

Plan International Australia Submission to the Gender Equality Strategy

About Plan International

Plan International is a global development and humanitarian organisation. As one of the oldest, largest and most experienced organisations in our field we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the injustices facing girls and the most marginalised children.

1. Focus on Adolescent Girls – the context

The region at the centre of Australia's aid program, the Asia-Pacific, has one of the youngest populations in the world. In Southeast Asia the population under the age of 24 is 42%, and over 50% in the Pacific. This presents incredible opportunity, yet Australia does not have a strategy for empowering adolescent girls and young women as part of its gender equality strategy.

The world is currently off track for achieving nearly all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recent analysis by Plan International (Plan) found that at the current rate of progress, the SDGs will make little difference to the lives of girls, young women and gender diverse young people. There has been limited improvement in the lives of girls and young women since 2015ⁱ.

However, girls, young women and gender diverse young people hold huge potential for driving gender equality. The [United Nation Population Fund](#) recognised that girls aged 10 are the key group whose potential, if unlocked, will create the economic and social conditions needed to achieve the SDGs. A focus on girls, particularly adolescent girls, in the new Gender Equality Strategy represents a significant opportunity to accelerate Australia's efforts towards gender equality.

Recommendations

The new Gender Equality Strategy should:

1. Tackle the root cause of gender inequality, through **investing in long term social norms change** and ensure that **adolescent girls are a specific focus** in gender equality programs.
2. Prioritise **high-quality and gender transformative education** (from early childhood education and primary, through to secondary and beyond, and especially during crisis) that addresses the barriers faced by the most marginalised girls, girls with a disability, and LGBTIQ+ young people in accessing and staying in school.
3. **Centre gender-responsive and inclusive climate mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage** responses that ensure the most marginalised and climate-affected girls are not left behind.
4. Strengthen investment in **adolescent friendly sexual and reproductive health services**, and increase investment in adolescent-girl-responsive services that engage girls at risk of child marriage.
5. Support **women and girl led organisations** and networks, with the funding flexibility to match.

2. What do girls and young women want to see from the new Gender Equality Strategy?

We surveyed over 300 girls, young women and gender diverse young people from Bangladesh, Cambodia and Timor Leste to ask them about their priorities to accelerate gender equality.

'Gender equality is [that boys] and girls have the same opportunity to access to achieve their dreams.'

- Young woman from Timor Leste

'I think gender equality is an equal access of girls and boys in every sphere. It can start from home and end in the political environment. Giving the same opportunity in education, job, in decision making, respect, the basic human rights to a girl and a boy'.

- Young woman from Bangladesh

When asked what actions should be taken to improve the rights of girls and ensure an equal future, the top five priorities were:

1. Investing in girls' leadership
2. Providing flexible, responsive and long-term funding to feminist organisations
3. More funding for girls' empowerment programs
4. Strengthening the prevention of violence against women and girls
5. Improving girls' access to education

3. The life of a girl - what would it look like to address this gap in the new Gender Equality Strategy?

3.1 Tackling the root causes of gender inequality

'Gender equality... means breaking down traditional gender roles and stereotypes, ensuring that everyone can make choices without limitations based on their gender, and addressing systemic discrimination and bias. In a gender-equal society, people are free to pursue their aspirations and potential without being held back by their gender identity.'

- Young woman from Bangladesh

The problem

Adolescence is a crucial time in the transition from childhood to adulthood and the opportunities, risks and needs for young people diverge considerably during adolescence. For adolescent girls, this time in their lives is critical.

Adolescent girls in their diversity are agents of change – within their communities, countries and globally. However, they are held back from realising their full potential as change leaders because of deep rooted and reinforced gendered norms. Adolescent girls are at particular risk of gender-based violence, exclusion from education, child, early and forced marriage, early pregnancy and labor exploitation. Yet adolescent girls are consistently overlooked and underserved in Australia's gender equality programsⁱⁱ.

The solution

The new Gender Equality Strategy should take a gender transformative approach and focus on the root causes of gender inequality, addressing patriarchal power structures and deep-rooted gendered attitudes, norms, practices and behaviours. It should include a specific focus on girls and young people, as adolescence is a critical time in which gender roles and norms intensify, and therefore a time in which young men can be engaged to address harmful gender norms and promote gender equality, alongside empowering adolescent girls.

Analysis undertaken by Plan found that in 2020, less than 5% of current investments with advancing gender equality as a principal or significant objective were directed towards adolescent girls, but almost 14% of investment could *potentially* target adolescent girlsⁱⁱⁱ. Formalising an investment target for adolescent girls would make them visible in Australia's gender equality strategy and allow more ambition into the future.

Recommendation

The new Gender Equality Strategy should:

1. Tackle the root cause of gender inequality, through investing in long term social norms change and ensure that adolescent girls are a specific focus in gender equality programs. This should include:
 - a. A target that at least 15% of investments which have the principal or significant objective of advancing gender equality, identify adolescent girls and young women as the primary beneficiaries by 2030.

- b. Establish a standard age-and-gender-disaggregated data criteria that tracks girls/boys 0-9, girls/boys 10-17, women/men 18-49 and women/men 50+, to ensure that the strategy can monitor investments that target girls and adolescent girls.
- c. Provide predictable, multi-year funding packages for long term social norms change, including working with adolescent boys and young men as agents of change to address gender-based violence.
- d. Projects with principal or significant gender equality objectives capture qualitative evidence with focus on participation of adolescent girls, young women, and young people with diverse gender identities, in co-design, implementation and evaluation of programs.

Case study: Champions of Change

22-year-old Asha is a facilitator for Plan International's Champions of Change program in Nepal. The project aims to advance gender equality through youth engagement, equipping young people with the skills to identify and challenge the harmful, negative masculinities that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

Having avoided an early marriage as a girl, Asha wants to ensure other girls understand their right to choose their own futures. Over time, the girls attending the Champions of Change sessions have become more confident and are now taking the initiative to teach their friends and family what they have learnt. "They go door-to-door and inform the parents about the impact of child marriage. Now the parents are more comfortable sending their daughters to the training sessions."

3.2 Ensuring all girls have access to a quality and inclusive education

As a girl, I was responsible for fetching water from the well, both for our daily needs and for our livestock. I had to wake up early to fetch water for bathing, cooking, and the animals' drinking. This meant I had less sleep... If we didn't get enough sleep due to waking up early for water, it would affect our learning. Fetching water in the morning made us tired, and then going to school in the heat made it even harder to concentrate on studying.

- Young woman, Indonesia

The problem

Worldwide, 130 million girls^{iv} were already out of school before the COVID-19 pandemic, a situation that has only worsened over the last few years. It is estimated that every seventh girl globally – 222 million in total – was unable to access remote learning programs when schools were closed due to COVID-19^v. Girls with a disability are more likely to be out of school compared to boys with a disability or girls without a disability^{vi}. For girls affected by crisis education is critical, providing protection, normalcy and hope for the future, however adolescent girls in conflict affected countries are 90% more likely than their peers in non-conflict settings to be out of school^{vii}.

Despite this, there is limited investment in Australia's aid budget to secondary education for girls, and investment in gender transformative education is not seen as an essential part of Australia's Gender Equality strategy. This matters, because secondary education is the point where girls are more likely to drop out of school to fulfil caring or labour responsibilities, or due to other gendered barriers.

The solution

Investment in gender transformative education should be a key pillar of the new Gender Equality Strategy. Gender-transformative education moves beyond improving access to education for girls and women. It equips and empowers stakeholders, students, teachers, communities and policy makers, to examine, challenge, and change harmful gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women^{viii}.

Addressing the barriers faced by girls to access a quality and inclusive education is a catalytic investment when it comes to progressing gender equality: the World Bank estimates that achieving universal female secondary education could virtually eliminate child marriage and reduce prevalence of adolescent pregnancy by up to 75%.

Recommendation

The new Gender Equality Strategy should:

2. Prioritise high-quality and gender transformative education (from early childhood education and primary, through to secondary and beyond, and especially during crisis) that addresses the barriers faced by the most marginalised girls, girls with a disability, and LGBTIQ+ young people in accessing and staying in school.

Case study: When girls' lead, change follows

From the Tompoun ethnic community in Cambodia's Ratanakiri Province, 17-year-old Lita regularly faced abuse from her neighbours as she walked to school each day.

"I tried to explain to my parents about my studies, but they did not listen to me, and I was not good at explaining as well," shares Lita. "I was sad and disappointed and thought my parents did not love or care about me... They wanted me to stop studying and marry a boy in the village."

Eventually Lita decided to move to the city to live with her aunt so she could continue her studies at high school. It was there that she came across a children's club which was set up with the support of Plan International's Girls Lead project which aims to empower girls, boys, and young people aged 12-24 years to promote social development and gender equality.

The children's club helped Lita turn her story into a play that was attended by parents, children and local authorities. Lita's parents also watched the performance which helped them understand their daughter's viewpoint. Now they are more supportive of Lita's desire to continue her studies.

3.3 Gender response and inclusive climate mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage responses

When I was about to go to college... I wondered if things would stay the same or if more changes would occur. When I [first] left and returned to my village, I saw that things had changed significantly. Even my own garden, which used to be green with plants, had changed. When I came back, I saw that many plants were no longer being taken care of because the soil had become infertile and the water was scarce. After that, I began to think that if I [left] again, would the garden be completely gone, and the trees too?

- Young woman, Indonesia

The problem

The climate crisis is intensifying gender inequalities, particularly for the most marginalised girls, young women and gender diverse young people who have contributed the least to the climate crisis, 20% of whom are living with a disability. An estimated 1 billion children – nearly half the world's 2.2 billion children – live in one of the 33 countries classified as “extremely high-risk” for climate and environmental shocks, with a high vulnerability due to inadequate essential services and wider climate resilience measures^{ix}.

Girls are experiencing the impact of climate change in their lives as growing inequality; hunger and food insecurity; reduced access to education and health services; erosion of livelihoods; increased gender-based violence, including child, early and forced marriage; and loss of loved ones. Although wanting to be part of solution, girls, young women and gender diverse young people are excluded from climate decision making, and one in three young girls and young women do not feel confident participating in climate governance processes^x.

The solution

Young women and girls consistently tell us that they want to be part of climate solutions that will help their communities and the world. A contemporary gender equality strategy should include specific focus on working with girls and young women to develop their technical and leadership skills in climate resilience and adaptation.

Recommendation

The new Gender Equality Strategy should:

3. Centre gender-responsive and inclusive climate mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage responses that ensure the most marginalised and climate-affected girls are not left behind. This should include:
 - a. Increased focus on market oriented, climate resilient technical, vocational and digital skill training that prepares adolescent girls and young women for work and gainfully engaged in decent and green livelihood opportunities.
 - b. Supporting girls and young women to develop their leadership skills in climate resilience and adaptation, and support them to have a seat at the table when it comes to climate decision making, both in their communities, countries, and internationally.

3.4 Sexual and reproductive health rights, and prevention of child, early and forced marriage and gender based violence

'For me it's... ensur[ing girls'] rights and respect[ing them] equally in society and in every sector, especially education and work... Most importantly the thought of child marriage and 'women are only born for pursuing their life as a housewife' should be changed...'

- Young woman, Bangladesh

The problem

Early pregnancy is the leading global cause of death among 15–19 year-old girls^{xi}. Evidence from global child protection and gender experts in [A Tough Period](#) showed that difficulties accessing menstrual products was a contributing factor to increased child, early and forced marriage and dropping out of school. Access to sexual and reproductive health services across the Asia Pacific were curtailed due to COVID-19 and this disproportionately impacted already marginalised girls, such as those living in remote and rural communities, displaced populations, girls with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBTIQ+ communities.

Of the 22 million people globally living in forced marriages, 41% are children^{xii}. Of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage, 12 are in the midst of severe humanitarian crises^{xiii}, when child marriage is used as a negative coping strategy by families to ease financial burdens or secure protection in unsafe environments.

[Globally](#), 35 per cent of women and girls 15 years or older have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence; this increases to over 70 per cent in crises-affected settings. Girls with disabilities face double discrimination due to their disability and gender, and experience even higher rates of violence. In [Goals Off Target](#), Plan International found that only two countries, Kenya and Philippines, saw the percentage of adolescent girls aged 15-19 report less physical violence in the last 12 month. A majority saw violence increase.

The solution

Adolescent girls have specific needs in relation to sexual and reproductive health, and services must be youth friendly for adolescent girls to feel comfortable in accessing them. Adolescent girls, particularly those who are most marginalised, must be central to the solution and can and should play a role in informing the design and delivery of programs as well as acting as change agents and peer educators.

When adolescent girls are able to exercise control over their own sexual and reproductive health they are in the best position possible to begin their journey into adulthood. Investments in adolescent focused sexual and reproductive health services and education are powerful vehicles for promoting empowered individuals, families and communities^{xiv}.

Alongside this, investing in quality, adolescent responsive services that engage girls at risk of child marriage or work to prevent gender based violence is critical. Girls who are educated are less likely to be married before they turn 18 and girls who remain in secondary education have fewer children and do so later in life^{xv}. When adolescent girls are able to make choices about when they get pregnant, when they are able to protect

themselves from sexually transmitted infections, and when they are able to stay healthy during their pregnancy and child birth, they have the best chance of transition to adulthood as happy and healthy young women.

Recommendation

The Gender Equality Strategy should:

4. Commit to strengthening investment in adolescent friendly sexual and reproductive health services, as well as increased investment in quality, adolescent-girl-responsive services that engage girls at risk of child marriage such as formal and non-formal education; child protection, gender based violence, social welfare, mental health and psychosocial support; livelihood support; and social protection.

3.5 Girls' leadership

'For me, gender equality is a world where all girls enjoy their rights. The state and its institutions have the duty to make sure that girls rights are protected, respected and fulfilled. At the same time, girls have the right to hold duty bearers to their promise.'

- Young woman, Timor Leste, 18-24

'Girls have the power to make changes individually and collective at all levels of their lives: with peers and family, their community, and even to influence institutions.'

- Young woman, Timor Leste, 18-24

The problem

Girls face persistent barriers to their leadership and activism, and they are often excluded from decision making spaces. These barriers include deeply rooted gender norms making it difficult to speak out on their views and aspirations; negative responses from community due to gender bias; a lack of access to education, resources and opportunities, and limited spaces in activism and advocacy for girls and young women^{xvi}. [Equal Power Now](#) found that girls and young women feel consistently excluded from politics: only half believe that people in their community view it as acceptable for girls and young women to engage in political activities, with one in five having been personally discouraged from doing so.

Young women and gender diverse young people are also more often engaging in informal and grassroots networks to drive change, especially around climate action. These groups are rarely seen as equal partners and experience structural obstacles such as a lack of access to resources, a lack of funding and other structural barriers such as shrinking civil space and patriarchal and hierarchal cultural norms.

The solution

Despite the challenges they face, 97% of girls surveyed as part of [Equal Power Now](#) thought that participating in politics was important, and 63% indicated significant civic engagement and participation through their involvement in some form of group or organisation. From signing petitions, to joining diverse youth movements and participating in youth councils, girls, young women and gender diverse young people are calling for their voices to be heard and fighting for their rights.

The Gender Equality Strategy can support them through including a focus on girls' leadership and activism, and by implementing a commitment to localization through support for girl and youth led organisations.

Recommendation

The new Gender Equality Strategy should:

5. Support women, girl and youth led organisation and networks, with the funding flexibility to match.

Contact

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References

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ⁱⁱ Plan International (2022) Girls to the Front: Time for foreign aid to see adolescent girls, available here: <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/girls-to-the-front-time-for-foreign-aid-to-see-adolescent-girls/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} See UNICEF SOWC 2022: <https://www.unicef.org/media/114636/file/SOWC-2021-full-report-English.pdf>. The global population of U18 (all children) is 2,353,672,000 --> 2.5 billion. The total number of U5 children is 677,942,000 --> 678 million. Total number of school aged children would be around 1,675,730,000 worldwide --> 1.676 billion. Let's say half (837,865 million) are girls. If 130 million girls worldwide were out of school prior to the pandemic, this is 15.5%.

^v UNICEF (2020) COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies

^{vi} <https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Leave-No-Girls-With-Disabilities-Behind-2021-eng.pdf>

^{vii} <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation>

^{viii} Plan International, Transform Education, UNGEI and UNICEF (2021), Gender Transformative Education. Available here: https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/01/unicef_plan_ungei_te_gender_transformative_education_web_copy_10dec21.pdf

^{ix} UNICEF (2021) The climate crisis is a child rights crisis.

^x Plan International Asia Pacific, 2022, The 2022 Asia-Pacific Girls' Report: Their Fight for the Future, available here: <https://plan-international.org/asia-pacific/publications/2022-asia-pacific-girls-report/>

^{xi} World Health Organisation, retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

^{xii} International Labor Organisation, 2022, Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage. Available here: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_854733.pdf

^{xiii} Niger, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali), Mozambique

^{xiv} Plan International Australia, 2018, Half A Billion Reasons

^{xv} Wodon, Q., C. Montenegro, H. Nguyen, and A. Onagoruwa (2018). Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls, The Cost of Not Educating Girls Notes Series. Washington, DC: The World Bank, p4

^{xvi} Plan International, 2022, *Asia Pacific Girls Report: their Fight for the Future*, retrieved from: <https://plan-international.org/asia-pacific/publications/2022-asia-pacific-girls-report/>