



The charity for  
girls' equality

# WE CAN LEAD

YOUNG PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA SHARE THEIR  
VIEWS ON SEXISM AND MISOGYNY IN POLITICS  
IN 2021 – AND WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE



## Girls in Australia should be growing up believing anything is possible – that they have choices and opportunities in their lives to shape the world they want to live in. Instead, many are forced to abandon their leadership aspirations out of concern for their own safety in Parliament.

Sadly, after a spate of reports of sexual misconduct, alleged rape, and women being victim-blamed, talked over and side-lined in our national parliament, women are increasingly disinterested in pursuing political careers.

In 2017 Plan International Australia, the charity for girls' equality, undertook a major research project called She Can Lead, surveying 2,000 Australian girls and young women about their aspirations for the future.

It found 56% of respondents thought female politicians were treated unfairly.

Now, in new polling Plan International Australia conducted in April 2021 of 507 young women aged 18-25, that figure has increased dramatically: 73% of young Australian women aged 18-21 do not believe that women in politics are treated equally to men; rising to almost 78% among women aged 22 to 25.

Shockingly, only one in 10 of the young women surveyed think the culture of Parliament House is safe for young women, and the vast majority want men to do better in calling out sexism.

And that perception of inequality applied right across the political spectrum. **What this shows is that rather than dealing with the toxic culture in parliament, the situation is getting worse.**

This matters to everyone because the economy needs women in the workforce and those women need to know workplaces are safe.

Young women in particular know that everyone deserves the right to live and work in an environment

free from harassment and violence, and they are telling us loud and clear that enough is enough.

They are looking to leadership from young women who are smashing the glass ceiling. Women like Brittany Higgins, Grace Tame, Chanel Congos, youth influencer of the year Yasmin Poole and a large cadre of powerful female journalists, organisers, economists and feminists that have come together in a powerful intergenerational dialogue to push for change, support each other and share tactics.

At the beginning of each year, Plan International Australia and The Body Shop kick off the Youth Activist Series (YAS), an annual leadership development program for young people of diverse genders and identities between the ages of 16 and 24. Over the year, the youth activists receive training in gender equality literacy, advocacy and government relations, public speaking and content collection so they can go out into the world and tackle gender equality head on.

This year, our nine inspiring youth activists have collaborated on a set of powerful recommendations for how we can make our peak seat of democracy a safer and equal place for all. The YAS have told us that change is too slow. They seek solidarity and action with others to bring about the changes that will empower all young women to fulfil their potential.

Achieving gender equality is everyone's responsibility – and that starts with making Parliament a safe and inclusive space for people from a diversity of genders, ethnicities and backgrounds.

# FOREWORD

On my 21st birthday, I delivered a speech at the Parliament of Victoria. I was speaking at a leadership program aimed at empowering young women of colour, a landmark initiative launched by Parliament Victoria.

I looked out into the sea of faces – young women across diverse ethnic backgrounds. All passionate, inspired and wanting to help shape the society they wished to see.

And yet here we are in 2021, and young women in Australia still need to think twice before considering pursuing a career in our nation's parliament.

After the recent reports of sexual assault in Parliament, just 10% of young women aged 18-25 believe that Parliament is a safe place to work.

Yes, you read that correctly: only 10%.

It is a dark day for our democracy if young women fear entering politics in case they are abused or even raped. And it creates a cycle of marginalisation, where decisions are made without young women's voices in the room.

It ties into a long history of sexism. Effectively no women were represented in the writing of the Constitution, Australia's most important document. Australia's first female politician was elected over 40 years after women were given the right to run as candidates.

While formal barriers have been removed, the impacts of excluding women remain. Female leaders continue to be subject to sexist and unequal treatment by the media and fellow politicians, from commentary on their looks or their choice to have or not have children.

History also shows us that women are not expected to play by the same rules as men. They're still expected to rise above the institution, to clean up men's mess. While women in deputy positions are celebrated, women who reach even higher are often demonised.

We can change this culture. Right now, Australia is in the midst of its own #MeToo reckoning. Politicians who have turned a blind eye to this sexist culture are finally being held accountable. Many of the figures who are leading this movement are young women, who are unashamedly brave, bold and unafraid.

To seize on this moment, we must create clearer pathways for women to enter into our political institutions and change them from the inside out.

It's time we commit to empowering the next generation of young female leaders, turning their dreams into a vision, building their hopes into aspiration. If we want to move forward, this is the step we need to take.

One day, I hope to walk through Parliament and see the many portraits of inspiring female leaders adorning its walls. I have faith it will happen.

**Yasmin Poole**  
Plan International Australia Ambassador



## THE DATA

**JUST 10%**  
of young Australian women believe the culture in our nation's Parliament is safe for women.

**73%**  
of young Australian women aged 18-21 do not believe that women in politics are treated equally to men; rising to almost 78% among women aged 22 to 25.

This perception applies across the political spectrum, with **89%** of young female Green voters, **77%** of Labor voters and **71%** of Coalition voters not believing that women involved in politics today are treated equally to men.

**81%**

of young women aged 18-25 have never considered or aspired to be Prime Minister.

Just 12% of young women say that they would pursue a career in national politics, while 72% say they would never want a career involved in politics.

**30%**  
say that both negative perceptions of the work culture in Canberra, and the accusations of misogyny in the Parliament holds them back from ever pursuing a career in politics.

**43%**  
of young women believe that discrimination towards women in politics holds back young women like them from pursuing political careers.

**54%**  
of young female Coalition voters do not believe that the current work culture in Canberra is safe for young women.

**73%**  
of young women would like to see the HR processes in Canberra overhauled to allow independent reporting of harassment in order to make politics fairer and equal for all.

**72%** of young women believe stronger action from men in calling out sexism is required to ensure that politics is fair and equal for all.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE:

From a young age, girls need to know that a political career is a possibility and that there is a clear pathway to enter local, state or federal politics. Around the world, Plan International is working with girls to achieve their leadership ambitions and to address gender discrimination. In Australia, our work with girls has highlighted the following specific recommendations that would help ensure they are encouraged and supported to become leaders.

- **Ensure that Parliament – and all workplaces, schools and higher education institutions – is a safe and equal space for all women and one free from misogyny and sexual harassment**

Close to three quarters of young Australian women aged 18-21 do not believe that women in politics are treated equally to men (73%), rising to almost eight in ten (78%) among women aged 22 to 25 - that is not good enough. We need to implement policy now to ensure our national parliament, along with all other workplaces, schools, and educational institutions are safe spaces for everyone.

- **Political parties must act urgently to enforce stricter quotas – not just for women, but for all people of different sexualities, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds who represent the diversity of the country we live in**

As more young Australians bravely claim their own diverse gender identities, we need people of diverse and intersectional communities in our Parliament to reflect modern Australia. People with lived experience of discrimination and self-empowerment are best placed to legislate for meaningful change for their own communities. Stricter quotas in place for people with a range of experiences and hardships will allow for a more understanding Australia.



“It is essential our politicians gain an understanding of the difficulties that women and gender diverse people face in their lives - difficulties that still transpire into politics. As leaders, they must put forth affirmative action plans that will tackle issues of sexism and misogyny.

– Harleen, 16, Melbourne





- **Nurture girls' leadership ambitions and give them a seat at the decision-making table**

Equip girls with the skills, networks and role models that will unlock their potential. Too many young women are growing up to believe that they won't have the same opportunities as men to become leaders, or that they don't possess the qualities of a great leader. Governments should invest in young women's emerging leadership programs in Australian high schools, to provide skills, networks and mentorship to girls to become leaders across government, business and civic life.

- **Standing in solidarity with girls and young women who report sexual harassment and abuse, and ensuring there is an independent and confidential avenue for girls and women to report such incidents**

It is critical that men and boys – and especially those in positions of power – be allies to women and girls and call out misogyny, harassment and abuse when they see it. One of the key problems we have witnessed in Parliament is that women had little or no recourse to report problems around misogyny, sexism, harassment and even rape when it has occurred. The Parliament needs to establish an independent, confidential, and safe space where women can report incidents without fear of impacts on their safety or career prospects.

- **Ensure no one is forced to choose between leadership and family life, and presenting clear pathways for young women to enter the political sphere**

Too many girls are deterred from pursuing a political career or having management aspirations because they don't believe it can coexist with family life. We need to crush this perception and ensure that politics and business are designed to work for young women.

- **Parliament's focus on diversity and emphasis on being inclusive is tokenistic and ignores the struggles that many women face.**

In order to achieve greater female representation in parliament, there needs to be a paradigm shift within our political parties towards a truly level and equal playing field for women. The appointment of women to committees or boardrooms must go beyond mere tokenism – they must be respected and given equal power to their male counterparts.

- **Creating educational and learning environments for all genders around the meaning of consent, both within Parliament and our educational systems.**

State and territory governments should provide targets and incentives for schools to promote gender equality. This should focus on introducing respectful relationships and consent education and gender training for staff, engaging gender equality experts and organisations. Such programs could help re-educate or remind politicians about the standards to which they should be behaving.



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**13 75 26**

**PLAN.ORG.AU**

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

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