



**THE STATE OF GIRLS'
RIGHTS IN THE UK**

2019-2020

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Foreword from the Youth Advisory Panel and message from Rose Caldwell, CEO	4
Introduction and overview	7
Key findings	10
Methodology	14
Section 1: How are girls’ rights applied in the UK?	18
Human rights frameworks	20
Sustainable Development Goals	24
Section 2: What is it like to be a girl?	26
Chapter 1: Safety and public spaces	29
Chapter 2: Education and school life	36
Chapter 3: Violence, sexual health and gender identity	52
Chapter 4: Mental health and wellbeing	68
Chapter 5: Participation and political engagement	88
Chapter 6: Racism and identity	102
Section 3: ‘Leave no one behind’	110
Girls in the youth justice system	113
Gypsy and Traveller girls	118
The impact of place on girls’ lives	123
The voices of girls in Middlesbrough	147
Recommendations for action	154
Appendices	159
Endnotes	163



FOREWORD FROM THE YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL

The Youth Advisory Panel wrote in the foreword of the 2016 State of Girls' Rights Report that its findings “do not shock us”.

We are still not shocked, and we are still demanding change. Our assessment of the findings of this follow-up report echo the frustration and anger felt by girls right across the UK, as our rights continue to be neglected. Gender-based violence is experienced in every aspect of our lives, from school and online to public spaces.

Sexual harassment occurs regularly for a lot of girls. This makes girls feel vulnerable and unsafe in public areas and even in school. In our experience, we have been followed by men at night, even when we are in groups. Our teachers have had to report suspicious men loitering outside the school gates to the police. Girls have walked down the street with men behind graphically joking with their friends about how they might rape us, or even snatch us. We are angry that we are forced to question and change our normal behaviour to avoid being a target. We want to challenge unwanted attention and comments but only when it is safe to do so.

This report exposes how girls feel frustrated that facilities in their local areas fail to provide them with youth work activities and safe spaces. Many girls of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds express how they feel further excluded from public spaces, with a feeling of ‘safe zones’ vs ‘white spaces’ emerging, whereby they experience multiple forms of racism in certain places.

We believe girls' needs are undervalued and overlooked compared to boys. In school, girls observe a highly gendered and unequal environment, despite outperforming boys in attainment. We have witnessed girls being actively discouraged from choosing STEM subjects and we see sexism in our textbooks, in our sports lessons and in the design of our uniform that makes us feel exposed and uncomfortable.

It is a fact that where you live will determine the quality of mental health support you are

able to access. Girls' mental health issues are rising and their concerns are not being taken seriously. When we ask for help, we are often confronted with accusations of exaggeration or attention-seeking. Social media has so many advantages for girls but sexualisation, scrutiny and judgement of our bodies is causing anxiety and low self-esteem for many of us.

We are concerned that our voices are being disregarded and the issues that

matter to us sidelined. We want our voices to be heard and our experiences listened to, especially as we are so underrepresented in public life. We believe that boys' views and needs are prioritised over our own which stifles gender equality and the opportunities available to us. It is everyone's responsibility to advance our rights and achieve gender equality in the UK. This report has girls at its heart and is a step towards real social change.

MESSAGE FROM ROSE CALDWELL, CEO, PLAN INTERNATIONAL UK

As we enter a new decade, it seems fitting to reflect on the changing landscape for girls both here in the UK and around the world.

While injustice and inequality still undoubtedly prevail, powerful movements such as #MeToo and young activists such as Greta Thunberg have raised the critical voices of girls and forced governments and institutions to listen.

But as we enter 2020, our latest report finds girls still feel disempowered. They are frustrated and fed up with the empty messages of female empowerment, while policies and practices at both national and local level are not going far enough to tackle inequality.

We know that when girls are truly empowered, both they and their communities thrive. Plan International UK strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls around the world, including here in the UK. We recently launched a safe online space for girls,

'Girls Shout Out', while our Champions of Wales programme is empowering young people to make positive change in their attitudes towards girls.

The findings in this report should serve as a wake-up call for all politicians and decision makers. If adolescent girls are feeling undervalued, unheard and under-represented in public life, we, as a society, are letting them down.

We simply cannot continue ignoring the fact that girls still feel excluded, marginalised and overlooked and we look forward to working with those in power to end the dangerous stereotypes that are holding girls back.



Rose Caldwell



Jade, 16, Scottish Highlands



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Plan International UK strives to deliver and protect the rights of millions of children – especially girls – across Latin America, Africa and Asia. We work to give every child the same chance in life. But when you're a girl it is even harder to be safe, to be in school and to be in charge of your body.

We know that girls' rights are global; wherever in the world a girl is born or lives, she should be safe, free from abuse, and have equal rights. This is why, in 2016, we turned our attention to the UK for the first time; to play our role in ensuring girls' rights are realised here as well. Taking its lead from our global 'State of the World's Girls' reports, we conducted a comprehensive study of girls' lives and the challenges they face across the UK. Despite being one of the world's wealthiest countries, we found that the UK was failing its girls.

Four years on, some significant developments have taken place for girls in the UK. From the #MeToo movement and the rise of girl activists, to the UK's second female Prime Minister, the conversation about gender equality and the situation for girls has evolved.

Our first report catalysed our campaigns that led us to successfully influence the Women and Equalities Select Committee to scrutinise the UK against Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality; to us joining the movement to influence for statutory relationships and sex education; and to influencing the Government to recognise street harassment as a form of violence against women and girls. Our report has also informed the work of many practitioners and professionals around the country who work with girls.

This is the second report in the series. It is a comprehensive assessment of girls' lives across the UK today, highlighting both key developments in their rights as well as key ongoing challenges. Throughout this report, there are clear themes that emerge that need further investigation and research. We will endeavor to conduct further, in-depth research into some of the key issues over the next three years, and work together with others to achieve further change.

WHY GIRLS?

The Government is accountable for meeting and upholding the rights of girls and young women in the UK under multiple international rights frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) (CEDAW). The Government also committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which also applies in the UK and directly affects girls.

Despite this, the Equal Measures 2030 Gender Index finds that the UK is ranked only 17th in Europe and North America for gender equality.¹ This index includes measures aligned to 14 of the 17 SDGs. Furthermore, according to the global KidsRights Index, the UK is placed 170th out of 181 countries for children's rights.² The UK's worryingly low position is driven by poor scores on the basic principles of the UNCRC, which includes child participation and having a basic policy infrastructure for children's rights.

The situation for girls in the UK is frequently overlooked. When girls are young, they tend to be gender neutralised in services, policy and data as 'children'. They are then subsumed into the adult-focused category of 'women' without consideration for the challenges girls and young women face, especially during adolescence. We sought to fill this gap by recognising and building on the important work of children's rights organisations, girls' organisations and the Violence Against Women and Girls sector. We listened to girls across the UK, in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern

6 IN 10

girls aged 14-21 think males are treated better than females in the UK

72%

of these girls noticed this difference in the media

41%

noticed this difference at school

22%

noticed this difference at home

Ireland, to understand the extent to which they are enjoying their rights.

The girls we spoke to are fed up and frustrated with empty words of 'female empowerment'. They are told they can succeed, but they face a threat to their safety in public, online and in schools. They are told to feel confident in their bodies, but they are judged and scrutinised on every aspect of their appearance. They are told gender equality has been achieved, and yet they do not feel represented or heard in public life. In a survey we conducted in 2019, we found that six in 10 girls aged 14-21 think males are treated better than females in the UK.³ These girls noticed this difference in the media (72%), at school (41%) and even at home (22%). As in other parts of the world, we found that being a girl or young woman in the UK comes with specific challenges, and it is clear that there is still much more to be done.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The individual sections in this report provide unique insight into girls' rights. None of the sections can tell the whole story on their own, but together, they make up a comprehensive depiction of girls' lives.

The first section explains how the international human rights frameworks and the Sustainable Development Goals apply in the UK. We conducted a review of human rights treaty bodies' recommendations to the UK Government since 2016 and present a summary of priority areas that we believe are most relevant to girls.

The second section follows with the reality of girls' lives. Placing girls' voices at the forefront, we conducted participatory research, including focus groups, with girls and young women in all four nations of the UK. We reviewed girlhood literature and data from the past three years and conducted interviews

with people working directly with girls. This section highlights the issues that matter to them. The research was conducted through an intersectional lens in order to include the experiences of girls of colour. This is a qualitative study and presents a powerful snapshot of the views front of mind for girls across the four nations.

Finally, Section 3, 'Leave no one behind', focuses on girls that face multiple barriers to their rights. This includes girls in the youth justice system, Gypsy and Traveller girls, girls in Middlesbrough – as the lowest ranked place in the 2016 report – and a presentation of the new local authority index on girls' rights, this time adding Scotland and Northern Ireland to our analysis.

Looking to the future, the final section lays out our recommendations to improve girls' rights across the whole of the UK, and to ensure that no girls are left behind.

WHO IS A GIRL?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. But the definition of 'girl' varies across research. For the purposes of this report, a girl has been defined as anyone identifying as female up to the age of 18 and a young woman aged up to 25.

Gender: The concept of gender refers to the norms, expectations and beliefs about the roles, relations and values attributed to girls and boys, women and men. These norms are socially constructed; they are neither invariable nor are they biologically determined. They change over time. They are learned from families and friends, in schools and communities, and from the media, government and religious organisations.

Gender identity: We recognise that most statistical data will be binary in nature, and therefore does not take into account the circumstances of transgender, intersex and gender non-conforming children. We strived to be inclusive of non-binary and transgender young people by using a child rights lens and an intersectional lens in our research.

SUMMARY

OF KEY FINDINGS

The local authority index finds substantial regional variation in girls' rights outcomes – both between and within the four nations. Of all areas in England, Wales and Scotland, Blackpool in England is the lowest ranked place and Orkney Islands in Scotland is the highest.

Although Orkney Islands performs best in the overall index, this does not mean we should become complacent on girls' rights in that area, or indeed any of the higher performing areas. The other sections of this report make that case strongly. It should also be noted that in creating this index, we have identified significant data gaps and as a consequence, key indicators could not be

included. The most significant data gap is on gender-based violence.

Furthermore, our qualitative research demonstrates that girls across the whole of the UK are experiencing challenges as a result of their gender and age. We must champion girls' rights in every place, while recognising that girls in some areas have different needs.

Through our research with girls and the adults that work with them, we found that:

Girls do not feel safe in public and they do not feel their local areas are designed for them. They are dealing with relentless street harassment and changing their behaviour to avoid being targeted. They don't feel they have enough spaces and leisure facilities in their local areas.

Girls are outperforming boys in educational attainment, but sexism and harassment in school is rife. Subject choices are still gendered, and gender stereotypes are impacting girls' future career opportunities. From sports to school uniforms and gender-based violence, education needs remodelling.

The full spectrum of gender-based violence and the threat of it shapes a girl's experience in every space that she lives her life – including online. The lack of sufficient, real-world relationships and sex education combined with easy access to pornography means that children and young people are uneducated on their bodies and ill-prepared for healthy, gender-equal relationships. The girls we spoke to were critical of the sexualisation of girls who are lesbian, gay or bisexual and of young girls.

Mental health issues amongst girls are rising and girls do not feel their mental health is being taken seriously. Social media plays a significant role in girls' lives and its connection to girls' mental health is complex. It is both a source of social connection and support, yet also a source of anxiety, loneliness and low self-esteem.

Girls across the UK do not feel heard in public life and they do not feel represented by parliaments. Girls care deeply about political issues and they have more access to information than ever before – but they are not attracted to machismo politics and they are critical of the way female MPs are treated.

Some groups of girls are facing distinct barriers to their rights or further marginalisation. Girls of colour are being held back by gendered and racial stereotypes and a lack of representation and role models. Many girls across the UK are experiencing racism in the plurality of forms that it takes: unconscious bias, microaggressions, colourism, overt racism and systematic inequality.

Pressures to look a certain way remain a source of anxiety in girls' lives and this is exacerbated by the exponential number of images they are exposed to – both online and offline. In addition to this pressure, a culture of shame and silence around periods has turned menstruation into a hidden public health issue, putting girls' physical, sexual and mental health at risk.

Where a girl lives affects her experiences and her opportunities. Our study found substantial variation in girls' rights and quality of life both across the UK and within each home nation. We found that Blackpool is the toughest place to be a girl in the UK.

“ Well I mean the gender pay gap crisis is still ongoing, and women are scared to leave their houses and there is a one in five chance that women might experience sexual violence. So, some people say that we’re equal, but I think they’re ill informed. ”

Hannah, 15, (right)
pictured with Pixie, 14
Scottish Highlands





METHODOLOGY

This is a broad assessment of girls' lives in the UK, primarily driven by girls' own perspectives, that highlights key trends and challenges across the country. It uses a mixed methodological approach and primarily focuses on qualitative research with girls. Different parts of the research were led by researchers with relevant experience and expertise, all of whom are listed at the front of this report. The different methodologies used are described below.

SECTION 1: HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW AND LEGAL REVIEW

We conducted a human rights review to identify key human rights concerns impacting girls since 2016. The Concluding Observations from seven treaty bodies were collated and each recommendation and sub recommendation logged. Each recommendation was analysed to assess its impact on girls, and was then coded to the six domains of the Equality and Human Rights Commission Measurement Framework for Equality and Human Rights, plus an additional theme of 'Human Rights General'.

For the legal review, the key public listing of legislation was used for a basic search of all laws passed between 2016 and June 2019. Only laws with Royal Assent and

listed on legislation.gov.uk were included in the analysis. This created a pool of 211 Acts of primary legislation covering the UK. Each was analysed to ascertain relevance to girls' rights, and following this, 113 Acts were further excluded. The remaining 98 individual Acts were then further assessed for relevance to girls' rights and thematically coded. Each Act was matched to one of the six domains of the Equality and Human Rights Commission Measurement Framework for Equality and Human Rights with the highest overall relevance.

We have included some key legislative developments in this report and also used this analysis to develop the recommendations.

SECTION 2: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTO GIRLS' LIVES

A review of recent literature was conducted, followed by interviews with practitioners working with girls. We then conducted participatory research with girls between the ages of 10 and 25, which included elicitive zine-making sessions followed by focus groups. These were facilitated by experienced researchers (listed at the front of the report) with girls across the four nations of the UK: Belfast (x2), Carlisle, Chepstow, Glasgow, London (x2), Newcastle, Perth and Swansea. Focus groups were largely unstructured and led by the girls; the role of the researcher was to moderate and facilitate the group and not to dictate the topic of conversation.

The participants came from a range of backgrounds, with a significant proportion coming from groups with underrepresented voices in parliament (for example white working-class girls and girls of colour (a number whom were also working class) and bisexual girls from all class and racial backgrounds. Recruitment was open to all those who identify as girls and was therefore trans-inclusive, however no participants openly identified themselves as trans. While some of the girls spoke of mental health conditions, none disclosed any physical disabilities, and therefore further research might consider focusing on disabled girls.

SECTION 3: LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

The section on girls in the youth justice system in England and Wales was led by Agenda Alliance. The methodology included an initial literature and data review, followed by interviews with six girls and young women aged between 16 and 20. A robust ethical and safeguarding process was implemented due to the vulnerability of the girls involved. All participants were working with support services at the time.

The Gypsy and Traveller Girls section was led by The Traveller Movement. The methodology included an initial literature and data review, followed by one-to-one interviews and small focus groups with Gypsy and Traveller Girls aged between 10 and 19 years. Robust

ethical and safeguarding processes were followed to ensure the girls were safe and comfortable during this study.

To create the section on girls in Middlesbrough, we heard from 11 girls from a range of backgrounds between the ages of 10 and 18. We used a participatory research method, based on the principle that through making things and talking through media products, girls are able to articulate their diverse experiences, engage with their social worlds, and create connections with one another.⁴ We conducted interviews with key practitioners that work with girls in the Middlesbrough area to provide further insight.

LOCAL AUTHORITY INDEX

Building on the first local authority index in the 2016 report, we extended the composite measure to cover Scotland as well as England and Wales. Northern Ireland was excluded from the composite indicator due to data gaps on two indicators: NEET rate and teenage conception rates; however we created a separate index for Northern Ireland. We only rank local authorities with full data or at most one indicator with missing data (among the included indicators). As a result, the local authorities of East Dunbartonshire and Eileanan an Iar in Scotland were excluded from the ranking.

Data was evaluated in terms of geographical coverage, temporal coverage (datasets more than three

years old were considered too dated, unless there was sufficient reason to believe that there would not have been a significant change in this variable since the period of observation), gender and age disaggregation, missing observations.

The index was generated by taking the average of standardised indicators and ranking the resultant variable. Standardising is a commonly used approach to rescale a variable so that it has a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Standardisation maps all the indicators on a common scale and has the advantage of keeping the relative distances among local authorities for each indicator unchanged.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL UK STATISTICS

Throughout the report we have included the results of our online statistical surveys from the past two years. Each survey was conducted through Opinium and based on a representative sample

of 1,000 girls aged 14-21 across the UK. Different surveys covered topics such as girls' perceptions of gender equality, period poverty, sexual harassment and digital rights.



Rachel, 15, Ards and North Down

Olamide, 17, Rochelle, 16, Matilda, 17 and Esther, 17, London





SECTION 1

**HOW ARE GIRLS'
RIGHTS APPLIED
IN THE UK?**

HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORKS

International recognition of human rights significantly developed in 1948 with the adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This details basic civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms that all humans are entitled to.

These rights and freedoms have been built upon into clear and specific obligations through a series of international human rights treaties, some of which provide additional protection for marginalised and oppressed groups. The United Nations has identified nine international human rights instruments as 'core' to human rights protection, of which seven have been ratified by the UK.

Through ratification, the UK Government has agreed to protect, respect and fulfil the obligations of these international human rights instruments. While there are no treaties that focus solely on girls' rights, there are some key international treaties that are particularly relevant to girls – both as children and as young women:

- The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the key convention when considering the protection of the rights of children. Critically, it “applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from. It doesn’t matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor.”⁵
- The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) calls on the international community to undertake measures to end gender discrimination in all forms. The Convention shows that stereotypes, customs and norms can constrain the advancement of women and girls. It states that “a change in the traditional role of men as well as the role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality of men and women”.⁶

Also relevant to girls' rights are the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) (1995) and the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011). This year, in March 2020, the global community will mark the 25th anniversary of the adoption of

the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is therefore a pivotal year for accelerating girls' rights. The 'Girl Child' section of the BPfA outlines specific objectives to eliminate all forms of discrimination against girls, eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls, promote and protect the rights of the girl, and increase awareness of her needs and potential.

IMPLEMENTATION

The UK has ratified both the UNCRC and CEDAW and is obliged in international law to take all appropriate legislative measures to implement both. The rights in these international conventions should be reflected in domestic laws.

Since ratification, there has been positive progress on bringing children's rights and voices into public policy. For example, the introduction of separate Children's Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the creation of Youth Councils/Youth Parliaments in the four nations and Scotland's 'Young Women Lead' programme. However, gaps in children's and girls' rights persist as highlighted throughout this report – and girls' rights are impacted differently depending on where in the UK they live.

Devolution is creating increasing shifts and changes in girls' rights protection across the UK. Our legal review found that between 2016 and 2019, more than 200 pieces of primary legislation were passed across the four nations of the UK, and 16% were highly relevant to girls' rights. Mirroring the findings in our local authority index in this report, there are clear disparities across the nations.

In fact, more rights-enhancing legislation was passed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined (50) than for the rest of the UK (48) – this is despite there being no functioning Northern Ireland Executive for the majority of the period under review. In addition, their rights-enhancing legislation is more profound and more focused on children or girls directly.

There are different approaches to reflecting international conventions across the UK:

- In Wales, the convention has been incorporated into legislation. The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure, passed in January 2011, imposed a duty from 2014 upon Welsh Ministers and the First Minister to have due regard to the Convention and its Optional Protocols when "making decisions about how to exercise [their] functions", affecting both strategic and practical decisions relating to children.
- The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 places specific duties on Scottish Ministers to keep under consideration whether there are any steps which they could take to give

better or further effect to the UNCRC requirement. The First Minister has committed to the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law before the end of the current Parliamentary session in 2021.⁷

The impact of incorporating the UNCRC into legislation in Wales is that, according to a director at a children's rights organisation in Wales, "There's more discussion in our assembly around children's rights and what does that mean. ... And we're also looking at opportunities now to progress other conventions ... There is a momentum I think in Wales to look at opportunities to incorporate other treaties in Wales."

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is Great Britain's national human rights institution and

is responsible for safeguarding and enforcing the laws that protect human rights. In recent years, the capacity of the EHRC to uphold equality and human rights laws has been reduced. As a key gender equality campaigner explained: "The EHRC has been cut in half, roughly. And when you cut an organisation's funding by half, it makes them conservative; it makes them less up for a scrap ... Some of the legislation around them also makes them risk averse. The 2006 Act doesn't give them a lot of free rein to really... There's a high threshold for them to be able to investigate anything, basically."

Human rights laws in Northern Ireland are protected and upheld by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. This was the first national human rights institution in the UK.

AREAS FOR ACTION

We conducted a comprehensive review of human rights concerns from the past three years, since we published our first UK report in 2016. This includes mapping and summarising the recommendations of the Concluding Observations, relating to the seven international human rights treaties ratified by the UK. The human rights treaties included in mapping are shown in the appendices.

A total of 522 recommendations have been made for improvements in human rights. All of these recommendations impact girls and over half are directly relevant to girls' rights. The list below highlights the recommendations that we believe should be priority areas for action on girls' rights:

- The need to develop inclusive education and tackle sexual harassment in education settings.
- Tackling the occupational segregation of women and men in employment – this would impact the visibility of women and men in different jobs and sectors and therefore provide young women and girls with role models. Connected to this are flexible working and action to encourage men to take parental leave.
- Child poverty and the creation of a clear child-rights focused strategy.
- Access to appropriate mental health services and a focus on best interests and consent for children under mental health law.

- Sexual and reproductive rights, especially access to abortion in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that abortion law changed for Northern Ireland during the course of this research, so enabling access and tackling stigma will be key going forward.
- Action on violence against women and girls, including legal protection from abuse, public awareness of the issue, access to effective services, effective training for professionals and adequate data.
- Participation in decision-making including effective engagement with national legislative processes on issues that affect children.

Many of the issues that emerged in our focus groups with girls mirror these issues, which illustrates the direct impact that Government policy and legislation has on girls' lives.

A more detailed list of the Human Rights Treaty recommendations can be found in Appendix 2.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

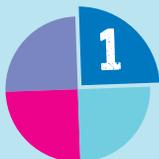
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 aspirational goals with 169 targets, which were adopted in a United Nations Resolution on 25 September 2015. 193 heads of state and government have made a historical commitment to end the discrimination and rights violations facing girls – including the UK.

The commitments to gender equality and girls across the 17 SDGs, and specifically in Goal 5: Gender Equality, provide a basis from which to address the unfinished business of realising girls' rights. Plan International's analysis of the SDGs has concluded that they carry four main promises to girls: that girls everywhere should be able to **learn, lead, decide** and **thrive**.

We believe we should address progress for girls' rights and gender equality at all levels: individual, household, community and institutional. We must always look at the experiences of the individual girl and what happens in her life, health and choices, but we must never lose sight of community attitudes and the laws and policies that govern the opportunities and choices made available to her.

Crucially, governments committed to 'leave no one behind' in their implementation of the SDGs, that is, to make sure that even the most vulnerable and marginalised, no matter their circumstances, should benefit from the SDGs.

THE SDGs PROMISE TO GIRLS



LEARN

Girls should have the skills they need to succeed in life and work.

Key goals:
SDG 4: Quality Education



LEAD

Girls should have the power to take action on issues that matter to them.

Key goals:
SDG 5: Gender Equality
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
SDG 16: Peace and Justice



DECIDE

Girls should have control over their own lives and bodies.

Key goals:
SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing
SDG 5: Gender Equality



THRIVE

Girls should be able to grow up cared for and free from violence and fear.

Key goals:
SDG 5: Gender Equality
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
SDG 16: Peace and Justice



SECTION 2

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A GIRL?

“ We still are fighting against expectations of, for a girl specifically, getting married, having children... what if someone doesn't want to have children? Like with climate change at the moment, I wouldn't blame them! Who wants to bring their child into this world?

It's always there. Like your dad saying, 'You should get married. You should have children. You should be the nice housewives. You should know how to cook. You should know how to clean.' Why can't my brother?

You're not getting married to someone for her to be your slave! They're there to be your partner, not to work for you. ”

Olamide, 17, London

This section places girls' voices at the forefront. It is structured by the key issues that emerged from our focus groups with girls across the UK. It is important to note that as with all sections of these reports, in the lived realities of girls, these areas overlap and get tangled with one another.

The most dominant feeling to emerge from discussions with girls and the service providers who work with them is frustration. Frustration at not being heard, not being taken seriously, and not being given access to adequate resources.

The girls in this study were frustrated with receiving empowerment messages at school, in the media and in commercial products, but with no context of how to reach gender equity. The girls heard loud and clear that they are capable, but what they struggled with is how to achieve this potential. One participant explained: *"They've given you a destination, but they haven't given you any way to get there. They've said you can do this. And we're like, 'That's great, how?'"* (Chepstow participant). Whilst another said: *"People say, 'Women can do anything', when in reality you can, but you have to work much harder to prove yourself,"* (Chepstow participant).

Common challenges emerged across all four nations. This section considers the spaces girls occupy and their feelings of safety and respect, from the street to their schools. It considers girls' own reflections on their education and experiences at school and the ways in which physical pain is trivialised and when their mental health is taken seriously, it is pathologised and subject to widely fluctuating quality of services.

Many of the girls discussed the impact of social media on their lives – both good and bad – but most were pragmatic in understanding that even though social media adds pressure to their lives, it is a platform for learning and connecting with people, and it would not be realistic to take it away.

This research has uncovered the ways in which girls are frustrated and angry at lack of trust, lack of space, lack of opportunities, and institutionalised sexism and racism.

CHAPTER 1

SAFETY AND PUBLIC SPACES

Every girl has a right to move freely on the streets and in public, without the fear of being intimidated and harassed. But from parks and bus stops to local high streets, girls told us they are dealing with regular sexual harassment and changing their behaviour and movements to avoid being targeted. The girls we spoke to do not feel safe in public.

Furthermore, girls' experiences and voices are being excluded from local architecture, infrastructure and urban planning. Our built environments have largely been designed by and for non-disabled men,⁸ and so navigating and taking up public space is more difficult for women and girls, and disabled girls in particular. Girls told us they don't feel they have enough safe space and facilities in their local areas, unlike the boys they see.



THRIVE

*SDG 5:
Gender
Equality*

*SDG 8:
Decent Work
and Economic
Growth*

*SDG 10:
Reduced
Inequalities*

*SDG 16:
Peace and
Justice*

GIRLS' SAFETY IN PUBLIC

“ I was walking home after school and I was texting someone so I wasn't really paying attention, and some guy came up to me and put his arm around me. I don't know who he was, but he was old. I removed him from me and then he kicked me in the leg and ran away from me. ”

Perth participant

Girls across the UK regularly receive unwanted attention from men and boys when they are out and about. This unwanted attention can take a number of forms, from staring and comments to touching. Our research found that amongst girls aged 14 to 21, 66% have experienced unwanted sexual attention or harassment in a public place.⁹ The girls we spoke to shared countless stories of harassment – too many to include in this report.

One focus group participant told how she had been followed and harassed by the same man for the past six years: *“The worst time it was my birthday and me and my friends were near this station and we were waiting for a friend, but this man started following us on his bike, and we had to run,”* (London participant).

The girls talked about feeling unsafe walking their own streets alone – be that at night or in the daytime. The absence of people, a quiet street, can also invoke feelings of fear: *“When I'm walking home from school, even though there's no one*

on the road, that's why I feel unsafe, because if someone wanted to come up that hill and kidnap me, then there's no one around,” (Chepstow participant).

Participants also felt unsafe using public transport – something most of the girls we spoke to relied on because most didn't have a driving licence or a car. Even waiting for transport to arrive can put girls in an unsafe situation, particularly in rural areas where buses can be less frequent.

One participant explained that she experienced intimidating behaviour while travelling on a train: *“A man way older than me ... sat and kind of blocked me so I wouldn't be able to get out, and he sat really close, trying to speak to me and stuff and that was late night on a train,”* (Perth participant).

Another participant talked about how a few times she has experienced intimidating behaviour on the bus: *“Just because you're a girl and the only person on the bus and there's always a group of guys who sit at*

“ I was waiting at the bus stop and these three men who were around 30 were just staring at my butt, I felt so uncomfortable. And then when I got on the bus they started waving at me. ”

Perth participant

the back and they start hitting each other and wolf whistle and you're like go away... but you can't leave because you have to get on the bus,” (Perth participant).

Fear of getting into a taxi can be heightened for girls as they feel they are putting themselves in a vulnerable position. One participant explained that while using a taxi (which she used upwards of 12 times a week due to her schooling situation) she was assumed to be a prostitute because of the way she was dressed. One participant in Northern Ireland highlighted the lack of female taxi drivers: *“The other day I was getting a taxi and she was female and I was like, that's the first time I've seen a female taxi driver,” (Belfast participant).*

The girls told how some train conductors do not believe they are children and force them to pay an adult's fare, while another said that a bus driver called her a 'wee bitch' when she tried to buy a child's ticket (Urban Scotland participant). Given that children rarely carry ID with them they are unlikely to be able to prove their age which can lead to further experiences of frustration.

Different geographies affect girls' sense of safety differently, but girls from a range of different backgrounds and places across the UK have developed similar coping mechanisms and strategies for safety in public. In more rural areas, lack of street lights and infrequent public transport can make girls feel unsafe, while in urban areas the increased presence of 'unknown others' can lead to feelings of fear and insecurity. Thomas et al. explain that in a post-industrial area of Wales, lack of investment in street lights has ignited “strong feelings of fear, isolation and disconnection” amongst its young residents.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Tara Young's research into girls, gangs and violence shows that the girls from high density urban areas she spoke to were “acutely aware of the potential risk of harm they faced when moving through the dangerous streets they described and they lived consistently with the fear of crime”.¹¹ These girls “had developed strategies for navigating public space; amongst these were congregating in groups, never going out alone, or chaperoning each other home”.¹²

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Come in we're
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Chicken Ke
with Rice

OPEN

SUNDAY

LIMITS





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I have an elderly dog who I walk every day. He's not a guard dog, but if someone was to come near me, then he'd be quite angry towards them ... if there are groups of people hanging around, occasionally they'll see me and get up and start walking towards me, and I'll change my route; walk around the park instead of walking through it, and then quickly cut back off to my road, as quick as I can to get away from them. But as soon as I've turned that corner and my house is in sight, I know I'm safe.

Occasionally, you'll have like that one person who's just sitting at the back [of the bus] and is staring at you. And occasionally, they'll make their way and sit right next to you and just start talking to you. ... But I try my best to sit right by the driver, so he can see, or she can see what's happening. ”

Abby, 18, Norfolk

LACK OF PUBLIC SPACE FOR GIRLS

Issues of safety on the street are exacerbated by lack of spaces for girls to occupy and a lack of free facilities for girls to use. This was also a dominant theme in the Girlguiding's 2019 *Girls' Attitudes Survey*, which found "girls want outdoor spaces that are cleaner, safer and easier to access".¹³

Despite many new housing developments across the UK, girls feel forgotten in their architecture and infrastructure planning. This is important not only for feelings of safety, but also for feelings of worth. A study into young people in a post-industrial town found that geographies influenced their sense of health, place and identity, and that geographies were "sensed through feelings of rejection and insecurity, reminding them of inequality, desertion and devaluation in a context of shrinking support and services at a local level".¹⁴

Girls feel that boys have free-to-use public spaces, such as football pitches, but they are often forced to use local shopping centres to get together, as other local facilities are either not suitable or too expensive to use. When asked if they

felt there were enough facilities around near where they live, one participant explained:

"The world's more around boys than girls ... I don't see why boys have got to think they are controlling the world... Girls have nowhere to go ... we get parks which girls can use, but where can girls go? You've got to pay for dance studios, parks are for little children ... what do girls have? Nothing," (Newcastle participant).

Local youth centres offer a good space for girls and this is what the girls in Newcastle seemed to be looking for: *"I think it's a really good place to go ... and you can use the gym, get a meal. You get a night with your friends for three hours plus, all for a pound," (Carlisle participant).*

Spaces provided to girls by practitioners are crucial – often life changing. The girls talked at length about how much they loved spaces where they could talk openly and freely about their problems and decompress, and that the adults that provide these spaces are the ones they have the most time for. As one participant told us: *"I feel like [we need] projects that*

“ It’s good that they build football pitches but do girls get to use that space? ”

Newcastle participant

bring girls together where they can talk. If I had never joined Milk and Honey,¹ I'm telling you now, I don't even know where I would be now," (London participant). Overwhelmingly the girls felt they could trust and turn to youth workers and pastoral support workers in schools.

But resources are limited. Across England in particular, the average spend on youth services per local authority has declined

by 69% since 2010.¹⁵ As girls seek spaces that allow them to live safe, healthy and meaningful lives, pressure is being placed on the people who work in youth clubs and youth services to work beyond their means and capacities to support the girls. While most of the practitioners we spoke to discussed how much they love working with young people, they said they do not have enough resources to provide all the support the girls need.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The Government has added 'sexual harassment in public' to its national strategy to end violence against women and girls and the next step is to implement the strategy.

More should be done to give girls the right to report street harassment and to be supported when it happens. Police forces, in partnership with businesses, community groups and public sector bodies should make information on how to report harassment more accessible. Those responsible for public areas, such as shop security staff and bus drivers, should play a more active role in responding to harassment.

The Government should invest in youth centres and youth work activities and it must ensure girls and young women get the provision and space they need – particularly in the most deprived areas.

¹ Milk and Honey is a platform that provides young women with a safe space



LEARN

SDG 4:
Quality
Education

CHAPTER 2

EDUCATION AND SCHOOL LIFE

On the surface, girls appear to be doing well in education across the UK; they are continuing to outperform boys in educational attainment rates. However, as this chapter shows, a universal education system and higher academic achievement do not always translate into equality or equity for girls.

Schools are a site of considerable frustration for girls, with each group of girls across the UK highlighting their own problems with educational systems. Girls do not feel they are being taken seriously by teachers or being respected as young women. Issues around school uniform, school sports, sexism and harassment all emerged.

Whilst girls outperform boys in attainment rates, subject choices are still highly gendered, impacting girls' future career opportunities and earning potential. As this research demonstrates, girls are still craving equality in the classroom.

FROM ATTAINMENT TO OPPORTUNITY

Girls outperform boys in attainment rates and since 2006 women have been more likely to enter higher education than men. This gender gap has grown wider each year since 2013.¹⁶ However, the independent Higher Education Policy Institute found that young men still outperform young women in the most prestigious areas, which include entry to the highest-tariff institutions and to the more highly valued science and engineering courses and to research degrees.¹⁷ Furthermore, six months after leaving higher education, women are more likely to be in work, but men are more likely to be in professional occupations. Among those with jobs, men also earn higher incomes on average.¹⁸

There is a strong gender segregation in subject choices in schools and higher education, which affect the jobs and careers young women go on to do and how much they earn. A comprehensive review found that at GCSE, gender differences in subject choice are generally more dramatic than differences in achievement.¹⁹

These different expectations arose in our focus groups. While some schools are trying to encourage more girls into STEM, at the same time, gender stereotypes are continuously being reproduced. One participant in Wales told us: *“I really enjoy science and it’s my favourite subject, which everyone’s like... ‘Wow, that’s so impressive that you like science so much. That’s like, more of a boy thing to do.’”* Another girl talked about being ‘lucky’ because the school was trying to increase opportunities for girls: *“We had people come in and talk to us, trying to get*

women and girls more into cyber, so they wouldn’t be scared to do it when they get to pick their choices,” (Chepstow participant), although back in class, *“It was, ‘Ahh, you’re doing cyber!’ from all the boys, and we were getting teased,”* (Chepstow participant).

The number of girls taking STEM A Levels has increased by 26% since 2010, but girls are still less likely to consider a STEM subject as their favourite.²⁰ In some cases, the gap is getting wider: in 2019, computing, ICT, and Maths all saw an increased gender gap compared to 2018. In 2018, the gender balance at university varied greatly, most notably computer science (17.2% female and 82.8% male) and engineering and technology (17.6% female and 82.4% male).²¹

Race and ethnicity are significant factors in young people’s educational attainment. Chinese and Indian pupils are ahead of White British pupils. However, people from Gypsy and Roma backgrounds, Travellers of Irish Heritage and Black Caribbean pupils are behind White British pupils – and they are also more likely to be excluded from school.²²

Furthermore, Remi Joseph-Salisbury writes that “Black exclusion rates are indicative of pervasive ideologies that impose stereotypes of deviance upon Black bodies.”²³ Ebinehita Iyere, founder of Milk and Honey and therapeutic youth practitioner at Juvenis explained to us the significant impact that schools’ handling of Black pupils has on the girls she works with: because *“no schools want to admit that they have these girls”*, school becomes a primary site where Black girls are left behind.

“ Growing up as a black woman, it is quite hard to actually see someone who represents you in a higher position. So, I feel like some of the standards that we do see ourselves are a bit lower.

Black women tend to have protective hairstyles such as braids or twists. I know that not even just in school, even in professional businesses in the corporate world, that it is seen as messy and unprofessional.

But if you see a white woman, for example, who would go in with, say, her bun or something like that, it's seen as completely normal, and it does cause that divide.

”

Tanya, 21, Birmingham





SEXUAL HARASSMENT

While girls work hard to achieve good grades, many are having to deal with sexual harassment in their school grounds. Of female students at mixed-sex schools, 37% have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school and 24% have been subjected to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature while at school.²⁴

Sexist language is also common; Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee found that nearly three-quarters (71%) of all 16-18-year-old boys and girls say they hear terms such as 'slut' or 'slag' used towards girls at schools on a regular basis.²⁵ In Wales, 60% of children in an annual survey reported hearing sexist language at school.²⁶

Through our discussions with girls, we have found that responses to this behaviour tend to place the burden on the victim and not the perpetrators. The girls in our focus groups talked about having their phones taken away because they were sent 'dick pics', being told

to leave school if they didn't want to see their abuser or being sent out of the classroom for wearing leggings. In addition, we were told of one school in Scotland which brought in counsellors for two girls being bullied by a boy about eating disorders, rather than dealing with the bully.

A study in England and Wales found that 27% of secondary school teachers say they would not feel confident tackling a sexist incident if they experienced or witnessed it in school.²⁷ This was evident in our focus groups, where girls explained that teachers rarely said anything when it happened, or didn't address the issue at hand. One participant described how *"a guy in my school grabbed my sister's ass and she turned around and just slapped him across the face and she got in trouble for it,"* (Urban Scotland participant).

This failure to take sexism, sexual harassment and even sexual assault seriously is also evident in the treatment of victims.

“ I was in an abusive relationship when I was 14 until I was 16. When I came out of it I had to go back to school with him while the police investigation was still going on. All my headteacher said was, ‘Deal with him being here or leave school.’ So I had to go back to school with him and do exams two weeks later. ”

Urban Scotland participant

“ I think we probably experience it on a daily basis, we just don't notice it. ”

Chepstow participant

The lack of information and support for victims illustrates how girls are being failed by the structures of the education system. It is no surprise that only 14% of students who have experienced sexual harassment reported it to a teacher.²⁸

It seems that while some movement has been made in a positive direction for women who have experienced and/or are victims of sexual assault in the wake of #MeToo, this has not extended to the UK's schooling system.

TRANSPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS

Many trans people have reported negative reactions to transitioning from schools. A large-scale government survey in the UK found that 35% of trans respondents had started transitioning before the age of 18 and of those, 69% said that they were transitioning while at school. Of those who were transitioning at school, 45% said their school was not very, or at all, supportive.²⁹

A report by Stonewall found that more than 2 in 5 trans pupils (44%) say that staff at their school are not familiar with the term 'trans' and what it means. The same report found 1 in 3 trans pupils (33%) are not able to be known by their preferred name at school.

Sally Carr and Nichola Langton of The Proud Trust explained to us that *“there are currently some schools in [redacted] where trans students in different schools essentially are being held responsible for the transphobia that they're experiencing.”* Some girls explained how a trans boy in their school was kicked out of the class for not wanting to sit with the girls, and *“a guidance teacher told him not to come out ... they tell you not to come out because your school's not ready for something like that,”* (Perth group).

More research is needed to understand the experiences of trans young people in school and to identify the support they need.

“ If you were a girl and you picked engineering then the boys took the mick, because they think oh that's a boy's thing. Sometimes the boys' teachers didn't even let girls on it, in our high school I don't think one girl went on that course, because it was for boys; all the girls did catering.

I thought of engineering in the beginning ... but when you saw all the boys thinking that, I thought no, I'll do catering with my mates. I've not known one girl do it because of the boys. **”**

Nicola, 20, Blackpool





LACK OF SUPPORT FROM THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Many participants talked about the importance of pastoral support from school staff such as librarians or teachers, and some of the girls in London suggested having in-school counsellors would give them space to help work through mental health issues. Teachers need both training and the time to be there for these girls, but many teachers report they are overstretched and under-resourced, and facing mental health issues themselves as a result of their work.³⁰ As a consequence, they are not always able to provide the pastoral roles and guidance that the girls find so valuable, nor are they equipped to deal with sexism and harassment in the most effective way.

In England and Wales, only 1 in 5 secondary school teachers have received training in recognising and tackling sexism as part of their Initial Teacher Education.³¹ A lack of training and insufficient structures in place within the system mean that girls and young women who experience sexism and/or sexual assault find they have little support.

The girls tended to agree that the majority of their teachers were ill-equipped to deal with sexism and sexual assault in the classroom. There is a sense amongst some of the girls that the school's interest in their experiences of sexism is predominantly performative, as some schools are unwilling to deal with 'difficult topics'. In some of the cases discussed in our research, the schools only responded when legal cases were brought against the school by its pupils.

More broadly than dealing with sexism and harassment, a number of participants discussed the importance of pastoral teachers, isolation teachers and librarians, in providing girls with the support they need. One participant said that she would purposefully act up in order to be sent to isolation, as it was only in this space she felt that the teacher could handle her, explaining: *"We used to just sit and have adult discussions ... about everything from mental health to my school work,"* (Carlisle participant).

“ ... the behaviours of my teachers, if anything, is wrong actually. This whole time. And I'm kind of frustrated in a way, that it's taken this long to realise and unpick it... I don't think the school knows how important that this is. ”

Chepstow participant

SPORTS

Physical activity levels decline from the age of seven in the UK, with activity levels dropping long before children leave primary school. Girls are doing less ‘moderate to vigorous’ activity than boys.³² By age 13 to 16, only 10% of girls achieve the Chief Medical Officer’s recommended levels of 60 minutes physical activity every day, compared to 16% of boys. Furthermore, girls from low socio-economic and Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are even less likely to be active than their peers.³³

For a number of girls in the focus groups, sport appeared to be an important way to have fun, however, in the context of school, sports was a contentious topic in which sexism is rife. It is no surprise that many of the girls are dissatisfied with their experiences of sport.

Implicit and explicit sexism from PE teachers was one hot topic of discussion in the focus groups. One Swansea-based participant, who had been playing badminton for over three years, described

how she was asked to watch boys demonstrate how to play the game. She said that she asked the teacher: *“Okay, can we go and play badminton, seeing as we’ve done it before? And he said, ‘Oh no, best you let the boys show you how it’s done’,”* (Swansea participant).

Other examples included girls involved in national level sports not being allowed to play with the boys (for example, a footballer in Swansea). Girls also detailed how girls’ outdoor sports fixtures would be cancelled when it was raining but boys were still able to play their games (Chepstow group). In Belfast, one girl talked about the disparity in resources allocated: *“You hear of all the trips the Northern Irish boys go to. They have done it a few times. We didn’t even have enough money for bags...”* (Belfast participant).

In a London group, one girl explained how everyone knew about the girls’ tennis team because tennis was played by white girls with flowing blonde hair,

“ I really do think PE is one of the most sexist subjects. ”
Swansea participant



“ I won the Yorkshire championships – they’re national championships. I got silver in the Tri Nations, which was Scotland, Wales and England, when I boxed for England with the England team. And then I went to Ireland and got a gold for the Monkstown Box Cup.

If I tell my teachers about boxing, they’re like, ‘Oh, do you do boxercise? Do you train once a week or something?’ I have to explain that I box for England...

I do think the idea of there being girls and boy sports is still around, because boys generally play football at dinner time, and girls don’t do that.

I really like boxing and [watching] rugby, but I also really like doing my hair, and make-up.



Violet, 13, East Riding of Yorkshire

but no one knew that the girls football team were national champions because they *“are not the ‘hot girls’ ... they don’t get attention from boys because they’re always at training or they’re always studying,”* (London participant).

PE kits and sporting uniforms were also seen as an area where double-standards and sexism loomed. Frustrated that they couldn’t just wear leggings or other ‘proper sports clothes’ girls decried that the skorts they are instructed to wear are *“clearly designed by someone who doesn’t have a woman’s body”* and

“doesn’t cover up the bits you want it to cover up,” (Chepstow participants). These problems with uniforms are exacerbated when girls’ bodies don’t fit the adolescent ideal, *“if you’ve got a big bum, then you’re struggling, because the skort rides up but the shorts stay down. So you can see your bum,”* (Chepstow participant).

Experiences of sport also intersect with experiences of menstruation, with some participants being told by teachers to *“just put a tampon in,”* (Swansea group) when they felt too uncomfortable to go swimming while on a period.

SPORTS FOR GIRLS, SPORTS FOR BOYS

“ This made me so angry. The boys were outside doing rugby and football. We were given three lessons on skipping. ”

In northern England, girls talked about how teachers contribute to the reproduction of notions of football as a boy’s sport. In Wales, where rugby is a national sport, the girls were very annoyed that they aren’t allowed to play ‘proper’ rugby like the boys – only touch rugby, if they were lucky.

When girls do try to play with the boys, they are assumed to be romantically interested in them: *“If we try to go into the cage to play football with the boys, it’s as if you are trying to flirt with them... the head of our junior school was like, ‘Girls, get out the cage.’ And we were like, ‘We’re playing football.’ And she was like, ‘No, you’re just chasing the boys,’”* (Belfast participant).

The fear of being bullied for doing a ‘boys’ sport’ is forcing some girls to do it in secret, outside of school. *“I say in school that I’m stopping, but at home I still do it [skateboarding] ‘cause I don’t wanna be picked on,”* (Chepstow participant). *“I’ve been going to a boxing club for a couple of weeks and sometimes boys would look through their windows of the room and laugh at me,”* (Perth participant). This participant no longer attends boxing class (she tells the group it’s because she doesn’t have the time any more), but she was going in the first place as a way of getting experience of self-defence.

SCHOOL UNIFORMS

School uniforms were discussed in focus groups across the country and rules, restrictions and double standards compared to boys are clearly affecting girls when they should feel able to focus on their schooling. For instance, one participant in Belfast recalled being asked by a teacher to change her shorts, despite boys being allowed to wear them. In Northern Ireland the girls were maddened by the double standards on sports uniform rules: they explained that *“In our school, we had sports in the last two periods and we weren’t allowed to leave in our PE kit because it wasn’t ‘appropriate.’ The boys left all the time in their PE kit...”* (Belfast participant).

Daily uniform checks in some schools act as a way of micromanaging girls’ lives and some girls told us that they feel *“restricted by school uniform codes,”* (Chepstow participant). Another participant explained that, *“There are girls who feel too self-conscious to wear what the school are providing for us,”* (Chepstow participant). Donna Botham of Children North East told us that, *“Girls have told us about concerns around feeling self-conscious when school shirts are see-through and certain designs of skirts which blow up in the wind.”* Some

girls told us that when they dress in a way that can be deemed provocative, there is often a heteronormative assumption underpinning it: *“What boy are you looking to impress?”* (London participant).

Researchers Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Connolly argue that school uniform policies have a unique impact on Black girls by limiting the expression of ‘Blackness’, and in particular when it comes to Black hair, there are many instances where young people have had their hair cut or suffered punishments for coming to school with their natural hair.³⁴ Socio-economic class can also affect girls’ experiences of school uniform. One girl told us that she is very tall and gets told off for exposing her ankles *“because I couldn’t find trousers long enough to suit my legs that weren’t like, really expensive,”* (Chepstow participant), while Donna Botham explained that girls living in poverty can find themselves unable to take part in prom because of the cost of dresses and other beauty treatments many girls feel pressured to have. The impact of gendered school uniforms is an area that would benefit from further research and particularly through an intersectional lens.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Education needs remodelling. From textbooks, sports and subject choice, to school uniforms and the prevalence of gender-based violence, the Government should commit to taking action on gender inequality in schools. Teachers need to be much better equipped and informed and their resources must be modernised. Governing bodies, schools and teachers must take a zero-tolerance approach to sexism and sexual harassment.



“ My school currently is a high-achieving girl’s school, so everything is pushed. Girls are applying to be doctors at Cambridge and nobody’s not doing a degree at a good university. But in secondary school it was kind of just like ‘get in and get out’.

We did have events and activities based around STEM, which was quite good and we’d go to the University of Birmingham and do classes. I think we’re quite lucky because a lot of schools don’t get that opportunity.

Luckily I had a parent who could help me find what I wanted to do. But if you don’t have those role models in your life to help you find out what you want to do, it’s really difficult.

”

Macey, 16, Birmingham





“ The biggest challenge I have being a girl here in Northern Ireland would be pay gaps. Ever since I was in P-6, I’ve always said I want to be a dentist when I’m older, no compromise.

And then I looked up statistics recently and turns out that there is a giant pay gap this year alone. Despite the fact that the majority of the people going into local universities are female for dentistry. We’re getting a lot less pay.

It makes me feel like no matter how hard I’m going to work, that there could be a guy beside me, not working nearly as hard, he’s going to get the exact same rewards.

I think that girls should be told from a younger age to pursue interests like technology and maths, but equally that boys should be allowed to pursue and make art and music and drama.

”

Rachel, 15, Ards and North Down



DECIDE

*SDG 3: Good
Health and
Wellbeing*

*SDG 5:
Gender
Equality*

CHAPTER 3

VIOLENCE, SEXUAL HEALTH AND GENDER IDENTITY

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Violence and the threat of violence are having serious implications for girls' freedom, their autonomy and their actual and perceived safety. It affects girls in all spaces that they live their lives: at home, in schools, in universities, at work, online and in public spaces.

The Government now recognises sexual harassment in public is a form of gender-based violence and has incorporated it into its strategy to end violence against women and girls. Gender-based violence includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape and other sexual crimes, domestic abuse (which can be psychological, emotional, physical, sexual and/or financial), human trafficking, child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation (FGM), so called 'honour' violence and forced marriage. It is driven by unequal power relations between women and men, girls and boys – and being young increases the risk of victimisation.

Girlguiding found that a high proportion of girls and young women had been subject to some form of gender-based violence: of all 11 to 21 year olds surveyed, almost a third had experienced sexual assault or rape, a third had experienced controlling behaviour and/or bullying from a partner, almost a quarter had experienced violence from a partner, and a fifth had experienced threats of sexual violence.³⁵

Our research found that two in three girls aged 14-21 (66%) have been sexually harassed in public – and 35% of girls aged 14-21 have been sexually harassed in public while wearing their school uniform.³⁶ In schools, 37% of female students (compared with 6% of male students) have experienced sexual harassment at school.³⁷

For some of the girls we spoke to, involving boys in interventions and solutions is crucial to their safety. However, many young people are unclear about what constitutes gender-based violence, and whether it is acceptable. Promundo's research of more than 1,000 young men across rural and urban areas, and all educational and income levels in the UK, found that nearly one in three had made sexually harassing comments to a woman or girl they didn't know in a public place (such as the street, their workplace, their school/university) or an internet or social media space in the previous month.³⁸ Furthermore, the 2013 'From Boys to Men' study found that while most people aged 13 to 14 believe it is wrong to hit a partner, many can think of exceptions to this rule – and boys were more likely than girls to endorse these

2 IN 3

girls aged 14-21 have been sexually harassed in public

35%

while wearing their school uniform

37%

at school
(compared with 6% of male students)

exceptions.³⁹ The study found that many young people do not see controlling behaviour or 'put downs' as domestic abuse.

Too many boys in the UK are still feeling under pressure to conform to a traditional form of masculinity that encourages male violence, dominance and control. Promundo and Axe found that young men in the UK feel under pressure to adhere to a certain type of masculinity, and these boys internalise society's rigid ideas of how a man should be: being self-sufficient, acting tough, looking physically attractive, sticking to rigid gender roles, being heterosexual, having sexual prowess, and using aggression to resolve conflicts (including in relationships with women).⁴⁰ Much more work needs to be done with boys to challenge harmful ideas of masculinity and prevent gender-based violence – including the seemingly 'harmless' harassment of girls.

“ I know a lot of guys who are 19, 20, and will be messaging 14, 15-year-old girls asking them for nudes. And I don’t feel like they can say no. I feel like they feel it’s something they have to do even though it’s not.

Cat-calling of younger girls is seen as normal. But because it’s this whole idea of older men with younger girls, that’s seen as normal, even though it’s really not; it’s really creepy.

They could try and do more to check people’s ages on dating apps because it is really dodgy having younger people on these apps. A lot of the things that people say on these apps are really sexual and inappropriate. And if you’re exposing young kids to it anyway, then that’s really weird. ”

Pixie, 14, Scottish Highlands



PORNOGRAPHY AND MEDIA

“ I wish I had access to more information, particularly about sexuality and the female body. I feel there’s still taboos. ”

London participant

The lack of comprehensive, real-world and relevant relationships and sex education combined with easy access to pornography and the shame and stigma surrounding these subjects, means that children and young people are woefully uneducated on their bodies and ill-prepared for healthy, gender-equal relationships. Kerry Cabbin, Director of Tough Cookies Education, explained that she has provided ‘consent’ workshops to more than 3,000 young people, and aside from the age of consent, 99% had never spoken about the topic before. A 2019 NSPCC report found that as girls were more likely to experience sexual abuse than boys,⁴¹ it therefore follows that “a higher proportion of girls have counselling about sexual abuse ...”⁴² than boys.

Some of these issues surrounding gender-equal relationships and consent are described by Lindsay Linning from RASASH as being a consequence of

boys’ easy access to pornographic material. In England, by age 16 most young people have seen porn. Older boys are more likely to have seen pornography and to watch it more often than girls or younger boys, and boys are more likely to feel positive about it than girls. Older children, particularly boys, are more likely to say they want to copy what they have seen in pornography.⁴³

Lindsay told us that in her sex and relationships education in the Scottish Highlands, she tries to challenge ingrained beliefs⁴⁴ and myth-bust what the young people have seen in pornography. Alison Chandler of Getaway Girls and Women’s Lives Leeds further explains: *“I think we’ve been in a really awful – I don’t know – black hole of ... a lost generation where all the sexual health education comes from porn because they’ve had such easy access to it and that really, really concerns me.”*

In her interview, Ann Paton of Children 1st: Scotland's National Children's Charity discussed the challenges that teachers face in regard to pornography: *“Even teachers are struggling with children that are accessing pornography in class and in school. When we talk about healthy relationships, it seems to be now that young people seem to use pornography as an education of what sexual relationships look like, what the sexual acts look like, and they're not realistic as to what a real relationship looks like.”*

A lack of focus on pleasure in sex and relationships education is a key issue for girls, especially for girls who are taught very little about their genitals and sexuality. Girls told us that teachers and facilitators of sex education have failed to teach about hormones, only the physical act of sex and the gestation process during pregnancy. As a result, girls are looking to the media for wider information on relationships, sex and their bodies.

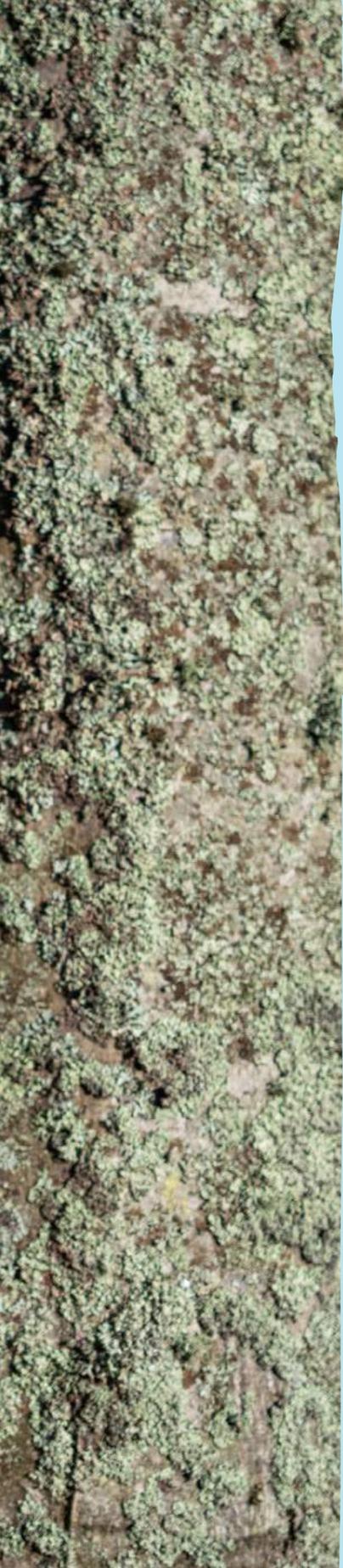
Governments across the UK have made progress on implementing relationships and sex education and improved the guidance available to schools. Compulsory Relationships Education for primary pupils and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for secondary

pupils will commence in September 2020 – although parents have the right to withdraw their children. In Wales, this will be a statutory part of the new curriculum, which is being developed and due to be in place across Wales by 2022.

In Scotland, statutory guidance on Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education (RSHP) published in 2014 applies to all state-maintained schools – except faith schools, which teach one in five Scottish pupils. A 2019 review of wider Personal and Social Education stated that the 2014 guidance will be updated to ensure consent education is appropriate and reflects the issues facing children and young people, especially from online influences. In Northern Ireland, all grant-aided schools must develop their own policy on how they will address Relationships and Sexuality Education within the curriculum.

Real world, inclusive education is one crucial factor in girls realising their sexual and reproductive rights. And as academic Debbie Weekes argues, “approaches to sex education need to account for the differential racialised experiences and definitions of sexuality”.⁴⁵ Effective delivery of the relationships and sex education curriculum will be essential.





“ The other thing with sex education was nobody ever talks about porn.

We had [a speaker] come in to do the porn talk the other day. I remember I was actually quite amused watching the boys who were clearly porn watchers; they had no idea just how the industry exploited women. And they were the ones that were asking all the questions.

That’s where boys are getting their sex tips from. And then, it’s just so unrealistic. ”

Megan, 17, Inverness

SEXUALITY AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

“ Bisexual men are always seen as gay, but they just aren’t ready to come out properly yet, and bisexual girls are always seen as like straight, but they just want attention ... The whole idea all centres around us being completely incapable of imagining a relationship not to appease men. ”

London participant

Some girls we spoke to expressed frustration that they were only given heterosexual sex education in school and not told anything about ‘male on male or girl on girl,’ (Carlisle participant). The heterosexual framing of sex and relationships education has a negative effect on girls and young women who identify as a lesbian or bisexual, both in terms of their sex, relationships and health education, and in reinforcing the stigma they experience.

Participants talked about the double standards with identifying as gay for men and women, saying that lesbian women are sexualised whereas gay men are not: “Say there’s a lesbian and there’s a gay person, everyone thinks that being gay is weird, but lesbians are like hot,” (Perth group). These double standards may be leading to girls covering up their lesbian identity. “I feel like girls also cover up, like say they’re lesbian, they just go, ‘Oh I’m bi’, like I know that’s a big thing,” (Perth group).

The consequence can ultimately be very damaging, in terms of lesbophobia, access to funding, and most troubling, sexual assault against lesbian women. Furthermore, the erasure of the lesbian

identity was something that troubled Sally Carr and Nichola Langton from The Proud Trust: “I think the term lesbian has been lost ... I find in my group that lots of them won’t identify as being a lesbian.”

One participant who identifies as bisexual explained that once she had come out at school, a lot of other people came out (Carlisle participant). However, her coming out resulted in bullying as well as a serious case of ‘spreading it’ (Carlisle participant). One of the consequences of being openly bisexual was for the experience to be trivialised and dismissed as an attention-grabbing act (Carlisle participant).

In terms of having relationships more broadly, some participants felt that there was pressure to be in a relationship, or at least pretend to want to be dating, where others said that “You’ve got all your life to get into a relationship, you don’t have to start now,” (Chepstow participant). However, heteronormative expectations make it hard for girls to be friends with boys without there being an assumption that there is a sexual or romantic relationship being desired or formed; “Just because I have a boy friend doesn’t mean I have to go out with him,” (Chepstow participant).

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

At the time of the focus groups, abortion was only legal in Northern Ireland in a very limited number of instances. The girls talked about their frustrations and anger that they could not access the same basic rights as girls and young women in the UK and also Ireland, *“It’s insane that everyone else like – Ireland – even England – registers us as human beings that have bodily autonomy – and our home doesn’t,”* (Belfast participant).

Access to services is not an issue isolated to Northern Ireland or where abortion is illegal. GPs can have a significant influence over a girl’s or young woman’s decision to have an abortion. The physical access to services and where they are located can also be a barrier to girls and young women seeking an abortion. One professional highlighted the difficulties that people in very rural parts of the UK have in getting to a centre, with the impact

being *“a sort of regional variation that’s out of step with the actual law,”* (abortion rights campaigner).

Disabled girls and women are also less likely to enjoy their reproductive rights: *“We’ve got anecdotal evidence that disabled women have been told they shouldn’t conceive, or they should have an abortion ... Various things where disabled women aren’t allowed to have their own agency. I think disabled girls will be particularly vulnerable ... there have been loads of cuts, and their ability to make their own decisions will be reduced,”* (abortion rights campaigner).

Tackling the shame and stigma around abortion is crucial for girls’ bodily autonomy. The subject should not be discussed as a matter of ethics or philosophy, but of sexual health and reproductive rights.

MENSTRUATION

A culture of stigma and silence around periods has turned menstruation into a hidden public health issue, putting girls’ physical, sexual and mental health at risk. Our research found that 1 in 7 girls (14%) didn’t know what was happening when they started their period, while more than a quarter (26%) didn’t know what to do⁴⁶ – and this was also reflected in our focus groups.

Girls told us how primary schools were unprepared for girls who started menstruating earlier in life and suggested that children should be taught about periods *“as soon as you start school,”* (Swansea participant) because *“it needs to*

be normalised.” For most of the girls in the Swansea group, learning about periods in the last year of their primary school was too late. As one participant explained, *“I started in Year 5 and it’s ridiculous because ... in my school they didn’t actually have sanitary bins,”* (Swansea participant).

What girls want is open and regular sex education classes that involve boys, and school facilities that reflect this commitment to girls’ bodies. In many of the focus groups girls discussed their frustration that boys are not taught anything related to girls’ bodies, particularly related to menstruation. One

participant exclaimed that some boys in Year 11 (age 15-16) “*didn’t know what periods were so they genuinely had to ask the teacher,*” (Chepstow participant).

Toilet policies can cause further anxiety for girls menstruating at school. A Swansea-based participant told how going to the toilet during class requires special permission from the teacher, which can be especially embarrassing when asking a male teacher. In these instances, girls feel very self-conscious and told us they would often rather wait and risk leaking than asking to leave.

Examples of shame and pranks were given across a range of sites. At the Swansea group a participant detailed how in Year 8 a “*boy went into this girl’s bag and took selfies with her pads and she was really upset.*” This was part of a larger campaign against menstruating girls that the participants referred to as ‘period raid attacks’ where boys (and sometimes other girls) would go through people’s bags to look for period products.

Menstruation and the associated pain that it can bring is another area of girls’ lives that is dismissed and trivialised. Taking period pain seriously emerged in our discussions with girls. One participant explained why she finds it very frustrating: “*Because they don’t actually understand*

1 IN 7

girls didn’t know what was happening when they started their period

that it is really painful and it’s not just us being weak, dramatic,” (Swansea participant).

The impact of menstruation on girls’ access to education must not be overlooked. One girl we spoke to missed an entire week of school when she experienced her first period. Data shows that girls over the age of 13 are more likely to miss school through absence than boys, and this aligns with the average age for first periods. In England, the rate of overall absence remains fairly constant from age five until around age 10, and there is little variation between genders. After age 10, absence rates for boys and girls rise. The rise is higher for boys until the age of 12, and from age 13 onwards, girls’ absence rates surpass those for boys. The Department for Education highlights that in the UK, the median age for starting menstruation is 12.9 years.⁴⁷

Period poverty is also impacting the lives of many girls across the UK: two-fifths

“ I have to ask him [teacher] but it’s proper embarrassing because he tells everyone about it. Try and ask him to talk privately and he won’t do it. ”

Newcastle participant



“ A lot of things have always been taboo. People haven’t been talking about sex, rape, periods, how your body grows. ... I think it’s really important that we talk about these kinds of things because where else are we going to learn about it?

We have to have somewhere where we can talk about it, have our opinions and not be judged. ... I think that it should be talked about in multiple places; at school, at home, in the media.

In my school there’s a lot of boys who don’t really know how to treat girls. A lot of boys in my year talk about girls like an object ... Like they talk about the way they [girls] look; if they’ve got a big bum or big features or stuff like that.

”

Tayibah, 13, Birmingham

“ My friend Amyⁱ was on her period and there was blood coming down her legs but she hadn’t realised until someone pointed it out. And everyone took the mick out of her. ”

Newcastle participant

of girls in the UK (40%) have had to use toilet roll because they can’t afford proper period products.⁴⁸

From 2018 to 2019, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government announced multiple pots of funding to provide access to free period products to fight period poverty. In 2019, the UK Government followed suit and committed to funding free products in schools,

colleges, hospitals and for those held in police custody. In summer 2019, the UK Government also launched a taskforce to find solutions to end period poverty in the UK by 2025, which as Plan International UK, we co-chair alongside Procter and Gamble and the Government Equalities Office. There has been strong progress on increasing access to period products and we must ensure that improving education and tackling stigma remain key priorities.

GENDER IDENTITY

“ Whether you were born a woman, or you want to become a woman, or identify as a woman – you have exactly as much rights as someone else wants. It’s not your gender, that should not be an issue. ”

Belfast participant

A 2018 review highlighted that the UK, along with other developed countries, is seeing an increase in the number of young people who are questioning their gender and taking the decision to pursue social and medical transition in line with their identified gender which may be non-binary. There has been a growth in children and young people referred to the gender identity services since 2011, especially amongst birth-registered females.⁴⁹

Young people have an expanding vocabulary for gender identity, and it has been found that many young people see the rights of trans people and people from sexual minorities as simply ‘modern’ or ‘twenty-first century.’⁵⁰ Girls we spoke to in one group in Belfast believe there is a generational gap with older people, but they could understand why they struggled with the concept of there being more than two genders, whilst their own generation

ⁱ Name has been changed

is less “obsessed with what genitals you are born with,” (Belfast participant).

The girls in our focus groups were passionate about ensuring that people are not shamed for being who they believe they are, understanding that the consequence of ostracising these young people can be alienating and harmful.

Some young people have also expressed concerns about the impact Brexit may have on their rights to live as the gender that they identify. For example, in consultation with youth in Northern

Ireland, NICCY found that intersex people are “are concerned that if an EU directive is adopted post-Brexit, partially as a result of pre-Brexit lobbying, the rights of intersex people in the EU will improve but those in the UK will be left behind, and lobbying efforts will need to be restarted”.⁵¹

For these girls, the body you inhabit should not limit who you want to be or indeed can be. Some of the girls also talked about how in their experience, it is boys who regulate the parameters of who gets to be what gender more than girls.

“ I think girls find it easier to accept if a boy wants to be a girl or a girl wants to be a boy. I think for girls, especially our age, they are so much more accepting than boys because they [boys] grow up in such a masculine way. They are just like, ‘No, I don’t understand it’ and they are closed minded about it and are like, ‘no, that’s not okay’. And it’s more boys who bully people about it. ”

Belfast participant

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

In the refreshed national strategy to end violence against women and girls, the Government recognised the importance of working with men and boys to tackle harmful gender norms. Long-term programmatic work needs to be delivered, but funding for work with men and boys should not detract from providing much needed services to women and girls.

Tackling the shame and stigma around abortion is crucial for girls’ bodily autonomy. The subject should not be discussed as a matter of ethics or philosophy, but of sexual health and reproductive rights.

In tackling the toxic trio of period poverty, there has already been strong progress on increasing access to period products, but through the Period Poverty Taskforce and beyond, the Government must ensure that dramatically improving menstruation education and tackling damaging stigma remain key priorities.

“ I feel unsafe, every single day. I look like a boy more so if I dare to go outside in anything other than a tracksuit I will have teenage boys and even adults shouting at me and calling me names. It happens in broad daylight.

If I go out in make-up, I cannot go 10 mins without someone staring at me like they want to burn me.

I've had to change my look a lot. I started expressing myself through the way I dress and makeup. But I don't anymore because of the harassment I got ... I was telling myself you have to wear sports clothes and look like everyone else. I cut my hair so short because I wanted to fit in.

Living life as a non-binary person is extremely difficult. ”

**Gray, 15, Blackpool
(pictured with Katie, 14)**







DECIDE

*SDG 3: Good
Health and
Wellbeing*

*SDG 5:
Gender
Equality*

CHAPTER 4

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The mental health of children and young people is at a critical point in the UK. Mental health is a highly gendered and complex issue, which manifests differently for boys and girls. Unfortunately, mainstream debates on young people's mental health tend to either oversimplify the gendered nature of mental health – particularly suicide – or take a gender-neutral lens which excludes this crucial analysis.

From mental health disorders and emotional labour, to social media and body image, this chapter sheds light on the mental health and wellbeing of girls, and highlights the impact of insufficient mental health services.

“ I ended up crying that night because I was seen as a very motherly figure to everyone. ”
Chepstow participant

GIRLS' MENTAL HEALTH

The latest NHS Digital prevalence data shows that the number of children and young people experiencing emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression has increased by 48% since 2004, and the rise is higher amongst girls and young women⁵² in England. According to The Children's Society's Good Childhood report, girls are more than twice as likely as boys to self-harm.⁵³ In Scotland, 44% of 15-year-old young women show signs of emotional problems.⁵⁴

The girls in our research talked about the importance of their emotionality and described this as one of the good things about being a girl. However, one girl explained that, *"I think when it comes to women's emotions, we're labelled as emotional but we're not taught how to deal with these emotions,"* (London participant) and so as a result it is the friendship circle that picks up the pieces and provides ongoing support when emotional breakdowns occur. Society broadly still dictates that young men are still expected to be strong, to not cry, ask for help, show vulnerability or display emotions – except anger⁵⁵ – and this means a lot of girls feel pressure to be the 'sensible ones' and provide emotional support to friends.

At a time when mental health provision and youth services are insufficient,

it seems girls are picking up the emotional labour. This was mirrored in a statement made in Carlisle: *"I seem to be everyone's therapist, I really do,"* (Carlisle participant), and was also picked up by the practitioners, who explained that cuts to services are putting burdens on the (usually women) who are providing support roles: *"All this focus on care in the community and self-care, it's pushed all the responsibility back onto women. And I think you know, increasingly we have to stop talking about self-care and start talking about mutual care because that's what we need to invest in."* (Interview with Sally Carr and Nichola Langton from The Proud Trust).

It appears that the traditional gender role of girls as 'carers' is still normalised in our culture. The Chepstow participants in particular said they would really appreciate being able to share their emotional labour with the boys in their lives. At the structural level, many Government policies inadvertently entrench traditional ideas of women and girls are primary carers. For example, policies and services related to health, social care and childcare are largely geared towards women and they often struggle to engage with men effectively. In order to ease the pressure on girls, we must challenge these gender norms at every level.

Suicide

Suicide amongst young people is receiving increased attention, particularly male suicide. In 2017, suicide was the most common cause of death for both boys (16.2% of all deaths) and girls (13.3%) aged between five and 19 years.⁵⁶ A 2018 study into suicide rates in OECD countries found that while the absolute number of completed suicides is higher among male adolescents than female,

suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are much more frequent among female adolescents.⁵⁷ The research found that men tend to use more violent techniques than women, whereby the consequences are more irreversible. Other studies have sought to better understand the gender paradox of suicidal behaviour,⁵⁸ and policy and practice responses to suicide must take into account robust and holistic data.

Trivialising girls' mental health

Many girls highlighted that talking about their emotions and mental ill health is seen as 'attention-seeking' and 'exaggerating.' A participant based in Scotland explained that when she was receiving NHS mental health support through CAMHS she felt *"completely judged the whole time,"* (Urban Scotland participant). Some girls explained that self-harm was rarely taken seriously by peers or adults in their lives, and at one school they said that their own headteacher minimised their anguish by referring to those that self-harm as 'the cutting crew' (Urban Scotland participant). In one instance a participant said that her guidance

teacher said that she "seemed proud" of her cut marks.

Disclosure of mental health problems and the reality of them are leaving some pupils unable to access educational opportunities. One girl who has been self-harming, for example, was told that she couldn't go on a school trip because she was *"a risk to others,"* (Carlisle participant). Another participant told us that she was once put in isolation for her mental health issues. Our discussions with girls demonstrate some of the ways in which girls across the UK aren't being given the support they need to work through mental health problems.

The state of mental health provision

The National Audit Office has found that fewer than one in three children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition get access to NHS care and treatment in England.⁵⁹ Analysis by the Education Policy Institute found that the average median waiting time for children in 2017/18 was five weeks to receive an initial assessment, and nine weeks to receive treatment.⁶⁰

In Scotland, the number of referrals to specialist mental health services increased by 22% between 2013/14 and 2017/18, with rejected referrals also increasing. This means that children and young people are waiting longer for treatment, with 26% who started treatment in 2017/18 waiting over 18 weeks, compared to 15% in 2013/14.⁶¹

In Wales, the 80% target for children and young people to be seen within 28 days (four weeks) from referral date to the first outpatient appointment was not met. In August 2017 only 39.4% of patients were seen within four weeks, while in March 2018 68.5% of patients were seen within the four-week period.⁶²

A UK-wide survey found that three in four (76%) parents said that their child's mental health had deteriorated while waiting for specialist mental health support.⁶³

When people are identified as needing mental health support, the support provided is often inadequate. A key problem is the lack of time and resources

1 IN 3

children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition get access to NHS care and treatment in England

to build the rapport necessary to give the right support.⁶⁴ Alison Chandler of Getaway Girls Leeds explained that work with girls needs to be tailored to what they need, and it needs to be current and relevant in order to engage girls. In her work with girls who have mental health problems from having experienced trauma, Ebinehita Iyere of Juvenis and Milk and Honey says that if a girl doesn't identify as a 'victim' then it is not useful to label her as one, and so we need to listen to girls' own self-articulation and allow them a voice.

One of our participants highlighted the importance of representation and diversity in the mental health profession. She explained that there are not enough Black mental health practitioners and girls of colour aren't able to see themselves reflected in the services that they need in order to live healthy lives.

Tackling the root causes of the mental health crisis in the UK is as important as providing support. As Chandler reflects, if the mental health specialists were to take on every girl that needs support in this area they would be swamped; it simply wouldn't be possible.





“ If someone doesn't have a good Instagram people will be like, 'Oh they're weird, you don't know who they are, it's literally just like a picture of them'. It's like judging a book by its cover, it devalues people. ”

**Kirsty, 15, Scottish Highlands
(left)**

“ People say, 'Oh they've only got a hundred followers, they're not cool and I don't want to talk to them, they're weird.' Or like, 'Did you see how many likes her photo got in 10 minutes compared to mine?'

And I just ask them, why does it matter? Why have we been programmed to care so much about a number, when it really shouldn't matter. It doesn't define you, it doesn't show who you are. ”

**Anna, 16, Scottish Highlands
(right)**

SOCIAL MEDIA

The digital world is another space in which young people live their lives. For young people who have largely grown up with easy access to the internet and smart phones, the line between the ‘real world’ and online is blurred – and issues that affect girls ‘in real life’, also affect girls online.

There is an ongoing public debate on the role of social media in girls’ mental health. Our research shows that the connection is complicated. Social media can play a very positive role in girls’ lives – providing access to networks of likeminded people and countering feelings of loneliness, but it can also exacerbate problems and inequalities facing girls offline.

Many of the youth workers we interviewed cited platforms such as Instagram as ‘having a lot to answer for’ when it comes to negative impact on girls’ lives, yet paradoxically, some girls are using social media to help them deal with issues around wellbeing.

It has been found that 91% of 16-24 year olds use online social networking,⁶⁵ with

19% of mid-teenage girls saying that they “spend more than three hours a day on Facebook and/or Twitter”⁶⁶ – although in our focus groups Instagram and Snapchat were cited as more regularly visited sites/apps and so could increase this number further.

A common theme to emerge from the conversations with practitioners was that girls routinely expressed anxieties of FOMO (‘fear of missing out’) and this was exacerbated by issues such as class and/or religion, as some girls simply can’t afford or are not allowed to take part in many activities.

Paradoxically, while social media can connect girls with one another, it can also increase feelings of loneliness, as Alison Chandler explains, *“If it’s isolation, I think that being on social media a lot doesn’t help ... it’s that fear of missing out, isn’t it? And seeing what everyone else is up to makes them feel even more isolated, so they think that they’re being included in something but actually it makes them feel worse about themselves because they’re not a part of it.”*

“ I just used to say my whole life story on the internet, and I think it’s because I felt so lonely, and alone in the world, I wanted everyone to know what happened to me. ”

London participant

“ Everyone is talking about Facetune. And that’s really good because now there is an increased awareness that sometimes you just physically cannot look like these people ... And it’s terrifying that we are living in a world where people think they have to ... resort to that in order to be accepted by society. ”

Belfast participant

Social media has a significant impact on girls’ sense of self and their body image. As Ann Paton explains, *“Pressure is on a different level now.”* Girls have been impacted by the use of digital editing, filters and body image trends such as the ‘thigh gap’ craze on Tumblr. Taking the time to deconstruct the images that they see is an important activity that most of the practitioners cited. In particular, highlighting the role of Photoshop and

plastic surgery in reminding girls that what they see online is rarely ‘naturally’ achievable. One of the focus group participants explained that *“It’s mostly fake, but it pressurises people, especially women,”* (Chepstow participant), demonstrating that it’s not the case that girls are passive dupes to the images on social media but that the messages online nevertheless permeate girls’ sense of self-worth.

The role of social media in mental health

Depressive symptoms linked to social media use are higher among girls⁶⁷ and are connected to disrupted sleep (young people sleeping close to their phones, checking regularly throughout the night and screen exposure at night time affecting melatonin production and circadian rhythm). Harassment and bullying, particularly around the sharing of images, also contributes to potential depressive episodes.⁶⁸

By contrast, some participants explained that they used ‘spam’ pages as a way of dealing with their emotions and mental health – otherwise known as ‘finstas’ (fake insta), which are private, hidden accounts. They explain that *“It’s a good way to relieve stress and other stuff you have,”* (London participant). The participant goes on to explain that not everybody can afford a therapist, and so posting on her spam page can be a way of connecting

“ Everything has to follow with a brand; you have to create your own image and your own identity, which isn't normally true at all. It's like a whole aesthetic which isn't often your real personality and speaking to and seeing someone in person is often incredibly different to how you expect them to be when you see them online.

In reality I don't have a massive amount of followers, I have like 500 and something whereas girls we know have got like 2,000 ... and it seems so bizarre to want verification, or to be appreciated by people who don't know you.

You want likes from people you've never met before that go to other schools and you're never going to see in your life. You want them to like your pictures and you want them to approve it, it's like approval from other people that you don't know, and never will know.

”

**Elsa, 16,
Scottish Highlands**





with people that have similar problems or issues as them. For other participants, posting on their spam accounts was a way of countering feelings of loneliness or dealing with issues of trauma.

One participant talked about creating her own platforms, speaking out for herself, as a way of countering the negativity online, *“I think that creating my own platform has actually helped me, because I can talk about what I want to talk about, and even though I might not*

get that many views, it just makes me feel okay, I can actually do this,” (London participant).

Chandler explained that in order to work on mental health she needed to engage with social media as this was having a significant impact on girls’ everyday lives. Sites such as Instagram were labelled as problematic for uncritically promoting ‘perfect’ lives, while sites such as Facebook were ‘meaner’ but at least a little realistic.

Coping mechanisms for social media

The girls discussed how they use hidden accounts (‘finstas’ or spam accounts) on Instagram as a way of regulating who sees what. One girl explained that *“people will follow a girl’s spam account to kind of reveal who she actually is,”* (Chepstow participant) because on these sites she will regulate who is able to follow her account. On this account participants talked about posting ‘silly’ and ‘ugly’ photos of themselves.

Media literacy is very important, and some of the girls talked about some of the ways in which they tried to enact this: *“I try to do my best to understand that social media exists and will*

influence me, but the most powerful thing that I can do is to understand that it is manipulating me. And then once I’m able to understand that, I have more power over it,” (London participant).

Whatever the social media site, the impact that it has on girls’ lives is most succinctly and powerfully put by a focus group participant who said:

“It just makes me so angry that an app, so basically lots of lines of code, can change the way that somebody feels about themselves and change decisions that they make in their lives,” (Chepstow participant).



“ When I go out, I’ve got some lads going, “Oh, you’re too fat, you should lose weight.” Or, “You shouldn’t be wearing that.” Or, “Your breasts are too big, your bum’s too big. Try and reduce it.” It’s just really hard.

When I was in school, I couldn’t wear a school skirt properly because I had lads judging me because if I had – you could see my thighs coming out of my skirt. They’d be like, oh you’ve got thunder thighs. Just trying to take the mick out of you.

It’s always made me feel ashamed of who I am. And whether or not in the future I wanted to go for lipo surgery or something like that just to reduce it. To make me look like someone they wanted me to be.

”

Hanya, 16, North East England

BODY IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM

“ I hate being in battle with my own body. ”

London participant

Cultural pressure to look a certain way remains a key source of anxiety in girls' lives. From the images they see in the media to harmful comments at school, girls are feeling pressured to conform to unrealistic beauty and body standards. This is exacerbated by the exponential number of images girls are exposed to today – both online and offline. Girlguiding found that 41% of girls aged 17-21 are not happy with the way they look (an increase from 30% in 2009), and a third would consider plastic surgery.⁶⁹

This is impacting girls' freedom, voice and even education. Our recent survey found one in six girls have missed school or work as a result of worrying about their appearance; and one in four UK girls have decided not to leave the house (to do things like go to the shops or out for a walk).⁷⁰

The notion of the 'ideal female body' is not a fixed signifier and it has changed throughout the past century. The aspirational body was thin in the 1920s, curvy in the 1950s, slim but strong in the 1980s and waifish in the 1990s. In the past few years, 'trends' in women's bodies have changed at an even faster pace, putting tremendous pressure on girls to 'keep up'.

As one participant explained, *“It was a trend to be skinny, to have this thigh gap,ⁱⁱ to have your ribs showing ... and now it's kind of flipped where it's thicc,ⁱⁱⁱ thicc, thicc. At first I was so happy that I was getting recognition because I was never a skinny child ... but now it's kind of turned ... skinny girls are getting shamed,”* (London participant).

Ideals are also shaped by race, ethnicity and culture: *“If you're black you're expected to have a certain body shape, especially our hair is a big thing, you have to have a nice weave and stuff,”* (London participant). Alison Chandler spoke of how while the 'big bum' was reified by the girls she worked with, this was operationalised differently by white girls and Black girls depending on their 'idealised' body shapes. It has been argued that some girls of colour have a less obsessive relationship with weight than white girls⁷¹ and this is due to the celebration of fuller figures within the African-American community.⁷² But this research doesn't engage with the internalisation of white European ideals and consider the ways in which Black girls' bodies are sexualised at an early age because of these 'fuller figures'.

ii A thigh gap is a body shape where the inner thighs do not touch each other.
iii Word to describe fuller figure

Pressure, scrutiny and body shaming

What is clear is the sheer amount of scrutiny that all girls are under. The policing of girls' bodies is rampant in their lives, from parents, to teachers, friends and online, and the girls describe the impossibility of meeting these ideals.

The scrutiny and pressure on girls is broader than weight or body shape, as the director at a children's rights organisation reflected: *"At times I think, did feminism ever happen in terms of the pressures on girls to conform to a particular body image? ... It's not even just body image. It's attributes, it's accessories, it's everything from how they walk to how they pose, to how they present themselves in public."*

There were countless stories from girls across the UK about this. One participant explained that she once received a call from someone on a private number who told her that she was *"a fat freak"* (Perth participant). Media feeds these forms of fat shaming: *"You go on YouTube and there are so many videos teaching you how to look better – better poses for you to look skinnier,"* (Belfast participant).

When it comes to make-up, the girls talked about how they feel like they can't win; if they wear make-up it gets commented on, and if they don't wear make-up it gets commented on. Either

way they are judged and scrutinised. One participant explained that *"I became friends with this girl and she literally forced me into wearing it ... I like to do it but I don't even want to wear it that much any more because of that whole 'I feel like I have to',"* (Perth participant).

Some participants also talked about the dichotomies they face, *"I feel like there's an idea that if you're pretty and stuff, if you want to dress up, you can't be smart at the same time,"* (London participant). This is articulated well by a participant in Northern Ireland who explains that there is a *"disheartening realisation that we have to exist with so many conditions imposed upon us. We have to be confident and humble and we have to be beautiful, but don't be too old and don't try too hard."* *"Wear make-up and don't wear too much make-up and try to be natural, but also be completely hairless,"* (Belfast participants).

Black girls are encountering specific paradoxical messaging about their bodies; there is both "pride in the voluptuous female body, and a long-standing punishing discourse suggesting that girls of colour, particularly black girls, are over-sexed and need to be controlled."⁷³ This contestation over what a Black girls' body should look like was highlighted by a participant who asked if she needed curves in order to 'be black'.





“ I’ve definitely not gone to events because I felt so bad about my body. I can laugh about it now because it’s kind of funny, but I remember this one time in Year 9 I had this skirt and it used to fit me, and I remember I was going to a party or something and it wouldn’t fit me. And I was just crying for about 20 minutes.

I was trying to force it to fit when it wasn’t going to fit, I was crying hysterically, and it stopped me from socialising with my friends.

... And like body hair especially, me and my mum argue about it a lot. She’s saying, ‘Shave your legs, shave your armpits’ ... And I know that if I was a boy there’s just not that same sort of energy.

I don’t see why the way I look is being dictated by someone else’s opinion of what an ideal woman should look like.

”

Rochelle, 16, London

Media and beauty industries

Girls talked at some length about the role of the corporate world of the beauty industry in feeding their insecurities, which has made having self-image issues just a normal part of life. The participants criticised the ways in which the beauty industry attempts to shame women into buying products such as razors. When asked what it was like to be a girl, one participant replied:

“We all face different issues ... But there are some major common ones. Like being bombarded by these things. Like constantly being told we are not good enough or pretty enough. Not – enough. Constantly being told by like everywhere. You can’t escape capitalism. Can’t escape ads. They always want to make money off you, so they are always going to prey on any insecurity that you might have. So you are bombarded constantly by the need to be perfect – and that’s insane,” (Belfast participant).

Girls want consistent and meaningful media that doesn’t tell them to hate their bodies and to educate them on important issues: *“It’s insane that there isn’t a popular mainstream magazine for women by women that engages with real actual topics that are important to us and significant to us and doesn’t try and shove bad diets down our throats,” (Belfast participant).* In Belfast, the girls talked about how they would like to see the removal of weight loss from the media, saying that *“the issue shouldn’t be about actual weight loss, it should be about how you can feel okay with whatever skin you are in,” (Belfast participant).*

Countering this pressure and culture is not easy, but when girls do, it can feel incredibly freeing: *“There’s something really liberating about just accepting yourself, because we often just like objectify ourselves,” (London participant).*

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Mental health provision should be increased, but tackling the root causes of the mental health crisis is as important as providing support and responding to the impact.

Mental health is gendered and can affect girls and boys differently, therefore, a gender lens should be applied to research and data, as well as policy and practice responses to the mental health of young people.

To relieve the pressure on girls taking on emotional labour, we must challenge the gender norms that drive it at every level. Policies and services related to health, social care and childcare should be geared towards men as much as they are towards women.

Government should drive increased regulation in the targeted advertising and marketing of products to teenage girls, such as harmful detox teas and plastic surgery. A gender analysis should be core to any initiative aiming to tackle poor body image.



“ You’re allowed to be bigger, but you can only be bigger in a certain way. And on Instagram influencers say, ‘here is some tea I will tell you about so that you can be bigger in a certain way’. So I think capitalism has just grabbed on to body image and it’s just ballooned into this moneymaking scheme. ”

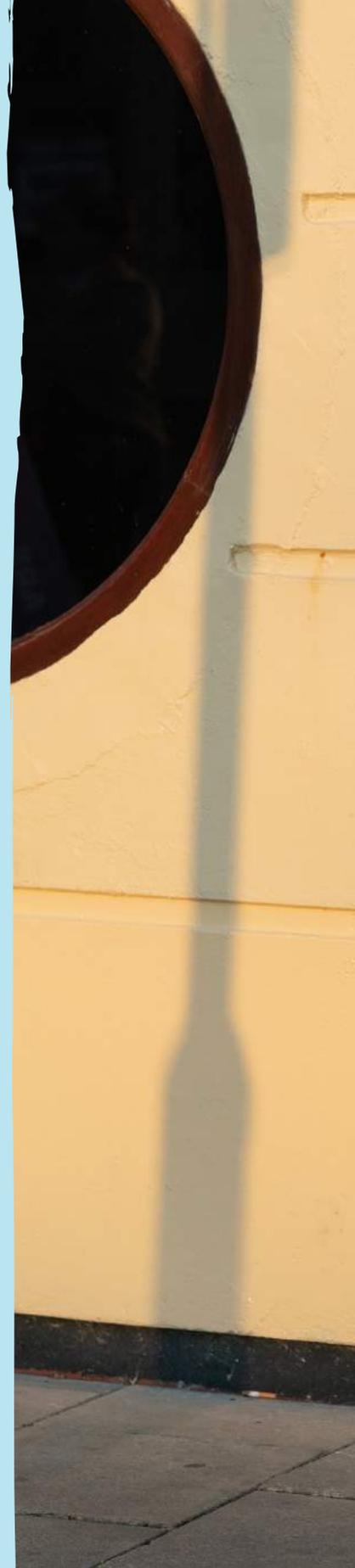
Clare, 18, County Armagh

“ All my friends have plastic surgery. They all have their lips done, and their nose done, and their jaw done. But I’ve never been that one [girl] myself.

I think it started when they were about 18, so two or three years ago now. I remember my friend got her lips done but she only got a couple millimetres, or whatever it is. She was like, ‘That’s it’.

Quite a few of my other friends have gotten their jaw done. You can actually get them on finance, so they’re being paid for monthly. ”

**Paige, 21,
East Riding of Yorkshire**







LEAD

SDG 5:
*Gender
Equality*

SDG 10:
*Reduced
Inequalities*

SDG 16:
*Peace and
Justice*

CHAPTER 5

PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

“ How we make ourselves heard is changing. Like with the #MeToo movement – that all started in social media and then it leaked out into the world of political protests. And there was Gina Martin, the activist over in England who made up-skirting illegal – she did that herself. She had just been a victim and decided she had to make a change.

So, I don't know, it does seem like women have more of a voice now than they did in the past but that's not really saying much. ... I think we are in an interesting time for women finding their voice in society. ”

Belfast participant

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Some commentators fear that young people are disengaged with political processes: “[F]or a youth generation that has borne the brunt of recent austerity politics and which already feels poorly served by the political class, the [Brexit] referendum outcome may serve to deepen the ongoing dissatisfaction that young people feel in relation to democratic processes in the UK.”⁷⁴

Yet girls are certainly not disengaged from political issues, and girl activists are becoming a staple on the British political landscape, from actors on a global scale such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg, to national activists such as Amika George and more local activists such as Scottish schoolgirl Martha Payne (who blogged about her school dinners).

Each of the jurisdictions has separate arrangements for children to express themselves in youth-led organisations: UK Youth Parliament, Scottish Youth Parliament, Northern Ireland Youth Forum and Welsh Youth Parliament. Of those elected to the UK Youth Parliament, 55% are female, 30% identify as Black, Asian or a minority ethnic group and 22% state they have a disability.⁷⁵ In addition, the Scottish Government set up ‘Young Women Lead’ in 2017, which is a leadership

programme that aims to increase young women’s political participation.

Youth-led organisations are crucial to raising young people’s voices in politics and decision-making, but young people’s voice in politics is limited. Around 700,000 16 and 17-year-old young women are currently denied a vote in Westminster elections⁷⁶ and political participation through voting is inconsistent across the UK: 16- and 17-year-olds can vote in Scottish Parliament and in Scottish local government elections (since 2015)⁷⁷ and on the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. Following devolution of voting age to Wales in 2017, The Assembly Commission has introduced legislation to lower the voting age for the Welsh Senedd to 16.

In Northern Ireland, the girls spoke articulately about their lack of voice in UK political decision-making, highlighting that, *“I think Northern Ireland is a really tricky situation for women to get their voices heard because we don’t even have a government,”* (Northern Ireland participant). Furthermore, the Northern Ireland girls’ anger about reproductive rights may help to explain the malaise that these girls have for the formal structures of politics in the UK: *“It’s insane what we are subjected to, so I would understand why people would ignore politics,”* (Northern Ireland participant).

“ I feel like if the age of consent is 16, you can fight for your country at 16, I pay tax at the moment and I’m not 18. ... We shouldn’t have to go through Youth Parliament to be heard. We should literally just as human beings have a right to influence what happens to us. ”

Eliza, 17, Liverpool





ACTIVISM

“ **Activism is so much more than being angry. It’s coming together, meeting like-minded people.** ”

Northern Ireland participant

The success of Extinction Rebellion in mobilising young people – and with girl activists like Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier, and Ridhima Pandey leading the climate change movement – demonstrates that young people, including girls, do have a political voice and want to be heard.

This is true across the UK. In our interview with Angela Lawrence MBE of Manchester Active Voices, she noted the large numbers of racially minoritised girls who took part in the Black Lives Matter march in Manchester. Researchers in Wales cited some of the ways in which young people living in a poor post-industrial area of Wales came together to effect political change, such as creating a public campaign to get the streetlights working – an issue that particularly impacts girls’ feelings of safety.⁷⁸ In Northern Ireland, researcher Sheena McGrellis argues young women have the potential to be change makers: “It is young women who are empowered in this regard. They appear to be in the driving seat of change; willing and eager for progress and new opportunities.”⁷⁹

Lisa Zimmerman of Integrate UK (a Bristol-based, youth-led charity) spoke of how far awareness has risen around issues of female genital mutilation (FGM) and honour-based violence, spearheaded in a large part by the activism of girls that she works with. She explained that the girls who wanted to change the practice

of FGM knew that they needed to engage both at a grassroots level and also with policy makers: “*They’re fearless and they have courage; I said to one of the girls I work with, ‘You should phone the Home Office’ – and she did.*”

Zimmerman also noted that this kind of engagement with activism has also had secondary gains for the girls, who have seen improvements in confidence, as well as providing career directions that they had previously not considered. It would therefore be a significant oversight to make any assumptions about girls’ political involvements and their capacity to fight for change.

The girls in Northern Ireland talked about how “*activism is brilliant and we need more of it,*” (Belfast participant), explaining that some of them attend groups where they make protest signs which helps to create a real ‘community of protest’ which they find so valuable. One reason this emerged more in Northern Ireland than in other groups may be because it helps the girls to fight feelings of helplessness that come from being so far removed from the source of power – Westminster: “*Because Northern Ireland – you know how it is. If the people in power don’t want to give you rights, then you feel kind of marginalised. Like defeated – like what’s the point? And then you go out to protest and you see all these people fighting*

for the same thing and it's brilliant and it gives you more confidence and hope," (Belfast participant).

Girl activists have become sources of inspiration to British girls, such as Holly and Megan Bavin from Solihull whose aim is to educate people about the climate

emergency.⁸⁰ However, the pay-off for being a girl activist is that they feel the pressure of 'being the future', when really what the girls want is action being taken by the adults in power right now. As one participant explains *"I feel like there needs to be like some leaders who are going to actually help," (Belfast participant).*

REPRESENTATION AND VOICE



I feel like we're being told that our opinions aren't valid because we're not allowed to make decisions.



Swansea participant

Following the December 2019 General Election, the House of Commons now has the highest number of female MPs ever. Yet girls still have fewer role models in public life than boys: of the 650 seats in the House of Commons, 220 (34%) are held by women.⁸¹ In the devolved legislature figures were better but remained below the population with women making up 36% of the Scottish Parliament, 32% of the Northern Ireland Assembly and 47% of the Welsh Assembly (based on figures before the December 2019 General Election).⁸²

There has been growing public concern on the level of hatred and abuse which women in public life receive, especially Black and Asian women. A high profile inquiry by the Committee on Standards in Public Life found that intimidation based on prejudice or hate has a disproportionately negative impact

on women, BAME, LGBT and other candidates from minority groups.⁸³

Research into the 2017 General Election found media to be "a toxic place for women" in public life, especially women of colour. MP Diane Abbott received almost half (45.14%) of all abusive tweets in the run-up to the election – 10 times more than any other women MPs. Excluding Diane Abbott, Black and Asian women MPs in Westminster received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs.⁸⁴

The girls we spoke to directly criticised the ways in which women politicians are represented in the media and one girl highlighted the ways in which women politicians aren't able to occupy political spaces in the same way that men are. Girlguiding's 2018 annual survey found that of girls put off politics, 32% stated it was due to reports of high levels of sexual harassment, and 28% stated it was due to the lack of female

politicians.⁸⁵ This has a knock-on impact on girls who may otherwise seek to pursue political or civic participation – and it may be a reason that girls are looking to girl activists as role models – or disengaging from politics completely.

A key professional from a girls' youth organisation explained: *"We need to ... get to a more positive place where actually to be a female leader is normalised, they are given the same respect and represented in the same way as a man and therefore girls think, 'Okay, I can do that.'"*

The girls in Belfast were happy for the progression in gender equality that is (slowly) coming their way, but they feel disenfranchised from the whole political system: *"We don't have anything. Like equal marriage and abortion – they might be introduced but that wasn't because of us. It wasn't our community that did it ... even though we had protests, campaigns and petitions and everything," (Belfast participant).*

The girls we interviewed in Northern Ireland highlighted the lack of government as a significant and very tangible barrier to representation. They don't feel represented as young women, or as people from Northern Ireland – particularly in Westminster.

"I don't think we're very represented. I feel like we're kind of just another part, we're not really part of anything any more. It's like we're separate from the UK, we're kind of separate from Ireland, we're kind of just our own little bubble," (Bláithín, 16).

In their discussion of Brexit, some of the Swansea participants talked about how decisions were being made by older people: *"It's going to affect us not them."* Participants in one of the Belfast groups also discussed how decision-makers are "dinosaurs" and that they were largely waiting for them "to die out." Other criticisms were levelled at the overrepresentation of men in governmental roles, with some girls feeling that men's voices are heard more: *"Men's opinions carry so much more weight, it directs the whole argument," (Belfast participant).*

Many girls felt that having a woman in power was important to see, but that one woman in power is not enough, and she shouldn't have to carry the burden of trying to represent all women. A similar theme emerged in Northern Ireland, where many of the girls felt that they had been let down by the women in power in a number of political parties. The girls are therefore critical of how women being in power is not simply a solution in and of itself.

“ They're like, 'Oh it's solved now' – you know when Obama was President, like, 'Oh racism is solved now' and a female Prime Minister, sexism is solved now. No, it's not. ”

London participant

BEING A FEMINIST

Many of the girls in our focus groups expressed knowledge of a range of feminist causes, including the gender pay gap, disproportionate representation in parliament and movements such as #MeToo. But openly identifying as a feminist is not always easy for girls.

Some of the girls discussed how boys in their classes ‘wind them up’ when they find out that they identify as a feminist. And the participants in Swansea in particular agreed that openly identifying as a feminist at school means ‘putting a target on their back’. The girls discussed how they just don’t think the boys understand what feminism is and they need to be educated on it.

For many of the girls we spoke to, a silencing happened which leads them to avoid talking about feminist politics: *“You just get attacked,” (Belfast participant)*. Girls are openly mocked and labelled a ‘feminazi’, or even referred to as a ‘disease’ (Chepstow focus group). One girl we interviewed illustrated how this pressure to disidentify with the term

‘feminist’ can play out: *“I was in this group chat with this boy recently and as an insult he said, ‘Oh shut up you feminists’ and I was just like, ‘What do you mean?’ And then my friend goes, ‘Oh no I’m not a feminist, I’m just saying you’re being sexist’ and then he said, ‘I’m joking, you’re not feminists, it’s fine,’” (girl interviewee, Scottish Highlands)*.

Another explained that identifying as a feminist can make you “seem crazy” (Belfast participant), and this contributes to much wider discourses (that are also fed by myths around menstruation and hormones), that can have a negative impact on girls’ mental health.

It is understandable why girls may opt to disidentify with the labels when we see the potential consequences of openly identifying as a feminist.

Sexism impacts girls’ lives in multiple ways and intersects with other identities. Girls experience structural sexism in school and elsewhere in public institutions, from teachers and boys at

“ That’s the thing about being called crazy as a woman, like most of the time we’re just standing up for ourselves and then they call us crazy, but what did you do to make us react like that? ”

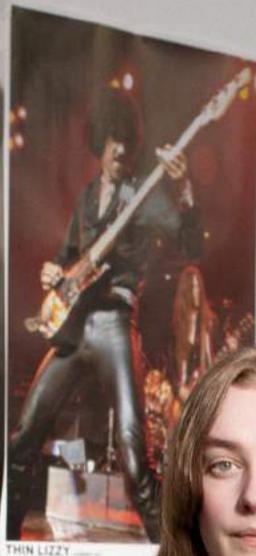
London participant



The girl from ipanema
GILBERTO



THE CRAMPS



THIN LIZZY





“ There’s a big misunderstanding of what a feminist is, because people just assume, ‘That’s like women need to be better than men, women are better than men in all aspects, men are nothing’, and it’s just not that.

They are uneducated in what it is, and before they speak, they should maybe find out.

[My definition of feminism is] someone that stands up for the rights of everyone and wants everyone to have equal opportunities in life. Which they should.

That’s what I don’t get, because as humans, I think we should all support each other. Especially as girls, we should all support each other. So why wouldn’t you want the best for the people around you? ”

Bláithín, 16, Derry

the individual level, but what is often overlooked is the sexism they encounter from other girls, which a participant from Belfast explains is learned through the media: *“We have been taught to compare ourselves and pit each other against one another,”* (Belfast participant). One participant from Perth explains:

“Sometimes girls can be sexist to other girls, like for example, if you don’t like dressing up, make-up and want to do just sports, other girls will say, ‘Oh you’re a girl you shouldn’t do boys stuff like that!’ ... I think in our modern society people just don’t like to show what they really like to be. For girls it’s kind of harder because girls are usually presented as sweet little princesses when actually they want to be something different,” (Perth group).

Despite this, many participants recognised and appreciated the advancements that have been made towards gender equality, from how the female identity is changing, to the increasing focus and mainstreaming of intersectionality. *“Everything is so much more intersectional, I feel so happy to be alive today. People go on about, ‘Oh I wish I lived in the 80s’ and, no, as a*

queer brown girl I’m really happy that I don’t live in the 80s,” (London participant).

However, girls are also seeing the commercialisation of the feminist movement and other equalities agendas. As a professional in a leading girls’ youth organisation explained, *“You have corporates really seeing this as a market to talk to LGBT people or the adverts, targeted [at] girls, around empowerment messaging. I don’t know how girls are perceiving that. Do they see that as, ‘Okay, I feel accepted and I feel included and I feel respected’, or do they see through some of that marketing?”*

One focus group participant discussed the paradox of trans exclusionary feminists: *“You get people who are against trans people, they call themselves feminists but they’re not willing to fight for the rights of trans people,”* (Chepstow participants). Sally Carr and Nichola Langton discussed how the inclusive girls’ groups organised by The Proud Trust allow trans girls to thrive: *“They come to do the women’s group because they are young women. So they’re not seen and treated individually as anything different than young women. So therefore they feel safer than going to possibly a wider LGBT group.”*

BREXIT

“It’s not fair because it’s our future.”
Swansea participant

Girls in the Swansea focus group were particularly frustrated by the age of people continuing to make decisions about their future in relation to Brexit. A key professional from a statutory body explained that in Northern Ireland, “It was older people voting about this, and it just didn’t feel progressive. It felt unfair to them [young people], that at a time in their lives when they should have been, more like we’re looking and having those opportunities opening up to them, they were being closed down for them.”

Fears around Brexit are wide ranging, from the impact on people’s rights to the impact on girls’ own personal lives. The girls we spoke to highlighted some of the concrete ways in which Brexit could impact their own lives, including their futures and their families. One girl described how she had wanted to include an Erasmus programme (an exchange programme for university students in EU countries) in her Geography degree, but is now thinking she will have to find other places to do fieldwork or ‘not even bother’ (Chepstow participant). The participants were also realistic about being

female and moving into male-dominated careers in the context of Brexit:

“In an industry that they want loads of girls to get into, like cyber or sciences, which I’d really like to do when I’m older, but in an industry that’s hard to get into already if you’re a girl, to basically cut us off from the rest of Europe where a lot of the opportunities are, it’s just made it a lot difficult. A lot more difficult,” (Chepstow participant).

Some of the girls said that the lack of clear information about Brexit left them feeling scared and anxious. The girls highlighted worries about wages, their parents, and even fears about access to food: “This is going to be really stupid but we were talking about it. And like we’re really scared that we’re going to have to like all go on rations.” Some participants had parents who were either from EU countries and family members who still live there, or parents who work in EU countries now. These girls expressed anxiety that they might not be able to see their family members as often as they do now.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Media companies need to continuously challenge themselves on the treatment of female MPs in the media compared to male MPs. The Government should commit to ending the harassment and sexism affecting women MPs – particularly those of colour.

From the local youth club to the Cabinet, girls need more platforms to be heard and respected. Policy makers should invest in the meaningful participation of girls and young women at local, regional and national levels.

“ I think feminism is hugely important right now. But there are a lot of people that have been saying things like, ‘Oh it’s ‘man hating’” and ‘everyone’s already equal’ but it’s not true. And I feel like there needs to be more awareness.

... It’s as if they’re scared that women will become superior and treat men the way men have treated women for centuries. I think it’s [because] men have always been higher up than women and they’re probably scared of the unknown. ”

Hannah, 15, Scottish Highlands







THRIVE

SDG 5:
Gender
Equality

SDG 8:
Decent Work
and Economic
Growth

SDG 10:
Reduced
Inequalities

SDG 16:
Peace and
Justice

CHAPTER 6

RACISM AND IDENTITY

This research has been conducted with an intersectional lens and the experiences of girls of colour are highlighted throughout the chapters, as Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote in 1989, *“Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.”*⁸⁶ However, there is a need to understand and tackle the racism in girls’ lives in its own right.

There is a growing amount of literature and focus on the experiences of women of colour, particularly on issues of employment and workplace discrimination. What is clear from our interviews with professionals and the literature on girls’ lives is that we need a much better understanding of the role that racism plays in girls’ everyday lives.

“ My dad said to me – in this world – especially in the western world, I’ll have to work 110% harder than anyone else, 1. because of the colour of my skin and 2. because I’m female. ”

Belfast participant

HOW RACISM MANIFESTS

“ Participant 1: “If someone is racist in America they’re just upfront about it, you know what I mean? Whereas if you’re here...”

Participant 2: “It’s a lot more institutional.”

Participant 1: “It’s institutional and it’s also the microaggressions ... It’s so hard to explain to people.”

London participants

Girls experience racism in the plurality of forms that it takes “including overt acts of interpersonal racism and more subtle forms, such as aversive racism and color-blind racial attitudes”.⁸⁷ The service providers to girls that we interviewed articulated that all forms of racism are impacting girls’ lives.

Angela Lawrence MBE of Manchester Active Voices explained that it is the institutional racism that she finds most troubling: “*It’s usually not outright racism but more subtle forms, racism that is held in policy and in the minds of the professionals.*” Lawrence believes that the authorities just don’t seem to want to address race. For example, in 2016, 3,000 young people marched from Moss Side to Manchester Town Hall for Black Lives Matter and there was no response from any of those in positions of power.

For the girls themselves it was sometimes harder to understand when they are victims of more implicit and structural forms of racism, as Ebinehita lyere explains: “*They may not even understand that they’re encountering racism at times unless it’s very direct because they’re still young women. They’re still learning what the world has to offer them.*”

At school, microaggressions manifest in telling a young woman of colour – particularly Black girls – that they are ‘acting white’ simply by being intelligent, for example: “*That’s the worst one. If someone’s really smart, all of a sudden, they’re acting white ... what are you trying to say about Black people?*” (London participant). Some participants described being called ‘coconut’ for taking on too many ‘white’ interests.

In these moments, the girls do recognise that these have deeply racist roots – usually that have been internalised by Black people. For example, one participant explained: *“If someone’s speaking in like, a posh way, or reading a book, and they’re saying ‘That’s white’, then that’s racist, because you’re saying that reading a book or speaking in an eloquent way is just inherently white,”* (London participant).

Some girls we spoke to noted the double standards between what white girls are allowed to get away with, particularly in school, and what Black girls are punished for. This is connected to the sexualisation of Black girls’ bodies; all girls experience tremendous pressure around body image and sexualisation, but the policing of young Black women’s bodies means that their bodies are judged to a different standard.⁸⁸ Victoria Showunmi has found that Black girls struggle with issues of sexualised and racialised embodiment within the school space⁸⁹ and Ringrose

et al. comment that Black girls are having to cover their bodies to “avoid punitive treatment by authority figures”.⁹⁰

The racism and stereotyping that some Black girls face is compounded when there has been comparatively little academic or policy work that seeks to understand ‘ordinary’ Black girls’ lives. Ebinehita Iyere explained that the dominant discourses she encounters in her work with Black girls are ones of either criminals or victims – labels that many Black girls do not identify with.

The girls we spoke to are critical of the media in feeding racist discourses: *“It’s the way the media portrays us as well, and I don’t know, like, they make the world think that we’re a certain way, and there’s so many different types of people in the world that they choose, they always choose one or two types of example ... I don’t know who controls the media, but I feel like they do it on purpose,”* (London participant).

**“ Can we not be sophisticated,
are we not intelligent? ”**
London participant



I think there's an unclear understanding of what it means to be a British citizen and what it means to be a citizen of this country but still have ethnic diversity. Because some people have come to me and gone, 'Oh no, you're not British'.

I've tried to explain ... 'I was born in Saudi Arabia. I grew up in India for the first three years, and then I came to the UK.' But I still class myself as being a British citizen. I have a British passport. I am a British citizen. That's what I feel. There's a lack of understanding of what that means. ”

Dona, 17, Liverpool



SAFE ZONES VS ‘WHITE SPACES’

Place plays an important role in how racism is experienced. Lisa Zimmerman explained that while Bristol, for example, has the appearance of being quite a diverse city, she sees it as more of a myth, with a large proportion of minoritised communities living separately from the white majority. This creates ‘safe zones’ where some members of the minoritised community can function without experiencing overt racism. It is only when girls from minoritised groups move into perceived ‘white spaces’ that they find themselves experiencing racism and white supremacy in its various forms: *“It usually starts with stares,”* says Zimmerman.⁹¹

The Black girls in the focus groups talked of consistently racist microaggressions enacted against them by white people in a range of public spaces. For example, on public transport such as trains: *“[There were] lots of white people on the train and they would just give her looks, like you’re not worth*

anything,” (London participant); on the bus: *“I’ll be sitting on the bus and like, ‘Why doesn’t anyone want to sit next to me?’”* (London participant); the library: *“I was with my sister and my godbrothers, and we were just in the library and it’s like, they moved when we sat down,”* (London participant).

Zimmerman explains these girls really aren’t equipped to deal with racism when they experience it, *“It’s hard for them, they need somewhere to go and someone to talk to, they can find it challenging and lonely at times, sometimes they call me up in tears.”*⁹²

Iyere explained that it is crucial girls are shown that they are able to access and take up spaces they might never have realised they could – spaces seen as ‘white spaces’. But girls must be equipped to deal with the hurt and pain that they feel when encountering racism, and to do that these girls also need safe spaces.

“ They’re scared of us, but it’s like Black people, we’re not scary, we’re just like everybody else. ”

London participant

RACE AND IDENTITY

“ I’m half-white and I’m half-Indian and no one wants me anyway, I have to find, like, mixed groups. ”

London group

Racism takes many forms. For the mixed-race girls we spoke with, some girls say they are seen as too Black, some are seen as not Black enough. One participant explains: *“I’ve had racism at me before, and people are asking me whether I’m actually Black,”* (Chepstow participant).

One girl we spoke to explained that for the first nine years of her life she was the only person of colour in her school, telling us that *“I just felt so uncomfortable the whole time,”* (London participant) and that she felt ashamed of her racial identity. Now that she goes to a school with more people of colour she feels more comfortable, but continues to experience *“a weird identity issue”* as she is now the member of the group with the lightest skin.

Other participants explained ‘code-switching’ at school, employing one side

of her identity with her white friends and another with her Black friends. She explains that this is a consequence of the Black community in her school being so small (London participant). For one mixed-race participant, social media provided a space for her *“understanding where I fit in, like, my personal race context of like, hair, because I have always grown up my entire life with a white mum,”* (London participant).

The girls talked about the internalisation of racism within their own communities, with the myth that being African means being poor in some kind of way compared to coming from a Caribbean background. One girl explained that discussions about this topic in her common room frustrate her, *“We’re already oppressed in society and now you’re just trying to break us up even more,”* (London participant).

RACISM AND RELIGION

Religion is a source of discrimination and inequality for many girls and young women – both from inside and outside of their cultural community or religion. For some girls, physical markers of their faith can lead to significant unsafety and abuse, and girls in Northern Ireland remain limited by sectarian lines.

Researchers have found that 1 in 4 of the 335 Muslim adolescents that they interviewed (across the UK) had reported being bullied because of their religion⁹³ and cite the role of the UK Government in fostering an environment that has led to this: “It has also been claimed that recent UK Government initiatives on counter-terrorism have made Muslim students more vulnerable to victimisation.⁹⁴” This bullying was as likely to be by other Asian children as it was by white children, as well as the ‘subtle racism’ and microaggressive acts from teachers, such as talking over students of colour, ignoring them, or applying low expectations onto this particular racial group.⁹⁵

For girls, Francis and McKenna write that racism is “found to be less about colour and more to do with the wearing of visible outward symbols of their faith which has led to an increase in fear and perceived vulnerability in schools and public spaces”.⁹⁶ In our interview, Donna Botham (Children’s North East) explained that the girls she works with “regularly receive discriminatory comments about their headscarves”. In addition to this, there are problematic discourses surrounding Muslim girls as ‘submissive’ and/or constrained by traditional familial expectations.⁹⁷

Some of the participants who practice religion said that they felt they have grown in autonomy as they have got older. One participant explained: “*When I was younger, I was bound by religion. Obviously I love my culture, but there are a lot of gender hierarchies and age hierarchies and I just think, particularly as a little brown girl in an Indian family, you don’t have much power. I think as I’ve grown older, I’ve learnt I don’t need religion to feel like a whole person,*” (London participant).

EASTERN EUROPEAN GIRLS

If we are to develop a full picture of girls' rights in the UK, diaspora groups from Eastern Europe must not be overlooked. After the accession of eight new member states in 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) a significant number of migrants from these Eastern European countries followed, many of them young and looking for work.

Rzepnikowska speaks of how the experiences of Eastern European migrants in the UK today are largely

rendered 'invisible' due to their whiteness.⁹⁸ Anderson argues that post-2004 migrants from Eastern Europe are perceived as a 'degenerate' whiteness, similar to that of the Jews and the Irish before them, and that this "does not exempt them from the effects of racism".⁹⁹ However, there is a paucity of research that has examined the experiences of young Eastern European people living in the UK. Little is known of the way xenophobia plays out in the lives of girls in contexts such as the classroom, the playground and in social media spaces.¹⁰⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Further research should be conducted into the role that racism and xenophobia plays in girls' everyday lives. Research and initiatives focused on gender equality should be conducted through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality is a theory posited by Kimberlé Crenshaw which brings together anti-racist and feminist thinking, to consider the unique disadvantages and oppressions experienced by women of colour. This perspective is essential to any rights-based work.

Leona, 16, Shannon, 15 and Yvonne, 14, Blackpool





SECTION 3

**'LEAVE NO
ONE BEHIND'**

The UK Government adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Plan International believes the 17 Goals hold four significant promises to girls: that girls everywhere should be able to learn, lead, decide and thrive. The SDGs' overarching agenda is to 'leave no one behind'; that is, to make sure that even the most vulnerable and marginalised, no matter their circumstances, should benefit from the SDGs. We wanted to understand to what extent this commitment is being realised for girls.

With this in mind, we conducted research into the lives of some of the girls who are the most marginalised and least heard: girls in the youth justice system and Gypsy and Traveller girls. We worked with Agenda Alliance and The Traveller Movement to understand the unique barriers these girls face to their rights. These chapters are based on focus groups and interviews with girls, a literature review and data review.

To understand the impact of place on girls' rights and life opportunities, we created the local authority index.

Covering England, Wales and Scotland, with a separate index for Northern Ireland (as a result of data gaps in this nation), we have found substantial variation in girls' rights and quality of life both across the UK and within each home nation.

Finally, this section includes a chapter on the voices and lives of girls in Middlesbrough. Middlesbrough was identified as the lowest ranked area in the 2016 index, so through participatory research, we heard from the girls themselves about what it is like to be a girl there.

GIRLS IN THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

“ I was just the system’s child, I was like nobody’s child. I just got moved from pillar to post and nobody cared. ”

Sheena*, 19

Girls in the youth justice system in England and Wales face considerable disadvantage: high rates of trauma and abuse, experience of social care, school exclusion and mental ill health. They tend to have difficult experiences of home and family life, and their offending is often associated with issues related to relationships with parents, partners and friends.¹⁰¹

Comparing the lives of girls and boys in the youth justice system, girls are more likely to:

- Have spent time in local authority care (55% compared to 27% of boys)¹⁰²
- Have been permanently excluded from school (74% of girls compared to 63% of boys)¹⁰³
- Have been exposed to domestic violence in the home (59% compared to 25% of boys)¹⁰⁴
- Be reported to be at risk of sexual exploitation (60% compared to 7% of boys)¹⁰⁵
- Report feeling unsafe whilst detained in Secure Training Centres (STCs) (80% compared with 29% of boys).¹⁰⁶

* Names have been changed to protect identities

THE LIVES OF GIRLS IN THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

Growing up in poverty can be a contributing factor to offending. One girl we spoke to described how neglect and poverty led to her stealing to feed herself, causing her to be arrested: *“I mean, there were times where I’d told them I’d not eaten in three days... which led me to go out and steal food for myself. Leaving me with more shoplifting convictions,”* (Katie, 20).

A disproportionate number of girls in custody have experience of being in care. Around two-thirds of girls in custody were currently or previously looked after in 2014-16,¹⁰⁷ but under 1% of girls in the general population are looked after.¹⁰⁸ Being in care can lead to the criminalisation of young people; children living in children’s homes (aged 16 and 17) are 15 times more likely to be criminalised than other children of the same age.¹⁰⁹ As one girl described, police can often be called out for incidents which would frequently be dealt with outside of the youth justice system in family homes: *“It started out from simple things, like when I was in my first care homes refusing to go to bed, they’ll call the police, then you’ll be in a*

cell overnight... Everything that I ever was locked up for was through the care system,” (Sheena, 19).

Girls in the youth justice system have significant rates of mental ill health, which can be exacerbated by contact with the justice system – 63% of girls in youth custody are assessed as having concerns around suicide or self-harm (compared to 30% of boys).¹¹⁰

Girls spoke frequently about coming into contact with the police at times of mental distress, as well as having these problems made worse by being arrested, going to court or being taken into custody. Few felt they got the support they needed when this happened.

Girls also described how distressing it could be to witness the mental health distress of other young women in secure settings, which could be detrimental to their own mental health, and exacerbate other problems like substance use.

Girls in the youth justice system have often had disrupted experiences of

“ I cut open my arms in the van... that happened like a few times when I got arrested, and I got to the police station and I’d just get chucked in a cell and just left there. ”

Katie, 20

education and learning, with high levels of exclusion and non-attendance, and poor educational outcomes. Accessing education is challenging, with variable provision across youth custody.¹¹¹ As one girl explained: “[Education in custody] was very poor... you’re bored all the time, because the teachers can’t control the classes. There’s not enough resources or courses to actually do anything properly,” (Amber, 19, previously in an STC).

Despite an emphasis in the youth justice system on rehabilitation and enabling children to ‘benefit from a second chance’,¹¹² having a criminal record can be a barrier to employment opportunities. It also affects self-esteem, agency and confidence, and can lead to girls facing stigma and shame among their peers. “It’s left me now with a ton of convictions ... for stuff that didn’t really need to be, you know, wasting police time and the court’s money and everything,” (Katie, 20).

GIRLS' EXPERIENCES OF THE SYSTEM

Girls are far less likely than boys to offend and tend to commit less serious offences than boys.¹¹³ Evidence also suggests girls are more likely to come to the attention of the youth justice system due to their vulnerability, rather than the severity of their offending.¹¹⁴

Girls are a minority in the youth justice system and as a consequence it does not respond effectively to their needs.¹¹⁵ Girls under 18 in custody are held in mixed settings, and while not all girls find this

problematic, they described experiences of sexist and unfair treatment from staff, as well as inappropriate and intimidating behaviour from boys.

The use of force, physical restraint and isolation on girls in custody to manage behaviour – and even self-harm – is increasing and disproportionately used against girls.¹¹⁶ The use of physical restraint is particularly concerning as many girls in custody have experienced sexual abuse or rape, with many

“ I couldn’t walk through the unit in like a pair of leggings and stuff... Some of them would take my washing out of the washing machine while it was in progress and sniff my underwear and all this weird stuff. ”

Sheena, 19, previously in a Secure Training Centre

reporting feelings of violation and being re-traumatised by restraint.¹¹⁷ The girls we spoke to who had been restrained felt this was often disproportionate and little was done to deescalate situations that could lead to it.

“I remember one time they... put something in my book [record]: ‘When you see her tagging, that’s the start to her violent behaviour, so restrain her.’ So if I was writing on the wall, they’d come and grab me and restrain me,” (Sheena, 19, previously in an STC).

Girls often have numerous workers involved in their lives, and the girls we spoke to reported huge inconsistency in the level and type of support they got. They felt like staff often failed to pick up on the underlying issues that

caused them to get in trouble in the first place, such as family drug use, parental mental health issues and domestic abuse between parents. They described professionals often unable to cope with the complexity of girls’ behavioural issues or emotional and mental health needs.

BAME girls are overrepresented in the system, and increasingly so: while there has been an 84.9% reduction in white girls receiving convictions over 10 years since 2006, there has been a 73.5% reduction for Black girls, and 52.1% for Asian girls.¹¹⁸ BAME girls face particular disadvantages such as discrimination, stigma, and a lack of specialist support within the justice system, yet the particular needs of these groups are invisible in most research and data.

GIRLS’ INVISIBILITY IN POLICY MAKING

There are principles within youth justice to ensure that in all decisions affecting children their wishes and feelings are taken into account, children’s participation is encouraged and their best interests are a primary concern.¹¹⁹ This is in line with Articles 8, 12 and 42 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹²⁰ In reality, the girls we spoke to felt that their wishes and feelings were rarely considered – that they were not listened to, their personal assets were not taken into account, and as a result, wrong decisions were sometimes made about their lives.

The needs of girls are consistently overlooked in policy. The Youth Justice Board’s strategic plan for 2018-21 does not make any specific reference to girls,¹²¹ and the Charlie Taylor

Review into the Youth Justice System (2016)¹²² makes only brief mention of the particular needs of girls in police custody.¹²³ A joint thematic inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2014) highlighted the lack of strategic direction in the youth secure estate to meet girls’ needs.¹²⁴

Equally, policy responses to adult women in the criminal justice system – for example the Corston Review (2007) of vulnerable women in the justice system and the Ministry of Justice Female Offender Strategy (2018) – have not taken account of girls or younger women. While Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) girls are overrepresented in the justice system, the Lammy Review into BAME individuals in the Criminal Justice System made only brief mention of girls.¹²⁵

MISSING DATA

Data on the offence types or length of sentences for which girls are sent to custody is not regularly published, and youth custody data is not published in a way that allows for a reading of gender alongside other protected characteristics such as race or disability.

In terms of measuring the number of girls, data shows there has been a sharp reduction in the number of girls entering the youth justice system and the secure estate over the past decade.¹²⁶ However, looking at the small total numbers of girls in custody at any one time masks the high numbers that pass through custody for brief periods on short sentences; research shows that three-quarters are sentenced to custody for six months or less.¹²⁷ This also disputes the view

that those girls in custody must have committed the most serious offences, as a third of girls are sentenced to custody for non-violent offences (34%).

There are also significant data gaps on the performance of youth offending teams. A 2014 Review by HM Inspectorate of Probation found that girls with youth offending teams experienced better outcomes when their needs were assessed and support was tailored to meet these needs, but there were inconsistencies in the degree to which assessments and interventions took account of gender differences. It also found little use of data and information to track outcomes for girls, so managers and practitioners were unable to demonstrate whether their service was effective.¹²⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

To improve the rights and outcomes of girls in contact with the youth justice system, there must be more focus on diverting girls away from the system and into specialist support in the community that meets their needs holistically. Professionals working across the youth justice system must be trained to respond and understand the particular experiences of girls, including mental health awareness and the impact of trauma and abuse.

Girls must be fully and meaningfully engaged in all decision-making that affects their lives, from their individual cases to policy and practice development across the youth justice system.

Data on the experiences and outcomes of girls in the youth justice system, which can be broken down by gender and other protected characteristics including age and ethnicity, should be regularly published. Crucially, to meet the needs of these girls, long-term, sustained investment in specialist youth- and gender-specific community services is needed.

GYPSY AND TRAVELLER GIRLS



English Gypsies have lived in the UK for over 600 years, originally moving from India in the 15th century. Irish Travellers started moving to Britain from Ireland over 170 years ago. Being a Traveller girl doesn't mean you always travel. Today, the majority of Gypsies and Travellers live in housing, partly because there are not enough caravan sites provided for them. For the most part, Irish Travellers' morals and lives are shaped by a strong Catholic belief system. In recent years more and more Gypsies and Travellers have joined the Gypsy-led evangelical Christian movement 'Light and Life'.

Gypsies and Travellers face multiple inequalities in most aspects of their lives, but the lack of consistent data collection means that public bodies are failing to tackle these inequalities.¹²⁹ Unwillingness to identify as Gypsies and Travellers to avoid discrimination and racism also adds to the issue of missing data.¹³⁰

“ You always know that your parents are there for you, you don't have to do things on your own, they guide you through life. ”

Participant

GYPSY AND TRAVELLER GIRLS' HEALTH

Gypsies and Travellers live on average 10-12 years less than the general population.¹³¹ This is partly due to unhealthy lifestyles, and partly due to failings by health sectors to work with and engage with the communities. Many Gypsy and Traveller girls have unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking alcohol, excessive use of sunbeds, plastic surgery, poor diets, crash dieting and diet pills. Insufficient provision of information and education, combined with the pressure to look and behave a certain way, contributes to this.

"There's girls like 15 and 16 doing these nasal sprays and tanning injections, and sunbeds and they think they are adults because they drink Red

Bull and smoke fags. Like basically everything you can think not to do if you want to live long and have children... That's why more Traveller girls need to be in education, because otherwise how will they know if they have no cop on," (participant, 15).

Lower life expectancy, coupled with high infant and maternal mortality rates,¹³² and six times higher suicide rate than the wider society,¹³³ means it is not uncommon for Gypsy and Traveller girls to experience multiple difficult bereavements in their lives.¹³⁴ To protect each other, Traveller families prefer not to talk about grief and loss, but this results in anxiety and depression for many girls.¹³⁵

“ We do expect a lot of ourselves; we have to cope with everything ... you almost haven't got time to grieve... If it's a member of your own family, your brother or sister, you can't show your feelings, you can't because you are afraid to hurt them; you have to keep a brave face on it. ”

Participant

GIRLS' EDUCATION AND EXPECTATIONS

Most Gypsy and Traveller parents want their girls to go to school but are faced with significant barriers in the education system. 70% of Gypsies and Travellers say they have experienced discrimination in education. Girls are often bullied throughout their school years by other pupils and discriminated against by teachers who fail to challenge racist name calling the same way it may be challenged with other ethnic groups. Traveller girls are constantly fighting against the negative stereotypes people have against them.

“Yeah that was in secondary school, she didn't like me because I was a Traveller. Nothing happened to that teacher. I left the school after that. Didn't go back,” (participant, 17, relaying the time a teacher called her a tramp).

Traveller girls tend to leave school earlier than other girls and have some of the lowest education outcomes.¹³⁶ The most common reason for being excluded from school¹³⁷ is when they fight back against bullies. Sometimes parents take their daughters out of school because of the continued bullying.

“People say things like a joke and laughing, but I never let myself get bullied. Like if someone says something to me I argue back,” (participant, 13).

Some girls think that they are bullied more than Traveller boys because of a perception that they are more vulnerable, as one girl told us: *“Traveller boys are more thick-skinned and they have a reputation of fighting, so no country person [non-Traveller] is gonna pick a fight. Whereas we have to sit back and not talk, so I think Traveller girls get a hard time,” (participant, 15).*

There are still girls that do not go to secondary school because they are not allowed to attend sex education classes or mix with boys, but this is slowly changing; Catholic girls' secondary schools are seen as a good option for many girls today. Additionally, many Gypsy and Traveller girls have started to question and challenge the strict gender roles placed on them by their communities and are proceeding to colleges and universities.

“ We get judged by what other Travellers do. In school the teachers say things like, ‘What are you doing there, you are just going to get married’, ‘You are going to fail your GCSEs’ and ‘Your lot don’t really go to school so why are you here?’ ”

Participant, 14

FAMILY LIFE AND GENDER ROLES

Increasingly, Traveller girls are starting to question why they have different rules and expectations compared to men and boys. As one girl explained: *“There’s no like equal rights or anything like that. But boys and men will tell you that you don’t compare men and women, you are not meant to do that. Even though it’s the 21st century. You are not meant to compare men and women,”* (participant, 15).

“That’s because they are doing the wrong! If we were doing the wrong then we will get compared,” (participant, 16).

Gendered expectations, particularly towards education and employment, are still a reality for many Irish Traveller girls, but they are finding ways to work around them. *“My uncle said to me ‘You are a big hairy 15-year-old. Why are you going to school?’ I said Mummy would kill me if I ever tried to leave school. I mean, they understand it when you explain it to them but it’s like, ‘Why are you in school, you should be at home’ and that,”* (participant, 15).

“Travellers follow me on Instagram; every Traveller in the country will say ‘That’s odd for a Traveller girl to go to school’. It’s just gossip. [That’s why] I wouldn’t post about exams or anything,” (participant, 15).

Traveller girls are often considered as the guardians of their family reputation

and therefore their behaviour is monitored more than boys’ behaviour.¹³⁸

A study of Traveller girls in Scotland revealed that almost all had their movement restricted.¹³⁹ The girls discussed how they were not allowed to leave their homes unaccompanied and that their physical space was confined to their home and community. However, the girls also expressed that this confinement is for their protection as a ‘girl’s reputation is everything’: *“It’s everything! It’s everything! Yeah because if you get ... like say your reputation gets like scandalised that’s your whole family scandalised. And family is everything!”* (participant).

“Country girls [non-Traveller] and Traveller girls are two different worlds. Like they don’t have to be afraid of their name and that whereas we have to maintain our reputation. So if a man ... says something rude to you, and you allow that to happen, that’s your responsibility. Then the boy says that to another boy and it goes around. ... And that’s what you have to worry about,” (participant, 16).

“I think it has a lot to do with our religion. Like my friends would have boyfriends in young age, whereas we believe in marriage and all that. So it’s hard sometimes to make friends and go out because your reputation is at stake,” (participant, 19).

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

“It just happens all the time, we are just so used to it,” (participant, 17).

As protected ethnic minorities Gypsy and Traveller girls have the right to be free from racial harassment and discrimination. However, racism and discrimination against them is widespread and the authorities consistently fail to address this. A staggering 91% of the respondents in a study reported they had experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity and over half had been refused service in restaurants, shops, pubs, cinemas, gyms, petrol stations, churches etc. because of their ethnicity.¹⁴⁰ A study found that only four in ten parents in Great Britain would be happy for their child to have a playdate at a home of a child who is a Gypsy or Traveller.¹⁴¹ Sadly, girls say racism is a part of everyday life.

“... . When I go to shops the security guards follow me and give me the evil eyes. Even though I've never stolen anything. And when you go to restaurants they ask you to pay in advance. When you go to hairdressers they ask you to pay first. If you ask why, they say that because we have had trouble from your kind of people. It makes me feel sad,” (participant, 19).

“One time me and my cousin, we were like eight or nine, went into a pound shop. We was walking around and we was getting sweets and all that. A man came following me and her and we were scared and went out because we didn't want to buy anything any more. But he stood in front of us and said, ‘Go into the back’. We had to go [into] this little room, he took pictures of us and said, ‘You are never allowed here again.’ But we never stole anything,” (participant, 16).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

To improve the rights and outcomes of Gypsy and Traveller girls in England and Wales, the government should re-introduce ring fenced funding to support the educational inclusion, engagement, transitions and opportunities of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.¹⁴² Senior leaders in all public service bodies should be trained in the Public Sector Equality Duty, specifically in relation to Gypsy and Traveller communities.

The quality of data collection and analysis on the access, outcomes and experiences of Gypsy and Traveller patients in health settings must be improved, in order to better address inequalities and to identify early strategies and care pathways appropriate to their needs. The Race Disparity Unit should review all Government and public datasets that currently do not use the 2011 census ethnicity classifications and require their use before the end of 2019/20, for example, the NHS data dictionary.

Schools should be challenging race and gender stereotypes wherever they encounter them. Ofsted should ensure that inspectors are actively inspecting schools for gender and racial stereotyping or signs of sexism or racism from either pupils or staff.

Finally, the Home Office should work with and fund organisations working with Gypsy and Traveller men and women to challenge traditional beliefs and attitudes towards women and girls which perpetuate their inequality.

THE IMPACT OF PLACE ON GIRLS' LIVES

Girls across the four nations of the UK raised and discussed common issues, however, we know that where you live changes your experiences as a girl and your life opportunities. To understand what it means to grow up as a girl in the UK, we need to look at the impact of place-based inequality on girls, their rights and their quality of life – both between nations and within them.

This 2020 study updates and extends the 2016 report: more recent data is used where such data is available, the geographic scope is extended to Northern Ireland and Scotland, and additional indicators of girls' rights are added.

While the UK Government holds overall responsibility for ensuring the fulfilment of girls' rights in the UK, powers and budgets are increasingly devolved to local authorities, so they need robust data and information and they need to be held to account for responding to the needs of girls. However, it should be noted that local authorities experienced a 49.1% reduction in central government funding between 2010/11 – 2017/18,¹⁴³ leaving many with significantly reduced resources to respond to girls' needs. It is therefore no surprise that girls in some areas are being left further behind.

Our study found substantial variation in girls' rights and quality of life both across the UK and within each home nation.

Three of the ten highest and best ranked local authorities are in Scotland, with Orkney Islands, East Renfrewshire and Shetland Islands ranking first, second and fourth respectively. The lower ranking positions are mainly occupied by local authorities in the north of England, such as Blackpool, Nottingham and Hartlepool. Both Blackpool and Nottingham appeared among the lowest ranked local authorities in the 2016 ranking as well, suggesting they are still being negatively affected by systematic inequality across the county.

While this index draws attention to the structural barriers to girls' rights, and the regional variation in girls' rights outcomes, it should be acknowledged that girls across the whole of the UK are experiencing challenges as a result of their gender and age – even in the top performing areas in this index. Therefore, we must continue to champion girls' rights across all parts of the UK, but recognise that girls in different areas might have different needs.



“ I think because I came from two different cultures in India it’s so different. I come from a culture where men and women are treated distinctly differently. So, coming to the UK where that’s not the case, in one aspect you think, wow this is so different, the UK is so equal. But there’s still a long way to go. When you look at details you still realise they’ve got the same problems, just in different levels. ”

Dona, 17, Liverpool

“ One of the things that I don’t really like is, obviously we’re Scouse, but the colloquialism ‘bird’ when boys call their girlfriend’s ‘bird’. I just hate it. It makes me cringe so much. And I’m like, “I don’t have feathers. I don’t fly. I am not a bird.” ”

Eva, 17, Liverpool

“ I think we’re quite blessed to kind of be in a place where I feel like everyone’s accepted, in Liverpool, but obviously you do face some challenges. And I think being a young woman is a lot harder. Even I used to volunteer in the shop and I’d have men coming up to me going, “How much are you?” ”

Eliza, 17, Liverpool

Methodology

In consultation with our research advisory group,^{iv} we identified potential indicators of girls' rights and quality of life within each human rights domain in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Equality Measurement Framework. This framework is the most widely accepted equality and human rights framework in the UK. Where possible, we collected data on each indicator that could be disaggregated by gender, age and local authority area.

The final local authority index is based on these indicators:

- child poverty
- life expectancy^v
- educational attainment
- child obesity
- teenage conception rates
- not in education, employment or training (NEET) status

All data relates to girls only, except child poverty which is gender-neutral. We created a local authority index on each individual indicator, as well as a

'composite indicator' which allows ranking of local authorities across all indicators combined.

We found significant data gaps on girls' rights indicators at local authority and national level. This is extremely concerning, because data is key to designing policies and services for girls, and for monitoring progress on their rights. These challenges make it very difficult to assess girls' rights in some regions and local authorities.

To avoid comparing local authorities with very different data availability, the overall index only ranks local authorities with full data or at most one indicator with missing data. As such, Northern Ireland and two Scottish local authorities are excluded from the overall index. For this reason, we have created a Northern Ireland-only index and map with the available data and indicators.

There is a detailed methodological description in the front of this report and data sources are outlined under each indicator in this section.

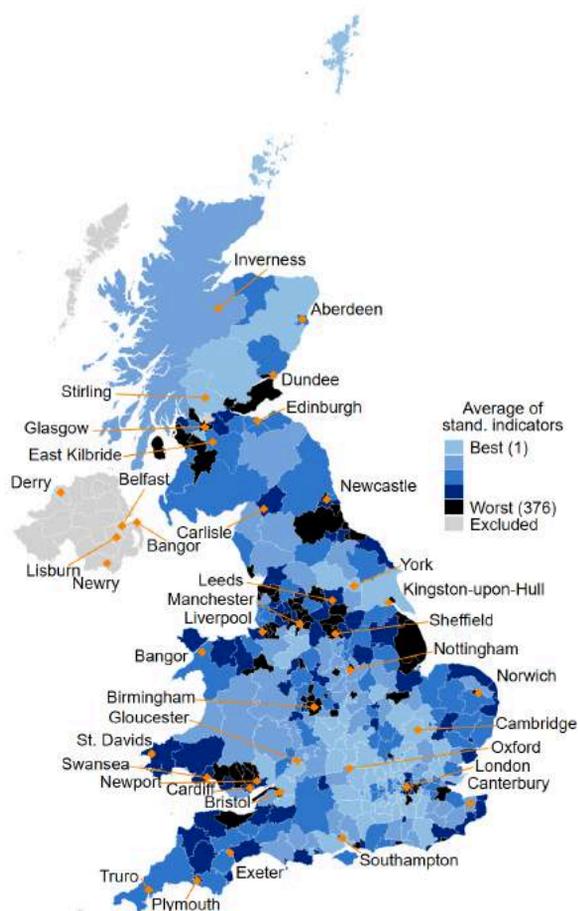
^{iv} A research advisory group was convened to provide advice on the research project. The members of the group are listed on the Acknowledgements page at the front of the report.

^v Three measures of life expectancy are included: life-expectancy, healthy-life-expectancy and disability-free-life-expectancy.

LOCAL AUTHORITY INDEX

England, Wales and Scotland

The top performing places are dominated by Scottish local authorities, with Orkney Islands and East Renfrewshire ranking first and second respectively and Shetland Islands ranking fourth. The remaining six local authorities are all located in central England (East and South East of England and Greater London). Considering the bottom 10 local authorities instead, two of them are located in Wales, one is located in Scotland and the remaining seven are located in England. Blackpool ranks among the bottom 10 local authorities for educational attainment, teenage conception rates, NEET status and disability-free life expectancy, and as such ranks lowest overall.



Top 10

1	Orkney Islands	1.48
2	E. Renfrewshire	1.31
3	Wokingham	1.29
4	Shetland Islands	1.19
5	Richmond up. T.	1.15
6	West Berkshire	1.10
7	Waverley	1.09
8	S. Cambridgesh.	1.03
9	Hart	1.00
10	Kingston up. T.	1.00

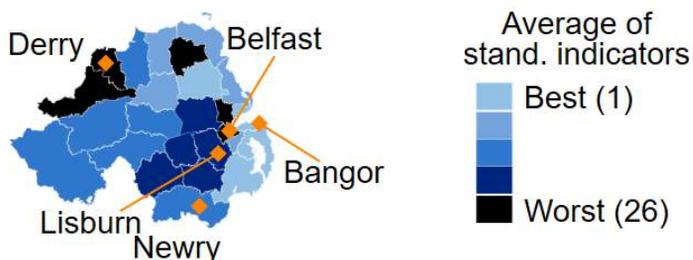
Bottom 10

367	Hyndburn	-1.18
368	Merthyr Tydfil	-1.18
369	Blaenau Gwent	-1.20
370	Knowsley	-1.23
371	Liverpool	-1.23
372	Dundee City	-1.44
373	Kingston up. H.	-1.45
374	Hartlepool	-1.54
375	Nottingham	-1.68
376	Blackpool	-2.43

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland index is based on child poverty, life expectancy, educational attainment, child obesity. Data on teenage conception rates and NEET status was not available at the time this research was conducted.

Although Northern Ireland is not included in the composite indicator, our methodology allows us to compare Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK. This is because the standardisation of each indicator has been performed using the UK-wide distribution of the indicator itself, rather than the distribution of Northern Irish local authorities only. We have found that Northern Irish local authorities perform above the UK average when considering a composite measure based on a restricted list of indicators. This is mainly driven by the results of Northern Ireland on educational attainment, with all Northern Irish local authorities ranking within the top 27 positions for this indicator. Looking at Northern Ireland only, North Down performs the best, and Derry is the lowest ranked.



Top 10

1	North Down	1.01
2	Down	0.91
3	Ards	0.87
4	Ballymena	0.85
5	Carrickfergus	0.79
6	Larne	0.79
7	Castlereagh	0.78
8	Magherafelt	0.76
9	Coleraine	0.74
10	Moyle	0.73

Bottom 10

17	Lisburn	0.61
18	Banbridge	0.49
19	Craigavon	0.40
20	Armagh	0.38
21	Antrim	0.38
22	Newtownabbey	0.34
23	Belfast	0.26
24	Ballymoney	0.17
25	Strabane	0.14
26	Derry	0.03

**Top left to right:
Kirsty, 15, Melvine, 16,
and Elsa, 16**

**Bottom left to right:
Anna, 16, and Jade, 16
Scottish Highlands**





THRIVE

*SDG 5:
Gender
Equality*

*SDG 8:
Decent Work
and Economic
Growth*

*SDG 10:
Reduced
Inequalities*

*SDG 16:
Peace and
Justice*

INDICATOR 1: CHILD POVERTY

Why does child poverty matter?

Child poverty rates fell between the late 1990s and 2010, then fluctuated in the first half of this decade. The later part of this decade has seen child poverty increase and it is now higher in both relative and absolute terms since 2010.¹⁴⁴ Analysis by the Department of Work and Pensions¹⁴⁵ suggests that 4.1m children were living in poverty in 2017-18, which represents 30% of all children. Growing up in relative poverty is associated with worse outcomes on a number of dimensions beyond the evident lack of household income:

- By age 19, 50% of students in receipt of free school meals in England have still not achieved GCSEs in English and Maths, compared to only 25% of those who were not eligible.¹⁴⁶ Without these GCSEs it is more difficult for these individuals to succeed in the labour market.
- In Scotland, 11% of children in the lowest income households reported 'fair', 'bad' or 'very bad' general health, compared to 3% in the highest income households.¹⁴⁷
- Deprivation is also associated with worse mental wellbeing and dental health, lower birth weights and higher infant mortality rates.
- In a 2018 survey of National Education Union members 63% said that they 'often' or 'sometimes' know of children missing out on extra-curricular activities because their parents cannot afford the costs.¹⁴⁸

How is child poverty measured?

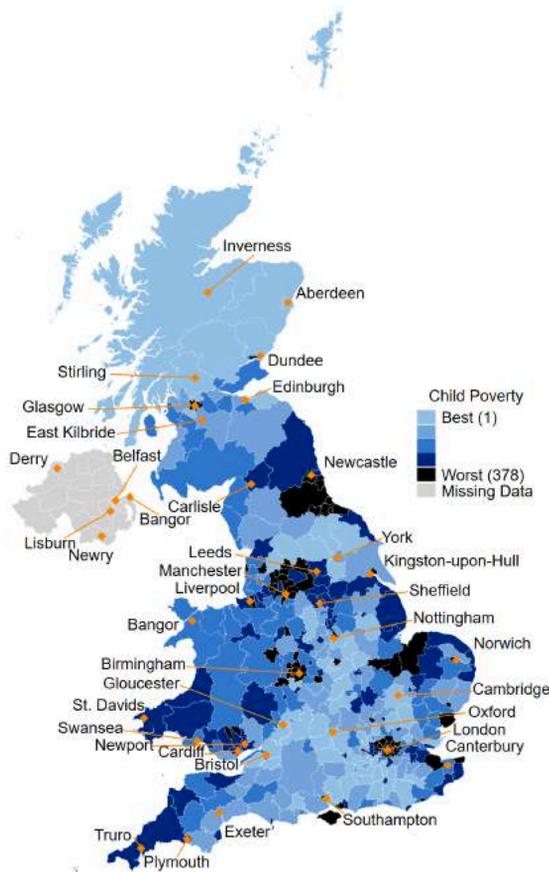
Using the most recently available UK-wide data from the Child Poverty Action Group, child poverty is reported as the percentage of children living in poverty, in a given local authority. More specifically, a child is defined as living in poverty if their household income is less than 60% of the national median income (after housing costs).

Index results

Across the UK, the distribution spans almost 45 percentage points, ranging between 9.4% child poverty rate in the Shetland Islands and 53.4% in Tower Hamlets. The lowest ranked region appears to be an outlier, sitting slightly apart from the remainder of the local authorities.

Among the top ten (least deprived) local authorities, two are in Scotland and eight are in England. Areas with the lowest levels of child poverty appear to be mainly in the south of England. All of the bottom ten (most deprived) are located in England, with six of these located in London. Wales and the more rural parts of Northern Ireland generally have higher levels of child poverty. In contrast, the remoter areas of Scotland perform slightly better.

Figure 1 Child poverty in the UK (in 2017) by local authority, ranked top to bottom



Top 10

1	Shetland Islands	9.4%
2	Wokingham	10.8%
3	Hart	11.2%
4	S. Northamp.	11.8%
5	Mole Valley	12.1%
6	Waverley	12.5%
7	S. Oxfordshire	12.5%
8	Aberdeenshire	12.6%
9	Rushcliffe	12.9%
10	Ribble Valley	12.9%

Bottom 10

395	Camden	39.9%
396	Islington	40.4%
397	Leicester	40.6%
398	Oldham	40.7%
399	Westminster	41.3%
400	Hackney	41.3%
401	Birmingham	42.3%
402	Newham	43.2%
403	Manchester	43.6%
404	Tower Hamlets	53.4%



THRIVE

SDG 5:
Gender
Equality

SDG 8:
Decent Work
and Economic
Growth

SDG 10:
Reduced
Inequalities

SDG 16:
Peace and
Justice

INDICATOR 2: LIFE EXPECTANCY

Why does life expectancy matter?

In England and Wales, life expectancy at birth has been steadily increasing since the early 1990s, with the increase in England outperforming that in Wales, and the north of England experiencing lower life expectancy than the south of England.¹⁴⁹ These regional discrepancies suggest that life expectancy may be affected by environmental and socioeconomic factors.

- The Marmot Review (2010) reported that those living in the poorest neighbourhoods die seven years earlier, on average, compared to those living in the wealthiest neighbourhoods.¹⁵⁰
- The King's Fund (2015) reported that areas which have persistently low life expectancy over time also suffer from higher deprivation among older people, unemployment, housing deprivation and binge drinking.¹⁵¹

How is life expectancy measured?

Data on life expectancy was taken from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and relates to the period 2015-2017, disaggregated by gender and local authority. We look at three different measures of life expectancy: life expectancy at birth; healthy life expectancy; and disability-free life expectancy (the number of years lived without a long-lasting physical or mental health condition).

The data reports the average time that a girl born in 2015-2017, in a given local authority, could be expected to live, based on current mortality rates in that local authority during that same time period.^{vi}

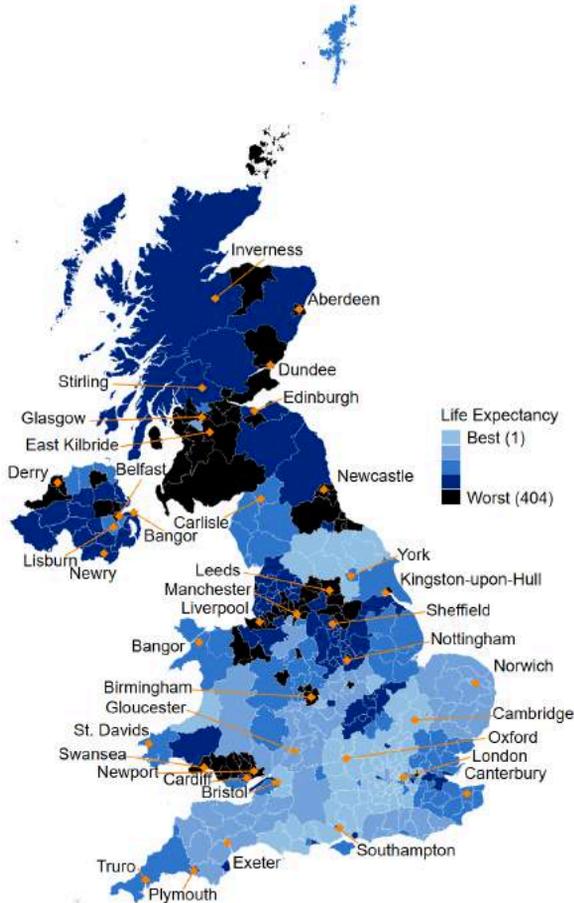
vi Due to the nature of the available data, there is no local authority level data for non-metropolitan counties (such as Lancashire). Consequently, values for these counties have been applied to the individual local authorities within them, resulting in clustering within regions.

Results

For the UK as a whole, the range of estimates for life expectancy spans almost eight years, from 78.7 years for Glasgow City to 86.5 years for Camden. The top 76 ranked local authorities are located in England but these areas are generally located in the south of England, while the north of England performs relatively worse.

Scotland performs relatively poorly in terms of life expectancy. Only East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire stand out from other Scottish local authorities (83.7 and 83.3 years respectively). The majority of Northern Ireland also post relatively low rank positions, while Wales appears to achieve a broader range of estimates.

Figure 2 Life expectancy in the UK by local authority, ranked top to bottom



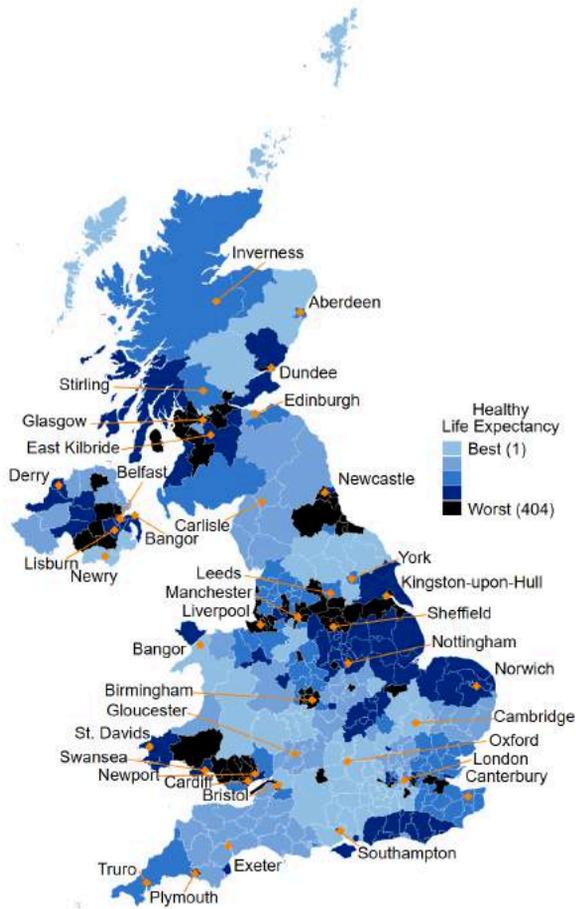
Top 10

1	Camden	86.55
2	Kens. & Chelsea	86.20
3	Westminster	86.03
4	Harrow	85.90
5	Rutland	85.79
6	Richmond up. T.	85.69
7	Wokingham	85.61
8	Barnet	85.45
9	Bromley	85.25
10	Brent	84.99

Bottom 10

395	East Ayrshire	79.96
396	Kingston up. H.	79.94
397	Middlesbrough	79.87
398	Inverclyde	79.68
399	Blackpool	79.56
400	Manchester	79.52
401	N. Lanarkshire	79.42
402	Dundee City	79.36
403	W. Dunbarton.	79.09
404	Glasgow City	78.73

Figure 3 Healthy life expectancy in the UK by local authority, ranked top to bottom



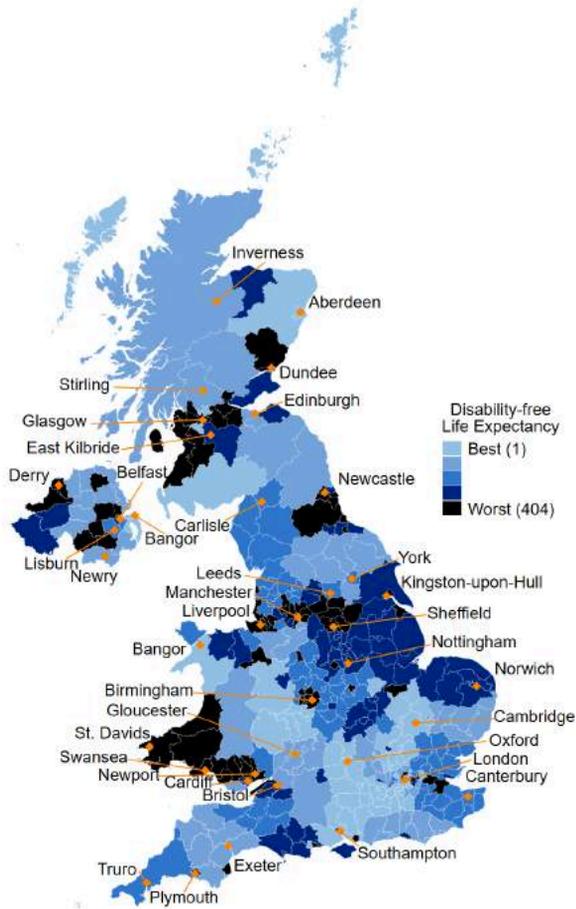
Top 10

1	Orkney Islands	75.01
2	Wokingham	71.59
3	Southwark	70.84
4	Winds. & Maid.	70.44
5	Wycombe	70.26
5	Chiltern	70.26
5	South Bucks	70.26
5	Aylesbury Vale	70.26
9	Cheshire East	70.10
10	Cherwell	69.99

Bottom 10

395	Tower Hamlets	57.18
396	North Ayrshire	57.13
397	Hartlepool	57.02
398	Kingston up. H.	56.94
399	Wakefield	56.69
400	Merthyr Tydfil	56.52
401	Manchester	56.23
402	Caerphilly	56.10
403	Blaenau Gwent	54.53
404	Nottingham	53.49

Figure 4 Disability-free life expectancy in the UK by local authority, ranked top to bottom



Top 10

1	Orkney Islands	71.78
2	Wandsworth	69.47
3	Winds. & Maid.	69.33
4	Rutland	68.84
5	West Berkshire	68.33
6	E. Dunbarton.	67.83
7	Richmond up. T.	67.70
8	Lambeth	67.66
9	Southwark	67.56
10	Reading	67.03

Bottom 10

395	Newcastle u. T.	56.27
396	Hartlepool	56.17
397	Caerphilly	56.04
398	Torfaen	55.83
399	Neath P. Talb.	55.82
400	Glasgow City	55.28
401	Newport	54.71
402	Blackpool	53.60
403	Nottingham	53.55
404	Blaenau Gwent	51.57



DECIDE

SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

SDG 5: Gender Equality

INDICATOR 3: TEENAGE CONCEPTIONS

Why do teenage conceptions matter?

While some adolescent mothers might make informed choices to start a family and do not face significant barriers, for most, teenage parenting is reflective of structural deprivation and gender inequality.

- The Information Services Division (ISD) of NHS National Services Scotland reported that pregnancy rates were five times higher for teenage girls from the most deprived areas compared to the least.¹⁵²
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2006) found that difficult and traumatic family backgrounds, as well as negative experiences at school, influenced girls' decisions to become pregnant.¹⁵³
- The Local Government Association and Public Health England found that children of teenage mothers are 30% more likely to be born with a low birth weight and are subject to a 75% higher rate of infant mortality.¹⁵⁴
- Pregnant girls often leave school early and at the age of 30, those who were teenage parents are 20% more likely to have no formally recognised qualifications.¹⁵⁵

How are teenage conception rates measured?

Data on teenage conceptions is published together for England and Wales, and separately for Scotland. However, as the Scottish data provider has attempted to follow the approach used for England and Wales, the data is broadly comparable; providing the number of conceptions for girls aged under 18 per 1,000 women aged 15-17. Conception statistics are not available for Northern Ireland, due to the laws and restrictions of when abortions can be performed.

Conception statistics for England and Wales were taken from the Office for National Statistics. In Scotland, ISD Scotland publishes data on teenage pregnancy.

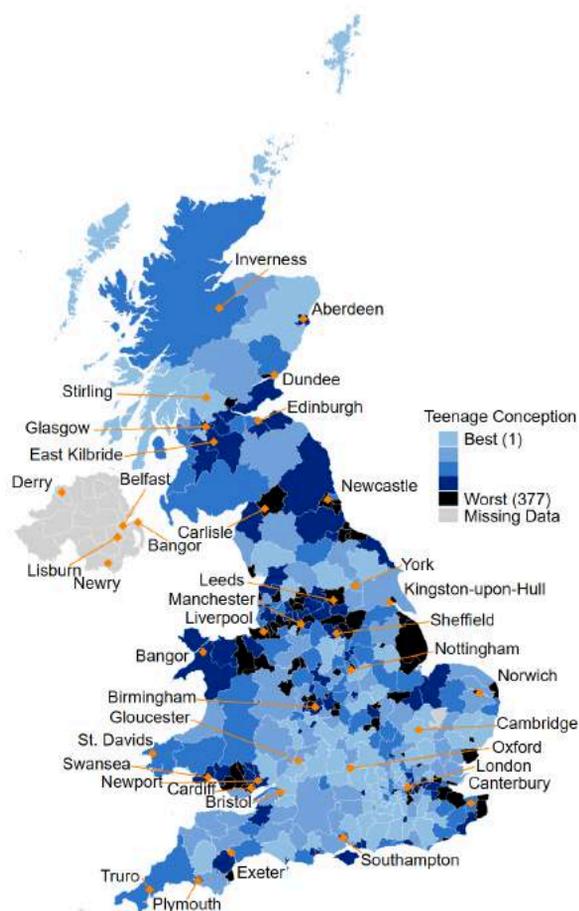
Results

Among the top ten ranked local authorities across the UK (excluding Northern Ireland), six are located in England and four are located in Scotland.

Overall, teenage pregnancy rates have been falling across the country in recent years, pointing to the success of the long-term public health interventions. Conception rates for women aged 15 to 17 in England and Wales were 18.9 per 1,000 in 2016, a decrease of 60% between 1998 and 2016.¹⁵⁶ In Scotland, in 2017, there were 30.2 teenage pregnancies per 1,000 women, a decrease from 31.7 in 2016 and 54.7 in 1994.¹⁵⁷

Individualised behavioural interventions such as access to contraception and education are vital, but they do not provide the full solution – or the support. The complex nature of the causes of teenage pregnancy mean that non-health interventions are required to reduce rates further.

Figure 5 Teenage conceptions in the UK (in 2016) by local authority, ranked top to bottom



Top 10

1	Hart	6.53
2	Rutland	6.70
3	E. Renfrewshire	6.73
4	Chiltern	7.50
5	Shetland Islands	8.09
5	Orkney Islands	8.09
5	Eileanan an Iar	8.09
8	Harrogate	8.13
9	Wokingham	8.20
10	Waverley	8.37

Bottom 10

368	Sunderland	33.77
369	Barnsley	34.60
370	Hyndburn	35.07
371	Middlesbrough	35.43
372	Tamworth	35.97
373	Kingston up. H.	36.13
374	Burnley	37.10
375	NE. Lincolnshire	37.17
376	Blackpool	38.47
377	Dundee City	39.95



LEARN

SDG 4:
Quality
Education

INDICATOR 4: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Why does educational attainment matter?

Education aims to not only provide young people with the required levels of numeracy and literacy to get by in society, but also to provide a minimum level of basic skills to allow them to pursue life's opportunities.

- The Nuffield Foundation found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds take less academically selective subjects irrespective of their levels of prior attainment. These differences are partly associated with the schools that students are enrolled in, not just individual characteristics.¹⁵⁸
- Those from poorer backgrounds are less likely to go to university, those that do are less likely to graduate or achieve high grades, and these differences in degree outcomes reduce the likelihood of obtaining a professional job and lower average earnings.¹⁵⁹
- Numerous studies have found education is connected to better health, including from the Resolution Foundation¹⁶⁰ the Economic and Social Research Council.¹⁶¹

How is educational attainment measured?

Using the Regulated Qualification Framework to ensure comparability in the level of attainment across the four nations, this measure is defined as follows:

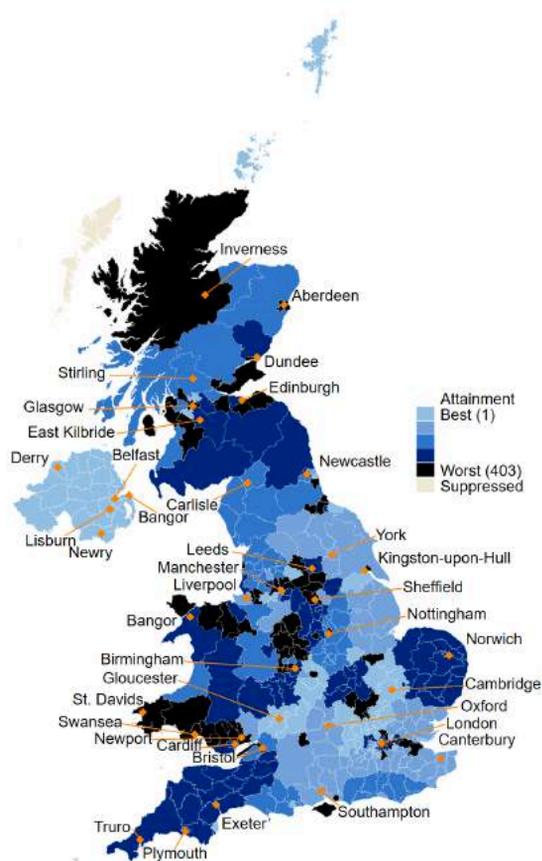
- England: percentage of girls who achieved all components of the English Baccalaureate, including a standard 4-9 pass in English and Maths. Data was obtained from the Department for Education.
- Scotland: percentage of female school leavers who achieved SCQF Level 5. Data was obtained from the Scottish Government.
- Wales: percentage of girls who achieved Level 2 including English/Welsh and Maths. Taken from StatsWales.
- Northern Ireland: percentage of girls achieving 5+ GCSEs A*-C including English and Maths. Data was obtained from the Department for Education in Northern Ireland.

Results

Northern Ireland dominates the top 24 ranking places in terms of educational attainment. All local authorities in Northern Ireland rank within the top 28 places (out of a total of 404 local authorities in the UK), with only East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire in Scotland ranking amongst them (in 25th and 26th place with attainment scores of 86.2% and 85.5% respectively).

Local authorities in Wales generally rank towards the bottom end of the UK-wide distribution. The best performing region in Wales (Monmouthshire, ranked 155th overall) achieves only a 69.5% attainment rate. The local authorities in England range from 44.2% in Blackpool to 84.3% in Chiltern (a total span of 40 percentage points).

Figure 6 Educational attainment in the UK by local authority, ranked top to bottom



Top 10

1	Coleraine	93.0%
1	Limavady	93.0%
1	Moyle	93.0%
4	Omagh	92.4%
4	Fermanagh	92.4%
6	Dungannon	92.0%
6	Magherafelt	92.0%
6	Cookstown	92.0%
9	Strabane	91.2%
9	Derry	91.2%

Bottom 10

394	Wrexham	51.5%
395	Milton Keynes	51.0%
396	Kens. & Chelsea	50.6%
397	Clackmannans.	49.5%
398	Nottingham	48.7%
399	Knowsley	47.5%
400	Kingston up. H.	46.4%
401	Blaenau Gwent	44.8%
402	Blackpool	44.1%
403	Merthyr Tydfil	43.8%



LEARN

SDG 4:
Quality
Education



THRIVE

SDG 5:
Gender
Equality

SDG 8:
Decent Work
and Economic
Growth

SDG 10:
Reduced
Inequalities

SDG 16:
Peace and
Justice

INDICATOR 5: NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING (NEET)

Why does NEET status matter?

Health and wellbeing is negatively affected by being NEET, and the implications of a period of unemployment or inactivity at a young age on future outcomes are potentially long-lasting.

- In a survey of young people who are NEET, run by the University and College Union, 33% mentioned depression as one of the consequences, while 37% said that they rarely leave the house and 39% mentioned stress and anxiety.¹⁶²
- Research by The Prince's Trust found that young people who are NEET rate their happiness 10 percentage points lower than those who are not.¹⁶³

In 2018, 11.9% of females aged 16-24 were NEET, compared to 10.7% of males.¹⁶⁴ The main reason for females being inactive is looking after the family or home, which is different from males. Poor health, including mental health, and transitioning between education and work are other key reasons.

How is NEET status measured?

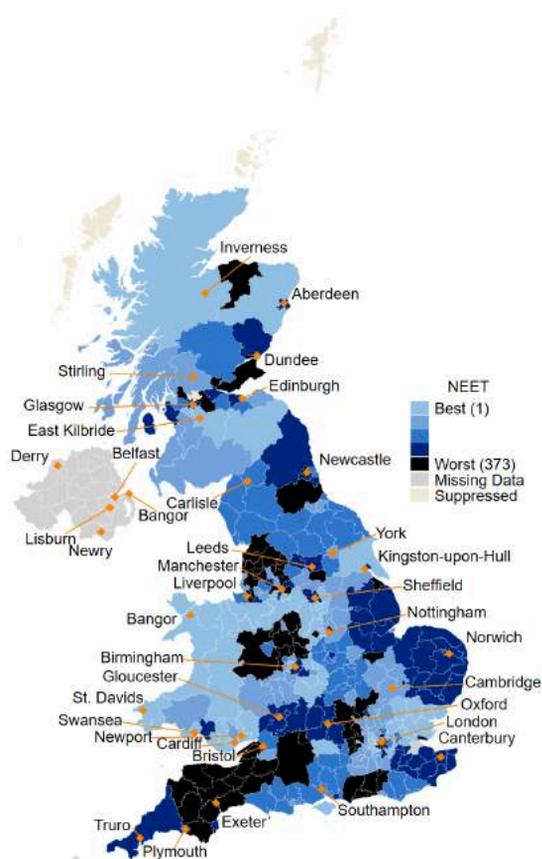
Those classed as being 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) are a combination of people who are unemployed but actively seeking work, as well as those who either don't want to work or are unable to (economically inactive).

- In England, the NEET indicator is defined as the number of 16-year-old girls who are NEET as a percentage of all 16-year-old girls known to the local authority. Data was obtained from the ONS.
- Data for Scotland was provided by Skills Development Scotland. Due to the small sample size at age 16, we measured the number of 17-year-old girls who are 'not participating' as a percentage of all 17-year-old girls in that local authority.
- Data for Wales relates to individuals who completed Year 11 and was provided by Careers Wales, who collect information on NEET status on behalf of the Welsh Government.
- Data is not available for Northern Ireland. A Freedom of Information request received the response that a breakdown by area or age was not possible as the numbers involved are too small.

Results

England dominates both the top and bottom ranked positions with Windsor & Maidenhead, Bracknell Forest, and Blackpool achieving particularly high proportions of NEET girls (12.9%, 10.8% and 10.4% respectively). Local authorities in Wales have relatively low proportions of girls that are NEET. Scotland also appears to perform well, as do some regions in the North East of England. There is also a predominance of low performing regions in the South West of England, particularly towards Bristol.

Figure 7 NEET status in the UK by local authority, ranked top to bottom



Top 10

1	Ham. & Fulham	0.3%
2	Bridgend	0.6%
3	Thurrock	0.7%
4	West Berkshire	0.7%
5	Conwy	0.8%
6	V. of Glamorgan	0.9%
7	Cardiff	0.9%
8	Ceredigion	0.9%
9	Isle of Anglesey	1.0%
10	Flintshire	1.0%

Bottom 10

364	Derby	6.3%
365	Wandsworth	6.4%
366	Dundee City	6.4%
367	Haringey	6.5%
368	Liverpool	7.4%
369	Kens. & Chelsea	8.2%
370	Wiltshire	9.2%
371	Blackpool	10.4%
372	Brackn. Forest	10.8%
373	Winds. & Maid.	12.9%



DECIDE

SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

SDG 5: Gender Equality

INDICATOR 6: CHILD OBESITY

Why does child obesity matter?

The proportion of children classed as either overweight or obese has been rising in the UK and is expected to reach 50% of all children by 2020. Beyond the immediate negative health, social and psychological implications, the impact of childhood obesity can extend far beyond the period of childhood to increased risks of obesity and the associated health conditions during adulthood, as well as premature death.

- According to the World Health Organisation, obesity during childhood is associated with obesity during adulthood, as well as premature death.¹⁶⁵
- Furthermore, obese children experience a range of health issues including breathing difficulties and increased risk of fractures.
- Overweight children are more likely to face low self-esteem and bullying.¹⁶⁶

How is child obesity measured?

The child obesity indicator is defined as the number of girls classed as obese as a percentage of the total number of girls in a given local authority. In England, Wales and Scotland, child obesity is measured using a child's Body Mass Index (BMI)^{vii} measured at age 4-5. A child is classed as obese if their BMI centile is greater than or equal to the 95th centile.¹⁶⁷ Northern Ireland uses the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) BMI cut-offs, where a BMI of greater than or equal to 30 is considered obese.¹⁶⁸

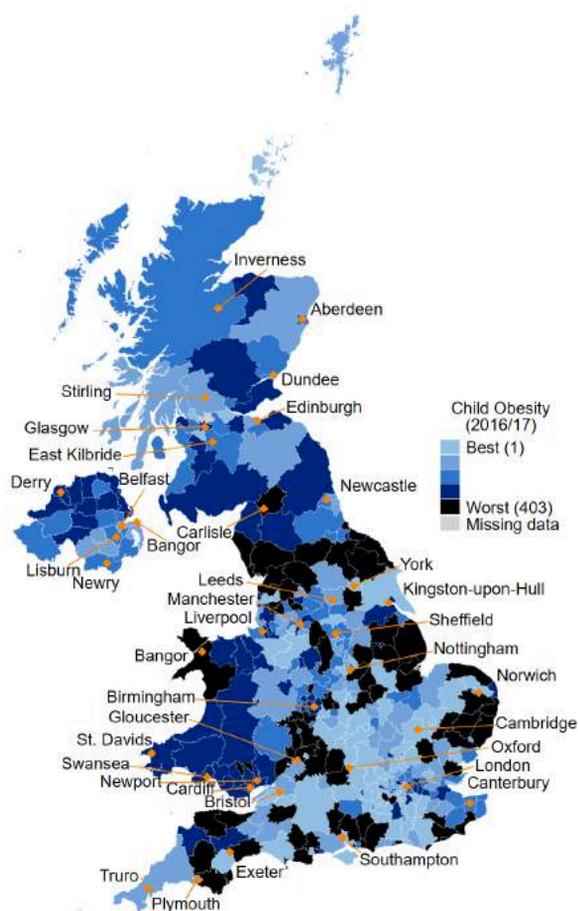
Data for England is taken from NHS Digital, data for Wales is published by NHS Wales, and data for Scotland was collected from NHS National Services Scotland, while data for Northern Ireland was provided by the Department of Health in response to a Freedom of Information request.

^{vii} BMI=weight/height², where weight is expressed in kilograms and height is expressed in metres.

Results

In general, poor performing regions are spread throughout the UK but are predominantly situated around the coast and borders of England, while Wales also ranks very low in all local authorities. Despite England being overwhelmingly represented among the bottom ranked local authorities, most of the top ranked local authorities appear to be located in the South East of England.

Figure 8 Child obesity in the UK (in 2016/17) by local authority, ranked best to worst



Top 10

1	Fylde	2.0%
2	Orkney Islands	2.0%
3	Cambridge	2.1%
4	Richmond up. T.	2.2%
5	Epsom & Ewell	2.3%
6	Kingston up. T.	2.5%
7	Waverley	2.5%
8	Reigate & Bans.	2.5%
9	Tandridge	2.5%
10	S. Oxfordshire	2.5%

Bottom 10

394	South Holland	27.4%
395	Hyndburn	27.6%
396	Hartlepool	28.3%
397	Barrow-in-Fur.	29.5%
398	West Devon	30.6%
399	Tamworth	30.8%
400	Richmondshire	31.1%
401	Ryedale	32.6%
402	West Somerset	33.3%
403	Rutland	35.6%

MISSING DATA: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Constituting a severe violation of an individual's fundamental human rights, violence against women and girls impacts girls' quality of life in ways beyond any immediate physical injury. Girls can experience long-lasting psychological trauma as well as difficulties in forming relationships, and are more likely to suffer from domestic abuse later in life. The incidence and severity of violence varies by gender, age group and level of deprivation.

- The ONS (2018) reported that girls aged 10-14 accounted for 23% of police-recorded sexual offences where the victim was female. For context, this age group accounts for only 5% of the female population.¹⁶⁹
- There is a negative relationship between domestic abuse and income: women in the lowest income brackets were more likely to be victims of domestic abuse in the previous 12 months than other income groups.¹⁷⁰

Data on violence against women and girls that is collected through authorities, the justice system or the healthcare system does not accurately reflect

the true prevalence, because not all victims will report and not all instances are visible in the system. In some local authority areas, an increase in police-reported offences may simply reflect a higher proportion of victims choosing or being able to report.

Data on violence against women and girls is generally not publicly available in any of the four home nations. In areas where this information is available in theory, we found it is not collected in a format to allow it to be easily provided to researchers.

To attempt to start painting a picture of violence against women and girls, we sought data on reported offences and submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Home Office for data on England and Wales, the Scottish Government, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The FOI requested data on the number of instances of violence against those under the age of 25 for the years 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. A disaggregation was requested by gender of victim, Police Force Area and instance of violence type (i.e. domestic violence, sexual offences etc).

We sent multiple FOI requests to the Scottish Government, Police Scotland and the Home Office, but they all either don't have the data or could not release it, which was disappointing. However, we later received data for England and Wales on the count of violence against the person offences recorded by the police, victims aged under 25 where the age is known, by Police Force Area in 2018 – but it did not show the type of violence.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) provided a response to an FOI request containing data regarding violence towards victims under the age of 25, split by gender. However, PSNI did not provide a regional disaggregation for this data. As such, this data has not been mapped.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a form of violence against women and girls which is gaining more attention from the Government. Worryingly, statistics estimating the prevalence of girls at risk of FGM in England and Wales remain unreliable, resulting in under-estimation.¹⁷¹ Wider systems and safeguarding procedures are crucial in

preventing FGM. This includes schools, health services and justice systems. Furthermore, as FGM is now in the RSE curriculum in England, the UK Government should work with specialist organisations to prepare guidance for teachers and pupils with concerns, survivors of FGM and those at risk.

Sexual exploitation

Awareness of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and sexual abuse against young women has risen following high-profile cases throughout England (Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford), and the report by Professor Alexis Jay, which considered evidence from the cases of over 1,400 children sexually exploited in Rotherham between 1997-2013.

The true scale is slowly becoming known, with the number of police-recorded child sexual offences increasing. However, as there is no specific crime of CSE in UK law and perpetrators are prosecuted for other offences, there is no accurate measurement of CSE. In addition, most children and young people do not tell anyone at the time abuse is taking place, but wait until they are adults.¹⁷²

According to the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, England and Wales data suggests that 15% of girls and young women and 5% of boys

and young men experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16. During 2017/18 the police in England and Wales recorded over 15,000 CSE-related crimes, with 14,546 cases in England and 466 cases in Wales.¹⁷³

There has been an increase in recorded cases of children trafficked for sexual exploitation (638 cases in 2018, up from 561 cases in 2017). The National Referral Mechanism finds girls are more likely to be trafficked for sexual exploitation than boys: 533 cases of girls, to 105 cases of boys, which represents 493 girls and 100 boys in England, 6 girls in Northern Ireland, 11 girls and 1 boy in Scotland, and 23 girls and 4 boys in Wales.¹⁷⁴ This aligns with the global statistics that show women and girls account for 71% of the detected victims of human trafficking globally and girls represent nearly the same proportion (69 per cent) of identified child trafficking victims.¹⁷⁵

Pako (top), 27 and Hanya, 16, Middlesbrough



demonstrate to newcomers and friends alike. The girls offered words such as ‘welcoming’, ‘approachable’, ‘loyal’, and ‘non-judgemental’. As a girl who had moved to the town from elsewhere in England, Izzy (aged 10) described Middlesbrough girls as, above all things, “friendly and kind.”

Girls were very aware of clichés about how they dressed and spoke. Some had come across assumptions that they were ‘slappers’ and ‘easy’ and that they were not academically able.

They came across these views in several places, particularly through media, but also when mixing with people from outside the region (and sometimes within the region). Emily (18) suggested that these views of Middlesbrough girls were expressed by boys and young men, which further illuminates gender inequalities.

Whilst some of their responses aimed at dismantling stereotypes were jokey,

as when Olivia (15) asserted “*Some of us are actually still virgins!*”, overall they were insistent that they were like other girls elsewhere.

For example, a working and professional identity, as well as a commitment to education, was central to the girls hopes for the future. They attacked the idea of being unintelligent, something that was often, they felt, attached to having a North East accent. Countering this, Maria (16) argued that, “*I think that most people think girls from Middlesbrough are quite stupid and not intelligent. And I actually don’t know where they get that from because most girls in Middlesbrough have quite well-paid jobs.*”

There was an awareness of the historical idea of Middlesbrough as a monolithic white, working class community centred on heavy industry and male breadwinners. It was characterised by Emily (18) as still male dominated and she said that this had an impact upon women and girls’ access to opportunities.

“ I’m sure I could work in the steelworks, just send me in there! ”

Maria, 16

STICKING TOGETHER

There is a great sense amongst girls in Middlesbrough of the need to work collectively and to look after each other: *“I think that a lot of the time, even if you don’t know each other, girls always do pull together and are always going to have each other’s backs” (Emily, 18).*

“I see them as being very protective of their friends and family, I mean, I think that it’s because they know that they are seen negatively, so they do a lot to protect themselves and the others they care for” (Maria, 16).

This protectiveness has roots in gender inequality: it shows both vulnerability

and an understanding that girls might be considered people of low status, both in their community and beyond. However, Maria also links it to Middlesbrough more broadly as an undervalued community and the need to take strength from each other.

The idea of support is connected to aspiration and acknowledging each other’s dreams and ambitions. Steph and Olivia, both aged 15 and close friends, appositely demonstrated this. As Olivia commented: *“We have goals that we want to reach and we’ll help each other and support each other [...] Like, I want to be a lawyer and Steph will back me up.”*

DETERMINED AMBITIONS

“ You want to live your life. You don’t want to get judged for what you wear, where you live or who you are. ”

Zaina, 13

When talking about how they saw themselves in the future, girls described diverse young people who typically dressed modestly, worked hard, and had academic and career ambitions. They had plans in mind for a future that enabled them to celebrate being from Middlesbrough, even if they moved away.

Their acute self-awareness was linked to an understanding of assumptions and discriminations by others, based on cliché and stereotype, and how that impacted upon their emotional and mental health. Judgement was a constant theme.

Yet alongside these concerns lay some

very strong ambitions. For example, the youngest girl that we interviewed, Izzy (10), had ambitions to be a footballer, was passionate about her training and wanted to play for either Leeds or Middlesbrough. Many career choices were focused on supporting others: *“I feel like if I do work with people with autism, it will change people’s lives”* (Steph, 15).

A varied range of potential careers were being planned, from solicitors to school teachers to successful businesswomen, but overall there was a desire to do work that satisfied them and to be acknowledged as good within their chosen fields. As Maria (16) shared, *“All of my friends are hardworking and ambitious and they want to do well.”*

Girls in Middlesbrough face significant social and economic challenges compared to girls in other regions of the UK, and these challenges are bigger than the actions of individual girls.

Nevertheless, the girls we spoke to are clearly resilient, strong and ambitious, and there was a sense of determination to support the town and the region.

As Emily (18), said, *“I like living in Middlesbrough and I want to do well.”* Further, Maria (16) asserted *“I want to make other people think ‘I wish I was raised in Middlesbrough’.”*

However, the older girls were aware that the root causes of girls’ inequality locally and nationally were related to political issues. They saw this as something that needed countering at national level. Maria (16), for instance, argued that *“there need to be more women in government or it’ll just be about men’s ideals.”*

Further, although they wanted to help make change, they knew that, as Maria (16) put it, to get listened to, *“I think you need to get plenty of other people’s support”* – an acknowledgement that they cannot simply overcome these barriers on their own.

“ Nothing is going to stop me. I don’t care if I’m from Middlesbrough. ”

Olivia, 15

WHAT DO MIDDLESBROUGH GIRLS NEED?

Enabling girls to realise their rights requires multi-level action from a range of institutions, including national and local governments.

Since we published the first report in 2016, Middlesbrough Council has produced 'Middlesbrough Joint Strategic Needs Assessment – Children and Young People 2018' which includes data on a range of girls' rights. This report states that their priority "is increasing the cohort of children to grow up in a safe and stable family and ensuring this will impact positively on key educational attainment, health and wellbeing outcomes for children", as well as reducing the number of children needing specialist services and improving data collection.¹⁷⁶

Middlesbrough has moved from the lowest ranked place in the 2016 local authority index (covering England and Wales) to 14th from the bottom (covering England, Wales and Scotland). This is because it has seen improvements in educational attainment (GCSEs), rates of girls who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), teen conception rates, and they perform adequately for child (girl) obesity.

The professionals working directly with Middlesbrough girls are also key to girls' realising their rights. Given their personal and professional experiences, the professionals we interviewed were highly aware of how the North East as a whole had, over time, been neglected, or worse, undermined, by various national policies.

They were also conscious of the ways that cuts in local government services were damaging the social infrastructure of Middlesbrough and nearby areas. For example, interviewees told us how services that *had* existed for girls in particular (and for young people in general) were now much more limited, meaning that issues around girls' rights are not as effectively addressed as they could be in areas with more funding.

Whilst they knew they could not overcome all the issues facing Middlesbrough, they told us that our first local authority index had given them extra stimulus. Consequently, work is taking place with girls on the ground to provide them with the support and services that can help them thrive.

Liz Edwards and Krista Coulson are the founders of Rubies, a charity working with 10 and 11-year-old girls



I love Middlesbrough and I want to stick around and do something that betters the area.



Krista Coulson, Rubies charity

across Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland, particularly regarding transitions to secondary school. They were motivated by the 2016 report to put their ideas into action; they were, as Krista said *“burning to do something.”*

Liz and Krista identified a need for preventative, rather than crisis, interventions around girls’ self-esteem and confidence, to address *“[...] what we’re going to do about it as a community, as a town, as a place”* (Krista). As Liz argued, they *“wanted to bring a therapeutic aspect to it as well [... as] that doesn’t necessarily exist in statutory services in the same way”* – highlighting a national need as well as a local one.

In interview, Dianne Casey (poet, youth and community project worker on Teesside) reiterated many of the Rubies’ sentiments. This was combined with an anger about the stereotypical representation of the region and the town in the media and in popular culture. Dianne referred to the various television programmes and news coverage of all of Teesside, feeling that Middlesbrough is *“stereotyped as a forgotten, jobless town, and that’s not the town that I recognise.”*

She argued that a more varied media depiction of the town would be helpful as part of a set of overall drivers for change: *“If [media] covered the amazing stuff that’s happening, the community spirit, the diversity in the job market, the awesome businesswomen that are out there achieving their goals, they’d really see a different side to Teesside.”*

Ann Stonehouse (Assist Women’s Network, Young Enterprise and Inspire2Learn) believes a change

to popular culture and media understandings of Middlesbrough is already underway, referring to the programme *‘Talking Up Teesside’* and the hashtag *#BrilliantlyBoro* that is used to highlight a positive side of Middlesbrough. This would, in turn, impact upon how girls see themselves, making them yet more aware of their possibilities and potential.

Everyone interviewed shared, despite their different roles and approaches, a wish to take action, whilst also acknowledging the necessity of national intervention in relation to girls’ rights locally and further afield.

The professionals also shared their awareness of the way that the region’s social issues appear at the national level debate periodically and then disappear again. Whilst they still hope that issues could be addressed, they were angry that little had been done by government and other institutions in the past.

In common with the other key professionals, Ann wanted to see a strong network developed to support girls across Teesside. This would enable local knowledge and experience to inform national level interventions regarding girls’ rights effectively. This was reflected in what Dianne said about *“amazing people doing amazing things in small pockets, and I really do feel that if we joined everything up and mapped it and worked in collaboration, the services for all young people would be improved.”*

In conclusion, as Ann said and as the others agreed, in both their words and actions, *“there needs to be this intervention to do something about [girls’ rights].”*

Hayley, 22, East Riding of Yorkshire



Emily, 16, East Riding of Yorkshire





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Girls' rights are global; wherever a girl is born or lives, she should be safe, free from abuse and have equal rights. The UK is accountable to girls under multiple international rights frameworks and the Sustainable Development Goals, however girls across the UK are telling us about their daily reality, one that sees gender inequality remaining rife – and some girls clearly being left behind.

Our report in 2016 called for the Government to treat girls as a priority group, to highlight and address their needs in a way that hasn't been done before. In 2020, this call to action still stands. Gender Champions should be appointed at national, devolved and local levels to consider the needs of girls in all policy areas and investment decisions, and to bring within them a new focus on delivering girls' rights and equality for all girls.

We recognise that many positive steps have been taken since we published our first report, most notably the change in abortion law in Northern Ireland, the introduction of mandatory sex and relationships education, action on period poverty and the addition of sexual harassment in public in the Government's strategy to end violence against women and girls. While this progress holds significant promises to girls, this report demonstrates that much more needs to be done.

These are our top priorities for girls.

1

WE MUST MAKE ALL PLACES SAFE FOR GIRLS – NO EXCEPTIONS



Girls have told us they do not feel safe online, in public or in school. Girls are angry at relentless sexual harassment in public. They are changing their behaviour to stay safe, restricting their freedom and independence.

The Government has added 'sexual harassment in public' to its national strategy to end violence against women and girls. The next step is to implement the strategy, therefore commitment and action is needed at national, devolved and local levels. More should be done to give girls the right to report street harassment and to be supported when it happens. Police forces, in partnership with businesses, community groups and public sector bodies should make information more accessible. Those responsible for public areas, such as shop security staff and bus drivers, should play a more active role in responding to harassment.

The Government should invest in youth centres and youth work activities and they must ensure girls and young women get the provision and space they need – particularly in the most deprived areas.

2

WE MUST REMODEL EDUCATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION



Girls are performing well in exams, but are yet to achieve equality in the classroom. From textbooks, sports and subject choice, to school uniforms and the prevalence of gender-based violence, the Government should commit to taking action on gender inequality in schools. Teachers need to be much better equipped and informed and their resources must be modernised. Governing bodies, schools and teachers must take a zero-tolerance approach to sexism and sexual harassment.

3

WE MUST RAISE GIRLS' VOICES



Girls across the UK do not feel heard. They do not feel their views are taken seriously, and they do not feel represented by parliament. Girls care deeply about political issues and they have more access to information than ever before – but they are not attracted to machismo politics.

From the local youth club to the Cabinet, girls need more platforms to be heard and respected. Policy makers should invest in mechanisms that enable the meaningful participation of girls and young women at local, regional and national levels, such as girls' committees or panels.

Media companies should continuously challenge themselves on the treatment of female MPs in the media compared to male MPs. The Government should commit to ending the harassment and sexism affecting women MPs – particularly those of colour.

4

WE MUST STOP CONTROLLING GIRLS' BODIES



Girls' bodies and appearances are under immense scrutiny and control. There is no escape from the pressure to keep up with fast changing body image 'trends'. This pressure is coming from every place: social media, popular culture, advertising, peers and even families.

Government should drive increased regulation in the targeted advertising and marketing of products to teenage girls, such as harmful detox teas and plastic surgery. A gender analysis should be core to any initiative aiming to tackle poor body image.

In tackling the toxic trio of period poverty, there has already been strong progress on increasing access to period products, but through the Period Poverty Taskforce and beyond, the Government must ensure that dramatically improving menstruation education and tackling damaging stigma remain key priorities.

5

WE NEED BETTER DATA ON GIRLS' RIGHTS



Data is crucial to designing policies and services for girls, and change cannot be measured without it. But there are significant gaps in data on girls' rights.

All official government statistics must capture gender and age. Other identity characteristics should be captured where possible. More specifically, more robust data is needed on all forms of violence against women and girls – including street harassment. The lower age limit applied to data collection of teenage conception rates, which is currently 15 years, should be removed. All public datasets must be updated to use the upcoming 2021 census ethnicity classifications which will include Gypsy/Traveller and Roma under white categories.

6

WE MUST ADVANCE THE RIGHTS OF ALL GIRLS



Girls across the country are experiencing challenges to their rights, but our report finds some girls are being left further behind. The Government committed to 'leave no one behind' in its progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and these are universal, meaning they must be a priority in the UK as well.

Government must tackle the systematic regional deprivation across the country that has a unique impact on adolescent girls. Our report shows extreme variation in girls' rights between the four nations and within them, particularly England which sees vast inequality, where girls in Blackpool face distinct disadvantages compared to girls in Wokingham, Berkshire.

Girls in the youth justice system need more tailored support. There should be a stronger focus on diverting girls away from the system and into specialist support in the community that meets their needs holistically.

There should also be a targeted focus on Gypsy and Traveller girls who have some of the poorest human rights outcomes. Government must reintroduce ring-fenced funding for services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

APPENDIX 1 – HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW

Each of the human rights instruments has established a committee of experts whose responsibilities include monitoring implementation of the treaty. In (usually) five year cycles, the relevant committee requests an initial report on the status of implementation of the relevant treaty from the Government, civil society and national human rights institutions. The Committee reviews these submissions and questions the Government on progress before issuing a set of ‘Concluding Observations’ which summarises progress and areas of concern in the implementation of the treaty and gives recommendations for improvement.

Human rights treaties included in mapping

Treaties reviewed	Acronym	Year adopted	Last review of UK
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	ICCPR	1966	2015
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	ICERD	1965	2016
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights	ICESCR	1966	2016
Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC	1989	2016
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	CRPD	2006	2017
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	CAT	1984	2019
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	CEDAW	1979	2019

Recommendations identified

Treaty	Number
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	55
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	41
Convention on the Rights of the Child	144
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights	59
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	88
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	63
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	72
TOTAL	522

APPENDIX 2 – HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODIES RECOMMENDATIONS 2016-2019

This table outlines a summary of key areas for action, based on our in-depth human rights review.

Human rights domain	Areas for action
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to develop inclusive education, focusing on access for disabled people, racist bullying and sexual harassment in education settings. • Changes to the curricula, including mandatory human rights education and a balanced account of colonial history. • Behaviour management strategies including issues surrounding inappropriate permanent or temporary exclusions.
Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The gender pay gap and the horizontal occupational segregation of men and women in employment. • Protecting women from sexual harassment in the workplace. • Flexible working and action to encourage men to take parental leave.
Living standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child poverty and a clear child-rights focused strategy. • Change to entitlement and social security from recent welfare law reform, including the use of sanctions; the lack of prompt and independent dispute resolution mechanisms and the rules relating to Universal Credit. • Impacts of social security and austerity policies on women, disabled people, ethnic minorities and children.
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to appropriate mental health services and a focus on best interests and consent for children under mental health law. • Mental health compliance with human rights, especially in relation to consent, best interests of the child, detention and non-consensual treatment. • Sexual and reproductive rights, especially access to abortion in Northern Ireland and wider issues of criminalisation of termination of pregnancy and related medical care. It should be noted that abortion rights have been progressed in Northern Ireland, which is a key change since we conducted this review. • National food strategy for access to nutritious food and support for breastfeeding.

Human rights domain	Areas for action
Justice and personal security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A significant priority area is action on violence against women and girls, and the connected issues of domestic violence, child and sex abuse, traditional harmful practices, trafficking and exploitation of prostitution. This includes filling gaps in legal protection from abuse, public awareness of the issue, access to effective services, effective training for professionals and adequate data. The victimisation and barriers to protection of disabled women and asylum seeking and refugee women is of particular concern. • Action to tackle hate crime, racism and xenophobia. • High level of detention and use of prison custodial sentence – including the treatment of girls in prison. • The minimum age of criminal responsibility. • Immigration detention of children and wider experiences in the asylum system, and inadequate facilitation of family reunification. • The legal aid system and barriers to accessing effective remedies for human rights violations and the disproportionate impact reforms have had on minority groups, especially disabled people.
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in decision-making including effective engagement with national legislative processes on issues that affect children. • Children deprived of a family environment, including loss of contact with parents and siblings, instability in placements and inadequate training for staff. • Privacy rights, including regulation and proportionality of the interception of personal communications and the ongoing access to and retention of communications data.

APPENDIX 3 – PRECLUDED INDICATORS: GAPS IN DATASETS

Topic	Details of unavailable data	
Health	Hospital admissions for substance/drugs misuse and hospital admissions for self-harm	Although data was obtained for England, Wales and Scotland for drugs misuse, and for all four home nations for self-harm, there were a large number of local authorities (particularly within England) with zero hospital admissions. This may be due to hospital admissions data being disaggregated by local authority on the basis of the location of the NHS trust, not the region of residence of the individual being admitted. As such, local authorities with large accident and emergency departments, mental health facilities, or other specialisms will be associated with higher counts of hospital admissions.
	Subjective wellbeing	Despite wellbeing being such a huge issue for young people and children, there is almost no data publicly available on subjective wellbeing at the regional level. The ONS told us they have not published age breakdowns by local authority and are limited by sample sizes that prohibit more granular wellbeing analysis by local authority.
Education and training	School exclusions	For England and Wales, a local authority and gender disaggregation was not available. A Freedom of Information request was submitted to the Welsh Government for a gender and local authority breakdown but at the time of writing no response had been received. Furthermore, there is no information available on the number of girls enrolled in Wales at local authority level, meaning that the number of exclusions could not be expressed as a percentage to be consistent with the other home nations.
	Apprenticeships	Data could not be found for apprenticeship completions, only apprenticeship starts, and so ultimately it was decided to exclude Wales from the apprenticeship indicator because a comparable metric could not be found.
Participation and citizenship	Cuts to youth services	There was a prevalence of 'zero' expenditure in one or both time periods in Wales. The Scottish Government do not recognise 'youth services' as a category in their expenditure. In Northern Ireland, data is not available and not held by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) or the Government departments.
	Cuts to sexual health services	Data on spend on sexual health services was even more sparse. The required budget breakdowns are published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government for England for 2013/2014 and 2017/2018. However, there were 201 missing data points. A Freedom of Information request was submitted to the Welsh Government but there is no distinct category for Sexual Health Service expenditure, only in relation to HIV/AIDS support.

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The voices of girls in Middlesbrough

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Hannah, 15 and Pixie, 14, Scottish Highlands



“ Women are not just conquests to be won, or objects, they’re worth something and they’re intelligent, they’re meant for something. ”

Anna, 16, Scottish Highlands

Plan International UK
Finsgate,
5-7 Cranwood Street,
London,
EC1V 9LH

www.plan-uk.org

@PlanUK

T: 0300 777 9777

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