



**GIRLS
GET EQUAL**

STRONGER TOGETHER

**Girls leading change in the Solomon Islands:
equal access to secondary education**

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Cover photo: “Stronger Together” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo symbolises that strong bonds between girls and boys will help encourage girls to continue with their studies. Boys think they have more power than girls and are better than them; but by working together and breaking down the differences, girls will be able to achieve and complete their education.”

ABOUT **PLAN INTERNATIONAL**

Plan International is a global independent development and humanitarian organisation. As one of the oldest, largest and most experienced organisations in our field we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the injustices facing girls and the most marginalised children.

Plan International Solomon Islands is committed to advocating on children's rights and equality for girls. As part of this mandate, this research has been carried out to identify the barriers that stop girls from completing their secondary education. Relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, Human Resource Development and the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs have been consulted in the process.

FOREWORD BY PLAN INTERNATIONAL SOLOMON ISLANDS YOUTH CHAMPIONS



Plan International Solomon Islands Youth Champions (L-R): Elima, Aroma, Margareth, Katrina and Elizabeth.

We are Plan International Solomon Islands Youth Champions, Elima, Aroma, Margareth, Katrina and Elizabeth. This report is written by us together with a group of 60 adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands and Plan International.

We are trying to solve the problem of the low number of adolescent girls completing secondary education.

We participated in a photovoice project where we identified the barriers standing in our way, and therefore what change we need to see in order to help us all complete secondary education. Each photo in this report represents one of the barriers stopping girls from finishing secondary level, and the captions and comments explain the how, the why and what we want to see change.

This is a really important issue, and we think it is a really good idea to help adolescent girls to complete secondary school.

We care about this issue because it affects many girls in the Solomon Islands.

We care about it because making change would help young women and girls to have a mindset of not giving up, because we would know everyone cares for and respects us, and especially that they value our education.

We care about it because all girls have the right to be educated, especially so we can have jobs in the future.

We identified the following barriers to secondary education in the Solomon Islands:

- School fees
- Relationships, marriage and early pregnancy
- Travelling to school
- Culture
- Family problems
- Bullying and peer pressure
- Quality education and inclusive infrastructure
- Lack of disability inclusive education

The biggest barrier stopping girls from getting to and completing secondary school is school fees. We want these to be eradicated, and for there to be a Fund for Girls that helps schools be more inclusive.

Above all, we want you to respect adolescent girls and listen to what we have to say. We want there to be gender equality in Solomon Islands – and especially for all girls to be able to be in and complete secondary school so that we can be role models and leaders of the future.

STAND WITH US. STAND FOR EQUALITY.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is the result of a photovoice participatory action research project with 60 adolescent girls in Solomon Islands, who also interviewed 164 peers and family members. It is strongly aligned with Plan International's guiding principles for child protection, programming and advocacy in the best interests of the child, and gender transformative programming and influencing.

A full policy report, *Our Education, Our Future* complements this Girls' Report to provide further context and detailed recommendations.



THE PROBLEM WE'RE TRYING TO SOLVE



“Fewer girls in secondary school” by girls in Honiara.

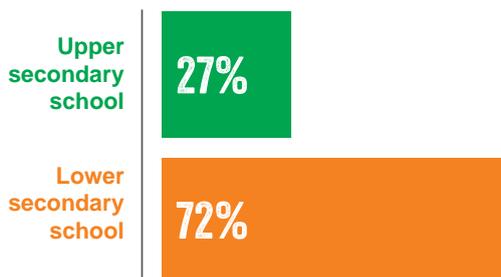
“This photo demonstrates how there are lots of girls in primary education, but fewer in secondary education. We want to see more girls educated to the highest levels.”

All adolescent girls and young women in the Solomon Islands have a right to a full 13 years of education, but too many of us are being left behind when it comes to secondary education.

What happened to all those girls who have been left behind? What are the barriers that are stopping them from accessing and completing secondary education?

This report aims to answer these questions and offer solutions, so that all girls and young women in the Solomon Islands are able to enjoy their right to education and move forward to create the future we want to see.

Figure 1: Girls enrolled in lower and upper secondary school



Steps of the photovoice project:

1. We co-designed and brainstormed answers to the research question.
2. We conducted peer surveys, interviewing up to five people each – our peers and family members – to ask them what they think are the barriers to girls' education.
3. We received photography training on how to take reality, symbolic and arranged scene images, and then spent up to one week creating and taking our photos individually and in small groups.
4. We selected our best photos and captioned them to explain what the photos represent, why we took them and what change we want to see.
5. We participated in data validation workshops three months later, where we viewed and commented on the draft policy report, validated the findings and recommendations, and validated the writing process for this Girls' Report.



OUR QUESTION:

WHAT MAKES IT HARD FOR ALL YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS TO HAVE THE CHANCE TO GO TO AND COMPLETE SECONDARY SCHOOL OR HAVE A SECOND CHANCE TO COMPLETE INFORMAL EDUCATION?

WHAT ARE THE STUMBLING BLOCKS OR BARRIERS?

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE

Each barrier represented in this report is followed by the solutions we want to see.

Our number one recommendation to enable all girls in the Solomon Islands to go to and complete secondary education is:

#1

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION SHOULD EXTEND THE **FEE-FREE BASIC EDUCATION POLICY TO ENSURE FREE SENIOR SECONDARY EDUCATION BY 2020.**

TOGETHER WITH DONORS, THEY SHOULD ALSO WORK WITH AND FINANCIALLY **SUPPORT SCHOOLS TO REDUCE OR ELIMINATE GAP FEES AT ALL LEVELS OF EDUCATION.**

Our priority recommendations to remove the other identified barriers include:

- The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, and Ministry for Health should support families and educators to embrace children's learning about their bodies, relationships and sexuality from early childhood and particularly throughout adolescence to allow children and young people to explore, clarify and form life-long healthy attitudes and practices, free from coercion, violence and discrimination.
- The Ministry of Education should work with schools to provide free school transportation services, e.g. a school bus or truck.
- The Ministry of Education should support young mothers to continue their education by introducing a second chance policy.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should fund and promote trainings for community, religious and political leaders to be allies and supporters for gender equality and girls' right to education.
- The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs should work to empower adolescent girls with the skills, knowledge and choices to be agents of change so they know what to do when they are affected by family problems, including gender-based violence.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should fund and promote programs with adolescent boys and young men to challenge sexism and promote respectful relationships.
- The Ministry of Education should work with schools to take a whole-school approach focusing on student safety and wellbeing, particularly in relation to bullying.
- The Ministry of Education should work with schools to encourage more women teachers into the profession, enabling them to progress in their careers, and to take on leadership positions.
- The Government should ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should consider the specific needs of adolescent girls in all policies and programs, including consulting directly with adolescent girls.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should promote girls' leadership by investing in, promoting and developing girls' leadership capabilities and encouraging women in leadership to include girls as well.

OUR VISION

We, adolescent girls and young women of the Solomon Islands, need to have the chance to go through and complete our secondary education.

We want all adolescent girls and young women to be able to achieve and to succeed, so that we can move forward to a better and brighter future.

A future where we are equal.

A future where we are confident and bold.

A future where we can speak up and out.

A future where we, adolescent girls and young women of the Solomon Islands, are leaders:

- in our families;
- in our communities;
- in our churches;
- in our schools;
- in our nation.

We respectfully ask you to listen to what we think, and listen to how we feel.

**HEAR OUR VOICE. STAND WITH US.
TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A CHANGE!**

ABOUT THIS STATEMENT

Certain phrases jumped out multiple times from the workshops and peer surveys related to adolescent girls' strong sense of why they want and need improved access to secondary education, what they aspire to, and the change they want to see, to such an extent that an overarching statement began to emerge. As such, a group statement was developed, verified and edited across each location. This statement is the result of that process.

"Love" by girls in Honiara.

"This photo is a reminder that loving everyone equally and respecting girls can help girls to achieve their dreams and encourage them to complete their secondary education."

**BARRIER:
SCHOOL FEES**



“NO MONEY, NO EDUCATION”
– BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“THIS PHOTO REPRESENTS THE MANY LEVELS OF EDUCATION THERE ARE TO FINISH, WITH NOT MUCH MONEY AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT GIRLS TO COMPLETE HER EDUCATION – WHETHER DUE TO LACK OF INCOME, OR GIRLS’ EDUCATION NOT BEING PRIORITISED.”

We are very aware of the cost of our education. We know that our families make sacrifices to send us to school, especially secondary school where they have to pay the gap fees and then the government school fees as well once we reach senior secondary level. For families who are struggling, this is a big barrier to sending their girls to school. It is the reason many girls have to drop out and can't complete their secondary education.

Paying for boys' education takes priority over girls' education, particularly in households that can only afford to pay for some children to go to school instead of everyone.

For instance, in a big family boys will come first and are sent to school, whereas us girls will be kept home to help look after the family and do the chores. Our education is seemingly not as important as the boys' education, and therefore the education of girls is neglected in favour of the education of boys.

The reasons why girls are passed over in favour of boys varies. The expectations of our roles and responsibilities plays a big part. It is assumed boys will look after aged parents while a girl will get married and look after her in-laws. Culture means that boys are prioritised over girls, and there is a lack of awareness or acceptance of the importance of our education.

As we get older and transition into secondary school, our families might start to think "what's the point?" This attitude puts down the importance of educating girls, as they just think of us as future wives and mothers, so there is no need to formally educate us. Yet we are also the future leaders, entrepreneurs and workers of our country.

Change is happening, but we want it to happen more quickly so that more of us can get to and succeed at school.

We want everyone to value our education and break down the financial barriers to help us get there.



"No school fees for girls" by girls in Honiara.

"This photo shows that lots of students are unable to pay their school fees, and that most girls in particular don't complete secondary school because of school fees."

"I want those individuals who are able to attend school but aren't interested in taking their studies seriously to realise they have a big opportunity to finish education rather than others who really want to complete secondary school but find it difficult to pay their fees."



"No money for school fees" by girls in Honiara.

"This photo represents that many families do not earn enough money to survive. A lack of income limits girls' access to school, because there is no money left for her."



"Without working together, no school fees for her!" by girls in Settlements, including White River and other areas.

"This photo demonstrates how family members and relatives often have to come together to support a girl to complete school – whether because her parents are unemployed or have limited income, or because she has no parents because they have both died. Members of the extended family must give support."

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

We want senior secondary school fees to be eliminated, and extra school fees at all levels to be reduced or eliminated, so that every family can afford to send all their children to school. A Fund for Girls could help encourage families to send their girls to school.

If there are still fees, we want the government to create more jobs and help our families earn enough money to pay for our fees.

We also want everyone to value our education. There should be awareness raising campaigns to help everyone know that sending girls to school is a good thing, and just as important as sending our brothers.

BARRIER:

RELATIONSHIPS, MARRIAGE AND PREGNANCY



“SCHOOL LIFE, OR HOUSE WIFE? LOSING MY FREEDOM”

— BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“This photo sends the message that giving up on education and freedom at teen age is a mistake.

“IT SHOWS A YOUNG BRIDE HOLDING A UNIFORM SHIRT, WHICH IS THE LAST THING SHE HAS TO TAKE OFF BEFORE GETTING MARRIED. SHE HAS TO STOP SCHOOL FOR TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE.

“SOME GIRLS ARE PRESSURED TO GET MARRIED AT A YOUNG AGE. TRADITION IS STRONG IN SOME AREAS, AND GIRLS DON'T HAVE A CHOICE WHEN IT COMES TO TRADITION.”

Once girls are married or have children, hardly any get to return to school. It's a full stop on her education. From our peer surveys we found two in five girls had dropped out because of pregnancy.

School rules and social stigma are the two main reasons. As soon as a girl is pregnant, she can be expelled from school. Lots of people think pregnant girls will influence others to get in trouble, so they are not allowed to go back to school even if they want to; in the rare cases they are allowed back they often don't go because of the shame and stigma they face from peers and teachers.

This isn't the same for the fathers. They may get suspended, and potentially will have to move schools, but they can continue with their education. Why can't we?

It is often not the girl's choice to get pregnant, so it's not fair if she can't complete her secondary education. It is difficult for us to access contraceptives, sometimes because of where we live, sometimes because of the cost – and sometimes both. We often also don't know much about safe sex; the Family Life Education curriculum is not taught in many schools, or only certain topics. Sometimes external educators come into schools to provide some of this education, but they only come once to give one talk and then disappear.

Boys often don't show respect to girls and can be physically violent, including sexual violence. They need to be taught to respect us and treat us right.

We can get married from the age of 15 with parental consent; we call this 'traditional marriage'. It is mainly arranged by the family and it happens due to stigma (if the girl is pregnant) or finances (for the bride price, and so that the girl is no longer the financial responsibility of her family). Families expect that once a girl is married, her role is to be a wife and mother. These norms and restrictive roles need to be broken down, especially so that young wives and mothers can return to school or at least get some informal education.

“THIS MAKES ME FEEL SAD, SORRY AND HOPELESS.”

Adolescent girl



“Teenage pregnancy stops young girls from going to school” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo presents a student who is hiding her face because she is ashamed that she got pregnant. She is letting go of her school bag: high school life is over.”



“Relationships” by girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo shows relationships are happening in many of our schools. They stop us from concentrating, they lead to teenage pregnancy and marriage, and they stop us from completing our education by getting us expelled.”

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

We want comprehensive sexuality information and education, at school and from our parents or caregivers. Single-sex classes and schools could also help, but co-ed schools can work if our peers – and boys in particular – are respectful of girls. They need to be educated to respect us and treat us right.

We also want high quality, youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services and to be able to talk to our parents or caregivers about sex and relationships and receive good information and guidance from them. If a girl is having sex but doesn't want to get pregnant, she should be able to do that and it shouldn't stop her from going to school. We want to have choice and control over our bodies.

We want child, early and forced marriage to end. It is a bad practice in our country. When girls are married, they should still be allowed to go back to school.

**BARRIER:
TRAVELLING TO SCHOOL**



“IS YOUR ROAD TO SCHOOL SAFE?”
— BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“THIS PHOTO SHOWS TWO DRUNK BOYS FOLLOWING A GIRL ON HER WAY TO SCHOOL AND THE DANGERS OF HER WALKING ALONE. SHE HAS NO CHOICE THOUGH, BECAUSE HER PARENTS CAN’T AFFORD TO PAY HER BUS FARE.”

It can be very difficult for girls to get to and from school. It can cost too much money, especially in Honiara and urban areas where bus fees are charged for lots of short routes instead of for the whole journey.

Or it can take too much time, with girls who walk to school spending hours doing this every day, and girls in urban areas stuck in traffic jams.

This makes us tired and late, which can make it hard to do our housework and homework after school. We often have to rush home – sometimes leaving classes early – because we are scared of getting in trouble if we return home late and don't have enough time to complete our chores.

It can also be unsafe to travel to school, whether walking or travelling by bus. Being followed, harassed and sometimes experiencing sexual or physical violence, especially by drunk boys who try to catch us girls, is a real problem. Sometimes we don't feel safe or our families don't think it is safe for us and so we are compelled to stop going to school entirely.

“IT IS VERY DANGEROUS FOR GIRLS TO WALK A FAR DISTANCE BY HERSELF [DUE TO] STUPID BOYS THAT HAVE BAD OPINIONS WHO WILL INTERACT WITH THEM ON THEIR WAY HOME.”

Adolescent girl

Girls who move from rural areas to attend school in Honiara can also suffer from culture shock, which can mean they don't know how to stay safe or they get too distracted to stay in their studies. Family members and teachers assume we will just know how to handle all the changes and navigate the city, but this is not always the case. The pressure related to this culture shock can lead girls to be disengaged from our education, which makes us more vulnerable to other social forces, like peer pressure, causing us to drop out of secondary school.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Schools should provide free school transport, such as school buses or trucks, to get us from home to school safely and so that everyone can afford to travel to school.

Girls should be supported in the transition to city life, by meeting their emotional and wellbeing needs and providing an orientation. If they are adopted by the extended family, they should be shown respect and care.



“No money to get to school” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo symbolises the impact of not having enough money to pay for transport: having to walk a long way to school. This is one of the main reasons girls end up not going to school.”



“The long road home” as created, taken and captioned by girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo shows how girls get tired, sweaty and hungry before we reach school because we have to walk so far to school.”



“Distance to school” as created, taken and captioned by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo shows how traffic in Honiara makes girls late for class and late home to do home-and house-work.”

**BARRIER:
CULTURE**



“EQUAL RESPONSIBILITIES”

— BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“THIS PHOTO SHOWS A GIRL CARRYING ONE OF HER BABY SIBLINGS IN HER ARMS, WATCHING HER BROTHER WALK TO SCHOOL. SHE HAS TO STAY HOME TO DO ALL THE HOUSE CHORES INSTEAD OF GOING TO SCHOOL AND GETTING EDUCATED.

“GIRLS SHOULD GET TREATED EQUALLY. EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO GO TO SCHOOL.”

Culture (customs, traditions and social norms or expectations) has a big impact on our lives and specifically on our ability to access and complete secondary education.

It includes the expectations placed on us to perform certain roles, especially completing housework, looking after siblings or older relatives, and working in the gardens.

The toxic combination of travelling long distances to and from school, having to concentrate at school, and then returning home to help with chores before completing our homework, is simply too much. It means that we often have to prioritise one over the other, and more often than not due to family pressure, studies are left abandoned. We girls carry too much of the workload between housework and homework, and this is unfair.

We do an average of 15-20 hours of chores a week, whereas boys do next to nothing – anywhere from one to six hours a week. These demands either prevent us from attending secondary school at all, or make it difficult for us to concentrate in class, complete our homework and pass our examinations.

Gender inequality is a fact of life: from the youngest ages, but particularly once we hit adolescence, boys are seen as the priority. For our education, this means that sending boys to school is seen as important while sending girls to school is a bonus if families can afford it – whether financially, or in terms of losing the extra help around the home.

All these things affect our studies and our futures, because we are unable to fully devote ourselves to studying which means we receive poorer grades, and can mean we fail our examinations – meaning we either don't get to the next year level or have to stop school entirely. This is due to the rules relating to examinations as well as families who no longer see the value in paying to educate us, if we are not going to succeed.

For girls who drop out of formal education, we face barriers to accessing informal education, since Rural Training Centres require school certificates, CVs and reference to gain admission.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Girls should get treated equally and everyone should be able to go to school. Gender equality will mean that boys are taught to respect girls, house duties are shared among all family members and school rules are applied equally to all students.

We want everyone to champion gender equality and girls' right to education, including traditional and religious leaders, and we want the Government to uphold girls' rights by appointing a Minister for Girls' Rights. This new office can help foster and encourage girls' education and leadership.

These changes are needed in household, school and community practices, as well as in the built environment. Schools and families should provide time and physical space for girls to study and do their homework, and more school lights and street lights should be installed for girls who are studying at night.



“Give space and study facilities for girls!” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo is of a girl laying on the floor to do some school work at midnight, after having finished her house duties. It is dark and she has no space. This can make her reluctant to attend school because she cannot concentrate.”

“IF SCHOOL FINISHES AT 1.30PM, GIRLS ARE EXPECTED TO COME HOME AND DO CHORES WHEREAS BOYS CAN THROW DOWN THEIR BASKET AND THEY ARE FREE.”

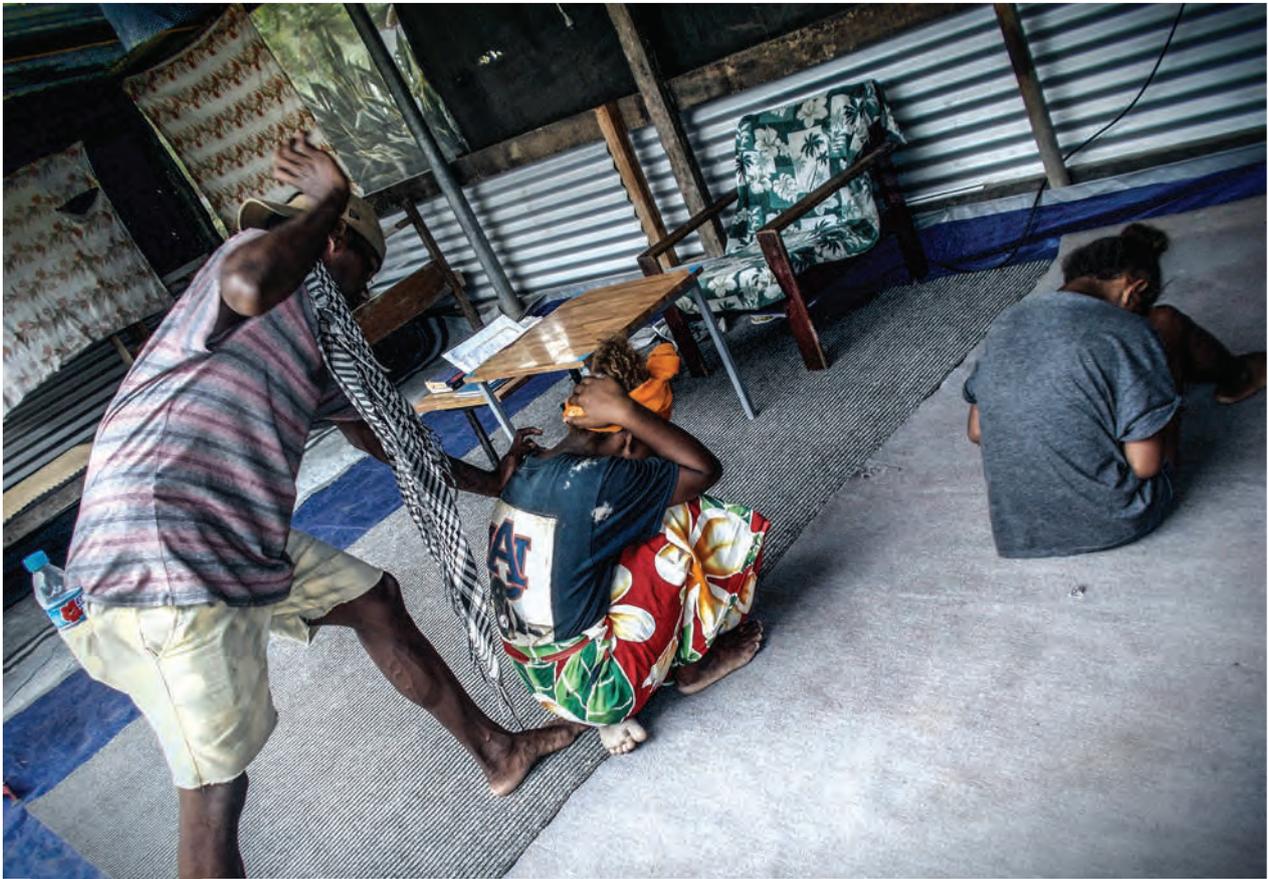
Teacher



“Too tired to take notes” by girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo symbolises the impact of living far from school, as there are no notes in the paper and it is blurry because the student feels tired because of the distance to school and having to do all the house duties.”

**BARRIER:
FAMILY PROBLEMS**



“THE DAY YOU RAISE YOUR HAND AGAINST YOUR WIFE, IS THE DAY IT AFFECTS YOUR CHILD’S EDUCATION”

– BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“This arranged scene depicts a drunken husband beating up his wife, and a young girl crying beside them inside their house.

“When parents separate due to domestic violence, the girl has to stay home to look after the house and not go to school.

“WE CHOSE TO TAKE THIS PHOTO TO LET PEOPLE KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING INSIDE HOMES AND HOW IT DISTURBS CHILDREN’S STUDIES, AND TO SHOW YOUNG PEOPLE NOT TO ENTERTAIN THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IN THEIR FUTURE HOMES.

“PARENTS NEED TO LEARN HOW TO SORT OUT THEIR PROBLEMS THROUGH A DECENT CONVERSATION.”

Family affairs, or family problems, is an important topic in our lives and another barrier to us completing secondary education. It includes fighting or violence at home (including domestic violence between parents or caregivers, and violence directed towards the child); separation and divorce; the challenges faced by children of single mothers, children without any parents, or adopted children living with extended family; and child abuse.

Under- and over- discipline are part of violence, and they are both bad. Under-discipline means we can do whatever we want without any consequences, which can lead to more easily giving into peer pressure and other influences, whereas over-discipline is the heavy-handed use of verbal or physical violence such as name calling, shouting at us at home, in front of our friends or in public places, swearing, smacking, getting whipped and other physical abuse.

Separation and divorce creates real problems for girls to stay in school, whether because we will have to go and live with extended family who do not prioritise girls' education (or their adoptive children's education) and therefore will not pay the fees, or because of the emotional impact. We become distracted, sad and cannot concentrate in class, and this can lead to girls dropping out of school altogether.

For girls growing up with single parents, particularly single mothers, financial struggles are a worry. This can mean there is no money to send any children to school, or that boys will be prioritised if there is limited money to be spent on school fees. If both parents die, we rely on the extended family to send us girls to school.

All these things really affect our ability to concentrate at school and to feel happy and safe. They can lead also to us having low self-esteem, which makes us more vulnerable to peer pressure. If we don't feel valued or respected then we can question why bother with anything – including why stay in school?



“Low self-esteem” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo represents the feeling girls have when they feel like they have nothing left for them in the world, which makes them feel like not attending school. This happens when there are family problems, or if girls aren't prioritised and are left out at home.”



“Family Problems” by girls in Honiara.

“This drawing is of a girl who has an empty heart because her parents have separated.

“As a result, she can't focus on her studies and doesn't complete her education.”



“Family Problems” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo is of a girl sitting in a classroom, but she is not doing anything, just thinking and crying about the problems in her family.

“Parents/guardians should stop fighting so that their children can do well in their studies.

“Our government should raise awareness in our communities about family violence.”

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

We want to see an end to domestic and gender-based violence. We girls should be free from fear of violence, especially in our own homes and at school, as these should be safe spaces for us to live and grow.

We want to see domestic disputes resolved through open dialogue and conversation, and a reduction in the consumption of alcohol and drugs that can exacerbate violence.

Families – including extended families if we are adopted – should treat us fairly and equally, especially respecting our equal right to education. This includes having time and space to study so that we will thrive in our school environment.

**BARRIER:
BULLYING AND PEER PRESSURE**



“NO RESPECT FOR GIRLS”

– BY GIRLS FROM THE SETTLEMENTS

“THIS ARRANGED SCENE SHOWS HOW BOYS THINK THEY ARE SUPERIOR TO GIRLS AND DON’T HAVE ANY RESPECT FOR THEM, SO THEY FEEL THEY CAN DO WHATEVER THEY WANT TO GIRLS.

“WHEN BOYS BULLY GIRLS IT CAN MAKE GIRLS FEEL UNSAFE TO GO TO SCHOOL OR EVEN WALK AROUND IN THEIR COMMUNITY.”

Bullying is a big issue in our lives. It is largely perpetrated by boys towards girls, and includes physical, emotional and verbal attacks and abuse such as teasing and swearing. Cyberbullying is increasingly an issue, with bullying happening online as well as in person. Occasionally, there may be bullying within families ridiculing girls who want to go to school.

The impact of bullying can be so bad that we do not want to go to school, especially because it impacts our self-esteem.

Peer pressure (between girls or friendship groups) is an additional barrier that can lead to reduced school attendance or dropping out of school altogether. We can face pressure from peer groups made up of friends (or friends of friends) who have already dropped out of school, who encourage us to leave also. Sometimes boys will sit around joking about which girl to lure away from school.

Both bullying and peer pressure can lead to girls getting suspended or expelled, missing classes, failing exams and ultimately dropping out of school.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

We want to learn how to say no to bad peers and to influences such as drugs, and we want to be treated equally and fairly by our peers, especially boys. We are calling for a safe and secure learning environment, and want the Government and schools to implement policies and programs on school-related gender-based violence and respectful relationships.



“Peer pressure” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo shows a girl who is being pressured into doing things she doesn’t want to do, which leads to stress and dropping out from school.”



“Setting our priorities straight” by girls in Honiara.

“The white cloth and green sticker represents the good choices and path, the black cloth and red sticker shows the bad path, stop and danger.

“The person is already facing the bad side – she’s trying to choose between the two but she’s being pulled to the bad because her friends are calling to her to follow them and hang out, and she doesn’t want to be left out.”



“Bad influences” by girls from the settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo shows all the bad influences we can come under, which can stop us from completing our education.”



“Peer pressure” by girls in Honiara.

“Without peer pressure, girls will be able to concentrate and fully complete their education. Then they will become leaders in the future.”

BARRIER:

QUALITY EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE



**“NO SPACES
FOR GIRLS IN SCHOOL”**
– BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“This photo represents the pyramid system in the Solomon Islands. It shows that there are lots of primary schools but as you go up the pyramid [i.e. to secondary and tertiary education], there are fewer schools and spaces are limited. This shuts down girls’ ability to access and complete secondary education.

“THE NEXT TIME SOMEONE IS ASKED TO REPRESENT OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM, I WANT THEM TO DO SO USING A SQUARE SHAPE INSTEAD – WHERE THE GRAINS ARE EQUALLY DISTRIBUTED FROM THE BOTTOM RIGHT UP TO THE TOP.”

There are often not enough spaces for girls in school, whether due to too few schools, or due to limited spaces because of over-crowded classrooms.

There is also a lack of gender-inclusive facilities, such as not enough dormitories, toilet or shower blocks for girls. The ones that do exist can be a long walk away, which is off-putting and potentially unsafe. We also find it difficult to get sanitary products; they are either not available or too expensive. When we have our period, we will often stay home. This means missing classes, which can lead to us falling behind and potentially failing exams as a result.

WHAT’S THE SOLUTION?

We want to see all schools that are of high quality, particularly so that parents can choose schools close to homes. We want better teacher training, smaller class sizes (i.e. two classes of 35 instead of one of 70), more teachers, and more facilities for girls so that we can attend school every day of every month.

INTERSECTING ISSUE: GIRLS LIVING WITH A DISABILITY



**“No opportunities for girls with disabilities”
by girls with disabilities.**

**“This photo depicts a tin can, which girls
with disabilities – who have either never
been to school or have had to drop out
of school – pick up to sell in order to
make a living.**

**“More people need to be aware of the
importance of girls’ education, especially
for girls with disabilities.”**

The Government has yet to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons of Disabilities. This means there is a lack of follow-through for Disability Inclusive Education. Each of the barriers in this report relate to girls and young women with disabilities, but those of us with a disability also face additional layers of disadvantage within each barrier.

For instance, non-disabled children will be preferenced over children with disabilities when families decide who to send to school if they cannot afford to send all children; and thus, those of us with a disability are doubly unlikely to get to school. An adolescent girl living with a disability often has to pay her own way, especially if she wants to go to secondary school.

Even when she does get to school, facilities for students with a disability do not really exist, whether accessible classrooms, toilets or transport to/from school, which can lead to us having to drop out. In addition, we are often even more vulnerable than other girls when travelling to school, as we are more likely to be targeted (especially if we have a visible disability) and less likely to be able to get away.

Social stigma and attitudes to disability is a major issue. If families feel a sense of shame they will often keep their child at home, out of sight, rather than send them to school. Other negative attitudes relate to the value of educating children with disabilities, with a lack of understanding as to what we can achieve.

We girls with disabilities rarely have the freedom to speak out because our family and community ignores us, and doesn't value or support us. This can lead to bullying, including from non-disabled students (if we are at school) and even from our friends. This makes us ashamed of our disabilities, and leads to low self-esteem. Self-pity is the top issue holding us back from living happy, fulfilled lives; by contrast, confidence and self-acceptance comes when families and communities demonstrate their love and support, including by sending us to school and valuing our education.

Many of us are not formally educated, having been kept at home instead. When we find community education programs offered through civil society organisations, we get to show what we are capable of: some of us have been to the United States to engage in the Commission on the Status of Women, others have trained as community educators, and still others have excelled as professional athletes. These successes can lead to greater acceptance and support from our families and communities, however we also often still encounter major difficulties getting schools, community members and government officials to respect and listen to us.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

We want the Government to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as soon as possible. This is our number one priority to support girls with a disability.

In demonstrating its commitment to the Convention, the Government should ensure an allocated budget for Disability Inclusive Education, and ensure priority spending towards children with disabilities.

We also recommend learning from others – domestically and internationally – to ensure best practice in government policy and school practice on inclusive infrastructure.

Community education programs are needed to reduce stigma and discrimination and encourage girls with disabilities to go to school.

Overall, we want to be listened to and respected: “nothing about us, without us.”

OUR **FUTURE** WITH EDUCATION



“Leadership” by girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo symbolises the potential strength, power and confidence of the many girls in Solomon Islands if we are given the chance to complete our secondary education.”

“Where will education take us?”

This was one of the questions answered both in the workshops and through the peer surveys.

Overwhelmingly, we believe the main benefit of education to be the increased chance of getting a job and thereby earning a steady income. This has the positive flow-on effects of being able to provide for our future family and support others, including sending more girls to school.

Education is also important for our empowerment. We want to be role models and leaders at all levels of society, including in the space of fighting for women’s and girls’ rights and freedoms and contributing more broadly to community development.

We also want to have a say and make decisions, again at all levels – from the household (particularly regarding finances) through to national parliament, and education is key for this.

Education helps us to be confident, bold and brave. It helps us speak up in situations where otherwise we would feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

Without education we would be constrained to traditional roles and responsibilities, struggling to have enough money, lacking in confidence, having little control over decision making, being locked out of leadership roles, and experiencing hopelessness.

WHAT’S THE SOLUTION?

We can be powerful agents of social and political change. We should be consulted and engaged with in the community, so that development and programs may be specifically targeted to our needs. Supporting us to be bold and brave leaders is essential for the future of this country.

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Photos

All photos were taken by Solomon Islander adolescent girls as part of the photovoice process. They are identified by location but not by individual photographer, as per the photovoice ethics process. All the captions were written by the photographer(s) as part of the process. The photos have been graded by Room3 in order to ensure consistent quality; however any special effects come from the photographer(s) experimenting with the camera settings themselves.



“Leadership” by adolescent girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo symbolises the potential strength, power and confidence of the many girls in Solomon Islands if we are given the chance to complete our secondary education.”

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