, norm or system (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Scott, 1989). This qualitative study data allows for verbal and described behavioural ‘glitches’ to be observed in the individual girls and their family members. Though verbal-only observations of ‘glitches’ represent a limitation in terms of observing the wider impact of attitudes which challenge gendered norms on individual and group behaviours, they are indications of the vital first steps towards social transformation.

The exploration of *why* girls challenge, rather than reiterating gendered norms, is both the most interesting and difficult factor to observe. This analysis was carried out by adapting the theory of gender socialization (UNICEF, 2017), which identifies the individual-, social- and structural-level influences which communicate gendered social norms to an individual, and to investigate instead the influencing factors which appear to help disrupt the process.

Main findings

- Early adolescence is a key point in the life course for identity formation and heightened awareness of gendered norms, making it a critical point for interventions to disrupt – rather than ingrain – gender-inequitable attitudes and practices.
- The process of challenging gendered norms and disrupting gender socialization is not linear – it varies and fluctuates across time as well as across different aspects of girls’ lives, creating limited but powerful windows of opportunity for norm change.
- Social-level influences – household dynamics and the wider community – are the most significant for an individual in reproducing or challenging gendered social norms. Understanding a girl’s full, and unique, social context allows for the identification of key people and spaces where there is the potential for disruption.
- Structural-level laws, discourse related to gender equality and socioeconomic factors show evidence of influencing gender roles in households and gender-equitable attitudes and should be taken into account in policy and programming. This is particularly the case for attitudes concerning child and early marriage, girls’

education, gender equality and rights; however, laws prohibiting corporal punishment appear to have limited effect in most of these nine contexts.

- A number of obstacles persist in preventing the translation of attitudes which challenge gendered social norms into changed behaviours – principally the real and perceived risks of gender based violence (GBV), which limit girls’ freedoms; the use of corporal punishment, which limits girls’ agency; and harmful norms, which associate violence and aggression with ‘masculinity’.

Longitudinal case studies

Three case studies will be used to present these findings: Margaret in Benin, Juliana in Brazil and Ly in Vietnam. Further detail can be found in Plan International UK’s series of regional reports ‘Real Choices, Real Lives: Girls Challenging the Gender Rules’ (2019a, 2019b, 2019c). To construct and analyse longitudinal case studies through the lens of gender socialization, the qualitative data held for each girl was mapped to present the girl’s own attitudes and described behaviours in relation to the presence/absence, attitudes and behaviours of key people in her life, her socioeconomic status, education and academic progress, physical and cognitive development, and evidence of her interactions with social- and structural-level institutions and concepts concerning gender norms. Looking at where an individual appears to ‘accept’ gendered expectations and reiterate gendered social norms, as well as where they appear to challenge said expectations and norms, enabled a greater understanding of the factor(s) – often a combination of more than one – which contributed to a shift. Along with a case study, a timeline of the ‘glitches’ to the gender socialization process demonstrated by a girl was used to track constants and changes in her attitudes and behaviours regarding gendered norms.

Box 1.1: Margaret, Benin

Margaret is 11 years old and the second eldest child in a family of six: she has an older sister, aged 16, two younger brothers, 9 and 6, and a younger sister, aged 2. Margaret was living with her mother, father and four siblings in a village in the south-western Couffo department of Benin until 2017 when she was sent to live with her paternal aunt, uncle and 13-year-old female cousin because “she was not obeying her parents” (Interviewer observation,

2017). Both of Margaret's parents work – her mother as a farmer and seller of cornmeal, and her father as a seasonal farmer and carpenter – but the household income is not always stable. In Margaret's aunt's home, both her aunt and uncle work: her aunt as a seller and her uncle as a primary school teacher. All of Margaret's siblings and cousins of school age are attending school. However, both Margaret and her older sister (16) have repeated primary school grades – Margaret repeated Grade 2 and then Grade 3 twice, which means she is three years behind for her age. Margaret's family hope that she will succeed in finishing her BAC³ and discuss the importance of girls' education primarily in relation to their daughters' capacity to look after their parents in the future. Margaret would like to go to university and thinks that her parents want her to be a midwife or policewoman. She herself would like to be rich, a nun and unmarried with no children. In both the parental and the aunt's home, the division of labour is strict and according to gendered expectations of roles, with women performing all household chores apart from in exceptional circumstances such as illness or pregnancy. Margaret and her older sister are allocated household chores while her brothers are not. Her father regards older females teaching girls to do household tasks as preparation for their future, as he commented in 2016, "they train them and then they marry". Margaret is closer to her father than her mother, she confides in him and says she admires him "the most" because he gives her things "straight away" when she asks.

Summary of 'glitches' timeline:

- 2014, *notices a difference*: "No my junior brothers are too young for domestic chores, but other boys of my age do domestic chores too. No, it's not in all the homes. In many homes they don't do anything, they just play."
- 2014, *attitude and described behaviour*: [How does she feel about the type/ quantity of chores she is allocated?] "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."
- 2014, *father's description of behaviour*: "When I observe my daughter Margaret, I think of moving her to Cotonou, to stay with my [older] sister. Because when I speak to her, she doesn't listen, she's not obedient and she does not fear me."
- 2015, *notices a difference*: "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, *describes behaviour*: "I don't do anything in the house. I don't do the tasks my mother gives me, I do what I want."
- 2016, *father's description of behaviour*: "Margaret is not a very well-behaved girl, she doesn't obey us, she is headstrong and afraid of no-one."

- 2017, *notices a difference*: "Yes, I think there is a difference; men cultivate the land while women do all the domestic chores, fetch water, go to the mill and sell products. Girls also do these things, but boys do nothing."
 - 2017, *acceptance of norm*: "I think it's fair because it's the duty of women and girls to be responsible for domestic chores."
 - 2017, *acceptance of norm*: "I would make the effort to do [what my parents ask of me] because I wouldn't want my parents to think of me as disobedient."
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Early adolescence and the non-linear process of disruption

In 2018, the average age of girls participating in Plan UK's 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study was 12, falling into the category of early adolescence, which, though different for each individual girl, has been found to be a critical period of identity development. The cohort data shows that while stronger for some girls than others, the physical and emotional changes that come with the first stages of puberty often represent a catalyst for family and wider society to increasingly view girls as young adults rather than children and enforce gendered expectations of behaviour more strictly. In some cases this can be due to understandings that upon beginning menstruating girls are at higher risk of gender-based violence including rape, of early pregnancy, as well as of early marriage, and the gendered norms enforced are often intended to protect girls; however, they also perpetuate gender-inequitable attitudes and practices.

The cohort data demonstrates that for some girls, the increasing emphasis from family members and the wider community on what is 'acceptable' for them to do as girls, where it is 'acceptable' for them to go as girls, and what they are expected to contribute to their households and communities as girls, ingrains and solidifies a girl's gendered attitudes and sees her reproducing said gendered norms. However, for other girls this heightened awareness of gendered expectations, and how they have a disproportionate impact on girls' rather than boys' freedoms and ability to choose how they spend their time, can instead spark a push-back against gendered norms and provide a potential window of opportunity to create alternative outcomes to the gender socialization process. The longitudinal nature of the cohort data enables us to observe how and where the girls can 'switch' from expressing relative acceptance of the gendered expectations of them to expressing a challenge to them, and vice versa.

This longitudinal analysis also highlights an important point, however: that the process of challenging or ‘disrupting’ gender socialization is not always linear – that is, while some girls first notice gendered differences in expectations of behaviour for themselves and their male peers, and then move on to questioning, critiquing and eventually challenging those gender norms, for other girls this process is somewhat more complex. The data shows that for some cohort girls in early adolescence the period of time where they begin to question gender norms can be cut short or reversed due to a shift in the influencing factors in their lives.

Looking at Margaret’s case in Benin (see Box 1.1), we can see where critique of gender norms related to an inequitable division of labour in the household – where females bear the burden of domestic responsibilities – appears to be ‘stamped out’ by an apparent intervention from extended family. Margaret demonstrates a number of varying ‘types’ of glitches to the gender socialization process, from identifying gendered differences for herself and her brothers in 2014 and 2015, to describing behaviour which challenges these expectations in 2016 – which is also reflected in her father’s complaints about her disobedient behaviour in 2014 and 2016. The potential to disrupt these norms within Margaret’s household, however small, appeared to disappear in 2017 when Margaret expressed attitudes which support a gendered division of labour and traditional gender roles.

Using the longitudinal and qualitative data collected from Margaret and her family, we can see that in 2017 Margaret was sent to live with her extended family – namely her paternal aunt, uncle and female cousin. Her father indicated that this was his plan for Margaret as early as 2014, specifically due to Margaret’s behaviour which did not reproduce the gendered expectations that as his daughter she should obey and ‘fear’ him, and the role he felt his sister would play in ‘correcting’ Margaret’s behaviour. In 2017, Margaret also vocalized attitudes which conformed to her father’s expectations that she obey him. In response to being asked if she felt she could say no to her parents when they ask her to do something she doesn’t want to do, she stated that she unequivocally would, so as not to challenge the expectation that she be obedient to them.

Margaret’s case enables us to investigate not only one of the most common areas where the cohort girls show glitches in gender socialization – the unequal and gendered division of labour – but how shifting dynamics in a girl’s social and familial sphere can reverse or ‘stunt’ her challenges to gender norms. This case also underlines the importance of context-specific and sensitive analysis to inform

social norm change interventions, as in Benin the practice of ‘child fostering’ – where girls like Margaret, are sent to live with extended family members, often specifically to be cared for by female family members – is common in many parts of the country.

Box 1.2: Juliana, Brazil

Juliana is 13 years old, and lives with her maternal grandparents and younger sister (11) in an urban area in the north-eastern state of Maranhão in Brazil. Until 2018, Juliana had frequent contact with her mother (28), step-father (33) and two half-brothers (8 and 4) who lived nearby until they moved out of the area. Juliana’s grandmother is her main carer and she appeared to have no contact with her father – who was imprisoned for some time for gang-related activities – until 2018 when she describes having some communication with him. The household has seen a number of shifts in dynamics due to the 2014 economic crisis in Brazil, which led to Juliana’s grandfather being unemployed for much of the period 2014–18 and Juliana’s grandmother becoming the family’s breadwinner as a domestic worker, having never previously worked. In 2018, Juliana’s grandfather became employed as a janitor, shifting the family dynamics once again. Education is a priority for Juliana’s grandmother, and the low quality of post-primary schooling in the area is a major concern, impacting Juliana’s academic progress. Juliana is in the correct school grade for her age and would like to attend university and work with computers. Prior to becoming employed, Juliana’s grandmother carried out the majority of domestic tasks in the home, with some help from Juliana and her sister, however this changed when her husband became unemployed and she began working, and Juliana’s grandfather began to take part in household work for the first time. Juliana has a close and positive relationship with her grandmother, who has expressed highly gendered attitudes with regard to traditional roles, apart from during the period of time she was the family breadwinner where she demonstrated some shifts in her attitude.

Summary of ‘glitches’ timeline

- *2015, acceptance of norm:* “I make my bed, tidy my dressing table and sweep the floor. I have to sweep the house too, because my uncle tells me to do it ... I like washing the dishes ... [I don’t like] sweeping the house, because my arm hurts.”
- *2016, notices a difference and attitude shift:* “There are men who wash the dishes, sweep the house, and there are men who don’t, so the women have to do it every day. [Do you think this is right, this is fair?] No, I don’t think so.”

- 2017, *describes a shift in dynamics*: “[Males and females] do the same things ... [for example] when we finish lunch, everyone washes their own plate.”
- 2018, *describes another shift in dynamics*: “I take care of the whole house, because they [my grandparents] can’t be here all the time ... because they’re working, both of them, and I stay at home alone, together with my sister.”

Further areas showing ‘glitches’ in 2018

- 2016, *reiterates norm*: “[It is important for girls to be beautiful] because if they were ugly the boys would not like them.”
- 2018, *attitude shift*: “For me, appearance doesn’t matter.”
- 2017, *awareness of expectations*: “My grandfather, he likes me to behave well in places and he likes me to play girls’ games, because I like playing ball, so he lets me play sometimes, but he likes me to play with girls’ things, to do girls’ things.”
- 2018, *challenges norm*: “They [my school friends] make fun of me, they say I’m a tomboy, that I’m always playing ball, all the time, with the boys ... then I tell them that this is sexist, because a girl can play ball just like a boy.”

Social- and structural-level influences of disruption

The theory of gender socialization which outlines the varying levels of influence in an individual’s life contributing to the reproduction of gender norms – individual-level, social-level and structural-level influences – was inverted in this analysis to investigate which of these influences could instead be facilitating girls to *challenge* the gender socialization process. The interaction of the three levels is often complex and specific to a particular girl’s context, including her personal development on the individual level, however, the cohort data broadly suggests that social-level influences in the family, household, peer group and community represent the most significant influencing factors during early adolescence. It is evident from the data that the attitudes and behaviours of a girl’s main carers and male peers regarding gender norms and roles play a central role in her expression of challenges to these norms.

The longitudinal data shows that a number of the cohort girls are exposed to non-normative gender roles in their households – in some cases for an extended period of time, such as in single-parent families or polygamous families, and in others due to short-term circumstances, such as illness, pregnancy or shifts in the employment of household members. In the latter case, there is evidence that

structural-level factors such as economics and national labour legislation can impact traditional gender roles on the social level and provide an opportunity for individuals to be exposed to alternative household structures.

Looking at the case of Juliana in Brazil (Box 1.2), the shifts in her grandparents' behaviour in the household from traditional gender roles – male breadwinner and female home maker – to female breadwinner and indications of a more equitable division of labour in the home, can be seen to impact not only the division of labour in the home, but the gendered attitudes of Juliana's grandmother, and the attitudes and behaviours of Juliana herself. Though born out of necessity – due to the 2014 economic crisis in Brazil leading to Juliana's grandfather becoming unemployed – rather than an active attempt to redress gender-inequitable practices in the home, the impact on Juliana's household is significant, as earlier in the study both of her grandparents expressed particularly strong gendered attitudes. Juliana's grandmother also explained how her informal employment as a domestic worker was impacted by labour law reforms in Brazil requiring all employees to have a formal contract, the details of which, including minimum wage, holiday pay and back payment for previous years' work, she successfully negotiated with her employer. This enabled the precarious nature of her employment as a domestic worker to offer more financial stability to the household, as well as appearing to give her further confidence to manage the family's finances and request her husband share the load of household work. Juliana shows awareness of an inequitable division of labour in 2016 and criticizes it, then in 2017 describes a shift in her household dynamics. However, once again highlighting the often limited windows of opportunity presented by such circumstances, by 2018 her grandfather had found a job, and the practicalities of both carers being in employment then required Juliana to carry the burden of looking after the home.

While investigating the extent of the impact these shifts have had on Juliana's attitudes towards gender is difficult, in 2017 and 2018 the qualitative data shows her to be significantly more vocal and critical of gendered norms such as those dictating that football is an unacceptable sport for girls; not only does she dismiss this idea and continue to play the sport, but challenges her peers who bully her for it. The interaction between structural-, social- and individual-level factors is clearly complex, and Juliana's case provides an example of why looking at all influencing factors in a girls' life is necessary to identify where, when and with whom valuable points of intervention may present themselves.

Box 1.3: Ly, Vietnam

Ly is 13 years old and lives along with her mother in a village in the Quang Ngai Province on the south-central coast of Vietnam. Ly's father died before she was born, and her maternal grandmother lived in the home until her death in 2018. Ly's mother's most stable source of income comes from farming, but she takes on secondary activities such as bricklaying and bundling wool. Ly is in Grade 7, the correct school year for her age and, having previously been described as "lazy" in studying, Ly aspires to go to university, something her mother thinks is out of reach. Ly is described by her mother and the researchers as cognitively mature and has started menstruating, however she reports knowing little about sexual and reproductive health and her mother's advice is for her to keep her distance from boys and she prohibits her from going out in the evening. Despite living in an all-female house, Ly is very aware of a gendered division of labour in the community, which she criticizes. Ly and her mother both describe having a strained relationship, in particular because Ly rarely obeys her mother and from 2015 has requested payment for helping her mother with household tasks. Ly's mother describes her daughter as "stubborn" and "not docile", among aspects of Ly's behaviour which diverge from expectations of girls in the community.

Summary of 'glitches' timeline

- 2016, *reiterates norm*: "Yes [it is important for girls to be beautiful] because there are many people who love beautiful girls."
- 2016, *describes behaviour*: "I make friends with everyone. I hang out with them but if they tease me, I will hit them."
- 2016, *mother's description of behaviour*: "She doesn't like wearing skirts, [she] likes boys' clothes, she often wears a cap instead of a wide-brimmed hat ... she wears men's clothes."
- 2017, *mother's description of behaviour*: "She has not been docile, still stubborn."
- 2018, *describes behaviour*: "Everyone in my class is scared of me because I am aggressive."
- 2018, *describes behaviour*: "I look like a boy ... yes [my style has changed] I am more manly [Did you choose your clothes or did your mother?] I did [it] for myself."

Further areas showing 'glitches' in 2018

- 2016, *reiterates norm*: "I would like to marry a doctor. Have one boy and one girl. [The girl next door says if there are two girls, there will be no one to take care of their parents after they get married]."
 - 2018, *attitude shift*: "No [I don't want to get married or have children] because I don't like it."
 - 2014, *notices a difference*: "Boys do not have to do housework. They just go to play. They play skipping, football."
 - 2018, *describes behaviour*: "[At school I am a] team leader ... [I should] clean up, but I never do. I asked some boys to clean up for me ... I request them to and they must follow."
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Harmful norms of 'masculinity' and persistent obstacles to social norm change

The analysis of the longitudinal cohort data to investigate where, when, how and why the girls challenge gendered norms also underlines the obstacles to gendered social norm change that persist in preventing the realization of alternative outcomes for girls and boys. The most evident and common barrier experienced by the girls is the risk and prevalence of violence in their lives. Violence takes various forms and is of varying severity across the cohort; however, in all cases it represents either an obstruction to the girls' ability to challenge gendered norms, or a factor which perpetuates and ingrains harmful concepts of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. The use of corporal punishment at home and in school, the real and perceived risks of gender-based violence from males in the wider community, and in the Latin America and Caribbean countries in particular, community and gang violence are consistently reported by cohort girls and their families. Risks of GBV are cited by many parents and carers as the basis for placing increasing limitations on the girls' movement and access to spaces, and while there are girls who identify a disparity between their own freedoms and those of their male peers and criticize this, there is little evidence of active challenges to these restrictions, as evidently to do so would likely require the girls putting themselves in danger. While such expectations of behaviour intend to maintain the safety of girls, rather than addressing the root causes of these risks of violence, the onus is placed on girls and women to protect themselves from males, reiterating gendered norms which associate males with violence and females with vulnerability.

The use of corporal punishment – though illegal at school in all nine cohort countries – is prevalent in the study data both at home and at school, and can be seen not only to limit girls’ abilities to use their voices and exert agency, but also to play a role in the normalization of violence and its association with ‘masculinity’. Across the cohort, but in the South-East Asia countries in particular, the cohort girls report witnessing their male peers being subjected to more frequent and severe physical punishment and violent discipline. The impact of this, from the perspective of the girls, on understandings of gender and violence are important to highlight.

Looking at the case of Ly in Vietnam (see Box 1.3), we see how exposure on the social level to harmful associations between violence and males can interact with an individual’s development of concepts of gender and identity during early adolescence. Until 2016, Ly reiterated a number of gendered norms which dictate ‘acceptable’ appearances and behaviours for girls. After this point, Ly expressed attitudes and behaviours which strongly challenged these norms, reflected in her mother’s descriptions of Ly’s behaviour and appearance. In order to challenge the gendered labels widely iterated in the South-East Asia cohort which categorize males as ‘strong’ and females as ‘weak’, Ly describes how she takes on characteristics traditionally associated with males. Descriptions of her aggressive behaviour, how her peers fear her, indicating that she has, or would, physically hit a peer are expressed by Ly alongside statements identifying herself as “more manly”; and her mother outlines Ly’s changing preferences for traditionally men’s, rather than women’s, clothes. Ly is one of a number of cohort girls who describe themselves as violent or aggressive, as partaking in traditionally ‘male’ sports, wearing traditionally ‘male’ clothes, and making this association with being more like a boy and less like a girl. In this way, the cohort girls explicitly demonstrate the binary nature of gendered norms and how often the only way to realize a desire to challenge restrictive social expectations of ‘femininity’ for girls appears to be to embody concepts of ‘masculinity’. As boys and men are depicted by those around the cohort girls as a threat and a source of violence, perpetuated by the normalization of their public subjection to corporal punishment, these harmful gendered norms are not only reproduced, but reinforced by the girls’ attempts to embody ‘masculinity’ in their rejection of acceptable ‘feminine’ behaviours.

Conclusions

Analysis of the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ cohort study data underlines the unique value that longitudinal, qualitative data brings to research

of the complex concepts of gender and social norms. Observing the gender socialization process of an individual requires an in-depth and long-term engagement with the varying influencing factors and shifting dynamics in their life in order to fully understand the dynamic nature of socialization and identify markers of where norms do not perfectly reproduce. While analysis of qualitative data can present difficulties in terms translation into 'generalizable' findings, arguably qualitative longitudinal data is more able to capture nuances of change, and hence detect 'glitches', than quantitative data. At the same time, observing the direct voice of girls over time allows us to see the change through the girls' eyes, which facilitates the ability to capture shifts. In this way, longitudinal and qualitative data can also enable a better understanding of progress on the objectives of SDG 5 by presenting substantive indicators of social change rather than quantified measures of equality.

To advance the empowerment of women and girls and achieve equality between the sexes it is necessary to look to the roots of gender-inequitable attitudes and behaviours, which lie in the critical process of gender socialization where the gender 'rules' are formed. While understandings of young children's development have benefited from focused research, the significance of gender in forming identities in early adolescence has been largely overlooked until relatively recently. As a period where girls are increasingly required to embody social expectations of 'femininity' and the role of a woman in family, community and wider society – often in stark contrast to the relative freedoms they experienced in childhood – early adolescence represents a moment of heightened awareness of gendered expectations, which can either reinforce the reproduction of gendered norms or in fact incite a pushback against them.

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' data demonstrates that social-level influences are highly significant in facilitating moments of disruption to the gender socialization process, as well as of course in ingraining gendered norms. However, the data also shows that the social level is unique to each girl, and understanding how her relationships with the people, institutions and social structures around her develop and change over time is essential when considering potential points of intervention. The fluctuating nature of gender socialization and the 'when', 'where' and 'how' of its disruption is evident in the cohort data, which, while highlighting the complex and sometimes narrow windows of opportunity for norm change, also indicate circumstances which may not have previously been considered as significant for intervention, such as the impact of the economic crisis in Brazil on

Juliana's household dynamics, and of the practice of child fostering on Margaret's attitudes and behaviours in Benin.

The wider longitudinal analysis of the nine countries involved in the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study found that all participating girls had shown at least one instance of a 'glitch' in the reproduction of gendered norms by 2018, by identifying differences in expectations between themselves and their male peers, questioning this disparity, or directly challenging these norms. These findings evidence the potential power within each girl to reject inequitable norms and realize alternative outcomes for their futures; however, the persistence of major obstacles to norm change, such as the continued prevalence of violence in girls' lives, means that without the alignment of wider social and political factors, social transformation remains limited.

Notes

- ¹ The original sample in 2006 included 146 girls; however, there were a number of deaths in the first year and there have been dropouts. Over the years, some girls and/or their families have been unavailable (for example through migration).
- ² The term 'glitch' was developed during this data analysis by researchers at Plan International UK to indicate where an individual shows some level of disruption to the gender socialization.
- ³ The baccalauréat is a French qualification that students are required to take to graduate from high school.

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