

Meet our 2021
Youth Activists

Educate girls,
transform the world

Breaking the stigma
around menstruation

UBUNTU

The magazine of Plan International Australia

Issue 05 — Autumn 2021

THE GIRLS' EDUCATION ISSUE.



The charity for
girls' equality

From the CEO

Welcome to issue five of Ubuntu – the girls’ education issue!

Investing in girls’ education is life changing. It provides girls with opportunities to shape their futures, to be heard and to lead. It’s one of the most effective – and most overlooked – solutions to climate change; it improves employment opportunities and outcomes, and can lift entire communities out of poverty. Girls’ education and its ripple effects have the potential to truly transform our world.

But for many girls, returning to school post-pandemic will not be an option.

The UN’s latest Sustainable Development Goals Report shows an estimated 71 million people are expected to be pushed back into extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic. This is the first rise in global poverty since 1998, and women and girls are bearing the heaviest brunt.

More than 130 million girls are being denied their right to an education at this very moment and the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on their education will only worsen.

Released in March, our latest research report, **Smart, Successful, Strong: The case for investing in adolescent girls’ education in aid and COVID-19 response and recovery**, reveals that more than 1.2 million girls are at risk of dropping out of school in the East Asia and Pacific region alone.

Turn to page seven to hear from girls in Indonesia, Kiribati and Vietnam, about the toll school closures and remote learning is having on them and the fears they have for their futures.

Though it has had an exacerbating effect, COVID-19 is by no means the only barrier stopping girls from accessing education. On page 13 we take a look at the harmful practice of child marriage and the devastating effects it can have on a girl’s future.

You’ll hear about our inclusive approach to education on page 11, and how it works to ensure every child is able to pursue their dreams and reach their full potential, no matter their gender.

And on page 18, you’ll meet Jeanette, a passionate supporter who is determined to make sure girls have access to education. She has generously left a gift to Plan International Australia in her Will, so we can support future generations to learn and grow.

This month, we’ve also made it easier than ever for passionate people like you to create lasting change. Keep an eye out for the flyer on our Safewill offering to learn how you can support our work for future generations of girls and their communities.

We know how extraordinary education is. How it unlocks a world of understanding, insight and opportunity. And how it allows young people to reach their potential – first and foremost as human beings, but also as citizens, leaders and contributors to the global economy.

We know education is the quickest path to achieving an equal world; one where all children can live happy and healthy lives, and where girls can take their rightful place as equals. It is our catch-cry: ‘a better now for her, a better future for everyone.’

Thank you for sharing our vision for a world where every child has the opportunity to go to – and complete – school, including girls. We are grateful to have you working alongside us.

Happy reading!



Susanne Legena
CEO,
Plan International Australia

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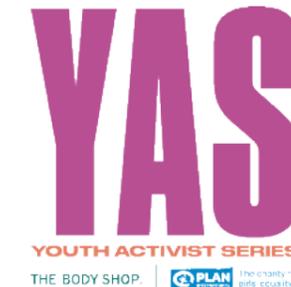
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I have learnt that a girl, no matter what and despite having children, can have a future, can make a plan and [make] better decisions.”

Jeanette, 20, Rwanda.

Find out more:

CHILD PROTECTION plan.org.au/privacy-policy/safeguarding-children-and-young-people-policy

FEEDBACK plan.org.au/privacy-policy/feedback-and-complaints

News



Food aid distribution in South Sudan.

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE JUST 'A STEP AWAY FROM FAMINE'

Right now, a global food crisis of devastating proportions is unfolding in some of the poorest countries around the world. Up to 270 million people are currently experiencing acute food insecurity with millions just a step away from famine.

Driven by conflict, exacerbated by the climate crisis, and inflamed by the global pandemic, this is one of the most dire humanitarian emergencies our world has ever seen, and women and girls will be hit the hardest.

In countries like South Sudan, we are already hearing reports of hunger-related deaths and families going entire days without food. Others are making heartbreaking choices, marrying their daughters early or saving what little food they have for working members of the household.

Plan International is urgently scaling up operations in Pibor and surrounding areas, where hunger is particularly acute. We have been working with local communities to deliver food and treatment for malnutrition, alongside child protection services and education programs for people who have been displaced from their homes, returnees and host communities. In partnership with the World Food Programme, we have reached more than 78,000 people with life-saving food supplies, treatment for malnutrition and psychosocial support and education activities. But there is so much more to be done.

It is vital that world leaders step up, provide more funding for humanitarian assistance, and put girls at the heart of our response to crises.

Over the coming weeks and months we'll keep you updated on how you can help ease the suffering of those most affected by this devastating humanitarian emergency - stay tuned.

SHE HAS A DREAM...

Yasmin Poole is a powerhouse when it comes to championing diversity and youth voices in social change, and we're not the only ones who have noticed. Earlier this year, Yasmin, one of our Plan International Australia Ambassadors, received an international Youth Influencer of the Year award from the US-based King Center, which honours the legacy of Martin Luther King. In winning the award, Yasmin Poole follows in the footsteps of past King Award recipients including Lady Gaga and the three founders of Black Lives Matter - Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi.



"It's an indescribable feeling to win this award. I'm deeply honoured to be recognised in honour of Martin Luther King, a titan of our history and a permanent reminder of the power of hope. I attribute much of this award to my work with Plan International Australia, which continues to fight for girls' equality every day. I look forward to continuing my work pushing for gender justice and demonstrating that young women always have a place in our political conversations."



Rahma, from Tanzania, with her sanitary pads from Plan International.

WORLD MENSTRUAL HEALTH DAY - AND OTHER NEWS!

Did you know that World Menstrual Health Day is coming up on 28 May? You can stay up to date on our MHD announcements and events - and lots of other exciting news and events - via your monthly Plan International Australia newsletter! Sign up today at plan.org.au

Menstruation is a fact of life. Period.

We're working to break the stigma around menstruation so that all girls can thrive.

800 million people menstruate every month around the globe, and yet periods are still a source of shame and stigma, and are often a barrier to girls completing their education.

A lack of access to sanitary products and adequate toilet facilities at school makes it incredibly difficult for girls to manage their period. It restricts their movements when they have their period, and often affects their attendance and performance at school.

Taboos, myths and shame surrounding menstruation can also lead to teasing, shaming and exclusion from daily activities, which all have a negative effect on a girl's sense of dignity.

Period stigma and poverty isn't isolated to a few countries, it affects every country around the globe.

Last May, on World Menstrual Health Day, we released *Periods in a Pandemic*, a report looking into women's and girls' experiences of managing their period during COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia and around the world.

The report revealed severe shortages of products (here in Australia, half of those surveyed said they had trouble finding period products), a sharp rise in prices of pads and tampons, and lack of access to basic information and services about menstrual hygiene management.

But we have seen progress.

Following 18 years of campaigning, Australia's GST on period products - known as the 'tampon tax' - was finally abolished in 2018. In 2020, Scotland became the first country

in the world to offer free period products to the general public. And as of 2021, schools in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and New Zealand have committed to providing free period products in schools.

As the charity for girls' equality, Plan International Australia acknowledges stigma around menstruation as a critical barrier, holding girls back. That is why we're addressing it.

THE SCHOOL EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO MANAGE MENSTRUATION WITH PRIDE

Together with Live & Learn Environmental Education and the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education, we've been working to normalise menstruation and improve access to WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) facilities in 20 schools across West Guadalcanal.

A key part of the WASH in Schools approach is breaking down stigma through education. Boys are included in these lessons and given the opportunity to ask questions, providing them with a better understanding of menstruation as a normal part of life.

Mr Matia, a headmaster at one of the schools, has become something of an advocate for menstrual hygiene management (MHM) since taking part in the training, and his school now stocks sanitary products, provides bins for their disposal and has refurbished their toilet facilities. "I want my school to become a role model for other schools in how we support our girls and MHM," he says.

When girls feel supported and have the proper resources to manage their periods hygienically and with dignity, they are empowered to pursue their education and thrive.

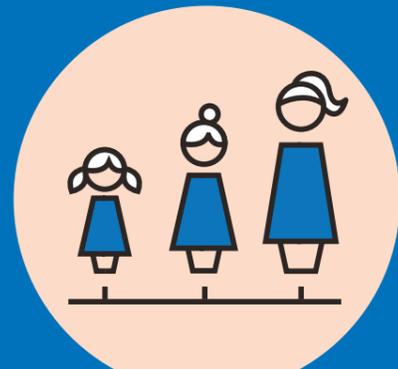


Primary students in Solomon Islands discuss sanitary pad options during lessons on menstrual health



The New Times, New Targets Project is an Australian Aid initiative implemented by Plan International Australia in partnership with Live & Learn Environmental Education on behalf of the Australian Government.

Educating girls leads to ...



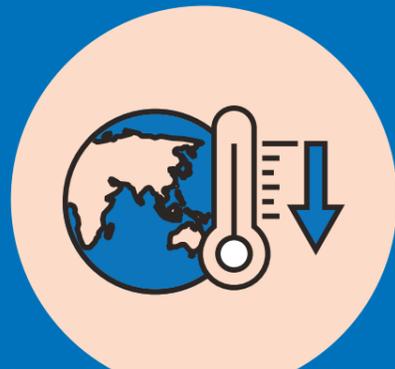
MULTI-GENERATIONAL CHANGE

A girl who can stay in school is more likely to grow into an adult who marries later, chooses if and when she'd like to have children, has a healthier family, earns a greater income, and pursues the life she wants. A girl who completes an education becomes a woman who can transform the lives of those around her, and she is more likely to ensure her own children are educated too.



MORE CHILDREN SURVIVING INFANCY AND GROWING UP HEALTHY

If every girl completed 12 years of schooling, the number of babies born early would fall by 59% and infant deaths would drop by 49%. Educated mothers are also more likely to vaccinate their children and have access to healthier lifestyle options.



A SUSTAINABLE CLIMATE

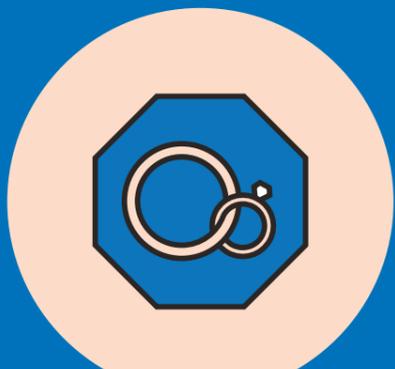
For every year a girl stays in school, her country's climate resilience measurably improves. And studies also show that female leaders are incredibly effective in conservation and protection efforts, and are more likely to pursue more sustainable futures for their communities.

Access to education is one of the most effective and cost-effective contributions to adapting to climate change and can support mitigation through improved life skills, green skills and more environmentally responsible decision-making.



IMPROVED ECONOMIC OUTCOMES AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Educating girls lifts more people out of poverty – for each 1% increase in girls' education, a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rises by 0.37%. If all girls are able to finish their secondary education or equivalent, our global GDP can increase by 10% over the next decade.



STOPPING CHILD MARRIAGE

12 years of education for every girl would reduce child marriage worldwide by 64%. This is because an educated girl is less likely to be forced into marriage. On top of this, educated mothers are more likely to invest in their daughters' education and stop the cycle of early marriage.

Educate girls, transform the world

Why is investing in girls' education so important?

Every child on the planet deserves the chance to reach their full potential, regardless of their gender. But poverty and injustice are dark realities for many, and girls are disproportionately affected. In times of crises, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than boys. Once they've dropped out, two in three girls will never return.

Gender inequality and discrimination knows no borders. This isn't restricted to any one community, culture or continent. Half the world's population is being held back by gender-based discrimination, but it doesn't have to be this way – it's something we have the power to change.

Education is the key to unlocking a better, more equal world. One where girls can grow up safely, access countless opportunities, and break the cycle of poverty – not just for themselves, but for their families and future generations. Education empowers girls to choose their own futures and create a better world for all.

WHAT IS THE GIRLS EDUCATION & EMPOWERMENT FUND ?

The Girls Education & Empowerment Fund is our new multi-year giving initiative designed to address the barriers preventing girls from accessing and completing a quality education, to support an entire generation of girls to finish school and choose their own futures.

To achieve this kind of long-term change, we need a long-term plan. That's why we ask supporters of the fund to commit to a multi-year pledge of a meaningful amount for five years.

Your contributions are pooled with other donors and used to leverage further funding in the form of multi-year grants from our institutional partners, like the World Food Programme and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, effectively multiplying your impact by 2x (or more).

Every girl has the right to go to school, pursue the life she wants, and own the decisions that will shape her future. A girl who gets the chance to complete her education becomes a woman who can transform the lives of those around her.



Find out more by visiting planau.me/girlseducation

When we focus on investing in a community at large, girls often miss out. When we target our investment on girls, no one misses out.

Investing in girls' education is life-changing for girls themselves – but the ripple effects it can have for entire communities and countries has the potential to truly transform our world.



Plan International Australia supporter, Dr Gary Leong is helping to break down the barriers to girls' education through the Girls Education & Empowerment Fund.

"As a father of two beautiful intelligent girls and a paediatrician, to see so many girls around the world not be able to reach their full potential is a global tragedy. This is why I have committed over the next five years to support Plan International's vision with the Girls Education & Empowerment Fund to promote global change and empower girls' health, literacy, and education."

Dr Gary Leong, NSW



Da, 6, and her friend enjoy their Lao lesson at school

Smart, Successful, Strong:

The case for investing in adolescent girls' education in aid and COVID-19 response and recovery.

Written by Difon, (17, Indonesia), Vania (17, Indonesia), Nhi (19, Vietnam), Duong Phuong Anh (22, Vietnam), Tebwebwe Terikaua (20, Kiribati) and Taarawa Ukenio (25, Kiribati).

Education is the key to a level playing field for all. It provides us with knowledge about the world. It paves the way for a good career. It helps build our characters. And when girls are educated, it can improve economic development, reduce inequality, and help build a more stable and resilient society so that all individuals have the opportunity to realize their potential.

But due to the impacts of COVID-19, girls are missing out. During lockdown, we face a higher risk of violence and harmful practices. The economic impacts of the pandemic are causing us to put our education and our hopes and dreams on hold to help ease the financial burden, and girls are dropping out and getting married early. Some of us may never have the opportunity to return to school.

Many of us lack internet access and devices, so we cannot study, even if online learning is an option. And if we do have internet access, we still struggle to keep up with school work because we often have to deal with the burden of housework too.

School closures have changed the way we socialize with our friends and learn; there's more pressure and it has affected our mental health.



Sari, 12, is able to learn at home in Indonesia, using the radio provided by Plan International.

It's likely that students will still be doing online classes for a while, so solutions for the problems are needed to make it more effective and less of a burden.

We can't stand alone, we need help from others, and that's why Plan International's girls' education report is so important.

The *Smart, Successful, Strong* report provides evidence of how COVID-19 has interrupted girls' access to education, and gives a voice to the young women who are facing these obstacles. As girls and young women, we often don't get to have a say in the decisions that affect our lives; this report is important because it gives us a chance to be heard.

The world needs to know what girls are facing to eliminate

problems. No one knows what girls are dealing with better than themselves and that's why we need to listen to girls' voices and amplify them, to inform world leaders or power holders.

We will not be silenced. We are here to ask for our rights, and power holders need to actively listen to girls' voices when it comes to decision making. We need to make sure girls' education is not ignored or excluded during the process of building back a better normal after COVID-19, so that all girls are free to discover their potential.

Education doesn't just transform our lives, it also transforms our families, our communities, our countries, and even the world. It's the key to a brighter future and better world.

Girls in Kiribati, Indonesia and Vietnam have spoken!

We're working with partners and supporters like you, to campaign for change, and we're calling on the Australian government to hear and support girls' vision for gender equality in education by:

- Renewing Australia's commitment to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).
- Increasing the percentage of Australian Aid that supports education, and shifting the focus from scholarships (which fail to reach the most vulnerable) to secondary education and strengthening gender equality in education systems.
- Embedding a strong focus on adolescent girls in the redesign of the gender equality program, Pacific Women Lead, by having both a stand-alone adolescent focused program as well as mainstreaming the unique needs of adolescent girls into all programs.

“

Education is everything. It unlocks doors and dreams, and unleashes potential. When girls have the chance to be educated, the barriers they face to equality are much easier to break – both for themselves and for future generations.

Susanne Legena, CEO, Plan International Australia

GIRLS' VISION

All adolescent girls must be able to complete their education, including being able to return to school if the pandemic has pushed them out of the classroom. Through workshops in Indonesia, Vietnam and Kiribati, we asked girls to provide their recommendations for donors and decision-makers to create equal access to quality and inclusive secondary education for all girls.

This was the message that the girls we spoke with issued, loud and clear. They want to see gender equality in education; they want schools to be able to 'build back equal'.

In particular they called on donors and decision-makers to invest in initiatives that:

1. Educate girls, families and communities about their right to complete 12 years of education, including an end to child, early and forced marriage/unions
2. Bridge the digital divide by ensuring that girls have access to digital resources as well as the training, confidence and desire to use them in their everyday lives
3. Provide age and gender appropriate support for girls' mental health and emotional wellbeing
4. Create more opportunities that enable girls to be leaders
5. Provide girls living with a disability with the same opportunities to access and complete education as all learners
6. Rebuild the education system to promote values-based learning that encourages and teaches diversity and inclusion, and respect and care for each other, so that schools are more welcoming environments for all, and free from discrimination, gender-based violence and harassment
7. Remove financial barriers to accessing or completing education, and ensure all schools have access to the same level of resources
8. Ensure girls' voices and views are central to decision-making, with school systems and curriculums co-designed with young people and participatory policy making processes
9. Embed comprehensive sexuality education in formal and informal education settings and ensure it is accessible for all children, adolescents and young people
10. Ensure schools are more environmentally friendly and teach climate change and action

Our 2021 Youth Activists

Generously supported by our partners at The Body Shop, the Youth Activist Series (YAS) is Plan International Australia's annual program for young people who are passionate about campaigning for gender justice and equality. We asked five of our inspiring Plan International Australia Youth Activists what activism means to them, and how they are trying to make a difference. *Here's what they had to say!*



As an activist, what are you trying to do to make a difference?

HARLEEN:

As an activist, to create change, it must initially begin with yourself. Everyday I find that by being an activist, it doesn't mean that you have to necessarily get all things right, rather you should be aiming to pursue knowledge in all areas to the best of your ability so you can strive to fight for things that matter, with a well-informed perspective. Education is a key factor to change, and can be used to change the lives of millions of people around the world, especially young girls. It is truly a form of liberation.

OLIVIA:

To me, being an activist means always trying my best to speak up for what I believe in and drive positive change. Making a difference means refusing to remain quiet in the face of overt prejudice and initiating discussion. I try to keep up with the world and educate myself on all aspects of society on a regular basis. By facilitating discussions, we can reduce stigma and collectively find a way to move forward.

MARGARET:

Personally, activism is all about the little change that can be made on a day-to-day basis. Not only do I do my best to ensure that my behaviour follows the model of my values and what I believe in, but I try to teach others what it is that I have learned. I think part of the reason that a lot of people don't engage with causes is because they aren't aware or don't have the time to learn, and if a 30 minute conversation can help someone to re-evaluate themselves then it's all worth it. On a bigger scale, I want to engage in discussions with organisations around how to better integrate young people into the conversation and decision-making processes, as well as encourage a more diverse and proportionally representative government system at all levels in Australia.

SIENA:

Individually, I focus on facilitating dialogue with my friends and family about social and global issues. Having open conversations helps to not only raise awareness in your social circles, but also creates a ripple effect where knowledge and perspectives can spread past your individual reach. Importantly, it reduces the stigma of discussing these issues. How can we solve issues like gender-based violence and climate change if we are socially intolerant of even discussing them?

SANDHYA:

Activism can take on countless forms. To me, it's about starting conversations and creating space for voices that are often left unheard. It's also about ensuring that the discussions we have are challenging, but conducive to change. I try to centre my activism around unity – whether it's around a dinner table or across the boardroom, I think that finding some common ground, however small it might be, is the first step towards meaningful action. To me, activism isn't about individuals making dramatic change, it's about harnessing the passion and commitment of an entire group to effect small changes in their micro-environments, and allowing the ripples to grow.

Visit our website to read the full interview with our youth activists – <https://planau.me/YAS-Q-and-A>

Want to support our YAS?

\$5 from every purchase of The Body Shop's **Shea Nourishing Body Lotion** will be donated to YAS! This nourishing lotion is enriched with Community Fair Trade shea butter from Ghana, handcrafted by women who have used Shea butter to nourish dry skin for generations. To support our YAS program, purchase some nourishing Shea Body Lotion, in-store and online: <https://www.thebodyshop.com/en-au/>

Every child = equal

If we want to end inequality, we must address it at all levels of the community.

A lot of the time that means we're focusing on the barriers that see girls disproportionately affected, whether they're being forced into child marriage, subjected to harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), or pushed out of school because their education isn't considered a priority.

Addressing barriers to equality means that we're working to make sure no one misses out – girls, or other marginalised children and young people, including children with disability, ethnic minority children and children living in remote communities.

One example of this is our approach to education. Your support allows us to provide scholarships and school materials to children who may not have access to the resources they need to succeed. It enables us to run school-feeding programs to make sure kids have enough energy to get through the school day, regardless of their family's situation. And it helps us to engage with parents and caregivers to provide information about the value of education in their children's lives.

Seuk and Nak live in Laos. Helena is from Indonesia. Though they are all enrolled in school, they face three very different obstacles that make learning difficult. Find out how we're tackling these barriers to ensure Helena, Seuk and Nak can all reach their full potential.



SEUK

7-year-old Seuk is a part of an ethnic minority group living in Laos. His family don't speak Lao at home, making progress at school much harder.

"Education is important for everyone, in particular ethnic minority girls and boys who often face difficulties when starting their primary education," explains Seuk's mother Lai.

We're working to support children like Seuk by setting up reading clubs in his community, where children can come together after school to read books, play games and sing songs in the Lao language.

"Every Friday, I join the reading club after school. I like playing with my friends and sharing stories with them. I feel happy

and enjoy learning," Seuk tells us. "Lao language and maths are my favourite subjects because I love reading storybooks and calculating."

When asked about her own hopes and dreams, Lai's thoughts are on her son's future. "Like other parents in general, I wish I could support my son's education and hopefully, he will get a job after graduating. Whatever his dream is, my husband and I will support him."

And despite only being seven years old, Seuk is thinking about the future too. "Today, when someone is sick, they need to walk for three hours to get to the clinic in another village. It's difficult if you don't have a scooter. If possible, I want to open a pharmacy or a health clinic in my community."



HELENA

12-year-old Helena is part of Plan International's Sponsorship program. She lives in a remote area of Indonesia, where lack of internet access and distractions at home have made distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic very difficult.

"I don't like staying at home because I can't see my friends and teachers," she explains. "It's challenging to study at home for hours. A lot of the time I have to cut my learning sessions short as I also have to do the daily chores to help my mother."

To prevent students in remote areas from being digitally excluded from learning, Plan International Indonesia, in collaboration with school authorities, local government and Community Disaster Preparedness Teams have introduced an alternative learning tool – the 'handy talky' (HT).

The HT is a radio device that allows children to learn by gathering in study groups (while adhering to health protocols). One device is installed at school, while the other is installed in each study group location, allowing students to participate in distance lessons for two hours a day.

"Learning using HT device helps a lot since my schoolmates and I directly listen to the voices of our teachers so there is a passion for learning." Explains Helena. "It boosts our mood to study. It feels like we return to school even if it is only for a short time."

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I like playing with my friends and sharing stories with them. I feel happy and enjoy learning. Lao language and maths are my favourite subjects because I love reading storybooks and calculating.”

Suek, 7, Laos



NAK

14-year-old Nak wasn't born with a disability. He fell seriously ill in grade two, and his parents, like many families in the Khmu communities of northern Laos, turned to traditional herbal medicines to heal him.

However, Nak's condition was unable to be cured and he has had difficulty walking ever since. Lacking the support and transportation needed to get to school, Nak was no longer able to attend, although sometimes, using his arms, Nak would crawl the 200 metre distance from his house to the school, just to watch his friends studying and playing.

When Plan International heard about Nak's situation, a meeting was called to work out how to support him. After receiving a

Polio diagnosis, Nak and his father were invited to spend time at a physical therapy centre where they learnt rehabilitation techniques that could build up Nak's upper body strength.

Today, Nak goes to school in a wheelchair, given to him by the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR) after Plan International approached them for support. Nak enjoys learning at school with friends, but most of all, he loves just being able to play with his friends.

"It is much better being at school, learning, playing and having fun with my friends, rather than staying alone at home. I love reading stories and singing songs," Nak says. "It is also better with the wheelchair, going to and coming from school. I am now doing exercises using the rehabilitation bars in my house. I am sure I will be able to go to school in the wheelchair by myself in the future."

The power of education

Education gives girls freedom and choices in life, but did you know it can also act as a powerful protective force against the harmful practice of child marriage?

In communities where child marriage occurs, we're working with girls to make sure they know their rights and have choices through education. We're also raising awareness on the risks of child marriage, and supporting families and communities to make sure girls are valued and their voices are heard.

Child marriage violates a girl's fundamental right to health, education and opportunity, and it's happening now in extremely high numbers. Each year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18. That's 23 girls every minute.

Girls who are married at this age are more likely to experience domestic violence, are often forced to have children before their bodies are ready, and are less likely to stay in school. Child marriage and early pregnancies account for between 15-30% of school drop outs.

With nowhere else to turn, these girls experience a loss of independence from their family, their community and their right to a safe and secure future.

There are many reasons why child marriage happens. Some of the main reasons are:

1. Gender inequality: Girls and women often occupy a lower status as a result of social and cultural traditions, attitudes and beliefs that deny them their rights.

2. Poverty: In families on a low income, girls may be seen as an economic burden. The perception

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I have the right to go to school, no matter what.”

Phulan, 18, Nepal

that a girl's potential to earn an income is comparatively poor pushes girls out of their homes and into marriage.

3. Customs: In many countries, the importance of preserving family 'honour' and girls' virginity means parents push their daughters into marriage before they're ready. People believe marriage safeguards against 'immoral' or 'inappropriate' behaviour.

4. Failure to enforce laws: Sometimes families aren't aware they're breaking the law. In some countries early marriage is so prevalent, prosecutions are rare.

5. Conflicts, disasters and emergencies: Disasters and emergencies increase economic pressures on households and many families who wouldn't previously have considered early marriage turn to it as a last resort.

6. Lack of education: Girls with no education are more likely to be married before the age of 18 than those with a secondary education.

SO WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT IT?

Education is one of the most powerful ways for girls to protect themselves from child marriage. An educated girl is less likely to be forced into marriage, and educated mothers are more likely to invest in their daughters' education and stop the cycle of early marriage.

In addition to helping girls stay in school, child marriage prevention is embedded in all of our programs, and some of the most effective ways we work to prevent it include:

- Advocating for new legislation and policy, and promoting child protection laws and their enforcement
- Ensuring girls have a legal, recognised identity through our digital birth-registration program. Proof of age can prevent the prevalence of child marriage in some countries
- Holding community forums and training sessions
- Facilitating monthly Girls' Clubs, which create safe environments for girls to learn about topics like reporting abuse, the dangers of child marriage, and the importance of education
- Advocating for change through the global advocacy alliance, Girls Not Brides
- Using digital technology to verify girls' ages. Our age verification program allows civil servants to perform on the spot checks at the time of marriage to verify the girl's age via mobile phones and computers.

No girl should have to marry as a child. That's why we're working in communities with girls, to make sure they know their rights and have choices so that being forced to marry as a child is not considered their only option.

FIGHTING CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL

South Asia has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, with nearly one in two girls being married before the age of 18.

Phulan is 18 years old, and a member of our 18+ program, which raises awareness of the negative impacts of child marriage, and equips girls with the information, skills and services they need to make their own decisions and have their voices heard.

In Nepal, where Phulan lives, 37% of girls are married before the age of 18 despite laws that say the minimum age of marriage is 20.

Two years ago, when Phulan was in grade 9, her parents arranged for her to marry a boy from a local family.

“I was aware of my rights and the disadvantages of child marriage through the 18+ program activities,” Phulan explains. “When I learned that my parents wanted to marry me off, I knew I couldn't let it happen. If I did, what kind of message would I be sending to other girls?”

Phulan insisted that she was not willing to get married until she had completed her studies, but her parents weren't convinced and continued to put pressure on her.

Desperate to escape the proposed marriage, Phulan confided in friends, and a local community worker and her teacher were made aware of the situation. They visited the family and were able to talk her parents out of the marriage. “I told my parents, I'd go to the police if they didn't give up,” Phulan adds.

Now free to continue her studies, Phulan is aware of the importance of her education.

“Once you're married, it's up to the in-laws to determine whether or not I can keep going to school. It'd be sad if I had to do that. I have the right to go to school, no matter what.”

Plan International is working with local governments to create child marriage-free zones in Nepal. Communities are encouraged to make a public declaration that child, early and forced marriage is strongly prohibited and a punishable offence in line with the existing law.

We're working with communities and girls like Phulan, to break the cycle of child marriage and give girls choices through education, and you can help us.

Donate to our appeal to end child marriage at www.plan.org.au/appeal/give-her-choices



Phulan, 18, Nepal

Test your knowledge on the topics covered in this issue of Ubuntu!

1. 12 years of education for every girl would reduce the rate of child marriage worldwide by how much?

- A** 100%
- B** 10%
- C** 64%
- D** 1%



2. Educating girls is a leading solution to climate change because it ...

- A** Improves girls' life skills
- B** Improves girls' green skills
- C** Empowers girls to make more environmentally responsible decisions
- D** All of the above



QUIZ!

3. One of the key determinants of whether a child succeeds in school and life is ...

- A** How prestigious their school is
- B** Their IQ score
- C** The nurturing care, parental support and access to early learning through play opportunities that they receive in early childhood
- D** Their ability to solve mathematical equations



4. Plan International Australia Ambassador Yasmin Poole was the recipient of an award that honours the legacy of which renowned activist?

- A** Nelson Mandela
- B** Gloria Steinem
- C** Rosa Parks
- D** Martin Luther King Jr



HOW DID YOU DO?

Answers: 1. C (refer to page, 17) 2. D (refer to page, 5) 3. C (refer to page, 17) 4. D (refer to page, 3)

Youth Club in Rwanda

With a focus on sharing vital life skills and sexual and reproductive health information, Plan International-supported Youth Clubs are helping to create change for girls in communities throughout Rwanda.

As the charity for girls' equality, our vision is for a world where girls can unleash their full potential, and all children can thrive. We're committed to creating this world, where girls can finish school, find meaningful work and have a say in their communities; where they can be free from fear and violence and decide if and when they want to get married.

But today, 130 million girls aren't in school. Almost 12 million are married every year, before they turn 18. And every year that same number of girls give birth between the ages 15-19.

Plan International-supported Youth Clubs are providing safe spaces for children and young people to learn about and discuss the issues that concern them, such as sexual and reproductive health. It's also an opportunity for them to connect with and support other young people, passing on knowledge to other students through a peer education program. Projects like these are only possible because of our wonderful supporters who donate to Plan International.

We'd like to introduce you to Jeanette, Deborah and Florence, just some of the young people who are part of our Youth Clubs in Rwanda.



JEANETTE, 20,
BUGESERA DISTRICT

"I have learnt that a girl, no matter what and despite having children, can have a future, can make a plan and [make] better decisions. I also learned about sexual reproductive health and how our bodies transform which is so helpful. Before I had no idea about how to prevent pregnancy and didn't understand that people could use condoms."

"I share my story with other girls and tell them to not rush, to be patient and satisfied with their lives even if they are poor. Girls now come to my home to learn and get advice from me. I could never think some years back that I would have an impact on other girls. I'm not ashamed of what I've gone through and I'm happy if it can help other girls make better decisions in their lives."



DEBORAH, 11,
GATSIBO DISTRICT

"The youth club here in my school plays a big role in helping me. They helped me buy a school uniform and school materials, so that I could go to school! I'm so happy when I'm at the club. I feel like a child, like all the others. I can smile, laugh and play. And it has made me feel confident. I love math and want to become a doctor so that I can contribute to social welfare and take good care of people that need help."



FLORENCE, 17,
BUGESERA DISTRICT

"I didn't know anything about my body and how it develops before I joined the youth club at my school. I have learnt a lot now, about periods and health issues, and how to look after myself."

"Some parents can afford to buy sanitary pads for their daughters but refuse to do so. Girls often have to go to school with no pads during their periods and feel very ashamed. Some girls even quit school because of this."

"I wish that each girl and boy could learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights."

The early years and beyond

We know that education transforms lives, and completing secondary school opens up a world of possibilities for young people. But can you name the biggest indicator for successful graduation?

It may surprise you to learn that one of the key determinants of whether a child succeeds in school and life is the nurturing care, parental support and access to early learning through play opportunities that they receive in early childhood. A child's early years will influence their health, growth and learning potential for the rest of their lives.

Every parent wants to give their child the very best start to life. But thousands of parents and caregivers all over the world don't get that chance. They can't always access the services, tools, and information necessary to give their children all they need to survive and thrive.

Parenting programs are just one of the ways we can help parents to give their children the healthiest, happiest childhood and beyond.

Plan International works with local governments and partners to support mothers and fathers to raise healthy, happy infants and children. We provide nutrition counselling that includes breastfeeding support, advice on starting home food gardens and food hygiene. We provide information about the milestones children should be reaching for healthy development, how parents can protect their children and support them with education and playful learning. And we

work to make sure all families can access clean water, sanitation and hygiene.

As well as this, our parenting programs have a focus on challenging gender norms and breaking down gender inequality in early childhood development by encouraging both parents to share the responsibility of caring for their children, supporting more fathers to be emotionally and practically engaged in their child's upbringing. We also focus on changing the way that children are socialised into limiting and discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes, and we work to ensure that girls and boys are provided with equal care and opportunities.

Parents, after all, are their children's first and most important teachers, and when equipped with the right skills, knowledge and resources, they can support their children from early childhood, all the way to secondary graduation and beyond.



EUNICE'S STORY

Eunice is 20 years old, and a first time mother living in Lira District, Uganda. Through a Plan International supported parenting education program in her local community, she has discovered the importance of play in development, and strengthened the bond between her and her daughter.

"As a young mother, I did not have the knowledge of how to care for my child. I did not know that play was an important factor in a child's development.

When I realised the importance of play in my child's life I made play toys for my child – she liked them and can spend much of her time playing with them.

These sessions are so practical and for purposes of sustainability, we were taught on how to make toys for the children to use for playing using locally available materials like paper, wood, banana fibre, plastics and the like."

JIMMY'S STORY

Jimmy is a farmer and father of five living in Alebtong District, in the Northern Region of Uganda.

Two of his children attend a Plan International-supported Early Childhood Development centre, where Jimmy has been involved in male engagement training.

With the support of the ELMA Foundation, Plan International Uganda has been implementing a holistic and integrated Early Childhood Development program in three districts since 2019, building on work supported by Plan International Australia since 2010.

"Before I got involved in male engagement training, I had a difficulty in communicating with my children ... I didn't know that I had a role in the life of my children and I had left it in the hands of my wife to handle them, and I could beat my children every time they irritated me.

After attending the training it changed my life! I got to know that beating the children was not a solution. I have learnt better ways of communicating with my children.

I had in mind that it was only the role of women to take care of the children. I have realised that as a father I have to support my wife in doing house, domestic chores and upbringing of the children. Now I support my wife in doing everything at home."

“

Before I got involved in male engagement training, I had a difficulty in communicating with my children. I didn't know that I had a role in the life of my children and I had left it in the hands of my wife to handle them.”

Jimmy, Uganda.



*Representation of Jeanette. Image supplied by Marcus Aurelius from Pexels.

“

With a good education, the world is your oyster.”

Having almost been denied the opportunity to complete her own schooling, it's no wonder Plan International supporter Jeanette Jones is so passionate about education.

"On my 15th birthday my father told me he would no longer pay for my education. He told me to quit school, get a job and find a husband."

Jeanette did get a job, but only to pay for her school fees, and she went on to become an educator herself, spending much of her career teaching children with disabilities.

Wanting her legacy to continue, Jeanette has decided to leave a gift to Plan International in her Will, so future generations of girls can access education and opportunities too.

"I'd like to see equality for girls. Equality of education. Equality of everything. Because girls aren't equal to boys anywhere. I marched for equal pay when I was in my twenties. And they are still marching for equal pay, and equal justice now.

I would like to see girls and women treated equal. With a good education, the world is your oyster."

Pass it on

In the spirit of Ubuntu, we ask that you keep the ripples of change alive by passing this magazine on once you've enjoyed it.

Whether you leave it in your local café or staff room or give it to a friend, this small act of sharing will help spread awareness of Plan International Australia and the incredible work your support makes possible.

The power to inspire others is in your hands.

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The charity for
girls' equality