



Until we are all equal

A photograph of three young women of diverse backgrounds standing in front of the United Nations Secretariat Building. They are all smiling and have their right arms raised in a gesture of solidarity. The woman on the left is wearing a white t-shirt and a black skirt. The woman in the middle is wearing a black jumpsuit. The woman on the right is wearing a patterned long-sleeve shirt and dark trousers. A large yellow graphic line loops around the women. In the background, many national flags are visible on poles, and the building has "UNITED NATIONS" and "NATIONS UNIES" written on it.

Strengthening Girls' Rights as Human Rights

Executive Summary



Report available at:
plan-international.org/publications/girls-rights-are-human-rights

This report on the status of girls in international policy making is based on research conducted in the first half of 2024. It follows on from, and updates, Plan International's groundbreaking 2018 report, *Girls' Rights Are Human Rights*.

Girls' rights are human rights. Yet, millions of girls continue to struggle to realise them. Girls are disproportionately disadvantaged in education, health, work and family life – particularly in the world's poorest countries. When factors like poverty, ethnicity or disability intersect and where gender stereotyping and unequal power relations prevail, girls' disadvantage is magnified.

This is not acceptable, girls deserve the full protection of their governments, and support from their families and communities.

Plan International's 2018 report showed how the international community had repeatedly promised to recognise the human rights of girls. Despite this, the report also found that in the previous decade, progress had stagnated and any specific focus on girls had shifted away.

Gender- and age-neutral approaches dominated the international agenda due to competing children's and women's rights discourses.

By 2024, what, if anything, had changed? This latest report, *'Strengthening Girls' Rights as Human Rights,'* examines developments from 2018 to 2023 and assesses whether the trends reported in 2018 are still in play and what new factors are affecting our ability to secure equal protection for girls in all their diversity.

The 2024 project reviewed references to girls and their rights in 3,664 international policy documents to shed light on improvements, gaps and trends related to girls' rights in key parts of human rights law and policy.

The aim of this analysis of the position of girls in human rights law and policy is to enable girls, in all their diversity, to reach their potential, to highlight the unfairness of girls' continuing status as marginalised and undervalued, and to improve their situation by acknowledging the reality of their lives: putting in place the rights and protections they are entitled to, but are too often denied.



Girl at the UN Human Rights Council in Switzerland
 © Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz



Girls stand in front of the United Nations Office in Switzerland © Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz

The struggle continues

It is clear from the research that there have been some hard-won significant areas of progress in girls' rights.

However, this progress has not been widespread and the struggle to protect girls' rights in some specific, and often sensitive areas—such as education, sexual and reproductive health, and the prevention of violence—has left little room for advancements in other areas, such as freedom from torture, disappearances, water, food, housing, land and inheritance rights.

While the advocacy efforts carried out by Plan International and partners to advance girls' rights over the past years have had some success, there are still many ways in which the international human rights framework inadequately protects girls: at current rates of change, it will take many more decades for girls and boys to be treated as equals. Our *'Strengthening Girls' Rights as Human Rights'* report provides an overview of the ways in which, over the last six years, the international community has addressed girls' rights via the New York and Geneva-based UN mechanisms. It identifies trends, gaps and opportunities, and makes recommendations on how to protect and advance girls' rights. The report focuses too on the need to guard against anti-rights actors and countervailing trends that threaten to row back on the gains made and impede any further progress on girls' rights. In this study, Plan International emphasises the need for intersectionality in its work on gender, recognising that many women and girls also identify across the sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) spectrum. This gender, age and diversity approach is essential to fully address women's and girls' rights and advance gender equality.

! International policy must be strengthened, so that girls are not left behind. Realising girls' rights starts with understanding what those rights entail.

To protect the progress already achieved, and to drive further advancements, greater investment and expertise in girls' rights is needed.

Key Findings

Although girls' rights and girls' rights issues have become increasingly visible in the outputs of the UN bodies and mechanisms, this visibility is not comprehensive and is more pronounced in some mechanisms and on some issues than others.

In many areas, girls and girls' rights issues remain largely invisible, hidden by the use of non-age-specific or gender-specific terminology. Girls tend to be treated as a homogenous group: their diversity is rarely acknowledged and consequently there are gaps in the degree to which girls' realities are fully reflected in international policies.



Girls at a session of the Commission on the Status of Women in the USA © Plan International / Joel Sheakoski

Steps forward

There has been significant progress made by advocates and negotiators to ensure greater visibility of girls' and girls' rights across many categories of international policy making. There are several ways in which these visibility trends are evident: girls are mentioned more often in soft law, there are more references to, and at times a more thorough examination of, girls' rights issues, and more opportunities for girls to participate procedurally in UN human rights mechanisms. Progress over the last six years can be categorised into the following areas:

- 1 **Increased reference to girls in titles, mandates and agendas:** for example, through the expansion of the mandates of the Working on the Discrimination Against Women and Girls (WG DAWG) and the mandate of the 'Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls (SR VAWG), and the growing prevalence of explicit references to girls in the titles of General Comments and other soft law instruments such as resolutions of the Human Rights Council.
- 2 **Increased prioritisation of girls' rights within the human rights institutions and their hierarchy:** including, for example, the WG DAWG now reporting annually to the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW), enhancing the links between the human rights community in Geneva and international policymakers in New York.
- 3 **Increased participation of girls in work programmes and events:** real visibility of girls participating as panellists and speakers and the deliberate institutionalised and systematised processes that are being established for inviting girls to participate in the shaping of policies that affect them and being the experts on their own experiences.
- 4 **Increased systematic inclusion of language on girls:** including increased references to girls and young women in specific paragraphs in negotiated instruments, alongside the growing frequency of references to 'women' being expanded to reference 'women and girls.'
- 5 **Increased recognition of girls' intersecting identities:** for example, through CEDAW Committee General Recommendation 39 on the rights of Indigenous women and girls, the first time that the issues affected by the intersecting identities of girls have been addressed to such an extent.
- 6 **Increased focus on including and addressing girls' rights in the substance of work:** for example, the growth in the number of issues where girls are mentioned and the greater breadth of topics where girls' rights are considered and addressed.
- 7 **Increased focus on girls as agents for change and as rights-holders, not just as vulnerable victims:** notably the significant work being done by the WG DAWG on positioning girls as right holders, leaders and advocates for their own rights, and the slow but not invisible recognition of girls' political participation rights by negotiators in international policymaking.

Change is evident, but is it sufficient?

Despite the impressive progress made in enhancing the visibility of girls and girls' rights, as described above, there is much more to be done. In 2018, the key finding in Plan International's *'Girls Rights Are Human Rights'* report was that girls were overshadowed by women and

children and rendered largely invisible in international law as a result.

This is still true and there are a number of ways in which girls and girls' rights risk remaining invisible:

Gender-neutral and age-neutral approaches risk reinforcing the invisibility of girls when insufficiently accompanied by gender-responsive and age-specific analysis

Far too often still, girls are subsumed or implicitly included within the terms 'women' or 'children,' who are the main focus for human rights protections, without recognition of their diversity. Alternatively, they are merely an add-on to 'women,' included in the formulation 'women and girls.' These two approaches—gender-neutral and gender-specific—should be used in a complementary manner to ensure gender-responsive analysis and gender-transformative outcomes. When girls are affected differently by human rights issues, these differences should be explored in a nuanced manner.

Sometimes gender-specific or age-specific language is being used to exclude mention of girls in relation to particular rights

When girls are included as part of the term 'women and girls,' one prominent trend, particularly in negotiated instruments, is to differentiate between women and girls with regards to certain rights. For example, when referring to issues that the CSW appears to have perceived as being relevant only to adult women (such as many political and economic rights), the term 'girls' is omitted from discussion of the issue. In Human Rights Council (HRC) resolutions, girls are usually omitted in the explicit references to "full, equal, effective and meaningful participation," as these resolutions most commonly only mention women.

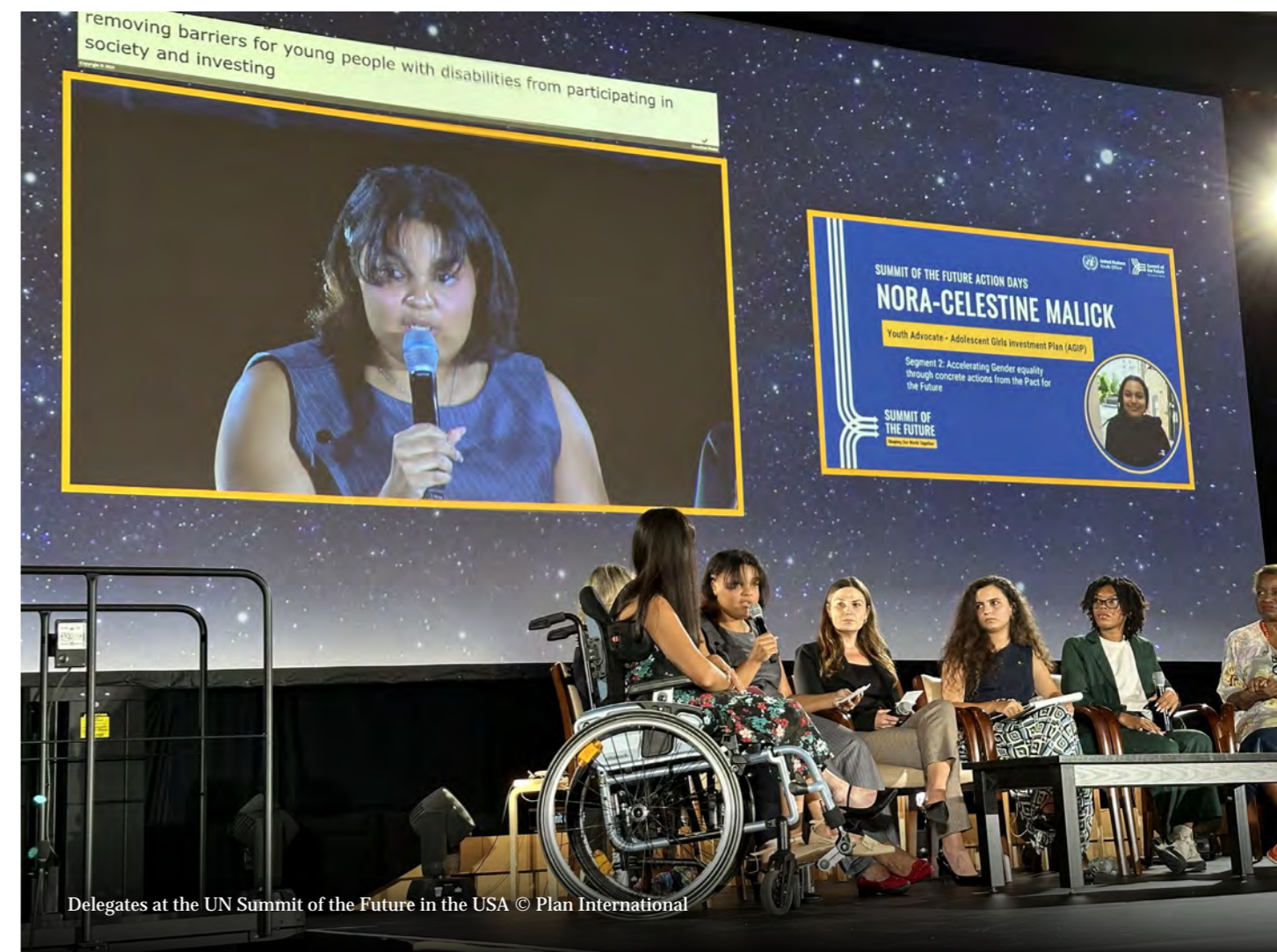
Treating all 'girls' as a homogenous group risks rendering some girls invisible

Women and girls are not a homogenous group: their lives, challenges, and opportunities may vary widely depending on other aspects of their identities, such as age, race, ethnicity, class, disability, indigeneity, rurality or diverse SOGIESC. When annexing 'girls' to be considered in combination with 'women,' we render the diversity of girls' identities and experiences invisible. When we consider 'girls' to be a group but only address some of their multiple and intersectional identities, we make some girls less visible than others.

The increasing recognition

human rights to be acknowledged and protected

Not only are the diversity and intersectionality of girls' identities often ignored or left insufficiently addressed, but the diversity of girls' rights issues is also not fully understood or addressed. It is frequently assumed that girls' rights are or should be confined to certain topics—such as discrimination and violence—and the wide range of human rights issues affecting girls are often underestimated and under-addressed. Girls cannot fully enjoy any of their rights unless all their rights are articulated and upheld.



Delegates at the UN Summit of the Future in the USA © Plan International

of girls' multiple intersecting identities does not go far enough to adequately consider the impact of girls' diversity on their human rights

Slowly but surely, the agreed language used in negotiated and non-negotiated instruments is evolving to reflect the multiple and intersecting identities of girls. It is becoming more commonplace, for example, to refer to 'girls in all their diversity' rather than just 'girls.' However, despite the acknowledgement of the existence of intersectional discrimination, UN mechanisms lack meaningful examination of the intersectionality of girls' identities and experiences—rendering the breadth and totality of girls' diversity and intersecting identities invisible. **Girls, in all their diversity, need all their**

Girls' agency and autonomy are not yet adequately reflected by policymakers

The pushback on girls' autonomy, agency and potential as leaders and agents of change has also restricted the way in which girls are considered by many UN mechanisms. Too often the unintended consequence of focusing on issues such as violence against girls, and the ways in which girls are disproportionately and negatively impacted in the areas of education and health, for example, is that we run the risk of reinforcing the image of girls as powerless victims. More needs to be done to reinforce girls as agents of change and individual rights-holders in ensuring their empowerment.

Anti-rights and anti-gender pushback

Increased visibility for girls' rights has also resulted in the politicisation of many related issues. In the past decade, the human rights community has seen a pushback against some key areas of progress, particularly related to gender equality, and an increase in the backlash on comprehensively addressing diversity in the development and implementation of international human rights law.

A complex and evolving network of 'anti-rights' and 'anti-gender' state and non-state actors is exerting increasing influence in international spaces as well as domestic politics.¹

This phenomenon has been identified as one of the major challenges in advancing girls' rights and gender equality going forward.²

Core girls' rights issues are under attack

Core girls' rights issues—particularly sexual and reproductive health and rights—have been the target of these movements, further contributing to the hardening of restrictive contexts around the world and curbing progress on many issues: including the promotion of comprehensive sexuality education, the role/rights of the family, the agency and autonomy of women and girls, and their full and meaningful participation.

Language is being instrumentalised

The increased visibility and substantive inclusion of girls has also led to a new challenge: the pitting of girls' rights language against the intersectional move to be inclusive of non-binary and/or gender non-conforming persons. There has been an instrumentalisation of the concept 'women and girls' to exclude persons with diverse SOGIESC, and to pit women's rights', children's rights', and girls' rights' movements against each other.

Progress is tempered with caution

The negotiating climate has become such that pen-holders and supporters of resolutions are making more efforts to accommodate and anticipate the mere fear of pushback, and bargaining tactics are used to ensure that it is not the most progressive language being used, particularly on the more sensitive issues.

! In today's climate, a disproportionate amount of time, energy and resources need to be dedicated towards defending the progress that has been made. This coincides with a reduction in funding for gender and children's rights globally, making it harder to hold onto any gains, let alone forge further ahead with this vital work.



Young woman moderates event on strengthening girls' rights in Switzerland © Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz

Recommendations

Despite the international community's promises to tackle gender equality and inclusion, millions of girls worldwide still cannot claim their rights as set out in international law. Empowering girls in all their diversity, therefore, requires a holistic and bold approach, as well as complementary action between the children's rights, women's rights, and

gender rights agendas. To ensure girls are not left behind, international policy must be strengthened, including via the nuance of the language it uses, the diversity of the groups it seeks to protect, and the application of an intersectionality lens to unpack the breadth and depth of the issues that it addresses.



The main recommendations for ensuring that girls' lived realities are acknowledged in international policy-making, are:

1

Strengthen international policy-making and soft law norm-setting to better reflect girls in all their diversity as rights-holders,

and the full range of girls' rights and realities, in a gender-transformative and age-responsive manner, by consistently using the strongest and most progressive agreed language available that is favourable to the advancement of girls' rights, better articulating girls' specific needs when developing new international norms, and address the diversity that exists amongst girls and the breadth and depth of girls' rights issues. Use [Plan International's Girls Rights Platform](#) and [Human Rights Policy Database](#) to identify and extract the strongest agreed language.

2

Expand the ways in which UN human rights mechanisms address girls' rights, including through (1) developing a new CEDAW/CRC Joint General Comment/Recommendation on the rights of girls in all their diversity, (2) adopting a new thematic resolution at the Human Rights Council on the girl child

(mirroring the UNGA initiative), and by ensuring all Special Procedures mandates and Treaty Bodies mainstream the rights of girls in all their diversity and apply an age-responsive approach, while continuing to increase the interaction between Treaty Bodies and mandate holders on girls' rights.

3

Prioritise girls' and young women's agency, leadership and organisation,

placing it at the heart of international policy-making, by strengthening and systematising the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of girls in international fora/assemblies. Establish mechanisms that allow for the institutionalisation of girls' and young women's participation in decision-making, and recognise and support girls as leaders, agents of change, and current and emerging human rights defenders. The international community must start from the position that girls understand best what is happening in their own lives and enable their meaningful participation.

4

Invest in enhancing understanding, knowledge and expertise on girls' rights,

and combatting the anti-rights/anti-gender agenda, by systematically collecting disaggregated data on girls guided by safety and safeguarding, training diplomats and negotiators of international standards on girls' rights and lived realities, appointing mandate holders on gender equality, as well as prioritising funding for civil society organisations working to maintain the progress made in girls' rights: enabling them to continue progress towards enhanced protection for girls across all areas of human rights.

5

Enhance States' compliance with international standards aiming to advance girls' rights

by ratifying and implementing key human rights instruments and withdrawing reservations that undermine girls' rights.



Youth delegates at the the UN headquarters in the USA © Plan International / Joel Sheakoski

Now is not the time to relax!

Significant strides have been made in highlighting the discrimination girls face simply for being young and female, bringing their rights to the forefront of policy discussions. However, while girls are certainly more visible, they are not yet seen clearly enough.

Progress has triggered pushback, with a revival of paternalism and the ascendancy of 'family values' under the guise of 'protection.' This approach often limits girls' rights, narrows their opportunities, and suppresses activism. In an

increasingly difficult environment with global political shifts in 2024, energy, strategy, vigilance and alliances will be needed to consolidate gains and further progress, so girls' rights and gender equality may be respected, protected and fulfilled.

Endnotes

- 1 Observatory on the Universality of Rights, 2021, 'Chapter 4: Anti-Rights Actors' in Rights at Risk: Time for Action – Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2021, available at www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Ch4_RightsAtRisk_TimeForAction_2021.pdf.
- 2 See, e.g., SR VAW, 'Twenty-five years of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences: an analysis of its evolution, current challenges and the way forward', 20 June 2019, UN Doc. A/HRC/41/42, paras. 20-22; WG DAWG, 'Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights in crisis', 28 April 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/47/38, paras. 47-49; Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, 'Sexual and reproductive health rights: challenges and opportunities during Covid-19', 16 July 2021, UN Doc. A/76/172, para. 82; and WG DAWG, 'Escalating backlash against gender equality and urgency of reaffirming substantive equality and the human rights of women and girls', 15 May 2024, UN Doc. A/HRC/56/51, para. 15. Reference to this backlash was also made in HRC, 'Resolution 50/18 on 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls', 8 July 2022, UN Doc. A/HCR/RES/50/18, preambular para. 8.



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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.

Published in 2024. Text © Plan International.

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