



EXPERTS ON OUR OWN LIVES

Listening to girls' experiences
of leadership and agency

Women Deliver 2023

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Plan International launched its report *'Taking the Lead: Girls and Young Women on Changing the Face of Leadership'* that took a deep dive into girls' aspirations to lead and the realities that girl and young women leaders face. In the four years since then, Plan International has continued to strengthen its active listening of girls and young women through research to understand, document, and amplify their experiences of leadership and agency. By centring the voices of girls and young women, this research has shown that they are the true experts on their own lives and must play a core role in decision-making on issues that impact them. Girls and young women all over the world demonstrate that they are leaders, have agency, and know what is needed to create real lasting change in their communities and societies. They do not underestimate the barriers in their way to participating and leading, rather they identify both the social and structural obstacles they face as well as strategies to dismantle them. It is clear that there is a need to shift power and resources to girls and young women as part of a wider centring of youth in action towards gender equality and social change.

Plan International deliberately seeks to understand the nuances of girls' agency and experiences of leadership and is led by insights gained through research that centres the voices of girls and young women. By carrying out this type of research, it is possible to demonstrate the diverse ways in which girls express their agency and lead in their communities, countries, and on the international level. In some cases, girls and young women use traditional or more formal routes to lead and affect change, by taking on recognised positions to speak to power. In other cases, their acts of leadership challenge the traditional definition of a 'leader' which often obscures or diminishes girls' and young women's actions and decision-making power. Plan International has also used its research to deep dive into the nuances of girls' agency, looking beyond limited indicators of agency that

focus on dramatic, 'heroic' or 'brave' actions of girls and young women in the public such as activists Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg, and instead at the subtler – but no less powerful – ways in which girls show agency in their lives.

As part of its five-year global strategy launched in 2022, Plan International stated its commitment to meaningful youth participation and girls' leadership and set out its ambition to become a youth-centred organisation by 2027 – recognising that this is a critical pathway to achieving its ambition for promoting girls' rights and gender equality. Any action towards gender equality will fail to create lasting change if it is not shaped by, co-created, or implemented in partnership with those who will be impacted. This is why Plan International engages young people in its work on leadership and agency, to be guided by their experiences and perspectives to develop clear actionable recommendations for governments, civil society, and the development sector. The recommendations presented in this report were drafted by youth delegates collaborating with Plan International for the 2023 Women Deliver Conference.

This report presents insights from Plan International's research with girls and young women on their experiences of leadership and their agency. There were four key findings from the synthesis of evidence:

- 1** Girls are taking on formal and informal leadership roles
- 2** Girls express their agency in diverse and nuanced ways
- 3** Girls identify persistent barriers to their leadership
- 4** Girls identify solutions to the barriers they face and call on others to help dismantle them



WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP?

Over the last four years Plan International has conducted various studies with girls and young women to unpack and interrogate their experiences and perceptions of agency and leadership. This report synthesises insights gained from three studies: Taking the Lead: Girls and Young Women on Changing the Face of Leadership (2019), State of the World's Girls: Equal Power Now (2022), and the 18-year-long Real Choices, Real Lives cohort study.

This report also contains recommendations from girls themselves, developed specifically for the 2023 Women Deliver Conference.

TAKING THE LEAD

[This research](#) was carried out in 2019 with girls and young women using a survey in 19 countries and supplemented by in-depth focus group discussions in five of them. The overall survey sample size was 10,064, with 413 focus group discussion participants. The research objective of this study was to fill a knowledge gap to understand what it means for girls and young women to be leaders and what encourages and discourages their leadership aspirations.



REPORT

The survey asked young women about their leadership aspirations in terms of career, country, community and family. The focus group discussion tool was designed to be participatory and was pinned around two key activities: body mapping and an activity that sought to gauge the main sources of influence and inspiration in the lives of young women.

STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS: EQUAL POWER NOW

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 was 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.



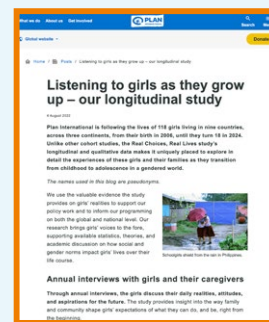
REPORT

The 2022 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. The research focused on girls' and young women's political participation and this synthesis draws from both the global survey data and qualitative data from young activists.

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES

Real Choices, Real Lives

is a qualitative, longitudinal study, which has been tracking the lives of girls¹ living in nine countries² across three regions since they were born in 2006. Data collection will continue until the girls turn 18 in 2024, making it one of few existing cohort studies that follows girls from early childhood through adolescence. The Real Choices, Real Lives study captures the nuance of girls' lived realities through in-depth interviews on a yearly or bi-yearly basis. By investigating the intersection between gender and age across diverse contexts and thematic areas, the study is able to present both the common experiences of girls globally as they grow up in a gendered world, as well as the factors that render every girl's life unique and shape the opportunities and challenges they face.



WEBSITE

In 2022, girls from seven³ of the nine study countries participated in data collection for the above State of the World's Girls: Equal Power Now research. This research specifically explored girls' perspectives on politics and their experience of leadership and participation on local, national and international levels. This synthesis draws from both from this data and data from the annual data collection with all girls in 2021. Evidence from the Real Choices, Real Lives study highlights the multifaceted nature of girls' agency and everyday leadership.

Please note that the names of the girls and young women have been changed to ensure anonymity

1 In 2022, 114 girls were participating in the study.

2 Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, The Philippines, Togo, Uganda, Vietnam.

3 The Uganda and Cambodia cohorts were unable to participate in 2022.



Photo © Plan International
The Girls' Movement (Movimiento por ser niña) is a civil society organisation supported by Plan International in Ecuador since 2018.

FINDINGS ON GIRLS' LEADERSHIP AND AGENCY

KEY FINDING 1:

GIRLS ARE TAKING ON BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

Girls and young women all over the world are demonstrating their leadership as change-makers, actively addressing gender justice issues in their communities and driving positive change for other young people and wider society. Plan International's research shows that girls and young women are also taking on specific leadership roles in their communities as well as at the national and global level. The *Taking the Lead* study found that of the more than **10,000 girls and young women who participated in the research, 85 per cent had had at least one experience of leading and 25 per cent reported multiple leadership experiences**. Over three-quarters of the participants in the research also said that they aspire to be leaders in their countries, communities, or professional careers.

Girls and young women such as Jen in Lebanon describe entering leadership roles after recognising an issue impacting their lives and their peers. By not only identifying a gap in representation for girls, but also taking action to lead the way for positive change, Jen demonstrates clear agency in her work:

“ *There wasn't any representation for the girls in my village. So, for that reason during 2016, when I was 16 years old, I tried to make a small initiative. It was my own initiative. We were having municipality elections, so I made a Facebook account, a group to make the people know more about municipality elections and how to elect far from their family names and from*

their sects or others – to choose the programme that represents them. And I also worked on how the girls and women should be a part of these elections and not to hide or to be afraid to be a part of it.

JEN, 23, LEBANON, EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022

Many participants in Plan International's research described similar, informal types of leadership experiences. In some cases, girls and young women reported leading as part of a wider group, through collective action on an issue that was not being addressed by authorities in their communities. Juliana in Brazil, for example, explained how she and her peers organised a protest at her school and successfully affected change for the benefit of all students:

“ *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 about it. Over time, things got better.*

JULIANA, 16, BRAZIL, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2022

Speaking with girls and young women in diverse contexts, Plan International's research found that their leadership is also often in the formal sphere – taking on specific positions with key responsibilities and power. Janell in Vietnam described the tasks involved in her leadership role and how the position both influences government and serves people in her community:

“ *I have a title of 'Head of Youth Advisory Committee', so I have a lot of chances to work with the Youth Union and also the Government. Whenever the Government is having any policy or having any project which has impacts on us, we do advisory on that. We read the proposal, see what are 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, EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S SHE LEADS PROGRAMME

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. The programme is implemented in nine countries: Mali, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Jordan and Lebanon.

“ *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 [TAKEN FROM EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022]

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 66th 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.

“ *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 [TAKEN FROM EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022]

Girls and young women are also redefining what leadership looks like, participating in both formal and informal activities, and in doing so challenging

traditional understandings of leadership and participation. Plan International's research with girls and young women in 19 countries found that girls do not aspire to take on traditional leadership roles but rather to be collaborative change-makers. Girls reject the conventional associations of leadership and positions of power such as status and hierarchy and instead place value on the potential for leaders to work with communities to bring about positive change. In this way, girls also recognise the need for leaders like them, who rate kindness and fairness and challenge the status quo, in order to advance social justice and gender equality.



I think that the woman leader has to see the future in a different way to other people, because that's why she is a leader, to guide and advise other people on what we have to do to make our dreams come true.

GIRL, 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, TAKING THE LEAD, 2019

The research with both activists and girls and young women who are not activists found that many have confidence in their own ability to lead, however key structural barriers prevent them from doing so. As part of the Taking the Lead research, 62% of respondents said that they were confident or very confident in their ability to lead.

For some girls participating in the Real Choices, Real Lives study, confidence to lead was tied to their awareness of the rights that they hold as citizens.



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.

HANG, 16, VIETNAM, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2022

A survey of girls and young women for the Equal Power Now research in 2022 found that just over half of respondents (52%) felt confident to speak in front of peers about a social, political, or economic issue, and just under half (48%) felt

confident to organise a group of peers to achieve change on an issue that they are passionate about. While confidence to speak out and lead may appear to be a reflection of self-esteem and individual ability, the qualitative data show that confidence is often tied to girls' and young women's environments. Michelle, a participant in the Real Choices, Real Lives study rated her confidence to lead as low stating that she would be *"embarrassed"* however, expanding, she highlighted that this was linked to a concern about how she would be received by others, *"I might not be heard"* (Michelle, 15, Philippines, Real Choices, Real Lives, 2022).

In 2019, Plan International's research with girls and young women across diverse ages, income status, education levels, marriage status and geographic locations identified particular characteristics of a young woman who is most likely to express confidence in her leadership abilities. This young woman is:

about 22, married, from a low-income country in Africa, is educated to tertiary standard, and is from a wealthier, generally more educated background.

TEXT FROM TAKING THE LEAD, 2019

The study also found that married young women generally expressed more confidence in their leadership abilities, and girls and young women with lower social status were more likely to aspire to become leaders in their communities. In 2022, the Equal Power Now study further found that girls and young women who identify as a racial, ethnic or religious minority were more likely to report confidence in participating in formal and informal political activities including taking on leadership roles. The same study, by contrast, found that respondents with a disability and respondents who identify as LGBTQI+ were less likely to report confidence in leading and participating.

Girls and young women who expressed high levels of confidence in their own leadership abilities – and who often applied these abilities through activism and campaigning – underscored the structural barriers that prevent girls and women from leading. Confidence in their personal ability and awareness of the need for their

skills and voices at the decision-making table is undermined by the lack of opportunity to be heard. As Marchessa explained, the issue lies not in her abilities but in gaining access to decision-making spaces:

“ Yes, I know I can...when I get a chance in expressing about the issues... given a chance to address issues.

MARCHESSA, 22, TANZANIA, EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022

KEY FINDING 2:

GIRLS EXPRESS THEIR AGENCY IN DIVERSE AND NUANCED WAYS

By exploring the qualitative and longitudinal data from the Real Choices, Real Lives study, it was possible to identify more nuanced expressions of girls' agency that are often overlooked in international development.

Firmly in their teen years, the Real Choices, Real Lives girls are growing up under multiple chronic crises: climate change, the lasting impacts of Covid-19, global rising living costs, the pervasiveness of sexual violence in their communities, and clear gender gaps and biases in political leadership, as data from 2021 and 2022 shows. What is clear is that girls' agency persists through how they imagine a future despite these crises. Girls' aspirations unveil the agency of girls living in such contexts, which challenges the dominant – and problematic – representation of hopelessness tied to girls in the Global South. The Real Choices, Real Lives girls demonstrate their agency through aspirations that have clear aims, are informed by their expert knowledge of their own contexts, and address the challenges facing girls and other members of their communities.

Over the years of the study, Azia from Togo has been discussing her future ambitions, which are strongly tied to the healthcare situation in her country. Azia initially explained that she intended to be a nurse to contribute to her family and community health: “[to] look after sick people and look after my family” (15, 2021). By 2022, this had developed into an aspiration to improve healthcare on a national level by becoming a Minister of Health, “to help and care for people in my community and country” (16, 2022).

The nuance of Azia's agency is clear here. Firstly, in her clear expression of why she aspires to work in this sector: to care for her family, community and country, and secondly in the development of her ambition. She changed her mind on how she would like to address the healthcare situation, exploring multiple options and strategies – to have and actively explore these different options is in itself an indicator of agency.

On aspiring to a better future and how girls and young women can be supported in her community, Annabelle from Benin suggested,

“ I am going to ask [political leaders] to give loans to women; to ensure free schooling for girls so that girls who reach the higher levels of secondary school are taken care of free of charge.

ANNABELLE, 15, BENIN, 2021

Annabelle reflected on the difficulties faced by girls and young women and has actively chosen how she will navigate a better outcome in this situation.

Another nuance around girls' agency from the Real Choices, Real Lives data, is evidence that girls' aspirations also lie outside formal education. This is a key consideration whereby formal educatedness is often framed as the sole linear, achievement for Global South girlhoods.

Bianca's educational and career aspirations show her hopes for her own future and how she wants to help others:

“ *The fact that I want to major in psychology... I've had this dream of helping people [who] have a problem with self-esteem, anxiety...*

BIANCA, 15, BRAZIL, 2021

Bianca is imagining a future that improves upon the current crises of her context, and has identified a degree as the pathway towards achieving this dream.



Photo © Plan International.
In Niger, a country with the highest rate of child marriage in the world according to UNICEF, an association of girls and women supported by Plan International has been fighting for sexual and reproductive health and rights since 2020, including in crisis-affected areas.

KEY FINDING 3:

GIRLS IDENTIFY PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO THEIR LEADERSHIP

Girls and young women are experts in their own lives and the issues affecting their peers and communities. Participants in the three studies identified numerous, persistent barriers to their access to leadership roles and decision-making spaces.

SEXISM AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

Across the three studies, girls and young women from diverse contexts reported that gender stereotypes and opinions about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for girls and women pose key challenges for their ability to lead. Jocelyn (16) in the Philippines explained that in her community there are negative assumptions made about girl and women leaders: “[they] will be judged because others might think that [they’re] just seeking for attention” (Real Choices, Real Lives, 2022). A young woman in the Dominican Republic described a similar situation for women in the workplace: “Even in the work environment, she is not well received, because people think that a woman leader is interfering.” (17-21, Taking the Lead, 2019). Rainbow, an activist in Uganda, detailed how restrictive rules around ‘acceptable’ behaviour for women is an impediment to leading as the very act of speaking up is considered disrespectful:

“ *Whenever a woman wants to stand up and speak... most of the men or the society may perceive it as disrespecting other people. So even though we have women there, they’re still struggling to take their place, they’re still struggling to show people that women are also more capable like men.*

RAINBOW, UGANDA, EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022

94%

of survey respondents in the Equal Power Now study identified that girls and young women may face diverse challenges when trying to participate in politics

19%

of girls and young women in the Equal Power Now study said that they have personally been discouraged from participating from decision-making

The Taking the Lead study found that girls and young women who had leadership experience were more likely to say that women leaders face discrimination based on gender – 94% agreed that women leaders are treated less well because of their gender (compared with 88% of respondents with no leadership experience).

DOUBLE STANDARDS FOR MEN AND WOMEN

The same study found that the vast majority of girls and young women – 94% – believe that women in leadership are treated less well because of their gender. Girls and women with leadership experience were also more likely to express the view that women in leadership positions have to work harder than men to be respected – 65% compared with 54%. This was an observation that was also reported by girls from both the Real Choices, Real Lives study and the Equal Power Now study. Girl and women leaders are judged differently to men and are often held to higher and sometimes contradictory standards. When explaining her hesitation to become a leader herself, Hang in Vietnam underlined these double standards:

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

HANG, 16, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2022

Anna, an activist in Germany, discussed her own experience of navigating these near-impossible expectations placed on women in leadership positions:

“*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, EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022

DISCRIMINATION BASED ON AGE AND GENDER

Plan International's research with adolescent girls and young women captures further intersections of discrimination that are often overlooked – in particular the twofold challenge that girls face due to both age and gender-related norms that devalue their contributions and restrict their access to decision-making spaces. More than a third (35%) of participants in the Equal Power Now survey reported that they don't think leaders in their country listen to girls and young women.

“*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, EQUAL POWER NOW, 2022

This was highlighted by girls in the Real Choices, Real Lives study, who, when discussing politics and participation, stated that in their communities this is viewed as 'adult business' and reported that adults do not value girls' opinions in this domain. Some girls explained that they fear they would face active discouragement or criticism if they spoke out on an issue, such as Amanda (16) from Brazil who said that adults “*think we're too young to talk about [social and political issues], that we don't know anything*” (Real Choices, Real Lives, 2022). Structural barriers such as community norms around age and gender also affect girls' ability to be heard. When told a story about a girl who went to her community leaders with a solution to a problem affecting girls, Jasmine in the Philippines described the girl as “brave”. This was not due to personal characteristics of the girl but because in Jasmine's community, to take this action would require her to transgress norms and risk exposure to social sanctions.

“*...because we ourselves are afraid to talk to our (Barangay) Captain. We don't even want to face him because we're not allowed.*

JASMINE, 15, THE PHILIPPINES, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2021

This example from Jasmine highlights the issue with some girls' empowerment discourses, that places an unfair burden on girls to be confident, 'empowered' and proactive to solve problems in their communities.

FEAR OF BACKLASH

Solely 'empowering' girls does not address structural barriers to their leadership, nor the potential backlash they could face by speaking out. Amelia in Uganda was well aware of the backlash faced by girls who speak their minds: "If a girl has a positive idea, she will be faced with opposition and negativity from other people who will tell her that she cannot do it" (Amelia, 15, Uganda, Real Choices, Real Lives, 2021).

Fear of verbal and physical violence and harassment from men and boys was a common

concern raised by girls and young women when discussing taking on leadership roles. In the Taking the Lead study, 93% of respondents with leadership experience stated that women in leadership roles experience unwanted physical contact.

This was often based on personal experiences of leadership, as with Darna in The Philippines who faced intimidation by her male peers when trying to assert her authority as secretary of their school's supreme council:

“ *When I was the leader of our classroom, it was hard because others don't follow, especially the boys. I was scared because they might punch me ... I felt like I don't want to be a leader.*

**DARNA, 16, THE PHILIPPINES,
REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2022**

KEY FINDING 4:

GIRLS IDENTIFY SOLUTIONS TO THE BARRIERS THEY FACE AND CALL ON OTHERS TO HELP DISMANTLE THEM

Plan International's research shows that girls are the leading authority not only on the barriers that they face to exercising their leadership, but also on how adults, communities, governments and NGOs can support them by dismantling these barriers. Qualitative research that centres on girls' voices, and actively listens, is able to capture this nuance and provide recommendations on how to effectively support girls. Girls are leaders and should be involved in decision-making, however it is not girls' individual responsibility to 'fix' societal problems such as gender inequality. From approaches that tackle deep-rooted, unequal gender norms to identifying the key enabling factors and stakeholders that can advance their ability to lead, girls and young women are clear on how adults, governments and NGOs should be supporting them.

The role that parents, caregivers and the wider family can play is key. By championing girls from

an early age, they can show her the potential she has on an individual level.

“ *I think that she became a leader because when she was a little girl her parents helped her, they advised her and gave her motivation to be strong and taught her that she had to know how to get on well with people, listen to them and help them.*

GIRL, 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, TAKING THE LEAD, 2019

The responsibility extends to girls' communities, civil society and policy makers, who can enable an environment that respects girls' and young women's voices and work to remove structural barriers that hinder their leadership. Additionally, governments, the media and the corporate sector should, through example and public campaigning, challenge sexism and discrimination at all levels.

Girls and young women in the Taking the Lead study underline the power of role models and leadership experience:

“ *My role model is my mother... I feel I'm nothing without her support. I want to bring positive changes in my society by getting inspiration from my mother as she is also a social worker.*

YOUNG WOMAN, 21-24, INDIA, TAKING THE LEAD, 2019

“ *Young women leaders should see a women-friendly future, because they can be one of those women.*

GIRL, 15-16, JAPAN, TAKING THE LEAD, 2019

Girls in the Real Choices, Real Lives study identified the roots of gender discrimination and gender-based violence in the socialisation of boys. They called on caregivers to raise boys to be promoters of gender equality rather than perpetuating harmful gender norms:

“ *...it's like educating your son not to be sexist and to try and respect women.*

SUSANA, 15, EL SALVADOR, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2021

“ *because they [boys and men] are not born that way [aggressive and violent], it will depend on the way they were raised.*

BIANCA, 15, BRAZIL, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2021

“ *...not all boys and men are aggressive towards women, because some men do respect women and it may depend on how they were brought up, with the right values.*

MARIEL, 15, EL SALVADOR, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2021

In this way, these girls reject the individual burden so often placed on them to navigate or indeed 'fix' their communities' problems and instead call on adults and wider society to challenge harmful gender norms.

Girls also called for a two-layered approach to improving their access to leadership roles, by not just asking for girls' participation opportunities, but also asking for adults to listen and to prioritise youth needs.

“ *[Adults need] to listen to us girls. Because we also have to express our opinions. They should take us into consideration and not exclude us.*

HILLARY, 16, EL SALVADOR, REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES, 2022

CONCLUSION

Plan International's research exemplifies the many ways in which girls and young women are taking on leadership roles and exercising their agency all over the world. In the face of persistent barriers and discrimination based on their age and gender, girls and young women continue to participate, speak out and lead in their communities. Girls consistently demonstrate that they are effective leaders, not in the future, but now, effecting positive change at the local, national and international level. By redefining what it means to be a leader, girls are challenging systems and behaviours that benefit the few and often ignore the issues impacting on girls' and

young women's everyday lives. Girls know what actions are needed to enable them to meaningfully and safely take part in decision-making, however it is not their individual responsibility to dismantle the barriers preventing them from doing so. Only by listening to girls and ensuring the dissemination of their voices, will action towards gender equality be effective and lasting.



Photo © Plan International. To mark the International Day of the Girl in Guatemala, girl leaders from across the country came together to form the first girls' parliament in the country. During a plenary session, the girls aged between 8 and 17 shared some of the problems that affect girls in their communities and proposed solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented in this synthesis were developed in collaboration with young women in four countries [Kenya, Uganda, Nicaragua and Jordan] who are participating as youth delegates with Plan International at the 2023 Women Deliver Conference. The youth delegates came together at an online workshop in May 2023 to discuss the findings and map recommendations based on the synthesis report and their own experiences of leadership.

At the core of the recommendations shared by the youth delegates were some key driving concepts:

Reflecting on the findings from this synthesis report, the youth delegates discussed their own experiences of challenges faced in leadership roles. Some described navigating impossibly high standards placed on girl and women leaders that set them up to fail:

They also shared experiencing similar discrimination to the study participants based on their age when speaking out:

On leading through advocacy in queer spaces traditionally dominated by gay men, a youth delegate explained that the combined sexism and ageism they experienced when they were younger has persisted despite getting older:

“ *Let women and girls speak for themselves.*
YOUTH DELEGATE, WORKSHOP, 2023

“ *The solution to the challenges we are currently facing as young women and girls lies within us.*
YOUTH DELEGATE, WORKSHOP, 2023

“ *Build movements that target women in all their diversities.*
YOUTH DELEGATE, WORKSHOP, 2023

“ *In my line of work they expect me to be perfect. If I make the slightest mistake it now comes back to 'you are female so that is why you can't do these things'.*
YOUTH DELEGATE, WORKSHOP, 2023

“ *Once they know you are younger than them, they dismiss your points*
YOUTH DELEGATE, WORKSHOP, 2023

“ *There are a lot of gender stereotypes and sexism, because they expect that what they say is what should be done. They also don't listen to you because of your age...I started my advocacy when I was quite young: 23 or 24 years [old]. At that time to have people to listen to what I had to say it was quite hard, up to date I am still facing the same challenge, they always see me as that one young woman who is just queer.*
YOUTH DELEGATE, WORKSHOP, 2023

FROM THE YOUTH DELEGATES' DISCUSSION, FIVE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS WERE IDENTIFIED:



1. SUPPORT COLLECTIVE ACTION

Young people are placing value on collective action rather than on individual leaders. The youth delegates emphasised the importance of building networks, partnerships and movements to work in unison for gender equality. They underscored the need for solidarity and for women and girls to work together rather than in competition with each other – as often encouraged by the patriarchal system by creating a sense of limited space for them at the table.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil society organisations must support girls to organise and mobilise, starting at community level, and ensure their organisations are resilient and sustained. Challenge negative gender and social norms that teach girls and women they have to compete with each other in order to reach positions of leadership and power. Instead, promote solidarity and support network building between girl and women-led organisations.

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2. ESTABLISH AND INSTITUTIONALISE FORMS OF CO-CREATION WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Girls and young women are calling for a different form of leadership than the traditional structures that currently dominate decision-making spaces. The youth delegates emphasised the need to shift power and catalyse social movements by not just providing girls and young women with a seat at the decision-making table but also redesigning decision-making processes to be co-creative and collaborative.

“ We must facilitate the methodology for girls and young women to be part of decision-making in organisations and NGOs

“ We should think of methods for girls and young women to propose their own needs and demands according to their social contexts. Establish and institutionalise forms of co-creation

The current shortfalls in government policy and budget planning are due to their lack of consideration of young people's perspectives. The onus is on governments to ensure that girls and young women are co-partners in their policy making and that their input is meaningful, not tokenistic.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil society organisations should encourage new visions of leadership: challenge the very perception of what it means to be a leader and reinforce the message that girls and women belong in the places and spaces of power.

Governments, including ministries and relevant agencies, must 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.

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.

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3. CREATE AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS

The youth delegates placed particular value on the role that a girl’s environment can play in supporting or hindering her ability to exercise agency and lead. Parents, caregivers and the wider family should be engaged to dismantle harmful gender norms and create supportive networks for girls. Engaging the wider community in awareness raising and participatory dialogues around girls’ and young women’s leadership potential and the barriers they face is also key.

“ **Engage parents and communities in raising awareness**

“ **Establish participatory dialogues or ‘diagnostico comunitario’**

INVEST IN GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

The delegates also emphasised the need for gender-transformative education – which actively challenges and shifts harmful gender and social norms. Notably, they advocated for targeting girls and women with information about the roots of gender inequalities and equipping them with the tools to challenge unequal gender norms, rather than contributing to their persistence.

“ **We should also educate girls not to replicate gender inequality**

“ **We need to target women and girls with information that will help them dismantle patriarchy and embrace leadership**

“ **Promote a gender-sensitive’ curriculum – a subject that empowers girls**

PROMOTE RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

For the youth delegates, promotion of ‘respectful communication’ at all levels is essential to advancing girls’ and young women’s leadership. Centring respectful communication challenges the combined sexism and ageism experienced by girls and young women from a patriarchal society that dismisses their input and silences their voice. The delegates also emphasised the importance

of all stakeholders – including girls and young women – adopting and upholding respectful communication when working together, to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments, schools, and civil society organisations must challenge sexism and discrimination: urgently tackle the pervasive discriminatory culture that deters girls from pursuing their leadership ambitions.

Parents, schools, religious and cultural organisations should be seen as key entry points to creating a strong support network that nurtures girls’ leadership aspirations. Efforts should be focused on making families more aware of their unique ability to foster equality in society by enabling girls to become leaders.

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4. PROTECT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS FROM BACKLASH

Girls and young women should not have to risk emotional, physical or sexual violence and harassment in order to speak out. Concerns around negative reactions and harmful behaviour from peers, family, community, colleagues and wider society including in online spaces, prevent many girls and women from taking on leadership roles. In order to ensure that girls and young women are able to meaningfully participate, preventing violence and harassment of girl and women leaders must be a priority.

“ **Ensure safety if girls/activists are speaking up**

PLAN INTERNATIONAL’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments, workplaces, and wider civil society must take concrete steps to prevent and respond to the very real experiences of sexual harassment violence, that girls and women in all of their diversity who are active in public life are subjected to. They must enforce existing laws and policies and strengthening reporting mechanisms. Public campaigning against all forms of violence against women must be funded and promoted.



5. TARGET MEDIA AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND GIRL LEADERS

The youth delegates highlighted the key role that media outlets play in perpetuating gender stereotypes as well as their potential to challenge these stereotypes and provide opportunities for girls and women to amplify their voices. Ensuring the accessibility of media platforms for young people to both own the way they are represented, and reach a wider audience with their ideas is key. In particular, the youth delegates recommended targeting both mainstream media as well as creating and supporting alternative media platforms.

“ *Alternative media platforms provide an opportunity to share our ideas freely*

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Media organisations in particular must recognise their role in perpetrating stereotypes around women leaders. Diversity, positive images and affirmative language could transform the way women are portrayed, providing girls and young women with the encouragement they need, promoting gender equality rather than adding to the discrimination and hostility that girls currently experience.

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Photo © Plan International

In Niger, the Girls Out Loud movement is gaining momentum after officially launching in the country last November. More than 100 girls, aged 14-24, are part of the group which brings girls together virtually to lead discussions on the issues affecting their lives. The insights gained from these discussions are used to find solutions to the problems they face and support them to become leaders in their communities and beyond.

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METHODOLOGY

This report draws from existing qualitative and quantitative evidence from the *Taking the Lead* study (2019), the *State of the World's Girls: Equal Power Now* study (2022) and data collected in 2021 and 2022 for the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study. Key learnings on girls' agency and leadership were identified from the Taking the Lead and Equal Power Now studies and this evidence was then triangulated with new analysis of the Real Choices, Real Lives data to explore girls' agency from a longitudinal perspective.

The annual Real Choices, Real Lives data is coded in NVivo and summary reports are produced for each country and each girl. These existing resources were used to carry out additional analysis on agency and leadership for this synthesis.

Data collection for the three studies was carried out in line with ethical research standards, and ethics approval was obtained for each of the three studies. All research carried out adhered to Plan International's Child and Youth Safeguarding Policy.

About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 80 countries.

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