Behind
the Screen
An inside look at gender
inequality in Asia

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Foreword

Gender inequality has planted its roots deeply and strongly alongside Asian ways of living. It is everywhere, from home to school and community, and rises up to the level of national politics. Together with poverty and other social issues such as child marriage and child labour, the disparity becomes dominant, preventing millions of girls from having the opportunity to study and to lead a good life. Even worse, it risks harming their physical and emotional condition.

Gender discrimination has its most glaring reflection in the education arena, particularly in South Asian countries. Plan has conducted gender scans to assess the level of gender sensitivity in its education programmes in Asia and identify modifications to improve them in the future.

The publication you have in your hands clearly portrays the reality and reasons why nearly 16 million girls are not going to school in Asia.

As a woman and a mother, I feel sad to see the unfair treatment girls receive. Within the same level of poverty, girls are kept from school while boys stay on. It is disappointing to know some parents find they must save money for their daughter’s dowry instead of paying for her schooling. It is frustrating to learn that despite the fact that in most of Asia basic education is now compulsory, so many girls still do not have access to school.

With 59 years experience working with children and communities in Asia, Plan is committed to eradicating poverty and making a positive difference in their lives. The issues revealed from this publication are extremely helpful for us in tackling the problems and increasing our effectiveness. I do hope the good practices and approaches shown in this publication will help us learn from each other, bring more girls into school and ultimately achieve gender equality in education.

Myrna Evora
Regional Director
Plan Asia
Bangkok, Thailand

Introduction

Imagine this. You have never been to school, although you want to so much. You can neither read nor write. And all you know of a school is your dream. What would you say if someone asks you, “What do you think about your right to education?” And you happen to be a girl.

Or imagine this. You have attended school for some years, and know how to read and write a bit. You want to learn more, because you know having a good education would change your life. Then you are told you cannot go to school any more. What would you tell the world? And you happen to be a girl.

This book is about gender. It offers a perspective on gender inequality in Asia and especially its impact on education for girls. It is the result of the gender scan that Plan Asia conducted in 10 countries at the end of 2006. You will see, maybe for the first time, the many faces of gender inequality, from family and community, to school and the education system.

Our story is also about the part that Plan Asia is playing in helping to erase long-held gender prejudices. It cites examples of Plan’s work in the region. It illustrates how much more must be done, of course not by Plan alone but by all citizens and organisations of goodwill, in order to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Above all, this book brings you the voices of children and women, the people first and foremost affected by gender discrimination. We hear their lament, exasperation and anger. Will they echo yours, if you happen to take their place? Some voices may sound familiar. Why do we hear them again and again?

The answer we know. The response lies in our hands.

Hoa Phuong Tran, Ph.D.
Regional Learning and Education Advisor
Plan Asia
Bangkok, Thailand
Asia is vast and diverse. The region boasts a plethora of landscapes, cultures, religions and ethnic groups. Unfortunately Asia can also be characterised by unequal achievement in human development, with great disparities that straddle geographic, socio-economic, ethnic, and gender lines.

Human development and the eradication of poverty are the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. One of the goals is to promote gender equality and empower women. And, since women and girls account for two-thirds of the world’s illiterates, this goal includes eliminating gender disparity in education. Some Asian countries are on track to meet the goal of... others lag behind.

The reasons for gender inequality are many and complex. While their roots are largely cultural or traditional, they may be based on extreme socio-economic deprivation. This publication, highlighting the most commonly found reasons, draws entirely on the views expressed by parents, children, teachers, and local officials in the communities where Plan Asia works. Their voices will be heard throughout these pages. And we are hopeful they will resonate far and wide.

Plan Asia obtained these views during a critical look at its education programmes to assess the level of their gender sensitivity. The first of such gender scans, as the reviews were called, was conducted in 2003. The scan was conceived and conducted not as a one-off assessment but as part of a continuous process of monitoring the gender responsiveness of the programmes. The second scan, carried out in 2006, was aimed at getting still further insights into community views, and including:

- Is gender equality reflected as a focus in Plan Asia’s education programmes?
- In what way do Plan’s education programmes address gender inequality?
- How effective are they in addressing gender inequality?
- What has made them effective/insufficiently effective?
- What do we need to do to make our education programmes gender sensitive?
- What capacity-building activities do we need so that our education programmes are more gender-responsive?
- What advocacy should we undertake in addressing gender inequality?

The comments of the girls and women, and the boys and men, whom Plan staff consulted during the scan throw their own light on the multiple obstacles to gender equity that girls face daily.

These barriers, in the family, in school and beyond, take numerous forms as this publication will reveal. However, readers will notice that the underlying concern of our scan’s respondents is very much on making schools more effective in attracting and retaining girl students. Girls’ education is seen as the key that unlocks the door to gender equality and women’s empowerment.

When education systems provide child-friendly and relevant curricula, children promote the principles of
gender equality, non-discrimination, peace and environmental sustainability that they have learned at school. Education enables girls to claim their rights and have choices. They can become agents of change, promoting gender equality. With the knowledge acquired at school, they are able to advocate for peace and against discrimination, for the safeguarding of their environment and against pollution and destruction. Educated girls are more likely to acquire a sustainable livelihood that propels them and their families beyond the dollar-a-day income level that traps millions in extreme poverty.

The communities where Plan works may not be aware of the Millennium Goal of gender equality. They certainly will not know that only a few Asia-Pacific countries met the 2005 deadline. However, the Goal’s second target date of 2015 is, for most of Asia, not beyond reach. Governments and donors owe it to the poor and disadvantaged to do everything in their power to meet this goal. It is argued that failure to meet the goal of gender parity (Goal No. 3) and the related goal of universal primary education would imperil Asia’s achievement of the seven other Millennium Development Goals.

Poverty goes hand-in-hand with a lack of education. Poor children are less likely to be educated when their mothers are themselves illiterate or uneducated. Instead they are required to contribute to the family income and take care of younger siblings. Their life of deprivation continues throughout adulthood and, in turn, is passed onto their children. The poorest of poor children – ethnic minorities, low-caste groups, orphans, street children and rural children - are in need of extraordinary support if they are to have any chance of going to school.

Education also requires the curriculum to include skills for wealth creation, in addition to reading, writing and numeracy, so that children are equipped to participate in their society’s economic development. This not only encourages parents to send children to school, but also makes it more feasible for children to find jobs afterwards.

Girls must have greater, easier access to education. The issue cuts across all aspects of human development. Schools protect girls from trafficking, from child labour and sexual exploitation. Schools teach them how to summon up the voices that have been silenced during centuries of gender discrimination. Education gives girls their voice.

II. Barriers to girls’ education and gender equality

“To raise and care for a daughter is like taking care of somebody else’s garden.”
(Nepalese proverb)

Official statistics show that girls are less likely than boys to enter and complete a full course of schooling. In South Asia alone more than 10 million girls do not go to school. The same is true of South-East Asia, even though altogether there are comparatively fewer out-of-school children.

The major barriers that keep girls out of school and obstruct gender equality are deep-rooted and numerous. They need to be addressed not just by education interventions, but also by broader, gender-responsive attitudes in the family, the community, and indeed at the national level too. The analysis that follows discusses the key factors - poverty, child labour, early marriage, the dowry, illiteracy, and son preference. Their varied expressions will then be touched upon again in the sections on gender inequality in the family, the community and school.

1. Poverty

Of the many obstacles to girls’ education, poverty is the recurring theme.

Across the region, families say it is a lack of money that prevents their children from going to school or staying in school once they have started. One Indonesian family from Rambang told Plan how “by entering our children in school we hope they can be clever and reach success in their life. We encourage our children to go to school until we don’t have enough money to pay the school cost.” And then the children have to leave. Or, as an Indian mother put it to us, “How can I send my daughter to school when I can’t even buy her a notebook for two Rupees?”

Poverty in Asia is pervasive. Six hundred million children are deprived of at least one or more of their basic needs – food, drinkable water, sanitation, health services, shelter and education. Over half of these children are absolutely poor. They live
early marriage

3. Early marriage
Early marriage is an expression of both poverty and tradition. Poor parents see marrying their daughters off as a solution to the protection of their daughters’ virginity. The practice is common in much of South Asia, particularly in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, where over half of all girls are married before they reach 18. In India, girls as young as 12 can marry while boys do not marry until they are 20. In practice, girls as young as 10 are already married off.

Anwari’s father says, “Talking of studies seems like an abuse. If there is no money, how will these children study? If we die, studies would support Anwari. She could stand on her own feet. But we are helpless.”

Child labour is a major obstacle to the achievement of Education For All, since children who work full time cannot go to school. Child labour deprives them of both their education and their childhood. For those who combine work and school, not only do their educational achievements suffer but also they tend to drop out of school quickly. India has the largest number of working children in the world and 23 per cent of the world’s out-of-school children.

Almost all children consulted in this study had something to say about child labour. They were unequivocal about how it is impossible for them to pursue their dream of school. From a tender age, work, not school or play, is the only reality that faces so many girls in poor communities across Asia. And sadly, they have only that reality to take for granted.

In many cases, young children from 5-6 years old already have to do serious household chores or wage earning labour, and often in hazardous conditions. Hence it is not surprising to hear an eight year old say, from her own experience, that “housework should be done by girls.”

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Provision of dowry is another burden of daughters over parents. Therefore, instead of giving them an education, it is better to spend the money on wedding expenses.

Mother, Pakistan

Komal attended school for 3 years in a village in Uttar Pradesh but never learnt to read and write. After her father died, Komal left school. She believes her family is no longer interested in educating her because she will move to her in-laws home soon. Together with her mother, she works for several hours a day doing piece-rate work - stitching stars, glitter etc. Komal also does much of the cooking and other housework.

She said her situation has overshadowed her will to succeed.

"I do not feel like studying. Circumstances have killed my desire to study," she said. "My family says it's time for my daa (leaving for her in-laws' house) but they don't have the money to perform the ceremony. I feel angry when I hear such talk."

Komal, age 12, out-of-school, lives in Uttar Pradesh, India

Sarita does housework, sibling care and agricultural work. Waking up at 5:30 she cooks, milks the cows, eats and goes to school. She likes her studies and dreams of becoming a teacher. Married at the age of 9 months, her parents are now thinking of sending her to her in-laws'. But she says:

"I don’t like this. I don’t believe in this marriage. I don’t know if I am married or not... We were married together – all four sisters. My three elder sisters and myself. The eldest was 15 years old, then 10, 8 and myself not even 1 year old!"

Sarita, age 14, belongs to a Scheduled Caste in Rajasthan, India

In Southeast Asian countries, the custom of early marriage varies greatly among provinces, states, or islands - sometimes in line with ethnographic patterns.

Some Asian countries, however, have managed to raise the age of marriage significantly. In Sri Lanka, for example, the average age at first marriage is 25.

National laws on marriage age notwithstanding, most families perpetuate their own experience by marrying their daughters early on. In the words of a 12-year-old girl in Bihar (India), "My mother and aunt talk about my marriage. I do so much housework, yet my mother says, ‘Let’s marry her off.’"

Once married, girls who previously attended school are unlikely to continue. Instead they are expected to take on duties in the household of their in-laws. They face early pregnancies, social isolation, and often abuses that go unpunished. Where a girl's family is very poor or she has lost her parents, she may find herself married as a third or fourth wife to a much older man, to fulfill the combined role of sexual and domestic servant.

All the girls participating in our study said early marriage affects them badly. To them early marriage is a fate they dread, yet feel powerless to do anything about it. Their feelings on marriage ranged from exasperation to anger. Another 12-year-old said, "My elder sister was married. I too will be married. I feel angry about this." Her words echo the views of many other girls.

4. Dowry
Although outlawed in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, the dowry still exists in these countries.

The dowry creates a huge barrier to education for girls from poor families. It came as a shock when a couple of years ago, during a village meeting in India, Plan staff heard this heartrending statement, "If my daughter gets higher education, her dowry will be bigger and we will not be able to afford it. So it is better that the girl does not go to school."

When parents are unable to afford the dowry, they face either the risk that their daughters will not marry or the prospect of their having to promise to pay the dowry later. And when the time comes and a family cannot meet its promise, it is the bride who bears the consequences. She may be beaten, raped, or put to death.

Faced with risks of this magnitude, it is no wonder that so many poor families still take what they perceive as the practical route proven by past generations. A daughter’s education must be subordinated to higher priorities. Her safety must be protected by a marriage contract at an early age and the certainty of a dowry accompanying her.

5. Illiteracy
Illiterates beget illiterates. It is caused by poverty and perpetuates poverty. In Asia, over 620 million people are illiterate. Over 400 million of them are women. Illiteracy makes women even more vulnerable to social and traditional pressure. Having been denied the opportunity to gain knowledge through son preference, the illiterate mother marries earlier; has more children; contributes to higher infant mortality and is less likely to educate her own girl children. “We follow the advice of our ancestors not to let our daughters learn too much because if they are able to read and write, they will write love letters to boys and this might result in their abduction.”

Mothers in focus groups that Plan supports in the communities tend to be champions for girls’ literacy. However, due to gender inequality in the home and the fact that they themselves are uneducated, these women are unable to insist that their daughters learn to read. Nevertheless,
“Girls’ education should be top priority because a literate mother can bring up her children a lot better than an illiterate mother,” said one Pakistani mother.

6. Son preference

Girls are discriminated against from their earliest years simply because they are female. In much of Asia, son preference remains strongly in place and shows through in many ways.

In Nepal’s rural areas, for example, parents prefer sons because they are deemed a form of social security, while girls remain a burden until married. In Nepali culture, preference starts from infancy. Boys are lactated as long as possible while daughters are lactated for as short a time as possible. Similarly in Bangladesh the preference for sons shows through strongly, from the way boys are nurtured when they are born, to how they are fed and clothed in childhood, and respected and even feared when they are grown up.

In Vietnam where ancestor worship predominates, and the family lineage is very important, sons hold a significant place as they sustain the family line.

Experience tells parents, or at least the family head, that it is a son who will one day take over as head of the family and take responsibility for earning money. And so “there is no need for girls to have a high level knowledge. Skills to manage the household can be learned from family members as well as her community.”

Son preference, combined with the patriarchy prevailing in most societies in South and South-East Asia, works against girls’ education. The decision to send and keep a girl at school lies with the fathers, a matter made worse by the high level of female illiteracy in many communities. Few illiterate women are able to persuade their husbands to send their daughters to school if the husband has decided otherwise.

In Pakistan teachers said the father is the decision maker and always takes a different approach towards his son than his daughter. The father gives preference to the education of boys whereas he does not consciously plan or facilitate his daughter’s education. Pakistan has a GPI (gender parity index) of 0.79 and is seriously off track to meeting the goal of gender parity in primary education. Son preference must be seen as one of the principal causes.

Parents consulted in our gender scan confirmed how the societal-assigned gender stereotypes and customary laws have greatly impacted their decision to send girls to school. According to Indonesian parents, “the level of education a woman attains makes little difference to her future as she will end up being a housewife.” Girls are unlikely to be considered for pursuing higher education when most parents think along the same line. As parents in Cambodia tell us, career opportunities for girls are limited anyway. “Daughters don’t need to study because they won’t be able to get high positions in government.” The culture of the glass-ceiling will, parents know, prevent their daughters from ever reaching important positions. Thus parents see no point in spending limited financial resources to support the education of a girl who will ultimately end up living with her in-laws. Sending a girl to school is akin to “watering a neighbour’s tree.”

Parents, Pakistan

In Vietnam, having a son at all costs often means that couples continue to try for a boy even if they are poor and have several daughters. In China, India, Nepal and Vietnam, son preference is evident in each country’s skewed girl-boy ratio that favours boys. This occurs through gender selection in which the girl foetus is aborted, or the infant girl child dies through neglect or infanticide. Neglect is the foremost cause of sickness, disability and death among children, especially girls, from two to five years old.

In some Indonesian villages girls are preferred. But this is only because girls can easily earn an income as domestics. This should not be seen in a positive light as, firstly, it prevents them from getting an education and secondly it makes them more vulnerable to trafficking.

Son preference also works heavily against the quality of a woman’s life. Her chances of a long and healthy life are endangered by son preference. It puts a heavy fertility burden on her and she is likely to have only limited access to ante-natal care and attended birth. Even when women are literate they tend to look up to a man as someone of higher stature and for whom they should make sacrifice. Many Vietnamese women are in the habit of denying their own interests — new clothes or food — in favour of their husbands and sons. They consider males more important.
III. What does Plan do to make it easier for girls to go to school?

Children everywhere have the right to a good quality education. This right is at the heart of all that Plan Asia does - from raising awareness of parents, to engaging with community leaders and school managers, or through advocating with central government.

Working in the poorest of poor communities Plan Asia takes a pragmatic approach. We concentrate on the education of all the most disadvantaged children in the community. The specific type of assistance varies according to local needs.

While in most of Asia basic education is usually free, there are many ancillary expenses such as uniforms, meals, schoolbooks, pens and paper, construction and maintenance fees. For a poor family, these costs may represent a significant part of their income, deterring parents from sending their children to school. In that case, girls are the first to remain at home.

Some countries have constitutions that state that primary education is compulsory and free – but still the students have to pay. Such ‘fees’ are often enough to prevent children from attending school, especially girls from poor families.

So in almost all countries where we work, Plan responds by providing scholarships, especially for girls, at both primary and secondary education levels, to cover their expenses. While some boys receive scholarships too, the majority go to girls since our priority is to help achieve gender parity in education. Special consideration is given to the most disadvantaged who are at risk of dropping out.

Plan Vietnam has been successful in negotiating with government to implement an ‘exception policy’ in its programme areas. Girls from very poor families and other vulnerable children are given reduction of ancillary costs, such as building maintenance and construction levies.

Plan also provides assistance in kind. Everything is based on what can make the crucial difference to a family. For example, in Bangladesh we provide pads, pens and supplementary books. In the Philippines Plan’s ‘Targeted School Assistance’ Programme (TSAP) provides material support such as school supplies and books as well as funding for the purchase of uniforms and payment of other school expenses.

In Cambodia we provide shoes and clothes to poor students and implement a feeding programme for the pre-school children. While these materials are intended for boys and girls alike, we know that they impact most favourably on girls, who are usually the first to go without. At the same time Plan Cambodia is implementing our School Improvement Programme. One of its effects is that families no longer have to hire tutors, as the quality of their education at school has improved.

In the more rural areas, a child’s journey from home to school is a challenge in itself. So in the Philippines we either meet the transportation cost or provide bicycles or, in the most difficult situations, pay for lodging near the school. In India we provide bicycles too. The bicycle not only makes it possible for girls to reach school when it’s far from home but also makes their journey safer.

A special initiative, being implemented in the Philippines, is Plan’s “Adopt-a-Child” programme. Teachers ‘adopt’ a child, usually a girl and disadvantaged, who shows exceptional interest in getting ahead and is perceived as having the potential to do so. The teacher gives the necessary support for her to become educated. These interventions may be backed up with house-to-house visits. Either Plan staff or teachers visit the homes of children known to be missing school, to discuss the reasons and see what can be done.

Plan Asia assists with early childhood care and development (ECCD) programmes as well. These programmes have two objectives. On the one hand they aim to expose younger children to proper care and early stimulation, and on the other they play a direct and important role in removing
obstacles that keep older girls away from school. By providing parents with a safe place to place their smallest children while they are out working, ECCD centres spare the need for an older sibling - a school-aged girl – to remain at home baby-sitting, and have the chance to attend school.

However, there are some families for whom no amount of assistance or persuasion, it seems, can surmount the obstacles to schooling their daughters. In such cases, Plan seeks to provide out-of-school girls with skills training. In Nepal and Vietnam, for example, Plan pays for girls to attend vocational training and skills development courses. Plan Philippines utilises Alternative Learning System to enable out of school adolescents who are working, or who have left the education system too long to rejoin formal education. Working adolescents can attend study programmes and get a certificate of secondary education while working. Girls joining this programme can determine their own study schedule and course options that are most suitable and beneficial to them. Apart from equipping girls with skills, these programmes reduce the risk of girls entering risky occupations or being trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. Similar programme for out-of-school youths is being supported by Plan in Nepal as well.

In India, Plan assists out-of-school girls through vocational training in handicrafts and other skills that will enable them to earn a living. Plan also offers non-formal education support in which girls can participate in “Package A, B or C”. All three packages provide non-formal schooling which enables girls who pass the course and exams to receive the same certificate as if they enrolled and completed primary (Package A), junior high (Package B) or senior-high school (Package C). So that the girls will have sufficient time for study, Plan supports their families with a variety of livelihood options that decrease the workload on girls. Options include fodder promotion, school water and sanitation improvements, and composting.

Plan Vietnam’s Microfinance Programme assists families in improving their household economic security, and especially the nutrition and education status of children. The independent evaluation of this project shows that parents used 64 per cent of the family income resulting from the loan on their children’s education needs such as textbooks, notebooks and other school fees.

The focus on girls’ education, especially their enrolment, is a primary dimension of the Indian Government’s intervention in primary education. It is an indicator closely monitored by international aid agencies as well, and there is considerable pressure on the Government to ensure that girl children enrol in the primary levels. Given this, Plan India has decided to put emphasis on planning and implementing programmes that can improve the retention and continuation of girl children in schools.

The project “Innovative Education Programmes in India with a Focus on Girl Child” was initiated by Plan India in 2002 to strengthen and consolidate existing interventions in the States of Rajasthan, Orissa and Karnataka. The principle objective has been “to address the issue of access to and quality of (girls’) education initiatives through innovative interventions to promote the equity and effectiveness of these interventions.” This has been achieved by liberating the elder girl children from taking care of the younger ones, through the intervention in ECCD programmes.

The second level of intervention has been in ensuring that the girl children received bicycles so that they can travel to and from school. This increased the attendance of girls in school and also contributed to their increased mobility and self esteem. Support in the form of benches for the children (the girls demanded better seating as it was difficult for them to squat on the floor in their skirts), the construction of separate and private latrines for use by girl children and in some cases financial assistance to purchase school uniforms, has also been provided by Plan.
IV. Gender discrimination starts at home

“One son is children, two daughters are none.”  
(Vietnamese proverb)

Unequal treatment and lack of opportunity begin at home. Gender-based stereotypes are passed on from one generation to the next, permeating every aspect of family life. Gender discrimination is reflected, for example, in how families invest in the education and health of girls as compared with boys.

1. Defining gender
The definition of ‘gender’ in the region is imperfectly interpreted. As demonstrated by the comments of girls and boys in India in the box on page 26, gender-based discrimination is not always understood by its victims. Often they think their way of determining who does what is just as it is done in their family, in other families, or in the community.

In Pakistan, Plan’s discussions on gender equality began with general discussion and explanation on gender. Mothers did not understand what gender was, as it related to societal roles and responsibilities. They only knew that gender had something to do with male and female. Once they understood the concept, the mothers confirmed that boys are preferred. Boys are expected to do more important, worldly things. Girls are brought up to become obedient housewives. Moreover, daughters are discouraged from expressing their views at all, as this will not help them to become dutiful wives.

Children’s perceptions of gender roles tend to mirror those of adults. Children in Dompu (Indonesia) reported that divisions of labour among boys and girls are according to such ‘established’ expectations. Boys said they don’t want to do ‘girl tasks’ because they are afraid of being called a ‘transvestite’.

As girls and boys are commonly perceived to have different qualities they are treated differently. As some parents in Dompu indicated, “There is different physical capability between males and females.” Thus boys collect grass, fish, herd livestock and work together with neighbours, while girls cook, wash dishes, clean the house and take care of younger siblings.

Pakistani children we met with also had no knowledge of gender. At the beginning of our interview they denied that there is gender inequality in society; it did not exist in their own community.

To help them recognise instances of gender inequality, the non-formal students were asked why they had dropped out of primary school. The girls gave reasons such as their mother needed help with household chores, marriage, and there was not enough money for education. At the same time they said that many Quranic verses reflect on gender equity.

“To get education is the right of every man and woman,” one girl recited. “We keep on studying Islamic teaching of having basic education. But in real life girls are not provided with this opportunity.”

Ironically, in some countries the recognised capabilities of girls over boys have not helped girls to be treated equitably. In Cambodia and Vietnam, boys are considered clumsy, naughty and careless, whereas girls are – and are expected to be – neat, docile and versatile. And parents in Vietnam explained that because of being clumsy and careless, boys are spared of doing the household work.

2. Working in the home
During the scan exercise in India, 95 per cent of the children interviewed indicated “girls should do housework.” This is reflected in the experience of the girls themselves: 95 per cent of them spend at least one and a half hours every day on housework, 33 per cent spend three hours or more. The majority believe that as housework is “women’s work and a moral duty” they will be punished if they don’t do it. On the other hand, a man’s work is purposeful and sustains the family. “Girls should do housework; boys should earn outside,” said a 10-year-old from Bihar.

Not unlike their counterparts in India, Vietnamese children recognised that girls bear a disproportionate amount of the housework. Three quarters of them reported that girls have to do more housework than boys, while boys have more time to study. A village chief in Cambodia concurred that housework is the reason families keep their daughters at home until they are 8 years old. Some
Cambodian parents explained that it is in order for girls to miss out on school because “daughters will just get married, stay at home, take care of children and do housework.”

As the belief and practice that household work is to be the females’ responsibility, passed on from generation to generation, both girls and boys take it for granted. It is not surprising that many girls told us it was wrong for boys to do housework. “If the girl has a job and the boy doesn’t, then he can do housework. But we don’t like it when our brothers do housework. We should worship our brother. He can do the outside work.” This attitude continues in adulthood. Women spend more time doing non-income work which is not valued the same as market work typically performed by men.

And what do the boys think? “We don’t clean and cook, or sweep because nobody tells us to. This work has become girls’ work only,” says a boy from Rajasthan, India. But a 16-year-old married girl from Rajasthan rejected traditional roles handed down by society. “I like to do outside work. This attitude continues in adulthood. Women spend more time doing non-income work which is not valued the same as market work typically performed by men.

3. Choosing a partner
In Pakistan, girls’ exasperation over choosing a partner is voiced loud and clear. “Boys and girls have forced marriages. However boys still have a say in their choice of partner, and the parents will agree. But if girls want to marry their own choice, parents just will not support. If the girl decides to go ahead despite opposition, parents do not accept the couple, and they are left alone to survive.” Consequently, we were told, the girls had no choice but to agree to their parents’ choice.

In Nepal, children said that parents easily accept inter-caste marriage of sons but would never allow their daughters to intermarry. And while early marriage affects both boys and girls, girls tend to suffer more from the tradition.

4. Discriminating financially
Fathers acknowledged that boys are preferred, albeit attributing gender inequality to societal pressures. Son preference is the reason why girls will eat last and worst. “Delicious and nutritious food is for boys and the less quality food is for girls,” said a girl from Nepal. While her brother is free studying or playing, she will be cleaning or cooking.

The differential treatment with regard to financial support to girls as compared to boys is another expression of gender discrimination in the family. Pakistani girls said, “When a boy leaves his job, the parents still support him, even if he is married and has children. However if a girl does not get married, she is considered a burden.” In Vietnam boys are provided with more clothes “because they are perceived as naughty and careless.” What if girls make similar mistakes? “They would be punished more severely, because parents expect that girls should always show a good example.”

Schoolgirls in Nepal disclosed that “special attention is given to sons when they become ill. They get treatment in the hospital. But parents follow the traditional way of treatment using faith healers and herbs when daughters get sick.”

Pakistani teachers concurred. “Parents and male members of the family discriminate against females in providing healthcare. They are always hesitant to provide the same care to females and male members of the family even if the situation is comparatively more critical.”

5. Schooling
Since boys are expected to be the bread earners, parents throughout the region invest primarily in educating sons. And when the family experiences economic hardships? Girls are the first to drop out of school to help family survival. Paradoxically, in the Philippines this expectation has resulted in more boys than girls dropping out of school to do wage-earning work.

In any event, where both sons and daughters go to school, they will still receive differential support from their father. Fathers give preference to the education of sons but do not consciously facilitate their daughters’ education. If a boy stays away from school, his parents follow up on the reasons why. If a girl stops going, neither parent bothers.

In many communities in India and Pakistan, traditional thinking is that education reduces a girl’s value: Parents expect to pay a higher dowry if their daughter has some education, and this prompts parents to keep their daughters at home. If their daughters are to attend school, the thinking goes, it should not continue beyond grade five. Girls get married soon after. They should prepare for the practical life of learning how to run the household and acquiring skills in cooking and raising children. And, from a Pakistani female student, “We often hear that girls are becoming foolish after getting an education.”
Gender: what is it? 
The girls speak about stereotypes

Plan India asked girls from different communities to comment on the following statement:

“Meena is ten years old. She likes to play cricket and go to the market. Aman is a boy. He likes playing with dolls, swinging on a swing and doing the housework. What do you feel about these two children?”

The girls’ answers reveal how gender stereotypes are deeply entrenched. At the same time, several girls and a few boys who participated in the discussions expressed thoughts that are refreshing and give hope.

Children in Delhi, India remarked:

Barkha, age 13, class 5:
“I will like it if my brother were to do housework. If brother doesn’t, the sister will have to do the housework. It is a little weird if girls do outside and boys do housework.”

Kanchan, age 10, class 3:
“Housework is to be done by girls. It doesn’t feel good if boys do housework.”

Archana, age 11, class 5:
“Girls should get what they want — cycling, marketing, going out. But boys should not cook or play with dolls.”

Suchita, age 12, class 4:
“Housework should be girls’ work? Why should a boy do it if he has a sister?”

Children in rural areas of Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, India remarked:

Gayatri, age 10, Class 4:
“If a boy does housework it will not feel good. Girls should do housework. Boys should earn outside.”

Ranjana, age 12, Class 6:
“I like the story. Whether it is housework or outside work, work is work. If the boy does housework and the girl does outside work, both are working. They are not forcing one another to do anything.”

Panni, age 16, married, non-school, has studied up to class 5 (is seventh of nine siblings — three boys and six girls):
“I like to do outside work. It is good if the brother does housework.”

Roshni, age 10, Class 4:
“I don’t like it if the brother does housework. But I do like to ride a cycle. I can come from school by cycle.”

Children in Delhi, India remarked:

Durga, 14, Cl 5 (fifth of six siblings — has four elder sisters, one elder brother and one younger):
“If the girl does housework, boy outside work, it is good.”

Phumi, age 11, Class 5:
“How can I like this story? Why should boys do housework if a girl is there?”

Santosh, age 11, non-schooled, has three brothers, three sisters, is married, left school to do housework:
“I like this girl Meena. I too do not like doing the housework.”

Santosh, age 14, non-schooled:
“I like the story. It is not right that she cycles. Going to the bazaar is fine, and also if she were to do housework it would be fine. If the boy swings on a swing and does housework it is good.”
Parents like those in Cambodia and Vietnam are potential change agents for gender equality in their community. The challenge is to enable them to rally other parents and create a critical mass of the prime decision makers to give their daughters an education which the girls deserve and to which they have the right.

So Plan consults with families, helping them to consider what family values are positive and can be built upon, which are neutral, and which ones can harm their children's interests. Plan also informs, advises and educates through forums and associations, involving parents and other community members in discussions on children's rights, gender and education. Parents receive training in positive parenting skills. Encouragement is given to improving parent and child communication, a first step to having parents reconsider their attitude on gender roles.

While this common thread of awareness raising and exchanging views connects all Plan Asia's programmes, interventions vary in response to country-specific situations.

In Cambodia, Plan recruits village animators in pre-schools to raise parental awareness. We conduct monthly meetings with parents that incorporate gender and children’s right to education on the agenda. Plan helps with setting up parent-teacher associations in primary schools and parent management committees in pre-schools. For both groups, female primary caregivers are encouraged to participate actively.

Amidst the overwhelmingly entrenched views we heard that contribute to the perpetuation of discrimination against girls, there are two that give hope, from Cambodia.

In Vietnam, Plan also encountered evidence of a broader perspective. Most Vietnamese parents agreed that they need to pay attention to their daughters' education, rather than merely that of their sons.

“I want my daughter to go to school so that she will be educated, so that she will learn about her rights - so that her husband won’t look down on her and she won’t be a victim of domestic violence.”

A mother, Cambodia

“I want my boy and girl to go to school. I do not discriminate between them. I want my girl to go to school so that she will be literate and so that people won’t look down on her.

A father collecting his children from school, Angkor Thom,
A similar approach is taken by Plan Nepal, with parenting education sessions and home visits. Through its provision of flexible schooling classes for out-of-school girls, Plan Nepal is increasing access to education for girls who otherwise would not be able to go to school on account of household responsibilities, economic hardship or marriage.

In Pakistan, Plan employs door-to-door visits to motivate families to educate girls. Economic incentives, such as scholarships for girls from poor families, help remove financial barriers. Awareness about gender issues is raised through discussions with parent teacher associations, parental education forums, talks with mothers and fathers, as well as through events such as Parents’ Day, Education for All campaigns and Child Rights Day.

Plan Indonesia also uses school development workshops, involving men and women, as a venue to discuss gender-related issues. The community learning centres supported by Plan make it explicitly the priority for female participation.

In the Philippines, parents in the barangays (the smallest local government unit) are informed about the government’s compulsory education ordinance. This provides them with the opportunity to understand government’s requirements and to find ways to maintain their children’s education. Plan conducts Parent Effectiveness Seminars for both mothers and fathers, which impart the need for both parents to participate in child-rearing and to treat boys and girls equally. Teachers are encouraged to visit the homes of students who are absent from school and are deemed at risk of dropping out.

Plan Bangladesh works through local bodies like the Community Learning Forum, Village Development Committee and School Management Committee, to organise enrolment drives. Addressing families with children of both primary and high school age, these groups place special emphasis on girls. Community meetings, discussions with teachers, officials and other local leaders also form part of the mobilisation effort. Youth organisations and students themselves hold rallies for children’s right to education.

In Vietnam, Plan promotes the rights of the child through both parent associations and activities at school. Parents and teachers are trained in positive parenting skills. Interpersonal communication between parents and children is seen as the first step to getting parents to change their attitudes and beliefs on gender roles.

Plan Vietnam recruits village animators in pre-schools to raise parental awareness. It also employs ‘Theatre for Development’ to promote gender equality. The plays portray women in dialogue with men – husbands, fathers, brothers, bosses and male colleagues. The women act out their everyday experiences, expressing their views and desire for change.

Another popular form of sensitisation in Vietnam is parent competitions on the rights of the child. Held on such occasions as International Children’s Day or Full Moon festivals, these competitions are both fun and educational events for adults and children alike. Parents are quizzed on their knowledge of children’s rights, in front of their children.

Plan China offers gender awareness training to school development committees and village development committees. The country office emphasises the importance of girls’ education at parent-teacher meetings and other school events.

Other forms of mobilisation and sensitisation have also shown positive effects. Fairs where a number of children from adjoining villages gather and discuss issues related to child rights are facilitated by Plan India. At one fair held recently in Lunkaransar, the focus of discussion was child protection, child rights and corporal punishment.

In all countries, the conduct of the gender scan has shown itself to be an excellent opportunity to sensitise parents about gender issues and to discuss ways to address them.

Further, and recognising the complex realities on the ground for families who are locked in poverty and see no easy way out, Plan combines sensitisation with other programmes, as mentioned earlier. They include skills training, adult literacy programmes, livelihood schemes, support for early childhood care and development and so on.
VI. Gender inequality persists at community level

“Men are the front legs of the elephant, while women are the back legs.”
(Thai proverb)

Gender-based discrimination is prevalent in most societies in Asia. Cultural practices confine males and females to household, community, and political roles solely on the basis of their sex. Gender inequality in the community is evident in how society values male and female contributions and how it rewards them. Boys are viewed as assets because they will take care of their parents in their old age. Therefore investment in education and basic social services is primarily focused on boys.

Cultural traditions and, on occasions, feudalism in the community tend to overrule parental sentiment. Women and girls in poor communities in some parts of South Asia live in a situation in which the combination of cultural, feudal, and patriarchal norms make them totally dependant on male members of the family, community, tribal and kin groups. “Society’s pressure”, meaning the influence of the community, was given by fathers, male teachers and boys participating in Plan’s ‘gender scan’ as reasons for their discriminating against girls. They did not appear to see that they themselves make up the same society that perpetuates such discrimination, until girls pointed this out.

Community cultural values are the overriding determinant of people’s behaviour, cutting across all other factors. In Pakistan and India, for example, girls’ education is associated with a too-independent girl and a less submissive wife. Thus parents are hesitant to educate girls when marriage to a good man is deemed more important. In Indonesia, the widespread view among students and teachers that female principals are gentle but cannot take good, tough decisions influence their choice of principals.

In Cambodia, Khmer tradition recognises the value of men as workers, whereas women cannot do important work. “People think women are not clever, slow in thinking and can’t get benefits after the study,” said a village chief. But in Vietnam, teachers said male and female roles are changing. “Recently women’s status has increased, and a larger number of women participate in politics.”
1. Restricted mobility

Women cannot work freely, particularly in rural areas, cannot own property, and in some areas don’t have identification. Families restrict females’ mobility due to the high value that society places on family honour and female modesty. “If she ever goes out of the house people start staring, gossiping, criticising and want to know where that woman is going and why,” one woman in Pakistan said. Such gossip can lead to an accusation that dishonours her family and result in her “honour killing.”

A recurrent fear for parents of school-going girls is the risk of their daughter being harassed on her way to school. Sarita, a 14-year-old from Rajasthan, India, walks one hour each way to school and she says the walk is scary with long lonely stretches. “One day a jeep stopped near me and men started talking to me, chasing me when I started running away.” The fear of abuse and molestation that happen on the way to school prompts many parents to keep their daughters at home, working. As a mother in Cambodia said, “If she goes to school and walks far, she may be raped.” Unfortunately, the lack of schools near their home, especially at post-primarily level, has forced many girls to discontinue their education, as going to school becomes dangerous for them.

Community groups in Pakistan report that parents cannot compromise their daughters’ safety and modesty for education. “I can tell you, it is very simple. We all are Muslims and the most important thing in our point of view is ‘Haya’ (modesty) and ‘Parda’ (veil). When our children grow up, this becomes more of a concern. We cannot compromise.”

School going girls often have to return home immediately after the end of class. Nepali teachers observed that, “Girls must return to their home on time, but boys are allowed to be flexible, chatting with friends and visiting friends after school.” In Kebumen, Indonesia teachers believe that parents have to implement a strict daily schedule that consists of study time, salat (prayer) and free time, to prevent the negative behaviour of female students.

The restriction on the mobility of females has a negative impact on girls’ education, and hence human development. It has to be a cause for re-examination of the location of schools, the provision of all girls’ schools, women teachers and sustainable approaches to non-formal education.

2. Society’s influence on gender inequality

Cultural norms can overrule religion, parental sentiments and national education policies. In countries where education is compulsory, boys are still favoured in a family economic crisis. Similarly while countries have laws that forbid early marriage, many parents follow the practice of marrying their daughters off - sometimes as young as ten. While in most cultures violence against females is expressly prohibited, domestic violence, dowry violence and “honour killings” are common in many communities.

The deep-rooted assumption that boys will be responsible for earning money while girls manage the household, has led parents to believe, “there is no need for girls to have a high level knowledge, as skills to manage a household can be learned from family members as well as her communities.” Hence in Bima Indonesia, on the one hand, most respondents said that both male and female students should enjoy equal opportunity to obtain education. But in times of financial hardship when they have to make a choice, both parents and children say they would favour keeping boys in school.

This bias is also expressed against adult females both in education and health. In poor, traditional communities of Pakistani women are less likely to be nourished and educated than men – a reality that adversely impacts a female’s quality of life and plays an important part in the high maternal and child mortality rates. Females are also less likely to receive treatment from a doctor for the same illnesses that a male would receive. In some rural areas women cannot work freely. And even when a woman does the income-earning work outside the house, she is still considered secondary to her husband.

Since men typically occupy positions of power in the community, both women and men internalise the message that decisions at home should be made by men. In East Lombok (Indonesia) most students said their fathers are dominant in making decisions, as they are the family heads. Only a few said that their mothers are the ones who make decisions.

Girls are also not prioritised for higher education because parents know their daughter’s chance of becoming a top official is not as likely as their son attaining such position. “Daughters don’t need to study because they will not be able to get high positions in parliament or get a top ranking position,” a Cambodian parent said.

Teachers in Pakistan said this line of thinking extends to government circles. “Key organisations such as the army, air force and navy are very reluctant to equally accommodating females in their network,” they said. With little hope of their daughters obtaining an ‘important’ job in the future, many parents see no point in spending limited financial resources to support the education of a girl who will ultimately end up living with her in-laws.

3. Distribution of labour

Time-use surveys in six Indian states reveal that women spend about 35 hours per week on household tasks and caring for children, the sick and elderly, compared to the 4 hours per week that men spend on these same tasks.

Girls are also not spared this phenomenon either. Sabiya, a 9-year-old girl from Delhi, wakes up at 6 in the morning and fetches milk from the dairy before going to school. When she returns home she does school work, housework, eats dinner and finally sleeps at around 10 pm. On the other hand, Sahana, an 11-year-old boy from Delhi said, “I don’t do housework. I like cycling and other activities. But that a boy should do...
While some women hold desirable jobs outside the home, they take on double duty by working outside the house, then doing housework upon returning. A female staff member of Plan confirmed this, “I have been provided the opportunity by my parents for higher education, and allowed to work outside home. However, when I return from work, I am expected to do the same stereotypical household chores no matter how tired I feel. But my brother does not receive the same expectations.”

In Pakistan one female respondent vividly gave an account of the situation girls and women face because of the dual role expected of them as income earners and caregivers. “Working women are only earning machines. No one cares about her feelings and emotions. She can’t have her share in property and community people also don’t want it. Husbands are always free to do physical torture but women can’t complain of her miserable life to anyone.”

4. Violence against girls and women
Discussion on violence against females is, in many communities, a sensitive topic. Yet it is very common. In Pakistan, 80 per cent of women experience violence within their homes. Though many incidents of “honour killing” are not reported, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported in 2002 more than 450 Pakistani women or girls were killed by relatives in so-called “honour killings.”

In India, it is reported that every 6 hours a young married woman is burned alive, beaten to death or driven to commit suicide. It is estimated that more than 15,000 women suffer from dowry-related violence every year. In Bangladesh more than 10 women each week suffer an acid attack that leaves them disfigured, often blind and disabled. Women interviewed said that society views domestic violence as the woman’s fault. They have nowhere to turn.

Young girls know the painful consequences of not doing housework well or ‘talking back’ to their husband. “When a girl goes to her own home after marriage, if she doesn’t know how to cook, everybody will taunt her, she will be beaten,” said a girl from Uttar Pradesh, India. In rural areas of Vietnam it is reported that men beat their wives when they do not fulfill their tasks – cooking, cleaning, or obeying their husband or parents in law. Despite numerous incidents, domestic violence is often seen as a private affair that is not often discussed in the public arena.

Cambodian teachers said that violence in the home not only impacts the psychosocial well-being of women and girls. It also affects school attendance noticeably. “Domestic violence at home is one of the difficulties girls are facing aside from a shortage of study materials, clothes, money and transportation to school.”

5. Vulnerable groups
Community discrimination against lower social classes is widespread in Asia. A girl who belongs to a low caste or an ethnic group is significantly more disadvantaged than a boy. Naina, a 13-year-old from Bihar is among the “Scheduled” caste. She attends school but has to work in the haveli (large house) to help support her family. “I like to study,” Naina said, “but there are many difficulties in my way.” In Nepal girls from the Dalit caste are more likely to be uneducated. Two-thirds of Nepali Dalits are illiterate.

The socio-economic status of the families sometimes can help ease gender discrimination to a certain extent. “Girls from rich families are able to pursue studies beyond the primary level. They are treated as ‘equal’ with boys. However, girls from poor families cannot afford to go to secondary school so people see them as occupying a lower social status than boys,” said a Plan Cambodia staff member. It illustrates the multi-fold burdens falling on the girls, esp. when they are poor, from ethnic minorities or migrant families, or disabled, or belong to a lower social status group.

For other children, geography is an issue. Rural conditions tend to affect girls more than boys, as again males are viewed as social security for the family and prioritised much more in poorer areas. “If all the rural people had the same welfare as city people, they would not worry about their life when they become old, and would not think they must have a boy to support them,” one Chinese interviewee said.

On the Sri Lankan tea estates, both the boys and girls experience little or no access to education because of the conditions of the plantations. Boys attend school, albeit irregularly, because they are participating in agricultural activities. But if the estate does not provide day care, and many do not, girls miss out on school altogether to take care of their younger siblings.

6. Women’s voice in the community
Women’s participation in community-based organisations is low, mirroring their status at home. When women do attend meetings, they are typically quiet. In Pakistan, Plan staff observe that “even though women are involved, decision making is always done by men.” At meetings In East Lombok (Indonesia) the ratio of women to men is usually about three to one. However, we are told, “the decisions are always taken by men as they are seen as more capable and clever than females. Women are only involved when men are absent. Women are also passive. They cannot influence forum effectively.”

In the meetings attended by both women and men, dominating speakers are often men who hold higher positions, not necessarily related to the project under discussion. “They articulate for all.”

The other main reason given for women’s passiveness in community affairs is their schedule. They are heavily engaged in work throughout the day. Female teachers in Shaanxi Province, China, said household work gets in the way of their participation in community activities. “We have little time to communicate with other people, to go outside to learn more. Therefore, there is little opportunity to promote our position.”
VII. How does Plan promote gender equality in the community?

Plan works with community organisations. It discusses sensitive issues of gender inequality. This dialogue complements its one-to-one engagement with the very poorest families.

But first, understanding of local culture and beliefs is necessary. People’s practice is guided by their personal values but at the same time governed by the dominant cultural values of their social surroundings.

Regular exchanges of view, making suggestions and offering support all play their part in building relationships and confidence between the parties. The discussions do not generally take place in the abstract but, rather, tie into community projects that Plan is supporting. Attitudinal change is not expected quickly since the poorest communities, in which Plan works, are not only traditional in their thinking but, in the absence of any national safety net, are risk averse. The dialogue takes place over a long period, in the family household and at community gatherings.

Plan Cambodia meets every month with community leaders to discuss project activities and gather support for gender equality and girls’ education. It has established parent-teacher associations in primary schools and parent management committees in pre-schools and has encouraged mothers to actively participate. An information education campaign took place in which information was brought to the forefront of the community on issues of gender roles in society, child rights, girls’ education, child trafficking, domestic violence and rape, corporal punishment and HIV/AIDS.

Plan Pakistan addresses attitudes of gender inequality in the community by setting up ‘female forums’, at which community animators hold a range of discussion to educate the community on the importance of basic education, with a focus on girls.

Research in Pakistan shows that illiterate mothers prefer to keep children, especially girls, at home to help with housework and grazing cattle. So Plan Pakistan and Plan Nepal carry out literacy projects for women so that by becoming more literate they will be more likely to support education for their daughters. In Nepal, messages about gender equality are also disseminated through its Education for All campaign, with ‘edutainment’ on gender discrimination through street dramas, radio and TV advertising.

Plan Sri Lanka provides public education that targets parents and communities with information on home-based early childhood care and development and child rights. In plantation areas Plan organises discussions with employers of tea plantations with the aim to persuade them to provide an appropriate school environment for children.

In India, Plan aims to change community attitudes towards gender inequality through awareness raising and girls enrolment drive. These interventions include the mobilisation of parents, group activities for children and the formation of girls’ collectives. Plan also arranges education about child rights for the children themselves at camps, residential and non-residential.

Plan Bangladesh meets regularly with local government, village development committees, community learning centres and school management committees. During the annual Global Action Week for Education for All, it mobilises support for children’s education, holding discussions with community opinion formers including political leaders and government officials, on child rights and gender equality. Materials are disseminated at the same time on education and communications. In Vietnam, training and sensitisation are provided for community leaders and community organisations – Plan’s partners included – on education law and children’s right to education. It undertakes advocacy with families to convey the importance of girls’ education. It organises community-wide sensitisation meetings to address beliefs and attitudes on the traditional roles of girls and boys, and arranges parent contests on child rights.

Looking ahead, Plan expects its gender scan to continue to be a particularly valuable tool in assessing the thinking of the community, to assist its members in understanding the different aspects of gender inequality and take action to address it.
VIII. Gender inequality is perpetuated by schools and the education system

Just as gender inequality in the home and community exists in many different forms, so it does within education circles. Instead of being institutions that disseminate knowledge and progress which can eradicate gender inequality, schools can, paradoxically, have the opposite effect. Gender inequality in education is evident in many aspects. It is apparent in obvious indicators such as the rates of enrolment, retention, drop-out and completion. It is also reflected in more subtle areas such as how girls are treated at school, in the classroom and on the playground, what educational experience girls have as compared with boys, and ultimately their learning outcomes.

Teachers, both male and female, often reflect the male-dominated attitudes of society in what they do at school. It can be seen through their use of ‘gender-tailored’ punishments, giving boys leadership positions, granting girls fewer opportunities to speak out in class, and having low expectations of girls’ potential. In Dompun Indonesia it is common for boys to become the weekly ceremony commander, “as boys usually possess a loud voice.” When a class is choosing its class leader, according to teachers in Rembang (Indonesia), it is common to hear the teacher ask, “Isn’t there a boy able to take on this responsibility?”

While the gender gap may be closing among primary school students, girls are still disappearing from the rosters before they reach secondary school. According to the EFA Report, China as a whole achieves parity between boys and girls in transition from primary to secondary education. However, in Plan China’s programme areas only 42 per cent of girls complete basic education (grade 9) compared to 47 per cent for boys. In Plan Pakistan areas only 55 per cent of girls enrolled in primary education complete it, as compared with 63 per cent boys.

In some other countries, on the other hand, the outlook is not entirely negative. Listen to what girl students in Kampong Cham (Cambodia) say about secondary education: “By studying further, we will have a good future, we’ll be cleverer, we’ll be able to get high salaries.” Similar views are expressed in Indonesia by students when they refuse to accept the prioritisation of boys in continuing education. They prefer a priority based on capability.

In the Philippines and Sri Lanka the secondary education gender gap actually favours girls. In Sri Lanka, for every 100 girls enrolled in secondary school there are 96 boys. In the Philippines for every 100 girls there are 91 boys. Girls overtake boys not only in enrolment but also in retention and cohort survival rates. Philippines’ teachers say the inverted gender disparity results from the social expectation that boys have to earn income for the family, while girls go by the social norm that they should behave well...
in school and listen intently to teachers. Most teachers feel it is also linked to girls’ greater commitment to learning than boys, and to their lower repetition and higher graduation rates.

2. Male-female teacher ratio
A predominance of male teachers has a significant effect on girls’ continuation in school in South Asian countries. The lack of female teachers makes parents feel insecure about sending their daughters to school. In Pakistan, there are so few female teachers that schools are forced to combine several grades into one. In Plan areas it is not uncommon to come across primary schools where a female teacher is teaching 80 girls at the same time. “In a few villages, secondary school exists but the teachers are male, so parents don’t allow girls to attend” (Plan partner). In Bangladesh an unspoken policy is to prefer female teachers, but due to the scarcity of teachers more men fill the role than women.

Gender inequality can also be seen in the division of responsibilities among teachers. In Dompu, Indonesia, teachers of first, second, and third grade students are mainly female, with males teaching the higher grades. There is a perception that female teachers are more patient and motherly, and therefore more appropriate to teach the lower grades. Students in Kebumen (Indonesia) described their female teachers as kind, patient, non-temperamental, and never impose hard punishment.

The male dominated mentality is particularly evident in how school leadership is perceived, and it contributes to reinforcing the male dominance in leadership positions. In East Lombok most teachers prefer women principals. “Female principals are more talkative, less aggressive, less mobile, but always pay attention to teachers’ food.” But in Rembang, another area of Indonesia, many teachers believe that women do not make good school principals because they cannot be tough as men. A male principal is seen as dexterous and wise whereas a female principal tends to be disciplined and friendly. Teachers said they would choose a male principal over a female principal because “a female principal would not work optimally as she has to leave when she is pregnant and this will affect the dynamics of her school.”

3. Curriculum
The curriculum is about what children learn at school. Depending on how it is designed, what it contains and how it is delivered, the curriculum can play a crucial part in either perpetuating or reducing gender-stereotypical misconceptions. When girls’ needs are taken into account in the curriculum content and delivery, it is of greater use for them. It will motivate parents to send them to school. On the other hand when the curriculum reflects the gender bias, it contributes to maintaining social inequalities. Gender-based misperceptions about what men and women are supposed to do mould boys and girls into those roles while they are at school.

An analysis of the textbooks in Uttar Pradesh revealed that in all but one textbook, the stories, poems, and plays have only male characters, and all of them have stereotyped roles. In the only story with a female character, she appears as a prominent character in the beginning but as the story progresses the strength and importance of her character fades away.

In one textbook analysed in Delhi there are three stories that have only males as their characters. The other seven stories with both male and female characters show them in their stereotyped roles; the female characters are shown as caring, weak, cunning, docile. Emphasis is on the male characters that are shown as strong, brave and more extroverted. Taking the textbooks as the truth, the majority of girls and boys will not challenge what they learn. It is no surprise that children, taught to internalise such roles from very early on, will reproduce them. Rekha, an 8-year-old girl from Delhi, says it all: “Housework should be done by girls. Boys doing housework does not look good.”

In most countries the curriculum does not include information about children’s rights and responsibilities, or about reproductive health for adolescents. Sex education in many cultures remains off-limits, even though basic knowledge on reproductive health is crucial for adolescent girls. Some teachers in Rembang, Indonesia, said, “There’s no need for teachers to teach about sex education, as students will know naturally by themselves.” In most families the girls don’t get basic information either. Many mothers don’t discuss the topic at all because they think their children will get the information from their friends.

This lack of crucial information affects females more than males. Girls face disproportionate health concerns following puberty. Foremost among these are early pregnancies and frequent childbirth. Though some teachers believe that students are not mature enough, even in the fifth and sixth grades, many cultures consider girls women at the age of 10 and marry them off shortly after. This is particularly true in South Asia, which has world’s highest rate of early marriages. Fifty per cent of girls marry before they reach 18, compared to 42 per cent in Africa, and 29 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean.

4. Girl-friendly environments
There is no gender equality in school when teachers are insensitive to gender issues, teaching materials are biased, girls are discouraged from being active participants in school, or violence and harassment prevail.

A girl-friendly school is one that is safe and healthy for all children – particularly girls. It enables girls, and boys, to attend school regularly and learn effectively. Girl-friendly school environments take gender into account by giving girls the same opportunity as boys to learn well, providing gender sensitive content and delivery of curriculum, separate latrines
for girls, adequate security, and appropriate intervention when girls are harassed and abused.

**a/ Equal opportunity for participation in class, school activities**

Children have the right to freedom of expression and access to information. Many girls are deprived of these rights simply because they are girls. Both female and male teachers tend to discourage girls from speaking up in class. As a consequence, girls do not participate frequently. They are then perceived as shy by their teachers who neglect to persuade them to participate. “Girls cannot participate in meetings since they cannot express their ideas.”

Teachers who are not gender-sensitive perpetuate gender discrimination in education in more than one way. Teachers in at least three quarter of the schools that Plan staff surveyed in India make sexist comments about girls’ roles. In at least half the co-educational schools, teachers pay more attention to boys, allocate work on a gender basis and organise separate seating for girls and boys. In one senior school in Rajasthan, girls are denied sports and science laboratory facilities. During the lunch break they are confined to a designated room. The gender-biased atmosphere is discomforting for girls, creating low self-esteem. It prejudices learning and pushes them into leaving school.

The choice of subjects for study in middle and high school is another area where gender-stereotypical misperceptions are evident. Girls in Uttar Pradesh are to take Home Science while boys Agricultural Science. In Pakistan, “girls are discouraged from taking up subjects which are so-called only for men, like engineering” (staff of Plan’s partner organisation). Teachers in East Lombok said, “Girls are good at art lessons, as women are more graceful, and often use feelings.” Only in the Philippines a totally different approach is used. Teachers in the city of Cagayan challenge gender stereotypes by opening up non-traditional vocations to girls and boys - for example, carpentry for girls and cooking for boys.

**b/ Girl abuse**

Harassment and abuse are major factors in girls dropping out of school. Fear for a daughter’s safety and family honour pose great concerns for parents. In Pakistan the boys themselves reported that boys hang around in the streets and tease girls. They agreed that this is one reason that parents stop girls from going to school. In Vietnam most girls complained that boys like teasing them. According to Plan partners, “When a girl is harassed on the street, she is stopped from going out to pursue education.” In Vietnam the girls said that the boys go farther than teasing. “The boys go so far as to hug and kiss girls – and that boys even slapped girls, beat or punched them.” Girls said that if they report this abuse, the teachers dismiss the sexual harassment as a harmless prank. Teachers don’t seem to see such incidents as abuse that can seriously affect girls.

Once girls reach puberty, parents become afraid that they will be sexually harassed on the way to school or in school by male teachers and students. In countries where the “Hudood Ordinance” applies, a raped or molested girl has to have four male witnesses to corroborate her story or else face prosecution for adultery. This possibility is more than enough for parents to keep their maturing daughters at home. “Parents are afraid to send their girls to school, because they will be far from here. We do not have separate education facilities for our girls, and we cannot send them to the boys’ school,” a member of the Pakistani Education Committee said.

Sexual harassment poses a powerful barrier to girls’ and young women’s access to education and their ability to benefit from it. It is a powerful factor both in influencing parents to keep girls out of school and for girls themselves to avoid school. The consequences of sexual harassment on girls are many. In addition to physical and psychological trauma, young girls face the consequences of rape – ostracism, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and sexually transmitted infections, including the HIV virus.¹⁴

Policies regarding sexual abuse differ from school to school and enforcement is problematic. In some Indonesian schools teachers agree to punish the sexual offender as he has betrayed the most basic moral values, while in others violations often go unpunished. In Bima (Indonesia), some teachers were more concerned about the perpetrator’s family than the well-being of the child. In some cases the offending teacher was simply moved to another school.

**c/ Corporal punishment**

Corporal punishment adds to other constraints and affects girls deeply. In most cultures discipline is considered necessary for a child. This often includes corporal punishment by both parents and teachers. The Vietnamese saying “if you love a child you need to give her a rod when needed, and if you don’t care about the child then you give him only sweet and good things” is still often heard. While positive discipline is helpful to children, corporal punishment is harmful and often has the opposite effect on them.

In communities where violence is the norm, corporal punishment is often accepted and passes unpunished. Corporal punishment includes a wide variety of actions such as hitting, slapping, spanking, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, shoving and choking as well as the use of a wide variety of objects such as wooden paddles, belts, sticks, pins and hands. In Dompu, teachers punish students by forcing them to stand up in front of the class, running around the school yard, hitting them with a ruler, pulling their ears or pinching them.

In some cultures the form of discipline is meted out to students based on widespread gender-based misperceptions.

Some teachers in Indonesia and Vietnam said that boys receive different forms of punishment because boys are stronger than girls. This is exemplified in Bima (Indonesia) where girls are punished by having to clean the blackboards or water the plants and schoolyard. But boys are slapped, hit by a blackboard eraser or
made to run around the schoolyard. If the boys cry the teacher will shout at them, “Boys should not be tearful.”

d/ Separate and private latrines
In South Asian countries the lack of separate latrines for girls amplifies parents’ fears for their daughters’ safety. Parents often withdraw girls from a school that does not offer adequate facilities. In Pakistan, government officials say many schools lack toilets and other appropriate facilities like boundary walls and security arrangements. In a country where co-educational classes are discouraged, the lack of separate, private latrines for girls is a serious problem. “Here we do not have separate education facilities for our girls. We cannot send them to the boys’ school,” a member of a community-based organisation said.

In other parts of Asia the lack of separate and private latrines for girls may not lead to drop out, as in South Asia. Nevertheless, it presents a considerable inconvenience and discomfort for girls while they are in school. In Vietnam teachers told us that the girls’ toilets are not safe because they are not private, but in plain view. Therefore, “the girls hesitate to use toilets.”

In Cambodia some schools provide separate latrines for boys and girls. Girl students from Kampong Cham are fortunate to have separate latrines and are satisfied with their school environment. “We are happy to go to school. It is clean, has separate toilets for boys and girls, a fence, and a nearby well.” Unfortunately not all schools have such facilities. Other Cambodian girls said their schools had toilets but they were always locked. The school director explained, “It is hard to maintain the cleanliness of these toilets.” This situation is not uncommon in other countries either. Instead of finding ways to enable students to take responsibilities for the hygiene of the school latrines, school management does not let students use them.

5. Learning achievement
Learners’ achievements in school are shaped first and foremost by the opportunities for learning that are presented and the kind of instruction that is provided. Apart from girls’ limited learning opportunities, teachers’ low expectations of their capability and the relevance of their education for the future work against their achieving good learning outcomes. The way teachers treat girl students in and outside the classroom makes it extremely difficult for them to become confident and learn well. The curriculum that contains gender stereotypes only fosters girls’ doubts about their capacity and role in society. In reality, it has been proven that when girls are enrolled and given a chance, they tend to do better than boys at school. Teachers in Rembang (Indonesia) said, “Girls are more active, diligent and dominate as the best students in school. Girls obey more and are clever to understand lessons.” This has been a consistent trend in some countries, such as the Philippines, where girls have been overtaking boys both in enrolment and in performance. Teachers in the Philippines tend to like female students because “they are well behaved and conscientious with their studies.” In Vietnam, girls overtake boys in academic performance, despite the fact that household work is assumed by girls.

Yet, although in many countries girls perform better than boys at school, girls are still unable to capitalise on their academic advantage. Evidence shows that men’s educational underachievement, where it exists, has not resulted in their falling behind economically and politically. The reality is that males largely occupy the most important positions, from community to central government. High performing females still face great difficulties in moving up the career ladder, often due to the fact that “women will have children, have to take leave,” (teachers, Indonesia). The lack of broader social policies that are gender responsive has made it difficult for females to translate their educational achievements into economic and political success.

6. Extra-curricular and sport activities
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child assures all children the right to play and participate in recreational activities regardless of sex, class, caste, ethnic minority, religion or disability. While extra-curricular activities may not directly affect students’ academic achievements, sports and extra-curricular activities enrich children’s education and their overall well-being. They enable them to be children.

In Pakistan and some parts of Sri Lanka girls are not allowed to participate in sports and extra-curricular activities. It is considered not proper if girls are also involved. In Nepal girls are limited to skipping and playing with toys, whereas boys can play football and other physical games. “Generally in sports lessons, boys are better than girls as boys are healthier and stronger” (teachers in East Lombok, Indonesia). And so “volley ball is for girls while football and sepak takraw are only for boys.”

What would children say about this if they were free to choose activities? Meera, a 10-year-old from Uttar Pradesh spoke for many when she said that girls should not be limited from participating in physical activities. “It is good if the girl rides a bicycle, does outside work, plays.”
IX. How does Plan promote gender equality in school and the education system?

Gender inequality permeates the education system so deeply that there is no single set of solutions. Even though the teachers and principals have relatively good education themselves, they are inheritors of their society’s pervasive discrimination and they pass it on to students. Therefore Plan’s approach is to address the issues as much with the faculty as with curricula and school facilities. This section gives an overview of the key areas where Plan provides assistance for the design and implementation of education programmes to address the multiple factors within the education system that work against gender equality - teachers, curriculum, teaching methods, school environment and so on. In parallel, we support social mobilisation to promote girls’ education and non-formal education opportunities.

1. Building capacity of teachers

Training to sensitise teachers on gender issues is one path to gender equality. Plan conducts training in a range of topics that aim to help teachers become change agents for gender equality. During such training sessions teachers acquire information on children’s rights, gender issues and ways to act in a gender-sensitive manner. They also act out gender stereotypes and discuss root causes of gender-based discrimination.

As teachers get trained in using child-centred methodology, they learn different ways to encourage girls to participate in the classroom. In countries undergoing curriculum reform, Plan helps with the training of teachers to use the new curriculum from a gender perspective. Teachers in China said that their exposure to such training helps them to assess their teaching practices through a gender lens and to realise how some of their practices can be discriminatory to girls.

School principals receive training on gender issues as part of the programme to strengthen school management capacity. The aim is, on the one hand, to help school principals to be understanding and supportive of female teachers. And on the other hand, it encourages school managers to adopt necessary measures to establish a girl-friendly school environment and to maintain close communications with families.

2. Strengthening school management committees

Plan believes in community and children’s participation in school affairs. Through such participation parents and community can demand schools to be accountable to them. In most countries school management committees exist as a venue for such participation. Yet, in practice they are often ineffective.

Plan supports the strengthening of the capacity of such committees so that they can participate effectively in school life. As a result, school management committee members are now able not only to take part in discussions but also to monitor the progress of such projects. In many places committee members have become vocal advocates on such issues as teacher absenteeism or mistreatment of students. In Bangladesh, Plan motivates school authorities and committee members to construct separate latrines and sanitation facilities for girls. Moreover, it persuades women to be members of the committee and encourages them to bring up issues and voice their opinion.

3. Life skills programmes

Recognising that life skills are very important for girls, particularly in disadvantaged areas, Plan supports several life skills programmes in Asia. Support for girls’ counselling, health education, leadership training, child-to-child mentoring, children’s clubs and child media has made a difference in the life of many girls. The following examples illustrate this.

Plan Cambodia recruits and trains ‘girl counsellors’. These girl counsellors follow up on younger girls when there are problems with school performance, absenteeism, dropping-out or sickness. This helps the younger girls to progress and older girls to gain more confidence.

“In the past I treated boys more strictly, but went easier on the girls. I would give boys more opportunities to answer questions in class, or come to blackboard and write. But now I do things differently – boys and girls have the same opportunity.”

Teacher in China, after receiving Plan training on gender
Plan Pakistan provides leadership training to girls — and boys. Experience in traditional communities has taught us to be pragmatic. This means that interventions like this one in Pakistan include boys as well. Otherwise, community resistance will result in girls being unable to benefit.

In the Philippines, Plan set up ‘child-to-child mentoring’. It is a programme in which children who are members of children’s associations and those who are good performers in class provide tutoring to students who need further guidance.

Plan Sri Lanka has worked with the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education to scan the curricula and identify provision for curriculum adaptation to integrate life skills, such as adolescent sexual and reproductive health, alcohol and substance abuse prevention, rational household income management and school health and hygiene.

Children’s groups facilitated by Plan Vietnam open up the opportunity for all children to participate in activities to improve learning outcomes. At the same time girls are singled out for preparatory coaching and for participation in student clubs and activities. In China many girls have been trained to be child reporters. They conduct interviews and write reports on what goes on in their school. Such experience not only increases their self-esteem, but also makes going to school fun and an enjoyable experience for them.

Career guidance for girls, orientation on substance abuse and provision of information on adolescent reproductive health are other programmes supported by Plan in the Philippines, Sri Lanka and several other countries.

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4. Child-friendly school environment

Making the school environment conducive to learning is one of the eight key factors of Plan’s School Improvement Programme (Annex 2). This concerns both the physical and emotional state of the children, and especially girls. It includes how girls are taught in class, whether seating arrangements are girl-friendly, whether they have access to separate latrines and water supply, and if overall school facilities are safe and healthy.

In some cultures, for example, a girl-friendly environment also means having a boundary wall around the school grounds. Plan Pakistan has been supporting this. In India, Plan provides support for girls’ study in both residential and non-residential girls’ education camps. In parallel to the provision of school facilities, Plan staff and partners encourage teachers to make sure girls have ready access the new equipment and supplies that Plan has provided. It often happens that even when schools have equipment and libraries to support learning, they are kept locked and students are not allowed to use them.

In addition, school management committees that Plan supports are asked to talk to school personnel and local authorities whenever there are incidents of abuse, and to seek solutions.

5. Vocational training

Vocational training based on market and family needs are supported by Plan in India and Vietnam. Poor girls get the type of well designed training that guarantees them work after graduation. The close connection with employers sought from the beginning helps the courses to be tailored to the needs and expectations of the labour market. Girls have studied such traditionally boys-only vocations as informatics, hotel management and have proved themselves as capable. In the Philippines, courses that traditionally were dominated by boys are now open to girls, and vice versa.

In Gunung Kidul (Indonesia) practical family needs are behind Plan’s decision to support local schools in developing an animal husbandry programme. This has helped keep girls, and boys, in school. Many parents would otherwise want to have their children collecting grass for animals feed rather than going to school.

6. Community-managed secondary schools for girls

Setting up secondary schools for girls is an initiative of Plan in Pakistan to help those girls in rural Pakistan who are forced to stay home due to a lack of a secondary school for girls in their village.

This is no small undertaking, especially when Plan Pakistan persuades the communities to manage the schools themselves. Plan provides monetary support (for teacher salaries), school furniture and technical assistance in teacher selection and training. It builds the capacity of education committees in school management, financial management and community mobilisation. The local community education committee oversees school construction, manages school resources (collecting fees, generating and managing local resources) and school affairs. And they raise awareness among parents about girls’ education.

The effect of such community-managed schools on girls, their families and other community members can be heard through the words of Nagina Habib, a ninth grader (below).

“Me and other girls of community school want to make our future bright. I want to further continue my studies. My parents are also very pleased with my education because education spreads light in the dark. Now I support my younger brothers and sisters in their studies. I do not want to see my brothers and sisters experiencing the same hardships that I faced. Now I can differentiate between what is good and what is not good. All this has happened due to education. After seeing us, people of our village have become aware about the importance of education. Now those people who were against the education of girls are sending their daughters and sisters to the school.”

Nagina Habib, grade 9, Community School, Lassan Thakral, Pakistan
Plan India has conducted research in 40 schools on the push-pull factors of girls’ access to education. The research found that, in general, the schools were not girl-friendly. There were too many factors making girls uncomfortable, unhappy, and discouraged, finally pushing most of the girls out of the system.

At the same time there were some factors present, scattered in different schools, that have a positive impact on girls’ retention.

The matrix below summarised relevant factors brought up by respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Keeps Girls in School</th>
<th>What Pushes them Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concerned, affectionate teachers</td>
<td>Hostile, unkind teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female teachers</td>
<td>No female teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/active teaching</td>
<td>No/bed/passive teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to weaker students</td>
<td>Low learning levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good learning levels</td>
<td>Co-education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-girls schools</td>
<td>Poor parent-teacher interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive parent-teacher interaction</td>
<td>School far from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School close to home</td>
<td>No viable transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible transport</td>
<td>Teachers insensitive to girls’ issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers do not beat</td>
<td>Teachers beat a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathrooms function</td>
<td>No functional bathrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td>No drinking water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school close by</td>
<td>No middle school close by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to children’s emotions</td>
<td>No sensitivity to children’s emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer group – school going girls</td>
<td>No/few school-going girls in village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low cost of education</td>
<td>High cost of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships as per need</td>
<td>No scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-day meals</td>
<td>No mid-day meals/low quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers respect girls’ needs</td>
<td>No respect for girls’ compulsions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High/balanced ratio of girls to boys</td>
<td>Few girls, many boys in class/school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No fear of teacher/school/studies</td>
<td>Fear of teacher/studies/school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents protective, but not anxious</td>
<td>Parents over-protective/ too anxious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School or route are unsafe</td>
<td>School close to home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers counsel when needed</td>
<td>No counselling when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents value education</td>
<td>Parents devalue education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level of household duties</td>
<td>Major burden of household duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No pressures of early marriage</td>
<td>Pressures of early marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated girls preferred for marriage</td>
<td>No such preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive role models</td>
<td>Lack of positive role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls are healthy</td>
<td>Poor health and nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care in school</td>
<td>No health care in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No disability or illness in family</td>
<td>Disability or severe illness in family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No crisis in community</td>
<td>Drought, flood – or other crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFC or tuition for help on studies</td>
<td>No NFC, tuition for help with studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge, balika shivirs linked to school</td>
<td>No courses for out-of-school girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable and caring family members</td>
<td>Death of parent or unstable family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for women and girls</td>
<td>Low respect for women and girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable family livelihood</td>
<td>Unstable family livelihood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less need for female child labour</td>
<td>Tasks such as grazing goats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible timings</td>
<td>Rigid standardised timings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The left hand column ‘What Keeps Girls in School’ helps us to understand what factors comprise a girl-friendly school. Along with the abovementioned dimensions, other practices that would help include ECCD centres, relevant life-skills education; counselling/mentoring at each transition point, and exit points with links to vocational educations.

Replication of girl-friendly schools on a larger scale would be to create girl-friendly communities that include empowerment programmes for women, counselling and support for families in difficult situations, safe spaces for girls’ collectives where they can meet, work and learn.

X. The way forward

Addressing deeply ingrained gender bias and its destructive effect on girls’ right to education and women’s empowerment is a formidable task. It is a process that requires commitment and patience extended over a long period. The capabilities to listen to people, both vocal and quiet, is the first crucial step for any success.16

In this book we have heard the voices of children, parents, teachers, Plan staff and partners telling us the realities on the ground. They express their feelings and biases, their sense of hopelessness, and for some - their hopes and dreams. While bringing the complex nature of gender-based discrimination into focus, they remind us that single actions to tackle individual aspects of gender inequality will not bring about substantial change. Instead it will be the outcome of many and diverse initiatives, pursued by every sort of organisation from the village councils and citizens’ groups to university researchers and central government.

The people interviewed - young and old, male and female - have brought up suggestions for change. It is their voices and recommendations that will guide our work and galvanize our determination to accelerate the achievement of gender equality.

In the following paragraphs we identify some of the actions that, based on Plan’s experience, we think will be helpful and do-able.
1. Advocacy in the community
Advocacy and sensitisation in the home, school, and the community is a prerequisite for change. Listening, discussing, adapting, informing and persuading are the essential elements. But it should not be assumed that change will come about in a short time. Root causes of gender inequality may be too deep-seated to be capable of quick resolution. A sense of modesty and an understanding of the complexities of a poor family’s struggle for survival are mandatory.

Approaches that work in one set of circumstances may not be replicable in another. The mind has to remain open to new ideas, to innovation. For example, advocacy for girls’ education is typically targeted at mothers. Shouldn’t fathers involved? Or another example, the dowry - would discussions with the girl’s family her parents to pay for her education rather than her dowry? Should one not also sensitise the family of the boy who will marry the girl?

Just as advocacy with the family calls for understanding and patience, the same applies when we seek to plant the seeds of change at the level of school principals and teachers, local groups, local leaders and local parliamentarians or other representatives of the national government.

2. Advocacy with the national government
Change in the communities can be neither sustained nor easily scaled up unless it is supported by gender-responsive policies, and legal frameworks are introduced at the national level and enforced. Thus advocacy is needed both downstream at the community level and upstream in central government.

The range of gender-linked topics to discuss with national governments is broad. The priorities will vary. Organisations, local, national, and external may choose to work collectively or separately. Below is a brief overview of the issues that Plan Asia believes are important to achieving gender equality in education.

First priority may be given to making the national curriculum gender sensitive, and recruiting and training teachers who can break the cycle of gender discrimination.

This would typically include:
• Reviewing curriculum and making changes based on principles of gender equality and children’s rights
• Promoting child-centred and gender-responsive methods of curriculum delivery through periodical teacher training and follow-up support
• Teachers’ code of conduct clearly articulated in pre-service and reinforced in-service training

The second priority is to address a number of other issues which, though varied from place to place, can include:
• Affordable and accessible ECCD centres at home or near primary, secondary schools
• Enforcement of legal age of marriage and labour
• Putting in place measures to prevent sexual harassment and corporal punishment in schools
• Prohibition of unofficial fees levied on parents by some schools
• Improved education management information systems (EMIS), with data disaggregated according to sex, socio-economic status and geographic location
• Instituting system for feedback on curriculum by all stakeholders – children, parents, teachers and school administration
• Incentives, both cash and non-cash, for exemplary teachers, especially female teachers

It will be noted that while some of these needs have budget implications, others have little or none. For example, the costs associated with having stakeholders’ feedback on the curriculum are negligible.

3. Behavioural change
The challenge is how to make sure that knowledge and an understanding of gender issues motivate people to change their behaviour. Even with the right mix of communication channels and tools, people will take a long time to change. Or they may not change at all, especially when the status quo is advantageous for certain key actors.

Plan Asia has used a variety of gender training modes for teachers, mothers and fathers, girls and boys, from direct information dissemination to fun events and theatre. They aim at changing people’s mentality and behaviour with regard to gender roles. Experience shows that such sensitisation should not be a one-off activity. It needs to be conducted regularly to strengthen the understanding of participants and reinforce the gender sensitive practices they will have acquired.

An effective training programme does not limit the discussions to gender issues alone, in the abstract. It needs to be dovetailed with training in other sectors, both in terms of organisation and content. For the training to be effective, it should not present a burden to the target groups. The reasons are simple: if you are a poor farmer and you are asked to attend several meetings a week to discuss a different issue each time, you will not have much time left to work for your family’s survival. And you probably will not have much enthusiasm for such meetings either.

Hence integrating gender issues with training in other topics, such as teaching methodologies, health, child rights and child protection, school improvement or early child care practices will make the best use of the little time that participants can spare. Concrete examples from different topics are helpful. There must be an opportunity for participants to open up, pose questions and express their views.

Gender training is needed not just for teachers and parents. Everyone involved with facilitating gender-sensitisation requires a comprehensive understanding of gender issues. The same holds true with staff of Plan, its partners, officials at the
ministry of education and other government agencies.

4. Social mobilisation

Plan has been supporting social mobilisation in all countries where it works. The themes around which Plan's social mobilisation is organised range from education, to gender, to health, water and environmental sanitation, to name a few. Social mobilisation brings people together to raise awareness for achieving a particular objective. It involves identifying the organisations, institutions, groups, networks and other persons who can contribute. It builds the capacity of these groups in the process, so that they are able to garner resources, plan, carry out and monitor activities.

One example of social mobilisation for gender equality is taking shape in Sri Lanka. After Plan conducted its gender scan, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students committed themselves to identify monitoring indicators and a participatory evaluation framework. They will establish a matrix of roles and responsibilities of the school principals, teachers, School Development Societies, community representatives and students in tackling the problems they will address in 3 to 5 years. Plan will provide technical and financial support to the provincial ministries of education to establish the school management committees to manage school budgets and oversee administration.

Social mobilisation for gender equality is enhanced by:

- Establishing female forums and girls’ groups to help identify gender-related needs and suggested interventions
- Joint gender advocacy efforts with agencies such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women’s Affairs at the local and national levels, partnering with non-government organisations and UN agencies
- Strengthening of partnerships with academic organisations and the media
- Offering gender courses on issues such as gender-responsive planning, gender-mainstreaming, preparation of gender-responsive information and teaching materials, monitoring and evaluation of gender-responsiveness in projects
- Integration of gender issues in project proposals
- Advocacy for allocation of resources to facilitate gender equality in the community, from government, donors and development organisations.

5. Scaling up programme and partnership

Each organisation that is helping governments and communities to achieve the Millennium Goal of gender parity in education and the empowerment of women evolves in its own way to arrive at a successful outcome.

For Plan Asia, the School Improvement Programme (SIP) will be highly relevant in this regard. The Plan’s School Improvement Programme uses an octagonal framework to identify the elements that are indispensable for all children to attend school and achieve successful learning. It shows the elements that are being well taken care of, which ones need attention and who attends to them. Annex 2 gives details of the octagon framework and explains the eight elements.

Based on the gender scan, Plan’s education interventions continue to include the following:

- Private and separate latrines for girls, and a safe supply of water at school
- Support for segregated schools where necessary
- Guidance and financial support for the construction of girl-friendly schools
- More female teachers, particularly at the secondary level
- Assistance in the construction of secondary schools near the village
- Home-based early child care opportunities, and if possible, one pre-school per village
- Livelihood projects to support poor families in sending both girls and boys to school
- Vocational training for disadvantaged children
- Special educational interventions for ethnic minority, low-caste, rural, and otherwise vulnerable children
- Non-formal education for children who cannot be mainstreamed into the formal education system
- Gender sensitisation of teachers, school managers, parent-teacher associations, village development committees and other community-based organisations
- Life skills courses and vocational courses for adolescents that are tailored to local needs

The gender scan plays an essential role in checking that every aspect of the eight elements of the SIP are implemented in a gender-sensitive way. The details on the methodology of the gender scan are given in annex 1. It is important to conduct a gender scan every two or three years. This will ensure that education programmes maintain a high level of gender sensitivity. For these programmes to be effective and able to reach out to as many children as possible, especially the hardest-to-reach, Plan partners with like-minded development organisations, including Community Based Organisations. Plan has been working with partners at local level and will now look for new forms of partnership, such as partnership structured around specific issues. Such can be helpful for Plan in scaling up its programme coverage as well as for successful advocacy work at national level.

The collaboration of parents, children, schools and the community can, step by step, help children to realise their rights and achieve gender equality in Asia. Although the first deadline for the Millennium Development Goal No. 3 (Gender equality in primary and secondary education by 2005) has already passed, the second deadline (gender parity in all education levels and the empowerment of women by 2015) can in principle be met. A concurrent goal for Education for All is not only to achieve gender parity by 2015 but also to achieve quality in basic education for all by the same date. Only by accelerating the pace of our collective actions, can the 2015 deadlines be achieved.
End notes


2 “Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.” United Nations Millennium Development Goal No. 2.


4 Child labour as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO): All children under 15 years of age who are economically active excluding (i) those who are under 5 years old and (ii) those between 12-14 years old who spend less than 14 hours a week on their jobs, unless their activities or occupations are hazardous by nature or circumstance. Added to this are 15–17-year-old children in the worst forms of child labour.


11 Ibid.


Annex 1

Gender Scan Methodology

Ten countries participated in this scanning: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Vietnam.

The two key tools used for the scan are Gender Scan Matrix and Focus Group Discussions (FGD).

1/ Gender Scan Matrix of education programmes in Plan Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How gender sensitive is your education programme?</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>List specific activities that your programme provides to substantiate ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the Family level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our education programme addresses socio-economic issues that affect girls’ education</td>
<td>1 Very low</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Low</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Average</td>
<td>3. etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Very high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It aims at changes in attitude and behaviour of family members in favour of girls’ education</td>
<td>1 Very low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Average</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Very high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the community level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It aims at changes in attitude and behaviour of the community in favour of girls’ education</td>
<td>1 Very low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Average</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Very high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At the School Level</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It raises awareness of teachers, and school personnel on issues relating to girls’ education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provides opportunities for all girls in the community to go to school</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It provides opportunities for all girls to attend school regularly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It provides opportunities for all girls to achieve their potential in all subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It supports activities that contribute to doing away with stereotypical perceptions about girls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It provides a safe physical environment where girls can study without fear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provides girls with the same opportunities as boys to learn in classroom</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It provides girls with the same opportunities as boys for extra-curricular activities

It actively seeks the views of female students and teachers on their experiences of education, and their opinions on how it can be improved

It provides adolescent girls (including those out-of-school) with the necessary life skills, career guidance and counselling

Our education programme contributes to influencing national/provincial government’s policy in favour of girls’ education, namely:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At the Education System level (national and/or provincial authorities)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Supports recruitment of female teachers
2. Supports making education materials and curriculum gender-sensitive
3. Supports the adoption of laws and policies that are gender sensitive
4. Advocacy for the enforcement of the rules of law (e.g. punishment for abuses against female students and teachers)

2/ Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted at the family, school, community, and district levels. It was Plan’s first gender audit conducted with stakeholders at these levels. Plan staff held focus group discussions with children, parents, teachers and school principals, Plan partners and community representatives. Plan staff at the programme unit level also participated in the discussions.

The core questions used in the FGD include:
1. What is the level of gender inequality that exists from the point of view of different stakeholders (parents, mothers, teachers, children, community members, education authorities, etc.)?
2. What interventions have been most effective in addressing gender inequality (regardless of whether or not such interventions have been supported by Plan)?
3. What are the key stumbling blocks of gender equality in your country/ community/ school?
4. What should be the role of Plan in clearing those stumbling blocks?
5. In addition to what Plan has done so far, what are other activities/interventions that are needed in order to address gender inequality in education?
6. In what way can Plan be most effective in advocating with government on the issue of gender equality?

Each Plan country office faced its own challenges and opportunities with the gender scan and FGDs. They took initiative to make sure that these questions are well understood by everyone. For example, Plan in Pakistan conducted the FGD first with its own staff and partners in order for everyone to understand the purpose of this research, to clarify any misunderstanding and have the same definition of gender in the local context. As it turns out, this activity not only provided staff with a better understanding of gender-related concepts but also brought home the need to look at themselves - as women and men - and the part they can play in bringing about gender equality. Indeed, without such understanding and realisation, it would be more difficult for Plan staff to help communities and schools to work towards gender equality.

In Vietnam some questions of operational nature were added to help the groups to be specific in their responses. In Bangladesh, on the other hand, the country office could not conduct the FGDs in all Programme Units as the riots flared up when two parties contested election dates. Nevertheless, the cumulative data gathered represented relevant findings on how families, the community, Plan staff and partners, and education and government officials perceived gender inequality and Plan interventions.

Workshop in December 2006 to discuss the second scan exercise

The Plan Asia regional workshop on the gender scan was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 15 to 21 December 2006. The workshop provided an opportunity for the representatives from participating countries to discuss their scan exercise and results,
and receive inputs on their initial analyses. They also exchanged experience on the actual process of the scan.

Other organisations working to promote gender equality, such as UNICEF and UNESCO were represented at the workshop. They received an update of Plan activities that are relevant to the UN Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) of which Plan Asia is a long-time member. After the workshop the country education advisors further sharpened the analyses based on the comments and recommendations of the workshop participants. As a follow-up, Plan country education advisors used the scan’s recommendations to modify their education programme activities, if this is called for. There is no doubt that their determination to work towards gender equality is also further galvanised as a result of the exercise.

The 2006 scan has provided the material for the current publication.

Plan Asia’s School Improvement Programme (The Octagon Framework)

Plan International has been working to support child-centred community development in Asia for many years. We promote, strengthen and protect child rights while ensuring that children play an active role in developing their future and that of their communities. Such approaches characterise our education programme that has a keen focus on gender equality. Learning from the lessons of interventions in the past, we have developed a strategy to ensure that our interventions are integrated and bring about meaningful changes in education and the lives of children.

This strategy is called the School Improvement Programme (SIP). The SIP is a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving the accountability, efficiency, quality and child-friendliness of schools that Plan supports in developing countries across Asia. It brings to the forefront the role of children and parents in bringing about meaningful changes in school which affect children’s enrolment, retention and completion of basic education.

The School Improvement strategy aims to:
- Support the initiatives of governments in achieving the goal of Education for All by 2015
- Support school-specific plans to improve their accountability and effectiveness in ensuring that all children attend school regularly, learn effectively and acquire basic reading, writing and numeracy skills
- Achieve gender equality and eliminate discrimination on the basis of class, caste and ethnicity
- Promote the participation of children and parents in the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans

Annex 2
Under the SIP strategy, Plan focuses its efforts on supporting the improvement in the eight key areas that have significant influence on children's enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes. This is why it is often called the Octagon Framework. The SIP aims to support schools in improving the following eight key areas:

1/ Having competent and motivated teachers: Teachers are at the heart of the education undertaking. Without competent and motivated teachers, students are not interested in attending school, cannot have good learning outcomes, and quickly drop out. Plan supports national and local governments in their efforts to recruit and retain competent and motivated teachers. Such support includes capacity building of teachers in subject matter teaching, methodology, knowledge of child rights, and financing of additional teachers to ensure the smooth running of schools.

2/ Making the learning process effective for children: Having sufficient and competent teachers is crucial. At the same time, the experience has shown that children cannot learn effectively unless the teaching process is child-friendly and participatory. Plan supports the introduction and use of child-centred learning methods, and the provision of appropriate teaching and learning aids. These efforts are accompanied with the training of the teachers in the use of such methods, the exchange of experience among the teachers, and the introduction of multi-grade teaching techniques.

3/ Mobilising the participation of children and parents: Plan believes that the view and participation of children and their parents should be actively sought as they are essential for school improvement. Plan promotes the ways and means for the participation of parents and children in school affairs while at the same time strengthens the capacity of school administrators in school management. Children's clubs, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) are given the support needed to actively participate in school improvement efforts. The use of media by children, establishment of groups of child reporters, and children's participation in advocacy events are among the most popular activities.

4/ Ensuring that the school environment is safe, sound and conducive to learning: Plan promotes a safe, sound and effective learning environment for all children. This includes, on the one hand, financial support for improved school physical facilities to make them child-friendly and gender-appropriate - such as provision of latrines and water supply, construction or rehabilitation of classrooms, provision of furniture, construction of teacher and student dormitory where this is necessary. On the other hand, Plan supports teachers' and students' efforts in making classrooms' arrangements and atmospheres conducive to learning, and advocates for the use of positive discipline and prevention of violence against children, particularly girls.

5/ Making curriculum relevant: A relevant curriculum enables children to make the best use of the schooling they receive, and in turn helps encourage parents to send their children, especially girls, to school. Plan supports efforts - both national and local - to make the curriculum gender-sensitive and relevant to the local context. This includes providing financial and pedagogical support to teachers in incorporating local and gender-sensitive knowledge into lessons, and supporting children's extra-curricular activities that can enrich their classroom learning. Plan-supported schools actively mobilise local knowledge and wisdom and use local people as resource persons.

6/ Enhancing student preparedness: When children have a good developmental foundation they do well and stay longer in school. Plan believes that interventions in education-only areas are not sufficient in improving children's learning outcomes. An unhealthy, mal-nourished child cannot learn effectively. Plan, therefore, provides
financial and methodological support for early child care and development, both in centre-and home-based contexts. Such support provides children from 0 to 6 years old with good care and the early stimulation necessary to ensure success in primary school. At the same time, pregnant mothers and parents receive information on effective parenting that combines positive traditional practices and the understanding of the rights of children as individuals. Plan also encourages parents, through sensitisation and livelihood interventions, to give their children the support they need for success in school. Scholarships and school supplies are given to those children at risk of postponed entry, dropping out, or not enrolling at all.

7/ Improving school governance: The empowerment and support of school managers is crucial for the success of school improvement efforts. Regardless of national education policies, many decisions taken at the school level and local practices determine whether a school is effective, and if children attend school regularly and acquire basic knowledge. Plan provides support to strengthen the capacity of school managers in the areas of management, and facilitates the participation of parents and children in school activities, including the development of a school improvement plan.

8/ Mobilising Government support: Plan is mindful that schools are a part of the national education system, and that governments are the primary service provider. Plan sets out to support governments in its efforts rather than substitute them. Through advocacy and support in training and facilities, Plan helps provincial and district education offices to provide supportive supervision to schools, and advocates for adequate government budget allocation.

Each of the abovementioned eight areas is equally important. If any proves weak, the strength and success of the whole will be affected. The following diagram shows the essence of Plan’s School Improvement Programme.

Plan Asia calls on its country offices in the region to incorporate gender considerations in the interventions of these eight areas to foster gender equality, both organisationally and programmatically.