

GIRLS CAN'T WAIT

A manifesto to accelerate equality and change for girls.



For children and equality for girls

Marie-Reine, 13, is a youth activist from Togo.

FIVE MORE GENERATIONS OF GIRLS ARE SET TO ENDURE THE INJUSTICES OF GENDER INEQUALITY.*

That means billions more girls across the decades subjected to violence, abuse and harm. Denied the chance to learn. Their bodies repeatedly policed. Their voices routinely silenced.

Girls, in all their diversity, deserve better. So what will the next UK government do to change this?

Whoever forms the next UK government will come to power at a time of big challenges – both in the UK and globally.

Strained public services. Economic uncertainty. Global instability. The climate crisis. The list goes on.

Some say these are the biggest set of challenges for any UK administration since the second world war.

But big challenges can be reconciled with bold action.

A confident and innovative UK government – and parliament – has a real chance to create lasting change if it chooses to. Change that includes tackling the biggest barriers facing girls.

We are Plan International, a global children's charity striving for an equal world.

In all that we do, we prioritise equality and change for girls. Because it's girls often bearing the brunt of the big challenges of today – from poverty to conflict.

It's even worse for girls with another identity society marginalises – such as a minoritised ethnicity or a disability. And graver still for girls living in the aftermath of a disaster, their vulnerability exposed.

But girls aren't giving up.

We see girls creating change and calling for braver action in their communities all around the world. They're bursting with talent, ideas and strength.

But girls are frustrated at the lack of progress, and the inequality still holding them back. And rightly so. It is not girls' responsibility to tackle the injustices they face. They need support – and hope.

The next UK government has a chance to champion gender equality and accelerate change for girls.

Gender equality is not a diversion from the big challenges ahead. It's a way forwards. Out of poverty. Out of danger. Both for girls and for the people around them – whether globally or in the UK.

For when we focus on making the world a better place to be a girl, we create safer and more just communities for everyone.

We've seen MPs and the UK Government create lasting change with and for girls before. From a huge global programme promoting girls' education to creating a law to tackle public sexual harassment in the UK. It works.

With a greater focus on girls, the next UK government can rewrite the future. Tackling the big challenges of today and tomorrow together.

This is a manifesto to set out how.

No one can truly prosper when half the world's citizens are denied the same rights enjoyed by the other half. Let's be the generation to change that.

**Based on the World Economic Forum estimate that it will take 131 years until we achieve global gender equality.*

GIRLS CAN'T WAIT FIVE GENERATIONS FOR CHANGE. NONE OF US CAN.



75%

of girls in the UK – some as young as 12 – have experienced public sexual harassment.¹

12

million girls globally are married before their 18th birthday every year.²

25%

of girls surveyed in the UK acknowledged recently experiencing food poverty.³

129

million girls globally are currently not in education.⁴

46%

of girls surveyed in the UK worry about their mental health.⁵

1 in 3

girls and women globally experience physical or sexual violence in their lives.⁶

“For everything to be fair is all we really want,” says Jazia, 13. She learnt about gender equality through workshops in Wales.



FOREWORDS

The next UK government must focus on accelerating equality and delivering change for girls, both in the UK and globally. Girls, in all their diversity, cannot wait another 131 years for gender equality. None of us can.

At Plan International UK, we recognise the next UK government faces big domestic and global challenges. This manifesto focusing on gender equality and change for girls is not an additional ask. Nor is it a diversion. It's a way forward towards a better world for all of us.

When girls can learn, make decisions about their bodies and their lives, manage their health and live free from violence in an enabling environment, there is no stopping them. We see girls creating change in their own lives and beyond. The decisions they make and the roles they take up can help to build more equal societies.

But change is stalling, and the current rate of progress still leaves an unacceptable number of girls exposed to poverty, violence and discrimination. What's more, a growing anti-rights movement threatens to roll back hard-won freedoms. Girls deserve better. We all do.

It's time for bold action. We've seen it happen before. We need to see it again. And crucially, girls need to be part of this, through more opportunities to shape and drive the change that will impact their lives. Generations of girls are counting on the next government for change.

Rose Caldwell,
Chief Executive, Plan International UK

A girl today shouldn't have to fear for the future or feel inferior to anyone else.

Yet we, and many young people like us, are frustrated. All around the world we are experiencing harmful attitudes towards girls' and women's rights. Conflict and climate change disrupt young peoples' education and limit our ambition. We feel pushed aside, left out and unheard in decision-making spaces.

We say, enough.

We're the Youth Advisory Panel at Plan International UK. Together, we've helped to set out the change we all need to see from the next UK government; for young people in the UK and all over the world.

We want to see global gender equity prioritised by MPs from all parties. To see global crises and conflict tackled with urgent action. To see life improve for girls in the UK and overseas.

These issues must be taken seriously because they are affecting our futures. It is integral that we include the representation of adolescents in our decision-making process. Listening to young people like us unites generations and helps create a broader and more equitable change. It is the only way to share and shift power.

Government can often feel alienating to young people like us. While many things are talked about and promised, it feels like nothing is done.

So, we're calling on the next government to help make this positive change. To prioritise those who are normally overlooked and uninvolved. Because only then, and only together, can we create the foundations for a better future for all.

Youth Advisory Panel,
Plan International UK

A MANIFESTO TO ACCELERATE EQUALITY AND CHANGE FOR GIRLS

The World Economic Forum estimates it will take 131 years until we achieve gender equality – that’s five more generations.

Girls can’t wait this long.

They’re bearing the brunt of this injustice right now. Missing out on the chance to go to school. Enduring harassment in the street. Being forced to marry.

The next UK Government – and all MPs in the next parliament – have a chance to champion gender equality and accelerate change for girls.

Because when we make the world a better place to be a girl, we create safer and more just communities for everyone.

This manifesto outlines the key priorities we know will support girls. Not only to access their rights. But to create positive change for themselves and their wider communities.

Big challenges demand bold action. Let’s make it happen.

OUR ASKS AT A GLANCE

1 Ensure the UK’s global policy centres on gender equality.

This means:

Policies recognise and respond to the unique experiences of girls and women, and more is done to push back against the global anti-rights movement.

2 Take urgent action to prevent and tackle global crises and conflict.

This means:

Responding quickly, collaboratively and at scale to the global challenges of the day, recognising the disproportionate impact these often have on girls.

3 Improve outcomes for girls in the UK.

This means:

Providing adequate resources and a willingness to tackle the issues girls in the UK say are holding them back.

4 Partner with girls on strategy and policy.

This means:

Ensuring more girls in the UK and globally get meaningful opportunities to input and shape decisions that affect their lives.

[Read our full manifesto asks from page 9.](#)

PRINCIPLES FOR CHANGE

Recognise and respond to differences in lived experiences.

Acknowledge the inequalities that racism and colonialism continue to cause.

[Find out more from page 14.](#)

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

The challenges for an incoming government are big. But change is possible. By working together with partners and young people, the UK government can create real, long-lasting impact for girls in the UK and around the world.

We've seen it happen.

Changing the law on public sexual harassment

In 2020, we launched the Crime Not Compliment campaign in partnership with grassroots, youth-led organisation Our Streets Now.

The campaign sought to create a change in the law that would finally take the issue of public sexual harassment seriously.

Young people across the two organisations, including Plan International UK's Youth Advisory Panel, worked tirelessly to drive this campaign.

Together the young activists gathered the support of over

half a million members of the public. They appeared in the media to raise awareness. And they worked with a range of MPs.

Ultimately, they successfully influenced the Government to back a change in the law – the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023.

Girls and young women often feel unseen and unheard on the issues that matter most to them. This campaign showed the value of their collective voice in enacting change.

“I feel proud to have been part of creating national change.”

Elodie, 17, Crime Not Compliment campaigner, UK

Elodie, 17, has campaigned for change in the UK.



Preventing famine in East Africa

In 2017, drought and conflict in East Africa created an extremely high risk of famine. Some 23 million people were in urgent need of food, water and medical treatment across Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. Girls were especially vulnerable.

The UK acted early to avert catastrophe. It provided £861 million in aid. It hosted international meetings to raise funding and worked closely with the humanitarian system to ensure an effective emergency response.

As a result, estimates say up to 16 million lives were saved. Proving the UK Government has – and can – prevent humanitarian disaster when responding early, collaboratively and at scale to a crisis.

Humanitarian crises increase girls' risk of violence, exploitation, lost education and hunger. Focusing on the emergencies of today gives girls greater protection.



Helping 1.6 million girls to learn and grow

The Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) has helped 1.6 million girls around the world claim their right to education.

Launched in 2012, the GEC was the UK Government's flagship global girls' education programme and the world's largest programme dedicated to girls' education.

The GEC has operated in 17 countries across 41 projects, tackling the barriers to girls' education. It's found ways for some of the most marginalised girls to access quality education and learning. This includes over half a million girls living in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Plan International alone has supported over 41,000 girls across Zimbabwe, Ghana and Sierra Leone through the GEC. This includes training young

women like Jariatu to become teachers themselves, creating a cycle of change in their communities.

The GEC shows that sustained political and financial prioritisation of girls' education creates lasting change. Especially when this focuses on girls who are the most likely to miss out on their education.

"Now I have strong hope for a brighter future," says Jariatu, now a qualified teacher in Sierra Leone.

CHANGE FOR GIRLS MUST START NOW



Today more girls are going to school than ever before. More girls are avoiding child marriage. Fewer girls are experiencing harmful practices. And fewer girls are facing unintended pregnancies while still children themselves.

This is progress – much of it led by young people themselves. And it means girls’ rights are being respected and protected. But not everywhere. Not all girls. And not enough girls.

In truth, progress is stagnating for girls globally and in the UK. More worrying is that hard-won gains risk being rolled back.

We must ensure things turn out differently for girls today and the generations to come.

The next UK Government – and all MPs in the next parliament – have a real opportunity to accelerate equality and change for girls. And in doing so, drive a more equal world for all.

This manifesto outlines the key priorities we know will support girls. Not only to access their rights. But to create positive change for themselves and their wider communities.

These solutions are based on over 85 years of experience working with girls in over 75 countries.

They also include findings from our latest State of Girls’ Rights in the UK report where we spoke to nearly 3,000 girls from across the UK.



Vee, 18, and Alicia, 20, took part in research for our State of Girls’ Rights in the UK report.

OUR MANIFESTO



1 ENSURE GLOBAL POLICY CENTRES ON GENDER EQUALITY.

For many years, the UK has been a force for change in supporting and progressing gender equality globally. It's funded life-changing programmes for girls and women across the world. It's brought together other governments and partners to create change. And it's been recognised as having leading experts across the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

But recent challenges have had devastating impacts for girls and women. Starting with the decision to cut the aid budget. This has been compounded by global challenges including Covid-19, conflict (especially in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan) and the rise in anti-rights movements. Not only is progress stalling but hard-won progress is now at risk.

The next government must urgently prioritise global gender equality to support girls' rights.

HOW:

1. Restore the aid budget to 0.7% of GNI.

Positive change for girls and young women will require funding. Funding for gender and adolescent programming has faced significantly higher cuts (33%) than the reduction to the overall aid budget (21.1%) ⁷. It is vital that funding is restored and spent effectively to target gender equality and girls' rights.

2. Commit to placing gender equality at the centre of the UK Government's international policy. This includes:

- a) Making sure the aid budget works for girls and women. This means prioritising funding for life-saving programmes including access to education, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, and protection from violence.
- b) Meeting the commitments made in the Government's Women and Girls Strategy. This must include meeting the commitment that at least 80% of the FCDO's bilateral aid programmes have a focus on gender equality by 2030.
- c) Remaining a vocal champion for human rights, gender equality and SRHR globally. Tackle the anti-rights movement including through diplomacy.
- d) Ensuring the UK's economic and trade policies work for the world's poorest and most marginalised young women.

An urgent need to tackle the anti-rights movement

There has been a clear rise in organised attacks by campaign groups and organisations working together to rollback rights. They are led by both state and non-state actors, including ultra-conservative states and conservative religious actors. These have influence across the globe, in governments and within the United Nations. And they target specific communities by using misleading or false information.

This growing anti-rights movement is organised and well-funded. And they're pushing for new policy and legislation that attacks gender equality, threatening to turn back the clock for girls and women.

We've seen this in the US with the repeal of Roe v. Wade – the Supreme Court ruling that gave women the constitutional right to abortion. And in damaging policies and legislation across the world, from Poland to Ghana.

In the UK, there are several groups challenging hard-won freedoms. Recent analysis showed the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) has rapidly increased efforts and spending to boost its UK influence, particularly within the wider anti-abortion movement.⁸

The next UK government must remain a vocal champion for human rights, gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

2

TAKE URGENT ACTION TO PREVENT AND TACKLE GLOBAL CRISES AND CONFLICT.



Conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate crisis have overlapped causing an unprecedented scale of humanitarian need. This is seen in the devastating crises in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, as well as climate-induced events like the hunger crisis in East Africa.

When a crisis strikes, children's lives are turned upside down. Their school, their home and their safety net may all be gone, sometimes in an instant. And in these fragile settings, the everyday injustices, discrimination and violence that girls face often take even more devastating forms.

The scale of problems facing girls in crisis may be vast. But they are not inevitable. The UK Government has previously demonstrated the impact it can have in humanitarian settings. In 2017, it acted quickly to raise funds and convene others to prevent famine in East Africa. Up to 16 million lives were saved.

The next government must channel the same ambition to lead and tackle complex crises.

70%
of people
experiencing
hunger
worldwide
are girls and
women.?

HOW:

1. Commit to climate financing.

The UK has historically played a major role in contributing to the climate crisis – and continues to. Responsibility for reducing emissions and financing climate action must be fairly shared by those who have benefited most from globalisation and economic development. The next government must meet the commitment to spend £11.6 billion on international climate finance by 2026. It must also ensure ambitious commitments are made for the next round of International Climate Finance from April 2026 to address the rapidly increasing impacts of climate change. Climate finance must be new and additional to UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) and reach those most affected by climate change, including women and girls.

2. Meet net zero commitments.

The Climate Change Act commits the UK Government by law to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to at least net zero by 2050. The next government must take bold action to keep this commitment on track and support the Paris Agreement goals to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C.

3. Protect girls living through conflict and crisis.

Ensure funding for crises and conflicts addresses the specific needs of girls and young women so they are better protected from risks such as gender-based violence, child marriage, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation.

4. Prevent famine and food insecurity.

Provide much more emergency and long-term funding to prevent famine and food insecurity, especially in hunger hotspots such as East Africa. These funds must be flexible, reach local organisations and support long-term resilience.

5. Expand safe routes for refugees to the UK.

The growing number of global crises creates an increase in the number of displaced people and refugees. The UK must commit to creating more safe routes for those seeking asylum in the UK, giving specific regard to the vulnerabilities of girls and young women.

6. Fund local groups.

Not nearly enough aid funding is reaching local organisations and groups. These organisations know best how to respond to the problems they are facing, particularly when crises and conflict hit. Despite many global commitments to ensure funding reaches these groups, only 1% of gender-focused aid reaches feminist groups in the Global South. An even smaller percentage makes its way to youth groups. This urgently needs addressing.

Being a girl in crisis

Complex and deadly crises are on the rise across the world. This poses a huge risk to girls – but why?

In fragile settings, children are more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, lost education and hunger. And girls – already experiencing the brunt of gender inequality – even more so.

It means when food is scarce, girls often eat last and least – or go without food altogether.

It means without access to period products, safe toilets and clean water, girls are forced to hide away and miss out.

It means when families are struggling to cope, girls are forced to sacrifice their education. Some will never return to school.

If situations deteriorate further, girls face graver abuse – such as being forced to marry early. Girls living through conflict are more likely to be married by 18 than finish school.

And the risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation increases just as access to support and safe spaces become harder to come by.

Humanitarian crises and gender inequality are intrinsically linked. Which is why change for girls in crisis must not be sidelined.

“ I believe the crisis has a greater impact on girls. ”

Sofiana, 13, Haiti



Sofiana lives in Haiti where insecurity and climate change have created a humanitarian crisis.

3 IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR GIRLS IN THE UK.

Society has been increasingly telling girls that they can be anything they want to be. But girls in the UK are frustrated by a lack of progress. They still feel held back by outdated stereotypes and unfair expectations.

We spoke to nearly 3,000 girls across the country to produce our latest State of Girls' Rights in the UK report – a key piece of research we carry out to get a deeper insight into the lives of girls in the UK.

Girls told us they don't feel safe and continue to face relentless pressure to look and act a certain way. They feel unprepared by their education, worried for future job prospects and are concerned by a rising culture of misogyny. They also don't feel their sexual and reproductive health and rights are taken seriously.

Growing up in a cost-of-living crisis and a climate emergency has also had an impact. Girls told us they feel 'uncertain' and 'anxious' about their own future and the future of the world.

The next UK government must deliver change for girls in the UK – but also hope.

3 in 5
girls and
young women
in the UK
do not trust
politicians
at all.¹⁰

HOW:

1. Prioritise gender equality and girls' rights across all departments.

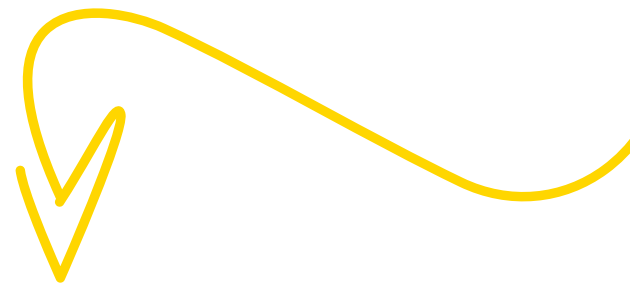
Launch a 10-year cross-departmental gender equality strategy. This should include specific and targeted support for girls and young women in all their diversity, focusing on tackling harmful gender norms. It should also include gender equality-focused objectives and targets, with responsibility for the strategy sitting with a member of Cabinet.

2. Make tackling public sexual harassment a priority.

Protect girls and young women from gender-based violence, including through implementing the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023. Its accompanying guidance must explicitly define public sexual harassment to close gaps in the law, and include wording to reduce the burden on victims to prove the perpetrator intended to cause harm. We need to see investment in the resources to tackle harassment.

3. Deliver comprehensive relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) for all.

Make comprehensive and gender transformative RSHE and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education statutory for all. Provide schools with funding and resources to ensure that teachers are trained, equipped, confident and supported to deliver this fundamental education.



What makes something gender transformative?

A gender transformative approach seeks to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and reshape unequal power relations. This means addressing things like harmful gender norms and roles, imbalanced power dynamics and discriminatory practices. It can help accelerate a fairer world for all.

4 PARTNER WITH GIRLS ON STRATEGY AND POLICY.

Around the world, girls are raising their voices. They are creating change in their communities. And they want to do more.

But girls struggle to access the funding, resources and support needed to participate. To create lasting change, girls must be included in decisions that affect their lives. The next government must see young people as partners.


HOW:

1. Work in partnership with girls.

Make sure girls are meaningfully involved when developing government strategies, policies and programmes that will affect their lives.

2. Make funding available for girl-led movements and activism.

Ring-fence funding for women and girls' organisations in the UK, and commit at least 10% of the aid budget that is spent on gender to funding local feminist organisations worldwide – including those led by girls. This should include organisations led by and for Black and minoritised girls and women, girls and women with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people.



“Girls have so much potential, but they’re not given the platform to exhibit this potential.”

Blessing, 17, Sierra Leone

Blessing helped pass a new gender equality law in Sierra Leone.

PRINCIPLES FOR CHANGE



Accelerating equality and change for girls must be equitable. Which is why in addition to the manifesto asks, we strongly recommend two key principles. Keeping these front of mind will help develop and implement fair and just policies.

Recognise and respond to differences in lived experiences.

Everyone experiences life differently. People can experience prejudice, discrimination and marginalisation – or power and privilege – as a result of their multiple identity characteristics. This includes gender, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. Policy must be intersectional and tailored to ensure all people are supported.

Acknowledge the inequalities that racism and colonialism continue to cause.

Colonialism isn't just a thing of the past. Its impacts are still acutely felt today throughout UK society and the global system. The next government must take active steps to address this, including by addressing power imbalances in the aid system.



CONCLUSION

Focusing on girls is not a diversion from the big challenges facing MPs and the next UK government. It's a way through.

To ensure decisions support the most marginalised in our communities. To boost the health and wealth of society. To prevent a humanitarian situation becoming a catastrophe.

When we focus on making the world a better place to be a girl, we create safer and more just communities for everyone.

But what's more, girls simply deserve the chance to thrive. And from today – not in five generations' time. Let's make it happen.

Charlotte, 12, took part in our UK Young Health Programme, run in partnership with AstraZeneca.



ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL UK

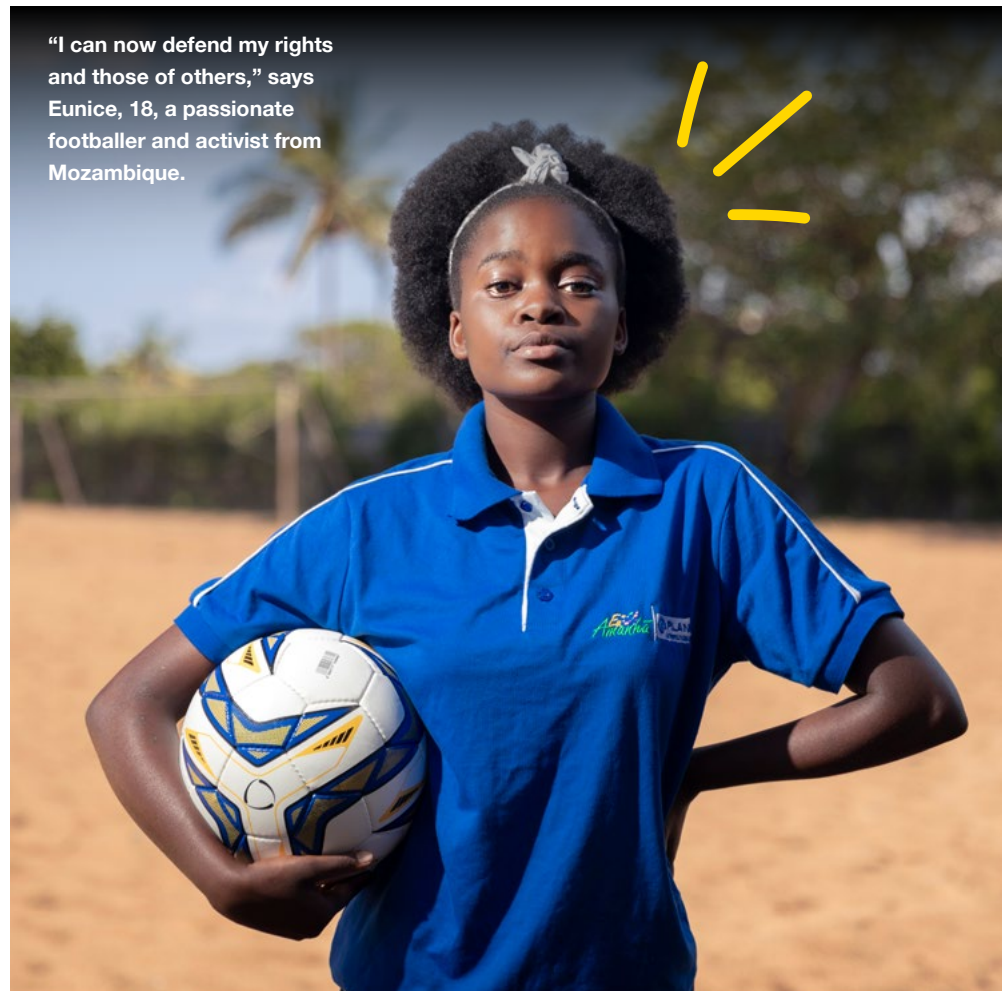
Plan International is a global children's charity striving for an equal world. One where every child can reach their full potential and every girl can choose her own future.

We bring people together to protect children's rights and keep girls safe, in school and in control of their bodies – even when disaster strikes.

**WE WON'T STOP
UNTIL WE ARE
ALL EQUAL.**

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Endnotes

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