



GIRLS
GET EQUAL

TURNING THE WORLD AROUND

GIRL AND YOUNG
WOMEN ACTIVISTS
LEADING THE FIGHT
FOR EQUALITY

GIRLS OUT
LOOK

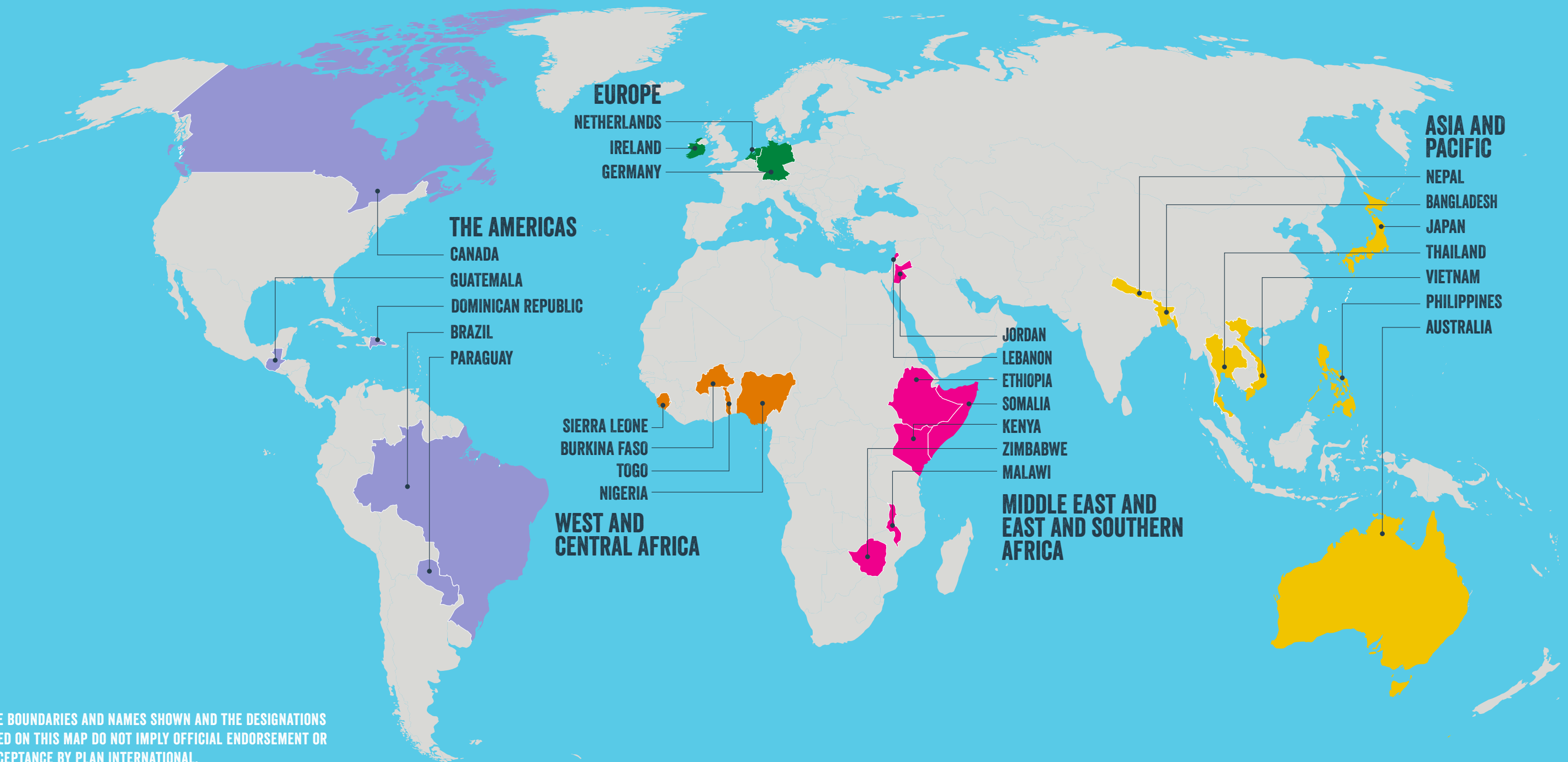
THE STATE OF THE
WORLD'S GIRLS

2 0 2 3

TURNING THE WORLD AROUND

GIRL AND YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS LEADING THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

Plan International first published the State of the World's Girls Report in 2007. This year's report is focused on girls' and young women's activism. The research, one of the largest studies of girl and young women activists to date, involved over 1,000 adolescent girls and young women across 26 countries. The research is ground-breaking, not least because the face-to-face interviews were led by 70 young women researchers who are themselves activists and their findings are supported by focus group discussions using participatory techniques.¹



THE BOUNDARIES AND NAMES SHOWN AND THE DESIGNATIONS USED ON THIS MAP DO NOT IMPLY OFFICIAL ENDORSEMENT OR ACCEPTANCE BY PLAN INTERNATIONAL.

Cover: Members of the Girls Out Loud group working together for change, Nepal
© Plan International / Sulav Photographs

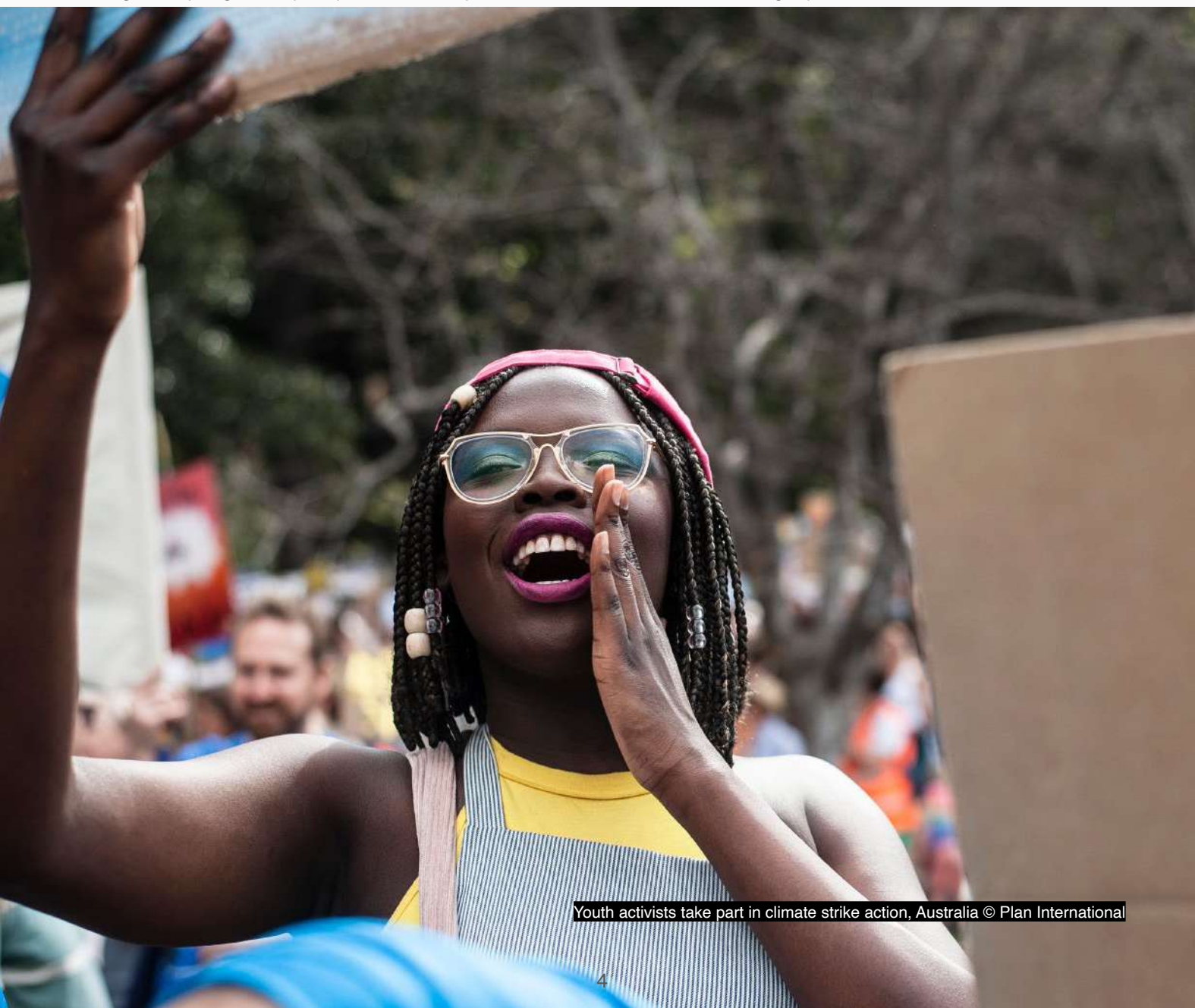
The names of the girls and young women in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. The majority of the girls and women chose the names they would like to use in this report. Where not supplied, a pseudonym was assigned to them. Photos used in this report are not of research participants.

SUMMING UP

This research provides a unique insight from over 1,000 participants* into what it's like to be an adolescent girl or young women activist in 2023: how are they treated, do they feel safe, what keeps them going?

Activism comes in many forms and is a vital part of the democratic process. At a time when civic space is both shrinking and shifting,² progress on gender equality is stalling and, in several of the countries where this research was conducted, the right to protest is severely restricted,³ girls and young women's right to make their voices heard must be protected. This study seeks to understand both the barriers that girl and young women activists face and the motivation and inspiration that drives them forward, in order to strengthen and support girl-led activism.

* 840 girls and young women participated in the survey, 203 in the interviews and 57 in the focus groups discussions.



Youth activists take part in climate strike action, Australia © Plan International

KEY FINDINGS

Girls and young women in the interviews and focus groups said:

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL ACTIVISM

- Education
- Skills training – including in leadership and public speaking
- Knowledge building

Girls and young women surveyed said:

60%

actively campaign about **gender equality** and **gender-based violence** issues

Nearly

60%

campaign both **online** and **in person**

95%

say that their activism has had a **positive impact** on them

61%

say the impact of their activism in creating change has **met or exceeded their expectations**



BARRIERS TO ACTIVISM

- lack of funding
- lack of confidence
- fears for their safety
- age and gender discrimination
- shrinking civic space
- repressive laws
- institutional bureaucracy

25%

indicated they felt **emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious** during their activism

27%

were put off from activism by the **negative views** expressed by members of their community and their family and friends

61%

faced **negative consequences** as a result of their activism

54%

identified **lack of finances** as the main barrier hindering them from engaging in activism

17%

had **feared for their safety** while undertaking activist activities

21%

were **deterred from activism**, reporting fears for their safety if they were to take part.



Despite the hurdles put in their way most of the adolescent girl and young women activists were determined to continue with their activism and saw it as a life's work.

FOREWORD

Muzoon Almellehan, 25, is a Syrian refugee and education activist. She has been campaigning for children's education in emergencies since she was forced to flee Syria with her family in 2013. She lived in refugee camps in Jordan for three years. Muzoon now lives in Newcastle, United Kingdom, and is a graduate of Newcastle University. She is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and offers a powerful, authentic voice on education in emergencies. In 2020, she was awarded the Dresden Peace Prize and as a teenager featured on the BBC's list of 100 most influential and inspirational women and Time's list of the 30 most influential teens.

Plan International's new report on girls' and young women's activism is an important one. We are so often told that our voices are unimportant but this report, in line with my own experience, demonstrates that fighting for our rights, and the rights of others, is never a lost cause.

I decided to be an activist as I realised that when we feel we have the power to change our societies for the better, we must believe in the voices of our hearts and start taking action to make change. For me, I felt it was critical to be using my own voice to encourage other children to believe in education and go to school and most importantly to never give up on their rights, in particular their learning. What has influenced me through my journey is that I do not accept loss and the fact that suffering was imposed on us, we must show our circumstances that we are stronger than them and we deserve our rights. Moreover, what has encouraged me to use my voice to fight for education is because I saw the huge difference education has made to my family who were working as teachers. My dad, uncles and aunts were school teachers, so this has inspired me to be educated in order to support my community and to contribute positively in uplifting others.

However, when we start to make the change, it is not an easy nor a straightforward mission. To be an activist

requires a tremendous amount of patience, strong will and determination in order to achieve your goals. So far, I am so proud that I have become a voice for millions around the world and my story represents and inspires them. Nothing could make me prouder than being a catalyst for change for those who are voiceless, no matter who they are, how old they are and where they come from. My voice is for them to gain their rights, be treated justly and be equal to their peers around the world.

My basic advice to every girl or young person who wants to bring change is to never underestimate even the smallest ideas and actions as they are the seeds for the most significant difference and the impact that they will make. Whenever you want to make a change just believe in yourself and never give up no matter what the challenges are. You will eventually reach your destination if you keep going.

Individuals are vital in making changes in their communities, but it is our collective action that can solve crises and it is what we must strive for by joining forces for making our world a better place. So, we must keep raising our voices for those who are in need and for those who are suffering around the world. It is important they know we have not forgotten them and we are taking action to address their challenges.



On 31 August 2022, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Muzoon Almellehan takes part in a mathematics accelerated learning class with 10-year-old Shahed while visiting children at a UNICEF-supported Makani centre in East Amman, Jordan.

CONTENTS

SUMMING UP..... 4

FOREWORD 6

INTRODUCTION 10

SETTING THE SCENE 12

METHODOLOGY 14

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED..... 15

1. Priority campaign issues 16

3. Impact of activism 20

4. How adolescent girls and young women organise 22

5. Education 23

GETTING IN THE WAY: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES..... 25

1. Finding the funds 27

2. Self-doubt..... 28

3. Safety fears..... 29

4. Age + gender 30

5. Race, religion and ethnicity 32

6. Structural barriers and civic space 33

7. Critical voices are hard to ignore 34

THE WAY AHEAD 38

CONCLUSION..... 40

RECOMMENDATIONS 43

CALLS TO ACTION 44

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... 48

RAISING THEIR VOICES



VIDALIA, 19, GUATEMALA
P.14



NARIN, 19, GERMANY
P.28



WISDOM, 23, NIGERIA
P.37



TAM, 23, VIETNAM
P.39



© Plan International

FROM THE CEO

This year’s State of the World’s Girls Report is about activism, about the experiences and challenges that girls and young women face when they campaign for their rights and the rights of others. The evidence provided here confirms everything we know from our work at Plan International. Girls and young women have unlimited reserves of creativity, energy and determination in overcoming extensive barriers in their activism. They tirelessly campaign for gender equality, challenge gender-based violence, raise awareness about climate change and run local campaigns to improve the lives of their peers. Whilst their resilience is beyond doubt, I am more convinced than ever that we need to offer our active and unwavering support.

Why is this? These young women face tremendous risks. They are often questioned by their families and communities as they break through harmful norms. They can even be the target of the anti-rights movement which is pushing back on hard won gains in areas such as sexual and reproductive health and rights including safe abortions, LGBTQIA+ rights, and comprehensive sexuality education.

These activists need support, they need our collective energy, and I am delighted that in this report, they tell us what we can and must do. The message is coming through clearly that they need funds, training, support in working with policy makers and governments, and a changed mindset to actively encourage their participation at all levels of society and in decision making processes. I also hear how intertwined their work is: tackling poverty underpins achieving gender equality as does promoting education and understanding both the urgency of climate action and the different impacts it has on people’s lives. At Plan International we are putting these principles into practice by re-engineering the way we work to bring young people into the centre of everything we do.

Girls and young women activists are in it for the long haul. We must offer our steadfast support to them, not just in words but in action. At Plan International, we are committed to doing just that – to elevating and amplifying their voices and backing their ambitions for change at every opportunity, and with all the means at our disposal.

Stephen Omollo,
CEO Plan International

INTRODUCTION

🔊 **“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*

For over a decade Plan International has been campaigning with girls and young women and since 2007 has produced an annual report on girls’ rights. Plan International’s *Girls Get Equal* campaign has championed girls’ voice, power and leadership, arguing that girls’ participation in the issues that affect their lives and shape their future is not only a rights issue but benefits wider society too. This year the report focuses on the experiences of activists. What happens when adolescent girls and young women do advocate for change and fight for their rights? The study is committed to conducting research with and for adolescent girls and young women, welcoming co-creation and collaboration. The young women activists chosen to lead this research help to get at the heart of the activism stories adolescent girls and young women have to tell and further amplify their perspectives and voices. Participation and activism are fundamental to democracy, gender equality is worth fighting for and we need more girls and young women as movement leaders, activists, change-makers and politicians.

Over the last decade there has been some progress: gender equality has been more clearly recognised as the urgent human rights issue that it is and girls, whose experiences were in danger of slipping through the cracks between women’s and children’s rights, are now much more of a focus. But, listening to adolescent girls and young women, it is clear that many of them are experiencing a backlash: those taking part in the research talked particularly of more repressive laws around certain issues – abortion, SRHR and LGBTIQ+ rights – which impede their activism. Increasingly authoritarian governments and political movements are back-tracking on gender equality: girls and young women’s rights, whatever the recent gains, are in danger. The patriarchy, as one young woman puts it, is flexing its muscle.

🔊 **“They act as if they are here, trying to help but actually, we remain a patriarchal state, even with all of our laws and rules, those laws that are supposed to protect us are not being respected or being taken as basis for implementation to protect women and we are still in fact still in a society that works on a patriarchal and sectarian foundation... We don’t have equality for women. We have legislative and systematic crime and violence against women. I don’t believe that we as a state, have the required resources and means to protect our women from different types of violence.”** *Anna, 24, Lebanon*

During the past four years Plan International has conducted research across 53 countries consulting with over 79,000 girls and young women, including girl and women activists who are on the frontline of making change happen. Last year’s *State of the World’s Girls* (SOTWG) Report *‘Equal Power Now: Girls, Young Women and Political Participation’* revealed that fewer than one in three girls agreed that politicians understand the views of girls and young women. They cannot be relied on to represent girls’ rights and protect their interests – girls and young women need to be their own advocates. The issues activists are engaged with overlap and intertwine. Their routes to activism vary but wherever they come from they bring the same tenacity and dedication to the causes they support and the same ambition to change their world for the better – girls and young women taking charge, demanding attention and succeeding.

🔊 **“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, is deep-rooted with poverty and I think that’s something that’s very important to work on.”** *Belkis, 22, Ethiopia*

KEY DEFINITIONS

- 🔍 **ACTIVISM:** efforts to promote, impede, direct or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society toward a perceived greater good.
- 🔍 **CAMPAIGNING OR COLLECTIVE ACTION:** involves people planning and implementing concrete actions together to achieve change. Either 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, taking (often collective) action for systemic change and conflict transformation. In certain contexts, the term “activist” may not be appropriate, and they may choose to identify as “advocates”, “youth leaders”, “influencers” or change makers.

SETTING THE SCENE

Progress towards gender equality has over the years been characterised by two steps forward, followed by one step back.⁴ And that is the optimistic view. Recent studies bear this out: there has been little progress on gender equality at the global level between 2015 and 2020.⁵ According to the World Economic Forum it will take another 131 years to achieve it.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has made things worse with well-documented increases in violence against women and in child and early forced marriages and unions (CEFMU).⁷ Additional impacts include the loss of employment for women who hold the majority of informal and lower paid jobs and the increase in unpaid care work that is mainly provided by girls and women.⁸

This lack of progress has not gone unrecognised and it is, as it has always been, the young who are most actively engaged in pressing for change. Volumes of research attest to the role empowered girls play in spearheading social change. It is young women and adolescent girls who are leading the fight against sexual violence and harassment with the #cuéntalo campaign in Latin America, #meuprimeiroassedio campaign in Brazil, and the global #metoo movement. The most recent women's movement in Iran has seen women from all ages and backgrounds demand justice, reform and rights, after the death of Mahsa Amini in morality police custody.

Adolescent girls and young women from many different countries can be found organising global movements, tackling diverse issues: young women like Malala Yousafzai, who campaigned for girls' education and was shot by the Taliban at the age of 15, and Greta Thunberg who, also at the age of 15, launched the "Fridays for Future," campaign highlighting climate change, which now has tens of thousands of followers. One of them was Vanessa Nakate, who, inspired by Thunberg, began a solidarity strike and for several months was the lone protester outside the gates of the Ugandan Parliament. Others joined her and she

founded the Youth for Future Africa and the Africa-based Rise Up Movement as well as the Green School Project transitioning schools to solar energy. These young women, and many others like them, testify to the energy, capacity and competence of young women everywhere.

🗣️ **"I'll say I'm active in ...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, Sierra, 19, Leone*

One of the most significant ways to advance gender equality is to support and resource feminist activism.⁹ That is not happening and feminist organisations – especially in the low and lower middle-income countries – continue to operate on shoestring budgets: 48 per cent of women's rights and feminist organisations from low and lower middle-income countries seeking funding from the Global Fund for Women report their most recent fiscal year budget was less than US\$30,000 a year.¹⁰ In 2021 it was estimated that, despite new funding commitments, women's rights organisations receive only 0.13 per cent of the total Official Development Assistance (ODA) and 0.4 per cent of all gender-related aid.¹¹ Not surprisingly perhaps, a recent UN Report, using data from 2017-2022, found that bias against women is as entrenched as it was a decade ago.

The gender social norms index, covering 85 per cent of the global population, reveals that close to nine out of ten men and women hold a fundamental bias against women: half of people in 80 countries believe men make better political leaders and a quarter believe that it is justified for men to beat their wives.¹²

Girls take part in event to mark the International Day of the Girl, Togo © Plan International



WHY ARE ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ORGANISING?

There are countless examples of activism and campaigning aiming for social change, and there are many reasons why young people become involved: strong identification with the group whose grievances the movement addresses, family background, class, education, and other elements of political socialisation that support activist engagement, all play a role.¹³

- 🕒 Gen Z, born between 1996 and 2010, 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 and in recent years, there has been a global decline in political rights and civil liberties.¹⁴ Additionally young people have 24/7 access to news cycles and user-generated content that was not available to earlier generations. They are bombarded with information about the many wrongs that need righting and it can be hard to turn away. You cannot say you did not know.
- 📊 Data from the CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks citizens' engagement and freedom of association, suggest an ever-shrinking civic space with only three per cent of people currently living in countries with open civic space.¹⁵ An increasingly inhumane approach to migrants, a rollback of girls', women's and LGBTIQ+ rights alongside a rise of far-right groups worldwide has motivated young people to take action. Many organisations point to democratic backsliding in the Americas, with strong opposition to feminist policies.¹⁶ This has led to legal changes that threaten women such as the criminalisation of abortion in El Salvador and parts of the USA, and the promotion of regressive laws in Guatemala which include criminalising miscarriage and banning schools from teaching students about non-heterosexual relationships.^{17,18,19} These attacks on civil liberties and an increase of discriminatory practices based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or social class, spur young people into

collective action to fight injustice. A shrinking civic space is also happening online. Digital technologies can have a key role in restricting civil society organisations (CSOs) and their activities and are often instrumentalised to curb opposition and dissent.²⁰

- 👥 Young people around the world are increasingly distrustful of institutions,²¹ and frustrated with the perceived lack of action from the older generation.²² While youth are mobilising and, in particular, joining movements focusing on immigration, feminism and LGBTIQ+ rights there is often tension between youth and adult leaders within these movements.²³ 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 apparent inaction.²⁴
- 🌐 The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for global development efforts and the framework acknowledges that young people are not passive beneficiaries but active participants in efforts to achieve the goals. Recognising the significance of youth engagement, the United Nations has established mechanisms such as the UN Major Group for Children and Youth 2030 Strategy to facilitate youth participation and amplify their contributions. However, despite the rhetoric, funding remains in short supply and there is ample evidence that young people's participation in formal modes of civic engagement is in decline.^{25,26}

But, as our research makes clear, engagement overall is not in decline. From petitions to protests to challenging social norms – at school, at home and at government level – girls' and young women's activism and engagement takes many forms.

🗣️ **"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*



Vidalia is 19 and comes from a rural area in Guatemala. She is currently at university studying social work and has been an activist from an early age. She was a co-researcher for this year's SOTWG Report and shares some of her thoughts about her own activism and her reactions to what she has learned.

In the area I come from activism is particularly hard work – just getting around is difficult. Many young women have little education and leave our communities to look for work elsewhere. It is a situation I would very much like to change. As part of my degree, I am learning a lot about how society works and am passing the information to my family and community members back home. After graduating I want to do something related to my community and, with the knowledge I have gained, help bring about change for women and children where I live.

I am also becoming active within the university and have contacted academic leaders and the mayor and town councillors to talk about the situation for girls and young women and about girls' education in particular.

As a researcher I conducted three interviews with three very different activists. They lead very dissimilar lives but agreed on one thing: activism can be tough.

Sometimes it is difficult to get support, because not many institutions or individuals really step forward to help. And some of the issues they deal with create tension in the communities they live and work in. They can be threatened in order to silence them, but for the young women I spoke to this was part of their life and work. They still fight on for the group they are part of and the issues they care about. One of the activists mentioned that there are national laws in place to protect and support them but they are not put into practice.

I think working together with others is so important. When you do things in a group it is more powerful. People have been imprisoned for defending rights, they must be freed, defending your rights should not be a problem.

It is important that laws are enforced, and new ones generated so that they really have an impact on the country and through this people can feel free.

METHODOLOGY²⁷

The research included over 1,000 adolescent girls and young women, one of the largest studies of female activists to date, and was conducted using a mixed methods and participatory approach with young women who are also activists conducting peer-to-peer interviews. It involved:

- ➊ a 20-question survey of 840 respondents in 26 countries across four regions. Data collection happened online over a period of six weeks between March 8th and April 24th. 60 per cent of participants were young women between 20-24, 40 per cent aged between 15-19.
- ➋ a series of peer-to-peer led interviews with 203 girls and young women who identified as activists across the same 26 countries. 73 per cent of interviewees were aged 20-24 and 27 per cent 15-19. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow space for an open-ended discussion with the interviewee

and the ability to be explorative in the exchange. Data collection was either online or face-to-face in the relevant Plan office. Interviewers were trained on qualitative interviews and ethics.

- ➌ focus group discussions with 57 participants overall. FGDs were conducted on Zoom.

Please note that the names of the girls and young women from the interviews and those in the focus group discussions have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

PRIORITY
CAMPAIGN ISSUES

P.16

FORMS OF
ACTIVISM

P.18

IMPACT OF
ACTIVISM

P.20

HOW ADOLESCENT
GIRLS AND YOUNG
WOMEN ORGANISE

P.22

EDUCATION

P.23

1. PRIORITY CAMPAIGN ISSUES

60% of survey respondents prioritised gender equality and gender-based violence.

Many respondents campaign on more than one issue and the topics they are concerned with overlap with each other: gender equality is intertwined, for example, with gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), poverty and the environment.

“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.” *Enna, 18, Philippines*

GBV, SRHR, climate and the environment, which was particularly important in Europe, all emerge as priority issues. The rights of young people and inclusion in decision-making are high on the list in the Middle Eastern, Eastern and Southern African Countries and in the Americas.

The personal is political – issues that affect young women’s daily lives are seen as yet another demonstration of gender inequality and campaigning on topics like menstrual hygiene management, or against tax on period products was widespread. The links between all the various issues they are incensed about, and their particular impact on women and girls, are clearly understood:

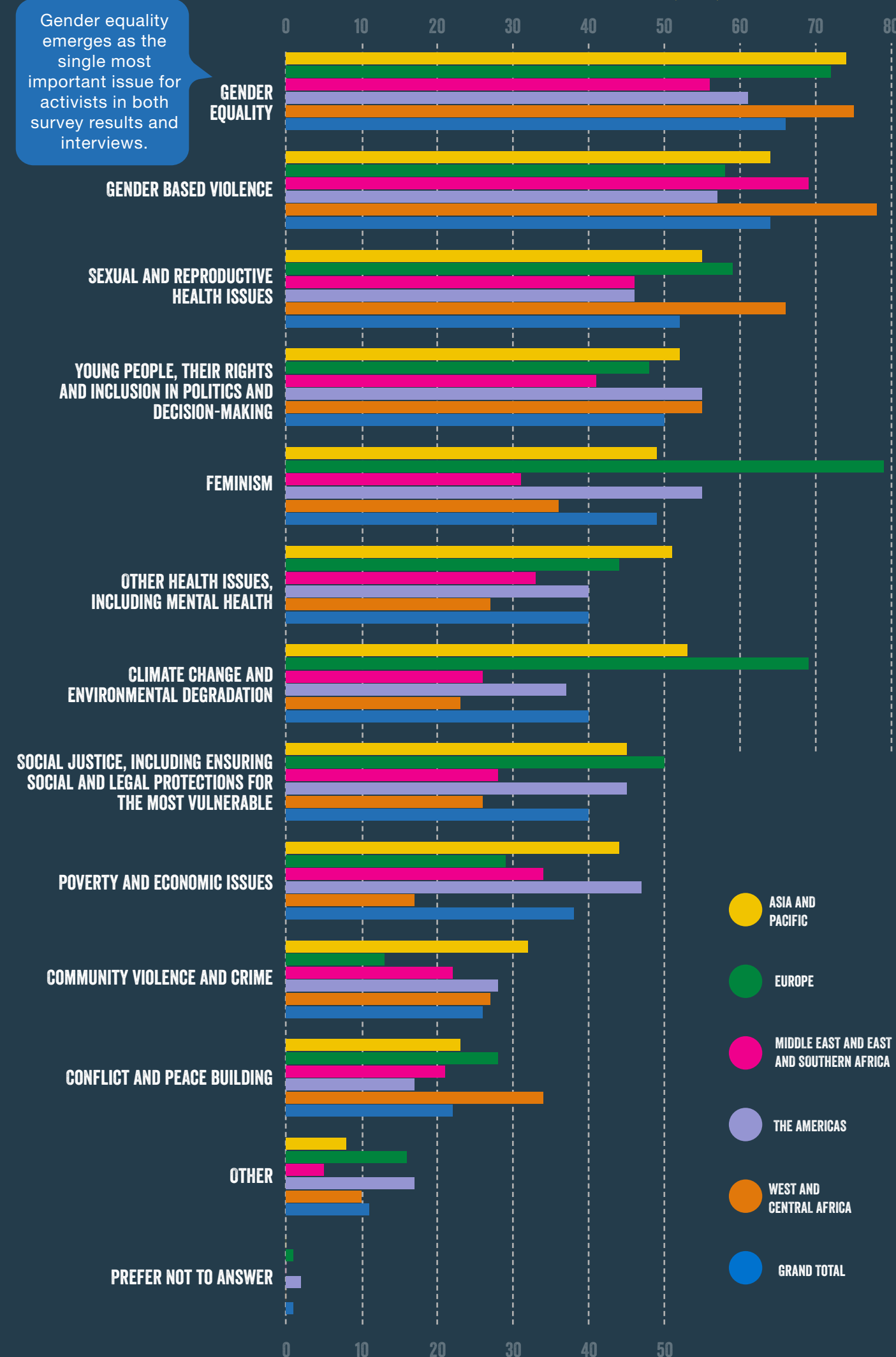
“One thing that we need to understand, or I figured out, is climate change affects everyone, but especially in a country like Ethiopia and developing countries, climate change affects girls and women more...For example, if you see that if there is a climate change, you don’t get water. So, in rural places to get water, women are going and then they will get raped, or they will have a physical harassment or a verbal harassment, so they have this kind of problems on them. So, the climate change effect is more on women rather than men.” *Person A, 24, Ethiopia*

Overall respondents were happy about discussing their activism with friends: 70 per cent said they were comfortable or very comfortable but this dropped when applied to family and community to 60 and 50 per cent respectively.



Girl leader speaks at the first Arab Girls' Summit, Jordan © Plan International

FIGURE 1: ISSUES THAT YOUNG WOMEN FOCUS ON IN THEIR ACTIVISM BY REGION (N=840)



2. FORMS OF ACTIVISM

Activism comes in many different forms. There were no differences by age group regarding how adolescent girls and young women were active, but those identifying as LGBTIQ+ are less likely to be active in person – 19 per cent compared to 27 per cent. A mix of online and in person activism was a lot more popular everywhere than only engaging online.

There was no clear consensus about the most effective forms of campaigning: 30 to 35 per cent of participants who are active campaigners placed speaking out or engaging (online or in person), joining a group to prompt social or systemic change, or utilising their skills and talents for advocacy and influencing, in their top three. Only in Europe was taking part in demonstrations, marches and public protests identified as important: possibly because it was the region with the fewest restrictions on the right to protest.

As was to be expected, given the selection process, which targeted those identifying as activists,²⁸ the overwhelming majority of participants in the peer-to-peer interviews were active campaigners. They worked in their communities, were advocates at roundtables, gave talks to raise awareness, employed media tactics, lobbied local decision-makers, worked with larger campaign initiatives and organised events.

Interviewees worked both online and in-person. They felt that social media was essential for reaching out to younger people and that it was often useful to plan and organise online, but the real buzz comes from getting together face-to-face:

“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 camaraderie 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*

Government action and support was appreciated in most countries, but was insufficient:

“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 up to us to see how best we can put all hands-on deck and fight it for ourselves.” *Amy, 19, Sierra Leone*

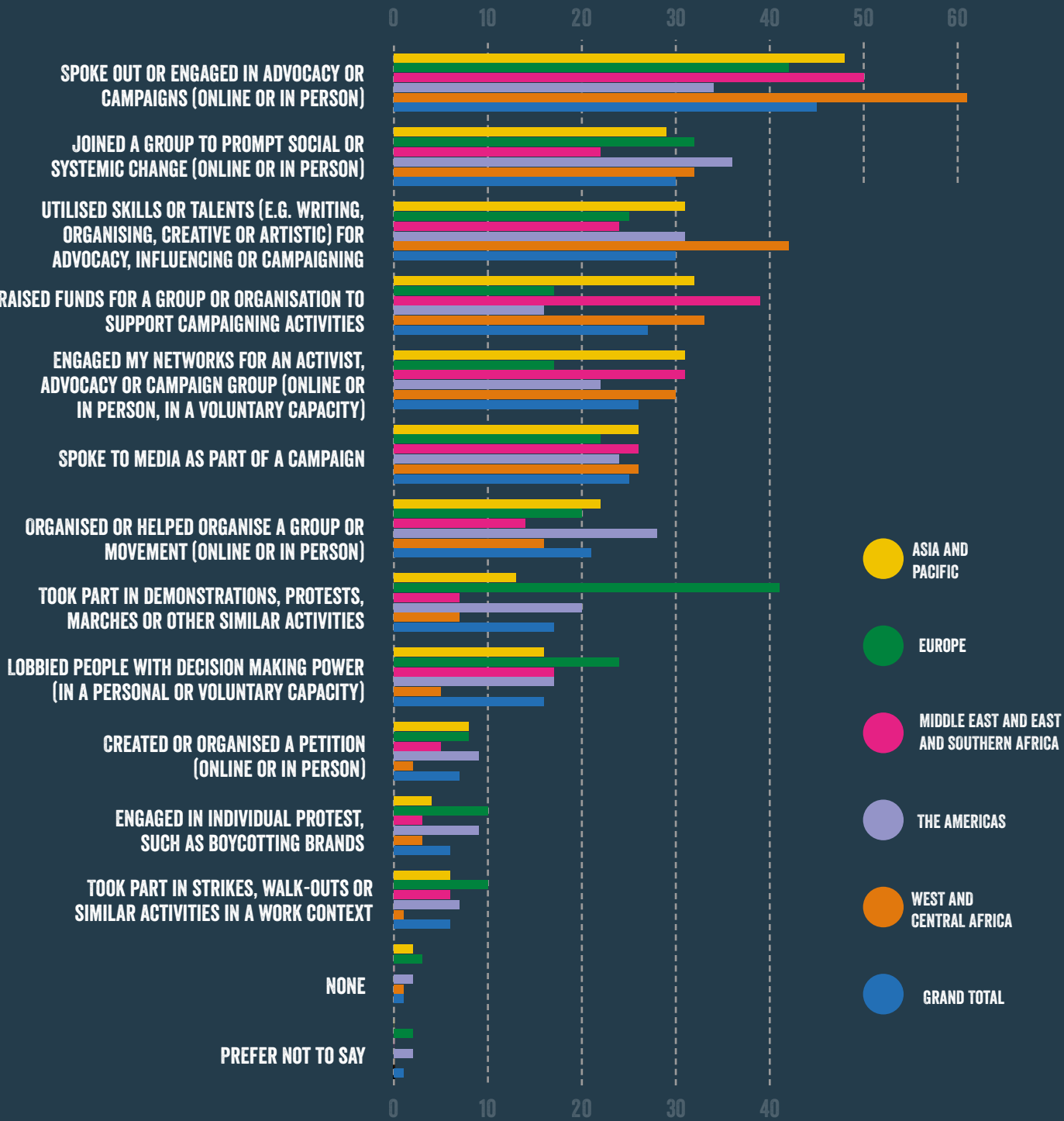
Some activists discuss the government support they receive: Mary John, 16, from Nigeria, for example, described how the Federal Ministry of Women’s Affairs is working on campaigns to eliminate child marriage and to address barriers to education for young women. This experience was not the same everywhere with a few girls noting that support may be ad-hoc 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 menstrual pads, but they stop there, they need to understand that there are more events, that there are circumstances that they need be worked out, they need it to not be 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 menstrual pads.” *Adriana, 24, Brazil*

They also feel that greater input from a range of people on the issues affecting them, adolescent girls and young women in particular, would start to change how things are done and lead to faster and better outcomes.

“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*

FIGURE 2: PERCEIVED EFFECTIVE ACTIONS TO ACHIEVE IMPACT BY REGION (N=840)





61% of survey respondents say the impact of their activism had met or exceeded their expectations

Youth activists at a conference in Canada
© Plan International / Ben Cox

3. IMPACT OF ACTIVISM

The interviewees were positive about the impact they were having and both realistic and patient about what to expect. They concentrated on local issues and changes in their communities rather than changes at the level of law or policy.

“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, but then we came up with local solutions on how to manage that sort of waste... Because currently there are no specific laws that deal with electronic waste.” *Haka, 22, Zimbabwe*

They talked about awareness raising on issues like menstrual health and child marriage which resulted in local changes and also about inspiring others to take action and creating a groundswell of opinion and activity, often at community level.

“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*

95% of survey respondents say that their activism has had a positive impact on them

Activists also acknowledged that their work had a personal impact on them, as well as on those around them:

“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.” *Sanjiva, 18, Nepal*

Around 70 per cent of survey respondents agreed that their activism has increased their confidence and helped them to develop or learn new skills.

65% said they felt pride or satisfaction for contributing to change

Seventy two percent of those identifying as LGBTIQ+ reported pride and satisfaction for contributing to change but were less likely to say they had developed more confidence.

As well as pride, what comes across in the interviews is a sense of empowerment. Their activism contributes to a feeling that they are both capable and valued:

“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.” *Miver, 24, Vietnam*

THE STRUGGLE TO STAY POSITIVE: “IT IS REALLY HARD”

Alongside the sense of pride and empowerment interviewees also acknowledge the personal and psychological cost: anxiety, depression, burn-out and emotional exhaustion.

“Yeah, I mean, definitely very overwhelming. I know like a lot of people in climate activism struggle with like, yeah, depression and burn-out and stuff just because, like, it is really hard.” *Rose, 18, Australia*

25% per cent of survey respondents indicated they felt emotionally or psychologically unwell or anxious during their activism

The sense of being overwhelmed can be because there is so much that needs to be done. Whatever you do will never be enough:

“Okay, so for me also my low point is sometimes I feel like maybe I’m not doing enough... I just try to remind myself that my efforts don’t have to be so big at the moment. I can just go one day at a time, one step at a time. I can just learn, because most of my learning has been on the journey. So sometimes I feel like I’m not doing enough, and then it’s really depressing.” *Lauren, 19, Nigeria, FGD*

Some activists felt incapacitated and had to take time out:

“...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 have some activities; I couldn’t go to activities anymore because I couldn’t stand the psychological attack anymore.” *Adriana, 24, Brazil*

Other interviewees acknowledge the constant effort, the struggle to just keep going: especially when the hope for change seems realisable but then the outcome is brutal and no-one appears to be listening.

“One of my biggest low points was just burnout... in 2020, yeah, when there was SARS 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, Ireland, FGD²⁹*

Rim from Lebanon talked about the price she had to pay for her activism, which included setting up a feminist group to work on sexual health issues, and its effect on her life and her 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... I wanted to submit my candidacy for municipal elections, but I backed off because it’s going to cost me a lot mentally.” *Rim, 24, Lebanon*

The pressures come from all sides: interviewees talked about the competitive nature of activism, about how hard it is to stand out against your family and friends and about just being in the public eye: being looked up to as a role model, can be gratifying but it can bring its own anxieties. Mental health was one of the issues adolescent girls and young women campaign on and many felt that post pandemic it had become even more important. Stella, 19, from Australia noted that not being able to access mental health support made it difficult to sustain activism which could be traumatising.

4. HOW ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ORGANISE

Most campaigners concentrated on their local area, working in communities whose needs and attitudes they understood:

- 📍 Survey participants, for the most part, organised to bring about change at either local or national level. Regional targets were rare and only in Europe and West and Central Africa was there any significant focus on the international arena. Those identifying as LGBTIQ+ were more likely to focus on attitudinal change and to target their campaigning at the national level.
- 🗣️ Activists from the peer-to-peer interviews and focus group discussions also mainly focused on their immediate community: aiming to raise awareness around issues like child marriage, menstrual hygiene and GBV. It was also recognised that grassroots activism had the ability to spread, influencing both national and global dynamics as decision-makers were forced to take notice. Older more experienced activists were more active at national level, having built alliances that made this effective.

🗣️ **“At first it was at the community level really, within the neighbourhood community, right? As much as I could take to other people. But then it expanded into other spaces that I was occupying, it gave me the opportunity to participate in a national campaign to confront the cycles of violence against women... 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*

BETTER TOGETHER

Almost all the young women and girls interviewed discussed activism as a collective endeavour. Individuals can perceive the need, create the community and lead the change but the best outcomes are achieved through collective effort. Being part of a group not only made you more powerful but created bonds that were sustaining and enabled you to keep going.

🗣️ **“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.”** *Fatou, 22, Togo*

As well as being more effective to work collectively, activists felt they could learn from the experience of larger organisations who had built up expertise and contacts. They mentioned working with women’s networks, with NGOs, local organisations and authorities like the police or government ministries. Working collectively was one of the key pieces of advice that activists said they would hand on: sharing resources, building on other’s expertise and feeling supported were key to both achieving success and building resilience.

🗣️ **“And know that it’s very difficult to just work and be passionate and put on 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

5. EDUCATION

Education was of fundamental importance to research participants and central to their ability to campaign and effect change. It is viewed as crucial to acquiring knowledge and often a significant route to finding like-minded people to work with. Activists are very focused on learning about their chosen topics and developing their skills, and acquire knowledge from many and varied sources: the UN and NGOs, at school or college, through doing courses, through media both traditional and social, online and in face-to-face meetings, through the project work they take part in and the groups they belong to.

🗣️ **“Because for me, education is the basis of everything. As cliché 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 brings the main pillars of a society to be 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?”** *Amora, 20, Brazil*



Youth activists working together towards gender equality, Vietnam © Plan International

📣 “What inspired my leitmotif, I think, was what I experienced myself as a young girl. The stereotypes, the prejudices, the fact that you are neglected. One day I talked about poverty and the fight against poverty and the fact that you are neglected because I am poor and everything. The fact that some people don’t want you to express yourself because they are too irritable. They want to hurt you, either hit you or go all like that. It made me get involved in these things, in these campaigns, to do something about it, because I don’t want them any more.”
Mamou, 22, Burkina Faso

📣 “My mother was a women rights’ activist and she used to work with an institution related to women rights, so I think this is the thing that paved the way for me.” *Julia, 16, Jordan*

📣 “... 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.’”
Ella, 19, Canada

WHY I’M AN ACTIVIST



📣 “I wasn’t interested in things that girls were conventionally interested in so I got a lot of, ‘No, you’re a girl, don’t do that. You’re not supposed to be doing that. What is that?’ That kind of thing. So then, I had no idea that people were out there fighting ‘this war’ for me. If I had known from a very early age, I think I would have been an activist from age seven.”
Valerie, 22, Nigeria

📣 “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

📣 “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 only 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, Ireland⁶⁰*

📣 “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*

GETTING IN THE WAY: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

FINDING
THE FUNDS
P.27

SELF-DOUBT
P.28

SAFETY FEARS
P.29

AGE + GENDER
P.30

RACE, RELIGION
AND ETHNICITY
P.32

STRUCTURAL
BARRIERS AND
CIVIC SPACE
P.33

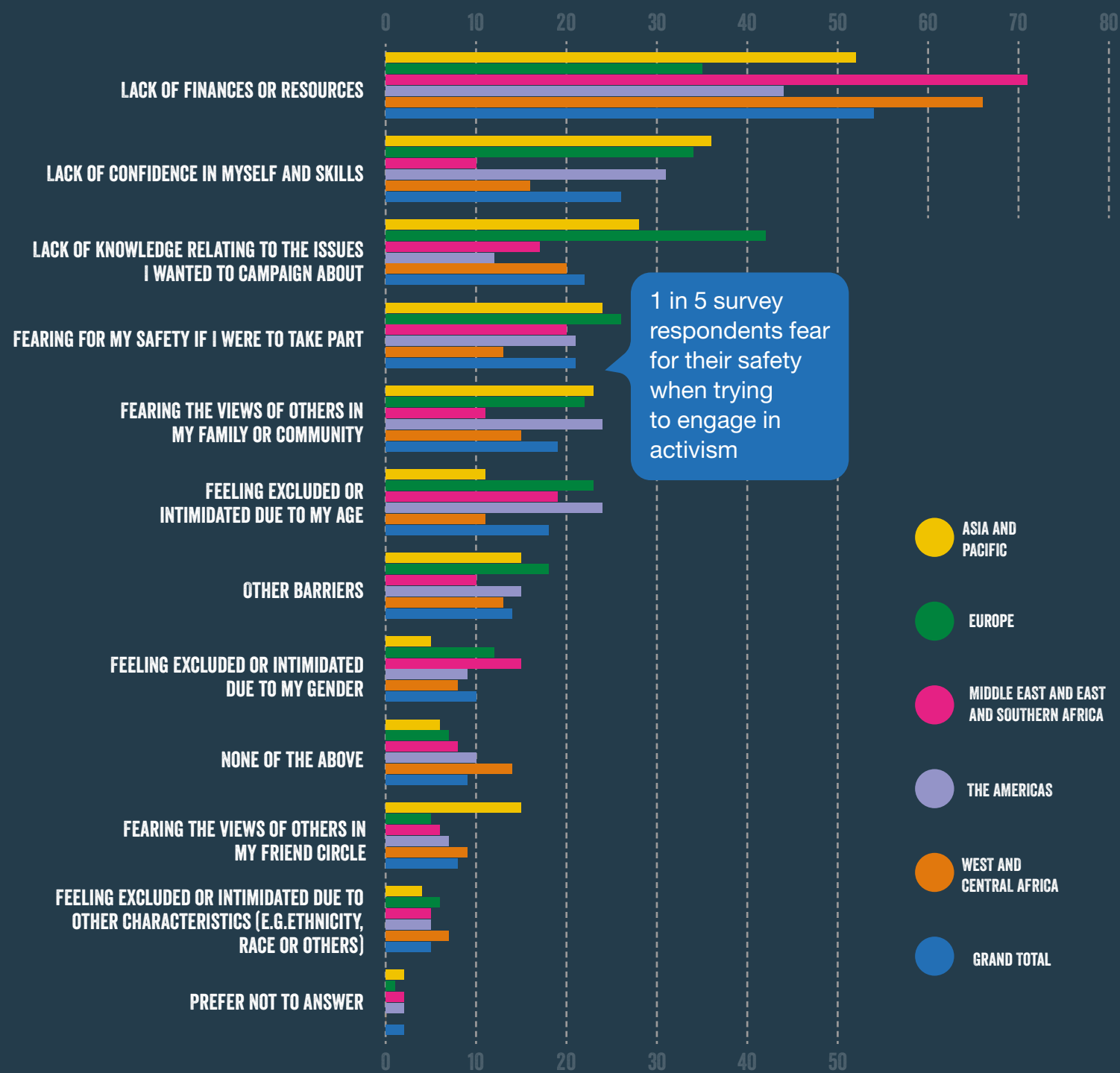
CRITICAL
VOICES ARE
HARD TO IGNORE
P.34

The barriers to being an activist are many and varied. There is a lack of support across the board: access to policy makers is difficult, funding and training is in short supply, discrimination, because you are young and female, is not. Government involvement is often tokenistic and community elders can be hostile. Young female activists struggle to network, to engage positively with the media and to be protected by the police.

Not everyone is affected: 22 per cent of survey respondents stated they had had no negative experiences while engaged in activism.

Some interviewees felt that being from a rural area makes activism more difficult. Towns and cities tend to be where meetings and activities take place and there could be challenges with travel – lack of transport and lack of money to pay for it.

FIGURE 3: CHALLENGERS AND BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED WHEN TRYING TO ENGAGE IN ACTIVISM (N=840)



1. FINDING THE FUNDS

54% of young women surveyed identified lack of finances as the main barrier to them engaging in activism

A third of survey respondents had no idea of their funding sources and a further third mentioned a mix of crowd funding and civil society grants. The interviewees mentioned a variety of funding sources: predominately multi-lateral funding from INGOs and NGOs, but including funds from local governments, national government departments and institutions like schools and universities. Usually, local government and NGO funding was combined with self-funding or fundraising activities like raffles, bring and buy sales or seeking donations from local people.

“I feel... most of the challenges are to do with finances... Sometimes you really know this person needs help... 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

Funding is an issue for many activists but for girls and young women working at local level, where they often struggle to get their voices heard and their issues on the table, the challenges can seem insurmountable. A few interviewees mentioned the advantages of going through larger INGOs for funding and felt that when you have the backing of a larger INGO it is easier to carry out planned activities and you benefit overall from their expertise.

Many mentioned specific barriers to securing funding:

- bureaucratic and lengthy process (even for small amounts)
- difficulties with not being recognised or registered which made them ineligible for funding
- complicated funding mechanism including high level skills needed for grant proposals

- lots of competition and limited options for funding for smaller organisations
- funds being too restrictive
- funding generally being precarious and unsustainable.

“I think grants ... 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...” 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

Not only are grants difficult to access but activists rarely get expenses even when working for established government initiatives like youth parliaments. This lack of financial compensation can cause real hardship: many cannot afford the travel or the necessary data bundles and can go hungry when there are no snacks or drinks available at meetings and rallies. Several girls commented that activism and campaigning generally work on a voluntary and unpaid basis which means that, problematically, as some were acutely aware, it becomes centred around those who can afford to take part:

“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 be an organisation, I have the money and my parents are willing to pay me resources... my dad bought my computer for editing in which I was able to edit videos for my job and for my non-profit.” Amelia, 18, Canada



Narin is a 19-year-old law student, living in Germany. Her parents were refugees. She became an activist at the age of 15 when she wrote political and slam poetry dealing with racism and refugees. She was one of the co-researchers for this year's SOTWG Report. These are some of her thoughts about and reactions to what she has learned and her recommendations for change in support of young women's activism:

I was surprised at how many obstacles that the young women I interviewed had to face. Activism is fundamental to our democracy but a lot of obstacles come from state institutions and activists need support to tackle this. It is necessary to offer empowerment programmes, so that young activists learn how to behave in certain situations. I am particularly worried about increasing regulation for activism, especially when it comes to left-wing activism. A lot of activists are called terrorists and get very strict punishments. Also, there is a lot of harassment coming from the right-wing scene, so a lot of young (left-wing) activists get intimidated by them. I am very worried about police violence that makes it more difficult and dangerous being an activist.

It was interesting that the young activists are very motivated and that they were truly asking for more projects and participation opportunities. At this point, the government has to establish more participation programmes. I agree with many of the interviewees that governments could also provide more funding: I am in the youth advisory parliament of the BMZ in Germany (development ministry) and I spend a lot of time commenting on certain drafts and travelling to advisory meetings with project managers and NGOs. I think my work is very important for the government, but it would be more inclusive and supportive to get an expense allowance.

I want more young activists to be able to get into politics and raise their voices. For me, I want to finish my university but also never stop being an activist. I want people to become part of politics, no matter where they come from and what financial status they have.

I want activism to be reachable for everyone and accessible for all minorities in this society.

2. SELF-DOUBT

Another common barrier for those taking part in the research was a lack of confidence in their own skills and a lack of knowledge about the issues they were interested in. This was particularly pronounced among the LGBTIQ+ community.

📣 **“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*

Despite this lack of self-confidence those identifying as LGBTIQ+ campaigned more at national level than those who did not – reflecting perhaps the greater anonymity achieved working away from their local community. Stigmatisation within their community was twice as high for LGBTIQ+ respondents and they were more likely to have experienced feeling anxious or emotionally unwell and to have been subjected to online harassment and abuse as a result of their campaigning activities.

3. SAFETY FEARS

Actual physical safety and feelings of fear and insecurity, which can impact mental health, are a real issue for many activists. Their fears are backed up by wider research: according to a 2022 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a lack of safety and security acts as a major barrier to girls and young women's activism.³¹

Girls and young women encounter hostility, aggression, and harassment as they go about their work. Especially if they are campaigning on issues seen as contentious or inappropriate subjects for girls and young women to discuss: GBV, SRHR, LGBTIQ+ rights. They can be targeted by the authorities, experience verbal hostility from some in the communities they visit, and can be threatened with, and experience, physical abuse. Valerie 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 for discussing gender equality.

📣 **“They literally chased us out of the school with a cane. They pursued me and two of my colleagues... It was a government school. You knew we are coming. We had already explained. So, I didn’t understand. Is it that they didn’t hear us?... But I think that’s why one of the organisations I work with, they will not allow females to go alone... Let there be a male in case something happens, in a case someone gets physical.”** *Valerie, 23, Nigeria*

Another interviewee, from Nepal, was threatened at her home, and complaints were made to her family, because of her work on child marriage. Several young women stated that many events take place in the evenings, and they feel unsafe walking home late at night. There is the constant threat of violence – on the streets and online:

📣 **“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 a subject to discrimination, stigma and violence...there is violence online, getting comments from people... we have people that want to take advantage of you so we are also prone to even sexual violence itself.”** *Mercy, 22, Malawi*

15% of survey respondents reported online harassment and abuse

Online some adolescent girls and young women encountered hate speech, insulting comments (sometimes sexualised), and trolling, usually when speaking up about feminism and gender equality. When you do, as Stephanie discovered, the toxicity of the internet is unleashed:

📣 **“I reckon if you drew up a bingo card of all the insults you could possibly throw at a young woman, most of them probably have been found in this experience... but also know that faceless strangers on the internet can say what they want. Unless someone actively take steps to physically threaten me or whatever, they can’t do anything. I had people threatened to come and take my wheelchair, and I was like, cool. So, what are you going to do with it once you’ve taken it? Did you think I was just going to hop out of it and let you? What’s the plan here, buddy?”** *Stephanie, 24, Australia*

Girls and young women also reported being sexually harassed by senior staff when working on campaigns with some organisations. And public protests can be risky affairs:

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

Some participants, who had not felt unsafe in the course of their activism, nevertheless reported feeling uncomfortable and many, as we have seen, struggle with self-doubt which is increased by the way they are viewed and treated.

📣 **“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 myself and that makes me uncomfortable sometimes.”** *Laura, 17, Germany*

4. AGE + GENDER

“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 female sitting in the same room, then the priority will be for the male to share his opinion.” *Julia, 16, Jordan*

As with the survey respondents, activists acknowledged that both their age and gender, being girls and young women, could make it more difficult for them to achieve their goals: young female activists were seen as less knowledgeable than their male counterparts. They report being patronised and ignored:

“‘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*

Gender stereotypes combine with age to really hold adolescent girls and young women back. They are scrutinised for how they look as well as what they say, and their behaviour is monitored in a way young male activists would never experience. Interviewees noted that girls and women can face a lot of hostility when speaking out in public. Wanjiku, 22, from Kenya, said her dad used to reprimand her for arguing in the community. This is going against accepted behaviour and attitudes are hard to shift and hard to live with:

“...lot of times our community don’t value our voice or don’t really take into account, they have their own cultural beliefs or the social taboo: that women are mostly not entitled to make any changes outside of their homes or small circle, they should not participate in the decision-making areas or speak loudly about the most critical issues in our society.” *Degan, 22, Somalia*

At all levels of society involving adolescent girls and young women in decision-making is often talked about but rarely implemented.

“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.” *Mala, 18, Thailand*

“They don’t want to listen to women, to girls, because we are only girls and there is always more misogyny.” *Belu, 19, Paraguay*

Previous State of the World’s Girls reports have 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.³² This year’s research backs this up.

“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, that 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*

Male hostility was noted by many of the interviewees and could be very intimidating. Men often see young female activists as a threat to their own power and privilege and think that gender equality, women’s rights, can only be to their disadvantage. Respondents were very aware that female activists in general, and particularly those who challenge male behaviour, were creating tensions in families and communities:

“Men kind of feel intimidated by women who are powerful, educated and know what they want and what they do not want... 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*

Family members in many countries often made it clear that they did not value activism or community work. They would prefer young women to concentrate on being wives and mothers, or to at least study medicine, not social work, and do a job that would bring in a good salary.

Families can be obstructive because they disapprove of the cause or are afraid of what the neighbours might say, but this is combined often with worry about their daughter’s safety.

“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 them 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.” *Sanjiva, 18, Nepal*

One tactic used by activists to get round the discrimination they faced, often adopted reluctantly, was to use male colleagues as frontmen. Activists in Japan ran a campaign to increase voter turnout by offering discounts at restaurants for those with voting certificates for the Tokyo governor’s election. They went to negotiate with the restaurants but, as girls, they were not taken seriously. When they visited the restaurants with a boy, they accomplished the project goals. Others adopted similar tactics:

“... 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 and he believes. In many instances he will despise me.” *Leah, 20, Kenya*

Youth activists from the Safer Cities project, Peru © Plan International / Anika Büssemeier





Young female activist attends online leadership workshop for indigenous girls and young women, Guatemala
© Plan International / Sandra Sebastián

5. RACE, RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

A combination of overlapping discriminatory prejudices was also cited as a barrier for young activists. Young women of colour felt targeted for abuse, often by police. In some places the limited representation of people of colour in activist spaces makes them more conspicuous.

🔊 **“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*

Racism in policing and during protests, was mentioned in several countries and Eva, 22, from Brazil, noted that

as a Black woman raising the flag of feminism you get more of a reaction. Rose, 18, from Australia described often noticing she was the only person of colour in a room. Lily, 24, also from Australia, noted how, being a woman of colour in parliamentary spaces and speaking with decision makers, you become more aware of both sexism and racism in parliament.

Young Muslim women also felt targeted and face criticism: Mafilatou, 23, Togo and Dalinah, 24, from Ethiopia both mentioned feeling more conspicuous in relation to wearing a hijab. Sadika from Bangladesh, was working with both men and women, which was frowned upon by the community she grew up in, her biggest challenge was getting people to accept her as a legitimate activist not an immoral woman.

6. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND CIVIC SPACE

The rise of the far-right which brings with it increased misogyny and a renewed attack on girls’ and women’s rights has made female activism everywhere more challenging and often frightening. 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.³³

Activists feel impeded by increasingly draconian laws which reduce freedom of speech: banning awareness raising on topics like abortion, contraception and LGBTIQ+ rights which governments or religious leaders consider contentious and, in general, rolling back hard-won and inter-connected rights:

🔊 **“Denying abortion care service to women [is] bringing a lot of challenge to women and girls, and I see the despair and the sadness and a lot of things that affect women, and 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 service. 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.”** *Etenesh, 24, Ethiopia*

Activists struggle with structural barriers: institutions that are rigid in their rules, laws that are increasingly restrictive and others, more protective of rights, that work on paper but not in practice. Some of the interviewees discussed how working in schools could be difficult as the ministry of education restricted what you could discuss and others talked about conservative religious beliefs which shape social and political debate to the detriment of girl-led activism.

Notably, adolescent girls and young women are encountering increasing obstacles in civic space. Older activists report feeling unsafe while campaigning in greater numbers than younger ones. One interviewee described how activists are persecuted, intimidated and even criminalised:

🔊 **“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.” *Leonie, 22, Germany*

Girls can feel particularly vulnerable to over-zealous policing and the prospect of imprisonment, and girls from several countries complained about the shrinking of civic space: only ten of the 26 countries taking part in the study allowed the full right to peaceful assembly.³⁴ Even in Canada and Germany where protest is, in theory, permitted, activists noted their governments were introducing restrictions or passing laws making it more difficult to do so. Additionally, complicated and bureaucratic processes make it hard to organise protests or public events generally.

🔊 **“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... 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.”** *Hawanatu, 17, Sierra Leone*

B’atz, 21, from Guatemala also stated that technically the laws in her country promote free speech, but this doesn’t always happen in practice: there is criminalisation of activists based on what they say or share. In many countries there has been a clamp down on digital rights and Laila, 24, from Jordan talked about being reported to the cybercrimes department if people object to your posts. This tendency to criminalisation or persecution of activists is not confined to one country and it is on the rise.

🔊 **“Launching a campaign is very provocative, if she’s speaking up about something that is very contradictory to her society, sect, or party, she could be exposed to a counter campaign, cyber armies, verbal or cyber violence, harassment sometimes and she will be confronted with what she fears most as a girl.”** *Luna, 23 Lebanon*

7. CRITICAL VOICES ARE HARD TO IGNORE

27% of survey respondents were afraid of the views of members of their community and of their family and friends

According to many of the research interviewees, this was not surprising as the views expressed were often negative: political activism tends to cause unease and most respondents had experienced criticism.

“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 not just shut up and go away?’”

Stephanie, 24, Australia

The sense of being ostracised and rejected is one of the main barriers to adolescent girls’ and young women’s activism. Younger activists, aged 15-19, worried more about the opinions of and opposition from family members than the older age group. They felt more excluded or intimidated because of their age than older respondents. The constant chipping away and calling out by those closest to you takes its toll.

“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... 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

Interviewees reported criticism from all sides which got worse if they associated with members of the LGBTIQ+ community or campaigned on issues around sexuality and SRHR. Female activists are viewed by some in the community as delinquent:

“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

Basically, what activists, across countries and cultures, encounter is the fact that women should know their place and that place is not on a campaigning platform, trying to bring about change: it is certainly not a young woman’s or adolescent girl’s place to be loud, to tell men what to do, to challenge the norm, to have their own voice and agency.

“...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 on the other hand, when you engage with activists on more of a decision-making kind... You go into a meeting, for example, and you’ll try to speak up on something.... you’ll just... be that kind of annoying woman who just keeps on trying to burst into the meeting, or make a point, or make it all about this, there’s an awful lot of negative connotations there as well.”

Aoife, 21, Ireland

“Well, they label you as a feminist, especially like the feminist not in a good way. ... ‘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

A major issue with friends and family was an overall lack of understanding – of the issues and about what activism actually involves:

“I don’t know if it’s awareness, or 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.”

Rhylie, 21, Canada

Not all reaction is negative and many reported being respected as brave and valued for the work they do.



Young woman hosts self defence classes as part of safe space project advocating against child marriage, Bangladesh © Plan International

Some community members saw young activists as role models and useful to the community.

“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

Binsa in Nepal said she receives lots of support from family and friends and even the ward administration helps her when she needs to go to the higher authorities. Degan from Somalia also is grateful for an especially supportive mother and many other activists reported a good reception from parents and community members. Some feel that there has been progress:

“I think currently our society is changing bit by bit and they are now being 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.”

Nadia, 23, Bangladesh

CLEARING THE HURDLES

During the research we asked the girls and young women taking part how they were managing. Burnout was a problem for some, but very few showed signs of giving up their activism. What strategies did they employ to enable them to keep going and jump over the various barriers placed in their way? For many, collectivism and collaboration were key:

“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

“If there are many of us, it is much better. There is a saying that there is strength in numbers. So, today, we can be heard in a better way. When there are many of us, people tend to listen.”

Monte, 18, Dominican Republic



Girl engages with panel discussion at the Global Girls Summit 2022, Nigeria © Plan International

Many employed specific strategies for the different areas of their work:

Protesting

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

Mental Health Challenges

- ✎ Trying to separate yourself from the criticism
- ✎ Practising self-care and having boundaries
- ✎ Having mental health sessions and training for activism
- ✎ Having a space to disassociate when you are doing a lot of activism or community work.

Safety considerations

- ✎ Sensitising communities before going deeper into the topic, for example by running an awareness campaign prior to face-to-face action
- ✎ Working with community leaders
- ✎ Having good safeguarding policies
- ✎ Getting support from different institutions and organisations – schools, NGOs, police.

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 find better ways to communicate and engage on other platforms if necessary.

Many of the respondents also discussed building their communication and research skills and others recognised the importance of an enabling environment: schools that teach them about their rights and build their self-confidence, laws that protect them, individuals and institutions prepared to support them in their work:

🗣️ **“... It’s also important to create the environment where youth can feel free to take part. For instance, when I started taking part in Women 7, (at the G7 summit) there were so many terms that I did not know, but the environment allowed me to ask for help. Support like that I think is also important to promote youth participation.”** *Lily, 22, Japan*



Wisdom is a 23-year-old feminist activist and law graduate and comes from Nigeria. She has been an activist for gender equality since the age of 16, when she began volunteering for organisations fighting for that cause. She was a co-researcher for this year’s SOTWG Report and reflects on activism generally and what she has learned.

As a young woman in a patriarchal society, I realised very early that this society has a place for my kind, a place not conducive for growth and full expression. I became a feminist at 13 and an activist at 16.

There’s been a lot of unlearning and learning since I actively identified as a feminist and took up gender equality activism. The government seem more responsive by the day and individuals and groups are beginning to see the need to close gender gaps and amplify the voices of women and girls, but where things are is still a far cry from what could be regarded as ideal.

Participating in this research was a confirmation that the limitations that society forces on women labeled as ‘norms’ and ‘nature’ are just a construct of society and can and must be challenged. Speaking with the participants motivated me to want to do more, seeing that they were playing their parts to ensure a just and equitable world: as they say ‘little drops of water make an ocean.’ A very exciting part of the research for me was learning that my activism had been an inspiration to others and that I had helped the girls and young women I interviewed on their journey.

The future of women and girls looks promising and I hope that one day we will live in a just and equitable world, where equality of the sexes is the norm. A world where we no longer have to worry about casual, internalised, institutionalised or systemic misogyny.

In order to take up space and change today’s stereotypical narratives, I have to fight for and demand the change I desire.

THE WAY AHEAD

Despite all the challenges, most of the girl and women activists interviewed felt proud and fulfilled by the work they do.

“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**

When asked where they might be in ten years’ time, the future most of them envisage includes continuing the work they have started. Girls and young women mentioned wanting to grow movements, influence government policies and inspire other girls and young people to become advocates.

“In ten years’ time, I see myself already having finished my university degree, ... having a job that is directly involved with systematic changes that I can make... to really get to a position where I can say I have decision-making power and with this decision-making power I can benefit the women in the communities and the municipality where I am.” **Mary, 23, Guatemala**

“I see myself as a professional... being an empowered woman... I see a community where women have much more opportunity to participate, where girls, no longer have the obstacle that because they are women they won’t be able to.” **Luki, 21, Paraguay**

Others saw their activism continuing through social and community work. They saw the importance too of combining work at the grassroots with campaigning to change policy. Rhylie, 21, from Canada, had noticed that as a social worker, you cannot always help the people you want to because there is a policy holding you back. She was not the only one to see the importance of involvement in policy making:

“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 on the table on international policies because... when you have a seat on 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, FGD**

Many interviewees reflected on the importance of working with the next generation, of encouraging real participation and providing platforms where previously ignored voices could be heard. Some wanted to work specifically on gender equality at a local level, tackling attitudes and practices that people are uncomfortable about discussing so that they do not go unnoticed and unchecked.

“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**

Girls and young women are clearly inspired by the activism they have participated in during their teens and twenties and are determined that it will remain part of their lives:

“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 10 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 who did not see professional activism as a way forward nevertheless wanted to work in media, politics, education, medicine or law, where they would continue to be involved with the issues they are passionate about.

“The National Woman’s Council in 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.... So, it would be really cool to affect change within the legal arena around the protection and prosecution of gender-based violence.” **Sally, 22, Ireland**

There were also more cautious voices reflecting on the cost of activism – the relentless nature of the work and a sense that for all the effort it could be hard to see progress:

“I guess having like a couple years of just being like speaking at events like every weekend and organising protests every week and missing every Friday of 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.” **Rose, 18, Australia**

“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... Looking at my dad, he was a campaigner back in the eighties... 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.” **Gormfhlaith, 24, Ireland**



Tam is 23 and from Vietnam. She has recently graduated from Fulbright University Vietnam with a B.A. (Hons) in Psychology. Over the past two years she has been involved in several research projects and is particularly interested in the impact of workplace sexism on women’s mental health. She was a co-researcher for this year’s SOTWG Report and shares some of her thoughts about what she has learned and some recommendations for the future.

In Vietnam, despite government efforts to foster gender equality, there is widespread sexist prejudice and discrimination. I have made it my mission to try to combat this and I found myself deeply inspired by the passion and determination of the young female activists I interviewed. They are pioneers, working in their communities, and rallying friends and family members to work alongside them. It is particularly impressive that they do all this campaigning for gender equality alongside university and work commitments.

Another thing that struck me, and this is a challenge I share, was how hard it can be to secure adequate funding for our projects. Activists are very much limited to doing things on a small scale, reaching fewer people than they would if more money was forthcoming. For me the most significant change we need is increased opportunities for wider-ranging activists which, put bluntly, means more money. Female activists and researchers need funding for non-profit, community-minded and academic research projects if their work is to have greater influence and impact.

Limited funding hinders female activists from scaling up their projects and pursuing activism as a life-long path.

CONCLUSION

🔊 **“I would like to talk about the globalisation of the projects, there are very good projects, but they do not reach the girls in marginalised places who need them. Sometimes we focus on places with more opportunities because it’s easier mobility, because there are more opportunities, there’s more development and all that. But those who need it are the girls and adolescents in places where resources do not reach. I am one of those who say that the absence of resources is equal to the absence of rights.”** *Minerba, 17, Dominican Republic*

For many adolescent girls and young women, activism, though rewarding, is also tough and unrelenting. In communities and countries in many different parts of the world they are not encouraged to speak out, to take part in political life, or to take action for change. The cost of doing so can be high: they are harassed, ostracised and ignored. Some fear for their safety and their mental health.

On a personal level, they have to develop qualities of self-belief, resilience, patience and courage, alongside excellent communication and research skills. They then must learn to operate in the current political and social environment which is hardly an encouraging one. Adolescent 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.

Despite all this, girls and young women are getting things done in their communities and even nationally and globally. They have a strong belief in their collective power. They know that, together, they can influence public opinion, challenge harmful stereotypes, and push for policy reforms that address the specific needs and rights of girls.

🔊 **“I think the one thing I’ve learned is that the issues that are important to you are never only important to just you... it’s really easy to feel like no one else cares about it just as much as you do. But if you reach out... 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.”** *Stella, 19, Australia*

What comes across from the research is that young female activists are a force to be reckoned with. They need to be recognised and valued in their role as advocates and change-makers; 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 came up again and again. Many activists specified they would like support in how to improve their fundraising methods or sources and how to apply for and secure grants. Some said 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 direct financial support for their activities: NGOs and others could sponsor events and seminars and make sure they pay expenses so 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 to understanding the law and governance.
- 🔍 Another area where outside agencies could help was with **lobbying** activities, guidance on advocacy and political systems and access to decision-makers: who 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 and the 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 taking part in this research. They are designed to magnify their impact and to assure girls and young women that the goals they have articulated are important to us all – that we have their backs.



Members of a project promoting awareness of sexual and reproductive health and rights, Bolivia © Plan International

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 four 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: 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.



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: incorporating seed and other types of flexible funding and including small grants and long-term financing, that is responsive to their priorities and the contexts they operate in. Multi-year flexible grants should be made available to reduce fundraising burdens and 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. Including 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. 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, concerning 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 people 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' freedoms of association and assembly, access to information, the 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 legally register or not, without repercussion on 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 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 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

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: ensuring 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** 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. 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 and 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 affect change and support the development of critical influencing skills: building effective advocacy and the ability to lobby power holders, including how to navigate different policy spaces and influencing processes. Focus should also be given to soft skills development, including leadership, public speaking and self-confidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, we would like to thank all the adolescent girls and young women who shared their views and experiences of activism and campaigning as part of this research. We are grateful for their time and insights.

We could not have done this research without our wonderful co-researchers who conducted the interviews and did an amazing job in capturing key insights from their fellow activists:

- Yasmin Poole, Elizabeth Payne and Grace Falconer (Australia)
- Fahmida Nishi and Saima Akter Dipty (Bangladesh)
- Débora Maria de Andrade Santos and Eduarda Santos Marques (Brazil)
- Vickie Stella Hien, Mawamoussé Marlene Wazina and Farida Pardevan (Burkina Faso)
- Jennifer Wani, Ashley Whiteman and Bhanvi Sachdeva (Canada)
- Nicol Alexandra Reyes, Delicia Ruiz Brito and Dawanny Rasel Montilla Ogando (Dominican Republic)
- Selamawit Gebremeskel, Hanadi Yusuf, Wudassiemariam Telahun, Ilaria Benardi and Hanna Kidane (Ethiopia)
- Gayda Narin Aytan (Narin) and Katja Schieritz (Germany)
- Lesly Jennifer Yesenia Coc Bol, Prisma Rodriguez and Vidalía Ortiz Miranda (Guatemala)
- Tara O'Neill and Emer Neville (Ireland)
- Shiori Yoshimura and Sayaka Ishii (Japan)
- Razan Khalil Al-Alam, Ahd AL-Majali and Juhaina Zureikat (Jordan)
- Silvia Aoko, Shamim Atieno and Latifah Njoki (Kenya)
- Dana Saad Deen, Jinan Zaaiteer and Clara Merheb (Lebanon)
- Maureen Kachale, Stacey Mdala and Catherine Sitole (Malawi)
- Manisha Chaudhary and Rejina Dhakal (Nepal)
- Lotte Peters and Jetske Beke (Netherlands)
- Wisdom Ojonugwa Omata, Heritage Sanmi-Lawal and Faith Onomwem Waziri (Nigeria)
- Bianca, Adriana and Liliana (Paraguay)
- Jessie Marie A Pedemonte, Nenia Nicole Alota and Alyanna Mitch Panganiban (Philippines)
- Blessing Kutubu and Kadiatu Tholley (Sierra Leone)
- Hafsa Omer, Soumaya Mahdi and Hodan Abdilahi (Somalia)
- Manyasiri Chotbunwong, Pornthip Rungrueang and Janthida Lapai (Thailand)
- Tchalim Abidé Moyoo, Douguema Bakpilna and Boumogue Abiré Nadège (Togo)
- Tran Ha Anh, Pham Nguyen Dan Tam and Pham Vu Quynh Ang (Vietnam)
- Michelle Varaidzo Tarumbidzwa Chikurunhe, Zvikomborero Hope Matsito and Rudo Linda Mudzingwa (Zimbabwe)

This research was undertaken by Plan International, in particular the following are acknowledged.

Report team: Sharon Goulds, Lead Editor and Report Author; Original Report Authors, Dr Karin Diaconu and Isobel Fergus with Aisling Corr, Danya Marx and Jenny Rivett (Contributing Authors)

Youth Advisors for the research: Sandra Cheah and Thien Nguyen. Many thanks also to Ifigeneia Kamaraotu, Global Youth and Campaigns Officer, who coordinated their inputs.

Plan International Editorial Board: Isobel Fergus, Interim Head of Research and Report Project Manager; Dr Jacqueline Gallinetti, Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning; Danny Plunkett, Head of Content and Creative; Zoe Birchall, Global Lead – Campaigns and Mobilisation; Madeleine Askham, Policy and Advocacy Lead for Youth Participation; Robin Knowles, Global Media Manager; Anna MacSwan, Head of Global Media and Public Relations and Kathleen Sherwin, Chief Strategy and Engagement Officer.

Many thanks to the following people for their invaluable feedback: Tenar Gomez-Lorente, Dr Keya Khandaker, and Chris Dominey (Plan International Global Hub), Josephine Brouwer, Agnes Neray and Anniek Groothius, (Plan International Netherlands) Anjum Sultana and Angie Ramos-Torres (Plan International Canada), Milena Oliva (Plan International Guatemala), Rachel Challita and Afdokia El-Khoury (Plan International Lebanon); Rama Dahabra and Dalia Kharoufeh (Plan International Jordan)

Additional Contributors: Especial thanks to Muzoon Almellehan for her inspiring foreword and to co-researchers Narin, Tam, Wisdom and Vidalia who shared their reflections on this experience.

Qualitative Data Coders: Nabila Mella Garip, Maite Sobrino Gonzalez, Chipiwa Maziva, Bernie Zakeyo, Alba Murcia, Zoe Roth Ogier, Lea Lyngo, Aisling Corr and Danya Marx

Country office and National Organisation teams: Thanks are due to staff at Plan International offices who helped facilitate the research and all the national and country offices who provided feedback on this report.

Focus Group Discussions Facilitators: Dr Karin Diaconu, Isobel Fergus, Aisling Corr, Danya Marx, Adele Parve and Jenny Rivett.

Design: Sandra Dudley

ENDNOTES

- 1 Girls and young women participated through a range of methods which included 840 participant surveys, 203 interviews and 7 focus groups discussions with a total of 57 participants. See full report: <https://plan-international.org/publications/turning-world-around>
- 2 CIVICUS. (2023). Facts and Figures. CIVICUS Monitor. Retrieved from <https://monitor.civicus.org/facts/> [Accessed 15 August 2023].
- 3 Out of 26 countries involved in the research for this study only ten allowed the full right to peaceful assembly.
- 4 UNDP Human Development Reports 2021 online at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/two-steps-forward-one-step-back-where-are-we-heading-gender-equality> [13 August 2023].
- 5 Equal Measures 2030. 2022. 2022 SDG Gender Index. [online] Available at: <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/2022-sdg-gender-index/> [Accessed 20 July 2023].
- 6 World Economic Forum. 2023. Global Gender Gap Report 2023. [online] Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023> [Accessed 20 July 2023].
- 7 Mantler T, Burd C, MacGregor JCD, Veenendaal J, McLean I, Wathen CN; Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Research Team. "There's no amount of tea in the world that is going to fix the patriarchy right now": The gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for women in the gender-based violence sector. SSM Qual Res Health. 2022 <https://europepmc.org/article/med/36212782> [Accessed 10 August 2023].
- 8 OECD Policy Response to Coronavirus 2021 <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/caregiving-in-crisis-gender-inequality-in-paid-and-unpaid-work-during-covid-19-3555d164/> Accessed 13 August 2023
- 9 Mama Cash. (2020). Feminist Activism Works: A review of select literature on the impact of feminist activism in achieving women's rights. Retrieved from: https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/feminist_activism_works_mama_cash.pdf [Accessed 16 May 2023].
- 10 AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development). (2021). Where is the money for feminist organising? Data Snapshots and call to action. Retrieved from: https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID_Research_WITM_Brief_ENG.pdf [Accessed 16 May 2023].
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Social Norms Index 2023. Retrieved from: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI> [Accessed 11th August 2023].
- 13 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>.
- 14 BBC Worklife. 2022, August 3. Gen Z: How Young People Are Changing Activism.. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220803-gen-z-how-young-people-are-changing-activism> [Accessed 2 May 2023].
- 15 CIVICUS. (2023). Facts and Figures. CIVICUS Monitor. Retrieved from <https://monitor.civicus.org/facts/> [Accessed 10 May 2023].
- 16 Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). (2023). Regressive Wave for Women in Central America. WOLA. Retrieved from <https://www.wola.org/analysis/regressive-wave-women-central-america/> [Accessed 12 May 2023].
- 17 Human Rights Watch. (2023, March 23). El Salvador: Court Hears Case on Total Abortion Ban. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/23/el-salvador-court-hears-case-total-abortion-ban> [Accessed 10 May 2023].
- 18 Human Rights Watch. (2023, April 18). Human Rights Crisis: Abortion in the United States after Dobbs. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/18/human-rights-crisis-abortion-united-states-after-dobbs> [Accessed 10 May 2023].
- 19 Human Rights Watch. (2022, March 15). "Life and Family" Bill: Smokescreen for Corruption in Guatemala. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/15/life-and-family-bill-smokescreen-corruption-guatemala> [Accessed 10 May 2023].
- 20 Tactical Tech. (unknown). Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective. Our Data Ourselves. <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/> [Accessed 2 August 2023].
- 21 O'Malley, D. L., & Johnson, R. (2018). A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do. Gender & Development, 26(3), 533-550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1526370>
- 22 Braungart, R. G., & Braungart, M. M. (2001). In International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences.
- 23 Elliott, T., & 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.
- 24 Kimball, G. (2019). Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists. Journal of International Women's Studies, 20(7), 35-56. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss7/3>.
- 25 Barrett, M., & Pachi, D. (2019). Civic and Political Engagement Among Youth: Concepts, forms and factors. In M. Barrett & D. Pachi (Eds.), Youth Civic and Political Engagement. Routledge.
- 26 O'Malley, D. L., & Johnson, R. (2018). A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do. Gender & Development, 26(3), 533-550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1526370>
- 27 See full report: <https://plan-international.org/publications/turning-world-around>
- 28 For detailed methodology go to the technical report: <https://plan-international.org/publications/turning-world-around>
- 29 Grace, not her real name, is originally from Nigeria.
- 30 Eva, not her real name, is originally from Hungary.
- 31 OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). (2022, September). Despite Being at the Forefront of Activism, Women and Girls Still Face Barriers. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/09/despite-being-forefront-activism-women-and-girls-still-face-barriers>
- 32 Plan International (2018) SOTWG Report: Unsafe in the City, Plan International (2020) SOTWG Report: Free to Be Online? <https://plan-international.org/publications>
- 33 AWID (2021) Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report – rights at risk. time for action
- 34 Right of Assembly Information Center. (2023). Right of Peaceful Assembly: A Comprehensive Resource. Right of Assembly. Available at: <https://www.rightofassembly.info/> [Accessed 26 July 2023].



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.

Plan International

Global Hub

Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155

Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

E-mail: info@plan-international.org

[plan-international.org](https://www.plan-international.org)

Published in 2023



facebook.com/planinternational



twitter.com/planglobal



instagram.com/planinternational



linkedin.com/company/plan-international



youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv