

TURNING THE WORLD AROUND

GIRL AND YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS LEADING THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



GIRLS GET EQUAL

This year Plan International's State of the World's Girls Report focuses on activism. It provides a unique insight from over a thousand 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? The research, one of the largest studies of girl and young women activists to date, 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

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, progress on gender equality is stalling,² 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.

📣 **"...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*

FOR A FULL BREAKDOWN OF RESEARCH FINDINGS GO TO: [PLAN-INTERNATIONAL.ORG/TURNING-WORLD-AROUND](https://plan-international.org/turning-world-around)

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED



The reasons why girls and young women become activists are many and varied. But, for the majority their activism is fuelled by exasperation. This discontent and desire for change was triggered in some cases by their personal circumstances and in others by global issues like climate crisis and gender-based violence (GBV). For some activism is just life – rooted in their daily experiences of discrimination – it cannot be turned on and off.

Adolescent girls and young women campaign around a variety of interconnected issues: **GENDER EQUALITY** and **GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE** emerged as the topics survey respondents were most concerned about.

📣 “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*



61% of adolescent girls and young women surveyed say the **impact of their activism in creating change has met or exceeded their expectations**. Interviewees agreed, they talked about their successes: raising awareness on issues like menstrual health, child marriage and GBV which resulted in local changes and inspired others to take action.

95% of survey respondents say that their activism has had a **positive impact** on them. Interviewees talked about feeling empowered and capable.

📣 “It changed me deeply... I know what my role is here, and this is what gives us the motive to continue, even in the midst of all these injustices ... for other girls to understand this and make other girls question themselves about this is very good, because I know that from there on, we start changing things, we start having an identity, we start understanding ourselves and not as a mirror of what society wants us to look like, right?” *Amora, 20, Brazil*

17% of survey respondents had **feared for their safety** while undertaking activist activities while **21 per cent** of survey respondents were **deterred from activism**, reporting fears for their safety if they were to take part. In the interviews activists noted oppressive policing, hostility from local community members, feeling unsafe on the streets and being abused online.

Adolescent girls and young women face many barriers to their activism which include **LACK OF FUNDING, LACK OF CONFIDENCE, AND CRITICISM FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS**. Activists also identified systemic gender discrimination, repressive laws and institutional bureaucracy as barriers to effective campaigning.

📣 “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*

54% of adolescent girls and young women surveyed identified **lack of finances** as the main barrier stopping them from engaging in activism.

27% of survey respondents were discouraged from activism by the **negative views** expressed by members of their community and their family and friends.

📣 “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*

25% of survey respondents indicated they felt **emotionally or psychologically unwell** or anxious during their activism. Interviewees reported the toll on their mental health, including depression and burnout, and being unable to access support.

EDUCATION is seen as foundational to their identity as activists and their ability to affect change. Skills training and knowledge building was seen as central to the success of their activism.

Despite the hurdles put in their way most of the girl and young women activists were **DETERMINED TO CONTINUE** with their activism and saw it as a life’s work.


📣 “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*



CALLS TO ACTION

It is not easy being a young female activist in today's world. Many of the girls and young women are challenging norms in their communities simply by being willing to speak out on issues they care about, and others often do not want discussed. They are subject to community backlash and to criticism from friends and family and this abuse is worse if they identify as LGBTIQ+ or belong to a religious, racial or ethnic minority. They are undoubtedly committed to their causes, but they need to be supported, their voices

amplified and their opinions included in decision-making. This means, not just working collectively with other groups of activists, but with governments, policy makers, community leaders, INGOs and a whole plethora of people and institutions who have the power to stand with them.

 **“It's always better to get your voices together. It's always better to collaborate, in my personal opinion.”**
Belkis, 22 Ethiopia

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO DO THIS:

PROVIDE FUNDING

Governments, donors, INGOs and other local and national funding bodies need to make flexible and diverse funding available to girl- and young-women led grassroots organisations: they must also provide compensation where appropriate, to make participation in civic and public life accessible to all.



TACKLE GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Community and government leaders must tackle gender stereotyping at all levels of society, including within families, so that girls' and young women's activism and contribution to society is recognised and valued. They must amplify the meaningful engagement of girls and young women in all areas of public life, including in policy making discussions.

PROTECT CIVIC SPACE

National and international policy makers must protect civic space, in all public arenas, so that civil liberties, including the right to protest safely, are defended. Harassment and abuse of girls and young women, both online and face-to-face, must be called out and legally sanctioned.



INVEST IN TRAINING

Schools, colleges and civil society organisations must support skills training and knowledge building: including the soft skills – leadership, self-confidence, public speaking, communications – which promote the effectiveness and engagement of girls and young women in advancing the changes they are intent on seeing.

KEEP GIRLS SAFE

Those in authority – at school, in NGOs, in the police force, in government ministries, at the UN – working with girls and young women, must acknowledge and mediate the particular risks, both to their mental health and their physical safety, when they are engaged in campaigning.

THE STATE OF THE
WORLD'S GIRLS

2023

- 1 Participation was through a range of methods which included 840 participant surveys, 203 interviews and focus groups with a total of 57 participants. See full report: <https://plan-international.org/publications/turning-world-around>
- 2 World Economic Forum. 2023. Global Gender Gap Report 2023. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023> [Accessed 20 July 2023].
- 3 Out of 26 countries involved in the research for this study only ten allowed the full right to peaceful assembly. See: Right of Assembly Information Center <https://www.rightofassembly.info/> [Accessed 26 July 2023]