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ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN CRISIS:

Experiences of migration in
Central America and Mexico

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Photos in this report do not depict research participants.

All photographs used in this report show girls and/or adolescents who are part of Plan International projects, and their use is authorized. The persons appearing in them are not to be assumed to be victims of some kind of violence and/or abuse.

WHY IS THIS REPORT IMPORTANT?



This research is part of a group of studies from Plan International called “Girls in Crisis” that analyzes the situation of adolescent girls and women in various emergency and crisis situations. This research has confirmed that the effects of these experiences are not the same for every girl or woman. When a crisis arises, external factors have an important impact on adolescents’ growth and development processes.

In a regional context of systemic violence, it is necessary to specifically take into account the violence, by reason of gender and age, that adolescents and young women go through in all areas of their day to day life (community, family, partner, sexual, among others), be it in their countries of origin, which constitutes a reason for their migration, or as violence experienced in the migratory journey, if they are forced to leave their home.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this research is to develop advocacy recommendations based on the analysis of some impacts of forced migration¹ and social or gender-based violence as it relates to the education of adolescents in the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) and Mexico.

¹ Human mobility - generic term covering all different forms of geographical movement of people.
Migration - movement of people outside their usual place of residence, either through an international border or within a country. Source: OIM glossary on Migration (2019).



METHODOLOGY

The information was collected using a qualitative and quantitative methodology (in-person and digital). Testimonies and experiences were obtained from 267 adolescent girls and boys, eight families and an average of 14 key participants in the Central American region (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) and Mexico.

The analysis in the report was formulated from the gender perspective to understand how the analyzed aspects are experienced in a differentiated way by adolescent girls and boys; this is why we used a population of both sexes for the collection of information, since the comparison between each of these can provide relevant information. However, the focus of the report highlights the specific impacts of migration on adolescents, in alignment with the Girls in Crisis reports.

PROFILE OF THE ADOLESCENT POPULATION PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

Adolescents between 15 and 19 years of age (except in the case of Mexico, which has expanded the age range due to methodological needs) in “mobility circumstances.” This means that the adolescents participating in the study have experienced migration or have plans to migrate. In all the analyzed countries, specifically in Guatemala and Mexico, adolescents from both Central America and South America participated.

MAIN RESULTS OF THE SURVEYS



39% of surveyed adolescents from the four countries identify **social or community violence as an everyday problem in their community.**



29% of surveyed adolescents believe that men particularly suffer **physical violence** (non-sexual) by other men, and **28%** believe that men suffer **violence in public spaces**, like robberies.



Almost 1 in 3 surveyed adolescents believe that women particularly suffer **physical and sexual violence at home** by acquaintances or family members.



4 out of 10 adolescents surveyed believe that the **different forms of violence affect adolescents** more than the general population. **14%** also believe that also violence in its various forms **affects people in a different way depending if they are man or woman.**



Adolescent girls are up to **4x more likely than the rest of the adolescent population surveyed** to report knowledge of violence against other woman.



22% of surveyed adolescents consider that **social violence and gender-based violence are equal factors in school drop out rates.**



1 out of 5 surveyed adolescents believe that **sexual violence or gender-based violence are reasons to migrate.**



1 out of 3 surveyed adolescents in the four countries believe **gender to be a determining factor of migration due to violence.**



MAIN FINDINGS

VIOLENCE AGAINST ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE REGIONS OF CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

Adolescents and young girls are exposed to violence because of their gender and age; as shown by the figures and data from multiple analyses at the regional and international levels. Violence impacts the lives of adolescents in their communities and is one of the causes of migration from their area or country of residence.

Teenage girls and young women surveyed in the four countries believe that different forms of violence are a major challenge in their communities — 39.4% of adolescents mostly identify social or community violence as a daily challenge.

According to what they think, there is a difference in the types of violence that men and women face. Almost 13% of teenage girls and young women surveyed believe that sexual violence is an everyday problem in their environment.

- The respondents say that young men suffer mainly physical violence (without a sexual component) by other men (28.7%) and violence in the public space, such as robberies (27.7%).
- In contrast, women face physical and sexual violence, at home or at the homes of people they know, or in the family environment (28.7%), as well as sexual violence in the community/public space (23.4%).

Other relevant data from the survey are:

- 4 in every 10 adolescents surveyed believe that the different forms of violence affect adolescents more than the general population.
- 14.9% think that violence, in its different forms, affects women or men differently.
- Female adolescents report to know up to 4 times more experiences of violence from other women. In particular, 21.3% emphasise social violence against them.

Violence towards adolescents and other gender factors and their impact on educational trajectory

Lack of safety and constant abuse, which also occur in the school environment, are often a cause of school dropouts, and the cause of internal displacement.

Of the adolescents surveyed, 22% consider that abuse and gender-based violence are equally strong factors causing school drop outs.

Graph 1: Violence as a daily problem in the community

TOTAL POPULATION OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND WOMEN SURVEYED WHO SEE VIOLENCE AS A DAILY PROBLEM IN THE COMMUNITY

TOTAL

12.80%

39.40%

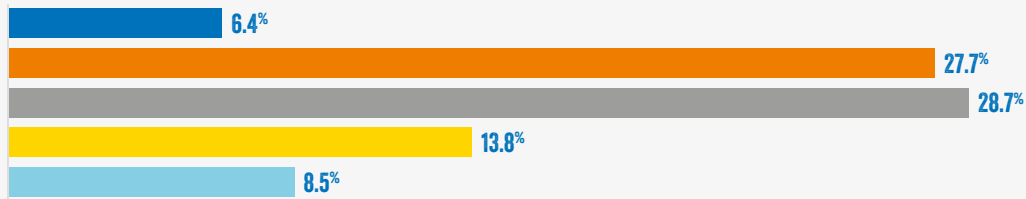
25.50%

- Yes, specifically sexual violence/gender-based violence
- Yes, specifically social and community violence (for example, groups in conflict with law enforcement or organized criminal groups)
- Yes, both social violence as well as sexual violence

Graph 2: Violence experienced by men and women in their communities

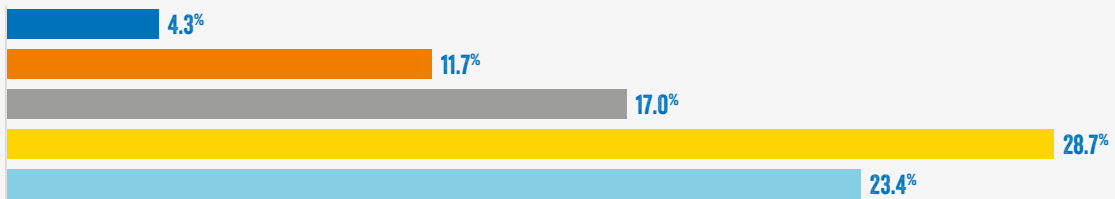
TYPE OF VIOLENCE MEN EXPERIENCE THE MOST ACCORDING TO ADOLESCENTS GIRLS

TOTAL



TYPE OF VIOLENCE WOMEN EXPERIENCE THE MOST ACCORDING TO ADOLESCENTS GIRLS

TOTAL



- Human trafficking
- Violence in public spaces (like robberies)
- Physical violence (without a sexual component) perpetrated by other men
- Physical and/or sexual violence at home (aggressions, rape perpetrated by family members and/or related persons)
- Sexual violence in community spaces (rape, aggressions perpetrated by unknown persons)

“Sexual violence towards women is another reason for school dropouts, also because there is a lot of violence towards women in schools, a cultural element that makes the girls remain silent about these situations and they just stop going to school; or violence in the family that puts them in an emotional situation that makes them stop going to school.”

Key informant adult woman, interviewed in El Salvador.

“I had trouble in school and I couldn’t go any more because I was afraid, because there were some girls that threatened me and hit me, so due to fear [...] they hit me, they did stuff to me, I told my parents that there were no classes.”

Adolescent girl, 16, from El Salvador, interviewed in Guatemala.

School was identified as a safe environment for most adolescents: 59.6% of the respondents consider it a space where they feel safe. However, almost 1 in 3 (27.7%) of the adolescents surveyed indicate that school is an insecure space, revealed by the interviews, where respondents said situations of physical, emotional, sexual and psychological violence are recorded in these places and on their way to them. These situations deeply affect young people, especially when there are no mechanisms for prevention, nor of protection in school environments.

“I am not afraid inside the University, but it is far from the city and I do need to walk and that whole block is dark and no one is there, there is no security outside.”

Adolescent girl, 16, interviewed in Honduras.

Other important factors that determine the educational continuity of adolescents are pregnancies and violence experienced in their home environment and family, and the gender mandate associated with care of dependents.

“Adolescent girls become pregnant and that does not allow them to continue studying, because they leave their homes or because they don’t want to stay in school.”

Adolescent girl, 18, from Venezuela interviewed in Guatemala.

Difficulties to continue studying, other times it’s because my dad is sick and I have to look after them.

Adolescent girl, 15, interviewed in El Salvador.

“No, in my case it’s not violence. What made us leave is the possibility of accessing better employment opportunities for my mom, because she is the only one that works.”

Adolescent girl, from Nicaragua.

Of those surveyed, 1 in 5 adolescents (19.1%) think that sexual or gender-based violence is a reason to migrate, and 29.8% think that violence is a reason to migrate “depending on gender.”

“My dad was violent, he hit us all the time and also abused us at some point, my sister and me. That’s why we left, so that never happened again. We left with my other siblings and my aunt and we are feeling better now here, more peaceful.”

Adolescent girl from Honduras interviewed in Mexico.

VIOLENCE AND A LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES AS A CAUSE FOR EXPULSION AND MIGRATION

In the context of poverty, structural violence and direct violence in the family and at community and educational level, migration is practically the only alternative for adolescents to be able to afford a better future.

Looking for a job or improving their employment situation, as well as continuing their education and training, are the main reasons for migrating women in the region, as reported by the adolescents.

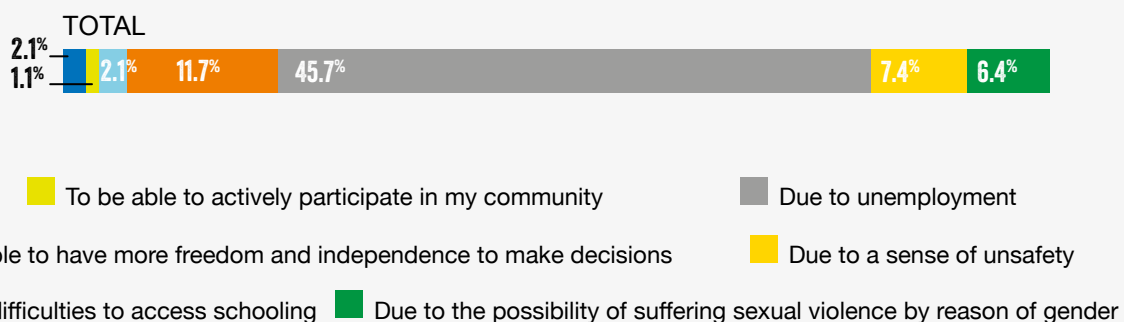
In this respect, 45.7% of the adolescents surveyed point out the lack of employment as a reason to migrate followed by the difficulty to access education (11.7%) and the lack of safety (violence) (7.4%).

“I, as well as my sisters, think that people sometimes emigrate due to violent situations, because they are suffering abuse in their homes or communities. Here we see a closed door, we see no opportunities in our country. What we have there is our friends, family, that is what one leaves behind when you emigrate.”

Adolescent girl, 18, interviewed in El Salvador.

Many of the women interviewed in the context of this research did not identify violence as an expulsion factor. Often, people give their testimonies in the transit places of migration while under fear of retaliation — it is common for the perpetrators of violence to be present on the migration routes.

GRAPH 3: REASONS FOR MIGRATING, ACCORDING TO INTERVIEWED ADOLESCENT GIRLS





Several of the young people interviewed in the four countries belong to families who, in the context of violence (in some cases extreme), opted for internal forced displacement before deciding to leave their countries and undertake an international migratory journey.

According to the people consulted, the main destination country when migrating continues to be the United States (36.2%).

THE MIGRATORY JOURNEY: VIOLENCE AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION DURING TRANSIT

According to the interviews and discussion groups conducted with the adolescents, the violence that the adolescents experience in their countries of origin increases and transforms while they're in transit. Sexual violence, the danger of falling into trafficking networks and becoming victims of blackmail increase. And these become a very frequent extortion tool in these contexts.

"We were tired, we were traveling for two weeks, basically living on the street. There were checkpoints everywhere and we had to pay money at each one of them."

Adolescent, age 16, from Nicaragua interviewed in Mexico

According to the reports collected in the interviews and discussion groups, along the entire migratory route, young people are likely one of the groups at the highest risk of physical, sexual and psychological violence. Certain border locations are particularly dangerous.

"The Darién is like hell, five days walking in the jungle, with mud up to our backs, insects biting us all the time, without food and very afraid. We always knew about the rapes, but fortunately, that didn't happen to us. We know they raped the ones who were ahead of us, but not us. Some say they rape everyone going, be it men or women, but that didn't happen to us."

Adolescent, age 15, from Venezuela, interviewed in Mexico.

As in their countries of origin, adolescents and their mothers adopt protective strategies to try to avoid sexual violence during the migratory journey, specifically hiding their body and posing as men.

“My mom had to dress me as a boy the whole way to prevent anything from happening to me and here when we have to go out to do an errand, I feel unsafe.”

Adolescent girl, 15, from Venezuela, interviewed in Mexico.

It is also common for young people to experience a lack of safety in shelters.

“Well here [in the shelter] we have also had some cases of men trying to abuse women; it once happened to me, I reported it and he was removed.”

Adolescent girl, 16, from Nicaragua, interviewed in Mexico.

In addition to the different forms of violence they experience during the migratory journey, the adolescents interviewed narrated how their sexual and reproductive rights were violated during transit. Menstruating or traveling while pregnant involves additional risks and difficulties that may also threaten the lives of women, as in the case of women with high risk pregnancies or women who experience abortions during migrant journeys.

“In my case, when my period comes, I don’t have pads.”

Adolescent girl, 19, from Venezuela, interviewed in Guatemala.

“To see my mother suffering due to everything that is happening to us, having to walk in the jungle with menstrual cramps, pregnant women suffering abortions (...)”

Adolescent girl, 15, from Venezuela, interviewed in Guatemala.

Education constitutes another one of the rights that is violated along the migratory journey. In general, young people perceive education as very important in their lives, although in interviews they recognize that it is often not the most viable option for them, since their economic situation forces them to seek a job.

“Yes I have to work ... school is not for me. I think I can’t help my family that way. I can help more if I work.”

Adolescent girl, 16, interviewed in Honduras.

According to the testimonies, there is hope for educational opportunities that can be reached by migrating; however, during transit, education is interrupted indefinitely and there are bureaucratic difficulties that affect access for students who migrate, which involve management of documents and legal procedures.

“People migrate to improve their life conditions, to find jobs that pay well and also to get a better education. Migrating to the United States is a great opportunity for study and to start a career. Many young people leave to get better education and many older people go to help their family who remain here in El Salvador ... there are many parents that take their children to the United States to give them a better life.”

Adolescent girl, 14, interviewed in El Salvador.

“We cannot go to schools here because we are undocumented, we are not Mexican and we also have no money to buy school supplies. My dad works, but the money he is earning he saves for food and getting out of here, not to pay for school for us.”

Adolescent, girl 15, from Nicaragua interviewed in Mexico.



Some of the shelters visited offer educational alternatives, providing informal education for children at early ages, but not for adolescents. For this population, leisure activities are usually offered to strengthen knowledge, but are not usually considered very entertaining by adolescents. In this sense, no programme that offers an actual opportunity for education in transit spaces was identified in the study.

“The school in the shelter is not for adolescents, it is for small children. They play games and sing songs and all that stuff. For us, there is nothing.”

Adolescent girl, 15, from Honduras, interviewed in Guatemala.

The probability that adolescents will be reinserted in a stable way to formal education once they have returned is very small. Although there are regulatory frameworks for access to education, public policies tend not to include this population, and when they are included, there is still a lack of information to integrate young people within a framework that broadly considers their condition and psychosocial perspective.

“Reintegration into the educational system here is regulated, the person returning can enter or access the educational system, but in practice this doesn’t happen, because there isn’t a psychosocial or integrating approach in place. This means it is necessary to work with the families to provide lasting solutions to those families.”

Key informant, man, interviewed in El Salvador.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis from a regional perspective shows important links between education, the situations of violence faced by girls and adolescents, and migration. The adolescents interviewed in the four countries live in situations of inequality due to gender and age, which manifest in lack of opportunities and violence that hampers their education and protection, and often pushes them to migrate.

The different types of violence (family, community, social or in the school environment) are constant in their lives and also in their journeys to other countries. Of the adolescents surveyed, 39.4% consider that social and community violence are a common problem in their communities.

Regarding their perception of gender-based violence, 28.7% of adolescents consider that women experience the greater part of sexual violence at their home, and that men suffer physical violence more specifically (non-sexual) exercised by other men (28.7%). In addition, 29.8% think that gender is a determining factor in their decision to migrate due to violence.

The culture of violence around the adolescent population has an effect on them; 40.4% believe that sexual and gender-based violence, as well as community violence, affect adolescents to a higher degree — they are at constant risk.

Some 22% of the adolescents surveyed believe that the different types of violence are a reason for dropping out of school. Gender norms, such as performing household tasks, or pregnancies are other factors that affect their continuance in schools.

Teenagers understand that education, ideally, will improve their lives. They speak of their schools as spaces of social interaction and safety, especially in cases where violence is constant in their other environments. Sometimes educational centers are described as places where violence can occur, but for other adolescents, they see educational centers as safe spaces when compared to other violent spaces, like their homes, their neighbourhoods or their communities.



The migration path that adolescents and their families are forced to take create an interruption to their education and increased risk of violence which they already experience in their countries of origin. As to the inequities and gender-based violence that they experience, these are added to the factors inherent to being a migrant person living in poverty.

This provides an insight into how violence is accepted as normal, and how it permeates each area (safety, family and social life, education) in the lives of adolescent girls and women in crisis in the Central American and Mexican regions.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR KEY DECISION-MAKERS:

a) Education aspects:

- Implement a comprehensive and inclusive approach in the education system, which is based on understanding education as a fundamental right for adolescents.
- Integrate sexual education and reproductive rights into educational curricula, as well as the sensitization of adolescents concerning gender-based violence.
- Encourage teacher training and awareness in the field of sexual and reproductive rights and the different violence faced by adolescents.
- Establish alliances and campaigns between the government, the educational community (including families) and social organizations for socio-educational matters.
- Promote social and educational policies that propose alternatives for adolescents in the context of daily and systemic violence.
- Provide safe spaces in schools for adolescents who need support and advice to ensure they are granted their rights.
- Design and establish protocols for the prevention and treatment of sexual violence, social violence and/or gender-based violence.
- These protocols must incorporate elements to identify whether violence can cause migration and therefore their desertion of the educational system.
- Provide sufficient financial support for the improvement of educational infrastructures, especially those that promote the protection of adolescents.
- Encourage the participation of adolescents in their school environments by creating student committees to collect their opinions and needs.
- Design and implement programmes that are more flexible in reintroducing adolescents in the educational system, which consider the effect of migration on their educational path and promote access to education, according to their age and school grade, as a way to prevent early school dropouts.
- Design and implement holistic programmes aimed at adolescents in educational centres to inform and raise awareness about the migratory circumstances faced by the young population.

- Promote and/or implement programmes and working strategies for adolescents to stay in school, specifically taking into account the factors that are most determinant in school dropout, such as pregnancies or violence, that they experience in their daily environment.

b) Security aspects:

- Establish and/or disseminate “safe routes” so that adolescents can go to school while minimizing risks of sexual violence they might encounter in public spaces.
- Expand and strengthen safety mechanisms established in major cities, and extend them to all territories, especially those with the highest violence rates.
- Promote the participation of educational authorities in safety mechanisms to ensure access to education for girls and adolescents.
- Promote the participation of local authorities in safety procedures to guarantee the rights of the adolescents who are migrating, taking into account their gender and age.
- Promote an approach for violence prevention, from an integrated and multidisciplinary perspective, guaranteeing cooperation and coordination among the different public entities.
- Establish awareness campaigns about gender-based violence aimed at the entire population, providing information on the resources and services available to the victims.

c) Migration aspects:

- Formulate public policies and allocate budgets to promote processes and social cohesion for the reintegration of adolescent girls and women into their communities, in the context of returning to their countries of origin.
- Design and implement initiatives and strategies that encourage preventing stigma towards people who are migrating.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS:

- Provide solutions to further illustrate the motives and vulnerabilities of adolescent girls and women in violent circumstances in their countries, through collecting reliable data and statistics.
- Provide solutions by each municipality to better observe violence as a cause of internal and international displacement, through collecting reliable data and statistics.
- Establish joint work strategies among governmental institutions and civil society organizations from all countries to ensure protection, as well as access to necessary care and justice, for adolescent girls and women in circumstances of internal and international migration due to violence.
- Reinforce the awareness and training offered in shelters during the migration process, offering guidelines for emergency education and psychosocial support.
- Provide information on the services and institutions available in countries for the protection of social and economic rights during the stay of migrant adolescents in shelters, as well as other resources available in migratory transit.



About UNFPA

UNFPA is the United Nations agency responsible for sexual and reproductive health. Our mission is to create a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe and every young person's potential is realized.

UNFPA calls for the fulfillment of reproductive rights for all and supports access to a full range of sexual and reproductive health services, including voluntary family planning, maternal health care and comprehensive sexuality education.

About SAVE THE CHILDREN

Save the Children envisions a world in which all children are assured their right to survival, protection, development and participation. Its mission is to drive significant advances in the way the world treats children in order to bring about immediate and lasting change in their lives. It aims to support community members to develop and improve the quality of their lives and those of their children, according to their own needs.

About EDUCO - Education and Cooperation Foundation - Educo

We are an NGO of global cooperation for development and humanitarian action, which has been working for more than 25 years in favor of children and in defense of their rights, especially the right to receive an equitable and quality education. We are present in 14 countries in Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia. We work through social projects involving more than 550,000 children and 150,000 adults.

We are part of the ChildFund Alliance, one of the main international coalitions of NGOs focused on child protection and present in five continents.

PROTECTED STEPS PROJECT

Co-implemented by Plan International and Save the Children in the countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador for a period of 18 months, this intervention aims to meet the needs of vulnerable populations, with a focus on children and adolescents' access to non-formal education (NFE) and the formal education system (FE), affected by spirals of violence, forced displacement and unsafe migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

The Pasos Protegidos Project is focusing its efforts on three main components: 1) Protection of children, adolescents and youth in migratory contexts; 2) Multipurpose cash transfers to support migrant families to cover basic needs; and 3) Education in Emergencies adapted for migrant, returnee, refugee and/or displaced children, adolescents and youth with the purpose of guaranteeing their right to education. The three outcomes will work in interrelation and synergy to respond to the urgent needs of children on the move and provide comprehensive support through cross-sectoral referrals and access to education services.

PROTECTED PASSAGE PROJECT

Co-implemented by Plan International, ChildFund International and EDUCO, Camino Protegido, which translates to Protected Passage in English, is designed for 3 years, with an initial focus on key gaps in services for the migrant population in Mexico and Guatemala. The program focuses on supporting children, adolescents and their families in migration and return in the Northern Triangle of Central America and Mexico. Special emphasis is placed on meeting the needs of girls aged 10-18 years and ensuring protection and rights, while using a gender approach in the activities.

The project is designed to address two critical components of the Central American and Mexican migration crisis:

(1) Providing humanitarian and adolescent-specific support — with an emphasis on the needs of adolescent girls — based on the needs identified by the young people themselves and by relevant and established organizations and agencies; and (2) supporting children and adolescents — with an emphasis on adolescent girls — in the process of waiting, return and safe reintegration. Both approaches were designed to build on the efforts of existing migration programs in the region, to avoid overlap, address remaining gaps and create linkages and referral systems.



ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of Plan International Spain and in no way should be considered a reflection of the views of the European Union.

This report is based on third-party opinions, obtained under consent through surveys, interviews and groups.

REGARDING PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Plan International is an independent organization created in Spain in 1937, committed to the rights of children and equality of girls, which fights for a more just world in which they can learn, lead, decide and prosper. Throughout its 85-year history, it has built strong alliances to support the rights of boys and girls from birth until they reach adulthood. Plan is present in more than 80 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

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The totality of this great team has been essential for the preparation of this report.

Regarding the photographs of the study

All photographs used in this report show girls and/or adolescents who are part of Plan International projects, and their use is authorized. The persons appearing in them are not to be assumed to be victims of some kind of violence and/or abuse.



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