

Girls' Everyday Resistance

Findings from Real Choices, Real Lives

Policy Brief

Around the world, girls are navigating the complexity of growing up as girls, where gender norms continue to shape what is expected of them and the futures they can dream of. Yet girls are seeking change.

While well-known girl activists like Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg and Autumn Peltier have addressed the UN, led protests, and engaged in international forums, most girls face significant barriers to formal political participation. Nevertheless, in their everyday lives, girls are reshaping the environment around them and the boundaries of what is possible. Girls question, resist, and seek change in creative and courageous ways. Recognising these often-overlooked everyday behaviours and beliefs is essential to advance the impact girls are already creating in their own lives and in their communities.

Therefore, in collaboration, Plan International and Cardiff University sought to understand **how girls question inequalities** as they progress through childhood and adolescence, and **whether they are able to create change**.

Girls' everyday resistance to gender inequality is diverse. Taking girls' agency as a broad spectrum, we emphasise how even small, silent or unseen acts are instances of resistance. We categorise these beliefs and behaviours into six forms of everyday resistance:



Egalitarian Statements • Vague statements in favour of equality, without any accompanying behaviours that challenge gender norms.



Questioning Norms • A girl or a caregiver starting to question a particular gender norm, without necessarily explicitly stating they thought it was unfair. This could include starting to question whether patterns of behaviour were determined by nature or by a god.



Attitudinal Resistance • A girl or caregiver expressing a view that gender roles or expectations are unfair and/or should change.



Articulated Resistance • Instances where a girl supports the idea of resisting gender norms, even if she does not feel able to do so herself.



Secret Behavioural Resistance • A girl knowingly disobeying gendered rules about her behaviour, but keeping her disobedience secret.



Overt Behavioural Resistance • A girl openly disobeying expected behaviours.



This policy brief draws on **18 years of research** by Plan International with **104 girls and their caregivers** in **nine countries** from their birth in **2006** until they turned **18** in **2024**.



Located across **three regions**, these countries are: **Benin, Togo and Uganda** in Africa, **Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador** in the Americas, and **Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam** in Southeast Asia.



The **Real Choices, Real Lives** study is the only longitudinal study of its kind, offering a **unique insight** into girls' experiences of growing up as girls.



Through **annual interviews**, the study captured girls' experiences, beliefs, and aspirations in their own words, focusing on how gender norms shape their lives.

Key Findings

Our analysis revealed when and how girls are resisting gender inequalities in their daily lives, as well as the enabling, or indeed, constraining environment for girls' resistance to gender norms:

1. We found that while caregivers were supportive of girls' equality of opportunity, in particular in education, and were strongly opposed to violations of girls' rights, such as early marriage, most caregivers still held essentialist views on a number of topics. As a result, **caregivers' views often represented barriers** to girls' access to or success in opportunities available to them, **enforcing acceptance of and conformity to gender norms** and expected behaviours of girls; with girls frequently facing violent repercussions if they failed to conform.
2. **Girls are questioning what they have been taught** about gender roles and recognising gender differences to be the result of expectations and social upbringing. Girls are expressing frustration at the distribution of chores or their limited freedoms compared to boys.
3. Though **girls have a strong desire to change the way things are**, many girls do not feel able to challenge gender norms as openly as they would wish to, like voicing these opinions to their caregivers or outright disobeying them.
4. **Girls recognise adults' role in failing to tackle gender inequality** and are calling for adults and authorities to do more. Girls are forthright in their demands for change from adults and authorities, especially regarding comprehensive sex education and doing more to protect girls from violence.
5. Girls are creative and courageous in how they are resisting gender norms, with **63 per cent of girls resisting gender norms in secret or subversive ways**, such as taking on secret jobs, and entering secret relationships. However, if girls are discovered, they face **significant dangers**, including punishment from caregivers, destruction of property, and exclusion from the family home or health risks from early unions such as unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections.
6. **47 per cent of girls are openly disobeying expected behaviours** and refusing to take on roles that girls are supposed to in their communities, from declining to do chores to defending themselves from bullying, violence and unwanted male attention.

38% of girls questioned whether boys and men are by nature more aggressive and violent than girls and women.

“Girls have good opinions...Girls can make a decision on their own, have rights to life, to development and to freedom.” Nakry, age 14 (2021), Cambodia

83% of the girls at some point over their childhood and adolescence expressed a desire for more and better sex education.

“Boys can go anywhere, but girls can't, they have to be at home all the time...It seems strange because it shouldn't be like that, everyone should be treated equally.” Gladys, age 14 (2021), El Salvador



Conclusion and Implications

.....

1. **Girls are engaging in diverse forms of resistance to gender inequality.**

This resistance may often be small scale, and even be silent or unseen, but shows that every day girls are resisting the norms around them they are taught to accept. We seek to support girls to further question and refuse the behaviour that is expected of them, but in ways they feel safe to do so.

.....

2. **Some girls are taking on significant risks in their secret resistance to gender inequality.**

We do not seek to glamourise this resistance and encourage risky behaviour, instead, we want to ensure girls are growing up in environments where they can safely question, learn and explore with support from adults.

.....

3. **Girls are calling on adults to do more to create an enabling environment for girls' leadership.**

Strict gendered expectations on girls' behaviours imposed by caregivers and adults in their community have placed limits on girls' agency. It is essential that adults, using positive parenting practices, listen to and encourage girls' voices.

.....

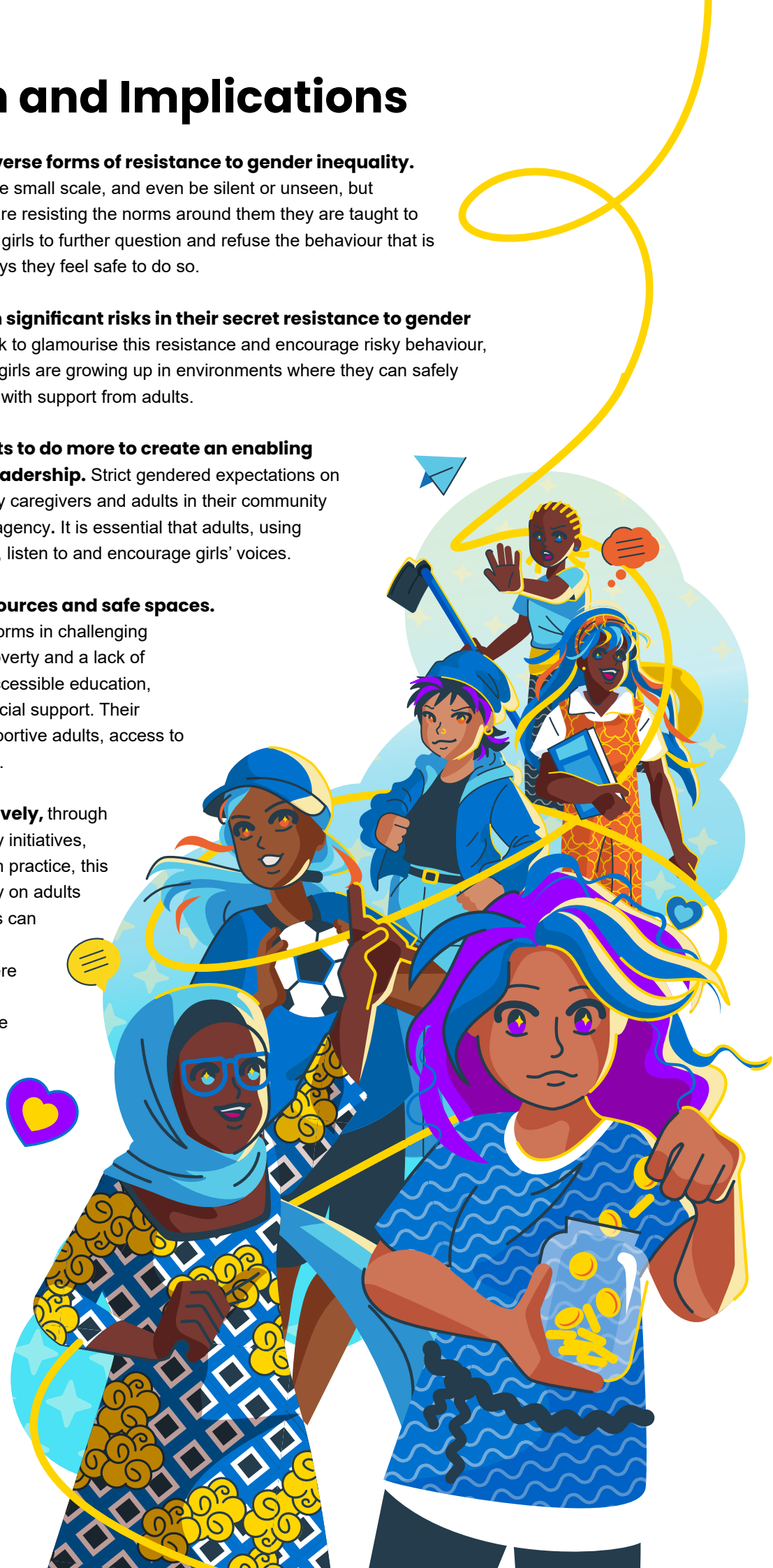
4. **Girls need access to resources and safe spaces.**

Girls are resisting gender norms in challenging environments marked by poverty and a lack of infrastructure like quality, accessible education, health care access, or financial support. Their resistance depends on supportive adults, access to resources, and safe spaces.

.....

5. **Girls want to act collectively,**

through groups, clubs, or community initiatives, rather than as individuals. In practice, this means placing responsibility on adults to create spaces where girls can talk about the changes they want to see, and ensure there are mechanisms for trusted adults to communicate these discussions to decision makers and ensure they are acted upon.



Recommendations

Governments and Authorities

- **Establish, strengthen and enforce legislative and policy frameworks** that enshrine gender equality in law; ban corporal punishment and conversion therapies; remove discriminatory legal norms which prevent girls from accessing their rights; and ensure an open safe civic space where all people have the right to freedom of expression and association of assembly.
- **Fund and implement a gender-transformative and inclusive education**, including programmes that strengthen equality of opportunity, such as on higher education, career pathways and financial literacy.
- **Invest in and create safe, community-based programmes and initiatives** that support girl's empowerment, leadership and rights awareness, and finance forums for girls to freely discuss issues affecting them, with mechanisms to feed those views into local and regional decision-making.
- **Support equality through investment and partnership**, reducing the burden of unpaid care work via essential infrastructure and incentives for employers; and support, resource, and partner with civil society, NGOs, local authorities and community leaders on promoting awareness of gender equality.

NGOs and Civil Society

- **Provide awareness raising and positive parenting workshops** for parents, caregivers, men, boys and community leaders, to challenge behaviours and views that reinforce gender norms; seek to change norms around physical punishment and the 'naturalness' of male violence; and promote positive role models and champion successful cases to both girls and boys.
- **Advance educational and skills development opportunities** for girls, providing training on how current gender roles prevent them from accessing opportunities that should be available to them; financial literacy; workers' rights and workplace sexual harassment; SRHR education on reducing the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; and employment and vocational skills.
- **Establish and strengthen safe and inclusive clubs, groups and networks for girls' participation**, including savings associations, consultations and councils where girls can safely discuss gender inequality and what they need to achieve change; supporting girls to form their own organisations; and informal (online) groups where girls can connect and share their experiences of resistance, with education on collective action.
- **Amplify girls' voices and celebrate diverse forms of resistance** through facilitating forums that feed girls' views to local, regional and national decision-makers, fund girls' groups as equal partners, and celebrate a wide variety of forms of resistance to gender inequality in their campaign and awareness-raising materials.

Local Authorities and Community Leaders

- **Support and facilitate girl-led and community initiatives**, including girls' sports and savings groups, and girl-led actions and concerns should be carefully visibilised at the local level.
- **Establish meaningful consultation and participation mechanisms**, involving girls in local decision-making through consultations, advisory panels, listening sessions, youth representation; and safe spaces where girls can collectively talk about topics that are troubling them, and establish mechanisms to feed these views into decision-making.
- **Reduce gender inequalities through inclusive infrastructure and support**, broadening access to social assistance, reducing unpaid care burdens, and ensuring a gender focus is integrated throughout all their operations.
- **Ensure girls' safety and access to services**, providing safe facilities, information on online safety, gender-sensitive services, and strong measures to address GBV.

Schools and Educators

- **Establish safe clubs and spaces for girls**, where girls can discuss topics important to them, discuss positive role models and leadership, and imagine and articulate the futures they want.
- **Promote gender equality through inclusive activities and education**, ensuring safe and respectful mixed gender activities such as sports, play and toys; reducing girls' school burdens; engaging boys to challenge GBV and as champions of girls' empowerment; embedding feminist leadership, activism and soft skills into the curriculum; and providing a comprehensive sexuality education.
- **Ensure participation and access for all girls**, through supporting girls' representation in school leadership positions, and extending education and skill-building opportunities to marginalised and hard-to-reach girls.
- **Embed age- and gender sensitivity across their policies, staff training, and curriculums** to ensure that teachers and the governing body are equipped to lead on gender empowerment and implement special measures to realise gender equality across the school community.



Read the full report at:
[plan-international.org/
publications/girls-everyday-resistance](https://plan-international.org/publications/girls-everyday-resistance)

