



**GIRLS
GET
EQUAL**

TURNING THE WORLD AROUND

**GIRL AND YOUNG
WOMEN ACTIVISTS
LEADING THE FIGHT
FOR EQUALITY**

**GIRLS OUT
LOOK**

TECHNICAL REPORT

**THE STATE OF THE
WORLD'S GIRLS**

2 0 2 3

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ABBREVIATIONS

APAC	Asia and the Pacific
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
CEDAW	UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEFMU	child early forced marriage and unions
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSO	civil society organisation
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DHS	Demographic Health Survey
EU	European Union
FGD	focus group discussion
FRIDA	The Young Feminist Fund
GAGE	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
GBV	gender based-violence
GGE	Girls Get Equal
GYIG	Global Young Influencer Group
HLPF	High Level Political Forum
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse people
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MEESA	Middle East and East and Southern Africa
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO	non-governmental organisation
ODA	official development assistance
ROA	Region of the Americas
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SOGIE	sexual orientation gender identity and expression
SRHR	sexual reproductive health and rights
SOTWG	State of the World's Girls
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VNRs	voluntary national reviews
WACA	West and Central Africa

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year the research undertaken for the **State of the World's Girls (SOTWG)** report is based on a survey with girls and young women activists, 203 peer-to-peer interviews and seven focus group discussions with 57 female youth activists. This research provides a snapshot of what it is like to be a girl or young woman campaigner in 2023. The backdrop to this is one of disrupted progress on gender equality, growing hostility towards bodily autonomy and girls' and women's rights, the rise of anti-rights movements and restricted civic space. The most pressing issues are globally interconnected. A rollback in rights in one context has ripple effects on to other contexts. Accordingly, this research seeks to understand both the barriers faced by girls and young women activists and campaigners around the world and the motivation and inspiration that drive them forward.

Our research demonstrates that girls and young women are passionate advocates in their communities. Some 60 per cent of girls and young women joined a group to prompt systemic change. Their activism was less about making changes to their own lives, and more about what they could do to change things for others, by speaking out or advocating directly.

Gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) were at the forefront of the girls' and young women's activism, with 60 per cent of respondents noting it as the topic they were most active on. Activists were acutely aware that achieving gender equality cannot happen in a silo. It was viewed by many of the activists as critically intertwined with other key areas. For example, activists explained how adopting the lens of gender equality allows them to interrogate the underlying structures which have a bearing on other areas, such as climate change, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) or poverty.

“One thing that we need to understand, or I figured out, is climate change affects everyone. But especially in a country like Ethiopia and developing countries, climate change affects more girls and women... For example, if you see that if there is climate change, you don't get water. So, in rural places to get water, women are going and then they will get raped or they will be physically harassed or verbally harassed so they have this kind of problem. So, the climate change effect is more on women rather than men.”

Person A, 24, Ethiopia

Most of the girls and young women appreciated that governments juggle multiple priorities but they noted that actions taken on pressing issues were often insufficient – hence the need for activism and collective action. Even when governments did offer support, it was often seen to be ad hoc and campaign-specific rather than part of broader government policy or programme initiatives. Young people are under-represented and underutilised in terms of advocacy work and policy-level changes and government decisions.

Despite some reservations, and some disagreement on the precise role that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) play in young female activism, there is a sense overall that young women and girl activists value the role that the SDGs can play in their work. Many of the goals align with their own priorities – gender equality, GBV, SRHR and climate action – while other goals like poverty and hunger reduction and quality education are intertwined with the work they are doing with their communities. The presence of the SDGs both helps the female activists to feel part of a global activist community and can be used to motivate their own governments around the issues that they care about. However, the SDGs are not a magic bullet and many activists had limited expectations around them in terms of real impact on their lives and activities. There were issues too around accountability. How can activists properly monitor progress and hold governments to account? There is a real need to involve youth in shaping policies, programmes and initiatives related to the SDGs. Several activists noted that including the voices of young women and girls as part of decision making is key to challenging the status quo around how things are done.

Education is discussed by many young women and girl activists as critical to informing their identity for activism and their ability to effect change. Girl and young women activists take self-education and acquiring knowledge about their topic of activism very seriously. Education in schools and universities as well as personal experience are among the first sources of knowledge for many young women and girl activists, prompting them to become active on an issue.

Most activists (60 per cent) campaign both online and face to face. From the survey, it emerges that campaigning online or digitally only is universally rare. Several of them explained how a mixed approach helps to target different types of stakeholders and audiences, but also cautioned that online-only activism may lend itself to misinformation or even exclusion. However, activists acknowledged that social media was important for targeting young people. Almost all the interviewed girls and young women discussed their activism as a collective endeavour – some even defining activism as inherently collective as it creates belonging and bonds between those taking action. Most young women and girl activists noted carrying out work at local or community levels. Activists who described targeting national-level stakeholders with their activism were generally older and more experienced. These were young women and girls who had started through grassroots activism and were now operating at national levels. Those active at national levels described this work as a high point, however they also acknowledged that not many people get access to that level of campaigning. They also reflected how important it is to use and share their experience to build the next generation and community of activists who can campaign on the issues.

Among survey respondents, 95 per cent said that their activism had a positive impact on them and 61 per cent of respondents said that their activism had met or exceeded their expectations. Interviewees critically reflected on impact, describing how and where this had occurred, with the majority noting impacts at personal or community levels. Very few of the young women and girl activists interviewed believed that their activism had no impact.

Girls' and young women's energy and determination were the dominant factor emerging from the research. Their reasons for becoming activists, and their sources of inspiration are many and varied. But for the majority, their activism is fuelled by frustration and discontent. In some cases, these feelings and the desire for change were triggered by socio-political circumstances, by how countries were rolling back on women's rights, or by perceived global inaction on the climate emergency. In other cases, personal experiences were the trigger, as Tani (23, Zimbabwe) points to:

“Well, I was raised by a single mother who struggled so much to take care of me and my brother, and she was also oppressed by my father's family. So, for me growing up, to be honest, sometimes when I think about it, it's like, ‘Oh, so the entire time I didn't realise that I was being nurtured into being a strong woman and being for women’. But at that time, you're just vulnerable. You're just seeing your mother being oppressed, and you're like, ‘Oh, God, I wish I had the power to set her free from this kind of oppression’.”

Many activists also underlined that in some of their contexts there were laws or restrictions that made it difficult to carry out activism activities. Only 10 of 26 countries in the study allowed the full right to peaceful assembly. Many shared that they encountered a lot of bureaucracy relating to activism and participation in social justice movements, with some blaming restrictive government policies. Girls and young women describe witnessing repression of activities and the limitation of freedoms such as speech and digital rights, as well as an increased need to gain permission for certain activities. Some girls and young women shared frightening experiences at peaceful marches with police crackdowns.

Around 54 per cent of young women surveyed identified a lack of finances or resources as the biggest barrier stopping them from engaging in activism. One-third of respondents said they were not aware of the funding sources that enabled their work. One in five girl and young women activists said they faced financial difficulties due to taking part in campaigning. Some of the girls self-funded by paying for their own expenses and activities.

It is not easy being a young female activist. Many of the girls and young women are challenging norms in their communities simply by being willing to speak out on issues they care about, and that others often do not want discussed. They are subject to community backlash and to criticism from friends and family. This abuse is worse if they identify as LGBTIQ+ or belong to a religious, racial or ethnic minority. Also, 17 per cent of activists had feared for their safety while taking part in activism. In the interviews, activists mentioned feeling insecure due to encountering vitriol and hate. One girl shared how she felt that being a girl or woman made her more vulnerable when undertaking activism. Some girls and young women had also felt unsafe due to online abuse or harassment that took place in the form of trolling and that worsened when a post became popular or gained traction.

To undertake activism, the girls and young women noted the need to be mentally strong. However, when asked about negative experiences encountered during their activism, 25 per cent indicated that they felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious. Some of the girls talk about poor mental health, anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion. Having to argue with people, especially loved ones, made it even more mentally challenging. Of the girls and young women who did not want to continue being activists, they gave being burned out as the reason.

Despite the hurdles put in their way, the overwhelming majority of the girl and young women activists were determined to continue with their activism or related activities and saw it as a life's work. They are undoubtedly committed to their causes, but they need to be brought into decision-making spaces and have their voices heard. That means not just working collectively with other groups of activists, but with governments, policy makers, community leaders, INGOs and a whole plethora of people and institutions who have the power to stand with them as they seek to turn the world around.

2. INTRODUCTION

The State of the World's Girls (SOTWG) report is released every year for International Day of the Girl on 11 October. The report contains the annual flagship research for Girls Get Equal (GGE), a Plan International campaign for girls' voice and power that champions their leadership in the drive for gender equality. For girls and young women to lead change themselves, people in power and decision makers need to be held accountable. This would ensure that girls have equal power and are able to make decisions that affect their lives, that they have equal freedom to speak up in public and equal representation, and that the harmful gender stereotypes that hold girls back cease to exist. These three aspects of gender equality – power, freedom and representation – form the foundation of the GGE campaign. They are grounded in a human rights approach that stems from international instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

As part of its SOTWG GGE research series so far, Plan International over the past four years has conducted four different studies, speaking with more than 79,000 girls and young women, including girl and young women activists who are at the forefront of making change happen.^{1,2} Each study has led to a publication. The 2022 SOTWG report *Equal Power Now: Girls, Young Women and Political Participation* revealed that more than two-thirds of girls and young women agreed that politicians understand the views of girls and young women. *The Truth Gap* in 2021 reported on misinformation and disinformation online and found that these restrict girls' activism: as a result, one out of four girls feels less confident to share her views and one in five stops engaging in politics or current affairs altogether. Previous State of the World's Girls reports have also pointed to a frightening culture of misogyny and violence against girls and young women: fear restricts their aspirations, curtails their mobility in all areas of their lives and undermines their confidence. In a world where social media is the newest form of organising, our 2020 report *Free to be Online* found that 58 per cent of girls surveyed had experienced online harassment. In 2019, Plan International's research report *Rewrite Her Story* exposed how media stereotypes and lack of representation affect girls' leadership ambitions. Girl and young women activists have bravely shared their concerns, aspirations and demands in relation to their freedom, representation and power.

Girls' voices and activism have garnered worldwide attention over the past decade but historically their voices have often been invisible and marginalised from traditional spaces of activism.³ This is part of a

¹ Spain, Italy, Peru, India, Uganda, Australia, Canada, United States, Honduras, El Salvador, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Ireland, United Kingdom, France, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Togo, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Nepal, Myanmar, Jordan, Egypt, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Lebanon and Thailand.

² This included surveys, interviews and focus group discussions with 79,420 girls and young women aged 15 to 25. There is a possibility of double counting as the survey used random selection and could have surveyed the same girl or woman across years, but we believe this possibility is still low.

³ Keller, J., Blue, M., Kearney, M. C., Pike, K. and Projansky, S. (2011). "Mapping New Methodological Approaches to Girls' Media Studies: Reflections from the Field", *Journal of Children and Media*, 9(4): 528–535, doi:10.1080/17482798.2015.1091103.

historical legacy of dismissing girls' voices and failing to consider girls as agents of change. Western media generally treats youth movements as if they were spontaneous emotive outbursts rather than organised strategies, when in fact their campaigns use sophisticated techniques.⁴ This type of media coverage often obscures the movement behind young activists and focuses solely on the individual. However, despite these barriers to their political participation, online participation and leadership, the girls and young women we spoke to across the five years continue to be passionate about driving change to improve the lives of girls and women around the world.

More young people around the world are engaging in activism and advocacy as individuals and by joining and organising movements for gender justice. **This year's SOTWG wants to celebrate the power of girls' and young women's activism and campaigning and to understand the crucial role they play in promoting gender equality and driving forward the girls' rights agenda.** Girls and young women from marginalised communities can face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on age, race, ethnicity and disability. Activism provides a platform for girls to share their stories and experiences, to learn from and support each other, and to raise awareness on intersectional issues. Our research shows that when girls and young women unite and work together towards a common goal, they feel they are creating significant impact in their communities and in their countries (see sections 6.1.6 and 6.1.7).

The world is not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Only 26 of 169 targets are likely to be achieved by 2030.⁵ In some cases, progress has unravelled. Only around 15 per cent of SDG targets are on track for 2030, while nearly half of the targets are moderately or severely off track.⁶ Youth are the world's biggest asset to achieve the SDGs and youth activism is instrumental in raising awareness, driving policy change and mobilising communities to work towards achieving the SDGs. To support this ambition, our research aims to explore, understand and give voice to girls and young women on their attitudes towards, and experiences of, activism and campaigning in the SDG era across a sample of diverse contexts.

This study offers an important contribution to the current evidence base on girls' and young women's activism. Our literature review showed that girls' and young women's activism is an under-researched area, especially in low and lower middle-income countries. Much of the existing research focuses on activism in high-income countries and that of older social movements such as the Occupy Wall Street movement. **Moreover, while there is extensive literature on the SDGs, there is less on how the SDGs can work more effectively for girls and young women – and virtually nothing on how female activism can drive forward the SDGs.**

This technical research provides data from a sample of **more than 1,000 girls and young women activists across qualitative and quantitative methodologies in 26 countries** in all their diversity across a wide range of political, civic and income contexts.⁷ It sets out detailed findings of a study conducted between March and May 2023 by Plan International. This study forms the basis of the 2023 State of the World's Girls Report (SOTWG).

Based on the findings from this study, a set of recommendations is presented. These outline the concrete actions that need to be taken at different levels to ensure that all girls and young women are able to be supported in their activism, helping them to drive further impacts on the issues that are important to them.

2.1 Scope and aims of the research

The aim of this research is to deep-dive into the current experiences of girls and young women surrounding activism, campaigning and influencing. The detailed objectives and questions this research targets are the following:

⁴ Kimball, G. (2019). "Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7), 35-56, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/ijws/vol20/iss7/3>.

⁵ UNECE (2022). "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – UNECE", <https://w3.unece.org/sdg2022/> [accessed 21 May 2023].

⁶ UN (2023). "Warning Over Half of World Is Being Left Behind, Secretary-General Urges Greater Action to End Extreme Poverty, at Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report Launch", press release, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sgsm21776.doc.htm> [accessed 13 June 2023].

⁷ This includes 840 girls and young women who responded to a quantitative survey and 260 girls and young women who participated in the qualitative study.

1. To offer an insight into the past and current context that girls and young women find themselves campaigning in now.
 - a. How have trends related to girl and youth activism and campaigning evolved over time and what campaigns or movements may have influenced them?
 - b. What is the current context surrounding gender equality with a focus on girls' and young women's activism in particular?
2. To understand how and why girls and young women get involved in campaigning and activism, including probing their awareness of the SDGs and whether the goals support them in their activism.
 - a. What are girls' and young women's perceptions and experiences of taking part in activism?
 - b. What kind of campaigning are girls and young women involved in and how do they organise?
 - c. How aware are girls and young women of the SDGs, and which SDGs, (if any), do girls and young women target with their campaigning? What is their experience of using them for their activism?
3. To identify the barriers that girls and young women encounter through their activism and the support they may require in their activism journey.
 - a. Are there specific barriers that girls encounter depending on the topic of campaign or context?
 - b. What supports have girls and young women had throughout their activism journey, and what other supports do they need?

3. KEY DEFINITIONS

There are a multitude of definitions around activism and campaigning. When interpreting the findings and recommendations, these are the definitions that should be kept in mind.

- **Activism:** Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, direct or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society towards a perceived greater good.
- **Adolescents:** Girls and boys in all their diversity aged between 10 and 19 years.
- **Campaigning or collective action:** Involves a number of people planning and implementing concrete actions together to achieve change by influencing decision makers to change decision-making processes and outcomes and/or influencing relevant attitudes, behaviour and norms of target groups to create social and political change. Collective action can be undertaken within a group or as a collective effort of multiple groups or networks.
- **Activists/advocates/campaigners:** Children, adolescents and youth, particularly girls and young women, who are taking (often collective) action for systemic change and conflict transformation.⁸ In certain contexts, the term "activist" may not be appropriate, and they may choose to identify as "advocates", "youth leaders", "influencers" or "change makers".

If girls or women did not identify as an activist or campaigner, they were asked if they had participated in one or more of the following activities:

- Used funds and resources to influence groups, organisations or persons to change.

⁸ Plan International (2020). "Engaging Girls, Boys and Youth as Active Citizens", <https://plan-international.org/publications/engaging-girls-boys-and-youth-active-citizens#download-options> [accessed 20 January 2023].

- Spoke out or engaged in advocacy or campaigns (online or in person).
- Created or organised a petition (online or in person).
- Raised funds for a group or organisation to support campaigning activities.
- Lobbied people with decision-making power (in a personal or voluntary capacity).
- Took part in demonstrations, protests, marches or other similar activities.
- Took part in strikes, walk-outs, or other similar activities in a work context.
- Organised or helped to organise a group or movement (online or in person).
- Joined an activist, advocacy or campaigning group (online or in person).
- Engaged their own networks for an activist, advocacy or campaign group (online or in person, in a voluntary capacity).
- Utilised their own skills or talents (e.g. writing, organising, creative or artistic) for advocacy, influencing or campaigning.
- Engaged in individual protest, such as boycotting brands.
- Spoke to media as part of a campaign.

If they had participated in at least one activity, they were eligible to participate in the study.

- **Girls:** Girls in all their diversity aged between 15 and 19 years.
- **Human rights defenders:** Individuals, groups and associations contributing to the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals. It encompasses anyone working for the promotion and protection of human rights, even on an occasional basis.
- **Young women:** Women in all their diversity aged 20 to 24 years.
- **Youth:** Persons aged between 15 and 24 years.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Setting the scene

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were developed as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, drafted and unilaterally signed in 2015, and which built on the objectives outlined by the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The agenda for action comprises 17 ambitious goals, 169 targets and 247 indicators which address a range of ecological, social and economic issues, the protection of human rights, and the importance of partnership. There is an explicit emphasis that the SDGs should be inclusive, participatory and rights-based. A central principle of Agenda 2030 is to “leave no one behind”. Moreover, the United Nations (UN) Member States made a commitment to reach those furthest behind first, and to fast-track them within the global agenda.⁹

Low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs) face major challenges to achieving the SDGs for vulnerable adolescents.¹⁰ This is reflected by countries’ difficulties in accessing external public and private financing on beneficial terms, in mobilising domestic resources adequately and in sustaining broad-based reforms to achieve faster growth.¹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these problems.

With an increase in the size of the world’s youth population has come an increased necessity to engage young people and put them at the helm of driving forward Agenda 2030. The importance of their participation, placing them at the centre of sustainable and inclusive development, has been highlighted in many national development strategies. Youth have historically been largely marginalised from

⁹ Guglielmi, S. and Jones, N. (2019). “Policy Note: The invisibility of adolescents within the SDGs”, GAGE, ODI.

¹⁰ Cluver, L. D., Orkin, F. M., Campeau, L., Toska, E., Webb, D., Carlqvist, A., and Sherr, L. (2019). “Improving lives by accelerating progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals for adolescents living with HIV: a prospective cohort study”, *Lancet Child Adolescence*, 3: 245–254.

¹¹ Shetty, S. (2020). “Accelerating Progress of Low-Income Countries Towards the SDGs: Balancing Realism and Ambition in a Post-COVID-19 World”, CGD Policy Paper 194. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/accelerating-progress-low-income-countries-towards-sdgs-balancing-realism-and-ambition>

development and decision-making processes. However, it is now being recognised that harnessing the creativity, leadership and social capital of youth holds the potential for the development of sustainable strategies to tackle some of the most pressing global challenges of our time.¹²

Little progress on gender equality has been made at the global level between 2015 and 2020.¹³ According to the World Economic Forum, it will take another 131 years to achieve gender equality.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has entrenched these gender fault lines, with a particular effect on women and girls. For example, women occupy the majority of informal and lower paid employment and as such they experienced much of the loss of employment during that period, while unpaid care work increased – mostly provided by girls and women. Violence against women and child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) also rose during the pandemic.

Activism has long been synonymous with youth. Consider the 1968 demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the US, the global Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring (2000–2009), or the recent protests in Iran over the death of the young female student Mahsa Amini. Young people have a record of pushing forward social change. Young activists have pushed for change through powerful social movements including the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, Los Indignados in Spain, Y'en a marre in Senegal, and le Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso.¹⁵

In addition, young women and girls are leading the fight against sexual violence and harassment such as the #cuéntalo campaign in Latin America, #meuprimeiroassedio campaign in Brazil, the global #metoo movement and the #everydaysexism campaign in the UK. In Iran, women from all ages and backgrounds have demanded justice, reform and rights following Mahsa Amini's death after she was arrested and held by the morality police. The protests are dominated by young women and men.

Volumes of research attest to the role that empowered girls can play in catalysing societal development. Not only does supporting and empowering adolescent girls contribute to progress towards gender equality. Research by Plan International and by the World Bank demonstrates that investing in girls' education and health can also lead to substantial economic and social returns including increased labour force participation, higher income levels and reduced poverty rates.^{16,17} Girl-led initiatives often focus on addressing community issues, aiming to solve problems and implement initiatives locally which can have a profound effect on communities' wellbeing. Girls in all their diversity have been flourishing as leaders of social change. Adolescent girls and young women have been leading and organising global movements like the "Fridays for Future" campaign for tackling climate change. Launched in 2018, the movement started with Greta Thunberg skipping school to protest about climate action outside the Swedish Parliament. Soon, the movement spread to tens of thousands of students worldwide skipping school to join peaceful demonstrations. For example, Vanessa Nakate, inspired by Thunberg, began a solidarity strike against inaction over the climate crisis in 2019. For several months she was the lone protester outside the gates of the Ugandan Parliament. She has also founded the Youth for Future Africa and the Africa-based Rise Up Movement.

Today young people are questioning traditional authority structures, championing change, challenging injustice and inequality, and asserting their rights to be included in decision-making processes. For example, a global study of almost 10,000 Gen Z'ers (people born between 1995 and 2010) found that 70 per cent are involved in a social or political cause. Although not all those surveyed identified as fully fledged activists, they were found to be highly socially involved – for instance, advocating for causes they believe in by reflecting that in what they choose to spend their money on and whom they choose

¹² UN General Assembly (2015). "Young People Must Be at Centre of Sustainable Development Agenda, Speakers Say, as General Assembly Marks Anniversary of World Programme of Action for Youth", Sixty-Ninth Session, High-Level Event for World Programme of Action on Youth, AM & PM Meetings. GA/11648, 29 May 2015.

¹³ Equal Measures 2030 (2022). "2022 SDG Gender Index", <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/2022-sdg-gender-index/> [accessed 20 July 2023].

¹⁴ World Economic Forum (2023). "Global Gender Gap Report 2023", <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023> [accessed 20 July 2023].

¹⁵ Kimball, G. (2019). "Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists".

¹⁶ Citi Group and Plan International (2020). "The Case for Holistic Investment in Girls: Improving Lives, Realizing Potential, Benefiting Everyone". Plan International, <https://plan-international.org/publications/the-case-for-holistic-investment-in-girls>

¹⁷ Wodon, Q., Montenegro, C., Nguyen, H. and Onagoruwa, A. (2018). "Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls", The Cost of Not Educating Girls Notes Series. Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/29956> (License: CC BY 3.0 IGO).

to work for.¹⁸ Young feminists are integrated within and organising across these diverse movements in an intersectional way, both within and between countries.¹⁹ Research into young feminist movements by FRIDA – the Young Feminist Fund – and the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) found that young feminist organisations across the globe represent diverse feminist identities and social movements, including: youth, climate justice, sex workers, LGBTIQ+ movements, indigenous movements, sexual reproductive rights, grassroots women’s movements, human rights defenders, health and disability rights.²⁰

4.2 Why are young people organising?

There are countless examples of activism, campaigning or collective action aiming for social change. Some have succeeded in achieving their goals, others have faltered and for many the ongoing struggle for change continues. Scholars have considered the forces that lead people to social movements and activism. They identify some of the following reasons for leading people to activism: strong identification with the group whose grievances the movement addresses, family background, social class, education and other elements of political socialisation that support activist engagement all play a role.²¹

Year on year, many countries around the world have seen net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with a rollback of girls’ and women’s rights.²² Young people have been raised against the backdrop of the 2008 recession. Their path to adulthood has been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which they have seen rising inequalities.²³ Increased technology access also means that young people have constant access to news cycles and user-generated content that was not available in the past, making it increasingly difficult to turn away from issues-driven discourse, further incentivising them to mobilise out of necessity.

The CIVICUS Monitor is one of the most comprehensive efforts to document the enabling conditions for civil society globally. Their data suggest an ever-shrinking civic space with only 3 per cent of people currently living in countries with an open civic space.²⁴ CIVICUS highlights the restrictions and attacks imposed on the physical spaces of civil society. However, civic space is also shrinking online. Digital technologies can be used to restrict spaces of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their activities, often instrumentalised by governments and non-state actors to curb opposition and dissent.²⁵ Nevertheless, digital technologies have become essential tools for CSOs to collaborate, raise awareness and mobilise effectively.²⁶ Various digital means, such as tech platforms, data collection and surveillance, can pose threats and restrictions to the work of CSOs, jeopardising the spaces available for political and civic engagement.²⁷

An increasingly inhumane approach to migration, a rollback of girls’, women’s and LGBTIQ+ rights alongside a rise of far-right groups worldwide and shrinking civic space have combined to prompt youth to take action. Many organisations have pointed to democratic backsliding in the Americas, with strong opposition to feminist policies.²⁸ This has led to changes of laws that threaten women such as the criminalisation of abortion in El Salvador and parts of the US, and the promotion of regressive laws in

¹⁸ Edelman (2021). “Unleashing the Power of Gen Z”, Edelman. Retrieved from <https://www.edelman.com/insights/unleashing-power-gen-z>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Davies, I., and Sweetman, C. (2018). “Introduction: development and young feminisms”, *Gender and Development*, 26(3): 387-401, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1540197>

²¹ Taft, J. K. (2017). “Teenage girls’ narratives of becoming activists”, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(1): 27–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2017.1324173>.

²² According to Freedom House, 2021 marked the 16th consecutive year of decline in rights, with 60 countries marking declines, and only 25 registering gains. Freedom House (2022). *Freedom in the World 2021: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, 2022, FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf (freedomhouse.org) (accessed 18 August 2023)

²³ BBC Worklife (2022). “Gen Z: How Young People Are Changing Activism”, BBC Worklife, 3 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220803-gen-z-how-young-people-are-changing-activism>

²⁴ CIVICUS (2023). “Facts and Figures”, CIVICUS Monitor. Retrieved from <https://monitor.civicus.org/facts/>

²⁵ Tactical Tech (unknown). “Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective”, Our Data Ourselves, <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) (2023). “Regressive Wave for Women in Central America”, WOLA, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/regressive-wave-women-central-america/>

Guatemala.^{29,30,31} The existing literature demonstrates that progress on women's rights is influenced by several factors, including the political party in government, the impact of left-leaning ideologies, the historical legacy of communism, the dynamics between the state and religious entities, the level of influence exerted by institutionalised religion in society, and the representation of women in national parliaments.³² Securing social change and access to rights is not a vertical process. Progress can be challenged and sometimes even reversed.³³ In fact, activists often invest significant time in defending and protecting gains made.

Types of activism campaigns or collective action can be many and varied. They can involve technological, cultural and social factors. One such socio-cultural factor is the desire to address perceived inequalities within social structures, which may be based on a person's race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion or class. When individuals or groups feel their civil liberties and rights are being compromised and witness oppressive and exclusionary policies, individuals or groups can come together to correct these injustices to various forms of activism or collective action as part of a social, cultural or political change.

Young people around the world are increasingly distrustful of institutions.³⁴ Braungart states that youth movements can emerge out of generational tensions and relations.³⁵ Moreover, the level of youth mobilisation varies from movement to movement, with movements like migrant rights, feminist and LGBTIQ+ rights experiencing a surge in recent years, although there is often tension between youth and adult leaders within these movements.³⁶ Recent youth activism reflects young people's values, a belief in gender equality and diversity, anger about environmental destruction and a growing impatience with the older generation's perceived inaction.³⁷ A study that looked at why youth participate in climate activism in Norway found that strike participants recognised that the responsibility for causing and addressing climate change rests on the shoulders of everyone, both at individual and structural levels.³⁸ This understanding of shared responsibility was related to a sense of self-blame, and is congruent with the literature on collective guilt and collective action.³⁹ Researchers found that collective guilt was related to identification with school strikers, which points to the importance of collective emotions, and perhaps particularly collective guilt, in the study of collective action.⁴⁰

4.3 Activist narratives

Research into activist identities has garnered considerable attention, shedding light on the complex and multi-faceted nature of individuals engaged in social and progressive causes.

Vallochi studied the identities of progressive activists by listening to their life stories.⁴¹ This helped to uncover important patterns related to how social class influences a person's activism. Through his work, Vallochi identified three distinct narratives that form the foundation of activist identities:

- activism as a calling
- activism as a career

²⁹ Human Rights Watch (2023) "El Salvador: Court Hears Case on Total Abortion Ban", 23 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/23/el-salvador-court-hears-case-total-abortion-ban>

³⁰ Human Rights Watch (2023) "Human Rights Crisis: Abortion in the United States after Dobbs", 18 April 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/18/human-rights-crisis-abortion-united-states-after-dobbs>

³¹ Human Rights Watch (2022). "Life and Family" Bill: Smokescreen for Corruption in Guatemala", 15 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/15/life-and-family-bill-smokescreen-corruption-guatemala>

³² Mama Cash (2020). Feminist activism works! A review of select literature on the impact of feminist activism in achieving women's rights, June 2020, https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/feminist_activism_works_mama_cash.pdf

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ O'Malley, D. L. and Johnson, R. (2018). "A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do", *Gender and Development*, 26(3): 533–550, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1526370>

³⁵ Braungart, R. G. and Braungart, M. M. (2001). "In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences".

³⁶ Elliott, T. and Earl, J. (2018). "Organizing the Next Generation: Youth Engagement with Activism Inside and Outside of Organizations", *Social Media + Society*, 1–18, DOI: 10.1177/2056305117750722.

³⁷ Kimball (2019). "Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists."

³⁸ Haugestad, C. A. P., Skauge, A. D., Kunst, J. R. and Power, S. A. (2021). "Why do youth participate in climate activism? A mixed-methods investigation of the #FridaysForFuture climate protests", *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 76: 101647, ISSN 0272-4944, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101647>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Vallochi, S. (2012). "Activism as a career, calling, and way of life", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 42(2): 169–200, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241612467202>

- activism as a way of life.

Another activist narrative is the “activist coming of age tale”. Rishoi argues that while male coming of age stories have been defined largely by a rugged individualism and search for self, women’s coming of age tales instead appear to centre more on the collective and on social connections.⁴² In both cases, however, the coming of age narrative has been criticised for describing young people as “becoming” rather than “being” which serves to describe young people as incapable in contrast to the imagined vision of a capable, complete and rational adult.

Drawing on the conventions of coming-of-age narratives as well as developmental ideas of adolescence as a time of self-discovery, Taft describes how teenage girl activists produce narratives of the activist self that are influenced by age-based discourses.⁴³ Activist stories are far from universal. Scholarship highlights how race, class and gender all influence the way that individuals narrate their activist biographies. Taft also highlights family tradition or a history of “left activism” as a key influence, with approximately a quarter of the 75 girls interviewed having a parent who is still, or once was, engaged in social movements and activism.

Taft and Gordon also highlight an outsider narrative where girls distinguish themselves from others in their school whom they see as frivolous and where becoming an activist is a way of finding others with the same interests.⁴⁴

4.4 How are young people organising?

There is ample evidence that young people’s engagement in formal modes of civic participation is in decline.^{45,46} However, alongside this retreat from formal modes of political participation, it is also widely recognised that many young people remain active in informal and civic forms of participation. Activism, community organising and participating in social movements are all powerful forms of civic engagement.

Hands outlines three modes of activism:

- protest and dissent: an expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo and an appeal to others for change;
- resistance: considered a more active practice, for example, joining an organisation that lobbies for change;
- rebellion: the strongest form of activism that implies direct action and can scale from small to large acts.⁴⁷

Activism and the methods people use will vary greatly by context. For example, the method activists will use in a closed or repressed state will be different to those in open or democratic political contexts. Within such material constraints, there are also negotiations about how strategies fit with activists’ identities and goals, which then culturally channel organising efforts in particular directions. Specific countries and local contexts also provide historical frameworks for making some ideas appear more unfamiliar and radical, even when they may be normalised as common sense in other places.

Social media has proven itself to be a vital tool for activist groups to spread awareness and mobilise movements. Alternative modes of activism such as radical leaflets, graffiti, protest music, performance art, videos and political documentaries can be spread rapidly across wider audiences via social media and the internet. This has been a powerful driver of young feminists with an issue that can stay as a single retweet, or continue into engagement over days, weeks or months with a movement mobilising around a key issue.⁴⁸ Many young women are coming into activism as a result of encountering others

⁴² Rishoi, C. (2003). “From Girl to Woman: American Women’s Coming-of-Age Narratives”, Albany: State University of New York Press

⁴³ Taft, J. K. (2017). “Teenage Girls’ Narratives of Becoming Activists”, *Contemporary Social Science* 12(1–2): 27–39.

⁴⁴ Gordon, H. R. and Taft, J. K. (2011). “Rethinking Youth Political Socialization: Teenage Activists Talk Back”, *Youth and Society* 43(4): 1499–1527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X10386087>

⁴⁵ Barrett, M. and Pachi, D. (2019). “Civic and Political Engagement Among Youth: Concepts, forms and factors”. In M. Barrett and D. Pachi (eds), *Youth Civic and Political Engagement*. Routledge.

⁴⁶ O’Malley and Johnson (2018). “A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do”.

⁴⁷ Hands, J. (2011). “@ is for Activism, Dissent, Resistance and Rebellion in a Digital Culture”. Pluto Press.

⁴⁸ Davies and Sweetman (2018). “Introduction: development and young feminisms”.

on social media, and movements are evolving organically from online forums. Some commentators have emphasised that fourth wave activism is not solely in the online sphere; rather, it is “an alliance between technology, social networks, and people on the streets”.⁴⁹

Women have been found to be more likely to engage in more private and resource-efficient forms of protest, such as signing petitions, or boycotting products,⁵⁰ and are more engaged than men in non-political volunteering, community services and local civic organisations.⁵¹ Feminist experiences of solidarity and exclusion in social justice movements shaped what today are called theories of intersectionality. Cross-cutting experiences of oppression shaped feminist choices of collective strategies for change.⁵² Young feminists are reinventing and building new types of organisations based on new cultures of leadership, greater emphasis on the collectives and more holistic compensation for activist work.⁵³ Young people are forging transformative feminist leadership models that challenge the status quo, decentralise power and place decisions in the hands of young feminists.⁵⁴ Feminist organising responds to both the inherent intersectionality among race, class, gender and sexualities and the priorities of its social context. Feminist organising strategies shift between independence and embeddedness, emphasising independence when gender concerns are ignored or trivialised by other movements, and embeddedness when they are more welcomed and supported.⁵⁵

4.5 Challenges

Gendered challenges

In many movements, girls, women, boys and men are working together but women and girls experience challenges that are specifically linked to being or identifying as a girl or woman. A UNHCR report identified gender and age discrimination, and exclusion from public spaces as key challenges for girls and young women’s participation in activism.⁵⁶ Ferree and Mueller found that historically when women organised in mixed sex groups, they often discovered gender subordination, and then looked for solidarity with other women to contest it.⁵⁷ For example, gender conflict during the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 gave rise to spin-off feminist organisations and networks.⁵⁸ Female activists shared that the movement was male-dominated and women were being “patronised and policed”.⁵⁹ However, tensions can still arise in women’s movements. Many feminists in LMICs argue that despite embracing intersectionality in theory, feminist organisers in middle- and high-income countries sometimes fail to recognise their own power and position, while also ignoring and alienating those whom they wish to help and sometimes producing more harm than good in local situations.⁶⁰

A factor that influences the experience of threats, risks and violence against female and girl activists is gender. According to a 2022 report by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), a lack of safety and security was a major barrier to girls’ and young women’s activism.⁶¹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Marien, S., Hooghe, M. and Quintelier, E. (2010). “Inequalities in Non-institutionalised Forms of Political Participation: A Multi-level Analysis of 25 Countries”, *Political Studies*, 58(1): 187–213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2009.00801.x>

⁵¹ Malin, H., Tirri, K. and Liauw, I. (2015). “Adolescent moral motivations for civic engagement: Clues to the political gender gap?”, *Journal of Moral Education*, 44(1): 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2015.1014324>

⁵² Ferree, M. M. and Ewig, C. (2013). “Global feminist organising: Identifying patterns of activism”. In S. Maddison and M. Sawyer (eds), *The Women’s Movement in Protest, Institutions and the Internet: Australia in Transnational Perspective* (pp. 148-162). Routledge.

⁵³ O’Malley and Johnson (2018). “A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do”.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ferree and Ewig (2013). “Global Feminist Organising: Identifying patterns of activism”.

⁵⁶ OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). (2022). “Despite Being at the Forefront of Activism, Women and Girls Still Face Barriers”, September, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/09/despite-being-forefront-activism-women-and-girls-still-face-barriers>

⁵⁷ Ferree, M. M. and Mueller, C. M. (2004). “Feminism and the Women’s Movement: A Global Perspective”. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, and H. Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (pp. 527–546), 01 January 2004, DOI: 10.1002/9780470999103.ch25.

⁵⁸ Hurwitz, H. M. and Taylor, V. (2018). “Women Occupying Wall Street: Gender Conflict and Feminist Mobilization”. In McCammon, H. J. and Banaszak, L. A. (eds), *100 Years of the Nineteenth Amendment: An Appraisal of Women’s Political Activism* (pp. 1-29). New York: Oxford Academic. Online edition. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190265144.003.0015. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190265144.003.0015>

⁵⁹ *Guardian* (2011). “Occupy Wall Street: Women struggle to make their voices heard”, *The Guardian*, 30 November 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/30/occupy-wall-street-women-voice>

⁶⁰ Ferree and Ewig (2013). “Global Feminist Organising: Identifying patterns of activism”.

⁶¹ OHCHR (2022). “Despite Being at the Forefront of Activism, Women and Girls Still Face Barriers”.

Female and gender non-conforming activists and campaigners are exposed to specific risks and numerous forms of violence.

Girls and young women are also more vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment when engaging in street activism. Due to these dangers, many female activists and campaigners have embraced technology, undertaking their activism and campaigning through online methods. For example, in Egypt, Asmaa Mahfouz, 26, developed a famous video appealing to men to go to Cairo's Tahir square. Since her parents forbade her to demonstrate on the streets or use the internet, she used her phone to organise from her bedroom.⁶²

Female activists and campaigners also attract vitriol online especially in relation to gender equality issues which can provoke considerable backlash. A study by Plan International with more than 14,000 girls in 22 countries found that harassment online falls into certain categories: harassment for simply being a girl or woman online, which gets worse if you are Black, identify as LGBTIQ+ or have a disability; or harassment that occurs when girls or women actively speak out online, where they are attacked for what they are saying or for being outspoken.⁶³ This can cause female activists and campaigners to be censored and silenced for speaking out about issues they care about.

Funding

Research since the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) has supported the fact that one of the most significant ways to advance gender equality is to support and resource feminist movements.⁶⁴ Analysis finds feminist movements – especially in low- and middle-income countries – continue to operate on shoestring budgets. For instance, 48 per cent of women's rights and feminist organisations from these areas seeking funding from the Global Fund for Women report their most recent fiscal year budget was less than US \$30,000 a year.⁶⁵

One of the critiques many feminist organisations and movements have in the sector is the "NGO-isation" of movements. Donor concerns often drive the formalisation of budgets and organisational roles to assure fiscal accountability. While this has some advantages, including demands from government for accountability for public money, it further ostracises smaller grassroots organisations who may not have the skills or resources to meet compliance measures. UN conferences and their parallel NGO forums have also spurred this NGO-isation by offering better access and resources to more formally organised groups.^{66,67} This further embeds power imbalances that favour the dominance of larger international and national organisations, usually led by adults.

There is limited flexible and core funding available that supports long-term sustainability of smaller civil society organisations and movements in general. While many governments have committed to increase their support for women and girls, according to a report conducted by AWID and Mama Cash more than 99 per cent never reached feminist movements directly.^{68,69} They highlight the issue is not a lack of resources but rather the way in which funding moves. They argue that funding should be channelled in ways that are intentionally designed to transfer funds to feminist movements in low- and middle-income countries.

Targeting foreign funding is one of the most popular and effective government strategies used worldwide to curb civil society activity. For example, in 2018, the Government of Nepal introduced the National Integrity Policy placing onerous restrictions on activist groups and on the foreign funding that many rely on for their work.⁷⁰ The policy requires groups to seek government permission to receive

⁶² Kimball (2019). "Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists".

⁶³ Plan International (2020). "Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experience of online harassment", https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/06/SO_TWGR2020-CommsReport-edition2023-EN.pdf [accessed 13 January 2023]

⁶⁴ Mama Cash (2020). "Feminist Activism Works: A review of select literature on the impact of feminist activism in achieving women's rights".

⁶⁵ AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) (2021). "Where is the money for feminist organising? Data snapshots and call to action", https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID_Research_WITM_Brief_ENG.pdf [accessed 16 May 2023]

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ferree and Ewig (2013). "Global Feminist Organising: Identifying patterns of activism".

⁶⁸ AWID (2021). "Where is the money for feminist organising? Data snapshots and call to action".

⁶⁹ UNICEF (2023). "Funding Flows", retrieved from <https://open.unicef.org/funding-flows>

⁷⁰ *Himalayan Times* (2018). "OPMCM drafts National Integrity Policy", 26 April 2018. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/opmcm-drafts-national-integrity-policy>

foreign grants.⁷¹ Likewise, in 2016, Bangladesh passed the Foreign Donations Regulation Bill, which mandates that foreign-funded NGOs, encompassing development, human rights and various other organisations, must seek approval for almost all their activities from a bureau reporting to the prime minister's office.⁷² However, the law lacks clear criteria for rejection or a specified timeframe for decisions.⁷³ Registration is also at the bureau's discretion, and there is a recent provision that criminalises criticism of the government by NGOs.⁷⁴ In Ethiopia, following severe restrictions on foreign funding introduced in 2009, a quarter of local groups shut down within three years.⁷⁵ In addition to targeting funding, many governments are creating additional administrative hurdles for CSOs, such as the need to file all planned activities in advance with the government.⁷⁶ This makes it increasingly difficult for activist groups to organise.

Insufficient funding and resourcing allocated to gender-specific initiatives hinder the effective implementation of the SDGs. Young people are crucial advocates for incorporating perspectives into financial planning and budgets. They can contribute by emphasising the need to consider youth concerns when deciding on financial sources and methods. Additionally, a comprehensive government approach involving planning and finance ministries greatly aids in coordinating policies and programmes, ensuring that youth-related matters receive due attention and appropriate funding in overall development decisions.⁷⁷

Structural barriers

Young activist groups commonly experience state and cultural oppression. In response to these risks, some groups, including feminist groups are operating in a clandestine way, using covert communication methods and alternative apps and platforms.⁷⁸ In some cases, they will have alternative ways of describing their work publicly – particularly when working on LGBTIQ+ issues, or sexual and reproductive health rights including abortion rights in contexts where these are criminalised.⁷⁹

4.6 Inclusion of youth within the SDGs

The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for global development efforts. The framework acknowledges that children and young people are not passive beneficiaries but active stakeholders and agents of change in efforts to achieve the goals. Recognising the significance of youth engagement, the UN has established guidance, such as the UN Youth Strategy to facilitate youth participation and to amplify their contributions.⁸⁰ In 2017, the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development's Working Group on Youth and the 2030 Agenda developed a set of guiding principles for youth engagement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with the process being led by UNDP and Restless Development (a non-profit agency that supports the collective power of young people).⁸¹

Youth development is often inadequately financed and resourced across many of the SDG areas. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda within the framework of national and local plans of action provides an opportunity to increase investment in youth development policies and programming. Efforts are being made to improve young people's access to finance, such as loans, grants and investment opportunities, to support their engagement in SDG-related activities. More work needs to be done to support youth mainstreaming in financial planning and budgeting, and to ensure a youth lens is used for sources and instruments of finance to support implementation of the SDGs.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Human Rights Watch (2016) "Bangladesh: New Law Will Choke Civil Society", 19 October 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/19/bangladesh-new-law-will-choke-civil-society>

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kreiekamp, J. (2017). "University College London Policy Brief – responding to the global crackdown on civil society", <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/sites/global-governance/files/policy-brief-civil-society.pdf> [accessed 3 February 2023]

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ United Nations (2017). "Chapter VI: Youth Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". In United Nations, *World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (pp.95–111).

⁷⁸ O'Malley and Johnson (2018). "A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do".

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ United Nations (n.d.). "Youth 2030, Working with children and young people – United Nations Youth Strategy", https://www.unyouth2030.com/files/ugd/b1d674_9f63445fc59a41b6bb50cbd4f800922b.pdf

⁸¹ United Nations (2017). "Chapter VI: Youth Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", (pp. 95-111).

The primary mechanism for follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in achieving the goals outlined is the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. This forum convenes on a yearly basis at the ministerial level and every four years at the heads of state level. It offers Member States an opportunity to exchange their development experiences, accomplishments, obstacles and insights through voluntary national reviews (VNRs). The low-level uptake of countries doing VNRs, (only 44 countries conducted VNRs in 2022), and the fact that youth involvement is not a formalised aspect of VNRs both indicate the lack of value placed on youth participation. Youth inclusion in SDG monitoring at national level is not financed or formalised across a majority of signatory states. This further perpetuates a failure to value youth involvement. However, many major groups representing different interests try to bring young people's perspectives into sectorial position papers as an official contribution to the High-level Political Forum.

The SDGs underscore the need to involve youth in shaping policies, programmes and initiatives related to the SDGs. However, implementation at the national and local levels does vary and examples of youth-led organisation and youth representative involvement in SDG coordination mechanisms remain sparse.⁸² There are some promising examples of good practice in countries that have established youth involvement in policy discussions. For instance, in Canada a Prime Minister's Youth Council has been established and in Burkina Faso there is a youth leader who takes on the role of ombudsman for youth during the SDG advancement and localisation process.⁸³ The Netherlands has a youth delegate programme with its own national SDG project and objectives. In 2017, Japan Youth Platform for Sustainability produced a youth-led shadow report for Japan's Voluntary National Review. While there has been some limited progress for young people in accountability processes, it is simply not enough. If the transformative power of the 2030 Agenda is to be realised then the follow-up, review and accountability processes for young people must be improved.

Another positive trend is the increasing addition of SDG implementation into other UN accountability mechanisms, especially the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). This is a peer-review mechanism overseen by the UN's Human Rights Council and involves a quinquennial review of the human rights record of every UN Member State and culminates in recommendations issued to each state for improving its compliance with international human rights standards. Not only has the UPR come to assume a central role in global human rights oversight, but it has also been identified as having the potential to enhance state accountability around the SDGs.⁸⁴ At national level, the government of Paraguay has developed SIMORE Plus, an innovative informatic system which allows monitoring of the implementation of obligations and recommendations, in the context of both international human rights bodies and the 2030 Agenda.⁸⁵ In both these cases, girls and young women can directly report on SDG implementation in relation to their human rights situations, raise concerns and propose direct recommendations to address gaps and violations. The UPR process allows any CSO to submit information, so there is no need to be registered, which further helps to bridge the gap in access to these spaces.

4.7 Are the SDGs working for girls?

Investment in data will be especially critical to monitor SDG progress and ensure accountability, as well as to increase understanding of the ongoing and emerging challenges faced by girls and young women. Data shows that the lives of girls and young women today are better in many respects than for previous generations. Girls are more likely to survive childhood, more likely to attend school and complete their education, and are less likely to be married while aged under 18. Yet girls still suffer significant deprivations and inequalities, many of which result from the persistent gender discrimination faced by girls and women everywhere. For many girls, this may be further compounded by their disability, location, race, ethnicity or migration status.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ United Nations General Assembly (2015). Res. 70/1, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1

⁸⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Justice Paraguay (n.d.). "Paraguay SIMPORE Plus", <https://www.mre.gov.py/simoreplus/>

The SDG preamble and other related initiatives such as the Youth 2030 initiative refers to young people as “critical agents of change”. It says the SDGs “lie in the hands of today's younger generation”.⁸⁶ Despite all this, their role as agents of change fails to be captured by the indicators. Currently the analysis used to understand young people’s experiences of gender inequality within SDG 5 is by mapping the ways in which young girls have been subject to oppressive measures within their lifetime. While this is important data to gather to highlight the realities of young girls, these indicators do not offer space for young people to be measured as active agents of sustainable development, but rather limits them as passive objects to whom sustainable development or, conversely, gender inequality happens.⁸⁷

The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme conducted a mapping of investments in adolescent girls from the top ten gender equality donors at global level from 2016 to 2020.⁸⁸ In terms of the ODA earmarked for SDG targets related to gender and adolescents, just over half (51 per cent) of the ODA received goes to the education sector (SDG 4). The other main sectors were good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), at 14 per cent; gender equality (SDG 5), at 11 per cent (this included projects/ programmes tackling violence against women and girls); and poverty alleviation (SDG 1), at 11 per cent, which included social protection measures. Despite evidence on the impact of climate change on women, girls and young people,⁸⁹ only 1 per cent of the gender and adolescent-targeted ODA went to climate change-related sectors.

Sustainable change for girls and progress towards achieving the SDGs will require investments from governments, donors and development organisations. The SDGs and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) platform provide a good opportunity for young female activists to hold their governments to account on their commitments and can be used as a tool for advocacy. For example, Restless Development’s Youth-Led Accountability for Gender Equality programme has emphasised the importance of community-level data collection, through engaging community-based young people in policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of SDG 5.^{90,91} Another example is the UN’s ACTNOW Campaign AWorld Platform for individual action on climate change and sustainability, which creates awareness around the SDGs and engages citizens in living sustainably. The HLPF provides key opportunities for young activists to get their messages across in relation to advocacy on the goals they feel are relevant to their lives and experiences. However, young people need to be included and adequately trained in the processes of data monitoring at the national level to be able to hold governments to account. There are a number of key issues within the SDG landscape that make this difficult to do which are highlighted below.

Lack of disaggregated data

Many countries suffer from a lack of robust data on youth and gender because many national data and statistical systems are under-resourced. Yet high-quality disaggregated data is needed to be able to effectively monitor progress towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is essential that any data collected does not put people at risk. Further, the data collected should respect the right to privacy, and the processes of data collection and analysis should follow a human rights-based approach. The OHCHR note, entitled “A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data: Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Development Agenda”, outlines the principles for data collection as follows: participation in the data collection process, especially of marginalised groups; data disaggregation to guard against discrimination based on sex, age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or religion; self-identification that does not reinforce further discrimination against vulnerable groups; transparency regarding the data collection process; privacy of respondents and maintaining confidentiality of their personal data; and accountability in data collection and use. The UN Statistical Commission (2019) has highlighted data disaggregation as a key priority for the SDGs, because the indicator framework is not delivering sufficient granularity on age and gender differences to be able to measure progress among particular

⁸⁶ United Nations (2015). “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, 42809, 1–13.

⁸⁷ Thomas, J. (2021). “Youth and Their Role in Attaining SDG 5 - Gender Equality”. In *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*. Springer Cham, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95687-9>

⁸⁸ All programming included in this review has gender equality as either a principal or significant objective, and includes young people as one of the target populations.

⁸⁹ Devonald, M., Guglielmi, S. and Jones, N. (2023). “Investing in adolescent girls: mapping global and national funding patterns from 2016 – 2020”, London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence

⁹⁰ Restless Development (2020). “Aisha’s Story”, <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/08/aishas-story/>

⁹¹ Restless Development (2020). “Tackling GBV: Accountability Powered by Young Voices”, Restless Development Blog, <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/10/tackling-gbv-accountability-powered-by-young-voices/>

groups. Only 18 indicators specifically call for data disaggregation. Of 232 SDG indicators, fewer than 8 per cent are gender and adolescent- or youth-specific.⁹²

There are data gaps on SRHR for unmarried sexually active adolescents.⁹³ Refugee adolescent girls (and, in some cases, boys) are also among the most overlooked populations in data collection and programming efforts.^{94,95} Failure to capture specific details in key SDG targets and indicators means that at-risk adolescents, especially girls and those with intersecting identities, are slipping further behind. For example, key general SRHR aspects like abortion and comprehensive sex education are alluded to in targets but are not captured by indicators.

The SDGs can be used to hold states accountable on the mechanisms used to protect some populations (such as girls' access to school). However, this potential is undermined when certain categories are not included within the SDG framework by way of a singular target or goal. This is the case for LGBTIQ+ communities, which makes it difficult to hold UN Member States accountable regarding gender equality for transgender and gender diverse people, people who may not conform to expected gender norms, people who do not conform to the gender assigned at birth, or people who are born with variations to their sex characteristics.

Inconsistent reporting by Member States

The 10- to 14-year cohort is disproportionately neglected across programming. Early adolescents are also slipping through the cracks of data collection efforts. The SDG Indicator 3.7.2 that tracks the adolescent birth rate, for example, has not included country data generated for the 10- to 14-year cohort. This is particularly troubling when considering data gathered from Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) which document that as many as 30 per cent of girls are married before the age of 15 in Chad, as are 29 per cent of girls in the Central African Republic and 22 per cent of girls in Bangladesh.⁹⁶

Access to data

Open access to information and data is at the heart of ensuring transparency and empowering young people as active stakeholders. Currently data can be complex to access with lots of different data sources and complicated calculations. Youth or girl-led monitoring of data involves specific data literacy and analytical skills (and unpaid time) which shuts out the most marginalised young people whose data is also not captured. The problem then becomes two-fold in that there is a lack of data on the youth and especially girls but also, they themselves are unable to access or collect data on their lives.

Cultural and social norms

The SDGs do capture and promote social norm change as part of their broader agenda to achieve sustainable development by 2030 but deep-rooted cultural and social norms and stereotypes continue to hinder progress towards gender equality under the SDGs. While the SDGs provide a framework and global commitment, their success in bringing about community norm change around gender ultimately depends on national and local efforts. Governments, civil society organisations, community leaders and individuals must work together to implement gender-responsive policies, programmes and initiatives tailored to their specific contexts. Mobilisation and activism can be vital for shaping implementation. Concerted efforts could lead to positive shifts in societal norms and contribute to achieving sustainable and meaningful gender equality. More targeted efforts are required to challenge and transform harmful social norms.

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Azzopardi, P., Kennedy, E. and Patton, G. (2017). "Data and indicators to measure adolescent health, social development, and well-being", Innocenti Research Brief, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

⁹⁴ Presler-Marshall, E. (2018). "Adolescent boys in Jordan: the state of the evidence", London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

⁹⁵ Samman, E., Lucci, P., Hagen-Zanker, J., Bhatkal, T., Simunovic, A. T., Nicolai, S., Stuart, E., and Caron, C. (2018). "SDG progress: fragility, crisis and leaving no one behind", London: ODI

⁹⁶ Guglielmi and Jones (2019). "Policy Note: The invisibility of adolescents within the SDGs".

5. METHODOLOGY

The research collected primary mixed methods data through a survey and qualitative peer-led interviews and focus group discussions. The methodology encompasses both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a holistic view of the participants' perspectives. Both methods targeted girl and young women activists whom we knew to be activists or campaigners. It intentionally targeted those we know to be involved in these activities in order to be able to capture their lived experiences of activism across the different contexts.

Two Global Young Influencer Group (GYIG) advisers were part of our reference group for the study and provided feedback and inputs at all key stages of the research including tool development, piloting and testing the survey and providing comments on the study.

5.1 Girl-led peer-to-peer interviews

A peer-to-peer methodology used for the qualitative aspects of this research was premised on a commitment to conducting research “with and for” young female activists. The interviews were led by 70 co-researchers all aged between 15 and 24 who identified as activists or were involved in campaigning or activism (see section 3 for criteria). The girls and women were trained on qualitative interviewing techniques, ethics, safeguarding and the tool itself.

Interview questions: The interview questions were developed by the SOTWG research team with inputs from the reference group who provided feedback on the tool. The co-researchers who conducted the interviews also had a chance to provide feedback and make changes ahead of piloting to ensure the questions were suitable for their country contexts.

The interview was structured into three sections that asked the participants questions about:

- campaigning and activism and their issue areas of focus;
- personal background in activism, how they became involved, as well as enablers and barriers they have experienced;
- knowledge and use of the SDGs and how they do or do not assist their activism.

Timeframe: Interviews took place between 1 April and 11 May 2023.

Data collection: 203 interviews were conducted by the co-researchers. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. This means that not every question was put to all girls to allow space for an open-ended discussion with the interviewee and the ability to be explorative in the exchange. **This also allowed the co-researchers to include their own prompts or follow-up questions.** The interviews varied in time but usually lasted about 30 minutes to two hours. They were conducted via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp and face-to-face in a relevant Plan International office, depending on what was most convenient to the interviewer and interviewee.

Sampling: Table 1 summarises the number of co-researchers per country and the number of interviews conducted and in what language.

Of the interviews, 73 per cent were with young women aged 20 to 24 years, and 27 per cent with girls and young women aged 15 to 19 years.

While not actively selected, the sample includes girls and young women who have a disability, indigenous girls and women, migrants, young mothers and those from the LGBTIQ+ community.

Table 1: Language of interviews, number of co-researchers, number of interviews by region and country

Region, country	Language of interviews	Number of co-researchers	Number of interviews
Middle East and East and Southern Africa			
Ethiopia	English, Amharic	3	7
Jordan	Arabic	3	9
Kenya	English, Kiswahili	3	8
Lebanon	Arabic	3	9
Malawi	English	3	9
Somalia	Arabic, English	3	9
Zimbabwe	English	3	4
West and Central Africa			
Burkina Faso	French	3	14
Togo	French	3	11
Sierra Leone	English	2	6
Nigeria	English	3	7
Asia and the Pacific			
Australia	English	3	9
Bangladesh	Bangla	2	4
Japan	Japanese	2	5
Nepal	Nepali	2	7
Philippines	Tagalog	3	9
Thailand	Thai	3	7
Vietnam	Vietnamese, English	3	9
Europe			
Germany	German, English	2	6
Ireland	English	2	6
Netherlands	Dutch	2	6
The Americas			
Brazil	Portuguese	2	6
Dominican Republic	Spanish	3	9
Guatemala	Spanish	3	9
Paraguay	Spanish	3	9
Canada	English	3	9
Total		70	203

5.2 Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions: Seven FGDs took place online. Online focus groups were chosen because the high number of different countries taking part meant that it was not possible to bring participants together face to face. The focus groups consisted of three key sessions. The first was an exercise aimed at gaining insights into how the girls and young women became interested in activism and what their dreams are in relation to activism or campaigning. The discussions were conducted through a timeline exercise and a series of statements which participants were asked to finish. Participants could write on the online sticky boards, grab the mike to speak or write in the chat box. The second was the exercise “Head, Heart, Bin, Bag” that aimed to explore and understand the experiences of young female campaigners and activists and to identify what successes and challenges they have experienced through their work. The final session was an open discussion around the SDGs, what did or did not resonate with participants about the SDGs, if they found the SDGs useful for their activism and whether they knew what SDGs their government was taking action on.

Timeframe: Focus group discussions took place from 20 March until 29 March 2023.

Data collection: All focus group discussions took place on Zoom. A number of different options were given to participants to support different time zones. Options with interpreters were more limited in order to book translators ahead of time. Focus group discussions were led by two to three facilitators depending on how many participants had signed up.

Sampling:

Table 2: Overview of focus group discussions by region and country, including language

Focus group discussion ⁹⁷	Language	Number of participants	Countries of participants
Focus group 1	English with French interpretation ⁹⁸	10	Philippines, Burkina Faso, Togo, Zimbabwe and Germany
Focus group 2	English	4	Nigeria, Ireland and Germany
Focus group 3	English with Nepali and Arabic interpretation ⁹⁹	13	Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal, Malawi, Jordan, Netherlands and Australia
Focus group 4	English	16	Somalia, Sierra Leone, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Vietnam
Focus group 5 ¹⁰⁰	English and Bangla	2	Bangladesh
Focus group 6	Spanish	6	Guatemala and Dominican Republic
Focus group 7	Spanish with Portuguese interpretation	6	Brazil and Paraguay
Total participants		57	

5.3 Qualitative data analysis

Following the interviews and focus group discussions, the English recordings were transcribed verbatim (excluding filler words like “um”) into English using the platform Rev.

French, Portuguese and Spanish interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed using the Sonix platform, but French, Spanish and Portuguese speaking coders checked for any language inconsistencies on the transcripts and made edits to the translation where necessary as they coded. Japanese and German interviews were transcribed and translated using AI technology, but the translation was checked and edited by staff at the Plan International Country Office. Kiswahili interviews were professionally translated by Plan International Kenya. Arabic interviews were transcribed and translated by a translation company in Lebanon and Jordan.

⁹⁷ Participants were free to choose from several sessions to accommodate time zones and their other priorities. This meant the numbers varied across sessions.

⁹⁸ This was done on Zoom with simultaneous French translation so French speakers could tune into the French speaking channel and when they spoke the other interpreter would simultaneously translate into English on the English language channel.

⁹⁹ This was done on Zoom with simultaneous Nepali and Arabic translation so Arabic and Nepali speakers could tune into the relevant channels to hear their chosen language and when they spoke the other interpreter would simultaneously translate into English on the English language channel.

¹⁰⁰ Some focus groups had very small numbers due to translation needs and Country Offices requested these to be done as a separate group. In those cases, the format was less like a focus group and more like an open discussion due to the small numbers.

The initial interview template was reviewed to make a qualitative codebook which considered possible themes related to the overall sections of the guide. The initial codebook was developed using a hierarchical coding frame to help organise and structure the data and to enable key findings, themes and arguments to be identified within and across each code. A group of seven coders were employed to work alongside members of the research team on the coding of transcripts. A two-hour training session for coders was organised, where the aim of the project, the data collection tools and coding framework were introduced. Coders then had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with one transcript, to code this and offer feedback on the process and framework. The inter-rater reliability of coders¹⁰¹ was not formally assessed, but this first coding exercise was used to align the approach to coding. Weekly check-in meetings were then organised during which coders could offer feedback on the coding process and where any queries would be addressed. In preparation of meetings, a research manager would audit the data and offer feedback to the group or individuals as necessary, to ensure quality assurance of the coding process. A largely deductive coding approach was used and transcripts were divided into key themes and interconnected sub-themes in each of the relevant categories. However, the codebook was developed and changed as new themes emerged, and codes were added or merged as per coders' suggestions. Overarching memos were also written by coders to connect and inter-relate the data and allow for interpretation and to create explanatory accounts.

Qualitative data analysis was undertaken through thematic analysis using Dedoose software. Researchers used a mix of reading through codes to get general themes and patterns of the data as well as using the Dedoose software visualisation tools to examine the general nature of the data, understand how the code system has been applied to the qualitative content, and to expose patterns of variation in the qualitative data and coding activity across sub-groups. For example, frequency charts, such as excerpt count against transcript chart and code application charts, were applied.

Please note that the names of the girls and young women from the interviews and those in the focus group discussions in this study have been changed to ensure anonymity. The majority of the girls and young women chose the names they would like to use in this study. Where not supplied, a pseudonym was assigned to them.

5.4 Survey

The survey was one of the biggest global surveys of girl and young women activists.

Questionnaire: Informed by the literature summarised above, a survey was developed to explore young female activists' experiences of campaigning, including how they were engaged in campaigning, what supports they had available, what barriers to engaging in campaigning and challenges they encountered during their activism journey. The survey included 20 questions and is available upon request.

Data collection happened online. The survey was fielded using Kobo (an online data collection platform) and young women were recruited to the survey via participating Country Offices. The latter put out calls for participation on social media or directly emailed young people who were engaged in relevant projects or initiatives to invite them to participate. The survey was available to fill out online.

Timeframe: The survey was open between 8 March 2023 and 24 April 2023 (over six weeks).

Piloting: The survey was piloted by Country Office focal points, members of the Plan International Global Hub research team and GYIG advisers to the project. Following piloting, changes were made to ensure comprehension of the survey and additional translations were commissioned.

Quality assurance and data monitoring: All survey responses were collected electronically. Data was routinely monitored to ensure that the system was accepting responses and that these were corresponding to expected inputs. Questions and answer options were restricted but allowed for skips and "prefer not to answer" options. No missing data was recorded.

¹⁰¹ Inter-rater or intercoder reliability is the measure of agreement between different coders on how to code the same data.

Sampling: The survey targeted girls and young women aged 15 to 24 in participating countries. Table 3 summarises the sample per country and the language in which the survey was available in that country. Countries are classified into regions as per Plan International's regional classification.

Table 3: Language, sample size by region and country

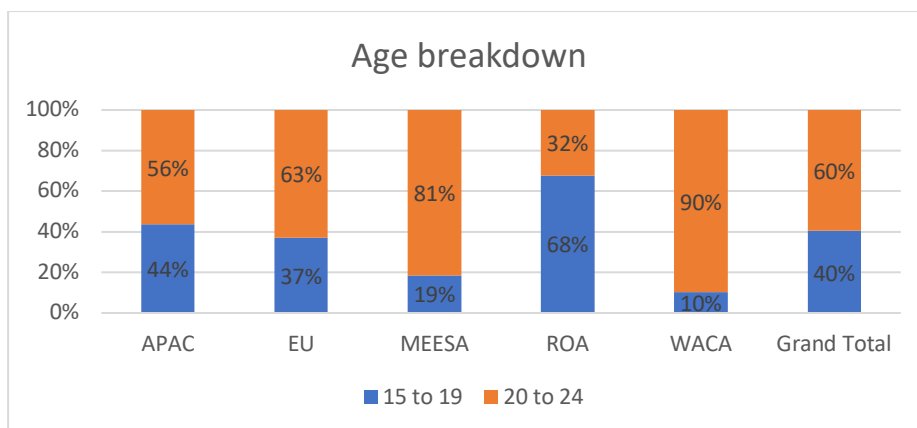
Country	Available language(s)	Total number of respondents
Middle East and East and Southern Africa (MEESA)		
Ethiopia	English	5
Jordan	Arabic	32
Kenya	English	28
Lebanon	Arabic	32
Malawi	Chichewa	54
Somalia	English	27
Zimbabwe	English	27
West and Central Africa (WACA)		
Burkina Faso	French	28
Togo	French	7
Sierra Leone	English	27
Nigeria	English	26
Asia and the Pacific (APAC)		
Australia	English	37
Bangladesh	Bangla	21
Japan	Japanese	6
Nepal	Nepali	40
Philippines	English	25
Thailand	Thai	31
Vietnam	Vietnamese	28
Europe		
Germany	German	26
Ireland	English	20
Netherlands	Dutch	50
Region of the Americas (ROA)		
Brazil	Portuguese	147
Dominican Republic	Spanish	40
Guatemala	Spanish	32
Paraguay	Spanish	23
Canada	English	12
Total		840

In the figures we will refer to the above abbreviated labels, and when a finding applies to countries in both the Middle East and East and Southern Africa region and West and Central Africa, we will discuss this as Middle East and Africa as a whole.

Characteristics of survey participants

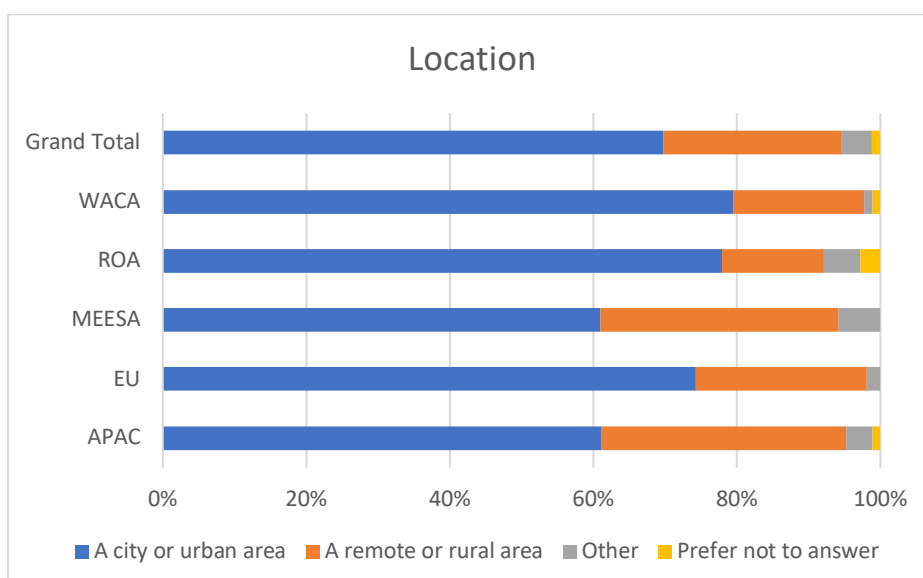
Age breakdown

Of the survey participants, 60 per cent were young women aged 20 to 24. This percentage is highest in the countries in the Middle East and Africa, and lowest in countries in the Americas.



Participants' location

Around 65 per cent of young women and girls surveyed lived in cities or urban areas. This percentage was highest for those residing in West and Central Africa and the Americas, but lowest for those in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa, and Asia and the Pacific.



Other characteristics

One in three of those surveyed identified as LGBTIQ+. This proportion was highest in the Americas and the European region, and lowest in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa.

One in ten participants said they had a disability. This rose to two in ten in Asia and the Pacific.

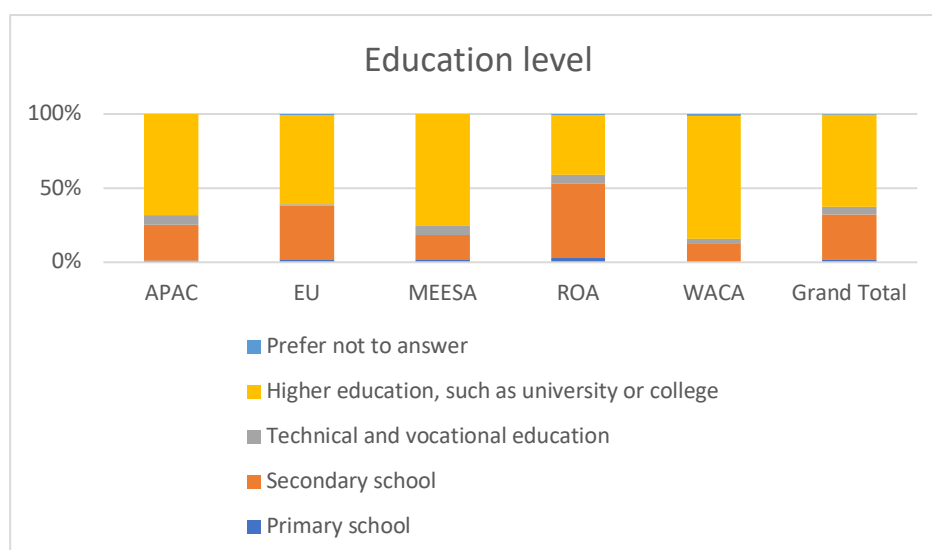
Between 13 and 17 per cent of participants identified as a minority. Most frequently this was a religious minority. Particularly in countries across Africa and the Middle East, around 25 per cent of respondents identified as religious minorities. In Asia and the Pacific, 23 per cent of respondents identified as ethnic minorities. The highest percentage of racial minority respondents were in the Americas (21 per cent).

About one in ten of those surveyed identified as internally displaced. Just 6 per cent of the total number surveyed identified as a refugee, but 17 per cent of respondents from the Middle East and East and Southern Africa identified as such.

Table 4: Intersectional characteristics of the sample

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
LGBTIQ+	38%	42%	15%	44%	22%	33%
Having a disability	19%	19%	7%	9%	9%	12%
Racial minority	14%	5%	8%	21%	8%	13%
Religious minority	12%	4%	26%	19%	25%	17%
Ethnic minority	23%	5%	13%	16%	19%	15%
Internally displaced person	9%	1%	11%	9%	19%	9%
Refugee	5%	2%	17%	0%	5%	6%

The educational level of respondents is high with 62 per cent of all surveyed having completed higher education. This is particularly high in West and Central Africa and the Middle East and East and Southern Africa.



Incentives: No incentives were offered to participants.

Data analysis: Data was summarised by question. To understand whether important differences existed by sub-groups of respondents, the overall pattern of responses was investigated by region, then by age-group, and also by whether respondents identified as LGBTIQ+. Tabulations and graphics offer an overview of important findings (i.e. illustrating differences in particular) with text commenting on each of the above comparisons in turn. Given the relatively modest sample size and variation by country, and also purposive sampling of young activists only, no formal statistical approaches were used for analysis.

5.5 Strengths and limitations to methodology

The peer-to-peer approach blurs the line between the researcher and subject, mitigating the traditional power imbalance inherent in that relationship. Our co-researchers were drawn from the community being studied. This means they had access to other activists who may have been unwilling to engage with professional researchers. Our co-researchers were able to use their existing networks and relationships of trust to approach other female activists to take part in the research. The co-researchers

could also bring the advantage of their own lived experiences. Their practical knowledge and inside understanding of the issues being studied enhances the richness of the research. In addition, participants may respond more honestly and openly to a co-researcher whom they know has personal experience of the issue being discussed and can speak more informally. However, it is possible that bias may also have been introduced as a result of the co-researchers' interviewing activists from their own networks and contacts and also through their own familiarity with the topic.

Benefits for the co-researcher included providing them with valuable work experience, compensation and training which may aid them in the future. A substantial body of evidence indicates that people gain confidence and self-esteem by participating in peer research and by finding that they have added significant value to the process.^{102,103}

Due to the research being in such a large number of countries and data collection needing to happen within a relatively short period of time, we needed a large number of co-researchers. Having such a large variety of data collectors (70 for 203 interviews) affected data quality. The team tried to mitigate this by using agreed standardised data collection tools, piloting the tools and by training data collectors together. However, in some instances interviews were rather brief and there was limited probing.

Co-researchers were recruited from different Plan International offices' networks and partners so there was bias of being interested in issues and topics that are central to the work of Plan International. As well as this, most of the co-researchers and corresponding interviewees needed online access or access to a telephone to do the interview. Some countries did conduct their interviews face to face but the majority of girls and young women needed sufficient access to devices that have internet or a phone connection.¹⁰⁴ This means that girls and young women who do not have sustainable access to the internet or phone connections – often the individuals who are the most vulnerable – were not able to share their experiences in some of the countries.

For the qualitative interviews conducted directly in the chosen language and translated after transcription into English, the original meaning of some concepts that the girls and young women mentioned during the interview might have been lost in translation.

An important limitation of the quantitative research is its lack of generalisability. The survey was filled in by 32 girl and young women activists per country on average, however it is likely that these individuals identify with Plan International's values and interests. Therefore, their responses cannot be said to represent the views of activists per country or even globally. Further, in some countries, there were challenges with fielding the survey – as in Ethiopia due to social media blackouts. However, the survey was quick to fill in (average time to complete was under ten minutes) and it was comprehensively designed with no missing data recorded given the existing skip/prefer not to respond answer options. This allows us to be confident in the survey's findings.

The survey also asked respondents if they identified as LGBTIQ+ but this answer option was only given in contexts where it was legal to do so. Individuals who identify as LGBTIQ+ may face societal stigma or discrimination, which could lead to disclosure reluctance in openly identifying as being LGBTIQ+. Respondents might provide what they perceive to be socially desirable answers rather than genuine responses, especially if they feel societal pressure to conform to certain identities.

Likewise, asking respondents to self-identify a disability can be problematic as the term "disability" can encompass a wide range of conditions, both visible and invisible. Different people may have varying interpretations of what constitutes a disability, leading to inconsistencies in responses and difficulty in accurately categorising respondents. Individuals with disabilities may face societal stigma or discrimination, which could lead to a reluctance to openly identify as having a disability, even in an anonymous survey. Some communities may have different perspectives on disabilities, leading to potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations of this question.

¹⁰² Thomas-Hughes, H. (2018). "Critical Conversations with Community Researchers - Making Co-Production Happen?", Bristol: University of Bristol and AHRC Connected Communities, https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project_resources/connected-communities-catalyst-fund-reports-2016-18/

¹⁰³ Dixon, J., Ward, J. and Blower, S. (2019). "'They sat and actually listened to what we think about the care system': the use of participation, consultation, peer research and co-production to raise the voices of young people in and leaving care in England", *Child Care in Practice*, 25(1): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2018.1521380>.

¹⁰⁴ Malawi, Nepal, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kenya and Bangladesh.

5.6 Ethics and safeguarding

Research ethics approval was granted from the UK-based ODI's Research Ethics Committee. A full safeguarding risk assessment was conducted to identify potential risks and mitigation measures for all data collection methods.

Survey

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the survey. The survey instrument was purposefully designed to be sensitively worded and non-invasive, however, appropriate safeguarding contacts were displayed at the start and end of the survey for each participant based on geographic location, to ensure that they could access support if needed.

Girl-led qualitative interviews and focus group discussions

Informed consent was obtained for all co-researchers who led the interviews. All co-researchers were trained on ethics and safeguarding including referral procedures and consent processes.

Informed consent was obtained for all the interviews and focus group discussions. Consent was obtained from all participants and from parents/guardians of girls under the age of 18. Participants, and parents/guardians where relevant, were informed about what participation would involve, that participation was voluntary, and that consent could be withdrawn, and how the research would be used. Verbal consent was also given to record the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write-up process and robust data security was ensured. All staff conducting focus group discussions had completed safeguarding courses and were briefed on safeguarding and referral processes.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Activism areas, activities and impact

6.1.1 Self-narratives of activism

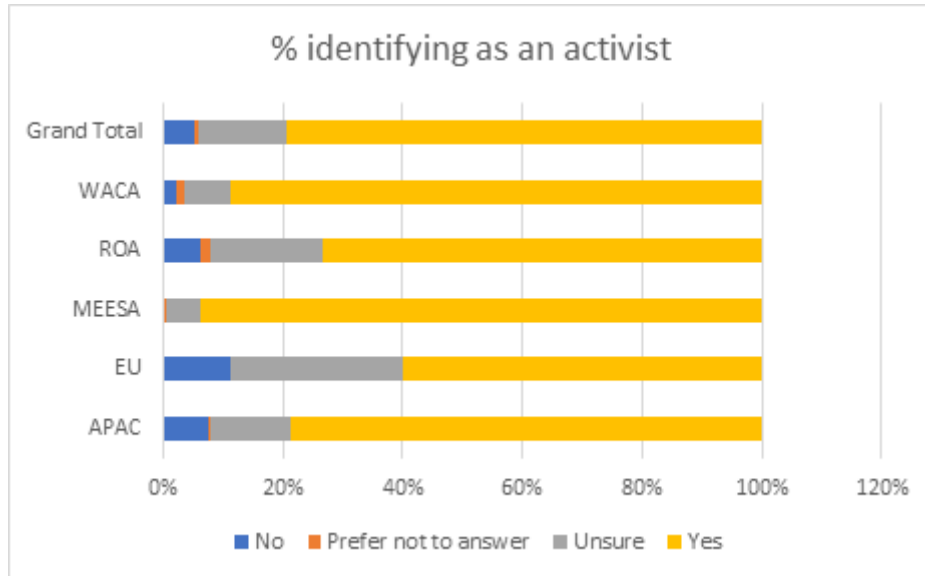
To be eligible to take part in the survey, girls and young women either had to self-identify as activists or take part in any of the activities listed and recognised as being part of activism (see section 3). However, not all young women and girls identify with the term “activist”, and this finding was consistent across both the quantitative and qualitative work.

Survey

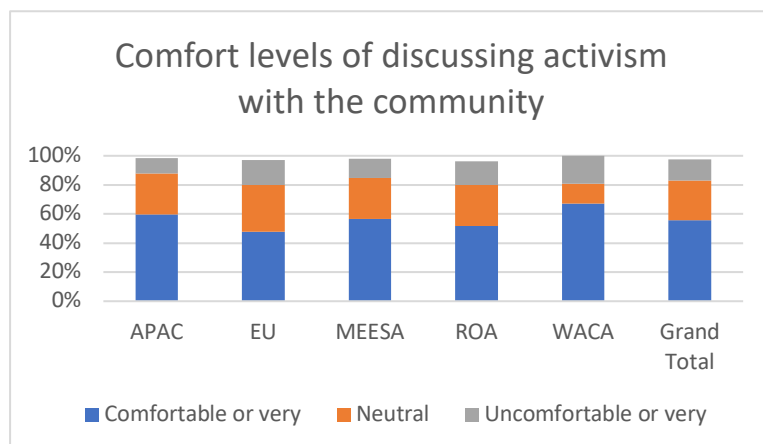
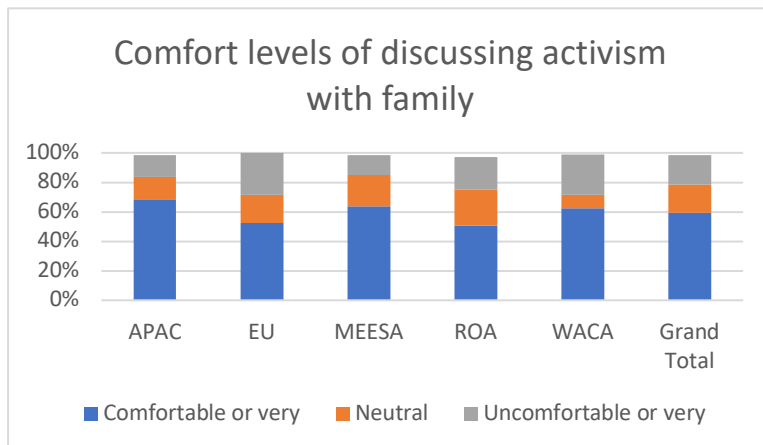
On average, 80 per cent of young women and girls said that they identified as an activist, but this proportion was highest in the West and Central Africa region (94 per cent) and the Middle East and East and Southern Africa regions (89 per cent). It was lowest in the European region (around 60 per cent).

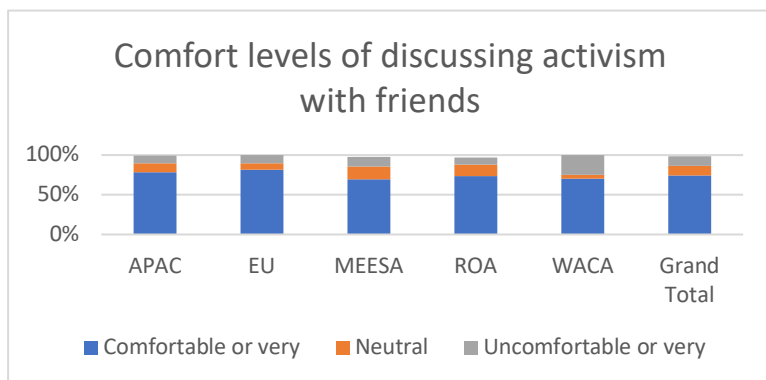
Across the entire sample, three-quarters (75 per cent) of girls and young women aged 15 to 19 identified as activists. This is slightly lower compared to around 82 per cent of those aged 20 to 24. There were no differences in the types of activities that young women took part in by age group.

The proportion of young women identifying as activists does not differ according to whether respondents identify as LGBTIQ+.



The survey also investigated how comfortable young female activists were to discuss their campaigning. Respondents were overall comfortable about discussing their activism with friends (70 per cent said they were comfortable or very comfortable). However, comfort levels were more mixed when focused on discussions with family (about 60 per cent said they were comfortable) and community (about 50 per cent said they were comfortable).





Activists in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa and the West and Central Africa regions were least comfortable about discussing activism with friends. Those in the European region and the Americas were least comfortable about discussing their activism with family or their community.

There were no differences in how comfortable activists were in discussing their work with friends, family or community by age group. There were also no differences in how comfortable activists were in discussing their work with friends or the community by whether they identified as LGBTIQ+. However, those identifying as LGBTIQ+ were less likely to say they were comfortable to speak to family about their activism.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions¹⁰⁵

While many defined themselves as “activists”, others used alternative terminology or used multiple terms to define themselves and their work – such as “advocate”, “change maker”, “campaigner”, “influencer”, “human rights defender” and “community leader”. Sadika (Bangladesh) said that she was regarded as a leader in her community because of her work challenging norms and attitudes. In this way, she felt particularly comfortable with the term change maker because she is contributing to change in her community.

Activists/advocates/campaigners:
Children, adolescents and youth, particularly girls and young women, taking (often collective) action for systemic change and conflict transformation.

Others specified that they were a certain type of activist, such as a female or feminist activist. Lily (20, Australia) described feeling empowered through her activism conducted through art:

“People see people who are so empowered by things, and I feel they’re like, ‘Oh, it’s not that person again, yapping on about it. Oh God, can they just chill out?’. Annoying, I just think, because I don’t let things go – which is probably actually a really good quality to have when it comes to this stuff because I just think that there’s so many people who honestly don’t have a voice that if something annoys me enough, I’ll think about it and I’ll do something about it and talk about it. Or bring it up especially in the indigenous rights space, because that is just frustrating how it’s still going on and, I think, being indigenous myself.”

Mary (21, Australia) previously thought that she might have to look or act a certain way to be an activist. She associated it with being extreme as that is how activists in her university were viewed. But once she got involved, she realised you could just be yourself and “we could feel the value in ourselves”. Valerie (22, Nigeria) said that being an activist helped her to be open-minded, to see things from more perspectives and to relate to more people. Zaidu (22, Nigeria) said that her personal story inspires her to speak up and activism had helped improve her self-esteem and low mental health. Some girls spoke about how being an activist had fundamentally changed who they were. Empowered (18, Philippines) reflected that previously she had been “shy” and “mentally blocked”, and she didn’t know how to speak out in public. Amora (20, Brazil) spoke about the change that activism had for her:

¹⁰⁵ All quotations in the study come from the qualitative interviews or the focus group discussions (FGDs); when from an FGD, this is added after the quotation.

“It changed me deeply... I know what my role is here, and this is what gives us the motive to continue, even in the midst of all these injustices... So I think that what happened to me, the vision that I had of the world from understanding this is what moves me. And for people, for other girls to understand this and make other girls question themselves about this, is very good. Because I know that from there on, we start changing things, we start having an identity, we start understanding ourselves and not as a mirror of what society wants us to look like, right? So, I think this is what happened to me and what I want other girls to understand. And that's why I think it's fundamental that we are always talking and making other people interested...that we seek to be better as a society, as a people.”

6.1.2 Issues campaigned on

Survey

In the survey, young women and girls were asked to identify the issues that their activism and campaigning focused on. The answer options were informed by a mapping of issues from previous State of the World's Girls research where girls and young women had outlined the issues that were important to them. Gender equality and gender-based violence were noted by 60 per cent as the topic on which they were active. This trend was largely consistent across regions; however, some differences are notable.

As per Table 5, sexual and reproductive health emerged as a strong focus of campaigning in Asia and the Pacific and in West and Central Africa specifically. Climate change and environmental degradation were identified by close to 70 per cent of activists in the European region as the focus of their activism. Young people, their rights and inclusion in politics and decision making was likewise a priority for action for activists in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa and the Americas. Feminism more particularly, however, was identified as one of the main areas of activism in Europe and the Americas only.

Table 5: Issues that young women focus on in their activism, by region (N=840)*

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
Poverty and economic issues	44%	29%	34%	47%	17%	38%
Sexual and reproductive health issues	55%	59%	46%	46%	66%	52%
Other health issues, including mental health	51%	44%	33%	40%	27%	40%
Conflict and peace building	23%	28%	21%	17%	34%	22%
Climate change and environmental degradation	53%	69%	26%	37%	23%	40%
Community violence and crime	32%	13%	22%	28%	27%	26%
Gender-based violence	64%	58%	69%	57%	78%	64%
Social justice, including ensuring social and legal protections for the most vulnerable	45%	50%	28%	45%	26%	40%
Young people, their rights and inclusion in politics and decision making	52%	48%	41%	55%	55%	50%
Feminism	49%	79%	31%	55%	36%	49%
Gender equality	74%	72%	56%	61%	75%	66%
Other	8%	16%	5%	17%	10%	11%
Prefer not to answer	0%	1%	0%	2%	0%	1%

*Respondents were able to choose more than one topic. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region. In yellow: least chosen options per region/total.

Overall, in the survey, there are no major differences in the topics that activists' campaign on based on age. Gender equality is still a major area of focus for both cohorts. Activists in the younger age group (15 to 19) were more likely to identify climate change and environmental degradation (46 per cent) in comparison with the older cohort. In contrast, activists in the 20 to 24 age group identified SRHR and gender-based violence as a major focus of activism, with 57 per cent of those in this age group identifying SRHR as their area of activism compared to 45 per cent of those in the younger age group; similarly, 68 per cent in the older age group mentioned gender-based violence compared to 58 per cent in the younger age group.

Despite activists campaigning on similar areas of focus, whether activists identify as LGBTIQ+ matters. Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ are likely to say that they campaign on climate change and environmental degradation, gender equality, gender-based violence, feminism and social justice, with a difference of 10 per cent or greater compared with non-LGBTIQ+ participants.

Table 6: Issues that young women focus on in their activism by region, age and LGBTIQ+ status (N=840)

	15 to 19	20 to 24	LGBTIQ+	Not LGBTIQ+	Prefer not to say
Poverty and economic issues	41%	35%	44%	34%	36%
Sexual and reproductive health issues	45%	57%	57%	52%	45%
Other health issues, including mental health	43%	38%	45%	37%	43%
Conflict and peace building	22%	22%	24%	23%	18%
Climate change and environmental degradation	46%	36%	49%	38%	39%
Community violence and crime	29%	24%	30%	23%	30%
Gender-based violence	58%	68%	70%	61%	58%
Social justice, including ensuring social and legal protections for the most vulnerable	42%	38%	52%	34%	40%
Young people, their rights and inclusion in politics and decision-making	53%	48%	56%	49%	44%
Feminism	51%	47%	63%	42%	51%
Gender equality	63%	67%	75%	63%	62%
Other	15%	9%	14%	11%	10%
Prefer not to answer	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%

In green, top response options indicated.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

In the qualitative peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions, informed by previous SOTWG research, where girls and young women had outlined the issues that were important to them, activists were asked whether their campaigning focused on reducing poverty, climate change, gender equality, peace and conflict resolution, and SRHR or other topics.

Most girls and young women were active on more than one issue, articulating that this is because their interest is grounded in what affects women like them both personally and generally.

“I’ll say I’m active in all because basically my organisation and what I’m doing, anything that concerns children, anything that concerns women, girls, young people, we are actively involved. So no matter what the issue is, as long as it’s affecting them severely in that they’re not good, then we are up for it.”

Amy, 19, Sierra Leone

The main topic that young women and girls mention and campaign on remains **gender equality**, particularly as activists recognise this as affecting their day-to-day lives and their rights. It is an area which only gets 14 per cent of ODA funding targeted at gender and adolescent-related issues.

“First of all, I myself am a young girl and all the issues we are talking about are themes that, in one way or another, influence what a young girl is in society. And working to meet these challenges means working to contribute to ensuring that this woman, this young girl, can effectively contribute to the impact of her society in a favourable and progressive way.”

Amazone, 24, Burkina Faso

“Well, I am involved. In the fight for the rights of girls, young girls and women. In a way that I saw the need to participate because I didn't have that encouragement and I realised that many things happened to me because I didn't have someone to guide me, someone to encourage the whole struggle of the rights of girls... This whole cycle that is also a fight against patriarchy.”

Eva, 22, Brazil

Gender equality was viewed as being critically intertwined with the other areas mentioned. For example, activists explained how adopting the lens of gender equality allows them to interrogate the underlying structures which have a bearing on other areas, such as **SRHR** or **poverty**. Lucy (21, Ethiopia) discusses how she is a strong feminist and is active in her school on gender equality advocacy. Rhylie (21, Canada) gives an example of how her interest in gender equality and reproductive rights overlaps with poverty. She notes that the costs of hygiene products targeted at women are more than double those targeted at men, and that menstrual hygiene products are particularly expensive. In her words:

“So, for me, my activism takes charge in volunteering and speaking out and realising like, hey, something's not right here within our society, within the norms. So yeah, I feel like I'm constantly questioning the status quo, questioning societal structures, institutions, and how women are always most often placed as second-class citizens to men.”

Many of the young women activists in the Asia and Pacific region particularly also explained how their activism surrounding gender equality helps to inform their work and campaigns on **LGBTIQ+ rights**.

“To be honest, I really wanted to be involved in gender equality activism, because nowadays we can't deny the fact that we're still experiencing inequality in terms of gender. There were still people who were close-minded, saying that God has only made two genders, and other genders don't have the right to be treated right and to be respected like normal people.”

AJ, 17, Philippines

“So, when my parents were discussing about like LGBTQ rights for instance, I've heard derogatory terms when they were discussing about it, and I felt very offended. So, I started researching about gender equality in Thailand as well as at the world scale. And after further studying, I found out that gender equality remains a very taboo topic.”

Ariel, 15, Thailand

Sexual and reproductive health was also identified as a priority for activism, with many young women and girls recognising the challenges that they and others like them face related to menstrual hygiene, adolescent sexual health and support particularly around family planning and access to SRH services.

Some girls explained that it was noticing or directly facing challenges to do with SRHR that made them interested in the area. Estella (19, Guatemala) remembers meeting a girl who was pregnant due to

rape. This experience spurred her to stress the importance of awareness of sexual and reproductive health services combined with psychological support. Goma (23, Japan) shared this:

“I work specifically on sexual and reproductive health and rights due to my personal life experience. While studying abroad, I met a girl who gave up her dream of becoming a teacher because of pregnancy and childbirth. Seeing this made me realise that pregnancy and childbirth have a huge impact on a woman's life.”

Activists recognised that SRHR is deeply intertwined with gender equality, but many also discussed linkages to poverty. For example, Fatou, (22, Togo) and Nica (24, Brazil) described how the price of menstrual products perpetuated hygiene poverty and mean that young women and girls must resort to less sanitary practices as did their mothers before them. Nica also noted how menstrual poverty must be understood in the wider context of women's equality and financial independence, which are core issues that had been neglected by previous governments. This was echoed by Chaarumathi (18, Nepal) who noted that young women in rural areas have been left behind, especially as relates to knowledge of how to manage menstrual hygiene and the ability to do so safely given their economic circumstances.

Other activists also discuss the linkages between climate change and SRHR:

“One thing that we need to understand, or I figured out, is climate change affects everyone. But especially in a country like Ethiopia and developing countries, climate change affects more girls and women... For example, if you see that if there is... climate change, you don't get water. So, in rural places to get water, women are going and then they will get raped or they will be physically harassed or verbally harassed so they have this kind of problem. So, the climate change effect is more on women rather than men.”

Person A, 24, Ethiopia

Some activists also noted a focus on **gender-based violence**,¹⁰⁶ or **female genital mutilation or cutting** (FGM/C). For example, FGM/C emerged as a specific challenge (as described in Somalia below) but FGM/C-related activism is also common in countries that receive high volumes of migrants (like Germany).

“So usually like I am focused on the issue of female genital mutilation because we are [in the] mostly affected countries – like 98 per cent of Somali women went through that. Then currently we do not have any policies in place, legislation and the issue has changed. So it is being medicalised so that is something that I want to change about it in the future. Inshallah.”

Saxarla, 24, Somalia

Young women who worked on gender-based violence also noted the difficulty in getting survivors to talk about this. For example, Petra (22, Nigeria) discussed how young women are not comfortable about sharing experiences particularly in groups. This was echoed by activists across regions, with Person A (24, Ethiopia) noting that in some countries, difficulties around discussing SRHR also relate to cultural norms, with SRHR remaining a complete taboo for discussion, despite its effects on all women.

Climate change is viewed as the urgent problem of our time, intractably linked to the many natural disasters and other economic and health threats that communities face:

“My campaigning on climate change is very important to me because the problem is big; it's not just my community [in Mindoro] that is experiencing this problem but the whole world. Our community in Mindoro is not that resilient when it comes to calamities. When calamities hit our community, the people were not able to stand up and start again, which is why I took the problem seriously. The impact was severe – not just for the people themselves but also for their source of income and properties,

¹⁰⁶ Gender-based violence received 11 per cent of gender and adolescent-targeted ODA.

and the entire community was affected as well. People were afflicted, not just physically but also emotionally and mentally.”

Empowered, 18, Philippines

“Climate change is important because I would like to see a clean environment, an environment that everyone would love to have. We have had disease outbreaks here such as cholera because of the dirty environment.”

Cecilia, 19, Kenya

Many young women and girls expressed feelings of anxiety and powerlessness when thinking about the climate. Beau (23, Netherlands) expressed that she feels this is an urgent problem and one that she is very worried about, resulting in feelings of powerlessness.

“Climate change is a pretty high priority, just because it’s a world problem that there is quite a time pressure on it. Yes, and I also think it affects me personally. It feels most urgent for myself. I’m very worried about that and it’s very bad. It can make you feel very powerless.”

Activism on climate change can take diverse forms, with some activists focused on direct actions to mitigate impacts and others working to change the broader systems that influence climate risks:

“I basically worked on climate change, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights before. And those segments were very much important for me because as we live in a global warming era, so it is very visible that climate change is a great threat for us. And that is why we work together with lots of people in tree plantation awareness creating and then climate change-related awareness activities.”

Rakhi, 23, Bangladesh

“I’m involved mostly in social and economic justice activism. So that one has been a lot of lobbying on policy and law issues to improve transparency and accountability from the government on public resources... For those climate change issues, my main focus has been on ecological systems. So, we’re looking at mines, infrastructure and all of that stuff, and how those developments affect people, how those developments affect access to primary resources, how they affect access to water or clean air for communities, and how communities are compensated with that regard. So a lot of climate justice issues, ecological justice issues. Yeah. So that’s a lot of what my activism has been about.”

Haka, 22, Zimbabwe

For climate change activists, awareness raising and creating spaces for young people to take part in decision making is a priority. For example, Mala (18, Thailand) discusses her work on raising awareness among students of climate change issues and trying to engage young people in policy making, because she acknowledges a gap regarding this:

“I see that part of the issue is the lack of youth in the policy-making processes because they are also the ones who are affected by these issues, but they are not currently seen too much as a stakeholder by a lot of entities.”

Relatively few activists discuss **poverty** alone as their priority for action. Where it is mentioned, the focus is on marginalisation and disadvantage, both of which are acknowledged to be challenges which invariably also link with other issues.

“Reducing poverty as well, as I told you, is the reason why I do advocacy. It’s because it’s something that I hold dear to my heart and reducing poverty is fundamental to do anything and to make a change. It’s very essential to move way forward in even all the other related areas. Poverty is a multidimensional issue. It affects our environment regarding climate change, gender equality, and any other inhuman treatments that we

suffer from are deep-rooted with poverty and I think that's something that's very important to work on."

Belkis, 22, Ethiopia

Similarly, very few activists mentioned working on **peace and conflict**-related issues, despite many of the activists living in countries affected by conflict. The exception was Jordan and Lebanon where a small number of girls discussed advocacy in relation to the Israel and Palestine conflict. Mostly when conflict was discussed, it was in settings with direct experience of recent conflict or those receiving displaced populations. For example, Elaine (21) describes activism related to the war in Ukraine and supporting refugees coming to Ireland. There is also broad acknowledgement that peace may mean different things for different communities:

"How can I explain it to you... I was always looking for peace, but the concept of peace differs from one person to another. And I was always aspiring to fulfil the concept of justice, even at home and everywhere I go. Both justice and freedom together, since both concepts are connected to each other, as when there is justice there shall be freedom and vice versa, because freedom without justice is a mess, and the world then will be like animals' life in the forest."

Suzan, 21, Jordan

Additional interests, beyond those that participants were prompted about, were also discussed in interviews. For example, many young women discussed the role of education in helping to inform activism (See section 6.1.3). Similarly, many discussed activism related to disability and inclusion:

"I'm like, well, I'm a disability advocate. So, I'm constantly advocating for members of the disabled community, whether that means being very loud about representation and pop culture or lobbying for changes to the NDIS [National Disability Insurance Scheme] or to different government policies and societal plans."

Stephanie, 24, Australia

"Yeah, so I'm really keen on the topic of disability inclusion, and in a lot of places I go to, young people with disabilities do not have access to their rights. Basic rights like ramps, having access to ramps or being included in programmes or having a sign language interpreter, at least in events and certain accessibility needs are usually not met. How I started my activism for disability inclusion was simply by just showing up in spaces because I realised a lot of young people with disabilities can't even have access to certain places because they aren't accessible enough. One thing I'm really proud of is somehow pioneering young people with disabilities to show up to places."

Chiamaka, 21, Nigeria

For other activists, racial justice and migrants' rights were also noted as a priority and focus of activism:

"I've been volunteering at [name of NGO] for a while, so that's racial justice-centred. We work on migration at the moment, so trying to get better access to healthcare, trying to overcome things like workplace exploitation for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. So that's something I've been passionate about in community."

Mary, 21, Australia

6.1.3 Sources of knowledge on issues

Education is discussed by many young women and girl activists as critical for informing their identity and future action:

"Because for me, education is the basis of everything. As clichéd as that is, to me that is pure truth. Education is what brings the identity to the people, to the individual. It's what brings the sense of justice, the sense of criticism, the search for justice. For me, education is what leads, what makes the main pillars of a society become a better environment. The importance of being connected to what happens in our politics is

fundamental, because without this, without knowing what's happening, there's no way we can criticise anything, right? ...Education for me is what brings identity to the people."

Amora, 20, Brazil

Young women and girl activists take self-education and acquiring knowledge about their topic of interest very seriously. Education in schools and universities as well as personal experience is discussed as one of the first sources of knowledge of many young women and girl activists, prompting them to become familiar or interested in a topic and then setting them up to seek more information elsewhere, including from research, social or other media. Ella (19, Canada) notes how both her own as well as other women's and people's experiences, as well as the education she received in school and university, helped to shape her interest in equality, particularly around indigenous rights.

Education sometimes also provides the appropriate platform to meet others with knowledge to share – for example, in courses, at meetings or conferences, or to identify organisations which are particularly active or important in relation to a topic. Zaidu (22, Nigeria) discusses how her education enabled her to gain an internship at a waste management organisation, which was related to her preferred topic of climate change. In some cases, however, formal educational institutions were noted as biased or insufficient, prompting young women to seek information elsewhere.

Other sources of knowledge that girls and young women then consulted include NGOs and other organisations. Binsa (18, Nepal) describes how they receive information from local NGOs and local authorities. In rare cases, some said that their family was also an important source of information; this was the case for Julia (16, Jordan) who received a lot of information from her mother:

"I think I became aware of such things because of my family, as when I was young, we used to openly discuss several things: whether related to rights or any other thing. My mother was a women's rights activist and she used to work with an institution related to women's rights, so I think this is the thing that paved the way for me."

Across all interviews, media and particularly social media, are identified as a preferred source of knowledge. Praia (24, Burkina Faso) discusses how social media is used the most by young people, and associations also rely on it a lot, so it is easier to use the existing channels. Khama (20, Malawi) discusses the internet more broadly and friends who share content on social media, as well as books. Amora (20, Brazil) notes the role of newspapers, television and podcasts in providing helpful information.

However, activists acknowledged that media was often biased, and that it was important to carefully research topics and get balanced information, including from official sources like the UN and others.

"I don't know whether in terms of looking for values or something, you have to be careful to get a broad view and get a bit of everything. And then websites, again, I think everything has to be taken with a pinch of salt and try to understand where – that's me talking as a historian as well. I understand the context of the source, but at the moment for one of my modules in college, I'm doing a project on women in Uganda because I'm working with a women's organisation in Uganda this summer. And this is an opportunity for me to learn about it first before I go, which I think is always important. I don't want to ever start something and not actually know what I'm getting into. And I've definitely used a lot of, and it's been very interesting to use, different data sets and different sort of sources from the World Bank, the UN, the different development agencies or NGOs as well. I think getting that sort of data as well is very important as well as the human story. I look for them wherever I can."

Elaine, 21, Ireland

6.1.4 Interactions with government on key issues

Activists focused their discussions on government action in relation to the issues they were campaigning on. Most girls and young women knew of the actions their government was taking (exceptions were few – some respondents from the Dominican Republic and one from Canada).

Most of the girls and young women appreciated that governments juggled multiple priorities and were generally positive about what action had been taken. But they noted that it was insufficient in many cases and hence there was a need for activism and collective action.

“Actually, our government is also taking lots of actions on these issues though, as we have lots of problems. And that is why I think it is just sometimes insufficient for us. But the government does have programmes like to build up gender equality... and climate change awareness.”

Rakhi, 23, Bangladesh

“Basically, the government is trying in their own way because we all know that this is not a one-man thing...we always know how to wait for the government but they’re also doing their little in their little way. But it’s all up to us to see how best we can put all hands on deck and fight it for ourselves.”

Amy, 19, Sierra Leone

Some young women and girl activists discuss how the government is supportive of their actions and may offer support to them for specific initiatives. For example, Mary John (16, Nigeria) described how the Federal Ministry of Women’s Affairs is working on campaigns to eliminate child marriage and also to address barriers to access to education for young women and girls. This experience was not the same across countries however, with a few participants noting that government support may be ad hoc and campaign-specific rather than part of broader government policy or programme initiatives.

“And at the municipal and state levels, we have the campaign issue of the delivery of sanitary towels. But they stop there, they need to understand that there are more events, that there are circumstances that need to be worked out. It needs to be not just simply a delivery or a support of the issue of the menstrual poverty. The issue of the menstrual poverty goes beyond the delivery of sanitary towels.”

Adriana, 24, Brazil

Many activists noted that the lack of action on specific issues by government must also be understood in light of the government focusing on national policy goals or pressing problems. For example, Saxarla (24, Somalia) describes how government priorities relate to the security of Somalia, with the bulk of the country’s budget being dedicated to security. This leaves little for other sectors like health.

“They left that to NGOs mostly to deal with issues that relate to gender issues or any other issue. They do put some money in health in general, but not specifically on women – whether it’s reproductive testing, it also comes under the budget of the Ministry of Health but there is no specific budget for issues related with women. So, because of that, you do not see much progress because NGOs can talk here and there but if there is no legislation to reinforce there is no accountability, then change is not easy to come.”

Saxarla, 24, Somalia

In some cases, the activists noted that the challenges with government action also relates to how entrenched certain practices or patterns of behaviour are. Laura (17, Germany) discusses how there are still big gaps regarding gender and racial equality, but that many issues remain unseen in relation to this because inequitable practices and views are already normalised within the governance system. Several activists noted that including the voices of young women and girls as part of decision making is key to challenging the status quo around how things are done.

“I believe it depends on the time and the occasion. The government is actively working on oral contraceptives due to public opinion. However, I believe that the lack of women in decision-making positions is a problem. There is a gender bias in the decision-making process.”

R, 22, Japan

“Well, only if you notice, there are some women and, in the government. But we are told that there is a lack of gender budgeting. A lot of women are in fact making

decisions, they say they take people into account but actually they don't really do it. So, I'm not too political, but that's what I've noticed."

Cinka, 24, Burkina Faso

"Actually, having campaigns, it's kind of difficult because you have to follow a lot of protocols, and sometimes it's really difficult, especially if that person just thinks that you are onto something that's against the government... Working with the organisation that I work with, the relationship kind of then is smoothed up. We see that the authorities then begin to understand that what we are doing is not meant to harm anybody. It's not meant to hinder whatever the government is trying to achieve, but it's just meant for the good and the wellbeing of the society."

Jessica, 24, Zimbabwe

Some countries have taken deliberate steps to ensure that young women are included. For example, Mala (18, Thailand) explains how the government created youth councils across different provinces and districts of the country, to be able to hear young people's voices in decision making. In other countries, activists noted that they are trying to lobby for such opportunities and spaces for young people's voices to be heard. For example, Em (23, Vietnam) describes how it would be important to create civil committees in universities, which allow for young people's voices to be heard outside the youth unions, which are very regulated.

6.1.5 Examples of activism activities

Survey

When asked further about the activities they took part in, there was broad agreement: more than 60 per cent of girls and young women spoke out or engaged in advocacy or campaigns online or in person or joined a group to prompt systemic change. Beyond this, some differences by region emerge. In countries in the Middle East and Africa and the Americas, around half of girls and young women also noted using their skills or talents for advocacy, influencing and campaigning. In West and Central Africa, about half of all young women also said that they engaged their networks for activism, advocacy or campaigning. In the European region, taking part in demonstrations, protests, marches or similar activities was also mentioned by more than 60 per cent of respondents.

Taking part in strikes, walk-outs or similar activities in work contexts, or creating or organising petitions, were both mentioned by a minority of respondents.

Table 7: How girls and young women were active by region (N=840)*

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
Raised funds for a group or organisation to support campaigning activities	49%	45%	34%	37%	34%	40%
Spoke out or engaged in advocacy or campaigns (online or in person)	66%	74%	64%	54%	73%	64%
Spoke to media as part of a campaign	44%	28%	25%	33%	33%	33%
Joined a group to prompt social or systemic change (online or in person)	56%	60%	50%	59%	53%	55%

Engaged their networks for an activist, advocacy or campaign group (online or in person, in a voluntary capacity)	50%	50%	36%	43%	35%	43%
Engaged in individual protest, such as boycotting brands	30%	55%	12%	30%	11%	27%
Used skills or talents (e.g. writing, organising, creative or artistic) for advocacy, influencing or campaigning	47%	52%	39%	53%	44%	47%
Lobbied people with decision-making power (in a personal or voluntary capacity)	30%	27%	25%	21%	23%	25%
Took part in demonstrations, protests, marches or other similar activities**	33%	66%	24%	42%	22%	36%
Took part in strikes, walk-outs or similar activities in a work context	18%	19%	12%	22%	11%	17%
Organised or helped organise a group or movement (online or in person)	37%	39%	33%	39%	39%	37%
Created or organised a petition (online or in person)	16%	14%	11%	18%	7%	14%

* Respondents were able to choose more than one activity. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region; in yellow, least chosen options per region/total.

** Only 10 of 26 countries in the research allow the full right to peacefully assemble (constitutionally and in practice). These were: Australia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, Dominican Republic, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Lebanon and Malawi.¹⁰⁷ Europe was the only region which allowed the full or partial right to peaceful assembly which may explain the high number of response rates for this answer option in that region.

Young women and girls who identify as LGBTIQ+ (40 per cent) are more likely to say that they have spoken to media as part of a campaign compared to non-LGBTIQ+ counterparts (30 per cent). Similarly, those identifying as LGBTIQ+ are likelier to say that they have engaged their networks, taken part in demonstrations or protests, or strikes or walk-outs in a work context.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

The young women and girls interviewed offered a diverse set of examples that describes how exactly they are involved in activism. Almost all of the activists interviewed discussed speaking out, or directly advocating on behalf of others. Ramá (21, Dominican Republic) discussed speaking up on behalf of herself and other students at school and lobbying their headmaster to change food portion sizes so that everyone received equal amounts. Flor (23, Guatemala) described speaking out and motivating others in the community to attend vaccination days and also to take part in family planning campaigns. Makhu (20, Zimbabwe) spoke about giving a speech to represent children with disabilities. Amazone, (24, Burkina Faso) offered an example of speaking out alongside an organisation to address the needs of displaced populations. Nanami (22, Japan) discussed how her speaking out happened via organised events – for example, at lectures where she could influence the next generation of young people.

Central to some of the girls' and young women's advocacy is the belief that activists are speaking out on issues for those who otherwise would not be able to.

¹⁰⁷ Right of Assembly Information Center (2023). "Right of Peaceful Assembly: A Comprehensive Resource", <https://www.rightofassembly.info/> [accessed 26 July 2023].

“So, what I’m involved in is, most importantly, advocacy. I advocate. I get the chance to meet government stakeholders and also victims. Since I’m being the voice for the voiceless, I meet those that are voiceless, that I’m fighting for because I’m fighting on behalf of them.”

Lucy, 21, Ethiopia

Girl and young women activists also frequently mentioned using media as part of their campaigns. For example, Mercy (22, Malawi) described an online campaign involving webinars and magazine articles on ending violence against women. Initiatives like these were also mentioned by Lucy (21, Ethiopia) who wrote for magazines, Carus (24, Germany) who noted running Instagram campaigns and using other media, and Mitch (18, Philippines) who described establishing a mini radio station to help raise awareness on SRHR and child rights.

The use of media was in some cases complemented by the use of specific artistic skills. For example, Sofie (22, Netherlands) mentioned writing music, and Frankie (22, Australia) described her use of art:

“I feel like I love doing art because you can encompass so much in it. But I don’t have to necessarily explain it because the art, it explains itself. I did a piece a few years ago on Black Lives Matter, and that specific artwork was looking at all the people who had lost their lives because, or due to Aboriginal deaths in custody..”

For many girls, activism also involved taking part in events that form part of larger campaigns. For example, Lee (23, Philippines) describes how they took part in activities surrounding climate change, particularly a tree planting event. They also helped to conduct a symposium to raise awareness on adolescent pregnancy where they brought together different youth organisations to discuss the topic and demand action on it. Stella (19, Australia) gave the example of hosting sewing events to prompt others to make their own sustainable bags. Gormfhlaith (24, Ireland) also discussed assisting with organising events and activities around Christmas as part of a refugee integration campaign.

Some young women had more experience in activism and had already participated for years. Some girls had started as young as seven or nine years old, though most had started in their early to mid-adolescence, which for many was in the past four to five years. Some discussed organising and leading entire campaigns. For example, Sally (22, Ireland) discussed organising an entire campaign, from start to finish, including applying for funding focused on sustainability of using period products.

Fundraising for campaigns was one of the most common actions that young women mentioned doing as part of their activism. Makda (22, Ethiopia) noted that “even though the advocacy is the main part, it also exposes you to all the other activities since they’re interlinked to the cause of the activity”. She discussed fundraising for students and education in this context. Sunflower (24, Vietnam) also raised funds in the context of educational programming, working with a larger partner and fundraising team to ensure that their activism would also have a higher profile. Ella (19, Canada) noted how they raised money regularly for climate change non-profit organisations.

Working together with authorities was also frequently mentioned as part of activism activities. For example, Jacqueline (20, Kenya) described working with local authorities and authority figures to raise awareness around gender-based violence, both in the community and on how to refer and effectively address cases.

Rallies, marches and protests were mentioned by very few young women and girls, largely as these were only relevant in contexts where such modes of organisation are allowed. For example, Stella (19, Australia) discusses a protest on climate change that they helped to organise via social media, and that received a lot of media attention. Young women and girls in the Netherlands and Canada also mentioned taking part in marches and protests.

Similarly rare were mentions of collective action in a work context and boycotts. The former was mentioned only by Éva (20, Ireland) who described how she managed to motivate co-workers at a factory to collectively bargain for higher wages. Boycotts were mentioned primarily in the context of girl and young women activists in the Middle East who participated in individual and group-level boycotts of goods from Israel. Another activity infrequently mentioned was takeovers; these were mentioned only by Gaby (17, Paraguay) who took part in one organised by Plan International:

“It’s symbolic, but it’s very representative for us, because they’re trying to make visible how invisible the vulnerability of girls would be in terms of taking power or making decisions.”

Some activists discussed how their initial campaigns and influencing then later directly informed their careers. Sofie (22, Netherlands), for example, started working for an organisation directly related to her campaign interest and this allowed her to organise webinars and to publish papers on climate change. Adriana (24, Brazil) discussed how her activism also fits in with political aspirations of being active as a councillor who would be able to promote secularist views, particularly as regards child wellbeing.

6.1.6 Most effective actions

Survey

When asked to identify the top three actions that were most effective as part of their campaigning, multiple options were identified. Between 30 and 35 per cent of activists noted speaking out or engaging (online or in person), joining a group to prompt social or systemic change, or using their skills and talents for advocacy, influencing and campaigning as being among their top three most effective actions.

Actions least chosen or perceived as less effective include engaging in individual protests or boycotts, taking part in strikes, walk-outs or similar in work contexts, or organising petitions. Some differences exist by region. Around 30 per cent of activists in Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East and East and Southern Africa also identified engaging their network for activism as important. In the European region, taking part in demonstrations, protests, marches or similar activities was also identified as particularly effective by 41 per cent of respondents.

Perceptions among age groups are similar, but those aged 20 to 24 are more likely to identify speaking out or engaging in advocacy as most effective (50 per cent vs 38 per cent among the younger age group).

Perceptions regarding effective actions were largely similar among those identifying as LGBTIQ+ when compared to those not identifying as such. One exception is “taking part in demonstrations, protests, marches or other similar activities”, where 25 per cent of those identifying as LGBTIQ+ said that this was effective in comparison to 14 per cent of those not identifying as LGBTIQ+.

Table 8: Actions perceived as effective for achieving impact, by region (N=840)*

Actions	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
Raised funds for a group or organisation to support campaigning activities	32%	17%	39%	16%	33%	27%
Spoke out or engaged in advocacy or campaigns (online or in person)	48%	42%	50%	34%	61%	45%
Spoke to media as part of a campaign	26%	22%	26%	24%	26%	25%
Joined a group to prompt social or systemic change (online or in person)	29%	32%	22%	36%	32%	30%
Engaged their networks for an activist, advocacy or campaign group (online or in person, in a voluntary capacity)	31%	17%	31%	22%	30%	26%
Engaged in individual protest, such as boycotting brands	4%	10%	3%	9%	3%	6%
Used skills or talents (e.g. writing, organising, creative or artistic) for advocacy, influencing or campaigning	31%	25%	24%	31%	42%	30%
Lobbied people with decision-making power (in a personal or voluntary capacity)	16%	24%	17%	17%	5%	16%
Took part in demonstrations, protests, marches or other similar activities	13%	41%	7%	20%	7%	17%
Took part in strikes, walk-outs or similar activities in a work context	6%	10%	6%	7%	1%	6%
Organised or helped organise a group or movement (online or in person)	22%	20%	14%	28%	16%	21%
Created or organised a petition (online or in person)	8%	8%	5%	9%	2%	7%
None	2%	3%	0%	2%	1%	1%
Prefer not to say	0%	2%	0%	2%	0%	1%

*Respondents were able to choose more than activity. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region; in yellow, least chosen options per region/total.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

The young women and girl activists interviewed were asked about their most successful activities, and as part of this offered different examples.

For many of them, the most successful activity they took part in was an event that allowed them direct access to decision makers whom they sought to influence. For example, Grace (24, Ireland)¹⁰⁸ recounts in the focus group discussion:

“We wrote a report for the Convention of the Rights of the Child sometime last year and we got to present it at the session in Geneva. So that was a really huge opportunity to see how those discussions are held. And I think that’s one of the places where I was, where I learned that change can be slow. Because sometimes when you go on such

¹⁰⁸ Grace was Nigerian but had moved to Ireland a few years ago.

huge platforms, you would hope that the change would be almost immediate, but it might not be. But that was still a really, really high point for me.”

Similarly, in a different focus group, Petronella (19, Zimbabwe) discusses how she used her artistic talent for writing and poetry to perform in front of city councillors and to campaign on debt forgiveness:

“Basically, the theme was accountability and debt distress, literally raising awareness on those kind of issues through poetry, so yeah. We did that and there was considerable change, especially in how things were done, and they actually started putting efforts in as far as paying those debts were concerned.”

For some girls and young women, their most successful activity related not to a one-off event, but rather to a longer-term initiative or longer-term actions they have taken. For example, Sunset (20, Germany) describes how she served on the Youth Advisory Board of the Federal Ministry for Economic Operation and Development in Germany and participated in several of their activities in order to make her voice heard. Chiamaka (21, Nigeria) also describes how it is not just one activity that she considers most successful, but constantly showing up and making sure you are seen by the community and others in order to influence:

“One thing I’m really proud of is the little milestones of just going out, even when it’s really difficult, going to places that are inaccessible and challenging the status quos that exist and seeing that impact other young people with disabilities to also show up and to do the work basically.”

Other young women echoed this sentiment, like Sunset:

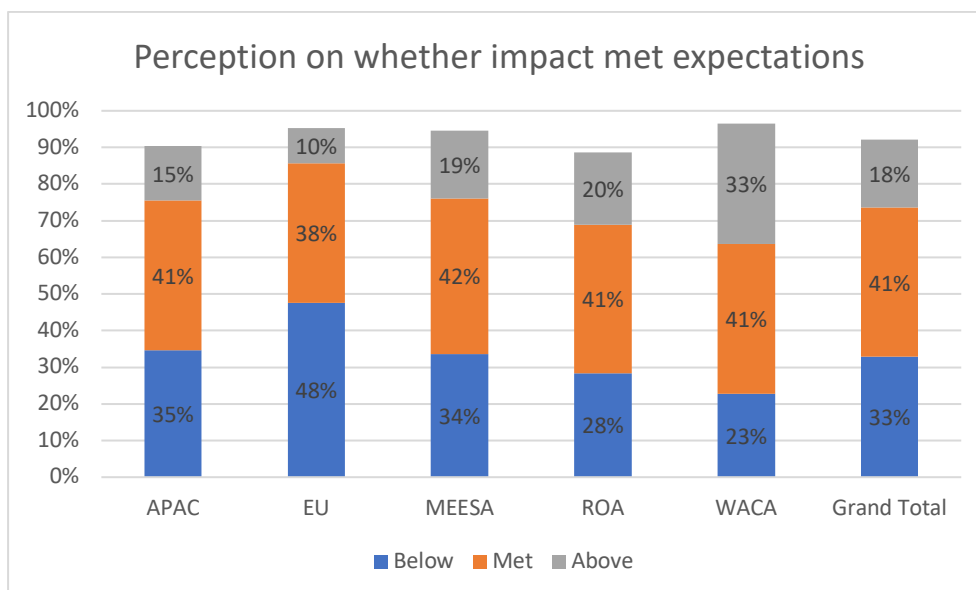
“No one moment that I would like to remember, but many small moments.”

6.1.7 Impact of activism

Survey

In the survey, just under 20 per cent of girl and young women activists surveyed said that the impact of their activism had gone above their initial expectations. The majority (41 per cent) said that it met their expectations.

There are no major differences by region, with a similar proportion of girl and young women activists saying that the impact of their activism met expectations across regions. However, those in the European region were least likely to say that impact exceeded expectations, and those in West and Central Africa were more likely to say this.



There were no major differences in perceptions on activism impact by age group or whether respondents identified as LGBTIQ+.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

Across the interviews, most young women and girl activists felt that their campaigning had made a **positive impact**. Interviewees reflected on impact critically, describing how and where this had occurred, with the majority noting impacts at personal or community levels. While several activists were intending to achieve higher-level impacts – national policy change for example – these were also the types of impact noted as most difficult to achieve, especially in short periods; behavioural or practice changes were perceived as likelier to happen.

“Do I feel my activism has made a change? I think definitely. I would like to say my activism has made some changes. It might not be on big government policy levels, but on communities. Like recently at an e-waste project, managing our electronic waste, like when we get rid of our laptops and our phones, then what happens then? So as waste is affecting the climate, we had education on taking care of e-waste as a form of advocacy in creating that kind of policy. Even though the policy wasn’t created, we came up with local solutions on how to manage that sort of waste that is there. Because currently there are no specific laws that deal with electronic waste.”
Haka, 22, Zimbabwe

Several activists described the pathway through which their work achieved impact on the specific issues they sought to influence – for example, Ishya (19, Nepal) explaining how local activism on child marriage helped to reduce this problem in the community. Elube (24, Malawi) in turn noted how local awareness raising and working with girls in schools to manage their menstrual hygiene helped girls and young women attend school throughout their periods and consequently helped them remain in school for longer. Empress (20, Nigeria) also described how activism on gender equality prompted young people to speak up when encountering it in day-to-day life. Girasol (22, Guatemala) discussed how communities were not aware of the importance of SRHR prior to her activism but were clearly more aware of this now and its importance to girls and young women.

Another type of impact mentioned by several young women and girl activists related to inspiring others to take part and helping others to realise the need for collective action:

“I would say yes, [it] made a difference, but haven’t solved them by any means. And I would say that in terms of making a difference, one of the main areas I would say is being able to let other people who are experiencing some of the challenges or have experienced some of the challenges that we’re trying to address, know that they are not alone in that journey. I think that in itself is powerful for being able to then look at, if we know that we are not alone, then we’re also aware that we’re able to create solutions or work towards creating solutions or at least environments in which other people can come to know the same, as well as learn about the strategy that has allowed us to have different outcomes for ourselves. So, I think that has been a lot of where the impact comes from.”
Triangle, 22, Canada

“Yeah, it’s not 100 per cent, but it’s hard because personally myself it has helped me. So, I believe and I know it has helped people and I have people who can actually justify that it’ll help them through their journey. It also helped me through my journey and up ‘til now, it’s still helping me.”
Musa, 22, Sierra Leone

Some young women and girl activists were more **ambivalent** about the impact of their campaigning and influencing. Across these accounts, activists still perceived their work to be impactful at personal, one-to-one or local levels. However, these activists were most critical of whether their work had impacted bigger goals, often involving policy change, or the change of norms at population level.

“I think it all depends on what you see as difference. Do you know what I mean? And I think sometimes you can focus too much on something really big. We’ve changed a law or we’ve changed something huge. But I think if you only think about activism that way, you’re really limiting yourself. You know what I mean? And half of it is, I think I probably made differences in ways that I don’t even know or ways I’ll never know because they could’ve spoken to someone about something and then they’d be like, ‘oh actually that changed how I’d see that’. Or ‘oh, I’m going to read into more of this’, or ‘oh actually that is terrible, I want to do something about it’. And I’m probably not going to know that they’ve done that.”

Elaine, 21, Ireland

That’s actually a really hard question, but it’s also a question that needs to be asked because it’s something that I should also reflect on myself. As much as I would like to say that I’ve made big impacts, that’s not the case. I’ve seen some progresses. I believe it definitely has created a ripple effect in my surroundings. I have also inspired fellow advocates and I have also left some kind of message in my advocacy and my questioning. But in terms of have I made tangible, quantifiable change? I think it’s something that I still need to make my progress on. There are still other factors beyond my control as well and also on my behalf that I need to work on to get to that effect. I believe I have made some changes. I believe I contributed to the cause, for sure, but I think it’s still far from enough and there’s still a very big gap that needs to be worked on my behalf and external factors as well.”

Belkis, 22, Ethiopia

Across these ambivalent accounts, young women activists also acknowledged that it was not their role or responsibility alone to achieve change, but that of broad groups and like-minded individuals. For example, Mary (21, Australia) details how difficult it is for activists to bring their lived experience into influencing when that experience is tough and also presents a daily struggle:

“On one hand I’m like, ‘yeah, let’s prove everyone wrong. Stop the sexism, stop the racism and the ableism and everything in parliament’. And I think being able to go and just book meetings with ministers and just be there, it felt more accessible than it would’ve if we didn’t have a programme like the YAS [Youth Activist Series]¹⁰⁹ to just go there and we were put in a space where we could just talk to ministers. But I think it also made me understand a lot more why people do take outside-of-government routes at change making when it’s probably difficult if people have really tough lived experience and they have to bring that with them to work and it’s very visible or they just think that they won’t fit in. (...) I could see how, just based on our identities or experiences, places like parliament for someone with a disability, it would be so difficult and that’s why they probably wouldn’t want to be in a space like that if it’s going to just make it more difficult for their lives. Like taking a wheelchair and the carpet on the floor, just not being accessible.”

Very few of the young women and girl activists interviewed believed their activism had **no impact**. For example, Rose (18, Australia) discusses how difficult it is to measure direct impact, especially on policy change; she also notes how exhausting campaigning can be and how demoralising it can be when the level of change that is expected is not achieved. This is echoed by Degan (22, Somalia) who says:

“No I will say it didn’t make that much of a change, because lots of times our community don’t validate our voice or don’t really take [it] into account. They have their own cultural beliefs or the social taboo that women are mostly not entitled to make any changes

¹⁰⁹ YAS is a 12-month programme run by Plan International Australia for young people who are passionate about fighting for gender justice. See: <https://www.plan.org.au/you-can-help/youth-activist-series-yas/>

outside their homes or small circle, they should not participate in the decision-making areas or speak loudly about the most critical issue in our society. That has always been our challenge.”

However, despite these challenges, young women activists still noted that they wished to remain active and that they may see the impact of their work later on:

“I’ve received several comments from many people who always motivate me to keep going and who always tell me ‘hey, how cool that you’re doing that’. But specifically, on social change. I think that remains to be seen, because I’m 19 years old and with this activism I’m just starting this year. So for me to see the result of that would still be a little while away. But for the moment I hope and I want to create an audience in which I can generate awareness.”

Estrella, 19, Guatemala

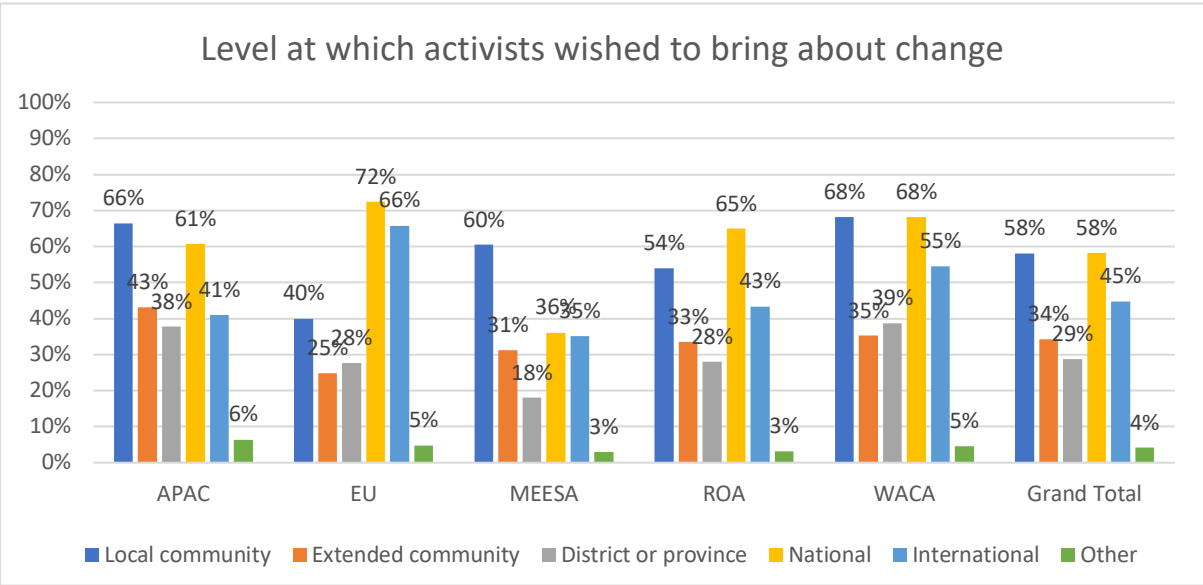
In rare cases, girl and young women activists also noted that they did not know whether their work had impact. For example, Julia (16, Jordan) speaks of her experience campaigning with an NGO and other organisations, but of receiving no follow-up regarding the impact that their work may have achieved.

6.2 How activism happens and is received

6.2.1 Level of campaigning and desired changes

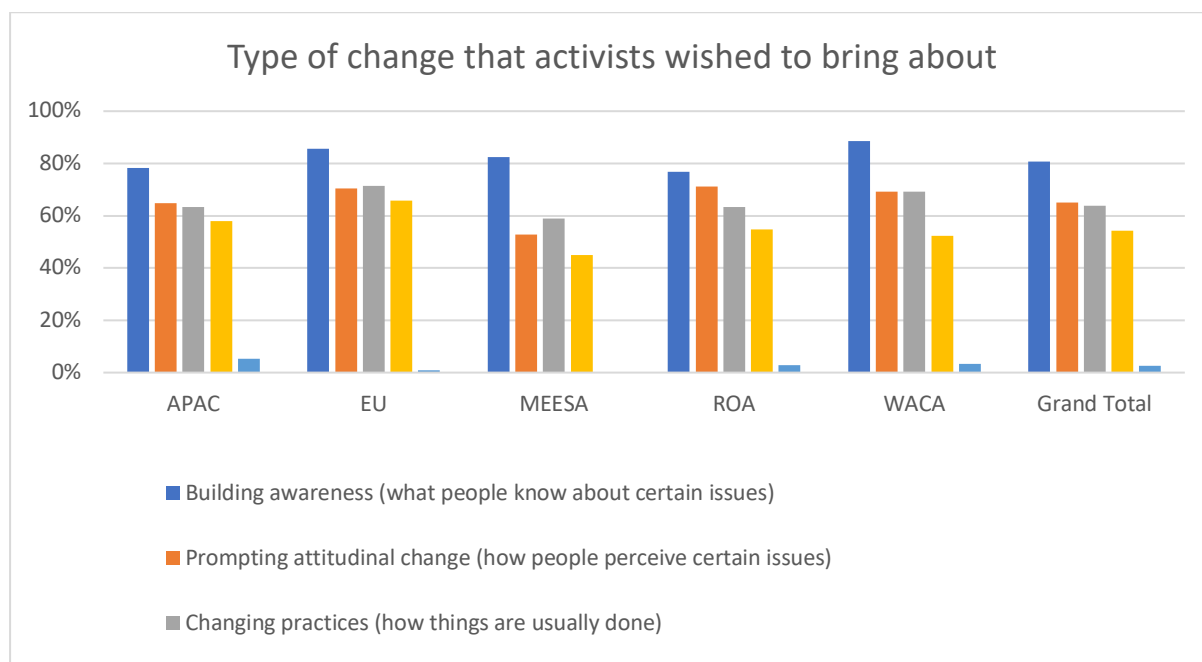
Survey

In the survey, when asked at what level they campaign, and intend to bring about change, a similar proportion of activists said at local community or national levels. A focus on extended communities or district levels was more rarely identified. These patterns were relatively consistent across regions, with a focus on local community dominating in Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East and East and Southern Africa region, and a focus on national level dominating in the Americas and the European region. A focus on international-level change was less likely to be noted in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa region and Asia and the Pacific region, but emerged more clearly in the European region and West and Central Africa.



More than 80 per cent of those surveyed noted that they wished to build awareness on issues they campaigned about; this was closely followed by activism that intended to prompt attitudinal and practice

change (around 60 per cent). Changes in laws or policies were also targeted, but by a lower percentage of respondents.



There were no differences by age group as relates to the level at which young women and girls of different ages were active, but older activists were overall more likely to say that they wanted to change practices (69 per cent) compared to those in the younger age group (56 per cent).

The activism of women identifying as LGBTIQ+ can be clearly distinguished from that of non-LGBTIQ+ counterparts. Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ are more likely to focus their activism beyond immediate communities – for example, 67 per cent of those identifying as LGBTIQ+ focus on achieving national-level change, compared to 44 per cent among those not identifying as LGBTIQ+.

Activists identifying as LGBTIQ+ are also more likely to focus on attitudinal change (72 per cent vs 63 per cent among those not identifying as such), and changing laws or policies (64 per cent among LGBTIQ+ vs 50 per cent among those not identifying as such).

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

Most young women and girl activists noted carrying out work at **local or community levels**. This either meant working directly in the setting where girls were active (such as schools, universities, groups depending on age) or more broadly in the community.

“Mainly it’s aimed at the school level and the community level. We aim to bring a positive social change in this level and areas.”

Liniksha, 20, Nepal

“As of now, the focus of our advocacy is our school because we’re still students, so as students, we’re going to start our advocacy in school, and if there’s an opportunity given to us, we’ll take it to the next level, like in our community.”

AJ, 17, Philippines

Activism at this level primarily targeted raising awareness or attitudes which impacted on local practices (such as child marriages, menstrual hygiene management, how gender-based violence is addressed). In one of the focus groups conducted, an interpreter summarises the achievement of Rani (19, Bangladesh) as follows:

“So her biggest gain, as she [Rani] describes, is also that she’s a leader now and she’s very proud that through her activism, she’s been able to prevent a lot of child marriages in her community. One of her biggest things that she’s learned through her work is that she can now speak to many kinds of people and that she can spread the knowledge that she’s learned from her work. And also, she feels like she knows now how to inspire other people to solve their own problems, especially when it comes to child marriage. She often speaks with other children in her community and motivates them to prevent child marriages by themselves and defend themselves against these things. And she also feels like through her work, she’s learned how to represent herself in front of anyone – be it children in the community, be it parent or caregiver, or be it government duty bearers.”

Mahelet (24, Ethiopia) in the focus group discussion offered another example of their local campaign and how it changed how boys acted towards menstruation:

“I was Plan International School’s ambassador, and I advocate for menstrual hygiene management... During that time, they assumed the female students were ashamed... What we were doing at that time, we try to advocate for pads. Period, menstruation is a normal thing... We collaborate with the male students and with the support of the male students, we work for that and we advocate, and then at the end of that advocacy work, what happened – maybe you can take it as a high point – that was when we donate the pads, when the female students receive the pads. They were happy and even take [a] picture with the pads, and also the male students were part of this and they support them. That was maybe the high points for me in my advocacy experience.”

Young women and girls described their community activism as grassroots level and acknowledged that this mostly worked indirectly to influence national level or global dynamics. For example, Fatou (22, Togo) mentioned that her local activism reached her town hall, prefecture and canton chiefs, all of whom make decisions for the community, and can also make other officials in similar positions aware of the changes they are making. Mary (21, Australia) describes how community organising can help mobilise those people directly affected by policies to speak about their own lived experience and to speak to decision makers at different levels to enact change.

Na (22, Vietnam) describes how campaigns can involve projects with targets at different levels and for different audiences, from local to national:

“Each project reaches different target audiences. There is a project to reach students, or teachers, their parents. The school is a chain system including branches all over the country, so we connect with the nationwide community network. We operate under a legal entity named as Association for Protection of Child’s Rights. We connect with the higher ranked office to approve policies. That’s why through all three levels...that means there’s the decision of community and people in power.”
Na, 22, Vietnam

“My point is there are obviously different levels of influence, but ultimately if you are a local activist, you have the same, if not more, power than somebody internationally, because I think the most powerful change happens at local and national levels.”
Susie, 17, Ireland

In rare cases, young women also discussed targeting specific entities that were not part of the community, but active at both grassroot and national levels. For example, Sofie (22, Netherlands) discusses protests aimed at influencing private industries and companies.

Some activists described how they targeted **national-level** stakeholders with their activism. These activists were generally older and more experienced, and had come up through the ranks of grassroots activism where they had built connections to groups and organisations, and where they had developed

their skills. Elaine (21, Ireland) recounts how her activism started at school, then she joined organisations such as Plan International in the hope of achieving wider impacts:

“And then the same way I suppose with Plan, the YAP [Youth Advisory Panel], I think less of it is at a local level. I think sometimes things trickle down and it makes sense to bring it to that local level. But I think more often than not, the campaigns are international. We build up to the International Day of the Girl and have something ready for that and try and present it to people in power. And then if you can get as high as you can, obviously that’s great.”

Elaine, 21, Ireland

Activism at national levels usually took different forms, but mostly involved either lobbying decision makers or authorities directly, working together with them on specific issues and changes that can be enacted into law or policy, as well as mobilising young people and those in power to create inclusive decision-making spaces.

“We are targeting the government and the court system where we want court precedents to be done first so that the survivors can get justice.”

Nyambura, 22, Kenya

“I think that it’s definitely aimed at politicians and power holders in their context, as it is a federal ministry we’re working with. And it is saying to change strategies and to change the point of view to include young people in decision-making processes and the consulting processes.”

Leonie, 22, Germany

“At first it was at the community level really, within the neighbourhood community, right? As much as I could talk to other people. But then it expanded into other spaces that I was filling, I was occupying. It gave me the opportunity to participate in a national campaign to confront the cycles of violence against women. It is a campaign that was born from this restlessness, from this desire to end this cycle within. It was born within the Youth Ministry and, because it is a religious area, it faced a lot of criticism, it faced many people, but with the intention of starting to shake the structures there.”

Eva, 22, Brazil

Like the accounts of activism at community level, national-level activism is just viewed as an extension of what needs to be done to address a specific problem or challenge.

“The truth is that I want to go wherever I have to go to solve the problem. What I was telling you about the menstrual cycle, menstruation and the reproductive system, I was going to start initially with my school because that is what I have within my reach. But the vast majority I try to reach the governments, the state, local governments, municipal governments and all that to improve the situation. For example, we undertook a project some time ago to include and give priority to women’s sports. So, we have to reach those who have the capacity to develop the project... There are mobilisation campaigns. Sometimes we march, sometimes we protest, but the idea is to reach out to where it is needed, not so central, but sometimes to more global issues.”

Minerva, 17, Dominican Republic

The young women and girls who managed to be active at national levels described high points:

“The three significant moments in my life are... the takeover. I took over the Swedish Embassy, a key position for one day, and I advocated for our girls’ political participation. That’s one. The second one is in 2022, [the] 16th day of activism I conducted. I was invited to a programme by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, and I made a press release calling for the government and for

international institutions to be more aware of gender-based violence on women. The third is the two intergenerational dialogues where I was the panellist, and they were really good moments for me because I was there with ambassadors and women leaders and public figures, in front of ministers and ambassadors. These are the greatest days or moments in my life.”

Zara, Ethiopia

However, they also acknowledged that not many people make it to the stage of national-level campaigning. They also reflected how important it is to use and share their experience to build the next generation and community of activists who can campaign on the issues.

“I think it’s really important, something that’s a really hard point for me is being able to build a sustainable community of young activists because sustainability is actually really difficult. Mobilising young people and then getting them to still continue in the activism is hard because sometimes some people get discouraged by not seeing frequent results or losing a lot of money or time. It’s actually a very painful journey. We’ve been able to build a sustainable community in different states in Nigeria. That’s a really high point. From doing this work, I was selected to be part of the youth advisory committee for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs... Basically, it was a really high point for all of us because finally I was able to have a seat at the table on international policies because a lot of the work we do, it’s not just advocacy and campaigning and lobbying, but when you have a seat at the table, you’re able to influence more. It’s a really high point because you get to speak to policy makers directly and have influence in what exactly they’re doing.”

Chiamaka, 21, Nigeria

Some young women and girl activists acknowledged being seen and heard by government officials and decision makers, but very few perceived that anything changed radically or sustainably. For example, Amy (19, Sierra Leone) describes working with a local minister, who despite not always acting or prompting change, listens to activists and works to guide them through how best to lobby for change. Another example is from Jenny (21, Australia) who heard on the radio about Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers, especially children in offshore detention camps, and realised they were younger than she was at the time. This prompted her to write a letter to the prime minister, and this was then on the news. However, Jenny was disappointed with the response which just reiterated the official stance of the government. Mary (21, Australia) also noted difficulties in being heard by decision makers:

“I feel like when it comes to things like going in spaces like parliament or even governments, I feel like to some extent I am heard, but I never really know because even when we went to parliament, we were given feedback from ministers on maybe where they could implement some of our recommendations. But there’s no long-term communication where they’re actually telling us, ‘we will actively try and do this’, or ‘we have started to do this work’. So I feel like when it comes to [a] more higher level, formal political spaces, I think I feel heard during the moment. But then in the long term, I never know.”

Very few young women and girls described being active at **regional or global levels**. Some explained that their goals related to participating at a high level, making their voices heard, while others acknowledged that the reason they started working at this level was to influence national policy.

“The target of our campaign is young people under 29 years old. And our goal is to let those voices be heard by decision makers both internationally and nationally, including governments, G7 countries, Japan Federation of Economic Organizations, United Nations etc.”

Lily, 22, Japan

“Well, we do try to change a lot of things within the Ministry, but sometimes with points that go beyond that, that are aimed at the position Germany has within international or multinational organisations as sub-bodies of the United Nations. And

it is also aimed at the entire coalition of the German government.”

Leonie, 22, Germany

Others explained that their activism at this level arose because certain campaigns and movements were already established at global levels. For example, Sunflower (24, Vietnam) noted how her local NGOs worked with her and others as part of the Global Partnership for Education to influence at both national and international levels.

In rare cases, regional activism arose because of contextual circumstances. For example, in Lebanon and Jordan, activism at this level is a direct result of an inability to protest and speak out in other neighbouring countries:

“We were also involved through online tools with neighbouring Arab countries that are unable to be present in person, from Syria, Jordan and Iraq... Yes indeed it resulted in change. I will give you an example: ...speaking of neighbouring countries, we used to host sessions of awareness and education with Syria which was undergoing hard and unhealthy circumstances. This contributed in giving some hope, and you would also highlight topics through which they could reflect on their personal life and change in it, so they can also have an impact on their surroundings, or at least look at things from a different perspective. You make them feel that they are active agents in their society, able to make a change from simple things, even if you don't have money, and even if you're living in the middle of crises, war and pandemics, you are able to be active, you only need to give them hope. For those residing in Lebanon, we were not only giving hope, we were giving out a tool, and when Syria got affected we were trying to gather donations of basic needs to send them to our brothers in Syria. The support is reciprocated. When the 4 August explosion occurred we received support, even morally, they were present and they helped on the ground in cleaning and so on. This shows reciprocity and makes you feel that these are humans like us who share our same crises and the same spirit in facing problems.”

Jenny, 21, Lebanon

6.2.2 Collective or individual activism

Almost all of the young women and girls interviewed discussed activism as a collective endeavour. Some even went so far as to define activism as inherently collective to create belonging and bonds between those taking action:

“For me, activism is, or being part of a group of activists makes you feel part of change, of the possibility to change something. Being on a demonstration, for example, and seeing all those people that came here that day to demonstrate against something. For me that's a feeling of belonging, belonging to a movement, to a group.”

Leonie, 22, Germany

“Most of the campaigns that we have done, it's more collective because it's an association, it's a troupe. That's it, we are young people and also there are things we do. It's more of a collective because we want to put everyone forward so that everyone feels good about themselves. Because we also try to work on trust. We're talking about all of us, the possibility of expressing ourselves in a group, in front of a crowd of people and others. So it's more of a collective.”

Fatou, 22, Togo

Many accounts of collective activism pointed out the benefits of this over individual action. For example, Audrey (20, Canada) noted that the groups, clubs, institutions already have ways of doing things which can be leveraged for new campaigns. This is usually more helpful than trying to start something from scratch and having to build the necessary social networks to make this happen. Learning from what is already there, be it collective knowledge or organisational knowledge, or experts, was also mentioned.

“In campaigns I actually prefer having teams; since the teams have better access and capacity. But an individual will have limited access and reach. I also feel that when advocacy depends on one person then it becomes more personal and loses its objective, so it’s better for advocacy to be teamwork, as the background must be institutional rather than personal.”

Laila, 24, Jordan

Collective activism was described in slightly different ways by interviewees. For example, Mary (23, Guatemala) discussed being part of a women’s network. Others discussed being part of or working closely together with NGOs, civil society or community-based organisations. Working with these was noted to provide activists with collective power and strength to campaign and achieve desired impacts:

“Yes, although our organisation is still very much new. I think that we were able to somehow influence others because right now I’m currently working on making sure that there are other organisations also that are placed and are aware of these issues. So it will not just be a one-organisation effort but rather a collective effort of all organisations that we have in the community.”

Lee, 23, Philippines

Fanta (24, Sierra Leone), among others, also discussed working together with local authorities when the need arose. For example, she notes that in the case of campaigning on sexual and gender-based violence, authorities like the police and other local support organisations, as well as ministries engaged in programmes on these issues, should be involved.

Some young women also discussed being involved in smaller-scale collective action, usually with friends or family.

“Mainly we do it with the support of our friends but we also seek the support from adults and older people as well. We tell them and explain to them the type of programmes we are doing and then we share the details as well which helps us to do the programmes successfully. If there are people who support then it will help us to successfully do the programmes.”

Dhanvi, 20, Nepal

However, activists reflected that organising like this is mostly ad hoc and not necessarily suited to bigger campaigns that target national-level change, for example. Some activists outlined that they were active both individually and as part of a collective, given the advantages of each of these methods:

“I have been in spaces as an individual and also as a group. So it’s hard to pick between them because there are times where I went on my own, individually, and I was able to actually network more, get out of my shell more and perform more. But even though that’s the case, teamwork, especially when you find the right team and somebody as motivated and as passionate as you, teamwork is always better. I believe in that. And especially advocacy and lobbying, it takes as many people as possible because the things that we are trying to achieve and the things that we are trying to work towards is a very big goal, and it takes as much help as we can get. But the point of teamwork would be better when you are with someone with the right mindset as you. But it’s always better to get your voices together. It’s always better to collaborate, in my personal opinion.”

Belkis, 22, Ethiopia

Being solely active as an individual was discussed by very few of the interviewees, but individual action was sometimes incorporated or done alongside collective action. A lot of girls and young women noted being individually active on social media or giving talks and lectures as individuals. Miriam (18, Germany) explained that individual action may be needed when groups are not interested in the same topics as individuals, and this was echoed by others across Malawi and Ethiopia. Amora (20, Brazil) also noted that for some activists, individual action is the only feasible way to remain active where there are competing priorities like school or university and work, which do not allow one to dedicate time to

collective action. However, one young woman detailed how she managed to directly merge her activism with work:

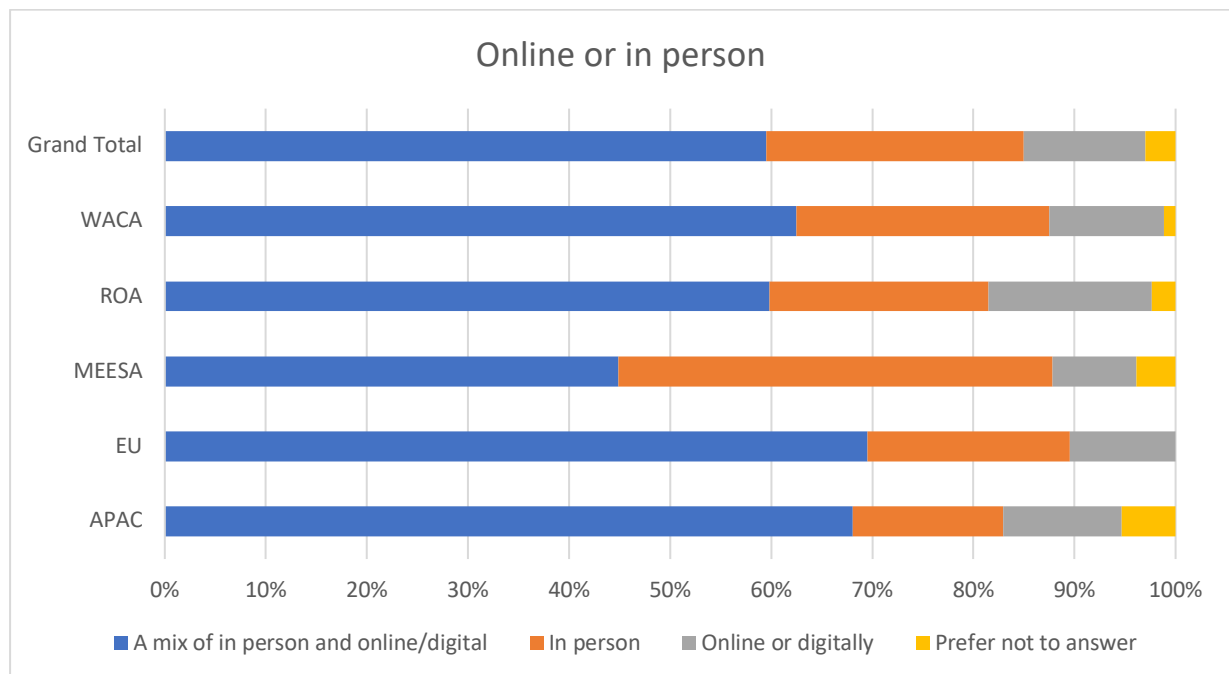
“Individual action, through business. So the products I sell are climate-friendly and eco-friendly. So I think when doing that, I’m creating a very, very little awareness that’s about our climate and how we should protect it. So, whenever I sell my product, I let people know. I’m like, ‘This is eco-friendly. This is a sustainable fashion product. This is very good for the air you breathe, for global warming not to increase.’”

Lucy, 21, Ethiopia

6.2.3 Online or face-to-face activism

Survey

From the survey, it emerges that campaigning online or digitally only is universally rare. About 60 per cent of all activists surveyed said that their activism took place as a mix of online and in person. This was relatively consistent across regions, except for the Middle East and East and Southern Africa, where in-person campaigning was used more than the other regions.



There were no differences by age group regarding how young girls were active, either online or in person, but those identifying as LGBTIQ+ are less likely to be active in person – 19 per cent vs 27 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+ counterparts.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

Most young women and girl activists discussed using a mix of online and face-to-face approaches during their campaigns. Several of them explained how a mixed approach helps to target different types of stakeholders and audiences, but also cautioned that online-only activism may lend itself to misinformation or even exclusion:

“I prefer both. I think just because it targets different audiences. I think everyone under the age of 50 or 40 is lenient towards the social media mark, and it’s great for

the younger generations to learn. The negative side is obviously the misinformation and people can create social media tiles that genuinely look real and factual, and people just love to get on the bandwagon and share. And the other, I love meeting in person because I just think the people that come in person are all retired and a lot of the older people, and that works for them and they like that. And I just think it's really encouraging, especially when it kind of goes a bit stagnant for a while and then we get together and it's exciting. So I like both."

Aaliyah, 21, Australia

Those activists who are directly seeking to influence young people noted that it was important to use social media. Nadia (23, Bangladesh) mentioned Facebook as particularly useful in her context.

However, some young women discussed the drawbacks of online interaction. Carus (24, Germany) highlights that online is unsuitable for "anything that doesn't have an immediate goal" – i.e. creative work, networking, interactions that require high emotion; these just cannot be conducted online in her view. Organising and planning campaigns online once goals are set were viewed as activities that could be done online. Tani (23, Zimbabwe) explains how in 2021, when focused on the Day of the African Child, she collaborated with others and organisations in organising campaigns and awareness raising.

However, across many accounts, face-to-face and in-person activism was noted to be more empowering and facilitating for making strong connections, particularly when the topic of discussion or activism is sensitive, and support may need to be offered.

"I think I do prefer the in-person stuff. I think there's something really powerful about being in a group of people and that sense of comradery and we're all in this together. I think sometimes it can feel sort of isolating when you're in the online space, even though you're surrounded by people and all that. But you turn off the phone or the laptop and you're there by yourself."

Elaine, 21, Ireland

"I feel like when you are talking about sensitive issues like this, it should be face-to-face because when you are face-to-face you get to talk about different things, and it's better because you can feel it, and you feel like even if you feel like hugging that person, you can hug that person, and then you could just be there and then listen to them. Your presence can matter. Online is not bad, but it can never be the same as face-to-face."

Eli, 22, Ethiopia

Other activists noted that face to face was the only way in which certain types of activities could happen: for example, Laura (17, Germany) noted marches; Cecilia (19, Kenya) discussed clean-ups; and Adriana (24, Brazil) noted working with families on vulnerability assessments and sign-posting or referral.

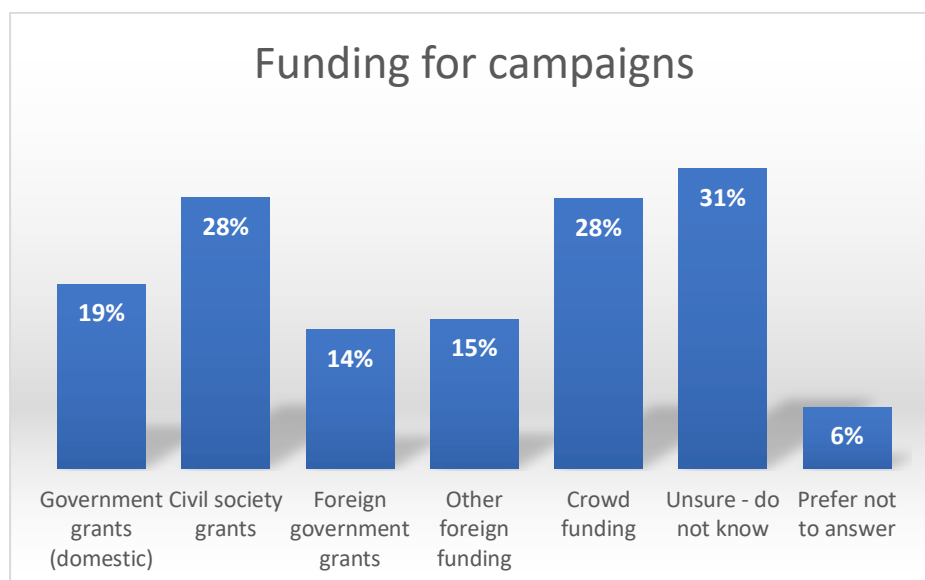
Very few young women and girls mentioned being active online only. Wanja (21, Kenya) noted that she mainly prefers engaging online as it allows her "to target a lot of people of all diversity and worldwide to spread information very fast". Cinka (24, Burkina Faso) in turn noted that she would use online means, particularly social media, mainly because she had done the work of building her accounts and networks online. The use of online activism evolved quite naturally over the course of the pandemic. Sally (22, Ireland) and Andile (24, Zimbabwe) discussed their activism changing over time. For example, Andile had started with face-to-face community-based activism, but as she moved to new places, and her networks dispersed, online activism became more popular.

6.2.4 Funding to support activism

Survey

When asked specifically about the funding that supported their activism and campaigns in the survey, about one-third of respondents said that they were not aware of the funding sources that enabled their work. The reasons behind this are unclear. A similar proportion noted crowdfunding and civil society grants as main sources of funding.¹¹⁰

Reported funding sources did not differ by age group.



Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

Funding was used for a variety of campaigning and advocacy activities and training. It was also used to cover costs such as travel, campaign materials and refreshments or snacks for programme participants. Most of the girls and young women from the focus groups and interviews sought funding from more than one source, and sourcing from just one funder was seen as not ideal:

“At the moment, we just got a really big, big, big lot of funding at the end of last year... We hold annual empowered Youth Summits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from ages 12 to 24... I think one day we’d love to [be] not sole reliant on funding from the government and applying for that or processes through local decision making and joint decision making... And it’s so annoying because Aboriginal people know how we want to do things, and we know we can solve things or build on things and work together on things. But it’s just so hard when you’re just restricted with funding.”

Aaliyah, 21, Australia

The biggest source of funding was multilateral funding from INGOs and NGOs. A few also applied for national funding from local NGOs. Only one girl received funding through a religious organisation. A few mentioned advantages of going through larger INGOs for funding. Some felt that activities become easier when you have the backing of a larger INGO, as well as the ability to learn from the experiences and expertise of larger NGOs. While most didn’t give details of how they received funding through these organisations, a few mentioned developing grant proposals.

“It was [a] social and economic justice movement. People within that movement together, they were structured differently, were in different communities. But then we

¹¹⁰ Crowdfunding refers to the practice of raising small amounts of money from a large number of individual contributors (the "crowd"). This is typically conducted through online platforms or social media, often through dedicated platforms such as Kickstarter, Indiegogo, GoFundMe, or Patreon, which facilitate the process of connecting project creators with potential backers.

all came together in participation to say: 'we're helping each other, we're learning from each other, we're structuring it this way'. It was okay. And then usually for funding, it's the mother organisation that would then fund to say, 'oh, this is how we do [it], this is what we are doing'. Yeah. Or writing proposals and submitting them to big organisations for funding."

Haka, 22, Zimbabwe

Sally (22, Ireland) received funding through the European Union (EU):

"So that was brilliant. And it was quite a substantial amount of money as well because reusable period products... what came up on our research is all reusable period products are very expensive, and that is often a barrier to their use. So, it was great to be able to provide people with products for free."

Activists appreciated a more holistic approach that offered growth in other areas as well as funding. One activist fundraised from international organisations when campaigning on riskier topics as they could then keep a fund for legal consultation or other support to guarantee safety.

A few girls mentioned receiving bilateral funds through embassies or international development agencies of foreign countries:

"So, if you have been a part of... the US State Department exchange programmes, you would become a part of the alumni and then you are able to ask for grants from them and from the association or from the US Department of State I think. And that was where I would usually find fundings for my projects sometimes when I was trying to find extra funding opportunities."

Mala, 18, Thailand

Only one girl from Ethiopia mentioned applying for a regional grant in Kenya. The other biggest way of funding their activities was through local government, which was mainly conducted through local municipalities like the city hall or their relevant ward. Unlike the multilateral options, this was rarely spoken about in terms of grant applications; instead activists built relationships and awareness on their activities to secure funding. Jhasmin (16, Dominican Republic) remarked that she liked to fundraise in this way because then it is easier to integrate programming and campaigns in the village and to get community buy-in.

"To get the fund, we share with them our plans and motives, tell them about the different initiatives that we do. And we ask them to provide the required needs and the importance of programmes that we are going to conduct, and they listen and analyse our proposal. Also they discuss among their team and approve the budget if it suits their interest. So after we get enough funds, we share the information with the children aged 10 to 18 years old, make them participate in the programmes which are based on the topics of child marriage, menstruation."

Binsa, 18, Nepal

Three girls mentioned getting funding from politicians such as local MPs or local political parties. A few girls approached national governments for funding such as federal ministries.

"Girls' leadership seminar... was a conference where I brought together women from high-density suburbs or young girls from high-density suburbs that went to high-density schools and young women and men that were doing well in society. The conference was meant to really encourage, to educate, but also for the young girls to get mentorship and to build networks. We approached minister [of] state offices, and they donated the food."

Andile, 24, Zimbabwe

When they did approach ministries, activists most often targeted the department with which the issue most aligned. For example, Andile (24, Zimbabwe) would target the Department of Environment for funding for a climate change campaign.

Others sought funding through institutions such as universities or schools. They would get funding through student unions, university grants and sometimes extra resources from a faculty. Often funding was through the annual budget allocation to students' clubs, but Purple Moose (21, Canada) underscored the need to plan well because if money runs out during the year, the rest has to be funded out of pocket.

Usually, local government and NGO funding was combined with self-funding or fundraising activities. Several girls completely self-funded their activities:

“I know myself, when you want to carry out activities and you don't have funding, we're all going to find a way.”

Mamou, 22, Burkina Faso

Some of the girls and young women self-funded their own expenses and activities. This was often because the activity did not require much money or because they were not part of formal channels for receiving funding such as an organisation. Fundraising was done in several ways, most frequently in the local communities through individual donations. The girl and young women activists mentioned holding fundraising events such as raffles, galas and selling items and baked goods. Amy (19, Sierra Leone) and Pushpa (23, Bangladesh) mentioned targeting local people whom they knew would have money to spare and would want to contribute by sending fundraising letters. Elube (24, Malawi) asked for donations of items such as sanitary pads and clothes for MHM projects rather than money. Several girls and young women sold merchandise like branded t-shirts. However, Frankie (22, Australia) highlighted that this type of fundraising often had limitations.

Many of the activists in Nepal did door-to-door fundraising. They had developed a One Rupee Campaign from where they would go door to door and ask local people to donate money for campaigning. They also mentioned a “Bhailo” programme, which was a dance campaign during the festival of Deepawali, where they would go door to door and provide entertainment through dance and for a donation. However, these approaches were usually applied alongside local grants.

A few received funding from private companies, although they emphasised that it needed to be a company that aligned with their values. Carus (24, Germany) managed to secure a large sum of funding through a private initiative structured like a venture capitalist fund which is less restrictive. Audrey (20, Canada) approaches tech companies and asks if they could fund through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programming. She also approaches local bakeries or coffee shops sometimes to ask them to sponsor a particular event. Mya (23, Burkina Faso) raised money through membership fees.

“Then, the other thing that we also do is we ask for funding from corporates and from individuals. It's so funny how sometimes we can overlook individuals, but they can really make a huge contribution. So this is where most of our contributions come from – from the individuals on the ground, as well as from corporate.”

Jessica, 24, Zimbabwe

The majority of girls and young women in Japan and one in Vietnam used crowdfunding. Lily (22, Japan) said the advantage of this is that they can spend money on what they wanted to focus on. She mentioned that if the fund use is strictly tied to certain issues and actions, it would be difficult for them to represent youth: **“Since money can have power, we'd like to avoid such situations.”**

“I started around October 2022 last year, and now I have made about 60 videos for awareness raising. I've made videos and put them out on social networking sites... But if I wanted to make videos, I would need an expert to make the videos for me, so I had to pay for it myself at first. I started thinking about making two videos a week or so, and I was running out of money. So I did a crowdfunding project. I raised 5 million yen [approximately US \$37,000], and now I'm aiming to make about 100 videos with that money.”

Nanami, 22, Japan

Many of the activists mentioned barriers to securing funding. The main barriers were:

- bureaucratic and lengthy processes (even for small amounts);
- difficulties with not being recognised or registered which made them ineligible for funding;

- complicated funding mechanisms which needed high levels of skills for grant proposals;
- lots of competitors and limited options for funding;
- funds being too restrictive;
- funding generally being precarious and unsustainable.

“I think grants were definitely things that we considered. It was a lot more difficult, though. I think the pathways to accessing them, I think it’s quite inaccessible for people who really just have a very grassroots connection, and they don’t have that pre-existing knowledge of the system... We were looking at it and we got the help of the women’s space to write a couple. And we, in the end, couldn’t really submit them because... I guess we didn’t meet the requirements for a lot of their things.”

Kaing, 19, Australia

“If we want to receive the fund from big organisations like that, we will need to submit the proposal, write the report, and implement the project with other partners. My organisation cannot handle it by ourselves.”

Ta, 22, Vietnam

“It’s really easy to see how an initiative that has so much meaning, and so much good behind it, and purpose, is often changed when government comes in, because there’s often a lot of rules, stipulations, changes that have been made in order for that to be approved, and I just feel like it kind of takes away some of the purpose behind that. So, it’s something that I’ve never done and something I haven’t really even looked into, personally.”

Amelia, 18, Canada

6.3 Personal backgrounds in activism

6.3.1 Inspiration for involvement

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

The sources of inspiration that the young women and girl activists drew on were diverse but often overlapping. Many noted that it was not just one influence that determined their path, but the confluence of circumstances and events. These are detailed below and range from personal experiences in childhood, to contact with other women or groups who acted as inspiration.

The two main influences and inspirations for activism that were noted among many interviewees and activists in the focus group accounts, were **frustration and discontent**. These were mainly mentioned in relation to what girls were starting to see in society and their surroundings, already from a young age:

“What inspired me was what I experienced myself as a young girl. The stereotypes, the prejudices, the fact of being neglected. One day I talked about poverty and the fight against poverty and of being neglected because I am poor and everything. The fact that some people don’t want you to express yourself because they are too hostile. They want to hurt you, either hit you or do something like that. It made me get involved in these things, in these campaigns, to do something about it. And I’m not sure that if a lot of people had gone through what I described, they would have made it.”

Mamou, 22, Burkina Faso

Some activists identified **experiences of adversity** as being the main motivating factor behind their activism. These experiences often related to their family or broader circumstances they encountered in childhood and made them understand that they had to stand up and address challenges of inequality and harmful norms.

“Well, I was raised by a single mother who struggled so much to take care of me and my brother, and she was also oppressed by my father’s family. So, for me growing up,

to be honest, sometimes when I think about it, it's like, 'Oh, so the entire time I didn't realise that I was being nurtured into being a strong woman and being for women'. But at that time, you're just vulnerable. You're just seeing your mother being oppressed, and you're like, 'Oh, God, I wish I had the power to set her free from this kind of oppression'."

Tani, 23, Zimbabwe

Anger and discontent were often mentioned in relation to young people's circumstances and those of their countries or even regarding the planet. For example, most of the young women and girls who were active on climate change discussed how the climate emergency is the main threat facing the world. In other cases, young women and girls specifically reflected on current socio-political circumstances, noting how countries were rolling back on women's rights in some cases:

"Well, gender equality is I think the most pressing in Hungary at the moment. I felt loads of times that being a woman is nothing but a burden and a disadvantage, especially when it comes to the current government's ways of addressing women or what they are deemed to be fit to do in Hungary, at least at the moment. So when you are constantly hearing in the media that women should have at least three children, stay at home, that being a mother is the only thing that a woman is fit to do, you become very angry. And not to mention the femicide cases, what we didn't ratify. And when your country declares war on gender as well, because they don't think that gender exists, it's just sex and these things will make your blood boil to a certain extent."

Éva, 20, Ireland¹¹¹

The sense of anger that young women and girls felt when faced with inequality in society, but also more serious challenges such as sexual assault and violence, came across palpably from their interviews. Some of the experiences that were recounted included discrimination, harassment, abuse, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the death of loved ones. The wish to gain justice and speak up for themselves as well as for others, allowed many young women to harness their anger and discontent and turn this into action:

"It's because of one issue that happened to this other woman. She did not receive her justice. So, I saw that today that there's only one woman because I've come and I have encountered that woman and see what she went through, what she's going through right now and at least I've tried to help her to gain justice. But I swear that there might be other women who are in the same situation as her or maybe a different situation, but they're also in the same category. So, I was like, I feel like we can help more people, more women through this. So we decided to come up with awareness campaigns, doing our activities so that we should mobilise people and come to know what women's justice is all about."

Elube, 24, Malawi

Chaarumathi (18, Nepal) discusses how seeing the prevalence of violence against women in society motivated them. This was similar for Ella (19, Canada):

"And I've just known so many women that have experienced sexual assault or sexual violence of some sort. And I feel like I was just finally like, 'I'm done. I am so fed up of women experiencing this and no one helping, no one doing anything'. And that's what really got me into women's rights, this kind of thing, because I was just like 'I'm done. This is stupid'."

Throughout their accounts, many young women and girls critically reflected on their own privilege and acknowledged that this also helped them to understand more broadly how pervasive inequalities really were:

"Everybody's naive as a child, but I learned from a very young age that what I have or what I can be is not because I'm just exceptionally smart and exceptionally dedicated."

¹¹¹ Éva, not her real name, is originally from Hungary.

It's because I was raised a certain way and I could access things from a very young age. And money was never an issue. Hiring a private tutor was never an issue... So, I'm here and I always go around life with the mindset that what I can be is not because I was born to be this person, but the factors outside of my control that contributed to forming for me the person who I am. And loads of people don't have the same sources and same factors working for their interest."

Éva, 20, Ireland

For some of the young women, the wish to be seen and recognised by society was their inspiration for activism. For example, Stephanie (24, Australia) details how she has spent most of her life campaigning to see a disabled Disney princess. For her, activism is just part of who she is.

"I think trying to distil my advocacy down to one thing is quite difficult because it's not as much a job as it is the way I live my life. I think for me, especially as a woman on the margins, I don't have the luxury of turning it off. It's like when people say, 'Oh, well I'm not interested in politics', or 'I don't care about that kind of stuff'. I'm like, wow, it must be nice. For people like me, the personal is political and the political is personal, so it kind of never really stops."

Stephanie, 24, Australia

Family was another main inspiration in the lives of young women and girl activists, with several noting how members of their family either taught them to be activists or encouraged them to start.

"I used to play table tennis competitively. And women in any sport are seen as the least important thing ever. They'd rather have the under-10 boys sorted and taken care of than the under-21 women, they don't give a crap. And I was competing for years at table tennis and my dad was a coach so he'd drive us up. And we'd go up to Belfast or Dublin or go away or something and I'd spend the entire trip on the way back giving out about how women were treated and how frustrating it was and all this kind of thing. And he turned around to me and went, 'Well, you obviously really care about this. What are you going to do? Are you going to do anything about it?' And that's not my dad being misogynistic... it's my dad pushing me to actually take action on something instead of just talking about it."

Gormfhlaith, 24, Ireland

"A lot of my stories also come from my mom's mom, who's still working to this day. She's the one who raised me predominantly in my life from the day I was born. She gave me my name. She fed me all the time. She showed me the moon and all of that stuff. But one thing she always taught me was that women could do anything possible. And my mom reinforced that teaching how we shouldn't be scared to pursue whatever we wanted to pursue. That education, of course, always comes first, but we shouldn't be scared to go after something if that's what we really want in life... But my grandma was humiliated in front of a lot of folks. She was told a lot of harsh words, a lot of shaming, a lot of shaming for being a woman and in poverty. But she never ever took that personally. Even if she was assaulted, even if she was whole things, she never took that or her goal was to provide for her kids. If someone has something to say, she would just be like, 'Okay, never mind. I'm not coming to you again'. And she would go on. She would say something back. She had a very loud mouth. She would say things, but she would never, ever back down. She would never go away. She would stand her ground until she got what she wanted. And I think she is, by far, one of my most inspirational characters in my life."

Kashi, 22, Canada

Beyond family, famous people were also mentioned by many activists as having inspired them.

Famous people mentioned include: Vanessa Nakate, Greta Thunberg, Hollie Cairns, Haben Girma, Michelle Obama, MLK, Hanna Lemma, Bleen Saleh, Nades, Rachel Mikwali, Wangari Maathai, Mama Charity Ngilu, Hayat Mirshad, Varaidzo Kativhu, Claudy Siar, Wahab Gupta, Malala Yousafzai, Farida

TM Touré from the Association des Héroïnes du Faso, Laetitia Bassolé, Emma Watson, Tony Berk and Pangina Heals.

“In terms of climate change, I really admire Greta Thunberg; she’s an advocate of climate change, and the reason why I admire her or look up to her is because, at a young age, she does something very significant – not just in her country but for the whole world as a whole.”

Lee, 23, Philippines

However, it was not just famous people who inspired the activists. In some interviews, the interviewees acknowledged that it was the co-researchers themselves whom they viewed as inspirational, as well as staff members of Plan International.

“Girls felt good to see other women who are activists and who are doing this, so then you can follow their footsteps. There are examples for you. So that was super nice and very helpful.”

Amelia, 18, Canada

Organisations like Plan International were mentioned by several young women and girls, as were other groups that helped to spark their interest in participation:

“What inspired me the most were my experiences with Plan International. From experiencing advocacy at the local, national and international levels, I got a lot more inspired and motivated. In fact, Plan International inspired me to pursue the path of social work as a course track in college because the social work profession states that we believe in the inherent work and dignity of all people, regardless of all the backgrounds they have.”

Jessa, 21, Philippines

“Initially when I studied my social science qualification, I wanted to be a counsellor, but I got an attachment in an organisation that was an activist organisation and it changed my mindset. I saw how activism could change people’s narratives, could change people’s lives, and how even for me to get my education, I got my education at a school that enrolls 70 per cent women. This is a result of activism. It sparked and ignited something in me because I felt like I got this opportunity because of an activist that stood up some years back. So I felt the need to also give someone the same opportunity and pass on the torch.”

Jessica, 24, Zimbabwe

Other activists were inspired and excited by the **movements they saw already happening** in society and wanted to join these, be part of them and contribute their passion:

“I think the main one that pushed me into being 100 per cent serious in putting myself into these issues and wanting to make a change was definitely the problems that we were having in Thailand at that time and joining the protests and meeting all these people, because that was the part where I was able to see 100 per cent that we are living in a problem.”

Fern, 24, Thailand

“What I appreciate in this domain, is that the people that I share these activities with are really excited. You might be part of a political party where some people support the idea but are not excited to work, or they might also have this opinion because their parents have it. Meanwhile in the domain of fighting for women’s rights, every person involved believes in this idea. You can see eagerness for change, you can see rage when we’re talking about a case of violence.”

Alexa, 23, Lebanon

The girls and young women were asked about inspiring social justice movements that they had come across throughout their journeys campaigning for social justice issues. A wide range of topics, such as

SRHR, education, gender equality, climate justice, human rights and peace in conflict were highlighted as influential both for their activism, and in their personal lives.

“For me, one of the most inspiring social justice movements is about gender equality because it has played a great part in my life. It has been an important movement for me where I have learned to embrace myself, to stand up for myself, to be confident, to raise my voice, and of course, to lead such young women out there suffering inequalities in this world. In this movement, all I can say is that I’ve learned a lot from being a girl who has been discriminated against and body-shamed, and now I stand firm as a woman with strength and power to be a champion of change!”

Enna, 18, Philippines

Movements focusing on period dignity, menstrual hygiene management and removing taxation of period products in certain countries were indicated as being important to some young women and girl activists in Nepal, Ireland, Ethiopia and Thailand. Lucy (21, Ethiopia) mentioned the Addis Powerhouse Yellow Movement which worked with the Ministry of Health to remove tax on period products, and Ariel (15, Thailand) was inspired by her country’s period dignity campaign which looked towards better holistic health for women, as well as educating young girls around menstruation. Bringing these socially “taboo” topics to the table was empowering to her:

“When girls are struggling, we should be able to share and express our struggles. We shouldn’t be keeping them to ourselves, but rather sharing it with others, trying to find solutions collectively, trying to find solutions to the problem.”

Raising awareness for funding the treatment of HIV/AIDs was discussed by Valerie (22, Nigeria) and Audrey (20, Canada), with the latter reflecting on the RED Campaign in their country as one which campaigned smartly and subtly through creating attractive products which included branding related to HIV/AIDS awareness and activism.

A significant amount of girl activists who answered this question indicated that advocacy around youth and girls’ education was inspiring to them. Eva (22, Brazil) was inspired by protests happening in schools for increased funding for education, and by young people taking up awareness raising in society for this issue themselves. Malala Yousafzai was named as an inspirational activist who has led this movement, especially in countries where access to education for girls, and children more broadly, is more difficult to achieve. Increasing access to education for all is the main inspiration for Kashi (22, Canada):

“Although in the western world, education might be a right, in other parts of the world [it] is seen as a privilege, especially from where my family comes from.¹¹² Education isn’t accessible. It isn’t a right. It is not something that you can afford. You need to pay for it... I think I’ve been very, very privileged to have the access that I have to the education that I have, especially at some place like UFC [University of Calgary]. I’m pretty sure my grandma, if she was alive today, she wouldn’t believe that a family from that village who faced a lot of issues would ever have a kid going to a higher education, and one of the best and most reputable institutions in the world. So, I think when it comes to access to education, I hope one day it’s accessible to all. But I think that’s one of my most favourite movements of all time.”

Gender equality, and the social movements surrounding this, were also high up on many girls’ lists of inspirational movements. Some girls indicated specific women’s rights defenders, such as Chimamanda Adichie (Petra, 23, Nigeria) and Lolita Chavex (Mary, 23, Guatemala) as inspirational to all women.

¹¹² Kashi is a Tamil woman who was born in Canada. Her father was originally from an extremely poor background in Sri Lanka.

6.3.2 Others they know involved in activism

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

Most of the young women and girls interviewed knew others who are involved in activism. These were usually close friends and other women and girls from the same community. However, some young women noted that it was rarer to see young women activists especially in rural areas.

“Most of my female friends are involved in activism, even in other organisations. Girls and young women take more participation in activism nowadays.”

Pushpa, 23, Bangladesh

“Yes, I know many girl activists from different backgrounds, sometimes from a purely scientific background, such as IT, technology, and engineering, but also very interested in the field of policy making. It’s not only limited to people from a specific background, it includes them all, and I know a lot of people involved.”

Souraya, 24 Lebanon

“Not the same in all areas: in my community, yes, girls and women are involved in activism, but I’ve noticed that when you go into the more rural, the deeper rural Zimbabwe, you find that most of the girls and women are not exposed to advocacy yet. And even if you do expose them, it’s almost like they do not feel like they have a right to take action or to take part. In that regard, there are communities where the girl child still needs to be assisted in order to take part in advocacy.”

Jessica, 24, Zimbabwe

Many interviewees reflected that their friends were also involved in activism given their background in school or university, where joining advocacy and campaign groups was common. For example, Leonie (22, Germany) explains how many of her friends in her hometown take part in “climate groups, in anti-fascist groups, what’s called anti-racist groups”, and partly also because Fridays for Future was present in the town and mobilised a lot of young people to be more active. Amber (23) noted similar experiences in Canada:

“Another one is the Mad movement. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with that but that’s been something that has been pretty popular and familiar with a lot of my peers and my network, mostly because our generation, I feel like, is being exposed and being more... Or, they are more familiar with mental health terminology and diagnoses and things like that, and especially post-pandemic I feel like a lot of people are recuperating from a lot of mental health concerns and/or they’re still undergoing mental health issues.”

Most of the girl and young women activists were likely to have activist friends simply because of their interests. Nanami (22, Japan) and Julia (16, Jordan) noted that they had many friends who were activists, partly also some whom they had met through their own work, and many who were active in the areas they were interested in.

Family involvement in activism was again an important influence. Many young women mentioned being influenced by their family members in their activism journey:

“Maybe my mom. She did a lot of work. She’s in the government and she worked a lot with ending violence against women and children and she does legal work regarding these issues. And she did a lot of that. She published a book regarding it and received awards because of it.”

Mala, 18, Thailand

“My parents used to participate in demonstrations, whether through organisation by my mother through the Women Federation or through anything else. And they also used to participate in demonstrations. For example, my father was a member in a political party, he did not have work related to women rights but he was a political activist. I remember when I was younger, they used to talk about such things and that was always open for discussion.”

Julia, 16, Jordan

“I know a lot of people [involved in activism] from here within my community, just like my family and actually as an extra, we have been doing workshops. And my dad sometimes gives us advice, he'll give you almost like a lecture.”

Hana, 18, Guatemala

A few of the girls and young women mentioned that their neighbours or close community were directly involved in activism. When this was said, it was usually in the context of close family friends or extended family. For example, Annah (21, Kenya) explains how a male neighbour and family friend was involved in awareness raising on gender-based violence in the community:

“He was up to changing the community, educating the community on gender-based violence. Actually, he started with the domestic violence in the community, so he was trying to educate the men and also the women on their rights and also the reduction of the domestic violence in the household. So I pick that from him, and then I also change it to another direction of SGBV.”

6.3.3 Most significant experience and feelings

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

During the focus group discussions and peer-to-peer interviews, young women and girls were asked to reflect on the most significant experience that had impacted their activism and how they felt about it. The young activists described a range of emotions from fulfilment to pride, love and gratitude. These feelings were strongly tied to their motivation to continue their work and recognition of its importance. A sense of fulfilment or satisfaction in the outcomes of their work was important for many:

“I feel like this is who I'm meant to be, and I just found a part of me that's so fulfilling, and I'm just like, ‘Wow. I finally feel like I found myself’. And I'm like, ‘This was the part that was missing’. So, it's been so fulfilling. And being able to not only change my own life, but to be able to change other people's lives, it's been amazing. And I hope that everyone in some sort of way is involved in advocacy and activism.”

Rhylie, 21, Canada

Feeling proud of the work that they and their fellow activists are doing was reported by many of the young women and girls as the strongest sentiment they experience. Francisca (15, Paraguay) identified the value of the moment she recognised not just her potential as an activist but her existing capabilities and the possibility of being an example to others. In some cases, activists described feeling proud when witnessing the positive impacts of their support of other young people:

“I felt so proud, overwhelmed, and made the other youth feel empowered.”

Ayah, 22, Philippines

“Well, it's one of the best feelings someone can have. Because you've been advocating for a very long time, and just at the end of the day, you just see people, they say, ‘Today we need to discuss. Today we need to talk about this because it is something that affects our girls, most especially the younger ones’. And if you as an advocate you are there, you witness such activities, you feel good. You don't really feel good, but you feel proud, because you have been part of the decision making, and

you have been a change maker for girls and young women.”
Barbie, 16, Sierra Leone

Sadika (Bangladesh) described the most significant feeling for her as the inspiration she gives to other girls to break down barriers and discrimination. Francisca (15, Paraguay) explained that for her a driving sentiment in her work is the knowledge that as girl activists “we are protagonists of change for a better world and that as girls we have potential”. For Bianca (17, Brazil), this feeling arises in her when she sees:

“The hope in the eyes of the girls and being able to multiply that in the project.”

There was a feeling that being a part of something bigger was a key part of their experience. Finding fellow activists and being part of collective action was a significant moment for many of the young women and girls.

Many participants described a shift that occurred within them when they first became exposed to activism and social issues. For Liniksha (20, Nepal), this shift occurred when she moved from thinking and reading about issues that she alone cared about and to starting to work with others:

“Now when I look back, I reflect that I was always confined to the knowledge from the books... And then I made personal changes and also motivated and encouraged the others to change as well... Thus I feel that I will be able to lead and take the activism continuously and I will continue to do so for the change since the change will be there, not only if I change myself but in the community.”

The young women described a sense of empowerment gained through their own work, which indicated a **positive self-perception** of themselves as activists through the confidence and skills they had gained, and also through the positive impact they believe they can achieve. It is key to listen to young women and girls to understand what women’s and girls’ empowerment looks like for them, the nuances of empowerment for them and what this means to them. Miver (24) in Vietnam describes what empowerment feels like to her:

“I can say too much, but that was the time I realised our power, our human power, and the feeling of knowing that you have the value. You have more than what people told you who you are. I think that’s empowerment.”

Chiamaka (21, Nigeria) felt a shift when after growing up with a disability and spending a lot of time at home, she started to get involved in groups that were mobilising on the same issues as her. This made her feel empowered:

“I’ve really experienced the power of the collective and humanity through my activism.”

Similarly, Lucy (21, Ethiopia) began her activism by taking individual action on environmental issues and autism awareness. She reported that the key turning point for her was when this turned into an advocacy club and its 50 members were able to effect change in her school and improve awareness of autism:

“I think it might seem very little, but as a young person who does not know anything about activism, who did not have a mentor doing that, I believe I made a lot of change in the school.”

Not only working together, but inspiring others to participate in social issues was something that gave Titi (21, Vietnam) lasting pride:

“I can’t forget when my friends said that they had got so much inspiration after joining some gender equality campaigns with me.”

Experience of taking on a leadership role was also something that significantly impacted some of the young women – in particular, by seeing first-hand how their work could contribute to positive change.

Banga (15, Togo) had become class valedictorian and she used her valedictory speech to raise awareness on early pregnancy. Sadika (Bangladesh) led 24 other young people as a Youth Group President in Bangladesh, and Belkis (22, Ethiopia) worked as a technical committee member in the Ethiopian Young Women Voices Committee.

Participation in specific campaigns or events on social issues such as gender equality was cited by many girls as a particularly meaningful experience. Some examples of campaigns that young women gave included an opportunity to meet with the “First Lady” of their country to discuss race discrimination experienced by girls and the Plan International initiative Girls takeover – wherein girls and young women step into the shoes of powerful individuals for a day to raise awareness of key issues. For Sanjiva (18) in Nepal, this experience was significant due to the impact it had on her perception of her own abilities:

“I have also seen myself change and feel more determined and capable. I used to feel that I was a powerless child before but now I feel that I am capable.”

The impact that participating in or leading campaigns has had on their confidence and self-esteem was highlighted by a number of young women and girls as a key aspect of their experience.

“Because it allowed me to develop confidence in myself, I am a woman and I plan to be among the leading women in the future and to be able to influence other women to have confidence in themselves and to launch themselves in development.”

Cinka, 24, Burkina Faso

“...I didn't think that I was doing something and then I took the training pledge ... That actually enlightened to me that I should have a voice that matters. If I have girls taking part as well, I think that will bring openness and peace of mind of the issues that are affecting their lives.”

Memory, 23, Malawi

For Rani (19, Bangladesh) the pride that she feels when speaking to her classmates about child marriage brings her confidence and “gives me a way to establish myself in society. It gives meaning to my work”. Advancing the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community is something that makes Thu (19), a queer activist in Vietnam, feel proud:

“Since my community of LGBTQ is quite small, we often get ignored. Therefore, whenever my community is mentioned when talking about rights issues, I always feel proud and inspired.”

This was also the case for Enna (18, Philippines), who described the positive change that she recognised in herself that developed during her involvement in a social movement:

“It has been an important movement for me where I have learned to embrace myself, to stand up for myself, to be confident, to raise my voice, and of course, to lead such young women out there suffering inequalities in this world. In this movement, all I can say is that I've learned a lot from being a girl who has been discriminated against and body shamed, and now I stand firm as a woman with strength and power to be a champion of change!”

Similarly, regarding the experience of taking on a leadership role, young women described experiencing a moment of realisation of the scale and significance of their actions. For R (22, Japan) this moment occurred when she considered how her work on a petition to the government would be remembered in the future:

“At first, I thought I'm not involved in any social movements. But when I was doing a petition...and submitted it to the related organisations such as the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or the Children's Agency, google, yahoo and so on, the work was broadcasted and was talked about in the same context as the student movement was

talked about. There I realised that my activity might be seen as a social movement by people in different generations.”

The opportunity to speak out on period poverty via a wide-reaching platform was an important experience for Grace (24, Ireland). This moment also led her to reflect on how far the period poverty movement had come in a short time:

“I think a really significant moment for me, I think would be, I got to do an interview on Euro News on period poverty in Ireland. And first of all, I think that was just really cool because I had only joined the app for maybe two months. So, when we started it, we started the campaign and we were just told to make videos and then I and another girl on the group got selected as spokespeople and we just thought, okay, I didn’t really know what that meant until that opportunity came up. So that was really cool to be able to be on TV and then talk about something that ... maybe a couple of years ago, would’ve been a taboo and no one really cares to talk about it. So that was a really big platform.”

Like Grace, other young women also linked the significance of an experience of activism to the specific issue they were working on, whether due to the sensitivity of the issue, the lack of attention it had previously received, or their achievement in the face of adversity.

“I think for me, the most inspiring thing to be a part of was that young women’s push around consent education. And also, protections for young survivors because it was actually hearing from the young person and the survivor as the expert in their own experience. And there was so much trauma involved around that advocacy. But at the same time, it was really, really empowering because so much of the problems that people have with that justice system is that they don’t have power within it. And suddenly, we created our own sources of power that we could draw from.”
Kaing, 19, Australia

6.4 Challenges related to activism and associated coping strategies

Survey

In the survey, young women were asked to reflect on the barriers they faced. This was done through three questions: the first question asked if anything had stopped them engaging in activism, influencing, or campaigning (Table 9). The second question asked if they had faced any negative experiences **during their activism** (for instance, while undertaking campaigning/activism) (Tables 10 and 11); and the final question asked about negative experiences **as a result of their activism** (Table 12).

Of the girls and young women surveyed, 54 per cent identified lack of finances as the main thing stopping them from engaging in activism, influencing or campaigning. This trend was consistent across regions.

Other common barriers included a lack of confidence in themselves and their skills (mentioned by 26 per cent overall, and around 30 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, the Americas and the European region) and a lack of knowledge relating to the issues they wanted to campaign on (mentioned by 22 per cent overall, and 28 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, and 42 per cent in the European region). In fact, 24 per cent of those in the Americas region also identified as barriers fearing the views of others in their family or community and feeling excluded or intimidated due to their age.

Perceptions on barriers differed slightly by age group. The 15–19 age group was more likely to identify the following barriers compared to those in older age groups: fears of the views of others in their family as a barrier (24 per cent vs 16 per cent among older), feeling excluded or intimidated due to their age (26 per cent compared to 13 per cent among older). In contrast, the 20–24 age group was more likely to say that fears for their own safety if they were to campaign constituted a barrier (25 per cent compared to 15 per cent among younger).

Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ were more likely to identify the following barriers: fearing the views of others in their family (25 per cent vs 15 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+); lack of confidence and skills (34 per cent vs 23 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+); and fears for their own safety (26 per cent vs 18 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+).

Table 9: Challenges and barriers encountered when trying to engage in activism (N=840)*

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
Lack of finances or resources	52%	35%	71%	44%	66%	54%
Fearing the views of others in my family or community	23%	22%	11%	24%	15%	19%
Fearing the views of others in my friendship circle	15%	5%	6%	7%	9%	8%
Lack of confidence in myself and skills	36%	34%	10%	31%	16%	26%
Lack of knowledge relating to the issues I wanted to campaign about	28%	42%	17%	12%	20%	22%
Feeling excluded or intimidated due to my age	11%	23%	19%	24%	11%	18%
Feeling excluded or intimidated due to my gender	5%	12%	15%	9%	8%	10%
Feeling excluded or intimidated due to other characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, race or others)	4%	6%	5%	5%	7%	5%
Fearing for my safety if I were to take part	24%	26%	20%	21%	13%	21%
Other barriers	15%	18%	10%	15%	13%	14%
None of the above	6%	7%	8%	10%	14%	9%
Prefer not to answer	2%	1%	2%	2%	0%	2%

*Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region.

When asked about negative experiences encountered during their activism (Table 10), between 25 and 29 per cent, however, indicated that they felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious, felt not listened to by adults, or faced financial difficulties. These challenges were mentioned relatively consistently across regions, although fewer respondents in the regions of the Americas and Europe mentioned facing financial difficulties. Also, 22 per cent of all respondents indicated that they had not faced any of the experiences listed.

Activists aged 15 to 19 were most likely to say that they did not feel listened to by adults (36 per cent compared to 24 per cent among the older age group). However, they were less likely to face financial difficulties (19 per cent compared to 32 per cent among the older age group) (see Table 11).

Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ were more likely to say that they felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious (31 per cent compared to 19 per cent among those not identifying as LGBTIQ+); and felt not listened to by adults (34 per cent compared to 26 per cent among those not LGBTIQ+).

Table 10: Negative experiences encountered during activism by region (N=840)*

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
I felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious	24%	28%	24%	28%	14%	25%
I felt not listened to by adults	35%	47%	20%	26%	25%	29%
I felt adults only included me due to my age and gender, but did not fully take on board my views	26%	25%	20%	20%	17%	22%
I felt intimidated or bullied by others	15%	10%	6%	10%	7%	10%
I feared for my safety	20%	11%	15%	22%	11%	17%
I faced financial difficulties	26%	11%	39%	19%	45%	27%
I faced negative experiences which made me stop engaging in activism, campaigning or influencing	16%	10%	8%	10%	7%	11%
Other negative experiences	13%	10%	13%	12%	13%	12%
None of the above	21%	28%	13%	24%	28%	22%
Prefer not to answer	5%	1%	3%	5%	0%	4%

*Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region.

Table 11: Negative experiences encountered during activism by age and LGBTIQ+ status (N=813)

	15 to 19	20 to 24	LGBTIQ+	Not LGBTIQ+	Prefer not to answer
I felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious	26%	23%	31%	19%	31%
I felt not listened to by adults	36%	24%	34%	26%	32%
I felt adults only included me due to my age and gender, but did not fully take on board my views	23%	21%	23%	19%	35%
I felt intimidated or bullied by others	12%	9%	12%	7%	19%
I feared for my safety	17%	17%	22%	15%	16%

I faced financial difficulties	19%	32%	25%	29%	30%
I faced negative experiences which made me stop engaging in activism, campaigning or influencing	11%	11%	12%	10%	13%
Other negative experiences	11%	13%	14%	10%	12%
None of the above	21%	22%	18%	26%	10%
Prefer not to answer	5%	3%	4%	3%	4%

When prompted to think about repercussions faced as a result of taking part in campaigning (Table 12), almost 40 per cent of young women and girl activists said that they had not faced negative repercussions. The most common negative repercussion listed financial difficulties, with 20 per cent of young women activists saying that they faced financial difficulties due to taking part in campaigning. This goes up to 32 per cent in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa and 33 per cent in West and Central Africa respectively.

Those aged 20 to 24 were more likely to say that they faced financial difficulties as a result of their activism (25 per cent compared to 12 per cent among the younger age group).

Among the other regions, additional repercussions emerge as important. For example, in Asia and the Pacific, facing online harassment and abuse was also mentioned, as well as facing stigma within the community. The latter was most commonly mentioned by activists in the European region. Activists in the Americas noted facing challenges that were not listed as part of the question.

Those aged 20 to 24 were more likely to say that they faced financial difficulties as a result of their activism (25 per cent compared to 12 per cent among the younger age group).

Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ were more likely to experience online harassment and abuse (21 per cent vs 13 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+) and stigmatisation within their community (21 per cent vs 10 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+).

Table 12: Repercussions of taking part in activism (N=840)*

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
Yes – I have faced threats of physical violence	8%	5%	10%	8%	14%	9%
Yes – I have faced physical violence and harassment	9%	3%	8%	5%	14%	7%
Yes – I have faced online harassment and abuse	18%	16%	12%	15%	16%	15%
Yes – I have been excluded from work/education	9%	2%	2%	7%	6%	6%
Yes – I have faced financial difficulties due to taking part	19%	8%	32%	11%	33%	20%
Yes – I have been excluded from access to decision makers	9%	4%	7%	6%	7%	7%
Yes – myself and others who were active have faced stigma within the community	15%	24%	10%	17%	9%	15%
Yes – myself and others who were active have been denied space to convene	6%	3%	2%	8%	6%	5%
Yes – myself and others who were active were denied resources for further activism	8%	6%	4%	4%	9%	6%
Yes – I have faced other negative repercussions	15%	14%	13%	20%	15%	16%
No – I have not faced any negative repercussions	39%	50%	35%	38%	38%	39%

*Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region.

6.4.1 Attitudes and perceptions of female activism

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

“Women who disrupt and create change are always viewed as villainised to some degree.”

Kaing, 19, Australia

Girls and young women interviewed were asked directly if the barriers mentioned were more or less difficult because of their gender. While many had already raised that gender was a key issue for them, some when prompted were able to reflect more on this. Many believed their activism encountered more difficulties specific to their gender. The only exception was in relation to police handling at protests where activists said it was usually men and boys who were handled more harshly in those circumstances.

“In terms of how we’re viewed, depends who you’re asking. I mean, I think there’s still large portions of the world who look at girls that have opinions, particularly on political and social issues, and go, ‘Oh my God, could she just shut up and go away?’.”

Stephanie, 24, Australia

The majority of girls describe negative attitudes and views of them as activists, which sometimes made them feel like “you are doing wrong”. Many girls described general criticisms or being scolded by community members for their activism. Some felt they had to look a certain way and be presentable in certain advocacy spaces, and some said they were criticised on their appearance.

“Sometimes when we go up on stage, when we are doing this advocacy thing, you hear from the crowd people saying, ‘How is she talking? Look at what she’s wearing. Look at the way she do, look at the way she’s phonetising. She even can’t speak better English’. So, these are things when you hear them you just literally go down, like ‘What am I even doing here?’.”

Barbie, 16, Sierra Leone

Some of the girls described being held back due to their gender. Mahelet (24) said in the focus group discussion that in Ethiopia young women are not allowed to advocate on social media. Luki (21, Paraguay) observed that girls are sometimes limited because they cannot go to places alone at certain times, and there are more restrictions placed on females than on males.

“Grandmother used to say that you have not even been able to solve the discrimination in your own family, between your brother and yourself, so how will you even solve the problems of discrimination in the society?”

Shirisha, 17, Nepal

“I started activism as soon as I was [a] child... I’ve seen a lot of things going on in my country, especially Somalia, women are not allowed to do anything... So when I was 16, I had a child. So, everybody was saying to me, and telling me that I can’t go back [to] school, I can’t keep on [living] my [own] life. I had become a mother, so I should stay at home, do nothing. That actually hit me hard, I didn’t want to stay home. I actually wanted to be a mother. My child, she’s fine now. But I wanted to become a something.”

Bilan, 23, Somalia

The girls and young women noted that young female activists were seen as unqualified and less knowledgeable than their male counterparts. This was further explored as respondents described double standards in gender norms that appear in the activism led by men and women.

“For me, I don’t think there are open chances for girls, and their opinions are not usually considered like boys. If we have a male and [a] female sitting in the same

room, then the priority will be for the male to share his opinion.”

Julia, 16, Jordan

“The community is still focused on male-dominated leadership, which limits girls’ participation in leadership and decision-making platforms around the community.”

Imani, 22, Kenya

A few respondents said that male activists were given more of a platform and their voices were preferred and opinions were valued more. Lily (20, Australia) shared a story of a politician visiting the indigenous organisation where she works and nobody asking her opinion on anything, but her male colleague showed up late and instantly everyone engaged him. From this experience she said that she was trying to position herself better to speak up and be heard.

Makda (22, Ethiopia) remarked that very few women participate in advocacy. A few of the young women spoke of giving male colleagues tasks in order to achieve their influencing aims. There was a sense that the activism goal came before an activist’s own feelings or ego. SPES (24, Japan) ran a campaign to increase voter turnout by offering discounts at restaurants for those with voting certificates for the Tokyo governor’s election. She went to negotiate with the restaurants but as girls alone, they were not taken seriously. She remarked that although it was not a perfect solution, when they visited the restaurants with a boy, they accomplished the project goals. Pushpa (23, Bangladesh) also said that people mock or ignore her, and because of these attitudes, she is now pursuing a strategy for a fellow male activist to lead the programme while she manages from the background. Leah (20, Kenya) also noted this:

“They don’t take it positively. In fact, most think there is nothing much that we do. That is why we decided to use the male champions because men tend to believe information from fellow men. As a girl it is very difficult for me to tell a man something that he believes. In many instances he will despise me.”

Activist spaces are male-dominated and community norms mean that female activists are seen as actively challenging gender roles, which places them in a difficult position. Examples of norms mentioned include: that it is not a woman’s or a girl’s place to be loud, to tell men what to do, to have their own voice and agency. Respondents who discussed such perceptions came from Somalia, Nigeria, Jordan, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, as well as the Philippines and Ireland.

“Well, they label you as a feminist, especially like the feminist not in a good way... and say like, ‘She wants to be equal with men. What’s she saying? How could she say this? She’s bold, she’s outspoken, she should shut up’, or whatever. And that’s the labels you get given if you speak louder of the problems women and girls face.”

Degan, 22, Somalia

“... I think among civic society it can often be perceived as being quite shouty maybe. It almost kind of feels like you can’t win, because if you’re out protesting and out marching on the streets and looking for change that way, you’re shouty... And you see an awful lot of language such as kind of screechy, kind of all of these gendered terms being thrown about when you see protests like that being led by women... there’s an awful lot of negative connotations there as well.”

Aoife, 21, Ireland

The activists said that girls and young women face a harsh backlash for speaking out or being in the public sphere. Wanjiku (22, Kenya) said that her dad would reprimand her for arguing in the community:

“If you look at his reasoning you see that because I am a lady, he felt as if I was inferior.”

The girls and young women were often challenged for deviating from expected norms for girls’ roles in the community – that is, being confined to household responsibilities and becoming mothers. One of the girls, Eli (22, Ethiopia), said family members were not happy about her defending women’s rights,

preferring her to work and get married. Em (23, Vietnam) also said that family complain that she is not focusing on fertility and family.

“I would say it’s a double-edged sword. Some people think that it’s good for girls to be involved. And on the other hand, they are seen in a bad light that they are women. They should stay at home... They shouldn’t be involved in all that is political, all that is in power, all that is campaigning. That’s not what they should do and that’s the reality.”

AJ, 17, Philippines

“In addition, there’ll also be pressures from people around them, like ‘She has a little baby and yet she’s doing something else other than child rearing’. Now I’m single and can do anything I want to do, but if I have a child, I would also be in a situation like that.”

Goma, 23, Japan

“When I was younger, I was feared at some point, there was some rejection. Especially in [location removed], a conservative Muslim city where a good woman should stay at home. There are some strong girls who simply have an opinion, who are always attacked. I was exposed to some attacks due to my personality and activity, the fact that I’m feminist is very controversial in the region. I was exposed to a lot of libel and hurt. But now, it’s like they checked with reality and settled for it, these girls exist and proved themselves.”

Talia, 22 Jordan

Some girls described other types of criticism coming from their own family members and friends. Delaya (21, Togo) described friends as unsupportive because they would say there is no money to do those kinds of activities. For example, Ishya (19, Nepal) said that her family discouraged her by indicating that social work and activism was not a useful endeavour. Her friends also sought to demotivate her by agreeing with her family that she would not achieve anything through her activism. Dhanvi (20, Nepal) said that community members complain about why she is doing these activities instead of studying and playing. Several of the girls in Ethiopia also said their family questioned them and wanted to stop their activism. Wanjiku (22, Kenya) said that at times she feels alone, as friends and family do not support her. Her father tried to stop her studying a social course on community advocacy and wanted her to do medicine instead, but she insisted on doing the course she wanted. Giulia (23, Netherlands) said that some in her family saw her work on climate activism as damaging their own livelihoods:

“...With my parents I can just have a good conversation about it. It’s mostly some further family, a couple of aunts... they are so also mainly a lot for farmers in the family. And so, they saw what I was doing as a kind of personal attack on them.”

Giulia, 23, Netherlands

“Others at my school bear hatred towards me. ‘She is turning her activism into her personality. You have to focus on really important things and not only her activism and we don’t want to hear about it anymore. It’s annoying.’ And then I’m like, ‘Yeah, well maybe for you it’s annoying, then imagine how it’s annoying for the people that are affected by it’.”

Laura, 17, Germany

Sadika (Bangladesh) and Binsa and Chaarumathi (both 18, Nepal) all described the knock-on effects that negative community discussions have on their families. Binsa’s words sum up the sentiments expressed by all three of the young women:

“People used to stop me and fill the ears of my family and other community members that I have been doing bad and useless work. I was also told to leave doing such things as this will affect my studies and life... they tried to demotivate me.”

Binsa, 18, Nepal

Sadika and Rani (19) from Bangladesh managed to overcome this by involving family in their activities – for example, if hosting a workshop, they take along their mother or father. So over time, family members have become more accepting once they see the work of helping the community. Both described this “social validation” as helpful for their families.

Sometimes the negative reactions stemmed from family’s or friends’ concerns or worries rather than pure criticism. Leonie (22, Germany) said that parents question whether it was a good use of her time, whether it was affecting her studies, but they have not outwardly tried to stop her. Lily (20, Australia) also said people had concerns over the consequences of her activism. Fern’s family (24, Thailand) did not want her to go out protesting for safety reasons. This was also the concern with Nadia’s (23) parents in Bangladesh, who want her to be careful. Therefore, she is not permitted to be involved in frontline campaigning, only the behind-the-scenes type of work. Sanjiva (18, Nepal) also voiced this:

“My father and mother did not want me to get involved in such activism and campaigns because as a girl child it is not accepted for me to go out and do such activities and they feared that something might happen to me. They might have done it out of love since they didn’t want their daughter to face any difficulties and criticism for my future but still, I think the gender also mattered here. They didn’t want me to go around on my own doing the activism and thus it created a sort of barrier for me.”

Examples of not adhering to expected norms played out in a number of ways. For instance, gendered tropes were used against female activists such as being depicted as angry rather than passionate. Also, males were characterised as leaders and champions, while girls and women were classified as emotional and weak and sometimes rude, too loud and annoying.

“It’s gender, because being a woman [means that] you can talk about a silly thing, and everybody’s going to feel like you’re being dramatic. You can talk about your pain, and nobody really gives a damn: women complain, and they are making a big deal.”
Eli, 22, Ethiopia

The girls and young women described names such as “feminazi” or even suggestions around having sexual relations with people in power to “gain a seat at the table”. Some of the young women from African countries conveyed that being labelled “feminists” was an insult in their contexts and discussed the stigma attached to female activists:

“There’s still a very negative perception of female activists and campaigners. The most common one being they’re delinquent, females.”
Haka, 22, Zimbabwe

“Because of the community perception around female activism, they have that fixed concept that women involving in activism are prostitutes, they talk too much, some are not taking control to their husbands, some are not respecting their parents.”
Fanta, 24, Sierra Leone

Girls and young women described men in particular as reacting badly to their activism. They thought this was due to males feeling oppressed or threatened by their activism. Ladan (23, Somalia) and Leah (20, Kenya) said that men have tried to stop them campaigning. Many of the girls in the Africa region said that men saw them as a threat to their rights or thought that women’s rights benefited women to the disadvantage of men.

“The community see girls and women work on gender issues, child rights or any other advocacy or activism, they automatically label you as sexist, feminist and say that ‘oh you hate men’, ‘oh you are just trying to be different as you are a woman’ and [you’re] told you can’t do it and you are trying to prove you are capable.”
Eli, 22, Ethiopia

“A common experience when engaging in activism is encountering young men on the streets who may insult you because they perceive your efforts as an attempt to fight

and suppress them.”

Leah, 20, Kenya

Some girls and young women shared that sometimes they are subjected to resentment or aggression when speaking out on certain topics such as feminism, SRHR or LGBTIQ+ rights. Makda (22, Ethiopia) said that although people were generally supportive, sometimes there were misunderstandings around feminism. Nari (19, Guatemala) and Atena (17, Dominican Republic) suggested that it was sometimes the issue that was the problem rather than the activist, and issues like comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and sexuality were frowned upon. Sunflower (24, Vietnam) said that remote or rural communities were less familiar with sensitive topics and thus have greater hesitance towards female activism. Carol (22, Zimbabwe) said it depended on the person; some people are more open to change than others especially in relation to social norms.

A major issue appeared to be that, according to the girls and young women, there is a lack of understanding about the issues in question or that family or relatives do not understand what activism is generally about. A few girls said that some parents in the community do not react well because they think the activists are misleading their children. Examples of some of the myths that girls and young women mentioned were:

- “You are doing the Fridays for Future protests to miss school.” (Rose, 18, Australia)
- “You do it for attention.” (Jhasmin 16, Dominican Republic; Gaby, 16, Paraguay)
- “You do it to benefit yourself and not the community.” (Cecilia, 19, Kenya; Monte, 18, Dominican Republic)
- “You are political and trying to support a certain party.” (Jessica, 24, Zimbabwe)
- “You are rich.” (Luso, 23, Malawi; Tani, 23, Zimbabwe)

In regard to the myth about being rich, Tani said these rumours happened after she had travelled to Europe with an NGO for her activism even though in reality she struggles financially. Rhyllie (21, Canada) pointed to a larger misunderstanding of what activism is and what campaigning looks like:

“I don't know if it's awareness, or if it's awareness they just don't maybe understand the breadth of activities and involvement that goes into activism and all the behind-the-scenes boring work of writing up and editing something or writing and drafting emails or whatever it is. I think the idea of activism for most people is just picketing and being out there yelling at a politician or something like that, which is definitely not what activism as a whole is.”

Some of the community backlash was down to whom the girls and young women associated with through their activism. Jessica (24, Zimbabwe) said that prejudices exist in her community around who she associated with. Through her activism, she had befriended people from the LGBTIQ+ community, so people now said she would be corrupted by hanging out with the wrong crowd and was advocating on the wrong topics. Em (23, Vietnam) said that her activism on LGBTIQ+ issues meant that she sometimes encountered homophobia from people. Monte (18, Dominican Republic) also shared that people try to stop her activism, saying that it is going to get her into trouble – but that she doesn't listen unless they have constructive criticism.

Apathy was also described as an issue. A few activists said that people in the community did not care about female issues and they did not get much support. For example, Eva (22, Brazil) said that she had to campaign in other locations as she had no support network in her own community, as people weren't interested. Laura (17, Germany) also stated that people in her region were not interested as they have an “old-fashioned mentality” and make fun of her activism.

Other negative reactions varied. Éva (20, Ireland) was originally from a rural town in Hungary. She said that people in her hometown criticised her support of homeless people, arguing it was their own faults that they were homeless. A few girls described discouragement at school. Laura (16, Germany) said that her teachers discourage her and try to stop her involvement in political parties, saying it won't change anything and is a waste of time. Julia (16, Jordan) also said her teachers are not happy when she leaves to take part in activist activities, even with parental permission. Laura (17, Germany) also said that their school principal stopped some actions for the UN-designated International Day for the

Elimination of Violence Against Women saying that there had not been enough notice and other things were planned.

However, there were positive reactions to their activism. Many described the praise they had received from different community members, saying they were seen as “qualified” and “brave”, and that they were listened to during decision making, and valued.

“Role model, I guess. As an advocate, I gained respect from people, and they listened to my opinions and ideas, then asked my perspective during meetings for projects and programmes to implement in our community.”

Kristine, 20, Philippines

Em (23, Vietnam) said that she still received support and compliments even when people may personally disagree with her stance on an issue. A few girls and young women described that only certain environments were supportive such as university ones. For example, Rakhi (23, Bangladesh) said that she was supported at university but when she goes to her village, they think what she says is wrong.

A few girls and young women said that their own family was particularly supportive, even when doing something that went against the grain. Binsa (18, Nepal) said that she received lots of support from family and friends, and even the ward administration helps her when she needs to go to the higher authorities. Degan (22, Somalia) was also grateful for an especially supportive mother, and this support helped when young boys and elders verbally abuse her. Other activists in Australia and the Philippines confirmed that their parents were proud of them.

“When we shared our advocacies, other parents expressed their desire for their children to get involved as well and for all children and youth to have the same mindset.”

Empowered, 18, Philippines

Other activists described views as mixed. Kenia (19, Philippines) said that some people think activists are asking too much of government but others saw her as a capable leader. Amy (19, Sierra Leone) discussed that some people saw her as idle while others were supportive.

“Each society is divided into two parts, the ones who are interested and supportive and others who disappoint and underestimate people, and we are actually living this reality.”

Suzan, 21, Jordan

Some discussions suggested a sense of progress over time, that communities now more readily view female activists in a positive way, whether this is through female activists becoming more common, involved in more opportunities or in positions of leadership, or being recognised for the value their work is bringing. Wanja (21, Kenya) said that her parents and elders opposed her and went against her agenda, but that she has the support of ward administrators and youth. She felt that overall the community is more supportive compared to when she started. Other respondents echoed this sense of changing attitudes:

“Before... females are nothing to them. Now, everybody is nice... Maybe like, ‘What a man can do, a woman can do better’. Unlike before [when] we have to be a full housewife. Now, the women in my community are engaging in skills because through my environmental initiative also... they are seeing the capability. They are seeing the hidden talent in them.”

Zaidu, 22, Nigeria

“I think currently our society is changing bit by bit and they are now in a more positive sense of female activists or change makers who are working in the policy sector or advocacy sector, and they are encouraging more and more females to work with the policy sector or the activists. And especially in our organisation, there are many, many female activists or change makers who are leading our important teams. So, I guess from this fact alone that our female activists are built in a more positive way

rather than the past, obviously.”
Nadia, 23, Bangladesh

6.4.2 Age and other intersectional characteristics and their influence

“Being a young girl who’s trying to make an impact is never easy. And again, being young, some people don’t take you seriously. And then there’s also negativity, but you need to be mentally strong and that’s been really hard.”
Petronella, 19, Zimbabwe

Girls and young women interviewed were also asked directly if the barriers mentioned were more or less difficult because of their age. The majority noted that it was a combination of both their age and gender that was a distinct barrier.

Some girls said they struggled to be taken seriously due to their age, as they were seen as too young or inexperienced to interfere with “adult business”. Binsa (18, Nepal) was told not to focus on activism at her age but on school. Monte (18, Dominican Republic) said that her community did not support young people and they are told that their opinions do not matter. Degan (22, Somalia) said that she was not allowed to advocate to the government once because of her age. Lillith (17, Netherlands) and Laura (17, Germany) said that people see their activism as just teenagers rebelling:

“I was having a conversation with parents from school, and it was a day of the open day in our schools and he [a parent] was discussing with me about whether people should focus on the climate or not. And when I started my argument with my, yeah, with facts... he was like, ‘Yeah, all young people just want to stand up against the older people, the people that have more experience. You don’t have any experience. You’re just a young girl and you’re living on the coats of your parents, and you just want to be different, and you are one of those girls’.”
Laura, 17, Germany

Amber (23, Canada) shared that youth are under-represented and underutilised in terms of advocacy work and policy-level changes and government decisions. Kristine (20, Philippines) also felt that policy makers did not want youth to be part of decision making because they think young people are incapable. Mahelet (24, Ethiopia) said that she was told only professionals and older people can advocate. Several of the girls and young women felt that young people were not listened to. A few activists remarked that this was often the case with government decision makers.

Emily (19, Canada) and Kaing (19, Australia) thought age-related experience was given more value than lived experiences in many cases. A few of the girls also remarked on intergenerational differences within certain movements – for example, on LGBTIQ+ issues, women’s rights or climate action movements. Lillith (17, Netherlands) said that older people do more of the talking in their climate organisation.

“...‘No, you’re too young, you won’t understand what we’re talking about.’ That’s something that happens a lot with the climate department. We try to get involved in the preparations for the last COP and we sent a lot of emails and phone calls and, yeah, wrote position papers. And they said they read it and they would take it into consideration. And when we ask for participation in the preparation for COP, the answer was, ‘Yeah, that’s too complex, you wouldn’t understand it’.”
Leonie, 22, Germany

“They talk about women’s rights, about no violence against women. But within these institutions, the same women colleagues overexploit their own women.”
B’atz, 21, Guatemala

Alina (24, Ireland) – whose words were endorsed by Etenesh (24, Ethiopia) – said that sometimes youth engagement was tokenistic.

“We get invited to things and we give our input on things. Nothing ever comes out of it. It’s more like they’ll involve us on the day. That’s it, that’s the end of it. There’s not a lot of continuation afterwards. And I see that, especially in terms of age, gender, and then socio-economic status as well. They think it’s great. ‘Oh yeah, we’ll bring in the students, and the low-income students and bring them in for a day and show them how everything works’.”

Alina, 24, Ireland

In contrast, Mada (24, Brazil) worried that being too old would become her barrier given that most NGOs wanted to engage with youth, and she would soon be 25:

“And so, I have had a hard time getting into these organisations. And then you wonder, oh my God, where is my space? What is my place? Where can I continue my actions, support? Because one of the things that I regret a little, I don’t know, is having entered a little late... So, sometimes this makes me a little bit anguished, of not being able to be close to those who are doing so many things that I admire.”

Challenges related to race, religion and class

Some of the girls felt that they were experiencing additional challenges due to other characteristics besides gender and age, for example, race and class. Girls and young women in Australia gave examples of this. Kaing (19) mentioned that coming from a low socio-economic background and a single-income household made it more difficult. Some of the girls felt there was a lack of representation for people of colour in activist spaces. Rose (18) described often noticing that she was the only person of colour in a room. Lily (20) said that being a woman of colour in parliamentary spaces and speaking with decision makers made her more aware of sexism and racism in parliament.

Some said that race made them an easier target for abuse. Eva (22, Brazil) said that as a black woman raising the flag of feminism provoked more of a reaction, and Aaliyah (21, Australia) had experienced racism as an aboriginal woman. Three girls mentioned racism in policing: Kaing (19, Australia) noted protests that related to First Nations issues were treated with more police brutality, while Lillith (17, Netherlands) and Sofie (22, Netherlands) felt that Dutch police treated foreign nationals worse especially if they didn’t speak Dutch:

“You can also see that they [the police] are becoming more and more repressive and, above all, they just find it very irritating that we are allowed to campaign... I did suffer from how they acted towards me. But what I found much more difficult actually and also very traumatising was to see how the police act towards other people and then for especially people of colour or people who are disabled or marginalised groups. Those are often treated much worse, and I know that... I am really not saying that every individual working in the police is a racist, but the institution is incredibly racist and full of white men.”

Sofie, 22, Netherlands

“The climate movement is incredibly white... it just stands out, but if you then always only see a certain kind of people... of course you have to deal with police and so sometimes police violence... You still unfortunately see that sometimes non-white people experience more police violence.”

Lillith, 17, Netherlands

Mafilatou (23, Togo) and Dalinah (24, Ethiopia) also mentioned being an easy target in relation to being Muslim and wearing a hijab. Sadika (Bangladesh) said that she is president of a youth group with 24 people, half of whom are men. She gets told as a Muslim woman that she is of bad moral character because she is working with men.

6.4.3 Safety considerations, mental health and confidence

The girls and young women were asked if they ever felt unsafe or uncomfortable when carrying out their activism. Some feared receiving security threats or experiencing violence. B'atz (21, Guatemala) said women have been persecuted for activism and that she was afraid about this.

Activists mentioned feeling insecure due to encountering vitriol and hate from the general public in relation to their activism. A few mentioned feelings of being unsafe because of never being sure how people would react to their message, especially in patriarchal societies. Dhanvi (20, Nepal) sometimes feared that people may “do her wrong”. Liniksha (20, Nepal) would not undertake activism in her community because it felt too unsafe or uncomfortable, so she does it far away from her home.

Some girls described being met with threats or aggressive body language. For example, Esther (22, Malawi) had experienced hostility when talking about reproduction with fathers of children. Imani (22, Kenya) spoke of challenges when carrying out gender-based violence advocacy and sometimes faced threats from men because most men feel like she is breaking up their families by helping girls and referring them to rescue centres. Chiamaka (21, Nigeria) also said that she felt completely unsafe because of security threats:

“So if I want to carry out activism in a certain community, it'll be really difficult to go to the most underserved communities where they need it the most, where they need some of the materials that we would want to provide, for instance. It'll be difficult to get to those areas or even be there physically because of security issues. There's a lot of kidnapping, there's a lot of violence that is going around. So, it's not safe, especially for women and girls and people with disabilities.”

Some girls and women described how people actively try to stop their campaigns or activities by issuing more dangerous threats. Valerie (22, Nigeria) shared a story of visiting a school to discuss what she thought was a pre-agreed topic around the education of girls in STEM and being chased out of the school for discussing gender equality. She was followed out of the school and the situation then “got physical”. After this incident males needed to accompany females in certain areas when they do activities for that organisation. Ishya (19, Nepal) was threatened at her home and complaints were made to her family due to her work on child marriage. Binsa (18, Nepal) also said that she received the greatest backlash over her child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) prevention programmes.

Laura (17, Germany) talked about travelling alone to a city to take part in protests, sometimes travelling alone at night and encountering hatred – it is the one part of activism that she does not like. Chaarumathi (18, Nepal) said that many programmes take place in the evening and participants worry about walking home late at night. Binsa (18, Nepal) also remembers receiving hate comments after a campaign and being worried about walking alone on quiet roads. Salma (22, Bangladesh) said that she would not campaign alone due to safety reasons.

Barbie (16, Sierra Leone) spoke about being more vulnerable as a girl activist. Mercy (22, Malawi) also felt this:

“Being a female young activist makes you vulnerable so you choosing to stand out and speak for yourself makes you more vulnerable. Hence you're subject to discrimination, stigma and violence ... just because you have chosen to speak out. So there is violence online, getting comments from people, even in the issue of vulnerability of young women we have people that want to take advantage of you so we are also prone to even sexual violence itself.”

Nadia (23, Bangladesh) had seen some incidents of sexual harassment from senior staff in certain organisations as they think it is a place for dating. Praia (24, Burkina Faso) described men putting their “hand under your lower back” making you uncomfortable.

Tani (23, Zimbabwe) said that during campaigns, she can get harassed, and people say bad things:

“So that's one thing that I've experienced to say, you're saying, ‘Oh, my body, my right’, and someone's like... ‘Ah, women, you just always saying this, but look at you. You dress this way, and you are enticing us’.”

“So, I was gender equality advocator until last year... at a young female leader training. So, a guy just hit me, and in an inappropriate place in front of everybody. So, I was so angry, I followed him, I followed him running.”
Salley, 18, Sierra Leone

Dalinah (24, Ethiopia) said that sometimes political spaces felt risky and she needed to step back. A few of the girls who carry out direct action had felt unsafe at times due to policing. Stephanie (24, Australia) said that climate change protesters are treated very poorly by police. Amelia (18, Canada) and Cecilia (19, Kenya) described police harassment and brutality, the former saying that she was advised to bring a mask and milk to pour on her face if going to protests and had experienced water cannon. Giulia (23, Netherlands) described chaos at a blockade and getting hit “hard” by an officer. Anna (23, Netherlands) remembered being faced with water cannon by military police and decided to get out of the situation. However, a male friend at the protest had bruises as police kept him in a hold for too long.

*“The first protest I went to...the police and the government decided to use the hoses and the rubber lines, tear gas. And so that was the first protest I went to. And the first thing I had to experience. So, it was terrifying because at one moment you're just like in a crowd. I was getting to know a lot more people. I was learning new things. We were protesting. And it was a peaceful protest as protests should be. And then the next moment we're running for our lives. And there's people saying like 'be careful you're going to get shot' or like 'be careful don't get hit by the hoses, the tear gas and everything'. So, that was very violent. And I guess now that I think back, I understood why my parents didn't want me to go. How violent it was.”*¹¹³
Fern, 24, Thailand

“There are many barriers like people verbally abusing me, directly I was involved with law enforcement while I was doing a protest, they tried to arrest us but when they saw the public and media, they left us.”
Pushpa, 23, Bangladesh

“Climate justice feminist protests in Mexico yes can get a bit intense... it's just that basically, not knowing exactly how it's going to turn out, not knowing how the police will react in those things as I'm not from there.”
Leonie, 22, Germany

Online abuse or harassment

Some girls had felt unsafe due to online abuse or harassment, which was mainly encountered on social media. The girls and young women encountered hate speech, insulting comments (sometimes sexualised), and trolling. Stephanie (24, Australia) felt the toxicity of the internet was unleashed when you speak up: they comment on her body, her intelligence and her right to live and even **“people threaten to come and take my wheelchair”**. She didn't feel it was targeted abuse but with any tweet that got traction she got trolled. Fern (24, Thailand) said that people online acted aggressively when she spoke about feminism and sexual assault in schools. Mya (23, Burkina Faso) received online harassment from a classmate because of advocating for gender equality.

A few girls remarked that they didn't ever feel unsafe due to activism but had felt uncomfortable for varying reasons.

“When older people say something like that and sometimes, they need to get louder and raise their voice and sometimes it makes me uncomfortable because they clearly use their power against me and that makes me uncomfortable sometimes.”
Laura, 17, Germany

Confidence

Confidence issues were also raised by some of the girls and young women who spoke of feeling self-doubt, low self-esteem, imposter syndrome and insecurity. Sometimes this was in relation to certain

¹¹³ Please note that the protest mentioned was not organised by Plan International Thailand.

scenarios such as having to talk to new people like politicians, suffering from stage fright, talking in front of people who are not listening. Leah (20, Kenya) described how dealing with constant criticism can start to erode self-confidence. Kristine, 20, Philippines shared that being looked up to by people brought a pressure to be perfect. B'atz (21, Guatemala) spoke about the competition element of activism feeding into insecurities, such as who has more degrees? Who has done more activism?

Mental health challenges

Some of the girls and young women talked about poor mental health, anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion. Rose (18, Australia) said that she felt this was a particular issue within the climate struggle with depression and burnout. Em (23, Vietnam) said that sometimes asking for money for LGBTIQ+ activities, if the funders are homophobic or transphobic, can be very “mentally draining”. Lauren (19, Nigeria) described as depressing the feeling of not doing enough. Stella (19, Australia) said that not being able to access mental health support made it difficult to do the work sustainably and can even end up re-traumatising people.

“One of my biggest low points was just burnout... in 2020, yeah, when there was SARS [Special Anti-Robbery Squad] protest in Nigeria, and it was all over the country. And at the beginning it seemed like, ‘Oh, this is going great, maybe we’ll be heard, maybe there will be change’. And it just kind of ended in the worst way possible, with so many young people dying. So that just puts, it just burnt everyone out. Everyone would just say, ‘Okay’. And for me personally, I just went into a hole, because it almost seemed like if now, if we can’t stand up for ourselves now, when?”

Grace, 24, Ireland¹¹⁴

Adriana (24, Brazil) also shared some mental health challenges that she had encountered during her activism:

“...in this process, I became ill, and I became mentally ill, physically ill, because you know that the body, the mind controls the body. And then I began to have a lot of anxiety, depression. I couldn’t do some activities; I couldn’t go to activities anymore because I couldn’t stand the psychological attack anymore.”

However, she did note that switching her work into other areas had allowed her to improve her mental health. Triangle (22, Canada) also described challenges around this:

“External criticism of the work is also very challenging and can be very disheartening as well. And mental health, I would say too, in terms of being impacted by traumas and experiences, but also having to intellectualise them for advocacy purposes or the education of others can also be a big piece of it as well.”

Rim (24, Lebanon) explained that people use libel to try to stop activism, even causing her problems at work, and trying to get her dismissed from her job, which consumes mental energy:

“Libel, a price that I paid with my mental health, regional exclusion, family exclusion and a delay in marriage. As a consequence, to everything that I went through, I moved to another city, my university is there, and I couldn’t even stay just to finish my bachelor [degree].”

However, Rim noted that sometimes, trying to balance looking after her mental health has held her back from her ambitions:

“I wanted to submit my candidacy for municipal elections, but I backed off because it’s going to cost me a lot mentally.”

Musu (22, Sierra Leone) noted the need to be mentally strong in activism. Amy (19, Sierra Leone) found challenging her parents particularly hard:

“The mental challenge, because most of the times when I [get] involve[d] in these things, you have people coming to you, ‘You’re doing these things to challenge your parents. You are always doing these things, that’s why you are doing this activism so that you’ll

¹¹⁴ Grace had moved to Ireland from Nigeria.

be able to challenge your parents.’ Although yes, I fight it off, but most of the times it gets to me because you are challenging your elders and your parents in the community, and so for me, that’s it.”

6.4.4 Financial challenges

Lack of financing and resource constraints were the main barrier to activism that girls and young women raised in the interviews and focus groups, building on the findings from the survey.

“I feel like some of the challenges, most of the challenges are to do with finances. And it’s because sometimes you really want to go into certain areas, but because we are a small organisation, you cannot afford to. Sometimes you really know this person needs help in this particular area, but you cannot because there’s no proper funding for you to assist them. And there’s nothing worse than giving someone hope, going there, talking to them, and not being able to change their situation. And I feel like that is one of the biggest barriers.”

Jessica, 24, Zimbabwe

Girls and women pointed out several costs associated with activism, such as running activities, expensive conferences, costly data bundles, travel costs to attend activities and training. Many of the activists self-financed their advocacy and campaigning activities.

“And then also financial. Woo, financial. Yeah, that’s also a big part of it too. The investment piece of what it requires to sustain these movements can also be challenging as well, whether it’s with your time and lost wages that will never be recovered or the actual investment of resources that has to go into this work.”

Triangle, 22, Canada

Sanjiva (18, Nepal) and Nica (24, Brazil) had experienced food shortages or hunger when carrying out activities when there was no money for food or snacks. Many of the self-funding activists pointed out it was difficult to manage their own finances to cover these costs as well as pay for personal daily expenses.

Many of the girls commented how activism and campaigning generally works on a voluntary and unpaid basis. Jenny (21, Australia), Miriam (18, Germany) and Amelia (18, Canada) remarked that this then centred around those who could best afford to take part, which was problematic. Amelia added:

“I am upper middle class, so my family has the funds to take me to certain groups. If I want to go after school to stuff, my parents can drive me. I have a car I can drive after school to certain clubs and events. If I want to start up an organisation, I have the money and my parents are willing to pay me [for] resources and whatever, like for my editing, my dad bought my computer for editing in which I was able to edit videos for my job and for my non-profit.”

Leonie (22, Germany) felt the barrier could be addressed by youth advisory panels, such as the ones in the German Ministry for Development and Cooperation, could go further by remunerating them for time spent on tasks.

6.4.5 Structural barriers and shrinking civic space¹¹⁵

Many activists also underlined that in some of their contexts there were laws or restrictions that made it difficult to carry out activism activities in their context. One girl shared that activists are persecuted and criminalised in her context and people intimidate activists, meaning that activists are “up against it”. Amber (23, Canada) mentioned that a lot of “indigenous movements have had a lot of fight and

¹¹⁵ Mentions of countries and girls’ and young women’s pseudonyms have been purposely omitted from parts of this section due to the sensitive nature of some of the issues discussed.

restrictions in terms of government participant and responses". A few noted restrictions or laws prohibiting protests. Laura (17, Germany) said that there were laws that restrict street protests or make them more difficult which is now a very big challenge for activism. Amelia (18, Canada) said that some states are trying to pass laws to make it harder to protest. Leonie (22) also noted that they recently changed the law in some parts of Germany:

"They can detain someone for a couple of days just because they think they're going to do something illegal without having any proof of that. And they pass that law, because many climate activists, they stick themselves on the streets with glue to block the street, to just create awareness... And there are a lot of climate activists in jails in Bavaria because of that law."

Mala (18, Thailand) spoke of lots of limitations on protests and sharing opinions on political issues that make it very difficult for large groups of people to go out and protest. Ariel (15, Thailand) shared that although activists needed to be careful of what they say in the media, overall the government was supportive of young people who want to advocate. Another interviewee said that protests were not possible, as security forces would arrest activists due to oppressive laws and restrictions.

Girls and young women in four countries mentioned the limits on freedom of speech. One girl said she wanted to share things online but sometimes cannot. It has also stopped her from going into journalism because there were too many restrictions. One girl mentioned legal challenges when practising free speech that authorities deemed as harmful; she also mentioned state surveillance that sometimes was covert and other times public.

Girls and young women from 11 countries shared that their governments' policies were restrictive due to the bureaucracy required to carry out an activity or a protest – "there is a lot of red tape around social justice movements". Another activist said that she was witnessing repression of activities and limitation of freedoms: more permissions were needed and no campaign activity can go ahead without government permissions.

"It's difficult to protest spontaneously because most of the time you have to get something like an agreement from the police and it always takes really long. So while you have the demonstration, it is also full of rules, because you cannot do everything, and if you are the head of it, you have to make sure that the police is there, that no one gets aggressive, that it doesn't interrupt or something. So, I think if you're the head of a demonstration, it's risky, and it's hard to organise, but it is possible."

Laura, 16, Germany

"You need police clearance. If you want to do some campaigns, some lobbying or advocacy, to ask for police clearance and that limits your speed. Asking for police clearance, they will only give you that clearance if you are on their side or if you are not doing something contrary to what they are doing... not just the recent governments, all governments that are passed so far, they have that culture. They will limit you without giving you that clearance. And it's only when you have the clearance that you go and protest. Without the clearance you will not. So as a campaign body, we've tried so much writing letters, appealing to governments for people to have access to freedom of speech..."

Fanta, 24, Sierra Leone

A few girls discussed structural barriers, such as a lack of institutional support for activism, difficulty in getting organisations registered and laws that make it difficult to organise. Chiamaka (21, Nigeria) referred to a lack of implementation of laws in Nigeria:

"We basically function in what I call a formal versus informal system. So, the formal system is the one that is written on paper, documented like the constitution. And even the constitution itself is archaic. But then there are some laws that have been written and passed, some bills that have been passed that are good on paper. And you look at it and you think, 'Oh, Nigeria actually has some pretty good laws and things that we could use to thrive'. For instance, the disability community has a disability act, which on paper looks amazing and, if implemented, could mean a whole change for the

disability community. But then it is not implemented. I think that's one challenge, especially for us activists... you're trying to do things a certain way by [the] book, but it wouldn't work out for you because you are not using the informal way, which is the way of the people."

One activist spoke of internet bans and a clamp-down on digital rights which make it hard to organise. Another shared an example of this in her country: that is, how sharing a post on Facebook can mean you always receive notifications indicating that your post contains particular words that are prevented from publishing, although all the words are normal. One girl shared that while there was no legislation actively prohibiting or punishing activism but there were limits on what you could do as an organisation or individual. Adriana (24, Brazil) said that local government corruption was a big barrier to her activism on deforestation in the Amazon.

Some spoke of laws or restrictions in relation to certain campaign areas – for example, abortion rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTIQ+ rights. This coincides with research from the Observatory on the Universality of Rights confirms that anti-rights groups are creating a transnational network of state and non-state actors undermining rights to gender and sexuality.¹¹⁶ Etenesh (24, Ethiopia) shows the global linkages of these issues, with Roe vs Wade bolstering the anti-choice movements in other contexts:

"Denying abortion care services to women brings a lot of challenges for women and girls, and I see the despair and the sadness and a lot of things that affect women. That motivates me to be an advocate and to change the growing anti-choice movement here in Ethiopia as well, because Ethiopia has a progressive law that enables women and young girls to access abortion care services. But after the overturn of Roe versus Wade, there's a growing anti-choice movement here as well. And that's the most inspiring for me that drives me to be an activist or an advocate."

One activist mentioned certain articles of the law which prevent awareness-raising activities that could lead to thousands of lives being saved in relation to clandestine pregnancies. Mary (23, Guatemala) said that for SRHR, there were limits on what regulations the Ministry of Health and Education would allow to be discussed. Another girl shared that her country is not kind to activists particularly those who are active on LGBTIQ+ rights.

A few girls spoke of government challenges but said these could sometimes be circumvented by building good relationships. Pushpa (23, Bangladesh) spoke of needing to be savvy in how activities were presented, how research and networking took place, otherwise local government could cause difficulties. Others spoke of media challenges.

Some girls and women shared that while laws do not restrict activism or campaigning, or may even be supportive, this does not mean that existing laws are implemented in practice. For example, girls in Nepal said that police do not follow up on CEFMU cases or any breaches of child labour laws.

"Then the law authorities will tell us to keep it confidential. They won't report the case and won't let us either. They think that if we report and bring out the case then we will have to face multiple processes and it will be a tedious process, so it is better to not raise the issue as it may look bad for the society. They also say that we will be unsafe if there is information that we have reported. In the law it is written that if they find out about a child marriage then there will be three years of jail and some compensation to be paid for the bail. But that is still not implemented at all."

Binsa, 18, Nepal

Ladan (23, Somalia) said that cases of sexual violence are not followed up on but she was trying to work with ministers and sheikhs to change this. B'atz (21, Guatemala) also stated that technically the laws in her country promote free speech, but that this does not happen in practice, as different activists

¹¹⁶ AWID (2021) Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report – rights at risk. time for action

and rights defenders are criminalised. Zaidu (22, Nigeria) stated that while laws were not restrictive, finding justice is difficult. Valerie (22, Nigeria) spoke of the importance of enabling laws:

“An example, there is the sexual harassment bill now that we’ve been trying to get ...passed as law. Sexual harassment in tertiary institutions, passing that as a law would make it way easier for we activists to get the message across and be able to hold the perpetrators accountable for what they did. But because ...those laws haven’t been put in place or those policies haven’t been put in place, it makes it difficult. So personally, I don’t think I’ve been in any situation where a law, a policy made it hard for me to carry out my advocacy duties in court. It’s more that there aren’t enough laws put in place to enable us, to push us forward, to help us move forward.”

Leonie (22, Germany) spoke of barriers that existed within youth advisory initiatives such as the structures of a ministry not being youth-friendly:

“The other barriers, the hierarchy that exists between people who are employed in a ministry and young people who are doing all their work in their free time, for example... They want to give us the opportunity to comment on something and then they expect us to answer the next day... So that is just a clash of structures at the ministry with pretty high or very strict structures and hierarchies, and then young people who try to break those hierarchies and try to work on a more flexible regime.”

A few girls in Europe and Africa mentioned the urban-rural divide. Elaine (21) and Gormfhlaith (24) in Ireland noted structural issues such as a lack of transport infrastructure that made it difficult to attend activities which largely took place in cities. Etenesh (24, Ethiopia) and Laura (17, Germany) thought that people were more open-minded in cities than in rural areas and less dismissive of their activism.

6.4.6 Cultural barriers

Girls and young women across the regions spoke of cultural and religious barriers and the difficulty of navigating norms and customs in relation to topics they campaigned on such as gender-based violence. Adriana (24, Brazil) described her council area as being dominated by evangelical Christians which made advocacy difficult. Tani in Zimbabwe explained how challenging norms could cause family tensions:

“Our culture, norms and values are still there in communities. And men kind of feel intimidated by women who are powerful, educated and know what they do not want. So as a person who says, ‘You know what? You shouldn’t let a man hit you. You should go to the police station’. We even do that with our families. My brother is out there abusing his wife. I tell her to go and report him to the police. You now have tension in the family, tension with your neighbours, because you’re trying to make sure that young women think for themselves and are stronger and independent to decide what they want. So in the community, you end up getting some kind of repression, especially from the males and some females who still feel like women need to be oppressed and be submissive.”
Tani, 23, Zimbabwe

Miver (24, Vietnam) said that it was difficult to break traditions around women’s roles in Vietnam. Alexa (23, Lebanon) said the Lebanese society was patriarchal. Lucy (21, Ethiopia) said that she is seen as a “deviant” for bringing western cultures through discussing feminism in her activism. Suzzy (19, Nigeria) commented that in northern Nigeria, gender equality is hard to implement due to cultural laws.

A few activists said that they encountered more difficulties with community elders. Fern (24, Thailand) said the Confucian beliefs sometimes restrict young people and generally the culture is of not questioning things in Thailand which makes it difficult to campaign. Aoife (21, Ireland) said that there was not the same culture of dissent as there was in other European countries such as France which meant that sometimes people do not engage in direct action.

Another barrier raised by several activists was around competing priorities with school or work.

Multiple other barriers were raised by different activists interviewed. These included:

- difficulties mobilising young people, mentioned by Chiamaka (21, Nigeria), Suzzy (19, Nigeria), Mamou (22, Burkina Faso);
- a lack of access to decision makers or those in power, according to Jessica (24, Zimbabwe) and Baly (21, Guatemala);
- police-related challenges such as case reporting not being followed up (Leah, 20, Kenya);
- lack of media support alongside misinformation (B'atz, 21, Guatemala);
- a lack of training and skills building (Aoife, 21, Ireland);
- lack of support from CSOs or a lack of support from the government (Mahelet, 24, Ethiopia)
- lack of networking and connections with other young advocates (Mahelet, 24, Ethiopia).

“I've still studied and still done qualifications, but I chose not to go to uni towards the end of my high school. It was my whole plan throughout the whole of my schooling life to go to uni and I ended up not wanting to go. And so that is also a barrier too. I'm the only one in my organisation that has not been to uni.”

Aaliyah, 21, Australia

6.4.7 Coping strategies to address barriers

Many of the girls and women had developed coping mechanisms to deal with the barriers they had encountered. The most common strategy was to rely on the support of their fellow activists or youth networks and to collaborate as much as possible. Others said that it also helped to connect with people generally, even if outside the activism sphere.

“Talking to other people about it makes a lot of difference. And I feel less alone. It gives me hope, because in this kind of struggle, sometimes you feel very alone. But when I talk to other people who care like I do, who are also struggling with this, it gives me a lot of hope. And I don't feel alone when I do this kind of activity... And we always end up learning other perspectives, other issues. How can we solve something, how far has it really gone? Sometimes we feel that we are not moving forward but talking to other people makes us feel better.”

Amora, 20, Brazil

Other strategies mentioned were in relation to specific areas:

Protesting

- Communicating when you feel uncomfortable, openly discussing if you want to leave.
- Deleting digital footprint especially in relation to participating in direct action.

Mental health challenges

- Trying to separate yourself from the criticism or ignore it.
- Practising self-care and having boundaries.
- Having mental health sessions and training for activism.
- Having a space to switch off when you're doing a lot of activism or community work.
- Creating boundaries for yourself.
- Therapy

Safety considerations

- Sensitising communities before going deeper into the topic – for example, having an awareness campaign for couple of weeks or maybe months prior to doing face-to-face work.
- Working with community leaders.
- Having good safeguarding policies when doing advocacy.
- Getting support from different institutions.

Online abuse

- Turning off comments on certain posts.
- Curating how you say things on social media.
- Being anonymous online.

- Muting abusive tweets.
- Not attacking back but finding better ways to communicate and engage on other platforms if necessary.

Although not directly asked about enablers, some of the activists spoke of what enables their activism, such as working with like-minded people.

“That’s why I like broader groups because you learn about other issues and you now learn about the intersectionality and how that part affects this part. And sometimes how working together with different groups, with different focuses can actually resolve the issue quicker or help you understand the root causes a bit better than just when you focus on your own niche area.”

Grace, 24, Nigeria

“Blogging has really been one way that I’ve been able to just get my voice out there, my thoughts out there. And it has also just created a lot of conversations around the kind of issues that I want.”

Andile, 24, Zimbabwe

Having an enabling environment was also discussed by some – for example, democratic laws which allowed protests. A few spoke of institutions that have youth clubs, councils or groups helping their activism flourish.

“Progressive public school that really supported young people being vocal about what mattered to them and supported us in our advocacy. I think a lot of people out of my high school ended up getting involved in advocacy in one way or another. And in large part that was because we went to a school that was so supportive of us speaking up for ourselves.”

Stella, 19, Australia

“If we get involved in the decision-making process, it will affect our views on things as well as how we bring along the next generations, once we are adults. It’s also important to create the environment where youth can feel free to take part. For instance, when I started taking part in W7 [Women 7],¹¹⁷ there were so many terms that I did not know, but the environment allowed me to ask for help. Supports like that I think are also important to promote youth participation.”

Lily, 22, Japan

6.5 Sustainable Development Goals

6.5.1 Knowledge of the SDGs

Most of the girls and young women activists had knowledge of the SDGs, and this was consistent with activists across the regions and countries. A few remarked how interconnected all the SDG issues were.

“Yes, the Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice.”

Enna, 18, Philippines

¹¹⁷ W7 is an official engagement group of the G7 Summit.

Many of the girls and young women cited the goals they were most familiar with through their campaigning and activism. Those were gender equality, climate action, zero poverty and education. Some also mentioned sustainable cities, clean water, strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals. As Haka (22, Zimbabwe) shared her enthusiasm about working within SDG frameworks:

“Ooh, how familiar am I with the SDGs? I am an SDG advocate, definitely, especially for my climate-based activism, where SDG number 11 to 15. 15 is my favourite, Life on Land, basically. I use those SDGs there because climate action, sustainable consumption, life below the water, life on land – those are the key causes of environmental activism, how you want to have a certain end goal. And if it’s a universal end goal, it’s easier to collaborate and work with different people... And then for accountability, transparency, I usually love the SDG for forming of strong institutions, strengthening institutions [SDG 16], because it is institutions that should have check and balance mechanisms for any individual existing within the state. So those are some of the SDGs that I’m primarily interested in. Of course, there’s more. But those are the primary ones.”

Most framed their discussions of the SDGs as part of the broader picture of issues they were already working on. For example, Rani (19, Bangladesh) mentioned that they do not formally work with any of the SDGs to inform their campaigns but her work in relation to child, early and forced marriage is part of the gender equality goal. Binsa (18, Nepal) also discussed how the SDGs aligned with the work she was doing on education. Nadia (23) and Sadika from Bangladesh also confirmed that their organisations and related activities worked on lots of activities related to the goals. Others were less specific about the alignment with the SDGs.

“I can’t pinpoint an activist who talks exactly about one SDG goal and be like ‘this is what I’m trying to do’. But I have heard of activists who advocate about things that align with SDGs like Greta Thunberg. She works a lot with climate change and the environment and recently as well.”

Mala, 18, Thailand

“But I think, yeah, probably the only way it comes into what I do is ... that ...I probably am working in line with the SDGs, but it’s not something I actively talk about or think about too much.”

Mary, 21, Australia

The girls and young women whom our co-researchers spoke to had gained knowledge on the SDGs in a variety of different ways. Most of the girls and young women had come across the SDGs as part of other activities or topics they were learning about. The exception was Sunflower (24) in Vietnam who was part of an SDG group with lots of young people working on SDG 4. She felt that the UN was active in helping to form different youth groups working for a specific goal. Most of the other activists had learnt about the goals at school and from books, courses, events, games, social media and also directly from other activists. Mada (24, Brazil) recalled using them before on a project but thought we should all be making more of an effort in trying to achieve them. Some mentioned civil society organisations, for example, many of the girls and young women in the Philippines mentioned Plan International and the Girls Get Equal campaign.

“I heard about it when Plan International started working within my area in 2016, under a programme called Girls Advocacy Alliance.”

Jacqueline, 20, Kenya

Several of the activists had learned about the SDGs as part of their degree at university. For example, girls and young women in Malawi, Philippines, Ethiopia, Thailand, Somalia, Australia and Ireland had studied courses such as international development or international relations of which the goals were a key part. Another activist (Mala, 18, Thailand) explained that she was self-motivated to learn about them:

“I have been studying the Sustainable Development Goals for different reasons. I have some knowledge of it and mostly because I admire the UN for creating these 17 goals and I like the thought process that I see when I read the goals. And so, I like studying it.”

Some of the girls and young women activists were less confident in their knowledge of the SDGs but said they knew “a bit” or were “somewhat familiar” with the SDGs. Only eight girls and women – who were located across all the regions – had never heard of the SDGs.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve heard of them. I’ve heard of sustainability in general, because my school at least, we’re very sustainable. We compost our stuff, we have organic food and stuff. They’re a sustainable school. But I don’t think I’ve ever heard of the UN Sustainability Goals.”

Emily, 19, Canada

Baly (21, Guatemala) said that although they were new to her, the SDGs sounded interesting and she was interested to learn more. While the knowledge of the SDGs was there across regions, it is important to note that there were very few activists who were able to talk about them beyond quite broad terms – only a handful of activists were able to discuss them in detail. Those few activists noted areas such as the history of the goals, and outlined targets and indicators and implementation progress.

Opinions on the SDGs

The large majority of the girls and young women felt that the SDGs were important. Many activists felt the SDGs were a useful way to guide their campaigns. For example, Lauren (19, Nigeria)¹¹⁸ found that the goals made it easier to narrow down what she should be focusing on for her campaigns and advocacy work. Wanja (21, Kenya) said the SDGs address the same issues they like to campaign on which she thought was an advantage. AJ (17, Philippines) also pointed out that when the area they are working on is included as an SDG – for example, climate action – that helped with the advocacy as it gave the issue more clout.

“The SDGs are very useful also because they give an orientation for the campaigns and action plans.”

Fatimata, 22, Burkina Faso

Other activists believed that the SDGs provided a clear way to demonstrate the relevance of their work to community members or funding bodies. Musu (22, Sierra Leone) appreciated that the SDGs target the same issues that her country was experiencing while Kenia (19, Philippines) said they helped greatly for spreading information about certain social issues.

“For example, there is a young activist who has used the SDGs to be able to show the relevance of the work that they’re doing and to be able to gain support to continue that work. Not only support from a financial standpoint to be able to show how it aligns with government priorities, but also to be able to show that the work is much more beyond the individuals of the marginalised community that are going to be directly impacted by this – how it actually contributes to a thriving, global community overall, which I think is extremely powerful. I actually do hope to be part of making that awareness known in the other work that I do as well. I think that’s an amazing model for being able to frame issues as not being only about your community or your special interest issue... Yeah, I think that there’s a lot of work being done around using SDGs to amplify social justice movements and work.”

Triangle, 22, Canada

Some girls and young women discussed the fact that these were global goals being used worldwide as an extra motivation rather than feeling as if they were working in a silo. Luki (21, Paraguay) also said that they made her feel less alone in her fight:

¹¹⁸ During the focus group discussion.

“It is extremely important, because knowing that we have, that there is a whole, a whole struggle, let’s say, behind what we are doing, it is very useful for us as an inspiration and it also gives us a safeguard, a support that we are not alone, fighting against all the problems that exist in society today.”

Luki, 21, Paraguay

“And I think young activists campaigning for their SDGs is the norm nowadays. You have specific end SDGs within the feminist movement. I know feminist organisations use them, gender equality SDG a lot... I think SDGs are the ‘in thing’ for activists now because you want to align with global like movements. And even in applying for funding, the SDGs are those buzzwords that you used to get that sort of funding to have programmes running on the ground because they are what defines activism and its outputs.”

Haka, 22, Zimbabwe

Some of the activists discussed particular elements of the SDGs which appealed to them. For example, Girasol (22, Guatemala) emphasised that the goals being formulated through a collaborative multi-stakeholder approach was especially important to her.

Some of the activists spoken to acknowledged that while the SDGs had some strengths, there were also many shortcomings. For example, Audrey (20, Canada) felt that they had some strengths but needed improvement:

“My initial reaction to the SDGs in grade 7 was that these are really dumb. Did a bunch of politicians and diplomats really just get together and make a list of 17 problems in the world? I could do that. And so for me, I never, or at that time, I didn’t really understand what the purpose was. Now I know that it’s this framework and it’s a useful tool for a lot of diplomats and people who are decision makers that come together and outline problems and organise solutions... I now think they’re a useful framework and I get how they’re good for an organisation. And I would say I’m pretty familiar with them just because I recently attended a UN event, and it was like I noticed a lot of the lobbying work was very organised into, ‘we’re going to work on SDG 5, gender quality’, or this person’s working on SDG 17, partnerships. And so I feel like I have a pretty solid understanding of them. And I feel like there could be more done to understand what each one really entails. Because like SDG 1, no poverty, that’s pretty broad. And so I feel like there could be more. So my, I guess, growth has been from why do these exist, to, this is an interesting framework, but could be improved upon.”

Most of the criticism among the girl and young women activists centred around the SDGs being too broad or vague and their implementation unclear:

“I think most advocates, if you show them the Sustainable Development Goals, they’d go, ‘Yeah, that kind of fits with the profile of what I’m doing’. So they feel very relevant, even if sometimes their arbitrariness makes them feel unreachable. As in they’re kind of very grand, sweeping statements, some of them. They’re not necessarily hyper-specific and even the ones that do have targets enmeshed don’t necessarily have a rollout plan for what that would actually look like and how we would actually get there... So I think they could probably be a little bit more in depth and that might help. I think sometimes organisations like the UN and other bodies that make these statements, they sound great, but there’s no actual real cohesive roadmap for how it’s going to be actioned.”

Stephanie, 24, Australia

Sunflower (24, Vietnam) said that while she did try to align the SDGs with her work, she thinks the UN needs to have a simplified version of information on the goals for youth:

“I still don't see ... a simplified version of these goals to explain to the young where are we and what we have to do in simplified ways, in very concrete actions, what we have to do to attain the goals. To be honest, it seemed that it's really difficult [to] imagine that we will get to that goal by 2030.”

While there is simplified general information available on the SDGs and how they came about, what was still clearly missing for many activists was simplified information for activists on how concretely to use them – for example, understanding what the data means, developing indicators, how to get involved in SDG processes and so on.

Some of the activists pointed out that the goals were too aspirational and unrealistic. Dalinah (24, Ethiopia) described how she was excited about them initially but had now lost faith in them due to the unrealistic nature of the goals and feeling that they are not intersectional:

“Well, I think they are very nice goals and if it were all to be achieved in the end, that would be fantastic. But I don't think it's possible and certainly not in 15 years. Well, because it's just so very many on so many different plains and all the so big, complex problems that I also think it's some problems that really need a whole systemic change.”

“But I think generally in other grassroots campaigns in Australia, it's not as common to see the SDGs. I think it's just, it lacks a bit of relevance in terms of the delivery, because it's quite vague, it's quite broad. And sometimes it's also quite aspirational, because they are aspirational. And sometimes I think in an Australian context, especially if you're campaigning or trying to get something done, you want something very specific.”

Kaing, 19, Australia

Others believed that they were only useful for youth activists advocating at the UN level. Sofie (22, Netherlands) thought that since the SDGs are created by the UN, there is too much of a western focus or gaze within the SDG discourse. Leonie (22, Germany) pointed out that the goals were a useful tool for influencing at the national level with government decision makers. Some of the girls and young women in Germany, Australia and Ireland felt that they were not particularly useful when advocating at community or grassroots levels.

“But I would never use the SDGs to justify a position within a group of young people that tries to, I don't know, change something within their city or their university or their town or whatever.”

Leonie, 22, Germany

“I feel like whenever I see them, it's people who I see online or on social media who are doing activism through the UN mainly. I feel like outside of that, [I] don't think about it too much... So I think a lot of the activism stuff I do probably aligns with them, but I don't think it's something I greatly consider until I see young people doing stuff for the UN.”

Mary, 21, Australia

“The UN youth delegate for Ireland this year ... I've seen a lot of her work kind of promoted through the lens of the SDGs, which makes sense because she's working for the UN. That makes sense. But generally, I don't think there is a lot of awareness around the SDGs. I even think people understand that they're not even legally binding, they're not legal commitments, they're just kind of hopeful objectives. So yeah, probably not, I wouldn't see a lot of it being done. It would probably be more understood that gender equality is important – this is something we should strive for, but probably not framed through the lens of the SDGs.”

Sally, 22, Ireland

Using the SDGs for their activism

Many of the activists thought the SDGs were useful for their activism and linked their programmes, activities and campaigns to them or at the very least knew other activists who did this. The girls and young women used the SDGs in a number of different ways, such as for developing campaign aims, advocating for policy change, educating others and for developing activities or programmes.

Jessica (24, Zimbabwe) explained that most young activists are governed by the SDGs because they are the goals the country is committed to. She said that many young activists she knew were working towards one or more of the goals. Valerie (22, Nigeria) discussed that she knew other youth advocates whose activism was based on one or more of the goals.

Mala (18, Thailand) felt the SDGs addressed the issues she liked to campaign on:

“It revolves a lot around education because I focus on using policy making in education. Like people are making curriculums, but young people are not one of the stakeholders. If young people are not one of the stakeholders, then how does that make sense? Because they’re the ones actually learning that curriculum. So quality education relates to what I work on youth and policy making.”

Sunset (20, Germany)¹¹⁹ said that it always depended on what she was working on. She used the SDGs previously for a global education campaign aimed at politicians in the German government to demonstrate what still needs to be achieved against Goal 4. Dhavi (20, Nepal) found the SDGs helpful to design the activities and thought they gave a good basis to work on. However, Chaarumathi (18, Nepal) said she needed more help with linking them to their campaigns.

Etenesh (24, Ethiopia) said that most of her campaigns are based on one of the SDGs. Rose (18, Australia) used the goals to decide what areas she would focus on “for the movement”. Bianca (17) and Fernanda (16) from Brazil used the SDGs for developing their campaign objectives.¹²⁰ Mitch (18, Philippines) used the SDGs to develop actions for campaigns and for community orientations on different topics connected to the goals. Alina and Grace (both 24, Ireland) used the SDGs by including the targets in campaigns and protests:

“I kind of get everyone in the habit of whatever we’re working on to link it back to an SDG and more specifically the targets within each SDG. Like whatever project we’re doing or campaign, I’d always say if it’s a small project, okay, sure, hitting one target is fine, but ideally hitting two targets beneath the goal is good as well. Just because it keeps us on track and it makes sure that we’re actually having an impact... So with the National Council of Ireland on their Young People’s Committee, they do a project every year..., we pick a specific SDG. So this year we chose ‘no poverty’. And then we looked at the targets underneath that and we settled on more of an education thing based around teaching people about no poverty. But before that, we kind of looked at the targets in each one. But trying to brainstorm campaigns that we could do and tackling each of the targets.”

Alina, 24, Ireland

Girls in Ethiopia seemed particularly interested in using the goals for advocating for policy change. Person A and Dalinah (both 24) recalled how they used the goals to support their work at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 27) last year. Person A had seen other guests in attendance linking policy changes they wanted to the goals. She also knew other activists who used it to influence policy in other areas. Belkis (22, Ethiopia) joined presentations and panel discussions on selected SDGs, for instance regarding policy changes on quality education.

Some used the SDGs to educate others but also to aid their advocacy work with political decision makers. Esther (22, Malawi) mentioned using them in the planning stages but had to improvise as most people do not understand what they are about – so they adapt their activities to accommodate this.

¹¹⁹ During the focus group discussion.

¹²⁰ During the focus group discussion.

Atena (16, Dominican Republic) wrote blogs about different SDG themes and spoke to young activists about them in her campaigns. Mary John (16, Nigeria) linked her activities and themes for International Day of the Girl and International Day of the African Child to the SDGs. She checks that her activities or programmes are linked to SDG 4 and SDG 5.

“The work that I’m doing, like my current job, so all of the projects have to follow one of the SDGs. It has to you know. It has to have a positive impact to one of the SDGs. And so when I recently did a booth where I was able to promote and ... to give people the opportunity to learn about the projects we’re doing in the team that I’m in, but also I got to see colleagues see their process in their projects. And they were able to promote and present about their projects that were helping their SDGs as well, such as the SDG that is about clean water and sanitation. I think that was really great.”

Ariel (15, Thailand) spoke about seeing other activists who use the SDGs as a set criterion and use them to measure how they’ve impacted the community:

“So, it has been used worldwide. I think it’s a good scale in which you could measure I’d say, like the breadth of the impact that you’ve done.”

The SDGs seemed a useful tool to begin conversations with leaders or to bring up topics which may not have been addressed otherwise (for example, SRHR). However, follow-ups with decision makers were clearly still lacking.

A number of the girls had never used the SDGs for their activism, nor had they heard of other activists that did so but a few thought that the goals could potentially be useful for activism.

“I can’t necessarily say that I’ve... really tried to build a campaign around the goals themselves or ...really brought them up and been, like, ‘I’m going to do this because it’s meeting this goal’. I think it’s just that ... they’re broad goals as well, and they can easily fit into a lot of what you’re doing, but in a way where it’s like, oh, ‘that’s nice that they relate’, but not necessarily going out there to target a specific goal.”

Lily, 24, Australia

Some activists did not use them and were unsure if others did. Degan (22, Somalia) did not know anyone using the SDGs for campaigns, only for training initiatives but she still thought that they were a clear improvement on the MDGs. Alex (24, Germany) said there were many demonstrations, activities and initiatives that the SDGs just were not part of.

However, a few did acknowledge that even though they did not use them *per se*, there was a clear relationship or link to their work. Lee (23, Philippines) reiterated that while not explicitly working on them, it was always implied as they are aiming for the same goals as the SDGs – for example, the goal on climate action.

“They definitely haven’t influenced the way I campaign. It just maybe just happens to fit into what I’m working on rather than I’m fitting into them.”

Mary, 21, Australia

However, a few girls were doubtful about the SDGs, saying that they were not helpful for their activism and the goals were not effective, with there being little chance of achieving them. Audrey (20, Canada) said she didn’t use them for activism:

“I know that a lot of activists use quick elevator pitches to be like, ‘hi, my name is something, and then..., I’m passionate about A, B, and C’. They would use gender equality, SRHR, and access to water or clean water, but not the SDGs themselves. And I kind of feel like they’re almost a bit dehumanising, like being able to take this very large world problem and then, like you said, boil it down to a list of 17 and then minimise a problem to a number.”

Perceptions of government action on the SDGs

Fatimata (22, Burkina Faso,) and Delaya (21, Togo) believed that their governments were taking action on SDG 5, on gender equality.¹²¹ Examples given were of gender quotas in certain employment sectors and scholarships for girls to attend schools. Amy (19, Sierra Leone) discussed working with government ministries on programmes to reduce gender-based violence in order to reach their obligations under the gender equality goal. Carmen (16, Dominican Republic) commented that in the last two years the government had made improvements towards gender equality: for example, she was now seeing women in key positions at local government level. She also pointed out that the government had now a Cabinet for Children and Maria (16, Dominican Republic) also confirmed there was a Minister for Youth.

Luso (23, Malawi) said that she was aware of the several government campaigns targeting gender equality around equal opportunities for employment. Dhanvi (20, Nepal) also felt the Government of Nepal had been working on a number of activities on gender equality, peace and conflict resolution and SRHR in alignment with the SDGs. Binsa (18, Nepal) noted that the Nepalese government is aiming to achieve the SDGs but she underlined the work to achieve them had to be a collective effort. Rani (19, Bangladesh) mentioned that the government there was working on clean water, health and wellbeing, and climate action through implementing vaccines for the children under five and also tree plantation projects in her community.

Sadika (Bangladesh) was unsure if her government did specific projects on the SDGs but discussed getting government permission to have a spot of land to start a tree plantation project. Her feeling was that the government was supportive of the goals even if it was not explicit. Chimwala (Malawi) felt her government is more focused on no poverty and zero hunger so other SDGs such as quality education and gender equality are given less attention. Alina (24, Ireland) and Alex (24, Germany) felt that their governments were not doing enough on climate action:

“It’s great achieving all other 16 of them [the goals], but if we don’t achieve climate action then we won’t have a world to live in.”
Alina, 24, Ireland

Alina did acknowledge that there had been progress on reduced inequalities through “good changes happening in terms of legislation” and also for gender equality.

Fernanda (16, Brazil) discussed improvement on zero hunger due to a change of government but she said that previously the situation had been “very bad”.

“Even the indigenous peoples. The previous government had no interest. In the indigenous villages they went very hungry, they are malnourished. But with this new government it’s much better. It’s improving somehow and I hope that there is still a lot of improvement, because the right to have drinking water, education, food is the minimum that we should have.”

Grace (24, Ireland)¹²² felt that the Nigerian government was not working on these issues: “they’re fighting against their own people”. But she thought that CSOs had stepped in to fill the gaps and were doing great jobs.

For most other girls and young women spoken to, they knew of the actions their government was taking on issues on which they were campaigning but they did not necessarily make the link of that being part of government action on the SDGs.

6.5.2 Government interactions with activists

Some activists believed their governments and institutions were collaborating with activists on some key issues. For example, Wanjiku (22, Kenya) described having a good relationship with police through her work on gender-based violence. Leonie (22, Germany) also spoke of a positive experience with government through her work with the Youth Advisory Council:

¹²¹ During the focus group discussion.

¹²² Grace is Nigerian but moved to Ireland.

“A few months ago, the German government announced the establishment of a feminist foreign policy, and as part of that, also the Development Cooperation was established with or supposedly established on a feminist basis. So they had to elaborate this strategy, and they consulted us and included us in that process. And the strategy as it is now, does include points of a decolonial view, for example. And that is something we pushed a lot, together with other civil society organisations. And I think there, they did listen to us and to others' organisations.”

Na (22, Vietnam) felt lucky to have the support of her government on issues such as gender equality, SRHR and climate change. However, many were also critical about their government interactions with activists on certain issues. Alex (24, Germany) also felt that activists were not being listened to enough on the climate issue. Alina and Grace (both 24, Ireland) noticed a lack of interaction with youth activists on SDG issues from their government.

“I've interacted with anyone in the government, I've always had to go to them. It's never been the other way around. I haven't met my local representatives ever just because they don't come around.”

Alina, 24, Ireland

Some girls and young women felt that their SDG activism with governments was tokenistic on the part of the government. For example, Sally (22) and Gormfhlaith (24) in Ireland discussed disillusionment based on their interactions in a meeting with the Irish government. Sally had been in a meeting on education:

“I think I came away feeling a little bit disappointed and disillusioned by our meeting. I mean, there's no other way of describing it than talking to a politician. I felt like the answers were almost pre-prepared. They were quite, I don't know, unnatural. I sometimes felt like she wasn't really directly answering the question I was asking of her. So that was a bit disappointing. And we were also asking her kind of around the barriers to entry for young women going into politics and I don't think, she really didn't understand what those were, in my opinion. I came away feeling a bit disillusioned by the experience because I felt like she wasn't really answering the questions we were asking of her, and it was kind of maybe more, not to be completely cynical, but a bit more of a PR event for her.”

Sally, 22, Ireland

“No. They listen. There's a difference between listening and active listening. They listen and then it filters out one ear, and it goes in one ear and out the other. They'll listen for the ten minutes where they have to look engaged because they're put in a room with women who they've been told have important things to say. Whether or not they actually listen to anybody, God knows. I've seen no evidence of it. Yeah. So not really, to be honest. They're full of hot air.”

Gormfhlaith, 24, Ireland

6.6 Future in activism

6.6.1 Aspirations for the future

Survey

The **positive impacts of taking part** were mentioned by an overwhelming majority, with more than 95 per cent of young women and girls agreeing that their activism had positive impacts on them. Around 70 per cent of young women and girl activists agreed that their activism helped them to develop their confidence and helped them to develop or learn new skills. This was universally high across respondents from all regions (see Table 13).

About half of all respondents said that activism had helped them to build up their professional network. This was around 60 per cent in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa region and Europe but relatively low at 30 per cent in the Americas.

Almost two-thirds (65 per cent) said they felt pride or satisfaction for contributing to change and this was generally very high in the European region and the Americas. It was expressed to a more moderate extent in Asia and the Pacific and West and Central Africa. But only half of respondents in the Middle East and East and Southern Africa said they felt this way.

Those in the younger age group were overall less likely to say that they experienced positive repercussions, especially as relates to building up their social or professional network: 39 per cent among those aged 15 to 19 compared to 57 per cent among those in the older age group.

Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ were less likely to say that they had developed their confidence (63 per cent vs 75 per cent among non-LGBTIQ+), but they were more likely to say they felt pride and satisfaction for contributing to change (72 per cent vs 64 per cent).

Table 13: Positive effects of taking part in activism (N=840)*

	Asia and the Pacific	EU	Middle East and East and Southern Africa	The Americas	West and Central Africa	Grand total
Developed my confidence	70%	66%	79%	60%	88%	70%
Developed or learned new skills	71%	62%	70%	69%	75%	69%
Built up my social or professional network	56%	59%	60%	30%	57%	50%
Felt pride and satisfaction over contributing to change	62%	83%	47%	76%	63%	65%
Experienced admiration from my community	43%	40%	41%	32%	53%	40%
Other positive effects	34%	21%	16%	22%	26%	24%

* Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Proportions are calculated as number of respondents indicating an issue/total number of responses (as relevant per region). In pink: majority options per region.

Peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions

Nearly all the girls and young women interviewed said that they want to continue with their activism at least to some degree. For example, if they didn't want to be an activist or campaigner or community organiser, they still wanted a career that was linked to being able to create social impact in their community or globally. It was clear that most of the girl and young women activists interviewed felt satisfied and fulfilled by the work they do.

“I think it's satisfying to be able to help people, to be able to change things. I think that everything, everything, everything comes together in activism. It's something that's really close to my heart.”

Praia, 24, Burkina Faso

“I think the expression is if you love what you do, then you don't work a day in your life. And that's the mindset that I have going into this. If I know that I'm creating change, if I know that slowly but surely, I'm improving the quality of life of individuals that I find are the most impacted and that I'm most passionate about, then of course especially.”

Amber, 23, Canada

“Now, when I look back, I reflect that I was always confined to the knowledge from books. And in the books there was not much of the outer exposure, and I was limited to what I read in the theory only. But after going into activism, I realised that there is much more to know than just the knowledge in the books. There needs to be more exposure to learn and so many topics are not covered by the books alone. And then I changed it in myself and brought personal changes and also motivated and encouraged the others to change as well. I feel that I have been gaining knowledge and it is my responsibility also to share the knowledge I have with others and only then will there be some value to what I have learnt. Thus, I feel that I will be able to lead and take part in activism continuously and I will continue to do so for the change since the change will be there, not only if I change myself but in the community.”

Liniksha, 20, Nepal

A couple of the activists lamented that they would prefer the world not to need activists but that they had to continue while issues still existed.

The most frequently cited way of continuing their work was through advocacy or campaigning. Girls and young women mentioned wanting to grow movements, influence government policies and inspire other girls and young people to become advocates. Stephanie (24, Australia) said she would continue to be an advocate as long as she was able to, as it was a way of life for her now. Some had already begun to make moves to fulfil their activism dreams – for example, Lillith (17, Netherlands) was taking a gap year in her studies to become a full-time activist in the climate movement but wanted to work still with other feminist and anti-racist movements.

Another frequently cited future was continuing to work in social and community work. Rhyllie (21, Canada) wanted to effect policy change through social work especially for under-represented voices. She noticed that now as a social worker, it is not always possible to help the people in need because the policy is a barrier.

“In ten years, I see myself already having finished my university degree, having a job that is directly involved with systematic changes that I can make from an entity or having a position of power to make decisions that can benefit the women in the communities and the municipality where I live.”

Mary, 23, Guatemala

Activities varied from conducting courses, sharing knowledge or continuing project work. Estrella (19, Guatemala) wanted to share knowledge by starting a podcast with other activists. Éva (20, Ireland) wanted to go back to Hungary and raise awareness on agriculture initiatives based on community-owned land. She wanted to use her activism to encourage people to join and challenge the status quo. Mary (21, Australia) wanted to make change by getting into community organising after university:

“But I think the two main ones are probably first community organising. So working more with mobilising people and getting people affected by policies to then have their own say through their lived experience or their own activism or advocacy – directly speak to decision makers and try and form change with different groups of people coming together – is probably one thing that I'd be interested in. But also, there are not many jobs in that space because a lot of community organisations aren't well funded. So, I don't know about that in the next ten years. And other than that, I'd probably be looking at social policy and I guess, looking at more marginalised groups in Australia or people that are probably on the receiving ends of a lot of policies, and then I'd try to make those policies better.”

Some wanted to remain working at the community or local level while a few were keen to transition to global influencing and eventually work for the UN or in international relations. Lily (24, Australia), for instance, wanted to start with community development but later work on global issues.

“Advocacy is something that I've been doing gradually, and for me, I believe that actions speak louder than voice. I believe that [my actions] can take me to places, that can take me somewhere that I've never been before. And I'm not doing this because I want people to know me. I actually want to see myself at higher level trying to help other people, not only in Sierra Leone, but also in the outer world. And also try to help women, children and the less privileged. So, in the next ten years, I want to see myself maybe at the UN trying to advocate and put strategies on how to actually help women and girls to be important in society and make them comfortable.”

Musu, 22, Sierra Leone

Many others were keen to stay in work related to youth and gender. They spoke about wanting to inspire youth to follow in their footsteps or to continue to remove barriers for young people. They wanted to be youth leaders or strengthen youth platforms. Mala (18, Thailand) wanted to bring young people into policy making.

Some wanted to work specifically on gender equality and reduce gender stereotyping and improve SRHR, especially knowledge on CSE.

“All I'm saying is we have to listen to each other. We have to help each other. We have to develop ... platforms where women can express their feelings, where women can say whatever they want. Feel free, feel safe... Because there's literally nothing here in Somalia.”

Bilan, 23, Somalia

“One thing I'm fighting for or creating an awareness at least in one small rural community, creating that and getting the gender equality concept fully in their minds. And eradicating that deeply rooted gender inequality concept is a goal. It's a huge goal in the case of Ethiopia, because gender equality is deeply rooted and cannot be eradicated so easily. So one community or two communities if I could, or three if I could, or a million if I could, something that I'd love to do.”

Lucy, 21, Ethiopia

Others wanted to continue their activism working on specific issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights, climate action, harm reduction for women who use drugs, human trafficking, poverty reduction and quality education. Rakhi (23, Bangladesh) wants to see girls continue their education because she had smart friends who could not continue their educations because of community beliefs. Some specific jobs they

wanted to do in relation to their area of interest were a teacher, a midwife who also taught CSE and worked on CSE projects, and a writer or YouTuber who educated girls.

Others preferred to transition into other professional fields away from activism but wanted these fields to link closely to making change. R (22, Japan) said she wanted to continue with activities but she did not want to be a “noisy activist”. Stella (19, Australia) also wanted to advocate still but not be a “professional activist”; lots of people she knew moved on to organisations such as Greenpeace to continue activism but she did not see that pathway for herself.

“I would still be an advocate, but I'm not sure if I'm going to be engaged in campaigns. I'm going to continue to be an advocate but in a higher level where I want to research and generate evidence-based data and influence policy makers, lawmakers, and higher power-holding people.”

Lucy, 21, Ethiopia

Many wanted to work for international or local NGOs, and some wanted to start their own organisations. They wanted to work on NGO projects that worked on gender equality and youth mentoring. Some wanted to work for NGOs that specialised in international development or climate action.

“My goal is to build a charity organisation that not only helps women but also helps senior citizens. Because I have seen cases of them begging for money in the street, living in poor conditions... it seems very unfair. So, my dream would be to build an organisation to help them.”

Leydi, 18, Guatemala

Pink (21, Dominican Republic) wanted to create a company that used natural resources in a sustainable way to have a positive impact in her community. Luso (23, Malawi) wanted to start a foster home for orphans. Petra (23) and Suzzy (19), both from Nigeria, wanted to start their own foundations or organisations, one for street children and the other for women and girls. Giulia (23, Netherlands) liked the media aspect to her activism and therefore saw herself working in communications for an NGO or as a journalist. Dalinah (24, Ethiopia) also wanted to be a journalist and commented that it would be nice to still have a foot in activism through documenting peoples' stories.

Other popular fields were politics and law. Some wanted to become a lawyer to change specific laws or help in a certain area – for example, in relation to CEFMU. B'atz (21, Guatemala) wanted to finish her law degree and specialise in areas related to the rights of women and indigenous people and eventually to run a legal organisation which supports young activists. Similarly, Sally (22, Ireland) wanted to influence change within the legal field:

“The National Woman's Council in Elaine, Ireland released a report around victims' access to the legal system, victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence, and just how difficult it is to access that system, how they often have to navigate...the criminal courts, the civil courts, the child protection avenues, and how re-traumatising it is – and just how expensive and difficult that process can be. So, it would be really cool to affect change within the legal arena around the protection and prosecution of gender-based violence.”

Emily (19, Canada) was currently working in an immigration law firm, mainly working with people from Latin America so she wanted to learn Spanish and Portuguese to be better able to support them without a translator. Belkis (22, Ethiopia) was interested in pursuing social justice and conflict resolution. Others said they wanted to go into politics as legislators, work for leftist parties, become a government minister, a mayor or a president.

Other jobs mentioned were diverse. They included: a researcher into sustainable energy, an artist, a journalist, academia, working in the film industry (but promoting things the speaker cares about), helping women in prisons to cope with mental health, a bank manager who solves financial issues in her society, working in direct service provision, working in international cooperation and land management.

Some girls were unsure what they wanted to do but were sure that they wanted to continue to impact people's lives and work to change things in their society. Instead, they mentioned dreams they had for society such as gender equality, better inclusivity for people with disabilities, minorities and LGBTIQ+ persons, eliminating social issues, a zero-carbon future, ensuring girls have security, and ending harmful practices. Sofie (22, Netherlands) said she hoped she would not "sacrifice some of your morals" in order to earn a living in later life and wanted to continue to fight for causes.

"My dream is to make the world a better place."

Sunset, 20, Germany

"My dream is to have equal human rights being celebrated with each and every one of us. They see every female being empowered and being able to speak out to let their voices be heard without any fear, and my biggest dream is to see a world free from abuses, a wonderful world."

Carol, 22, Zimbabwe

A few girls did not want to continue in activism. Not all gave reasons for this but those who did said it was "draining" and "taxing" – they were tired of confrontation and experiencing burnout. Frankie (22, Australia) was worried that this would eventually impact her mental health and that she may not be able to keep going with it. Rose (18, Australia) felt burnt out with direct action:

"I guess having ... a couple years of just ... speaking at events, like every weekend and organising protests every week, and missing every Friday off school and everything, it's quite like exhausting. I don't think it's probably sustainable ... for a lot of people to be doing that like long term."

"I'm probably going to feel like my dad and I'm going to feel despondent, probably a little sad, probably up to my waist in water. Yeah, I don't really feel positive about that. Looking at my dad, he was a campaigner back in the eighties and spraying people's coats with glue and stuff, with the anti-fur and stuff like that. He feels like stuff was achieved, but the reality was none of it was urgent enough. So, he feels a little bit sad about it. But he enjoys talking to people who are involved now. I'd probably feel the same."

Gormfhlaithe, 24, Ireland

6.6.2 Most important learning and advice

The main learning and advice that activists had was about working in a collective and through partnerships. There were clear feelings of solidarity among activists. Some highlighted networking and collaborating and building these positive relationships with other young feminist activists or organisations. Estrella (19, Guatemala) said that you needed to build alliances with organisations that support women's work. Jenny (21, Australia) highlighted another important element:

"Look out for what movements and organisations already exist so you can help them out and tap into their resources and bring your own lived experience."

Others conveyed that these partnerships were important for leveraging networking, having coherent messages and avoiding duplication of efforts.

"Building a strong network of advocates can amplify the impact of advocacy efforts."

Makda, 22, Ethiopia

Many highlighted building a support network of like-minded people. Salley (18, Sierra Leone) said that it was important to "have each other's backs". Others highlighted that when feeling alone or burnt out it was important to tap into this "amazing community of activists" and face difficulties together. Many felt that they could rely on other activists for advice when needed or to speak to about insecurities.

"And know that it's very difficult to just work and be passionate and put your full energy into something all on your own. It is great to have a team, to have friends, to have peers, to have coaches, mentors who are supportive of you. And that's why I'm"

here today, because I have such supportive people surrounding me – and find people who trust in you.”

Mala, 18, Thailand

“It’s very important to, should I say, get to meet other people doing the same thing as you’re doing. Like-minded people – that way you can stay focused and stay on the part you’re meant to be. Because sometimes it’s easier to get discouraged when you’re not surrounded with people doing exactly the same thing you’re doing.”

Lauren, 19, Nigeria

“I think the one thing I’ve learned is that the issues that are important to you are never only important to just you. And I think it’s really easy to feel like, because it’s your own experience and because you have ownership over your own experience, it’s really easy to feel like no one else cares about it just as much as you do. But if you reach out and if you share your work and if you make opportunities for other people to be involved and actually give people a hand up, you are almost always going to find people who want to help you reach that goal. Because more often than not, there’ll be so many other people who want to see you succeed. And sharing that workload helps all of you. It’s not taking opportunities from you, it’s helping everyone really.”

Stella, 19, Australia

The other main advice that girls and young women had was around having self-confidence and self-belief. Many girls and young women spoke of needing to assert their voice and express themselves. They highlighted that activists cannot be afraid to share their opinions. Enna (18, Philippines) confirmed this belief:

“You have to be firm and strong to stand up for yourself! Let us hear your voices, be confident, do what you think is right, don’t hesitate, be ready to lead and build your kingdom, and lastly, be the champion of change.”

“I think just kind of push through with confidence and I’m still learning to find my voice and speak up myself.”

Frankie, 22, Australia

Being courageous was mentioned a lot by the girls and young women. A few said it was important for a person to understand their own worth in activist spaces.

“I feel like advice is a big question, but I think just being a bit fearless – which I think is definitely a privilege – but understanding your own worth in these spaces. I feel like sometimes when we’re applying for things, we really have to sell ourselves and we’re like, what have we done? Are we even good enough? But I feel like especially for young women and gender diverse people, I feel like it’s a lot more normal for us to doubt ourselves just because of expectations of what other people might think of us, especially in leadership or outwardly activism stuff.”

Mary, 21, Australia

Shirisha (17, Nepal) built on this by saying that it was important not to shy away from talking about sensitive issues – for example, MHM. She underlined that a person should not feel the need to adhere to community norms around gender. Leonie (22, Germany) spoke about being bold and talking to politicians.

Girls and young women also highlighted that it was important not to underestimate oneself and to push to be in the same spaces as male colleagues. Suzzy (19, Nigeria) shared that it was important to not set limits because of being a girl or woman.

“I just want someone to know that if there is someone like me who can stand up and who can speak up, then why not you who can also do it?”

Makhu, 20, Zimbabwe

Resilience was another key piece of advice highlighted. Girls and young women felt that it was important to stay positive and calm but also to be persistent and to “keep going”.

“Being resilient, no matter how many challenges or how many problems that you face in your community, but the passion that you have and the agenda that you want to push so that ... maybe you can see the change in your community.”

Imani, 22, Kenya

A few activists said that they managed to be resilient by not listening to criticism unless it was constructive or not taking it personally. Others highlighted ignoring negativity and not letting it intimidate them or allowing negative comments to stop them. Alexa (23, Lebanon) said that it was also important to learn to control one’s own reactions.

Other important advice the activists had was understanding that change takes time, and that some change takes place in small increments so to try not to get frustrated. Taking time to understand the situations of others was also seen as important.

“You must be patient and understanding. Society isn’t the same everywhere, the freedom you might have here might be a curse there, so I must understand her and her circumstances because it is not easy to detach from her environment.”

Jenny, 21, Lebanon

Some girls and young women also explained that it was important to get educated and to use that as a “weapon for advocacy”. Lucy (21, Ethiopia) underlined needing to use an evidence-based approach. She highlighted that knowledge of facts was important especially in a chosen area of specialisation. For Wanjiku (22, Kenya), “knowledge is power” – and even if one had dropped out of school it was still important to acquire knowledge from other sources for activism work.

“Avoid adopting ideas without understanding them and having awareness.”

Rahmeh, 22, Jordan

Girls and young women also underlined the importance of practising self-care, with some describing this in relation to becoming burnt out. They highlighted the need to get rest, to respect one’s own boundaries, to remember the right to say no or to take a step back and generally to try not to get overwhelmed.

Sometimes this was in relation to not putting oneself at risk and following good mitigation procedures, such as undertaking risk assessments.

“Make sure that everything you do is safe for you first. Like don’t put yourself at risk. And I was in that situation before where I understand that when we advocate for things such as human rights, gender equality or even equality in politics and in social class, we’re risking our lives for this. Because there’s already a structured system that for years and years, they’ve maintained it and they’ve kind of restricted us through law, through a lot of factors that makes us feel scared to kind of go against it, to question it. Yeah. We know we’re putting ourselves at risk, we should know the limit of how much that is. So, we don’t end up not just like ruining ourselves, our safety, but also ruining the whole thing.”

Fern, 24, Thailand

Listening to others’ lived experiences was also highlighted by a few speakers, as was having an intersectional lens when campaigning. A small number of girls and young women said that it was important to have well-defined goals and to stick to them. Etenesh (24, Ethiopia) said that it was helpful to know your advocacy or campaign targets.

“Advocates should also remain committed to their cause, and be willing to adapt and improve their techniques to achieve their goals.”

Makda, 22, Ethiopia

The rest of the advice for other activists was varied – such as find your niche and passion, practise innovative campaigning, undertake public speaking training, know your rights and the law, join events and take advantage when given spaces, complement government efforts and be respectful of the communities where you work.

“Most of us advocates, we are not aware of how the system works, especially when it comes to policies. So when we are aware of how the system works, it’ll be easier for us to know how we can influence key decision makers. And also, I have learned that we should make time to get to know the people we are dealing with and we build trust with policy makers, influencers, as well as the community.”

Carol, 22, Zimbabwe

“My advice is to younger girls who would like to start fighting for LGBTQ rights is learning how to listen to each other and to yourself, and try to get involved in the community and learn about the culture in your area.”

Thu, 19, Vietnam

6.6.3 Requests for support

When asked what Plan International or similar NGOs could do to support the girls and young women in their activism, the majority said funding. Many of the girls and young women specified that they would like support in how to improve their fundraising methods or sources, and how to apply for and secure grants. Some of the activists shared that they would like resourcing support which included food supplies, nappies, soap, reading materials, sanitary pads, Zoom licences and travel support. Girasol (22, Guatemala) and Liniksha (20, Nepal) highlighted that they needed more support in managing budgets for their activities, while three of the girls in Japan said that they would like to be compensated for their activism work or for NGOs to sponsor their events.

The other major area where activists required further support was how to better lobby those in positions of power, particularly those in government and/or politicians. Ella (19, Canada) said that she would like to learn more about working at policy level and how to work and team up with other activists for structural and policy change. Elaine (21, Ireland) also said that a course on lobbying and activism from people who work on this and at grassroots levels would be helpful. Nadia (23, Bangladesh) wanted seminars with policy makers and activists:

“I think from their side, seminars where they can involve the policy makers and the social activists so that they get a common platform face-to-face and they can talk about the problems to the policy makers so that they can learn about the facts. Also, they can arrange for research paper competitions so that fact-based information is more easily presented to the policy makers, to government officials, to politicians, to national assembly members so that they can know more about the problems and the solutions they can work on.”

When asked about an area of campaigning, advocacy or activism she would like to get involved in but would need more support to do so, Nadia replied:

“I would like to say the lobbying of the politicians because I feel like this is such a sensitive area because these types of things are handled in a more careful way because it has to align with the political infrastructure in our country. But it also should be for the society. But this type of things are not actually available at root level or general people cannot get in touch with the policy makers easily. So I want to get involved in that sector, but I think this type of sector needs more support.”

Nadia, 23, Bangladesh

“I think stronger consultation processes from state bodies and governmental departments and stuff would be of enormous benefit and I think get more people

involved in that decision-making process. I think that's really important, and I think it's something we're failing miserably on at the moment."

Aoife, 21, Ireland

Linked to the above, some girls and young women wanted more advocacy training – for example, more support in how to develop campaigns such as media campaigns and social media campaigns – while others wanted more support in local advocacy efforts.

A lot of the training that the girls and young women sought was around further knowledge or support in their area of activism. Those areas ranged across adolescent SRH, juvenile detention, gender-based violence, mental health, CEFMU, social inclusion, MHM, politics, indigenous rights, working with persons with disabilities, and climate change. Fanta (24, Sierra Leone) and Mary (23, Guatemala) said that they would benefit more from learning more about processes around reporting gender-based violence issues around the community. Kouka (24, Burkina Faso) mentioned support with monitoring and evaluating if an activity was successful. There were also other asks for training of varying kinds:

- legal training
- critical thinking
- awareness raising
- rights knowledge
- governance
- public speaking
- ICT
- power, privilege and bias.

"We need support in knowing how to read complicated laws and translating [those] into simple understanding. We need tools in our hands, a long and complicated law with many articles won't be held by a normal citizen who will come out, talk about it, and know what her rights and responsibilities are. We want to be this tool that converts this law to something simpler that people can affiliate with. We also need a back-up which comes from popular support and the notoriety and the reputation of our NGO... We could employ these resources to make debate sessions and get to the centre of decision making."

Souraya, 24, Lebanon

Some girls and young women wanted NGOs and similar organisations to amplify youth engagement and mobilisation. These included building youth networks, providing opportunities for young people to speak to government, and encouraging government to open more spaces for youth to take part in government bodies. Also suggested was the development of youth advisory councils which are deployed in communities, the production of youth training tools to create more youth programmes and having more youth-focused projects.

"I want Plan International to keep a connected network of young people and in order to make sure that the impact that they are trying to make can be branched out to different paths."

Mala, 18, Thailand

"Personally, I think the direction that Plan is taking is wonderful, which is taking a youth-centred approach to their work and also involving youth in their strategies, in their plan as an international organisation on not just a country office level, but also on an international level. I suppose what I want to see is Plan continuing to do that, putting youth experience and voice at the centre of your plan and your interventions and your projects. From that, taking a bottom-up approach and a bottom-up view by taking into account the youth voices and experiences."

Khanh, 22, Vietnam

"Connecting people all around the world. So maybe creating spaces and connecting people and maybe having conferences, even virtual conferences that you can attend, seminars. I think that would honestly be so amazing. I think in a lot of other places around the world, people, young people, women especially, aren't as empowered to

have their voices heard, aren't as encouraged to speak up, to actually even be interested in stuff like climate change and to dive into it and to do research and [be] encourage[d] to participate and contribute. So I think that would be amazing.”
Purple Moose, 21, Canada

Girls and young women also requested general capacity-building opportunities including motivational talks and advisory groups and panels. Some wanted a specific focus on building their leadership skills and those of other girls and young women. A few also mentioned wanting mentorship opportunities. Tani (23, Zimbabwe) wanted to mentor young mothers.

“Especially for young girls and women being an advocate and campaigner, NGOs like Plan International and others can provide a platform or an opportunity where these people come together, put their ideas, and someone would actually listen and implement. So the first thing would be providing that grass or that platform where girls and women come to come together and discuss those ideas.”
Lucy, 21, Ethiopia

Others wanted more networking opportunities and advice on building partnerships. For example, through networks or conferences or with NGOs and feminist organisations or sometimes business sectors. Other ideas were developed around further help with localisation and reaching rural areas. Em (23, Vietnam) wanted more people from local communities in NGO positions.

7. CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

The aim of this research is to deep-dive into the current experiences of girls and young women surrounding activism, campaigning and influencing. Overall, the findings demonstrate that gender equality is a clear driver for the girls' and young women's campaigns and focus. However, the activists themselves viewed gender equality as being critically intertwined with so many of the other SDGs.

What comes across from the research is that young female activists are a force to be reckoned with. They are educating themselves on the issues that are important to them and have an unwavering commitment to social and gender justice. They need to be recognised and valued in their roles as advocates, change makers and contributors to achieving the SDGs.

Our research shows that it is not easy being a young female activist. Girls and young women are organising against a challenging background of shrinking civic space with an increasing number of laws and restrictions which make it difficult to carry out activism work. In fact, 17 per cent of girls and young women said they had feared for their safety while undertaking activism. It was clear that being a girl or young woman who is active publicly means that additional safety considerations have to be made. Some of the girls and young women who participated had also experienced harassment, vitriol and abuse online for speaking out on issues they cared about.

Some of the activists shared issues about their mental health. It was clear that this arose from carrying the weight of some of the world's biggest issues on their shoulders and for often feeling guilt for not being able to reach more people with their work. They obviously need more support.

Girls and young women activists are encountering further barriers due to their age and gender. Many of the girls and young women are challenging norms in their communities by simply being a female who is willing to speak out on issues they care about. The girls and young women often spoke of experiencing a community backlash and sometimes even criticism from their own friends and family. This abuse was often worse if the girl or young woman identified as a minority.

Despite these challenges, they have a strong belief in their collective power to turn the world around. Girls and young women are achieving impact in their communities and sometimes even nationally and globally. They have a strong belief in their collective power, and they are inspiring each other as well as other girls and young women to continue to create a significant impact. Through campaigns, protests and advocacy, they can influence public opinion, challenge harmful stereotypes, and push for policy

reforms that address the specific needs and rights of girls. Their campaigning is a vital part of the democratic process – and they need more support. That support could come in a number of ways.

- **Funding**, or the lack of it, was raised continually. Many activists specified that they would like support in how to improve their fundraising methods or sources and how to apply for and secure grants. They pointed to complex funding mechanisms that were hard to access if you were a small grassroots organisation. Some said that they would like resourcing support which includes food supplies, nappies, soap, reading materials, menstrual pads, Zoom licences and travel funds. Some mentioned help with budgeting and others wanted direct financial support for their activities: NGOs and others could sponsor events and seminars and make sure they pay expenses so that all activists can afford to participate.
- Overall, **training** was a key need and ranged from training in public speaking and leadership, the use of technology and social media, to improving their knowledge of the issues they care about and improving their understanding of the law and governance.
- Another area where outside agencies could help was with **lobbying** activities, guidance on advocacy and political systems: whom to approach on particular issues, how and when, and providing platforms and networking opportunities.
- Young activists also need to feel **safe** if they are to be effective. Organisations they are working with need to have robust safeguarding policies, rigorous feedback mechanisms and debriefing processes that protect mental health.

“I understand that when we advocate for things such as human rights, gender equality or even equality in politics and in social class, we’re risking our lives for this. Because there’s already a structured system that for years and years, they’ve maintained it and they’ve kind of restricted us through law, through a lot of factors.”

Fern, 24, Thailand

The recommendations laid out below are built on the ideas, experiences and opinions of the girls and young women who took part in this research. The recommendations are designed to magnify the impact of these activists and to assure girls and young women that the goals they have articulated are important to us all – that we have their backs.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is critical that power holders in all decision-making spaces support girls’ and young women’s collective action and recognise their value and role as civil society actors. There are five key ways to achieve this.

1. Increase the amount of flexible and diverse funding to grassroots girl- and youth-led groups and networks.
2. Strengthen adolescent girls’ and young women’s participation in civic and political life: this entails ceding power to grassroots girl- and youth-led groups, and providing access to decision makers through open, safe civic space.
3. Address barriers to girls’ and young women’s activism and the mounting backlash against those who are politically active – at family, national and international levels – particularly against the backdrop of strong anti-rights movements and increased gender discrimination.
4. Support girls’ and young women’s education at all levels, including the necessary soft skills development to build self-confidence, improve communication competences and bolster leadership potential.

5. Increase political will, investments in and commitment to gender equality among UN Member States as a cross-cutting priority for the 2030 Agenda at the SDG summit and for the remainder of the timeframe of the SDGs.

Calls to action

1. Provide financial resources and non-financial support

Government donors, philanthropists, funding bodies and civil society organisations must:

- **Increase** the provision of flexible and responsive funding to girl- and youth-led groups, organisations and networks to support their work. This involves incorporating seed and other types of flexible funding, including small grants and long-term financing, which are responsive to their priorities and the contexts they operate in. Multi-year flexible grants should be made available to reduce fundraising burdens and to allow youth groups to adjust programmatic priorities and to respond to changing environments.
- **Provide** non-financial support in line with girls' needs. This could include girl- and youth-centred capacity strengthening, access to mentoring and network-building opportunities, access to decision makers and influencing spaces, safety and security and mental health and wellbeing support, and physical assets such as office space.
- **Re-assess** risk appetites to shift more power to and trust in young people. This includes by removing any bureaucratic barriers that prevent girl activists and young women-led groups from accessing funding and other non-financial support. Where adapting practices to increase direct funding will take time, donors should be open to testing different modalities for shifting money and working with others, including feminist and/or youth-friendly intermediaries, to find solutions to provide financial and non-financial support to girl- and youth-led organisations and networks. This is especially where they are unregistered or cannot meet donor pre-conditions such as having bank accounts.
- **Provide** financial resources through more inclusive and participatory grant-making processes co-designed with girls. Girls need to be at the heart of setting donor priorities, and of decision making that concerns the distribution of funds. Funders should adopt more youth-friendly applications and reporting processes, reducing the administrative and reporting burden. Freeing up young people's, often volunteers', time will expand their capacity for undertaking advocacy activities.
- **Provide** fair and adequate compensation. Organisations working with girls and young women need to pay for their time and expertise. Donors, who are often responsible for setting ceilings for compensation, must do so in a way that is gender responsive and reflective of the local economic climate, taking into consideration cost of living and rates of inflation. Civil society and NGOs should also provide reasonable support, including financial compensation, to young people who are engaged in their activities.

2. Strengthen the meaningful engagement of girls and young women in all areas of public life, facilitating access to decision makers

Governments should:

- **Remove** any institutional barriers that constrain girl-led groups' and youth groups' freedom of association and assembly, access to information, right to privacy and to be heard. Their autonomy must be respected and free from unwanted interference.
- **Ensure** that national laws and policies make it possible for girls and young women to choose to organise within movements or associations and to legally register or not, without repercussions for their activities or their funding options.
- **Provide**, along with local authorities, the necessary spaces and resources to enable girl- and youth-led groups to engage in public dialogue and decision making as respected members of civil society.

- **Adopt**, budget for, implement and monitor national legislation and policies to ensure that girls and young women activists in all their diversity are able to actively contribute to public life. This should include legislation that acknowledges and protects all children and young people from violence, and particularly girls and women from gender-based discrimination when they choose to be politically active. Legislation and policies should be fully consistent with international human rights law including the UNCRC, CEDAW and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Governments, local government and national ministries must:

- **Increase**, strengthen and adequately resource existing structures that enable girls' and young people's participation within formal governance mechanisms such as national youth councils, and child and youth parliaments. At the same time, ensure that these structures operate in a way that is gender and age-responsive and promote the inclusion of girls and young women in all their diversity.

United Nations, governments and the international community must:

- **Fulfil** their commitment to girls' and young women's meaningful participation in the shaping, implementation and monitoring of global development agendas and frameworks. This should include upholding existing commitments to girls, gender equality and the Leave No One Behind principle in the SDG framework and other processes such as Generation Equality and the International Conference on Population and Development. To ensure girls and young women can access and freely express their views and recommendations at all levels of decision making, governments should consider their inclusion in national delegations to intergovernmental spaces, including, but not limited to, the SDG Summit in September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024.

3. Address barriers to girls' and young women's activism and the mounting backlash against those who are politically active

Governments should:

- **Ensure** that girls and young women activists can speak out without fear of threats, harassment or violence, both online and in public spaces through social norms change campaigns, enforced laws and policies, and strengthened reporting mechanisms. Girls' networks and youth groups should have the freedom to speak out and engage in protests without fear of interference from government authorities, the military and local law enforcement.

Government policy makers and social media companies must:

- **Take responsibility** for creating an open, accessible and safe online civic space for girl and young women activists, providing meaningful connectivity and secure access to the internet. This includes through the creation of regulatory frameworks for content moderation and by creating stronger, more effective, transparent and accessible reporting mechanisms that are specific to online gender-based violence and age-related discrimination, that hold perpetrators to account and are responsive to girls' needs and experiences.

National, regional and international human rights bodies and governments should:

- **Take measures** to monitor the specific situation for girl and young women human rights defenders and take appropriate action to protect and empower them.

Governments, donors, NGOs and gender justice movements must:

- **Resource and support** the wellbeing and safety of girl-led groups who are advocating at the frontlines. Girls need space to process and support their psychosocial health when dealing with the systemic violence and discrimination against them. This is especially the case for girls

advocating in countries where there are conflicts, restrictive civic space and unstable political systems, or when they are campaigning on particularly sensitive or taboo issues.

International organisations, including UN bodies, partnerships and INGOs should:

- **Invest** in and support long-term programmes, including mentoring, that provide early opportunities and sustained support for girls and young women who choose to speak out and advocate in their communities. Where possible, these organisations should work in partnership with women's rights movements and other grassroots organisations to provide intergenerational support, solidarity and mentorship to girl activists.

4. Support girls' and young women's education at all levels

Education ministries should:

- **Ensure** the provision of inclusive, quality gender transformative education which includes a focus on human rights and civic education. This entails equipping all children and youth, particularly girls and young women, with the necessary skills, knowledge, critical consciousness and experience to feel confident to engage in civic and political life as activists, advocates and informed citizens. This commitment is enshrined in the SDG 4.7 target. Governments should make a point of reporting on progress to implement this as part of their commitment to Leave No One Behind.

School stakeholders (teachers, councils and parents) must:

- **Provide** students, especially girls, with opportunities to develop the soft skills integral to influencing, including leadership skills development, public speaking and access to decision-making processes within school governance structures, such as school councils and elections.

INGOs and civil society must:

- **Recognise** the value of girl and youth activists to influence and affect change. Support the development of critical influencing skills: building effective advocacy, being able to lobby power holders, navigating different policy spaces and influencing processes. Focus should also be on soft skills development, including leadership and public speaking.

5. Increase political will, investments in and commitment to gender equality among UN Member States as a cross-cutting priority for the 2030 Agenda at the SDG summit and for the remainder of the SDGs.

National governments must:

- **Support** gender equality and girls' rights within the SDG framework. We call on Member States to make firm statements of intent at the summit and affirm strong global and national commitments to investing in gender equality and interventions for adolescent girls across all SDGs.
- **Invest** in gender and age-disaggregated data that properly tracks progress on the SDGs. Applying these lenses to data collection is key to ensuring that girls and young women are no longer invisible within the SDG framework, and it enables the tracking of real progress being made. By the next SDG summit in 2027, we expect to see a discernible shift in the number of governments reporting with gender and age-disaggregated data.
- **Provide** appropriate training in the processes of data monitoring and utilise tools like Citizen Scorecards with girls, youth groups and communities so governments can be held to account.

International policy makers and national governments must:

- **Promote and encourage** ownership of the SDG Agenda at grassroots level, providing accessible and practical information about the SDGs. They should also design SDG interventions in direct partnership with girls to maximise the impact and relevance of the SDGs to local activists and their communities.
- **Commit** to systematic and ongoing engagement with adolescent girls and young women activists. Regular consultation and dialogue on the issues that affect their lives will ensure that young activists can help to drive change and deliver the SDG promise of a better world that is fit to address today's challenges. To do this, policy makers and national governments must allocate sufficient funding to gender equality and youth participation, ensuring that commitments to both are not merely rhetorical but grounded in well-funded projects and programmes.

Governments and civil society should:

- Encourage girls and young people to participate in the formal accountability mechanisms of the SDG framework such as the Voluntary National Reviews. Where girls are excluded from these spaces, they should be supported to engage in shadow and alternate reporting where progress from their perspectives can be captured. Such support could enable young people to record where and how they themselves are leading on SDG implementation – which currently is not captured in formal reporting mechanisms.

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GIRLS GET EQUAL

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, Plan International drives changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For over 85 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children and we are active in more than 80 countries.

GIRLS GET EQUAL

Plan International has been campaigning for girls' rights for over a decade and the Girls Get Equal campaign aims to ensure girls and young women have power over their own lives and can help shape the world around them. Promoting leadership and amplifying girls' voices is central to the campaign. Ensuring girls' access to power holders and their involvement in the decisions that help shape their lives is crucial to upholding their rights. Their engagement in campaigning for social and political change needs to be supported at all levels and the barriers to their activism must be recognised and removed.

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