



Unlock the power of girls now

Why gender equality is **the** social and political issue of our time

Executive summary

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report, building on research gathered over the last decade, focuses on the testimony of young people, particularly adolescent girls, and on their right to properly participate in decisions that affect their lives at family, community and national levels. It emphasises that girls are almost always denied the opportunity at home, at school and in their wider communities, to be heard and heeded. Their voices and experiences do not influence or lead change: they are not decision-makers even in matters, like leaving school and getting married, that have a massive impact on their lives. They are largely invisible in public spaces. In this report we are listening carefully to what they have told us about what must be done and how to do it.

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 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

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No matter what their circumstances, girls worldwide face a wall of resistance in their struggle for gender equality: despite laws, policies and global targets all put in place to advance change, the pace of progress is disturbingly slow.

The research undertaken by Plan International this year in Spain, Uganda and Colombia demonstrates clearly that gender inequality is still very much part of the fabric of our society. The evidence we have gathered is fascinating, and horrifying, uncovering a complex thread of discrimination and violence at all levels. The key to equality is to challenge the widespread perception that girls are worth less than boys: a valuation that starts when they are born and follows them into their adult lives. As one young woman in Uganda commented:

“The parents only favour the boys. They even say that a [girl] child is a curse – if you start a journey and the first thing you meet is a girl and you’re a man, it’s considered as bad luck so you have to go back [home] until you first meet with a boy.”

Mercy, 16, Uganda

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Studying the lives of girls

“Girls want to have more self-confidence, to not feel afraid or ashamed to express their feelings and needs.”

Andrea, 15, Ecuador

Over the past four years Plan International has undertaken three major studies – *Hear Our Voices*, *Girls Speak Out* and *Counting the Invisible* – that focus on examining the attitudes and perceptions of adolescent girls and boys in many different parts of the world.

This approach has continued in the latest study, *Voices of Hope*, carried out and reported on this year. The findings of this body of research – what girls and boys have told us regarding their lives, perceptions and opinions – present a real opportunity to help transform girls’ lives. Those in power must listen to what girls have to say and act upon it.

One message that has come over unmistakably, in all the findings over four years of research, is that the discriminatory attitudes and behaviour entrenched in family and community life, where power is wielded almost entirely by men, keep gender stereotypes alive. This deep-seated bias which views women and girls as inferior is the greatest barrier to ending inequality. It must not just be ignored simply because it has proved so difficult to change.

Poverty and violence sustain inequality

In this year's research in both Colombia and Uganda, the participants identified a series of interconnecting issues within their communities which included family and economic disadvantage, and widespread violence. Boys in Colombia discussed the threat and fact of physical violence on the streets, the issue of gangs and drugs, while girls talked about the threat of sexual violence, rape and sexual harassment that they face every day. This pervasive fear of violence both inside and outside the home was discussed in Uganda too, with family dynamics appearing to become increasingly complex as girls grow up.

Poverty and economic hardship were part of the everyday reality of those taking part in the research and again gender plays a part in how this affects their lives: in Colombia girls worry about the impact on their educational opportunities while boys can get drawn into gangs and selling drugs. In Uganda too poverty has a greater effect on girls' continuing education and the lack of money can force them into transactional sex with older boyfriends.

“Other situations at home force her to fall into relationships and such things... [this] can force the girl to fall into love.”

[Interviewer] “So should we say that if a girl gets a boyfriend, her problems will have been solved?”

“At the moment she can be thinking that that's the best solution she is having. But she ends up with an end result that's disastrous.”

Edith, 16, Uganda

Just over half of the female interviewees in Uganda were already mothers, most first becoming pregnant at 13 or 14 years old.

Discrimination starts at home

In both countries girls described their homes and families as a place where gender power relations and discrimination affect them on a day-to-day basis. They see this as unfair: it limits their time for study, for recreation and rest, and this, in turn, compromises their rights.

“At home I have to sweep, wash the dishes and wash my brother’s clothes. He was brought to the world as a trophy that is cleaned and taken care of and it makes me feel bad. How is it possible that I have to do everything and also have to wash his clothes? He can learn too.”

Paola, 16, Colombia

Girls could see that boys too were bound by their parents’ and peers’ expectations:

“Here they have something like a law: when a boy is 13 he must have a girlfriend or he is gay. It is a law created by the gang members: they agreed on it with all the boys and now it is common for everyone and young people to say: ‘You turn 13 and don’t have a girlfriend, you are gay’.”

Luisa, 14, Colombia

Traditional family roles were also noted, and resented, by girls in Spain:

“I see that my parents still have the mentality that the girls have to learn to do this [the housework] for their future. And my brother being a boy, hardly knows how to do anything.”

Julia, 14, Spain

Although physical violence was not mentioned by participants in Spain, the psychological bullying experienced by anyone who did not conform to established stereotypes was certainly an issue. Girls complained also about only being valued as accessories and sex objects by boys and men and having to look pretty and fashionable at all times:

“ Well, we have to be perfect. I do not know how to explain. We have to be educated, yes that’s true, but we cannot talk too much. We have to be thin, we have to be pretty, we have to be smart, we have to be good with our husbands, boyfriends. ”

Sara, 19, Spain

Youth leading change

All the young people taking part in the research in Uganda and Colombia were part of Plan International’s Champions of Change programme and, as a result of taking part in this programme, had seen many changes in their own attitudes: in renewed self-confidence and in their capacity to influence the lives and opinions of others. For girls, this journey of individual empowerment has led to the recognition that, as girls, they are valuable, able and powerful.

There were many examples in the interviews of girls regularly explaining to their parents the gender inequality at play and bargaining for fairer treatment.

“ So, I told my mum that there should be equality because it was not possible that I had to wash the dishes, and my brother came home and got dishes dirty and did not wash anything because he

is the man. Then I told her that it was machismo. She began to understand me and we began to talk. So now when I go out I tell her where I am going. If my brother goes out he also says where he is going, so I do not see that inequality any more. ” ”

Gabriela, 15, Colombia

Despite some success at home it was a different story in the community, where girls felt they were usually excluded from any effective participation. One girl from Colombia described her community as “against women and chauvinist” and another demonstrated a clear understanding of how long it might take for this chauvinism to shift:

“ “The positive thing is that you gradually teach people that things should not be like that, that you have to improve them and work harder to make things better. The idea is to gradually improve. There are people who don’t listen but you can teach them step by step, like a grain of sand at a time until they become interested. ” ”

Lorena, 14, Colombia

Work within the community is, nevertheless, further advanced in Colombia, where the respondents had been participants in the Champions of Change programme for some time, and their self-confidence and strategic capacity is noticeably more developed. In Uganda, girls who were inclined to question the status quo felt more constrained by the pressure not to challenge their families and communities too hard, and by the conviction that they were not listened to. It is evident from both studies that any young women daring to be different, and stepping out in public spaces as they know they must, will be risking outrage and may well be ostracised and bullied:

“ “...they believed I was submissive and quiet. They thought I would continue like that, but when I started to talk and play they started to say: ‘Soccer is not for you, you are going to be a tomboy,



PHOTO: Spain's Youth Advisory Panel member addresses the Spanish Parliament in Madrid.

you are going to break a leg, do not play.' It hurt at first because I did not expect my neighbours to say that or my friends to walk away, but then I understood that if they really loved me we could fix things. I explained that I am not going to become 'butch' by playing with a ball. I am still a girl, even when I play soccer or wear trousers. ””

Gabriela, 15, Colombia

In both countries young people also focused on communication strategies, identifying a number of ways to capture an audience who might not normally engage with gender equality issues.

““ I would do some lectures, plays and things that draw people's attention such as movies, series, brochures and things like that because there are people who do not pay attention to newspapers. People focus more on the movies or the internet. ””

Juan, 16, Colombia

Tackling violence

“If I were the mayor, I would enforce the law forbidding violence against women. If people do not respect the law, they will be punished.”

Cindy, 15, Colombia

Adolescent girls taking part in the research in Colombia clearly hold local and national politicians and state officials responsible for protecting and promoting gender equality and for ensuring that young women are safe from violence. They wanted a safe public environment, appropriate mechanisms for reporting violence that did not put them at further risk and public campaigns, at both local and national level, in support of gender equality:

“The mayor has more power than us. He can develop projects, campaigns, social mobilisation at schools and talk about equality. They could also show films about gender equality and then discuss it.”

Carolina, 16, Colombia

Additionally young people talked about the role of the media: specifically mentioning soap operas that normalise violence against women and girls. As one 15-year-old boy in Colombia explained:

“Boys see men beating women on the TV and want to do the same thing.”

Gaining allies and building support

Young people identified a range of potential allies important as supporters in the struggle for gender equality: transforming the family was identified as the cornerstone for wider changes, and parental support and understanding as key. Female role models, who personify the lifting of barriers through their personal success in male-dominated areas or professions, were also targeted as allies, as were NGOs, teachers, community and, in some cases, religious leaders and the media. Young people were particularly aware of their lack of access to state and institutional power and were concerned to find support among politicians and state officials.

“Politicians are role models to a number of young people, community and clan members. They can contribute to the situations of girls and boys through chairing community dialogues to discuss with the community how to advance gender equality and also address other challenges in the community. Politicians also can support or provide funds to support youth-led movements to run programmes to challenge social norms.”

Odongo, 16, Uganda

Conclusion: girls cannot change the world alone



PHOTO: Girl leader of a menstrual hygiene club set up by Plan International at a school in Eastern Uganda.
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The research has demonstrated that in order to transform attitudes and change the rules of society there must be a specific focus on power which remains largely in male hands. The unequal power relations at play often remain invisible and internalised and until they change nothing else will. In Spain, according to our research, gender inequality is perceived primarily as an issue for girls that should be tackled by girls with boys, perhaps, helping. In Uganda and Colombia participants are convinced that boys too are disadvantaged by gender inequality and that they too are responsible for creating a society where expectations, hopes and dreams are not conditioned and restricted by gender. It is crucially important that the balance of responsibility for creating transformational change is shifted everywhere.

“ The president, the mayor, the governor and other leaders, they know rights and can create a society where we have equality. They have lived in a world where they know what it feels like. Also parents, because everything starts from home. ”

Adriana, 16, Colombia

Laws and policies that promote gender equality may be nominally in place in many countries as they are, for example, in Spain. Despite that, the research conducted there illustrates clearly that the concept of equality has not taken root, even in the hearts and minds of the young people interviewed. It is quite clear from all the research that girls are still valued less than boys and for the most part see themselves as worth less.

For transformative change to take place, gender equality must be become a key social and political issue and power holders must use their authority to challenge the deeply held personal attitudes that perpetuate misogyny, waste talent and impoverish all our lives.

Recommendations: unlocking the power of girls



PHOTO: Girls take part in child rights awareness activity in a refugee camp in Rwanda.

1 - Gender equality desperately needs a political and social revolution.

Governments must step up and intervene in public and private spaces – from homes to boardrooms, to political institutions and in the media to end violence against women and girls. This means funding effective public campaigns to bring about the wholesale change in attitudes to ensure that finally girls and women are valued equally with boys and men.

2 - Girls must become visible in places of power and influence.

They can be empowered and lead change, but they can't do it alone. They need allies, strong role models and increased visibility in public spaces. Resources from the international donor community need to be directed towards advancing gender equality with increased support to young people, including girls.

3 - Greater efforts are needed to understand how adolescents actually live their lives.

Everyone – governments, civil society, corporate bosses, local leaders, parents, girls and boys themselves – needs to engage critically with gender discrimination and how it defines society.

“Adults are fundamental in the construction of our lives and personalities. If there are adults who think and act with gender equality... young people will feel more confident.”

Vivian, 14, Colombia

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