



GIRLS  
GET EQUAL

# EQUAL POWER

# NOW

GIRLS, YOUNG WOMEN &  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

THE STATE OF THE  
WORLD'S GIRLS

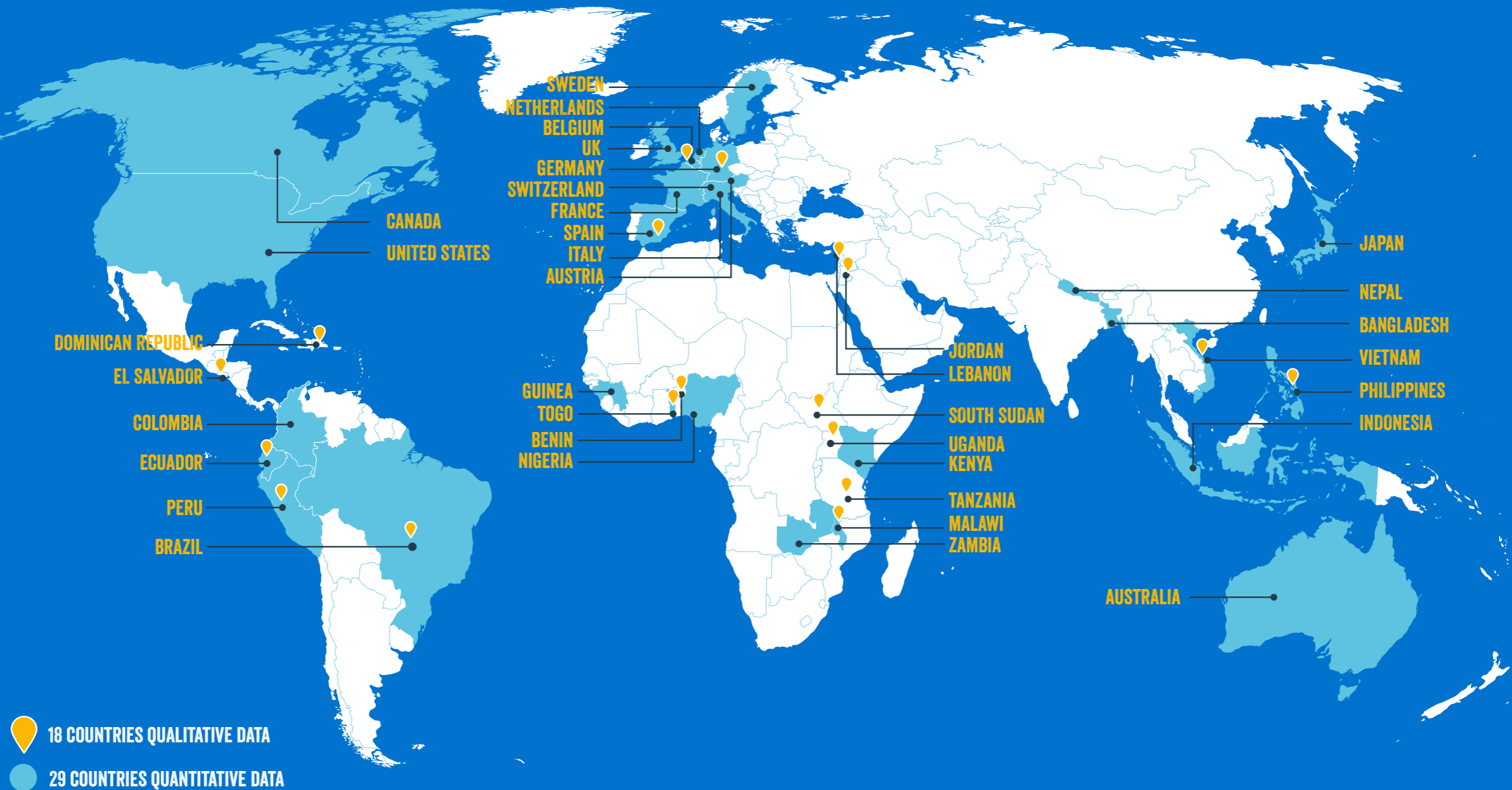
2022





# EQUAL POWER NOW

## GIRLS, YOUNG WOMEN & POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



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Disclaimer: References to political parties and politicians are included in the text: this does not imply any affiliation, or agreement, with their policies or political positions, on the part of Plan International. The names of the girls and young women in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Plan International first published the State of the World's Girls report in 2007. The 2022 report on the political participation of girls and young women is the fifth in a new series that each year has examined the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that limit girls' freedom and opportunities in specific environments or sectors. This year's research, using a mixed methods approach, was conducted across 36 countries, including a survey with nearly 29,000 adolescent girls and young women in 29 countries, as well as in-depth interviews, in 18 countries.

For a fuller description of the research methodology see [page 58](#).

## FROM THE CEO



This year's State of the World's Girls Report is focused on understanding political participation; what does it mean for girls and young women?

International laws give young people the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The unfortunate reality though is that, particularly for girls and young women, access to decision-making spaces is often fraught with obstacles. The girls and young women we interviewed said that they often feel ignored: their participation, even when the door is open to them, is tokenistic and their contributions not integrated in any meaningful way. This means that so many decisions that will impact their present and their future are taken for young people, rather than with them.

Our report shows us that girls and young women worry about a wide spectrum of critical issues from poverty and unemployment, climate change and the environment, to health and education. They want to be involved in making the world a better place and the world certainly needs their energy and their insights to achieve sustainable change. We know from our research that girls want to contribute to their countries and communities and we need to champion their rights. We must work together so that girls and young people not only have a seat at the decision-making table but that their participation translates into significant improvements to their daily lives and opportunities.

At Plan International, we want a world where all girls know and exercise their rights and live the life they choose. I am confident that this new report will help us, together with young people from around the world to chart a way forward.

**STEPHEN OMOLLO**

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# PREFACE

**Tien, 23**, began her interest in gender equality at university and is head of the Youth Advisory Committee at Plan International Vietnam. She works as Business Development Manager for a software company. Here she is talking to **Keiver, 17**, an activist with Plan International Colombia who has just started his university studies.



## TIEN:

The theme of this report is one of big significance to me personally. Early on, through my interactions with the government, I've realised the barriers that young people and especially women face in political advocacy. I would love to put the first brick into that wall, to raise the voice of young people, and influence political decisions on issues we care about. So how about you, Keiver?

## KEIVER:

Given that men dominate political spaces, as a man I want to make a difference between many who say that women cannot, should not participate or are not made for these spaces, just because they are women. I am interested in this issue because I firmly believe in the value and abilities of women. What do you think an ideal world would look like in terms of girls and young women's political participation?

## TIEN:

I imagine a world where girls could sit together round the table with decision-makers. We would be able to talk about our challenges, concerns, expectations, and recommendations. We would have a solution-oriented discussion with empathy and patience.

## KEIVER:

I also dream of an equitable world. Where women are given equal opportunities to show their skills and grow their knowledge. Let us continue to work for the participation of girls, adolescents and young women in politics, let the example start from our collectives.

## TIEN:

Yes, you're right. Collectives and groups of engaged young people, especially girls and young women, in politics can be a source of innovation and improvement. The fresh ideas and approaches from young people will ensure that policy is responsive to our concerns. I really hope that this report can be a small first step in increasing the visibility of the issue and contribute to the development of a solution.

## KEIVER:

I agree with you! I hope it can help people understand the issue, see the relevance of young women's participation and endorse it in all possible scenarios.

# FOREWORD

By *Aya Chebbi*, former UN Youth Envoy and founder & Chair of Nala Feminist Collective

I have been following Plan International's campaign for girls' leadership and am very thrilled to see this new report on political participation shared with the world.

This reminds me of when I found the power of my own political voice. I was on the frontline unafraid to die for freedom during my country, Tunisia's, revolution in 2011. The freedom as a girl to be safe, to make choices, to have access to reproductive and sexual health, to have education and school meals, to unlock financial freedom, to be, to become and to belong as an equal human being with political power.

These freedoms cannot be guaranteed without the political participation of young women - from the family debate at the dinner table to the high-level negotiation table. Girls' voices cannot be denied and their experiences must not go unrecognised.

As a generation, we make up about half the world, which means we have superpowers; the demographic power, the voting power, the mobilisation power and the innovation power. We take to the streets when no one listens because our struggle is a struggle for voice. In Africa, the average age of the population is 20. However, the average age of African leaders is 64-years-old and this generation gap excludes young women from the political system - and not just in Africa.

If we don't address this now, by the end of the century as our population doubles, the gap will be even wider. In my advocacy during my mandate as the African Union Youth Envoy, I promoted what I call Intergenerational Co-Leadership. I believe we cannot inherit systems we did not co-design and therefore must co-lead now to reform the failing systems, break this cycle, bridge this gap and allow for generational healing.

As we can see from the research for this report, young women are able and eager to be involved in political life – not to be confined by other people's judgements and opinions but to express their own and represent themselves. To make a difference, the world needs to believe in our power as young women. Our power not

to watch and blame the system, but to change it. Our power to better humanity, not destroy it. Our power that leads from a place of love to bring about healing and mend the broken spaces of our world. Young women should not only have a seat at the table when policy is formed but must occupy the decision-making positions we deserve: speaking truth to power and making it count.



## AYA CHEBBI

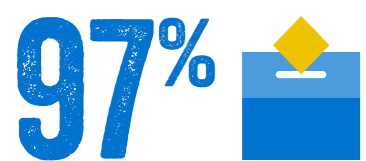
Ms Aya Chebbi is a Pan-African Feminist and Diplomat who came to prominence as a political activist-blogger during the Tunisian revolution in 2011. She served as the first ever African Union Special Envoy on Youth and the youngest diplomat at the African Union Commission Chairperson's Cabinet (2018-21). As Founder and Chair of Nala Feminist Collective, she works to bring young women into politics: pioneering the Africa Young Women Beijing+25 Manifesto, which demands gender equality at work, at home, in political office, in the justice system and across all areas of women's lives.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research is based on a large-scale survey of almost **29,000** girls and young women **aged 15 to 24 from 29 countries** spanning all regions, income levels and civic contexts. It also includes in-depth interviews with 94 girls and young women across 18 countries who were a mix of programme participants and young activists.

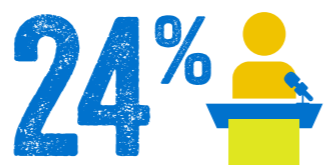
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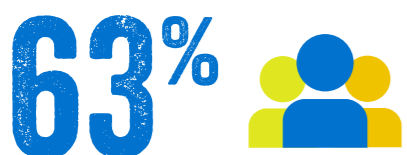
of survey respondents **thought participating in politics was important**



of girls and young women surveyed had **some experience of participating** in or engaging with politics



of those who aspire to participate in politics can **see themselves standing for political office**



of survey respondents are **involved in some form of group or organisation** indicating significant levels of civic engagement and participation



reported that they were **generally happy with their leaders' decisions** on issues they care about



have **personally been discouraged from engaging** with or participating in politics



**think women are not qualified** to be political leaders



of girls and young women believed that, in their **communities' view, it was acceptable** for girls and young women to engage in political activities

It is clear from the findings that gender norms, what society and girls themselves see as appropriate for girls and young women, have a strong impact on their participation in politics. It is also clear from the findings that girls and young women are not a homogenous group. Their opinions diverge according to location, income, sexual identity, religion, ethnicity and a host of other intersecting factors.

Some participants were put off by the abuse and harassment they saw women in public life experiencing, aware that female politicians are held to higher standards and judged in different ways from their male counterparts. Despite this, girls and young women know that their political participation is important, to bring about improvements in their own lives and to contribute to their communities and countries. A third of activists interviewed also felt that formal modes of participation, engaging directly with the state, were crucial to bringing about lasting political change. Girls and young women are interested in issues that range from poverty and unemployment to the environment and climate change, to education and health. However, they do not underestimate the challenges they face with 94 per cent of survey respondents recognising the barriers in their way. Girls and young women are often condescended to and rarely listened to. Although, in some countries, female representation in parliaments and on local councils has improved, there remains a lack of political role models and, in many contexts, a recent rollback of girls' and women's rights.

Despite these challenges, girls and young women are politically engaged in many different ways: from voting and signing petitions, to joining diverse youth movements and participating in school councils. School and family are crucially influential as girls and young women learn about politics and want to take their place as decision-makers. Political participation can seem more accessible at the local level and for many this is where they are active and involved. Girls and young women have the right, at local, national and international levels, to take part in the decisions that affect their lives. There are ways to make this happen.

*"Their decisions have repercussions on the actions and lives of all people, on our relationships of otherness, on the limits we set for ourselves, on the things that are not allowed and the things that are allowed. So, I feel that politics is very important."*

**AURORA, 20, ECUADOR**



## FOUR ROUTES TOWARDS GIRLS' GREATER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

### DECISION MAKERS AT ALL LEVELS...

must institutionalise the meaningful and safe participation of girls and their groups through the adoption of fully resourced and accountable policies, strategies and frameworks.

### NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS...

must ensure access to diverse and inclusive pathways toward political participation: including resourcing and strengthening civic education and leadership opportunities and facilitating girls' inclusion in local decision-making processes.

### GOVERNMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES...

must address the violence experienced by women politicians and girl activists by adopting a zero-tolerance approach to violence. The media can support by promoting positive images and by calling attention to violence experienced in both online and offline spaces.

### UN, GOVERNMENTS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY...

should recognise girls' vital and distinct role in civil society and provide accessible resources so that girls' organisations are resilient and sustainable in the face of crises and external threats.

Girls and young women, in all their diversity, **need all the support they can get to organise and mobilise to ensure that they and their organisations are fully equipped to play their part in the future of their communities and countries.**





Credit: Plan International

# INTRODUCTION

This year, as the world slowly emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, Plan International’s State of the World’s Girls report is looking at girls’ and young women’s political participation.

Making the voices of girls and young women heard, and their opinions, experiences and rights taken into consideration, when decisions are made - often far away from the places and people that these decisions will matter most - is crucially important. Important as a right, important to inform policy and to design programmes that seek to improve lives and opportunities, and also critical to promoting gender equality.

*“I think there’s still this a big culture of male dominance in the sense that it’s thought that men are smarter than women are, and that sometimes women in power positions may be laughed at. So, I feel like that’s still a problem.”*

**JULIETTE, 21, BELGIUM**



Decisions made within the political sphere affect every aspect of girls’ and young women’s lives – from whether they are afforded legal protections against child marriage and have their sexual and reproductive rights protected, to the budgets allocated to their education. Seen in the context of a widespread rollback in girls’ and women’s rights<sup>1</sup> – epitomised by the successful overturning of *Roe v Wade*, the 1973 ruling which granted women access to legal abortion in the USA – the need for girls and young women to engage in and influence political decisions is increasingly urgent.

Last year’s State of the World’s Girls report, *The Truth Gap*, reported on misinformation and disinformation online and found that it restricts girls’ activism: making one out of four girls feel less confident to share their views and one in five stop engaging in politics or current affairs altogether. It is not the only barrier to girls and young women being active in the political sphere. Previous State of the World’s Girls reports have also pointed to a frightening culture of misogyny and violence against girls and young women: fear restricts their aspirations, curtails their mobility in all areas of their lives and undermines their confidence. In 2018, *Unsafe in the City* documented this fear and

the violence girls experience in their daily lives in all public spaces; *Rewrite Her Story*, in 2019, exposed how media stereotypes and lack of representation affects girls’ leadership ambitions and, in 2020, *Free to be Online* found that 58 per cent of girls surveyed had experienced online harassment and political activists were targeted with even greater abuse. This not only inhibits both the ability and the desire to be active politically but reduces opportunities to learn, to make friends and allies and to live fully in the modern world.

Girls are subject to particular barriers to political participation based on both their age and gender: as *young people*, their political rights are limited and they may be wrongly dismissed as insufficiently mature to participate in political processes, and, *because they are girls*, gender stereotyping keeps them out of the public sphere and generates obstacles that boys and young men do not face.

*“And then there are many people who think that when we get into positions, that we have to make decisions and so on, we can reason less logically, which is an argument that I have also heard a lot.”*

**SOFIA, 24, SPAIN**



Yet, despite this, encouraged by new information and communication technologies, girls and young women are increasingly exploring different routes to bringing about the changes they want to see. Diverse youth movements, grassroots activism and collective action are on the rise as girls and young women engage with the issues – poverty, climate change, conflict, education and health – that are important to them and to us all.<sup>2</sup>

*“I won’t be afraid if I’m a part of it, because of course there are many of us. It’s hard if I’ll do it alone.”*

**ROSAMIE, 16, RCRL,<sup>3</sup> PHILIPPINES**







Credit: Plan International

## DEFINING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is the voluntary\* activities that girls and young women undertake:

- ➔ *within formal political spaces or via established political institutions;*
- ➔ *to influence such spaces and institutions;*
- ➔ *for other political reasons, including solving community problems;*
- ➔ *in a broader context - workplaces, educational institutions, media - where it may be appropriate to label such activities as political.*

It is particularly important to adopt a broad definition of political participation, which includes (but goes beyond) the formal sphere, when investigating the activities of girls and young women. It allows us to recognise and understand the activities most commonly undertaken by girls and young women, which mainly take place outside the formal political sphere, often as part of civil society at local or community level. It also enables us to recognise and value the political knowledge and experience that girls and young women already have, and to identify recommendations for how to best support girls' and young women's political participation as current, as well as future political actors.

Political activity is as diverse as those taking part and the belief, widely held in some contexts, that 'politics' is not an appropriate activity for girls and young women, needs to be challenged.

Girls and young women are not a homogenous group: they are all individuals, influenced by their personal circumstances, opportunities and characteristics. There are regional differences and their opinions and experiences are also affected by their socio-economic status, their race, their faith, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation and their gender identity.

### Respondents who identify as LGBTIQ+ and those from minority backgrounds were found to hold more negative views about political leaders

In our research, age emerged as having little bearing on participation: girls aged 15-19, although activities like voting, were not open to most of them, did not differ greatly in their attitudes from the 20 to 24 age group.

What does come across is that girls and young women, in all their diversity, are increasingly concerned about poverty and unemployment and its effect on their communities. As the COVID-19 pandemic recedes a little, its aftermath as economies fail to recover, is having an impact. In communities already adversely affected by the climate crisis, families struggle to feed themselves, and the war in Ukraine reaches beyond the sufferings of those living there to increase the likelihood of hunger and food shortages across different countries and continents. Money is in short supply everywhere. Not only are family incomes affected but government funding to essential services is also under threat.

*"People have no money to buy maize to eat. The girls whose house is next door to mine, only eat once a day and have to beg for food."*

**ALICE, 16, RCRL, BENIN**



Climate change, increasing hunger, poverty and war are all impossible to ignore and, as they get older, adolescent girls and young women are becoming more politically conscious, more interested in social issues and increasingly aware of how decisions made, both locally and nationally, will have an effect on their lives. They must be supported both to claim their rights and to develop their capacities to participate. As young people they need to be able to influence the world they live in and help shape it. They also need to develop today the skills, knowledge and the desire to stay politically active, which as adult women, they will bring to the world tomorrow.

The overarching aim of the wide-ranging research conducted for this report is to explore and understand girls' and young women's attitudes towards, and experiences of, political and civic participation and institutions, across a diverse range of contexts:

- ➔ How do girls and young women conceptualise politics, and which political issues do they prioritise?
- ➔ How do they view their political leaders and do they feel properly represented within the political sphere?
- ➔ What influences their decision to participate in politics? What puts them off and what inspires them?
- ➔ What strategies and support need to be in place to enable them to become more actively engaged in the issues and campaigns they feel are important?

*"I see two assembly members, for example, who are very young and they are women at the national level, two assembly members and they are very vigilant, for example, for abortion rights. They are... known here in Ecuador. And I kind of follow their work a lot because I admire them a lot."*

**AURORA, 20, ECUADOR**





# SETTING THE SCENE

Globally, political participation and representation are highly gendered. Across cultures and throughout history, politics has been the domain of privilege and power for older, male and often wealthy citizens.

Progress has undoubtedly been made – until 1960 only half of the world's nations granted women the right to vote but, by 2020, no country barred women from voting on account of their sex.<sup>5</sup>

Yet 2021 marked the 16th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, with 60 countries suffering net declines in political rights and civil liberties, and only 25 registering gains.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend: in some countries, restrictions used to curb the pandemic were instrumentalised to suppress opposition groups and curtail space for political debate during elections.<sup>7</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to reversing many of the gains in gender equality. Evidence suggests that some countries, which had already begun to roll back the rights of girls and women, have used the COVID-19 pandemic to further undermine these rights, as well as those of LGBTIQ+ communities.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, the rapid growth of social media and internet usage, accelerated by the pandemic, has played a key role in expanding the opportunities for, and the ways in which, girls and young women can engage in politics. As of April 2022, there were almost five billion internet users worldwide: 4.65 billion of these, 58 per cent of the world's population, are social media users.<sup>9</sup> This move online is shifting the landscape of political participation and young people in particular are redefining what it means to participate in politics, outside the confines of formal political institutions.<sup>10</sup>

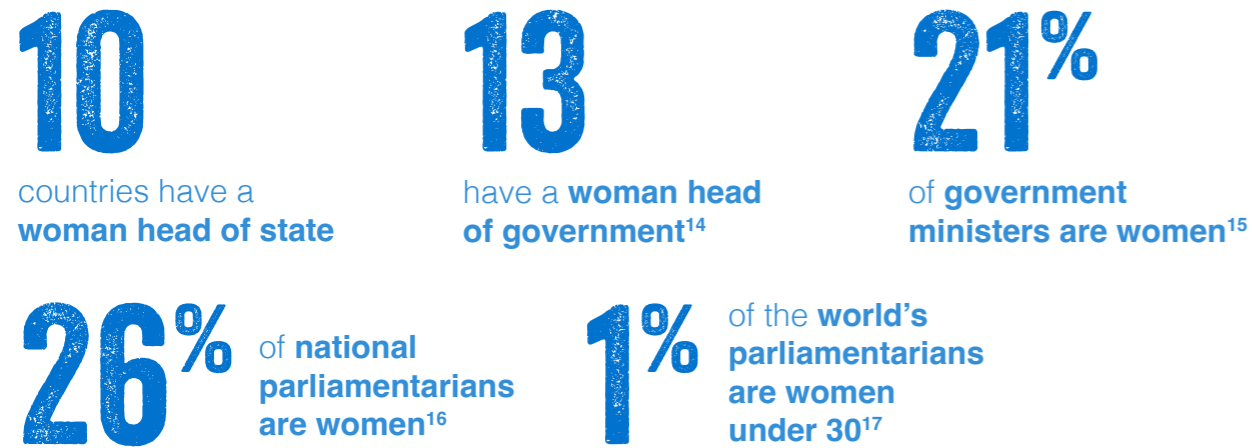
Evidence indicates that young people are increasingly disillusioned, expressing a lack of trust in politicians, political parties and institutions<sup>11</sup> and, in most parts of the world, young people's participation in formal political processes and institutions is declining.<sup>12</sup>





## The gender and age gap in political leadership and representation:<sup>13</sup>

Globally, political leadership and representation remains heavily male-dominated, especially in national government:



At local levels, the picture is slightly better: recent evidence from UN Women demonstrates that women, including young women, hold a greater proportion of seats in local government than in national government in almost all parts of the world.<sup>20</sup> However, there is still a gender and age gap: women remain less well-represented in local governments than men, and young women remain less well-represented than their older counterparts.

At the current rate of progress, it will take **155 YEARS** to attain gender parity in politics worldwide.<sup>21</sup>

It is men who are more visible on the political stage, dominating the traditional offices of state and political media coverage. This too has its effect: research suggests that girls are more likely to envision themselves as future political actors when women political role models are depicted in mainstream media.<sup>22</sup> As one participant in a previous study by Plan International<sup>23</sup> commented:

*"In life one needs a person to give us an example and to tell us, 'You can do it, you can do it,' someone to encourage us."*

**GIRL, 15, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

Photo above: Sanna Marin in 2019, by Laura Kotila, Government office, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

### EQUAL POWER PROFILE

#### THE PRIME MINISTER



*"I want to build a society where every child can become anything and every person can live and grow in dignity."<sup>19</sup>*

Sanna Marin, prime minister of Finland since 2019, was 34 when she was elected, the youngest person to hold the office in Finnish history. She has a four-year-old daughter. Her premiership has not been without its controversies – some perhaps attributable to her being young and female. She worked her way through college and was the first person in her family to attend university. She started her political career in the youth wing of the Social Democratic Party. Her rise to the top is not seen as quite so remarkable in Finland as it may seem to others: it may be due to a generous education system, inexpensive and extremely good childcare, and an overall social and economic commitment to gender equality more culturally embedded and better resourced than in many other countries. Her government consists of 10 women and nine men.<sup>18</sup>

## What are the main barriers to young women's political participation?

The evidence from many studies is clear: women, particularly young women and those from marginalised backgrounds, face a host of legal, economic and socio-cultural barriers to running for political office and young women in positions of political leadership, whether in formal or informal settings, experience opposition because of their age and gender.

- **There is some evidence<sup>24</sup>, mainly from western democracies, that girls are less interested than boys in formal political participation**, preferring social movement related activities. This preference for informal politics means that girls and young women are not taking on political leadership in the corridors of power, where it may count the most.
- **In many countries, young women are legally barred from running for political office.** In 69 per cent of countries, the minimum legal age to hold parliamentary office is higher than the minimum voting age<sup>25</sup> – sending out signals to potential candidates that politics is not a 'business for young people'.<sup>26</sup>
- **Studies have also shown that women are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for political office<sup>27</sup>** and are more likely to avoid competitive environments<sup>28</sup> – preferences which are in turn shaped by societal gender norms.
- According to a 2015 survey conducted in 84 countries by the Women in Parliaments Global Forum and the World Bank, **women are three times as likely to worry about gender discrimination and twice as likely to fear not being taken as seriously as their male counterparts.**<sup>29</sup>
- Violence and harassment against women who are in political office, running for office, or otherwise politically active is an issue affecting many countries round the globe.<sup>30</sup> While **acts of gender-based political violence** are usually directed at individual women, they also **carry an impact beyond their intended specific target, including deterring girls and women who might consider engaging in politics**, and communicating to society that women should not participate in public life.<sup>31</sup>
- **Social norms and discriminatory beliefs linked to age and gender influence the opportunities available for girls and young women to participate in politics, and the challenges faced by those who do.** One of the most important of these is ageism, or more specifically, **adultism**, which typically manifests as a tendency to dismiss young people's opinions and contributions because of their age.<sup>32</sup> Adultism can also manifest as excessive praise for politically active girls, who are labelled as 'heroic' or inspirational.<sup>33</sup> Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg are good examples of this and research with adolescent activists in the US has suggested that this lionisation can be experienced negatively by other girls. It is interpreted as condescending and implying that most youth are not capable of meaningful political participation.<sup>34</sup>
- **In many societies there is a prevailing belief that politics is an inappropriate activity for women – and by extension, girls.** Although public attitudes to women's political participation are slowly changing,<sup>35</sup> progress in this area is uneven. Girls in some parts of the world, including the Middle East and Africa, continue to face significant barriers to political participation. For example, girls and young women who attend political meetings may find their morality questioned, especially where such meetings occur at night.<sup>36</sup> Research from the US also shows that parents typically place greater constraints on the mobility of girls than boys,<sup>37</sup> which can limit girls' ability to participate in social movements.<sup>38</sup>
- **An interest in political participation, or the lack of it, is laid down at an early stage of a child's development.** The family context is often seen as the most important arena for this process of political socialisation – evidence has shown that stable parental political attitudes and frequent contact with political issues through family discussions significantly increases pre-adult awareness and long-term disposition for political participation.<sup>39</sup> There is also evidence that, within families, boys and young men are more likely than girls to be socialised by their parents to think about politics as a career path.<sup>40</sup>



## Patterns of political participation amongst girls and young women

Research suggests that young people are more likely to participate in politics via less formal, non-institutional channels, including through protests and demonstrations, as well as more individualised forms of political action.<sup>41</sup>

This tendency to favour non-institutional forms of participation appears to be particularly pronounced among girls and young women,<sup>42</sup> both because they face greater barriers to participation via institutional channels, and because they have a genuine preference for the less formal approach.<sup>43</sup> While girls often reject formal politics, they are highly invested in their communities, interested in solving community problems, and are personally committed to the idea of social change.<sup>44</sup> There is some evidence, mainly from research in Western democracies, that the forms of political participation preferred by girls and boys begin to diverge in adolescence.<sup>45</sup>

Since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, many countries have established participatory mechanisms for young people, such as Youth Councils and Youth Parliaments, and have also sought to include children and youth in participatory policy making and participatory budgeting initiatives. These advances have offered girls and young women increased opportunities to engage in formal political processes in many parts of the world. In many cases, Youth Councils have allowed young people to shape policies and decisions at the local level.<sup>46</sup> The design of Youth Parliaments, however, often turns them into a form of civic education, rather than channels for democratic participation.<sup>47</sup> Evidence also suggests that selection procedures for Youth Parliaments and Youth Councils mean that they struggle to include diverse youth, which leads to underrepresentation of marginalised communities.<sup>48, 49</sup>

Although participatory mechanisms can offer girls and young women a pathway into formal politics, political activity remains, for most of them, outside of official structures. This absence from institutional political structures has, some have argued, compromised their ability to become public, social movement actors' and competent political leaders.<sup>50</sup> It remains imperative that girls learn how to participate in the formal political sphere, regardless of their outsider status.

**“As long as this pattern of unequal self-selection into institutional politics persists and as long as the monopoly of decision-making rests with parties and political institutions, it will be difficult to establish gender equality of representation in politics.”<sup>51</sup>**

### ONLINE ACTIVISM

The rapid expansion of social media and internet usage over recent years has played a key role in shifting the landscape of political participation and expanded the ways in which girls and young women can engage in politics. Ease of communication and networking and individuals' access, and exposure to, political information have vastly increased, while information sources have been diversified and 'democratised'.<sup>52</sup> As young people are growing up with high levels of engagement in online spaces, understanding the implications of these shifts for their political participation and wider engagement is a growing area of research.

Online or digital activism encompasses an immense variety of actions: many traditional forms of participation, such as signing petitions, contacting representatives, or belonging to community groups have moved online. Young people in particular are using social media to develop their political identities and express political stances in creative forms such as videos and memes<sup>53</sup> and are redefining political participation outside the confines of formal political institutions.<sup>54</sup> Research from Fiji suggests that online channels of participation are particularly important to individuals whose ability to communicate in other ways is constrained by virtue of their age and/or gender.<sup>55</sup> This may also make online participation especially valuable to trans girls, as well as those who otherwise identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community.

Online forms of political participation are not immune from violence. Girl and women activists are disproportionately attacked or 'trolled' online, often with sexualised threats intended to intimidate and prevent them from speaking out.<sup>56</sup> Online spaces have also given governments new tools for repressing political activism and constraining civil society. This has included the strategic use of internet shutdowns, the targeted blocking of social media sites, and the use of digital spaces to gather intelligence on political activists.<sup>57</sup>

### GIRL-LED ORGANISATIONS

Girls' and young women's participation outside formal political channels often takes place through various forms of collective action: we are witnessing a rise in diverse, intersectional and de-centralised youth movements and grassroots activism in which girls and young women are particularly visible. Existing research also shows that girls tend to organise in distinct ways. Girl-led organisations typically adopt flatter, less hierarchical structures and are less likely to be formally registered.<sup>60</sup>

The *Fridays for Future* (FFF) climate movement illustrates the forms of political participation, and political organisation, in which girls and young women most commonly engage. Despite the high profile of Greta Thunberg, FFF has remained a decentralised, grass-roots movement with no formal leaders. In its non-hierarchical structure, and in working outside of established political institutions, FFF provides an example of the apparent tendency of girls to favour less institutionalised modes of political participation and organisation. However, it also demonstrates the fact that girls' adoption of non-institutional modes of political participation does not preclude a desire to influence the actions of traditional political institutions.

A survey of young feminist organisations (YFOs) found that girls and young women are organising around a range of issues. While there are differences between regions, the issues of highest priority were found to be gender-based violence, sexual reproductive health and rights, as well as political and economic empowerment for women. The same survey found that while YFOs are campaigning for change within the 'formal' political sphere, their activism on the issues they care about also seeks to effect change in the 'informal sphere' of individual consciousness and social and cultural norms.<sup>61</sup>

**Girls' and young women's rights to political participation are enshrined in international law – in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - as well as in global agreements like**

## EQUAL POWER PROFILE

### THE ACTIVIST



*“We believe we deserve better. Who else is going to start [changing things] but us? We want to serve as this bridge that connects the society we want with the society we have right now.”<sup>59</sup>*

Arya Cabutihan is from the Philippines and co-chair of *Amarela*, a youth-driven initiative to make sexual and reproductive health and rights information accessible to young people. She started her involvement with *Amarela* at 15 and is fervent advocate of youth activism. The Facebook-based group has a team of teen volunteers of diverse gender identities who work in shifts to produce informational materials, organise talks, and hold webinars for their more than 14,000 followers. The core of their work revolves around stripping reproductive health information of medical jargon and transforming it into infographics, using local languages. Despite the fact that the government has declared that tackling teen pregnancy is a priority, an estimated 500 teenagers give birth every day<sup>58</sup> and talking about sex remains very much a taboo. *Amarela* and its staff receive frequent threats.

*Image copyright: Amarela*

**the Sustainable Development Goals. Whatever the legislation, it is clear from the research carried out by many different individuals and organisations that the impact of these laws and agreements is not sufficiently felt in the daily lives of the girls and young women whose rights they aim to protect.**



# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Our key findings from the survey and two sets of qualitative interviews, conducted with young women activists and with participants from a longitudinal study Real Choices, Real Lives which Plan International has been running since 2007, are set out below.

**1. WHAT DOES THE WORD POLITICS MEAN TO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?**

**2. WHICH POLITICAL ISSUES DO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN CARE ABOUT MOST?**

**3. HOW DO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN RATE THEIR CURRENT POLITICAL LEADERSHIP? IS IT REPRESENTATIVE, RESPONSIVE AND HONEST?**

**4. CAN WOMEN BECOME POLITICAL LEADERS AND HOW IS THIS VIEWED IN YOUR COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY?**

**5. WHY IS GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IMPORTANT AND WHAT SORT OF PARTICIPATION ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?**

**6. WHAT DISCOURAGES, OR ENCOURAGES, GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS?**

**7. LOOKING AHEAD – PRIME MINISTERS, CAMPAIGNERS OR VOTERS? HOW GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN SEE THEIR FUTURE IN POLITICS.**



1.

# WHAT DOES THE WORD POLITICS MEAN TO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?

*"When I hear the term politics, I mean politics in the sense of affairs of state... I'm going to talk about it in the sense of business, state business. I can say it's a way of governing. It's a way of managing the State affairs..."*

**MINERVA, 23, TOGO**



PALACIO LEGISLATIVO



Credit: Plan International

In order to understand how girls and young women conceptualise politics, and provide a framework for our subsequent findings, participants in both sets of qualitative interviews were asked an open question. What do you associate with the term politics? Overwhelmingly, regardless of context or experience of political participation, respondents associated the word politics with the formal political sphere, and for many, particularly among the activist group, it was a negative term.

Amongst the *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* girls who felt able to answer this question,<sup>62</sup> politics was generally linked to governance and political leaders, including a country's president, government ministers, and local mayors, and was often discussed in neutral terms. In El Salvador, Benin, the Philippines, and Togo, girls discussed politics in relation to elections and voting as well as political candidates who had visited their homes and communities during election periods. For participants in Vietnam, Benin, and Togo politics was the governance or

management of societies and communities. Just one girl mentioned democracy in her interpretation of politics and linked political parties with "peace".

*"In my humble opinion, politics is democracy; parties are the culture of peace."*

**FEZIRE, 16, RCRL, TOGO**



Activists from Belgium, Malawi and Germany associated politics with the exercise of power:

*"I always associate politics with who has the power to decide for a larger group and how do we allocate that power? So, in a democracy we decide to do that by voting, which is pretty cool, I think, but then who gets to participate in those voting structures? So, for me it's really about power structures."*

**ANNA, 23, GERMANY**



In El Salvador, Brazil and the Philippines *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* interviewees frequently associated politics with corruption.

*"They give out money in exchange for vote. In short, vote-buying."*

**REYNA, 15, RCRL, PHILIPPINES**



*"When I hear that word, the first thing that comes to my mind is theft. Because all the people who are elected to represent us end up stealing public money."*

**BIANCA, 16, RCRL, BRAZIL**



There were, however, some isolated examples of girls and young women making positive associations with politics.

*"I feel like politics and policies and policies are always making decisions in relation to people's lives...But I also think that I relate them all to justice, to fairness and to rights, because I feel that politics is also like that means for societies to be fairer and more equitable."*

**AURORA, 20, ECUADOR**



Overall, responses to this question reveal a relatively narrow definition of politics. This, in turn, may mean that girls and young women underestimate the true scope of their political participation and may lead them to answer questions only by reference to a particular kind of political leader: one occupying formal political office. And, in the main, neither young nor female.



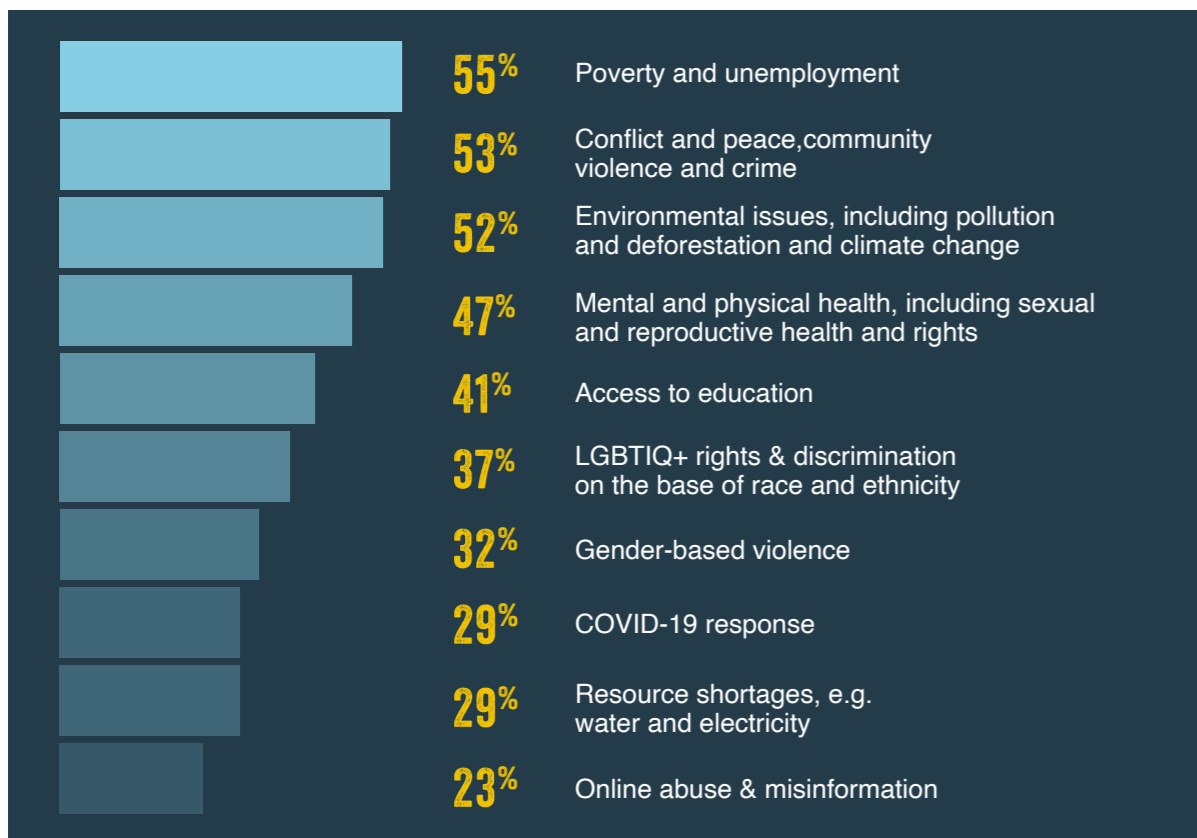
2.

# WHICH POLITICAL ISSUES DO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN CARE ABOUT MOST?

In order to understand which political issues girls and young women were most concerned about, participants in both interview groups and those taking part in the survey were asked about the issues they consider to be priorities for political action. Across all three groups, although a diverse range of issues were identified, **poverty and unemployment were clear priorities, as were environmental issues and concerns about violence and conflict.** Amongst the activists, gender equality and wider concerns about the functioning of political systems and the lack of civil and political rights and freedoms, were also frequently mentioned.

**Survey respondents** were asked to identify five priorities for political action from among 15 options: poverty and unemployment; conflict and peace, community violence and crime; environmental issues, including pollution and climate change; mental and physical health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to education emerged as the top priorities.

## PRIORITIES FOR POLITICAL ACTION

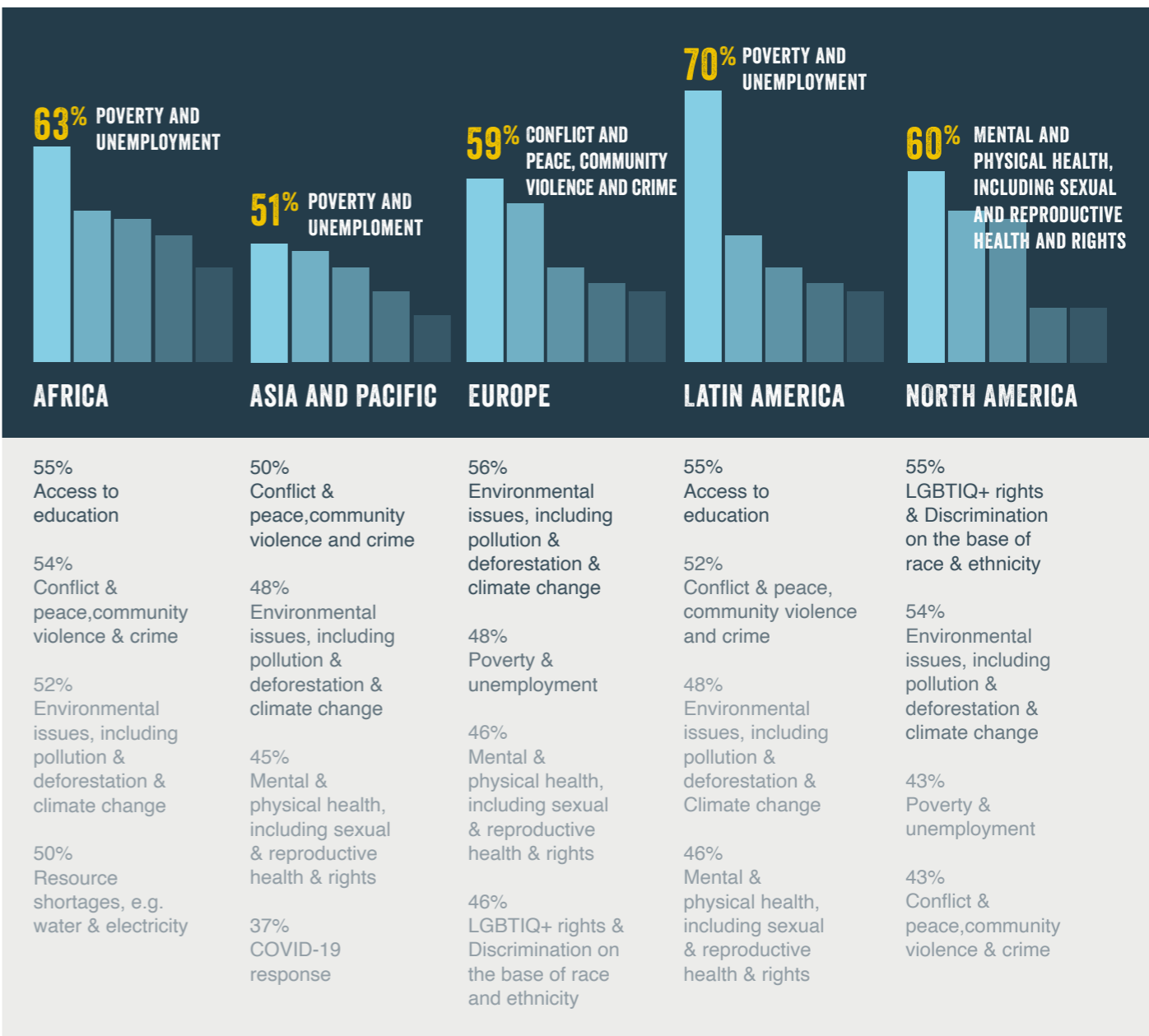


Priorities for political action differed significantly by location and country income. In Africa, Asia and the Pacific and in Latin America, where 70 per cent of survey respondents flagged this issue, poverty and unemployment are the top priorities. Interviews with girls from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study back up the survey findings: in the Dominican Republic, Togo and El Salvador, the lack of employment for young people was raised as a key issue.

Survey respondents in North America and Europe chose mental and physical health and peace and

conflict respectively as priorities. Concerns about resource shortages which are at 50 per cent in the Africa region fall to approximately 20 per cent in North America, Asia and the Pacific and Europe. As you might expect, countries at the lower end of the income range consistently placed resource shortages in their top five priorities. Environmental issues are prioritised by around 50 per cent across all regions and access to education is very much a priority in Africa and Latin America.

## PRIORITIES FOR POLITICAL ACTION BY REGION







“Let’s think of how are girls able to go back to school? And when we talk of girls, let’s not forget that during COVID 19, we had girls that got pregnant in that process. How are we going to make sure that even those girls are able to still go back to school and pursue their dreams and their careers?”

**RAINBOW, 22, UGANDA**

Credit: Plan International

Education, particularly girls’ education, was the most commonly mentioned priority amongst the activists’ interviews and was highlighted by almost half of the girls and young women in this group. Activists from Togo, Uganda and Peru discussed their concerns about how school closures during COVID-19, which increased rates of early pregnancy, may be widening the gender gap in education. Issues related to violence against girls and women were mentioned across both sets of interviews. In the survey, gender-based violence emerged as a higher priority in Africa and Latin America than in the other regions. Amongst the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls, the lack of safety in their community was of particular concern in Latin America and the Caribbean and for some of the girls in Vietnam and Benin.

“The lack of safety that we, girls and women have to face. When we go out on the street at night, we are afraid because we’re not sure of anything. There are a lot of bad people out there and we feel threatened... afraid of something happening... of a possible rape happening.”

**BIANCA, 16, RCRL, BRAZIL**

Location and income play a significant role in the priorities selected but answers also break down in other ways. Survey responses from those belonging

to the various minority groups were similar to each other but different to the general population. Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ are particularly concerned about discrimination and LGBTIQ+ rights and mental and physical health, for example. Sixty per cent of those identifying as having a disability were most concerned with mental and physical health and this is also a priority issue for other minority groups. However, despite these differences, concerns about the environment, violence and conflict, and poverty and unemployment remain of primary importance across all groups.

In the interviews with *Real Choices, Real Lives* participants, many cited concerns about pollution and the impact of climate change on agriculture and food. Water scarcity, or in some cases flooding, was affecting crops. Prices were on the rise. Girls could see their families struggling and economic issues were a major cause for concern as they saw not only food costs but fuel and other household necessities increasing in price. They could see the impact of all this on their educational prospects and were also concerned for people’s mental health.

“It seems that every year prices go up more, and people get more stressed, with bills, debts...”

**JULIANA, 16, RCRL, BRAZIL**

Across both sets of interviews girls’ priorities for political action are grounded in their daily lives. They watch crops fail, food prices rise and families struggling with day-to-day expenses. They worry about health, education, war and violence and much of this is compounded by the particular impact that poverty and violence have on them as girls and young women. They struggle to imagine a better future. Many of the activists highlighted the lack of meaningful participation of girls and young women in political decision-making processes and the unequal representation of women in political leadership. For them a better future rests in political and social change, in girls and young women being accepted as equal, and recognised as competent.

“...We need an independent woman who knows, well, our rights as a woman and as youth to be presented in this parliament. And I think it is hard for us since they don’t want such a woman to be represented in the parliament... And also to make our youth think more about their rights and to express their opinions. When we express our opinions and know our rights well, then we will have a new generation that will make a change and get what we want.”

**JEN, 23, LEBANON**

## EQUAL POWER PROFILE

### THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST AND VICE-PRESIDENT



“Our governments have turned their backs on the people, on justice and on peace. If they had done their job properly, I wouldn’t be here.”<sup>63</sup>

Francia Elena Márquez Mina is a Colombian human-rights and environmental activist and lawyer, who is the vice president of Colombia. She first became an activist at 13 when the construction of a dam threatened her community. In 2018, Márquez led a protest march of 80 women who trekked 560 kilometres (350 miles) to the capital city of Bogotá, and demanded the removal of all illegal miners from their community. She was awarded the Goldman Environmental award for her work to stop illegal gold mining. Márquez is an agricultural technician graduate from the National Learning Service of Colombia and obtained a law degree from the University of Santiago de Cali in 2020. She is a single mother of two children, was pregnant with her first child at 16 and worked as a maid to pay the bills.

Photo above: Francia Márquez, by The Left, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



3.

# HOW DO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN RATE THEIR CURRENT POLITICAL LEADERSHIP? IS IT REPRESENTATIVE, RESPONSIVE AND HONEST?

*"There are some who only want votes, so that they can have the election, but they don't take into account that people need them... Because they only think about themselves... they kind of forget about the adolescents. they don't help them, they only help the people who are most convenient for them."*

**SHARINA, 16, RCRL, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

## PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL LEADERS

POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL LEADERS IN MY COUNTRY...	...DISAGREE	...NEITHER	...AGREE
know and understand the views of girls and young women	45%	25%	30%
act in the best interest of girls and young women	43%	26%	31%
are available to speak to girls and young women about their concerns	42%	24%	33%
support making politics accessible and inclusive for girls and young women	33%	27%	40%
are representative of the communities they serve	34%	27%	39%
take action on the issues that I consider a priority for political action	38%	28%	34%

The research findings overall show that girls and young women hold mixed views about their political leaders and the survey findings highlight this: 40 per cent of survey respondents agree that politicians support girls' participation in politics, against 33 per cent who don't agree; 43 per cent feel that politicians do not act in the best interests of girls and young women, while 31 per cent think they do.

Notable differences emerged between regions, with girls in Latin America being significantly more negative about their leaders than girls in Asia, and respondents in Africa the most likely to say that the decisions of their leaders had made them stop engaging in politics altogether.

Girls and young women who identify as LGBTIQ+ and those from minority backgrounds were also found to hold more negative views.

**59%** of respondents who identify as LGBTIQ+ say that politicians fail to understand the views of girls and young women.

Globally, only one in three think politicians take action on the issues that matter to them and more than half have lost trust in political leaders as a result.

Only **11%** of survey participants reported that they were generally happy with their leaders' decisions on issues they care about.

When asked how decisions made by politicians and their actions made them feel, 62 per cent of respondents reported that the actions of their political leaders made them feel sad, stressed worried, anxious or unsafe.



### SPEAKING OUT: INTERVIEWEES HAVE THEIR SAY.

In the interviews, responses were certainly not uniform but one common theme was a frustration that commitments made by political leaders were often not translated into action.

*"I feel a lot of things are, to me, kind of like cheap talk, so to say. Because I feel in politics, it's a lot of talking, but not as much doing or not as much making words true or putting actions behind words."*

**JULIETTE, 21, BELGIUM**

The failure of politicians to keep their promises to local communities was a recurrent complaint and several participants noted that commitments, made particularly in relation to young people, often did not come to fruition after leaders were elected.

*"The politicians, during that campaign, they complain about it. But once they're given the position, they forget about the young people."*

**UNIQUÉ, 23, SOUTH SUDAN**

Across the *Real Choices, Real Lives* interviews, opinions about politicians were based very much on what they were doing locally. They were largely positive in Benin, Togo and Vietnam where girls pointed to tangible benefits.

*"They [political leaders and representatives] educate us on how not to get COVID-19 and they build schools for us to go to school."*

**LELEM, 16, RCRL, TOGO**

However, they were more negative in Brazil, Philippines, El Salvador and Dominican Republic where there was a general feeling that political leaders were not doing enough to help people in their circumstances and it was the practical actions, or lack of them, that mattered.

*"Most students drop out due to the difficulty of the road and mud especially during the rainy season."*

**CHRISTINE, 16, RCRL, PHILIPPINES**

This concern with their local communities and girls' and young women's preference for local engagement is a theme across the research. It is very much a route into political participation as girls and young women can, and will, use the evidence in front of them to demand change.

Will the dissatisfaction with their political representatives which many of them express be a further spur to their own political participation?



4.

# CAN WOMEN BECOME POLITICAL LEADERS AND HOW IS THIS VIEWED IN YOUR COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY?



*"Women leaders are underestimated. Many think they won't be able to make it. That's the challenge I see."*

**DARNA, 16, PHILIPPINES**

*Credit: Plan International*

There is ample evidence that women, and particularly young women, face a host of gendered barriers to becoming political leaders. In order to understand how girls viewed this discrimination and its likely impact on them, a range of questions were asked about attitudes to girls and young women in politics: how are they treated, are they visible in positions of leadership, how acceptable is young female leadership to the communities they live in?

**Only half of survey respondents believed that it was acceptable for girls and young women to become political leaders.**

**1 in 10 girls surveyed believe women are not qualified to be political leaders.**

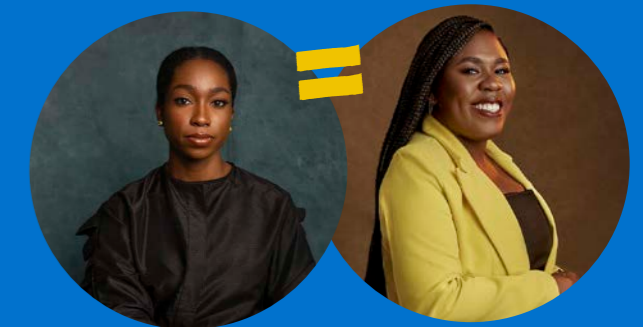
**40%** of survey respondents agreed that female politicians suffer abuse and intimidation and that they are judged for how they look or dress.

The survey responses also revealed that girls' perceptions of gender and age norms surrounding political leadership were consistent across minority groups but differed between regions. The regional findings are not straightforward, with respondents in Africa reporting that girls' and young women's political leadership was acceptable but a lot more of them, than in other areas, nevertheless thinking that women are not qualified for leadership. Possibly the abuse and belittlement of women politicians, reported particularly by girls and young women in Africa, is undermining their overall confidence in women's leadership.

- ➔ Close to 80 per cent of respondents in Africa agreed that it would be acceptable for girls and young women to become political leaders at different levels.
- ➔ Across other regions, the percentage of girls and young women reporting this is significantly lower, ranging from 34 per cent to 57 per cent.
- ➔ Twenty-two per cent of respondents in Africa reported that girls and young women are not qualified to be leaders, compared to an average six per cent of respondents across all other regions.
- ➔ Respondents in Africa were most likely to report that female politicians face intimidation and abuse and are judged by the way they look or dress.
- ➔ Respondents in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to report that it is acceptable to become a female leader.

## EQUAL POWER PROFILE

### THE FEMINIST ENTREPRENEURS



*"Nigeria is a deeply patriarchal society, and that means not only are women's voices often silenced but young people are treated as second-class citizens. We all matter and deserve to be treated with human dignity and respect, regardless of age and other discriminating factors."*<sup>65</sup>

Damilola Odufuwa and Odunayo Eweniyi are successful tech entrepreneurs and young feminist leaders from Nigeria. In 2020 they joined forces, along with committed women from many different walks of life, to create the Feminist Coalition, which focuses on women's rights and safety, economic empowerment, and the political participation of women. Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school girls in the world, and one of Africa's lowest rates of female parliamentary representation, globally ranking 181 of 193 countries.<sup>64</sup> They are on a mission to champion equality for women in Nigerian society with a core focus on education, financial freedom, and representation in public office. For its first project, the organisation supported the 2020 #EndSARS protests that called for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad and an end to police brutality. Their activism has brought with it abuse and harassment and a lot of anxiety for their families and friends. The Feminist Coalition is calling for better representation in leadership roles for women, fair pay and a recognition across the entire society that the many barriers holding women and girls back must be identified and removed.





## SPEAKING OUT: INTERVIEWEES HAVE THEIR SAY.

In the qualitative interviews, girls described how notions of leadership are gendered, often in subtle and complex ways.

*"But as a woman I've noticed that, for myself and with my friends, and with the people that I work with, you prepare very differently for participating in a political discussion than men and boys do. I feel that men and boys are encouraged just by nature to be in those spaces whereas as a female, you feel that space isn't made for you."*

**ANNA, 23, GERMANY**

When asked whether they saw women in positions of political leadership, most of the *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* girls were able to give examples, particularly at community level, and several of the activists also had examples of women leaders.

*"I don't think it's equal between men and women, but I do think that there's more women than there used to be, and that the number of women is growing."*

**JULIETTE, 21, BELGIUM**

Many activists, however, observed persistent gender gaps in political leadership at all levels. Young women from Lebanon, South Sudan, Jordan and Malawi were all concerned about the limited representation of women at the national level, particularly in parliament.

*"Most of the political positions are occupied by the men. The women are few in those posts of governance."*

**UNIQUE, 23, SOUTH SUDAN**

Responses from *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* girls in Benin, Brazil, Philippines and Vietnam also indicated a clear gender gap in political leadership. Where there were women in political roles, girls noted that they were often the exception - the sole woman on a local council otherwise made up of men. In Brazil, several girls also noted that where there were women in political leadership positions, they were usually white.<sup>66</sup>

*"It's rare for us to see a Black woman leading"*

**NATALIA, 15, RCRL, BRAZIL**

Several of the activists, echoing findings from the survey, also highlighted the challenges and threats faced by women in positions of political leadership.

*"I remember there was an incident in 2019, where two females were actually undressed just because they publicly affiliated themselves with a certain political party. So, the other political party got mad: 'You females, you're not supposed to publicly say this.'"*

**ZOE, 23, MALAWI**

In both sets of interviews, and across contexts, girls and young women were highly conscious of how notions of leadership are gendered and how expectations of women in leadership positions differed from those of men.

*"We all say to ourselves, this is a woman. What is she looking for in politics? There is a lot of underestimation of women's capacity... we don't say to ourselves that she has abilities, that she has influence and that she is able to influence. But we say to ourselves that... maybe it's because a man helped her... It's like women are so lame that they can't do anything. It's really difficult. They are not encouraged, especially in this field."*

**NATUREL, 16, TOGO**

Responses from *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* girls in the Philippines and Vietnam revealed that while women leaders were seen positively, there is a clear distinction between the qualities that women leaders were expected to possess in comparison with men. They are described as kind and approachable, though not lacking in courage.

*"It means she is kind because she has the heart to help poor people and brave because she has the ability to lead with conviction. To girls like me, to be an example to the youth here and have the courage."*

**JASMINE, 15, RCRL, PHILIPPINES**

In contrast male leaders are frequently described as strong, being able to resolve disputes and having an overall ability to get things done. Everywhere gendered expectations of a woman's place and her abilities hold women and girls back: not least because girls and young women themselves have grown up with them.

*"For generations we have been sold this image... if they make me close my eyes and imagine a political person... I would have immediately thought of a man with a tie, because those are the images that are thrown at us... we don't immediately see a woman or a young woman. So, it's hard for people to believe that a woman, and I insist that a young woman can manage to be in these spaces. It's a kind of behaviour that we have learnt from generation to generation."*

**AURORA, 20, ECUADOR**

There are signs of progress: in some contexts, girls and young women observed that views were changing over time.

*"The old world... still sees women as a sexual object and an object of the house, that the woman has to stay here and clean the house, do the other things, take care of the children and the man is the one who has to work. But in these times the old world must understand that here we are, in the middle of an era where all young people are on the internet."*

**VALENTINA, 19, PERU**

However, the research tells us that there is a long way to go: leadership is still configured in the male image. Women leaders struggle to be taken seriously and when in power are judged more harshly than their male colleagues.

*"If a male leader and female leader make the same mistake, the female leader will be blamed more."*

**HANG, 15, RCRL, VIETNAM**



5.

## WHY IS GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IMPORTANT AND WHAT SORT OF PARTICIPATION ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

There was overwhelming agreement that girls and young women should participate in politics. They had many different reasons and many different ways of doing this.

Girls and young women everywhere viewed their participation in politics as important in terms of acting as role models for the next generation: survey respondents in Africa and North America placed particular importance on this, while those in Latin America prioritised making political spaces more inclusive. In low-income countries, respondents saw young women's

participation as particularly instrumental in tackling corruption, promoting peace and placing more emphasis on social justice. Survey respondents from minority groups, or identifying as LGBTIQ+, also emphasised, as might be expected, the importance of making political spaces more inclusive and representative.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS?



The question remained – what form does girls' and young women's participation in politics take? Is it active, frequent, local or national?

And if 97 per cent of survey respondents agree that participating is important, how many actually do participate in one way or another?

**83%** of girls and young women surveyed had some experience of participating in or engaging with politics

Evidence from the survey also shows that, contrary to the assumption that young people are more likely to participate through informal channels, formal modes of political participation, notably voting, were more common than informal activities. Voting was the most popular way of engaging with politics, running for office the least - though a substantial minority would consider it:

**24%** of survey respondents who are keen to engage in politics are also prepared to stand for political office.

Girls' and young women's political activities also included engaging with and following political discussion on various platforms — using both traditional media and social media — participating in discussion groups at school, campaigning, and joining activist associations and other social groups in their local community.

**63%** of girls and young women belong to some form of group or organisation

- Girls and young women from the Africa region are the most engaged with politics.
- Membership of social groups, voluntary community groups and feminist/girl and young women groups is notably higher in Africa than in other regions.
- Overall, participation appears highest in low-income countries, and seems to decrease on average as country income increases.
- Participants who identify as LGBTIQ+, having a disability or belonging to a minority are overall more likely to say they joined an online group or social movement and that they have signed a petition either online or in person.
- Those identifying as belonging to a minority group are more likely to belong to a feminist organisation or association and to campaign about an issue they care about.
- Respondents living in rural areas are overall more likely to report having voted or persuaded others to vote.

## EQUAL POWER PROFILE

### THE STUDENT ACTIVIST



*“Any decision made without me is against me... girls everywhere must stand together and fight for their rights.”*

Khadija, 25, is a Senagalese student in her second year of a project management course. She is the President of the Backa Sister create network - a project set up by Plan International Senegal which uses theatre, music and art to campaign for girls' rights and for them to be heard, and heeded, in their communities. Khadija has been a community activist from an early age and lobbies local politicians to promote the interests of girls and young women and make sure they cannot be ignored. For her, girls' participation in the decisions that will affect their lives is crucial: “Any decision made without me is against me.” She campaigns to raise awareness around critical issues like early pregnancy: adolescent girls need information and so do their parents and community members and with the Backa Sister create network they get it through theatre, singing and art. As she says, “girls everywhere must stand together and fight for their rights.” And as she and her organisation demonstrate they must use all means at their disposal.





## SPEAKING OUT: INTERVIEWEES HAVE THEIR SAY.

Experiences of political participation between the activists, who have been involved for some time with Plan International's work for girls' rights, and the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls were, as to be expected, very different. Many of the activists described involvement in multiple activities, spanning both formal and informal political spheres, from community level to national and even international fora.

The *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls, in contrast, had much lower levels of experience with political participation, and in most countries very few had experience of participating in formal political processes. However, echoing the survey findings, many of them did report activities such as reading about a political issue online or following a political discussion on the news which suggests that many of them are interested in politics and political participation, even if this interest has not translated into action.

*"I watched [online] what's going on in our country, political issues about who's the strong contender for the presidency, what 's the status of COVID-19, weather updates if there's a typhoon coming, and what's going on in the war in Russia and Ukraine."*

**CHESA, 16, RCRL, PHILIPPINES**

In Vietnam, many reported participating in community level activities through their local Youth Unions. Hang is Secretary of her Youth Union and a core cadre of her local Schoolgirl Club, which organises capacity building and advocacy activities for girls from ethnic minorities.

*"By participating in the club, I learn more deeply about women and girls' rights in general and especially ethnic schoolgirls in particular. Normally my club holds meetings to discuss the issues of strengthening women and girls' rights by propagandising other schoolmates, families, villages and communes."*

**HANG, 15, RCRL, VIETNAM**

Juliana from Brazil is the only interviewee from *Real Choices, Real Lives* who had taken part in a political protest, describing class walk-outs by students which achieved their aim:

*"We left classes very, very early, because we didn't have a teacher. It was about the lack of... of water, of snacks, of toilets, of everything. So, we made this protest and went to one of our teachers, the science teacher, who helped us. And when the director saw it, he got mad about it and decided to do something. Over time, things got better."*

**JULIANA, 15, RCRL, BRAZIL**

The activists interviewed campaign for gender equality and girls' rights and are involved in promoting social norm change in their communities. Many are focused particularly on eradicating violence against women and girls. Other issues include early pregnancy and child, early and forced marriage and unions, girls' education and the political participation of girls and women. They also recognise the importance of participation in formal political processes to bring about the changes they want to see.

*"I have a title of 'Head of Youth Advisory Committee'.... Whenever the government is having any policy or having any project which impacts on us, we do advisory on that. We read the proposal, see what is going to be some of the obstacles or what is going to be a restriction, does it support everyone, or does it hurt anyone in the community?"*

**JANELL, 24, VIETNAM**

## EFFECTIVE WAYS TO PARTICIPATE, ACCORDING TO THE ACTIVISTS WE SPOKE TO:

→ Views on voting were largely positive though some were put off by the narrow scope of representation and/or by corruption in politics.

*"I feel that voting is very important because it introduces us to political life, always and whenever it is a conscious vote, to know for whom we are voting and that these people will respond to our interests and to our families and society."*

**AURORA, 20, ECUADOR**

→ Some activists felt that **formal participation**, through advisory groups and youth councils for example, could be tokenistic. Girls and young women were not always comfortable with formality and **social movements** were often viewed as effective and complementary to more formal political participation. Creative activities as a means of organising, promoting awareness and expressing political views included organising festivals, the use of cinema, theatre or public performances, producing a radio soap opera were all mentioned as campaigning strategies.

*"There's always a very formalised way on how to participate and how to get there. Those ways mostly have not been designed for females to be there... And that's why I think social movements play such a big role when we talk about girls in politics in general, because the barriers are less, the access to the space is easier... We have to push both, I guess."*

**ANNA, 23, GERMANY**

→ Activists recognise that, while social movements and collective action could get issues onto the political agenda, to be effective and sustainable, change always needs to be embedded in laws and policies.

*"Yes, it is necessary and I think it is the indispensable complement to ... the collective, social struggle, the social collectives, and then to move on to formality so that it is written down, so that there are precedents, so that the new generations can adapt it to their reality."*

**AURORA, 20, ECUADOR**

→ Online activism was viewed largely positively as an opportunity to join with like-minded people and to acquire new information. Several of the activists described using a variety of online platforms for the purposes of mobilisation, awareness raising and campaigning - Facebook, WhatsApp, Tiktok and YouTube were all mentioned.

*"And I think that if people are active on social networks and talking about women's leadership issues and so on, it can help a lot of young girls and young men to find their way. And I also think that this is the easiest way today to reach people quickly, a large number of people."*

**MINERVA, 23, TOGO**

→ The activists' comments on how to participate were by and large supported by the *Real Choices, Real Lives* interviewees who, though too young to vote, apart from in Brazil, mostly intended to. They also supported collective action and public pressure as a way to draw attention to the issues that concerned them, particularly in their local communities. They pointed out that holding a public protest is a way for young people, who are too young to vote and whose voices are generally ignored, to get their views across to political leaders.

*"Participate in a march or rally, because the authorities do not receive young people when they go to their homes to present their problems."*

**ANTI-YARA, 16, RCRL, TOGO**



6.

# WHAT DISCOURAGES, OR ENCOURAGES, GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS?

## The Influence of Others

The actions and attitudes of those in power are very much key to how the survey respondents viewed participation in politics: they cited politicians not listening to girls and young women, a lack of politicians to inspire engagement, and politics not being open to young women or girls' participation as central to an overall disengagement.

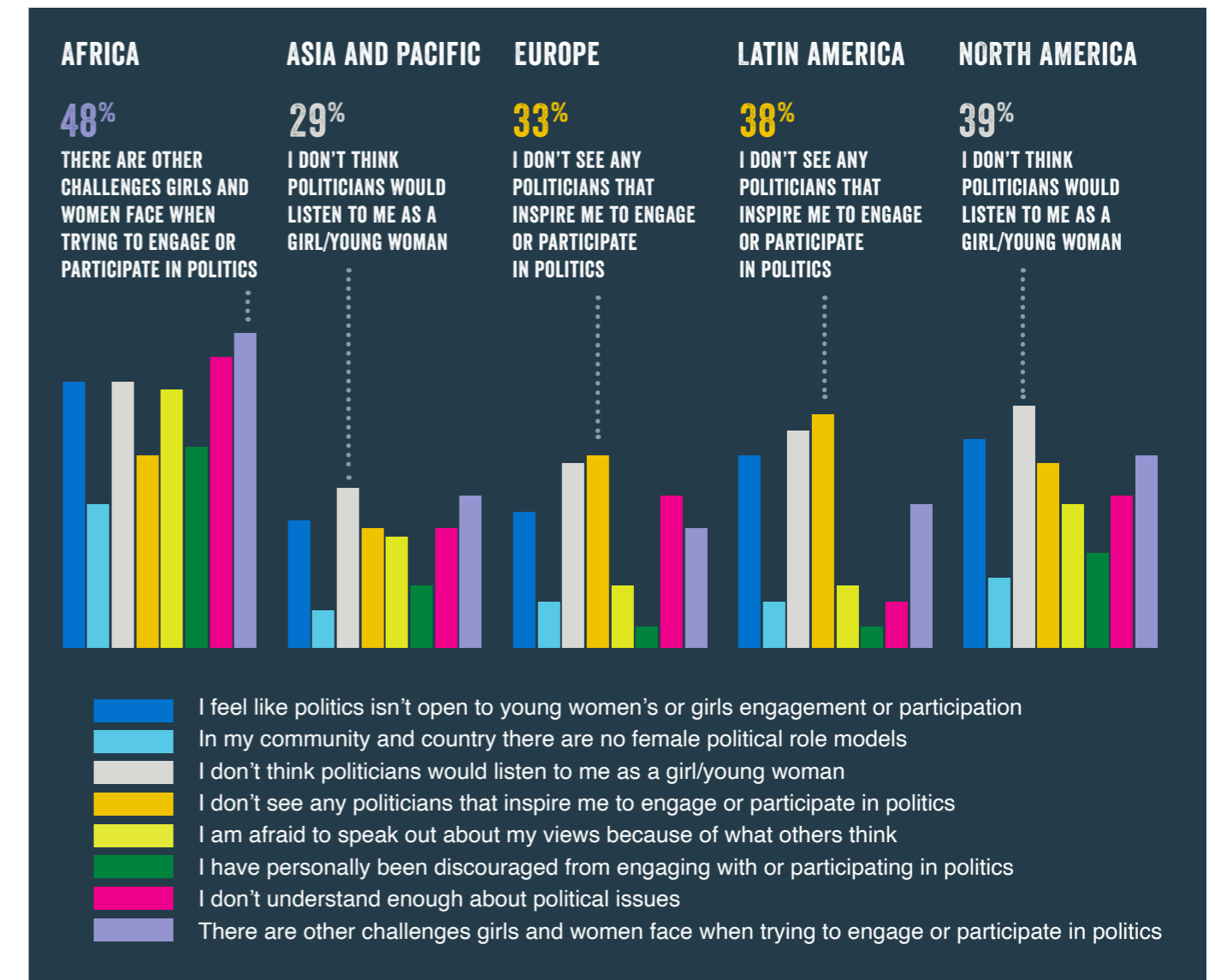
Challenges to political participation are mentioned more frequently by respondents from Africa and the Middle East and North American regions compared to respondents from Europe, and Asia and the Pacific. However, respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean were more likely than those in other regions to report that they don't see any politicians who inspire them to participate – very much in line with the negative perceptions of political leaders expressed earlier by girls in this region. The findings in this section show just how pervasive the social norms which discourage girls' and young women's political participation are.

**94% OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED BARRIERS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**



Credit: Plan International

## PERCEIVED CHALLENGES TO GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION BY REGION



Girls' and young women's engagement and participation is strongly shaped by what is acceptable to the communities they live in. Only 50 per cent of girls say that it would be acceptable for them to try and influence community or national leaders. There seems to be more leeway about using social media: 65 per cent of girls say that, in their communities, it would be acceptable to use the internet or social media to bring about change.

However, in lower income countries, 80 per cent of girls and young women surveyed thought it would be okay for them to become state or national leaders compared to 39 per cent in upper middle-income countries and 51 per cent in high income countries. Respondents identifying as LGBTIQ, similarly to those identifying as having a disability,

are significantly less likely to say that it is acceptable for them to participate or engage in politics.

Overall, there is a relationship between the percentage of women in national parliaments and the number of girls and young women identifying specific challenges to participation. On average, the lower the representation of women in parliament, the higher the percentage of girls and young women who note barriers to participation.

However, despite the obstacles in their way, survey respondents felt that political participation was easier for them than it had been for their mothers and grandmothers. Possibly because what is deemed appropriate female behaviour is shifting, or due to the advent and greater accessibility of the internet and social media.





## SPEAKING OUT: INTERVIEWEES HAVE THEIR SAY.

In the qualitative interviews, too, girls and young women are under no illusions about the scale of the challenges they face.

*"There is no awareness that patriarchal structures still exist to a huge level. And that is what I feel is the greatest barrier. Because if you don't acknowledge that, or if society doesn't acknowledge that, your problems or barriers will always be regarded as something that roots entirely in your individual person, which is just not the case."*

**ANNA, 23, GERMANY**

Insights from the qualitative interviews also reveal the ways in which norms linked to both age and gender create barriers: not being listened to or not being taken seriously is the most common concern for girls across both the survey and the interviews and results in a diminished sense of political worth.

*"Because no matter what we say, they won't listen. For example, when someone came to complain, nothing happens..."*

**REYNA, 15, RCRL, PHILIPPINES**

This was the main barrier to participation faced by the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls, it was cited by girls in Brazil, Philippines, Togo and Vietnam and described as a humiliating combination of ageism and sexism:

*"They think we're too young to talk about it, that we don't know anything... because it's a girl talking, and they'll think it's not a priority"*

**AMANDA, 15, RCRL, BRAZIL**

Activists too mentioned the condescension and the lack of any real interest in what young women have to contribute.

*"There was a time we went to a place...talking about how women can participate in being leaders in the society. We got several opinions like, 'Do you even know what you're doing? You are very young. So, I'm pretty sure you don't know....' People ignore you because of your age."*

**MARCHESSA, 22, TANZANIA**

Girls and young women also described how they have observed violence, harassment or abuse against women political leaders, including against activists, which in some cases has discouraged their participation. Some of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls were worried that girls may be subject to violence for raising issues with authorities in their community.

Across both groups, girls and young women spoke about how political systems are structured in ways which limit their ability to voice their opinions and can discourage them from trying. Only one *Real Choices, Real Lives* girl mentioned that she had attempted to raise an issue with local leadership, and the experience was not positive. Not only did the local leader ignore her concerns about poor roads to school but she was also scolded by another government employee for speaking out.

*"When I know I'm right, I don't cry. I also learned from my parents because if you cry, you will be repeatedly oppressed, and you should have the courage to defend yourself to other people."*

**CHRISTINE, 16, RCRL, PHILIPPINES**

Resistance from communities gets more intransigent when activists are campaigning on issues, like gender equality or child marriage, that challenge social norms.

*"Trying to make sure that you talk to them about issues of gender equality, of giving girls equal opportunities, of letting girls continue with their studies, instead of forcing them into early marriages. It's a very tricky thing... to talk to this person about the things that they have been considering normal for a long period."*

**RAINBOW, 22, UGANDA**

The responses from activists also reveal the myriad ways in which restrictions on civic space are obstructing politically active girls and young women. In some cases, young women had been personally targeted, threatened or investigated by authorities.

*"I made some movies, but the municipality just tried to stop me. They ask the security to come and arrest me... I was 17... I said that I have a paper that allows me to make this activity in this school. And I presented everything... And I continued the activity and nothing happened with me, but they tried to talk about me, on the social media [they said] a lot of bad things, that 'I'm a big, bad girl.' And I was 'trying to present porn videos for kids in the country.'"*

**JEN, 23, LEBANON**

Other activists, from a wide array of countries, described the various ways in which restrictions on civil society affect their activities. These ranged from the threat of jail, to clampdowns by authorities on street protests, to legal restrictions which limit their ability to organise, or mean that they require approval from authorities for their activities.

Many of the barriers mentioned in the context of girls' and women's political participation echo the barriers and challenges girls perceive women leaders facing which were discussed earlier. This suggests that they apply across the board and indicate that girls' and young women's early experiences of political participation are marred by similar challenges to those faced by older women and are compounded by their age.

*"Politics is a very tricky thing, and in order for you to be part of it, you must be well informed of what is taking place, of what you need to do... because politics is all about convincing the larger group that you're capable... And when you don't have that knowledge and information, when you don't have that self-confidence, you'll be left behind. And most of the girls and young women lack that."*

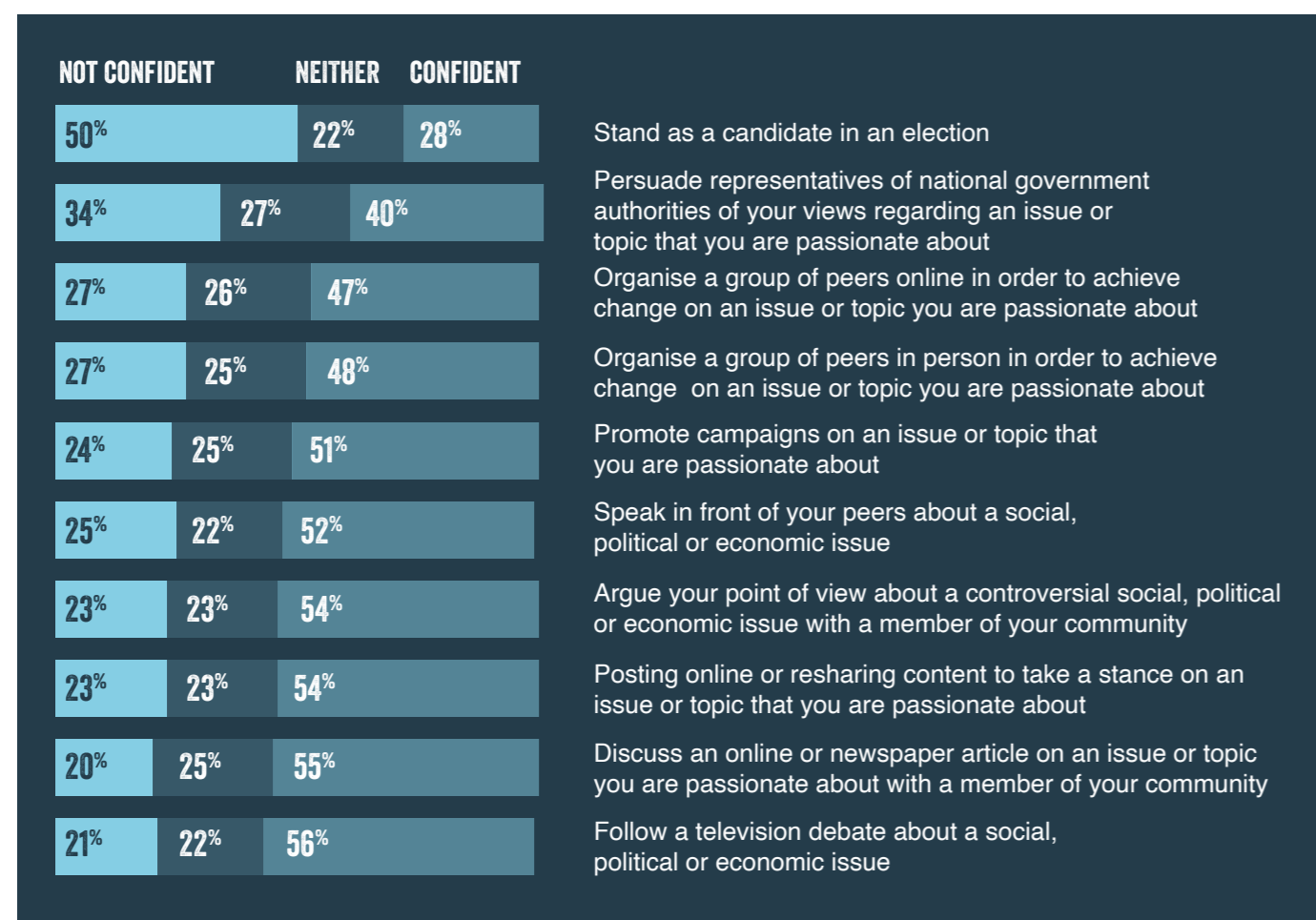
**RAINBOW, 22, UGANDA**



## Individual Confidence and Self-Belief

In addition to social circumstances and the attitudes of the community you live in, evidence shows that girls' and young women's likelihood of participating in politics is strongly influenced by more individual experiences, which shape their personal political identities, values and behaviours and can create resilience and nourish self-esteem, or not. Feeling confident in your abilities, in the knowledge and skills you possess and, in your right to be heard is crucially important.

### CONFIDENCE TO ENGAGE IN POLITICAL ACTIVITIES



Nearly **50%** of survey respondents reported not being confident, or unsure about their confidence, when it came to political participation.

A lack of confidence is mentioned fairly evenly across the geographical regions. Overall respondents from lower income countries feel more confident in their political engagement than those from higher income countries. Those identifying with a racial, ethnic or religious minority report greater confidence, compared to participants overall. Respondents identifying as LGBTIQ+, or as having a disability feel less confident.

Lack of knowledge and political skills may also contribute to the lack of confidence survey respondents reported. Although the majority of them felt they knew something about the political workings in their country and community they reported having a better knowledge of voting systems than they did of how to hold politicians to account once they were in power.

**54%** of respondents said they had gained their political knowledge at home, **52%** said at school or university and **50%** said online from social media.



## SPEAKING OUT: INTERVIEWEES HAVE THEIR SAY.

Responses across both qualitative interviewee groups reinforce the importance both of self-confidence and of civic education and understanding political systems.

Amongst the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls, knowledge of their rights, and seeing themselves as rights-holders, appeared to increase their feelings of political effectiveness. All girls who spoke about themselves as rights-holders said that they could influence their leaders or representatives.

*"Yes, at school we were taught that we also have rights. So, I can go to the delegate to give my opinion on a decision we have to take. I can write a letter to the district chief and the mayor. If I go to the delegate and he has not listened to me, I can look for my fellow students who have the same worries as me and we will go together to the head of the district."*

**THEA, 16, RCRL, BENIN**

Access to this knowledge is not universal and most of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls explained that they find out about political issues obliquely through overhearing what family and other community members are discussing, mirroring findings from the survey. Media was also an influencing factor in how they learned about and discussed politics: with girls in most countries citing the influence of TV and radio and to a lesser extent the internet and social media. Across the seven countries, a number of girls do note discussing political topics at school, although this was less common than family, friends and neighbours.

*"I hear about these problems in my community, in my family and even at school the teachers talk about it; me and my friends also often discuss these problems."*

**NANA- ADJA, 16, RCRL, TOGO**

In two countries, Benin and Vietnam, girls referred to local organisations, including women's and youth groups, where issues were discussed and action taken. Four of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls said they did not hear about politics from anyone: one noting that people around her were just not interested.

As was to be expected, virtually all of the activists engaged in political discussion, most often with their friends and they had some confidence in their ability to bring about change.

*"Yes, I know I can... given a chance to address issues."*

**MARCHESSA, 22, TANZANIA**

Echoing the remarks made by the *Real Choices, Real Lives* interviewees, however, activists also commented that adults made them feel that their views and opinions are not valued.

*"I feel that many times adults... they prefer to talk among adults, because they are rarely the ones who take an interest in an adolescent, because many times, they say 'No, what are adolescents going to know about politics?'"*

**VALENTINA, 19, PERU**

Another activist felt that much adult engagement was tokenistic and led nowhere:

*"Because they are considering us like as young people who lack professional life and professional experience... So we are talking or we were talking, yeah, 'Of course you are welcome to talk, but it's not our mission to take what you said into account.'"*

**SARA, 24, JORDAN**

Across both groups, girls and young women noted differences between the issues discussed by girls and women and those discussed by boys and men, and gender differences in the way issues are discussed. Girls and young women are conscious of being limited by their age and gender. Their self-belief can feel constantly under siege while their access to the knowledge and skills they need to fully participate in society is also harder to access than it should be.

*"I feel women or girls, we are limited to talking about certain issues. The way men would talk about it, it's a little bit different from how females talk about it... I feel males are allowed to talk about everything that they want to, whereas females, it's not like that, female groups are restricted to certain things."*

**ZOE, 23, MALAWI**



## FINDING THE WAY THROUGH

Given the challenges that they face, what skills and knowledge do girls and young women think they need to help them to actively engage in politics, to find their way around a system that seems to be designed to keep them out?

Despite the different levels of experience of political participation, responses to this question were markedly similar across the two interview groups.

- Communication skills were right at the top of the list. While some of the *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* girls said that they had had the opportunity to develop some of these skills through their roles as class monitors and elected secretaries, overall, they made it clear that they would need to work on them much more. Activists also discussed the importance of having the ability and confidence to speak up effectively, to talk to different people, including government officials, and having foreign language skills. Also mentioned was the ability to argue effectively, and being able put forward well-founded and backed up opinions that they could defend.
- A range of personal characteristics were mentioned: strength, courage, confidence, assertiveness, perseverance, perhaps reflecting their perceptions of the qualities needed for women to succeed in male-dominated political spheres, were also cited by both groups. *Real Choices*, *Real Lives* girls from Togo, Benin, Vietnam, and the Philippines added personal qualities such as wisdom and friendliness, which were not mentioned by activists. The range of skills, perceived to be required, was however queried by one of the activists as off-putting and evidence of a double standard:

*"When you say something, I think you have to be sure of yourself. You have to have the sources and the means to be able to defend your idea."*

**MINERVA, 23, TOGO**

*"It's pretty funny, because I think about all those skills, things that people tell me that I should be able to do in order to be able to participate. It's like you need to be this ... and you need to be able to voice your opinion and say that and not be interrupted and be strong and be a little bit cold, but not too cold... We teach women that they need a whole three pages of skills before they even can get to it."*

**ANNA, 23, GERMANY**

- Knowledge and understanding of important issues and overall civic education was also seen by both groups as crucial, including key legislation, political structures and mechanisms. The importance of education more generally was also highlighted by activists, who stressed that this was a foundational block to political understanding and skills.

*"We should be reflecting on our curriculum... what types of topics we are putting in these curricula, are these really linked to politics? Yeah, of course it's important to have history, it's important to have geography, but how are these linked to the nowadays life or to the real life we are experiencing now?"*

**SARA, 24, JORDAN**

## EQUAL POWER PROFILE

### THE YOUNG POLITICIAN



*"We need to tackle patriarchy and break it. And to do that we need to work within schools and preschools and talking to children at a really young age... It feels like sometimes I need to move mountains to get to the place where men just get to. I can get there, but it feels like I need to do more for it and I need to earn it. And men and young boys can just take it."*

Maja Lundqvist, 22, works for Plan International in Sweden and was previously part of their youth advisory panel for seven years. She is soon to start an undergraduate degree in journalism and in her spare time she plays football. Maja has been interested in politics for a long time. She has described herself as an activist but thinks that to bring about effective change you have to engage at a formal political level. For this you need to join a party even if you don't agree with every single policy and she has recently joined the Social Democrats. Many young women, she feels, find that formal political forums can be a bit daunting, probably a bit boring too, and she is trying to create space for young women like her to participate and to make it more fun. She doesn't underestimate how hard political participation can be: *"I didn't dare actually to be political at first because I saw how so many women received hatred, or got threatened. You're being treated in another way than men."* Maja's particular concerns are gender equality, children's rights and climate change. She is now President of Rebella, the young women's branch of the Social Democrat Party. She has been canvassing with Sweden's Prime Minister and talks about how important female role models are to her. Without that support young women in politics have a mountain to climb.



7.

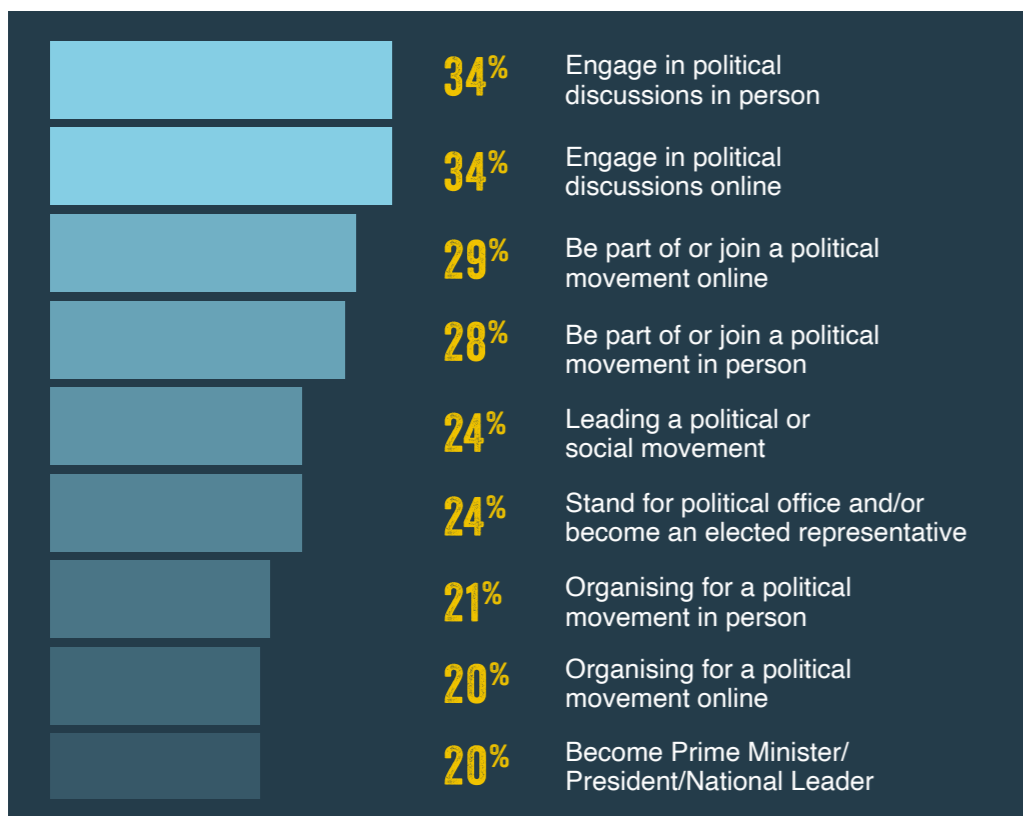
# LOOKING AHEAD – PRIME MINISTERS, CAMPAIGNERS OR VOTERS? HOW GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN SEE THEIR FUTURE IN POLITICS.

Most survey respondents saw themselves as engaged in politics but not particularly actively. There were others who were more ambitious and some who had already decided to disengage entirely. The range of reactions is interesting and illustrates, perhaps, that what puts some participants off may positively energise others.

## FUTURE ASPIRATIONS FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

**21%** OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS REPORTED NOT BEING INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS AT ALL IN THE FUTURE.

**15%** OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS MAY BE INTERESTED IN ENGAGING, BUT NOT IN ANY OF THE WAYS THE SURVEY ASKED ABOUT.



**24%** OF THOSE WHO WERE KEEN TO ENGAGE, WANT TO LEAD A POLITICAL OR SOCIAL MOVEMENT OR STAND FOR POLITICAL OFFICE.

**20%** A FURTHER WISH TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER, PRESIDENT OR A NATIONAL LEADER.

Girls and young women who live in societies where political activity is generally frowned upon seem most keen to participate. Also, the higher the percentage of women in parliament, and as female politicians and activists become more visible, the lower the aspirations of girls to engage and lead.

Given that a lot of research studies, and our own interviewees, have emphasised the importance of role models and representation this is an interesting finding. One possibility is that greater exposure to the difficulties faced by female politicians is making

girls think twice about participating. Or alternatively, as they see other women stepping forward as political leaders, they feel they don't have to.

Respondents identifying as LGBTIQ+ are significantly less likely to want to lead a political or social movement, to stand for office or become a national leader. Those living in rural areas were keen to engage locally and get involved in social movements but much less likely than their urban counterparts to want to become national leaders.



## SPEAKING OUT: INTERVIEWEES HAVE THEIR SAY

The majority of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls in all countries, apart from Togo, said that they would not like to become a political leader, whereas most of the activists said that they would like to, or would consider it, seeing this as an extension of their current activism.

Amongst the girls and young women who did aspire to political leadership, the reasons given were strongly aligned with the survey findings: contributing to their community and their country's progress was a key motivation.

*"To help my community and to make my country evolve; and because when a woman takes the lead in something, it always works out well and it's good to know, she is valued and respected."*

**ESSOHANA, 16, RCRL, TOGO**

Amongst the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls who did not aspire to political leadership, a range of reasons were given: for some the association of leaders with public speaking was an issue. In Vietnam in particular, girls discussed not having the required skills or knowledge to take on a leadership role.

*"Because I find out that when I am a leader, I make a lot of mistakes. Comparing with other monitors, I think they are doing much better than I am."*

**TRINH, 16, VIETNAM**

These responses underline earlier findings about the importance of confidence and how hard it is for so many girls and young women to feel that they can participate as competent leaders and engaged citizens. It seems to be common to girls and women across the world.

Michelle Obama said in 2018 "I wish that girls could fail as bad as men do and be OK. Because let me tell you, watching men fail up — it is frustrating. It's frustrating to see a lot of men blow it and win. And we hold ourselves to these crazy, crazy standards."<sup>67</sup>

Respondents in Benin discussed violence directed at political leaders as a reason for not wanting to become involved in politics. Similarly, several of the activists who did not want to go into positions of political leadership explained how they were put off by their perceptions of what politics is like, and fear of backlash or negativity within political systems, and the media, towards women.

*"To me, politics should be a positive thing, but I think in my perception, it's really not because of all the bad things you hear about it."*

**JULIETTE, 21, BELGIUM**

The activists who expressed a desire to become political leaders spoke about wanting to be a role model, to increase women's representation in politics and to give voice to girls; others wanted to make a difference to their communities, to improve the lives and opportunities of girls and young women and to champion gender equality.



# PROGRAMME AND PRACTICE

## → SHE LEADS

*She Leads* is a five-year programme funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs through Plan International Netherlands, focused on supporting girl- and young women-led activism. It is run by Plan International globally, in partnership with Defence for Children International, Terre des hommes and FEMNET. The programme is implemented in nine countries — Mali, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Jordan and Lebanon — as well as at an international level.

*She Leads Global Advocacy Network* supports girls and young women to engage with and influence international policy processes at the UN: a delegation of 14 girls and young women from West and East Africa was supported to engage with the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women; a further group of 14 girls and young women from six countries across Africa and the Middle East engaged with the Human Rights Council, focusing particularly on the theme of girls' and young women's activism.

## IMPACT

Their presence at this event meant that girls and young women's issues were raised on the policy agenda and for the delegates themselves the experience boosted both confidence and knowledge. They extended their networks and gained a greater understanding of policy mechanisms.

*"There is a lot of advocacy work that girls and young women are doing around the world. They have gained expertise, they have the knowledge, they are masters in their own challenges, they are experts in their own issues."*

**NANCY, SHE LEADS YOUTH DELEGATE, KENYA**

## INITIATIVES AT COUNTRY LEVEL INCLUDE:

### SHE LEADS, JORDAN

*She Leads* programme in Jordan aims to increase the influence of girls and young women on decision-making and to transform gender norms in formal and informal institutions. *She Leads* played a key role in the 16 Days of Activism (16DOA), a national event aimed at increasing the influence of women and girls in public and political spaces through workshops/discussions/awareness sessions conducted across Jordan. These activities, reinforced by local news and social media coverage, have meant an increased focus on gender equality. Collaboration between the Jordan National Commission for Women and Plan Jordan's *She Leads* programme resulted in a national press conference, highlighting for the first time the importance of girls' and young women's rights and participation in public safe spaces. Additionally, Plan International Jordan signed an MOU with the Jordan National Commission for Women to support their Shama'a network: a national network working to eliminate violence against women and unite individuals and organisations working at local level. Participants in the *She Leads* programme get the opportunity to take part in international advocacy and in open discussions about the challenges and obstacles women face in the fight for gender equality.

*"We must rethink and reshape the environment that girls grow up in along with their upbringing... It's important to transform our reality in order to make space for the voices, opinions and thoughts of girls and women."*

**LUJAIN, 17, SHE LEADS, JORDAN**

### SHE LEADS, UGANDA

*She Leads* in Uganda has been reaching out to diverse girls and young women across the country to provide leadership training and to encourage their involvement in their local communities. Girls are supported to interact with religious and community leaders, are trained in advocacy and in understanding laws and policies,

particularly those relevant to advocating for girls' rights and gender equality. The project is raising the profile of girls' and young women's political participation and young female leaders are delivering positive change in their communities.



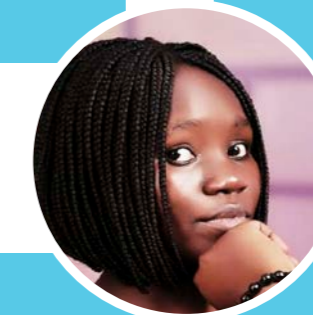
*"It is significant because I have become a leader in my community which is something I had never thought would happen. As a former child mother, I never knew I would have the platforms to influence and create change for girls and young women living in my community."*

**PONI, 21, SHE LEADS, UGANDA**



*"I feel that I am making a difference in my community. I am now confident that to a certain extent the views of girls and young women have been put into consideration by our leaders. Given the few decisions that I have been able to influence, I have been able to impact the lives of my fellow girls."*

**PATRICIA, 19, SHE LEADS, UGANDA**



*"I have been working on the Human Rights Council 50 where I delivered a statement demanding that women should be paid for care work and pushing for equality between women and men... I am currently working with the Dutch embassy to collect data and make an advocacy case for the rule of law and security in Uganda."*

**SOLEA, 21, SHE LEADS, UGANDA**



# PROGRAMME AND PRACTICE

## PLAN INTERNATIONAL PERU

### → SCHOOL OF POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR INDIGENOUS ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG WOMEN

This programme has been running for four years and aims to promote the active participation of indigenous adolescent girls and young women in the political, social and cultural life of their community. The project is implemented in the high Andean villages of Peru where girls and young women are often not recognised as decision-makers and where, too, gender-based violence and the fear of violence has a negative impact on their lives and opportunities.



*"Political participation is fundamental, since we learn to address an audience that does not believe in us and that does not prioritise our needs... and I know I have to be a woman with 'guts'. Because I think a woman who comes to government sometimes encounters a lot of difficulties."*

**JENNY, 18, PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT**

The project works with girls and young women, with their parents and families and with local leaders to encourage the organised participation of girls and young women in decision-making processes and to help protect them against violence.

*"The impact on girls is enormous: they are discovering new things, and realising how important they are within society and that their dreams have no limits. They can achieve their ambitions, and reach political positions and improve the lives of many girls and women of all ages, giving them a brighter future."*

**PAMELA IRCO, PLAN PROJECT WORKER**

Young leaders, 126 female and 46 male, have been trained to play an active part in their community: attending information fairs, meeting with local authorities, and organising awareness marches. They have been concentrating on the fight against gender-based violence – demanding better protection services and effective co-ordination between institutions and sectors. Their efforts have resulted in action being taken through the provincial violence eradication unit.

Eight youth organisations have been set up to continue these advocacy activities which include producing a radio soap opera, called Cambiando esquemas, tackling themes of gender-based violence (GBV), life skills and sexual and reproductive health.



*"We have formed the Makimanta Youth Organization, which means 'Hand in hand together and together for a better future.' It has not been easy to organise... the pandemic limited our meetings and poor connectivity has been another challenge. But now we are building momentum and putting together our action and advocacy plans to achieve positive results."*

**CAROLINA, 17, PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT**

The issues that particularly affect girls and young women have also been pulled into the spotlight with initiatives like the development of a mobile app for anonymous reporting of GBV and an alert button to flag cases of violence.

This leadership project supports girls and young women to develop their social and communication skills. Their decision-making and leadership potential is gaining increasing recognition from community leaders as they take their place in formal participation spaces.



*"It has been positive to have managed to mobilise more than 200 adolescents in different activities, to work for the reduction of the high rate of teenage pregnancy... As a representative my commitment is to work for the rights of children and adolescents."*

**KATHERINE, 15, PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT**



Youth organisations meeting in Chumbivilcas. Photo Credit: Plan International







# RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations build on the ideas, experiences and opinions of the girls and young women taking part in this research.

## RECOMMENDATION

To build trust and facilitate genuine participation, power holders must open formal, safe and inclusive space for girls and their networks to enable their meaningful contribution to decision-making at all levels.



### CALLS TO ACTION

- Governments** must fulfil their commitments including the Sustainable Development Goals and international obligations under CRC, CEDAW, and ICCPR to provide legal guarantees for girls' and young women's participation in decision-making processes at the national and sub-national level.
- Governments, including ministries and relevant agencies, to meaningfully involve girls** and their networks in the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of public policies, budgets and legislation and put strong accountability mechanisms in place to track the impact of girls' participation.
- Governments to reform, and resource national youth councils, youth parliaments and other relevant formalised structures** so that they are gender-transformative and their leadership is representative of girls and youth in all their diversity. Strong safeguarding mechanisms need to be in place, linked with local networks including girl-led and girl-serving organisations.
- Donors, UN agencies, and governments to introduce or update and fund their youth strategies and policies** so that they prioritise girls' and young women's political socialisation and participation and support them with the necessary resources and institutional mechanisms to facilitate both effective implementation and monitoring and evaluation.
- Governments and the humanitarian community must remove the barriers to participation faced by girls in humanitarian settings** to ensure systematic and meaningful participation of girls in all phases of humanitarian action. Girls face a unique set of risks during humanitarian crisis but often their needs fail to be prioritised. **As the global hunger crisis escalates**, governments and the UN have an obligation to include girls and young women in their response and ensure their involvement in decisions that affect them.

## RECOMMENDATION

Starting at the local level, increase girls' access to diverse, inclusive and accessible pathways towards political participation.



### CALLS TO ACTION

- Governments must allocate resources to the sub-national levels aimed at increasing young women's representation and access** to local government positions via special measures, traineeships and adult-youth partnerships for shared learning, and building mutual trust and respect.
- Local Government Minister or equivalent to set a strategy with allocated resources to support local governments to meaningfully include girls in all local decision-making:** strengthening their role and capacities to engage in participatory budgeting, social audits and planning.
- Local governments to partner with community-based organisations to reach girls, including the most marginalised, by providing diverse opportunities to engage:** investing in participatory mechanisms including digital innovations, working through school structures and linking girl-led groups and their networks with formal decision-making processes.



## RECOMMENDATION

Provide civic education: knowledge and skills are foundational in girls' political socialisation and a pathway to political participation.



### CALLS TO ACTION

9. **Education ministries must ensure civic education is gender-transformative and is included in national school curricula.** It should include the depiction of women leaders as role models, human rights, gender-sensitive voting information, understanding decision-making processes and the role of civil society. It should provide opportunities to practise political discourse and promote diverse forms of participation, including pathways towards political leadership.
10. **UN Agencies, donors and INGOs to support the development of gender-transformative civic education tools and activities** including teacher training resources.
11. **School stakeholders (teachers, councils, and parents) to provide students, especially girls, with opportunities to practise their leadership:** supporting leadership skills-development, and access to decision-making opportunities within school governance structures, such as school councils and elections.
12. **Governments and donors to fund comprehensive, community-based, non-formal education programmes** that equip girls, particularly the most marginalised and out-of-school girls and young women, with the agency, skills and civic knowledge, to support their full political socialisation.

## RECOMMENDATION

Build positive gender and social norms within families and communities to enable and promote girls' and young women's political participation.



### CALLS TO ACTION

13. **Programme providers to invest in holistic approaches, including the engagement of the wider community** on the importance of opening spaces for girls and young women and for their inclusion in community-level decision-making.
14. **International organisations, including UN bodies, partnerships and INGOs,** to invest in and support long term programmes, including mentoring, that provide early opportunities and sustained support for those young women pursuing positions of political leadership.
15. **The media and journalists to combat negative stereotypes of women in leadership by** promoting positive and diverse images of women's political leadership and girls' and young women's activism, while ethically and sensitively bringing public attention to incidences of gender-based violence in politics.
16. **Social media companies must take responsibility for creating a safe online environment for girls and young women by** creating stronger, more effective, transparent and accessible reporting mechanisms, specific to online gender-based violence, that hold perpetrators to account and are responsive to girls' needs and experiences.
17. **Parliaments, public institutions and political parties to put in place zero-tolerance policies on violence and sexual harassment** and respond to the heightened risks of violence experienced by young women and particularly those overlapping with marginalised and minority groups, by providing inclusive and accessible reporting mechanisms and safe spaces.

## RECOMMENDATION

Support girls to organise and mobilise, starting at community level, and ensure their organisations are resilient and sustained.



### CALLS TO ACTION

18. **UN, donors and governments must** support girls' collective action and organising: **recognising and strengthening their vital and distinct role as civil society actors,** by providing accessible resources (both financial and non-financial), capacity strengthening and safe spaces, to foster their political efficacy and their resilience in the face of crises and external threats.
19. **Women's rights organisations and civil society to recognise** and value the unique and vital contribution of girls' and young women's organisations, by **providing intergenerational leadership and mentoring** and facilitating their participation in wider civil society processes.
20. **International, regional and intergovernmental bodies to introduce protective mechanisms and structures** in order to monitor, mitigate and respond to risks posed to girl human rights organisations and activists.

*"More capacity building, more knowledge, more information on leadership, on politics, on the importance. So that also limits us because you cannot give out what you do not have. And if you do not have the right resources and platforms, that would be a very big challenge for you."*

**RAINBOW, 22, UGANDA**





# METHODOLOGY

The research collected primary mixed-methods data through a large-scale survey and two sets of qualitative interviews.

## SURVEY

**Questionnaire:** The questionnaire had 15 closed questions; most of them allowed respondents to select multiple answer codes. Questions were structured around three areas: their perceptions of political leaders, issues and effects of decisions; their perception of girls' and young women's engagement with, and participation in, politics; their own engagement with, and participation in, politics.<sup>68</sup>

**Timeframe:** Data was collected from February to April 2022 by two marketing research companies, IPSOS and GeoPoll on behalf of Plan International.

Two different methodologies were used to collect the data: Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) Computer Assisted Web-Interviewing (CAWI)

### Target population and eligibility criteria:

The survey targeted girls and young women (including LGBTIQ+) aged 15 to 24. In each country, except Switzerland where the target was 500, the aim was to collect responses from 1000 girls and young women aged 15 to 24.

## SURVEY COUNTRIES:

**Africa:** Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Togo, Zambia.

**Asia and the Pacific:** Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, Philippines, Vietnam.

**Europe:** Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK.

**Americas:** Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, USA.

**Participants:** A total of 28,751 young women and girls took part in the survey. 63 per cent were over the age of 20.

There are significant differences in the geographic spread of responses: 9,500 are from Europe, 7,000 from Asia and the Pacific, 6,153 from Africa and the Middle East, 4,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean and 1,344 from North America.

## QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Two sets of qualitative interviews were conducted in order to triangulate findings from the survey and to understand the perspectives of girls and young women with contrasting levels of experience with political participation:

→ Semi-structured qualitative interviews with 78 girls aged 15 to 16 across seven of the nine countries enrolled in Plan International's *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort study. Girls live in predominantly rural settings and come from the lowest income households within their countries (at the time of selection). Countries involved were: **Philippines, Vietnam, Benin, Togo, Dominican Republic, Brazil and El Salvador**

→ In-depth qualitative interviews with **16 girl and young woman activists** known to Plan International through their involvement in programmes or campaigns. These girls and young women come from a variety of backgrounds but were purposively sampled based on the fact that they were known to be politically active. The 13 countries involved were: **Togo, Malawi, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Jordan, Lebanon, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Vietnam, Ecuador and Peru.**

The two sets of interviews followed a similar structure, and several questions asked were common to both groups. However, due to the anticipated differences in understanding of the topic and experiences of political participation, interviews with *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls were more structured, and interviews with girl and young women activists included additional questions exploring their experiences of different types of political participation.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

The survey data is not nationally or globally representative. It is important to note that while the sample for the survey attempted to be representative of underlying populations as far as possible, the companies are most likely to have sampled wealthier and higher educated segments of society because only those who had access to the internet and phone were surveyed. The number of participants is not evenly spread across geographic regions, and this means the sample overall is not balanced.

Some of the qualitative interviews were conducted in the chosen local language and later translated into English. The original meaning of some concepts that the girls and young women mentioned during the interview might have been lost in translation.

The survey is, however, large and based across a variety of contexts and countries. The mixed methods used during the research have enabled the survey data to be triangulated against two unique qualitative sources and further tested against a comprehensive literature review.

## ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING

Research ethics approval was granted from the UK-based Overseas Development Institute's Research Ethics Committee. A full safeguarding risk assessment was conducted to identify potential risks and mitigation measures for all data collection methods.

The survey contractors had to sign a code of conduct confirming that they would adhere to Plan International's Global Safeguarding Policy. Consent was obtained from all participants and from parents/guardians of 15 to 17-year-olds. In line with ethics and safeguarding procedures, qualitative interviews were conducted by two members of Plan International staff or hired consultants who had completed safeguarding training and were briefed on safeguarding and referral processes. Informed consent and assent were given prior to the interviews and verbal consent given to record them.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout.



Credit: Plan International



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# GIRLS GET EQUAL

## ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, Plan International drives changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For over 85 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children and we are active in more than 80 countries.

## GIRLS GET EQUAL

Plan International has been campaigning for girls' rights for over a decade and the current Girls Get Equal campaign aims to ensure girls and young women have power over their own lives and can help shape the world around them. Promoting leadership and amplifying girls' voices is central to the campaign. Ensuring girls access to power holders and their involvement in the decisions that help shape their lives is crucial to upholding their rights. Their engagement in politics needs to be supported at all levels and the barriers to their political participation must be recognised and removed.






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