

## MEDIA BACKGROUNDER

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### ***Hear Our Voices: Do Adolescent Girls' Issues Really Matter?***

October 6, 2014

#### **Background**

- Plan Canada releases a new global report, [\*Hear Our Voices: Do Adolescent Girls' Issues Really Matter?\*](#), in advance of the third annual International Day of the Girl on October 11, 2014 to bring attention to the stark realities many girls around the world still face growing up.
- Plan International spoke directly with over 7,000 adolescent girls and boys aged 12-16 in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Central and South America, making it one of the largest studies of adolescent girls' rights to be conducted in the development sector.
- The purpose of the study was to help girls, communities and Plan to understand the key issues that adolescent girls face today, and to give them a platform to express their concerns *in their own words*.

#### **The truth about being a girl**

- The report showed that things are getting better for girls – though far too slowly in many areas. Many girls are now able to dream of completing school and having a brighter future.
  - 41% of the adolescent girls Plan spoke to said that girls always or often complete at least nine years of school in their communities.
  - *“My parents like education because they are both uneducated and they want us to be the best and to be highly educated.”* –Adolescent girl, Egypt
- However, across all countries, adolescent girls Plan spoke to revealed that they do not see themselves as having rights. Girls are not aware of their rights nor do they see themselves as people who are deserving of rights.
  - *“The girls are like servants of boys and men. Their issues don't really matter.”* –Adolescent girl, Cameroon
- The findings reveal that violence against girls is frighteningly normative – girls expect to be victims of violence, and the levels of violence that they experience are seen as normal. Girls seldom feel free from violence at home, in communities, and at school.
  - Over a quarter (28%) of girls Plan spoke to across 11 countries claimed that girls never or seldom feel safe on their way to and from school. 77% of girls Plan spoke to in one Bangladesh community claimed that adolescent girls never or seldom feel safe in their community.
  - *“I just feel safe with my family, because no one else cares for us. Rape and kidnapping cases are a given.”* –Adolescent girl, Nicaragua
- Over half (51%) of girls involved in the study said that adolescent girls never or seldom say what they think when a boy or man is around.
  - *“We are embarrassed to speak in the presence of men.”* –Adolescent girl, Egypt
- 39% of girls Plan spoke to claimed that girls never or seldom are able to decide about their own marriage.
  - Globally, one in three girls in the developing world will be married by her eighteenth birthday.
  - *“Some parents use their girl children to settle debts, thereby forcing them to get married to people they don't love.”* –Adolescent girl, Cameroon
- The study revealed that girls have challenges completing school and sometimes have to drop out due to early pregnancy, early marriage, or poverty.

- Girls involved in the study revealed that more than half (58%) of adolescent girls never or seldom return to school after having a child. Globally 1 in every 5 adolescent girls are out of school.
- Over half (53%) of girls Plan spoke to claimed that adolescent girls never or seldom decide if they become pregnant.
  - *“Girls do not have decision-making power over pregnancy. The male says to them, ‘You are machines to birth children.’”* –Adolescent girl, Pakistan
  - Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries.
- Nearly half (48%) of all adolescent girls involved in the study said that girls and boys never or seldom share household chores, taking time away from girls’ studies.

### Innovative methodology

- To create this global report, Plan employed innovative methodology that is at odds with how the international development sector has traditionally operated.
- Plan developed two participatory research tools for the study – the [Girls Empowerment Star](#) and the [School Equality Scorecard](#). This innovative methodology is based on cutting-edge theory and practice, some drawn from the business world, employing a new way of asking girls for their views on their experiences.
- The study puts girls’ and boy’s voices at the centre and combines a unique layering of qualitative and quantitative data to capture the realities of girls’ and boy’s lives.

### Canadian girls share similar concerns

- In September 2014, Plan Canada led a focus group discussion with a small but diverse group of girls from across Canada to ask questions about girls’ experiences similar to those posed to the girls and boys canvassed across Asia, Africa, Central and South America for the global report.
- Canadian girls expressed similar experiences of violation of their rights, discrimination, harassment, and other severe concerns related to gender.
- Canadian girls expressed ongoing fear for their personal safety when travelling to and from school, work, or going about their other daily routines and social outings. Many expressed feeling like a target for assault and violence because they are girls.
  - *“Safety is such a basic human right that is often taken away from girls. I want to walk my dog by myself, go shopping or take the bus, any basic activity but I’m constantly on edge.”* – Girl, 17, Newfoundland
  - *“As much as we’d like to think that we’re safe, we really aren’t. We’re told from a very young age that guys will always have the upper hand and that we should avoid late-night encounters because if something goes wrong, society will tell us that it was our fault.”* –Girl, 18, Ontario
- Canadian girls expressed often feeling uncomfortable ‘speaking up’ around men and boys, and felt that their views would not be taken seriously because they are girls.
  - *“I feel like as a girl I’m told, just by my culture so much by my culture, I should be a submissive person. I should be quiet when adult males are speaking...”* –Girl, 17, Ontario
  - *“Personally I find it hard sometimes to speak about what matters to me around guys/men, especially identifying as a feminist, because of terms such ‘feminazi’ or ‘man hater’.”* –Girl, 15, Ontario
- Canadian girls felt that they had a lot of freedom and opportunity to pursue an education and successful career, and many felt supported to do so, but they expressed concern that they were still expected to do more cooking, cleaning and household chores than their male family members.
  - *“In my family it’s strange because education wise, my family supports girls even more because they really believe in education for girls, but they still believe that women should take care of the house.”* – Girl, 16, Ontario
  - *“I feel that girls do more household chores but now it is slowly changing and guys are helping more. But people still think that girls should do that because it what they are meant to do.”* –Girl, 18, Ontario
- Canadian girls also expressed the urgent need for action to be taken by schools, government, law-makers, and families to engage boys and men in addressing and stopping violence, violation of girls’ rights, and discrimination against girls in all forms.
  - *“People try to teach girls to protect themselves because that is easier than telling boys to treat women with respect.”* –Girl, 17, BC

- *“We need to be respected first, and that is when we will feel safe no matter what the time of day is or where we are. And that starts with the teachings of respect.” –Girl, 18, Ontario*

### **About Plan and the Because I am a Girl initiative**

Founded in 1937, Plan is one of the world’s oldest and largest international development agencies, working in partnership with millions of people around the world to end global poverty. Not for profit, independent and inclusive of all faiths and cultures, Plan has only one agenda: to improve the lives of children. **Because I am a Girl** is Plan’s global initiative to end gender inequality, promote girls’ rights and lift millions of girls – and everyone around them – out of poverty. Visit [plancanada.ca](http://plancanada.ca) and [becauseiamagirl.ca](http://becauseiamagirl.ca) for more information.

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