



Belgium
partner in development

THE STATE OF GIRLS' RIGHTS IN BOLIVIA

March 2022



GIRLS' RIGHTS AT A GLANCE¹

Bolivia has the second highest percentage of women in the national legislative body of Latin America and the Caribbean. The country has also made progress in reducing poverty, and has ensured an **overall protective legislative framework to the population**. Nevertheless, girls and women remain constrained by **multiple unequal social and gender norms deeply rooted** in the society's multiculturalism and multilingualism, and patriarchal and adult centric system. Girls and women are expected to be submissive, subordinate, and obedient. They are **socially expected to become good housewives and mothers**. Being responsible for domestic chores and taking care of their children and their husband, girls' and women's reproductive roles influence the type of paid work they access, with many women engaged in poorly paid domestic work outside of their household. Girls are undervalued, with son-preference a frequent attitude. They are also limited in their freedom, relationships and decision-making, compared to boys and men.

Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) are widely accepted in Bolivia. One young woman out of ten are married or in union before aged 18. The practice is even more frequent among **minority indigenous communities** where some believe the ideal age for a girl to marry starts at 13 years old. Reasons explaining the issue are a will to escape violence, hopes to find a better life, but also early pregnancies - even when sexual violence caused it. As a result, adolescent girls and young women are limited in their access to income or resources to make decisions independently; they **drop-out of school, they experience gender-based violence and they are exposed to early pregnancies, for which they are solely blamed**. Gender norms and stereotypes are also having consequences on boys as society traditionally places certain expectations on them that prevent them from building healthy relationships, which often leads them to adopt behaviours that perpetuate violence against girls and women.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are taboo in Bolivian' society. **Girls receive no sexual education, have limited access to family planning and contraceptive options**. They also lack sufficient autonomy and agency to prevent or delay early pregnancy. As a result, for young women between 15 and 19 years old, three pregnancies out of four were unplanned. Unsafe abortion is the third cause of maternal mortality. The situation is worst for **girls from rural areas and from indigenous communities**: one young woman under 20 in five have been pregnant for these two categories.

School drop-outs remain a concern, and it is in direct correlation with CEFMU, as both a cause and a consequence of girls not finishing their education. Partners of married girls are entitled to make decisions and prevent them from pursuing their education. Pregnant girls may be removed from school to marry and to avoid shame on the family. Economic reasons and lack of adequate, inclusive and safe infrastructures can hinder girls' right to education. Girls and young women from **indigenous communities face even greater discrimination** including in the school environment because of the language barrier and curriculum not being adapted to the reality of these minority groups.

Violence is alarming: **one woman out of two reports having experienced psychological violence, one woman out of five sexual violence and physical violence, and one woman out of ten economic violence**; in a majority of cases, violence is perpetrated by an intimate partner. Unequal gender norms normalizing violence exercised by boys and men on girls and women is at the core of the issue. As girls, when growing up, have limited agency and economic autonomy, they are less likely to challenge norms and thrive.

Despite a law protecting a minimum salary for everyone, **three young women in ten receive no remuneration for the work they do**, and **seven women out of ten are engaged in vulnerable employment**. This limits their opportunities to thrive, to be empowered, and makes them highly vulnerable to external shocks and their consequences.

¹ The executive summary contains references that are made available across the report

Poverty and external shocks likely restrain the respect of girls' rights. Bolivia is one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the region; youth are particularly vulnerable to poverty and exclusion. As a result, CEFMU are encouraged as a way to escape poverty or to spare the families the extra mouth to feed. Internal and external migration increases. Since 2005, a **feminization of migration** has been noticed with half of migrants being women, that can both be a threat by exposing them to new forms of violence, and be an opportunity to challenge traditional family model and the gender imbalances, with women becoming the main breadwinners of their family, and an opportunity for the advancement of girls' rights.

External shocks are likely to put additional pressure on girls' rights. First, **climate change** is having drastic impact on the population with frequent floods, frosts, droughts, epidemics, forest fire, landslides and hailstorms. This is having negative impacts on agriculture and subsistence economy, leaving people from rural communities, especially indigenous population, at high risk and vulnerability to the impacts of natural hazards; this in turns is expected to increase the violations of girls' rights, because of **scarce livelihoods and adoption of negative coping mechanisms**.


Second, COVID-19 exacerbated risk factors such as **anxiety, income reduction and employment loss**. With **restrictions measures** adopted by the government and no access to protective services, **domestic violence increased**: each day, at least four girls or adolescents experienced violence. Education has also been impacted with approximately 2.9 million children and adolescents out of school. The educational gap has been widened both by place of residence, between urban and rural areas, and by income level because of the limited access to technology required to follow distance learning for those children. Some girls may never return to school.

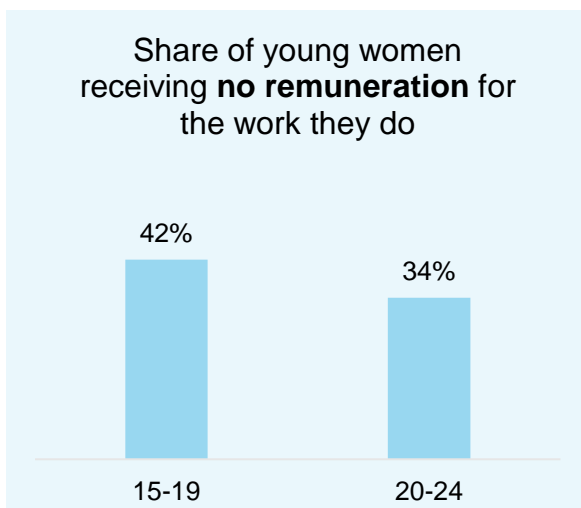
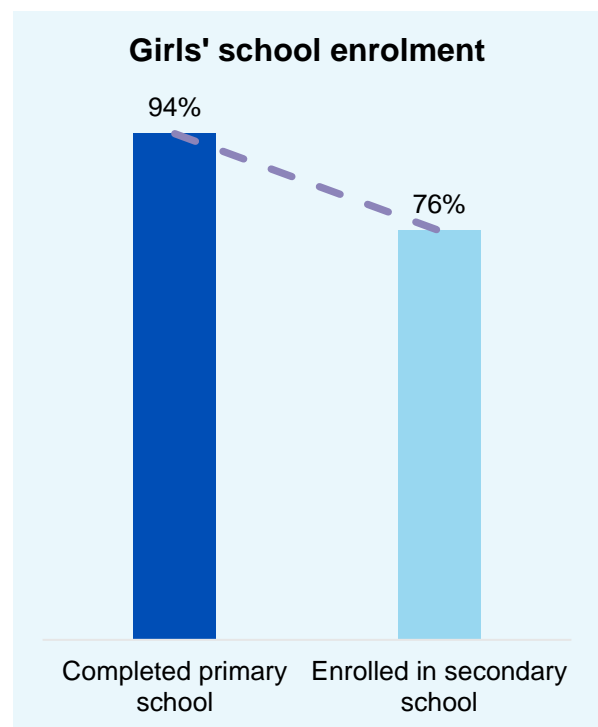
Despite the overall protective legislative framework – with international instruments ratified and national legislations adopted –, **respect of girls' rights remains limited in practice as gaps persist between the formulation and implementation of these policies**. Awareness-raising of laws, sufficient resources and completely protective legislations are lacking.



13  **IS THOUGHT TO BE AN IDEAL AGE FOR A GIRL TO MARRY FOR SOME MEN FROM VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**



75  **OUT OF 100 GIRLS AND WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED AT LEAST ONE INCIDENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC, PHYSICAL OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES**



OUT OF 1,000 YOUNG WOMEN,

65  **GAVE BIRTH BEFORE AGE 19**

HOW GIRLS SHOULD BEHAVE – GENDER NORMS AT WORK IN BOLIVIA

Bolivia has reached the highest percentage (53%) of women in the national legislative body in Latin America and the Caribbean, after Cuba.² However, women's participation in decision-making in community assemblies and municipal summits is much lower than that of men, and girls and women remain constrained by multiple unequal social and gender norms. **Growing up as a girl in Bolivia is significantly different as growing up as a boy.** These differences take their roots in Bolivia's context, culture, and more importantly deeply-rooted patriarchal system.

Globally, social norms around early marriage, son preference, domestic and unpaid care work, and women in the workforce and politics limit girls and young women's opportunities based on their gender.

Clear expectations of what girls and boys should do

Bolivia is a multicultural and multilingual country, counting 36 indigenous groups and nations that preserved their culture and are recognised in the Political Constitution of the State. The patriarchal structures exist across all these diverse groups, and **continue to promote gender inequalities and maintain violations of girls' and women's rights at the family, community and State levels.**³

Unwritten rules and expectations about **what individuals are expected to do based on their gender are shaping attitudes and behaviours, generally favouring the superiority of boys and men over girls and women.** Boys and men are seen as inherently strong and violent: "*Boys and girls are unequal. Girls do not have the same strength as boys*", testified Bolivian men interviewed by Plan International.⁴ It is also believed that having a son is better than having a daughter: "*Here in our community, when a girl is born, no one says anything, but when a boy is born, we say 'what a pleasure!'*".⁵ Son preference is, thus, frequent and driven by harmful gender norms. Girls and women, on the other hand, are expected to be submissive and obedient.⁶ Some indigenous groups hold the traditional belief that women and men are complementary, which is detrimental to women as they are considered incomplete humans who need men to be whole.⁷ Consequently, girls measure their value through the attention they receive from boys.

The role of girls and women is seen as mainly being **responsible for domestic chores, taking care of the children and making sure they respond to their husband's needs.** As a result, when they do access economic opportunities, it is precarious, poorly paid work that often mirrors their domestic tasks, such as washing and ironing clothes or baking bread. **Girls are socialized from a young age to become housewives and mothers.** They are, therefore, unlike boys, pushed to take on an important part of domestic chores and to take care of their siblings. These tasks impede on their studies, which makes families and communities value less their education, and condemns them to low-paying and precarious jobs in the future.

The clear expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman impact every aspect of their lives, including in the intimacy of their households. Men are considered the decision-makers and breadwinners of their families and enjoy a higher level of freedom. In some indigenous communities, only married men can take up community leadership positions. Boys and men also enjoy more freedom with regards to relationships. Men interviewed by Plan International noted that a marker of masculinity is to have multiple sexual partners, whether they are in union or not. Some men also shared that they believed that women tend to deceive men and are more likely to leave their partner

² Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, Bolivia, 2019.

³ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, Bolivia, 2019.

⁴ Plan International, UNFPA, *A hidden reality for adolescent girls, Child, early and forced marriages and unions in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

for someone with more resources or with better looks.⁸ Boys and men consider their role of breadwinners as more difficult than that of caretaker. They, therefore, perceive marriages and unions as favourable, since women will take household obligations off of their plate.⁹

The social value of marriage

Entrenched unequal gender norms allow for **child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) to be widely accepted in Bolivia**. While likely underreported, **it is estimated that 20% of girls are married or in union before the age of 18 and 3% before being 15 years old**.¹⁰ The prevalence is higher among minorities of Quechua-speaking communities, the Aymara people and Afro-descendants. A study conducted by Plan International showed that some men from indigenous communities believe that the ideal age for union for girls starts at age 13 and 18 years for boys.¹¹ Nevertheless, boys are also at risk of CEFMU in Bolivia. 5% of boys are married or in union before 18, making Bolivia the fifteenth country with the highest prevalence of CEFMU among boys globally.¹² This can be explained by the pressure also put on boys to marry early, as well as the benefits perceived by boys in marrying early.¹³

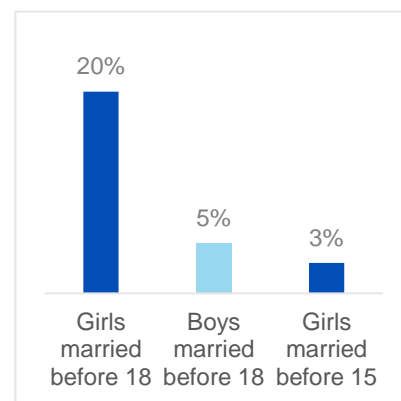


FIGURE 1: GIRLS NOT BRIDES ATLAS, BOLIVIA, 2021

CEFMU persist due to their **strong historical and cultural roots**.

Socially, it is considered as a **phenomenon that is rarely questioned**. Pregnant girls are frequently forced to marry or enter into union, even when it is the result of sexual violence, and they are solely blamed.¹⁴ Besides social pressure, girls may choose to enter into marriage or union to escape violence and abuse from their parents. They may also marry with the hope of having a better life: *“I got married as child by necessity, I don’t have family or support”*, noted a Bolivian woman; *“Some girls are poor and don’t have enough to eat, they think that entering into union will solve their problems”*, expressed an adolescent; *“I wanted to have my partner and be happy. I imagined many things that did not happen, as he only wanted to have sex with me”*, confirmed a young woman.¹⁵

CEFMU has **negative consequences on all aspects of girls’ life, limiting their autonomy and agency, pushing girls out of school and maintaining them in precarious situations**. Evidence shows that CEFMU exacerbates gender inequalities, increases gender-based violence risks, constrains women’s and girls’ sexual and maternal health, limits their sexual and reproductive rights and heightens the likelihood of multiple teenage pregnancies.¹⁶ Additionally, as it hinders their educational and economic opportunities by pushing them out of school, married girls face specific barriers to lift them out of poverty. These impacts are even more severe for girls and women from indigenous communities, whose basic needs are rarely fully met as they have limited access to basic social services and are often left out of protective systems.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights as a taboo

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) remain a taboo in Bolivia. Girls, especially those in formal unions or marriage, generally do not receive any sexuality education. As communication between parents and children is generally weak, parents do not talk about SRHR with their children: *“We, mothers, don’t talk to our girls and we don’t tell them anything about when their periods start... and that’s why our girls get pregnant”* reported parents.¹⁷ Schools also fail to provide safe space for girls to ask their questions around SRHR as many schoolteachers are men - preventing girls from being confident in talking about their intimacy - and some teachers refuse to provide sex education

⁸ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Girls Not Brides, *Atlas*, Bolivia, 2021.

¹¹ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

¹² Girls Not Brides, *op. cit.*

¹³ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Girls Not Brides, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

believing erroneously that any information provided to youth spurs sexual activity, though it is the opposite. All in all, **adolescents lack access to reliable information on every aspect of SRHR.**

The lack of knowledge around SRHR **fuels misconceptions such as that contraception causes cancer or encourages girls to have sexual relationships outside of marriage.**¹⁸ It also leaves girls and women uninformed about family planning and contraceptive options that could help them prevent or delay pregnancies. **Three out of four pregnancies in young women between 15 and 19 years old are unplanned, with unsafe abortion being the third cause of maternal mortality.**¹⁹ Teenage and unplanned pregnancies are more prevalent among girls from rural areas (20%) and indigenous communities – 27% for Quechuas, 24% for Aymara and 28% for others compared to 12% for White and/or Mestizos.²⁰

Bolivian young women interviewed by Plan International stated: “I did not know much about sex education and that’s why I think I got myself pregnant”, “It is important that there should be sex education in school with education on how to prevent pregnancy at an early age, if I had known I would not have gotten married and I could have continued to study”, “I did not know how to take care of myself to avoid getting pregnant, I did not know what I needed to do”.²¹ The intimate relationship women have with their partner reflects the Bolivian patriarchal system: in general, women can have sexual relations with their partner only for reproductive reasons, and it is not seen positively for a woman to have such relations.²²

Girls’ access to inclusive and quality education is still constrained

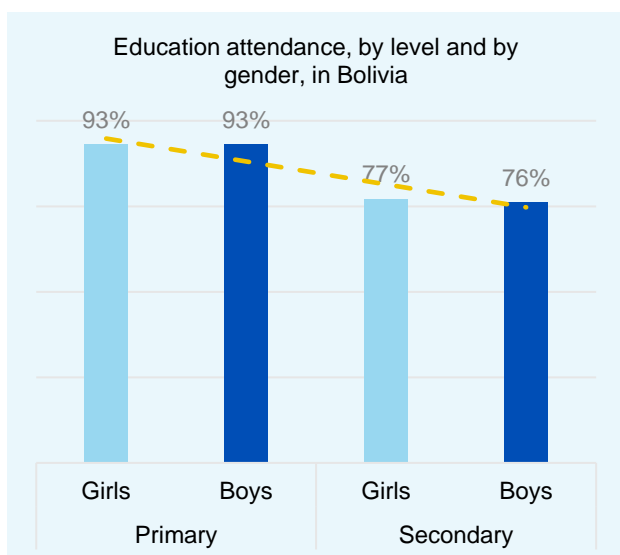


FIGURE 2: UNESCO DATA, COMPILED BY THE WORLD BANK, BOLIVIA, 2018-2019

The net education coverage of Bolivia has improved at the primary, secondary and preschool levels. Coverage is slightly higher for girls compared to boys.²³ School drop-out remains however an issue, as enrolment does not necessarily translate into completion. Disparities exist depending on gender, socio-economic conditions, regions (whether urban or rural) and the type of education (private education or state education). Young people, especially girls, are prevented from defining their life project, which, in turn, does not motivate them to study and to make the right choices.

CEFMU is both a cause and a consequence of school drop-out for girls. On the one hand, married adolescents and adolescents in unions tend to drop out of school, especially when early pregnancy comes in the equation. “I would have liked to be alone, to not have gone through this, to first have studied and then looked for work and then had a family” reported a young married

woman, talking about her partner preventing her from finishing school.²⁴ If a girl has a baby, she is often denied access to the classroom, unless she can find reliable and affordable childcare: “Teachers get angry because babies mess up the whole class because they make noise, so it’s difficult”, testified a young woman to Plan International’ staff.²⁵ Pregnant girls are also often removed from school by their parents in order to avoid shame on the family. On the other hand, families sometimes cannot

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ministerio de Justicia, *Plan Plurinacional de Prevencion de Embarazos en Adolescentes y Jovenes, 2015-2020*, Bolivia, 2015.

²⁰ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

²¹ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

²² Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

²³ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

afford to send their daughter to school and, with no option for gainful employment, marriage or union become her only option.²⁶

Girls are also dropping out of school for **economic reasons and lack of adequate infrastructures**, and the situation is **worst for children coming from indigenous communities**. Some migrate to cities within Bolivia or to other countries to obtain work and support their family. The main reasons reported by Plan International' sponsored children and adolescents in communities where we work, for not attending school was that *"they need them at home"* (47%) and that the *"school is far away"*.²⁷ Some girls only attend primary school because there are no secondary schools in their communities, or because families perceive risks in sending their daughters to distant communities where secondary education is available.²⁸

Justified violence, limited agency: four times out of ten, violence on girls and women was perpetrated by their intimate partner

Violence against girls and women is alarming in Bolivia: **47% of single women reported having experienced psychological violence, 21% sexual violence, 17% physical violence and 12% economic violence.**²⁹ Among girls in early unions or marriages who experienced violence, **43% of the perpetrators were their intimate partner.**³⁰ Bolivia has become the most dangerous country for women and girls in the region, with La Paz and Santa Cruz being the departments with the highest prevalence of violence. According to the State Attorney General's Office, during 2020, there have been 51 cases of infanticide, 108 cases of child rape, 131 femicides, 463 cases of girls, adolescents and young women's trafficking, 2 out of 10 children under 20 years of age being pregnant.³¹

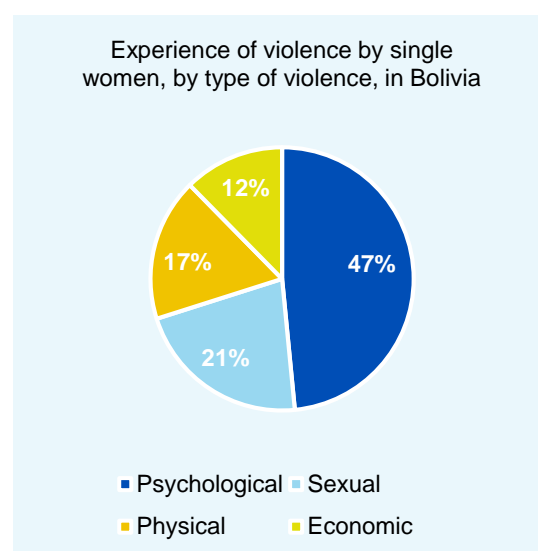


FIGURE 3: PLAN INTERNATIONAL, COUNTRY STRATEGY 2019-2024, BOLIVIA, 2019

Violence is rooted in harmful gender norms that also depict women as inferior to men, condone men's power and dominance over women, normalize violence and consider violent behaviour from boys and men is due to biological attributes. The culture of impunity and the insufficient access of girls and women to justice contributes to the recidivism of perpetrators. In most cases, the perpetrator is someone known to the survivor, and the abuse happens at home or in schools, making these spaces unsafe.

Additional interacting factors include alcohol consumption from the population aged 15 years and older, that is high in Bolivia and identified as a driver of violence: 4% of men are alcohol dependent and 10% of men have alcohol use disorders.³² This has an impact on girls and women: *"approximately one third of the women surveyed in El Alto had been forced by their partner to have sexual intercourse, usually after the man had been drinking. Alcohol abuse was identified by the women surveyed as being a major problem at home, linked to incidences of domestic violence and coercive sex"*.³³ Girls and women are more likely to experience the consequences of someone else's drinking and report high prevalence of family, marital and intimate partner violence, including sexual violence, as well as

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

³¹ Sistema Nacional de Información en Salud y Vigilancia Epidemiológica (SNIS-VE), 2020.

³² WHO, *Alcohol consumption: levels and patterns*,

https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/profiles/bol.pdf, 2018, accessed on 12/01/2022.

³³ WHO, *WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol*, https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/en/bolivia.pdf, 2004, accessed on 12/01/2022.

sexual harassment and sexual assault. These patterns are rooted in traditionally gender roles and societal behaviours, where “*alcohol use has often been viewed as a sign of power and privilege*”.³⁴

Levels of **human trafficking** and smuggling are high in Bolivia. **Girls and adolescent girls, aged 13 to 19, as well as women, indigenous populations, people with diverse sexual orientation and migrant population, are amongst the population the most at risk.** In 2019, the Public Ministry reported 336 cases of trafficking and smuggling, from which 75% were women.³⁵ On the border between Bolivia and Argentina, more than 300 cases of trafficking and smuggling were registered in 2018 and more than 4,000 children were identified in a situation of slavery in the neighbouring country.³⁶

Several complex and multi-causal economic, cultural, gender and social factors lead to this problematic: conditions of poverty, lack of decent and sustainable employment, lack of access to education and information as regard the issue of trafficking and smuggling, lack of proper communication between parents and their children, domestic violence, and alcoholism that expel young people and adolescents from their home. Despite the adoption of the Law 263 against Trafficking and Smuggling in Persons in 2012, enforcement is lacking, thus, failing to protect effectively from trafficking.

The barriers to economic empowerment

Women and young people face great **difficulties in accessing the formal economy as there is an inadequate articulation between demand and labour supply.** Stereotypes and harmful gender norms negatively affect girls’ agency and access to education also impact their access to economic opportunities in the long term as they grow up³⁷. Without adequate training and support, they end up being less equipped in terms of skills and as young women, they have less time to dedicate to paid work, and are the most likely to engage in low-pay and vulnerable employment.

42% of adolescent girls, aged 15 to 19, and 34% of young women, aged 20 to 24, receive no remuneration for the work they do, usually contributing to agricultural and livestock activities.³⁸ 69%

Economic empowerment and limiting gender norms are strongly intertwined. Literature reviews regarding women’s agency and empowerment highlight that gender norms surrounding women’s agency moderate the impacts of many interventions that aim at alleviating material constraints. Access to financial resources alone, without addressing gender-specific constraints, is not a mechanism that consistently improves young women’s agency. However, giving young women more direct control over resources, often by employing design or program features such as privacy or digital payment systems, appears to be a mechanism that consistently leads to improvements in women’s agency.

Yet, working with girls and young women as early as possible is a unique opportunity to strengthen their agency

Based on the literature review, programs show a greater impact when aiming to support young women in delaying marriage and childbearing, compared to programs that aimed to change household decision-making dynamics within a marriage, perhaps because women did not have good outside options.

Adolescence is a crucial time in the transition from childhood to adulthood, a time at which the expectations, opportunities, risks and needs for girls and boys diverge considerably.

³⁴ Pan American Health Organization, *Regional Status Report on alcohol and health in the Americas 2020*, https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52705/9789275122211_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, 2020, accessed on 12/01/2022.

³⁵ Citizen Security Observatory, *Data*, Bolivia, 2019.

³⁶ Fundación Volviendo a Casa del Concejo Federal de Lucha Contra la Trata de Argentina, 2018.

³⁷ Wei Chang, Eleonora Guarnieri, Seema Jayachandran, Lucia Diaz-Martin, Akshara Gopalan, Claire Walsh. *Enhancing Women’s Agency: Cross-Cutting Lessons From Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Studies in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*, July 2020. J-Pal Working Paper

³⁸ CEPAL, *Bolivia*, 2016 – on the basis of household surveys.

of women, compared to 59% of men, are still engaged in vulnerable employment.³⁹ This means that women are the least likely to have formal work arrangements, social protection and safety nets to guard against economic shocks, and often are incapable of generating sufficient savings to offset these shocks.

POVERTY TRAP, SHOCKS AND RESILIENCE: HOW POVERTY ACTS AS A BARRIER TO EMPOWERMENT FOR GIRLS IN BOLIVIA

Poverty trap and limited economic empowerment

Poverty and external shocks hamper the realisation of girls' rights⁴⁰. **The less wealthy a family is, the more likely she will adopt negative coping mechanisms when shocks occur.** Bolivia has undergone a significant and positive evolution regarding poverty between 2006 and 2015. **Extreme poverty fell from 38% to 17%, and poverty from 60% to 39%.** Yet, it remains one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the region, and the situation is expected to worsen with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Bolivia is the country with the highest percentage of malnourished population (20%), and the highest incidence of anaemia.⁴¹

Young people under 29 years old represent 60% of the population, and they are more at risk of facing negative impacts of poverty.⁴² 58% of them live in poverty, with higher rates in rural areas (68%) than in urban areas (42%).⁴³ Within poor households, 90% of the members are children and adolescents; the long-lasting consequences of living in poverty affect their opportunities to thrive and lift themselves out of poverty.⁴⁴ Women are also disadvantaged compared to men as 32% of women do not have their own income, in contrast to 8% of men.⁴⁵ As a result, CEFMU is used as a way to flee poverty or to spare the families the extra mouth to feed.⁴⁶

Women in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) on average report less freedom of choice, control over one's life and life satisfaction compared to men in the same countries and women in wealthier countries. Globally, the average rate of respondents agreeing that wife beating is acceptable, that women have no say in decisions on large household purchases, or that agree that men make better business executives than women do, is strongly correlated with wealth of the country – the lower the GDP per capita, the more likely respondents will report negative attitudes towards gender equality and women and girls' empowerment.

Complexity of future shocks & resilience

Bolivia has undergone a **demographic and social transformation, characterized by rapid urbanization, with 68% of the population living in urban areas.**⁴⁷ Migration is, thus, internal, from rural areas to urban ones, but is also external with people migrating to other countries. Many rural municipalities are losing population, while a limited number of urban municipalities are receiving most of these migrants. In 2016, the municipalities receiving the most migrants were: 32% for Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 20% for El Alto and 11% for Cochabamba. This entails a high demand for basic public service, such as water, sanitation, electricity, education and health, that the government is not always ready to provide.⁴⁸

The main push factors for this rural exodus are the **adverse climate and the lack of social interactions because of a low-density population.** The “pull” factors are the **attractive economic**

³⁹ World Bank, *Bolivia*, 2019.

⁴⁰ Wei Chang et al., *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

⁴² Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ IISec, *La situación en figuras de los Derechos de la Niñez y Adolescencia en Bolivia frente a la pandemia*, 2020.

⁴⁵ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Girls Not Brides, *Atlas*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* – referring to Andersen and Jemio, 2016.

opportunities and good infrastructure: densely populated municipalities, high percentage of workers in industry and service sectors, and high levels of public investment. Middle-income earners are more likely to migrate. The richest are satisfied where they are, while the poorest do not have the resources to leave their region.⁴⁹

Since 2005, the feminization of migration is being observed, with women accounting for more than half of Bolivia's migrants.⁵⁰ There are indications that the continued migration of women may have an impact on the traditional family model and gender relations. Due to remittances sent back, migrant women often become the main breadwinners of the family.⁵¹ Yet, regarding children, this is having negative impacts as it causes family "destruction" and psychosocial stress for family members. Young women, when migrating, are facing new vulnerabilities, but also consider new opportunities for empowerment, by challenging gender norms and expectations.

Bolivian population has to deal with **disasters, especially floods, landslides and droughts, and is vulnerable to the consequences of climate change.** Between 2006 and 2016, 41% of adverse events were floods, 14% were droughts, 21% were frost and 17% were hailstorms. Due to the magnitude of the impacts and the remoteness of the regions, climate change is a complex issue, difficult to respond to. Each year, emergencies affect, on average, 250,000 people, among which 40% are children.⁵² **As a result, families lost crops and small livestock for self-consumption and local sale, which was needed for them to generate some economic income.**⁵³

How COVID-19 can be a setback for girls' right

Measures adopted by the government of Bolivia to refrain the spread of the COVID-19 had **negative impacts on girls' rights.** Data shows that, **since the beginning of COVID-19, violence against girls has intensified,** and restrictions on movement have reduced access to essential protection services and SRHR services for those who experience violence in the home. Impacts are expected to deepen inequality gaps in access to health and nutrition services, which will mean **major setbacks in the exercise of these rights.** The most obvious consequences are already the increase in child and adolescent pregnancies - as one of the forms of gender-based violence - and the impact on the mental health of girls and adolescents.

Several risk factors have been exacerbated, such as the **stress caused by the emergency situation and confinement, the drop in income from work, and loss of employment among others.**⁵⁴ As a result, during the lockdown, **domestic violence against children and women have drastically increased: at least 4 girls or adolescents underwent sexual violence every day.**⁵⁵ Survivors have been locked in the home with their aggressors and the protective services usually in place were not accessible anymore, preventing girls from reporting their sufferings. Children and adolescents have been isolated from positive and supportive relationships, such as schools, extended family and community. In the future, many cases will go unpunished and it will be very difficult to restore the rights of these girls to access the care and support they need.⁵⁶

Education has also been highly impacted by school closure, despite their replacement by virtual and distance learning. Approximately 2.9 million children and adolescents were not formally exercising their right to education due to the risks associated with COVID-19 infection. Students risk falling far behind in their learning and those who were already vulnerable may never return to school. Distance learning also proved to be insufficient and to widen the educational gap both by place of residence (rural or urban) and by income level as only 3% of households in the lowest wealth quintile and 10% of rural households have an internet connection.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.* – referring to Andersen and Nina, 2007.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* – referring to UN, 2016.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* – referring to Bastia, 2009.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ UNICEF, *6 prioridades sobre la niñez y adolescencia en Bolivia*, 2020.

⁵⁵ Alianza por la Solidaridad, *Bolivia*, 2020 – referring to UNFPA.

⁵⁶ UNICEF, *6 prioridades sobre la niñez y adolescencia en Bolivia*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

PROTECTING GIRLS' RIGHTS WITH STRONG LEGAL FRAMEWORKS: OPPORTUNITIES AND GAPS IN BOLIVIA

As a member of the United Nations and the Organisation of American States (OAS), **Bolivia has assumed a set of obligations** arising from the United Nations Charter, the OAS Charter and, fundamentally, from human rights treaties, including general instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the American Convention on Human Rights. Among the specific instruments on the rights of children, youth and women, Bolivia is party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It has also made commitments in relation to sexual and reproductive rights in the Montevideo Consensus.⁵⁸

On the national level, **Bolivia is even a pioneer in legislative protective framework and has a State Political Constitution with clear principles related to human rights and a number of laws relating to children, adolescents and youth**, such as the Law n°438 to guarantee women a life free of violence, the Law n°70 on education and the Law n°807 on gender identity.⁵⁹ It has also specific institutions, such as the Defensoria de la Ninez (DNI), and different municipal integral legal services (SLIMP), which are supporting body for the fight against violence in the family.

Despite an overall protective legislative framework, limits on the rights of girls are still observed in Bolivia. First, the national legislation itself puts obstacles. Exceptions to the minimum age for marriage are allowed in the Children and Adolescent Code, vacating the protection for girls, and it is possible to marry or enter into union at 16 years of age as long as a person has written authorization from legal guardian.⁶⁰ Currently, there is also no law on the specific issue of equality of the girl child.⁶¹ Second, the favourable legislation in place is limited in its application because of a lack of awareness-raising among officials themselves, and among the population.

A representative of a municipality stated “*I don't think there are any norms about marriage, maybe there are, but we don't know them*”.⁶² Legislation also fails to reach remote and more vulnerable populations by not being translated into indigenous languages.⁶³ Finally, there is still a deep gap between what the laws propose and what has been achieved in terms of the actual exercise of rights which is due to the fragile institutions, the insufficient allocation of resources and the persistent existence of a highly patriarchal society.⁶⁴ Bolivian men who are involved in CEFMU, or who are known to have committed rape of a minor are sometimes protected by the community⁶⁵, preventing girls from enjoying full respect of their rights and recognition of violations to them.

YET, THERE IS HOPE

Across Plan's areas of intervention, **girls challenge restrictive gender norms and promote gender equality, empowerment, protective environment.** They lead change to ensure that girls from their communities access inclusive quality education, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, and that they live free from violence in their communities. With a strong attention to inclusion, gender-transformative and human-rights based approaches, programmes and influencing work focusing on education, agency, youth economic empowerment, protection from GBV, access to services, have the potential to equip girls with the relevant tools to challenge norms, claim their rights, thrive, empower themselves to be active drivers of change and lift themselves out of poverty.

⁵⁸ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Plan International, *Situational Analysis*, *op. cit.*

⁶² Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Girls Not Brides, *Atlas*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Plan International, *Country Strategy 2019-2024*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ Plan International, UNFPA, *op. cit.*

Methodological note

Most of the statistical data is taken from [the Demographic and Health Surveys](#), [the World Bank Open Data](#), [Girls Not Brides Atlas](#), [UNICEF data](#), [International Labour Organization data](#), [the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys](#). This report was written on the basis of a literature review conducted by Plan International Belgium in 2021, including internal reports and documentation from Plan International's projects and programmes, as well as guidelines from peer organisations, institutions, UN Agencies and global legal frameworks.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the DGD. All remaining errors and opinions expressed in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Cover photos: youth playing football in Bolivia, 2021.

Photo on page 3: families receiving kits during COVID-19 pandemic, 2020.

Credits: Plan International



Alejandra, 18, is part of a project that promotes gender equality through football, 2021.

Credits: Plan International

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL BELGIUM

Plan Belgium has been committed since 1983 to a fairer and more secure world for all children and young people, by addressing the root causes of challenges and obstacles encountered by girls and vulnerable children. All our projects seek to promote **gender equality, by analysing the root causes of unequal access to opportunities for girls and boys and of gender-based violence.** We are working alongside children, youth, our advocates and partners to address the root causes of the barriers that vulnerable girls and children face. Our programs contribute to Plan's overall ambition, that is by 2025, **100 million girls can learn, lead, decide and thrive.** Currently, Plan Belgium is working in Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Malawi, Bolivia, Ecuador, Vietnam. Plan Belgium implements programs and projects in the impact areas of: i) protection against abuse and violence; ii) youth participation and leadership; iii) inclusive and quality safe education, both formal and non-formal; iv) economic strengthening of young people through employment and entrepreneurship.

In Belgium, Plan is particularly involved in the fight against gender-based violence, in the School of Children's Rights, in order to help teachers and students to be aware of their rights and those of their peers in Belgium and around the world. Finally, Plan as a civil society organization carries the voice of girls in civic and political mobilizations, including within development cooperation.

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL BOLIVIA

Plan International has been working in **Bolivia for over 50 years** to promote children's rights and equality for girls. Our work focuses on supporting children and young people to live free from poverty, violence and injustice. To achieve that, we work with a number of different partners as well as children, young people and their communities. The rights of children and young people in Bolivia are central to all our work and we strive to be innovative and strengthen intercultural relations across the country.





Plan International priorities in Bolivia include early childhood development, quality education, increasing children's leadership in society, sexual and reproductive health rights, the prevention of all forms of violence, the development of knowledge and skills to obtain good jobs.

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