



GIRL, INTERRUPTED

10 YEARS OF GIRLS' RIGHTS IN AUSTRALIA

The progress, the setbacks and
how to accelerate equality for all.



The charity for
girls' equality

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

**Plan International Australia
acknowledges and pays respect
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.**

FOREWORD

Every year on October 11, Plan International shines a light on the unique challenges that girls face globally and celebrates their enormous potential to bring about change.

As the charity for girls' equality, Plan International played a significant role in the United Nations introduction of International Day of the Girl in 2011 – the day was born from our campaign to see girls on the global agenda. And now, here we are, marking a full 10 years of this special day.

Like all anniversaries, this one feels like a good time to reflect on the past – how far we've come and how far we've yet to go when it comes to girls' rights, both here in Australia and around the world. This report does just that.

We have seen progress for gender equality in the last 10 years. Child mortality has dropped significantly since 2012. There have been real improvements on legal protections from certain forms of abuse, with child marriage outlawed in a number of countries in the last decade, and female genital mutilation banned in South Sudan. And we've watched so many incredible girls, young women and gender diverse youth lead movements and bring about enormous change in this world.

However, change has not been equitable; it has been slow and it has been fragile, especially for those with intersecting identities.

We've seen huge setbacks for girls' rights, freedoms and education as a result of Covid-19 and other escalating humanitarian crises – global hunger, the war in Ukraine. The rise of far right politics. The patriarchy and harmful, entrenched gender stereotypes.

In Australia, progress for girls has been similarly uneven, slow and brittle, with girls, young women and gender diverse young people encountering deep and systemic inequities in Australian society that impact them every day and in every space.

While International Day of the Girl is absolutely about celebrating the power and potential of girls and young people, this ten year anniversary is also a stark reminder of how much work there is still to be done.

Ten years from now my own daughter Orla will be a young woman in her early 20s, and I want her to feel confident that she is equal, she is safe and she can live up to her full potential and realise all her dreams without any restrictions. I want this for all girls, in all their diversities. And there is hope.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, by unlocking the potential of every 10-year-old girl, we can create the economic and social conditions needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. If all the 10-year-old girls who drop out of school or do not attend school in developing countries completed secondary education, they would contribute \$21 billion a year to their economies. How incredible is that?

Instead of feeling disheartened by the challenges and roadblocks detailed in this report, let us use them as fuel to fight even harder for a world where girls are equal. Because when we invest in girls – when we give them the tools to learn, lead and decide – they can change the world.

SUSANNE LEGENA

Plan International Australia CEO





INTRODUCTION

Girls, young women and gender diverse young people¹ in Australia are leaders, activists, learners and knowledge holders. They are complex and multi-dimensional people, with intersecting identities and dynamic lived experiences. They have lived through history-defining moments such as the COVID-19 global pandemic and the crisis of climate change, moments that will continue to shape and impact their lives.

100,000

The amount of signatures on the successful 2018 grassroots campaign calling on the Australian Government to remove the GST from period products.

The campaign was led by young feminist Subeta Vimalarajah.

There are over 3.7 million girls and young women in Australia aged 24 years and under.² Despite their numbers and their powerful intersecting identities, girls, young women and gender diverse young people encounter deep and systemic inequities in Australian society which impacts on them every day, in every space. These inequities diminish their aspirations, limit their opportunities and erode their well-being. For many years, Plan International Australia has stood alongside young people to shine a spotlight on intersecting gender inequality and their impacts and to amplify girls and young women's calls for accountability and change.

Ten years ago, the United Nations designated 11 October the International Day of the Girl – a day to give girls' rights visibility and to remind all decision-makers and power-holders of their responsibility to drive improvements in the lives of girls through strong leadership, girl-centred laws and policies and gender and girl responsive budgets.

This report looks back on the last ten years and the state of girls' lives in Australia, to answer the question 'How have decision-makers and power-holders stepped up to their responsibility of delivering justice and gender equality to girls in Australia?' This report provides a snapshot of the changes that have happened in girls lives and the nation around them. It shows progress in some key areas but also the alarmingly little progress in others. It profiles the leadership of young leaders including our very own Youth Activists who tirelessly advocate for systemic change that will improve the future for girls, young women and gender diverse people in Australia.

GENDER EQUALITY IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Gender equality is a core human right that affects all people and is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5). When a society strives towards gender equality, it creates the conditions for all people whether they identify as male, female or gender diverse to thrive as they access equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities.³ Ultimately, gender equality is a precondition to sustainable development, peace and security. It is the foundation for preventing gender-based violence and essential for economic prosperity. Countries with higher levels of gender equality, have higher rates of good health, are more prosperous and safer.

For girls, young women and gender diverse young people, advances in gender equality can provide opportunities that were previously only enjoyed by men, it can drive changes in consent, make public and private spaces safer and create more respectful learning and work environments.

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

We have a dream. She has a plan.

Put simply, we're the charity for girls' equality. We tackle the root causes of poverty, support communities through crisis, campaign for gender equality and help governments do what's right for children and particularly for girls. We believe a better world is possible. An equal world; a world where all children can live happy and healthy lives, and where girls can take their rightful place as equals.



A TEN-YEAR SNAPSHOT OF GIRLS' RIGHTS IN AUSTRALIA

10,000

The amount of signatures on the successful 2018 grassroots campaign to abolish calling on the Australian Government to remove the GST from period products. The campaign was led by young feminist Subeta Vimalarajah.

43RD

Where Australia sits on the WEF global gender gap index – falling from 25th spot in 2012

1 IN 5

The number of Australians who are forced to use unsuitable alternatives because they could not afford pads, tampons or menstrual cups

69%

The amount of Australian young women who said climate change and the environment were their top priorities for politicians to tackle. Globally, that number was 52%

1 IN 10

The number of young Australian women and gender diverse people who believe Parliament is a safe place to work

53%

Of young Australian women said decisions by their political leaders made them feel stressed or anxious, compared to 43% globally

42%

The amount of young Australian women aged 18-24 who felt unsafe walking at night because of the risk of sexual harassment.

1 IN 3

of young women in Sydney who have experienced street harassment, reported experiencing anxiety, depression or ongoing mental health issues as a direct result.

\$30M

The amount of money the NSW Government this year announced it would dedicate to re-designing Sydney to be more safe for women and girls – this was the result of tireless advocacy from young people

UNACCEPTABLE SETBACKS

- Adolescent girls and young women have had the highest rates of hospitalisation from intentional self-harm across all age groups since 2012.⁵
- Anxiety and depressive disorders are the most common disorder amongst girls. This is consistent with girls' own views - in the 2022 Mission Australia Survey of 20,000 adolescent aged 15-19, girls identified coping with stress and mental health as the issues of most personal concern to them.⁶
- 48.1% of transgender and gender diverse people aged 14 to 25 reported that they had attempted suicide in their lifetime and 62.1% of LGBTIQ+ young people aged 14 to 21 reported having self-harmed.⁷
- Rates of sexual assault have increased over the decade by 22%. In 2019, the rates of sexual assault for girls and young women aged 15-19 were nine times higher than for males of that age. This is also known to be significantly underreported.⁸
- Rates of gender-based violence are disproportionately higher amongst First Nations girls and young women than the non-Indigenous population. Alarming, 3 in every 5 First Nations women have experienced physical or sexual violence. Girls aged 10-14 are the greatest number of victims of sexual violence, followed by young women aged 15-24. First Nations women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence than non-Indigenous women and 11 times more likely to die due to assault.
- The 2018 Australian Trans and Gender Diverse Sexual Health survey found 53% of participants reported experiencing sexual violence or coercion, well above the national average.⁹
- Women with disabilities were 40% more likely to be victims of family violence than women without disabilities and more than 70% of women with disabilities have had violent sexual encounters in their lifetime.¹⁰

DATA FAILS TO REFLECT THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

In preparing this report it was evident that large gaps exist in Australia's data ecosystem in relation to young people and their lived reality. Recent examples such as the ABS handling of census data on non-binary people demonstrates how our national data system does not reflect the lived realities and intersecting identities of young people.

Data is rarely disaggregated to include intersectional issues of race, ethnicity, disability, sexual identity and gender identity. Without a rich data ecosystem, Australia will never be able to genuinely meet the needs and reflect the views of **all** Australian girls, young women and gender diverse young people.

PROGRESS

The number of adolescent pregnancies (ages 15-19) has halved in the last decade from close to 11,000 in 2012 to 5,600 in 2019.⁴

The number of women in the House of Representatives has increased from 25% in 2012 to 38% in 2022.¹¹ Based on current progress, it will take another decade for equal representation in the House.¹²

The number of Parliamentarians with Asian heritage has increased from 0.44% in 2012 (one person) to 4.4% in 2022.¹³ Based on current progress, it will take another 33 years for Parliament to reflect the diversity of the Australian community (17.4% have Asian heritage).¹⁴

In the area of education, the last ten years has seen important progress being made in access to education and educational outcomes for First Nations girls and young women. In 2014-15, almost half (47%) of First Nations women aged 15 years and over, achieved a certificate, diploma or degree (almost double the numbers from 2008). In 2018-2019, 66% of First Nations young people had attained Year 12 or equivalent. However, far more needs to be done to ensure First Nations young people have equal access to education.



1 IN 5

The number of Australians who are forced to use unsuitable alternatives because they could not afford pads, tampons or menstrual cups

HOW DOES AUSTRALIA FARE ON GENDER EQUALITY GLOBALLY?

According to the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, Australia fell from 25th in the world in 2012 to 43rd in 2022. This is compared to New Zealand, who in 2022, ranked 4th in the world.

According to the 2022 SDG Gender Equality Index released by Equal Measures Australia came 14th globally, the same position it was ranked in 2019 and lagging behind New Zealand, Ireland and Spain.



FIRST NATIONS GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

This special snapshot of the state of rights for First Nations' girls, young women and gender diverse young people comes at an important time – a decade on from the 2012 Final Report of the Expert Panel on the Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution, five years on from the Uluru Statement of the Heart and amidst strong and urgent calls for an Indigenous Voice for Parliament.

Over the last decade we have seen First Nations girls, young women and gender diverse people lead in all spaces and on all issues. Bundjalung woman, Amelia Telford, has been a prominent youth climate change activist and up until this year, National Director of Seed, Australia's first Indigenous Youth Climate Network. Vanessa Turnbull-Roberts, also a Bundjalung woman, who was forcibly removed from her family at the age of 11, is a fierce advocate for the end of forced removal of First Nation's children. She was the winner of the 2019 Young People's Human Rights Medal. Tarneen Onus-Williams is a proud Gunditjmarra, Bindal, Yorta Yorta and Torres Strait Islander person and campaign activist organising around Invasion Day, Blak Deaths in Custody and Stop the Forced Closures of Aboriginal Communities.

Deep, systemic and intersecting challenges exist for young First Nations' people in Australia. Some progress has been made in the last decade in the areas of education and leadership however in other areas, First Nations girls, young women and gender

diverse people are disproportionately impacted. The entrenched barriers and their intersectional experiences place them far behind Australia's non-Indigenous population in the realisation of their rights.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 2020 report, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report*, is a leading report reflecting First Nation's girls and women's voices and calls for action. The report "*describes how First Nations women carry knowledge about sustaining existence, are doing the backbone work of society—caring for children, family and Country—and are at the forefront of driving economic and social change.*"¹⁵

In 2022, the AHRC released an Implementation Framework for the report – a blueprint for all decision-makers in designing systems of gender equality and justice for First Nations' girls and young women.¹⁶

The report captured some of the key data on progress for First Nations girls in the last decade:¹⁷

In the area of education, the last ten years has seen important progress being made in access to education and educational outcomes for First Nations girls and young women. In 2014–15, almost half (47%) of First Nations women aged 15 years and over, achieved a certificate, diploma or degree (almost double the numbers from 2008). In 2018–2019, 66% of First Nations young people had attained Year 12 or equivalent.

However, the rates of gender-based violence are disproportionately higher amongst First Nations girls and young women than the non-Indigenous population. Alarming, 3 in every 5 First Nations women have experienced physical or sexual violence. Girls aged 10-14 are the greatest number of victims of sexual violence, followed by young women aged 15-24.¹⁸ First Nations women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence than non-Indigenous women and 11 times more likely to die due to assault.

Data suggests that girls and young women experience high levels of anxiety and depression – more so than First Nations boys and young men and the non-Indigenous population.



47%

of First Nations women aged 15 years and over achieved a certificate, diploma or degree in 2015 (almost double the numbers since 2008)

A TIMELINE OF DEFINING MOMENTS

FOR GIRLS' HUMAN RIGHTS IN AUSTRALIA FROM 2012-2022

2012

- First and only female Prime Minister in Australia
- Prime Minister, Julia Gillard's misogyny speech in Parliament
- Final Report of the Expert Panel on the Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution



2013

- The Marriage Equality Act 2013 is passed in the ACT, making it the first state or territory to legalise same-sex marriage in Australia
- Transgender children no longer require Family Court approval to access puberty blockers
- First Indigenous woman (Nova Peris) elected to the Senate



2014

- Victoria announced the first Royal Commission into Family Violence
- Queensland established the Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence

2015

- Office of the eSafety Commissioner established to regulate online safety in Australia

2016

- First Indigenous woman (Linda Burney) elected to the House of Representatives



2017

- Uluru Statement from the Heart first released
- Launch of Women's Australian Football League
- The Marriage Equality Act 2017 is passed in Australia after a national referendum



2018

- First Australian School Strike 4 Climate
- The Tampon Tax repealed by Australian Parliament

2019

- Equal gender representation in the Australian Senate
- Australian Football Women's League Player, Tayla Harris the subject of obscene and violent comments after Channel 7 posted a photo of her kicking for goal in an AFWL match
- Largest climate protests in Australia's history during School Strike 4 Climate



2020

- Victorian Government announces free period products in all public schools in Victoria

2021

- Brittney Higgins speaks publicly for the first time about her alleged rape in Parliament House
- Women's March4Justice rallies held across the country
- Sex Discrimination Commissioner's report on making Parliament a safe workplace delivered

2022

- Education Ministers around Australia agree to mandate age-appropriate consent and respectful relationships education from foundation to year 10 in all Australian schools
- Highest numbers of Parliamentarians from First Nations and Asian backgrounds elected to the 47th Parliament
- The leadership and activism of young women such as Chanel Contos – who placed consent firmly on the national agenda with her Teach Us Consent campaign – led to Education Ministers around Australia agreeing to mandate age-appropriate consent and respectful relationships education from foundation to year 10 in all Australian schools.



A DECADE OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FIGHTING FOR THEIR RIGHTS

Though the snapshot of girls' rights in Australia paints a grim picture of what young people have experienced in the last ten years, it is not the whole story. The last decade has been marked by history-shaping world and national events that have shifted our values, our cultural and social norms as well our laws and policies. Leading the fight for gender equality and justice are young, intersectional feminists whose leadership and courage have led to real and meaningful changes across all issues that affect girls, young women and gender diverse young people. Even where change has not occurred, the tireless advocacy and activism of young people have laid bare the inequities in Australia's structures and systems and laid the foundation for change into the future.

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AND PERIOD POVERTY

The last ten years has seen important gains for young Australians in addressing period poverty. A long-standing campaign to remove a goods and services tax (GST) on tampons and sanitary pads led to a major win in October 2018 when the then Coalition Government committed to removing the GST on period products. The win was thanks to the tireless advocacy of young feminist leaders such as Subeta Vimalarajah who launched an online petition that gathered over 100,000 signatures. The then University of Sydney student led a campaign of activism and alongside organisations such as Share the Dignity, were able to hold decision-makers to account and drive change.¹⁹

A 2021 survey by Share the Dignity found that period poverty continues to exist, with people in regional Australia as well as people from First Nations, asylum seeker, refugee and migrant backgrounds being most disadvantaged. It revealed that 1 in 5 Australians are forced to use unsuitable alternatives because they could not afford pads, tampons or menstrual cups.²⁰ Almost half of all 125,000 survey participants said they missed at least one day of school because of their period.²¹ In order to promote greater access, state and territory governments across Australia have made period products free to high school students - with Victoria, the first state to do so in 2020 and Western Australia the last, in August 2022.

For girls, young women, gender diverse and intersex people with disabilities, the fight for reproductive justice continues. Despite forced sterilisation being recognised as a form of torture by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and as a form of violence by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the practice continues legally in Australia today.²² Adolescent girls, young women and intersex people are most at risk of forced sterilisation and routinely denied alternative high quality and inclusive support for their sexual and menstrual health.²³ The issue has been closely examined by Senate Committees and the recent Royal Commission into People with Disabilities and despite recommendations for reform, no progress has been made to eliminate this inhumane practice.



TACKLING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ALL ITS FORMS

Over the last ten years, Australia has seen a growing and powerful movement to tackle all forms of violence against girls and young women. From family violence, through to street harassment, online abuse, sexual consent and the Australian #MeToo movement, the calls for change have grown louder and more urgent and have been heard by decision-makers across the country and in all spaces.

The epidemic of intimate partner violence and sexual assault in Australia has been in sharp focus with the 2014 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence and the Queensland Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence alongside numerous Parliamentary enquiries.

The raft of recommendations led to important family violence and sexual assault reforms, some of which included comprehensive consent and respectful relationships education for young people. The last decade has seen a range of respectful relationships programs being offered to young people - for example, since 2018, the Victorian Government mandated Respectful Relationships as a core component of curriculum in Victorian schools. However, a national, consistent and comprehensive curriculum approach has been lacking.

The leadership and activism of young women such as Chanel Contos has placed this issue firmly on the national agenda. As a student and activist, in 2021 she launched an online platform Teach Us Consent, which collected more than 6,600 stories of sexual assault.²⁴ She also launched an online petition calling on Education Ministers to adopt the new Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) curriculum and to go beyond this, to provide more holistic consent education covering “rape culture, grooming, sexual coercion, slut shaming, toxic masculinity, queer sex education, enthusiastic consent, and porn literacy.”²⁵ In February 2022, Education Ministers around Australia agreed to mandate age-appropriate consent and respectful relationships education from foundation to year 10 in all Australian schools.²⁶

Plan International Activist, Libby Payne, teaches young people consent and respectful relationships. The issue of online harassment and abuse as a form of GBV has emerged over the last decade as one of the most significant threats to the safety and well-being of girls, young women and gender diverse people.



“IT IS SO IMPORTANT THAT YOUNG PEOPLE – GIRLS, YOUNG WOMEN AND NONBINARY FOLKS IN PARTICULAR – ARE INVOLVED IN CREATING AND LEADING CHANGE AROUND THE ISSUES THAT IMPACT THEM. I FEEL PRIVILEGED TO BE ABLE TO GO INTO SCHOOLS AND HOLD SPACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO DISCUSS TOPICS AROUND SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS THAT THEY DON’T USUALLY GET TO EXPLORE IN A NORMAL SCHOOL DAY.”

– LIBBY PAYNE

The issue has grown in prominence over the years as high profile, young intersectional feminists such as Yasmin Abdel-Magied and Nyadol Nyuon OAM have spoken out about the violent and abusive messages they receive online and the personal and professional impacts these have had on their lives.²⁷ Nyadol Nyuon OAM gave evidence to a Parliamentary Committee examining the Social Media (Anti-Trolling) Bill 2022, outlining the sustained, racist and gendered attacks she has been subject to.²⁸ In 2019, Australian Football Women’s League Player, Tayla Harris was the subject of obscene and violent comments after Channel 7 posted a photo of her kicking for goal in an AFWL match.²⁹

Despite the establishment of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) in 2015 as Australia’s national independent regulator and educator for online safety, little progress has been made to make online spaces safe for girls and young women. In early 2022, the then Coalition Government introduced the Social Media (Anti-Trolling) Bill 2022. The Bill has now lapsed and there is uncertainty as to whether the new Labor Government will pursue this avenue for making online spaces in Australia safer.

SNAPSHOT: STREET HARASSMENT

Plan International has over the last ten years worked with girls, young women and gender diverse activists and their communities to reclaim public spaces and end street harassment in cities including Kampala, Delhi, Hanoi and Lima through its Safer Cities Program.

This year, a PIA survey revealed that 42% of young women aged 18-24 felt unsafe walking at night because of the risk of sexual harassment, and the numbers were significantly higher for young women with a disability. For this cohort, more than a quarter said they felt less safe now than before COVID-19 changed the world.³⁰

Street harassment has a real impact on the well-being of survivors. A 2018 PIA survey of girls in Sydney aged 18-25 found that 1 in 3 girls who have been harassed once a month or more, reported experiencing anxiety, depression or ongoing mental health issues as a direct result.³¹

In response, PIA together with XYX Lab and Crowdspot, launched Free to Be in 2018 - an online crowd-mapping tool enabling young women in Sydney, Delhi, Kampala, Lima and Madrid to identify and share public spaces that made them feel uneasy and scared, or happy and safe. It empowered young women in Sydney and other cities to call out unsafe experiences and geographically identify spaces where change needed to occur.

As a result of this research, the report *Unsafe in the City* was launched for IDG 2018. Its data from 21,000 girls and women across the globe and their recommendations provided decision-makers with a clear roadmap for addressing street harassment in their cities.

In Australia, PIA's Youth Activists worked closely with governments, police and transport authorities such as the Greater Sydney Commission and Victoria Police to co-design solutions that would meet the needs of girls and young women. Our youth activists took key stakeholders on immersive walks around the city, looking at 'hot spots' and leading activities based on the data and young women's stories.



The tireless advocacy of our youth activists has led to important wins in Australia.

In March 2020 a new Women's Safety Charter, designed to guide efforts by city-makers and government organisations to make Greater Sydney a safer place for girls and women, was launched by the Greater Sydney Commission in collaboration with Transport for NSW and the Committee for Sydney.

Directly after the Charter launch, Transport for NSW threw their weight behind it by announcing the 'Safety After Dark' Innovation Challenge to find new and effective ways to combat the problem of harassment on public transport.

In July 2022, the NSW Government announced a \$30 million investment into 10 pilot projects to co-design parts of the city with girls and women and address street harassment. As a result, public spaces, parklands and public transport in NSW will undergo a safety overhaul in consultation with girls and young women.

Also in July 2022, Victoria Police announced the launch of a new text-based reporting tool to make reporting street harassment and abuse safer, and easier for young women.

Despite these wins, we know that change is slow and ending street harassment requires long term advocacy and systemic change. Experiences of safety in public spaces is impacted not only by gender, but also by race, religion, body size, sexuality and disability and continued advocacy is needed to ensure that all experiences of the city are taken into account when designing anti-street harassment initiatives.

This year, our incredible Youth Activists are delivering a unique and powerful interactive training to help people recognise and address street harassment when they see it, as part of the global Stand Up Against Street Harassment campaign, powered by L'Oreal Paris.



AN INCLUSIVE AND SAFE PARLIAMENT

In 2012, Australia's first and only female Prime Minister, Julie Gillard, set Australian politics on fire and made world news with her unforgettable misogyny speech, a speech which gave words to the fury and frustration of many Australians. The then Prime Minister's treatment in Parliament was deeply rooted in sexism – with her being labelled amongst other things as “deliberately barren” by the late Senator Bill Heffernan and “a tax-payer funded nanny” by then MP, Sophie Mirabella.

The toxic sexism of Parliament was felt by women on all sides of politics with Julia Banks resigning from the Liberal Party claiming sexism and bullying.³² In 2019, Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young won a defamation case against Liberal Democrat Senator David Leyonhjelm who had levelled numerous sexist slurs against her inside and outside of Parliament and was ordered to pay \$120,000 in damages (a subsequent appeal by him was unsuccessful).³³

Federal Parliament's #MeToo moment arrived in February 2019, when Brittney Higgins publicly alleged that she had been raped by a fellow staffer in 2019 while working in Senator Linda Reynolds office. Her harrowing story led to countless numbers of other women coming forward to share their own stories of sexual harassment and assault in Parliament. It was a pivotal moment which drove the Women's Marches 4 Justice across the country with an estimated 110,000 people marching across states and territories to demand change and safety for women and girls.³⁴

As a response, the then Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, commissioned the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, to undertake a review of workplace culture in Federal Parliament.

The *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (2021)* report found that women in Federal Parliamentary workplaces experienced sexual harassment at a much higher rates (40%) than men (26%) and female Parliamentarians experienced higher rates again, with 63%

reporting sexual harassment compared to 24% of male Parliamentarians.³⁵ The review had 23 recommendations calling for specific actions to increase representation of First Nations people, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people and people from CALD backgrounds, the establishment of an Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission and mandatory best practice training for parliamentarians and staff, focusing on respectful workplace behaviour.

Representation in Parliament is an indicator of progress on gender equality in Australia. Over the last decade some progress has been made but it has been unsatisfactorily slow, particularly in the numbers of women in the House of Representatives. Achieving diversity of religion, disability, race and sexual and gender identity has been even slower. In 2012 women made up only 29% of Federal Parliamentarians in that year.³⁶ There was only one Indigenous Parliamentarian in (Ken Wyatt MP) and only one overseas born MP of Asian heritage – Penny Wong MP.³⁷

In 2022, after the last Federal election in May, the diversity of Parliament changed more than it has in the last decade. There are now ten Parliamentarians who have Asian heritage including the first Afghan-born Parliamentarian – Senator Fatima Payman.³⁸ There are currently 10 Parliamentarians who identify as LGBTIQ+.³⁹ There is only one Parliamentarian – Senator Jordan Steele-John who identifies as having a disability, which is not at all reflective of the 18% of the Australian population who identify as having a disability.⁴⁰ On current progress it will take another 400 years for Parliament to have the same percentage of people with disabilities as the Australia population.⁴¹

1 IN 10

The number of young Australian women and gender diverse people who believe Parliament is a safe place to work.





SNAPSHOT – INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IN PARLIAMENT

Plan International Australia has, over the last decade, amplified the leadership aspirations of girls and young women in Australia with our Youth Activists and IDG ‘Take-Overs’.

Together with girls and young women activists, we have highlighted the barriers to leadership for our next generation. Our focus on Parliament and work with Parliamentarians has shone a spotlight on the lack of diversity in Parliament, the unsafe nature of Parliament as a workplace and the ways in which these factors are barriers for girls, young women and gender diverse people to aspire to and pursue political careers and leadership opportunities.

In 2017, PIA surveyed more than 2000 Australian girls and young women aged 10-25-years old about their aspirations for the future. The *She Can Lead: Young people in Australia share their views on politics* report showed that more than half of young women (56%) thought female politicians were treated unfairly by their male colleagues. One in three young men surveyed also agreed this was the case. Only 2% of girls aged 10-14 listed politics as a future career option, rising to 5% for girls 15-17 and then dropping to 0% of young women aged 18-25.

The *She Can Lead* report was handed to then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, along with the Leader of The Australian Greens, Leader of the Xenophon team and Deputy Leader of the Labor party, in Canberra by a group of 17 young women who participated in Plan International’s Parliamentary Takeover program in 2017.

After Parliament’s #MeToo moment, the political aspirations of young people were even further diminished. A PIA survey of over 1000 girls and young women in 2022 found that 60% of young women said they do not believe Parliament is a more

safe or equal place. One third of CALD young women said they would never consider politics because of their cultural or ethnic background and because our Parliament is not diverse enough and 42% of those who identified as LGBTIQ+ said their reluctance to seek a political job stemmed from perceived homophobia and transphobia in Parliament.⁴²

In the lead up to the May 2022 Federal election our Youth Activists launched a campaign for greater diversity in Australia’s Parliament calling on all political parties to set targets for gender and ethnic representation as well as the full implementation of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner’s 2021 report in the next 18 months.

The May 2022 election in Australia did herald some important progress in diversity that reflects how targets and meaningful practices of inclusion by political parties can bring about systemic change. The highest number of women and First Nations Parliamentarians were elected to Parliament. The first Afghan-born Senator was elected, Senator Fatima Payman. Australia now has two Ministers, for the first time ever, who identify as Muslim (Anne Aly MP and Ed Husic MP).⁴³

However, there is much work still to do to reflect the diversity of Australia’s population – only 4.4% of MPs in Parliament identify as having an Asian background compared to 18% of the population. Zero Parliamentarians have shared that they are transgender, non-binary or gender diverse.

The recent racial vilification of Senator Mehreen Faruqi by Senator Pauline Hanson and the consequent online abuse targeted at Senator Faruqi highlights just how unsafe Parliament continues to be for people from CALD, First Nations and LGBTIQ+ backgrounds.

CLIMATE CHANGE

We cannot reflect on the last ten years of girls' rights without reflecting on the role girls, young women and gender diverse young people have played in spearheading the movement to end climate change globally and here in Australia. In 2018, Greta Thunberg's regular Friday protests outside the Swedish Parliament, caught the attention of the world and seeded School Strike 4 Climate. In Australia, girls and young women were already at the forefront of climate activism.

The first of the School Strikes 4 Climate in 2018 saw thousands of children and young people protest in capital cities and regional centres.⁴⁴ Leading the protests were young intersectional climate change activists including then high school student Varsha Yajman – a powerful and prominent voice who has since gone on to found the SAPNA South Asian Climate Solidarity Network. In 2019, Australia hosted the biggest climate protests in its history with estimates of up to 350,000 students and allies marching to demand justice.⁴⁵

First Nations voices have also been prominent in the climate change movement in Australia with young women including Bundjalung woman, Amelia Telford, leading Seed and Gudanji Wakaja woman, Rikki Dank, campaigning against fracking in her home of Borroloola in the Northern Territory as well as advocating for First Nations voices and recommendations at the COP26 climate summit.⁴⁶

In 2020, a group of eight teenagers including Anjali Sharma issued a class action to stop the then Minister for the Environment, Sussan Ley, from approving an expansion to the coalmine Vickery, near Gunnedah in NSW. Though overturned on appeal, the original decision found that the Federal Government had a duty of care to children and young people to mitigate the impacts of climate change. The class action gave rise to many more class actions across the world, led by young litigants, demanding accountability from their governments for climate change.

Australia and its Pacific neighbours have seen the impacts of climate change more intensely over the last ten years. Most recent climate-driven extreme weather events such as the Lismore and larger Queensland/NSW floods in 2022, the 2019 bushfires



across Victoria, the ACT and NSW underpin the devastating impact of fires on communities and Australia's flora and fauna.

Australia ratified the Paris Agreement on Climate Change on 10 November 2016. Despite the clear and present evidence of climate change, Australia's Coalition Federal Government (prior to the May 2022 election) had dragged its feet on its global and national commitments. In the Sustainable Development Report 2021, Australia was ranked last out of 193 UN member states for action taken to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

In the context of Australia's aid and development program, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade launched its Climate Change Action Strategy (2020-2025) in November 2019. DFAT's initiatives over the last decade have included the establishment of the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) and an increase in its climate finance commitment to \$2 billion for neighbouring countries over 2020-25.⁴⁷ Australia's climate finance commitments are yet to be fully realised and Australia still falls significantly short of its global fair share of climate finance funding. There is also much work for DFAT to do to apply a strong gender and intersectional lens to ensure that girls, young women and gender diverse young people benefit from Australia's climate change investments in aid and development.

69%

The amount of Australian young women who said climate change and the environment were their top priorities for politicians to tackle. Globally, that number was 52%

MEET YASMIN POOLE

This decade of defining moments for girls' rights would not have been possible without the leadership of young women such as Yasmin Poole. We first met Yasmin in 2017. Since then, Yasmin has been an incredible National Ambassador for Plan International – advocating for girls' rights here in Australia and around the world. We interviewed Yasmin on her leadership and girls' rights in Australia. Here's what she had to say:

What motivates you to speak out on issues that impact girls and young women in all their diversity?

I speak out because I can't look away. When I was young, I vividly remember witnessing racism and sexism against my mother. At the time, I carried these experiences with feelings of shame and hopelessness. I feel agency by sharing my own story and helping to amplify the realities of girls and young women that are so often left on the sidelines. I am equal parts fascinated and determined to change the systemic drivers that harm us while privileging others.

From your perspective what have been the most pressing and urgent issues for girls and young women in the last ten years?

So many. In Australia, there has been a really powerful conversation around sexual harassment and abuse. In part, that conversation was made possible because of amazing feminists who have come before. But I also think it was a watershed moment for young women speaking up, like Brittany Higgins, Grace Tame, Dhanya Mani and Chanel Contos. Another issue is climate change which is uniquely affecting girls and young women around the world. For example, young women are less likely to receive an education following a natural disaster as they are expected to help out in the home. A final issue is how female dominated industries are paid far less compared to male dominated industries, such



as aged care, education and early childhood. This creates a systemic power imbalance where young women enter this pipeline, and over time we see that women have less financial mobility than men, and consequently less power and opportunity.

What have been the 3 most important and pivotal moments in the last ten years for girls' rights?

That's a tough one. I would say that three moments that changed the conversation around girls' rights was the March4Justice movement in front of Parliament, where young women's voices were front and centre. Julia Gillard's speech on misogyny also transformed thinking around sexism in politics and showed that we can and should call it out. The third moment would be Malala Yousafzai winning the Nobel Peace Prize for her activism around girls' education. She inspired me when I was in high school and showed what was possible when you speak up.

Can you identify the big wins for girls and gender equality in the last ten years?

A big win is that we have more women than ever in Parliament, including First Nations and culturally diverse women. There is more work to go, but I believe this representation will help to evolve and advance our national conversations around intersectional gender equality. Other big wins were the commitment to mandatory consent education and law reform around enthusiastic consent. I think the pandemic also led to a lot more conversations about systemic disadvantage and intersectionality, because we saw how different communities were differently harmed. I'm hopeful that those conversations will lead to cultural and political change.

What do you see as the emerging issues for girls and young women in the next decade?

Climate change will continue to harm girls and young women around the globe with greater severity and reach. I think there will be more conversations about how social media algorithms are amplifying misogyny and discrimination, and I hope that social media platforms are held accountable. I also think younger generations are resonating with intersectionality rather than just focusing on gender, which will transform our feminist priorities and challenge governments, businesses, and other decision-making bodies to change their language.

What are you hopeful about when you think about the future of gender equality in Australia?

I believe that Australia has a robust democratic system and creating change here is far more possible compared to other countries where activists must literally put their lives on the line to call for change. Of course, there are many things that harm of democracy, from Australia's colonial history and unwillingness to engage in truth telling to how our gender equality movement continues to centre

white and wealthy women. But I do believe that many people are listening and, as a country, we are institutionally flexible enough to change and evolve.

What helps you to keep fighting and advocating for young people and gender equality?

Because I know that minds can be changed.

I am often in spaces where I am the only person who looks like me: the only young person, the only young woman, the only Asian-Australian. I am privileged to have this platform, and really feel a responsibility to advocate for young women and demonstrate that our voices should be part of this debate. The gender equality movement goes beyond me, or any one person. This movement is for all of us: previous generations, our generations, generations to come. Transformation happens when we collectively speak up.

What final message do you have for all decision-makers about girls rights?

Girls are watching you. We are smart, we are informed, and we deeply care about our future. We will eventually vote. Girls' voices are powerful. We have unique visions for creating a better future and can use our lived experience to spotlight the barriers that girls are facing across systems like education and employment. Platform us, hear us and see us – in our diversity.

What final message do you have for girls and young women in Australia who are advocating for their rights?

Your voice matters and your experiences matter. You matter, and we need you in this conversation.

SNAPSHOT – GIRLS' EDUCATION TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

Over the last decade, Plan International has shone a light on the gendered impacts of climate change and amplified the voices of girls and young women calling for more action by the Australian Government, both nationally and internationally (through its aid and development program). Together with other leading organisations such as the Malala Fund, Plan International has identified girls' education as one of the single, most powerful interventions to address climate change.

Girls, young women and gender diverse young people bear some of the worst impacts of climate change. Climate change related natural disasters increase girls' risk of gender-based violence – in particular child marriage, human trafficking and intimate partner and sexual violence.⁴⁸ Climate change disproportionately impacts girls and young with intersectional experiences (such as those identifying as LGBTIQ+, First Nations or having a disability) and they are the least likely to access food, shelter and relief assistance during a climate change emergency – further threatening their livelihoods and well-being. They are also the first to lose their education – pulled out of school to assist with rebuilding homes, caring for younger siblings or being forced into early marriage/unions.

A 2017 Brookings Institute study suggests that for every additional year of schooling a girl receives on average, her country's resilience to climate disasters can be expected to

improve by 3.2 points.⁴⁹ According to UNESCO, educating girls could result in a massive reduction in emissions of 51.48 gigatons by 2050.⁵⁰

Girls, young women and gender diverse young people in Australia have identified climate change as their number one issue of concern. With this, they have also identified climate-change anxiety as being a threat to their health and well-being.

Plan International Australia, together with our Youth Activists and supporters, has strongly advocated for greater accountability and investment by the Australian Government through its aid and development program with a strong focus on girls' education.

In November 2021, PIA released its report, Raising our voice: Funding Climate Education and Youth Leadership in SE Asia and the Pacific, which found that while 25% of Australia Overseas Development Assistance went to projects that targeted climate change, none of this spending was targeted at programs that identified climate change as a principal goal. It also found that there was zero funding targeted at climate change education in schools.⁵¹

Plan International, alongside young climate change activists, to ensure that girls' education is a leading strategy for addressing climate change around the globe.

53%

Of young Australian women said decisions by their political leaders made them feel stressed or anxious, compared to 43% globally.





LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

THE NEXT DECADE AND BEYOND

AS THIS REPORT HAS DEMONSTRATED, THE LAST DECADE HAS SEEN SIGNIFICANT, HISTORY SHAPING MOMENTS IN AUSTRALIA. GIRLS, YOUNG WOMEN AND GENDER DIVERSE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE BEEN AT THE FRONT OF THESE CHANGES, LEADING, SPEAKING OUT AND SHAPING THE FUTURE.

However, the data shows us that progress is slow. At times, painstakingly slow.

Diversity in Parliament has made small, positive gains, however there is still so much to do to ensure our Parliaments across Australia reflect the diversity of our population. In particular, as we move forward it is critical that our Parliaments have younger representatives to help shape policy and decision-making. The number of Parliamentarians with disability must increase to reflect the experiences of people with disability. Into the future, girls and young women will be watching closely as to how Parliament works to implement the Set the Standard recommendations. Will Parliament become a more respectful and safer workplace?

As we can see from this report, gender-based violence continues to be prevalent in private and public spaces. The fight continues to ensure that girls, young women and gender diverse young people's experiences and needs are centred in responses to violence, that early intervention and primary preventions strategies genuinely reflect the reality of their lives.

Lastly, we are being rapidly being propelled towards a future that is unsustainable on our planet. Without a concerted effort to employ real and meaningful strategies to combat climate change, we will leave nothing to our future generations. Girls and young women will, no doubt, continue to be the leaders and advocates holding governments to account and calling for a more sustainable future.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE THE STATE OF THE WORLD TO LOOK LIKE FOR ALL GIRLS BY 2032?



IN TEN YEARS FROM NOW, I WOULD REALLY LIKE TO SEE A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF ONLINE VIOLENCE INCIDENTS FOR YOUNG WOMEN. SOCIAL MEDIA SHOULD BE A WELCOMING AND SAFE-SPACE FOR WOMEN TO OPENLY EXPRESS THEMSELVES.

— Kayshini, Plan International Australia youth activist



I HOPE GIRLS ACROSS THE GLOBE FEEL MORE INCLUDED, REPRESENTED AND ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS. A WORLD THAT CHAMPIONS FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND TREATS THEM AS EQUALS. A WORLD WHERE GENDER NORMS AND THE FEAR OF BEING SUBJECTED TO SEXISM, MISOGYNY AND RACISM ARE NOT HOLDING GIRLS BACK.

— Grace, Plan International Australia youth activist





I HOPE THAT 10 YEARS FROM NOW, EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, OUTCOMES, AND RIGHTS WOULD EXIST FOR ALL PEOPLE REGARDLESS OF GENDER IDENTITY - THAT GIRLS AND GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE CAN LIVE WITHOUT BARRIERS THAT EXIST SOLELY BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDER.

— Olivia Causer, Plan International Australia youth activist

I WOULD LIKE THE WORLD TO FULLY SUPPORT GIRLS AND WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL RIGHTS ESPECIALLY IN HEALTH CARE. I WANT WOMEN, GIRLS, TRANS PEOPLE AND GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE TO BE SAFE AND NOT BE SUBJECTED TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS WELL AS GENDERED VIOLENCE. I WANT LAWS AND POLICIES TO ACTUALLY HOLD PERPETRATORS ACCOUNTABLE INSTEAD OF BLAMING VICTIMS. I WANT A WORLD WHERE TRANS WOMEN, TRANS MEN AND GENDER DIVERSE/GENDER NON-CONFORMING PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHTS TO ACCESS GENDER AFFIRMATION THERAPY WHICH SHOULD BE LEGAL IN ALL NATIONS. I WANT A WORLD WHERE CONVERSION THERAPY IS BANNED IN ALL NATIONS, WHERE ABORTION IS LEGAL AND FREE FOR ALL, AND WHERE FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IS TOTALLY BANNED AND ILLEGAL.

— Jan Sam, Plan International Australia youth activist



END NOTES

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