



Until we are all equal



Plan International

LEAD – Girls, Boys and Youth as Active Drivers of Change

A snapshot of our evidence from 2024

Through our global strategy *All Girls Standing Strong*, Plan International works in over 80 countries and focuses programming in six priority thematic areas, as well as responding to humanitarian emergencies.

At the end of 2024, we reviewed evidence available from projects and countries working in each thematic area – covering evaluations and results, research and annual reporting metrics. This short snapshot summarises some of the insights from our evidence this year in LEAD and what we can learn from it.

Plan International's work under LEAD centres on ensuring that girls, boys and young people shape decisions that affect their lives by leading change within their own communities and influencing decisions at higher levels. Core focus areas include:

- Youth collective action
- Duty bearers realise young people's participation
- Media for young drivers of change

Learn more about our work [here](#).



Key insights



- **Many young people are already acting as drivers of change, through influencing family or community dynamics, developing their own advocacy campaigns, and engaging duty bearers.** Through our programming and capacity building activities this year, we've seen positive outcomes in young people developing agency, which we know continues to be a priority area for them.
- **Girls and young women are rejecting traditional leadership roles in favour of solidarity, collaboration and collective action, and value support in these efforts.** Key themes of our work this year under the banner of collective action relate to building the capacity of youth groups and facilitating their collaboration with other stakeholders, with financial support and linkages with duty bearers being seen as important enablers.
- **Young people experience positive impacts of their own activism – personally and within their communities – but also face multiple barriers.** Key challenges relate to how gender, age, race and other identity characteristics impact how systems receive them as leaders, gendered risks to emotional and physical safety (online and offline), and barriers in access to funding. It's critical that we continue to challenge deep-seated norms and support young people in analysing and mitigating risks.
- **We need to continue to advocate, and shape opportunities, for youth engagement that is truly meaningful.** Our projects show positive signs in relation to progress with governments and duty bearers in realising young people's participation, but we know that it is not yet consistent or at the level it needs to be.
- **Across the sector, we need to continue to prioritise advocacy with donors and continue to reflect and improve our own practices to enable flexible funding and sustained collaboration and partnerships.** This is critical for effective support to the ongoing development of youth led groups and organisations.

2024

figures at a glance

Our global footprint

(Annual reporting, July 2023 to June 2024)



1.1 million
girls supported to be active citizens.



4.8 million
children and adults reached with programming for girls, boys and youth as active drivers of change.

Duty bearers responding to young people's advocacy

76%

of government policymakers and UN agencies were assessed as responding to and supporting young people's advocacy asks.



(Monitoring data from young people participating in four projects)

Advocacy for girls' leadership

57 influencing successes in relation to girls' leadership, including:



18 changes

or developments related to laws, policies, regulations or guidelines on girls' rights.



6 commitments

to, or increases in, investment, budget, expenditure, systems or services which will contribute to girls' rights.

(Annual reporting against our Global Advocacy Strategy, July 2023 to June 2024)

What are some of the key issues? Selected findings from research

Our research this year – conducted over a range of country contexts – demonstrates that **young people are already important drivers of change**, taking on leadership roles in their communities, in informal spaces, as well as at a national and global level.

“I have also seen myself change and feel more determined and capable. I used to feel that I was a powerless child before but now I feel that I am capable.”

Sanjiva, 18, Nepal

The rich experiences of girls and young women as change-makers often **challenge traditional ideals of leadership, favouring collective action and collaboration**, based on principles of kindness and equality. Young people recommend that Plan and other organisations increase support in this area – supporting girls and women to collectively mobilise, build networks and challenge norms that foster competition.

Across studies, leadership and activism championed by young women and girls was often **more concentrated at a community level** and focused on local change rather than at broader levels of policy or law. Positive impacts of their work were discussed both in relation to positive personal impacts as well as outcomes within their communities.

“I would like to say my activism has made some changes. It might not be on big government policy levels, but on communities. Like recently at an e-waste project, managing our electronic waste, like when we get rid of our laptops and our phones, then what happens then? So as waste is affecting the climate, we had education on taking care of e-waste as a form of advocacy in creating that kind of policy. Even though the policy wasn't created, but then we came up with local solutions on how to manage that sort of waste....”

Haka, 22, Zimbabwe

Female representation and presence in decision-making, leadership and political spaces was seen as a key influencing factor that inspired youth. Governments and duty bearers were also highlighted for their crucial role – young people continue to recommend that they create empowering and inclusive ways to dismantle barriers to meaningful youth participation, turn commitments into concrete actions and focus on enforcement and accountability for change. This may necessitate changes in governance structures and decision-making processes.

“There is so much tokenism. The most marginalised and underserved girls are still not heard.”

Aurelia, 22, Sub-Saharan Africa

Across reports, **gender, age, race and ethnicity, perceived lack of safety, harassment, backlash, and challenges with access to funding** were identified as key barriers to girls and young women's leadership and activism. Intersecting identity characteristics were not necessarily found as barriers to girls and young women's self-perception of leadership, but as a barrier in relation to the way other people, or systems, may treat them as leaders. Impacts on the emotional and physical safety of young women and girls were highlighted across reports as a risk related to activism and leadership, occurring in offline and online spaces. From encountering emotional burnout to sexual harassment, hostility, aggression and threats, girls and young women faced severe barriers in their work, heightening when they engaged in topics perceived as sensitive or taboo. Lack of funding or barriers to financial support was discussed as a key challenge for girls and young women in activism and leadership – including lengthy processes, eligibility criteria and the complex and competitive nature of funding opportunities. Additional barriers mentioned in the global report *Turning the World Around* included restricted or shrinking civic space (including repressive laws), and institutional bureaucracy.

95% of girls and young women say that their activism has had a positive impact on them.

25% of girls and young women felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious during their activism.

61% of girls and young women faced negative consequences as a result of their activism.

61% say the impact of their activism in creating change has met or exceeded their expectations.

21% of respondents were deterred from activism, reporting fears for their safety if they were to take part.

Read more about these stats

(Turning the World Around: Girl and Young Women Activists Leading the Fight for Equality)

Worldwide, women occupy:

35.5% of local government seats,

26.7% of parliamentary seats and

28.2% of management positions in the workplace.

97% of 29,000 girls and young women surveyed by Plan believe that it is important to participate in politics.

31 countries around the world with women as Heads of State or Government.

Read more about these stats

(Our Voices for our Tomorrow: Youth Reimagining a Gender-Equal Future)

85% of girls and young women had leadership experience.

94% of respondents believed girls and young women face diverse challenges when trying to participate in politics.

Over 75% of girls and young women aspired to be leaders in either their professional careers, in their communities or countries.

Read more about these stats

(Experts On Our Own Lives: Listening to Girls' Experiences of Leadership and Agency)

What have we learned? Selected findings from evaluations



We reviewed 23 evaluations of LEAD programming this year, covering 30 countries in four regions.

Many of our evaluations this year showed improvements in metrics of confidence, self-worth, and awareness, which we know are priorities for the young people we are working with. Projects are seeing positive results in terms of young people developing agency. This has been achieved through different interventions targeting young people directly, including most commonly capacity strengthening in the form of mentoring, training, simulations and coaching. For example:

- In **Benin**, under the *Girls Get Equal Campaign*, “Club Cafes” were set up throughout the country enabling girls to meet, exchange ideas and plan activities in a safe and friendly space. The campaign synergised with other programming, and further empowered girls and young women to coordinate and form networks such as the National Girls’ Movement, ultimately leading to enhanced self-confidence to stand up for themselves.
- In **Guatemala**, through the *Champions of Change* methodology and the opportunities to participate in school and community spaces, adolescents increased their self-esteem and confidence to express themselves.

Projects showed positive outcomes in supporting young people to take up opportunities as actors of change. This can take many forms, including girls and young people influencing family and community decisions and dynamics, acting as leaders in their communities, developing their own advocacy campaigns or meaningfully participating in decision making. For example, in Vietnam, young people participated in annual influencing workshops, alongside teachers, village heads and local authorities to assess and find solutions to ending early child marriage and human trafficking.

Financial support and facilitating contact with power holders emerged as key enablers for youth groups to build their capacity and take collective action on the issues important to them. Through our projects this year, Plan has facilitated and strengthened collaboration and youth collective action using a variety of mechanisms. The most commonly cited enablers to success include financial support (particularly when flexible and longer term) and creating opportunities for youth groups and networks to engage with key actors (including duty bearers, other peer organisations and the media), on the issues that are important to them.

In order to enhance children, adolescents and youth collective action more generally, it’s important that projects in all thematic areas strengthen their focus on youth-centred programming alongside other contextually relevant priority thematic areas and allocate human and financial resources to do so.

Young people experience positive outcomes for themselves and for their communities from activism but also deal with negative consequences, which are often gendered. Findings from evaluations identified that LEAD programming must strengthen its focus on meaningfully engaging boys and young men, as well as wider communities, especially in contexts where norms, stigma and traditions affect children’s rights.

Our evaluations show positive signs in relation to progress with governments and duty bearers in realising young people’s participation. Reports highlighted actions around capacity building with duty bearers around participation, advocacy for their involvement, and direct support to children and young people’s involvement in these fora. This included their participation in international conferences, global and regional fora, government structures at various levels, as part of advocacy and lobbying and in child

protection committees and other community structures. Participation took various forms, including articulating concerns during decision making processes, acting as peace ambassadors, and running for school and community elections, among others. From the evidence, we can see duty-bearer’s commitments to young people’s participation and/or issues being highly achieved in some projects.

Alongside these commitments, some reports highlighted other influencing wins realised through the participation of multiple stakeholders.

For example, duty bearers have:

- drafted or revised laws and position papers on gender issues or child protection.

- passed or adopted new policies, codes of conduct and regulations for safeguarding children, addressing gender inequality, discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence.
- implemented policies and procedures related to issues affecting girls or realising the rights of people living with disabilities (including young people).

However, from both research and evaluations, we can also see that the extent of meaningful engagement – and how it is defined – varies, demonstrating the continued importance of work in this area.

Nicol, 18, from Colombia’s Cauca region, advocates for children’s, youth, and women’s rights through reading, writing, and study. As president of the Municipal Youth Council and a participant in Plan International’s Empoder Arte por la Paz project, she has led a Citizens’ Agenda, engaged with local authorities, and represented her community at the Universal Periodic Review in Geneva.

Where we need to keep going deeper...

The evidence available this year has informed some insights which are relevant for Plan International but also the wider sector, in terms of how investment is targeted and how programmes are designed, to support young people in their ambitions to act as active drivers of change:

- **Targeted strategies for those with the most barriers to participation:** Factors such as disability status, gender identity and sexual orientation, race and religion create increased, and often intersecting, barriers to meaningful participation and increased risk of backlash or negative impacts. Targeted approaches are needed to identify and address these challenges, requiring meaningful engagement with girls and young people in all their diversity (whether they be project participants or partners) from project design onwards.
- **Capitalising on our ability to facilitate linkages:** Young people place significant value on interventions that enable their access to key stakeholders (including duty bearers, other peer organisations and the media), including through coaching and mentorship, as well as peer-to-peer platform and networks. This also includes work with networks that foster collaboration between groups that are working towards similar goals, with a view to building complementarity and solidarity instead of competition.

- **Building longer term relationships:** A key theme from some of the evidence this year was the need for longer term partnerships and support mechanisms, including support to ongoing organisational development of youth groups and organisations and follow up support to grant recipients, and connections to alumni networks. This implies a need to seek – and advocate for – longer term project cycles and to maximise opportunities for follow-on projects that leverage past successes, as well building and nurturing sustained partnerships with youth led organisations and groups.
- **Continue to challenge deep-seated norms and our response to risks for youth activists:** There is a need to continue to deepen our work on challenging wider gender and age-related norms. This is in order to increase representation and help dismantle institutional barriers that prevent women, girls and young people, in all their diversity, from engaging in activism and attaining and staying in political and public leadership positions. We also need to better support young people in analysing and mitigating risks they face during activism, including in shrinking civic spaces.
- **Investing in meaningful youth engagement.** Meaningful youth engagement is still not consistent or at the level it needs to be and how it is defined varies. We need to continue to strengthen our own advocacy with duty bearers, and how we shape opportunities for youth to engage meaningfully on the issues that are important to them.

Read more from this year:

Plan International's Policy Position on the rights of people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics.

The Girls' Pact for the Future: Adolescent girls and young people share their concerns, their vision of a positive future with gender equality at its heart, and recommendations for policy makers.

For Our Futures: Youth Voices on Climate Justice and Education: 30 youth activists from Indonesia, Nepal and Australia worked together to find out how climate change is impacting girls' education and what changes they want to see.



Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization 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.

Plan International
Global Hub
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155
Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505
E-mail: info@plan-international.org



plan-international.org



facebook.com/planinternational



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Cover photo: Fátima, 14, wears her traditional Cusco dress in a rapeseed field in Peru. As a peer educator for the Deciding Without Violence project, she raises awareness about violence against women and girls, challenges gender stereotypes, and works to prevent teenage pregnancy in her community.

Disclaimer: Images used throughout this report are not of research participants. Consent was received for the use of all images.