

# THE FUTURE ONLINE

# YAS

YOUTH ACTIVIST SERIES

THE BODY SHOP

PLAN  
INTERNATIONAL

The charity for  
girls' equality



# FOREWORD



## Olivia – Australian Youth Activist & report team member

In a space that should be safe and used for education and communication, severe acts of violence from trolling, to cyberstalking, to sexual exploitation are occurring and are having a destructive impact on young people all across the world.

Girls and gender-diverse people constantly experience online harassment, threats, and abuse that are motivated by race, gender, sexuality, and physical appearance. In 2020, Plan International Australia's Free to Be Online research found that 58% of girls across all 22 survey countries had personally experienced some type of online abuse on social media platforms. Girls should not feel unsafe as a result of their internet use.

The line between onlookers and active participants on the web is often blurred. Accountability for damaging content online often extends beyond the creator. Following, subscribing or promoting online sources aimed to humiliate or injure someone can also be termed bullying or even abusive behaviour.

The concept of bystander intervention is as simple as people helping people. An active bystander acts against online abuse when they witness it.

The vastness of the online sphere can often make users feel they are more anonymous and have less responsibility. This report was created with the goal of increasing active bystanders to combat the toxic surge of online violence, and work toward a safer and more inclusive online space.

Working with youth activists from Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam was such an incredible opportunity. Through developing the report, we were able to discuss our views and ideas, and it was fascinating to see the parallels and distinctions between each country. I really enjoyed getting a glimpse into unique experiences of girls and women living in Indonesia and Vietnam and developing solutions that will have a powerful impact in the virtual spaces of our countries.

Overall, I think this process has really opened my eyes to just how prevalent acts of online violence are, and the critical role of active bystanders in addressing it. I'm proud to be part of the report that the youth activists have produced, and look forward to a future with an online space that is equitable, safe, and inclusive for people of all genders and identities.

## MEET THE TEAM OF YOUNG PEOPLE LEADING THIS PROJECT:

### Indonesia

Vania (she/her)  
Maya (she/her)  
Naila (she/her)  
Agnia (she/her)  
Chiki (she/her)  
Mistry (she/her)  
Amanda (she/her)  
Fayanna (she/her)  
Lily (she/her)

### Vietnam

Chi Ngô (she/her)  
Thảo T (she/her)  
Nhi L (she/her)  
Thảo N (she/her)  
Nhi B (she/her)  
Nhưng C (she/her)  
Thủy P (she/her)  
Chi Nguyễn (she/her)  
Tiên N (she/her)

### Australia

Harleen S (she/her)  
Sandhya DT (she/her)  
Elizabeth L (she/her)  
Siena B (they/them)  
Olivia C (she/her)  
Jazmin Wn (she/her)  
Kayshini L (she/her)  
Margaret T (she/her)

## WORDS OF WISDOM

“Bullying, a lot of bad things harm people, and it is still happening every day online. We haven’t overcome underlying gender inequality, normalization of objectifying women, and other cultural norms or reasons in real life, so when we move to a platform without limitations, it is easier for them to do something based on what they want and reckless with the norms. People might express themselves in a wrong way, but it is on us to do something. Because even the simplest things, like reporting or giving supportive messages, matter.”

– Naila, 19, Indonesia

“I hope my small contribution can help creating the most civilized, safest and happiest society. Social networks will become a place where people share all of their difficulties and receive sympathy and encouragement in return.”

– Chi Ngô, 18, Vietnam

“Online safety is absolutely paramount to the future of gender and broader global equality. As more of our elements of our lives and workplaces start to transition online, we are in the everpresent need for more regulations, knowledge, education and action to ensure that the internet is a safe place. If we keep going the way we are going, digital and online literacy and safety is going to become one of the largest issues on the planet. We have to be proactive, and not reactive when it comes to the safety of our young people and particularly women on the internet. This project is about a group of young activists looking to the future. Can our governments follow?”

– Margaret T, 21, Australia

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people around the world, particularly girls and gender-diverse folks, are physically threatened, racially abused, sexually harassed and body shamed online and it gets worse when they raise their voices and share their opinions. Online violence and harassment is serious, it causes real harm and it is silencing young people in a space where they should be free to be online.

How different would the world be if we all took action and called out online gender based violence and harassment against young people when we see it?

As a group of young people aged between 15 and 25 we came together from Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia, to design and lead a project to uncover how active intervention by bystanders and reform on social media platforms can fight the growing levels of gender based violence and harassment that young people experience online.

Using a youth centric model, we designed the guiding project questions, conducted focus group discussions with our peers and are now campaigning for change.

For the project we asked the question:

...

**What is needed to mobilise and support people to take action when they witness online gender-based violence directed towards young people in all our diversity?**

...

Our findings, recommendations and ideas for action demonstrate that change is possible - and that the responsibility for change lies with all of us as individuals, as well as requiring systems change.

## Key findings and recommendations

- There are a range of factors that contribute to online violence and harassment including cultural norms and gender stereotypes, social media platforms not doing enough to address the issue, social media influencers who can sometimes perpetuate the problem and more broadly, the global pandemic.
- Young people are powerful agents of change and can be mobilised to be active bystanders but they need the education, tools and support to do so. Education systems and social media companies have a big and important role to play in equipping people to be active bystanders.
- Education and resources for active bystanding will be most effective if they are co-designed with young people and centre the voices of victims/survivors. They must be comprehensive and include - the root causes of gender based violence and harassment, adopt a trauma-informed approach, address the mental health impacts on bystanders and provide a toolkit of what actions we can take as bystanders.

### We call on:

- Ministries of Education to develop and deliver (with young people) comprehensive digital literacy education that addresses online gender based violence and harassment as well as providing mental health support programs to young people experiencing violence and harassment and active bystanders.
- Social media companies to implement a range of measures including access to bystander information alongside links to region-specific support systems; create safer online spaces for young people with diverse experiences (eg LGBTIQ+ young people, young people of colour, Indigenous young people), take clear and active steps to stamp out gender based violence and harassment on their platforms.



Plan International launched the Girls Out Loud initiative (locally named "nha fala") in Guinea-Bissau. Together with girls and young women, we have set up safe online spaces where they can discuss key gender issues. Photo: Tânia Pereira.

## INTRODUCTION

“As more young people are spending time online I've definitely seen an increase of harassment and abuse towards young people, sometimes it doesn't even have to be for a reason certain individuals just want to escape their boredom, people feel this is the easiest way to put people down as we are spending most of our time on social media, I've also seen an increase in racism over the last year.”

– Young person, peer focus group participant, Australia

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant people across the world are spending more time online than ever before. While this has allowed us to stay connected to each other, work and study from home, we have also seen an increase in the amount of gender based harassment in online spaces. **This certainly isn't a new issue; however, with our everyday lives almost entirely online now, the option to 'just switch off' simply isn't possible anymore. Online environments have got to change, because our engagement with them can't.**

Young people are tired of feeling unsafe in online spaces, and tired of social media companies doing nothing about it. At Plan International we believe young people are best placed to create solutions to the problems that directly impact them, and thus this project allows us to tackle online harassment head on, and propose solutions for a new way forward. Youth activists from Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam came together to do just that, to propose what the future online could look like.

**Active online bystanding** was identified as a means through which online spaces and social media platforms in particular could become safer. Bystanders have a huge role in ensuring victims/ survivors and targets of online violence aren't left feeling alone or silenced, but supported by those around them. Engaging online communities to stand up and speak out when they see gender based violence is half of the solution. Putting pressure on social media companies to reform their platforms to be safer and more inclusive of young people in all their diversities needs to happen as well.

Working collaboratively, this group of powerful young people designed this project to uncover how bystander intervention combined with platform reform can be a force for change. Through a youth centric model, participants designed the guiding project questions, conducted focus group discussions with peers, and are now campaigning for change.

A new future online is possible, and this project is part of getting us there.

### **Defining online gender based violence and harassment**

There are many definitions of online gender-based harassment but for this research, the following has been used, in line with the Plan International Free to Be Online report: “action by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms. This action is carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology and includes stalking, bullying, sex-based harassment, defamation, hate speech, exploitation and gender trolling.”

# THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the restrictions put in place to respond to it, has made being online more important than ever. For people isolated at home the online world can be a lifeline. It's been particularly significant for young people as they struggle to keep up with their education and stay connected to friends.

Sadly, with more people spending more time online, online harassment has increased. Youth participants reflected that this is compounded as social media algorithms try to connect users with more and more content to fill their time, increasingly surfacing content that is outside their usual interests, community and values.

Young people are encountering more racism online, feeling the growing visibility of white supremacist and alt-right groups and experiencing harassment and abuse when they speak out against racism. Participants reflected that while moderation in this space seemed to be insufficient or even absent, they were seeing people, and particularly women, shadow-banned for images of their own bodies, or for speaking about sex work.

The pandemic has also shifted where we spend time online, bringing new forms of online harassment. For example, as meetings, lectures and other gatherings moved online in 2020, we saw a spate of "zoom bombings" as white supremacists exploited the lack of established security measures and protocols

to enter meetings and show images and symbols of hate and racism.

For International Day of the Girl in 2020, Plan International released a global report, [Free to be Online](#), which explored the experiences of girls and young women online, revealing more than half had been harassed and abused on social media. The platforms' inadequate mechanisms for reporting inappropriate behaviour were highlighted for their role in allowing harassment to slip through the cracks.

Plan International launched a global campaign alongside the release of the report, petitioning social media companies to listen to young people and reform their reporting mechanisms. But our campaign cannot end here. The challenges faced by young people around the world, particularly girls, non-binary and gender diverse young people, in all their diversity, go far beyond reporting mechanisms.

Just as we've seen mass public awareness campaigns to encourage better bystanding on our streets, we need to empower people to actively make our online spaces safer and more welcoming for everyone, so that all young people may enjoy full and equal access to the opportunities online spaces have to offer.



Nisha, 17, Nepal.

Yomira, 20, from Ecuador uses her mobile phone to take part in an online training course.



## BACKGROUND

### Who are bystanders?

Bystander intervention is a part of changing the culture of gender based violence and harassment online by encouraging those witnessing it to step up and say something.

Through our desk review we found that bystander intervention involves five key steps:

- 1) Noticing a situation you deem as wrong.
- 2) Understanding that this situation needs intervention.
- 3) Determining your responsibility to intervene in this situation.
- 4) Deciding how to intervene.
- 5) Having the ability or capacity to intervene in the way you deem appropriate (Patterson, Allan, Cross, 2016).

The ways bystanders behave can also be categorised into different roles; *Outsiders* who are aware of the situation but take no action, *Reinforcers* who encourage the bullying or harassment through reacting to posts or resharing, *Assistants* who don't start the bullying but join in through commenting or posts of their own, and *Defenders* who actively defend the victim (Quirk and Campbell, 2015).

### Why do bystanders intervene?

Bystander intervention is both motivated and discouraged by a number of factors. The number of bystanders has an impact alongside anonymity online,

as when there are more bystanders a diffusion of responsibility occurs, as bystanders feel someone else will step in, or it is not their job to do so (Brody and Vangelisti, 2016).

Closeness to the victim is a strong motivator for bystander intervention, as research has found the closer the bystander to the victim, such as a close friend or family member, as opposed to an acquaintance, the more likely they are to intervene (Brody and Vangelisti, 2016). Other factors such as whether the situation is considered an emergency, and the personal moral codes of bystanders also play a role (Patterson, Allan, Cross, 2016).

Bystanders respond to online bullying and harassment through a number of means, including counter speech, asking the perpetrator to stop, calling on other leaders and peers as well as authority figures to intervene (AHRC, 2013; Powell and Henry, 2015).

Overall, active bystander intervention is effective in positively supporting the target and reduces the impact of the violence (Moxey and Bussey, 2020).

However, the research suggests that there are mental health impacts for bystanders as a result of witnessing and intervening in online harassment and bullying (Mazzone, 2020; Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety, 2011).

It is recommended that bystanders, alongside victims, need to be supported in building the skills to stand up against bullying and harassment, so they feel confident in doing so, as well as being provided with mental health support (Mazzone, 2020).

## Resources to support active bystanding

When it comes to ensuring young people understand the importance of being an active bystanders, and feel equipped to act, the existing resources surrounding digital literacy and safety online are insufficient.

Most resources to target online harassment for bystanders relate to late primary school, and early high school students, and focuses on cyberbullying between classmates.

Interestingly, this focus of harassment caused by those known to target is not in line with our research in *Free to Be Online* which found that the three largest groups of harassers for young women and girls were: strangers (36%), anonymous social media users (32%), people on platforms not their friends (29%). This leaves a gap in students' education around how to manage the large proportion of harassment that comes from people who are unknown to the victim.

The terms used to describe online acts of harassment and violence experienced by young people were also problematic. Cyberbullying was seen by young people as silly and mean, but not serious, which could be due to the outdated wording (Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety, 2011). Sexual abuse, stalking and harassment were considered separate to cyberbullying, however used more specifically in relation to adults – creating a disjunct between their experiences.

Online harassment certainly isn't new, however we found the majority of existing research that outlines how bystanders can act to stop the violence is based on instances of bullying that happens face to face.

This reveals that while resources to improve the digital literacy of young people do exist they lack contemporary understandings of the unique ways in which harassment happens online. Resources available are also too broad, homogenising online platforms without demonstrating the ways both the perpetration of violence and bystander intervention differ according to platform, thus ill preparing students. Overall, while a youth centred approach was suggested among the existing literature none of the research or resources that we analysed were co-designed with young people.

### **Filling the evidence gap**

We aim to fill a gap in this project by utilising a youth centric approach that gets to the heart of what youth want from their online spaces, and considers the roles of both bystanders, and social media platforms, in reducing gender based violence online. We also strive to include the voices excluded from existing research by providing a gendered lens, as well as considerations into the needs of specific groups such as LGBTQIA+ youth, Indigenous Australians, ethnically and culturally diverse people, and people living with disabilities.



Girls in Vietnam use a computer to access online training.  
Photo: An Nguyen Quoc



# OUR QUESTION

Youth participants from Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam came together to explore the issues faced by young people when engaging in online spaces. Together they designed an inquiry question to investigate the impacts of bystander intervention and use this as a stepping stone for creating a safer online environment for youth online.

## Our Topic of Inquiry

Young people experience online harassment and abuse, not just cyberbullying. Often, it is from individuals we do not know or have little connection with, not just our peers.

Given the increase in young people learning and spending time online during the global pandemic, and the prevalence of online gender-based violence that we face – which is often aided by key 'role models', influencers and popular figures on social

media platforms, and exacerbated by our lack of access to youth-led, inclusive and platform-specific resources – our question is:

...

**What is needed to mobilise and support people to take action when they witness online gender-based violence directed toward young people in all our diversity?**

...



Artist @mrpichon from Dominican Republic created this illustration to raise awareness of online harassment and the impact it has on girls and young women.

# KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from this project - which reflect the data collected and analysed by the youth participants through peer focus group discussions and their digital reviews - can be broken into three core categories - causes of harassment, bystander mobilisation and supporting bystanders.

## Why is online harassment happening to young people?

We think it is important to understand the causes of online harassment in order to fight against them. From COVID-19 to gender norms, influencers and social media platforms these causes are often intertwined and compound each other. Largely, these causes are learned social norms or beliefs or a result of such norms or beliefs. With time we believe these can be unlearned.

### COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic through the increased shift to online work, study and socialisation was seen by participants in Australia and Indonesia as a contributing factor to online harassment. The amount of time spent online by young people and boredom was evidenced as one of the reasons for increased online harassment. The inability to log off when much of life in lockdown is online was seen as a major factor in the seeming inescapability of harassing and violent content.

### Social media influencers

The youth participants in Australia and Vietnam highlighted the role of popular figures online such as celebrities or influencers in both perpetuating and calling out gender based violence online.

When speaking up on issues of social importance this was sometimes perceived as genuine, and other times as a result of social expectations or trends. One example given was the online activism surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, where if influencers didn't post something in support of the movement they would be called out as being complicit in systems of racism or sexism. It is this question around authenticity that made our youth participants sceptical about their role in speaking up against violence online.

“Role models have massive amounts of influence, especially over young people. Unfortunately, they aren't always qualified to speak about gender- based violence and discrimination. There are also all too many examples of role models being ignorant. Many engage in attractive trends which help their image, but have little to no effect on addressing the issue. I think many of them need to "practice what they preach" more.”

– Young person, peer focus group participant, Australia

### Social media platforms

Youth participants across Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam recognised that social media platforms play a large role in the harassment experienced by young people online.

They noted the need for more transparent reporting with adequate follow up processes that don't leave young people feeling like reporting in the first place was pointless.

Participants also pointed to capitalism and the business models of social media companies that promote content that is violent or inciting harassment due to its high engagement, as a key cause.

Australian participants reflected on the implementation of the sensitivity filter on Instagram as a poor attempt to make their platform safer as it restricts the content of activists and victim/survivors who are sharing their experiences of violence and harassment, in addition to other content categorised as harmful.

The use of clickbait titles by online news organisations particularly in stories involving women and their bodies was identified in the digital reviews as encouraging an environment of insults and harassment, where the news site showed little accountability for the hurtful messages in their comments.

## **Cultural Norms**

There were a number of cultural norms that participants across all countries identified as the root causes of gender based violence such as sexism, toxic masculinity, racism, and homophobia.

There was discussion also around how these factors often intersect in ways that compound varying forms of online harassment.

In Indonesia, participants honed in on conservative ideas around gender expression, identifying the harmful stereotypes directed towards women who posted photos of themselves in clothing considered 'sexy' who were seen as 'asking for harassment.' They also identified the power relations between genders as also having an impact towards gender based violence, particularly in cases where perpetrators are the significant other of the victim.

Freedom of speech was identified by participants from Australia and Vietnam as an argument used by perpetrators to excuse and justify their harassment of others online. Confusion, lack of education, and misinformation around what freedom of speech is was seen as resulting in online gender based violence.

“I think also we are often told that in online spaces [we should] "take a break" or "log off". Especially in times right now, when people are spending so much of their life online, "take a break" is no longer a suitable response. People are unable to/should not be made to distance themselves from these spaces in order to accommodate free speech (harassment).”  
– Young person, peer focus group participant, Australia

## **How can young people be mobilised to be active bystanders?**

“Standing up for what you think is right, and if it's wrong to some people, you can reflect on whether it is really wrong or not. If it isn't, stand your ground.”  
– A peer focus group participant, Indonesia

We found that in order to mobilise young people to be active bystanders they need to:

- Know what active bystanding is;
- Be educated on the best ways to go about it; and
- Have environments that support their actions.

It's critical that social media companies and education systems work together to equip youth in standing up against online gender based violence and harassment.

## **Social Media Companies**

In terms of mobilising bystanders, youth participants in Australia and Indonesia noted that social media companies need to be specific about what behaviour is expected from their users and the options available for them when being an active bystander. This is because bystander intervention looks very different on different platforms, whether it's commenting, liking, direct messaging, or retweeting. Advice changes depending on if the subject of the post is the target or if the post was made by a third party.

## **Education**

In order to feel empowered to intervene and become active bystanders, youth participants across all countries emphasised a need for education into the root causes of online harassment such as sexism, racism, and homophobia.

In Indonesia and Vietnam participants noted that often young people did not realise they were behaving in a way that could be perceived as harassment towards other social media users, due to lack of education. This reveals that education needs to cover what online gender based harassment is, alongside how to be an active bystander against it.

Youth participants across the three countries also felt that education surrounding online violence should centre the voices and stories of victim/survivors to remind people there are real people experiencing this harassment.

Alongside this the positive impact of bystander intervention on the person experiencing harassment should be highlighted so that young people are encouraged to speak up and know that their actions are doing good. Young people also wanted education into crowd psychology and how anonymity online defuses the sense of responsibility over intervening.

Participants in Australia and Indonesia spoke to the fact that because bystanding looks different on every social media platform, education materials and programs need to reflect this, being specific in terms of how to intervene rather than using a one size fits all approach.

“Schools tend to have a "one size fits all" mentality when it comes to issues of abuse and bullying. Education about it always seems to be outdated. Staying up to date with specific issues and terms is important.”  
– Young person, peer focus group participant, Australia



Girls in Nepal came together for the Girls Out Loud project. The girls took part in sessions to discuss online violence, female empowerment and gender equality. Photo: Bishal Ranamagar

### **How do young people want bystanders to act?**

Active bystanding can look very different depending which social media platform you are using, however there are common threads between them.

Youth participants across all countries emphasised that when supporting targets the best approach is to utilise a trauma informed response by validating their experiences, offering support, and providing options of what next steps to take.

∴ “I know for me, I had difficulty standing up to harassment online because I often felt like I was doing something inherently wrong, and that it was my fault. I know if someone told me that it wasn't my fault, and that harassment was wrong, it would make me feel less discouraged to speak up for myself.”

∴ -Young person, Australia (aged 20-24)

Active bystander support can also involve encouragement and support for the target without engaging in the violent or harassing comments of the perpetrator.

If bystanders decide to engage with the perpetrator the best approach is to address their argument or actions, rather than engaging in character attacks which can make the situation worse.

Additionally, participants in Indonesia and Vietnam suggested that bystanders should try to understand the context of the situation and make a judgement about how to intervene so they can give the best support to targets.

### **Supporting Bystanders**

In order to feel comfortable to stand up for others, bystanders need to be supported by the platforms they are on, the law and have mental health services available when needed.

We cannot expect young people to potentially put themselves in harm's way without providing the safety net for them to do so confidently.

### **Resources for bystanders**

Youth participants in Australia and Indonesia expressed that resources for bystanders and targets of online violence should be easily accessible across all social media platforms and not hidden deep in the settings function. These resources should be inclusive of reporting information, how to be a bystander, as well as mental health support.

Participants in Indonesia extended this idea and noted that education around how to take care of your mental health as a bystander needs to go beyond the classroom and become a part of social conversations. Those in Vietnam expressed the need for support systems and protections for bystanders from institutions such as the government, NGO's and civil society organisations.

### **Guidelines**

Youth participants from Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam emphasised the need for clear and accessible guidelines for engaging online that support bystanders and targets, and have no tolerance for harassment.

These guidelines also need to directly address freedom of speech arguments so that these cannot be used against their existence or enforcement. Accessible legal protections and support for online harassment that caters to diverse experiences, as well as clear communications around these protections so that both victim/survivors and perpetrators are aware of them was supported by participants across all the three countries.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were proposed by the youth participants and emerged out of the data analysis.

Across Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam, we agreed that in order to create the online spaces we would like to see, there needs to be a combined effort to improve active online bystander engagement, alongside action and accountability from social media companies - as one without the other will not solve the issue of online gender based violence and harassment.

## Bystander education & support

Youth participants recognised, the importance of education and guidance for young people to be active bystanders.

We made specific recommendations to strengthen curriculums and resources to support young people to be active bystanders in their interactions on social media.

We call on Ministries of Education to implement or update digital literacy education to include:

- What online harassment and gender based violence looks like
- Why it happens, and the root causes such as sexism, racism, ageism, homophobia, and capitalism
- The differentiation between freedom of speech and harassment
- Who perpetrates it
- How to be an active bystander
- How to report or take action
- Impacts of being an active bystander on oneself and the victim/survivor

In designing learning resources we recommend:

- All material be co-designed with young people in all their diversities
- The voices of victims/survivors are centred

In supporting bystanders we recommend:

- Mental health supports within schools are responsive to young people experiencing the impacts of online harassment and those acting as bystanders.
- Education around how to take care of your mental health as a bystander should go beyond the classroom and become a part of social conversations.

## Creating safer online spaces

There was a strong overall recommendation from Australia, Vietnam and Indonesia that social media companies played an important role in ending online violence and harassment and providing important guidance and resources to promote active bystanding.

We call on social media companies to:

- Implement an information hub that provides access to bystander information alongside links to region-specific support systems specific to those impacted by the intersectional aspects of online harassment, e.g. support for LGBTIQ+ people, or those impacted by racism. Resources should be inclusive of reporting information, how to be a bystander, as well as mental health support
- Design and update online spaces to be safer for people with diverse experiences (LGBTIQ+ young people, young people of colour, Indigenous young people)
- Improve their terms of use to be condemn gender based violence and harassment
- Improve their reporting features to be more transparent with faster responses and implement a dedicated team of staff to assist bystanders and victims when reporting the harassment
- Outline the consequences for perpetrating gender based violence and harassment and enforce them
- Consult with and co-design all measures to stop gender based violence and harassment with young people in all our diversities
- Utilise technology to detect posts about false information around sexism, racism, homophobia etc (Vietnam). Example: Facebook and Instagram COVID-19 info hub
- Implement the censoring or flagging of certain words before the content is able to be posted

## Legal protections

We recommend that all bystanders and victims of online abuse are able to easily access and understand the enforced legal protections as well as access legal experts who are diverse and approachable.

# IDEAS FOR CHANGE

These ideas for change were developed in conversations during the peer focus groups and in workshop 3. They demonstrate the creative power of young people in proposing campaign ideas to actualise the change they want to see in the world.

- Open letter action around media outlets online and the “clickbait” language they use, how this incites and creates an environment for online harassment.
- Freedom of speech awareness campaign - ‘words that wound’ – defining freedom of speech from abusing people and their existence – “If you can’t say it on the street, then you shouldn’t be able to say it on the internet”.
- Social media Influencers and role models should advocate and encourage youth to positively intervene via popular channels i.e. their social media, TV shows, news articles.
- Bystander handbook with key information, resources, and support presented in a creative engaging format.
- Petition to have digital literacy included in education.
- Work with social media companies to change their guidelines, implement better reporting, and include a specific function on how to access support.
- A digital mailbox to collect experiences of online harassment.
- While influencers aren’t always best placed to speak on gender based violence they often perpetuate it, and have power in stopping it. Speak to them through a social media campaign e.g. 5 things young people want influencers to know about gender based violence.
- “It all starts from you” campaign: The key message of the campaign could be focused on how gender-based violence could be prevented and stopped by simple actions from someone, it takes one person standing up for others to follow, and empowering young people to take that step.
- Creative visual online campaign centring victims of online abuse discussing what it would have meant to have bystanders intervene.
- Photo shoot to raise awareness of body shaming in online harassment and portray the impact of active bystanding on the victim.

# CONCLUSION

As youth, we led the way in deciding what we wanted to discover from this project, the topics to discuss with our peers, the recommendations for change, and the campaigns to take action moving forward. Active bystander intervention has the power to stop gender based violence online, and with the support of social media companies, online spaces will become safer.

The Future Online is designed for and by young people in all our diversities. It is safe for us to work, study, and socialise and exist wholly as we are. It is an online community that respects and treats each other with kindness, where people stand up when something is wrong.

We believe this future isn't a blue sky vision, it's possible. But we need decision makers to amplify our voices, and put our plans into action. This future is waiting, help us make it a reality.

## Where to from here?

We will be taking this report and our vision for a future online to decision makers in Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam including our Ministries of Education and social media companies.

We encourage those of you working with young people or in the online safety space to consider our recommendations for change and consider the ways you can create meaningful campaigns and actions that are youth centric. If you want to know more get in touch with us, we would be happy to talk about how you can get involved.

Alongside our report launch we will be implementing our digital storytelling and campaign actions to drive the recommendations supporting the online environments they want to see.

We invite you to support our vision and follow our journey for The Future Online.

<https://www.plan.org.au/campaign/future-online>



Young woman in Ecuador, uses her mobile phone.

# METHODOLOGY

## **Project objectives**

Through this project we aimed to:

1. Increase decision-makers' understanding of the key issues for young people online and influence them to create changes that create a safe, equitable inclusive online world.
2. To empower young people, particularly girls, young women, and gender-diverse people, to shape safer, more welcoming online spaces.
3. Equip young people, and particularly adolescent girls, non-binary and gender diverse youth, in all their diversity, with the tools to identify, develop and advocate for recommendations that result in tangible improvement in online spaces.
4. Provide a platform for young people to be powerful advocates for change, connecting them with change-makers and decision makers at a national and regional level, with the goal of campaigning and advocating for the implementation of their priority policy, legislation and/or social change recommendations.

## **Our approach**

Plan International Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam worked together with YLab, a co-design and consulting social enterprise that brings young people with diverse lived experiences and partners together to tackle society's most complex challenges, to design four workshops that brought together 26 young people from the three countries. Through these workshops, the youth participants defined their topic of inquiry, selected and were trained in their chosen data collection methods, collectively analysed their data and co-designed solutions and ideas for change. Each of these workshops were underpinned by desk reviews conducted by a youth researcher in each country, who also conducted the initial data coding and analysis.

The youth participants also joined country-level workshops and created action groups that worked together between the core project workshops, specifically for the data collection, report writing, digital story and campaigning components of the project.

## **Limitations**

The limitations of this project were largely due to the time available to conduct the peer focus groups; these were conducted over a two-week period, and participants relied heavily on their peer networks to recruit participants for the discussions. This means focus group outcomes are indicative rather than representative, and are reflective of the values and views of those in the youth participants' circles.

## **Youth safeguarding**

Conducting youth-centric projects is strongly aligned with Plan International's guiding principles for child protection, programming and advocacy in the best interests of the child, and gender transformative programming and influencing.

A comprehensive risk assessment was completed for the project, focused on participants' safety, wellbeing and empowerment.

Informed and ongoing consent is an extremely important element of safeguarding. All youth participants had a clear understanding of the process and protocols, and were involved and/or briefed on all decisions and steps. Through each touch point with the participants, the objectives and uses of the data were made clear. For those participants under 18, parental/guardian consent was acquired.

Given the nature of this topic, the project team had regular debriefs on participant wellbeing and support that could be provided, as well as ensuring the project approach was strengths-based and solutions-focussed.

Clear referral pathways were also communicated throughout the project. External support organisations were detailed, and/or the participants had the ability to contact the Child Safeguarding Focal Point at Plan International Australia.

In addition, the youth participants received facilitation training in preparation for conducting peer focus group discussions. This training aided a deep understanding of safeguarding for children and young people – how to create safer spaces, ensure participants felt empowered during their involvement and communicating clear processes for referral.



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## Youth Team Report Author

Elizabeth Payne

## Youth Consultants

Nguyen Huy Ha Anh  
Nguyen Thi An Giang  
Tran Le Khanh Huyen  
Elizabeth Payne  
Ananda Zhafira  
Imogen Senior  
Maya Musa

## Project Team

*Plan International*  
Duong Phuong Anh (Vietnam)  
Tran Huu Phuong Anh (Vietnam)  
Robert McKechnie (Australia)  
Pasanna Mutha-Merrennege (Australia)  
Kate Phillips (Australia)  
Aashna Pillay (Australia)  
Aditya Septiansyah (Indonesia)  
Joy Toose (Australia)

## YLab

Chelsea Lang  
Ope Olubodun  
Lien To

## Additional contributors

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## Images

All photos © Plan International

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Plan International Australia  
18/60 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006  
GPO Box 2818, Melbourne VIC 3001  
Tel: 13 75 26 Fax: +61 (3) 9670 1130  
Email: [info@plan.org.au](mailto:info@plan.org.au)

ABN 49 004 875 807

 /planaustralia

 @PlanAustralia

 @plan\_australia

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Australian authors of this report acknowledge and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging of this nation. We recognise sovereignty was never ceded and that this land always was and always will be First Nations land. We recognise their ongoing connection to land, waters and community, and we commit to ongoing learning, deep and active listening, and taking action in solidarity.