

REAL CHOICES,
REAL LIVES

WORLD
HUNGER
AND ITS
IMPACT
ON GIRLS



PLEASE NOTE: NONE OF THE IMAGES USED IN THIS REPORT ARE OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

INTRODUCTION

The world is in the grip of an unprecedented hunger crisis putting an estimated 193 million people in urgent need of food assistance.¹



The effects of the climate crisis and COVID-19 are being further compounded by rising food prices, increasing the lack of access to livelihoods and poverty. The conflict in Ukraine has exacerbated this situation, in particular due to food, energy and fertiliser price increases. These impacts on world hunger are being felt across the globe and in 2022 the food security situation is deteriorating further.² Women and girls account for 70% of the world's hungry³ and when food is scarce, girls are often among the worst affected, with food insecurity placing girls at risk not only of hunger, but gender-based discrimination and violence. Girls are more likely than boys to be taken out of school when families come under strain, and for those who continue to attend school, hunger can severely impact their learning. When facing food insecurity, some caregivers resort to negative coping mechanisms in order to feed their families, and girls are at heightened risk of child, early, and forced marriage and unions. As part of its response to the global hunger crisis, Plan International is responding to the hunger crisis in 17 global hunger hotspots,⁴ providing programme responses including school feeding, cash and voucher assistance, and food distribution. In addition, Plan International is also investigating the effect the crisis is having on girls and young women worldwide whose experiences often go unacknowledged and unaddressed.

This research brief looks to understand the effects of the crisis on the girls from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study. A qualitative, longitudinal study that has been tracking the lives of girls in nine countries⁵ in three regions for 15 years. Through annual data collection with girls and their caregivers, the study is able to offer unique insight into the experiences of girls during childhood and adolescence in distinct contexts and the realities that shape their lives. This research brief draws on data from two rounds of data collection⁶ that took place in 2021⁷ and 2022⁸ – when the girls were aged between 14 and 16 – and explores how the global hunger crisis has impacted the Cohort girls and their families over the past two years. Data from the Cohort show that the global food crisis reaches beyond the contexts classified as at most risk of severe food insecurity, affecting girls in countries all over the world.

1. [The global report on food crises 2022](https://www.plan-international.org/hungriest-places-on-earth/)

2. Plan International 2022 'The Hungriest Places on Earth' Available at: <https://www.plan-international.org/hungriest-places-on-earth/>

3. <https://www.wunrn.com/2016/03/women-hunger-70-of-the-worlds-hungry-are-women-un-special-rapporteur-on-the-right-to-food-report/>

4. Countries include Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Zambia, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan, Lebanon, and Bangladesh.

5. Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, The Dominican Republic, El Salvador, The Philippines, Togo, Uganda, and Vietnam.

6. In 2021, 118 girls and their main caregivers were interviewed. In 2022, 78 girls were interviewed and their caregivers were not – the Cambodia and Uganda Cohorts did not take part in this data collection.

7. Data collection took place between March and June 2021.

8. Data collection took place between February and April 2022.

KEY FINDINGS

01 Cohort girls and their families in Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, The Dominican Republic, El Salvador, The Philippines, Togo, and Uganda report experiencing **food insecurity** during the last two years. While these countries are not the most acutely food-insecure countries, they do demonstrate that food insecurity issues are widespread and its impacts are being felt in varied ways within and across countries.

02 The key factors contributing to the Cohort families' food insecurity across the nine countries in the last two years have been **COVID-19** related measures and their impact on household income; the **increase in food and fuel costs** due to COVID-19 related measures, the impacts of **climate change**, and **the conflict in Ukraine**; and **extreme weather** caused by climate change damaging or destroying crops.

03 Some girls and their families – in El Salvador and the Philippines in particular – have experienced food insecurity due to the **compound impact** of the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events, and increased food and fuel costs in their communities.

04 In all 9 Cohort countries, girls and their families report resorting to **negative coping mechanisms** to deal with food scarcity, including adults skipping meals to feed children or whole families foregoing food to pay for healthcare, and prioritising buying food over paying girls' school fees.

05 In some Cohort countries, girls and their families report that food scarcity is linked to cases of **family and domestic violence**, **child marriage**, **child labour**, and **sexual exploitation** of girls in their communities.

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES – COHORT STUDY MAP



KEY STATS: AFRICA

BENIN



THE **LEVEL OF HUNGER** EXPERIENCED BY THE POPULATION IN BENIN WAS CLASSIFIED AS **'SERIOUS'** ON THE **GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX** IN 2021

IT RANKED **82ND** OUT OF 116 COUNTRIES⁹



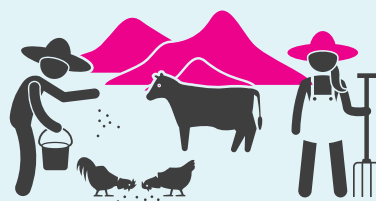
THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN A SEMI-URBAN AREA, NOT FAR FROM THE CAPITAL, WITH STRONG AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY, SUPPLEMENTED BY TRADE IN FOOD

TOGO



THE **LEVEL OF HUNGER** EXPERIENCED BY THE POPULATION IN TOGO WAS CLASSIFIED AS **'SERIOUS'** ON THE **GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX** IN 2021

IT RANKED **89TH** OUT OF 116 COUNTRIES¹⁰



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF THE COUNTRY WHERE THE **STANDARD OF LIVING** IS LOW AND **SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE** IS THE PRIMARY **EMPLOYMENT**

UGANDA



69.2% OF THE POPULATION IN UGANDA WAS REPORTED TO HAVE EXPERIENCED **MODERATE/SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY** IN 2019¹¹



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN RURAL COMMUNITIES* THAT DEPEND ON FARMING AS A **SOURCE OF FOOD AND INCOME** – THE MAIN CROP IS SUGARCANE

*About 150 kms from Kampala.

9. Global Hunger Index 'Benin'. Available at: [Benin - Global Hunger Index \(GHI\) - peer-reviewed annual publication designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels](#)

10. Global Hunger Index 'Togo'. Available at: [Togo - Global Hunger Index \(GHI\) - peer-reviewed annual publication designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels](#)

11. World Bank Data. Available at: [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\) - Uganda | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

WHAT ARE THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HUNGER IN THE COHORT COUNTRIES?

INCREASED FOOD AND FUEL COSTS

Across all the Cohort countries, girls and their families have been affected by rises in food and fuel prices. Already driven up in many contexts due to the COVID-19 pandemic which saw reduction in food production, and the impacts of climate change on crop yields, food has become even more expensive since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine due to the reduction in the global supply of barley, maize, and fertiliser. The impacts of the situation in Ukraine are particularly visible in the Philippines Cohort, where the surge in cost of fertiliser since the conflict began has meant that families like Christine's can no longer afford to cultivate rice and have turned to fishing to earn an income. Rosamie reported that her family are no longer able to use their motorcycle – that they used to use to transport their farming produce – due to the cost of petrol:

“It increased due to the effects of the war in Ukraine. The price is rising. People are still buying because they have no choice.”

ROSAMIE¹², 16,
THE PHILIPPINES, 2022



The harvest is put in a container, ready to be carried home.

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Rosamie is well-informed about global politics and economics due to the impact it has had on her family's livelihood. She described the compound effects of extreme weather and price rises on their food security:

“We're supposed to harvest but due to the heavy rains lately, the rice we got is empty. We're losing money because the fertilizer is expensive. It's sad We are trying. Of course it's hard when there is no money to pay for the needs, whatever you do and that's it. The only important thing is to have something to eat.”

ROSAMIE, 16,
THE PHILIPPINES, 2022

Kyla explains that while whole families are experiencing the challenges brought by the economic situation in her community, she has seen that it is women who are most affected:

“Because they have a family, too. Especially those who have lost their jobs ... Because mothers carry the burden with expenses, where to get money ... They [fathers] are also affected. Of course, especially if there is no livelihood. But it's really the women who carry the problem.”

KYLA, 16,
THE PHILIPPINES, 2022

12. All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Changes to the climate including extreme weather events have also contributed to food insecurity in Cohort girls' households. Families reported damage or destruction of crops in Benin, Togo, and Uganda due to dry, hot weather and drought, while in the Philippines and Cambodia girls and caregivers described how rice harvests were significantly reduced due to flooding. When the tropical storm 'Amanda' hit El Salvador in 2020, Cohort families already dealing with the economic impacts of COVID-19 measures faced further challenges when bean harvests were destroyed by extreme winds and flooding. Girls and their families in the Cohort countries have reported impacts of changes to the climate on their food security for a number of years, however for many this was further exacerbated by the economic strains brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a compound effect.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on food security have been widely documented, the effects of COVID-19 and the ongoing economic recovery are still acutely felt by the Cohort girls and their families who continue to report its impacts. Girls and their families in all nine Cohort countries were impacted by the government-imposed restrictions on movement and workplaces leading in most cases to a decline in income or complete loss of employment for the girls' households.

“Before the arrival of COVID-19, I used to sell porridge but with the restrictions, people no longer came out to eat and drink; everybody stayed at home and business dropped. We are now struggling to feed the family.”

**NINI-RIKE'S MOTHER,
TOGO, 2021**

In Benin, many of the girls' female caregivers work as traders and experienced a severe decline in income as they were unable to travel to buy and sell due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some Cohort households in the Philippines and Togo had relied on remittances sent from family members working in cities and abroad, however when these family members also lost their income due to COVID-19 restrictions, girls and their families were left without this safety net. In Cambodia, girls reported experiencing food scarcity after their mothers lost their jobs during the pandemic.



A 14-year-old girl
in Vietnam.

©Plan International

“Since the covid 19 spread, my life has changed, no communication with friends, no school, I have to work more on housework, lack of food and mother lost her job. So, we need to save as much as possible.”

**SOTHANY, 14,
CAMBODIA, 2021**

While the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on food security has been widely documented, the effects of COVID-19 and the ongoing economic recovery are still acutely felt by the Cohort girls and their families who continue to report its impacts. Girls and their families in all nine Cohort countries were impacted by the government-imposed restrictions on movement and workplaces leading in most cases to a decline in income or complete loss of employment for the girls' households.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the Cohort families reported receiving food relief from the national government. In El Salvador, Gabriela's family relied on the support provided, though they did not initially expect to be included among the recipients. Justine's family in Uganda, however, reported that while others were provided with food relief, their household did not receive any support. Justine's mother explained that support was only provided to people living in urban areas, excluding those living in rural areas based, in her opinion, on the understanding that those living in rural areas could subsist on homegrown food:

“I don't really know but it could be that they think that people in the villages have food since they can dig in their gardens ... I felt bad because at times people in the villages like those in towns may not be having food to eat and they were all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, so why do they select only the town dwellers?”

**JUSTINE'S MOTHER,
UGANDA, 2021**

KEY STATS: ASIA

CAMBODIA



44.8%
OF THE POPULATION
IN CAMBODIA WAS
REPORTED TO
HAVE EXPERIENCED
MODERATE/SEVERE
FOOD INSECURITY
IN 2019¹³

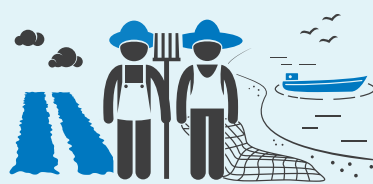


THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR
FAMILIES ARE FROM **RURAL**
AREAS AND THEY **WORK** MAINLY
AS **FARMERS** AND **AGRICULTURAL**
LABOURERS

PHILIPPINES



42.7%
OF THE POPULATION
IN THE PHILIPPINES
WAS REPORTED TO
HAVE EXPERIENCED
MODERATE/SEVERE
FOOD INSECURITY
IN 2019¹⁴

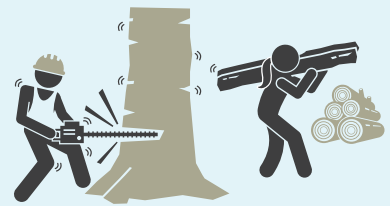


THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR
FAMILIES **LIVE** IN **RURAL AREAS**
HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO TYPHOONS,
FLOODS, DROUGHT AND SUSCEPTIBLE
TO CLIMATE CHANGE HAZARDS.
THE POPULATION **MAKES A LIVING**
FROM **AGRICULTURE** AND, IN THE
COASTAL REGION, **FISHING**

VIETNAM



6.5%
OF THE POPULATION
IN VIETNAM WAS
REPORTED TO
HAVE EXPERIENCED
MODERATE/SEVERE
FOOD INSECURITY
IN 2019¹⁵



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR
FAMILIES **LIVE** IN **LARGELY RURAL**
AREAS WHERE THE POPULATION
WORKS IN **AGRICULTURE** OR
FORESTRY AND THERE IS **INTERNAL**
MIGRATION TO THE BIG CITIES

13. World Bank Data. Available at: [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\) - Cambodia](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.UK.SRVS.CV?locations=AS) | [Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/)

14. World Bank Data. Available at: [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\) - Philippines](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.UK.SRVS.CV?locations=AS) | [Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/)

15. World Bank Data. Available at: [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\) - Vietnam](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.UK.SRVS.CV?locations=AS) | [Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/)



A girl in El Salvador who has to work in order to financially support her family.

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HOW ARE GIRLS IMPACTED BY HUNGER?

GIRLS' HEALTH AND WELLBEING

For Cohort families experiencing food insecurity, the impact of hunger on the health, wellbeing, and future prospects of the girls are key concerns for their caregivers. Girls in Benin, Togo, the Philippines, and Uganda reported a decline in their mental health due to lack of food. Girls are aware of the difficulties that their families are facing, and some explain that they experience anxiety about whether they will have enough to eat.

“No fun, no rest and not enough food – I become frustrated, I shut down, scowl and I am not happy.”

**ANNABELLE, 14,
BENIN, 2021**

In Uganda, Sheila's family struggled to find work as agricultural workers during the COVID-19 pandemic due to government restrictions on movement, a lack of employment opportunities, and fear of contracting the virus. Her father reported that Sheila had lost weight due to a lack of food and that the whole family had at times resorted to going without food all day in order to pay for healthcare.

While the Cohort girls and their families in Vietnam did not report experiencing food insecurity, many explained how increases in food and fuel costs have led them to make changes to their diet, either due to reduced access to certain foods or in order to save money. In Brazil, Natalia's mother also reported cutting the family's food expenses down to the "basics" due to inflated prices and a limited budget.

IMPACTS ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

A key concern for Cohort families in Uganda is the impact that hunger has on girls' education. Families that struggle to provide girls with enough food at home worry about how this will affect their learning at school.

“She was affected because learning on an empty stomach may cause the child not to concentrate.”

NIMISHA'S MOTHER,
UGANDA, 2021

Amelia explains that in some cases children resort to stealing food from fellow classmates after being sent to school without enough to eat. She criticises parents who punish their children for stealing rather than acknowledging that they were forced to:

“Because they contribute to a child's failure yet blame the child for failing. For example, if a child is sent to school with nothing to take them through the term, they may end up stealing sugar from another child and parents beat them, yet they know fully that these children left home without essential necessities.”

AMELIA, 14,
UGANDA, 2021

While lunch is provided at the Cohort girls' schools in Uganda, some girls report that it is only given to students who have paid their school fees in full. For families that are facing difficulties buying enough food to eat at home, school fees are often deprioritised. This means that girls whose families are unable to pay their fees are left hungry during the day, and in some cases, this leads them to stop attending school. Miremba says that her friends help her by sharing their food when she doesn't have enough to eat at school, which happens when her father is unable to give her money for school:

“I feel sad when I request my father to give me upkeep to spend at school and he tells me that he doesn't have money.”

MIREMBA,
UGANDA, 2021

EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

In the Philippines, Mahalia's community was affected by African Swine Fever¹⁶ which compounded the economic impacts of COVID-19 restrictions of movement on trade for farmers like her parents. Mahalia's family reported that this stressor had contributed to an increase in family violence in their community. Melanie's mother also linked food insecurity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic to parental violence towards children in her community, including cases of child marriage:

“They became abusive and violent. That is the effect of Covid ... Yes, there are situations like that here wherein they have many children and have no food to eat ... there are some who have financial and food problems. Instead of sending the children to school, they just let them marry even though they're still young.”

MELANIE'S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

Rebecca's mother in Uganda explains how girls are at particular risk of exploitation by their families who are experiencing food insecurity, indicating that girls are encouraged to enter or continue relationships with men in order to secure food for the family:

“Because such parents want to benefit from their daughters so fast by earning some money out of the girl so fast and the desire to eat well also makes them fail to talk to their daughters instead they are sent to request for sugar, meat, rice from these men.”

REBECCA'S MOTHER,
UGANDA, 2021

16. African swine fever (ASF) is a viral disease affecting pigs and wild boar with up to 100% case fatality rate. The first outbreak in The Philippines was reported in July 2019, as of July 2021, ASF spread to 50 out of its 81 provinces. FAO 'ASF situation update'. Available at: [FAO ASF situation update - African Swine Fever \(ASF\) - FAO Emergency Prevention System for Animal Health \(EMPRES-AH\)](#)

KEY STATS: LATIN AMERICA

BRAZIL



23.5%
OF THE POPULATION
IN BRAZIL WAS
REPORTED TO
HAVE EXPERIENCED
MODERATE/SEVERE
FOOD INSECURITY
IN 2019¹⁷



SOME COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR
FAMILIES **MAKE THEIR LIVING**
IN AGRICULTURE AND OTHERS DO
CASUAL WORK OR ARE RELIANT ON
GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



THE **LEVEL OF HUNGER**
EXPERIENCED BY THE
POPULATION IN THE
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
WAS CLASSIFIED AS
'LOW' ON THE **GLOBAL**
HUNGER INDEX IN 2021

IT RANKED **36TH**
OUT OF 116 COUNTRIES¹⁸



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR
FAMILIES **LIVE IN** RURAL AREAS
– FAMILY **INCOMES** ARE LARGELY
DERIVED FROM GROWING **BANANAS,**
TOMATOES AND **COFFEE**

EL SALVADOR



47.1%
OF THE POPULATION
IN EL SALVADOR
WAS REPORTED TO
HAVE EXPERIENCED
MODERATE/SEVERE
FOOD INSECURITY
IN 2019¹⁹



SOME OF THE
COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR
FAMILIES **LIVE IN A REMOTE**
MOUNTAINOUS AREA, OTHERS IN
A **SEMI-RURAL COASTAL AREA**

EMPLOYMENT IS LARGELY
AGRICULTURAL BUT BOTH DROUGHT
AND FLOODS DESTROY CROPS AND
FAMILIES FALL BACK ON **MANUAL**
WORK AND VARIOUS **OTHER TRADES**

17. World Bank Data. Available at: [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\) - Brazil | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.UK.SRVS.VS?locations=BR)

18. Global Hunger Index 'Dominican Republic'. Available at: [Dominican Republic - Global Hunger Index \(GHI\) - peer-reviewed annual publication designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels](https://www.hungerindex.org/country/dominican-republic)

19. World Bank Data. Available at: [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\) - El Salvador | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.UK.SRVS.VS?locations=SV)

RECOMMENDATIONS

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS, DONORS AND OTHER HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Urgently contribute towards the USD \$21.5 billion needed to avert almost 49 million people from the brink of famine and promote the resilience of 137 million people. Funds need to be readily available, immediately provided, flexible and unearmarked. Failure to do so will likely result in widespread starvation as well as a complete collapse of agricultural livelihood strategies and assets. It is for this reason that Plan International applauds the recent decision by the US Congress to approve \$5 billion for global food security and calls on other G7 members to also make significant funding available.

Support governments to reinforce and scale-up gender responsive, unconditional social protection and income support measures for the most affected and vulnerable people and families, including child- and female-headed households, families with young children, displaced populations, and where relevant, to create an enabling environment for humanitarian actors to complement the national response. Support the combination of these measures wherever possible with nutrition, health, hygiene/sanitation, nurturing care for child development and gender equality information and messaging for families and communities

In addition to life-saving humanitarian action, **increased investment in resilience**, including alternative livelihoods and shock responsive, flexible social protection systems is imperative. Opportunities must also be taken to ensure that life-saving assistance to address acute food insecurity is coordinated with and complementary to efforts to address drivers of food insecurity, and that all long-term development funding incorporates rapid crisis modifiers.

Sex- and age-disaggregated data about food security needs, including information about the needs of school-age children and adolescents, is essential to meeting their age- and gender-specific needs, particularly of adolescent girls. Consulting children and adolescents to understand their coping mechanisms and preferences is essential to designing safe, inclusive programmes.

Increase the prioritisation of funding for **gender responsive child protection, GBV, mental health and psychosocial support, maternal and child health, SRHR and education interventions** integrated into food and nutrition programmes, to ensure that the immediate protection, health and longer-term wellbeing of children, particularly girls, is not undermined in contexts of acute food insecurity.

Increase funding for critical school feeding programmes. Where necessary, alternative food distribution measures should be identified in the event of school closures, such as school meal collection services, or cash transfers where appropriate, to replace school feedings. These should be adapted to ensure they reach the youngest children and adolescent girls – including those that were out of school before the crisis.

Acting early saves lives. Funding for anticipatory action and preparedness based on early warning indicators is critical, and where appropriate should use forecast-based financing. Adequate, timely and flexible funding must be made available to support interventions such as distribution of agricultural inputs to prevent and mitigate foreseen climate shock impacts on food production; emergency cash transfers to ensure that vulnerable populations can protect themselves ahead of shocks; livestock protection activities, in particular ahead of drought; strengthened and continuous surveillance and early warning; control of pests and diseases; and prepositioning of food, especially if increases in displacement are foreseen.

Prioritise child safety, dignity and wellbeing during food insecurity programmes to avoid causing harm and ensure that accountability mechanisms, including child-friendly feedback mechanisms are established which provide gender- and age-responsive, inclusive, safe and confidential ways for children and young people to receive information, provide feedback and meaningfully participate in influencing humanitarian programming.



Acknowledgments

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This research brief was written by Jenny Rivett.

Cover photograph: A girl selling spinach at a market in Togo. ©Plan International

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About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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