Research on discriminatory social norms in relation to violence against women and girls from the perspective of girls, boys, women and men in Bangladesh, Egypt and Pakistan

Plan

This report was commissioned by Plan UK's Girls Fund. It was authored by Elanor Jackson, Tina Wallace and Marie Wernham.

Please contact Natalie Au at natalie.au@plan-uk.org for more details.

Plan UK
Finsgate
5-7 Cranwood Street
London
EC1V 9LH

Tel: +44 (0)20 7608 1311
Fax: +44 (0)20 7253 9989

Web: www.plan-uk.org

Registered Charity no: 276035 - Registered in England no: 1364201

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Acronyms

ASRHR	Adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights
BIAAG	Because I am a Girl (Plan International campaign)
CBO	Community based organisation
CCCD	Child centred community development
CDF	Community Development Facilitator
CP	Child protection
CSP	Country strategic plan
CO	Country office
DFID	Department for International Development (UK Government)
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender based violence
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GPP	Girl Power Programme (funded by Plan Netherlands)
KII	Key informant interview
NFE	Non-formal education
NGO	Non-government organisation
NRSP	National Rural Support Programme (National NGO in Pakistan and Plan partner)
POVC	Protection of Vulnerable Children (Plan Bangladesh programme)
PSM	Programme Strategy Manager
PU	Programme unit
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

1) INTRODUCTION

Plan has made a global commitment to promote girls' rights and gender equality and has developed several approaches towards progressing this ambition. One of these is to understand, analyse and address discriminatory social norms that underpin gender inequality and the second class status of women and girls in so many countries. Addressing the beliefs, customs, traditions, laws and practices that uphold these norms is complex and difficult; change is often slow. Yet without tackling the institutional and other barriers that face women and girls it will not be possible to achieve sustainable change or real transformation.

This report presents research carried out to understand the challenges in three countries where Plan works and explore the fundamental structures that shape attitudes and behaviour around gender roles and potential. The research asked how communities themselves see the current situation and what women and girls, men and boys want to see changed; what Plan wants to achieve and how staff undertake work in this area; and what is actually changing in favour of women and girls in the communities studied. The focus of the report is on what people themselves experience and think, especially adolescent girls, and their aspirations for the future.

The research was short term but brought out many issues, some common across all contexts and some unique or community or country specific. Social norms are deeply embedded in institutional structures, attitudes and beliefs hence change is incremental rather than dramatic; nevertheless positive changes are taking place in each of the communities visited. The report explores the changes and what enables and what prevents change in attitudes and behaviour and encourages Plan to develop and continue this important work over the long term.

i) Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research was to explore discriminatory social norms and harmful practices with a particular focus on those that relate to violence against women and girls[1] (VAWG) that keep girls and women marginalised in communities and the wider society.

Three countries were chosen for this research on the basis that they were all engaged in work tackling these norms and trying to bring about positive change, especially for adolescent girls, in contexts that are similar, e.g. highly conservative communities, backlash against a rights and gender agenda, similar drivers around the protection of girls' sexuality and honour and where risks around girls' safety in speaking out about sensitive gender issues exist. Egypt and Bangladesh were selected because of their involvement with Plan UK's Girls' Fund, which supports gender transformative work and Plan Pakistan, because of its work on girls' education supported through the DFID funded 'Building Skills for Life' programme.

Plan UK understands social norms to mean 'A pattern of behaviour motivated by a desire to conform to shared social expectations of an important reference group'[2]. Discriminatory norms relating to gender and violence against women and girls are widespread and influencing and changing social norms is widely recognized as critically important though challenging work, essential for long-term and sustainable change.

[1] Violence against women and girls is defined as "…any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." It includes: physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, in the community, or perpetuated by the state. It includes battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence, rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs." UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993). Taken from:http://www.gadnetwork.org/storage/csw/Violence%20Against%20Women%20and%20Girls.pdf

2 Heise, 2013.

This small scale qualitative research study is considered an important initiative for Plan UK which is committed to increasing its gender transformative work, deepening and sharing learning about this work and becoming recognised for quality programming on adolescent girls' rights. This research was focused on learning from communities about the dominant social norms that directly affect girls negatively, how these affect girls and boys differently, and how far these are changing through the work of Plan and other agencies, and the wider social changes in their context from government policies and the media.

Listening to groups of girls, boys, men and women in selected communities where Plan works, understanding their perspective and experiences was expected to help Plan (and others) to deepen their understanding of the issues facing the communities and what approaches are enabling positive change. The views and priorities of staff involved in this work were also part of the research as their long term knowledge of communities adds greatly to the insights that outsiders can gain in a short time.

ii) This report

This synthesis report aims to draw together the key learning that emerged during the three country visits: similarities and differences are highlighted and an analysis of the factors which are enabling and challenging changes in the different contexts presented. The report reflects on the findings from the research in relation to learning from some of the global literature on tackling social norms, a small but growing area of research.

Inevitably much of the local detail, quotes and insights will not be included in a synthesis report, however detailed country reports were written for each country and are available from Plan UK for those who want to understand the contexts and details of each of the three countries.

iii) Research approach

In developing and defining the research, a set of guiding questions were devised, which were modified and tailored to each country context as the research took place. The questions focused on the nature of the discriminatory norms in each context, how they are upheld and enforced in different communities, their effects especially on women and girls, but also men and boys, and how these are changing over time. The causes of the changes were to be explored, including but also going beyond the work of Plan.

In each country the questions developed in the UK were reviewed, discussed and adapted to fit the context and appropriate participatory exercises were identified. The tools used were ones that staff felt comfortable using and that were locally appropriate; consequently different exercises were carried out in each context. The focus and discussion on different discriminatory norms varied, and followed the interests and experiences of participants in each group; the issues raised differed between the groups and between the three contexts.

This was a more open, participatory and less structured way of working for staff in Egypt and Pakistan, while in Bangladesh a more structured participatory approach worked well. Throughout, the focus was on listening and learning from staff, volunteers and communities and the researchers tried to facilitate processes that these groups felt comfortable with and which enabled them to express their views in their own ways. Inevitably the data collected varied and the most appropriate ways of working were not always the same between diverse communities, although the overall purpose and focus remained steady.

Overall, a total of 43 focus group discussions (FGDs) of different sizes, divided by sex and age took place in the three contexts and were supplemented with key informant interviews (KIIs) and

group and individual interviews with Plan Country Office and Programme Unit staff. In addition, key evaluations and reports were read to give depth and a longer term perspective and context to the research[3].

In Egypt and Pakistan, two communities were selected by Plan staff for the research, one, where staff felt there was more evidence of gender transformation and another, where they felt that changes have been harder to achieve. In Bangladesh the two communities were selected to ensure a mix of ethnic diversity and remoteness from the Programme Unit (PU).

iv) Challenges facing the communities

People in the communities in Egypt and Pakistan identified many problems that they face in their everyday lives, including problems of poverty, lack of clean water, lack of services, dirty villages, child labour and the poor quality of education. In both communities in Pakistan the priority issue mentioned by many was the contaminated drinking water and in addition, in one community, the open sewage system. Young people talked about insufficient schools and lack of transport and access to amenities. Some of the teachers were concerned about the Provincial Government policy on the use of the English language medium in schools.

In Egypt there were major concerns around lack of jobs, poor services and amenities and also food shortages; security was also a serious issue. Men especially stressed these community problems as issues of great concern to them and their families. Child marriage, violence against women and girls and female genital mutilation (FGM – in Egypt) were not identified as priorities by many of the local people; the focus on these issues has been introduced by external agencies, including the Government, the media and Plan. While recognised by many as important (especially women and girls) it is clear that there are many other negative factors pressing in on their lives; they have many challenges to face.

In Bangladesh, however, alongside extreme poverty, socio-economic insecurity and lack of access to education and employment, issues of gender-based violence arose more frequently (e.g. child marriage, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, dowry and dowry-related violence). The communities were also able to identify differences in life experiences based on sex, which amount to gender discrimination, for example: unequal access to education, preferential treatment of boys, access to – and types of - economic and other opportunities, and behaviours associated with, or judged differently, for females and males. It was not possible to establish during the research the extent to which the higher priority given to VAWG and gender discrimination in Bangladesh, compared to the other two countries, was as a result of Plan interventions on these topics as opposed to a reflection of the communities' natural concerns. Certainly Plan has been working in Dinajpur PU in Bangladesh for about 20 years and has a long history of working with communities. Further exploration would be required to identify whether the gender focus of the work in Bangladesh was initiated by the communities, by Plan or a combination of both.

In comparison, in Egypt and Pakistan, because the driver for work on girls' rights and gender equality did not come directly from the community it was clear that many of the priority needs they raised are not addressed through Plan's work, although in one of the communities in Pakistan some of these needs (eg. in Community 212 EB - clean water and sewage system, village dispensary, space for Lady Health Worker to work in), are prioritised in the community

[3] **Pakistan**: 13 FGDs, 4 KIIs, in the communities, 3 meetings with other groups including Plan partners working in the community, and groups of older men and women, workshops, meetings and KIIs with several CO staff.
Egypt: 14 FGDs; 7 KIIs, of these 6 in the communities, several interviews and two staff workshops; three days with community promoters. Groups always divided by age and sex
Bangladesh: 16 FGDs, 18 semi-structured KIIs at Country Office, PU and community level; one workshop with 19 staff members and partners from the three northern PUs

development plan drawn up by the community based organisation and supported through Plan's sponsorship programme. Some staff in the Vehari PU also saw other development issues as more important than work on gender equality issues. In Egypt, some work was done by Plan on issues of e.g. health and hygiene, small scale income generation. However the way priorities on gender equality are defined does set up a challenging dynamic around building local ownership and understanding, especially when people face so many difficulties in their daily lives. The short timelines for change, characteristic of grant-funded programmes, result in huge pressures on staff, when they are working on sensitive and culturally defined issues.

vi) Politics – changing political context in the three countries

The political contexts in each of the three countries, while very different, share some common characteristics. The contexts are politically volatile, the countries contain and try to manage very diverse religious ideas and practices, and laws or effective implementation of laws to protect women and girls are largely lacking.

In Bangladesh, in relation to gender discrimination, although Plan has a good relationship with some individual government representatives at different levels, in general stakeholders complain of lack of interest, lack of sensitivity and lack of awareness among duty-bearers: standing committees in local councils rarely devote any attention to child protection issues, including violence against girls; and local government bodies lack awareness about and sensitivity to child rights issues in general, let alone issues specifically pertaining to the rights of girls, and do not consider them in their development plans.
It does not help that the general political situation is so volatile, with frequent civil disruptions and '*hartals'* (general strikes) which can turn violent. Civil society organisations are also sometimes politically biased (resulting in 'under' or 'over' engagement with government). Furthermore, the politicisation of religion makes it very challenging, with major political parties being associated with either Hinduism or Islam. The Bangla language press reports village level incidents of violence against people and property, such as the burning down of houses and attacks (even fatal) on people of the opposite religion. This is then followed by reprisals and allegations that the initial attacks were 'self-inflicted' in order to gain sympathy for their own side whilst demonising the other. The boundaries between politics and religion are very blurred, making advocacy very complicated.

Egypt has been through major upheavals in recent years, starting with the Arab Spring, the overthrow of Mubarak and his regime, the rise and success of the Muslim Brotherhood in the first elections, followed by their overthrow by force and recent new elections bringing in an ex-military leader. The country is deeply divided over these events and the understanding and narratives of what happened, what has been good and what has been bad, and where the country will go now are all contested. This has directly affected the work on gender equality issues because the work of changing laws on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage or early and forced marriage (EFM)[4], for example, were highly identified with Mubarak's wife and external agencies. Where these are rejected there is a current backlash and working on issues of the rights of women and girls is under threat. The country has been and remains for the moment insecure, making the context for development work challenging, especially in some regions.

In the last few years, Pakistan has seen political instability as well as sectarian conflict and different interpretations of women's roles and their rights. The Pakistan Taliban has been gaining power and there are concerns for some that politics are becoming 'talibanised'. In 2009, schools were destroyed in attacks in KPK (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly called the North-west frontier Province) including girls' schools, which gives a clear message against girls' education, especially in Malakand the Taliban hub in Pakistan. It was felt by some staff and others consulted that there

[4] Early and forced marriage is defined as 'any marriage of a child under the age of 18 without their consent and constitutes a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.' Taken from:
http://www.gadnetwork.org/storage/csw/Harmful%20Traditional%20Practices.pdf

has been a shift in mind-set and that this has become increasingly conservative, affected by the war in Afghanistan, the security situation in the country and extremism.

Some consulted in Pakistan noted that people are suspicious of international NGOs, they are seen as linked to the Americans and unfair to Pakistan, which means that people are wary of such agencies and the messages they bring. This is a significant issue for Plan when talking about principles of girls' and boys' rights and gender equality in the context of international human rights conventions.

vii) Plan's different approaches to addressing discriminatory social norms

Plan's approaches to work on addressing social norms varied in the three countries. An overview of the approach in each context is included below. Further details are provided in the individual country reports.

Egypt – the work in Assiut

In Egypt the focus in Assiut is unique in many ways, and indeed different from the teams in Cairo around this work. The programme was purposefully set up to address social norms, and was supported initially for six years with a highly flexible grant from Plan Sweden. Other funders, including Plan UK, joined later. This allowed the team to develop a programme slowly, learning from experience and changing and adapting as they learned about working in communities on the very challenging issues of FGM and early marriage especially. This PU also brings in sponsorship funding to complement this programme work.

The programme staff all come from the local area and of course language is not an issue in Egypt, all have Arabic. They have come from different backgrounds all with development experience in other agencies, and the senior leadership has commitment and experience around working on gender inequality for over 20 years in this area. They are well networked to other individuals and agencies working on issues of gender equality in the Governorate and are also opportunistic, and pick up new ideas and contacts and use them where appropriate, rather than feeling they have to reinvent ideas and approaches.

It is a team that adapts their work as they learn about what does and does not work, and reflects on their progress and setbacks. As a result there are several distinctive aspects to their approach:

- They use a family approach; they try to work with everyone in the family and all sectors of the community, using the concepts of improving family life for all.
- They do not use the language of gender equality or girls' and women's rights very much as these are poorly understood and external to the community.
- They work closely with community promoters, chosen from each community where they work, and train them to work alongside the communities in groups, committees and at events, promoting the issues of major concern, especially girls' education, ending FGM and child marriage.
- They work through community development associations, a government local authority, and train them to promote the issues and support the volunteers. They also set up local village committees to support the work.
- They take a holistic approach, understanding that nothing can change for women and girls unless they themselves are aware and confident and able to understand and work for the changes they want.
- They engage closely with appropriate Ministries, religious leaders, doctors to get their endorsement and to talk to communities about thinking of the core issues according to religious texts, medical information- while some religious leaders see FGM as a must many scholars do not and they come to address people in the communities.
- They have a clear understanding of the causes of gender inequality and the roots in patriarchy, upheld by tradition, customs, religion and socialization from birth.

The work is designed to promote small steps towards changing attitudes and behaviour across all groups in the community, and includes work with, and training of, community and village leaders, discussions with religious people and key external people committed to gender equality issues to encourage discussion, debate and seek out appropriate ways of supporting new thinking in the communities and families.

The approach in Pakistan

Plan Pakistan's Country Strategic Plan (2011 – 2015) identifies gender inequality and discrimination as one of the major causes of poverty and violation of rights of the girl child noting that this leads to a lack of opportunities for women and girls to access education, health care, vocational skills and hence livelihood opportunities.

Plan Pakistan's focus on gender equality is relatively recent, with programmes specifically focused on gender two to three years into implementation and staff capacity building on gender beginning two years ago. The recent Gender Equality Self Assessment, conducted in July 2013, highlighted the need to strengthen the gender responsiveness of Plan's programmes.

In the two communities selected for the research, Plan has implemented a range of programmes over the eleven years and continues to implement an early childhood development centre in both communities and a fast track learning centre (NFE centre) for adolescent girls in one of the communities. Staff, partners and some community members noted that considerable work is needed initially to convince people to allow their daughters to attend the learning centres but once this is done, they are usually widely appreciated. In one of the research communities Plan and its partner NRSP were not able to do this and the NFE centre closed due to poor attendance.

The most constant and long term involvement by Plan in the selected communities has been through the work of its Community Development Facilitators (CDFs) who undertake what Plan term as a '**social mobilization approach**', the core element of its sponsorship work in communities. This involves a male and female CDF setting up different forums for men, women and children. Eventually, they try and bring the men's and women's forums together into a CBO or if a CBO exists, to strengthen this group. This process works better if the community can see a benefit from being in these groups and it speaks to their interests. If there is such an incentive then this means men are more likely to agree to women and girls participating in these groups.

The CDFs main role is to follow up on 800-1000 sponsored children – collecting information and photos on individual children for reports to sponsors, following up on problems etc. In addition, the CDFs build the capacity of the committees and forums. They conduct one training in each quarter for each forum (training is offered in a number of areas) and gender is usually covered in a half day session using materials from the Planting Equality Gender and Child Rights Training Manual (Plan International). CDFs highlighted that in the sessions on gender, they ask who is dominant and people share their issues. Women talk about decision making, gender based violence (the CDFs explained that they only talk about violence indirectly). They also talk about ownership of property – "*Girls feel they should withdraw from their right to property and give to their brother because they are worried he will not survive"*. With the children's forums one CDF explained that they do a basic introduction to gender. Aside from this, they collect gender sensitive information in relation to livelihoods, health and hygiene, education and some exploration of decision making.

The approach in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh there is a three-pronged approach to working on gender equality: 1) A focus on 'mainstreaming gender': in staff training; including it as a key component in programme development across all thematic areas; improving monitoring, evaluation and research; including it in partnership agreements; through the 5-year 'gender transformation strategy' currently under

development; and in the upcoming review of the Country Strategic Plan; 2) Implementing specific grant-funded programmes with a focus on gender equality issues; and 3) building on the existence of sponsorship-funded community forums to strengthen capacity and life skills in relation to gender issues.

In the two Upazilas or sub-districts within the Dinajpur PU where the research took place (Chirir Bandor and Khansama) there are a total of nearly 11,900 Plan-sponsored children, 61 community-based organisations, 12 Child Forums at the local council level and 120 other Children's Organisations. The sponsorship work is based on a child rights approach to Plan's 'Child-Centred Community Development' methodology whereby community forums are established to build the capacity of local people (both rights-holders and duty-bearers) to develop action plans and to implement, monitor and evaluate community development initiatives. The community forums receive training and capacity building sessions on rights, including non-discrimination and the need for gender equality, supported by Plan staff and volunteers. This sponsorship-funded work complements specific projects in Plan Bangladesh's priority programme areas as set out in the Country Strategic Plan. In addition to the general awareness raising they receive on gender, these community forums are therefore also used as a mechanism to help implement components of grant-funded projects which address gender inequality directly.

Plan Bangladesh's grant-funded projects of various sizes directly relevant to gender mostly come under the POVC programme and include: Protecting Human Rights (intimate partner violence); Girl Power Project (aiming to reduce GBV); Generation Breakthrough (prevention of GBV, promoting healthy relationships and meeting adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (ASRHR) needs); ASRHR programme; Stop Child Marriage; Missing Child Alert (addressing child trafficking); Girls Football Project; and the Youth Economic Development Programme (vocational training and placement, apprenticeships, livelihoods and aspirations – with a particular focus on vulnerable young women. The implementation of activities at community level depends on the particular project framework. For example, the Stop Child Marriage project is directly targeting adolescent girls from the sponsorship-funded community-based Children's Organisations (as well as local NGOs and local government representatives in PU areas) with awareness-raising, media campaigns, peer education, life skills training and developing reporting mechanisms at local police stations. In comparison, one of the many elements of the Generation Breakthrough project involves building the capacity of male football coaches to discuss issues with boys in communities such as VAWG and adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Many of the projects also involve networking with other civil society organisations at community level, as well as national level advocacy.

2) CHANGES in the communities – what is changing and what is not changing

2.1) Key findings from the communities

There have been many changes in all three countries which the women and girls consulted are positive about. Many are small but a few were more significant, for example, raising the mean age of marriage from 15 to 17 in the research area in Bangladesh[5]. The researchers found important incremental changes for girls in terms of increased confidence and assertiveness amongst some girls, especially those involved in Plan groups and initiatives. In Bangladesh and among the community volunteers in Egypt this was particularly noticeable. However, overall, the experiences

[5] These data were supplied by Plan in the PU.

and views of different individuals within the groups varied, making it difficult to generalise and some felt that little had changed for them.

Feedback in all countries suggests that more girls are accessing school and staying in school for longer, there are some increases in girls' mobility, their access to livelihood opportunities (not in Egypt though) and delay in their age of marriage. Some of the girls and women with more education feel more able to influence the decisions of their parents or husbands. Most of the women consulted have bigger aspirations for their daughters than they have been able to realise for themselves.

Understanding of gender issues varied in the different countries. In Egypt and Bangladesh there was more awareness of different kinds of gender discrimination and inequality than in Pakistan. In some areas in all countries there was evidence of attitude change, e.g. groups of girls, boys, women and men in Bangladesh calling for equal education opportunities and increased employment opportunities for girls and women and some boys in Pakistan stating that girls should have an 'equal'[6] right to property as boys and 100 women farmers attending a meeting outside of the community, for many the first time to be allowed out by male family members to attend such an event. In Egypt, over 400 women had been able to leave their communities, many for the first time, to attend a women's day event in the city, and several were able to speak out in public. A mixed group of boys and girls had travelled to Cairo to perform a drama in public spaces on early and forced marriage, again a real break with past traditions.

In all countries, the awareness and interest in changing things was more evident in younger males and females. Younger boys and men tended to recognise that girls and women should have equal rights, though this increased awareness does not necessarily indicate a shift in their behaviour enough to promote equality or challenge discriminatory social norms.

In all countries, the biggest changes identified were a greater number of girls attending school and more women going outside of the house than in the past. In Pakistan and Bangladesh some felt that more women were going out to work, in Egypt to attend meetings; work there is not encouraged for women. Access to work and education were both important in Pakistan and Bangladesh for raising women's status, increasing their confidence, earning them more respect and access and control over financial resources.

In all locations, there was evidence of appreciation for Plan's work on different issues such as education, FGM (only Egypt) and early and forced marriage (Bangladesh and Egypt) and many Plan staff consulted have done some considered thinking about their work on gender equality and how best to engage with communities on tackling the barriers to realising this.

Nevertheless, the changes are small and huge challenges remain. Norms are clear, tight, restrictive for women and girls, and supported by tradition and religious beliefs/interpretations of religion. They are upheld by gossip, the fact that everyone does it, conformity, patriarchy, concepts of what defines a 'good woman' and 'good man' with women being seen as the holders of family honour. Norms are centuries old, deeply entrenched and are hard to challenge until a critical mass is achieved. Addressing such norms requires long term work and needs focused and in-depth support which goes beyond project timeframes and starts where local people are at, building on their priorities for change. Plan staff met well understood these requirements.

[6] Generally a daughter's share is half that of her brother's: "Allah commands you regarding your children. For the male a share equivalent to that of two females. " [Qur'an 4:11], however when girls and boys spoke of this, it was translated as 'equal rights' to property. It was not clear whether respondents were actually saying girls and boys should be able to access the same amount of land i.e. have equal rights or if they meant that they should access their existing rights; it is therefore phrased in the way it was translated

2.2) Changes in relation to violence against women and girls

i) Female Genital Mutilation

This is a central focus for the work in Egypt. While FGM takes place also in Bangladesh there is very little discussion of it; it is not practiced in Pakistan. While ending FGM is a core focus of the work in Assiut, Egypt, and some progress on changing attitudes, and even practice, have been reported in the past, the feedback from the communities questioned showed clearly that FGM is practised widely and girls expected to be cut or had already been cut even though some were scared and some were questioning it. There is evidence that awareness about the practice is being raised and discussion is taking place around it, but there is no clear evidence yet of FGM being rejected. This was a real disappointment to staff, who have worked hard on this issue at all levels.

The cultural practice of FGM is extremely strong in this part of Egypt, and was universal across all communities and religions until recently; change is coming but slowly and is more focused in urban areas and educated families. A few quotes serve to show the scale, depth and realities of the practice of FGM:

> *It is necessary and vital for us in the village.* (Girl 18-25*)*
> *It is common here in our village to circumcise girls because FGM is chastity to girls and also it is our tradition*. (Girl 18-25)
> *People say a girl who is not circumcised is a bad girl.* (Woman over 35)

There is real evidence of the practice being questioned and discussed as seen in every FGD. However, people are not sure what is right or wrong, they get mixed messages about whether it is a religious obligation or not, and the links to being a 'good woman', getting married and being accepted in the community are extremely strong. It is an important step though and the issue is now a subject for discussion and that more people are learning it is against the law, something many still do not know. While there is a law, in fact there has never been a prosecution until 2014 and for many FGM is 'a given'. Women over 35 in an urban slum reflected some of the confusions:

> *They say FGM is wrong but I don't know if FGM is right or wrong.*
> *I am confused.*
> *We hear bad words about the girls who haven't undergone FGM. They can't control themselves*
> *The girls who have not undergone FGM always have desire.*

Some want change, especially the adolescent and younger girls, and some women regretted circumcising their daughters. There were many stories of the pain and damage that FGM caused some women, yet there was also a sense that however much some of them want change this is not going to happen, or not yet:

> *We hope the FGM concept will change but it is out of our hands.* (Young girl)
> *They will not change their traditions about FGM.* (Man over 35)
> *Maybe FGM is wrong but it is our tradition and we should do it*. (Woman over 35)
> *Even if they [parents] come they will not hear and not act after that. Nothing will change.* (Adolescent girl)

The feedback clearly showed in every group that FGM is the norm, it is almost universally practiced and many said they would continue circumcision for girls into the next generation. A very few of the younger girls have not yet been circumcised but they expected they would be in the end, in spite of the fear of the pain and the dangers to their health, which they understood well.

ii) Child marriage, decisions around marriage and the experience of marriage itself

While child marriage is a central plank of the work on addressing harmful practices for girls in all three contexts, and is seen to be a cause of school drop-out, the feedback was not clear cut. There are clear trends in all three countries that the age of marriage is rising, but from a very low base in some countries (e.g. as young as 9 or 11 in Egypt). Most of those who had contact with Plan had learned that child marriage has many negative consequences for girls, and Plan predominantly communicates the health risks of child marriage for girls and the impact on their education, rather than explicitly framing it as a 'rights' issue:

> *'Stop child marriage' as a standalone message is meaningless at village level: a family first needs to understand the education, health and social consequences; then it is possible to move onto issues around rights, choice, decision-making and how religion emphasises the importance of consent and how it is illegal. Different tools need to be used in a comprehensive and integrated approach*. (Manager of the Girl Power Project, Plan Bangladesh).

Aware of it as a concern, most girls and boys in the FGDs in all three countries said they would marry later.

In Bangladesh, 120 villages have declared themselves to be 'child marriage free'. Although this does not spell the end of child marriage (as those who are determined can go to a different village to have the ceremony performed), it nonetheless indicates a strong, joint commitment from key actors. Furthermore, the figures collected by the Plan PU in Dinajpur show the mean age of marriage there has risen from 15 in 2012 to 17.6 in 2014. The Adviser on Child Protection points out:

> *Don't underestimate the importance of small gains: delaying the age of child marriage is a milestone. After raising the age – and thus increasing protection and health benefits - we can move onto the next target, and then the next. If a girl can get to 18 she can explore other opportunities. Even minimal awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage leads to awareness of other things and helps to develop life skills.*

However, the factors perpetuating child marriage are complex. The Plan Bangladesh Adviser for the Youth Economic Development Programme recounted the words of a girl he met:

> *I had to marry as I had nothing to do. Marrying today or four years later is the same for me.*

It is not only poverty and social pressure but also lack of aspiration for a better life. According to the Child Protection Adviser, *"A parent will say: 'OK, so I'll delay marrying my daughter until 18 or 22. Is Plan going to help me pay the bigger dowry she'll need, then?'"*

In Bangladesh dowry is illegal, but families can circumvent this issue by describing it as a 'gift'. It is a hugely strong tradition, even amongst wealthy, middle class, educated families. It may be demanded or given freely. In some contexts, parents need to give a smaller dowry to the groom and his family for the marriage of younger girls. A period of relative financial success (such as a good harvest) may bring parents to decide to marry a daughter before the dowry needed disappears into other household costs. Dowry and dowry-related violence against brides where a dowry may be seen as insufficient were highlighted in group discussions:

> "*The amount needed for dowry is increasing on a daily basis leading to violence by in-laws.*" (45-year-old woman, Tetulia)
> *A 16-year-old girl got married in this school a few days ago and the groom's family took dowry. Most people are illiterate and take dowry. Lots of women are victims of violence as a result of dowry, so it's a bad thing.* (14-year-old girl, Alokjhari)

The feedback on early and forced marriage in Egypt was at times confusing. Many said they do not

agree with it and do not practice it, yet the imams and teachers talked about it as a real challenge in these communities. It was hard to get a sense of how prevalent the practice is and people clearly had very different opinions about it.

While many see it is problematic and the imam will not marry people under 18 anymore (both imams say they do not do this now because it is against the law, though one had a brother who married a girl under 18) so they go to the religious scribe who signs a paper with them, which has no status in law. Girls who marry this way have no rights on divorce, or if the husband dies and lack any protection at all. Hence, they may become destitute. In addition, if they marry too young they are not able to perform the duties of a wife or mother, or carry out their domestic responsibilities and they cannot continue their education. Many people know this and talked about it, citing examples of girls who had failed in their wifely duties and left 'the marriage'. They have few options for their future.

On the other hand, several people said that if girls are physically mature it is good or all right to marry young, especially if the girls agree and like the man. Some are certainly worried about leaving marriage too late and almost everyone - except for a few adolescents and women in their 20s - sees marriage as the key activity for women which provides their identity and purpose (and increased status) in life, so being married even when young is good.

> *In Upper Egypt they see that the girl must marry and her family become comfortable.*
> (Young girl, Abu-Teg)

There was more open discussion about early and forced marriage than FGM; it is not seen as essential to either the religion or the traditions to marry before 18 and while many of the older women were married from 13-18 many of the girls engaged with the Community Development Association and Plan programmes are not yet married and are over 18. They recognise that this is a custom that is changing with each generation, for example for many, their grandparents were married from as young as 9. Most were happy with the common practice of cousin marriage but almost all thought that girls should now have a say in who they marry and were against forced marriages.

Some saw early and forced marriage as driven by poverty (Egypt and Bangladesh) or by marriage exchange, a big issue in Pakistan, where it is a way of strengthening family ties and keeping land within families. In community 83 WB, teachers from the girls' middle school stated early and forced marriage as the main reason for drop out of girls from the school. In Bangladesh and for some in Pakistan there was concern around the rise of 'love marriages' due to the perceived negative influence of girls and boys mixing more freely and communicating by mobile phone, and – from the children's side – to avoid being pressured or forced to marry someone of their parents' choosing. One 18-year-old girl in Bangladesh said: "*Now girls have mobile phones and communicate with boys. Parents are worried about their girls getting into trouble so are arranging child marriages, even though they know it's bad."* Women (over age 40) in Tetulia, Bangladesh, shared the following:

> *They don't listen to us.*
> *They don't want to wait until 18.*
> *Due to mobile phones, communication between girls and boys is easy, and with transport it's easy to go out of the village. This causes problems.*
> *Before, when girls got married very, very young, they had no ability to express themselves but now girls are getting educated and can give their opinions. So child marriage now is about love marriages.*

Plan staff in Pakistan said the delay in marriage they saw was due to girls remaining in education longer. In Egypt they felt there were multiple reasons for dropping out of school and early marriage was only one - many saw the poor quality of education and violence in schools as also important.

Other issues raised around marriage by the girls in Pakistan and Egypt were about choice- they

are against forced marriages in Egypt, though some felt this is declining; it was less clear in Pakistan whether girls' ability to decide on marriage proposals was changing. Some respondents felt that this was changing in educated families, but others did not think it was and this was a priority for some girls and women in both communities.

> *The parents sometimes realise that something bad could happen if they don't respond to their children's wishes i.e. they could run away.* (Man aged 18 – 24 in community 212 EB, Pakistan).
> *The father and mother decide on the marriage.* (Girls aged 12-15, in 83 WB)
> *Parents do ask the consent of their daughters but the final decision is with the parents. (*Some girls aged 12-15, in 83 WB)
> *Women can't speak for their choice in marriage* (Woman aged 18 – 24 in Community 212 EB)

In one community some young women said that some mothers are sympathetic but cannot impose their will on the husbands. "*In relation to marriage, if the husband goes along with the wife he will say ' If anything happens in future to your daughter – I am not responsible*'".

In Bangladesh there were references to women and men over 40 both preventing and arranging child marriage, or creating pressure for it to happen. Many spoke of the rising age of marriage across the generations. None of the girls or boys in the FGDs (aged 12-19) were married yet and they all stated their intention to get married over the age of 18. A lot of emphasis was put on the need for economic independence before getting married.

> *My future daughter will get married when she's empowered.* (18-year-old girl, Tetulia)
> *I have to get established first, then get married. Girls under 18 are like a child. They can't concentrate on the household. They want to go and play outside like a child.* (15-year-old boy, Alokjhari)
> *Powerless girls of our age may get married early - because parents think they're a burden - and have many children, but a powerful girl's family will not arrange child marriage for her.* (16-19 year-old girls, Alokjhari)
> *Our grandmothers got married at 10. We got married at 13. The age is increasing but it's still happening. We will marry our daughters at 18.* (25-year-old woman, Tetulia)
> *I got married at 12 and was pregnant at 14. It was very tough to take care of the baby and my own needs. This is why I'm against child marriage.* (45-year-old woman, Tetulia)
> *My mother got married aged 4. My parents had a very good friendship but now girls are aware of their rights and boys are aware of their power. This causes a clash and leads to more emotional and physical violence.* (32-year-old woman, Tetulia)

In Pakistan and Egypt no one mentioned the legislation and in the former, few people seemed aware that there is a proposal for a change in the legislation to raise the legal age of consent for girls from 16 to 18 although this is a hot topic in the media and Plan is undertaking advocacy on the issue; in Egypt this is already law. It is the subject of contestation with the Islamic Ideology Council in Pakistan who in a meeting on 21st May endorsed its earlier ruling that girls as young as nine years old were eligible to be married: "if the signs of puberty are visible"[7].

In Bangladesh, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 (amended 1984) prohibits marriage of males under 21 and females under 18, but awareness and enforcement is minimal and the penalties are insufficient to deter such a widely accepted practice. However, Plan is very focused on child marriage in the communities in which it is working, particularly through the Stop Child Marriage project.

[7] Published in Dawn (national newspaper), May 22nd, 2014

iii) Violence – at home, in school and in the community

Violence, albeit in different forms, was evident in all six communities. In Egypt there was special concern about violence in schools for both boys and girls, and violence at home which seemed especially troubling to many adolescent girls. In Bangladesh violence by men against women in the home was raised as more of a concern and also sexual harassment of girls outside the home, which was common across all the research areas. Teasing by boys was discussed by boys and girls in Pakistan but violence in the home was mentioned by very few.

In Egypt the violence experienced by adolescent girls and boys was raised repeatedly. Young people experience physical violence such as beating, hair pulling and arm twisting at school and at home; this sometimes results in serious injuries as expressed by boys in one community:

> *Teachers insult the students inside class*
> *Teachers beat students when they do not answer questions*

Young girls in the same community said:

> *I am thinking of leaving the school because of beating and they insult us and our parents*
> *The teacher beat me with a stick and my hands had been injured,* for another, 'her back swelled'

One felt 'teachers should beat because there are some students who behave inadequately and they mostly beat those students. But they should beat softly'.

Some of the comments from girls about violence at home included:

> *Parents do not agree if I want to go out with my friends, But if my brother wants to go out with his friends, they agree- no problem*
> *They are treating boys better than us*
> *My mother doesn't love me at the time she beats me so I feel I hate her*
> *Girls are beaten for any action they do*
> *At my first menses my mother beat me saying I was too young*
> *I hate myself because I am a girl*

Psychological violence is also common in Egypt, with adolescents especially reporting humiliation, being ignored and not listened to, or told off repeatedly both at home and at school. It is a cause of school dropout, especially for boys, and a cause of real unhappiness especially among adolescent girls. They spoke at length about this issue in each FGD and afterwards in informal discussions; it affects their everyday lives and the community promoters referred often to the neglect of girls at home because of the preference for boys. This was the first priority for the children and young people in the discussions.

They also raised the issue of harassment on the streets and when they leave home, citing this as one reason for parents always wanting them to stay home. The boys agreed that girls do get hassled in public spaces; some recognised this as unacceptable but felt that changing this behaviour would be difficult. As in Pakistan women did not discuss domestic violence in the groups although the imam in one community said that over 50% of his congregation experience domestic abuse and many couples come to him for support and counselling. Plan staff and community promoters also talked of this as an issue for some women.

There was concern raised by staff and volunteers in Egypt about the possible consequences for girls 'who speak out'; all the community promoters said these girls will be at risk of getting into trouble; they are also subject to criticism and possibly abuse. This was referred to but not discussed in any detail; it is an issue that community leaders are asked to address by supporting those girls who are at risk because of wanting to do things differently. More discussion and

analysis of what kinds of 'abuse' are meted out to girls and young women who break some of the accepted norms and how to support them is required. In Bangladesh there appear to be no cases of physical reprisal against girls speaking out against child marriage, but they may face disapproval at home and in the community.

In Bangladesh, there was no mention of corporal punishment in schools, but corporal punishment of boys at home (not girls) was mentioned a few times. However, most attention was given to violence by men against women in the home and sexual harassment of girls and women outside the home. In Tetulia, intimate partner violence was the most commonly mentioned form of violence for females – especially in relation to women aged 20-40. Both women and men over 40 cited it as a negative life experience:

> *A husband beats his wife if the house is not clean.* (20-40 year-old women, Tetulia)
> *A husband gives us food to eat and a stick to beat us.* (40-year-old woman, Tetulia)
> *Whenever we speak back to our husband he starts beating us. This is very common. It's usual.* (45-year-old woman, Tetulia)
> *It's very usual and almost a right for a husband to be angry and beat his wife. It's not that big a deal.* (Women over 40, Tetulia)

In Alokjhari in Bangladesh, intimate partner violence was the second issue around violence cited after child marriage. As in Tetulia, it was mentioned by all the female groups. Half referred to a female lack of power and there was one mention of suicide and another mention of death as a result of such violence. Half felt that males perpetrating violence were perceived to be those with less power compared to males who behave well and provide for their families. The two mentions of violence in the home by male groups were men over 40 stating that it is perpetrated by mothers-in-law.

> *Newly married daughters-in-law are tortured by their mother-in-law and sister-in-law and the mother-in-law takes the daughter-in-law's sari, telling her to leave the house.* (Men over 40, Alokjhari)

In Tetulia in Bangladesh, sexual harassment in the community was the second mostly commonly cited GBV issue. The vast majority of cases are females being harassed by males, particularly in relation to 11-19 year-olds (girls experiencing it and boys perpetrating it). 16-19 year-old girls also mentioned sexual harassment of women aged 20-40 at home, on the road and in the office. In general it was given more attention by the female groups. In Alokjhari, it was the third mostly commonly cited VAWG issue. 20-40 year-old women cited it in the context of women being powerful when – experiencing sexual harassment in the community – they continue to go out anyway.

> *Sometimes when women our age go outside the community, people tease them on the road. Although they are teased, powerful women are still going out.* (20-40 year-old women, Alokjhari)

16-19 year-old boys link it to girls committing suicide.

> *The parents, family and even the girl herself feels ashamed to be a victim of eve teasing and sometimes the girl commits suicide.* (16-19 year-old boys, Alokjhari)

Other types of violence against women and girls mentioned in Bangladesh include suicide of women aged 20-40 as a result of VAWG, men committing rape, trafficking, murder, kidnapping and 'violence against women' in general. Psychological violence by husbands was also mentioned with women over 40 in Alokjhari stating:

> *Men always tell women to leave the house, even after a very small quarrel*.
> *We experienced lots of violence when our husbands were younger. The physical violence is now less than before because both men and women are weaker. Some still experience*

physical violence but the mental stress for all of us is very strong, from our sons as well as our husbands.

16-19 year-old girls talk about powerless women *"living like a slave"* in the household; 20-40 year-old women reference marital rape in relation to female powerlessness *("some can refuse sex, but not all").* Girls aged 16-19 mentioned women aged 20-40 and over 40 being forced into prostitution by poverty and insecurity. 12-15 year-old girls mentioned women over 40 perpetrating violence against children. Finally, men over 40 state that:

Usually women under 40 are victims of violence in the home, but over the age of 40 they commit it.

In Pakistan, when reflecting on what has changed a few girls in both communities talked about a decline in violence in schools and the absence of corporal punishment:

Plan and other agencies have come here. Due to corporal punishment being reduced girls are less afraid to come to school (quote from girls aged 12-15 community 83 WB).

This finding was supported by teachers in the schools in both communities, one Head teacher mentioning Plan International's '*Learn without Fear'* Campaign to end corporal punishment in schools*.*

Other types of violence of concern to adolescent girls in both communities related to taunting by males within the community and the fear of being teased, which inhibits girls from wanting to go out in the community and results in their parents not allowing them to go out. Whilst the men consulted recognized that their behaviour goes against religious teaching, beyond suggesting exercising better self-control they expressed little commitment to change, particularly in community 212 EB.

In Pakistan, other kinds of violence were not talked about much in the focus groups. Many girls and women found it difficult to talk about the problems that they face and boys and men only spoke about teasing of girls. A few girls in 212 EB talked about beatings of women by men and in some cases hair pulling. It was difficult to get a sense from people of whether the incidence of domestic violence is changing and it was explained that these kinds of issues are resolved within the family without outside intervention. The teachers consulted in community 83 WB and the Numbradar[8] felt that domestic violence is only a problem in uneducated families.

A female Plan partner staff member (working for Bedari in the Girl Power Programme) noted that from her perspective, awareness of violence issues is at least changing:

Before no one was aware of child protection issues but now people consider this an issue. The younger generation see this as a problem and that something should be done.

2.3) Other changes identified by girls, boys, men and women

i) Girls' access to and continuation in education

Overall there is a rise in the numbers of girls enrolling in school and evidence of girls staying longer in education, with some for example reaching degree level in all countries. However, boys and girls in Egypt drop out of school to work illegally in factories in the urban community because of family poverty and some girls are taken out of school to marry. Girls are generally encouraged to

[8] The Numbradar is the head of the village and is recognised by government. The role of the Numbradar is to collect taxes for land and property and to resolve problems; this is an inherited role.

attend school if the family can afford this, partly because there are enough schools nearby and in one community a good history of school attendance. However, the concerns about the quality of education, the need for private tuition -which is costly if children are to do well - and the problems of violence continue to influence how parents and children view school.

In Egypt some girls travel to the city to attend University, though only a few, but they do not expect this education to really change their position in the community and they return home to marry. Few expect to get paid work and as yet the link between formal education and qualification and entering the job markets is not forged for girls from these communities. Their primary purpose is still to marry and to support their family and do well in their domestic roles.

Feedback from the different groups in both communities in Pakistan suggests that greater numbers of girls are accessing primary education and secondary education and that parents increasingly recognise the value of educating both boys and girls. This finding supports the views of the Vehari CDFs consulted who highlighted increased literacy of girls and increased access to education as critically important and influenced through Plan's non formal education initiatives. Girls spoke about wanting to continue in education and wanting their daughters to be educated and girls, boys, men and women talked of the importance of education. In community 83 WB they emphasized the link between education and employment, but less so in 212 EB which is further from the city and where the girls attending non-formal education were less clear about this leading to employment. Some women talked about being able to influence their husbands and discuss decisions and that this is a result of men and women both being educated. In this community older boys said they are likely to drop out of secondary school to get jobs in factories or as mechanics locally, adding that the quality of education is poor. Boys here saw less value in education and they along with other groups consulted estimated that 50% of men in their twenties from the community migrate to the Gulf states to work as labourers, drivers, barbers etc. to send money back to their families.

It was clear that for girls and women consulted in Pakistan, they see education as fundamental in building their confidence and in increasing their status in their families. The preference for boys' education was still acknowledged but it was felt that this is declining and that both men and women have seen the value of educating both their sons and daughters, in part because those that work are able to support their parents.

Both adolescent boys and girls in both communities in Pakistan spoke of Plan's focus on education and there being greater awareness of the importance of education amongst parents. They also talked about the influence of media and seeing working women coming from outside the community. Most of the adolescents consulted are from families where parents were not educated and they highlighted that they are afforded greater respect from their parents because they have been educated. Nevertheless, some of girls and women consulted in community 83 WB spoke about not being allowed to access education by their parents, suggesting that some parents still have not changed their attitudes towards educating their daughters.

In Bangladesh, feedback highlighted that there has been increased school enrolment of girls and it was felt by the primary school teacher interviewed and by Plan staff that this was greatly aided by the Government stipend to cover additional expenses for girls through to age 15. There was also positive feedback about how girls and boys being in school together contributes in some way to normalizing greater gender equality. For example, according to a primary school Head Teacher interviewed in Tetulia, she insists that chores like cleaning the floors and keeping the garden tidy are done equally by girls and boys, even though the boys complain about this at first. In the classroom, the teachers mix girls and boys to sit together (although by age 8 or 9 they drift naturally into same-sex groups). She also stated:

> *Girls raise their hands first, more than boys. This has changed. Girls didn't used to be like this six or seven years ago.*

Since about five years ago, girls are consistently doing better academically across all subjects. Girls are more aware of the need to do well and earn money due to the economic situation and they feel responsible for families.

She thinks that girls' empowerment will continue into secondary school because of the government stipend. It was also noted that all of the school girls aged 12-15 who took part in the FGDs were all confident to express their opinions, even those with minimal contact with Plan. They were just as much, if not more confident than the boys of the same age. The stipend has been available for the last 20 years and the focus group discussions showed a distinct difference above and below 20 years of age: under this age, both girls and boys are much more aware of the issues faced by the other sex. Above this age there is more of a gulf in understanding and attitudes. However, the girls' educational stipend programme is subject to massive corruption and may be in danger of being abolished altogether.

In Bangladesh it would appear that the younger generations were clearer about the need for girls to get secondary and tertiary education, particularly with a view to entering the job market and accessing well-paid jobs and they highlighted the importance of economic independence for girls and women.

ii) Girls' access to employment and livelihood opportunities

The situation is very different in the three countries. In Egypt, as in much of the Arab world, women's economic participation is very limited, and in the region of Egypt where the research took place women's economic participation is very low. Few of the girls in the communities will find jobs or go out to work; few will even engage in income generation work within or near the home, though it is expected that this will change slowly.

In the communities, Plan is providing skills for small income generation projects for women though only one woman in the FGDs had started a small business, others want to but are prevented by their in-laws or lack of adequate capital. Most families do not encourage the married women to work, even though they are very poor, and it is not really possible for unmarried women to start up in business.

Economic independence (opportunities to earn money, make financial decisions, inherit and control assets and take economic responsibility for the family) was the most common form of gender discrimination (as opposed to VAWG) issue associated with 'power' in the Bangladesh 'gender power spectrum' exercise undertaken with research participants. The same issue was frequently cited on both sides of the male and female power spectrums, with economic independence strongly associated with power and lack of it associated with lack of power. However, the examples cited of women's economic power were significantly more limited than the men's ('most' men have economic power but 'very few' women); women over 40 in Alokjhari said:

We can get involved with some organisations like micro-credit.
We can take out a loan and give it to our husbands.

On the other side, men's perceived value, worth and power in the family is strongly and directly linked to his ability to financially provide not only for his wife and children, but also his parents. This places a different kind of stress on men, with some men feeling proud of this role and others complaining of frustration, stress and mental health problems.

Men earn money. This is why they are more powerful. This is the system. Men go out, make money and make decisions. Women stay at home and do housework. This is how it is in nature, In life, too. (Women aged 20-40, Alokjhari)

There was a difference in Bangladesh between the highly constrained experience of older women and the possibilities open in some cases to younger generations. Women over 40 from Alokjhari said:

> *We cannot do business in society. If a woman starts a business, they will call her a bad woman and will consider her husband a bad man for not taking care of his wife.*
> *We are allowed to look after chickens, but not allowed to sell the eggs or earn any money from them.*

When asked how change can be enabled, they responded:

> *Job opportunities for women. Jobs with higher salaries by getting higher education. Not for us but for future generations. We're already old and this is the time to die.*

These older women just want to be able to sell their eggs. In comparison, a 17-year-old girl from the same community said that her preferred type of work would be either an office job (which would allow her time to do the housework and look after the children), a primary school teacher, or she would like the opportunity to work abroad. It is not clear the extent to which she will be able to achieve these dreams, but her aspirations are higher than the older women in the community.

It was not that apparent from the research that employment opportunities were increasing for women and girls in Pakistan, however some of those consulted said that more women were able to go out of the communities to work than in the past. Plan CDFs had highlighted that in a few communities women aged 20-25 are getting jobs e.g. in schools, Plan partner organisations, local NGOs etc. In community 83 WB, people identified some women who go outside of the community to work but this was still a minority. Women in this community aged 18 -24 highlighted that in the past, women were illiterate and spent more time in the field and now there are educated working women:

> *Before women went out for agricultural labour but now they can study or go out for other types of work.*
> *Parents need to see the nature of the job before they decide to 'allow it'*

This group felt that the majority of parents are open to the idea of the girls going out for work. The general view was that as more women become educated, more of them will access work.

However women's mobility remains a key barrier to women accessing work as well as the expectation that women will marry and manage the household, so some young women in both communities do not see their education as necessarily leading to employment opportunities, more so in Community 212 EB:

> *I have an education (until Class 10) but can't get a job due to my brother. If I get married then it will depend on my husband whether I can work"*, (Girl attending Plan's NFE centre).
> *Only when families have financial crises then women are allowed to go out to work.* (Girl aged 15-18)

Some of those consulted in Pakistan talked about the need for more vocational training in the villages and there was some awareness that vocational training initiatives had been implemented in the communities in the past through Plan. It was reported that those who had accessed such training had benefited and the one participant in Plan's milk value chain project who was interviewed in community 212 EB, talked about the increased income for those women involved in the project, an increase which has been sustained since the project ended.

iii) Empowerment – expressing opinion, confidence, voice, agency

It must be remembered that, in any country, there is a huge range of experience amongst women and girls based on individual circumstances, even within the same socio-economic stratum. Differing levels of empowerment/disempowerment were evident amongst the different groups of girls and women consulted in each country.

It was apparent that those who were members of Plan groups in Pakistan tended to have more confidence in speaking and expressing some opinions and that they had acquired this as a result of engagement in the groups.

In Bangladesh, the girls in the FGDs included a mixture of those with minimal Plan contact with those whose involvement is more substantial. However, all of the girls aged 12-15 involved in the FGDs were in school and, as with the older girls and young women aged 16-19, they were all confident to express their opinions in the small group work, often engaging in lively discussions amongst themselves. As was to be expected, some were more confident than others when speaking out in the plenary discussions, but in general all of the groups seemed comfortable and relaxed and all of the girls were able to make eye contact with the foreign researcher. One of the young women reflected on the Plan life skills training she had participated in:

> *Life skills training has been so important in my life. In the child protection training I learned resilience, to live life in society and how to protect myself. As I got the opportunity to talk with other children and Plan staff, I made a goal in my life to be strong and empowered. Plan helped me to overcome my situation*". (21-year-old young woman who has overcome difficult personal and family circumstances and who has now been accepted to study a degree in commerce)

In the 'gender power spectrum' exercise in Alokjhari, Bangladesh, expressing opinions and being listened to was the third most common gender discrimination issue associated with 'power' (after economic independence and education). This was raised much more frequently by female rather than male groups, possibly indicating the emphasis girls and women place on this, whereas it might be assumed that boys and men take this more for granted. Likewise, in Tetulia, expressing opinions and making decisions was mentioned only by female - not male - groups. A few of these groups mentioned that more weight is giving to women's opinions and decisions in the household as she gets older (over 40), but even here there was disagreement over how much decision-making power women really have, even at the household level.

> *Powerless women of our age can't take decisions independently, without their husbands. When these women make decisions, family and society doesn't accept this. They can't take decisions to buy anything or about expenses in the family. In the family it is an unequal situation. If a man makes a bad decision, nothing is said. If a woman has a good idea, she is always put down. However, some women* [implication being that this is a minority] *can express their opinions and take decisions like buying things for their children. If they earn money then everyone in the family listens to them.* (20-40 year-old men, Alokjhari)

In Egypt, the girls in the FGDs and interviewed were all members of at least one Plan group, so no comparison with those not working with Plan is possible. There was certainly evidence of confidence among many of the girls who attended the FGDs, especially some of the youngest girls who participated freely and vocally, with some singing songs about their rights. However, in each FGD some young women and girls were very shy and said little, and many of them remained quiet when asked about their hopes and dreams or said they had none.

The community promoters, also girls and young women from these communities, showed the greatest change. They were very able to work alongside men and boys, to express their views, to run groups and share ideas. They had an energy often not seen among adolescent girls; indeed the contrast between the hopes and energy of the little girls and the adolescents was often very

stark. The younger ones are open to the new ideas and experiences and hope to work and play new roles when they grow up. There is a new and growing awareness of these girls around a range of issues that affect their lives and unlike many of their mothers they have hopes and dreams for the future. Many fear these will not be realised and are quite sad but a few are finding ways to take new opportunities and live life differently in some ways, especially those who become volunteers.

One issue that came out very strongly in Egypt, in the discussions with both groups of adolescent girls and those in their early twenties, was a sense of their lack of control over their lives and their highly constrained opportunities. They felt they had the potential to develop their skills and knowledge through more education, to work and travel out of their homes and communities, to access new experiences and ideas, but they were not allowed to. They feel ignored, unheard, neglected in so many ways as the following quotes show:

In Abu-Teg:

They are treating boys better than us.
They can't work because fathers will say the community will criticize him for not caring for his children adequately.
They fear walking out because of the gossip and the behaviour of the boys, who harass them verbally and sometimes even physically.

In Belayza:

A girl can't express her opinion, even if she did no-one cares about her opinion.
The girls have no right to go out of their homes.
No-one cares about my skill not develops it.
Our energy is repressed.
People say parents can't afford her if she works.
There is discrimination between boys and girls, boys get education, girls marry.
My dream is completely rejected and I have nothing to do.
If I convince my father, what about my mother? If I convince my mother, what about my brothers?

People do not listen to them and many of them talk about feeling sad or depressed. Even if they get education almost all will wait at home to marry. They lack confidence to speak out, even at home. The boys confirmed this was the life that their sisters lived.

However, some changes were identified in this area by the girls and staff. First, many of the girls met want to speak out, they believe they have opinions that are valid and ideas they want to express and this is new for many girls. They have taken a range of courses and learned about their value as people, their right to education and health, their roles as citizens. A few have travelled, for study or drama and they are learning more about the world than their mothers before them. They see opportunities they want to take.

In Pakistan, feedback from the different groups consulted in the research communities suggested that both girls and boys who are educated are more respected by their parents than those who aren't and that they are more likely to be consulted on issues such as marriage. Also there were examples of where girls or women were earning money and had some choice around how to spend this money. The more educated girls consulted displayed more confidence and greater aspirations for their futures. Plan CDFs spoke of the girls they work with in the forums speaking out in meetings even in front of adults; of those girls and women encountered in the research, the Captain of the Children's forum in one community was very confident, along with one or two women who had jobs or a higher level of education in the other community.

Older women in Pakistan (age 30+) consulted in community 83 WB, said in relation to decision making - "*men can't do anything without women and vice versa – they are like 2 wheels of the one cart". (*When asked which wheel of the cart is the biggest, they were quick to answer – "*the men, because they are the family leader and are earning")*. However these women do not see a need to

change this.

Most of the women in the group of teachers in 83 WB, (three of whom live in the community) had plenty to say and were comfortable talking about sensitive issues such as violence. Nevertheless, these were a minority amongst the girls and involved in the research, most of whom were extremely shy and unconfident and found it difficult to make eye contact, express their own opinions and talk about their hopes for change. They identified customs and traditions which affected their freedom of choice and mobility but were at a loss as to how these could be challenged. When encouraged to voice their own views about what they want to change, eventually after a lot of coaxing, they said they would like to have greater freedom of movement, increased decision making power, particularly in relation to marriage and they would like to access their right to property.

In both communities in Pakistan girls and women spoke about the constraints on their mobility as a key concern. In community 83 WB, the issue of where girls and women are allowed to go out is not changing much – clearly there are some girls who are going outside of the community for education and women who go for work but these are a minority and these decisions are ultimately taken by their fathers or parents and it is rare for adolescent girls to go outside the community without being accompanied by a male relative. Even inside the community, girls are accompanied by brothers or fathers and can only go in groups of girls to a few places. Women older than 20 and women who are married have more freedom to move around in the village, whilst adolescent girls in the 15-18 age group are the most restricted and do not feel confident to go out alone due to teasing from men and boys. Women still do not sit in meetings with men, and in fact, women do not raise this as a concern even though Plan has encouraged during 11 years of working in the community.

In Pakistan, those boys who were members of the Plan forum in community 83 WB showed respect for girls and knowledge of rights. The middle group of boys in this community (aged 15 – 18) were the most confident and engaged in the discussions (only 2 of these were members of the Plan forum), the young and older groups were shyer but interested in discussing the issues nonetheless. On the contrary, boys and men in 212 EB were not shy, particularly the 15 – 18 year olds. Several of these were noisy and joked around and were less able to talk about rights and equality, in spite of a number of them belonging to the Plan forum and CBO and some were disrespectful of the Plan female staff.

iv) Inheritance, ownership of assets and access to property

While this was not a focus of the research it came up as a critical issue in both Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was not raised as an issue in Egypt, where women remain totally dependent on men for access to assets.

Attitudes towards a girl's rights to access property are changing in Pakistan; girls said they are more aware of this issue and should have access to property and said it is discussed in the media. Boys and men also recognised that the property practice is unjust. They say that girls have equal rights to inherit according to their understanding of Islamic law[9] and this matters to more girls now. However, the custom of offering land to their brothers is very entrenched and this practice is not yet changing. Land is critical in this agricultural area and has high value yet girls are still giving up their rights to own land, something which would change their status. Girls in 212 EB (aged 15 – 18) explained how it works in their community:

[9] As mentioned previously, generally a daughter's share is half that of her brother's. This first principle which the Qur'an lays down refers to males and females of equal degree and class. This means that a son inherits a share equivalent to that of two daughters, a full (germane) brother inherits twice as much as a full sister, a son's son inherits twice as much as a son's daughter and so on. This principle is however, not universally applicable as seen in verse 4:12, the descendants of the mother notably the uterine brother and uterine sister inherit equally as do their descendants. (http://www.islam101.com/sociology/inheritance.htm)

A few parents do offer property to their daughters but they don't want it and they give it to their brothers.

When asked if they would like to have their share of the land, they said:

We are happy with the way it is because otherwise we would sacrifice our relationships with our brothers.

The boys (aged 12-15) in 83 WB when asked why girls do not have an equal share in property, responded –

Sisters love their brothers and give their share to them.

In Bangladesh, due to inheritance laws and social norms and traditions, girls and women are hugely disadvantaged and in many cases made totally dependent on men through lack of independent assets. Even in some wealthy, middle class, educated families, preference may often be given to sons and brothers rather than daughters and sisters, even when distributing assets which should rightly belong to the girls and women. Women over 40 from Alokjhari said:

We can have assets from our father, but not our husband.
We're over 50 but our husband still asks for money from our parents.
My husband said to me, 'you only need food and clothes so this is enough. You shouldn't ask for anything else as I provide this'.
Women feel very vulnerable as they don't own any assets.
Sometimes we can bring cows from our father, but we are still not allowed to keep profits from the sale of the milk.
When we bring any assets from our fathers, our husbands will search us and act like a policeman, confiscating anything we bring; [Researcher: *"How can this be changed?"]*
When girls and boys get the same education, the attitude of the boys will change in the future. Our husbands are not educated.

3) What is enabling change/driving change at community level?

People spoke of the importance of education in changing attitudes and practices and it was clear that educated women and girls had greater aspirations and greater exposure to other ways of thinking. Some also spoke about the importance of seeing female role models from outside the communities with jobs. Many spoke of the power of the media which was seen as both a positive and negative influence and is explored further below.

i) Plan's work that is contributing to incremental change in the communities

Plan's approach varies across countries and different Programme Units, as explained in the Introduction.

Several approaches that Plan is taking are enabling communities to start to engage with difficult gender issues and bring about some changes in both attitudes and sometimes behaviour. In all three contexts it was seen that staff were working in locally relevant ways, using language the community feel comfortable with, starting where the community is and taking things slowly. In all three countries, they highlighted the importance of prioritising work with young people because this is where change is most likely to happen.

Some of the offices work hard to tailor the approach specifically for each community, recognising the diversity that exists even between communities in the same area; this was especially true in Egypt. Standardised approaches are not seen as appropriate or used by staff. For example, the Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Manager in Pakistan gave an example where Plan is working with the madrassas in one district in the North where the girls are coming for religious education. They have been able to agree on a regular curriculum to be adopted: "*people there don't like the idea of girls' education but these religious institutions are only teaching the recital of the Qur'an, not even the translation"*. He recognised the importance of adapting approaches to specific contexts but noted that they may have wider relevance across Plan's work than is currently given credit.

All of the staff met during the research work with men and boys albeit in different ways, (except in Bangladesh where not all projects involve work with men and boys, however staff consulted recognised the importance of this). They want to engage men and boys in understanding gender inequality and committing to support women and girls to secure the changes they want and which would improve their lives. This is seen as critical in enabling change around social norms in all communities.

In Egypt, the Assiut team have developed a specific programme to address discriminatory social norms there, which they have been implementing for several years and which uses a holistic and family focused approach. They have one year training for younger children, using a manual, Aflatoun; at adolescence they divide boys and girls and run programmes for each using manuals called New Vision and New Horizon. Arab Women Speak Out, based on well-researched work by John Hopkins University, is used with adult women and they have now written a manual for premarital classes and divorcees. These manuals are comprehensive around issues of female and male roles and responsibilities and cover many aspects of peoples' lives including citizenship, health and hygiene, as well as the specific issues of violence against girls, early and forced marriage and FGM. They work to build up understanding and the confidence of women and girls, as well as boys, to learn, to participate and build their confidence to ask questions and express themselves.

The learning is delivered through locally recruited community promoters who can promote discussion, share ideas and enable people to approach new ways of thinking about their lives, partly because they know them and share their life experiences. The staff and volunteers also run events for the whole community that raise difficult issues around gendered customs and traditions, to raise awareness and build knowledge.

Much of the work with the boys in Egypt is to enable them to support the girls and find new ways of thinking about gender roles and relationships and why the lives of girls need changing, especially around access to education, mobility, delaying marriage and freedom from FGM. The focus with men is on allowing their wives more freedom/decision making, which will enhance family harmony. These activities are contributing to opening up spaces for debate and discussion, enabling women and girls to leave their homes to attend classes- and even in 2014 to attend a major event in Assiut for international Women's Day- and so building their confidence and experience. The work is promoting the importance of allowing both girls and boys to ask questions, take on new ideas and want to realise their potential.

In Pakistan, the most constant and long term involvement by Plan in many communities is through the work of its Community Development Facilitators as described in the introduction. Whilst their overall purpose is not to address discriminatory social norms, there is potential for CDFs to work over the long term with community groups and individuals in the community on tackling gender discrimination, although the level of work this would involve, would not be possible given their current responsibilities for following up with sponsored families. Other initiatives such as offering non-formal education and vocational training to girls were considered important by women and girls and some men and boys in the community, however these tend to be shorter term if governed by programme timeframes.

Again PU and partner staff are very aware of the need to work in locally relevant ways, particularly in their approach to work on girls' empowerment, for example, couching terms and concepts in a language which makes sense to local people. Some staff talked about entry points, for example, approaching the issue of early and forced marriage by talking about the health risks as this is easier for people in communities to understand. It is also easier for staff themselves, who may find it hard to challenge customs and traditions, and enables them to facilitate reflection on whether these customs are beneficial to boys and girls etc.

Experience in Bangladesh showed that the interventions started from where people are, not where we want them to be, and the work is implemented sensitively, with the participation of relevant stakeholders from the beginning. For example, communities will accept talking about adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights in relation to unmarried adolescents but it is essential to prepare the communities very well first, through careful explanations. In one area they didn't work with adolescents directly for a period of 6 months but instead spent a long time working with adult community groups to prepare the way. According to the Project Manager for the Generation Breakthrough Project, "*reality has changed a lot in Bangladesh. Communities are not necessarily as reactionary as one might expect*….*if approached in the right way."* However, a lot of this work is still in the early stages, especially the 'mainstreaming' component.

Community feedback on Plan's approaches

In Egypt the FGDs were attended by women and men, girls and boys, all of whom had attended one or more of Plan's activities; their feedback on the classes and events was largely very positive. People clearly enjoy the meetings and classes they attend, they have learned a lot and are now able to ask questions and discuss challenging subjects, and women and girls especially enjoy the time spent away from home, making new friends and discussing issues in a safe space. The men feel they have less time for the gatherings however.

Women and girls talked of the range of learning, from making soap and knitting for income generation or household use through to how to choose and negotiate with a marriage partner in pre-marital classes. All the young people talked of learning the importance of inclusion and working alongside people with disabilities, the importance of participation, especially in elections, and of the detailed knowledge they now have around issues of early marriage, girls' education and FGM. Many of the young people said they felt they had the right to speak out and have their own opinions, even though these are often ignored. Many of Plan's messages and information are very well received; however, there are clearly very diverse responses to and opinions of the message to end FGM, which even some of the volunteers do not fully accept, and early and forced marriage.

In Bangladesh, focus group members who have participated in Plan projects and programmes expressed interest in, and gratitude for, the work of Plan. The life skills programmes and children's discussion forums were particularly appreciated. When asked for suggestions on ways to improve current interventions aimed at reducing violence against women and girls and gender inequalities, participants struggled to come up with alternative ideas and tended to cite approaches which Plan has already taken on board, particularly in relation to awareness-raising initiatives.

Some of those consulted in the communities in Pakistan highlighted the importance of Plan and its partners' early childhood development centres and non-formal education centres in communities which provide opportunities for girls' education from an early age as well as offering education for girls beyond primary in communities which lack secondary schools. These initiatives are implemented alongside awareness raising by Plan on the importance of girls' education and children's rights, with the children's forum, men's forum and women's forum in each community (linked to its sponsorship programme).

The girls (aged 12-15) in 212 EB suggested that parents' awareness of the value of education for girls has increased as a result of the enrolment campaign (Plan), banners and rallies and that the establishment of the fast track learning centre has been the main reason for the change.

Boys aged 12-15 in community 83 WB felt that there had been an increase in what they consider to be powerful boys and girls in the village:

- *This is due to Plan coming to the village.*
- *Education has made a difference*. *5 years ago 60% of children were out of school. Now 95% are in school, including girls.*
- *Before, girls and their parents were unaware and now they are and copy people from other villages*

Past initiatives implemented by Plan and partners offering vocational training were appreciated and some young people benefitted as well as the milk value chain programme which one woman participant highlighted as being instrumental in increasing her income from milk production.

ii) Government policies

In all three countries there are moves to change the position and status of women and girls, with a range of laws around early marriage, universal education and ending female genital mutilation. While laws are often not implemented there is a commitment to the better treatment and opportunities for women and girls, also reflected in their signing of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

iii) Influence of the media

It is apparent that in the last 15 years in Pakistan there has been increasing access to numerous private TV channels (over 40) and around 20 radio stations and people generally acknowledged that nowadays public opinion is affected by media on a much wider scale. There are around 15 – 20 Pakistani channels. Staff noted that issues of gender inequality are raised on some of the Pakistani channels and some girls watch these programmes. Plan itself has produced TV clips on child marriage and talk shows on the radio and TV. On the radio, the hosts took live calls, shared information on educational opportunities and responded to calls from people asking where to get support for child marriage. The PU Manager for Islamabad spoke of the power of the media:

> *There has been a big change in the last few years, learning used to happen from within the family, now media/internet and friends are huge influences on young people rather than their families. Before there was control by the family but now there is more influence from external sources and this can be both positive and negative*.

Boys and girls in the research communities in Pakistan talked about access to TV. Girls' viewing is more tightly controlled than boys, but many girls in both communities talked about watching channels of their choice when their brothers and fathers were absent. However the gender role models portrayed on many of the Indian movie channels are rarely positive, as one respondent noted. Older women in one community talked about girls only being allowed to watch religious channels.

It was outside the remit of this research to examine the different media options available in each country, online, via mobile and television. The type of programmes which are accessible was not explored nor their gender messaging, who has access to different channels/websites and who doesn't, which programmes are viewed and by which members of the family etc. and what are the factors that influence viewing choices for individuals. Hence it is not possible to draw significant conclusions regarding the extent and power of media influence.

In Bangladesh, soap opera television shows, especially from India, but also from within Bangladesh, reach huge audiences in rural areas. Not every household has a television, but there

are enough in every village for people to gather together to watch programmes. The soap operas currently portray and reinforce very negative gender stereotypes but this could be a very effective mechanism to introduce positive, gender-friendly awareness-raising messages to large audiences of both women and men - provided that the shows are accessible (screened between 7-10pm) and highly engaging, based on good story-telling principles rather than taking an overtly 'educational' approach[10].

It is possible that the only images of professional women to which villagers are exposed in some of the rural communities in Bangladesh are female newsreaders. It is apparently common to watch the evening news which precedes the soap operas. There are also Islamic religious television channels, but these are apparently watched by relatively few people. A rural imam interviewed for the research stated that he doesn't have a television in his house due to his low salary. He goes to the bazaar to watch news, but not religious channels. He does not listen to the radio but will read newspapers in the office. There is increasing prevalence of basic mobile phones, but these are generally not internet-connected smartphones.

There is also wide access to TV in Egypt, even in poor communities. There are numerous channels, ranging from the very religious to the decadent. Girls and women, however, talked of having little leisure time to watch TV and they are not 'in control of the remote'. Religious leaders encourage families to watch religious channels and not to watch anything that deviates from religious teaching, but few people in the focus groups talked about TV and so their viewing habits are not known. Many were unaware of the laws against early and forced marriage and FGM even though these are well covered in the media according to staff.

4) Barriers to change identified in the communities

i) Strict gender roles and the concept of 'honour'

The researchers found that gender roles and expectations around the behaviour of women and girls are deeply embedded in all three countries and upholding women's honour is of fundamental importance to all.

In Bangladesh, household work, childcare and taking responsibility for the family was the most commonly cited type of gender discrimination arising in the 'gender lifeline' exercise in Tetulia. It was given equal emphasis by both female and male groups and the findings were similar amongst females and males: both associate household work and childcare with females, and financial responsibility for the family with males. Although both sexes were mostly positive about women enjoying being wives and mothers, amongst the negative issues raised, the female groups talked more about the burden placed on women whereas the male groups criticised women who do not take proper care of the household and family.

In Alokjhari, Bangladesh, issues around reputation and honour were raised more frequently by male than female groups and female 'bad behaviour' is judged much more harshly than the same behaviour for males:

> *When a [powerless] woman becomes spoiled [defined by the group as not respecting elders, having affairs and giving her own opinion] and starts living on her own decisions, she'll be considered a bad woman in the community*. (Men aged 20-40)

[10] The Plan Bangladesh Research and Evaluation Coordinator identified a good example of such a show with an interesting and gender-challenging storyline (in Bengali, entitled 'Friend') but it was showing too late for villagers to watch (11.30pm).

W*hen a [powerless] girl does something wrong, society considers it a very big issue.* (Boys aged 16-19).
When a young widow with no children gets married again then society speaks badly about her, calling her 'shameless'. (Women over 40, Alokjhari)
If an educated girl does something wrong, then everyone blames her education for it. (12-15 year-old boys, Alokjhari)

Discrimination in the '*salish'* in Bangladesh (community-based non-formal justice system) was raised particularly by female groups and particularly in relation to negative female experiences of powerlessness:

If boys and girls have a love affair, the salish and everyone else will blame the girl and the girl's parents. Sometimes men destroy women's lives, for example the salish will make a judgement in favour of the man, even though they know the woman is innocent. (Women aged 20-40, Alokjhari)
Sometimes people will blame her with false information and will punish her. (Girls aged 12-15, Alokjhari)
At the salish in the village, the boy's family will bribe the Head Man and blame the girl. Most of the time girls are blamed. (14-year-old girl, Alokjhari)
When a man does something wrong they let it drop because he's a man but if it's a girl or woman she is always punished in the salish. (25-year-old woman, Alokjhari)
When we make any mistakes, the village arranges salish to punish us. (Women over 40)

As with other countries, freedom of movement in Bangladesh was discussed in terms of negative experiences such as girls not being allowed to play outside and women being criticised for going out in the community without their husbands. Even where girls and women have the freedom to go out in the community this was stated as 'few' or 'very few' whereas 'most' boys and men can go out freely.

In Egypt the concepts of a good woman and a good wife were very clear; gender roles are sharply differentiated. Men are expected to provide, protect and make decisions; women are to reproduce, keep the home and family honour intact. The key role for women is of marriage and their families have the responsibility to get their daughters married while virgins. It was described in this way, a girl is a fragile package to be protected while growing up so that when the time comes she can be handed over carefully to her husband and on the morning after the marriage, if all goes well, the husband will congratulate the father and his work is done.

Once married, women have to protect the honour of the family, by controlling especially the behaviour and reputation of the girls and herself. All the focus groups discussed the importance and significance of marriage especially for girls as seen earlier. Women are not expected to work outside the home or earn an income but they need to be able to have children, care for them, look after the home and their husbands well:

My sister is serving at home all day. (Boy, Belayza)
The little girls always do domestic work and when she grows she does not complete her education and doesn't work. (Boy, Belayza)
Women feel that she is weak. It is a bad feeling to feel your husband is not satisfied with you…but women have many responsibilities and they are always loaded with domestic work. (Young woman, Abu-Teg)
*We are not totally open minded. We like keeping our traditions and customs (about male/female roles). (*Adolescent boy, Abu-Teg)
They (women and girls) can't work because fathers will say the community will criticize him for not caring for his children [family] adequately. (Girl Abu Teg*)*

In Pakistan, girls in both communities aged 12 - 18 talked about the household work they were responsible for and the constraints on their mobility both within and outside of the community and limited choice of how to spend their leisure time, as well as their lack of access to mobile phones. Boys aged 15 – 18 in community 83 WB talked about expectations for men aged 20 – 25. They

said that as well as going to college young men do extra work to support the household at this age, *"Men get jobs in workshops, work as teachers, work in shops, etc."* They pointed out that boys are under some pressure from their families to work and earn at this age but added:

> *At least they have their own will, unlike girls, who have to have their parents' consent to do things.*

The concept of family 'honour,' which is so intrinsic to early and forced marriage and girls' mobility and to views of what is acceptable behaviour by women and girls was something that those consulted in the communities found difficult to identify as a key factor in determining expectations around girls' and women's behaviour. However, it was highlighted as an important issue by Plan staff in and is the subject of much discussion in the country's national newspapers. Girls themselves struggled to explain why they are not able to go out unaccompanied beyond their parents' fear that something bad will happen to them and for some, their own lack of confidence. This lack of mobility was a key concern for girls (aged 15-18) in both communities. In 83 WB there were examples of women going out of the community to work but there were also many examples of girls not being able to go out of the communities to continue their schooling due to it not being safe, or transport not being available, or it not being allowed according to custom or religion. It was suggested by some Plan staff and an independent gender consultant that the increased levels of violence in the country over the past few years, along with the increased reporting of violence against women and girls in the media, has led to greater concerns for the safety of women and girls and a culture of fear.

Older women in both communities in Pakistan felt less strongly about workload and mobility and recognized that once married they had greater freedom of movement. A few of the older women spoke about decision making around having children. Those who are able to go to health clinics without their husbands have more opportunity to choose a family planning option than those who don't. Men in 83 WB (in the 18-25 age group) talked about families having fewer children nowadays but found it too uncomfortable to discuss family planning or where they access information on such issues.

ii) Customs and traditions

In all three countries, the customs and beliefs around women's roles and expectations around their behaviour and the lack of clarity about whether religion dictates a particular practice or behaviour are significant barriers to change as are girls' own lack of confidence and timidity.

In Pakistan, when asked why girls are perceived as less valued than boys, or why girls and boys have different responsibilities and behaviour, the adolescent girls and boys would answer:

> *It has always been this way.*
> *It is the custom.*
> *It is the custom in this village, from childhood, we are part of this, it is an inbuilt system and we are used to it.*

Boys (aged 15 – 18) in 83 WB in Pakistan highlighted that the work girls do in the house from the age of 10 – 15 is to prepare them for managing a household after they marry. Occasionally respondents talked about the custom in their family group being different than the wider practice in the village, such as one of the teachers in community 83 WB or the Fast track learning centre teacher in 212 EB. Overall respondents found it hard to explain why certain customs exist, where they originated, whether they are supported or refuted by religious teaching, whether they were widespread or particular to the village or caste.

In 83 WB, people could not explain why men and women were not able to come together in meetings, nor did any of those consulted talk about this as being something which needs to change. Even the Numbradar (male community leader who inherits this position) in this community attributed this issue solely to the lack of a formal mechanism for women and men to come together. In relation to freedom to go out, some women in this community said that the view in their families is that there is no need for them to go out, as their fathers provide everything they need in the home.

There were also mixed views about certain customs and traditions and whether these need to change amongst Plan PU staff in Vehari. One of the PU staff (male), questioned whether girls actually want changes in relation to having more control over their free time and choice over being able to go outside to play. He feels that girls do enjoy themselves and mentioned the fact that they stay in the house in their recreation time is part of the '*culture and tradition'*.

In Bangladesh, customs and traditions are mixed with religious beliefs and assumptions (both Hindu and Muslim) and set against a general backdrop of patriarchy, poverty and the socio-economic, political and cultural disempowerment of women. Girls' and women's often total economic dependency on men, combined with the treating of women and girls as property and/or a burden, renders them extremely vulnerable to VAWG. The 2013 report '*Customary Laws, Norms and Practices in Bangladesh: Gender Based Violence Perspective'* – written for the Plan Bangladesh Girl Power Project - lists no less than 51 types of 'customs, norms and practices' related to GBV, many of which have their origins in so-called 'customs and traditions'. At the community level, men in the focus group discussions in Tetulia raised the importance of good religious behaviour by women whereas in Alokjhari good religious behaviour by males is associated with male power. However, changes can take place, with small gains in gender equality becoming entrenched, albeit often through slow and painful processes led by courageous individuals and supported by NGOs:

> *If we as children become aware of the negative consequences of child marriage, we can explain this [to parents], then one day maybe they will listen to us and we can make a difference.* (12-15 year-old boys, Tetulia)
> *Older girls can ride bikes. They were teased at first, but now people are used to it.* (Women over 40, Alokjhari)
> *If girls can get an opportunity to play sports that are in the Olympic games, then people will see them and change their attitudes*. (17-year-old girl, Alokjhari)

It should be noted that some girls are already playing football and doing karate through Plan Bangladesh projects.

In Egypt the answer to almost every question about why things were done the way they were, why women did not work, why girls married young, why education was seen as more important for boys, why FGM is practised, was customs and traditions. These dominated all the discussions and are held to be essential to the smooth running of the communities and society. Some were seen to be rooted in religion while others have been practised for generations and maintain the social order. They are known by all, described in the same way by all and are very tightly applied and hard to resist.

iii) Interpretation of religion

There was often a lack of clarity amongst individuals consulted in the communities in Pakistan and Egypt, about whether a particular practice is supported by Islam. Views tended to vary at community level, sometimes according to education levels.

The Vehari PU Manager in Pakistan clearly articulated the challenges related to religious interpretation –

There are no criteria for becoming an imam in a mosque – anyone can do this if they build a mosque and grow a beard. People are very influenced by appearance.

He added that there is no standardisation of the education offered in madrassas. He explained that this means that many Imams are poorly educated and do not understand the true teachings of the Qur'an and there are many different schools of religious teaching. Hence, imams may use religion to perpetuate discriminatory views and practices and people accept this because the majority of people are ignorant of the religion.

In some cases respondents in Pakistan were clear that the Qur'an states one thing but that the custom is different:

Boys are breastfed for two years but girls only for 1.5 years although the Qur'an says it should be two years for both. (Girls aged 15-18 in community 212 EB).

A number of respondents of different ages emphasized that girls and boys are equal according to Islam, but they also pointed out the different treatment of boys and girls which begins before birth in spite of this:

When a girl is born people moan and cry, whereas when a boy is born, they use flour to make symbols by the gate and celebrate. *If three to four girls are born in a family, people give the girls names like 'Allah Mafi'* (means 'no more girls'). (Quote from teacher group in 83 WB)

Some staff noted that many traditions and practices which impact negatively on gender equality exist across different religious groups e.g. Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The Islamabad PUM shared some interesting reflections on her experience of working with slum communities in the city, many of which are Christian communities. She noted that even though men and women mix more in urban communities, decision making power remains with men in relation to women's mobility/schooling/ control etc. So from her perspective, the psyche has not changed. In these communities, both the men and women go out to work, they both sit in Plan groups and meetings, but the women seldom talk and they generally agree with the men's opinions, hence the underlying inequality issues remain.

There are some areas where it is easier to see that religious interpretation is challenging changes, for example in relation to early and forced marriage. Religious scholars state that girls and boys can marry at an age when they achieve 'maturity' but this is interpreted narrowly i.e. only in the physical sense so when girls and boys reach puberty this is considered sufficient, regardless of their emotional maturity and ability to manage a family etc. In addition, moral values which are influenced by religion, mean that relationships are seen as sinful and marriage as a way of legitimising relationships, or if done early, it is considered a way of avoiding this sinful life. In relation to legislation on polygamy, which is currently being discussed by policy makers, the position of the Islamic Ideology Council is that the law around seeking a wife's permission for polygamy is against Sharia Law.

In Egypt, the intertwining of customs and traditions and religion is complex. Many practices exist across Christianity and Islam, though as in the case of FGM, the practice may be supported by particular verses or interpretations from the Qur'an or the Bible. People were very confused in the sample communities about whether or not FGM is a 'must' in Islam, but even those who did not think it was still practice it, because of the tradition. Religious beliefs clearly underpin the value given to family and community, to the need for girls to be pure, to the importance of the man as the head of the family and the woman as his 'helpmeet' and apply across the religious faiths in Egypt.

Many people are fearful of change or even discussing change where they see the practice being rooted in a religious requirement and to not do it would mean they were not practicing their religion properly. This belief is a major barrier often to even discussing changes and the need for changes and some people who follow a strict interpretation of their religion find the work on addressing

discriminatory social norms disturbing and some reject it. Staff and volunteers have to answer questions and manage discussions with people who feel their work and messages are threatening their faith and they receive limited support or training from Plan in doing this kind of work.

All the major world religions espouse essentially patriarchal views, for example 'treat your husband like a god' (Hinduism), 'a woman shall not have authority over a man' (Christianity) and 'two female witnesses shall have the equivalent of one male witness' (Islam). In Bangladesh this is often combined with a degree of fatalism regarding gender roles and the disempowered status of women and girls which became apparent during the research, and not just in relation to the rural poor: for example, the concept of 'karma' and reincarnation in Hinduism and the oft-heard phrase "it is the will of Allah" in Islam are strong beliefs. Thus very high levels of violence against women and girls and gender discrimination are accepted as 'normal'. For example, a 2011 survey of 12,600 girls and women over the age of 15 conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and supported by UNFPA reveals that 87% of currently married women have ever experienced psychological, physical, sexual and/or economic violence by their current husband, 77% within the past 12 months: 80% have ever experienced psychological violence, 72% within the past 12 months; 65% have experienced physical violence by their current husbands, almost half within the last 12 months; about half have experienced economic violence, one third in the past 12 months; and more than one third have experienced sexual violence by their current husbands, nearly one quarter in the past 12 months.[11] This, again, provides a challenging backdrop against which to position messages on gender equality and women's and children's rights.

In Bangladesh (as with one dominant party in Egypt, now banned) this is further complicated by the politicisation of religion with major political parties being associated with either Hinduism or Islam. The boundaries between politics and religion are blurred, making advocacy complicated. If a conservative Islamic party were to gain power then there is a fear by some stakeholders interviewed that the slow moves towards gender equality would be halted and likely go backwards. There is not enough of a positive groundswell / tipping point of female empowerment to withstand a push back at this point. This is of particular concern given the proactive, strategic and well-funded efforts of conservative elements to increase their supporter base and influence policy. For example, following the debate of a particular piece of legislation seen as 'anti-Islamic', the organised protests in the streets of Dhaka were so strong that the legislation was immediately dropped by the Government. In contrast, the moderates are only reactive, not proactive in trying to counter regressive moves. This is an area which deserves serious attention in the consideration of any gender equality programming in Bangladesh.

iv) Gossip/family pressures

One way that social norms are upheld and those transgressing them are punished is through family censure and local gossip. Most of the focus groups in Egypt talked about the need to keep the family happy, including mothers-in-law as well as parents, husbands and others relatives. The extended family is there to control and monitor behaviour and intervene when it is not appropriate. Parents can be ruthless in upholding social norms:

> *My uncle told his daughter that she will have to undergo FGM, she told him no and if you force me I will throw myself from the roof. He told her you will circumcise anyway and if you throw yourself from the roof I will throw your mother after you. (*Young girl, Belayza)

Gossip, by boys and other members of the community are also very strong upholders of tradition:

[11] *Report on Violence Against Women Survey 2011,* Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA, December 2013: http://203.112.218.66/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/Latest%20Statistics%20Release/VAW_Survey_2011.pdf [accessed 20 June 2014].

They fear walking out because of the gossip and the behaviour of the boys, who harass them verbally and sometimes even physically. (Girl, Abu Teg)

One woman who wanted to start a small business was forbidden by her parents-in-law who said it reflected badly on her husband, another who did start a small stall in her front room with her husband's support was subject daily to male comments and the man living opposite opened a similar stall and told villagers that they need not go to a women but could come to him now.

The social pressures upholding the central social norms were very strong indeed in both communities, and only those with real determination and courage can risk flying in the face of the censure and gossip that accompanies making changes. The younger girls feel a little freer, especially in the village where Real Madrid is doing sports projects with the young people and they have hopes that they will play football in the future. They will need a lot of support to maintain these opportunities once they reach puberty and are a target for Plan support.

In Pakistan, there was little discussion amongst the community groups about gossip in the community but it was clear that girls experienced significant pressure from family members, especially males. Many of the restrictions on girls' mobility relate to what is deemed appropriate for girls to do and where they are allowed to go. Girls aged 15-18 in community 83 WB share the following:

We do not go to the shopping store; our brothers or fathers go instead. This is because our families think it is not a good place for girls to go.
There are boys standing there who call us names and whistle.
Even if the bad boys were sent out of the community we still wouldn't go out alone because our parents won't allow it as they think this makes us seem like vagabonds.

The PUM in Islamabad explained that some families do understand gender equality and rights and support their daughters but they are also worried about what others in the community will say about their daughters' behaviour, so they do it quietly in their own way. For example, they recently carried out training on lifeskills for young people and one girl said her brother would not allow her to continue the course. Plan went to talk to the brother and as a result, they arranged a taxi and called him when she left the training so he would know that she was coming straight back. With these arrangements in place, she was able to complete the 13 days of training with her reputation intact.

In Bangladesh this is linked to perceptions of traditional gender roles, honour and reputation, as highlighted previously:

It [gender inequality] is not about education or assets but about social norms. You have to go to your in-laws' or husband's house and live as a traditional wife, even if you are educated. (46-year-old woman, Alokjhari).

v) Limited practical value of education

As mentioned previously, some girls in Pakistan and Egypt questioned the point of continuing in their education as they did not see this as opening up new opportunities for them in terms of employment or decision making power within their families. In Egypt girls go home to wait for marriage post education and none in the sample expected to get a job or be allowed to go out to work in any capacity.

In the Plan intervention areas in Bangladesh there was a strong desire amongst the girls to continue their education, but they also had stories of female classmates being withdrawn from school to get married or contribute to running the household or dropping out when resources are scarce, with brothers being prioritised over sisters if a choice has to be made.

vi) Weak legal implementation – law has little meaning

In all three contexts there is a lack of legal instruments in place to protect women, from violence, from being disinherited, from early and forced marriage and FGM and where there are laws passed in the past 10 years, these are not being implemented. Women and girls do not access the law to seek redress for violence of any kind and gender related problems are addressed within communities.

In Bangladesh, poor legislation and lack of enforcement were cited as major obstacles. For example, there is no legislation to stop violence against women at the family level although there are laws against child marriage, dowry, acid throwing and 'women and children repression'. There is widespread impunity and lack of enforcement of legislation and policies. Because socio-cultural norms in relation to child abuse result in greater suffering and social exclusion for the abused than for the abuser, incidents of abuse are not usually reported. Police stations and court houses are extremely un-child-friendly and un-woman-friendly and the majority of issues that do come to light are often settled at community level through the '*salish'* non-formal system of community 'justice' whereby women and girls are falsely accused or scapegoated and punished while the men and boys walk free. Awareness of the illegality of child marriage has little bearing on behaviour because customary laws, social norms and poverty-driven economic needs often trump national policies and legislation.

> *As Plan and others are already working here, there are already awareness programmes and the government already has laws, but there is no implementation or only a very low fine. They should review the law and punish people harder. (19 year-old boy, Tetulia)*

The situation is very similar in Pakistan. Weak implementation of legislation was also a barrier that was highlighted by both CO and PU staff and partner staff in Pakistan and is documented widely in research and discussed in the press, however it was not mentioned by local people in the communities. Even during the development of timelines for the community, participants talked of being unaffected by national level policy changes and events. People in communities talked about resolving violence issues and conflicts within families rather than seeking outside intervention. The PU Manager in Vehari feels strongly that if there were laws which are implemented for long enough then things would change:

> *Any person who is not literate will follow the law*.

He thinks the weak implementation of the law will change with a strong role of the judiciary and added that the High Court and Supreme Court are becoming stronger – "*This is a ray of hope that if the judiciary is allowed to play their role, the police will have to improve (currently they don't do good quality work). People have no faith in the police so just make settlements with abusers in the case of rape or sexual abuse*."

In Egypt many people in the rural and urban villages and slums do not know about the legislation on early and forced marriage and FGM. These laws are not yet implemented and by and large, legal processes do not appear to have much meaning for the communities in Upper Egypt. There is impunity for abuses against women and girls, though some do go to the community association or the imam with their complaints and try to seek redress through them.

vii) Lack of incentives for men and boys

In Pakistan, it was clear that there is very little incentive for men to want to challenge social norms themselves, particularly older men who exercise most power in the communities. A staff member from Plan's partner Bedari working in the Girl Power Programme said that in her experience they

have not felt any change in men's behaviour after three years, although men under 20 understand the issues more easily:

> *With older men it is difficult and they do not apply what they learn in their homes - it is a challenge for their authority.*
> *In Pakistan men have two personalities: outside the home they are polite, gender sensitive and inside the home is another story* (A Plan staff member (female))

The Islamabad PUM gave an example of how patriarchy is determined from an early age. She talked of a three year old boy, who said about his sister, "*If she takes one step outside of the house, my father will kill her*". On the other hand, she recognised:

> *There are many good stories as well but male dominance is still there and not just in the slums, also in elite homes – men are not willing to give up power.*

The PSM-Strategy in the Pakistan CO suggested that the approach needed is to encourage men and boys to see the need to do justice to different relationships and treat women with respect – daughters, wives, mothers etc.

> *It is important to involve men and boys for them to understand how treating people differently affects wider society i.e. making the world more secure for their sisters and enabling women to have the ability and freedom to make choices and freedom to access services equally when they are available*."

This was reflected by some of the adolescent boys' views who were consulted in the research communities, particularly in 83 WB:

> *Change should start with ourselves and we should be responsible to change our own behaviour (i.e. in relation to teasing women) and we should also talk to our parents to encourage them to treat their sons and daughters equally.*

In Bangladesh, the Director of the Department of Women's Affairs (Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs) stated:

> *We need to avoid isolating men. It's not 'for and against'. It's not 'either/or'. It needs to be promoted as a win-win situation. Men are scared. We need to talk about unlocking everyone's potential as human beings […] Our first identity should be 'human', not 'male' or 'female'. […] An enabling environment needs to be implemented. Doing things side by side will enlighten society and help work towards sustainable development."*

In Egypt, while a lot of attention is focused on men and boys it was proving hard to engage men in some of the discussions, their time and interest is limited. It is harder to get male volunteers to work as promoters than female, and they find it more challenging to accept and work with some of Plan's aims for girls. There are men willing to engage and some doctors and imams are supportive of the work, along with some community leaders. However, staff said that it is hard to keep men involved and many do not see the value in or need for changing gender roles and relationships; others who work a lot with Plan confessed they were confused and unsure about some of the key gender equality messages.

viii) Lack of confidence of girls

Whilst some girls had increased their confidence as a result of participation in Plan programmes, community groups or as a result of being educated, as described above, many of those consulted lacked confidence or were scared to voice their opinions in Pakistan and Egypt, constrained by expectations around their behaviour and lacking in self-esteem (this was not the case in the FGDs

in Bangladesh although they spoke of constraints faced by girls in voicing their opinions in their families and communities.)

In Egypt this was true of many girls, though some had learned confidence and had ideas and hopes for the future as a result of courses with Plan, being community promoters, having education. Their major concern was that no-one wanted to know or listen to them and they can't change social norms themselves.

In Pakistan, many of the girls consulted talked about wanting to do less household work but could not see how this situation could be changed given the cultural context; many who talked about wanting more freedom were at a loss as to how to change the mind-sets of male relatives. The Girl Power Programme has been implemented in one of the communities for two years but in the limited time spent with the girls in the FGDs, it was not evident that they were more confident than their counterparts in the other community and the goal of girls' empowerment seems a distant dream. It took most of the time allocated to the discussions for girls and women to feel comfortable on reflecting on the differences in the lives of girls and boys and to begin exploring why those differences exist, expressing their feelings and opinions was particularly challenging for them. Teachers in both communities talked about girls' lack of confidence and self esteem. This suggests that for many, the lack of belief in the possibility of changing long held customs and low level of aspirations, are significant challenges.

In Bangladesh, as stated earlier, without education, specific life skills and empowerment programmes, girls would likely still be very limited in their ability to raise their heads, let alone speak out about child marriage and other issues in the community.

ix) Need to recognize change is slow and requires a critical mass

It should not be forgotten that change takes a long time and is influenced by many factors, some of which are part of wider social and political change e.g. the rise in the marriage age, decline in family size or the increasing number of women in work. Influencing social norms is complex and long term work which goes beyond donor cycles. One staff member in Pakistan highlighted the enormity of trying to change discriminatory social norms:

> *We are in small communities and social norms are bigger than one community. We need to see things at the local level, the province and the country. What control does one international NGO have with a certain amount of resources? We have 40-60 CDFs and lots of work going on at the district and national level. In the last 10 years there are so many influences in the policy and the media. There are multiple levels we are trying to influence.*

Some staff in Pakistan also stressed the need for deeper and longer term engagement on gender issues with community members and groups, to be more effective in bringing about change at this level. The need to identify influential people/ role models in the community and develop a relationship with them to engage them in inspiring change, in addition to the work Plan does to establish groups, was suggested by some. The Islamabad PU Manager explained that there is only one community where they cannot work with mixed groups of men and women. A female CDF can work with them but the women in that community cannot talk with the men. This is in Alipore where the people are migrants from Fatah and are not used to urban dynamics - "*This will take years to change"*.

Awareness and understanding of gender issues is like the layers of an onion – some issues may be obvious to see but others remain hidden and taken for granted. For example, in Bangladesh, Plan male staff members may be passionate about combatting child marriage in communities, and may be able to articulate very clearly the need for gender equality in theory, but they may well fail to appreciate the gender inequalities they are perpetuating at home, not realizing that their own wives are working the equivalent of two jobs: taking care of the housework and childcare, in

addition to having their own full time and demanding career. It is important to achieve a critical mass / tipping point whereby, little by little, more and more gender-equitable gains come to slowly be seen as 'normal', e.g. girls riding bikes in northern Bangladesh, equal numbers of girls and boys sitting side by side in school, girls getting married at 17 rather than 15: things that were previously unheard of but which are now accepted.

The knowledge of the complexity and difficulties of making change are well understood by staff in Egypt, who see their work as very long term. Now they are laying down the early building blocks and all small changes are celebrated; a delayed marriage, a girl asking questions about FGM; girls being allowed out to Plan classes; little girls talking about their rights and engaging in sports. They expect change to come with the next generation and focus especially on nurturing the youngest girls and supporting them as they grow up, to help them to have dreams and to find ways to follow those, especially around education, exposure to new ideas, delaying marriage and finding future work.

5) Challenges for Plan in addressing discriminatory social norms

There were common challenges in all three countries which included a culture of staff overload, rushing the work and in some countries, ambitious timetables around 'mainstreaming gender' in all organisational structures and activities. In Pakistan, the Gender Advisor noted that gender mainstreaming is a complex and challenging process which takes time:

> *The mind-sets of staff are used to hierarchy, authority etc. and it is easy to say that you work for social justice and inclusion but if you are not convinced as an individual – you can't promote these principles with others.*

She added that more human resources and financial resources are needed, for example to deliver training, as well as to enable more space and time for discussion and application of learning

One of the PU Managers in Pakistan did a course on tackling exclusion which also means gender and raised the concern of the expectations placed on staff:

> *This is now another layer. We need to combine rights, gender and now exclusion. Different teams are supporting different issues, no one is talking about how we will do all this together.*

Common to Pakistan and Bangladesh is the drive to increase the number of grant-funded programmes being implemented. Whilst in some ways improving accountability and providing an opportunity to plan interventions more strategically, this also creates pressure to develop complex proposals for programmes with short time-frames to a range of donors. In Pakistan this often means working in communities where Plan has not had a previous sponsorship presence (this was also sometimes the case in Bangladesh), hence the time needed to build an understanding of communities and develop key relationships also has to be squeezed into the timeframe. This can lead to siloed ways of working and disconnected programmes working on the same or similar issues.

Staff overload was a significant issue in all countries, both at CO, PU and community level. Some feedback from staff in Pakistan highlights some of the issues:

> *Plan wants greater geographical coverage, visibility and response to need but ultimately this means the focus is on breadth not depth*

Plan is trying to accommodate so many things and spreading themselves and chasing numbers.
The CDFs have to wear many hats and are juggling. CDFs are frustrated as they have too much work and burden. Their files are incomplete, they are not able to follow up cases properly eg. ensuring a disabled child gets to access the support they need.
The challenge in Plan is not just time management, it is also the capacity of the CDFs – they can't be experts in everything.

In Bangladesh, all staff were aware of the need for integration of programme and project approaches, developing more coherent and strategic mutual reinforcing of multiple approaches (education, health, life skills for children, legislation etc.) whereby the 'gender lens' is applied to all aspects of working. There are currently limited structures in place to enable and encourage reflection and cross-fertilisation of learning between projects and programmes and there is no concerted advocacy strategy for approaching key stakeholders in a coordinated way across programmes[12].

Many staff in all three countries talked about the pressure of paperwork and reporting. In Bangladesh, a man in one community also noted:

NGOs are always busy with paper and pencil work. They should increase their work in the field to increase effectiveness. (32-year-old man, Tetulia).

With so many programmes, groups and issues, work on gender equality can become squeezed into training sessions and awareness raising events at community level which do not always connect with national level advocacy work. Evaluation frameworks dictated by donors are becoming increasingly quantitative and survey based – a method which does not lend itself to exploring issues of discrimination and violence and qualitative learning on what stakeholders think is working and why and whether the issues of key concern to them are being addressed, is often absent.

Specific challenges relating to Plan's engagement with religious leaders and protection issues are discussed in more detail below.

The need to work more systematically with religious leaders

For some staff, religion is a far more significant issue than Plan 'allows for' in its work. Plan staff are acutely aware of the importance of religion both in the CO and PUs.

In Egypt, the Plan staff engage very consciously with religious leaders and know and understand the critical importance of talking to people about e.g. FGM with the backing of religious texts and narratives. However, this is something they do using their own experience and it is not an issue discussed more widely in Plan; support for working on gender equality and religious beliefs and texts is not part of any gender training work. It can be hard for staff and community volunteers to have to respond to the confusion and concerns found among the community members around religious issues, especially in contexts where religion and ideology is highly politicised, and is an area where more discussion and support from Plan would be appropriate.

In Pakistan, in spite of concerns at Country Office level that Plan is not qualified to engage in religious debate and there are so many religious schools of thought that it would be impossible to engage with them all, at PU level there were suggestions that more engagement is needed and examples of where such engagement had produced positive results. For example the Vehari PU

[12] The research in Bangladesh used the eight elements of UNICEF's 'Protective Environment Framework' to look at strengths, weaknesses and gaps in current policy, programming and implementation in relation to GBV and gender discrimination. This provides a useful framework to help identify how interventions can be made more effective and sustainable. More information on this can be found in the Bangladesh Country Report.

Manager stressed that Illiteracy and not knowing the religion are important issues which Plan could take advantage of, because there is an opportunity to tell people – '*this is the right way'* according to the religion**.** He gave an example of some training they gave recently on open defecation for imams. He said hardly any of them properly understand Arabic so giving them training on issues and linking these to the Qur'an is a way of influencing their own culture and opinions. They were motivated by cleanliness being important within Islam and they are now positive about the introduction of latrines and have begun endorsing the work Plan is doing.

In Bangladesh, Plan appears to be unwilling or unable to engage fully or systematically with religious leaders. This is undoubtedly due to the complexity and sensitivity of the religious context, a possible lack of expertise within Plan Bangladesh and lack of support from Plan internationally to deal with these difficult issues. However, this remains a key area which is not being adequately addressed at present. Ad hoc work is being conducted with religious leaders at local level, but this could – and should – be made more proactive and systematic. For example, rather than local PU staff approaching religious leaders somewhat ad hoc and individually (depending on what area they're working in, or which programme they've got funds for awareness-raising sessions on), Plan could start working with the Ministry of Religion and the Islamic Association. The imam interviewed for the research was Chair of the Imam Association in his sub-district. The imams have quarterly meetings where they decide which texts they will preach on each Friday and the interpretation these texts will be given. These types of leaders – and the training institutes where they get their initial training from - could be deliberately targeted with child and women's rights messages if approached in the right way.

Protection for female staff and volunteers

The challenges and risks faced by some of the female staff, volunteers and partner staff in Egypt and Pakistan are particularly concerning.

In Pakistan, a female staff member from Plan's partner, Bedari faces constant threats from people in the communities related to the violence cases she is involved in resolving. These include threats to her personally and to her office. She receives security support from Plan and from Bedari but said that this is not enough and she needs further security arrangements. In the Girl Power Programme mid-term review it was reported that girls and women from all age groups perceive they continue to experience violence against them and that the reported prevalence of violence has not changed since the start of the programme. Continued monitoring of these risks is essential. If Plan intends to increase its focus on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, it will be important to take the risks to staff into account as well as risks to those who report violence and take adequate steps to protect such individuals, particularly given the lack of law enforcement in the country.

6) Plan's work in the three countries put in the wider global context

While a full literature review was not possible within the timeframe of this research several key documents on addressing discriminatory social norms and changing attitudes and behaviour around gender inequality - and specifically about harmful practices for women and girls - were reviewed. Much of what was seen in the three country studies echoes recent findings in this literature.

There is a growing consensus around what is needed to enable women and men, boys and girls to change their attitudes and behaviour around e.g. addressing violence against women and girls, ending early and forced marriage, working on HIV prevention, stopping FGM, promoting girls'

education, the rights of women and girls to economic opportunities and the importance of promoting the voice and agency of women and girls themselves.

The literature highlighted here clearly endorses many of the findings of this research. While the references are linked to specific points, much of the literature refers to many of the issues highlighted here, which are interlinked and need addressing in a holistic way. The literature rooted in other research shows the need to:

- Recognize the power of patriarchy and how this is reinforced at all levels of society, through discriminatory laws and policies down to local level power relations within the household.[13]
- Understand the importance of taking a holistic approach, working with communities as well as individuals, working from the local to national levels, looking at all the factors that influence and reinforce the position and status of women and girls at every level[14], including with working with and learning from women's movements and organisations.[15]
- Work with men and boys as well as women and girls to change attitudes, norms and behaviour around gender roles and rights[16]
- The critical importance of girls' education in enabling positive change for women and girls. [17]
- Address the deep rooted beliefs, traditions and customs, including religious beliefs, that hold women and girls in positions of subordination and subject to violence [18]
- Work long term with communities and individuals, especially women and girls, building their awareness and also their confidence and agency so that they can start to act differently and take different decisions about their lives [19]
- Recognize the importance of a critical mass of opinion before people can easily start to change their behaviour and challenge social norms.[20] There may be a tipping point – little by little, more and more gains come to be seen as normal and things that were previously unacceptable now become seen as accepted.
- Tackle women's and girls' lack of confidence and the need to build their skills and ability to express themselves in contexts when they have always been ignored. It takes time, patience and mentoring to enable those who have never been heard before to speak out against injustices, to see themselves as having the power to act (agency)[21].
- Address the legal and policy issues that prevent women and girls making progress in the fields of education, taking control over their sexual and reproductive health rights, accessing income opportunities and being represented at all levels of decision making. Laws may be passed, constitutions in place but unless these are implemented in practice they do little to help address gender inequalities.
- Recognize the realities of violence against women and girls that prevent them from speaking out, challenging and participating[22].
- Work on the economic issues facing women and girls, giving them access to an income in order to raise their status within the family and community and enable them to better meet their basic needs and those of their family. It is also, however, critical to understand

[13] *Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Navigating Pathways of Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice in Rural Bangladesh*. Naila Kabeer, Development and Change, Vol 42, No.2, 2011;, Measuring empowerment as a variable in international development in Narayan, Measuring empowerment, cross cultural perspectives, A Malhotra and S Schuler, World Bank, Washington, 2005; Pathways to women's empowerment project , A. Cornwall, www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/

[14] *Unicef Child Protection Strategy*, United Nations Economic and Social Council, May 2008

[15] *Pathways to women's empowerment project*, A. Cornwall, www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/

[16] Transforming social institutions to prevent violence against women and girls and improve development outcomes. OECD, 2013; On norms and agency; conversations about gender equality with women and men in 20 countries. World Bank, Washington, 2012.

[17] Nike's education work through the Girl Effect; Plan's work on BIAAG campaign, Plan's BIAAG report on Girls' Education, 2012.

[18] GSDRC, HELPDESK RESEARCH REPORT: Changing attitudes and behaviours in relation to gender equality, DFID, UK, 2012.

[19] World Bank, Voice and agency: empowering women and girls for shared prosperity, Washington, 2014.

[20] IBID

[21]. Advancing equality in women's participation and influence in public life through the post 2015 framework, Lisa Horner and Rachael Stokes, VSO, London, November 2012.

[22] OECD, Op cit.

women's contribution to the household economy through unpaid and care work, something overlooked in many statistics and reports, contributing to the 'invisibility of women's work'.[23]

This research showed that many of these findings hold true in the three contexts studied. Many of these points were recognised by the different teams working on the ground; some resonated more in some contexts than others.

In addition the research highlighted a few issues that are sometimes glossed over or treated rather lightly in some of the literature:

- **While the need to work with men and boys is well accepted** the reality of doing this in deeply conservative contexts is perhaps over-simplified in some of the literature. In reality it is essential to find men and boys who are open to thinking differently about gender inequality and willing to find ways to address it. It is essential to find those who are the opinion formers who are open to new approaches and build alliances. It is important to find incentives that will encourage men and boys to want to challenge the status quo. At present this favours them and gives them power and freedom to act and decide within their households and communities and it is reinforced by centuries of tradition and practice. What will encourage them to challenge the situation and how is this best done? This work, while important, has to be carefully thought through and targeted in each different context and the long term nature of the work needs to be recognized.

- **The need to recognize and work with the critical importance of religion, all religions**, which in many contexts maintain and promote the patriarchal structures that have traditionally placed men as the heads of the family and closer to God; they are the priests and intermediaries, the interpreters of the holy books and the preachers; they are the keepers of the religion. In almost all religions women are defined as weaker, inferior, in need of the care and protection of men; they are the householders and carers, dependents of the men. Their bodies are often seen to represent the family virtue and their sexual norms are clearly defined in religious texts and practices. While there are religious leaders who take alternative approaches to the existing social norms, and sometimes religion is indeed a force for radical change, identifying leaders who want to promote the rights and needs of women and girls is not always seen as critical in this work. Strangely, little research has been done around the role of religious beliefs across the world in upholding gender inequality, in spite of many calls for academics and NGOs to explore this at the Beijing Women's conference as long ago as 1995[24]. Manuals on gender equality training are often silent on religion, yet religion often underpins customs and traditions that limit the rights of women and girls. There may be a blurring between what is required by religion and what is expected by the traditions and customs of patriarchy in any given society but much development work tries to avoid getting entangled in these complex issues.

- **The power of the extended family and of local gossip within and outside the family** that keep people bound by certain forms of behaviour is often underplayed. While attitudes may and do change and new ideas come in to communities from different sources, including the media, external agencies, returnees from migration, it is often extremely difficult for women and girls to break the social norms and change their behaviour. This often involves running the gauntlet of family and community censorship and rejection, through gossip, rejection and marginalization; in some contexts women and girls may be killed or totally ostracized for stepping out of line, as the recent cases of the Muslim woman marrying a Christian in Sudan and the stoning to death of a woman by her family on the streets in Pakistan show. Many examples highlight the power of the family and community in upholding and reinforcing accepted concepts of family honour and what a good wife and a good woman should be. The concept of a critical mass questioning existing norms is

[23]. Women's work in Lebanon: making the invisible visible**, Sustainable employment opportunities for women, project 2 in** CRTD, Tina Wallace, 2013, A Beirut, Lebanon January 2013, www.crtda.org.lb, last accessed 25th June 2014.
[24] A. Whitehead speaking in a panel discussion for Pathways of women's empowerment at SOAS, 2012. http://www.mixcloud.com/ids/work-theme-panel-pathways-of-womens-empowerment-soas-january-2012/ Last accessed June 25th 2014.

clearly important in enabling people to make bold changes in behaviour, but this concept of building a critical mass in order to enable people to change their behaviour is not always evident in the approaches taken to this work.

- **The reality that changing attitudes and raising awareness are important prerequisites but do not necessarily enable changes in behaviour** needs more attention. The work of e.g. Stepping Stones highlights the need for changes in thinking across communities, for support for individuals wanting to change behaviour and the need for on-going encouragement, even in contexts of high prevalence of HIV for example, where changed behaviour can be life-saving. The risks in challenging social expectations and norms mean that women and girls, and indeed men and boys, need on-going support, confidence building and a strong sense of agency before their behaviour can change.

- **The difference between the aspirations women may have for their daughters** - in terms of a better life, a job, more education, voice and the ability to participate in decision making at different levels - and what they want from their daughters-in-law, who are often required to uphold the normative and traditional values of marriage, motherhood and women's role can be stark. Women may act very differently as mothers than as mothers-in-law, where they are often seen to be the keepers of honour, virtue and family status.

- **While the media is often highlighted as a force for social change**, especially the new social media, very little research is yet available about who has access to different forms of technology and media information, what women and girls are allowed to watch and use, and how far the messages and ideas are empowering or reinforcing gender stereotypical roles. While some data was collected on these issues this was very limited and much more research is needed to understand what the role of the media is in reinforcing or releasing women and girls from their traditional roles and constraints.

- **Issues of power appear to be often underplayed in some of the existing literature** and the violence that is perpetrated on women- physical and psychological- often under-reported. This research showed worrying levels of violence against women and girls in the home, in schools and out on the streets, limiting their mobility and education in many cases. The role of violence in keeping girls as well as boys out of school in some contexts, in controlling women and girls at home often remain outside the focus of the programmes working on FGM, child marriage and education. The scale and extent of violence in some communities is quite shocking, as the Safe schools campaign in Africa and Middle East for Plan highlighted.

- **Working on economic issues is important but not always possible**, especially in contexts such as parts of the Middle East where women's economic participation is traditionally very low and where sanctions against women going out to work are often strong. Issues of mobility, safety outside the home, the firm belief that a man is the provider combine to make work in this arena challenging, again something underplayed in some of the literature