



Until we are all equal

A photograph of three young women 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 vest over a black top and black pants. The woman on the right is wearing a white patterned long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. A yellow graphic line loops around the women and the building. The background shows the UN building with its name in English and French, and a row of international flags on poles.

Strengthening Girls' Rights as Human Rights

An in-depth study into the status of girls in international policy-making at the United Nations



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

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Acronyms

CAT

Convention Against Torture And Other Cruel, Inhuman And Degrading Treatment

CAT Committee

Committee Against Torture

CEDAW

Convention On The Elimination Of All Forms Of Discrimination Against Women

CEDAW Committee

Committee On The Elimination Of Discrimination Against Women

CEFM

Child, Early And Forced Marriage

CERD

Convention On The Elimination Of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination

CESCR Committee

Committee On Economic, Social And Cultural Rights

CRC

Convention On The Rights Of The Child

CRC Committee

Committee On The Rights Of The Child

CRPD

Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities

CRPD Committee

Committee On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities

CSE

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

CSW

Commission On The Status Of Women

DAW

Discrimination Against Women

DAWG

Discrimination Against Women and Girls"

FGM/C

Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting

GBV

Gender-Based Violence

GC

General Comment

GR

General Recommendation

HRC

Human Rights Council

ICCPR

International Covenant On Civil And Political Rights

ICESCR

International Covenant On Social, Economic And Cultural Rights

ICPD

International Conference On Population And Development

OHCHR

United Nations Office Of The High Commissioner For Human Rights

OP

Operational Paragraph

PP

Preambular Paragraph

SDGs

Sustainable Development Goals

SG

Secretary-General

SR

Special Rapporteur

SRH

Sexual And Reproductive Health

SRHR

Sexual And Reproductive Health And Rights

SRS

Special Representative Of The Secretary-General

UN

United Nations

UNGA

United Nations General Assembly

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees

UPR

Universal Periodic Review

VAW

Violence Against Women

VAWG

Violence Against Women And Girls

WG

Working Group

WHO

World Health Organization

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Introduction

Background

Girls continue to be the largest excluded group in the world. They face discrimination and abuse simply for being young and female. Additional factors like ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, refugee status and poverty—and the intersections of these characteristics, identities and circumstances—can increase their marginalisation.

Violence against girls can begin as soon as they are born, or even before—and continue throughout their life cycle. As they grow up, gender discriminatory practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation, obstruct their development and limit their opportunities. Adolescent girls are often taken out of school before completing secondary level, because sons are seen as a better investment in the family's future. Gendered stereotypes around unpaid care work also mean that girls are struggling to balance their time between their education, developing skills for the future and household and agricultural chores. Some girls are pulled out of school altogether to help at home. Girls who stay at school often face poor conditions—confronted with barriers such as a lack of girl-friendly toilets, gender bias in pedagogy, and gender bias in school materials.

At all stages of childhood, girls face distinct disadvantages that are directly related to the double discrimination of being both young and female. Their lack of educational opportunities will have a negative impact on every aspect of their lives, for the rest of their lives.

Plan International recognises that millions of 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 unacceptable, girls deserve the full protection of their governments, and support from their families and communities. When a girl can grow up safe, happy, and healthy with the full enjoyment of her human rights, she can grow up to reach her full potential and thrive.

The aim of the analysis of the position of girls in human rights law and policy, conducted for this report, is to facilitate the empowerment of girls, in all their diversity, so that they reach their full potential. It seeks to expose the persistent injustice of girls being marginalised and undervalued, and to improve their situation by acknowledging the realities of their lives: making sure they receive the rights and protections they are entitled to, but are too often denied.

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



Read this report at:
plan-international.org/publications/girls-rights-are-human-rights



! This is a summarised version of a longer technical report. For a detailed methodology and further in-depth analysis of girls' rights by human rights mechanisms and of the policy documents scrutinised during the research process go to: plan-international.org/publications/strengthening-girls-rights-as-human-rights

The 2018 research analysed existing references to girls and their rights in more than 1,300 international policy documents, covering a period of 87 years from 1930 to 2017. It revealed the extent to which international law overlooks girls' rights, effectively rendering girls invisible. Throughout the history of girls' rights, up to the point of publication of the 2018 report, girls were rarely mentioned as a specific demographic in international law.

Where they were mentioned, there was a failure to fully reflect the barriers that they face. The 2018 report found that, too often, girls were falling between the dominant agendas of women's and children's rights, and that gender-neutral and age-neutral approaches were shaping international law-making. The unique challenges that girls face were barely visible.

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For this current project, we analysed policy developments from 2018 to the end of 2023, to shed light on improvements, gaps and trends related to girls' rights in key parts of human rights law and policy.

.....

The report identifies areas where girls' rights have been successfully recognised and integrated into international standards, while also highlighting the gaps that Plan International, and other like-minded stakeholders, should prioritise to further protect and enhance these rights. **The report focuses on the need to guard against anti-rights actors and countervailing trends that threaten to not only roll back on the gains made but also impede any further progress.**

In this report, Plan International also 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.



To find out more about the Girls' Rights Platform visit: girlsrightsplatform.org



Girls' Rights Platform

Plan International's Girls' Rights Platform contains the **largest girls' rights policy database** in the world. With over 10,000 documents ranging from 1948 to present, explore our database to find the language you need to advance your advocacy and policy priorities in a few simple clicks.

Plan International developed this Girls' Rights Platform to support NGOs, child and young activists, diplomats, UN agencies, and academia in bringing girls from the margins to the **centre of the international agenda**.

This platform offers a number of **resources and tools**, including our Human Rights Policy Database, Youth Accountability Training for girls' rights advocates, and a number of reports and factsheets analysing the status of girls' rights in international policy and law.

By making these powerful resources available, Plan International hopes to **increase the visibility of girls' rights in policy**, build a wider movement in support of them, and push back against regressive trends that have stifled progress for girls' rights and gender equality more broadly.

Research scope & methodology

This research has sought to measure the advancement of girls' rights in negotiated and non-negotiated outputs of the Geneva and New York UN mechanisms in recent years, to better understand the progress made as well as the pushback against girls' rights, and to update the previous seminal work on girls' human rights published by Plan International in 2018.

As the 2018 *'Girls Rights Are Human Rights'* report contained a comprehensive overview of the international treaty regime relevant to girls' rights (the so-called 'hard law'), this report picks up the analysis of international 'soft law' which include quasi-legal instruments such as resolutions, agreed conclusions, general recommendations/comments, and similar outputs. While not legally binding, these instruments hold significant authority and serve to reinforce and

interpret existing international norms. This report examines key developments in the promotion of girls' rights within these frameworks, highlighting their role in strengthening commitments to prior agreements and advancing the global agenda on girls' rights.

By conducting quantitative and qualitative analysis of the language in policy documents developed by these UN bodies since 2018, we have examined how effectively these documents integrate a gender, age, and diversity perspective and promote and protect the specific rights of girls in all their diversity. Our goal was to identify where and how progress has been made, and where and what are the gaps and shortfalls in policy language when addressing girls' rights in UN spaces, across a range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.



Detailed information on the research methodology and limitations can be found at: plan-international.org/publications/strengthening-girls-rights-as-human-rights

Scope of this research project

The timeframe covered by this study is **1 January 2018 to 31 December 2023**. The key mechanisms and their outputs examined in this study are:

- ✓ UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions
- ✓ Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Agreed Conclusions
- ✓ Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolutions
- ✓ Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Recommendations
- ✓ Special Procedures thematic report recommendations
- ✓ Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) report recommendations
- ✓ Treaty Body General Comments (GCs) and General Recommendations (GRs)
- ✓ Treaty Body recommendations in Concluding Observations to State Periodic Reviews



Milestones in achieving girls' rights

1979

- The UN General Assembly adopts the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**—an international convention to protect the rights of women and girls.
- UNESCO proclaimed 1979 as the **International Year of the Child**.

1989

- UN **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** adopted to protect the rights of children.

1990

- The **World Summit for Children** results in a declaration that asserted that “girls must be given equal treatment and opportunities from the very beginning”.
- **UNICEF’s board** recommended that its strategy and programmes for the ensuing decade explicitly address the status and needs of the girl child.
- **The United Nations proclaimed 1990 ‘The Year of the Girl Child’** and the **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) the 1990s ‘The Decade of the Girl Child’**.
- **The CEDAW General Recommendation No. 14** on female circumcision is adopted, although it fails to mention girls.

1992

- The CEDAW Committee adopts **General Recommendation No. 19 on gender-based violence**, which was updated in 2017.

1993

- The **Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action** clarifies that “the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of universal human rights” and calls upon governments to “intensify their efforts for the protection and promotion of human rights of women and the girl child.”

1994

- Adoption of the **ICPD Programme of Action**, which recognized that reproductive health rights, as well as women’s empowerment and gender equality, are cornerstones of population and development.
- Mandate of the **UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women** established.

1995

- The **CRC Committee** holds its **Day of General Discussion on the Girl Child**.
- The **4th World Conference on Women in Beijing** results in the Beijing Platform for Action, of which the plight of the girl child was a key topic area.
- First resolution on the girl child adopted by the UN General Assembly.

1998

- **CSW’s Agreed Conclusions prioritised the girl child**, which outlined actions and initiatives aimed at, inter alia, the promotion and protection of the human rights of the girl child; education and empowerment of the girl child; improving the health needs of girls, the situation of girls in armed conflict, and combating trafficking and eliminating child labour.



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1999

- **CEDAW’s General Recommendation No. 24 on women and health** emphasises that girls constitute a vulnerable and disadvantaged group that makes them especially susceptible to sexual abuse and, inter alia, disadvantages them in access to information about sexual health.

2000

- **Millennium Development Goals** include the “ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education” as a Goal 3 indicator.
- **UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security** adopted, recognising the impact of conflict on women and girls.

2002

- The twenty-seventh special session of the **General Assembly on Children** in 2002 recognised that the achievement of development goals for children, particularly girls, was contingent upon, inter alia, women’s empowerment.

2005

- The **2005 World Summit** reaffirms the human rights of girls, and calls for the elimination of discrimination and violence against the girl child and efforts to improve girls’ education, including secondary and higher education, as well as vocational and technical training.

2006

- **UN DESA’s Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)** conducts an expert group meeting in preparation of the programme of work of the Commission on the Status of Women 2007 which annual priority focuses on the **elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child**. The expert group meeting concluded that girls are at particular risk of marginalisation in the international system, and that a rights formulation is instrumental in ending discrimination and violence against them.

2007

- **CSW’s Agreed Conclusions** were again themed around the ‘Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against the Girl Child’.
- The **Special Rapporteur on Slavery** recognizes child, early and forced marriage as slavery-like practices in its report to the HRC.
- Publication of **Plan International’s first State of the World’s Girls Report**, highlighting the need for a global focus on girls’ rights.



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2008

- In his report to the HRC, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture explicitly recognised that **FGM can amount to torture**.

2011

- **UN Women established** as a ‘global champion for gender equality’.
- The **Third Optional Protocol to the CRC** establishing an individual communications procedure, allowing children to lodge complaints to the CRC Committee, has been adopted.

2012

- **UN General Assembly** adopts a resolution “Intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilations”, demonstrating the political will of the international community to eliminate FGM.
- First celebration of **International Day of the Girl**, established with a UN resolution in 2011.

The Last Six Years: trends, gaps, opportunities and challenges

This report is based on an in-depth study into the status of girls in international law.

A full list of texts studied can be found at plan-international.org/publications/strengthening-girls-rights-as-human-rights



3,664
international policy documents were reviewed

The research, analysing data and evidence from 2018-2023, reviewed references to girls and their rights in 3,664 international policy documents, measuring the advancement of girls' rights, as well as the pushback against them, in international language and policies.

It is clear from the overall findings of this study, that despite some very real progress, there are worrying trends and gaps, as well as opportunities and continuing challenges in promoting and protecting girls' rights.



⚠ Although girls' rights and related issues have become increasingly visible in the outputs of the UN bodies and mechanisms, this visibility is uneven and is more pronounced in some mechanisms and on some issues than others.

⚠ In many areas, girls and their specific rights remain largely invisible, hidden by the use of non-age-specific or gender-specific terminology. Girls tend to be treated as a homogenous group, with little recognition of their diversity.



Consequently, international policies often fail to fully reflect the complex realities and varied experiences of girls around the world.

The non-negotiated instruments, in particular, do prioritise the need to reflect intersectionality, however, the international community's ability to address this in negotiated instruments

has been stymied by the anti-rights and anti-gender pushback. This pushback represents a key challenge to both any further progress and to maintaining current gains.

2012

- The **CRC and CEDAW Committees release a joint General Recommendation/Comment** on harmful practices.
- UN General Assembly adopts a landmark resolution calling for a ban on child marriage.

2015

- **2030 Sustainable Development Agenda adopted** by 193 UN Member States. Goal 5 requires governments worldwide to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" by 2030.

2016

- The **New Urban Agenda**, shaping the future development of cities, was adopted by UN member states and specifically recognised the rights and needs of girls in urban areas.
- In his report to the HRC, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture considers harmful practices such as FGM, child and forced marriage and honour-based violence as forms of **gender-based violence that constitute ill-treatment and torture**.

2017

- **CEDAW Committee General Recommendation 35** updating GR19 on violence against women, referring to girls too.

2018

- **Publication of Plan International's landmark report *Girls Rights are Human Rights***.
- Launch of Plan International's Girls' Rights Platform: girlsrightsplatform.org

2019

- **Expansion of the title mandate of the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women to include 'girls,'** through the advocacy work of Plan International.
- The CRC and CEDAW Committees update their joint General Recommendation No. 31 / General Comment No. 18 on harmful practices.

2021

- The Human Rights Council passes the **first resolution on 'Menstrual hygiene management, human rights and gender equality'**.
- The Human Rights Council introduces a new thematic resolution on the 'Realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl', which is the first resolution at the HRC to focus specifically on girls.

2022

- **Expansion of the title and mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women to include girls.**
- **The CEDAW Committee publishes General Recommendation No. 39 on Indigenous women and girls.**
- The Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls releases important report on girls' activism.
- Landmark resolution at the HRC on girls' activism, based on **WG DAWG report**.

2023

- The Human Rights Council passes its first resolution on 'The **centrality of care and support** from a human rights perspective,' an important move in the recognition of the unpaid domestic labour that women and girls perform.

2024

- **The Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls releases a report on the anti-rights and anti-gender pushback.**



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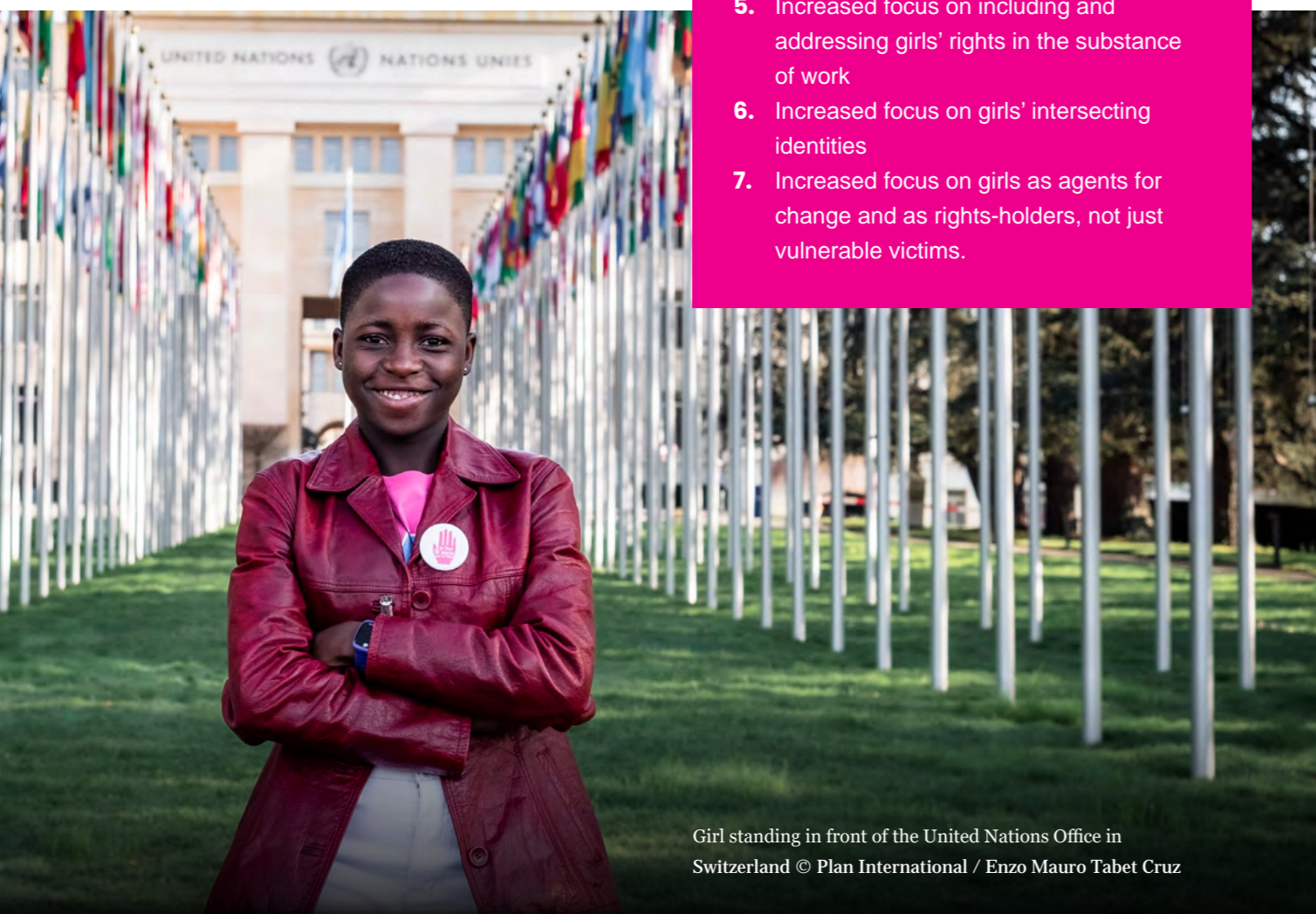
Moving Forward: promoting girls' rights

The gains in promoting girls' rights are considerable. In recent years, advocates and negotiators have made significant progress to ensure greater visibility of girls' and girls' rights across all categories of international policy making:

- ! Girls are mentioned more in soft law.
- ! Reference to, and at times thorough examination of, girls' rights issues are occurring more often.
- ! There are more opportunities for girls to participate procedurally in UN bodies and mechanisms.

The trends in progress regarding the visibility of girls and girls' rights in international policy-making over the last six years can be categorised into the following areas:

1. Increased reference to girls in titles, mandates and agendas
2. Increased prioritisation of girls' rights within the human rights institutions and their hierarchy
3. Increased participation of girls in work programmes and events
4. Increased systematic inclusion of language on girls
5. Increased focus on including and addressing girls' rights in the substance of work
6. Increased focus on girls' intersecting identities
7. Increased focus on girls as agents for change and as rights-holders, not just vulnerable victims.



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



Girls show they are more powerful together in Nepal © Plan International

1. What's in a name? Increased reference to girls in titles, mandates and agendas

The most notable change during the period studied was an expansion in titles and mandates. In 2019 the Working Group on the Discrimination Against Women in law and practice (WG DAW), became the Working Group on the Discrimination Against Women and Girls (WG DAWG)¹ and, in 2022, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its causes and consequences (SR VAW) became the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls (SR VAWG).²

These changes of name have led to a heightened visibility of girls within the work of these mandates, which has, directly and indirectly, enhanced the likelihood of girls' rights issues being explicitly addressed in the various outputs of these Special Procedures.

This heightened visibility of girls as rights-holders and greater integration of girls' rights issues throughout these mandates has led to an increased and more systematic focus on addressing girls' rights. This has extended not only throughout the work of these bodies, but also beyond them in other mechanisms.

Progress report

- ✓ Over the course of the period studied in this research, there has been a deliberate shift by the CEDAW Committee to be more explicit in its inclusion of girls, mentioning girls in the titles and agendas of their Annual Days of Discussion,³ and in their subsequent General Recommendations.⁴
- ✓ There has also been a growing prevalence of explicit references to girls in the titles of other soft law instruments such as resolutions of the HRC.⁵

2. Working together: increased prioritisation of girls' rights within the human rights institutions and their hierarchy

A change in institutional reporting requirements accompanied the change of mandate for the WG DAWG: in addition to its regular reporting to the HRC, the body from whom its mandate is derived,⁶ the group now provides an annual update report to the CSW.

This means that the WG DAWG has joined the CEDAW Committee and the SR VAWG in reporting to CSW annually.

This has enhanced the visibility of reporting and discussion of girls' rights issues within the international system, and strengthened the links between the human rights community in Geneva and international policymakers in New York.

On an institutional level, there has also been progress in prioritising girls' rights as an area of collaborative efforts for the treaty bodies.

Progress report

- ✔ The 2014 collaboration by the CRC and CEDAW Committees on their Joint Recommendation/General Comment 31 on Harmful Practices, was continued, to work on strengthening the language of this joint output in 2019.⁷
- ✔ This set a precedent in other work streams: the CRC and CEDAW Committees have since issued joint Concluding Observations for the periodic state review of Sao Tome and Principe,⁸ and hope to find other opportunities for similar joint efforts when reporting timelines for countries align.



Young women celebrate inauguration of new piped water system in Cambodia © Plan International

3. Being seen and heard: increased participation of girls in work programmes and events

.....
One of the most fundamental areas of progress in this trend of enhanced visibility is the physical presence of girls participating at UN events.

This is a major area of progress as the UN bodies and mechanisms have taken deliberate steps to institutionalise and systematise the participation of girls and young women as panellists, speakers and participants at events at the UN Human Rights Council, Treaty Body meetings and consultations, and other fora.

Progress report

- ✔ The WG DAWG now incorporates discussions with girls and girls' participation within the framework of their thematic priorities,⁹ and the CEDAW Committee has been including girls in their Annual Days of Discussion and other events.¹⁰
- ✔ Of particular note was the 2022 report by the WG DAWG, dedicated solely to the activism of girls and young women, which highlights barriers they face to equality as well as their active role in effectively challenging these barriers.
- ✔ In relation to this, the WG DAWG held a side event at the 65th session of the CSW where they invited five girl activists from across the globe to share their stories.¹¹ During the preparation of their 2022 report, the WG DAWG met with a diverse group of girl and young women activists, who "*identified the critical challenges they have been facing at many levels*"¹² and whose voices directly informed many of the report's findings and recommendations. These consultations were carried out as part of concerted efforts on the part of the WG DAWG in recent years to ensure the inclusion of girls' perspectives in its reporting, through meaningful and direct engagement with girls from a broad spectrum of intersecting identities.¹³
- ✔ The CRC Committee has engaged with children, including girls, in the preparation of their General Comments 24, 25, and 26, and, in recent years, included the participation of girl children in their Annual Days of Discussion.¹⁴ In particular, for General Comment No. 26 on 'children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change',¹⁵ the CRC Committee confirms a "diverse and dedicated children's advisory team supported the consultation process undertaken for the general comment, with 16,331 contributions from children, from 121 countries, through online surveys, focus groups and in-person national and regional consultations."¹⁶ Likewise, as part of the development of General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment,¹⁷ "[m]ore than 700 children and young people, from nine to 22 years old across 27 countries, were asked for their thoughts on how digital technology affected their lives."¹⁸ In addition, nearly 300 children and young people from around the world designed a child-friendly version of the General Comment 25.¹⁹
- ✔ For the first time, in June 2023, a girl actively participated in the negotiations of the Human Rights Council resolution on child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). This engagement was mirrored in March 2024 with the HRC resolution on the 'Rights of the child', ensuring that the perspectives of girls and directly impacted communities are reflected in the development of key policy documents.

We must continue to institutionalise and systematise the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of girls in international policy-making as a core element of UN mechanisms' work.

As girls become more visible as participants, this also helps to shift the perception from girls as mere vulnerable victims of human rights abuses, to positioning girls as rights-holders and agents of change.

Through the institutionalisation of their participation at the UN, girls are becoming more visible in the international human rights movement as activists and current and emerging human rights defenders.

The increased physical participation of girls in UN human rights spaces was also thanks to more inclusive language in negotiated documents, especially HRC resolutions, supporting their full, equal, meaningful and safe participation in international policy-making. Indeed, between 2018 and 2023, the inclusion of language on girls' rights organisations and the role of girls as agents of change increased considerably.

Beginning in 2021, the CSW makes explicit reference to girls' and young women's empowerment and participation in political and other decision-making contexts, particularly in relation to the climate crisis.

The Agreed Conclusions of 2021,²⁰ which focus on the theme of *'women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls,'* acknowledges the contributions of girls and young women as agents of change and the need for their participation in a variety of contexts.

It also highlights the role of mentorship in facilitating these opportunities: *"The Commission recognises that young women are particularly underrepresented in public life and disproportionately excluded*

*from consultations on issues that affect them, despite being involved in activities that call for broader change and address, inter alia, structural inequalities, climate change and poverty."*²¹

This explicit mentioning of girls' and young women's empowerment and participation was also evident in HRC resolutions: in the 2018 version of the recurring resolution on 'Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls,' no reference was made to girls and youth led organisations, and only women human rights defenders were mentioned.²²

However, in 2019, the former were added in the preambular paragraphs, and by 2021, *"women and girl human rights defenders"* were specifically included.²³ Additionally, during these years, women and girls are recognised as *"agents of change"* along with men and boys in the fight to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls.²⁴

In 2023, the reference to men and boys was improved to include their role as *"agents and beneficiaries of change and as strategic partners and allies"* in this fight, which is a significant recognition and acknowledges the benefits that men and boys will gain with the achievement of gender equality.²⁵

However, while the 2023 iteration of the resolution maintains reference to girl-led organisations, it unfortunately lost the reference to both women and girls human rights defenders. Clearly, progress is not guaranteed, and the anti-rights pushback is strong.

The recurring (2018, 2019, 2020, 2022)²⁶ resolution on the 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls,' also represents an important step forward and includes some rare and progressive language surrounding girls' and young women's participation and activism, especially with the adoption of the landmark 2022 resolution.

In addition to a broad definition of intersectionality and intersectional discrimination, the 2022 resolution also discusses *"girls and young women activists"*, and girl human rights defenders who face particular challenges, such as violence and harassment for their participation in public life, impacting their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.²⁷

Through this, States have made a clear statement that girls and young women have the right to participate in decision-making, and that steps must be taken to make sure that no one—including governments—prevents them from exercising that right.

The resolution advocates for the creation and enhancement of "safe and accessible spaces" for girls and young women activists to allow them to participate and exercise their rights.²⁸

! The physical presence of girls, and the ability to hear from girls themselves about their experiences, is vital: girls understand best what is happening in their own lives.



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

4. Words matter: increased systematic inclusion of language on girls

There has been significant progress in the use of language around girls and girls' rights.

Where resolutions at UNGA and the HRC and CSW Agreed Conclusions once spoke only of 'women' or 'children,' they now reference 'women and girls' or, occasionally, single out 'girls' through terms like 'especially girls' or 'particularly girls.'²⁹

Progress report

- ✓ In outputs of UNGA and the HRC there is now regular mention of the specific rights of 'women and girls' in areas such as the right to education, right to health, right to non-discrimination and elimination of all forms of violence.³⁰ Further, where resolutions continue to reference girls as part of the phrase 'women and girls' the need to incorporate gender, age and diversity approaches to policies combatting trafficking is more readily acknowledged.³¹
- ✓ In HRC resolutions, references to 'girls' as a stand-alone group have increased, but these are minimal compared to the 'women and girls' formulation.
- ✓ The scope of girls' rights addressed by UNGA has expanded from 2018 to 2023, and resolutions now include more language specifically on girls.
- ✓ Starting in 2021, CSW Agreed Conclusions began providing greater visibility and nuance to girls' issues through more targeted, age-specific observations and recommendations. However, the most common iteration found in these documents is, in fact, still 'women and girls.'

Girls remain visible throughout the CSW documents, although generally lacking age-specific nuance, and most often accompanying women.

Notably, the 2022 text explicitly refers to "adolescent girls and young women" in the context of State obligations to "respect, protect and fulfil the[ir] right to sexual and reproductive health".³³

In some HRC resolutions, age-specific references, in the form of language such as 'young women' and 'adolescent girls,' have increased. For instance, the recurring resolution on 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls' includes some rare and progressive language to the rights of 'adolescent girls' and 'young women'.³²

Where age-sensitive language is present, references to adolescent girls can be found in various paragraphs relating to their specific vulnerability to CEFM and poverty linked with rurality. This is also the case in the UNGA consensus resolution on CEFM.³⁴

Other references to adolescent girls in this resolution are linked to their right to meaningful participation and consultation, their right to education, right to health including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).³⁵

When references to a specific phase in girls' lives remain limited, girls, whatever their differences—whether in age, characteristics or circumstances—will remain mostly an undefined and seemingly homogenous group.

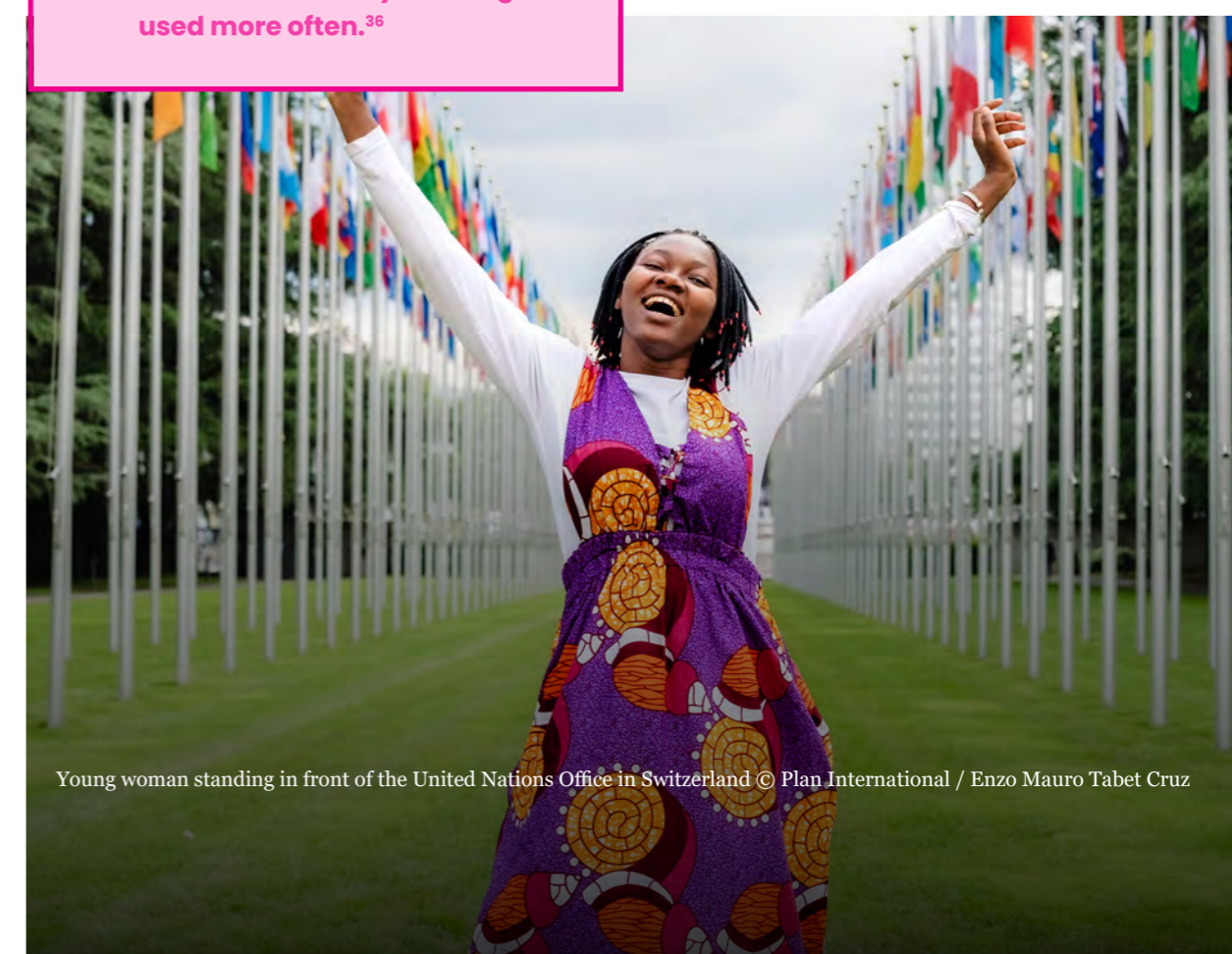
The greater visibility in the use of explicit language related to girls and girls' rights is particularly evident in the non-negotiated documents, which is unsurprising, given this is a less contentious space for progressing language. The visibility of girls increased significantly in Special Procedures reports issued between 2018 and 2023: an increasing number of reports appeared to utilise terminology with greater intentionality to describe the situation of girls.

! In Special Procedures mandate holders' reports, the language of 'women and girls in all their diversity' is being used more often.³⁶

In the work of some of the other mechanisms examined, for example, the CEDAW Committee, the word 'women' has always been interpreted to cover girls. But in recent years there has been a more deliberate shift to ensure that this is not an assumed or inferred inclusion but rather an explicit one: in its last two General Recommendations the word 'girls' has been included in the title.³⁷

This has also been the case for their Concluding Observations, where there has been more deliberate references to girls in recent years.³⁸ For example, in its Concluding Observations on South Africa's most recent periodic state review, a discussion on SRHR specifically references "adolescent girls and young women" and focuses on GBV against girls in relation to education.³⁹

At times, CEDAW has even shifted its language to preference the placement of the word 'girls' before 'women', for example in the context of education.⁴⁰ Finally, in terms of increased visibility of girls' rights language, it is important to note that within the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) over the reporting period analysed, references to girls and girls' rights are commonplace, with 188 States receiving recommendations incorporating this language.⁴¹



Young woman standing in front of the United Nations Office in Switzerland © Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz

5. Addressing the realities of girls' lives: change where it matters most

There has been an increased focus on including and addressing girls' rights in the substance of the work of many of the New York- and Geneva-based UN bodies and mechanisms.

There have been more specific references to girls and an increased depth of analysis, by UNGA, CSW and HRC, around issues where girls and girls' rights are most often considered and addressed—SRHR, education, child marriage, and harmful practices such as FGM.

Progress report

- ✓ The UNGA resolutions mention more frequently some specific rights of women and girls such as the right to education, right to health, right to non-discrimination and to the elimination of all forms of violence.
- ✓ This is the case with the expansion in the range of human rights issues addressed in the preambular paragraphs of the UNGA biennial consensus resolution on 'the girl child.' The various iterations of this resolution on the 'girl child' identify that, across the board, girls experience barriers to the full realisation of their rights.
- ✓ In 2022, the recurring HRC resolution on 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls,' in addition to specifically addressing girls and young women's participation and activism, also expands upon topics which are rarely discussed. This includes the consequences faced by girls and young women as a result of stereotypes and negative social and gender norms.⁴²
- ✓ This resolution is the only place referencing wider issues, with the exception of the gender digital divide which is mentioned across different resolutions, and DAWG in sport which, since 2019, has been the subject of a separate stand-alone resolution.⁴³

! In recent years, the UNGA biennial consensus resolution on the 'girl child' has emphasised extreme poverty as one of the biggest obstacles to meeting the needs and promoting and protecting the rights of the child, including for girls.⁴⁴

This resolution has also drawn a strong link between the occurrence of harmful practices, CEFM, and unpaid care work, which often ends education, as further limiting girls' opportunities.⁴⁵

Girls and girls' rights issues are also being included and considered in some newer and emerging areas of human rights, rendering girls more visible and therefore better protected by soft law. Girls are mentioned, for example, in the first HRC resolution on the care and support agenda in 2023.⁴⁶

An examination of the way in which girls' are disproportionately affected is also included in the HRC's resolution on 'Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls' in digital contexts⁴⁷ and the UNGA consideration of the gender digital divide in the resolution on the girl child.⁴⁸ In addition, girls' rights are being examined in relation to issues,

such as the violence and harassment which can accompany their participation in public life, and other negative outcomes resulting from gender stereotypes and negative cultural and social norms.⁴⁹

The 2023 HRC resolution on girls' education focused on climate change—the first time the HRC has identified girls specifically as rights holders impacted by climate change.⁵⁰

As the increased use of language identifying girls as rights-holders has raised their visibility with international policy makers it has provided an opportunity to enhance the examination of the substance of the human rights issues affecting girls. It also emphasises the urgent need to address how these human rights, once properly understood and acknowledged, are to be implemented.

Young girl checks her speakers notes as moderator in Switzerland
© Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz

Progress report

- ✓ In October 2018, the CEDAW Committee first included references to girls in their General Recommendation No. 37 on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change.⁵¹ This did not just heighten the visibility of girls as individual rights-holders impacted by climate change, but also helped to break down the silos between and within UN agencies and other bodies working on these issues.⁵²
- ✓ Additionally, it has helped to highlight the importance of understanding the girls' rights aspects of broader human rights issues.
- ✓ In the other Treaty Bodies, there have been some developments in the ways girls' rights issues are being rendered more visible. For example, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee (CRPD Committee) discusses girls and girls' rights in relation to a variety of civil and economic rights which are often forgotten.⁵³
- ✓ The 2018 Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 36 on the right to life discusses women and girls with some consistency. It outlines in detail their SRHR in relation to abortion, which is uncommon, especially with regard to civil and political rights. It may, however, be understood in relation to the quantity of input they were receiving from pro-life advocates.⁵⁴



Woman holds meeting with Foreign Affairs staff about girls' political participation in Switzerland
© Plan International / Sven de Almeida

Access to digital technology is increasingly acknowledged as a girls' rights issue.

The 2021 Agreed Conclusions from CSW, while discussing the need to bridge the digital gender divide, also highlighted in previous years, make explicit reference to the role of digital literacy and access to technology in enhancing the participation of both 'women and girls' in public life.

The CSW *"recognises that digital platforms can become public spaces in which new strategies to influence policy and politics are forged and where women and girls can exercise their right to participate fully and effectively in public life."*⁵⁵

The document acknowledges the agency of girls as well, by recognising the contributions of girls' and youth-led organisations in advocating for their rights.⁵⁶

6. Different girls, different needs, equal rights: increased recognition of girls' intersecting identities

The concept of intersectionality is helpful to understand how different aspects of girls' lives can overlap and interact, often generating complex challenges or opportunities. For example, HRC resolutions on VAWG adopt broad definitions of intersectionality and intersectional discrimination, discussing *"age, gender, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion or belief, physical and mental health, disability, civil status, socioeconomic and migration status."*

It acknowledges *"women and girls belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups, Indigenous women and girls, women and girls of African descent and women and girls with disabilities."*⁵⁷

The resolutions also emphasise the need to take *"age- and gender-responsive"* measures to address discrimination against women and girls with disabilities: crucial language which implicitly includes girls throughout their lifecycle.⁵⁸

! **Intersectionality refers to the complex and cumulative way that the effects of different forms of discrimination (for example on the basis of age, gender, race, and others) combine, overlap, and intersect.**

Progress report

- ✓ There has been some recent progress in international law and policy in including and addressing girls' rights in the context of intersecting identities: this is most visible with reference to Indigenous rights, disability rights, and rights for rural girls.
- ✓ In 2022, the CEDAW Committee issued General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights of Indigenous women and girls, the first time that the issues affected by the intersecting identities of Indigenous girls have been addressed to such an extent.⁵⁹
- ✓ In relation to girls with disabilities, the CRPD Committee consistently recognises the rights of women and girls with disabilities,⁶⁰ including in its General Comment No. 7 on Participation with persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities.
- ✓ UNGA, CSW and HRC have all given attention to intersectionality regarding rural girls.
- ✓ In 2023, the UNGA resolution on the 'girl child' expanded upon the rights of girls living in rural and remote areas, and girls with disabilities, outlining the increased barriers that they face in accessing education, healthcare, and nutrition.⁶¹
- ✓ In 2018, the CSW Agreed Conclusions were devoted to the rights of rural women and girls.⁶²

There have been also increases in references to intersectionality at the HRC, and more resolutions feature intersectional identities beyond women and girls from rural areas and women and girls with disabilities—the main intersectional identities previously identified.

In the UPR recommendations during the 3rd and 4th cycle many of the recommendations made about education also recognise intersectionality and mention girls with disabilities, and girls in various contexts such as in rural communities, or conflict areas.

! **On issues of growing importance, such as internal displacement and climate change, girls have, across the period of study, become more visible in the work of Special Procedures mandates holders. However, the analysis conducted remains superficial.**

7. Leading the charge, being the change: increased focus on girls as agents for change and as rights-holders, not just as vulnerable victims

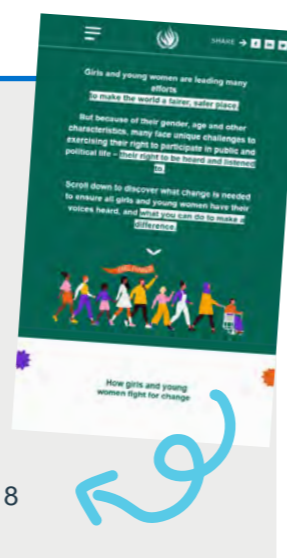
Finally, progress has been made over the last six years in enhancing visibility in terms of how we perceive girls, shifting the narrative to portray girls as rights-holders and agents of change, with increasing attention paid to their civil and political rights.

Progress report

- ✓ A 2022 report by the WG DAWG was dedicated solely to the activism of girls and young women, which highlights barriers they face to equality as well as their active role in effectively challenging these barriers.⁶³ In this report, girls were recognised as potential *“powerful leaders and agents of change.”*⁶⁴ By dedicating a report to the topic of girls’ and young women’s activism, the WG DAWG insists that their civic engagement be taken seriously. It challenges assumptions that would dismiss the seriousness of girls’ activism, in part by highlighting the sheer range of issues on which girls’ and young women’s activism has been engaged.⁶⁵
- ✓ In a 2021 report dedicated to climate justice,⁶⁶ the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression underscored the role of children and youth in climate activism, with girls’ and young women’s activism receiving particular emphasis.
- ✓ This development in the realm of non-negotiated soft law recognition is being matched more slowly and with more difficulty in the negotiation arena. In this arena, recognising the agency and participation rights of girls is, while not impossible, a greater challenge, and is increasingly obstructed by the pushback from the anti-rights and anti-gender groups.

“Girls and young women are mobilising worldwide to demand and catalyse change on critical global issues. They are at the forefront of initiatives aimed at transforming societies towards social justice, gender equality and sustainability. This is occurring despite, and frequently in reaction to, the barriers that they continue to face in participating in public and political life, as a result of persistent gender-based discrimination and violence within families, communities and society at large.”

WG DAWG, *Girls' and young women's activism*, 2022, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/50/25, para 8



Activists not victims

The 2023 HRC resolution on girls’ education, speaks of the potential of girls as *“powerful leaders and agents of change.”*⁶⁷

Likewise, the UNGA resolution on CEFM explicitly recognises girls as *“agents of change in their own lives”* which represents a shift from the weaker language present in the other resolutions’ discussions on participation.⁶⁸

The Agreed Conclusions of 2021,⁶⁹ which focus on the theme of *‘women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls,’* acknowledges the contributions of girls and young women as agents of change and the need for their participation in a variety of contexts, as well as the role of mentorship in facilitating these opportunities: *“The Commission recognises that young women are particularly underrepresented in public life and*

*disproportionately excluded from consultations on issues that affect them, despite being involved in activities that call for broader change and address, inter alia, structural inequalities, climate change and poverty.”*⁷⁰

The enhanced visibility of girls and young women, and the increasing recognition, however slowly, of their rights, has regrettably, led to the politicisation of many of these issues as battlegrounds for the anti-rights agenda and anti-gender groups.

Pushback on particularly sensitive areas where progress has been made in relation to girls’ rights means, as we will see in the next sections of the report, focused energy and resources are needed to maintain the status quo, let alone advocate for further advancement.



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

Still in the shadows?

As we have demonstrated in the previous section, change is evident, but is it sufficient?

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. Despite the often impressive progress made in enhancing the visibility of girls and girls' rights, as described above, many of the findings of 2018 still stand.

Girls are still poorly served by an over-reliance on age-and gender-neutral approaches and there are a number of ways in which girls and girls' rights risk remaining invisible.

1. Gender-neutral and age-neutral approaches risk reinforcing the invisibility of girls when insufficiently accompanied by gender-transformative and age-specific analysis.
2. Sometimes gender-specific or age-specific language is being used to exclude mention of girls in relation to particular rights.
3. Treating all 'girls' as a homogenous group risks rendering some girls invisible.
4. The increasing recognition of girls' multiple intersecting identities does not go far enough to adequately consider the impact of girls' diversity on their human rights.
5. Girls, in all their diversity, need all their human rights to be acknowledged and protected
6. Girls' agency and autonomy is not yet adequately reflected by policymakers.



Girls take part in workshop to develop their manifesto in Nepal © Plan International

1. Respect my rights too: gender-neutral and age-neutral approaches risk reinforcing the invisibility of girls

Far too often, girls are subsumed or implicitly included within the terms, 'women' or 'children,' who remain the main focus for human rights protections.

This is the case with most of the UN documents studied. Alternatively, girls are too often merely an add-on to 'women' as part of the formulation 'women and girls.'

Progress report

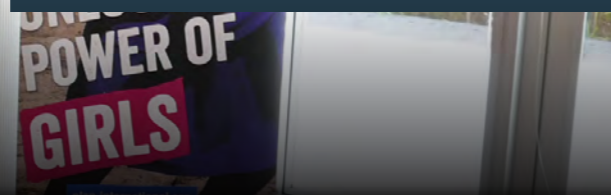
- In UPR recommendations, girls are usually mentioned as a corollary to women.
- UNGA and HRC resolutions describe the obstacles that women and girls face, but often omit the specific needs of girls which differ from those of women.
- 'Girls' continues to remain an undefined and seemingly homogeneous group with little meaningful discussion on girls at different stages of their lives.
- In some Special Procedures reports, the use of terms such as 'women and girls' referenced girls inconsistently and without a discernible link to their specific needs.
- Sometimes Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies such as the CEDAW Committee, or Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, take a more deliberative approach, making it clear that 'women' or 'children' includes 'girls.' In each of these instances, the different forms of discrimination that affect girls are not often outlined specifically.

In 2018, Plan International found that the failure by human rights mechanisms and UN bodies to explicitly identify girls as rights-holders when discussing issues that specifically impact girls—and the failure to use age-specific language when girls are directly and

disproportionately impacted—is at best an oversight that signifies a lack of sensitivity to the wide range of human rights violations suffered by girls, and at worst a desire to safeguard the precarious space occupied by women's rights. It is a conclusion that lingers.



Workshop on barriers to girls' participation held in Switzerland © Plan International



"The majority of international policy documents are gender—or age-neutral and often corral girls into the generic categories of 'children', 'adolescents', 'youth' or 'women'—therefore relegating girls' rights to the margins of childrens' or women's rights."

Plan International, *Girls' rights are human rights*, 2017, available at: plan-international.org/publications/girls-rights-are-human-rights/



The 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. For example:

- ❗ The CRC Committee's application of a gender-neutral child-rights-based approach should be accompanied by gender-responsive analysis when addressing issues of relevance to girls' rights, to ensure the gender-specific issues that girls face remain visible.
- ❗ Similarly, the CEDAW Committee's previous tendency to take an age-neutral approach through a broad use of the term 'women' did not always sufficiently address the age-specific needs of girls and young women.
- ❗ To render girls visible, more needs to be done to extrapolate the ways in which girls' experiences, their needs, and the violations they suffer, differ from women's. This will not only strengthen the protections offered by international law, but will also clarify, with more specificity, what States must do to fulfil their obligations and ensure the realisation of girls' rights.

At the HRC, for instance, the resolutions on trafficking in women and girls use the phrase 'women and children' in some contexts: for example in relation to the use of communications technologies for the purpose of exploitation and for child sexual abuse material, or child, early and forced marriage.⁷¹

While mentioning 'children' does implicitly include girls, it does not recognise the gender-, age- and diversity-specific risks that girls face, nor that they are often disproportionately affected by these abuses.

As a result, it does not outline the specific protections that need to be in place to safeguard their multiple and intersecting identities.

Additionally, though some of their reports do directly acknowledge the gendered nature of the violations, the Annual Reports of the Special

Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict utilise gender-neutral language, referencing 'children,' including in recommendations. While this approach is important to recognise the rights of children in all their diversity, especially non-binary children and those with diverse SOGIESC, the specific challenges and needs of girls must also be identified, in order to ensure adequate protections are accorded to them.

Gender-neutral language in international law does not give due attention to the realities of girls' lives, which are usually shaped by their gender and age.

The rights and needs of girls must be explicitly recognised and addressed in international law to ensure targeted action that will then lead to social and transformative change.



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

2. Why not include me? 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 economic rights), the term 'girls' is omitted from discussion of the issue.⁷² CSW is not alone here, this happens in UNGA and HRC resolutions also.

While there may be practical reasons for some of these omissions (in the case of labour rights, for example, to avoid the perception that the mechanisms are legitimising child labour), in other instances, the omission appears to be based on assumptions made by adults about girls' capacities. This is particularly pronounced in the discussion of various forms of participation, involvement in decision-making, and the exercise of civil and political rights, which is heavily skewed towards women.

More Needs to Be Done!

Progress report

- ✓ In HRC resolutions, girls are usually omitted in the explicit references to full, equal, effective, and meaningful participation, as these resolutions most commonly mention only women.⁷³
- ✓ Policymakers may discuss the right of 'women and girls' to participate, but then only make provision for the protection of women politicians or women human rights defenders.
- ✓ Girls are only present in phrases which implicitly and indirectly refer to their right to participation, for example, "[education] strengthens the voice, agency and leadership of women and girls."⁷⁴

The issue of girls' participation political and public life has emerged as one of the most controversial topics of girls' rights, representing one of the main areas experiencing pushback.

Girls and young women often find themselves excluded from active participation and have gender and age-inappropriate policies forced upon them, rather than being agents of change within these systems.

These systems, which significantly influence their lives, are rarely developed to ensure their meaningful participation and to consider their specific needs and preferences.⁷⁵

Despite the CEDAW Committee's 'all encompassing' definition of women, which implicitly includes girls, as distinct from women, are in some cases the subject of the recommendations.

.....
However, the CEDAW Committee's selective explicit inclusion of girls in some areas, inadvertently bolsters the effect of their exclusion from other areas of rights.

Recommendations on rural women for example omit girls in reference to work, leadership and property, and is inconsistent in including them regarding participation in climate change policy-making.

The presence of age-sensitive quantifiers can be seen in some UNGA and HRC resolutions, which occasionally use language such as 'young women' or 'adolescent girls.'⁷⁶ However, when there is one of these rare examinations of the sub-sets of girls' identities, it is inevitably because of the context and the subject matter: age-specific nuances tend to be included when negotiating the most sensitive and politically charged resolutions—those dealing with SRHR for example.



Plan side event on strengthening girls' rights at the UN Human Rights Council in Switzerland
 © Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz

3. Recognising difference: treating all 'girls' as a homogenous group risks rendering some girls and girls' rights issues 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.

Progress report

- ✓ In some UN human rights mechanisms, such as the CEDAW Committee or Special Procedures, the term 'women' has been explicitly recognised and defined as including 'girls.' While this does not necessarily diminish protections afforded to girls under international human rights law, it does not recognise the breadth of girls' identities and experiences.
- ✓ The use of women to include girls misses the opportunity to discuss and expand upon the ways in which girls are rights holders, how these issues impact them specifically, and how States should go about fulfilling their obligations and the realisation of girls' rights. This is crucial for a meaningful consideration of girls' rights and there must be greater analysis throughout UN bodies and mechanisms to ensure this.
- ✓ When 'girls' are mentioned, the language used in most of the UN human rights documents mostly depicts 'girls' as a uniform group, with some intersectional identities (such as girls with disabilities and girls in rural areas) being discussed more than others (such as Indigenous girls), rendering some girls less visible than others
- ✓ In the examination of Special Procedures reports it was found that the mere inclusion of the word 'girls' did not increase their visibility *per se*: in actuality, the Special Procedures reports that provided the most visibility to girls' rights were not necessarily those that included the greatest number of references to girls, but which instead contextualised the term, unpacking what was meant by girls and girls' rights in the context of the issues discussed.

More Needs to Be Done!

Positioning girls as homogeneous victims and referring to them only/always as 'girls' or 'children,' undermines the fact that the needs and capacities of girls across various ages and from various geographic, ethnic, social, or other identities are completely different.

In order to ensure that these diversities in girls' identities and experiences are integrated into the consideration and development of human rights standards, a greater understanding of the intersections and differences in their lives, identities and characteristics is needed.

If this understanding is to be achievable and meaningful a recommendation identified throughout the course of this research and across UN mechanisms is the need for increased collection of disaggregated data regarding girls.

It is clear that the data available on women is not sufficient to understand the needs of girls; likewise, more data needs to be made available on the intersectional identities and experiences of girls in order to counter their invisibility.

Several Special Procedures reports, for example, cited the need for more disaggregated data on the impacts of climate change, particularly with regard to women and children, and taking into consideration intersecting factors such as migration, displacement, disabilities and indigeneity.⁷⁷ This research would have the potential of providing greater depth, nuance and specificity to the analysis of girls' rights in the context of climate change, and to provide greater visibility to these issues going forward.



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



Girls learning how to advocate against child marriage in Nepal © Plan International

4. More than just a girl: recognition of girls' multiple intersecting identities does not go far enough

Slowly but surely, the language used in negotiated and non-negotiated instruments is evolving to reflect the multiple and intersecting identities of girls.

! It is becoming more commonplace to refer to 'girls in all their diversity' rather than just 'girls.'⁷⁸

Progress report

- ✓ Despite the acknowledgement of the existence of intersectional discrimination, UN bodies and mechanisms lack meaningful examination of the intersectionality of girls' identities and experiences, which renders the breadth and totality of girls' diversity and intersecting identities invisible.
- ✓ While intersectionality is used as a lens to discuss children's rights issues, most UN mechanisms fail to expand upon the ways that intersectionality leads to different outcomes for different people.
- ✓ Even when resolutions describe the intersecting forms of discrimination that women and girls face, clearly spelling out how intersecting forms of identities can exacerbate discrimination, intersectional identities are rarely discussed and unpacked beyond this identification of grounds of discrimination.
When they are discussed in greater detail, particularly in the case of Treaty Bodies, only some identities are regularly recognised, namely women and girls in rural areas, and girls with disabilities. References to women and girls from minorities, including racial and ethnic minorities, remain less common.
- ✓ The limited references to diverse SOGIESC also subtly erode the visibility of girls who are lesbians, bisexual, transgender and queer.

More Needs to Be Done!

There is no explicit reference to gender-diverse women and girls, for example, in CSW discussions of intersectionality during the period under review: the enumeration of groups experiencing intersectionality simply includes a catch-all category of 'other status' which is left open to interpretation.

Only five UPR recommendations (1.4 per cent) discussed discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This underrepresentation extends to LBTQI+ girls and the discrimination they may face, reflecting

a broader lack of attention to SOGIESC issues in UN mechanisms. Simply acknowledging that some groups will be 'disproportionately impacted' by certain forms of discrimination is not enough to meaningfully expand the scope of international human rights law to include and protect these groups.

Acknowledging intersectionality must not be the end of the discussion, rather it must serve as a jumping off point for all UN mechanisms to expand upon the particularities of various groups to ensure that maximum protection by international law is accorded.

5. Across the board: girls need all their human rights to be acknowledged and protected

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. Girls and their concerns are less visible within consideration of certain rights, particularly when resources are focused on issues at the forefront of the anti-rights and anti-gender backlash.

Progress report

- ✓ Girls are rarely, if ever, discussed in relation to some socio-economic rights, such as the rights to property or social protection. Resolutions at the HRC acknowledge these rights only in relation to women.
- ✓ Similarly, socio-economic rights, such as housing, water and sanitation, and nutrition, are also rarely the topic of girls' rights in UPR recommendations.
- ✓ The Committee Against Torture (CAT Committee), Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD Committee), the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED Committee) and the Human Rights Committee, have GCs which never reference girls. The lack of references to girls' rights by these Treaty Bodies reinforces the silos to which women and children have been relegated.

More Needs to Be Done!

As the first set of issues—education, SRHR and non-violence—are also, not coincidentally, those which are facing significant pushback, civil society advocates spend a disproportionate amount of time and resources defending girls' rights in these spaces. Meanwhile, the full range of human rights are not being comprehensively addressed. The relevance of some human rights issues to girls and the impact of these issues on

girls' rights are not always fully understood, explored or addressed by UN mechanisms, and as a consequence, there is a lack of nuance in the exploration of girls' rights. For example, resolutions of the HRC which are specifically about women and girls primarily address the themes of violence and discrimination. Violence and discrimination take the forefront of women's and girls' rights at the expense of other rights.

There is a clear divide between those rights where girls are clearly identified as rights-holders—in education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and non-violence—and those areas where girls' rights remain unaddressed and unarticulated.

6. Champions not victims: girls' agency and autonomy is not yet adequately reflected

More needs to be done to continue reinforcing girls as agents of change and autonomous rights-holders, as paved by the work of the WG DAWG.⁷⁹ The pushback on girls' autonomy, agency and potential as leaders has restricted the way in which girls are considered by many UN mechanisms.

arises from the persisting perception of girls simply as vulnerable and helpless victims, rather than as empowered rights-holders. The anti-rights and anti-gender pushback at the UN among States regarding recognising girls' participation has further bolstered this pigeon-holing of girls as powerless.

Too often the unintended consequence of focusing on issues such as violence, and the ways in which girls are disproportionately negatively impacted in the areas of education and health—as well as the controversy surrounding recognising girls' right to participation—is that we run the risk of reinforcing the image of girls as powerless victims. This language exemplifies the underlying impetus behind the strong focus on violence which

To effectively combat gender inequality, we must continue to fight towards eliminating discrimination and violence against girls, while ensuring that we foster their participation, and their empowerment as autonomous agents of change. Plan International's important work on child and youth engagement, including the participatory workshops which took place in the run-up to this year's Summit of the Future, is a crucial example of this.

Progress report

- ✓ Analysis of the outputs of Special Procedures shows that girls have continued to be framed primarily through the lens of 'vulnerability,' particularly with regard to sexual and gender-based violence.
- ✓ Similarly, several of the UPR recommendations discussing violence against minority women and girls, when referring to women and girls with disabilities, also refer to them as 'vulnerable.'
- ✓ When girls are included in UNGA resolutions it is mostly in reference to violence and discrimination, and when the opportunity arises to include their voices in changing the status quo, the anti-rights pushback seeks to exclude them.

More Needs to Be Done!



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



Full report and the Girls Pact for the Future can be found at: plan-international.org/girls-pact



Our Voices For Our Tomorrow

This report presents young people's thoughts, worries, ideas, vision, and recommendations for a gender-equal and inclusive future. It provides a foundation for informed discussion, generating new evidence on what concrete steps we can take to achieve gender equality and positive futures for everyone.

Plan International conducted participatory workshops and an online survey with more than 100 young people from over 35 countries representing all regions of the world so that the voices of adolescent girls and young people emerge loud and clear during this year's UN Summit of the Future.

The overall objective of the study is to situate youth at the centre of discussions and to highlight the need for a gender-transformative approach to shaping tomorrow's world.

Through this research, adolescent girls and young people shaped the Girl's Pact for the Future, sharing their concerns with the current state of the world, envisioning a future centred on gender equality, and presenting clear, actionable recommendations for policymakers to achieve this goal.

“I found myself standing in a place I had always dreamed of reaching in my future. Yet, what I witnessed surpassed mere personal aspirations. In that moment, I beheld something far greater than gender; I saw humanity itself. I glimpsed the potential for prosperity within each and every individual. This realisation dawned upon me as a result of our collective efforts to break down existing barriers and pave the way for boundless opportunities to flourish in the days to come.”

Azoo,⁸⁰ 21 Female, South Asia, Workshop

“What I speak today will impact tomorrow, for my future begins with my voice today. Please, listen to our voices as young people, for the decisions you make today will impact our lives tomorrow.”

Furaha, 16, Female, Sub-Saharan Africa

One step forward, two steps back: anti-rights and anti-gender pushback

In order to continue to move forward with girls' rights, and to protect the gains won in recent years, it is crucial to remain vigilant, build strong alliances, and secure adequate resources.

Anti-rights agendas are gaining momentum, and there is much at stake. In the past decade, the human rights community has seen a pushback against some of the key areas of progress that have been made in human rights, particularly gender rights, SRHR and LGBTQIA+ rights, 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' actors is exerting increasing influence in international spaces as well as domestic politics.⁸¹ This phenomenon has been studied and acknowledged by researchers and advocates in the UN human rights system,⁸² as well as by UN experts including the Special Procedures,⁸³ and by Member States at the HRC.⁸⁴

Several Special Procedures in their reports have referred to an organised and well-funded backlash from ultraconservative state and non-state actors against the use of more expansive and inclusive language reflecting gender diversity. This has been identified as one of the major challenges, going forward, in advancing girls' rights and gender equality.⁸⁵



"These movements have formed various national and transnational alliances aimed at promoting stereotypical attitudes about the roles of women and men in the family and society that restrict women's and girls' choices and potential in many aspects of their lives. They have attacked the term 'gender', seeing it as a tool of "ideological colonization" that aims to destroy the "traditional family" and 'family values. (...) As a result, the world is witnessing a growing backlash against sexual and reproductive health rights, including comprehensive education on sexual and reproductive health, ever-present misogynistic statements in the media and the rise of anti-gender discourse in the public domain, even by high-ranking politicians, as well as attacks on women and girl human rights defenders."

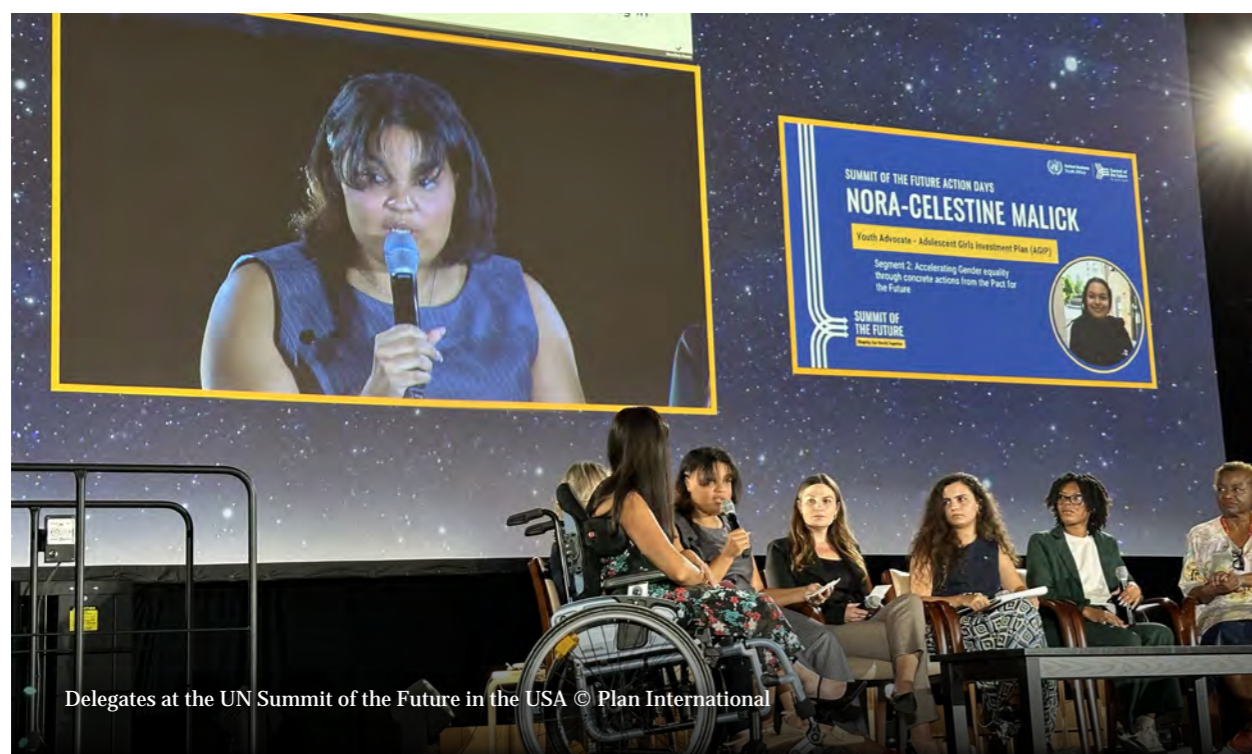
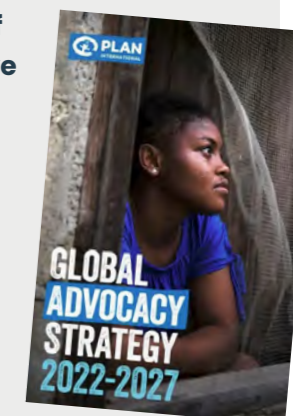
WG DAWG, *Escalating backlash against gender equality and urgency of reaffirming substantive equality and the human rights of women and girls: Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and Girls*, 15 May 2024, UN Doc. AIHRC/56/51, para. 15.

In early 2024, the WG DAWG published a report on the backlash that women's and girls' rights are experiencing, characterised particularly by attacks on women's and girls' bodily autonomy, and efforts to exert paternalistic control by parents/guardians over girls and young women.⁸⁶

This backlash can be seen throughout the UN mechanisms, especially in negotiated documents, with some Member States pushing for the inclusion of weakened legal language, which waters down existing legal guarantees and hampers protection in practice. In 2022, Plan International, in its Global Advocacy Strategy 2022-2027, had already explained the urgent need to address this:

"Core girls' rights issues—particularly SRHR—have been the target of these movements, further contributing to the hardening of restrictive contexts around the world and curbing progress on issues including the promotion of comprehensive sexuality education {CSE}, access to contraception, access to safe abortion, and the rights of girls, young women and gender non-conforming people more broadly. This means that organisations like Plan International that are doing in-depth work on these issues are doing it with increasing personal and organisational risk, significant personal and organisational consequences, and little—or no—recognition and funding."

Plan International, *Global Advocacy Strategy 2022-2027*, 2022, available at plan-international.org/publications/global-advocacy-strategy/



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

The impact of the pushback is felt across a variety of issues, and anti-rights activists employ a variety of different tactics: what has been a more positive environment for girls' rights and gender equality is now less open to change.

The ways in which the anti-rights and anti-gender groups are particularly affecting girls' rights, as found in this study, are as follows:

1. Core girls' rights issues are under attack.
2. Language is being instrumentalised.
3. Progress is tempered with caution.
4. Girls' rights advocates need support to defend, maintain and further progress.



Youth delegate standing in front of the United Nations Office in Switzerland © Plan International / Antoine Tardy

1. Promoting 'family values:' core girls' rights issues are under attack

Core girls' rights issues, particularly SRHR, have been the target of these groups, further contributing to the hardening of restrictive contexts around the world and curbing progress on issues including the promotion of CSE, access to contraception, access to safe abortion, and the rights of girls, young women and gender non-conforming people more broadly.

The anti-rights and anti-gender groups focus their pushback on some key issues which are, not coincidentally, at the heart of girls' rights advocacy.

! In several recent negotiated documents, particularly in UNGA and HRC resolutions, there has been a noticeable increase in language reflecting the ongoing pushback against girls' rights.

It has been claimed that these are "efforts by conservative actors to develop and institutionalize a parallel system of human rights that clashes with existing norms and standards, including in the areas of gender-based violence and child rights."⁸⁷

Pushback in Action

- ✓ In their attempts to 'protect the family,' anti-rights and anti-gender groups try to establish the family as a rights-holder and "attempt... to construct a new category of 'parental rights,'"⁸⁸ prioritising "parental authority figures over the rights of children."⁸⁹
- ✓ This is intended to erode and undermine the autonomy and decision-making capability of girls, particularly in the area of SRHR and CSE: the anti-rights and anti-gender groups claim that "CSE violates 'parental rights', harms children, and is not education but ideological indoctrination."⁹⁰
- ✓ Backlash is most visible in the HRC, where it is organised and consistently targeted on the same key topics, which overlap with the most sensitive topics in the girls' rights agenda: gender diversity, SRHR—particularly on issues such as comprehensive sexuality education and safe abortion—the role/rights of the family, the agency and autonomy of women and girls, and their full and meaningful participation.



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

As a result of the anti-rights and anti-gender groups, some wording regarding girls' rights in HRC resolutions has been stripped back. For example, in the 2020 and 2022 iterations of the resolution on 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls,' references to CSE were consistently attacked and there were several

requests to remove the concept completely or to severely temper the language. Some States called to replace references to CSE (highlighted below) in emphasising that it should be relevant to "cultural contexts" in which parents and legal guardians would play a role in accessing such knowledge about relationships and sexuality:

Text adopted

A/HRC/50/18

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development (2022)

"To promote long-term awareness-raising initiatives in education, in communities in the media and online, engaging men and boys, through the incorporation of curricula on all women's and girls' rights into teacher training courses, on topics including the root causes of gender-based discrimination and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, **and by ensuring universal access to evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education;**"

Text suggested by amendment that was rejected, to replace references to CSE

A/HRC/50/L.39

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development (2022)

"To promote long-term awareness-raising initiatives in education, [...] including domestic violence, **and by ensuring universal access to scientifically accurate and age-appropriate education that is relevant to cultural contexts, that provides adolescent girls and boys and young women and men, in and out of school, consistent with their evolving capacities, and with appropriate direction and guidance from parents and legal guardians, with information on sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gender equality and the empowerment of women, human rights, physical, psychological and pubertal development and power in relationships between women and men, to enable them to build self-esteem and foster informed decision-making, communication and risk reduction skills and to develop respectful relationships, in full partnership with young persons, parents, legal guardians, caregivers, educators and health-care providers;**"

The attempts to water down language in girls' rights resolutions can also be seen when certain States have proposed amendments during the voting on topics such as women's, girls' and children's rights. For example, in 2023, during consideration of the resolution on 'preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights' at the 54th session of the HRC, several States sought to dilute

references to "sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights" by replacing it with "the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including but not limited to sexual and reproductive health." This change aimed to minimise the emphasis on SRHR. Attacks were also made against CSE, with amendments requesting for its complete deletion.

At the 55th session of the HRC in 2024, the resolution on the 'Rights of the child: realising the rights of the child and inclusive social protection,' was also the subject of amendments tabled on several sensitive topics. For example, on SRHR, amendments to remove all mention of 'sexual and reproductive' in front of 'health' in relation to the right of children to sexual and reproductive health, or to remove the entire reference to the right, were voted on and struck down. Similarly attempts were made to water down the language on participation, changing "in accordance with the evolving capacities of the child" to "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" or as "giving due weight to the views of the child in accordance to age and maturity." Requests to delete "autonomy of the children" throughout the text were also made. A clear example of this can also be seen in the 2023 iteration of UNGA's resolution on the 'Rights of the Child.'

The addition of 'family rights' language reflects the anti-gender groups' advocacy strategies to water down protections enshrined in children's rights, diminish girls' autonomy as individual rights-holders, and attempt to recognise parents and/or the family as rights-holders.

One of the main ways in which this pushback is exemplified is through attempts to increase the role that parents have in children's decision-making, especially regarding restricting girls' right to bodily autonomy. Attacks on CSE are often characterised by a push to include the role of parents in the teaching of, and access to information on, sexual reproductive and health rights. The 2023 iteration of the UNGA resolution largely retains the language from the 2018 version, on ensuring that comprehensive sexuality education is scaled up and is "consistent with [adolescent girls and boys and young women and men's] evolving capacities". Both texts emphasise also the role of parents, by adding "and with appropriate direction and guidance from parents and legal guardians, with the best interest of the child as their basic concern".⁹¹



Young woman at the UN Summit of the Future in the USA © Plan International



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

While it is promising to see that age considerations are being made and that girls' ages are quantified in the form of references to adolescents and young women, the emphasis on the role and rights of parents and guardians in the acquisition of information on SRHR, gender equality and women's empowerment, must be understood as a symptom of the pushback existing from anti-rights and anti-gender groups. Additionally, the lack of change and improvement in the language from 2018 to 2023 may also be an indication of the consistency of this pushback, and the continued difficulty for negotiators to include progressive language.

Attacks on the child-rights based approach, which prioritises participation, were also evident, with requests to remove its mentions and replace them with "from a child's rights perspective."

This is not a concept established and formulated by international human rights law resulting in specific obligations or duties. Additionally, States tabled amendments pushing for more language on "the rights of the family" wanting to insert references to 'family-oriented' policies and inserting language on the rights and duties of parents as persons legally responsible for the child to provide direction and guidance in the exercise of the child's rights.

All of these amendments were either withdrawn before the voting on the resolution, or were voted down in the session, leading to the original resolution being passed without a vote. These tactics used by the anti-gender groups are examples of the ways in which progress made on specific areas of children's and girls' rights are being threatened, as well as the increased effort needed to maintain the status quo.

2. A war of words: 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 inclusive language mentioning 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.

At the HRC, there has been an understandable move by children's rights advocates to prioritise the use of the word 'children' rather than gender-specific language, as this is a way of encompassing diversity (albeit without the explicit recognition of persons with diverse gender identities including non-binary genders) without using controversial gender-binary language.

Pushback in Action

- ✓ When gender-specific language, such as 'girls' or 'women and girls,' is used, the anti-rights and anti-gender groups generally request the inclusion of 'boys' or 'men and boys' to reinforce the gender binary.
- ✓ 'Women and girls' rights' are presented as being in opposition to the LGBTQIA+ and SOGIESC agendas. For example, trans women are presented as a threat to womanhood and to women and girls: *"part of a larger 'sex-based rights' and 'gender critical' agenda that seeks to establish a new and narrow meaning of what being a woman is."*⁹²

! **Equality for girls means equality for girls in all their diversity.**



Young woman interviews the President of the National Council in Switzerland © Plan International / Sven de Almeida

This struggle has increased in recent years with the anti-gender and so-called gender ideology proponents, and this has posed challenges for advocates who must balance the two agendas, ensuring to not bolster one at the detriment of the other and instead advocating for both by introducing progressive and inclusive language. The result has been an increase in the effort needed in order to simply maintain existing language, as well as be able to identify when that existing language is being instrumentalised to exclude and limit the rights of transgender and non-binary persons.

For instance, in 2020 and 2022, amendments to the HRC resolution on the 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls' were tabled to remove references to 'gender' in relation to discrimination, and replace it with 'sex'⁹³—this is likely to be a consequence of the current wave of

pushback arguing that gender language amounts to 'ideological colonisation,' and/or transphobic forces that wish to preserve the sex-binary as much as possible.⁹⁴

With the exclusion of 'gender', the text would favour biologically deterministic and binary interpretations of identities at the expense of identities which do not fall within the binary or are gender-neutral, undermining protection for transgender women and girls.

As per its 'Position Paper on People with diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC)',⁹⁵ Plan International believes that gender equality and diverse SOGIESC inclusion go hand in hand. Gender equality and girl's rights are important frameworks for realising the rights of all children and young people.



Available at:
plan-international.org/publications/sogiesc-policy-position/



“Plan International's Position Paper on People with diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics

Our work towards gender equality and diverse SOGIESC inclusion are mutually compatible and reinforcing, moving us forward in our gender transformative change journey.

We recognise that gender equality and girl's rights are important frameworks for realising the rights of all children and young people, including those with diverse SOGIESC.

Working with children and young people with diverse SOGIESC who also experience multiple, intersecting, and structural inequalities—including racism, imperialism, and ableism—will help Plan International to achieve the SDG commitments to leave no-one behind and to reach the furthest behind first.”



Youth delegates and chaperones pose for photo in Switzerland
 © Plan International / Enzo Mauro Tabet Cruz

3. A change of climate: progress is tempered with caution

It's not always that the language has been rolled back or even that the anti-rights and anti-gender groups have sought amendments to apply reductionist language.

Rather, **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.**

❗ **Failure to consistently use progressive language is opening up negotiations on key areas and risking a roll-back on some girls' rights.**

For example, HRC debates on the resolution on the 'Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls' demonstrate the attempts to weaken existing language and illustrate the strain the UN diplomats are under to maintain girls' rights, even with text that is not the most progressive.⁹⁶ In fact, in focus group discussions that were conducted for this study, participants voiced their concern at the amount of effort diplomats are having to put in to maintaining the status quo, which is taking opportunities away from introducing new and progressive language to advance girls' rights.

.....
While progress has been made in recent years, it is under threat by coordinated efforts to undermine international human rights law and strip girls of the protections they are afforded.

4. Holding the line: girls' rights advocates need support to defend, maintain and further progress

In this context, 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, due to decreases in multilateral and bilateral aid and international cooperation budgets.

Girls' rights activists and advocates working to promote and protect human rights, gender equality and diversity, especially in areas targeted by anti-human rights and anti-gender actors are at heightened risk of persecution, violence and attacks.

.....
Understanding the challenges ahead is crucial to meeting them. Girls' rights advocates, and girls themselves, need support to defend, maintain and further progress if the gains of the last decade are not to be entirely undermined.

Conclusion

Now is evidently not the time to sit back and relax. Over the last few years, advocates for girls' rights—and for girls to be recognised as autonomous and active agents in their own lives—have made significant strides in bringing the discrimination they face, simply for being young and female, to the forefront of policy discussions and human rights mechanisms.

❗ **Girls are certainly more visible but not yet seen clearly enough.**

Success, though limited, has set off a reaction. There is increasing pushback against the gains made, marked by a revival of paternalism and the ascendancy of 'family values'—an ethos which is predominantly patriarchal and rarely benefits the younger, female members of any family.

'Protection' is the prevailing argument, which may seem hard to challenge, but often goes hand in hand with restriction, and a narrowing definition of what is appropriate for girls and for women.

This regressive mindset is reflected in the language used, the diversity ignored and in the spaces for change and activism squeezed. In an increasingly difficult environment, energy, strategy, vigilance and alliances will be needed to consolidate gains and further progress, so girls' rights and gender equality may be protected and promoted.

The recommendations on the next pages are addressed to power holders and potential allies as we map out the next steps.



Girl outside the United Nations Office 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, with complementary action between the children's rights, women's rights, and gender rights agendas. In order 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.

.....

Plan International is calling on the international community to articulate the rights and needs of girls in all their diversity in a way that has never been done before. Girls require targeted actions to reflect the particular and intersecting challenges of gender- age- and inclusion-based inequality. States should intentionally and explicitly address this double burden of discrimination and recognise the realisation of girls' rights as an objective in itself.

.....

Plan International therefore urges the international community to implement the following recommendations:

- 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 girl's rights and realities, in a gender-transformative and age-responsive manner**
- 2. Expand the ways in which UN bodies, human rights mechanisms and mandates specifically address girls' rights, by ensuring all Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies mainstream the rights of girls in all their diversity and apply an age-responsive approach, continuing to increase the interaction between Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures mandate holders on girls' rights.**
- 3. Put girls' and young women's agency, leadership and organisation at the heart of international policy-making.**
- 4. Invest in enhancing understanding, knowledge and expertise on girls' rights**
- 5. Enhance states' compliance with international standards aiming to advance girls' rights**

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 girl's rights and realities, in a gender-transformative and age-responsive manner:

1

- **Use language that is the most progressive and protective of girls' rights.** Celebrate and support continued progress in girls' rights discourse and the protection and fulfilment of the full range of girls' rights, including participation, agency, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Consistently use the strongest and most progressive agreed language available that is favourable to the advancement of girls' rights. See Plan International's Advocacy Tool: 'Language Matters'. Raise awareness of and use Plan International's Girls Rights Platform and Human Rights Policy Database to identify and extract the strongest agreed language available.
- **Strengthen a gender, age, and diversity perspective across all areas of human rights and better articulate the specific needs and lived realities of girls in all their diversity when developing new international norms.** Single out girls and adolescent girls where in reality they are differently and/or disproportionately affected, to effectively address the reality of their lives. While the gender-neutral approach is important to recognise the rights of children, especially non-binary children and those with diverse SOGIESC, the specific challenges and needs of girls and adolescents in all their diversity must be identified, in order to ensure adequate protections are accorded to her.
- **Take measures to bridge the gap between women's and children's rights that currently render girls and adolescent girls invisible:** Differentiate girls' and adolescent girls' human rights from women's and children's rights via explicit and nuanced language to reflect their experiences. A greater degree of analysis is needed throughout the UN mechanisms to ensure girls are not simply subsumed into the term 'women and girls' but that the breadth of the identities and experiences girls, and especially adolescent girls, are addressed in order to ensure their full protection under international human rights law.
- **Spell out the diversity amongst girls and the breadth and depth of girls' rights issues.** Consider girls in all their diversity, their intersecting and multifaceted identities and the social contexts when developing international standards. Unpack intersecting identities and recognise the differing impacts, needs, and experiences of girls, including the differing needs of girls at various ages.
- **Stop politicising issues relating to the girl.** Foster complementarity rather than competition regarding use of gender-neutral language, recognising that the rights of girls, women and children are mutually compatible and reinforcing. Recognise 'girls and children in all their diversity.' When girls are differently and disproportionately affected, be intentional and explicit in the use of girls' rights language, without undermining or negating support for non-binary/gender-neutral language as a way of acknowledging diversity.



Young woman being interviewed at the Spanish Congress of Deputies in Spain © Plan International

2

Expand the ways in which UN bodies, human rights mechanisms and mandates specifically address girls' rights, by ensuring all Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies mainstream the rights of girls in all their diversity and apply an age-responsive approach, continuing to increase the interaction between Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures mandate holders on girls' rights.

- **Adopt a new HRC resolution on the girl child**, following the UNGA example. Encourage and enhance consistency and complementarity between UNGA and HRC resolutions, and a greater width and breadth of consideration of the issues and realities affecting girls and their intersecting identities.
- **Develop a new CRC/CEDAW Joint General Comment/Recommendation on the rights of girls in all their diversity.** The CEDAW and CRC Committees should develop a new joint General Comment/Recommendation to specify the human rights of girls and ways to address them through the interpretation of CEDAW and CRC obligations, to fill the current lacuna in international law. Bearing in mind the multiple discrimination faced by girls, the two Committees should increase their direct interaction with one another to ensure that both mechanisms more specifically and adequately address the girl child. A new Joint GC/GR could identify how the intersection between gender and age impacts girls, and raise awareness on the topic. A new Joint GC/GR would enhance the international community's ability to understand and address the totality of girls' rights and experiences, and move beyond over-emphasising girls as victims of violence and discrimination. The Joint GC/GR could harmonise international commitments to better reflect girls' realities, while also strengthening the interpretation and application of international law for the benefit of girls. This new mandate could address girls' economic, social and cultural rights, their need for economic empowerment, as well as their civil and political rights and participation, and their role as agents of change. It could ensure the inclusivity of consideration of SOGIESC issues so as to be able to identify the rights of girls in all their diversity.
- **Continue to increase interaction between the Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures on girls' rights.** Strengthen the focus of all Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures on girls in all their diversity to progress past the focus on applying a discrimination framework to girls and girls' rights issues, which often stereotypes them as victims, including by supporting joint collaborations in workstreams between the CRC/CEDAW and CESCR and the CCPR on the totality of girls' rights: including access to food and water, participation rights, land and inheritance. The CESCR Committee must do more to incorporate into their work analysis how girls' ESC rights can be respected, protected and fulfilled. Likewise, the Human Rights Committee must do more to incorporate into their work, analysis of how girls' civil and political rights can be respected, protected and fulfilled, particularly rights related to participation. Ensure that all mandates of Special Procedures, which include the requirement "to integrate a gender perspective," explicitly incorporate a focus on girls' rights, addressing the unique challenges and needs of girls alongside broader gender considerations.

Put girls' and young women's agency, leadership and organisation at the heart of international policy-making

3

- **Listen to girls to strengthen** international norms and continue to strengthen and systematise the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of girls in international policy-making as a core element of UN mechanisms' work. The international community must start from the position that girls understand best what is happening in their own lives and enable their meaningful participation.
- **Ensure girls and young women in all their diversity enjoy civic and political freedoms and increased and sustained influence in decision-making processes.** Establish mechanisms that allow for the institutionalisation of girls' and young women's full, effective and meaningful participation in decision-making. Help to break down barriers, including gender and social norms, that prevent girls and young women, including the most vulnerable and marginalised, from making autonomous decisions and realising their rights.
- **Recognise and support girls** as rights-holders, agents of change and current and emerging human rights defenders. Strengthen girls, including adolescent girls, agency and autonomy to make their own decisions, in line with their evolving capacities. Reinforce movements and networks for collective action. Provide opportunities for girls to be mentored by older women human rights defenders and international policy-makers. Look to the future and invest now in building a generation of girls who will be the future leaders of the human rights movement.



Youth delegates point at the word "Peace" from a mural at the United Nations in Switzerland © Plan International / Antoine Tardy

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

4

- Systematically collect disaggregated data on girls specifically.** Invest in age, sex- and gender-related disaggregated data to adequately reflect girls' realities in policies and to provide an evidence-base for improving the situation of girls in international, national, and regional policies and programmes. Data collection and data security should be ensured, should be guided by safety and safeguarding, and should not result in further marginalisation. Ideally, data should be collected disaggregated by age, sex, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion, disability, location, class/caste, economic status, marital status, sexual orientation and gender identity, refugee and migratory status, with due protections for privacy and human rights. This must include the age range 10 to 14 years in order to make younger adolescent girls and their needs visible and to track progress against commitments, policies and programmes on girls and young women.
- Train negotiators of international standards on girls' rights and realities.** Invest in training programmes and capacity building for diplomats to enhance their expertise and empower them to consistently apply progressive language in negotiations.
- Ensure the appointment of Special Procedures mandate holders and Treaty Body Committee Members** with strong girls' rights expertise and invest in gender awareness training programmes for UN experts, including during induction sessions.
- Provide the basis for a more in-depth understanding and analysis of girls' rights,** moving away from potential tokenism and mere mentions of girls in titles and mandates. Ensure the international community, diplomats, and civil society have the resources and expertise needed to address the totality of girls' experiences, the issues that affect them, and the breadth of their rights. More effort and investment must go in to drafting, negotiating and passing resolutions on girls' rights.
- Prioritise funding civil society work on girls' rights.** Support NGOs, including girl- and youth-led organisations, in their core work to maintain the progress made to date and to continue progressing towards enhanced protection of girls and girls' rights, including supporting work on issues beyond the traditional stereotypical topics associated with girls.
- Invest in promoting equality for girls in all their diversity and remain steadfast in our commitment to girls' rights.** By better understanding and analysing the strategies and language used by the anti-rights and anti-gender groups in different contexts, we can help promote a healthy progression, promotion and protection of girls' rights. Adequate resourcing is vital for mitigating and responding to the intensifying crises, fragility and threats facing the world today, including the backlash against human rights and gender-diversity.

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

5

- Ratify all relevant instruments relating to securing political, economic, social, and cultural rights for girls**—especially both CEDAW and CRC and the communications procedure Optional Protocols to CEDAW, CRC, ICCPR and ICESCR—and strengthen the implementation of such instruments at national and local levels, and ensure timely reporting to treaty bodies on the progress of such implementation.
- Withdraw all reservations** to CEDAW, CRC, the SGDs, ICPD, Beijing Declaration, and other international agreements that undermine the protection of girls and their human rights.



Explore the database and take our girls' rights quiz at: girlsrightsplatform.org

Looking for Strong Language?

Check out our human rights database, which allows you to easily find and build upon strong agreed language and soft law.

The database not only covers documents related to genders, or the rights of children, woman, or girls. It covers all human rights issues and can be used broadly, in any human rights negotiation.

Endnotes

- 1 HRC, 'Resolution 41/6 on Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls', 11 July 2019, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/41/6.
- 2 HRC, 'Resolution 50/7 Mandate of Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences', 7 July 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/50/7.
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Until we are all equal

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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