

Half the sky

There is the sky down in the well, a perfect disc
of blue. Small piece-of-the-moon finds herself
reflected in it, leaning over the rim to look
as if into a stranger's face.

The sky looks back at her and she looks back at the sky.

There is the sky shivering in the well
The bucket has broken into it. Her hands
are hauling up the wealth of plundered water.
The sky knows she will pay for this.
The sky looks back at her and she looks back at the sky.

The weight of the sky on her head,
and miles to carry it. Her legs buckle,
soft bones melting, knees
driven earthward before their time.
The sky looks down at her and she looks down.

In the bucket, the sky turns to brass,
heavy, heavy-hearted, it feels the curl of a child
inside the child, forming between the unformed
hips. And she is carrying the weight of the sky.
The sky looks back at her and she looks back at the sky.

And she is carrying half a truth.
And she is carrying half a lie.
And she is carrying half of tomorrow.
And she is carrying half the sky.

Imtiaz Dharker

Take action at: plan-international.org/girls



Child-rights campaigner
Zainabu in a refugee camp
in Niger.

MEERI KOUTANIEMI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because I am a Girl

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS 2015

THE
UNFINISHED
BUSINESS OF
GIRLS'

RIGHTS





"My parents do not give value or recognition to me. They only have praise for my brother."

Girl, 15, Nepal

This comment from a 15-year-old girl in Nepal is echoed across the world in many countries and in many different circumstances. It is the lack of 'value' that underpins the struggle for gender equality, which, despite centuries of activism, has so far proved an elusive goal. In spite of positive legislation and international conventions protecting the rights of girls and women, harmful practices and social expectations have kept generations of girls firmly 'in their place'.

In 2007 Plan International launched a series of reports on the 'State of the World's Girls'. It began with a simple yet poignant message: the double jeopardy of being young and female means that girls are getting a raw deal. Over the years the unfaltering evidence has shown that, despite the landmark achievements of the women's rights movement, millions of girls the world over are being condemned to a life of poverty and inequality. Women have become presidents and prime ministers, scientists, artists, actors and chief executives; they run countries, companies, newspapers and colleges. But still in 2014 a girl from Cameroon could say to us that "the girls are like servants of boys and men. Their issues don't really matter." And in 2012 another girl could be shot for daring to go to school and talking about her right to do so.

The pace of change

2015, the target year for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), also marks the 20th anniversary of the historic UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, one of the largest ever gatherings of women, and a critical turning point in the world's focus on gender equality. Looking back, there is cause for celebration, but also frustration: at the pace, which has been too slow, and at the efforts, too piecemeal and uneven. Of course, there is progress: four million child deaths have been prevented over the past four decades thanks to the global increase in women's education.¹ There are more constitutions and legal frameworks which pay attention to women. There are fewer mothers dying in child birth now than any other time in history; the rate

¹ Gakidou, Dr Emmanuela, Krycia Cowling, BS, Prof Rafael Lozano, MD, Prof Christopher JL Murray, MD. 'Increased educational attainment and its effect on child mortality in 175 countries between 1970 and 2009: a systematic analysis.' *The Lancet* 376 (18 September 2010), [http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(10\)61257-3.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(10)61257-3.pdf) ² Every Woman Every Child. 'Saving Lives, Protecting Futures: Progress Report on the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health 2010-2015.' Every Woman Every Child, 2015. ³ UNESCO. 'Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2015: Achievements and Challenges.' UNESCO, 2015.

of maternal mortality has decreased by almost 50 per cent since 1990.² More girls are enrolling in primary education than ever before.³ Adolescent girls in particular have, in recent years, gained increased attention within the international development community. As complex issues like child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and gender-based violence are gaining recognition as barriers to both wellbeing and poverty reduction, governments, civil society and the private sector are increasingly allocating resources and targeting policies to curtail these abuses.

As the MDGs come to the end of their allotted time, there is a renewed opportunity to properly embed the transformation of gender relations into the underlying structures of our society. With a greater consensus around the economic benefits of empowering women and girls there has been a vigorous campaign to put gender equality at the heart of the new Sustainable Development Agenda as a principle that informs everything else. It's critical that the implementation of the new development agenda makes the links and recognises that poverty is rooted in gender-based inequality, exclusion and injustice. It is the complex interplay of unequal power relations and discriminatory practices that poses the biggest challenge to achieving sustainable and ethical development across societies and communities.

'We're going to change the world'

This year we have given the job of assessing the state of the world's girls to many different people across the globe. The authors do not always agree with each other, or with their publisher, but we want to capture dissent and discussion, optimism and pessimism, and to try to see the world's girls from these different perspectives. Contributions come from journalists, poets, politicians, activists, business leaders, economists and academics. They come also from Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, from Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Australia, Ethiopia, Sweden, France, Canada, Nigeria, Afghanistan, the UK, the US, and Egypt; the unfinished business of girls' rights is tackled in a variety of ways and in many different voices.

There is poetry from Imtiaz Dharker, a short story from Joanne Harris, a photo-spread from Liya Kebede. We have asked economic commentator Katrine Marçal to reflect on our 2009 report 'Girls in the Global Economy' and we have a contribution on that topic from Indra Nooyi. President Jimmy Carter has taken up the theme of working with men and boys, as have four champions of change from Latin America – Yelsin, Kevin, Kendir and Elmer. Mariane Pearl uses her experience as an international journalist and activist to illuminate the theme of girls in conflict zones; Australia's former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, writing about girls' education, tells us: "The reality in most developing countries is that gender inequality is only one obstacle of the many girls face." Youth activist Chernor Bah describes why, for him, girls' education is the big global issue of our time. Anita Haidary paints a vivid picture of why she co-founded Young Women for Change in Afghanistan. Bukky Shonibare reflects on Nigeria's social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls and Catalina Ruiz-Navarro writes about the gender divide in IT and why it matters. Nawal El Saadawi looks back over her life as a writer and activist and brings decades of experience to the long struggle for justice for girls and women. Journalist and author Sally Armstrong, a strong advocate for the resilience and new energy of this generation of young women, writes optimistically about the potential for change.

Many of our contributors see the next few years as crucial to bringing about historic and significant transformation; the culmination of all the efforts that went before and the first time in history that forward momentum for girls' and women's rights will not immediately be followed by backlash. 2015 is a year full of promise and this time that promise must be honoured.

We're the generation of change

by **Sally Armstrong**, human rights activist, journalist and award-winning author

Here come the girls. For all the pessimists who claim the women's movement is over and that young people don't care, I have news. I found it as a journalist in Asia and Africa and in Europe and the Americas while I was researching my book *Uprising: A New Age is Dawning for Every Mother's Daughter*. There are girls and young women all over the world who are holding up a pure clear light for all to see. They're asking questions that were never asked before, such as "Where is it written in the holy book that I cannot go to school?" and "If this is our culture, tell me why we would do something that is harmful to all of us?" They are countering bogus religious claims and cultural contradictions that have held girls back for centuries. That's because the earth has started to shift under the status

The Unfinished Business of Girls' Rights

of girls. The good news doesn't mean that injustices like forced marriage, underage marriage, sexual harassment and rape and physical beatings have been relegated to history books where they belong. But there is a clarion call around the world claiming misogyny and extremism and fundamentalism and harmful practices must be held accountable because these actions have been proven to be a negative force for the health and wellbeing of half the world's population. What's more, they're now seen as bad for the economy. Experts claim this change in the status of girls and women will reduce poverty, cut conflict and turn the economy around. In the past there was a taboo about talking about issues such as sexual abuse and forced marriage. If you can't talk about it, you can't change it.

The process of change is usually daring, certainly time-consuming, invariably costly, and occasionally heartbreaking, but eventually an exercise so rewarding that it becomes the stuff of legends... One of the girls I talked to said, "We're the generation of change. We have the power and a new viewpoint and we're going to change the world – watch us."

Lighting the way

by **Mariane Pearl**, Managing Editor of the Chime for Change campaign, journalist and author

I went to 18 countries to profile many different women and, since I started working as Managing Editor of the Chime for Change's storytelling platform, I have been lucky to provide a place for their stories. Mostly first-person accounts that, I hope, create a patchwork of voices from women and girls singing a different song. People who have been through a lot and have become beacons of wisdom. Feeble flickers sparkling everywhere, hoping that lighting the way for themselves will allow them to illuminate others...

The changes that are under way are indeed unprecedented as women and girls claim their rights to their lives, their bodies and their story. It is Mercy in Malawi who decides to do her coming out publicly by going to the national newspaper and giving them a front-page story: "I am a Lesbian" spread across Page One of the *Malawi News* the next day. Mercy was exorcised, thrown out of her house and shamed by all. Yet, she withstood the storm, because of her profound belief in her right to choose her sexuality. And no one had ever done this before in this deeply homophobic country. It is Nujood in Yemen who, at 10 years old, obtains a divorce, breaking the timeless tribal tradition. It is Malala, it is Mayerli in Colombia who, at 15, after seeing her best friend shot in front of her, created a children's think tank to stop violence. Fear of the drug cartels, the level of corruption, the rampant impunity, drugs and alcohol made for resignation and the trivialisation of brutality. So the children gathered in a sand pit and came to the understanding that violence started at home. They decided to work on their parents and the community, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding. They became the first group of children to be nominated for a Nobel Peace prize. These unsung heroes light the way for millions of others, armed with an unconditional belief in the right of humans to live as such.

We need a new economic story

by **Katrine Marçal**, lead editorial writer for Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*, and author of *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?*

The 11-year-old girl who walks 15 kilometres every morning to gather wood for her family plays a big part in her country's ability to develop economically. If we don't acknowledge her work, our whole understanding of what creates economic development is at risk of being wrong.

The French author and feminist Simone de Beauvoir described woman as 'the second sex'. It's the man who comes first. It's the man who counts. He defines the world and woman is 'the other', everything he is not but also that which he is dependent on so he can be who he is.

In the same way that there is a 'second sex', there is a 'second economy'. The work that is traditionally carried out by men is what counts. Women's work is 'the other'. Everything that he doesn't do but that he is dependent on so he can do what he does...

Every society must in some way create a structure for how to care for other people; otherwise, neither the economy nor anything else will work. Without care, children can't grow and the sick won't get healthy. Being cared for by others is the medium through which we learn cooperation, empathy, respect, self-discipline and thoughtfulness.

These are fundamental life skills.

When married women in the West entered the workforce, they started to devote more time to the kind of work that is counted (working outside the home) and less time to the kind of work that isn't (domestic work). This dramatically increased the GDP in the Western world.

But was this increase accurate?

Because no one had bothered to quantify housework, we might have overvalued the actual increase of wealth. The calculations we make today about how much wealth would increase if more women in developing economies took up paid work might be wrong for the same reason.

We need a new economic story. One that stresses the need for change without ignoring the economic contributions women and girls make today.

Girls and women are not an untapped economic resource in the world; their work is the invisible structure that keeps societies and economies together.

But they haven't freely chosen this role. And they are not being paid, compensated or acknowledged for it.

This needs to change.

The courage to dream

by **Indra Nooyi**, Chairman and CEO of PepsiCo

When one out of every five adolescent girls on this planet is denied an education because her family cannot afford her school fees... because she has been sold into prostitution... because she is not deemed worthy of the chance to learn – when 62 million girls are out of school, we are not even close to unlocking the potential that our young people hold.^{4,5}

Because the truth is that, even if young girls have the courage to dream big, those dreams have no chance of becoming reality unless they are coupled with the freedom to attend school day in and day out. And even if a young mother receives a microcredit loan, it will only matter if she has the time and opportunity to grow her business.

Our daughters' imaginations should have no bounds, and we cannot rest until they also have the opportunities to pursue their dreams.

Champions of Change: Working with young men across Latin America



"Society tells us we should be sexist, tough, aggressive. But that's not right. I told myself I had the power to change."

Kevin, 16

"I think my father hit me because he knew no other way to resolve things: that's what they taught him."

Kendir, 17

"They say that we men have to be strong, we can't cry, we can't express our feelings. Well the fact is that I am so in love."

Elmer, 17

"A teacher taught me that we should never lose our dignity. I feel I have dignity, I am different, I am free."

Yelsin, 17

⁴ UNESCO GMR and UIS. 'Progress in getting all children to school stalls but some countries show the way forward.' UNESCO GMR and UIS, Policy Paper 14/ Fact Sheet 28, June 2014. ⁵ Quote from Indra Nooyi.

Girls' education is the global civil rights issue of our time

by **Chernor Bah**, leading youth advocate for global education, Associate at the Population Council

I was raised in Sierra Leone by a single mom alongside two sisters in what is one of the worst places in the world to be a girl. My mother separated from my father when I was young and has since then worked as a primary school teacher. She is educated. But the pay for a teacher like her was – and still is – paltry. Highly aware of the circumstances for women in Sierra Leone, she had to work hard and use all her energy and ingenuity to make ends meet. So, to supplement her low teachers' pay, she sold everything – bread, cake, palm oil – whatever she (with my sisters' and my help) could create with her own hands.

And because she was a teacher with a little bit of education herself, and despite many challenges (including at one point, fleeing the country for our lives, as refugees), she understood the power of learning. That makes me one of the lucky ones. Without my mother's understanding of the value of education, I would not have gotten the education I did and would not be where I am today. It's one small example of how educating a woman has multiple ripple effects for her family and the community around her.

But I was lucky not just to have an enlightened mother; I was fortunate also to be a boy. My two sisters faced challenges I never did: threats of sexual violence, men coming in contact with them and, even when the girls were fairly young, asking them to marry them. As we got older, there were signals from many directions suggesting that their lives seemed to matter less, even though I was always convinced they were smarter than me. In retrospect, I can now see what happened: society spent so much time telling them, and girls like them, that there were higher expectations for me only because I was a boy.

The odds were, and are, stacked against them.

The challenge of girls' education

by **Julia Gillard**, former Prime Minister of Australia, Chair of the Board of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE)

The reality in most developing countries is that gender inequality is only one obstacle of the many girls face. Poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion and geography (do they live in rural or urban areas? Are they near or far from schools?) are powerful factors determining whether or not a girl gets educated. If we're not taking those other factors into account, we can't possibly meet the goal of educating all girls.

Put another way, a girl with disabilities from a poor, rural and ethnically disadvantaged family has virtually no chance of completing primary school, while the picture is more encouraging for girls from a relatively prosperous family in an urban area. As the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2013/14 noted, "If recent trends continue, the richest boys will achieve universal primary completion in 2021, but the poorest girls will not catch up until 2086."⁶

We have to target approaches that focus not just on girls but also on a complex set of needs, lest we leave many stuck in poverty. Funding should focus on multiple factors that keep children – usually the hardest to reach, such as girls, those living in remote areas, and those who are of marginalised groups or disabled – out of school...

The Sustainable Development Goals that will succeed the MDGs at the end of 2015 must aspire to deliver equity at every level of education, carrying forward the unfinished business of universal education, especially for those children who are very poor, those living in remote, conflict-affected and fragile regions, children with disabilities and, of course, girls.

But what does it mean to "deliver equity at every level of education"? How will we know when we've reached that point? We'll know it when every boy and every girl is able to go to a school for a quality education. When there are enough school buildings; functioning, sustainable education systems; sufficient availability of qualified teachers, particularly female teachers, who are important for girls to succeed; quality textbooks and other learning materials; and free schools that remove financial barriers to getting girls educated. We'll know it also when all families and communities see educating girls as essential to their personal development and to the future wellbeing of their societies.

⁶ UNESCO. 'Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2013/14. Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality for All.' UNESCO, 2014.

I hope and dream of a day

by **Anita Haidary**, Afghan women's rights activist and co-founder of Young Women for Change (YWC)

I long for the time when I can sit in a park and read a book. These things might sound so simple but life is about simple things. It is the small things that make women feel weak; if you want an ice cream you have to wait for your father to come so he can take you out. Of course, you can go alone but you would rather not go because sounds and catcalls will echo in your ears for hours. It can get serious when girls and young women are not allowed to go to school any more because they are followed by strange men. And it is always our fault. My friends and I meet more often now because I work and can hire a taxi. This was not true five years ago. If I wanted to see friends I had to wait for my father to give me a ride. It is not like women can't walk, but they have to get used to being touched, called names, and stared at. It is not easy, the constant and never-ending battle tires you out and finally you choose not to go out at all. But for me giving up is not an option.

I hope and dream of a day, and I know it will come true, where all women and girls are respected and treated as humans not because they are mothers, sisters and wives but because they are human. It's their birthright to be respected as human beings. This is what Young Women for Change stands for: respect for girls' and women's capacity, ability, knowledge, and decision-making power.

The greatest cause of our time

by **Liya Kebede**, supermodel and designer, founder of the Liya Kebede Foundation for mothers

Every day in countries all over the world young mothers like those pictured below rise to face a day full of extraordinary demands with incredible resilience and hope that the future holds better. It is the greatest cause of our time to see that it does.



Cameroon

Fatou and her two-year-old daughter emerge from the tent they share with five other families at a hospital compound turned refugee centre. She is seeking out breakfast that will sustain her for the long day ahead. When conflict engulfed her village in the Central African Republic, the 15-year-old mother fled, trekking on foot over 600 kilometres under the constant threat of violence. She does not know where the rest of her family are. The camp health clinic offers maternal and child-health services that are crucial for displaced girls like her.

Vietnam

Quy and her husband were married at a young age, like many other teenage couples in rural Vietnam. Her husband was killed in an accident when their son was just three months old and she returned to live with her parents. It is time for bed for her son Chi. She adores this time of night with him. During the day she works in the fields planting corn and picking vegetables and it falls to her young sister Thien to watch after him. She feels lucky to be surrounded by such loving parents and siblings. She wonders what life will be like for her son growing up without a father, though. "I won't get married again. I will spend my life for my son."



The power of patriarchy

by **President Jimmy Carter**, 39th President of the United States of America (1977-1981) and founder of The Carter Center, which works to advance peace and health worldwide

It is time that men and boys recognise the part they must play in gender equality and join with the voices and actions of the women and girls who are trying to reshape society in the interests of us all. Men hold the power in many of the institutions that govern us, and these institutions need to change the attitudes that sustain them in their current form.

Most societies were shaped by religious doctrine mandated by male authorities, so attitudes and systems that promote male dominance have become the norm. Such doctrine came from religious leaders who distorted religious scriptures by selecting texts that depict women as inherently inferior or subservient to men.⁷ Alongside such patriarchal systems, violence in society has also become normalised.⁸ My nation, the USA, and other countries accept violence as a way to solve problems – from the use of the death penalty and mass incarceration in addressing crime, to pre-emptive and unjust warfare abroad. Many societal structures are built around the expectation of violence, and this is illustrated by the existence of brutality in the family. Violence against women and girls happens far too often, from intimate partner violence to honour killings. “Equal human dignity is a human right, as codified in many global treaties. It is my hope that political and religious leaders will step forward and use their influence to communicate clearly that violence against women and girls must stop, that we are failing our societies, and that the time for leadership is now.



#BringBackOurGirls Movement

by **Bukky Shonibare**, a Human Resource and Strategy Consultant in Nigeria. She is also a strategic team member of the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Abuja

Upon the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls, the #BringBackOurGirls movement erupted as an outraged response of citizens, mainly women/mothers, who have had enough of the killings of innocent and defenceless children...

In no time, the hashtag gained momentum. People realised the girls could be their own daughters, nieces, sisters, or even neighbours. The world connected and responded. With the social media population covering governments, the international community, institutions, journalists, news agencies, key actors/influencers and politicians, the message quickly travelled through every nook and cranny of the world. Responders believed their faces and the #BringBackOurGirls placard would do something; so much so that solidarity and support came from all cadres of people and countries.

Celebrities took turns to be counted – from singers like Alicia Keys to world leaders like the UK prime minister David Cameron, US Secretary of State John Kerry and his predecessor Hillary Clinton, US First Lady Michelle Obama and the Pakistani teenage education campaigner, Malala Yousafzai, not forgetting Nigerian celebrities and personalities. The US President, Barack Obama, also heard and acted by sending a specialist team to Nigeria to assess the situation and advise on the help the American government could provide. *Time* magazine reported that “two weeks after its first use, #BringBackOurGirls had gathered two million mentions”.

So what was the real impact of #BringBackOurGirls? Once the frenzy started dying down, people began to

^{7,8} Carter, J. 'A call to action: religion, women, violence and power.' New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

ask: how far can a simple hashtag go in actually bringing back the girls? What do we mean by success? After all, the girls were still missing. However, the campaigners on the ground in Nigeria who have been the main activists believed, and still do, that because the campaign attracted such attention, the conversation will keep going. The spotlight in itself will have made a difference. Over time, the campaign, while continuing to put pressure to bring back our girls, has evolved into the convergence point of our shared humanity and empathy for the voiceless victims of violence and bigotry.

We must become cybernauts

by **Catalina Ruiz-Navarro**, Colombian journalist and feminist, born in the Caribbean and based in Mexico City

Human history, culture and knowledge are formed by a body of content that defines the way we see the world. Traditionally, history has been written by the privileged few and large swathes of the population are marginalised. They don't produce content and therefore don't influence the creation of culture. Even though these groups have freedom of expression, they don't exercise it, and that perpetuates and reinforces the same patterns that keep the same groups in power and reproduces the same inequalities and injustices...

The internet opened the door to my career, but on the way I've also personally experienced online bullying, constant troll attacks, attempts at smear campaigns and aggressive comments. The internet can be as mean as it is kind. In 2013 in the city of Medellín, for example, 12-year-old virgins were being auctioned off on a web page using PIN numbers. Reporting on stories like this I've learnt that the vulnerabilities of the real world, the violence and the machismo, extend into the virtual world. The same old predators who prowl for prey and engage in human trafficking have a powerful presence on social media; inadequate digital security and data protection practices, plus not being aware enough of the dangers, can leave girls exposed and vulnerable.

But, as girls and young women, we must not settle for being 'cyber victims', we must become 'cybernauts' and the hostility of the internet, instead of intimidating us, should make more of us take up space on the web. Seizing ownership of technology is an important way to struggle and become empowered. Digital media can be about communication, solidarity, diversity, advocacy and defending girls' and women's rights.

There is still a hope

by **Nawal El Saadawi**, writer, novelist, medical doctor and fighter for women's rights

A girl's lack of self-confidence is due to the social and religious upbringing and the intellectual restrictions imposed on her from early childhood. This leads to low self-esteem and to the girl feeling physically, psychologically and mentally weak. Hence, she surrenders to orders and blindly obeys them. She accepts and internalises all the foolish gender-attributed characteristics of femininity, such as shyness, stupidity, certain kinds of beauty and female tenderness.

I might have lost my self-confidence and my mind completely because of that. I could have ended up living at the bottom of the social ladder, like most of the girls of my generation, had it not been for my mother, who managed to preserve part of her own childhood rebellion. She aspired to a better life for me than the one she had led. She whispered in my ears, saying, "There is no burning hell."

My mother insisted that I continue with my university education at the Faculty of Medicine. She refused to make me stay at home to help her out with the cooking, as my father advised. My mother bore all the fatigue and the sore fingers that resulted from washing the dishes for nine children and their father, just so that I could continue with my higher education...

Through painful experiences in love, marriage, divorce and motherhood, I overcame the culture and the norms of my parents and our patriarchal and hierarchical society. I did not limit what I read to the curriculum imposed by our oppressive government, not only in school but in society at large; thanks to my free reading, I grew up, evolved and recognised how fake these opposites are: masculine/feminine, mind/body, sky/ground, God/Demon, spiritual/material, black/white, ruler/ruled or master/slave...

There is still a hope in the future that hasn't faded or been extinguished. This hope is reflected in movements of young people from all over the world. The revolution continues, despite being scattered. It continues to seek to achieve its four goals of Freedom, Independence, Justice and Dignity.

The evidence: girls' critical issues and ideas for change

Since the first of the 'State of the World's Girls' reports, Plan International has committed to building the evidence base on girls' rights and realities. We started with a longitudinal study – 'Real Choices, Real Lives' – that is following a small group of girls in nine countries from their birth in 2006. Today these girls are nine years old and their lives illuminate our work.

An evidence base on girls is critically important – to arm advocates everywhere with fresh insights and data on the plight and power of girls; to inform programmes that create long-term change for girls and boys; and to spur on further investment and political will through stakeholders convinced by the data which draws out the realities of girls' lives.

For this report Plan International, working with Ipsos MORI, also commissioned research with 4,219 girls in four countries – Ecuador, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. We asked them specific questions on four areas that thousands of adolescent girls in these countries had identified in an earlier research study, 'Hear Our Voices', as the most pressing issues in their lives. In this year's continuing study, 'Girls Speak Out',⁹ we asked girls about their perspectives on gender-based violence at school and in the community, about early marriage and early pregnancy.

"If I had enough information then I won't become pregnant; I don't have enough information, that's why I get pregnant in early age. I am 19 years old at this time and I have a small daughter. I spend all my time looking after her. I want to study further."

Girl, Pakistan

Most importantly, these 4,219 girls across three continents were asked what could be done to combat the challenges they face, and to identify who should be primarily responsible to make sure that something is, indeed, done. The young woman in Pakistan who said *"girls should take their own decisions about their lives. They should get a proper education and both the government and family members should agree about this"* pinpoints clearly where the action for change must begin and who the key actors should be.

As we scrutinise the primary research findings of 'Girls Speak Out', we find a clear consensus in many areas. Participants from four different countries told us quite unambiguously that adolescent girls are becoming more valued in their communities than they used to be and the vast majority, 88 per cent, agree that girls have more opportunities in life than their mothers did.

So there is progress. But girls' actual lives, as we also know from our research, still demonstrate a significant lack of equality and opportunity. Large numbers of girls across all four countries told us that they have little control over the decisions that determine their fate, that they need more information to avoid early pregnancy and marriage, and that they lack the confidence to stand up for themselves when they would like to. Only 37 per cent believe that they are often or always given the same opportunities as boys.

Throughout the girls' responses, violence, or the fear of violence, is a pervasive theme and girls consistently see early or forced marriage as a factor in increasing the risk of violence, with 68 per cent saying that girls who marry young are more likely to experience violence in the home.

Taking responsibility for change

Throughout the research, it is striking that girls see changing their lives for the better as the responsibility largely of themselves and their families rather than of the government or community and religious leaders. The only exception to this is the way they view the role of the police as critical in protecting girls from violence. The primacy of the family in perpetuating gender inequality is often ignored and what happens in the privacy of people's homes and hearts is of course difficult to know and therefore hard to change. The girls we spoke to reflect this dilemma; they look to their own empowerment but they need their families to support and value them if they are to be able to speak out, be heard and become full citizens with equal rights and responsibilities.

"I would advise girls: talk to your parents, tell them you feel alone, ask them to talk to you."

Girl, Nicaragua

⁹ For the full research report, see plan-international.org/girls

Finding some answers

As expert witnesses, the young women we spoke to have told us unequivocally what needs to be done. So what do they want in response to the injustices that they face?

- Girls want their parents to talk and to listen to them more and to support them more: 53 per cent of girls across the four countries prioritised supportive attitudes from family and community towards girls who get pregnant.
- They want the problem of violence recognised and tackled by their communities and the national authorities; 47 per cent overall wanted someone they trust they can talk to if they experience violence or abuse.

“Girls must have open lines of communication to feel free to report matters of abuse and actually see progress, like the perpetrators being arrested, as this would give them some form of solace. The victim-friendly departments at the police stations should have more women, as victims find it hard to express their feelings to men.”

Girl, Zimbabwe

- In relation to early pregnancy, early marriage and gender-based violence, girls want information, and communication in school, at home and in the media. This was prioritised above any form of legislation or policy change.
- Programmes of education, safe spaces, awareness campaigns, breaking taboos, building confidence, “calling the police and breaking the silence” and, as one girl in Pakistan put it, “education about self-esteem” were called for again and again.
- 64 per cent of girls in Zimbabwe prioritised the opportunity for young mothers to complete secondary education.

It is these voices that need to be heard by the policy makers and legislators if the empowerment of women and girls is to be key to the future success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“I would organise meetings with all the women my age to make demonstrations and marches about women’s rights, that we need information and to talk about topics considered by the society as taboos, to talk openly.”

Girl, Ecuador

Overall, the picture that emerges of girls’ lives and their solutions to the challenges they face is one of great complexity. Much of the evidence we have demonstrates the gaps on the ground and the importance of really understanding who we are talking about and to. All girls have rights, but their route to realising them will differ according to their class, age, location, family life, disabilities and sexual orientation. From our own research it is clear that there are differences from country to country and, within countries, from region to region. The context of discrimination may be as important in bringing about transformative change as the fact of discrimination itself.

Because I am a girl

This year, the voices of the report talk of hope, renewed opportunity and the potential transformation of girls’ lives. Mariane Pearl speaks for many when she says: “I have now read, seen and heard hundreds of stories of women and girls and I have never failed to find a will to seek change, at often high personal costs, for the sake of others... The changes that are under way are indeed unprecedented as women and girls claim their rights to their lives, their bodies and their story.”

There is no magic bullet or universal solution, but progress has been made and in the years ahead we can and must listen to girls as they speak out. At Plan International in the coming years we pledge to work with girls, and with women, boys and men, for girls’ rights; to campaign alongside them, to design programmes that have listened to their needs and opinions and to prioritise the education they so obviously value. ‘Because I am a Girl’ is now the banner for change, no longer the reason why you learn less, eat less and are valued less. In 2007, a 15-year-old girl in Nepal told us that despite all her efforts her parents “only have praise for my brother”. In the years to come we must ensure that her daughter, and girls everywhere, will never utter those words.