Building Digital Resilience

Girls and young women demand a safer digital future

Contents

All names have been changed to protect the participant's identity.

Girl watches video on her mobile phone with her friends in Vietnam © Plan International

This report

is the result of collaboration between <mark>Plan International</mark> and <mark>CNN As Equals</mark> to hear directly from young women and girls about the harms they face online, how they protect themselves and how tech companies, governments, local communities and their own families should play their part in keeping them safe.[1]

The intention was to give young women and girls an opportunity to not only talk about their digital lives but also share what they believe is needed for a safer digital future.

The research built upon the insights gained from previous Plan International and CNN As Equals work in this area. This includes Plan's <mark>'The Truth Gap'</mark> in 2021 which explored misinformation online and <mark>'Free to be Online'</mark> in 2020 which investigated the online harassment girls have faced, as well as the CNN As Equals series <mark>'Systems Error'</mark>.

Through this collaboration, CNN As Equals were able to work with Plan International's country offices to reach young women and together, through this report, make their voices heard by policy and decision makers.

1 plan-international.org
   edition.cnn.com/interactive/asequals

Colombia
Brazil
Bolivia
Nepal
Burkina Faso
Kenya
Malawi
Philippines
Timor-Leste
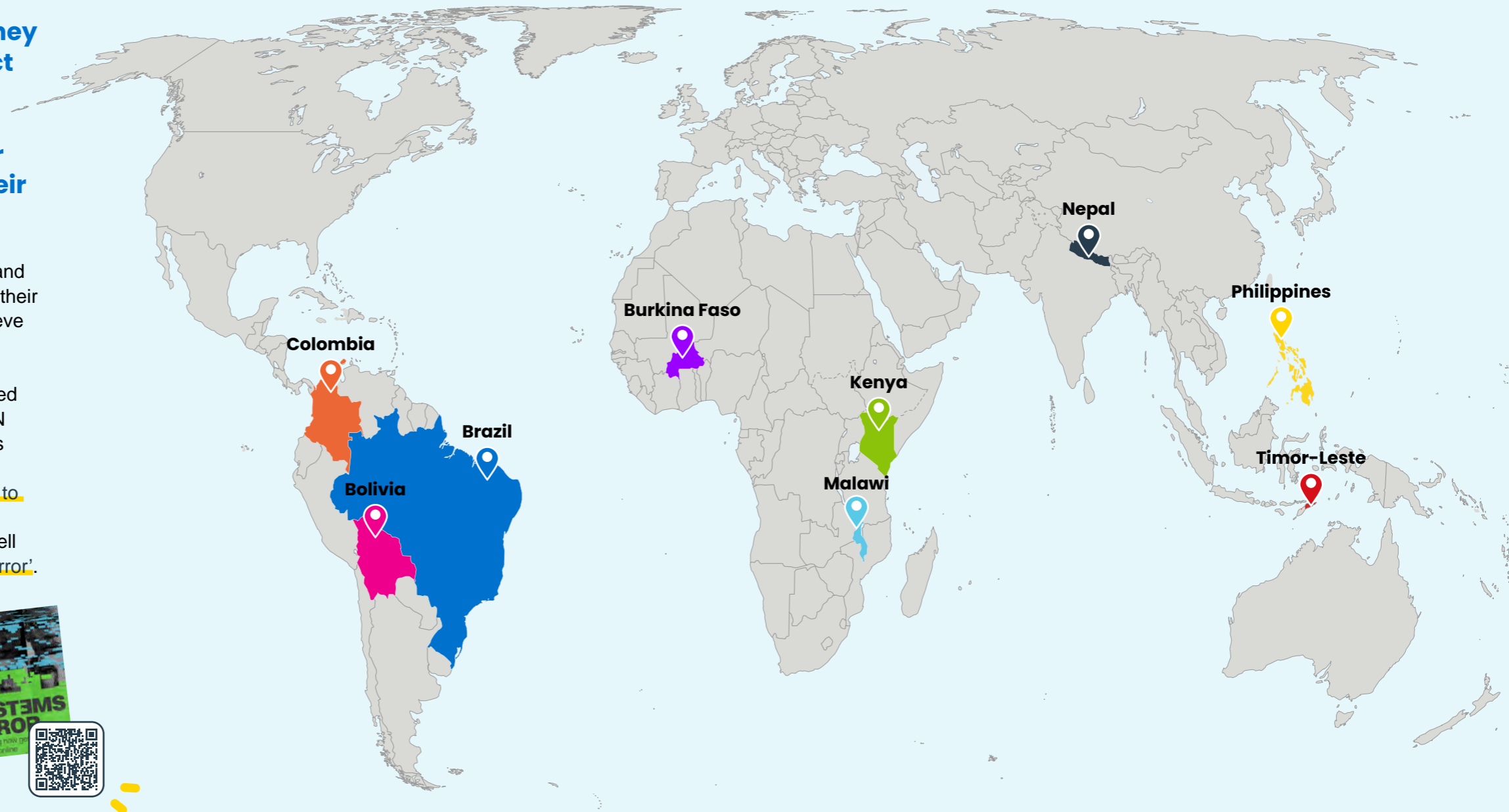
9 countries

624 girls and young women

aged between **13–24** years old

An additional 73 girls and young women also aged between 13–24 took part in focus discussion groups in Brazil, Malawi and the Philippines.

Introduction

The internet plays an increasingly central part in all our lives, opening up a whole new world of friends, study and work opportunities, and entertainment: the girls and young women taking part in Plan International's latest research study use it to socialise, to learn new skills, to shop, to keep up with the news and to research and exchange information on a vast array of subjects.

They also experience online abuse in many forms: sexual harassment, cyberbullying, imposters who are not who they say they are and those who blackmail them with falsified photos.

Despite all this they know how essential being online is to their lives and are determined to take advantage of the many opportunities it has to offer - relying primarily on themselves and each other to stay safe: developing key strategies to protect themselves in the face of regular harassment and abuse. In today's world, as the research participants are keenly aware, not being online is not an option but it is also clear from the current study, that this generation of online users have long realised that they cannot rely on the authorities, tech platforms, or even their parents, to protect them.

Participants point out that there are significant gaps in the actions taken by the different authorities, including governments and social media platforms, at global, national and local levels.

This needs to change: policy makers, governments and the tech billionaires who own the many social media platforms have a responsibility – especially to the young and vulnerable.

Overall support is lacking and there is a lot more that needs to be done to keep girls and young women safe online, to foster digital resilience, and to ensure that gender equality is promoted and respected.

Girls and young women stress that they have had to look after themselves but they also emphasise that the wider community has a role to play.

"With so much of what we do on social media, we lose our self-responsibility to find out what the features are that can protect us … Wouldn't it be better if it came from us ourselves that we are responsible for ourselves. Because they say prevention is better than cure. Are you going to wait for this to happen to you before making your account private or before you take measures?"
Lea, 17-20, Philippines

Young people taking a selfie in Guinea-Bissau © Plan International

Background

Plan International has been conducting research into the digital experiences of girls and young women over a number of years. The 2020 State of the World's Girls Report "Free to Be Online"[2] tracked girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment and found that in many cases the level of abuse was closing down opportunities, driving them off the internet and limiting their access to information and to the world outside the one they lived in. This report was followed in 2021 with a further study on the impact of misinformation and disinformation online,[3] which found that 20 per cent of girls and young women felt physically unsafe and that 18 per cent stopped engaging in politics as a result of their online experiences.

Digital access, know-how, developing skills, online resilience and generally being able to take part in the debates and opportunities of the modern world is a human right and a gender equality issue.

Getting online, having access to accurate information, understanding the digital world, engaging in civil society and feeling safe is important for everyone but bad experiences have a particular impact on the lives of girls and young women: being young and female, as in many spheres of life, increases vulnerability, limits opportunity and inhibits self-confidence.

Young woman using her mobile phone in Vietnam
© Plan International

Online sexual harassment – unsolicited images, sexual comments, discriminatory hate speech – which is worse if you identify as a member of a racial, religious or ethnic minority or as LGBTIQ+ - is a continuation of the excesses of the offline world but online the perpetrators can hide more easily.

Dealing with all this is vital and this research initiative is designed to amplify girls' voices as they not only tell us about their digital lives but also propose ways for policy makers to support them: to help them help themselves to navigate the online world - to enjoy the life-enhancing opportunities it has to offer and avoid what is destructive.

2   https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-online/
3   https://plan-international.org/publications/the-truth-gap/

The Research

A total of
624
girls and young women

Originating from
9 countries

Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Philippines, Timor-Leste

Aged between
13–24
years old

Completed a survey
to tell us about their internet use

- Why and how they go online?
- Do they feel safe?
- What do they do if they don't?
- Whose responsibility is it to keep them safe?
- What can be done and on what platforms do they feel least protected?
- What does their online life look like – what are their positive and negative experiences, are they regularly impacted by online harms, in what ways?
- What do they like to do online?
- What is most important to them of their online activities?

These questions were also discussed in a series of focus groups

With
73 girls and young women

Aged between
13–24
years old

from Brazil, Malawi and the Philippines
using a variety of participatory approaches and storytelling tools

(!) Ethics approval for the project and the survey tool was obtained from the Plan International Institutional Review Board. The survey and focus group discussions included information sheets and consent forms. Participants were assured that participation was voluntary and that we would keep their data secure and confidential.

> **"Still, the fact that you're behind a screen and not face to face with the person encourages you to be the worst creature that ever walked the face of the Earth. … people don't have the courage to say things to other people's faces, but they have the courage to say them on the internet. So that's something that needs to be addressed…"** Camila, 23, Brazil[4]
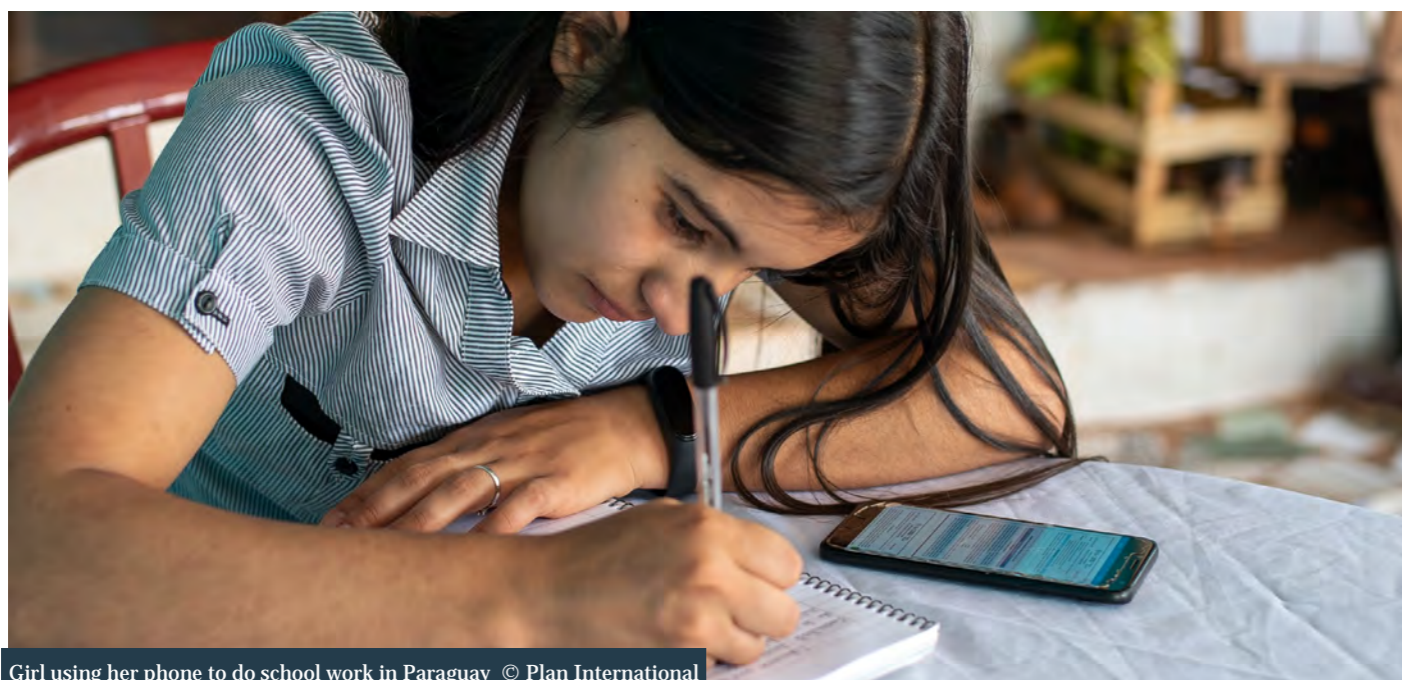
Girl using her phone to do school work in Paraguay © Plan International

What is perhaps most notable in this latest research is how self-reliant girls and young women are when it comes to digital resilience – there is a sense throughout of them taking whatever is thrown at them in their stride and an overall determination to protect themselves and each other, to refuse to be intimidated.

But they shouldn't have to do it on their own. Protecting girls and young women online, whether it's from sexual harassment, financial scams or, as discussed in the following quote, cyberbullying, is not just their responsibility:

> **"They should give literacy to teenagers about the proper way to use social media especially in cases like that, how these things can be prevented. They should also spread their knowledge to teenagers because most don't know how to deal with the situation once they receive something like that …
> It seems like the solution to this should come from within the community."** Angel, 17-20, Philippines

4 Unless otherwise stated all quotes are from the current research

The problems girls and young women confront on and offline have not changed from those identified in earlier research. What has changed though, as this study demonstrates, is both the increased centrality of social media and all the other varied activities that take place online, and the advances in technology which make abuse more toxic: creating yet another space where girls and young women can be disadvantaged, bullied, and kept in what is seen to be 'their place.'

What felt at first like liberation - new information, new friends and new opportunities - can become threatening, dangerous and overwhelming.

> **"I'll just add that if ever it doesn't stop and you already feel helpless, it's okay for you to lessen your [time] being immersed in the internet and focus on yourself, like bond with your family, or like go out alone, go somewhere else where you feel safe by yourself such as parks or malls.. Just walk around instead of stressing and immersing [too much] online. Because that can build up some trauma, anxiety, social anxiety and that can lead to depression which is very common nowadays due to immersion to the internet."** Lea, 17-20, Philippines

Taking a break, as Lea suggests, is a good idea but it is not acceptable if the only way girls and young women can protect their mental health and deal with being online is to retreat from it. **Silencing girls' voices and restricting their opportunities is not the answer.** Girls and young women need their families and communities, the tech companies and the authorities to step up, listen to them and support them with all the means at their disposal:

> **"Sometimes we talk to people because we know and understand that these people, they are going to listen to us and these people are going to give us advice… we also talk to them because we know these people are not going to expose me."** Alinafe, 21-24, Malawi

Key findings

67%
of girls and young women
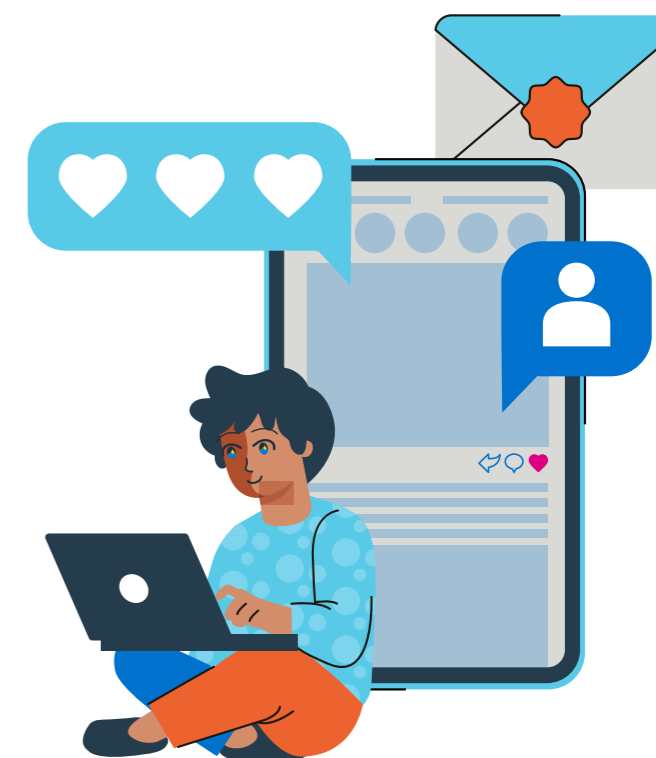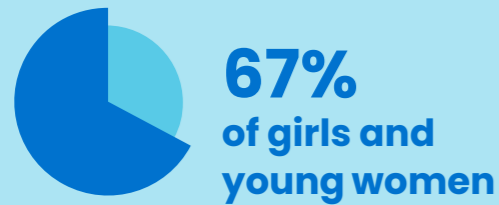
taking part in the survey reported themselves as the most responsible for their online safety with around 10% citing parents/carers and tech companies as responsible. The absence of effective regulation of online harassment has led to girls and young women understanding the importance to protect themselves.

Nearly 25% of participants
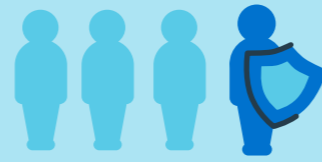
stated they as individuals are very prepared to look after themselves online. Girls and young women everywhere reported blocking messages from someone they did not want to hear from and changing their profile setting to private, as the most helpful actions to protect themselves online.

75% of survey participants

reported having harmful online experiences at some point

- with almost **40% being harassed** at least **once a month**
- and **11%** saying this happened **daily or almost daily**
- **44%** reported seeing or receiving **unwanted sexual** images or videos online
- **37%** had received **inappropriate** sexual messages
- and **25%** faced **discrimination or hate speech**.

35% of survey participants

reported feeling sad, depressed worried or anxious as a result of their experience online. Globally girls and young women reported that upsetting experiences online happened the most on Facebook, followed by Whatsapp and Instagram.

Age is a more important indicator of difference in survey responses than location: the younger age group for example were more likely to go to parents and carers for help. The older age groups were more cautious in their approach to the internet.

44% of survey participants

said if they needed help they talked to their friends, **32% talked to siblings** This was backed up in the focus group findings.

Girls and young women understand the importance of protecting themselves.
There is a sense from the survey participants, emphasised in the focus group discussions, that experiencing online harms is always going to be an issue so they need to learn to protect themselves and get on with their online activities.

Girls and young women taking part in the research do, however, stress that they cannot do this alone.

They need structured support from the authorities, from the tech companies, governments and wider society to keep them safe. In the focus discussion groups their recommendations include:

- Creating awareness of online safety issues through campaigning nationally and locally and providing helplines and safe spaces where appropriate.

- Improving digital literacy for parents and teachers as well as young people. Include online safety in school and college curricula and make social media companies provide training and support.

- Strengthen and implement laws to hold perpetrators of online abuse to account as well as the platforms that host them.

- Strengthen reporting mechanisms and improve content moderation on all online platforms.

What we have learned

It is clear from the survey responses and the focus group discussions that over the last few years, particularly post pandemic, life has very much moved online. Girls and young women learn, study, socialise and share their daily lives on the internet.

❝ "…because like it or not, everything is now online now, we no longer use anything physical. I no longer need to go to the University … of course I have to go to classes. But everything else related to the coursework, to the tests, [I can do] via the internet." Ana, 24, Brazil

❝ "My life changed after I discovered BARD [Gemini]. BARD [Gemini] is Google's artificial intelligence, and I'm its biggest champion. It's really cool, it has some kind of humanised touch. I needed to use an Excel formula and it explained why that formula exists, how to use every term in the formula, it's wonderful. So, I like looking for information and learning new things. That's it. I'm no longer focusing on just posting something." Daniela, 24, Brazil

The development of AI has, for some, revolutionised their online lives and opportunities and will continue to do so.

With some interesting exceptions, there are striking similarities in terms of both attitudes and experiences across all research countries.

Girls and young women are not daunted by new technology and are determined to deal with online abuse and the lack of regulation demanding support when they need it.

23% of survey participants felt very prepared to protect themselves online.

Overall, despite an often intimidating online environment, the findings demonstrate real resilience: the majority of girls and young women everywhere felt they were at least somewhat prepared to tackle whatever their online experiences threw at them.

Focus group discussions participants discussed **how new technological developments could help keep them safe by increasing security and verifying user accounts:**

However, despite girls' and young women's resilience the online environment can be daunting.

Survey participants protected themselves in various ways: by blocking, ignoring, changing privacy settings and sometimes reporting.

❝ "I also want to add on her point, as we do, with the sim cards when registering, we use IDs, that gives the real identity of the person, I think the owners of the platforms, like Facebook, WhatsApp, they can also use those strategies, so that if person violate someone's rights they can be easily identified."
Maureen, 21-24, Malawi

In the sections to follow participants share their experiences, their ideas, and their demands for action.

The online environment: quite toxic

Girls and young women's online encounters were often frightening: they reported seeing discriminatory hate messages, money scams that targeted them, and information that encouraged self-harm and self-hatred. In Asia for example 40 per cent of survey participants reported seeing discussions of ways to harm yourself and 26 per cent had seen content about ways to take your own life. Participants in South America and Africa had similar experiences and the distress this causes was reflected in the comments made in the focus group discussions.
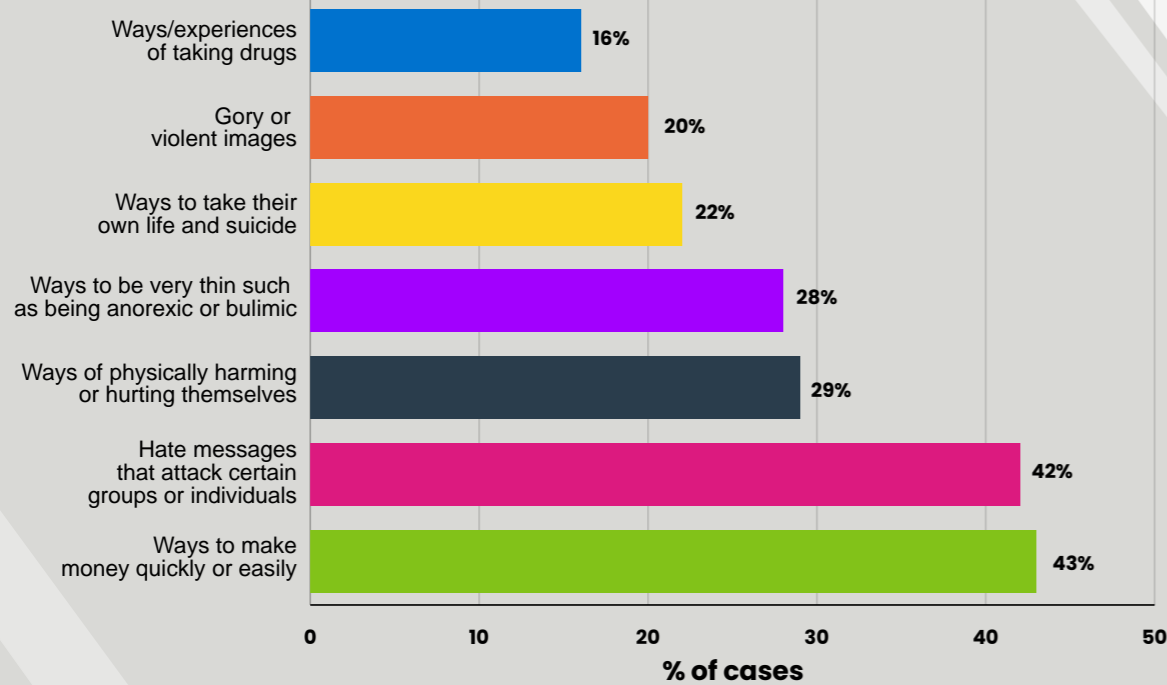
> **"Internet is now quite a lot toxic. And [the] internet destroys people's mental health."** Althea, 15, Philippines
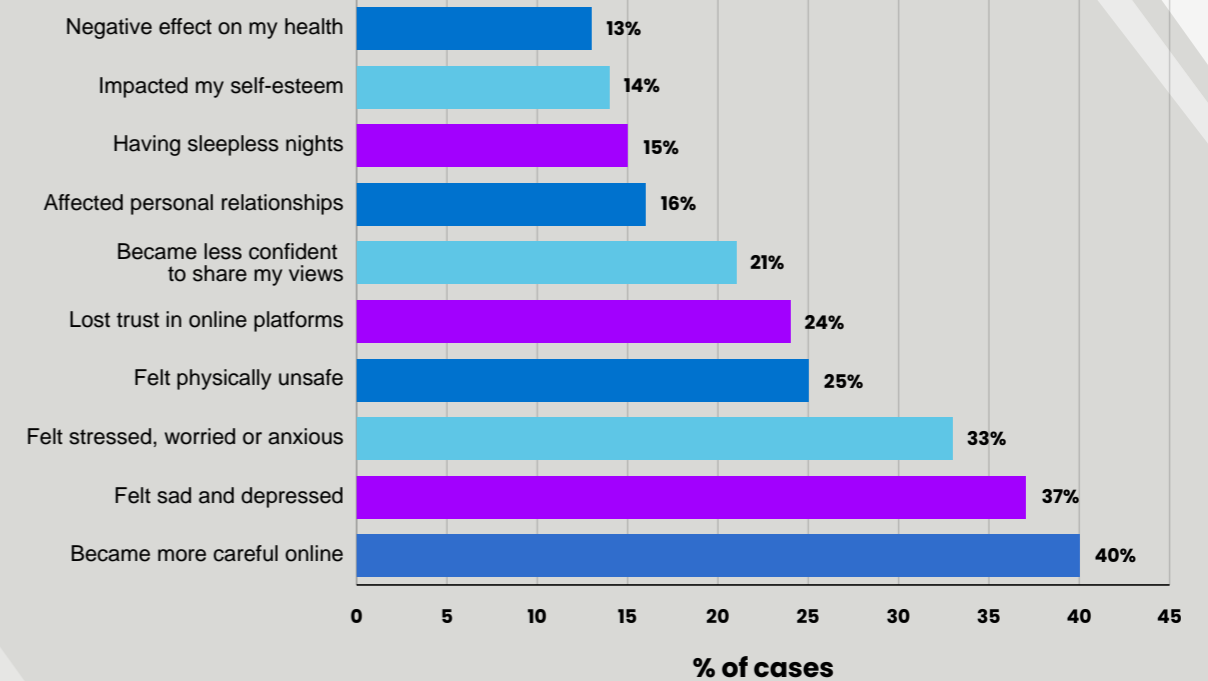
It is quite clear that, **despite the resilience they display, harassment, harmful content and the overall online environment has an impact on girls and young women's online behaviour and, more alarmingly, on their mental health** with many depressed, anxious and stressed, losing trust in online platforms and feeling that they need to curtail their online activities. Older participants in particular reported being endlessly wary and always vigilant, which takes its own toll.

> **"I used to be much more active, posting photos almost every day, stories about myself, selfies. Nowadays, with AI and this whole thing... you can take anything and change it and you can be shown saying different things. I confess that I went a little paranoid about this. Like, I don't have any pictures of myself on Instagram today. I post stories sometimes... But I don't post much about my life. I think I used to be very active in this sense. Very much so... But today I feel like I no longer enjoy this exposure..."** Camila, 23, Brazil

Bad things discussed online

Category	% of cases
Ways to make money quickly or easily	43%
Hate messages that attack certain groups or individuals	42%
Ways of physically harming or hurting themselves	29%
Ways to be very thin such as being anorexic or bulimic	28%
Ways to take their own life and suicide	22%
Gory or violent images	20%
Ways/experiences of taking drugs	16%

% of cases

Impact of harmful content online

Category	% of cases
Became more careful online	40%
Felt sad and depressed	37%
Felt stressed, worried or anxious	33%
Felt physically unsafe	25%
Lost trust in online platforms	24%
Became less confident to share my views	21%
Affected personal relationships	16%
Having sleepless nights	15%
Impacted my self-esteem	14%
Negative effect on my health	13%

% of cases

> **"Sharing things there [on social media] was hurting me both psychologically and personally, especially because people can watch you evolve, make progress, and they wish you harm. So this ends up affecting our lives in a certain way."** Daniela, 24, Brazil

Being careful, feeling sad or stressed or physically unsafe were the most cited impacts of participants' experiences of the harmful content discussed online. Further ramifications included reduced confidence, arguments with family and friends and negative effects on work and study.

Survey Participants in Asia felt safer online (44 per cent) than those in Africa (24 per cent) and South America (22 per cent). The difference is large and hard to explain. However, even in Asia nearly a quarter of survey participants felt either not at all, or not very, safe. Participants in all three regions reported being careful about accepting friend requests but more so in Latin America and Africa where 67 per cent and 66 per cent responded "very true" or "mostly true" to the statement, "I am careful what friend requests to accept," compared to 55 per cent in Asia.

Girls in the focus group discussions in the Philippines talked about the impact of cyberbullying, which often started at school and continued online at home. The fact that their bullies were known to them made it harder to report and impossible to switch off from. It was particularly an issue for the 13-16-year-olds.

> **"I am always being cyberbullied there and I also ask why they still need to post on social media when they could confront me... It's also hurtful at the same time because the slurs they use are so bad. Then the positive side of the internet is that I get information about my problem there. The only negative thing is, they make a big deal out of even the small things through social media."**
> Michelle, 13, Philippines

Online experiences of negative content

Category	% of cases
Asked to do something sexual	13%
Lost money by being cheated	13%
Receiving threats of sexual violence	14%
Body shaming	14%
Received threats of physical violence	15%
Stalked or received unwanted attention	15%
None of the above	16%
Tried to have an intimate relationship with me	17%
Cyberbullying or online harassment	19%
Exposure to harmful or misleading content	21%
Discrimination and hate speech	25%
Receiving inappropriate sexual messages	37%
Seeing or receiving unwanted sexual imagery	44%

% of cases

Over 80%
of the survey participants have seen or received unwanted sexual images or videos or received inappropriate sexual messages or comments online while 29% received threats of physical or sexual violence.

Girls' online experiences also include, encounters with people who are not who they say they are, people using their identity, uploading pictures without their consent and using photo-shopping or AI to post naked photos:


Girls looking at photos on their mobile phone in Brazil © Plan International

> **"So that time I accepted a friend request to someone I didn't know. I started chilling with a guy and he sent me a naked picture and asked me to send my picture too. So, I was scared, that just some random person wants my picture the I should send mine too. So, he said if you won't send, I will take your picture on your profile, I didn't know about photoshop, so the person edited my picture, where one side was showing, naked picture of me, I was young and scared, so I was afraid to tell anyone. And then I told my elder sister about it, and she told me to block the person and see what will happen, I blocked him then after some investigation the person was a lady. The picture she sent wasn't him and I was depressed because I thought, she will post it [the photoshopped picture]. But she didn't post."** Maureen 21-24, Malawi

> **"Like what she says that she is being bullied on social media, like me too. I get harassed on social media like my friends, they edit my photo to look like I have no clothes."** Verlyn, 15, Philippines
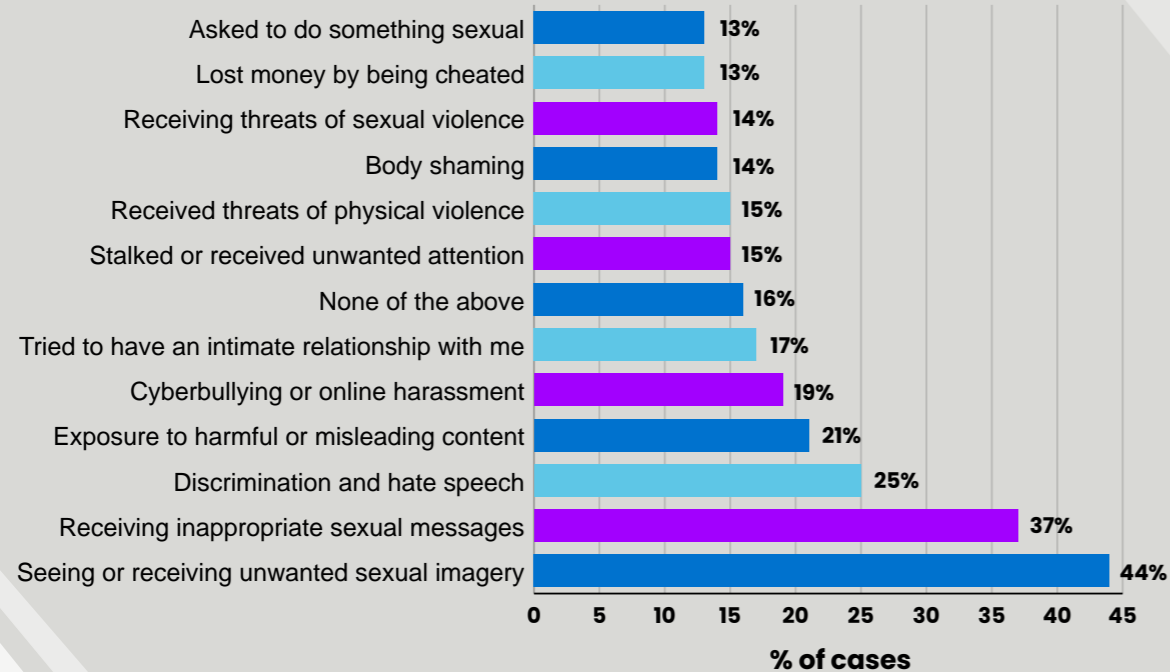
These experiences were reflected across the focus group discussions in all three countries.

Participants responded both angrily and sadly to a story-telling scenario where a young woman is sent sexual images online, it was all too familiar to many of them:

> **"I think, since we are teenagers now, it is often experienced by girls, especially when you are popular on Instagram or social media. Usually, there are guys who are that confident. They harass people on social media, and they think it's okay to send something like that without the other's consent."** Reyna, 21-24, Philippines

> **"I accepted a friend request, that kept on sending me, explicit pictures… even if I didn't reply to him he could send 'hi' and send pictures and asking me can you be my girlfriend, I didn't like it so I just blocked the person I left Facebook, like for four years, I have just got back on Facebook this year because I didn't like Facebook."** Maureen, 21-24, Malawi

Facebook was one of the platforms where most women had experienced upsetting behaviours (72 percent), followed by Whastapp (45 per cent), and Instagram (22 per cent)

Top 5 platforms participants use

Platform	%
Youtube	12%
TikTok	19%
Instagram	22%
Whatsapp	45%
Facebook	72%

% of cases

Despite these negative experiences, girls know how important it is to use the internet and social media, it is part and parcel of daily life: a lot of the time they report really enjoying their time online and can see its benefits in terms of study or work, entertainment and having a window on the outside world.
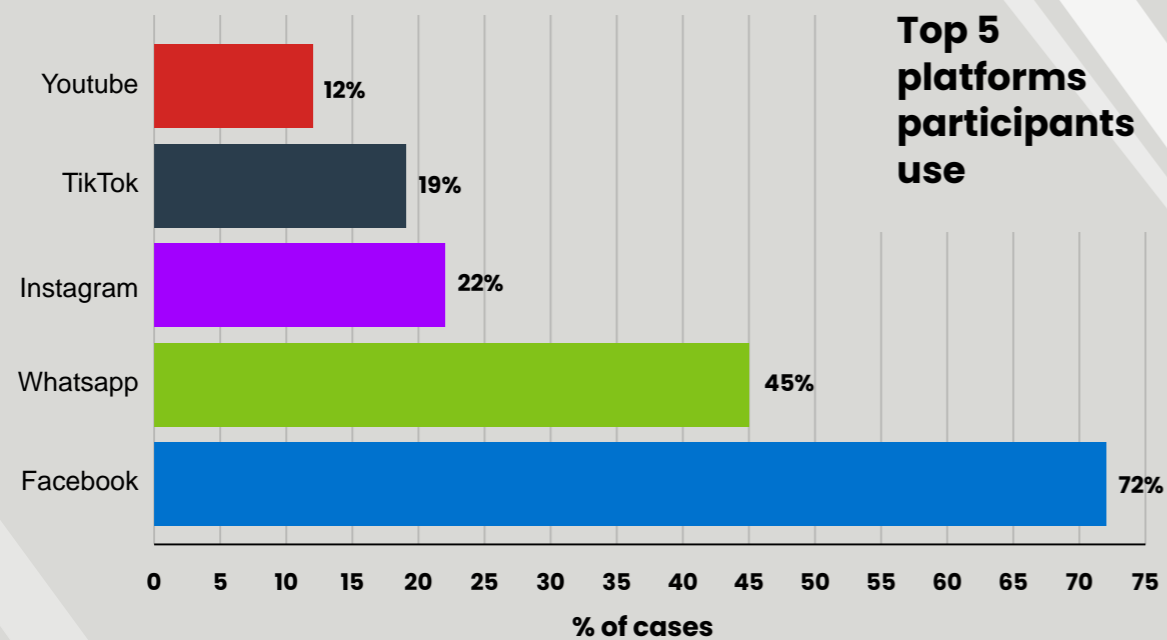
> **"I always discover new courses. Now I'm taking a Google course, for which I got a scholarship. So that's it. And I signed up for another programme too, I'm going to do it. I'm going to be completely knackered by the end of the year, but it's going to be good… I've also come to the conclusion that trying to be completely offline… I won't be able to do all the things I want to do. So, to have the life I want to have, I need to be on social media."** Fernanda, 21, Brazil

Or as Angel put it:

> **"Social media is there for us to see the outside world more so that we don't just stay in our comfort zone."** Angel, 17-20, Philippines

They may go offline for a while but acknowledge that being online is synonymous with today's world – particularly for the young.

You have to be there which means you have to develop ways of dealing with the bad experiences.

> **"I didn't have someone to navigate me with these social media stuff. But I believe we have to accept that we are going to meet people who are not going to like us, that's okay."** Stacey, 17-20, Malawi

Young woman using her mobile phone to stay connected during the pandemic in Guatemala © Plan International

75% of survey participants reported being bothered at least once or twice by their online experiences.

Free to be online?

In 2020 Plan International's State of the World's Girls Report, Free to Be Online, conducted research with over 14,000 girls and young women from 22 countries. The research found that:

More than half of girls surveyed, from around the world, have been harassed and abused online.

1 in 5 girls were abused online and feel physically unsafe as a result.

Online abuse is silencing girls' voices.

As they do in 2024, participants talked about the opportunities the internet and social media represented but they also talked about fear and feeling unsafe.

23% of girls and young women reported harassment on Instagram.

**14%** of girls and young women reported harassment on WhatsApp.

39% of girls and young women reported harassment on Facebook.

Then, as now, harassment came in many different shapes, ranging from threats of physical or sexual violence to racist comments, cyberbullying and stalking: of the **58% of girls** who reported harassment, **81%** said they had experienced multiple types of harassment.

In 2020
girls and young women asked for concrete action from law and policy-makers and from the social media companies including:

- ⊘ Create effective and accessible reporting mechanisms that target gender-based violence.
- ⊘ Hold perpetrators to account.
- ⊘ Collect disaggregated data that acknowledges girls' intersecting identities and tracks the scale and size of the problem.
- ⊘ Take this issue seriously.
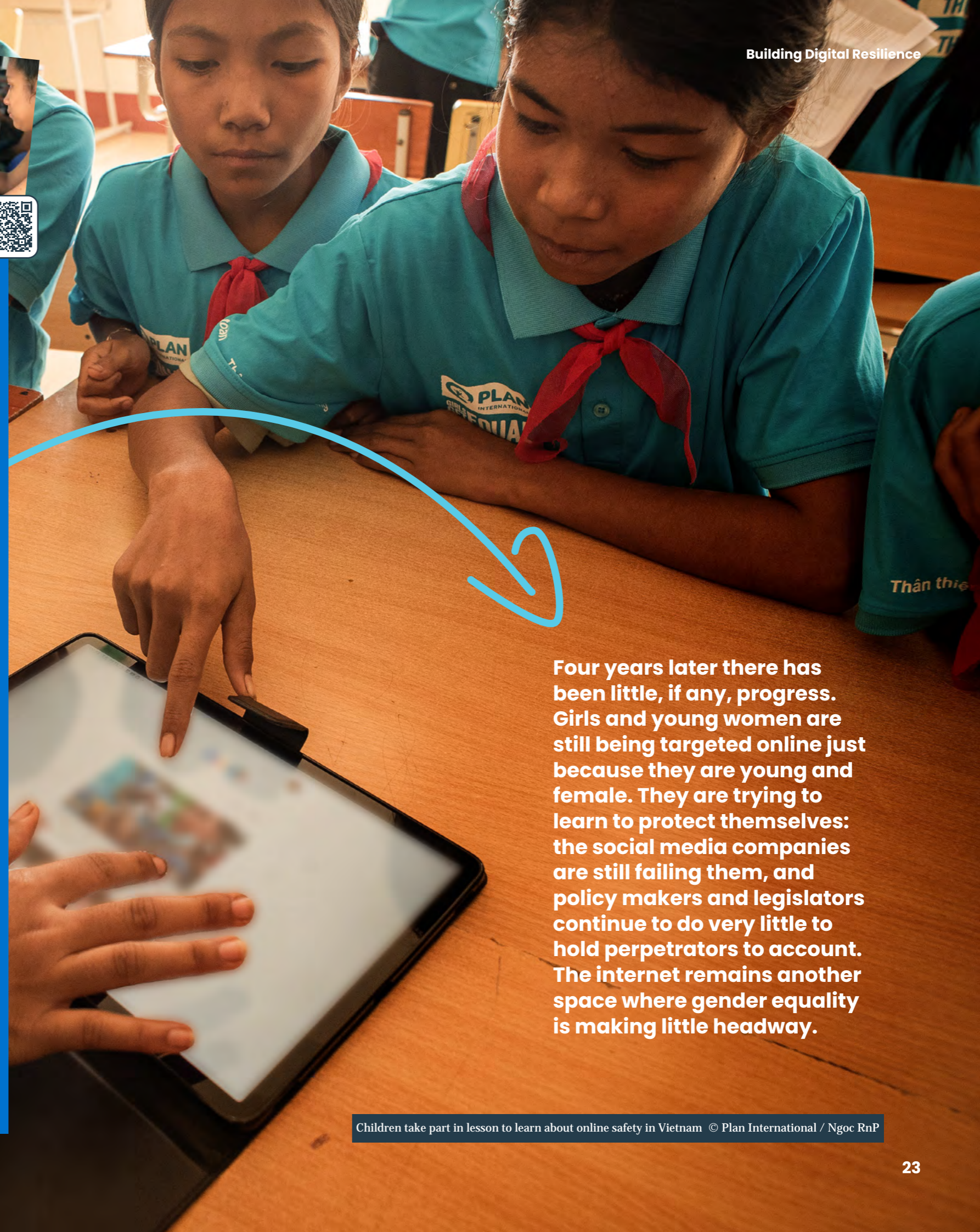
Four years later there has been little, if any, progress. Girls and young women are still being targeted online just because they are young and female. They are trying to learn to protect themselves: the social media companies are still failing them, and policy makers and legislators continue to do very little to hold perpetrators to account. The internet remains another space where gender equality is making little headway.

Children take part in lesson to learn about online safety in Vietnam © Plan International / Ngoc RnP

Taking action

Throughout the research participants express a strong sense of responsibility to take care of themselves online and to keep up with new developments in technology. But do they rely so much on themselves and their peers because there is so little help forthcoming from anyone else?
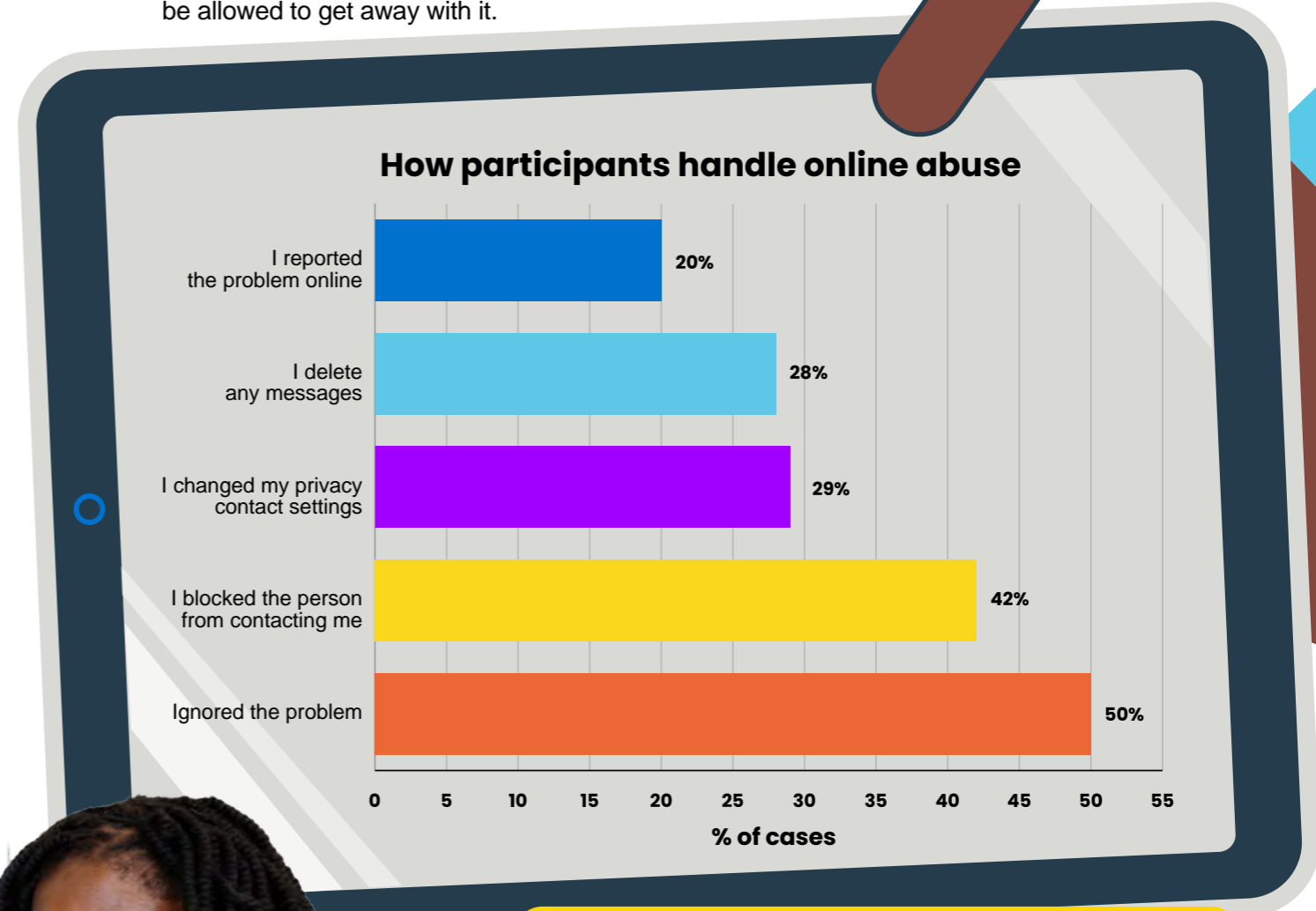
The overwhelming majority of survey participants, 67%, feel that they are responsible for their own online safety. This compares with 11 per cent who cite technology companies and 10 per cent parents or caregivers.

The majority of survey participants, 61 per cent, also feel prepared or very prepared to protect themselves online. They had strategies to deal with the issues that arose which centred on blocking the person concerned, closing the browser and changing privacy settings. Girls did report issues but fewer than ten per cent of them found it particularly helpful.

This finding was echoed in the focus group discussions:

Who do you think is most responsible for online safety		
	N	%
Myself	418	67.0%
My parents/carers	63	10.1%
My school/ university	12	1.9%
My workplace	2	0.3%
My community	14	2.2%
My government	17	2.7%
Technology companies/ owners of online platforms	71	11.4%
The police	5	0.8%
Other	2	0.3%
Prefer not to say	20	3.2%

> **"I believe that... if the complaints actually had results, then there would be fewer cases, because these cases are often reported, but the complaints lead to nothing. For example, many times we make a report and instead of the report being successful, a text appears saying that there is no violation of the community guidelines."** Livia, 18, Brazil

In Asia particularly, **survey participants had little faith in reporting mechanisms** and the preferred option was to ignore the problem: many of them did not have people they could go to for help, though, in the focus group discussions, there was a recognition that perpetrators should not be allowed to get away with it.

How participants handle online abuse

- I reported the problem online — 20%
- I delete any messages — 28%
- I changed my privacy contact settings — 29%
- I blocked the person from contacting me — 42%
- Ignored the problem — 50%

% of cases

Young women take part in activity in Guinea-Bissau © Plan International

> **"Because even we can say to just ignore it, it is also necessary that it not happen again to others. So actions are needed to be taken. It's okay to ignore them, but we can't tolerate that kind of behaviour either. We can now raise concerns with those, like, teachers or adults that there is someone who does these so that by that time, their [bad] behaviour will end and they will not be able to do it to others."** Angel, 17-20, Philippines
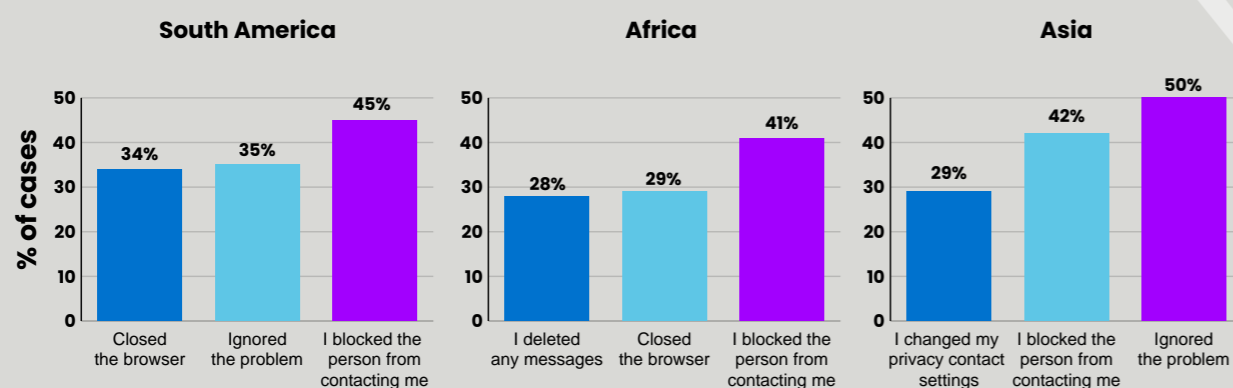
Three top actions taken when upset online. By region.

South America

- Closed the browser: 34%
- Ignored the problem: 35%
- I blocked the person from contacting me: 45%

% of cases (y-axis: 0–50)

Africa

- I deleted any messages: 28%
- Closed the browser: 29%
- I blocked the person from contacting me: 41%

Asia

- I changed my privacy contact settings: 29%
- I blocked the person from contacting me: 42%
- Ignored the problem: 50%

In the focus group discussions participants talked about blocking, turning accounts to private, being careful with friend requests and about what they post – cutting back on personal information to help protect themselves.

> **"When you open an account, someone sends you a friend request, you are the owner of that account, you are the CEO. So, you don't know the person why should you accept? Of course, we want to network and so on but also try to go beyond, find out what does this person really do. Try to check before you accept their friend request"** Luso, 17-20, Malawi

Participants also talked about stepping back for a while to preserve their sanity:

There was also some resentment at the idea that you had to step away rather than the perpetrators changing their behaviour:

> **"I've trying to have more of a life offline, and that gives me more peace of mind when I'm online, without feeling overwhelmed. Because, you know, when we stay connected for a long time, we feel like, "guys, help, I'm overwhelmed". And when we spend more time offline, then go back online, we don't feel that stress."** Fernanda, 21, Brazil

> **"It's already been said I should keep my accounts private, but what if I'm a public person? Even though I may be a small influencer, I only have a thousand followers. But I want to be a public person, I want to show my daily life, and I want people to reach me, even if they don't know me. But that's no reason for someone to come and send me hateful messages and, well, intimate photos."** Helena, 17-20 Brazil

The role of family and friends

Some of the girls in the focus group discussions, especially in Brazil, said that their parents did monitor their social media activities:

> **"My mother is always looking at my phone to see what I'm doing, what I'm doing right and what I'm doing wrong. She's always there to help me."** Paula,17, Brazil

Younger girls in the Philippines also talked about sometimes making sure their parents couldn't see their online activities by making "dump accounts"or archiving messages.[5] They don't want their social media activities to be curtailed and are not comfortable talking to their parents about anything that might be bothering them.

> **"I am not open to my parents. They've raised us up being used to not really opening up. It seems we just keep our problems or feeling to ourselves. We're not used to opening up to each other."** Jaimee, 13-16, Philippines

Many of the focus group participants, particularly in the older age group, talked about being the recognised digital expert in their family: they know that their parents, and the older generation generally, struggle to keep up with all that technology has to offer – and certainly are not equipped to fight off any of its threats.

> **"Usually, we are the ones who help them more often because we know how to use the internet better than them."** Reyna, 21-24, Philippines

> **"… my father, I think he's the person who has the most knowledge, but it's not possible to ask him for help because he works most of the time, so it's difficult to get in touch with him. As for other people like my mother, my uncles, they don't know much and I'm the one who has to do things for them. Even to print a document, for example, they don't know how to configure a mobile phone, so I have to do all this."** Klara, 17, Brazil

> **"They [adults] see it as a small thing, trivial, but for me, we are young, they seem [a] big deal. So, we have different mindsets."** Christel, 13-16, Philippines

5   An account where you can dump information and photos that you do not want seen on your main account.

This reliance on friends for both practical and emotional support was evident in the focus group discussions where many felt that only their friends understood what they were going through and were tech savvy enough to help with practical suggestions.

> " **"Of course, our friends are in the same age bracket, like they know how our brains work, what's in fashion, what's going on right now. So, it's like they know the most accurate or the best solution that can be applied to the problem or the given situation that we said."**
> Lea,17-20, Philippines

That doesn't mean that greater and more structured support would not be welcome:

> " **"But… a support network could be formed so we could get information, you know? I think there would be a lot of people who would go after that. Not that it's easy, it's not like we know how to solve a problem immediately, like taking someone to the doctor. No, we don't know. It would be on standby, we would probably have problems in the future, but I think we would at least have a support network."**
> Gabriela, 21, Brazil

Many focus group discussions participants felt that although they could, and should, look after themselves it shouldn't all be down to them.

> " **"I think it would be good if most applications, especially the most used ones like Twitter [X] and Instagram, had something included in their system … if there was a tool able to detect when a person makes comments or publishes something that is offensive and in doing so bring down the person's account. And if that person tries to create another account with the same email as the old one, they stop the process."**
> Paula, 17, Brazil

63% of participants
reported friends, boyfriend or girlfriend as their source of support when upset about something online.

The Way Ahead

The research participants, as well as providing us with a vivid picture of the opportunities and challenges of their online life were also encouraged to look ahead at what could be done to both enhance their overall online experience and keep them safe. One of the survey questions asked girls and young women "what is lacking in order to protect girls online?"

South America
- 61.7%
- 46.9%
- 45.7%
- 39.4%
- 39.4%

- Adequate education on digital literacy
- Awareness campaigns to educate girls
- Strict enforcement of online platforms
- Stronger legal measures
- Improved parental guidance and education

Africa
- 81.8%
- 33.8%
- 34.2%
- 39.8%
- 43.3%

- Adequate education on digital literacy
- Awareness campaigns to educate girls
- Increased awareness campaigns
- Stronger legal measures
- Improved parental guidance and education

Asia
- 68.5%
- 35.6%
- 30.2%
- 33.6%
- 32.2%

- Adequate education on digital literacy
- Awareness campaigns to educate girls
- Increased awareness campaigns
- Strict enforcement of online platforms
- Improved parental guidance and education

In South America
survey participants picked adequate education on digital literacy (60 per cent), followed by improved parental guidance and education (47 per cent) and stronger legal measures (46 per cent).

In Africa
responses were similar: adequate education on digital literacy (81 per cent), followed by awareness campaigns to educate girls (43 per cent) and increased awareness campaigns (39 per cent).

In Asia
participants again picked education on digital literacy at 67 per cent, followed by improved parental guidance and education (37 per cent) and increased awareness campaigns (32 per cent).

Young people learn how to use tablet computers in Bangladesh © Plan International

Digital literacy

The survey responses demonstrate that girls and young women are acutely aware of the importance of digital literacy. This is backed up in the focus group discussions where participants had views on who could improve it:

> **"Those who provide them [digital literacy lessons] should be the companies that make the apps. Because, of course, we are also their responsibility since they are the ones who make the apps. They are responsible for what can happen to us or what we can encounter in the app that was created."** Reyna, 21-24, Philippines

In the focus group discussions girls and young women were also asked if they had received any education on digital literacy and if so, was there anything lacking in how it was taught or provided? The consensus was that digital literacy in schools and colleges should include dealing with harassment and cyberbullying, on how to navigate online risks, not just be a course on basic practical computer skills such as creating spreadsheets and documents. Participants also thought digital literacy should be taught to parents and carers and that the community overall could be more aware and involved.

> **"I think also social media platforms can also be user friendly to people like parents and guardians so that they can safeguard they children on what they are doing. Because most of times, parents they don't follow up what they children are doing, because they don't know maybe how to use Facebook, WhatsApp, so they just let the children be there and do whatever they want, so there is need to make it user friendly for the parents to follow up on their children."** Fungai, 21-24, Malawi

One of the older participants in the Philippines felt that digital education providers themselves were under-informed and that local authorities in the Barangays needed digital literacy lessons so that this knowledge was widely disseminated and the issues involved were discussed and understood.

Girl taking photos on her smartphone in the Philippines © Plan International

Awareness campaigns to support girls and young women and their parents and carers

Also came up in the Focus Group Discussions. Many of the girls and young women are supporting their friends, family members and members of their community with little support themselves and few obvious places to go to for help and information.

They made suggestions about providing victims of online abuse with phone numbers and safe spaces where they could talk to someone. They felt governments could do much more to raise public awareness of the risks that can occur online and, as one participant in Brazil, outlined some practical suggestions:

> **"I think there should be greater awareness. Not only the people, but the governments need to do something. Do you know these campaigns they run for healthcare? Something like that, a mega-campaign saying ... Because if they do that [to raise awareness about] the issue of public safety and the issue of health, why not about the issue of scams and the internet? ... Let's start a campaign, let's open an NGO, let's help, let's find out what to do."** Gabriela, 21, Brazil

Some in the focus groups were very aware of the comparisons between the lack of action on online gender-based abuse, particularly in local communities where the problem is barely understood, and actions taken in other areas:

> **"In Malawi, we are doing great when it comes to ending gender-based violence, but then the gap that is there is that we are not considering, those abuses whereby young girls experience online like cyberbullying and any other abuses online... I think what can be done is to provide a training to the local structures in the community so that they can address those issues and so that they can know where to report and how they can advise the community, to go when they experience those issues."** Wanda 21-24 Malawi

Community involvement and community awareness are seen by many as key to helping girls and young women successfully negotiate online risks and take advantage of the opportunities it offers.

There is a vast generation gap: as Livia from Brazil comments, older people, "still live a lot in the past," adding "new things have to be ... whether they like it or not." There is an overall impression that the whole subject needs to be opened up, treated more seriously and understood more deeply and girls and young women are keen to participate – both to learn and to teach.

Legislation and reporting mechanisms

The survey participants expected very little from governments in the way of protection but did feel that the tech companies had a responsibility to the users of the technology they were profiting from.

In the discussion groups, girls in Malawi and the Philippines mentioned wanting to see social media firms improve how they take action on harmful online behaviours such as quicker response times and improved technologies to detect fake accounts, including using AI to identify platform users so there is no hiding behind false names and endless new accounts.

Girls want to talk to real people and have them involved in monitoring, not robots.

> **"Because we talk a lot about the users, but if the networks don't do anything about it, the users feel free. So, it's no use. For example, after the school shootings, I don't remember how many profiles I reported that talked about that kind of thing. And one or two were removed, because there were very explicit things. So, you need … sometimes, a woman's account is taken down because she is breastfeeding, but at the same time, there are profiles that say horrible things and are reported, but they are not removed because it is "freedom of expression". So, we need to find a balance, have real people analysing cases and not just robots, because we know that robots recognise patterns, but these patterns are not always easy to identify, especially in comments."** Ana, 24, Brazil

Young woman repairs mobile phones at her home in Bangladesh © Plan International

There is a sense that tech companies need to be a lot more responsive:

> **"If it's a crime, even harassment, the person can report it and start a lawsuit. So the company, the social network, they can… actually, they not only can, they have a duty to contribute to the process, they have an obligation. You just go and start a lawsuit, you say "come on, Instagram. We want to know who this person is", they are obliged to disclose it, you know? […]So, let's do that, let's sue them, let's go for it, because there's no point in just blocking the person. They can open another account and make a zillion comments."** Ana, 24, Brazil

One girl suggested more tailored ways for social media to provide information on their terms and conditions:

> **"Because there are huge texts which most people are too lazy to read, because there's a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff and there's not always direct information."** Klara 17, Brazil

Another had a suggestion to improve reporting systems:

> **"I think a website could be created that would give people an answer, some feedback. The person would make a complaint, report the problem and then receive feedback, an answer on what to do."** Livia, 18, Brazil

Some girls in Brazil and Malawi wanted to see both improved regulation of social media companies and stronger legislation which could hold online abusers to account.

> **"So we asked, to what extent can a person be punished on the internet? And the issue of regulating social networks came into play. It was a huge topic last year, you know? And it involved everyone, people were like, "they are going to forbid people to use social media". It's not like that. I think some regulation is necessary because social networks are open…"** Antonia, 21-24, Brazil

> **"I think criminalisation of cyberbullying, I think there is need to take that seriously."** Pennia, 21-24, Malawi

When the subject of government legislation and monitoring was discussed in the focus groups many of the participants saw a role for the relevant authorities in protecting girls online through legislation which is both enacted and properly enforced.

> "There should be greater support from the government, because there are several laws, but many people are not aware of these laws, and these laws are also not put into practice. Many times, the law is there, but it's just for show."
> Livia, 18, Brazil

> "I don't know if you've heard of the law on stalking … the law on stalking now guarantees that even if the platform doesn't do anything you can go and denounce a person, and they will guarantee you a certain protection. This didn't exist in Brazil, it's something totally new. We know that most of those who are harassed on the internet, who are stalked on the internet, are women. So, it's a super new law, super recent, [it passed] last year. And helping a little with protection, it isn't everything, but it gives us some guarantees." Jessica, 23, Brazil

Girl and her family look at pictures on phone in El Salvador © Plan International

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Conclusion

The research illustrates clearly how important having access to all the internet can provide is to girls and young women.

It is not an option to go completely offline and though cutting down online time may, as some suggest, be good for your mental health it is not a solution to the many challenges girls face and does not hold perpetrators to account. The research also points to how fraught being online can be and how much it matters that we don't allow the internet to be yet another space which has a detrimental impact on gender equality and on girls' lives and opportunities.

Gender-based violence, threats and hate messages, sexual harassment and bullying play the same part online as they do offline. It is a whole new domain to negotiate and one that is constantly changing.

Leaving girls and young women to do this on their own is not an option, but the findings show that they are having to do it alone.

> I think it's so depressing because you're alone. You have no guidance especially from your parents. I would feel so alone and maybe so depressed. I will wonder who is my ally in this world? Am I the only one?" Angel, 17-20, Philippines

Girl tries to get a mobile phone signal in Bolivia
© Plan International / Mateo Caballero

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Participants have answered questions about their online lives, its risks and benefits, how they protect themselves, how they build digital resilience, where do they go for help, who provides it and what people and organisations could do better? What do they see as key to preserving their resilience and shaping their online future?

This online future is increasingly at risk.

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) poses unique dangers for girls and young women, exacerbating existing online harms. It has the potential to amplify gender-based inequalities and vulnerabilities and as the technology improves it is increasingly difficult to decipher what is real and what is AI generated, making online abuse even more damaging. Technology moves fast, it is crucial that education, legislation and overall digital awareness keep up with it and that the worst excesses of this brave new, and sometimes bewildering, world are kept in check.

This requires comprehensive measures, including equitable access to digital literacy education, robust regulation of AI systems, and proactive efforts to combat online harassment and exploitation. Only by staying vigilant and responsive to the evolving challenges can we ensure the safety and well-being of girls and young women in the digital age.

Digital literacy, resilience and addressing the issues that hold girls back online are crucial to creating a future that fosters true gender equality and empowers girls and young women as equal members of society: enabling them as activists, workers, dreamers and creators. The girls and young women taking part in the research project have thought long and deeply about these issues. The recommendations that follow - to address the negative online experiences that they have described and to encourage the more positive trends – not least their ability to protect themselves and their determination to support others to do so, come from them.

Woman has set up a business charging people's mobile phones in Niger © Plan International / Fabien Akakpo

Recommendations

Ensuring the online safety of children and young people, in all their diversity, is a shared responsibility between governments, policy makers, civil society institutions, parents, guardians, and the wider community at local, national, and global levels.

Too often girls and young women are left to navigate online with little support: this is solvable, between parents, schools, legislators, policy makers and technology companies there is a lot we can do. Recommendations from our research participants – what would most help them to help themselves – came under three main headings: awareness raising, digital literacy and robust accountability.

Parents and guardians should:

- ✓ **Foster open and honest communication** with their children about their online experiences. Encourage them to share any concerns or questions they may have, and actively listen to their perspectives without judgment.
- ✓ **Take the time to educate** themselves and their children about online risks and best practices for staying safe online. Stay informed about the latest trends in internet safety, privacy settings, and parental control tools. And, crucially, know where there are sources of support and information when they need help.
- ✓ **Teach their children to be responsible digital citizens** and for parents who use the internet to model positive online behaviour. Emphasise the importance of respecting others' privacy, being kind and respectful in online interactions, and avoiding sharing personal information with strangers.
- ✓ **Encourage their children to think critically** about all the content they encounter online. Teach them to question the credibility of sources and to verify information before accepting it as true.

Communities, families, civil society, faith-based organisations and other stakeholders also have a role to play and should:

- ✓ **Take steps to engage with girls** so that they feel secure in talking about online harms and know that they are supported.
- ✓ **Facilitate broader discussions** on the issue of online safety aimed at eliminating gender inequality, harmful gender norms and violence against women and girls.
- ✓ **Put resources into equipping girls with digital literacy skills** to navigate technology and information effectively, safely, and ethically, supporting them to understand both the positive impacts and potential risks of being online, with a particular emphasis on reaching rural and marginalised communities.

> ❝ **"I think raising awareness, can be the best solution, people have to know that we are all equal, we need maybe civic education, educating the communities, everyone has to know…We are all human. So, awareness must be raised."** Maureen, 21-24, Malawi

Social media companies should:

- ✓ **Consult with girls and young women** and include them in the design and development of enhanced reporting mechanisms and enhanced content moderation.
- ✓ **Create stronger, more effective and accessible reporting mechanisms** that hold perpetrators to account and are specific to online harms that effect women and girls: applying sanctions in line with other platform violations. Reporting mechanisms must be responsive to all girls' needs and experiences - acknowledging the specific challenges of intersecting identities and ensuring confidentiality and data privacy.
- ✓ **Strengthen and improve content moderation** to identify and remove perpetrators of online harms, also ensuring that there is parity, proportionality and transparency in their approach to content moderation across the globe. It is imperative not to rely too much on automation which is less effective at identifying unacceptable content, or understanding context, than a trained human moderator.
- ✓ **Create a follow up report mechanism** so that victims have the ability to follow their reported incident and can clearly see what steps are being taken to resolve their cases. It is also essential for social media companies to deepen their understanding of their own algorithms. This includes comprehensive training for staff involved in algorithm development and content moderation. By gaining a deeper insight into how algorithms function and their potential impact on users, companies can make informed decisions to prioritise user safety and well-being.

- ✓ **Simplify and clarify their terms and conditions** so that platform users understand what to expect and where to go for information and support.
- ✓ **Develop a range of training programmes** tailored to different age groups and levels of digital literacy such as hosting workshops, webinars and interactive sessions covering online safety topics such as privacy settings, identifying scams, cyberbullying prevention and online etiquette.
- ✓ **Collaborate with online safety experts, child psychologists, educators, and community leaders** to design and deliver comprehensive training materials.

> ❝ **"I feel like these cases are not being taken seriously because there aren't too many people reporting them. If a report is done, it is usually women [who are victims] but they tend to be ashamed to speak up about what happened to them, because [they know] that these kinds of complaints are not being paid serious attention to. There aren't too many people reporting as well because they don't really have a 'voice' to do that."** Reyna, 21-24, Philippines

National Governments should:

- ✓ **Spearhead the creation of a National Online Safety Initiative** aimed at empowering families with the knowledge, tools, and resources needed to navigate the digital landscape safely. This initiative should involve collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and community organisations to develop a coordinated approach to online safety. Policies should also be in place to ensure due legal process, where necessary, to hold perpetrators to account.
- ✓ **Deliver a broad range of support services**, including helplines, primarily for girls, but also for their families and communities, with a focus on mental health and self-care.

Ministries of Education should:

- ✓ **Prioritise comprehensive training programmes** for educators to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to address contemporary issues. Include modules on digital literacy, gender sensitivity, and strategies for reaching marginalised communities. These training sessions should be mandatory and recurrent to ensure teachers stay updated with the latest advancements and methodologies.

- ✓ **Develop and deliver digital curricula** on how to be safe online: giving students the skills to recognise, avoid and prevent online harms against women and girls, including the ability to use reporting mechanisms. Digital education must address the digital divide and reach marginalised and vulnerable communities.

- ✓ **Work with health departments** to establish public health campaigns that reach out to the wider community with information about the impact of online harassment on mental and physical health, with a focus on intersectionality.

- ✓ **Work with community leaders** to raise awareness and offer support programmes, including workshops, online resources and community classes, to enhance the digital literacy skills of people of all ages, with a particular focus on parents These sessions can be conducted as part of "Online Safety Days" where students, teachers, and parents come together to learn about the potential risks associated with digital platforms and how to mitigate them. Empowering parents with digital literacy skills enables them to play an active role in their children's digital lives and promotes a safer online environment for the entire family.

- ✓ **Encourage and fund schools** to collaborate with cybersecurity experts, child psychologists, and community organizations to provide comprehensive guidance and resources.

- ✓ **Create safe spaces within schools and communities** where women and girls feel comfortable discussing their online experiences, concerns, and challenges. Designate trusted community members, such as counsellors or teachers trained in digital literacy, to oversee these spaces and provide support and guidance to students. Safe spaces can serve as forums for open dialogue, peer support, and education on responsible digital citizenship and a way for community leaders to listen to both parents and children.

> " **"I think in school, the teachers and those in higher [positions] than them. Because aren't elementary school children more comfortable talking to teachers? And not only in elementary school but in all school institutions, I hope they will listen to their students..."** Maricel, 17-20, Philippines

Law enforcement agencies should:

- ⚠ **Enact innovative laws and polices** addressing online safety, holding social media platforms and other third-party internet platforms to account.

- ⚠ **Enable the effective implementation of laws and policies** addressing online harms against all women and girls by all relevant government departments including the police, the judiciary and the prosecution services. Ensure access to justice for girls and young women who are targeted with online harms, ensuring privacy, and including promoting awareness of reporting mechanisms, training law enforcement and judicial officers and establishing helplines.

> " **"Laws should be enforced because the laws are there that everyone abusing someone they need to be punished, but you will see that still more they don't take it seriously, so the abusers should be punished so that other people should take a lesson from it..."** Chimwala, 13, Malawi

Acknowledgements

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Until we are all equal

CNN As Equals

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.

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As Equals is a CNN series that aims to reveal what systemic gender inequality looks like.

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Girls sign online petition calling for children to be educated in digital literacy in Vietnam © Plan International

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