SETTING THE AGENDA: THE GIRLS' PLATFORM FOR ACTION

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FOREWORD

To support girl's engagement in the Beijing+25 process, Plan International has undertaken consultations with girls across 12 countries to understand our views and priorities and to create this 'Girls' Platform for Action'. I am a youth advocate from the Girls Advocacy Alliance in the Philippines and part of the Bidlisiw Foundation Peer Support Group, and it was a privilege and opportunity to be one of the young women advocates that participated in the consultations.

Girls' full participation in the Beijing+25 process is fundamental to our rights of freedom for empowerment and for establishing equality and accountability. We can contribute to making significant change not just in our community, but also globally. Our participation also strengthens our own capacity and growth. Through this process, we have been able to articulate our concerns and needs and have formulated clear recommendations for the Action Coalition leaders.

One of the top priorities that we have chosen to bring attention to is violence against women and girls that still persists in the Philippines, and globally, which is very alarming. Young women and girls, especially girl-children from rural areas, experience violence in different forms including commercial sexual exploitation, child labor, gender stereotyping in education, trafficking, prostitution, and teenage pregnancy. It must stop now so that this will not be perpetuated across generations. Despite the growing awareness, laws and policies, administrative and institutional measures, there are still many obstacles for women and girl survivors to access formal justice.

We urge governments to create policies to protect women and girls and to make sure these policies are implemented properly. We also urge governments to find concrete ways to eliminate gender attitudes and stereotypical gender roles, as well as harmful traditional practices that foster, tolerate or maintain gender-based violence against women and girls. It is important to listen to girls and include us in creating and implementing these solutions.

We call on you to use this Girls' Platform for Action to act on the priorities we have highlighted and work with us to make change as part of the Generation Equality Process.

Leah, Youth Advocate from the Philippines

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study brings together findings of a consultation process that took place in the first half of 2020 to better understand adolescent girls' views on the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) and to provide a tool for girls' own advocacy and engagement in the Generation Equality Action Coalitions. What has emerged is a common set of priorities and recommendations expressed by adolescent girls, across the world.

Over 350 girls aged 14-19 took part in a mixed method consultation process across 12 countries, including: Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Kenya, Liberia, Nepal, Paraguay, the Philippines, Sierra Leone and Uganda. An additional 797 girls engaged with the process via online platforms. This report is a reflection of the key themes that emerged as priorities for adolescent girls and their demands for action for each of the Action Coalition themes: gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, bodily autonomy, climate justice, technology and innovation, feminist movements and leadership.

Across all 12 countries, **girls clearly defined gender-based violence, education, poverty and economic empowerment, health and girl's leadership as priority action areas for achieving gender equality in their lifetime**. Adolescent girls have described how they experience disadvantage as a result of violence, early pregnancy, child marriage and limited opportunities for education and employment and how COVID-19 has worsened these existing gender inequalities.

Gender-based violence (GBV) was the top concern across all respondents with public harassment and sexual violence widespread. **Mental health as a result of GBV experiences** and the uncertainty of COVID-19 have emerged as a distinct cross-cutting issue. Girls called for greater recognition of mental health as a priority and for better access to mental health services.

Adolescent girls in all their diversity described a severe lack of access to **sexual and reproductive health** information, sanitary products, contraception, and legal and safe abortion. **Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU)** was described as an accepted practice in the majority of countries[1]. Girls confirmed that improved knowledge of SRHR topics and increased access to contraceptives was essential to help avoid unwanted pregnancy and ensure that girls stayed in school for longer, creating more opportunities for thriving in the future.

COVID-19 has the potential to undo the progress made in advancing the rights of girls if their needs are not recognised and addressed in the global response. **The economic burden** has put immense pressure on families and girls are experiencing an increase in domestic care responsibilities to help sustain and support parents and families. The pandemic has further exacerbated issues around 'decent' work, with girls afraid to return to livelihood activities that feel unsafe, and others reporting an increase in child labour.

Education is recognised by girls as the tool that increases freedom of choice, provides economic opportunity and they are eager to return as soon as possible. However, many professions still remain out of reach for girls. Girls shared **aspirations to work in non-traditional fields, including STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) and entrepreneurship. **Digital access** is a significant issue for many girls, with boys and men given priority access to digital resources in the household. Despite the opportunities the internet has provided, girls reported a serious concern with online harassment.
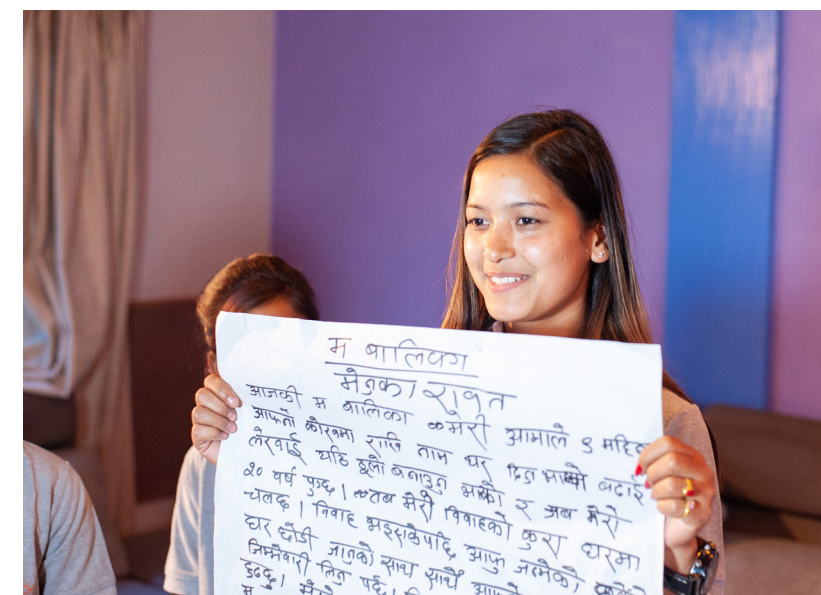
Girls are ready to lead, and they are sick of being ignored. In many instances, **girls are already leading gender equality efforts in their communities.** However, backlash is a significant issue and many girls reported being mocked, discouraged, and in some cases physically abused for participation. COVID-19 is having a negative impact on girls-led advocacy and the ability to organise due to restrictions on movement and lack of access to the internet, together with reduced access to decision-making platforms.

Throughout the consultation process, participants vocalised a need for change, and faster change, to transform the everyday realities of their lives. Girls own practical experience gives rise to many ideas as to how this might be done. Furthermore, **girls want to be key partners in bringing about this change** and play a role in ensuring that girls and women live in safe and conducive, violence free environments.

We, girls from all over the world, have come together to share our priorities for Generation Equality, and to demand a seat at the table.

This is our platform for action: a call to the Generation Equality Action Coalition Leadership to ensure that adolescent girls are meaningfully engaged in the Action Coalition and Generation Equality process. Governments and community leaders must recognise the experience of adolescent girls and work with us as equal partners. We are ready to play an active role in creating real change. The Action Coalitions provide an opportunity to ensure that adolescent girls' views and concerns are at the heart of decision making and that clear responses to identified needs can be acted upon.

We have identified six priority agendas and we call on you to respond to our key demands:

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Ensure we have genuine access to justice by holding perpetrators accountable for all forms of violence perpetrated against us, including street, sexual and online harassment. Provide us with appropriate services that are responsive to age, gender and diversity, including safe spaces, SRHR and mental health services.

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Recognise our leadership and the critical role we can and do play in achieving gender equality. Support us financially to run our girl-led groups and networks and support us to access formal platforms and spaces, where you enable us to make our voices heard.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Create schools and workplaces that promote gender equality and are free from discrimination and address the unequal responsibilities of care and housework, that hold us back from realizing our full potential.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Ensure that all girls, including girls in rural areas and LGBTIQ+ youth, have access to adolescent friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services and information, including legal and safe abortion; quality and free contraceptives; and free sanitary products, without requiring the authorisation of our parents or carers.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Consider and act on the gender dimensions of climate change and include girls and women in all our diversity in response programming, and invest in girl-led community initiatives to support local climate action.

DIGITAL

Urgently address the gender digital divide by ensuring we have equal access to digital technology and online spaces as our brothers and male peers, and that these are free from violence and abuse. Support us to pursue careers in STEM, via technical skills and vocational training.

Our challenge to you is to work with us to address these action areas, so that together we can achieve gender equality in our lifetime.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) set out the most comprehensive blueprint for women's rights and gender equality to date. Twenty-five years on, there is still a long way to go in achieving gender equality. This is largely due to the deeply engrained nature of gender inequality across society, but also the fact that in 1995 girls' rights were largely absent from discussions.

Gender equality and the rights of women are linked with the recognition of girls' rights and the actions necessary to realise them. It is hard to make radical changes to society and to women's lives if we do not start framing the necessary changes during adolescence. Adolescence is a highly significant stage in girls' lives, and one where their future direction is determined. It can also be a time where traditional expectations and social attitudes begin to restrict their world view and curtail their ambitions. **Whether girls are able to take their place as equal citizens in the world, will largely depend on whether governments and society stand in partnership to enable them to reach their full potential.**

"She mo pirimba! I get goose bumps when I realize that 25 years ago women were already fighting for our rights. Knowing what happened 25 years ago encourages us to keep on fighting for the rights of girls."
(Rural Paraguay)

A formal review of the BPfA is currently underway to assess the impact and progress since Member States first reached agreement on this historical call for action, 25 years ago. This review process is an opportunity to put adolescent girls at the heart of discussions, and for their voices and opinions to be heard and acted upon.

As part of the preparation for the review, a multi-generational campaign was launched by UN Women, called Generation Equality. This included the creation of a series of 'Action Coalitions' that are intended to drive accelerated progress across a number of priority themes.

The Action Coalitions will be led by multiple stakeholder representatives from, governments, civil society, international organisations, women's and youth-led organizations and movements and private sector entities. Within this multi-generational process, there has been a public commitment to ensuring adolescent girls are at the heart of each Action Coalition's work.

To understand what adolescent girls feel about progress and what still needs to change in their lives, Plan International, and the Girls Advocacy Alliance, in partnership with Terre des Hommes and Defence for Children - ECPAT partnered with groups of girls across 12 lower and middle income countries to understand girls' perspectives and priorities and to support them in ensuring that these would be central to the Beijing review process. This report is a reflection of the key themes that emerged as priorities for adolescent girls and their call for action for each of the Action Coalition themes.

Despite ambitious plans for 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the delay, changing and shortening of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW64), and the postponement of the Generation Equality Forum global gatherings in Mexico and Paris until 2021. In response to this crisis, some of the Beijing +25 process has shifted online, sometimes progressing as closed-door events that are often scheduled for European or New York time zones. This has severely hampered civil society's participation and has left little meaningful space for girls to hold states to account on the commitments they made to progressing the rights of girls and women in 1995[2]. This report will play an important role in ensuring girls' voices are heard as well as providing them with an evidenced advocacy resource to lead their own activism.

NOTHING ABOUT GIRLS WITHOUT GIRLS

2. METHODOLOGY

Recognising the distinct lack of data and information available on the lives of adolescent girls, the consultations aimed to speak with adolescent girls, in all their diversity, in the later age bracket of 14-19 years. The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. From January to May 2020, 350 girls took part in focus groups and consultation events across 12 countries, including: Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Kenya, Liberia, Nepal, Paraguay, the Philippines, Sierra Leone and Uganda. The results were further validated with an additional 797 girls via online platforms.

An initial in-depth consultation process supported participants to examine the BpFA with an adolescent girls' lens. This was followed by a prioritisation process, where girls identified key areas of concern and identified gaps in the current framework.

Following this, a validation process was undertaken to ensure further discussion of key issues raised by girls, and to engage respondents in reviewing initial findings for accuracy. This ensured adolescent girls' involvement in every stage of the research process. A global online survey was also completed by 149 adolescent girls from ten of the countries to gather further quantitative data on girls' priorities. A range of viewpoints were sought including from both rural and urban backgrounds, individuals with disabilities, representatives of diverse ethnic and racial groups and adolescents who identify as LGBTIQ+.Although the target audience for focus group discussions were adolescent girls aged 14-19 years, a small number of young women participated from outside this age group. The consultation process was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and so practical and logistical changes were made to enable adolescent girls to still participate fully and safely. This also presented an opportunity to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the shifting priorities of adolescent girls.

The report also draws on outcomes of the Plan Canada's Youth for Gender Equality (YGE) initiative, co-led by Plan International Canada and the Canadian Teachers' Federation, a two-year project that sought to understand the impact of gender on the lives of young Canadians[3]. Through these parallel processes, what has emerged is a common set of priorities and recommendations expressed by adolescent girls across the world. This report lays out the results and analysis of the consultation process.

THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION – 25 YEARS ON.

When the BPfA was written, many of the most pressing issues for girls were less prominent. The impact of climate change had not been fully recognised, technological advances and the digital information explosion had not yet been realised. Since the BPfA more is understood around intersectionality of gender and age and how it is compounded by poverty and other factors of discrimination such as disability, sexual identity, caste or ethnicity. This research highlights insights into girls' perspectives and experience of some of these gaps.

2.1 OVERVIEW

To identify girls' priorities for gender equality at this critical 25-year juncture, girls began by analysing the 12 critical areas for action outlined by the BPfA 25 years ago and considered: what are the most important areas right now, which of those are most relevant to their daily lives, and what would they like governments to focus on?

Across all 12 countries, girls clearly identified violence against women and girls (VAWG), education, poverty, health, and women's leadership as priority action areas for achieving gender equality in their lifetime. Figure one shows that seven-in-ten girls identified VAWG as the top priority, this was followed by women in power and decision-making, women and poverty, education and health, particularly sexual and reproductive health services. The economy also rated significantly as a key area for renewed focus.
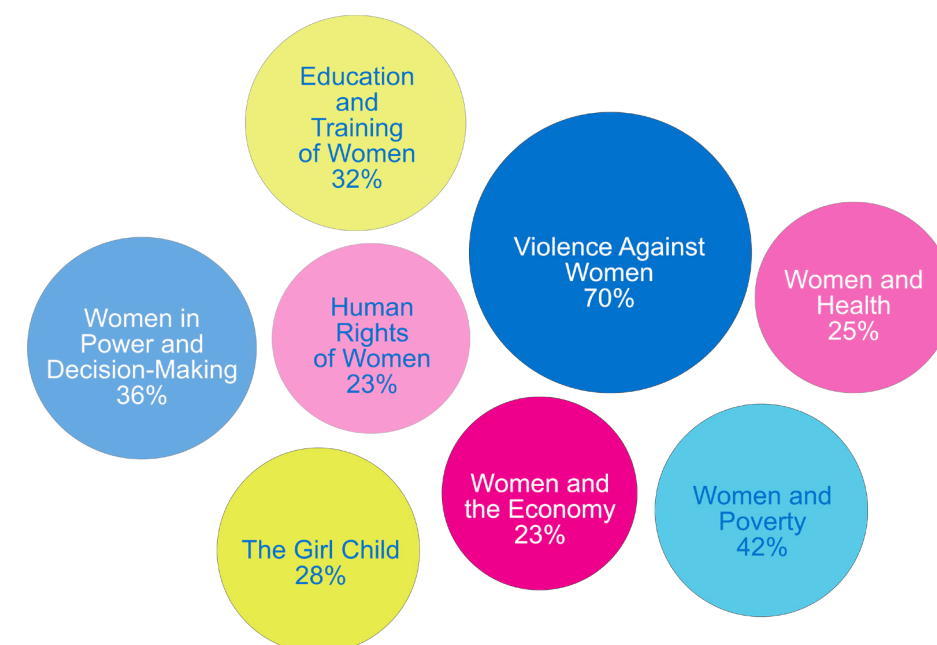

- Education and Training of Women 32%
- Women in Power and Decision-Making 36%
- Human Rights of Women 23%
- Violence Against Women 70%
- Women and Health 25%
- The Girl Child 28%
- Women and the Economy 23%
- Women and Poverty 42%

Figure 1: Girls priorities across the 12 critical areas for action in the BPfA

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 global pandemic is significantly impacting the environment in which adolescent girls grow and develop. Adolescent girls are being disproportionally affected by the socio-economic impacts of the outbreak[4]. Efforts to control the virus have increased existing gender inequalities with school closures, reducing access to essential health and protection services, as well as social networks. A significant anxiety felt by most of the girls was the limited access to sanitary products and sexual and reproductive health services and information. Economic burden has put immense pressure on families to provide basic needs and cope with food shortages, and this has seen an increase in domestic care responsibilities for adolescent girls and in some countries, girls reported a rise of child labour.

Girls recognised the increased risk of GBV as a result of economic pressures on families, the inability to escape violent domestic situations during lock down and the pronounced lack of access to justice against the perpetrator. One-in-five survey respondents identified violence in the home as a major concern. COVID-19 is imposing increasing risks to already vulnerable, young LGBTIQ+ people. Young LGBTIQ+ people have been forced to isolate in unsafe residencies often with family that may not accept their identities.

As children were unable to attend school during COVID-19, girls reported an increase in sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, early marriage and abuse, particularly in Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda, as a result of the economic pressures of the pandemic. Now outside of the normal school routine, girls are thinking about how they can help sustain and support their parents and families through income generating activities.

The pandemic has the potential to undo the progress made in advancing the rights of girls if their needs are not recognised and addressed in the global response to COVID-19. Overall, the pandemic has led to girls feeling a sense of abandonment and inferiority, even in areas where they felt they had made progress.

When asked what their most immediate concerns were, respondents felt school closures was the most pressing issue. Anxiety was commonly expressed about the long-term consequences on their future prospects, financial security and ability to support families.

This was followed by the impact of restrictions on movement with two-in-five (40 per cent) concerned about not being able to access their usual support network and friends. Girls have seen access to social space and peer support curtailed and are less likely to have access to digital spaces for education and support, with priority given to brothers and adults in their household. This is having a negative impact on their ability to advocate and to organize, due to restrictions on movement, lack of access to the internet, together with reduced access to decision-making platforms.

In contrast, there have been some benefits of COVID-19 including increased social ties within the home and some creative use of online platforms for girl-led action. Girls stated that their sense of abandonment has fostered a new desire for gender equality and participation in power and decision-making.

4. GIRLS PRIORITIES ACROSS THE GENERATION EQUALITY ACTION COALITION AREAS

The following section maps key areas of concerns and demands for change from adolescent girls across the six Action Coalition thematic areas.

4.1 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence (GBV) was identified as the top priority issue across all consultations and selected by almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of survey respondents, particularly those from rural communities. A common sentiment was that unless GBV was addressed, then progress in other action areas would be undermined.

Girls described the types of violence experienced by themselves and their peers which included sexual violence, CEFMU and early pregnancy, public harassment, domestic violence, psychological violence, cybercrime and child labour, often imposed by family members. Girls are being sexually exploited in exchange for basic necessities such as food and described this as a source of survival for some young girls. In Sierra Leone they spoke of girls being less of a priority to feed in contrast to male household members. For some girls, this continues when they are forced into early marriage and childbearing where they still might experience sexual, psychological and physical violence, perpetrated by their husbands. Participants described violence as something that was often an inescapable feature of daily life experienced at home, at school, on the streets and on public transport.

Public Harassment and assault were common across both urban and rural communities. Girls often attributed the abuse as a response to the clothes they wore: *"If we dress as we like, we are attacked."* (Rural Paraguay). Girls described catcalling or being touched or groped in public places by strangers. They reported not feeling safe to go out in public and that the fear of violence often led them to modify their behaviour and restrict their movements and activities. This was a distinctly prevalent theme for non-binary youths and one youth mentioned being *"scared to come out [as non-binary] for threat of violence.*" (Canada)

Violent behaviour is inherited. Girls understood and highlighted how violence was passed on from one generation to the next. Violence is normalised early on in the home, where girls may grow up witnessing violence perpetrated by their fathers against their mothers, and where misogynistic forms of masculinity are passed down from one generation to the next. Girls emphasised the importance of addressing the root causes of violence and tackling the rigid gender norms at the family level.

Gender-based hate crime. While femicide was a distinct feature to Latin American discussions [see box, page 16], gender-based hate crimes were described as existing in different forms elsewhere. In Nepal respondents spoke of acid attacks against women and in Uganda they spoke of women being killed as a result of domestic violence.

Violence in schools and sexual harassment were raised as concerns, perpetrated by both teachers and male peers. Girls saw education as gendered, giving priority to boys causing some girls to drop out of their education. Participants simultaneously identified schools as an opportunity to influence positive change and challenge accepted gender roles.

Unresponsive justice systems and how the states and authorities responded to incidents of GBV was a major discussion point across 8 out of 12 countries. While there has been progress in institutional frameworks that criminalise GBV offenses, attitudes at a family and community level towards protecting perpetrators reduces the likelihood of successful prosecutions and upholding legal frameworks. Inconsistent judicial processes, corruption among police officers and local leaders, lack of trained officials to process cases, cultural barriers and the status of offenders were cited as reasons preventing girls from reporting crimes. Girls also expressed a lack of trust in the system. Across all countries, girls felt that perpetrators are not being held accountable and that the criminal justice system overall is not adequate and/or responsive to the specific needs of girls. Victim blaming is prevalent, where girls often carry the blame while the attacker walks free and results in less girls feeling able to report violence. The experience of stigma and shame was commonly expressed. Girls from rural areas appear to be more vulnerable to GBV through a lack of police presence, lack of accountability and willingness of communities to inform on/report perpetrators and negative cultural practices.
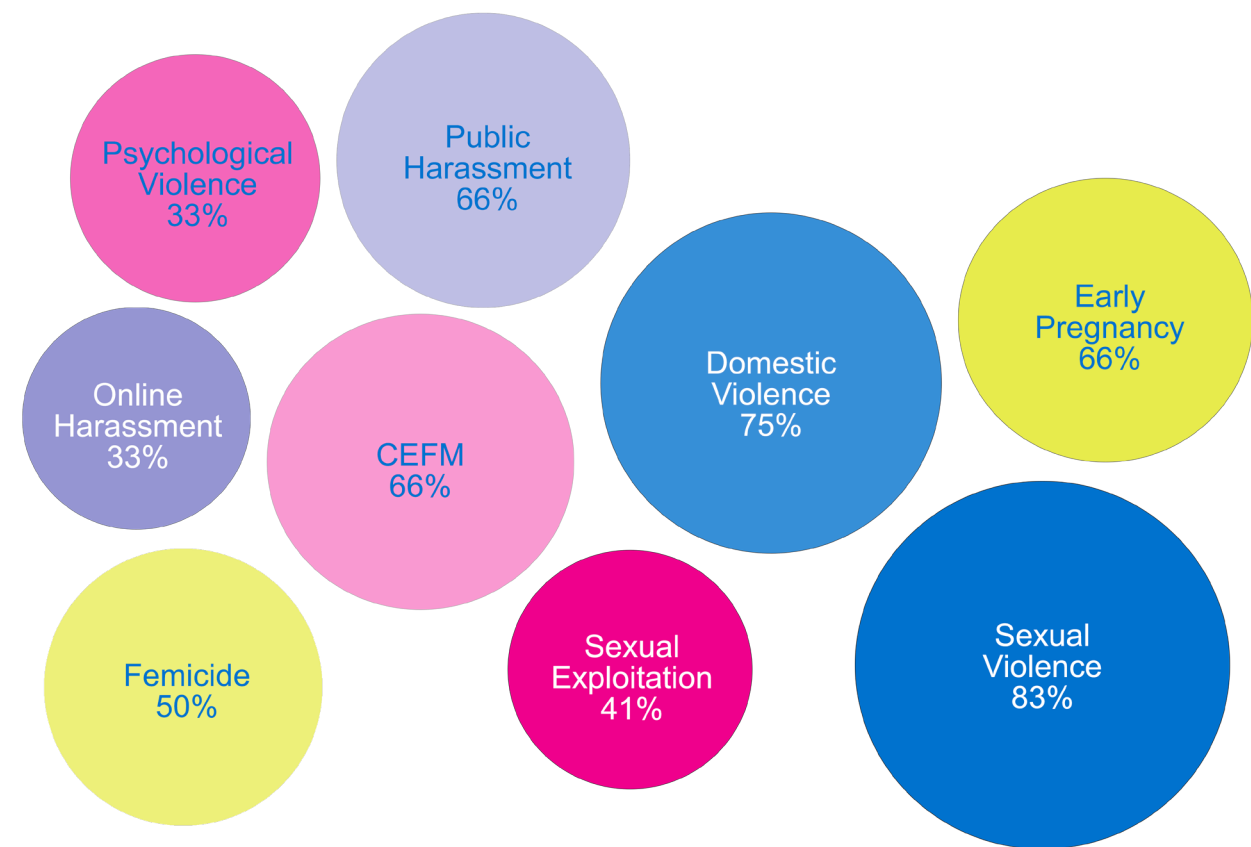

Psychological Violence 33%

Public Harassment 66%

Early Pregnancy 66%

Online Harassment 33%

CEFM 66%

Domestic Violence 75%

Femicide 50%

Sexual Exploitation 41%

Sexual Violence 83%

Figure 2: Types of Violence

"We were always told that the house was the safe place, but danger and insecurities are something that repeats on the street and in the house."
(Nohelia, 18, Urban Ecuador)

KEY DEMANDS: GBV

- Recognise femicide, in all its forms, as a hate crime in legal systems.
- Ensure genuine access to justice by upholding GBV laws and criminalising perpetrators of all forms of gender-based violence, including street, sexual and online harassment.
- Provide safe spaces for girls in all their diversities and access to tailored gender and age responsive GBV services, including mental health support, SRHR services and confidential helplines, particularly for online harassment cases.
- Strengthen the child protection mechanisms, at the family, community and municipal level, to achieve a joined-up and effective response to violence.
- Work with boys and their families to challenge attitudes and behaviours towards GBV, on issues of masculinities and to promote positive gender norms.

4.2 BODILY AUTONOMY AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Almost half (47 per cent) of survey respondents identified SRHR as a top priority. Adolescent girls spoke of a lack of access to sanitary products, contraception, and legal and safe abortion as pressing issues. A common perception was that adolescent's sexual and reproductive health simply is not a priority for their families or governments and they are met with discrimination. *"Adolescents and young women who want to access contraceptives are viewed with prejudice due to their age."* (Urban Ecuador).

Wide inequalities in accessing SRHR services. The situation is worse for girls in rural areas where: *"girls and adolescents have less access to contraceptive methods."* (Urban Ecuador) and when travelling long distances to access a local health centre may come with the increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV): *"The journey to the health centre is very dangerous, a girl was once raped."* (Urban Colombia). The lack of SRHR information and services was identified as a major cause of **early pregnancy**, that disproportionately impacted the poorest adolescent girls who have fewer tools to prevent pregnancy and were less likely to be able to access abortions.

LATIN AMERICA: FEMICIDE
Adolescent girls from across South and Central America spoke of the highly normalised sexual harassment and 'machismo culture' that has led to cases of femicide. The deeply entrenched gender roles within society continue to exist and there is a lack of endorsement of laws against sexual violence that leaves girls and women feeling vulnerable and unlikely to report crime. *"We live in a country where there is a lot of male chauvinism and that is why feminicide exists and this happens from generation to generation because of the education that people receive."* (Claudia, El Salvador)

LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS
Girls noted the importance of advocating for the inclusion of young people in all their diversity within SRH services. One participant noted how the needs of the LGBTIQ+ community were rarely taken into account and expressed that: *"Comprehensive non-heteronormative sexual and reproductive health services and access to contraceptives are required, without questioning or requesting authorization from the father or mother."* (Urban Ecuador). There remains limited recognition of LGBTIQ+ rights within the BPfA. Girls see the need to ensure that LGBTIQ+ rights are advocated for within all the Action Coalitions.

The lack of investment and budget made available for sexual and reproductive health and rights was of serious concern, especially at the local level. Girls said it was essential to support women's organisations that promote their rights as girls and adolescents, as well as the creation of safe spaces for reporting abuses and discussing SRHR issues.

Girls agreed that improved knowledge of SRHR topics and increased access to SRHR services, particularly contraceptives was important to help avoid unwanted pregnancy and ensure that girls stayed in school for longer. Girls felt they did not have adequate access to **comprehensive sex, relationship and sexuality education**, concerning their bodies and their rights, that is inclusive of and responsive to all sexual and gender identities. They also felt that better education was needed to help to reduce the cultural stigma surrounding menstruation and, combined with access to affordable sanitary products, would also help to keep girls in school. For example, in Nepal harmful cultural practices and rituals, such as isolation during periods, need to be addressed.

Girls recommended that the government should do something to reduce the financial burden on adolescent girls: *"Free tampons provided by government,"* (Canada) was one suggestion from a young person in Canada and another Canadian Youth for Gender Equality participant called for: *"Better birth control and period medications and mental [health] help. As well as better access to these resources"* (Canada).

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health, stress and anxiety have emerged as a distinct cross-cutting issue, particularly as a result of the uncertainty of COVID-19. Participants felt that mental health is not discussed and often overlooked. Girls felt mental health is currently not taken seriously by health professionals and they often are subjected to poor care or suffer discrimination for being young and female. *"We need to make doctors aware of the attention we deserve, not to make fun of our symptoms and not to tell us that we are exaggerating."* (Urban Colombia).

Girls recognised the ongoing impact of GBV on their mental health and the lack of available psycho-social support and sexual and reproductive health services. Depression, anxiety and general mental health concerns were discussed most commonly in relation to girls' experiences of violence and abuse, especially for child mothers. One participant called for stigma surrounding mental health to be addressed by encouraging an open conversation: *"Talks at the community level should be organised so people know it is not a disease, or anything from another world. At the national level, there should be a law about suicide prevention and protection from discrimination."* (Leydi, 19, El Salvador). There was a call for greater recognition of mental health as a priority and better access to mental health services. This was particularly important from the perspectives of the non-binary youth, one of whom recommended better *"access to support, [including] support groups, mental health services, health care."* (Canada).

BODILY AUTONOMY AND SRHR: KEY DEMANDS

- Ensure access to free, legal and safe abortion; quality and free contraceptives, sanitary products and specialised and friendly information and SRH services. Ensure access for marginalised girls including those from rural areas as well as LGBTIQ youth, without ever questioning or requesting authorisation from their parents or carers.
- Ensure government investment in comprehensive sexuality education, throughout school and for out of school youth, taking into account the specific needs of all adolescent girls in all their diversity including young LGBTIQ+ people and those with disabilities.
- Deliver public awareness raising campaigns to challenge stigma around menstruation.
- Work with parents to abandon harmful practices and to actively challenge discriminatory cultural norms.

4.3 ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RIGHTS

More than two-in-five (43 per cent) of survey respondents chose economic justice and rights as a key priority, especially among the older respondents.

Career progress and decent work were described, together with quality education, as the means by which adolescent girls could escape from poverty and achieve financial independence. Girls recognize that women's contribution to the economy is not valued by society and that gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace were widespread. Girls aspire to securing decent work which they describe as being paid fairly, being free from harassment and discrimination and receiving equal consideration for promotions and senior positions. A common perception was that decent jobs were reserved for their male counterparts, while girls and women continued to occupy domestic and informal work, that generally paid poorly and lacked labour protections and social security benefits. Most countries are still seeing women excluded from certain economic opportunities, for example, women are still prevented from planting trees like rubber, cocoa and coffee in most parts of Liberia.

COVID-19 has worsened already existing issues around 'decent' work. In the Philippines, girls spoke of experiencing unfair treatment, such as being laid off based on the assumption that they have weaker immune systems. Girls also cited fears of not wanting to return to their livelihood activities, due to anxiety of getting COVID-19. *"Women are hesitant to return to their dress-making livelihood activities in fear of acquiring the virus."* (Ayna, Philippines). In Sierra Leone, the economic challenges of the outbreak, have been seen to expose adolescent girls to increased risk of sexual exploitation. This includes those seeking domestic jobs in homes, who are at increased risk of COVID-19 and GBV. In some cases, COVID-19 has also led to girls starting new income-generating activities to help sustain and support parents, with girls reporting an increase in child labour.

Unpaid care work and the unequal delegation of tasks at home were raised. Girls reported often being asked to collect water and complete domestic chores while their brothers were able to go out and play. In rural Nepal, girls face the double burden of domestic chores and farming responsibilities. The disproportionate amount of household and care work that girls engage in from an early age limits the time they have available to pursue their academic interests and extracurricular activities. In turn this hinders the development of social, interpersonal and leadership skills and competencies which could eventually contribute to them realising their full economic potential.

Education is recognised by girls as the tool that increases freedom of choice, provides economic opportunities and has a potentially catalytic role in shifting gender norms and roles. It is seen as the route towards equality and independence, giving women and girls more power in society. Advances in girls' education have been hailed as one of the successes of the last 25 years. In Sierra Leone school enrollments have doubled. However, education is still one of the key areas where girls describe experiencing exclusion and discrimination, with some girls unable to go to school at all. This is especially true for rural and marginalised girls, including early mothers and girls with disabilities. As one participant stated that being deaf meant she had to repeat a school year several times: *"The teachers were not prepared to help us learn; the school was simply not ready."* (Urban Paraguay). This was also evident in the disparity of opportunities offered to girls and boys and where traditional ideas of what girls and boys can and cannot do was reinforced: *"The problem with education is that it reinforces stereotypes and does not allow girls to choose trades and professions traditionally assigned to men."* (Rural Colombia). Girls recognise the economic cost to excluding them from education: *"The government and the family loses because an uneducated population can't contribute to economic and social development."* (Urban Uganda).

One of the key barriers to girls' education is the continuing idea, held by many families and communities, that boys' education is a priority and girls' education is not. *"The community believes that a boy's education is better than a girl's because boys remain in the home while girls get married off."* (Rural Kenya). *"My father usually paid school fees for my brother and mine were either paid late, or never paid. During my final exams my school fees were paid late which disorganised me and I*

performed poorly because I could hardly concentrate – this really killed me inside." (Rural Uganda). Discussions on education highlight the persistent unequal access and the ongoing battle girls face, often in their personal lives, to remain in school, especially as they reach secondary school age. Costs of school fees, adolescent pregnancy, early marital unions, domestic child labour and looking after younger siblings are all barriers to completing education. In some countries, governments continue to ban pregnant girls from attending school while, in others, the associated stigma prevents girls from re-entering education: *"Currently the girls are allowed to go back to school even if they are pregnant although the stigma and discrimination from some teachers and pupils has not been addressed. They are called mothers in school."* (Rural Kenya).

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RIGHTS: KEY DEMANDS

- Address gender discrimination in educational institutions by providing gender transformative curriculums and skills training options for girls.
- Address the unequal responsibility for housework that holds girls back and hinders the long-term economic potential of girls, through policy, education awareness raising and the redistribution of housework with male family members.
- Generate career routes for adolescent girls to access decent work, by committing to equal opportunities and working with the formal sectors to stamp out discriminatory recruitment practices and harassment.
- Support girls into entrepreneurship and taking opportunities for income generation to secure economic independence and to reduce vulnerabilities to GBV, sexual exploitation and harmful practices.
- Support girls to remain in school by providing free secondary education, ensuring equal access to marginalised girls, including child mothers, girls with disabilities and girls living in rural areas.

> *"I want to be a civil engineer. I want to own my own topography company, where pregnant women and women with children will be able to work without restrictions. There will be a nursery so that women can work while their children are taken good care."*
> *(Jennifer, 19, Ecuador)*

4.4 TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Technology and innovation for Gender Equality. Almost a quarter (22 per cent) of survey respondents saw technology and innovation for gender equality as a key issue. This was particularly identified as a concern for older girls.

STEM and Entrepreneurship. Girls shared aspirations for working in non-traditional fields including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) and entrepreneurship. Engineering was mentioned regularly across Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Kenya and Uganda. However, the discrimination experienced early on in the educational system, reinforces old ideas of what is appropriate for boys and girls to learn and to do and inevitably leads to a decrease in job prospects and economic opportunities for girls. Girls want opportunities early on to pursue non-traditional career aspirations, with the support of their schools and governments.

Online violence. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and Twitter, have become new arenas of GBV that have given rise to online bullying and harassment. A culture of intimate image-sharing has contributed to a heightened risk of grooming and exploitation and in many cases, girls are blamed as the cause of the new wave of online violence. There is often no parental or adult authority oversight and communities do not understand how to respond to this new area of concern or were not seen to be taking it seriously. There is also a lack of appropriate support mechanisms in place. *"The community doesn't know how to deal with online violence. As a youth leader, those cases are among the ones that have impacted me the most, in addition the violence is normalised and justified."* (Yulianis, 17, Colombia).

The Internet and digital technologies are increasingly the way girls socialize, organize and learn. Now, with the increased reliance on ICT through COVID-19 period, girls have recognized digital access as a basic need. They demand that online spaces should be free from any type of violence, harassment or discrimination because girls and adolescents have the right to participate in them.

> *"The internet is important to be able to study and participate but, on the other hand, girls are exposed to bullying and it is a negative aspect."*
> *(Tanya, 18, Ecuador)*

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION FOR GENDER EQUALITY: KEY DEMANDS

- Support girls to pursue careers in STEM through technical skills and vocational training and access to mentorships and scholarships in STEM and business.
- Enact laws to protect against cyberbullying and disinformation in social networks and ensure protection mechanisms are established to protect human rights.
- Ensure digital rights and safe internet usage are in all national curricula.
- Address the gender digital divide by ensuring girls have equal access to digital technology and platforms.
- Promote peer-to-peer culture of positive internet usage countering online bullying and supporting girls' networks.

GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Digital access is a significant issue particularly for rural adolescent girls. Respondents spoke of brothers and other family members getting priority access to computers and online devices and girls being prevented from participating in online activities. As one survey respondent said: *"I was not allowed to use social media much as I am a girl and my brothers can use [it] as much as they want."* The digital divide has become pronounced through the COVID-19 pandemic as girls are reliant on it to study, to participate, to communicate with their friends/peers, and to access information of interest for them. The limitation of internet access during this period has impacted of girls' ability to participate in youth-led advocacy and organising.

4.5 FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AND LEADERSHIP

Almost three-in-ten (28 per cent) of survey respondents selected feminist movements and leadership as a key issue of concern.

Online spaces are increasingly utilised for girls-led participation, with 71% of girls reporting they use online spaces to support their activism (see Figure 3).
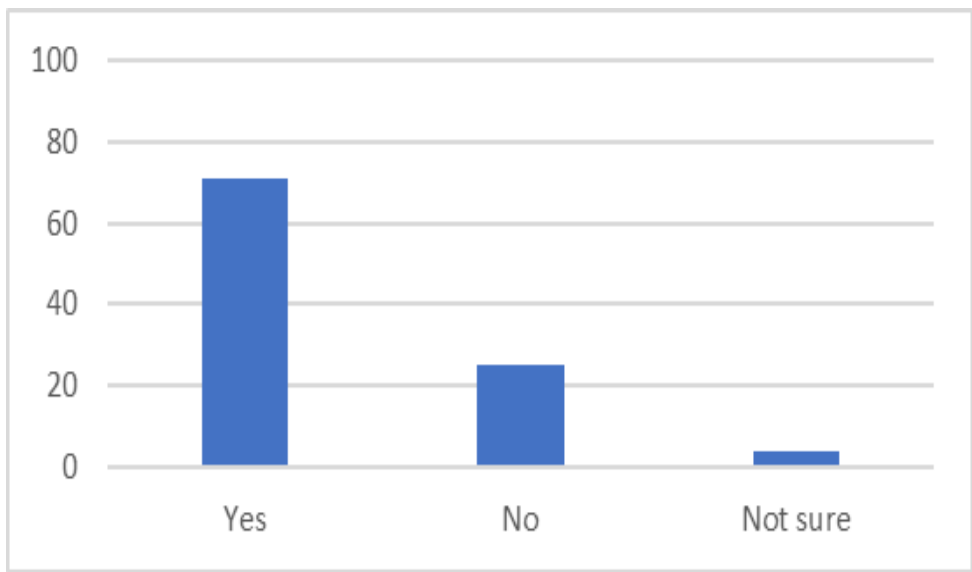

Figure 3: % of adolescent girls accessing online platforms

Women's participation in public life. Respondents identified clear linkages between restrictions of self-expression and autonomy experienced early on in life, with women's broader absence from decision-making processes, and the lack of overall lack of representation. While recognising clear progress had been made, with more women represented at all levels of government, girls felt that on the whole, their schools, neighbourhoods, municipalities and countries continued to be led by men. Where women were represented in public positions, their power was granted by men and these positions often lacked substance or real authority. Girls want to see more women as leaders and role models, especially in male-dominated fields. *"We want to see women and girls in higher positions of power and decision-making."* (Urban Uganda).

Girls are ready to lead, and they are sick of being ignored. Across the many different areas of their lives, girls describe not being heard, their ideas overlooked, and their opinions not valued. COVID-19 has worsened girl's ability to access and influence decision-making platforms within

their communities and girls fear that it may undo the progress that has been made. *"There has been no girls-led activities because the police and the community are social distancing and meetings were banned."* (Maureen, 20, Kenya). In addition, social distancing and internet connectivity issues affect their participation in forums and dialogues with other girls and authorities. As Mariam explained: *"I have a Whatsapp group where we discuss issues affecting us, but the problem is many girls cannot access these platforms because of lack of android phones and internet bundles."* (Mariam, 20, Kenya).

Strengthening girls' organising and recognition of adolescent girls' role in addressing issues that were important to them came up as a common cross-cutting theme. As one participant stated: *"It is not that women don't want to lead, they are not given the platform to lead."* (Urban Philippines). They called on governments to support girls' spaces and platforms, where from an early age their voices and agency could be supported, and their agendas could be strengthened. They also have clear ideas on how they can best contribute to achieving gender equality:
- Over three quarters (83 per cent) felt that the best way girls can contribute to gender equality is by working within their community to challenge gender norms and social attitudes.
- 62 per cent believe that gender equality is best achieved by being part of and building a network of girls and youth to take collective action on issues they care about.
- 53 per cent believe that by advocating for changes in laws and policies, they can positively impact women and girls' lives.

"Although they mock us, I continue to tell them that I want to be the community chairlady and no amount of mockery will stop me from achieving my dream."
(Miatta, Youth advocate, Liberia)

"We must all unite, raise a great voice, in Colombia and the world, to show that we adolescent girls have power and a mandate."
(Rural Colombia)

Shifting Discriminatory norms. Girls understood real progress as being directly tied to shifting discriminatory norms at the local level. Working with the family unit and tackling discriminatory attitudes among boys from an early age were considered prerequisites for gender equality and equal participation across public life. Girls talked about lack of progress and limited women's leadership being tied to traditional practices and religious beliefs that prevent women from reaching their highest potential. One explained: *"Cultural norms within families and communities' hinder women and girls from making decisions regarding anything including their body, education attainment and attaining leadership positions."* (Urban Uganda).

Backlash is a significant issue with more than three-in-five respondents (62 per cent) having experienced backlash around their involvement in advocacy. Many girls reported being mocked, discouraged and dissuaded, and in some cases physically abused for participation. While there have been legislative developments, girls felt that communities do not respond favourably to young women and girls aspiring to take up leadership roles or meaningful community actions.

Girls do not feel supported and there are limited spaces to showcase their talent, their ability to lead and to participate in decision-making. Some parents refuse to allow girls to participate for fear of cultural inappropriateness. As one participant explained: *"Women are seen as domestic workers and not decision makers"* (Rural Liberia). This often results in low self-esteem, low self-confidence and mental health issues.

Many girls were actively participating in their community and a small number were also actively raising girls' issues, including advocating for access to sanitary products and supporting vulnerable groups. In all countries there are examples of girls organising and building solidarity, with many finding creative solutions to continue engagement through COVID-19. As one girl described: *"In the homes, in the lives of women, in the community, we women are now more leaders, we unite, we leave messages and we get out of the problems we have"* (Rural Colombia).
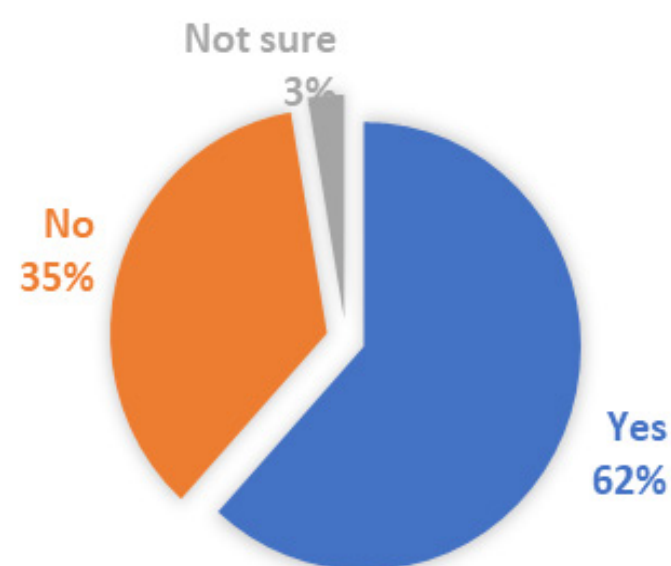

Figure 5: Experience of backlash around involvement in advocating for girls' rights

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AND LEADERSHIP: KEY DEMANDS

- Recognise and support leadership of girls by enabling access to platforms and space to lead: starting in school, as well as in formal processes at the national and sub-national levels.
- Prioritise the strengthening of girls' voices by investing in and supporting network building between girl-led groups, young feminist organisations and broader civil society networks.
- Partner with girl-led networks to challenge and address the negative social attitudes that hold girls back.
- Promote positive women role-models and provide mentoring opportunities between women leaders and girls, women's organisations and girl-led groups.

"The mandates given to women have changed, but we want more, we want to shout and go forward, we do not want to be satisfied, we want each of the 12 priorities to be fulfilled and even more, we want a world for the rights of women and men"
(Rural Colombia)

4.6 FEMINIST ACTION FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

Less than one-in-five survey respondents (19 per cent) selected feminist action for climate change as a key priority. Overall, survey respondents shared that they had a limited understanding of climate justice but are aware that this is an issue of increasing concern. Girls recognised the negative health implications of climate change, particularly as a result of plastic usage, contamination from mining, agrochemicals and heavy industry, resulting in pollution.

Girls understood that they are disproportionately affected by the impact of climate change and the disruption to their daily lives, especially in rural communities where girls have responsibility for agriculture and water collection. In Uganda, when there are water shortages, girls feel they are the ones most impacted as they are expected to fetch water as part of their domestic responsibilities.

Girls felt they should play a key role in ensuring these issues are being taken seriously. As one girl explained: *"We, the adolescent girls, have to promote changes in our communities, so that people are more conscious, that they take care of the environment."* (Lizany, 17, Colombia). Girls often felt left out of decision-making in addressing environmental problems and recognised women need to take centre stage in identifying solutions.

Some girls highlighted examples of positive environmental programmes taking place, such as tree planting programmes in Paraguay, Philippines and Nepal and involvement in environment activities such as Eco Fem in the Philippines. In Paraguay, girls spoke of the role that teachers had played in raising awareness and climate action. *"In my school we carry out various actions, such as talks on environmental protection, and I think that the authorities should raise awareness among young people so that they are the promoters of change for the care of the environment."* (Marlene, Paraguay). Girls want to see greater public awareness raising on climate change and felt governments should be held to account for environmental protection and ensure measures are in place to uphold laws.

FEMINIST ACTION FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE – KEY DEMANDS

- Ensure greater environmental protections through upholding laws and effective enforcement.
- Ensure universal recycling provision, a reduction of plastic usage including a global ban on plastic bags.
- Increased awareness and education on climate change issues.
- Support solution-focused environment programmes, such as tree planting and forest protection.
- Decision-makers should consider the gender dimension of climate change and how women and girls in all their diversity are included in the response programming.
- Develop girl-led community initiatives to support local climate action.

"We girls are among those who emit the least greenhouse gases, but we are the ones who suffer the most from climate change. It affects our access to livelihoods and limits access to land and water. That's why gender equality and girls' leadership is key to ensuring that the needs of all people and the planet are recognized."
(Yulianis, 17, Colombia)

"Many of us girls don't understand what climate justice is, it's important to know that girls and women have an important role to play in addressing climate change."
(Alison, 16, Bolivia)

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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 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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