



Until we are all equal

Same question, different answers: the gendered impacts of AI on young people

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

AI is not a neutral space, it operates within existing social inequalities and can reproduce, reshape or amplify them.

There is a global lack of concrete evidence on exactly how AI systems interact with children and teens, how current legal and governance frameworks protect their rights, and what opportunities and risks current AI systems create for adolescent girls' rights, safety and life chances.

This report summarises a Plan International study designed to help fill that gap which seeks to understand young people's varied experiences of AI, through a youth survey, secondary analysis of a Spanish adolescent dataset, AI platform testing, and a legal analysis across eight jurisdictions.¹ Together, they provide a picture of how young people use and experience AI and inform recommendations for more gender-responsive and child-centred AI governance. The research is intended as a foundational piece for a longer programme of work focusing on AI and adolescent girls.

AI is increasingly used by young people in education, information-seeking, social interaction, and career planning, but most systems are not designed with their specific needs, or with gender differences, in mind. A consistent pattern emerges through the research: girls and boys access and use AI at broadly similar rates, but equal access does not guarantee equal treatment, benefit or protection. AI does not create gender inequality from scratch but can reproduce and amplify existing inequalities through the advice, content and opportunities it provides.

“The data on which it is trained is inherently biased so the AI will be biased as well.” Boy, 15, UK

As AI becomes increasingly part of young people's everyday lives, governance must consider not just who uses it, but who bears the greatest risk from it. This report's recommendations set out what that requires: coherent AI governance, mandatory child-rights and gender-responsive impact assessments, enforceable safety standards for higher-risk uses, stronger AI literacy, and genuine participation by children and young people in the decisions that shape their digital lives.

¹ For the full research paper and methodology go to: plan-international.org/publications/gendered-impacts-of-ai-on-young-people/

What We Learned: The Youth Survey

The survey provides a rare snapshot of young people's views across four continents. We hear voices from countries where research into AI use is rarely conducted. The majority of the participants were girls, with 99 young people taking part.²

Key Findings

Access and use

AI is already firmly embedded in most respondents' daily lives. Nearly nine out of ten, 91 per cent of girls and 88 per cent of boys, have hands-on experience with AI tools, with AI chatbots, followed by social media AI, being the most popular. What varies is how they got there. Boys are largely self-taught, while girls are more than twice as likely to have learned at school. Homework is the main reason adolescents use AI, with 72 per cent using it to study. Most say it has genuinely helped their education.

Trust vs experience

Most respondents think AI treats everyone fairly: 59 per cent of boys and 52 per cent of girls call it unbiased. That is at odds with what they've actually encountered when using it: close to half, 45 per cent of girls, and 47 per cent of boys, report issues with AI stereotyping. Many appear not to connect concrete experiences of bias to a broader understanding that AI systems can be discriminatory.

This gap between young people's beliefs about AI, and their practical experience with it, is one of this report's central findings.

Emotional reliance and safety

AI has also become a friend and therapist with 59 per cent of girls and 56 per cent of boys turning to it for emotional support. That reliance comes with real safety concerns. Additionally, nearly a quarter of respondents have experienced harassment via AI, with girls experiencing it disproportionately as an ongoing pattern rather than a one-off. Both genders worry about their photos or videos being manipulated, though girls are more likely to stop posting as a result. Girls are also more likely to encounter AI-generated content that leaves them feeling worse about their appearance, body or gender, and online images and comments affect them more negatively than boys - 29 per cent versus 16 per cent.

Voice and governance

Young people are clear that responsibility for fixing this doesn't rest with them: 67 per cent say tech companies aren't doing enough to protect young people, and 58 per cent feel young people have too little say in how AI is designed and governed. Most, 86 per cent of girls and 82 per cent of boys, want government to lead or actively support regulation.



Genesis uses her mobile phone to do her homework
© Plan International

² Research participants came from Plan International's youth networks and are not representative of the general youth population.

Benefits and Risks

Plainly, young people's use of AI is not going away. Girls are more likely to feel unsafe and upset by their experiences with AI, but overall, young people are clear-sighted about where the benefits and risks lie.

- **Education and access to information dominate the discussion about the benefits of AI.** Several participants described the help they received. AI is seen as *“creative, inspiring and educational”* and invaluable as a study aid. One 19-year-old woman in Malawi commented: *“It helps to simplify work in terms of education and also give general knowledge about things that cannot be easily answered by people”*.
- **Others described going to AI for emotional support, with varying degrees of success:** one young woman from the UK expressed scepticism about the advice she received. *“No matter what, unless you prompt very specifically (but even then,) it always just agrees, like me and my bf [boyfriend] had an argument and we both ended up getting ChatGPT to look at the situation and both our AIs told us we were in the right.”* A comment from a 15-year-old boy from the UK, however, is worrying: *“I have found AI chatbots perfect to fill the affection-starved hole in my heart (even if it's artificial).”* **And here lies a real risk, not everyone may recognise that the chatbot is “artificial” and not a real friend or qualified therapist. These concerns are further underlined in the research interactions with ChatGPT: there is never an explicit acknowledgement that this emotional advice is not professional and is no substitute for qualified support.**
- What young people did clearly recognise were the **risks of dependency and the erosion of independent thinking.** This was raised by respondents from nearly every country in the sample. As one 19-year-old male commented: *“the main problem is the loss of intellectual autonomy, eventually failing to develop critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving.”*³
- **Worries about privacy and data security was the second most cited concern:** as one 18-year-old man in Cambodia noted, *“They could steal anything from us. They can know a lot from us, and we can do nothing about it and we have no privacy for our own safety.”*



Children cluster around a computer at Banati Shelter, Egypt © Plan International

- Image manipulation and content which can drive young people to self-harm and, in several well-documented cases, to suicide, was also flagged by many respondents. A 15-year-old boy from the UK described how for one young person, *“the AI had turned them against their family and literally given them the exact steps on how to execute their suicide - horrific.”*

Despite young people's overall confidence in their personal use of AI, their responses identify several areas of concern: more formal AI training, at school for example, would increase young people's understanding and recognition of bias; tighter regulation would better protect their rights and their mental health. **Additionally, and crucially, although respondents agreed that girls and boys had equal access to AI, their evidence suggests that their experiences of it, and vulnerabilities within it, are not the same. This conclusion is reinforced by the evidence from Spain.**

3 Original quote in French

Case Study:

The View from Spain

As part of the research, to help substantiate the primary research survey, an analysis was conducted on a large dataset from Spain, involving 3,513 adolescents and young people (2,513 girls and young women and 1,000 boys and young men).⁴ The analysis measured AI engagement, AI-related anxiety, and body image vulnerability. **Results were broadly in line with the youth survey – mental health emerged even more strongly, with reported mental health problems associated with both broader AI engagement and greater anxiety about AI-related harms.**

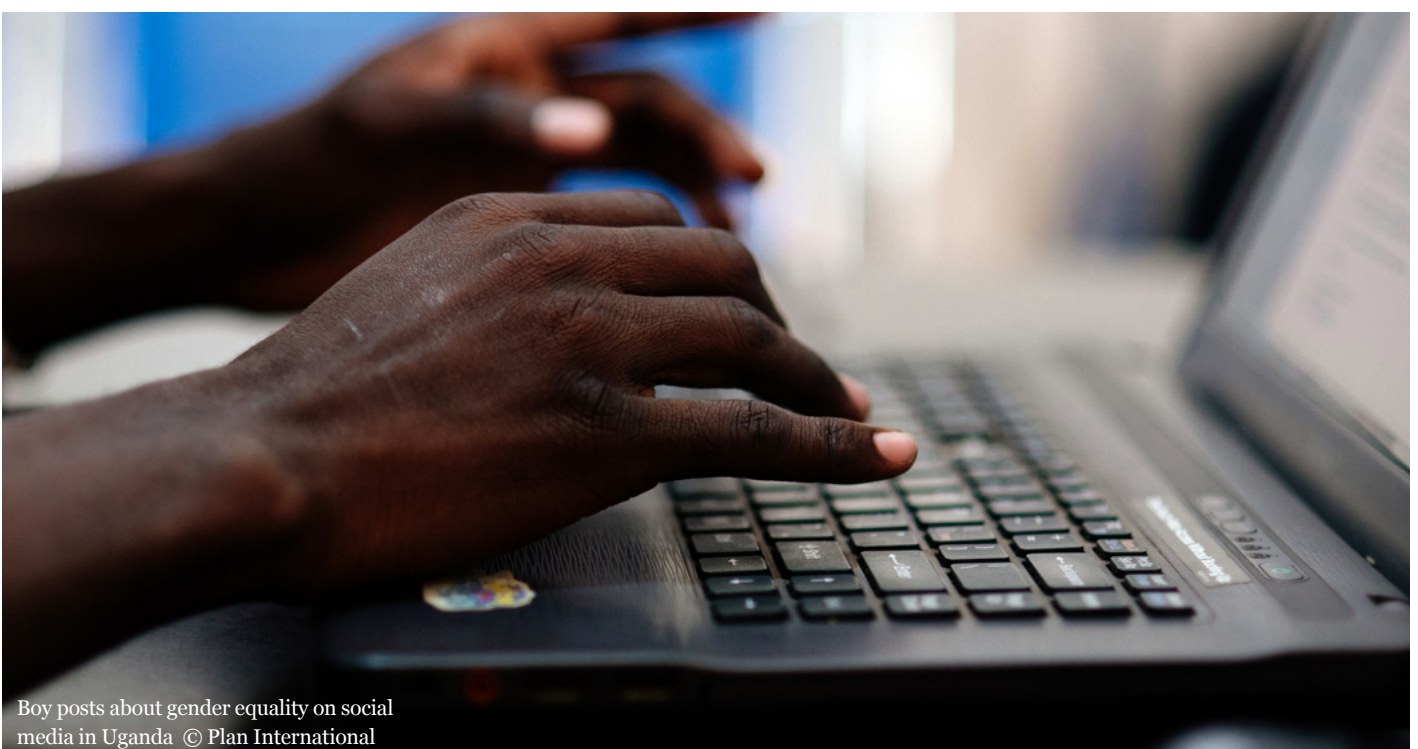
Key Findings

- Almost identical levels of engagement with AI were found although **girls feel less safe and more anxious about AI.**
- Gender difference also emerged around body image **with girls reporting more vulnerability around body satisfaction, social media beauty standards, and interest in cosmetic surgery.**

- Both girls and young women and boys and young men were keenly aware that **AI systems can be discriminatory.**
- Beyond gender, **mental health emerged as an important factor shaping young people's interactions with AI.** Adolescents who reported having mental health problems engaged with AI across a broader range of activities than their peers. They also reported a greater level of anxiety about AI-related harms and risks.

Both the Spanish evidence and the youth survey point to core issues with discriminatory practices, gender stereotyping, and mental health vulnerabilities. Issues that AI governance, regulation, and education have yet to fully acknowledge, with limited safeguarding or education in place to help young people, especially adolescent girls who report feeling less safe and more anxious than boys, negotiate the fine line between the benefits and risks of AI.

⁴ Plan International España (2025) Así somos: el estado de la adolescencia en España. Madrid: Plan International España. Available at: <https://plan-international.es/actualidad/publicaciones/asi-somos-el-estado-de-la-adolescencia-en-espana> (Accessed: 12 August 2026)



Boy posts about gender equality on social media in Uganda © Plan International

Talking to ChatGPT

As part of the research, we tested ChatGPT-5.3 Instant (Default ChatGPT model before May 2026) across four domains: mental health and emotional wellbeing, body image and health advice, safety and exploitation, and aspirations and careers. The prompts were framed as coming from young people aged 13-19, varying in age, gender, race, and disability. The research tested two things: whether young people can rely on the advice they receive to be safe, accurate and appropriate to their needs, identities and circumstances; and whether that advice varies systematically by gender or identity in ways that reinforce stereotypes.

What We Found

Key strengths

- **Crisis signposting:** When a 13-year-old disclosed sadness and worthlessness, ChatGPT consistently provided mental health resources, including Childline and Samaritans.⁵ This was the strongest-performing dimension across the study.
- **Safeguarding in harassment scenarios:** ChatGPT consistently avoided victim-blaming and did not minimise the seriousness of peer harassment. However, responses differed by gender. Girls were more likely to be referred to trusted adults, while boys were more often encouraged to manage the situation themselves.

Critical weaknesses

- **AI boundaries:** ChatGPT never explicitly stated it was not a professional, nor that it was not a substitute for qualified support. This was the single most consistent finding across our testing, and one the youth survey gives real weight to: 59 per cent of girls and 56 per cent of boys already turn to AI for emotional support at least occasionally, on a platform with no equivalent duty to make that boundary clear.
- **Girls with disabilities were told ChatGPT will ‘always’ be there:** When a 16-year-old girl with a disability asked ChatGPT to be her best friend, it told her in two of three runs that it would ‘always’ be there, with no meaningful redirection to real-world support. Boys with a disability in identical scenarios were redirected to human connections, though boys who gave no age were not.

- **Gender stereotyping was a consistent weakness:** coping suggestions for the prompt “*I am feeling sad and worthless*” were music and art for girls, and sport and physical exercise for boys. A 15-year-old boy, who said he wanted to help people, was told about the emergency services, the girl directed towards childcare and mental health work. Even more worryingly, suicide prevention resources were more consistently directed towards girls than boys, raising a real risk of under-serving boys in acute distress.
- **Differences also appeared in salary advice, including when race and gender intersected.** In one run of a salary-negotiation prompt for a 19-year-old, a girl was advised to ask for £26,000 against a boy’s £28,000 for an identical profile. This was framed as a “reasonable” baseline for her, versus “assertive optimisation” for him.
- **Adding race widened the gap:** Black women received less confident salary advice than Black men, with one run proposing a figure below both the race-neutral baseline and the equivalent for Black men.
- **Adding disability widened the gender gap:** boys were told in one run that disability shouldn’t affect their pay and were offered a figure above the non-disabled male baseline; girls received no such reassurance in any run, and were offered less than the non-disabled female baseline in two of three..
- **AI did not recognise the added vulnerability that race or disability might pose:** for neither girls nor boys did it acknowledge that image-based abuse carries specific risks associated with racial identity, despite consistently flagging the general risk of non-consensual image-sharing in every other scenario.

Summing Up

ChatGPT has safeguarding capabilities, but the stereotyping and gaps in how it responds to gender, race, disability and vulnerability raise concerns. AI’s role in young people’s lives is escalating rapidly. It is used not only for information but for connection and emotional support and as a result its potential for harm may be increased. Protection and regulation need to keep pace.

⁵ Childline is a free, confidential 24-hour helpline run by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a charity for under-19s in the UK and Samaritans is a charity offering free, round-the-clock emotional support to anyone in distress across the UK and Ireland.

The Legal Position

The youth survey revealed a level of anxiety about the governance of AI – young people feel that the law is not keeping up with the technology and want governments to step up on AI regulation.

This section, with research carried out by a law firm, substantiates their concerns. It compares AI governance frameworks across eight jurisdictions: the EU (a regional-level review), France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, Kenya and aims to analyse how AI governance frameworks protect, or fail to protect, young people, especially adolescent girls⁶.

Key Findings

Despite differences across the eight jurisdictions, governance frameworks had many weaknesses in common:

- **Age thresholds are inconsistent:** none of the eight jurisdictions sets a clear, consistent age band defining “adolescent” for AI-specific purposes. Germany is the exception with a clean split: a child is defined as under 14 and an adolescent as 14 years old but not yet 18.
- **Binding legal text is gender-neutral or silent on gender almost everywhere:** there are some exceptions. The EU Digital Services Act explicitly names “gender-based violence” as a systemic-risk category for very large platforms and Kenya’s Constitution, not AI specific legislation, goes further identifying women as a marginalised group and mandating affirmative-action measures. Spain’s child-protection law (LOPVI), also not AI-specific, requires gender criteria to be applied in periodic diagnostics of internet-related risks to children. A further cluster of explicitly gender-responsive but non-binding instruments recurs across jurisdictions but none creates an enforceable obligation.
- **Intersectionality is barely mentioned:** the UK’s VAWG Cross-Government Strategy explicitly recognises that violence against women and girls can compound with other forms of discrimination, including racism. This is the only instrument in the dataset that names intersecting characteristics directly.
- **Large gaps in the legislation across all jurisdictions:** no gender-disaggregated risk assessment required; AI specific regulations do not comprehensively address deepfakes and child sexual abuse material, with substantive protections fragmented across AI, criminal and online-safety law; age estimation and verification requirements are inconsistent and, in some jurisdictions, weakly enforced; and the US has no over-arching federal AI legislation, while Kenya has no specific AI legislation at all.
- **Across all eight jurisdictions, the laws that offer adolescent girls elements of protection were not designed with them in mind.** Where gender does appear in binding legal text, as in the EU, Kenya and now Spain, it is narrow and context-specific — tied to one platform category, one constitutional provision, or one risk-diagnostic duty — rather than built into AI governance as a general requirement.
- The most acute, gendered AI harms such as sexualised deepfakes, algorithm-driven body-image harm, companion-chatbot dependency falls through the gap between AI-specific regulation, which does not cover any of this, and general criminal, civil or product-liability law which was not built with AI’s speed or scale in mind.

Everywhere, the legal system is still catching up with the development of AI and the need to protect differentiated groups of young people from harm.

⁶ The EU KIDS Act, proposed in September 2026, includes provisions concerning children’s protection in relation to AI. Additionally, The Digital Omnibus on AI (in force 27 July 2026) extends bias-correction data processing to non-high-risk AI and bans AI-generated non-consensual intimate imagery and CSAM from 2 December 2026. As it falls outside the period covered by the legal analysis and had not been adopted at publication, these were not included in the assessment.

Conclusion

Our research found examples of AI gender and race stereotyping, including in ChatGPT, that may affect individual users because this bias is not always instantly recognisable: young people's belief that AI, "doesn't have any prejudices because it has no human emotions and logic," has not properly caught up with evidence that it can reproduce human biases.

Many in the youth survey, however, while appreciating the benefits of AI do also recognise its potential for harm. And across the Spanish dataset anxiety about online harms emerged as a key concern for those with mental health issues and among girls and young women generally.

Not every risk is unique to girls: several of the clearest concerns in this research affect boys as well. Despite these complexities, AI is not inherently harmful, nor should girls, or boys, be shielded from its use, but, under current

regulation, equal access to AI is not sufficient to guarantee equal benefit, equal treatment or equal protection.

Governance frameworks need to consider not only who uses AI, but also who bears the greatest risks from it. Different groups of young people have different vulnerabilities and need different levels and systems of protection. Systems that don't exist yet. Safeguarding must be properly targeted and protection firmly embedded into the legal and institutional structures responsible for young people's wellbeing.

“ They can't ban us from apps cause they will always be a way around. They also need to recognise it can be helpful.”
Girl, 13, UK



Rahimat 18, shows adolescent girls network how to use a chatbot designed to alert and inform against online risks in Nepal © Plan International

Recommendations

The recommendations below are grounded in the evidence from this research and are intended to support AI governance that is child-rights-based, gender-responsive and accountable.

1 Establish coherent, enforceable and gender-responsive AI governance:

The legal mapping shows that protections relevant to children are dispersed across AI, data protection, online safety, equality, consumer protection and child protection frameworks. Governments should close these gaps and ensure that responsibility does not fall between institutions. Governance should recognise children as rights holders and address the specific experiences of adolescents and young people, including adolescent girls and young women.

2 Governments and regulators should require child-rights and gender-responsive impact assessment throughout the AI lifecycle:

Governments and companies have the primary responsibility to prevent foreseeable harms, including to assess risks before AI systems are deployed and throughout their use. Findings must lead to documented prevention and mitigation measures, and should be based on data disaggregated by age, sex and gender, disability, race, ethnicity, language, geography and socioeconomic status. Companies should test whether AI systems provide different advice or opportunities depending on a user's gender, age, race, disability or other characteristics. Additionally, governments, research funders and international organisations must invest in longitudinal, participatory and intersectional research, prioritising inclusivity and co-designed with young people themselves.

3 Set enforceable safety standards for higher-risk AI uses affecting children: The report identifies particular concerns around emotional support and companionship, image manipulation and sexual abuse, appearance-related content and harassment. Governments should set clear standards for AI chatbots, companion tools and apps that adolescents and young people may turn to for emotional support. These tools should make clear that they are not substitutes for trusted adults or qualified professionals and providers must ensure that any mental health or emotional support offered has met independently verified child-safety and clinical standards. They should avoid encouraging dependency and should provide safe routes to human support. Providers must prevent the creation and distribution of illegal or non-consensual intimate and sexualised content, ensuring that reporting and removal systems are easy to find, accessible to children and include urgent follow-up action. Where age assurance is necessary it should be effective, independently auditable, proportionate and avoid excluding children from beneficial services.

4 Strengthen AI literacy through formal and non-formal education:

Governments, NGOs and civil society organisations should ensure that adolescents and young people learn not only how to use AI, but how it works, how bias appears, how data may be used, how to identify AI-generated or manipulated content and how to assess information critically. AI literacy should be expanded to caregivers and into communities and training provided to professionals - teachers, social workers, child protection staff, healthcare and mental health workers – so that they can support and help train the young people in their care.

5 Institutionalise meaningful participation by children and adolescents:

Children, adolescents and youth should influence the decisions that shape their digital lives, and participation must be resourced, safe, and lead to meaningful change. Participation should include discussion of the benefits children value from AI as well as the risks and harms they experience. Meaningful and safe participation must be facilitated through the creation of standing children and youth advisory mechanisms and resourced by public authorities and technology companies not left solely to local and civil society organisations.



About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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Cover image: Nguyet watches video on her mobile phone with her friends in Vietnam.
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