

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE EU STRATEGY ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD 2021-2025

Plan International welcomes the EU's priority to develop a comprehensive Strategy on the Rights of the Child, as well as the online consultation and other actions taken to gather inputs from children, child rights organisations and broader civil society. In these unprecedented times, where the progress made to advance the realisation of human rights and the SDG risk to be lost, we believe this is an opportunity for the EU to take a stand for girls and boys in all their diversity around the world. We hope the dialogue and exchange with the EU institutions will continue. This document presents a set of contributions by Plan International¹. They are focused on a **general set of principles we believe should underpin the Strategy, as well as on the current context we face and the key areas of the future strategy in relation to the main areas of work of Plan International**².

General principles underpinning the Child Rights Strategy

Plan International stresses the need for the Strategy on the Rights of the Child to have the Convention on the Rights of Child as its main framework while ensuring the principles of non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, their right to survival and development and the respect of their views are at the core of the strategy.

In addition, as an organisation working with and for children and youth with a focus on girls, we believe that it is essential to consider applying a **cross-cutting gender transformative approach** in all its actions. Implementing a gender transformative approach means:

- identifying and addressing social and gender norms throughout children's life course;
- strengthening girls' agency, including through knowledge and equal access to resources;
- working with boys and men to embrace positive masculinities and promote gender equality;
- considering girls, boys, young women and young men in all their diversity when identifying and responding to their needs, including those with disabilities or who identify as LGBTIQ+;
- seeking to improve the social position (value or status) of girls and young women in society;
- fostering enabling policy, budgetary and institutional frameworks to support girls, boys, young women and young men towards gender equality.

Finally, we believe it is also relevant to:

- Follow a **life-cycle approach** by clearly identifying the challenges and needs children face at different stages of their lives, from early childhood to adolescence and their transition into adulthood.
- **Recognise, analyse and act on the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination** children face. This means that children experience inequality and discrimination differently according to their age, their gender identity, their sexual orientation, disabilities, among other exclusion factors that have to be addressed accordingly.
- It should **recognise children as agents of change** and be underpinned by children's priorities. Children should meaningfully participate both in the design of the Child Rights Strategy as well as in its implementation at national, regional and local levels.

¹ Our contribution was drafted with 11 national offices in Europe that have extensive experience working towards the realisation of children's rights and equality for girls across the world.

² Plan International has contributed to and supports the Joint Position Paper on a Comprehensive Child Rights Strategy, developed by 29 child rights organisations. The position is available here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/joint-position-paper-comprehensive-child-rights-strategy>

- **Ensure that all EU legislation and policies, whether external or internal, are child-rights and gender proofed.** Mainstreaming children rights through a gender sensitive lens in all EU laws and policies is essential to enable address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of girls and young women.

The impacts of Covid-19 in the lives of children, especially girls

We are facing an unprecedented global pandemic that is impacting individuals, communities and governments across the world. The outbreak of COVID-19 has **amplified existing inequalities and injustices and affected the environment in which children and young people grow and develop** as they face disruptions to their access to food, education, healthcare, protection and wellbeing. Along with their families and communities, children and young people have been placed under extreme stress from health and economic burdens and isolation. **Girls and young women, especially the most marginalised, have been particularly affected by the secondary impacts due to their age, gender and other exclusion factors³.**

With the outbreak, progress made to advance children's rights risk to be undermined. **Therefore, both immediate response and longer-term strategies** are necessary to protect development gains and further children's rights in the longer-term. This is why we strongly believe the EU must uphold the principle of **leaving no one behind across the strategy and its actions** and use the EU's existing tools for solidarity in an effective and consistent way. This must be accompanied by the allocation of appropriate resources targeting children and youth, girls and young women living in conflict-affected and humanitarian zones – including refugee and migrants' camps.

Thematic priorities

In addition to the cross-cutting elements outlined above, Plan International believes the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must include the following considerations when developing its priorities and actions:

1. Ensure the realisation of the rights of children in the most vulnerable situations.

The economic effects of the outbreak are affecting children and youth and their families and caregivers, putting them at risk of extreme poverty. It is estimated that COVID-19 pushed between 119 and 124 million more people into poverty in 2020. In 2021, it is foreseen that the estimated COVID-19-induced poor increases to between 143 and 163 million people⁴; fragility and violent conflict are exacerbated and the numbers of people facing acute food insecurity are doubled⁵. This situation risks to further exacerbate the rights abuses in global supply chains, including child labour and labour rights violations against their parents⁶. Any measure/plan addressing economic and social impacts and policies in the

³ See:

Halting Lives: the impacts of Covid-19 on girls, Plan International 2020: <https://plan-international.org/publications/halting-lives-impact-covid-19-girls>

African Girls in Covid-19 Pandemic, Plan International 2020: <https://plan-international.org/publications/african-girls-covid-19-pandemic>

⁴ More information: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021>

⁵ More information: <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>

⁶ Respect Child Rights in Global Supply Chains. Call for an Effective Human Rights Due Diligence Law. Plan International and others, 2020: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/01/germany-respect-child-rights-global-supply-chains>

future **must support access to income for families, protect the rights of workers and communities and improve social protection systems that protect children, especially the ones in the most vulnerable situations including girls and adolescent girls.** Taking into account the heavy impacts on young women's access to livelihoods, measures should be gender responsive and target sectors where young women and women represent a large proportion of workers.

Children, in particular girls living in the least developed countries and fragile, conflict and disaster affected contexts have been acutely vulnerable to the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these contexts, health systems quickly became overwhelmed, with enormous obstacles to disease prevention and treatment, particularly in displacement camps and situations of armed conflict. **The provision of essential humanitarian assistance and protection, including services critical for the safety and wellbeing of children, particularly pregnant girls, young mothers and others with specific sexual and reproductive health needs should be a priority.**

2. Ensure that children in all their diversity thrive and grow up equally valued and cared for, free from discrimination, violence and fear.

Every child and young person have the right to live a life free from any form of violence, and deserves to grow up in a safe, peaceful, nurturing and enabling environment where they can fully exercise their rights. Children experience different forms of violence at different stages of their development and girls and boys experience different forms of violence. **Responses to violence against children must be inclusive, gender transformative and age-sensitive, to ensure that all children's experiences of violence are understood, responded to, and ultimately prevented.**

Evidence clearly shows that girls and young women face more violence – much of it hidden or normalised – throughout their childhood, adolescence and early adult years than boys and young men. Gaps in legal protections for girls who are at risk, or who are survivors, of violence must be addressed. **Challenging discriminatory social norms and unequal power dynamics between girls and boys and women and men is critical to ending all forms of gender-based violence in both development and emergency settings.** The age factor is also critical: objectives and activities related to ending discrimination and violence against girls (including access to justice and the strengthening of child protection systems) need to respect the principles and rights contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, specific contexts or places where girls may be subject to violence, such as online, at school and in the city⁷ (in public transportation) should receive attention⁸. This can improve girls' mobility and their opportunities and have a positive impact on their freedom of expression, their participation and their education.

In conflicts and emergency settings, sexual and gender-based violence increases due to the breakdown of protection structures within communities. Girls and women can become systematic targets in conflict situations. Concerns regarding their safety can restrict their social roles and their free movement, create further barriers to accessing services and rights, and can lead displaced communities to resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child, early and forced marriage and child labour.

⁷ Plan International's Safer Cities project, supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizen Programme of the European Commission, aims at producing evidence of the violence girls and young women face in public spaces in cities in Spain (Madrid, Barcelona and Sevilla) and Belgium (Brussels, Charleroi and Antwerp). More information, here: <https://plan-international.org/ending-violence/safer-cities-girls>

⁸ Unsafe in the City. A research report on girls' safety across five cities, Plan International, 2018: <https://plan-international.org/unsafe-city>

3. Acknowledge the climate crisis as a child rights crisis and align and complement its goals and actions to those of the EU Green Deal.

Climate change and biodiversity loss have disproportionate impacts on children, particularly girls, and especially those in the most vulnerable situations and poorest communities who have the fewest resources to cope. This is seriously threatening their human rights and is the most significant intergenerational equity issue of our time. The transition to a just and green economy offers a significant opportunity to advance gender equality through deploying systemic changes which are transformative for both climate and gender injustices.

Therefore, in line with recognizing the potential for girls and boys to play decisive roles in identifying practical solutions to address climate change and community-based adaptation, the EU strategy on the Rights of the Child **should propose formal mechanisms to support children's and young people's rights-based participation in discussions and decision-making on climate change issues.** Additionally, the strategy should ensure **increased investment in climate change and environmental education to strengthen the capacity of children and young people, as agents of change, on climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience efforts and to equip them with the knowledge and skills required to contribute to a safe and sustainable future.** Girls and young women are at the forefront of movements fighting against climate change. EU initiatives such as the European Climate Pact should support their collective actions, and develop concrete and meaningful opportunities for their voices to be heard in decision-making. Finally, the Green Deal is an ambitious and relevant agenda to tackle climate change and as such, **its implementation must be informed by and aligned with the priorities of the Child Rights Strategy. This is particularly important in relation to the active role children and young people in Europe and beyond can and want play in decisions over their own future.**

4. For everyone to equally benefit from the digital transformation, it is important to recognise and address the digital gender gap.

Girls and women often have less access to technology and the internet compared to boys and men. In low- and middle-income countries, women are on average 10% less likely than men to own a phone. Globally, 184 million fewer women own a mobile phone than men. This gap is even wider with regard to mobile internet, with women 26% less likely to use it than men in these countries. A report by Girl Effect and the Vodafone Foundation shows that boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone and 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone than girls.⁹ Affordability and infrastructure are key factors for the digital gender gap, but girls are also particularly affected by social barriers. Our recent report "Free To Be Online?" based on research with over 14,000 girls and young women in 31 countries shows that online abuse and harassment silences them and makes them withdraw from online¹⁰. Girls are harassed just for being girls and it gets worse if they have other intersecting identities (race, disability, sexual orientation or other) and if they are politically active or speak up about issues they care about¹¹.

Without equal access to technology and the internet, and without effective mechanisms to address online harassment, girls will not be able to equally participate in our ever more digital societies. **Actions should therefore focus on developing digital skills, promoting access to internet and technology through affordability and inclusive infrastructure, as well as challenging discriminatory norms about girls' access to and use of the internet.** Digital and social media

⁹ Real girls, real lives, connected. A global study of girls' access and usage of mobile, told through 3000 voices, Vodafone Foundation and Girl Effect, 2018: https://www.girlsandmobile.org/s/GE_VO_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

¹⁰ 58 per cent of girls reported that they have personally experienced some form of online harassment on social media platforms. Harassment starts at age 8, and is most violent between 14 and 16 years old.

¹¹ Free to be Online, Plan International 2020: <https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline>

platforms have a key role to play by taking responsibility for creating a safe online environment for girls and young women in all their diversity. **Responses in partnership with these platforms must focus on creating or strengthening effective and accessible reporting mechanisms that target gender-based violence, and holding perpetrators to account.**

5. **Better reach out to children in all their diversity and support their agency, as well as their role as active drivers of change, in order to successfully promote their political empowerment on the long term.**

First, building the foundations for girls' full and effective participation in public life must start in childhood, through the fulfilment of their human rights, especially the right to education. In addition, recognising that nowadays girls and young women are increasingly involved in informal structures and forms of political participation, it is important to support youth-led movements, young feminist activists and human rights defenders, networks and association, informal and formal, through flexible funding and non-financial support that allow them to follow their own priorities as key drivers of change.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should also **promote collaboration with partner countries to promote and strengthen formal mechanisms for girls and young women's participation in decision-making processes, and continue supporting girls' and young women's meaningful engagement to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met, taking into account their safety and specific vulnerabilities being both young and female.** In line with an intersectional approach, the EU should also take into consideration that participation is far from equal for girls and young women living in low-income and fragile contexts, in rural and remote areas, with lower levels of education, who are less engaged in any form of participation¹². Participatory processes and platforms, including online, should remain open and accessible to all individuals without discrimination, acknowledging and responding to intersecting forms of exclusion.

¹² See: Girls Action Plan: <https://plan-international.org/eu/Girls-Action-Plan>