

THE STATE OF GIRLS' RIGHTS IN THE UK 2024



For children and
equality for girls



Evie, 14 and Ella, 15, Blackpool

CONTENTS

- Acknowledgements 4
- Foreword 6
- Introduction 10
- What we've learnt..... 18
- What are gender norms, stereotypes and gender-based violence - definitions 30
- Methodology 32
- Chapter 1: Joy and happiness 34**
- Chapter 2: Gender-based violence 46**
- Chapter 3: Health and wellbeing inequality 68**
- Chapter 4: Beauty, body image and appearance pressures 88**
- Chapter 5: Education and working life 100**
- Chapter 6: Money worries and the cost of living..... 120**
- Chapter 7: Leisure and physical activity 132**
- Chapter 8: Participation 144**
- Chapter 9: Gender norms and stereotypes 152**
- Chapter 10: Where is it toughest to be a girl..... 165**
- The voices of girls in North East Lincolnshire and Blackpool 174
- Conclusions 185
- Support and information 186
- Appendices 188
- References 202

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Citations

We have aimed to include research from a wide variety of sources to demonstrate the range of challenges facing girls and young women. Inclusion of a source, author or organisation should not be assumed to reflect Plan International UK's agreement with the wider work, or necessarily reflect Plan International UK's position on a topic. We are deeply grateful to all those who have published work, which is cited in this report, for contributing to our understanding of the challenges facing girls and young women.

Content Note

There are several challenges faced by girls and young women which may be upsetting. Readers will come to this report with their own unique life experiences and may find some of the content distressing or triggering. The decision to include this content is not taken lightly, but is important to show the range of challenges facing girls and young women in the UK today.

Our research shows that these challenges may often be more acute and painful for girls and young women from diverse backgrounds — such as girls of colour, LGBTQ+ girls, neurodiverse girls, girls with a disability, girls with a mental health condition, girls living without both of their parents, and young carers. If you identify with these groups, then please take extra care as you explore these themes in the report.

Sources for further advice and support are included at the end of this report.



FOREWORD

ROSE CALDWELL, CEO

Since our last State of Girls' Rights in the UK report in 2020, the world has been through a period of drastic change.

We have seen some progress to support girls and young women in the UK, but too much has stayed the same.

Whilst girls and young women told us throughout our research that they find much joy in life, in their communities, and relationships, they also told us loud and clear that they aren't experiencing the progress on gender equality that they've been promised. They are angry and frustrated with the state of equality and face huge pressure to meet the standards society expects of them.

Girls and young women often don't feel safe in public, they do not feel listened to by people in power, and they are frustrated at not being able to make their own choices in life. All these challenges are felt more keenly by girls from diverse communities, including girls of colour, LGBTQ+ girls, and disabled girls. The community in which a girl grows up still has a huge impact on her life.

Importantly, we heard very clearly that trust in politicians and our institutions to make change is low. Despite this, girls are making their voices heard. Society must do more to ensure girls are able to create the changes they want to see.

Plan International UK's recent flagship #CrimeNotCompliment campaign, in partnership with Our Streets Now, worked with thousands of youth activists to tackle the problem of public sexual harassment. I am delighted that after years of tireless campaigning by girls and youth activists, the Protection from Sex-Based Harassment in Public Bill has become law. This campaign highlights the potential and power of girls and young women to make real change happen.

It's not just in the UK that we see what happens when girls are truly empowered. Plan International works in partnership with girls around the world who are making change happen in their communities.

The voices of the girls who so generously gave their time to this research are what bring this report to life. Our research ensured we heard from girls from seldom heard from and diverse communities.

Politicians must listen to girls and young women. We must break down the dangerous stereotypes and structures that so often prevent them from reaching their full potential. We must empower girls to access their rights and choose the lives they want to live.

CLARA & NOVA, MEMBERS OF PLAN INTERNATIONAL UK'S YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL

We joined the Youth Advisory Panel to amplify our voices as young women. We want to create change that will help girls and young women out there to have better, and safer, experiences.

As young people, we have experienced the impact of living in a society that has created little positive change in our lives. We've been extremely saddened by the state of the world and want to use our voices to take action – just like the girls who have fed into this report.

Since 2020, our lives have significantly changed. Getting older during this time has been a difficult challenge to face, especially with all the changes we go through in life and the lack of education around these topics. We've been exposed to more knowledge,



Clara (first on the left) and Nova (third from the left) are members of the Youth Advisory Panel

Plan International UK

but also more disinformation is being propagated. Manosphere content is being so easily disguised and it's truly upsetting seeing younger and younger boys becoming so caught up in it. You can really see the videos impacting their behaviour and what they say, which can be scary and intimidating. But getting older also means building strength, clarity, and resilience – we're proud of the people we are growing up to be, and how we can affect change for girls.

This report is truly eye-opening to the state of how things are in our country for girls and young women. People don't realise the full extent of the problems we face. This report helps to educate us on what's going on and how girls and young women are truly feeling in this country so that we can take action! The main things that stand out is just how many girls feel gender norms hold them back and how few girls and young women feel fully safe in public. We should expect society to have changed more, so girls could feel empowered by everyone around them to do what they want, regardless of their gender. Every single girl and young woman deserves to feel safe wherever they go.

The increasing prominence of the cost of living crisis has also impacted us and lots of girls around us. Especially when it comes to hygiene products, feeding yourself nutritionally, being able to go out with friends and enjoy your time. Seeing all this negative action going on in the world, and our country, but still seeing such little change being made by our Government is scary and saddening. Community action and response make us

feel more hopeful for the future, and the solidarity of our friends and groups like the Youth Advisory Panel show us that grassroots change and support is out there.

This research shows only one in six young people like us feel like they can trust politicians. Girls and young women are such a big part of society, and we deserve to have our feelings taken into account when decisions are taken. We can see changes starting to be made, such as the new Protection from Sex-Based Harassment in Public Act 2023, however there is still a long way to go with many more necessary changes that need to be made. We're excited to work with Plan International UK on their General Election campaign, to make sure our voices are heard in Parliament on behalf of girls everywhere.

Girls and young women should be involved in campaigning because, we know first-hand it is such an empowering thing to do. We feel hopeful that we can make positive changes for women all around the world so we can all feel safer, be treated equally and with respect, and so all women are able to access the help and healthcare they need. We hope that more girls will feel safer out in public and feel like they can achieve whatever they want – we know we all have it within us to do whatever we put our minds to. We're tired of waiting. We need to change the script and see different perspectives reflected to improve the state of girls' rights!

Clara (18, London) and Nova (16, Glasgow)
Youth Advisory Panel members, 2023-25

Plan International UK's Youth Advisory Panel contributed to the research design and recommendations of this report



“GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN CAMPAIGNING BECAUSE, WE KNOW FIRST-HAND IT IS SUCH AN EMPOWERING THING TO DO.”

INTRODUCTION

“NO ONE LISTENS TO A YOUNG GIRL.”

Wherever girls are born or live, they **should be safe**. Every girl should feel safe, be able to live with joy, and aim high for their future.

Around the world, including here in the UK, girls are telling us loud and clear that they aren't experiencing the progress on gender equality that they've been promised. Many feel that their rights are under attack, while the anti-rights movement dedicated to “curtailing gender equality and human rights”ⁱ increases its activity around the world. We need bold action to challenge this movement. We cannot let another generation of girls grow up without realising equality.

Since 2007, Plan International have released our State of the World's Girls research annually. It is informed by adolescent girls and youth activists, in all their diversity, across the globe. This ensures that the research is evidence-based and focuses on issues that matter most to girls and young women.ⁱ

“The world that we are in is getting exhausting being a woman.”

(Survey Participant, 21, East Staffordshire)

In addition, since 2016, we have conducted research into how girls' rights are being realised in the UK.ⁱⁱ The conversation on gender equality, since our last State of Girls' Rights report in 2020, has continued and evolved, however major drivers of inequalities have held us back from making real progress. Global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis, have impacted the UK.

We've seen growing misogyny online in the 'manosphere', a deepening climate emergency, and a lack of funding for dedicated services for women. The regressive, well-funded and coordinated anti-rights and anti-gender movement is driving systemic attempts for global rollback on our legal rights, “curtailing gender equality and human rights” including limiting access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, “blocking access to financial assets, and condoning gender-based violence.”ⁱⁱ

Only **5%** of girls and young women feel “completely safe” in public spaces, such as on public transport or on the street.

ⁱ www.plan-international.org/publications/state-of-the-worlds-girls/
ⁱⁱ www.plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk

“SOMETIMES PEOPLE LOOK AT ME AND SAY, ‘YOU CAN'T DO THESE THINGS JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE A GIRL', WHICH I HAVE EXPERIENCED MY WHOLE LIFE.”

Tilly, 13, Blackpool



As a result, girls have been drawn to activism as part of important global social justice movements. These include Black Lives Matter, following the murder of George Floyd and the climate movement, through role models such as Greta Thunberg. Here in the UK, the murders of women such as Bibaa Henry and Nicola Smallman, Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa and Brianna Ghey, have drawn girls to join the movement against gender-based violence.

Against this backdrop, we embarked on our largest ever exercise to talk to girls and understand their lives. We spoke to nearly 3,000 girls and young women aged 12 to 21 in England, Scotland, Wales,

and Northern Ireland - nearly three times more girls than in our 2020 report.

We held creative workshops to talk to girls and young women in detail about their lives. We expanded and refreshed our local authority Composite Index, looking at where in the UK it is toughest to live as a girl or young woman. We worked directly with girls in workshops and with our Youth Advisory Panel, which is the voice of young people at Plan International UK, to develop recommendations. Girls and young women told us that they are frustrated at being held back by restrictive stereotypes and unfair expectations. These impact every area of their lives and are felt more strongly as they get older.

OUR COMMITMENT TO ALL GIRLS

When we talk about and act for 'girls', we are including anyone whose gender identity is wholly, or in part, 'girl'. This includes cis or cisgender girls (whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth), trans or transgender girls (whose gender identity does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth)⁹ and non-binary, gender fluid, and agender young people. We also recognise that work relevant to girls may also be relevant for trans boys, and gender questioning young people. The term 'girl' encompasses a wide diversity of experiences.

Joy despite adversity

“There’s days where I could be annoyed, angry, sad, stressed. I’m not happy every day. There are days where it can be rough for me sometimes.”

(Survey participant, 13, Belfast)

There are many sources of joy in the lives of girls and young women. Nearly nine in ten (85%) told us that they are happy to some extent. Relationships and friendships are the primary source of happiness for girls and young women (87%), followed by being

online (86%), and taking part in leisure activities (83%). Girls clearly value feeling connected as part of their community, whether in-person or online. Sadly, the joy and happiness that girls feel lessens as they get older.

- While 12% of girls aged 12 to 16 are “completely happy” in life, this declines to 8% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Being “not very happy” or “not happy at all” increases from 10% to 15%.

The pressure of gender norms

Our report finds that girls across the UK are angry and frustrated about the state of gender equality in the UK. Girls’ happiness declines as the reality of the pressures, norms, and limitations they experience are realised. Society has been telling girls for years that they can be anything, but they are still held back by outdated stereotypes and unfair expectations. These expectations and informal rules of what it is to be a girl or woman shape how girls and young women are expected to behave. Girls and young women who reject or do not conform to these expectations may face exclusion, criticism, discipline or violence for rejecting the ‘right’ way to act.

- Nearly half of girls and young women agree that expectations about how girls and women should act and what they should be hold them back (47%).
- This worsens with age with 40% of 12 to 16 year olds and 54% of 17 to 21 year olds agreeing that these expectations of them hold them back.

Girls and young women have told us more clearly than ever that these attitudes, behaviours, and expectations placed on them are a part of their daily lives. Many girls told us they struggle with being told they can be anything, because society is failing them by not enabling them to build the lives they want. They are acutely aware of the restrictions and limits of a society. This puts pressure on girls to look and act a certain way. The girls and young women we spoke to were aware of this pressure on body image but could not see

ways around this. Girls told us they are left unable to meet societal expectations and are held back by expectations on them to conform. This is even more pointed in the lives of girls from diverse communities. This was felt across many areas of their daily lives and imagined in what their futures might be like as women. Societal norms are not changing fast enough, leaving girls afraid for the future as they navigate growing up whilst feeling unprepared and undermined.

47% of girls and young women agree that expectations about how girls and women should act and what they should be hold them back.

As much as 44% of girls and young women felt that the way they look holds them back - this rises from 38% of 12 to 16 year olds to 51% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Feeling unsafe and misogyny

All genders are affected by gender inequality and patriarchy. Patriarchy is the system of social norms that privileges men or boys at the expense of women and girls, gender non-conforming people, LGBTQ+ people, people living with disabilities, men and boys and others who do not, or cannot, conform to patriarchal norms.

We know from our work globally that these systems of power disadvantage girls, who face specific challenges because of their age and their gender. Around the world, girls are denied an education, the right to make informed choices about their body, or if, whether, and who to marry - just because they are girls. Girls are often exposed to physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence in

all spheres of life - including in their homes, schools, and public spaces. This violence perpetuates structures of power and control. And girls who are minoritised may face higher restrictions and violence for failing to conform.

Girls in the UK are not immune to this. Our conversations with girls, about their rights, takes place against a backdrop of increasing misogyny in the public sphere. High-profile figures, such as Andrew Tate, are driving hypermasculinity, particularly online.

56% felt that “education to change the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women” would help them feel safer and more protected.

The girls that participated in this research feel at least somewhat or mostly safe in most areas. Only 5% of girls and young women feel “completely safe” in public spaces, such as on public transport or on the street. Only one in ten (9%) feel completely safe in online spaces, and 11% feel completely safe in leisure spaces. As children move into adolescence and navigate an increasingly complex world, the risk they may be victimised increases and may take different forms.⁴

- 56% of girls said they felt that “education to change the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women” would help them feel safer and more protected. This rose from 51% of 12 to 16 year olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Cost of living and employment

Around the world we continue to feel the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst experiencing increasing conflict and crises, and dealing with the climate emergency. All of which are contributing to the major cost of living crisis we see in the UK and globally, where women and girls are disproportionately impacted.

The cost of living crisis, feeling unprepared by their education, and a employment market rife with sexism, were principal concerns for many of the girls who participated in this research. Just 54% of girls and young women agree that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future.

- 54% of the girls and young women we spoke to feel they have the same educational and employment opportunities as boys or men their age. This declines from 58% of 12 to 16 year olds to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

This is particularly challenging for girls and young women from marginalised communities and those who are starting to live outside the family home and supporting themselves financially. Girls are worried for their future as they step into the world of work. 15% of 12 to 16 year olds are not happy with current or future job prospects, rising to 36% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Growing up in a cost of living crisis has fundamentally affected girls. A quarter of girls and young women (25%) told us they have experienced food poverty over the previous year. The food they bought didn't last and they didn't have the money to buy more. Older girls we surveyed were three times more likely to have experienced food poverty.

- 11% of 12 to 16 year olds stated they didn't have money to buy more food at some point in the previous 12 months. This rose to 35% for 17 to 21 year olds.

Uncertain and anxious

“Life can be stressful and sometimes frustrating. It feels like the future is uncertain.”
(Survey participant, 17, South Northamptonshire)

Girls told us they feel “uncertain” and “anxious” about their future and the future of the world. This is a concern shared with many young people that Plan International engages with around the world. In this research, 53% of girls and young women said they were uncertain and 52% said they were anxious about their future.

Tired of empty words and commitments, girls want to see real, tangible change in their lives. However, our research shows that girls have little faith and trust in politicians and institutions to make change on vital issues like gender equality, a fairer society, and the climate emergency, a reality. One in five (20%) say they do not trust the police. Only one in six (16%) trust politicians, whilst three in five (60%) say they do not trust politicians at all.

52% of 17 to 21 year old girls and young women are happy with the protection of our natural world.

- Only 49% of girls and young women are happy with the protection of our natural world - 31% of 12 to 16 year olds are unhappy, rising to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Inequality in society is a source of unhappiness for 51% of girls, rising from 41% for 12 to 16 to 62% for 17 to 21 year olds.
- Distrust in politicians increases with age, from 49% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 70% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Distrust in the police increases with age, from 15% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 24% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Where you live and who you are still matters

Our report continues to find that outcomes for girls still vary dramatically, depending on where they live. Our research revealed that North East Lincolnshire is the toughest place to be a girl in the UK. There is a clear pattern that girls in communities with high levels of deprivation⁵ will encounter more barriers to getting ahead in life.

Our research points to deprivation as a source of these barriers, but also structural failure from central and devolved government in supporting girls to live healthy lives, have fair access to the education they want, and feel safe in their communities. Cuts to local services, which girls and young women draw on, are being felt across the UK. Looking solely at economic deprivation does not show us the full picture of a girl's life.

Most challenges are experienced more keenly by girls in certain communities. LGBTQ+ girls, girls of colour, girls with disabilities, girls whose first language isn't English, neurodivergent girls, girls who live with one or neither parent, young carers, girls living with mental health conditions, and girls with other long term health conditions all told us of the greater challenges they face, across all the dimensions we looked at in this survey.

We need to see change

Girls want to be part of creating change. Around the world, girls and young women are standing up for their rights. They are at the forefront of social and gender justice movements, both online and offline.⁶ They are campaigning for their rights and those of future generations, including here in the UK, and want their voices to be heard.

Just over a quarter of girls we spoke to want to be more involved in campaigning (26%). We need politicians across the UK to respond

to the challenges facing girls today, with clear action, direction, and strategy. Answering these challenges must be done through a gender-based lens, to remove the barriers girls face and to build towards equality, grounded in accessing their rights.

- 20% of 12 to 16 year olds and 32% of 17 to 21 year olds want to become more involved in campaigning and activism.

Girls are raising their voices and saying, 'no more'. No more harassment. No more abuse. No more violence. They are tired of feeling like they do not have control over their bodies and their lives. Girls are standing up and challenging the current state of the world. We must stand with them.

32% of 17 to 21 year olds want to become more involved in campaigning and activism.

WHO IS PLAN INTERNATIONAL?

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.

Poverty, violence, and discrimination still hold back millions of children globally. And it is often girls that are most affected. That's why ensuring girls get equal chances in life is at the heart of everything we do.

We work across more than 80 countries to build a future where every child is safe, and every child receives an education. A world where all girls are free from violence, in control of their own body, know their rights, and have their voices heard.

And if disaster strikes, we're there too. We work to protect children, keep them learning, and help their communities recover.

But we don't do it alone. To create lasting change, we work together with children, local communities, partners, and our supporters.

We believe a better future is possible.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

HOW THIS REPORT IS STRUCTURED

This report aims to cover the many areas which impact the lives of girls and young women in the UK. Each chapter focuses on one aspect of life, and the policies which affect girls and young women day to day. These include, education and working life, health and wellbeing, or accessing leisure facilities. However, as these areas are complex and interwoven, we have sought to highlight other chapters where relevant. In particular, the experiences of girls and young women feeling unsafe in many areas of life features in several chapters.

Some of the cross-cutting themes explored in the research have been pulled out in separate sections, such as life online, a lack of dedicated services for girls and young women, and the impact of the cost of living crisis.

We have dedicated a chapter to covering the impact of gendered expectations and stereotypes, which impact girls and young women in every area of life. Our Index of local authorities, which shows how where someone is born impacts their experiences, can be found in Chapter 10.

Overarching recommendations for Governmental action form a separate section towards the end of this report.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

Key takeaways from our State of Girls' Rights 2024 research with 2,963 girls and young women in the UK, aged 12 to 21, across the different themes we investigated.

CHAPTER 1: JOY AND HAPPINESS

Relationships and friendships are the most important source of joy for the girls and young women who participated in this research. However, as they get older, girls and young women find less joy and hope and experience more anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

- Happiness**
 - 85% of girls and young women described themselves as happy, to some extent.
 - The proportion of girls and young women who are unhappy rises from 10% of 12 to 16 year olds up to 15% of 17 to 21 year olds.
 - The main sources of happiness are relationships and friendships (87%), online life (86%), and participation in leisure activities (83%).
- Their future**
 - 53% of girls and young women said they were "uncertain" and 52% said they were "anxious" about their future, while 51% said they were "hopeful".

CHAPTER 2: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Girls and young women do not feel safe — particularly in public spaces, online, and in leisure settings. Many girls and young women told us they do not trust the police, and do not trust institutions to take gender-based violence seriously.

- Feeling safe**
 - 93% of girls and young women do not feel "completely safe" in public places.
 - Only one in eleven (9%) girls and young women say they feel completely safe online.
 - Around 6% of 12 to 16 year olds say they do not feel safe at all online. This doubles to around 12% of those aged 17 to 21.
 - One in five (20%) girls and young women told us they do not trust the police at all to help them if they are in difficulty. This increased with age to almost a quarter (24%) of 17 to 21 year olds. A quarter (25%) of girls and young women of colour do not trust the police at all.

CHAPTER 3: HEALTH AND WELLBEING INEQUALITY

Many girls and young women we spoke to feel conflicted about their mental health. They feel positive about their ability to share how they feel with each other, whilst at the same time feeling a lot of pressure to be and act a certain way. Many girls and young women talked about the prevalence of suicide and self-harm, disordered eating, and use of drugs, nicotine, and alcohol among their peer groups.

- Mental health**
 - Only two in five (40%) girls and young women are happy with their mental health, declining from 46% of 12 to 16 year olds to 35% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Alcohol or drugs**
 - Nearly half (46%) of respondents to our survey knew someone in their peer group who was addicted to alcohol or drugs.
- Our natural world**
 - One in five (20%) girls and young women told us they were anxious about the protection of our natural world, rising from 17% of 12 to 16 year olds to almost a quarter (24%) of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Physical Health**
 - 25% of young women aged 17 to 21 are not happy with their physical health.
- Menstrual Health**
 - 8% of girls and young women say improved access to period products would help them to achieve their full educational potential.

CHAPTER 4: BEAUTY, BODY IMAGE, AND APPEARANCE PRESSURES

Girls and young women face enormous pressure to look a certain way, and face repercussions if they don't conform. Girls and young women told us they feel policed, and unable to control decisions about their own bodies.

- The way they look**
 - 44% of girls and young women felt that the way they look holds them back — this rises from 38% of 12 to 16 year olds to 51% of 17 to 21 year olds.
 - 37% of girls and young women were not happy with how they looked and their body image — this rises from 30% of 12 to 16 year olds to 42% of 17 to 21 year olds.
 - When we asked girls and young women what worries them, 'how you look (body image)' was top of the list with more than half (52%) of 12 to 21 year olds identifying this as a source of concern.
- Media representation**
 - A third (33%) of respondents feel that girls and young women are not well represented in the media, rising from 25% of 12 to 16 year olds to 41% of 17 to 21 year olds. 46% of girls and young women with a mental health condition feel girls and young women are not well represented in the media.

CHAPTER 5: EDUCATION AND WORKING LIFE

Girls and young women told us that educational institutions were largely important and joyful for them. However, many felt education was letting them down; especially girls from seldom heard groups. They wanted to feel safe yet faced discrimination or violence. As they enter the world of work, girls and young women are worried about inequality and feeling unsafe.

Preparing for the future

- Just 54% of girls and young women agree that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future. Disagreement increases with age with 15% of 12 to 16 year olds disagreeing, rising to 25% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Job prospects

- 15% of 12 to 16 year olds are not happy with current or future job prospects, more than doubling to 36% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Only half of the girls and young women we spoke to feel they have the same educational and employment opportunities as boys or men their age — 54% of girls and young women aged 12 to 21, declining from 58% of 12 to 16 year olds to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

CHAPTER 6: MONEY WORRIES AND THE COST OF LIVING

Money was a common cause of concern for girls and young women, especially as they got older. The cost of living crisis is having a disproportionate effect on women, with worries about access to basics like food and stable housing.

Food poverty

- A quarter of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 acknowledge they have experienced food poverty in the previous 12 months, whereby the food they bought didn't last and they didn't have the money to buy more. Older girls are three times more likely to agree (11% of 12 to 16 year olds, rising to 35% of 17 to 21 year olds).

Money

- One in three girls and young women say they worry about them or their family having enough money (36%). Concern doubles with age, from one in four 12 to 16 year olds worried at all (23%), rising to half (50%) of 17 to 21 year olds.

Unstable housing

- One in eight (12%) girls and young women with disabilities told us they do not have somewhere comfortable to live.

CHAPTER 7: LEISURE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Leisure activities such as sports, hobbies, and cultural activities are important for happiness for girls and young women. But many girls and young women do not engage with these joyful activities as much as they would like to. Whilst this is due to many reasons, the most common reasons were feeling unsafe, feeling unsupported, facilities that are inaccessible, and cost.

Safety in leisure spaces

- Only one in nine girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (11%) say that they feel completely safe in leisure spaces.

Hobbies and activities

- Only 42% of respondents aged 17 to 21 take part in hobbies as much as they want to.
- 26% of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation say they never take part in sporting activities, compared to 19% of those living in areas of low deprivation.
- One in four (25%) LGBTQ+ girls and young women say they take part in sport as much as they want to, compared with two in five (41%) girls and young women who do not identify as LGBTQ+.

CHAPTER 8: PARTICIPATION

Girls and young women told us that they want to take action themselves to make their community and world a better place. They also told us that their trust in politicians is low. They do not trust politicians to listen to them or to take action on issues that matter to them, such as the climate emergency or inequality.

Campaigning

- A quarter of girls want to increase their participation in campaigning (26%). This rises with age from a fifth (20%) of 12 to 16 year olds, up to a third (32%) of 17 to 21 year olds.

Politicians

- Three in five (60%) girls and young women do not trust politicians at all, which increases with age from almost half (49%) of 12 to 16 year olds to up to seven in ten (70%) of 17 to 21 year olds.
- LGBTQ+ girls and young women (74%) are more likely than girls and young women who do not identify as LGBTQ+ to say that they do not trust politicians at all.
- Only one in six (16%) girls and young women we surveyed trust politicians at all.

Inequality in society

- Inequality in society is a source of unhappiness for 51% of girls, rising from 41% of 12 to 16 years olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Our natural world

- 31% of 12 to 16 year olds are unhappy with the lack of protection of our natural world and this rises to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

CHAPTER 9: GENDER NORMS AND STEREOTYPES

Girls are taught they can be anything, and society has promised them equality. However, these promises haven't been met. Society has failed to engage with the root causes of inequality, gender norms, and stereotypes in many areas of life. As a result, girls still feel pressure to act, look, and conform in impossible ways.

Expectations about how girls and women should act

- 47% of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 said that expectations about how girls and women should act, and what they should be, hold them back in life. This worsens with age from 40% of 12 to 16 year olds increasing to more than half of 17 to 21 year olds (54%) agreeing that these expectations of them hold them back. 64% of girls and young women with a mental health condition feel held back by expectations of what they are and should be.

Expectations about how girls and women should look

- Many girls and young women we spoke to (39%) felt under pressure to look and/or act older than they are. More than half of girls and young women with disabilities agree that they feel the need to act or look older than they are (55%).

Positive relationships with boys and men outside of their family

- Just over half (51%) of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 in our survey feel they have positive relationships with boys and men outside of their family – compared with two thirds (64%) who have positive relationships with girls and women.



CHAPTER 10: THE TOUGHEST PLACES TO BE A GIRL

Our Index of local authorities demonstrates a number of challenges facing girls and young women across the UK. We looked at a range of 12 different indicators to understand the place-based inequalities girls face. The toughest place to grow up as a girl in the UK is **North East Lincolnshire**, which has the lowest score on our Index. The local authority with the highest score is **East Dunbartonshire**.

Local authority that perform well, and poorly, on our Index can be found across most of the country. Each local authority will be facing different, and sometimes more extreme, challenges in terms of delivering services. It can be distracting to focus on one or two of the worst performing places in composite indices such as this one. The goal is not to single out individual local authorities, but to show the scale of structural challenges faced both by girls and young women, as well as local leaders in delivering services to communities in need of support. There are challenges across the country – not one place varies outside 69.07 to 79.74 out of 100 on our Index. This shows that every community has room to improve, and robust support and investment from central governments is necessary to improve the lives of girls and young women in the UK.

There are some striking differences when comparing the top performing and toughest places to be a girl in the UK.

STEM

- **A third fewer girls take a STEM subject at A-Level** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to nearly half in the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (31.4% compared to 47.3%)

Attainment

- **Girls' GCSE (or equivalent) performance is 30% lower** in the worst performing 10 Local Authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (55.8% compared to 80.5%)

living in poverty

- **Girls are 65% more likely to be living in poverty** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (35.3% versus 21.3%)

The pay gap

- **The pay gap between men and women is over 14 percentage points higher** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (17.9% versus 4.5%)

Good health

- **Girls are expected to live 6 fewer years in good health over their life** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (50.6 years versus 57.0 years)

WHAT HAS CHANGED SINCE 2020

Since our last State of Girls' Rights in the UK report in 2020, we have seen progress in pushing forward girls' rights, despite substantial challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. It is important to maintain this momentum, particularly as the impacts of these challenges are still being felt by society. This is compounded by the impacts of the spread of the manosphere and misogynistic influencers online.

Landmark legislation has sent a strong message that public sexual harassment is never acceptable, by introducing tougher sentences for certain types of harassment. Plan International UK's #CrimeNotCompliment campaign, in partnership with Our Streets Now, has been successful with the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023 passing into law, after it was tabled as a private members' bill by Greg Clark MP. Despite this momentous achievement, our fight doesn't end here. We will be watching carefully how the Bill is implemented, to ensure that girls are given the route to justice they have been promised. A lot of work still needs to be done, but this legislation is a hugely significant step towards stamping out public sexual harassment and ultimately making our streets safer for girls and women. Wider legislation, such as the Domestic Abuse Act

2021 and Online Safety Act 2023, have taken steps towards addressing gender-based violence in-person and online.

We have seen rising public awareness of the importance of tackling gender-based violence. The UK Government has launched a new public campaign aiming to shape the attitudes that normalise and tolerate violence and abuse.⁷ The Welsh Government has published a new Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: strategy 2022 to 2026, which aims to change public attitudes, increase awareness, and train relevant professionals to provide effective, timely, and appropriate responses.⁸ The UK Government has also added violence against women and girls to the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR), making it a national priority in England and Wales.⁹ The SPR will be revisited by February 2025.¹⁰

Relationships education has been compulsory for pupils in primary education in England since statutory guidance in September 2020,¹¹ while in Wales we've seen a mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Code developed following the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021. This legislation will ensure all children and young people can develop their understanding and skills, in order to make informed choices and to be happy, healthy, and safe.¹² Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence incorporates health and wellbeing as one of the eight curricular areas for young people aged 3 to 18.¹³

Women's health inequalities are being better recognised across the UK. The UK Government has published a Women's Health Strategy for England¹⁴ and the Scottish Government has published a Women's Health Plan.¹⁵ The Welsh Government has published a Discovery Report, setting the foundations for a Women's Health Plan, alongside

issuing and monitoring a Quality Statement for Women's and Girls' Health.¹⁶ The Northern Ireland Department of Health is conducting a large-scale public listening exercise and developing a Women's Health Action Plan.¹⁷

Yet, for all this progress, we have also seen worrying developments such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Girls and young women raised concerns about the legislation preventing their ability to stand up for their rights. The End Violence Against Women Coalition says this legislation "threatens women's rights, will put Black, minoritised and migrant women in harm's way and will have little if any positive impact on violence against women."¹⁸

Despite some progress, this report demonstrates that there is still a long way to go to reach equality. We need to see faster and more progressive action than we have seen in the last four years.



WHY GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The rights of all girls in all their diversity are universal. Regardless of where in the world a girl is born or lives, she should be safe, free from abuse, and have the opportunity to realise her rights.

Across the globe, too often the rights of girls are compromised by gender inequality, violence, poverty, poor education, unfair policies, ingrained discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes, conflict, and disasters.

Globally, a third of countries are either making 'no progress' on gender equality or are 'moving in the wrong direction'. While the UK Government has committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we see no movement on the Equal Measures 2030 Gender Index.¹⁹ The UK placed 18th in 2022 on the Index, showing no progress since 2015, despite being nearly 30 years since the Beijing Platform for Action. Other countries, however, with similar income levels and challenges are showing progress.

In theory, girls' rights in the UK are protected and upheld by multiple policies, laws, frameworks, and treaties such as 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). In reality, girls tell us that despite all the laws, they do not feel protected.

Girls are often overlooked by decision-makers. Girls under 18 tend to be included as 'children' in gender-neutral policy, services, and data. After 18 years, they are subsumed into the adult-focused category of 'women'. This ignores the specific challenges that girls and young women face through adolescence. It flattens experiences that girls and women may have at age 12 in primary school, or in their early 20s as young adults, or when they're in their 40s, 50s or 60s as older adults. This can mean girls are not heard or are dismissed, when we know it is important for their voices to be heard.

Our research found that girls' experiences of relationships, life online, feeling safe, trust in institutions like politicians and the police, all change as they get older. It is vital to understand the lives of girls and young women at all stages of their life and development, and not to condense their experiences. We must focus more on understanding girls' lives at these transitional stages.

AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO OUR WORK

Plan International UK is committed to values of intersectional feminism and campaigning for gender equality. Girls and young women's experiences can vary significantly depending on where they live, and their social identities. We realise the experiences within these groups vary considerably and there are as many 'intersections' of identity as there are people.

There are no universally agreed age-based definitions of girls or young women. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. For statistical purposes, the UN defines 'youth' as people between the ages of 15 and 24.²⁰

For the purposes of this report, a girl has been defined as anyone identifying as a girl up to the age of 18, in all their diversity, and a young woman as up to 21. This age range enables us to capture key transition stages in life, from childhood into adolescence and then into young adulthood.

No one person can represent someone else's life experience or speak on behalf of a whole group. We hope that by highlighting differences, we will give an insight into some of the additional challenges that girls and women may face as a result of the way society discriminates against or prioritises social groups. These social groups, which impact on our identity, may include age, sex, gender identity, sex characteristics, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic origin, colour, race,

language, religious or political beliefs, marital status, disability, physical or mental health, family, socio-economic or cultural background, class, any history of conflict with the law, and more.

Intersectionality is a "prism for understanding certain kinds of problems."²¹ It's thinking about power, privilege, and gender, in a way that recognises a person's combination of social identities. It means we think about multiple forms of inequality (based on our social identities) at the same time, rather than considering each of them separately. We understand how they overlap (or intersect) and compound to create a person's experience of prejudice and inequality, or power and privilege within society. Depending on the system of power and structural discrimination, people with some identities will face the negative impact of power imbalances, while other identities will benefit from privilege over others. People can have both identities that experience privilege and those that experience discrimination, and this can vary between contexts depending on the system of power.

“Look at this from a ... feminist view. Because being a woman and being a Black woman or an Asian woman or a white woman can affect experiences of being a woman. The expectations are not the same for all women as different cultures call for different things from women. It would be interesting to look into that, as it can help you take on a much more detailed route to how it is that you will choose to support young women.”

(Black African young woman, 20, Rushcliffe)

Girls and young women who took part in this research asked us to consider intersectionality throughout this project. While feminism has multiple interpretations, and may have different subjective meanings to different individuals, Plan International UK subscribes to an intersectional feminist approach. We understand that gender discrimination is compounded by other forms of discrimination and this is rooted in a society based on deep structural power inequalities.

In the findings of our survey of nearly 3,000 girls and young women, we have reported on several areas where girls and young women with other marginalised identities are facing worse outcomes than those who do not belong to those identities. It should be noted that in some instances respondents could fall under several identities or categories. For example, LGBTQ+ girls and young women may also have mental health issues, potentially because of discrimination, as well as challenges navigating an inaccessible world.

We have tried to gather more specific data on respondents where possible. Over 600 of the nearly 3,000 girls and young women who took part in our survey identified as Asian,

Asian British, Black, African, Caribbean, Black British or Mixed. Over 600 girls identified as being part of the LGBTQ+ community. Over a third of respondents identified themselves as neurodivergent, or having a mental health condition, long-term health condition, or physical disability. Our creative workshops drew on the experiences of several different communities. In the Great Yarmouth group, we worked with girls and young women from a range of different cultural backgrounds, including two girls and young women from a Lithuanian background, and four girls and young women with Afro-Caribbean heritage. The Cupar group was selected because it represented a diverse mix of gender and sexual identities. The Derry group represented a range of faiths.

Language is ever evolving and fluid. Plan International UK aims to use people-first language. This means that we put emphasis on the person first and acknowledge that someone is not solely defined by one strand of their identity.²² Girls and young women who took part in this research self-defined their identity and have sometimes used a range of terms to describe their, or another person's,

identity. We have aimed to let girls' own voices stand where possible. We have also used terminology from other organisations, where relevant, in citing other work.

There are several terms used in the UK to describe a person's race and ethnicity. In this report we primarily aim to use terms such as people of colour (often noted as PoC) or Black and minoritised to refer to girls and young women who are racial minorities in the UK. We have aimed to avoid using BAME in the development of this report as it does not recognise the diversity of experience within communities of colour. 'BAME' can demean people by categorising them in relation to what they are not, rather than what they are, such as Black Caribbean, Asian British and other such identities.²³ We recognise that girls and young women of colour are not homogenous groups or communities. Understanding the heterogeneity of minoritised girls' experiences is fundamental to making visible the nuance of marginalisation and the complex intersections between race, ethnicity, faith, and gender, as well as other identities. We also recognise that there will be differences within racial or ethnic groups based on location, class, disability, or many other factors and identities.²⁴

We are committed to ensuring that all children and young people, whatever their identity or circumstances, can access their rights. This includes the rights of trans children and young people, and we are committed to being trans-inclusive in our work. This enables us to achieve our mission – to achieve children's rights and equality for girls – more fully. Trans people not identifying as a girl or woman may be affected by the same sex-or gender-based discrimination as girls. Trans people, including trans children and young people, face daily

violations of their human rights. Discrimination, violence, and harassment can happen in any part of life including schools, in the health system, or in the workplace. Issues such as sexism and misogyny relate in large part to how a person is perceived in the moment. Trans girls experience these issues, just as cisgender girls do, and they can also affect trans boys, non-binary people, and others under the wider trans umbrella. Combined trans prejudice and misogyny can be referred to as 'transmisogyny'. We also recognise that programmes and other work relevant to girls may also be relevant for trans boys, and gender questioning young people. We recognise that most statistical data widely published is binary in nature, and therefore does not consider the circumstances of transgender, intersex and gender non-conforming children and young people.

There are several terms used by people with a range of health conditions and impairments. Some will prefer phrases like 'people with disabilities' and others will prefer 'disabled people'. There is huge diversity within communities that are not monolithic.²⁵ When speaking of girls and young women who may be neurodivergent or have specific mental or physical health conditions, we have sought to be specific. We wholly acknowledge that people are disabled by barriers in society²⁶ and not by their impairment or difference. We have sought to highlight where people with a disability are facing further challenges due to this lack of accessibility. We have sought to use the term 'people with disabilities' in this report, recognising the language used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).²⁷

WHAT ARE GENDER NORMS, STEREOTYPES AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE - DEFINITIONS

Gender norms and stereotypes can have many varied definitions and meanings. Here at Plan International we adopt the following definitions:



GENDER NORMS:

Define the expected behaviours and prescribe ways of being for people of a particular gender in a group or society. They are often age specific and influenced by other markers of identity (e.g. ethnicity, class). They shape how people should act, based on their gender, to the point that they become a profound part of people's sense of self. Gender norms reflect and sustain a hierarchy of power and privilege that typically favours that which is considered male or masculine - over that which is female or feminine. They structure women's, girls', boys' and men's (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, agency, power, and social position. They are both embedded in institutions and reproduced by people's actions. They are also sustained through social rewards and sanctions, and often times through violence.

SOCIAL NORMS:

Expectations or informal rules shared by people in a group or society as to how people should behave. Norms shape what people believe are typical and/or appropriate behaviours in a certain context. People usually prefer to follow the norm because they believe most people in their relevant context conform to it. There are social rewards for people who conform to norms, as well as social sanctions for those who do not conform.

GIRLS' RIGHTS:

Girls are right holders in their own right. Girls have rights — and not because they are a subgroup of 'women' or 'children'. Girls' rights are covered by both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:

Gender-based violence (GBV)ⁱⁱⁱ refers to any act of violence that is directed against an individual based on their gender identity or perceived gender. It is a widespread and persistent problem that affects people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds. Gender-based violence is rooted in unequal power relations between all genders. It is perpetuated by social norms, attitudes, and practices that discriminate against and marginalise girls and women and people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. This type of violence encompasses a wide range of abusive behaviours, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It can occur in many settings, including in the home, in schools, in institutions, and in the community.

GENDER JUSTICE:

Gender justice is the ending of inequalities according to gender, which result in women's and girls' subordination to men and boys. It implies that all genders have equal access to and control over resources, the ability to make choices in their lives, as well as access to provisions to redress inequalities, as needed. A commitment to gender justice means taking a position against gender discrimination, exclusion, and gender-based violence. It focuses on the responsibility to hold duty bearers accountable to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights, including those of girls and women.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.plan-international.org/protection-from-violence/gbv-gender-based-violence

METHODOLOGY

This new research study takes an intersectional feminist approach to provide a rounded snapshot of girls' rights and girls' lives, in all their diversity, across the UK today.

We have combined newly gathered quantitative and qualitative data with existing evidence. Survey data was collected between May and June 2023.

This report brings together the findings of the five core elements of our study. Across each of these, intersectional data collection and analysis was prioritised, meaning that the experiences and outcomes of girls in all their diversity was intentionally sought and differences identified and explored where possible. These research streams were:

- **Horizon scanning with girls.** To inform the shape of our survey, we held workshops with 24 girls from across the UK.
- **Large-scale survey.** We surveyed the views of 2,963 girls and young women aged 12 to 21 across the UK, conducted in schools and via online panels, with the support of CHILDWISE.
- **Literature review.** We scanned evidence and datasets published between 2018 and 2023, principally since our last State of Girls' Rights report in 2020, focusing on the specific age group of 12 to 21 years, with the support of More in Common.
- **Creative workshops.** We held five, two-day creative workshops with girls and young women in all four UK nations. Some groups focused on supporting girls and young women with different experiences, such

as girls and young women with experience of care, LGBTQ+ girls and young women, and girls and young women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This was done with the support of Media Education.

- **Indexing of local authority level data.**

We identified, with the support of More in Common, a set of key indicators across available local authority datasets. These were assessed as most relevant to capture the levels of enjoyment of rights by girls and young women where they live across the UK. We present this as an Index, looking at varying levels of support across the UK.

**We surveyed
the views of
2,963
girls and young women
aged 12 to 21 across the UK**

This report was built on a methodological approach inspired by feminist and participatory action methodologies. Feminist methodologies can be described as an “attempt to eradicate sexist bias in research and find ways to capture women’s voices that are consistent with feminist ideals.”^{iv} The research is guided by Plan International UK’s Feminist Leadership Principles.^{iv} In practice this meant continually foregrounding the voices of girls and young women and reflecting on decisions made in the research

^{iv} www.careers.plan-uk.org/our-values

from a feminist perspective. A complete methodology is provided in the appendices.

Plan International UK is committed to adhering to and implementing ethical standards in monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives.^v All research activities were undertaken in line with Plan International’s Research Policy and Standards. Researchers were required to adhere to strict codes of conduct, including child protection and safeguarding policies, and additional safeguarding measures were put in place including in the handling of data. We seek to ensure that the wellbeing, dignity, rights, and safety of children, young people and other participants in monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives are respected and protected. As with all of Plan International UK’s programmes, campaigns, and research, this research adhered to the highest standards of ethics, safeguarding, and risk mitigation.

There are a number of challenges faced by girls and young women which may be upsetting to participants in our research and to readers. Readers will come to this report with unique life experiences. The decisions to include this content is not taken lightly but is important to show the range of challenges facing girls and young women today. We took specific steps to safeguard younger and more vulnerable participants. We went through a rigorous safeguarding and ethics process, which was followed in response to any disclosures. Results were processed in line with Plan International’s Safeguarding policies and processes. Given the age range of research participants in some instances where questions were particularly sensitive, different questions were asked to ensure they were age appropriate – in the reporting of data we have indicated where this is the case.

^v www.plan-uk.org/safeguarding-children-and-adults

For example, we only asked participants over 15 years old the extent to which they agreed with statements such as ‘it is okay for a boy / man to touch me even if I don’t want them to’. The question was also prefaced with a trigger warning saying ‘The next question is about types of violence and abuse. If you do not feel comfortable answering this question, please click NEXT and remember please follow up with your teacher or the services listed in the banner if needed’.

This approach has enabled us to present a snapshot of the voices of girls and young women across the UK to help us understand the key concerns, challenges, and opportunities faced by girls and young women in the UK. This shows a complex picture of mixed progress. While this report focuses on girls and young women, the associated actions and recommendations are designed to help the social and economic institutions and structures to change to accommodate the interests of a more diverse constituency – girls may face challenges but do not need to be ‘fixed’, nor treated as the ‘problem’.



CHAPTER 1: JOY AND HAPPINESS

“I ENJOY THE THINGS I DO BUT
LIFE IS LIKE A ROLLERCOASTER.”

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT BRINGS GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN JOY AND HAPPINESS

While the girls and young women who participated in this research find joy in many areas of life, as they get older they find less joy and hope and more anxiety and

uncertainty about the future. Key sources of joy are relationships and friendships, being online, and participation in leisure such as hobbies, sports, and cultural activities.

“I'm trying to enjoy all the little things in life to then, one day, step-by-step achieve big goals.”

(Survey participant 21, Bournemouth)

85%

of girls and young women described themselves as happy, to some extent – yet the proportion which are unhappy rises from 10% of 12 to 16 year olds up to 15% of 17 to 21 year olds.



“I have good friends and family. I have all I need.”

(Survey participant, 13, London)

Girls and young women who responded to our survey were mostly happy in life. 85% of the nearly 3,000 respondents described themselves as happy – to some extent. The highest proportion of respondents told us that they are “mostly happy” (43%).

Relationships and friendships are the primary source of happiness for girls and young women (87% are happy with this aspect of their life), followed by being online (86%), and participation in leisure activities (83%). Girls are however least happy with inequality in society, protection of our natural world, and the pressure they face to be a certain way.

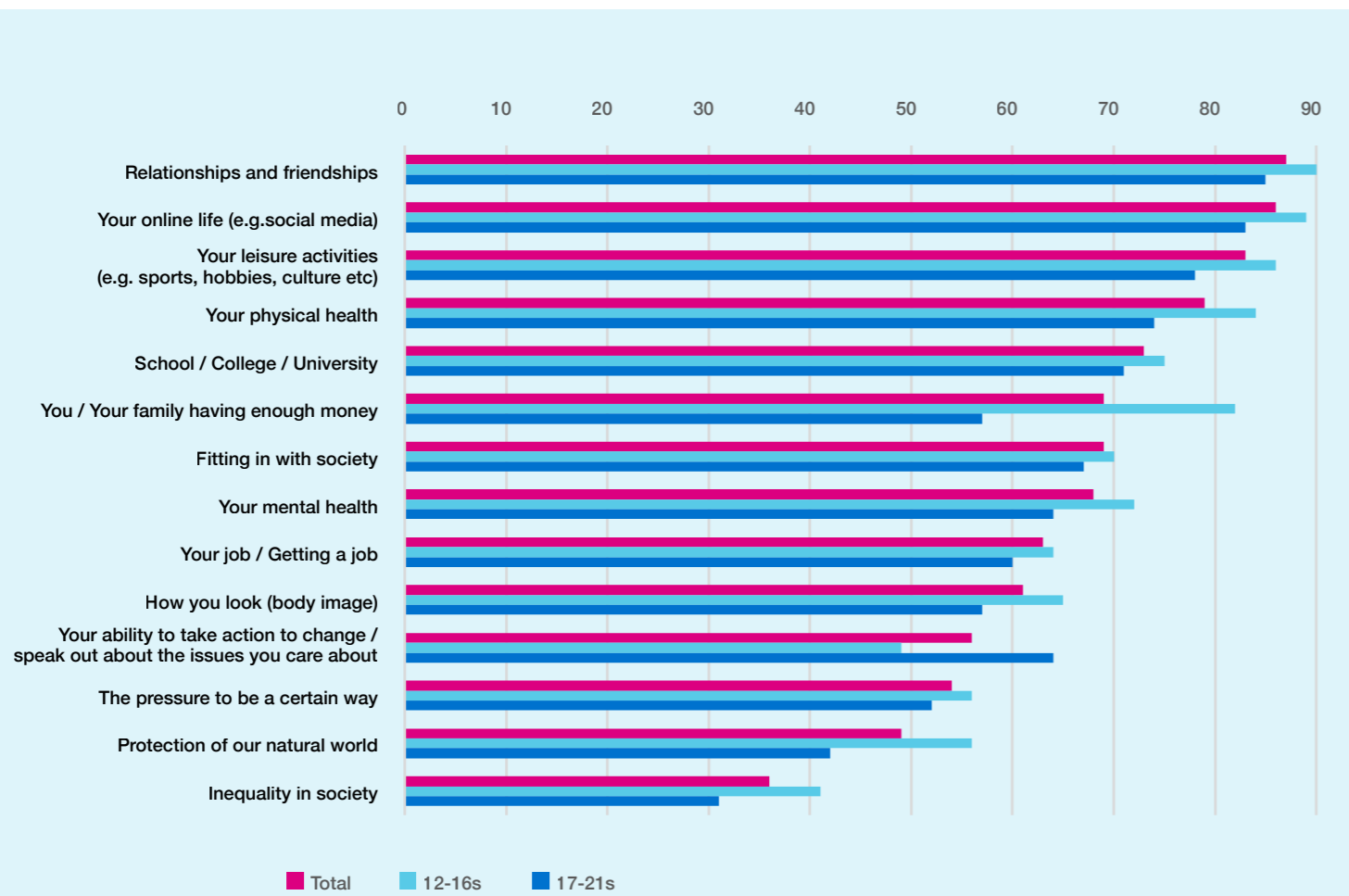


Figure 1: Areas of life where girls and young women are happy

“A stage in my life where I find it is difficult going from a child into adulthood. I feel like there are too many responsibilities and people expect you to be all grown up.”

(Survey participant, 18, Derby)

Our research has found that girls are less happy as they get older and the reality of the pressures, norms, and limitations put on them are realised. While 12% of girls aged 12 to 16 are “completely happy” in life, this declines to 8% of 17 to 21 year olds, whilst being unhappy^{vi} (13%) rose from 10% of 12 to 16 year olds up to 15% of 17 to 21 year olds. The specific areas of happiness change over time – while 90% of 12 to 16 year olds are happy with their relationships, this declines to 85% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Family life consistently ranks highly as a source of happiness over other parts of children’s lives, according to The Good Childhood 2023 research from The Children’s Society.²⁹ Families have a huge impact on children’s wellbeing. Children who did not feel supported by their family were over six times more likely to feel unhappy with their lives as a whole (17.7%), than children who felt their family supported them in most things (2.8%).³⁰

Research finds that girls are more likely to have smaller, tighter-knit groups of friends than boys.³¹ The impact of social media, and the transition to more online friendships, are nuanced with girls (64%) more likely than boys (38%) to say that they use social media or messaging to ‘send supportive messages to friends if they are having a hard time’.³² Connection with family helps wellbeing and outcomes for young people. Evidence shows that children who have good relationships with their parents have a better chance of passing at least five GCSEs, and girls with a good relationship with their mother had better mental wellbeing.³³ There is some evidence that 13 to 14 year olds who had low levels of connectedness to their family before the Covid-19 pandemic had increased levels of general wellbeing and reduced levels of anxiety and depression during lockdown – potentially due to spending more time with their family.³⁴ It should be noted that it is the quality of the relationships within a family that make the biggest difference in a child’s wellbeing, rather than the family structure.³⁵

^{vi} Participants chose not very happy or not happy at all.



From a video created in research workshop in Derry by Amber, Brianne, Ebonie & Caoimhe, all 12 years old

12%

of girls aged 12 to 16 are
"completely happy" in life.



Art created in research workshop in Blackpool by Helen, 21

LIFE ONLINE

“Social media can have a strong impact on young women.”

(Great Yarmouth Narrative Inquiry A)

Spending a large proportion of life online is increasingly common. We asked girls and young women whether their online life, e.g. social media, made them happy.

Life online can encompass social media, gaming, listening to music, reading content such as blogs and articles, and watching TV or video-sharing platforms such as YouTube or TikTok. OFCOM characterises 12 to 15 year olds as connecting and creating in media, communicating with others, while becoming more socially independent and asserting their personality. As they grow, 16 and 17 year olds will be branching out in media, using a wider and more diverse diet of apps and sites. Girls and young women are slightly more likely to use social media and were more likely to use social media to actively connect with others via sharing, commenting, and posting content or videos, than boys and young men.³⁶

Social media and digital technologies are the social sphere of today’s youth — places where lessons are learned, attitudes are formed, and body image concerns are cultivated and metastasised into convictions.³⁷ This will be especially true for young people who are establishing their identity amid significant physical, cognitive, and social changes. Social media has a

huge impact on the life of girls and young women. Many girls find strength and happiness in the relationships they form and the persona they can build online.

Only 9% of girls and young women we surveyed aged 12 to 21 said that they felt “completely” safe online.

Online life is a huge source of happiness for girls and young women, but not without challenges. 86% are happy with their online life, second only to relationships and friendships. Just one in ten girls feel unhappy with their online life (10%) — this represents the smallest source of unhappiness we asked about in our survey. Yet this is also a cause of concern for most girls. It is a space where girls are confronted with misogyny, discrimination, and bullying. This makes them feel unsafe and has an impact on their wellbeing. Only 9% of girls and young women we surveyed aged 12 to 21 said that they felt “completely” safe

online. The proportion who “do not feel safe at all” online doubles with age, from 6% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 12% of 17 to 21 year olds. Whereas 5% of 12 to 16 year olds are unhappy with life online, rising to 14% of 17 to 21 year olds. Out of the 86% of girls who say they are happy with their online life 7% still do not feel safe at all, showing that there is some inherent lack of safety in online life for most girls and young women — even while it brings many of them happiness. This dichotomy, a source of joy where you can’t feel completely safe, creates a complex environment for girls to grow up.

A disproportionate number of young carers are unhappy with their online life (17%), along with those who suffer from a mental health condition, and neurodivergent girls and young women (both 16%), compared to 7% of those girls and young women who did not identify with any of those groups. Similar numbers of disabled girls, and those who identify as LGBTQ+ also struggle with exposure to negativity in the online world (both 15%). Those from single parent households (14%), girls and young women of colour (13%), and those living in areas of high deprivation (11%) are also marginally more likely to feel unhappy about their online life. For LGBTQ+ youth, we know that they may be using social media to connect to young people with similar experiences and using social media to explore their identity, as all young people do, and to seek social support.³⁸ So, ensuring life online is a safe place is important. Online cyberbullying can lead to real world effects as those who

are victims of cyberbullying are more than twice as likely to self-harm.³⁹

Around a third (35%) of girls and young women worry that they are addicted to social media, rising from 29% of 12 to 16 year olds to 40% of 17 to 21 year olds. Studies suggest that girls spend more time on social media than boys, which can have an impact on their lives in several ways.⁴⁰ For example, there is a correlation between social media use and greater body weight dissatisfaction,⁴¹ lack of sleep⁴² and being 70% more likely to fall asleep late on school nights if more than five hours a day is spent on social media, compared to those who spend one to three hours.⁴³ The Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns also rapidly increased social media usage — a survey of nine European countries in April to May 2020 found an increase of 65% longer screen time.⁴⁴ However, while we saw increases during lockdown, this is starting to reset. Data from the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, using GWI data,⁴⁵ shows that young women aged 16 to 24 globally have reduced their daily average internet time by 50 minutes over 2022 — from 8 hours and 18 minutes per day in January 2022, to 7 hours and 28 minutes per day in January 2023, a drop of 10%.

86% of girls and young women are happy with their online life, second only to relationships and friendships.

“Being a woman is difficult and it is unfair how men perceive and berate women online and in person. The world is going backwards, and it is terrifying to witness.”

(Survey participant, 20, South East England)

40% of girls and young women said they would like more controls over negative content towards girls and women on social media to help them feel safer.

A fifth of children aged 10 to 15 years in England and Wales (19%) experience online bullying and 72% of those experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.⁴⁶ Support for girls experiencing online harm falls short of the scale of the challenge. The UK Schools Online Safety Assessment self-evaluation tool for schools finds that many schools in England have an inadequate framework for protecting students online.⁴⁷ Many schools are not meeting the minimum legal requirements for effective online safety training. Around half of the schools in England have no wider community engagement on online safety or no governor training, and two in five schools (40%) have no online safety training for staff.⁴⁸ Teachers report feeling a “lack of confidence” and are ill-equipped to deal with the scale of the challenge.⁴⁹

More than one in three girls and young women we spoke to said they would like more controls over negative content towards girls and women on social media to help them feel safer (37%). Girls aged 18 to 19 felt most strongly about this. The Online Safety Act 2023 is intended to address some of these challenges. Among other things, it requires social media platforms to remove or prevent illegal content, prevent children from accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content, enforce age limits and age-checking measures, and provide parents and children with clear and accessible ways to report problems online when they do arise. Yet there have been criticisms⁵⁰ of the legislation being “piecemeal” and new criminal offences for cyberflashing unenforceable as it will require evidence of the perpetrator’s intent to cause harm, rather than focusing on whether or not there was intent. Social media companies need stronger, more effective, and accessible reporting mechanisms.⁵²

WHAT GIRLS WORRY ABOUT

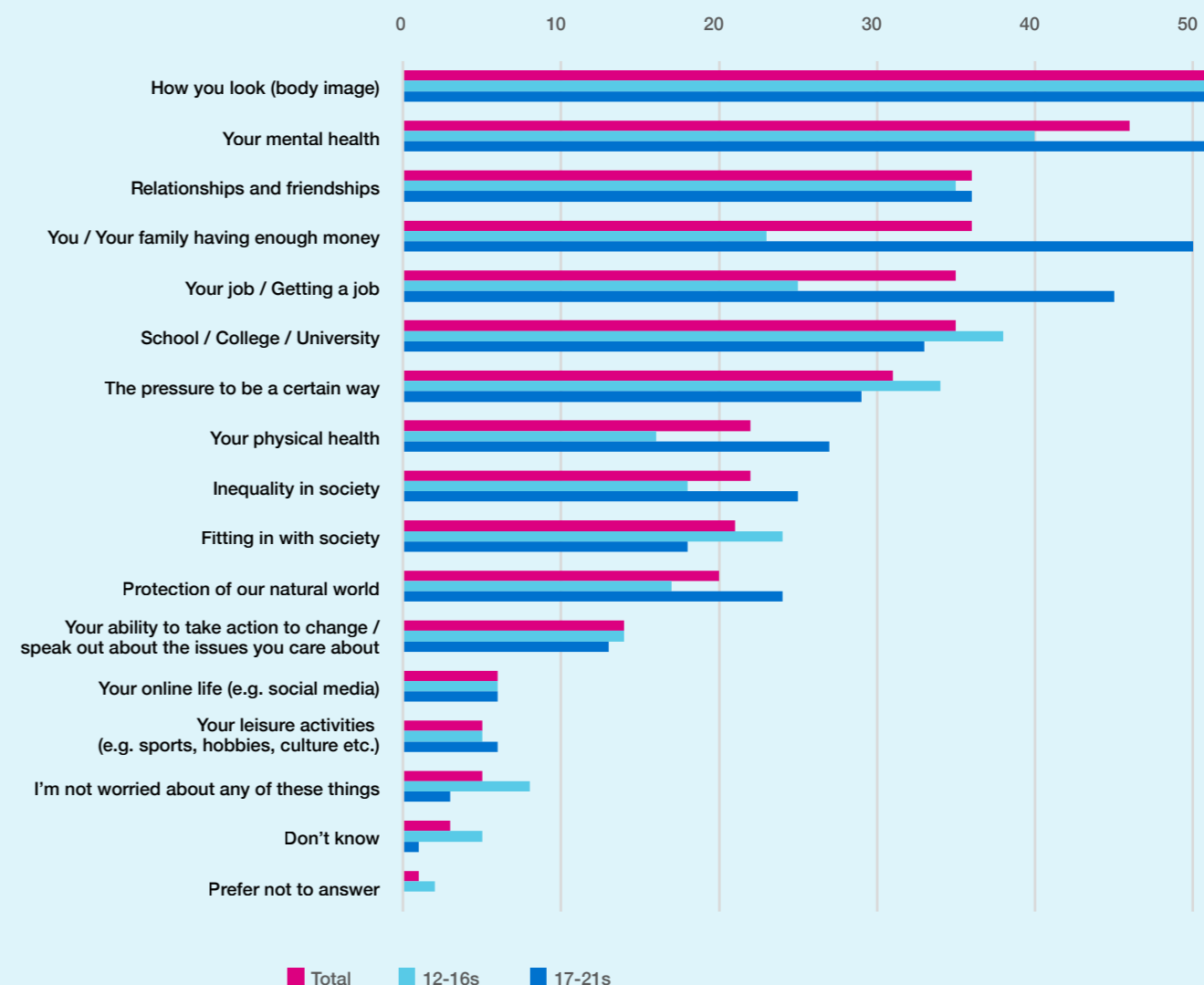


Figure 2: Graph showing areas of life girls and young women worry about the most

Figure 2 shows the areas girls worry about the most, and most areas see an increase in worry from 12 to 16 year olds to 17 to 21 year olds. Girls are worried about their appearance, mental health, relationships and family, having enough money, and employment and education. Almost all areas showed that 17 to 21 year olds worry more than 12 to 16 year olds, with the exception of school/college/university — perhaps as they got used to the system they were in, the pressure to be a certain way, fitting in with society, and

their ability to take action to change. This might show that young women are building their community and relationships, and speaking out on the issues they care about as they get older. Our study is corroborated by others, including the Good Childhood report (2023)⁵³ which highlights a decrease of happiness when girls reach puberty. Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Prince’s Trust (2021: 8)⁵⁴ found that “as children get older, the drop in median wellbeing scores is greater for girls than for boys”.

“It’s difficult in whatever you do. There’s not a day I don’t think about my body or money or the future. Would like a day when I’m not thinking about everything.”

(Survey participant, 21, London)

Having enough money is the area where unhappiness grows the most with age — more than doubling from 23% of 12 to 16 year olds to 50% of 17 to 21 year olds. Their job or

getting a job is the area where unhappiness grows second most with age, nearly doubling from 25% of 12 to 16 year olds to 45% of 17 to 21 year olds.

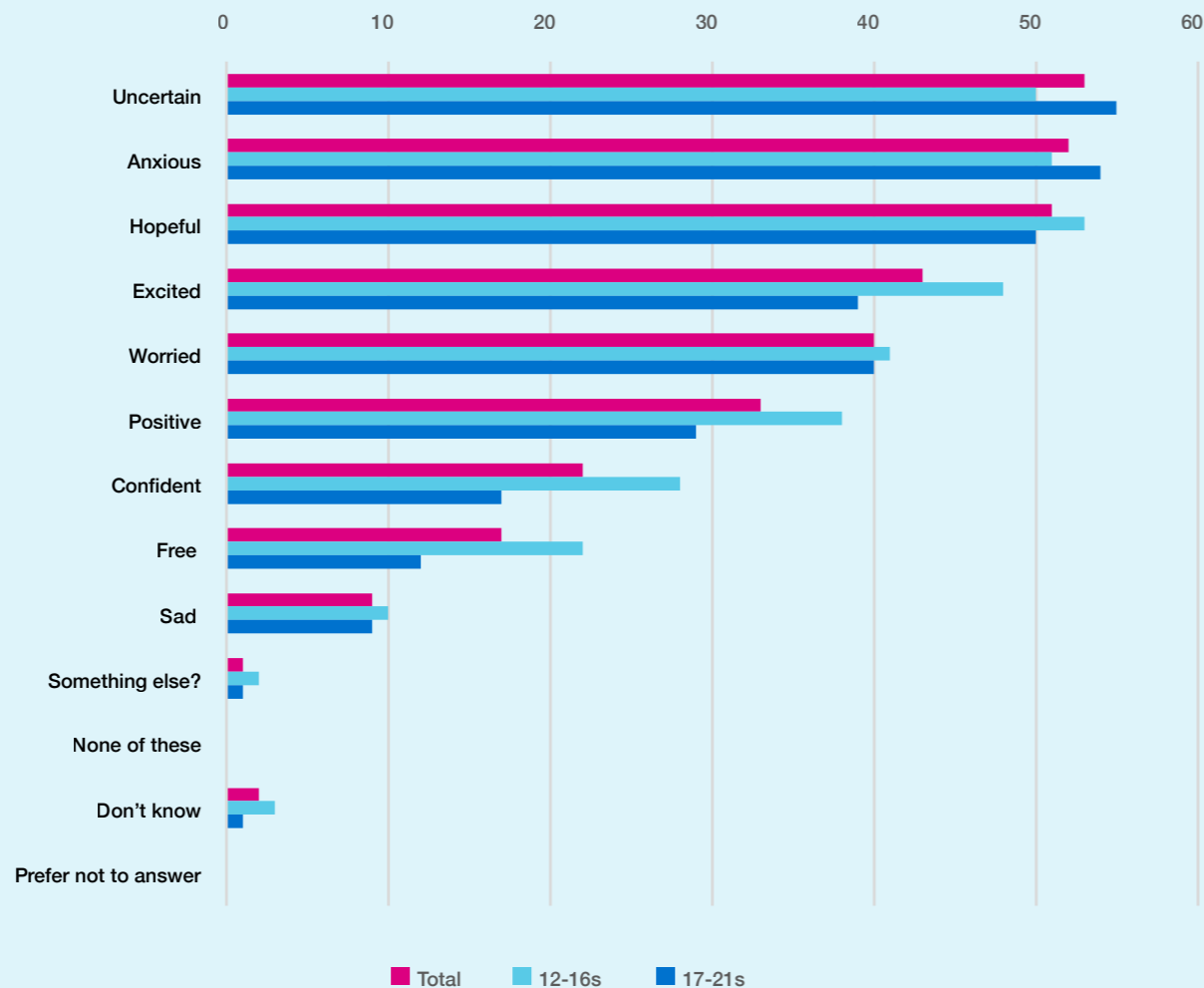


Figure 3: How girls and young women describe their future

53% of girls and young women said they were ‘uncertain’ about their future.

We gave girls and young women a list of words and asked which words they would use to describe how they felt about their future. 53% of girls and young women said they were ‘uncertain’ and 52% said they were ‘anxious’ about their future, while 51% said they felt ‘hopeful’. However, all of these also changed with age. Girls, as they develop into young women, got more uncertain –

increasing from 50% of 12 to 16 year olds to 55% of 17 to 21 year olds. Girls got more anxious, increasing from 51% of 12 to 16 year olds to 54% of 17 to 21 year olds. Girls also got less hopeful, declining from 53% of 12 to 16 year olds to 50% of 17 to 21 year olds. These were the only results selected by a majority of respondents.

We also saw the biggest proportional falls among 17 to 21 year olds saying that they felt excited (a drop of 19%), positive (dropping 24%), confident (dropping 40%) and free (dropping 45%). Only 12% of 17 to 21 year olds said that they felt free.

13% of all girls and young women are unhappy. It’s even higher for some groups...

20% of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

22% of girls and young women with a disability

24% of girls and young women with a long-term condition

26% of girls and young women with a mental health condition

CHAPTER 2: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

“I’M SCARED TO WALK ALONE.”

WHAT WE’VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is endemic. Girls and young women tell us they feel violence against them is normalised. Girls and young women rarely feel completely safe, particularly in public spaces, online, and in leisure settings. The rise of the ‘manosphere’ is driving

dangerous norms of intrusive and aggressive hypermasculine sexuality. Girls and young women told us they often do not trust the police, and do not trust institutions to take gender-based violence seriously.

“I have been taught from childhood that men are not responsible for their own actions because they supposedly mature slower than women. It has been ingrained in me from a young age that men are hopeless hormonal creatures that cannot control their desires and that it is my responsibility to stop their behaviour by altering myself to fit into societal standards.

I have been sexualised and ridiculed for my sexuality all the way through my life including two prominent sexual assaults. I have been depleted of any love or trust that I had for men, and I fear I will never feel safe around men again.”

(Survey participant, 20, Plymouth)



Edda, 16, Great Yarmouth



93%

of girls and young women do not feel “completely safe” in public places.

“I feel like I’m not safe when walking the streets by myself. I’ve been catcalled before and I’m only 14, this is scary.”
(Survey participant, 14, Trafford)

“If it wasn’t already bad, the murder of Sarah Everard clarified the safety of women within the UK. It’s ridiculous and heartbreaking that I don’t feel safe walking anywhere alone, literally ANYWHERE.”
(Survey participant, 21, Leeds)

Gender-based violence is everywhere and normalised across society. We heard an outpouring of stories of abuse and violence against girls and young women. Girls and young women face it online, in schools and universities, in public, at work, and in the home. Girls and young women told us there were few places they felt completely safe and they are acutely aware of this. Gender-based violence is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. As we know from our work around the world, gender-based violence is perpetuated by social norms, attitudes, and practices that discriminate against and marginalise girls and women. It is rooted in unequal power-relations that typically favour men and boys and affects all girls and women everywhere across the world, directly or indirectly. The tragic cases of Bibaa Henry, Nicole Smallman, Sarah Everard, Sabina

Nessa, and Brianna Ghey have highlighted the prevalence of gender-based violence in the UK.

We asked girls and young women how safe they feel in different locations. The more public and less personal the place, the less safe girls feel. Girls are most likely to feel completely safe at home (72%), with wider family (51%), and in religious places (30%), and least likely to feel completely safe in public spaces (5%), online (9%), and in leisure settings (11%). Feelings of lack of safety were common among the nearly 3,000 girls and young women who responded to our survey. In the final survey question, we asked if there was anything else they would like to share about their experiences of being a girl or young woman. Repeatedly, the girls and young women took this opportunity to detail how they do not feel safe in public.

“I want to be able to walk the 2 minute and 80 second walk to my friend’s house when it’s dark. That’s it!”
(Workshop participant, Blackpool)

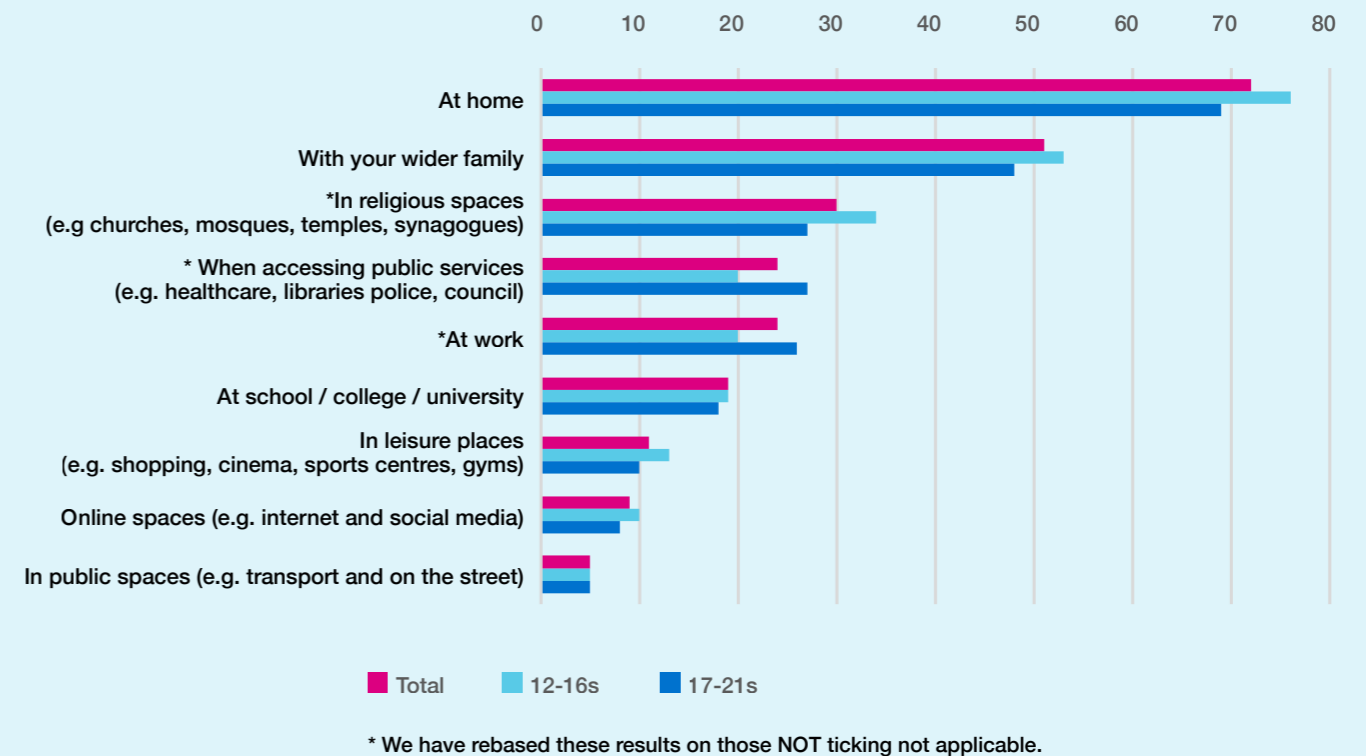


Figure 4: Where girls feel completely safe

Whilst girls and young women are more likely to feel unsafe in public places, for those experiencing or witnessing domestic violence or control and coercion, more private spaces such as the home will be inherently unsafe, with less access to support and witnesses of crimes. While public spaces may feel more unsafe, statistically girls and young women are more likely to experience physical violence in the home. Sky News analysis⁵⁵ shows that “women were more likely to be killed by a partner or ex-partner (32%) or someone else they knew (24%)” compared to “13% of women killed by a stranger.” Official data for England and

Wales shows that of an estimated 2.1 million people aged 16 years and over experiencing domestic abuse, 1.4 million are women and girls.⁵⁶ These feelings of lack of safety are even more worrying as the lines between the public and private spaces can be blurred. Girls may feel unsafe when they are online at home because of online harassment, misogyny on the internet, unsolicited messages, or online pornography. One in twenty men in the UK said they were “‘definitely’ or ‘highly likely’ to have sexual contact with a child between the ages of 10 to 14 years old if they thought no one would find out.”⁵⁷

“I am scared of getting sexually assaulted and scared of certain types of men that wander around.”

(Survey participant, 12, Belfast)

“I have experienced several occasions where I have felt unsafe whilst being alone due to a male following me, calling me names, trying to lead me away etc.”

(Survey participant, 18, Swindon)

Girls told us they are being followed, stared at, yelled at, and worse. Girls as young as 12 told us they fear unwanted attention from men in their daily lives. They are struggling to handle it, and desperately want it to stop. Everyone's Invited have highlighted that 99.7% of respondents to Victim Focus UK's sample study of over 22,400 women have been repeatedly subjected “to violence including assaults, harassment, and rape.”⁵⁸

Many girls and young women who took part in our survey wanted to take part in sport, hobbies, nature, and culture more regularly. However, around one in three (33%) would need to feel safer to do so. The threat of violence and harassment serves to make girls and young women's horizons smaller and keep them from engaging in the things that give them passion and a reason to enjoy life.

“I feel unsafe wherever I go, I've been sexually harassed a lot. Like, A LOT. Yet no one does anything other than 'boys will be boys', 'just ignore them' etc.”

(Survey participant, 14, Mid Suffolk)

Girls as young as **12** told us they fear unwanted attention from men in their daily lives.

“I think that, in my school especially, there is a ridiculous amount of jokes about women and girls by the boys in my year...It is crushing and damages your confidence but I don't know how to change it or make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else. I have reported it to my parents.”

(Survey participant, 15, Cherwell)

LISTEN
An Ode to my Sisters

To all my sisters,

Please understand

you're more than a worth

they labelled you with.

Those words of hate shouldn't get to you.

Screenshots from a video created by Eda, 15, Great Yarmouth

“Especially in school, being a girl is really hard and often really scary. It angers me that the words and actions of boys are often just dismissed when they’re actually incredibly harmful.”

(Survey participant, 16, Stockport)

Pervasive violence is also affecting girls’ and young women’s experience of education. We found that only around one in five girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (19%) say that they feel completely safe at school, college, or university. A small minority (4%) say they do not feel safe at all in school, college, or university but one in nine (11%) of LGBTQ+ girls and young women feel completely safe in school, college, or university.

When asked to identify the top five things that would help them achieve their potential in their education, 24% chose “feeling safe”,

from a long list of options (see Chapter 5 for how girls feel they can achieve their potential in school). Young carers and LGBTQ+ girls and young women were more likely to select this option (30% and 29% respectively).

Some groups of girls feel even less secure. Violence is used (as discussed in Chapter 9 on gender norms) as a means of control by men and boys over women and girls, including to enforce dominant ideas of femininity and how girls and young women should act and look. Women and girls who do not, or cannot, conform to these ideals are more likely to feel unsafe and insecure in public.

ONLY 67%

of girls and young women of colour

60%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

60%

of neurodivergent girls and young women

feel completely safe at home

Previous Plan International⁵⁹ research found that disabled girls (92%), LGBTQ+ girls and young women (90%), mixed-race girls (88%) and Black, Black British, African,

and Caribbean girls (82%) have experienced public sexual harassment compared to 75% of girls and young women overall.

HARMFUL PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Gender-based violence is wide-ranging. For our research we focused on perceptions of violence, feeling unsafe, and recorded data on violence. We recognise there are other severe forms of violence impacting girls and women in the UK which we have not explored in detail — such as Female Genital Cutting (FGC) or Mutilation (FGM)^{vii}, “honour-based” violence^{viii}, forced marriage, modern slavery and scarification.⁶⁰ There are a wide range of ‘Harmful Practices’ which have “anchored themselves deep in societies with a view to keep women in submission”⁶¹ and may be carried out in the name of social, cultural, and religious tradition.

Given the sensitivity, we did not ask questions on these topics directly to girls and young women in our survey. There are challenges with these practices globally, including in the UK, and they should not be ignored. Some national data is collected on prevalence, but it is limited. More than 10,000 potential victims of modern slavery were identified by the Government in 2020, and nearly half (47%) were children.⁶² FGM was identified among 1,785 individual women and girls who attended NHS Trusts and GP practices in the period July 2023 to September 2023.⁶³ There is best practice⁶⁴ on legislating on these practices and research⁶⁵ showing methods for sensitive safeguarding of girls at risk of such practices.

^{vii} The partial or total removal of external female genitalia, or other injury to female genital organs, for non-medical reasons.

^{viii} Honour-based abuse is a crime or incident committed to protect or defend the ‘honour’ of a family or community.

GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ARE NOT SAFE ONLINE

“When I was 12, I experienced an unpleasant situation where [an] old man sent me the photos of his naked body and I was really traumatised after this.”

(Survey participant, 18, London)

“Being a woman is difficult and it is unfair how men perceive and berate women online and in person. The world is going backwards, and it is terrifying to witness.”

(Survey participant, 20, Brighton)

Our research found many girls and young women experience violence and abuse online. Only one in eleven (9%) girls and young women say they feel completely safe online, with a further 31% saying they feel

mostly safe. Around 6% of 12 to 16 year olds say they do not feel safe at all online, and this doubles to around 12% of those aged 17 to 21.

“Last night, I had a really disgusting experience where like it was like 5 minutes past twelve in the morning... some random boy with Snapchat added me and randomly just like started asking me to show stuff and my mum was in the room next door and I thought OK, I need to tell her about it. I still did not tell her but, but also I’m sure that’s what they like.”

(Workshop participant, Cupar)

Studies show how endemic online violence is for girls and young women. In a study of over 7,500 people, 15% of women have experienced online violence.⁶⁶ Of those women who experienced online violence, 13% said it progressed to offline violence. Research conducted by Refuge in 2021 found that one in three women in the UK have experienced online abuse (perpetrated on social media or other online platforms) at some point in their lives.⁶⁷ This rises to almost two in three (62%) among women aged 18 to 34. In England, 90% of girls have been sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see either a lot or some of the time.⁶⁸ Online grooming has risen by 82% between 2017 and 2023 according to the NSPCC⁶⁹ with girls aged 12 to 15 years old most likely to be victims.⁷⁰ The issues are evolving quickly – in 2024, a UK police force investigated the sexual offence

of a young girl’s digital persona that took place in augmented reality. This is thought to be the first case of its kind in the UK.⁷¹

Increased availability of online pornography compounds these problems and has an impact on young people’s attitudes towards sex, sexuality, and consent. Women’s Aid research found that while 4% of children and young people who weren’t exposed to pornography disagreed that it is important to talk with your partner about whether you are ready to have sex, this jumped to 11% of children and young people who disagreed if they had been exposed to nudity/pornography.⁷² This exposure without appropriate Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) risks children learning dynamics from inappropriate and inaccurate sources.

THE MANOSPHERE AND MISOGYNY

Since our last State of Girls' Rights in the UK report (2020), we have seen the rise of the 'manosphere', a cluster of online communities "united in their hate-filled views on women and girls" which promote a "hypermasculine sexuality that is intrusive or aggressive."⁷³ This is a loose confederation of subgroups, such as involuntary celibates (incels), Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs).⁷⁴

These communities can shore up and promote arguments that boys should resent girls for their successes, and the support they receive, and encourage boys to perceive girls' successes as a threat to their position of privilege in society. They can spin a false narrative that society has been corrupted by feminism in favour of inherent sex

differences between men and women, and the solution is a regressive hypermasculine role for men and the submission of women.⁷⁵ Sadly, 18% of men aged 16 to 29 feel "attempts to give equal opportunities" to women have gone "much too far" or "too far" according to King's College London's Policy Institute and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership polling.⁷⁶ These communities promote 'alternative truth' claims – they draw upon authoritative sources and use common ways to share knowledge, like statistics, glossaries, and wikis to bolster their legitimacy. But they leave out context, often leave claims unsubstantiated, and provide distorted 'evidence'. They argue that they provide an 'alternative' viewpoint to the mainstream yet are inherently "connected to underlying misogynist structures in society."⁷⁷

“Sexism is still prevalent - if not getting worse - with social media trying to make men masculine again. It is a breeding ground for hate against women that young boys can read. Without proper education and suitable role models these boys could think it is okay to harm women, that women are objects and it is their right to treat them how they want.”

(Survey participant, 20, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Boys and young men, particularly those who may be in vulnerable situations, may be targets for this content. Some boys may "join" the manosphere to "find a remedy" for their vulnerability, though stories from former members of the manosphere have suggested that this "did not help them meet standards of heterosexual masculinity but rather exacerbated their experiences of vulnerability."⁷⁸

Girls and young women are the targets of this misogyny, as well as those with diverse gender and sexual identities and men who don't conform to dominant masculine ideals. Those attempting to break down these views are then subject to misogyny's "disciplining function to keep patriarchal gender hierarchies in place", and retaliation is legitimate.⁷⁹

The issue however is not solely with aggressive sexuality but also the weaponisation in the manosphere of "self-professed 'nice guys' claiming that they 'deserve' sex (due to the fact that they treat women better than sexually

aggressive men do) but are unfairly 'denied' due to women's supposedly misguided or selfish natures". This shows worrying attitudes of entitlement, belief in a transactive nature of sex, and resentment.⁸⁰

“Yes, because you learn about both sides. Andrew Tate, the boys are copying everything he says, they shout it in the corridors. That Andrew Tate is a GOAT [Greatest of All Time].”

(Narrative inquiry C, Cupar)

The dramatic rise, since our last report, of toxic content driven by 'influencers' such as Andrew Tate has been stark. Boys flock to cultural commentators like Jordan Peterson and his "quasi-spiritual self-help."⁸¹ Polling from Hope Not Hate⁸² showed:

- "that 75% of young men aged 18 to 24 and 79% of young men aged 16 to 17 had watched, listened to, or read something by Andrew Tate."
- "half of young men had a positive view, against only 8% of young women" of Andrew Tate.
- "more young people have "heard of Tate than Rishi Sunak."⁸³

Figures from Ipsos polling for King's College London's Policy Institute and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership⁸⁴ found:

- "while polling has shown that 6% of the people who have heard of Andrew Tate have a favourable view, this grows to 21% of men aged 16 to 29. One in five young men who are aware of his views do not find them offensive (20%)."

- "among those polled who say they have heard of Jordan Peterson, more have unfavourable (36%) than favourable (22%) views of him – but this extends to 32% of men aged 16 to 29 who have favourable views."

These influencers have gained in prominence since 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns may have led to an increase in consumption of misogynistic online content by young people as in-person socialising was limited. There was a 600% increase in traffic to incel sites in the UK between April – November 2021.⁸⁵ In a poll conducted in March 2020 on incel.co, the largest percentage of respondents (36%) were between the ages of 18 to 21, and 8% reported being younger than 17. Researchers⁸⁶ proposed that incels do not become misogynistic within the incel community and extremist sites, and instead this process takes place on more mainstream sites such as YouTube, TikTok, gaming boards, and 4chan that act as a pipeline to more extreme content. Sites such as YouTube and TikTok have powerful algorithms that can show these videos to children who have never before been exposed to these themes.^{87 88 89}

The cost of living crisis may also drive interest in these influencers. Hope Not Hate's director of education and training talks about how most pupils follow YouTubers such as MrBeast (an American entrepreneur, philanthropist, and influencer) and become infatuated with people

becoming rich quickly.⁹⁰ Against a cost of living crisis, it is no wonder that these influencers can become heroes to some. Influencers like Tate peddle their gleam of 'supposed wealth' before introducing misogynistic and hypermasculine themes.

“Too much hate and toxic masculinity, degrading women.”
(Survey participant, 21, Burnley)

Young women
are not safe,

we are not to take.

Men look us as prey.
Needless to say. ~

Young women
are not safe

when we go out
at night

men are always
in sight,

giving us a fright,

sometimes ruining
our night.

Screenshots from a video created by Romie, 14, Neath Port Talbot

The impact of these influencers is stark. Research from Women's Aid showed that children exposed to "misogynistic social media content, like Andrew Tate, were almost five times more likely than those not exposed to view hurting someone physically as acceptable if you say sorry afterwards."⁹¹

Over half (56%) of girls and young women we spoke to said they felt "education to change boys' and men's attitudes and behaviour towards women" would help them feel safer and more protected – rising from 51% of 12 to 16 year olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds. Many existing 'positive masculinity' interventions, such as those employed by organisations like Beyond Equality, focus

on raising awareness, creating safe spaces for boys to be curious and ask questions to unpick the current belief systems, and facilitating introspection. Some campaigns, such as Sound, encourages men aged 18 to 34 in Wales to learn about gender-based violence through having "conversations with male peers in safe spaces, sounding out problematic behaviours and concerns" and offering trusted insights on healthy relationships.⁹² We need to work with all genders to support men and boys to reject these forms of hypermasculine sexuality. Campaigns could amplify the voices of former members of incel and misogynistic communities and positive role models as a step towards this.

Excerpt from a poem written by
Caitlin, 14, Neath Port Talbot.

fake.
Solid Meetic is fake.
all the "pretty girls" are fake.
it make us "not pretty girls" so insecure.
Why are they so fake.
but why we are getting bullying in school
for no reason that why
Why are people always use
that why people are so scared to go, as
we got cells but they are not

GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN SEE VIOLENCE AS NORMALISED

“I don’t know a single girl who hasn’t been harassed. Every one of them has experienced anything from a creepy catcall to full on rape and I think that’s extremely sad.”

(Survey participant, 20, Harrow)

“Boys think that if you let them kiss you then they can touch too. I don’t want them to. I don’t want to be with boys anymore because they can’t be trusted.”

(Survey participant, 21, Shrewsbury)

Violence towards women and children is endemic in society. While most girls and young women (93%) who took part in our survey said that it is unacceptable for a boy or man to touch them when they don’t want them to, a notable minority (7%) don’t always consider this unacceptable.^{ix}

Nine out of ten girls and young women aged 15 to 21 say it is never acceptable for a boy or man to hit them (90%). However, we found that one in eleven (9%) of the girls and young

women aged 15 to 21 surveyed, considered it to be “acceptable” to some degree for a boy or man to hit them and can imagine a situation where it might be acceptable for a boy or man to hit them. This refers to 6% who think this is *acceptable in rare circumstances*, 2% who think it is *sometimes acceptable*, and 1% who say it is *always acceptable*. We did not explore this question in this survey in more detail, so it is likely to be driven by a complex set of societal norms which would need further research to understand.

“I have been harassed, stalked and sexually assaulted, and emotionally abused by multiple men in my life and I’m only 21 years of age. As a young woman you end up just accepting that it’s part of being a woman.”

(Survey participant, 21, Lewes)

16% of girls and young women we spoke to believe being shouted at or called names by a boy or man is acceptable in some circumstances, with girls and young women with a physical disability (21%), a long-term health condition (21%), and girls and young women who speak English as a second language (21%) most likely to consider being

shouted at or called names acceptable on some level.

Almost all girls consider it unacceptable for a boy or man to take, edit, or send videos or photos of them without their consent (90%), although a notable minority consider these behaviours acceptable to some degree (9%).

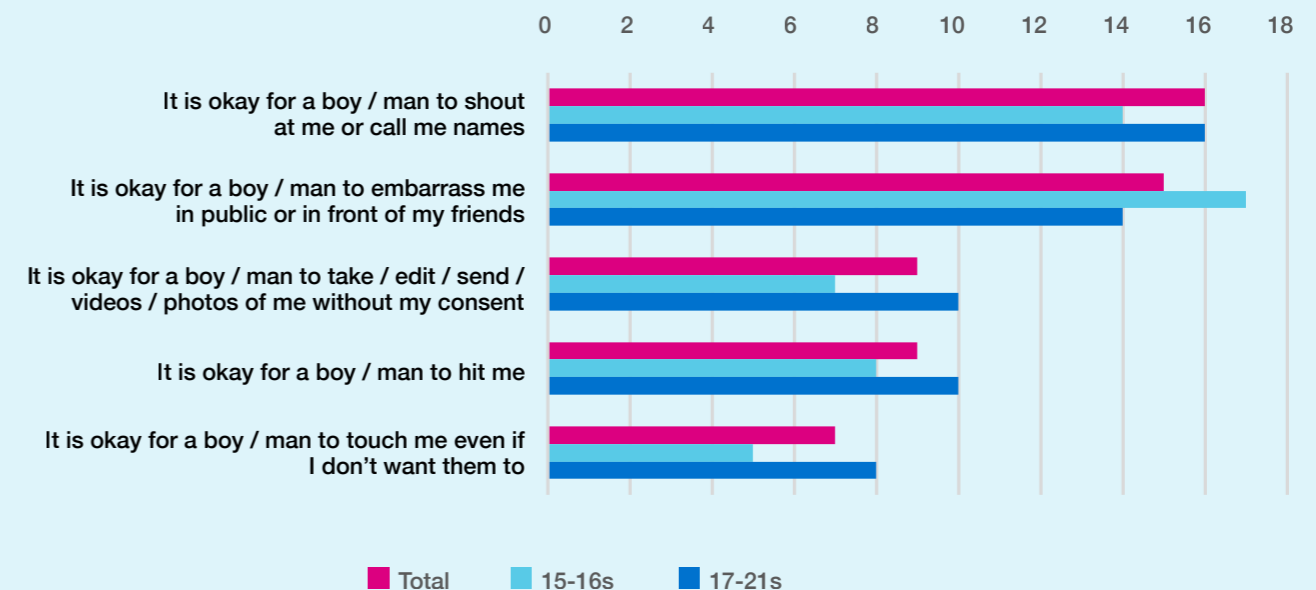


Figure 5: Girls and young women’s perceptions on types of behaviours of boys and men they feel is acceptable

^{ix} Due to the sensitivity of these questions we only asked this to girls and young women over the age of 15. The question was prefaced with a trigger warning saying ‘The next question is about types of violence and abuse. If you do not feel comfortable answering this question please click NEXT and remember please follow up with your teacher or the services listed in the banner if needed’. Participants were asked ‘to what extent do you agree or disagree with statements, for example ‘it is okay for a boy / man to touch me even if I don’t want them to’ and ‘it is ok for a boy/man to hit me’ to focus on them rather than on men hitting women more generally. Answers included: *It is never acceptable; It is acceptable in rare circumstances; It is sometimes acceptable; It is acceptable most of the time; It is always acceptable; Don’t know and Prefer not to answer.*

VIOLENCE FACED BY PEOPLE OF DIVERSE SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION, AND SEX CHARACTERISTICS

“There needs to be more education on the LGBTQI+ community. I myself am in a same sex relationship (4 years) and we don’t dare hold hands in public as we’re scared of abuse or being sexualised just cause we’re women. I could go on and on - there needs to be a change in society.”

(Survey participant, 21, Burnley)

“Being trans is hard when you’re younger and when you get older, experiencing body dysmorphia every day is something that can affect a person’s mental health.”

(Survey participant, trans woman, 16, Stockport)

In our work, we spoke to many young people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. We heard from over 600 LGBTQ+ young people in our

survey, and one of the youth groups we worked with engaged specifically with the LGBTQ+ community. They told us of the discrimination and violence they face.

“Despite living in a situation that is painful and oftentimes toxic, I love my family and I’m lucky to have loving friends and a wonderful partner.”

(Survey participant, non-binary, 18, Sandwell)

LGBTQ+ people face a range of challenges in life, on top of the challenges they face as girls and young women. Many women struggle to live up to the standards expected of them by society, and this can be made more

complex by being gay or trans. A 2019 survey conducted by YouGov for Amazon “found that school children being bullied for being [LGBTQ+] was more common than bullying relating to racism, sexism or religion.”⁹³

“I can control most aspects of my life but there are restrictions in access to facilities.”

(Survey participant, non-binary, 20, London)

A person’s gender identity is their innate sense of their own gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

Everyone has a gender identity and expresses their gender in a unique and personal way.

Some people use the term non-binary for gender identities which don’t fully align with terms like “man” or “woman”. Although non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.⁹⁴ Those who have a different gender identity than the sex they were assigned at birth, face challenges in several areas of their life because of transphobia. In the year ending March 2023, 4,732 hate crimes against transgender people were recorded – a rise of 11% on the previous year.⁹⁵ This is a huge rise from 2020/21 when there were 2,728 recorded hate crimes against transgender people. Sexual orientation hate crimes fell by 6%, although this is still an increase of 112% over the last five years.⁹⁶

A Home Office report said that “transgender issues have been heavily discussed by politicians, the media and on social media over the last year, which may have led to an increase in these offences, or more awareness in the police in the identification

and recording of these crimes.”⁹⁷ This is likely just a snapshot of the picture, with estimates that nearly nine in ten (88%) transgender people do not report the most serious hate crimes or incidents to the police.⁹⁸ The tragic case of the murder of Brianna Ghey, 16, by two teenagers who exchanged messages including transphobic slurs and materials in advance of murdering her, has brought this violence to the forefront. According to trans journalist, Jess O’Thomson, “There has been much discussion as to whether transphobia was a ‘motive’ in the killing of Brianna. The reality is, we never know the motive for many crimes, as highlighted by the prosecution in their closing speech. However, it seems clear to me that transphobia contributed to Brianna’s death. She was vulnerable, and this made her easier to kill. Moreover, the transphobic language in the messages between the defendants no doubt helped dehumanise Brianna in their eyes. We know such dehumanisation can make killing easier.”⁹⁹

“I find any PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) learning we do on relationships to be focused on straight couples. I would love for it to be more inclusive to LGBT couples.”

(Survey participant, 14, Mid Suffolk)

Only 11% of LGBTQ+ girls and young women feel completely safe at school, college, or university, compared to 21% of girls and young women who do not identify as LGBTQ+. One study found that “only 27% of secondary school students say their school would be safe for [LGBTQ+] individuals to ‘come out’ as [LGBTQ+].”¹⁰⁰ At the time of publishing this report in July 2024, draft Government guidance has been issued for schools in England supporting ‘gender questioning’ children. There is scepticism and concern among experts about this guidance.¹⁰¹ Organisations including

Mermaids, Stonewall, and Liberty have warned that the guidance “seeks to deny the existence of transgender pupils, discouraging them from coming out and being their authentic selves, and could lead to young people being forcibly outed to parents and teachers.”¹⁰² Where Government action and legislation frames the ‘problem’ as protecting cisgender girls, it risks centering on reaffirming heteronormativity, bowing to patriarchal norms, and maintaining paternal views towards girls by promoting views of traditional gender roles.¹⁰³

INSTITUTIONS LET GIRLS DOWN WHEN THEY COME FORWARD

Girls and young women do not trust the police to help them

“I don’t feel confident going to the police about anything! Within this topic about the police and everything, when a girl goes to a police station and says to a police officer, ‘I’ve just been raped, help!’ They go, ‘On no you’re not, you’re just saying that because you’re an attention seeker.’”

(Workshop participant, Blackpool)

“I feel more unsafe around male police officers than I do men at a bar.”

(Workshop participant, Blackpool)

One in five (20%) girls and young women told us they do not trust the police at all to help them if they are in difficulty. Trust in the police decreases with age, from seven in ten 12 to 16 year olds (72%), down to two in three 17 to 21 year olds (66%). Furthermore, actively recording distrust increases with age, from 15% at age 12 to 16, up to one in four 17 to 21 year olds (24%).

We don’t specifically know why this lack of trust occurs, and it may have a multitude of reasons. Girls told us that they didn’t feel the police and justice system would take their experiences seriously. When girls and young women experience violence, the chances of justice being served are slim. One in four women have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult¹⁰⁴ while the Home Office¹⁰⁵ report that only 1.3% of recorded rape offences, that have been assigned an outcome, resulted in a charge or summons. Heavy-handed policing has been prominent in media in recent years in cases such as the policing of the Reclaim These Streets movement.¹⁰⁶ The policing of the vigils, in

response to the kidnap, rape, and murder of Sarah Everard, have increased the sense there is a hostile environment for civic participation, and were brought up in our research.¹⁰⁷

This lack of trust may be even higher in different communities due to institutional discrimination – as one example, a report by Baroness Casey found that misogyny, racism, and homophobia are rife in the Metropolitan police force.¹⁰⁸ Police involved in the case of Child Q – where police officers strip searched a Black school girl without an appropriate adult present – and where a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review found that racism and ‘adultification’ bias were “likely” influences on police¹⁰⁹, have faced disciplinary proceedings.¹¹⁰

This lack of trust can have huge effects. 38% of survivors of rape don’t tell the police because they don’t think the police would help.¹¹¹ Lack of trust in police can further drive feelings of lack of safety in public spaces.

20% of all girls and women do not trust the police at all. It’s even higher for some groups...

25%

of girls and women of colour

28%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

31%

of girls and young women with a mental health condition or physical disability

Services for survivors of domestic abuse

Not only are prosecutions minimal for survivors of domestic abuse, but there is inadequate support for their recovery and wellbeing. Specialist services offer survivors of gender-based violence a trauma-informed holistic package of wrap-around support and wellbeing services to meet women’s often multiple and wide-ranging needs. Effective support is known to reduce the long-term impacts that abuse can have on survivors.¹¹² But in England and Wales, just 35% of domestic abuse survivors said that accessing support was “easy” or “very easy”. Research from Women’s Aid¹¹³ reveals the economic crisis facing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and gender-based violence services. They found that nearly every one of their members (96%) were experiencing increased rent, other increased costs such as for food or supplies, or other financial issues.

There are gaps in support services for younger survivors of domestic abuse. The Missing the Mark research from The Children’s Society found that around 70% of local authorities in England do not have policies or procedures in place to respond to abusive teenage relationships for those under 18.¹¹⁴ Despite statutory duties for local authorities under the Domestic Abuse Act (2021), 77% of

local authorities in England and Wales offer no specialist support for children who have experienced domestic abuse.¹¹⁵ Young people need this support – whilst 70% of children and young people said they would seek support if affected by domestic abuse, 61% did not know or were unsure where to go for this according to Women’s Aid.¹¹⁶

Specialist services led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women, deaf and disabled women, LGBTQ+ survivors, and other groups are often most appropriate for the communities they support. When survivors who are people of colour report violence, there are fewer support services available, with half of Black and minoritised specialist refuges having been forced to close or been taken over by larger providers due to lack of funding in 2010 to 2020.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, just 5% of refuge spaces listed in 2019 were accessible to woman with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). These women are subject to immigration control and cannot claim public funds without certain exceptions, which can hugely reduce the support available to them.¹¹⁸ Some people who are living in the UK on spousal visas or other types of visas will have the NRPF condition attached, and undocumented migrants and

many asylum seekers also have No Recourse to Public Funds. This can be a major barrier to escaping abuse, particularly as it may leave survivors financially dependent on abusers.¹¹⁹

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner found “15% of community organisations reported that they would not accept referrals from individuals with NRPF.”¹²⁰

Lack of effective legislation

“When in public, sometimes men can appear to be dangerous and intimidating. It would be much easier and comforting if more laws against sexual harassment and rape etc were put in place.”

(Survey participant, 16, North Wiltshire)

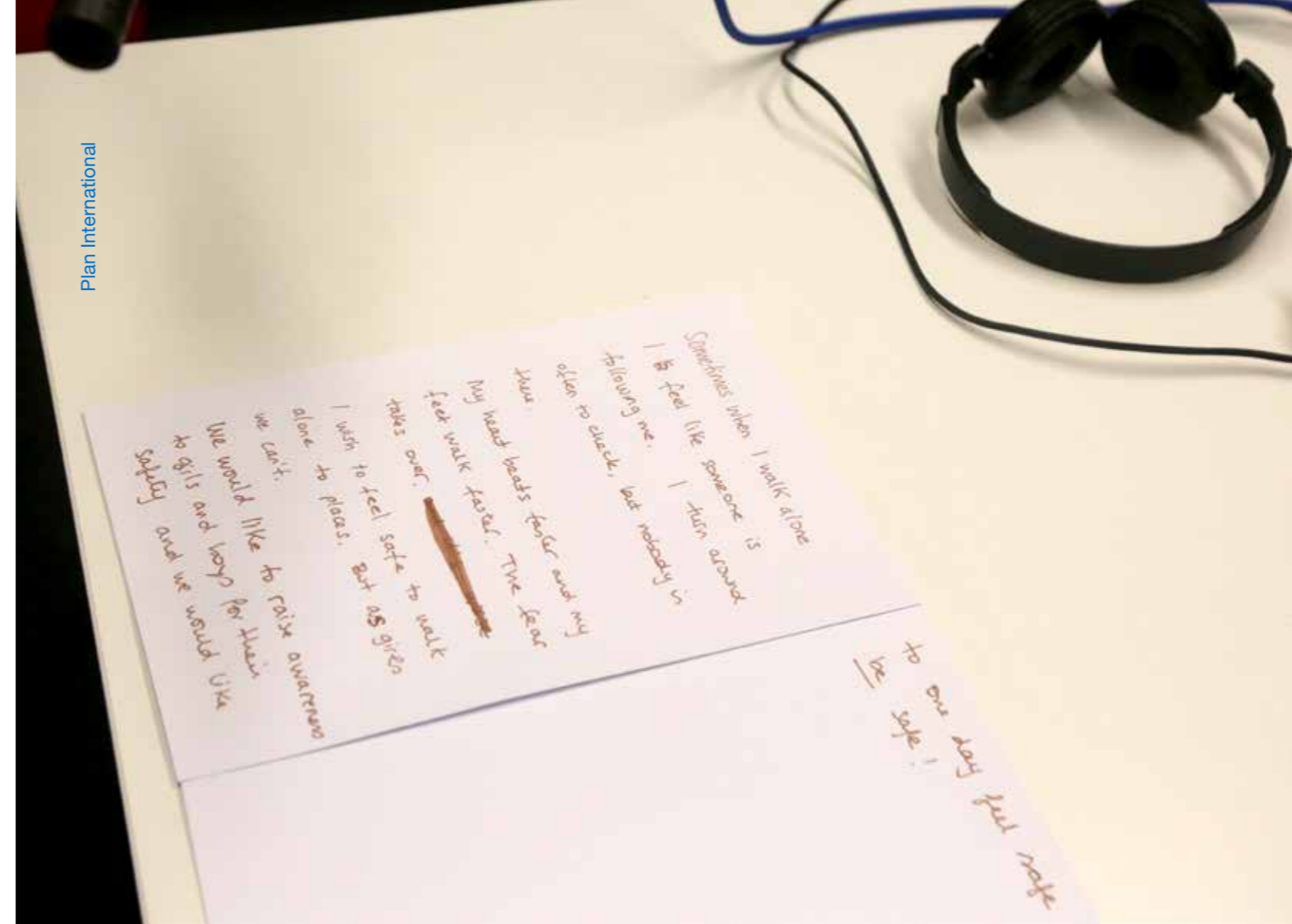
Some girls and young women wanted a stronger and more effective criminal justice response to gender-based violence. Girls also wanted gaps in the law filled. Since our last report in 2020, girl and women-led campaigns have resulted in new laws to tackle public sexual harassment in England and Wales, to make it easier to convict someone of so called ‘revenge porn’^x, and to include new ‘cyberflashing’^{xi} offences.

Current approaches

In 2021 the UK Government set out its action plan for improving the Criminal Justice System’s response to rape in England and Wales¹²¹ and in 2023 published a progress update to the review.¹²² In a move that has been welcomed by leading organisations, the Government announced that Operation Soteria, which aims to shift

rape investigations away from an undue focus on the perceived credibility of the victim, and instead focus on the actions of the suspect, would be rolled out across all 43 police forces and 14 CPS areas across England and Wales.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 includes a statutory definition of domestic abuse for the first time, which requires agencies to respond to it, recognising emotional and economic abuse and coercive control as forms of domestic abuse, and recognising children as victims if they see, hear, or otherwise experience the effects of abuse. It gave the role of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner an independent role in gathering information and data and placed a duty on local authorities to assess need and provide safe accommodation for survivors and their children.



Text written in research workshop in Neath Port Talbot

^x When someone shares sexually explicit images or videos of another person without their consent, and with the aim of causing them distress or harm.

^{xi} The practice typically involves offenders sending an unsolicited sexual image to people via social media or dating apps but can also be over data sharing services such as Bluetooth and Airdrop.

CHAPTER 3: HEALTH AND WELLBEING INEQUALITY

“MY PAIN IS CONTINUALLY DISMISSED AS ANXIETY.”

Only two in five 12 to 21 year old girls and young women are completely or mostly happy with their mental health (40%).

WHAT WE’VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT HEALTH

Many girls and young women we spoke to feel conflicted about their mental health. They feel positive about girls and women’s ability to share how they feel at the same time as feeling a lot of pressure to be and act a certain way. Many girls and young women told us of challenges, such as being affected by suicide and self-harm, disordered eating, and members

of their peer groups being addicted to drugs or alcohol. While most girls are happy with their physical health, there are still huge inequalities confronting girls. Many feel they are not taken seriously by professionals. Period dignity continues as a challenge, where girls and young women feel unprepared and want to see improved access to period products.

“Struggling to get help, through doctors, with medical issues as they don’t know what symptoms affect women for it. At a [male-dominated] degree at Uni so have faced a lot of sexism and horrible comments.”

(Survey participant, 20, North Ayrshire)

27%

of girls and young women reported that they had a mental health condition.

“I FEEL LIKE BOYS DO NEED TO BE EDUCATED ON GIRLS’ PERIODS BECAUSE ALTHOUGH THEY DON’T GET THEM, IT AFFECTS PEOPLE AROUND THEM.”

Genna, 15, Blackpool



MENTAL HEALTH

“There’s so much in my life that makes me happy and I’m so grateful for all of it, but I really struggle with anxiety, and it gets in the way of so much. I end up overanalysing good things until they become bad in my head. I hate how much of my life anxiety controls, even after all this time of acknowledging and working through it.”

(Survey participant, 16, Stockport)

Only two in five (40%) 12 to 21 year olds who responded to our survey of nearly 3,000 girls and young women are completely (13%) or mostly (27%) happy with their mental health (40%), with a further three in ten (28%) somewhat happy and three in ten (29%) saying they are unhappy.

Girls and young women are often struggling with their mental health. Among our respondents, 27% reported that they had a mental health condition. These results are echoed in other statistics showing around 18% of children aged 7 to 16 had a probable mental disorder and 10.8% had a possible mental disorder.¹²³ Mental ill health is a growing problem for young people. In 2022, the Good Childhood Report found the lowest levels of happiness^{xii} among children since 2012.¹²⁴

The proportion of girls who experience common mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, has been rising at a faster rate in recent years. Research shows a quarter of girls are likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety — at a rate three times higher than their male counterparts.¹²⁵ The Health Foundation’s analysis of NHS Digital Data finds that the number of young women aged 17 to 19 with

probable mental health conditions has almost doubled between 2017 and 2021 (from 13.4% to 24.8%)¹²⁶. In Scotland, the Health and Behavioural study found only 21% of girls felt ‘very happy’ — the lowest score since 1994 and halving from a peak of 45% in 2006.¹²⁷

Gendered expectations and pressure can be a source of mental health challenges (explored more in Chapter 9 on gender norms and stereotypes). Gender leads to different trajectories in mental health and changes in age also dramatically affects the likelihood and types of potential mental health challenges. Evidence shows that mental health issues grow steadily in girls and young women from childhood through to late adolescence. Among 8 to 16 year olds, rates of probable mental disorders were similar for girls and boys. Boys are more likely to experience a probable mental health disorder between the ages of 8 to 10 than girls (17.7% compared to 13.6%) yet for 17 to 25 year olds we see that rates are twice as high for young women than young men (30.4% compared to 13.4%).¹²⁸ Among 16 to 24 year olds, mental wellbeing is lower among young women than young men.¹²⁹ The Education Policy Institute¹³⁰ found that girls aged 14 years old experience higher levels of psychological distress than boys.

“I feel like growing up as a woman in this society is a lot harder because we have lots more pressure on us to look a certain way and to act a certain way and it’s not very good for our mental health if we’re thinking like that...I believe being a woman in some cases gives me more opportunities to be heard, in the case of mental health and expressing my feelings, but it also can make me feel powerless at times. Knowing I’ll never be completely safe on the street at night without a man and knowing that I’ll not be taken seriously at times and knowing that I’ll often be held to a higher standard.”

(Survey participant, 18, Mid Suffolk)

Many girls and young women we spoke to feel conflicted about their mental health. They feel positive about girls and women’s ability to share how they feel — at the same time as feeling a lot of pressure to be and act a certain way. This theme came up time and time again in our conversations; of girls being caught between contradictory and conflicting expectations and unable to decide their own choices and preferences.

Older girls aged 16 to 21 tended to be more unhappy about their mental health. Almost half of girls and young women tell us they worry about their mental health (46%), increasing to more than half of 17 to 21 year olds (52%). This is likely because of the increased responsibility, pressure, and awareness of the issues around them.

Girls’ mental health is more affected by community factors, according to the Education Policy Institute’s study of Young People’s Mental and Emotional Health. For girls, feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood is significantly predictive of poorer wellbeing and higher psychological distress at ages 14 and 17.¹³¹ Socio-economic status links with mental health, with evidence showing that compared to peers from high socio-economic status background, children from low socio-economic backgrounds were almost four times more likely to develop mental health problems.¹³² Referral rates to secondary mental health services are 57% higher among children from deprived areas than those in more affluent neighbourhoods.¹³³

61%

of neurodiverse girls and young women

63%

of girls and young women with a long-term health condition

64%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

69%

of girls and young women with a disability

worry about their mental health

^{xii} It should be noted that happiness is not synonymous with good mental health, however they are both indicative of each other.

62%

of girls and young women of colour

85%

of girls and young women with disabilities

86%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

89%

of girls and young women who have a mental health condition

know girls or women their age who have been affected by self-harm

“Struggling with my mental health, stressing about university and family problems.”

(Survey participant, 20, Leeds)

We know girls’ mental health has worsened since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is emerging evidence that, if anything, Covid-19 has had a greater impact on girls and women than on men and boys, with girls’ mental wellbeing declining more, and greater deterioration, especially those from lower-income families¹³⁴

We asked girls and young women what would help to improve their mental and physical health. More money is the key thing that would help nearly half of girls and young women improve both their mental and physical health (46%). Specific mental health support was chosen by more than one in three (37%). One in three would also appreciate learning how to look after their mental and physical health better (34%).

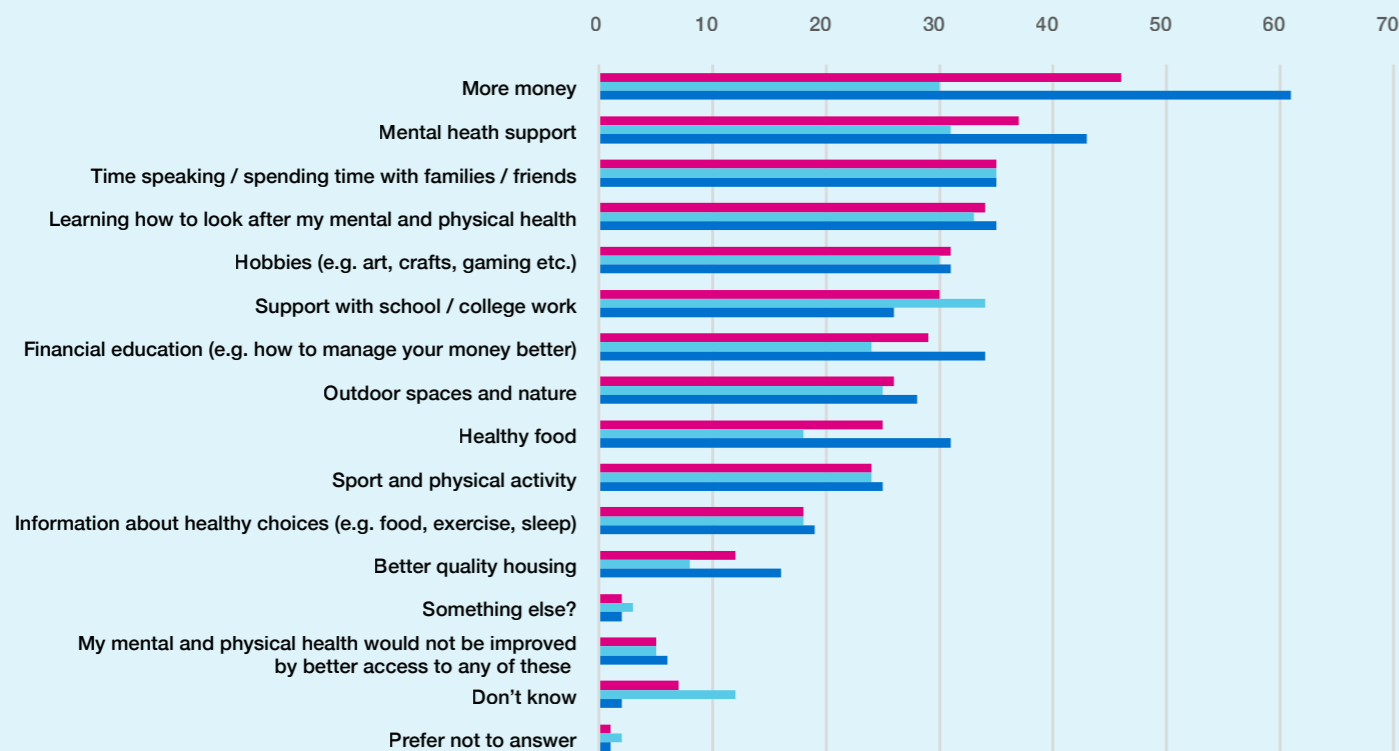


Figure 6: What would help your mental health?

ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS AND SPECIFIC CAUSES OF ANXIETY

Poor mental health can lead to addictive behaviours such as disordered eating, self-harm, and alcohol and drug taking, to relieve emotional pain. There are many varieties of addictive behaviours and anxieties – this section covers a selection which girls told us repeatedly, were challenges. Though

there are many other behaviours, including excessive exercise, shopping, gambling and the like which can be used to manage poor mental wellbeing and emotional distress. We recognise that addictive behaviours are a way to cope with emotional distress and should be taken seriously.

Suicide & self-harm

Self-harm can take multiple forms including cutting, controlled eating, general self-neglect, over-exercising, biting, burning, having unsafe sex, and misusing substances.¹³⁵ In England, 26% of 16 to 24 year old women have self-harmed at some point and in Scotland 21% of 18 to 34 year old women have experience of self-harm.¹³⁶ Studies show that rates of self-harm are higher for women by “a ratio of 2.6 females to 1 male.”¹³⁷ In 2021, suicide rates among young women had the largest increase since records began in 1981 and the trend has been steadily increasing in recent years.¹³⁸

The 2022 Girls Speak Report also suggested that self-harming is higher among Black and South Asian women and that support for these groups is also more limited.¹³⁹

In England, **26%** of 16 to 24 year old women have self-harmed at some point.

“I don’t see a reason why I deserve to live.”

(Survey participant, 18, London)

“Going through issues behind closed doors meant self-harming. This is a key issue.”

(Survey participant, 19, Peterborough)

“I need to know how can I stop self-harming in my life and how is it going to affect me.”

(Survey participant, 12, Glasgow)

- Girls and young women told us that self-harm is prevalent among their peers, with three quarters aware of a peer who is affected by self-harm

(74%)^{xiii} This increased from 66% of 12 to 16 year olds to 80% of 17 to 21 year olds.

^{xiii} To protect the wellbeing of participants, we did not ask girls and young women about direct experiences of self-harm. We asked about whether they agreed “I know girls / women my age who have been affected by self-harm”. See our Methodology for more on safeguarding participants.

Disordered eating and eating disorders

“I am recovering from an eating disorder and would have liked more education on how body image changes, as well as more information on ALL mental health conditions, like anxiety, depression and how to look after your mental health. Not things like ‘take a bubble bath’, more like how to talk about how you may be struggling and how to identify if you are struggling.”

(Survey participant, 16, Stockport)

Disordered thoughts and behaviour around eating can be a type of self-harm.¹⁴⁰ Eating disorders come in many different forms¹⁴¹, such as “limiting the amount of food eaten, eating very large quantities of food at once, getting rid of food eaten through unhealthy means (e.g. making themselves sick, misusing laxatives, fasting, or excessive exercise), or a combination of these behaviours”.

Eating disorders are much more likely to affect girls and young women than any other group. Over 90% of those who have been hospitalised, primarily due to an eating disorder diagnosis, are reported to be

girls and women.¹⁴² Almost half of hospital admissions for 2020 - 2021 were for those under the age of 25.¹⁴³ The rates of probable eating disorders increased between 2017 and 2021.¹⁴⁴ Some of the reasons around the rise of eating disorders are attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic and social media sites. Research¹⁴⁵ has found increased access to social media, less social contact, anxiety around health and the public health messaging around weight and the connection to Covid-19 may have caused low self-esteem amongst girls and young women during the pandemic. Social media trends can also focus heavily on appearance, and risks enabling access to pro-eating disorder content.¹⁴⁶

“I feel mostly talented and that I’m doing well but I also am recovering from an eating disorder and really struggle with anxiety, often finding small things especially triggering.”

(Survey participant, 18, Scotland)

NHS England’s waiting time targets for diagnosis of eating disorders for children and young people have never been met since they were introduced in 2017.¹⁴⁷ Dame Rachel de Souza (Children’s Commissioner for England) urged the Government to address underlying causes and potential drivers of disordered eating. In Wales, the Government has a four-week target¹⁴⁸ and in Scotland eating disorders were specifically included in Scottish Government’s Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027

Drugs, and alcohol

In our survey we found that 46% of participants knew someone in their peer group who was addicted to alcohol or drugs. This increased from 34% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 56% of 17 to 21 year olds.^{xiv} Research shows that up to 70% of premature adult deaths reflect behaviours adopted in adolescence¹⁵⁰ so addressing this behaviour among 12 to 16 year olds may prevent further deaths when older. Studies find that girls are more likely than boys

and a digital tool to support young people has been developed.¹⁴⁹

Whilst disordered eating and diagnosed eating disorders are not the same, they can be indicative of a possible eating disorder. For more than half of girls and young women who participated in our survey, their thoughts are preoccupied by food (54%). This increases with age from 44% of 12 to 16 year olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds.

to use drugs to alleviate emotional pain, whereas boys are more likely to use them for hedonistic reasons.¹⁵¹ Women make up approximately one quarter of all people with serious drug problems in Europe and are particularly likely to come from families with substance use problems, have a substance-using partner, have children and be responsible for their care, and have experienced adverse childhood experiences, such as sexual and physical abuse.¹⁵²

VAPING

Vaping is a recent social and cultural phenomenon affecting the lives of young people¹⁵³ and is more common amongst girls and young women than boys and men.¹⁵⁴ The vast majority (82%) of participants who took part in our research know of someone their own age who regularly vapes or smokes, backing up the many reports about a vaping epidemic among young people. According to NHS figures for 2021, “9% of 11 to 15 year old children used e-cigarettes, up from 6% in 2018, and a figure which rises to 18% for 15 year olds.”¹⁵⁵

^{xiv} To protect the wellbeing of participants, we did not ask girls and young women about direct experiences of drug, alcohol, or nicotine use. We asked about whether they agreed “I know girls / women my age who regularly vape and/or smoke” and “I know girls / women my age who are addicted to alcohol and/or drugs”. See our Methodology for more on safeguarding participants.

Climate anxiety

“I am worried about the climate.”

(Survey participant, 12, Camden)

One in five (20%) girls and young women told us they were worried about the protection of our natural world, rising from 17% of 12 to 16 year olds to a quarter (24%) of 17 to 21 year olds. Girls and young women voiced existential worries, with children as young as 12 telling us that they're worried about the climate.

We are experiencing a human-made climate emergency, with the impacts and costs falling disproportionately on those least responsible for causing it. Climate-induced humanitarian crises are growing and intensifying, exacerbating existing inequalities – including gender inequality. Climate change is a social and intergenerational injustice.¹⁵⁶ The inequality and discrimination experienced by marginalised girls and young women are amplified by climate change. This generation

of girls will feel the greatest impacts, but many – particularly those living in lower income countries and communities – will not have the resources they need to cope.¹⁵⁷

The potential impact of the climate crisis is becoming clear even in the UK. The UK Health Security Agency warns of 10,000 deaths caused by the climate crisis in the UK every year by the 2050s if we don't take action to avoid the worst-case warming scenarios.¹⁵⁸

20% of girls and young women told us they were worried about the protection of our natural world

“The planet is burning all the time. So, what can I determine here in my future?”

(Survey participant, 16, Westminster)

YouGov and the Woodland Trust found one in three young people (16 to 24 years old) are scared (33%), sad (34%), or pessimistic (34%) about climate change, with 28% feeling “overwhelmed.”¹⁵⁹ The first large-scale

investigation of climate anxiety in children and young people aged 16 to 25 globally in 2021 found that in the UK, only 25.3% were “optimistic” about climate change, while 52.8% felt “guilty”, 51.4% felt “ashamed” and 55.4% felt “powerless.”¹⁶⁰

“I'm worried there might be less opportunities because the climate of the planet is getting worse and worse.”

(Horizon Scanning Workshop participant, Wales)

Young people know the Government needs to be doing more. Surveys found 65.3% of young people felt the Government was not taking their concerns seriously enough and 68.6% felt the Government is not doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe.¹⁶¹ The Woodland Trust/YouGov poll showed only 9% of respondents felt young people have a great deal of influence in making decisions about climate change.¹⁶² Surveys have found only 27.8% of young people in the UK felt the Government could be trusted, 64.8% said the Government were failing

young people across the world, and 57.2% said the Government were betraying them or future generations.¹⁶³

Climate change, intensified by governmental failure to act, serves as a “chronic, long-term and potentially inescapable stressor” and will negatively impact the mental health of girls and young women.¹⁶⁴ Children need support to understand climate change, its impacts, and how they can act. We must encourage children to take the lead on climate change issues and adaptation.¹⁶⁵

PHYSICAL HEALTH

“I have a lot of physical and mental health issues that make my life very difficult and stressful at times.”

(Survey participant, 21, Bristol)

Most (79%) girls and young women were happy with their physical health. Dissatisfaction increases with age, with 12% of 12 to 16 year olds unhappy with their physical health, doubling to 25% of 17 to 21 year olds. 8% of our respondents have a long-term health condition and 3% have a disability.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) finds almost three quarters of girls in England (aged 10 to 19) say their general health is ‘very good’ — these figures are higher for 10 to 14 year old girls and lower for 15 to 19 year olds.¹⁶⁶ In Scotland, eight in ten girls (79%) say their health is “at least good.”¹⁶⁷ However, girls are more likely to report poor physical health than boys.¹⁶⁸¹⁶⁹

Our healthcare system has been “designed by men, for men” according to the UK Government Women’s Health Strategy¹⁷⁰ and has marginalised women’s needs.”¹⁷¹ A commitment to tackling these inequities

is important, but requires clear targets and funding.¹⁷²¹⁷³ We know that the UK has the “largest female health gap in the G20 and the 12th largest globally.” Since 2010, health inequalities across the UK have widened and improvements to life expectancy have stalled.^{174 175} Life expectancies for the 10% most deprived women have become shorter.¹⁷⁶ In recent years, healthy life expectancy^{xv} has declined more rapidly for women.¹⁷⁷

Poverty plays a major part in girls and young women’s access to healthy food and physical activity. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that “16 to 34 year olds in poverty are 1.5 times as likely to be in poor health (23% compared with 16%) than those not in poverty.”¹⁷⁸ Research found that some groups of women face greater health inequalities than others — for example, Black pregnant women are five times more likely, and Asian woman twice as likely, to die in childbirth compared to their white counterparts.¹⁷⁹

^{xv} Healthy life expectancy is how long a person can expect to live without irreversible or limiting conditions or disabilities.

ACCESSING PROFESSIONAL HEALTHCARE SUPPORT

“I’m told by male doctors and male students at my school that I’m fat and I need to lose weight, but I’m healthy and physically fit. I think they just have a stereotype which is that women should be skinny with big boobs and a big bum which is such a bad stereotype.”

(Survey participant, 14, Mid Suffolk)

19% of girls and young women are unhappy with their physical health. It’s even higher for some groups...

34%

of girls and young women with a mental health condition

40%

of girls and young women with a long-term health condition

49%

of girls and young women with disabilities

“Struggling to get help, through doctors, with medical issues as they don’t know what symptoms affect women for it.”

(Survey participant, 20, North Ayrshire)

Three-quarters (77%) of girls and young women told us they feel listened to and involved in healthcare decisions. While 10% of 12 to 16 year olds disagree, rising to 16% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Girls told us they were reluctant to seek help because of difficulty talking about health issues (41%) and a fear that they ‘won’t be taken seriously’ (41%). Following closely

behind is the thought that ‘other people’s needs are more important than their own’ (38%), whilst one in four fear that decisions may be made without their consent (25%). Those with an existing mental health condition (57%), neurodivergent girls (56%), or LGBTQ+ girls and young women (58%) are most likely to fear that they won’t be taken seriously if they try to seek help.

Women and girls' health issues are often overlooked, not taken seriously, misunderstood, or under-researched. Stigma, taboos, misogyny, and gender stereotyping continue to contribute to worse health outcomes for girls and women.¹⁸⁰ Research shows a lack of knowledge and information on women's health¹⁸¹ and dismissal of debilitating health problems as "benign" and deprioritised — despite causing intense pain.¹⁸² According to the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists, the number of women waiting over a year for care in England has increased from 66 before

the Covid-19 pandemic to nearly 25,000.¹⁸³ For example, despite it affecting 10% of women, endometriosis remains one of the most widely under-diagnosed gynaecological conditions. It takes on average seven years to gain a diagnosis.¹⁸⁴ Most young women do not receive timely support or treatment.¹⁸⁵

Other girls and young women told us they felt there are gendered stereotypes held by medical professionals — or a lack of knowledge about how the issues manifest differently in girls and women.

“I've had a lot of health problems lately - one thing I've noticed is my pain is continually dismissed as anxiety. I have a feeling this is a girl thing and if a man was presenting with the same symptoms, it would not be just dismissed as panic or anxiety.”
(Survey participant, 21, Belfast)

Most girls and young women who took part in our large-scale survey say that they have

support for their mental health if they need it (61%).

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Girls and young people in the UK face complex barriers to realising their sexual and reproductive health and rights. These include lack of access to services and information, stigma in defining their own sexuality and related discrimination, as well as challenges to their own bodily autonomy – the right to choose sexual partners, to have safe and pleasurable sexual encounters, and whether

or when to marry or have children. In the UK, menstruation and sexuality education can still be seen as taboo, access to safe abortion remains a legal quagmire, and support for pregnant and parenting girls and young people is a vital need. Girls and young women told us, through our survey and workshops, how they felt their sexual and reproductive health and rights were not taken seriously or ignored.

Relationships, Sex and Health Education

“Life as a girl is hard and in sex education [it was not] explained that we only touch a guy if we want to.”
(Survey participant, 21, West Lothian)

“I wasn't taught about sexual harassment in school. I wish I had been taught it. It would be useful to be taught about healthy interpersonal relationships and healthy sexual relationships. Why hadn't I been taught about it? At this point, it's my own responsibility to learn about it but it seems kind of taboo to even try, you know?”
(Survey participant, 18, Manchester)

“I think there should be more campaigns and education targeting boys and their behaviours as opposed to focusing on girls, and I don't feel supported.”
(Survey participant, 15, Havering)

16% of all girls and young women do not have support with their mental health. It's even higher for some groups...

21%
of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

24%
of girls and young women with a mental health condition

27%
of neurodivergent girls and young women

28%
of girls with a physical disability

Girls and young women told us they need to see better and more comprehensive Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) in schools. A quarter of girls and young women (25%) told us they believe that learning about sex, relationships, and their body will help them to achieve their potential.^{xvi} Girls and young women recognised the role of good quality RSHE to break down gendered attitudes, behaviours, and expectations. These issues are explored in more detail in Chapter 2 on gender-based violence and in Chapter 9 on gender norms.

Girls told us they want everyone to learn about building healthy relationships, the importance of consent, and what constitutes assault and harassment. A poll conducted by Savanta for Plan International UK found that Relationships, Sex and Health Education was the top priority for improving SRHR in the UK for 38% of respondents, with 57% of respondents ranking it as one of their top three most important issues for SRHR.¹⁸⁶ RSHE is important for young people to gain knowledge, explore values and attitudes, and develop the skills they need to make conscious, healthy, and respectful choices about relationships and sexuality.¹⁸⁷ RSHE in the UK should align with global guidelines on comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). These stipulate that CSE should be provided in a way that is non-judgemental, non-discriminatory, scientifically accurate, accessible, inclusive, rights-based,

gender-transformative, and adapted to the evolving capacity of the child, adolescent, or young person.¹⁸⁸ Existing studies show that if delivered effectively, CSE can improve the knowledge and attitudes of young people in relation to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) - as well as reduce risky sexual behaviours.¹⁸⁹ Evidence also shows that gender-focused programmes are more effective in achieving sexual and reproductive health outcomes for young people.¹⁹⁰ Any RSHE curriculum should also be age and developmentally appropriate, and respond to children, adolescents, and young people's evolving capacities.¹⁹¹

Just over half of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (56%) agree that they have been taught what they need to know about healthy relationships and sex, as girls and young women. Yet less than one in five (17%) girls and young women feel that boys and men are taught what boys should know about healthy relationships and sex, which decreased from 21% of 12 to 16 year old girls and young women to just 14% of 17 to 21 year olds. We need boys and young men to benefit from quality RSHE to improve their ability to form healthy, safe, respectful, and consensual relationships, and to support their own sexual and reproductive health and rights. Involving boys and men as agents of change is key to challenging dominant patriarchal attitudes and developing equality.



feel boys and men are taught what they need to know about healthy relationships and sex

The views of young women and girls are reflected in the review on RSHE in schools in England conducted by OFSTED (2021)¹⁹² which stated:

“Children and young people were rarely positive about the RSHE they had received. They felt that it was too little, too late and that the curriculum was not equipping them with the information and advice they needed to navigate the reality of their lives. Because of these gaps, they told us they turned to social media or their peers to educate each other.”

RSHE guidance is under review in England in line with a three-year review cycle promised in 2019.¹⁹³ Monitoring the implementation is essential to ensure that guidance stays updated. However, Plan International UK is concerned by the new draft guidance. It is crucial that all young people are taught what they need to know to be safe, have healthy relationships and be happy, supported by trusted teachers who are trained and equipped

to deliver this fundamental education. Young people want to see proper lesson time allocated for RSHE with trained, specialist teachers.¹⁹⁴ Parents and educators should be supported to embrace children's learning about their bodies, relationships, and sexuality from early childhood to allow children to explore, clarify, and form life-long healthy attitudes and practices — free from coercion, violence, and discrimination.¹⁹⁵ We are failing our young people if we do not give them the knowledge and tools they need at the right time for them to make good decisions about their relationships, bodies and reproductive rights.

In Scotland, RSHP (Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood) is coming into the curriculum for children at a younger age in primary schools. However, Zero Tolerance Scotland argues there is still more to be done to improve RSHP, citing incidents of sexual harassment in secondary schools as evidence of the need for better education in primary schools.¹⁹⁶ Schools in Wales now teach Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) on a mandatory phased basis, from September 2022. The Code and Guidance sets out that RSE must be developmentally appropriate – meaning children learn about relationships and sexuality in a way that is right for their age, experiences, and understanding.¹⁹⁷ The Welsh Government has, for example, said that the youngest children would be taught topics such as sharing, kindness, and respect.¹⁹⁸

^{xvi} This combined the response for learning about sex and relationships, learning about their body, and access to period products

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Plan International UK research found that approximately 9% of young women (aged 16 to 25) in the UK have used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to ask questions about sexual health, and 12% have used it to ask about periods.¹⁹⁹ This corroborates the idea that the education children and teenagers are receiving doesn't feel sufficient and AI is filling a gap in that education.

Whilst the internet and AI can provide information, there is a lot of negative and inaccurate information available that girls and young women may not be able to distinguish from accurate sources. Chatbots and AI run the risk of reinforcing societal biases and stereotypes around gender, sexuality, and race²⁰⁰ if they are trained on incorrect or misogynistic materials. Studies have shown that, given most data sets have elements of bias, AI and learning machines will make operations and decisions which are in turn biased.²⁰¹

Similar tools can be manipulated to spread disinformation.²⁰² Automated content moderation tools, based on machine learning, can face challenges when a community views misogynistic content as 'healthy', yet externally it is viewed as toxic.²⁰³



9% of young women (aged 16 to 25) in the UK have used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to ask questions about sexual health.

Pregnancy and access to safe abortion

Girls and young women must be supported to make autonomous and informed decisions about their reproductive health, including the ability to choose if, when, and how many children to have. This is crucial to girls' mental and physical health and socio-economic outcomes. Nearly half (45%) of 16 to 21 year olds told us as part of a Plan International UK and Savanta poll that accessible, safe and legal abortion care was one of the most important issues to focus on when improving sexual and

reproductive health and rights in the UK.²⁰⁴ CSE, and access to quality contraception and other health services — including safe abortion — can prevent unintended pregnancy. Research shows that teenage mothers are less likely to finish their education, are more likely to live in poverty, and have a higher risk of mental health problems than older mothers.²⁰⁵ This shows the importance of providing holistic support to pregnant and parenting girls and young people.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw the introduction of telemedicine for abortion in England so women can administer self-care at home.²⁰⁶ Abortion in Northern Ireland has been decriminalised, with widespread support. Amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill have also been tabled to stop anyone facing prosecution for ending their own pregnancy in England and Wales.

Abortion is healthcare, and criminalising such issues leaves the right to sexual and reproductive health poorly protected. However, abortion is still “hamstrung by stigma,”²⁰⁷ including institutionally through hurdles such as the two-doctor requirement for approval of abortion.²⁰⁸ The British Pregnancy

Association Service²⁰⁹ argues that safe access zones around abortion clinics are still not being implemented and women continue to be harassed.

Access to abortion clinics can be a barrier for those living in more rural areas, or for those without the financial means get to clinics. For example, in Wales there are 14 sites providing abortion services. Most of these are in South Wales to reflect the population there, which means those seeking abortion from North Wales are required to travel.²¹⁰ Engender Scotland²¹¹ argue that “access to abortion for disabled women” is “shaped and potentially undermined by discrimination and stereotyping.”

Period dignity

“I really think period products should be free. It's wild that women are having to pay the pink tax for basic universal necessities.”

(Survey participant, 18, North West England)

Period dignity is not only about the supply and access to period products, but also about education, support, and eradicating period stigma. Our 2018 report Break the Barriers²¹² on girls' experience of menstruation recognised the ‘toxic trio’²¹³ that creates and sustains period poverty in the UK: cost and inaccessibility of period products, lack of education around periods, and shame, stigma, and taboos. Since our last report, period poverty has been an active topic for legislation and government action.

In 2021, we saw the removal of the ‘tampon tax’ from sanitary products, recognising that period products are essential items — not luxury ones. However, the cost of living crisis has meant gains in period product

affordability have largely been lost, with charity Freedom4Girls reporting tracking ‘soaring costs’ in period products due to rapid inflation and supply chain issues.²¹⁴

In 2020, the Department for Education in England introduced a Period Product Scheme to address access to products in schools. However, the full impact and efficacy of the scheme remains unknown as it has not yet been evaluated. The Period Dignity Grant was established in Wales in 2018. A recent evaluation found it offers positive outcomes, such as savings, but most positively, people are less worried and embarrassed about menstruating. The Grant is filtered down to schools, but more work is needed to reach community settings such as voluntary groups

that may be more likely to be supporting under-served communities.²¹⁵ The Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly have passed Period Products Free Provision Acts, to provide free period products to all. More research is required to understand the impact of these initiatives across different localities.

Despite these initiatives, polling in 2023 by Irise International, In Kind Direct, Freedom4Girls and Cysters — as part of the Every Period Counts campaign — found that nearly half of girls (44%) say they have difficulty accessing free period products at school.²¹⁶

“Yes, free sanitary products but where do you get them really?”

“Public bathrooms, not a lot of places provide their free ones anymore.”
(Cupar Focus Group)

Our own research confirms that period poverty remains a key issue for many women and girls. Access to period products was something that girls and young women

repeatedly expressed as a challenge. Many saying they felt that there were girls who needed them but could not access them.

“Although I have access to period products, I believe a lot of girls do not and that is an issue that should be brought to more people’s attention.”
(Survey participant, 18, West Midlands).

Nearly 1 in 10 (8%) of girls and young women told us that access to period products would help them to achieve their full educational potential. Around 3% of girls and young women who took part in our survey said they were not able to access period products at all. Period poverty was even more common for some groups, including girls and young women with a long-term health condition

(6%), girls and young women with a physical disability (5%), and girls and young women of colour (4%). Our earlier research found that 28% of girls aged 14 to 21 were “struggling” to afford period products, showing that there is potentially a wider population of girls and young women who can, in theory, access products but are struggling to do so.²¹⁷

“Not being listened to by doctors, saying ‘it’s just something you’ll grow out of’, my entire life for constant leg pain. Having extremely heavy periods and extreme period pain to the point I’m throwing up, but doctors won’t even investigate me for endometriosis cause apparently, I’m too young and might grow out of it.”
(Survey participant, 19, South East England)

“Schools need better sex education. And boys and teachers need to be aware of what girls experience monthly with their periods. Also, schools need to make allowances for girls to be able to use heat pads or hot water bottles if that’s the only thing that helps ease their period pains.”
(Survey participant, 18, Northern Ireland)

Girls and young women said that experiences of periods were misunderstood at school and in wider society. Girls and young women told us there needs to be more education about periods to reduce stigma and reduce the taboo nature of discussing menstruation.

It is important to girls that schools be more flexible and supportive. While Menstrual Health Education has been introduced in the new RSHE curriculum in England, there is limited further information or instruction on how to implement the lessons.²¹⁸



Art created in research workshop in Blackpool by Helen, 21

CHAPTER 4: BEAUTY, BODY IMAGE AND APPEARANCE PRESSURES

“YOU’VE GOTTA BE SKINNY AND YOU’VE GOTTA HAVE NICE TEETH, HAVE NICE LONG HAIR.”

WHAT WE’VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT APPEARANCE PRESSURE

Girls and young women face enormous pressure to look a certain way, and face repercussions if they don’t conform.

While some girls felt joy in beauty culture, overwhelmingly girls and young women told us

that the way they looked caused them to be anxious and unhappy. They told us they feel policed, and unable to control decisions about their own bodies. School uniforms were seen as a key aspect of this control.

“My body feels like it’s for everyone else, not for myself.”
(Horizon Scanning Workshop participant, England)

44%

of girls and young women feel that the way they look holds them back.

“I FEEL VERY AWARE OF MYSELF AND HOW I LOOK BECAUSE THAT’S HOW I THINK [OTHERS] FORM THEIR OPINIONS ON PEOPLE.”

Olivia, 15, Blackpool



A complex relationship with beauty culture

“I love being a girl, you can get your hair and your nails done and wear make up.”

(Horizon Scanning Workshop participant, Wales).

“That’s why girls have so many insecurities these days, because we’ve got to look a certain way.”

(Workshop participant, Wales)

Girls and young women told us they have a complex relationship with beauty culture. We heard from nearly 3,000 girls and young women in our survey, and many more shared their stories in more depth in our creative workshops. Several respondents told us that fashion or shopping for beauty supplies is a way to connect with other girls and young women. Experimenting with makeup can be a source of pleasure, allowing them to bond with friends, and also an opportunity to express their creativity. Research has found that adolescent girls report wearing makeup as a way to enhance social status and they do it as they want to feel admired by their peers.²¹⁹

While there can be community and connection in beauty culture, overwhelmingly girls and young women told us that pressures about appearance can fuel unhappiness. When we asked what brought them happiness or what they were unhappy with, 37% of girls and young women were not happy with how they looked and their body image. This increases from 30% of 12 to 16 year olds, to 42% of 17 to 21 year olds. For young women, this was the third highest source of unhappiness, after inequality in society and protection of our natural world.

Girls and young women said that how they look was the part of life that worried them the most. More than half of 12 to 21 year olds identify this as a primary source of concern (52%).



Art created in research workshop in Blackpool by Els, 14

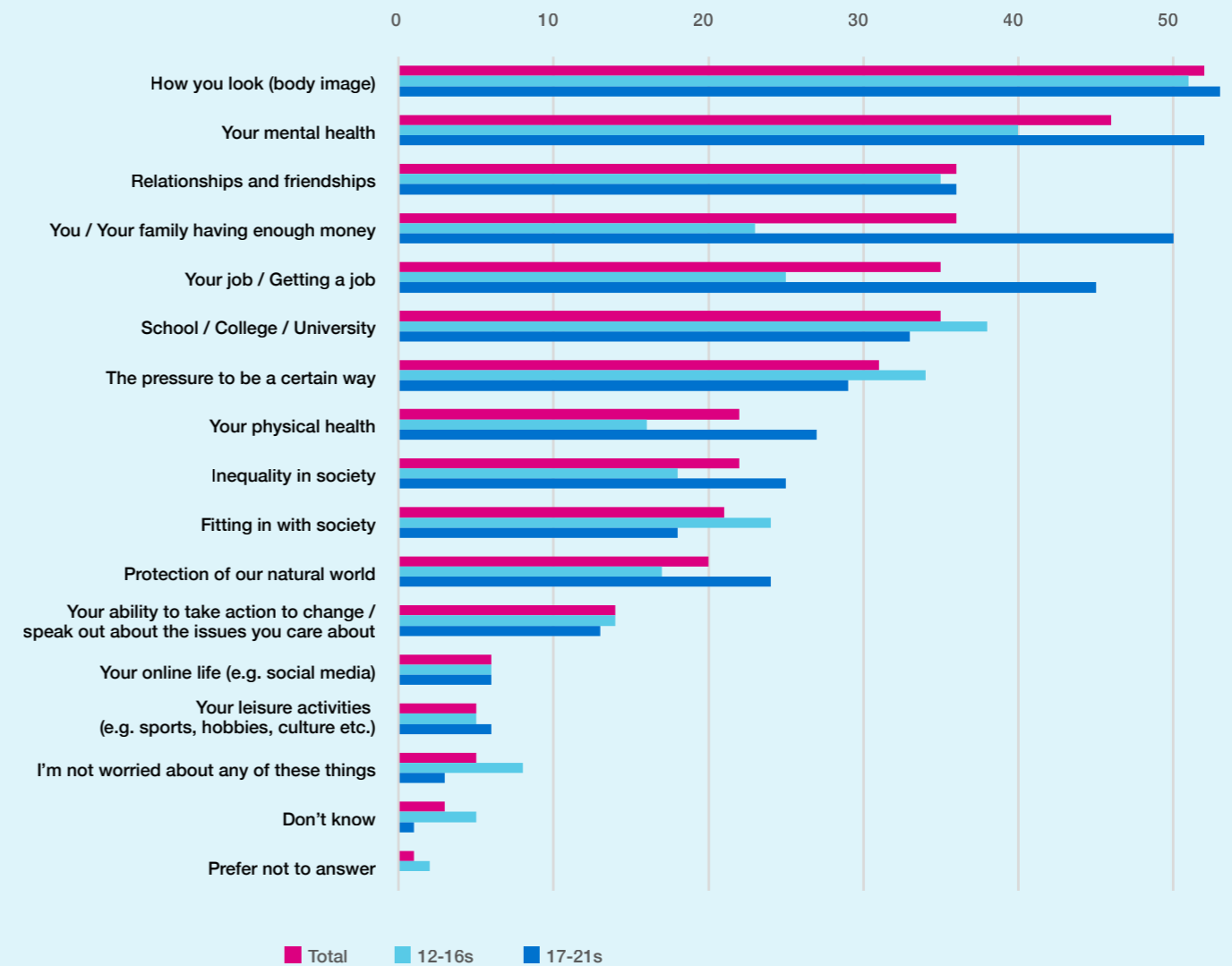


Figure 7: Which of the following are you most worried about? Please choose the top five things you worry about the most

“I think everyone is conditioned that they have to look a certain way. They have to be somebody, that they’re not necessarily who they are.”

(Narrative Inquiry B participant, Cupar)

“It isn’t that hard to change your ways and to learn women aren’t just an object but a person.”

(Survey participant, 14, Stafford)

Girls and young women worrying about their bodies varied little by age, while unhappiness with their body image increased as girls got older. This supports research that girls are taught at an early age, by our society, to internalise their body as an object to be looked at, which can lead to them habitually monitoring their bodies.²²⁰ Research has shown body size stereotypes begin when girls in Western societies are as young as 3 years-old.²²¹ These stereotypes are felt more acutely as girls get older, fuelling unhappiness, with puberty being a key time when unhappiness increases as girls become more aware of their body and how the world perceives them, both online and offline.²²²

There is tension between girls and young women enjoying the joy, connection, and the creative expression they find in beauty culture, contrasting against the social norms and pressures to conform to ideals

and beauty standards. The latter of which are impossible to live up to and can cause unhappiness. Girls and young women told us they feel they cannot win as they face contradictory situations in so many spaces. Feldman states:

“All this emphasis on beauty creates a Catch-22 situation for women. According to this research, if women want gender equality, then they shouldn’t buy into the norms that pressure women to spend considerable time pursuing beauty. But it creates a double bind, because if women ignore the beauty norms, they may be penalised at work or in their personal lives.”²²³

The kinds of pressure girls feel around appearance are multiple and that they relate to physical characteristics such as weight, hair and teeth, how they dress, and how they present themselves.

“Being a young woman in this day and age can be difficult and makes you feel under pressure to be as pretty as all the other girls.”

(Survey participant, 19, Birmingham)

“The pressure on young girls is rapidly increasing as social media grows. The need to be skinny, have clear skin, be physically fit, go to the gym, like sex etc. As social media grows, so does the expectation that all girls should be the same way and just like models in the media.”

(Survey participant, 21, Glasgow)

In terms of clothing, girls tell us how they feel they can’t win. One workshop participant shares the dilemma around what shoes and jeans to wear. If she goes for heels, she will be called a ‘slut’ and if she wears sneakers she will be called ‘pick me girl’ (a colloquial term for a girl or a woman who “seeks male validation

above all else, to the detriment of other women”).²²⁴ If she wears skintight jeans she will be called ‘try hard’ and if they are baggy she will be called ‘boring’. Girls also drew links between pressures around appearance and how much they should be eating. Eating disorders are explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

Appearance pressures in the media

“There is a perception on social media of what a female should look like, nothing is for woman with stretch marks or more weight. Social media is a massive part of young people’s lives now and it has a massive impact on mental health. It’s very worrying being a 16-year-old in this world right now.”

(Survey participant, 16, Redditch)

“Boys need to be taught realistic expectations and not expect what is shown through social media or other platforms.”

(Survey participant, 19, South West England)

A third (33%) of survey respondents feel that girls and young women are not well represented in the media, rising from 25% of 12 to 16 year olds to 41% of 17 to 21 year olds. Girls and young women told us the representation of girls and young women

in the media – across social media, publishing, broadcasting, and advertising - contributes to unrealistic expectations of them. Mass media plays an outsized role in communicating cultural stereotypes about body image.²²⁵

“Sometimes I feel scared in the presence of boys because I know they are laughing at how I look.”

(Survey participant, 15, Mid Suffolk)

Many girls told us that boys have unrealistic expectations of them and how they ‘should’ look, based on media images. Boys need to be educated about toxic beauty standards. Much of this is a result of the media and advertising industries promoting images of celebrities and influencers, which are often digitally edited to perfectionistic and unrealistic standards. Girlguiding²²⁶ research found that 78% of girls and young women feel boys think girls should look like the images they see in the media.

Girls and young women told us they want boys and men to know what girls look like so that they don’t come to expect all girls to look like models and celebrities. They want them to know what is normal to expect of girls (for example, some girls have facial hair), and what it is like to be a girl (for example, some girls will menstruate). Girls want to be better understood by boys, and experience less pressure from boys. But they acknowledge that there is much work to be done.

42%

of neurodivergent girls and young women

45%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

45%

of girls and young women with a disability

46%

of girls and young women with a mental health condition

feel girls and young women are not well represented in the media

Some groups of girls and young women have not been widely, equally, or well represented in the media, both historically and right now. Numerous reports detail the negative ways in which women and girls of colour are depicted in the media. Research conducted by Unstereotype Alliance found that on average 52% of Middle Eastern women, 50% of Southern Asian women, 48% of Jewish women, and 46% of South East

Asian women said they rarely, or never, see people from their ethnic group in advertising.²²⁷ Women of colour are highly excluded from the news industry in editorial roles and in news coverage.²²⁸ This lack of visibility leads to stereotypical representations when there is coverage²²⁹ or for white women to be promoted as the ideal aspirational images in media, making girls of colour feel excluded.

Beauty standards hold girls back

“I think there’s not a lot of solidarity among the young girls because, especially in my school, there’s a lot of division between the popular girls and the unpopular girls. Because, yeah, there’s a lot of pressure to conform to some part of society and make yourself beautiful for boys who couldn’t care less.”

(Workshop participant, Great Yarmouth)

44% of girls and young women said they felt the way they look holds them back. This increased from 38% of 12 to 16 year olds to over half (51%) of 17 to 21 year olds.

Research shows that conforming to beauty ideals in relation to weight, hair type, and clothing can lead to better grades, jobs, and salaries.²³⁰ Following these beauty standards can start at school and result in greater confidence for adults. However, they create inequality for those who do not conform and create pressure for those who do meet the standard society promotes, to maintain some form of ‘ideal’. These gender norms

are enforced by advertisements which play “on young girls’ insecurities about their appearance”, whether deliberately or not.²³¹ This leaves girls and women with an impossible situation – pay the mental, financial, and physical cost of keeping up with these ideals or don’t participate and potentially be left behind.

44% of girls and young women said they felt the way they look holds them back.

Girls and young women don't feel in control of their own bodies

“Some people make rude comments about the way I and other girls in the class look, and it makes me feel uncomfortable in my body and as if people are constantly judging me.”

(Survey participant, 15, South Lakeland)

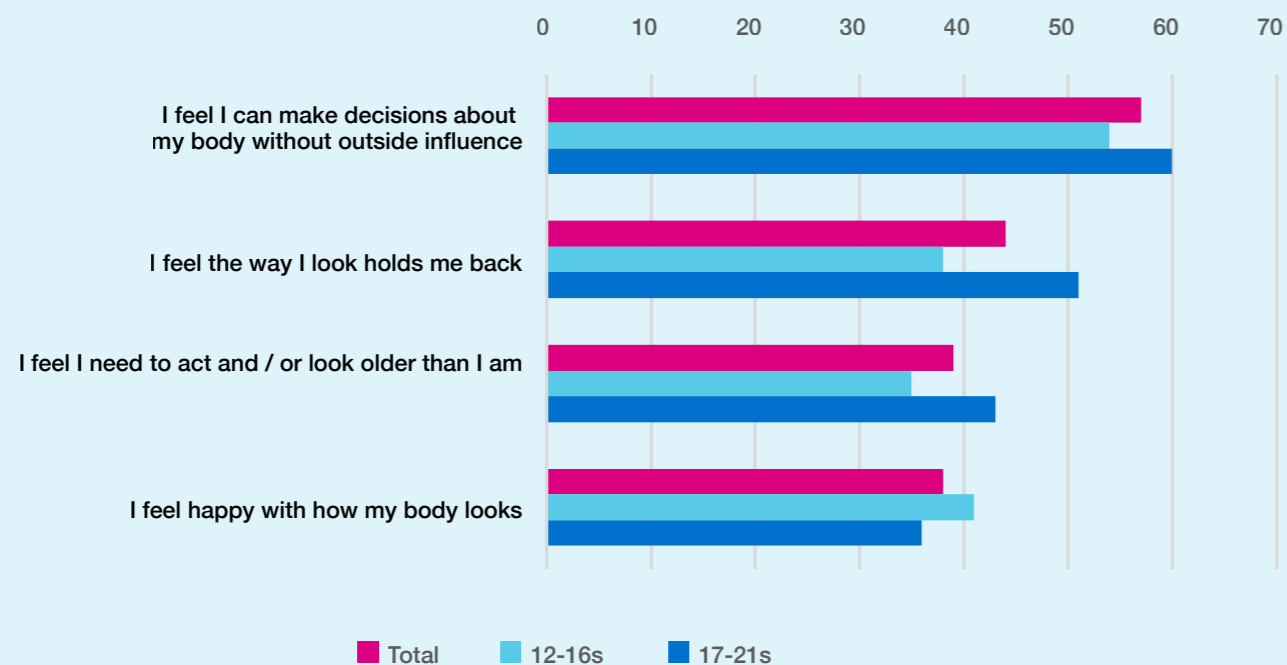


Figure 8: How girls and young women feel about themselves and their bodies

Girls and young women explained how they feel hugely self-conscious, constantly judged and surveyed, objectified, and only valued for their looks. They feel huge pressure to look a certain way and comply with narrow standards of beauty. Girls feel like the way they look was

being ‘policed’ across society, in families, and at school. 17% of girls and young women said that they cannot make a decision about their body without outside influence, rising from 16% of 12 to 16 year olds to a fifth (20%) of 17 to 21 year olds.

“The dress codes are stupid, like the skirt rule. If boys/ teachers are distracted by my skirt then they should sort themselves out.”

(Survey participant, 14, Cardiff)

“It’s about control. Control is what it’s about.”

(Workshop participant, Wales)

In a school setting, uniforms are a way that this control manifests. Girls told us they feel that school uniform standards are used to control their behaviour more than boys. They told us this felt like double standards. Practices such as measuring the length of skirts to make sure they’re ‘acceptable’, risks teaching girls at a young age that their bodies can and should be controlled. It instils norms that their bodies are not their own. Gendering clothes – skirts for girls, trousers for boys – teaches children to adhere to gender norms early in life. It undermines students who are non-binary, gender questioning or transitioning. Gender-neutral codes, while well-intentioned, often miss the mark by making the whole uniform masculine.²³²

Some girls experience this more acutely than others. For example, researchers Joseph-Salisbury and Connolly²³³ argue that school uniform policies have a unique impact on Black girls by limiting their expression of ‘Blackness’. This is particularly the case when

it comes to Black girls and young women, who risk punishment for coming to school with hairstyles such as braids and cornrows. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has already warned that bans on such hairstyles are potentially unlawful.²³⁴ This can tie in with cultural notions of what is acceptable and ‘tidy’ and ‘clean’, which are based in racist notions of purity.²³⁵ With the cost of living crisis, girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not be able to afford uniforms, prom dresses, and to keep up with the latest fashions.

Some girls say this was couched in language of keeping girls safe or ‘concern for their welfare’. But it is disempowering and deeply unfair that girls are being told to modify their own behaviour to protect their safety. This shows the level of control over girls’ lives, expecting girls to be submissive. It expects victims to put a stop to violence, rather than perpetrators being told to change and be prevented from harming girls and young women.

“I think everyone is conditioned that they have to look a certain way. They have to be somebody, that they’re not necessarily who they are. Don’t wear that colour because you shouldn’t wear that. The technology girls have access to these days doesn’t help the situation, because if the first thing you’re seeing [on your phone] is a woman that has had hundreds of thousands of pounds of plastic surgery and has access to the best editing technology, that isn’t real. It can make it difficult.”

(Narrative Inquiry B participant, Cupar)

Such pressures meant girls and young women can feel uncomfortable being themselves. The use of phone apps with filters are common amongst girls and young women. Girlguiding Girls’ Attitudes Survey²³⁶ found that 48% of girls and young women disclosed that they regularly use apps or filters to make photos of themselves look better online. 34% said they wouldn’t post photos of themselves unless they use an app or filter to change their appearance. The pressure girls and young women feel make many consider changing their appearance through surgery. Research by Girlguiding²³⁷ finds that 33% of 11 to 21 year olds would consider cosmetic surgery, and this has increased by

4% since 2018. There has been a 70% rise in the number of people requesting labiaplasty^{xvii} surgery in recent years.²³⁸ This rise could in part have been attributed to the rise of online pornography, which promotes specific beauty standards.²³⁹ In 2022, the “British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPs) found that demand for Botox treatments rose 124% compared to the previous year.”²⁴⁰ As a result of the rise in teens looking for an ‘Instagram face’, it is now illegal to administer Botox or book an appointment for under 18 year olds. Whilst this is helpful legislation, the root causes of appearance pressures remain — and are enforced across society.



“I think it’s about showing how people feel different. Some people may have been having a bad day and just feeling dull and insecure about their stomach or how much they weigh that day or what size clothes they wear and so on. Or somebody can comment on their weight or how they look or how ugly they look.”

Art created in research workshop in Neath Port Talbot, by Caitlin, 14 and Lauren, 14

^{xvii} An operation where the lips of the vulva are shortened or reshaped

CHAPTER 5: EDUCATION AND WORKING LIFE

“NEVER GET TAUGHT ABOUT MY FUTURE AT SCHOOL.”

Just 54% of girls and young women agree that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future. Disagreement increases with age with 15% of 12 to 16 year olds disagreeing, rising to 25% of 17 to 21 year olds.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

Girls and young women told us that educational institutions were largely important and joyful for them. Yet educational institutions were also places where they faced discrimination. Many felt education was letting them down in preparing them for the future.

Girls told us they felt held back, unprepared, and put at a disadvantage compared to boys and young men. Girls and young women want simple but practical steps to improve their pathways into their careers.

“I don't know what I want to do and I'm scared there aren't a lot of opportunities and time is running out to decide.”
(Survey participant, 18, Blackburn with Darwen)



Evie, 14, Blackpool



25%

of girls and young women disagree that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future.

EDUCATION BRINGS BOTH JOY AND STRESS

“I am mostly happy about coming to school and learning new things and having the chance to socialise with others. I am also happy about taking part in many activities and spending time with my loved ones.”

(Survey participant, 13, Leicester)

“I struggle with self-confidence issues, and I have been through a lot of difficult times in the past. But I love my University course and my friends – they make me happy.”

(Survey participant, 19, Edinburgh)

The majority of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (73%) who responded to our survey feel positively about their educational institutions, whether that is a school, college, or university. This held fairly steady as 12 to 16 year olds (75%) entered the age of going

to university at 17 to 21 (71%). Girls living in Scotland and Northern Ireland are most likely to say they are completely happy with their school, college, or university (20% and 19% respectively) compared to girls and young women in England (14%) and Wales (11%).

“Things like school can be stressful due to expectations.”

(Survey participant, 14, Newcastle-under-Lyme)

“I think there are a lot of expectations that are hard to manage. Additionally, everything is so expensive as a student it is hard to imagine I have the same future as my parents’ generation.”

(Survey participant, 21, Islington)

Whilst education was a source of happiness for many, we also found it was a source of stress and pressure for many girls and young women, which affects their overall happiness. 20% of girls and young women are unhappy

with their educational institution. This increased for different groups of marginalised girls. It’s not clear whether this stems from barriers to access, negative experiences when they do attend, or a combination of both.

30%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

33%

of neurodivergent girls and young women

37%

of girls and young women who are carers

38%

of girls and young women with disabilities

are unhappy with their school, college, or university

FEELING UNSAFE IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

“I don’t feel my school is safe for me.”

(Survey participant, 14, Mid Suffolk)

“I want someone in school to leave me alone and stop saying sexual weird comments to me and about me to other people because it’s not fair.”

(Survey participant, 13, Newcastle-under-Lyme)

Girls and young women told us they do not feel safe in educational institutions. Only one in five (19%) girls and young women aged 12

to 21 told us that they feel completely safe at school, college, or university.

19%

of all girls and young women feel completely safe at educational settings. It’s even lower for some groups...

11%

of LGBT girls and young women

10%

of girls and young women with a disability

9%

of neurodivergent girls and young women

8%

of girls and young women with a mental health condition

“I think that the way in which primary schools, especially, deal with sexual harassment is simply not good enough. I know that many may not expect for children of the ages of 8 to 12 would be using these comments and using derogatory or sexual language to female peers but I myself and many of my peers have experienced this.”

(Survey participant, 14, South Ribble)

Campaigning from girls' and women's organisations such as Everyone's Invited, Our Streets Now, Girlguiding and End Violence Against Women have exposed the staggering levels of sexual harassment happening in schools, colleges, and universities. Two-thirds (67%) of girls and young women have experienced sexual harassment from other students at school.²⁴¹

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) carried out a rapid review of the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence.²⁴² OFSTED²⁴³ found that "nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers." Barriers to reporting violence

included the risk of being ostracised by peers or getting peers into trouble, the process being out of their control and worries about how adults will react. These barriers compound into a feeling that they don't have control over their own lives so that "for some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them."

This continues into university, with the UniSAFE project finding that nearly two-thirds (62%) of the 42,000 respondents, who took part in their survey of gender-based violence in research organisations in 2022, said that they had faced at least one form of gender-based violence. This was higher for women (66%) and non-binary people (74%). Yet only 7% of students and 23% of staff, who had experienced this violence, reported the incident.²⁴⁴

“Firstly, sexism is ridiculously common in schools and is completely ignored. It's mostly boys being quite sexist, but all the teachers are just like “boys stop it!” And are very “boys will be boys”.”
(Survey participant, 13, Isles of Scilly)

“There is a boy in school that is constantly being weird towards me - looking at me in weird places and trying to touch me. He did it before when I wore trousers, but I told a teacher. I'm being blamed for it because my skirt is “too short”.”
(Survey participant, 12, South Gloucestershire)

Girls and young women told us they were concerned that not enough is being done to tackle the pervasive problem of sexual harassment in educational institutions. They told us they are being blamed for harassment, with teachers focusing on their clothes and not focusing on preventing harm from others. In our survey, almost half (47%) of girls and

young women told us that education in schools about recognising and preventing sexual harassment would be a good solution. This rises with age from 35% of 12 to 13 year olds to 53% of 18 to 21 year olds — perhaps as girls come to realise that such education has not materialised and/or is much needed.

Girls said they recognise the challenges of normalising gender-based violence begins early in life and needs to be tackled at the root rather than blaming girls and young women, who are often victimised by sexual harassment. OFSTED's survey found "being blamed or parents finding out" were the third and fourth most common reasons given by children and young people for not coming forward about sexual violence and harassment. Many had fears that "they might be blamed for doing things they were told not to do, for example sending nudes, even if they were pressured to do so."²⁴⁵ OFSTED recommended that: "leaders should take a whole-school/college approach to developing a culture where all

kinds of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are recognised and addressed."²⁴⁶ Our section on the manosphere on page 56 and on relationships and sexual health education in Chapter 3 go into more detail.

53% of 18 to 21 year old girls and young women told us that education in schools about recognising and preventing sexual harassment would be a good solution.

Discrimination in education

“I got bullied really bad and they did nothing but give multiple warnings.”
(Survey participant, 14, Three Rivers)

“I'm currently being bullied, and my life is hard.”
(Survey participant, 12, Croydon)

Girls raised worries about bullying – this can shape life for girls and young women in school. Bullying, especially frequent bullying, can lead to young people being more likely to experience mental health issues, be obese, not be in education, employment or training into adulthood, or be victims of domestic violence.²⁴⁷

Research finds that a quarter of pupils (24%) report being frequently bullied and 6% admit to frequently bullying others.²⁴⁸ Evidence from the UK Department for Education shows that girls are more likely than boys to have experienced

bullying in the past year – 42% for girls versus 33% for boys.²⁴⁹ Trans people are particularly at risk of bullying, as 52% are bullied for being trans, with one in ten subject to death threats.²⁵⁰ This can have stark impacts, as "most children who experience gender variance fail to complete their school education" due to bullying.²⁵¹ Young people with special educational needs (SEN) are even more likely to experience bullying – almost half of young people (46%) with SEN had experienced bullying, compared to 36% of those without an illness or disability.²⁵²

“When I was in school, there were just three Black girls. However, they all got our names wrong. We didn’t all look alike, just because of our skin colour.”

(Workshop participant, Great Yarmouth)

“A less happy time for me was definitely when I got called like racist names and I guess it is the first time it truly, really happened to me. I was shocked and stunned. You usually feel safe.”

(Workshop participant, Great Yarmouth)

Girls and young women of colour told us about their experiences of racism – the extent of which is evident in the wider research. The YMCA finds, for example, that “95% of young Black British people have witnessed racist language in education.” Nearly half (49%) feel that racism is the biggest hurdle

to academic attainment and 50% say teachers’ perceptions are the most significant barrier to their education success.²⁵³ Research from the Guardian²⁵⁴ involving Freedom of Information (FOI) requests found that between 2016 and 2021 there were over 60,000 racist incidents reported in schools.

SCHOOL TOILETS

“A girl puts her hand up and says, ‘please can I go to the toilet,’ they will go ‘no’ or get a male teacher to take us to the bathroom and wait outside. They lock the toilet cubicles as well and they lock them! And for example, for girls who go through it, like if we need, like they’re not allowed . . . if a boy asks it’s like ‘Oh yes, you can go.’ What is so different with a boy, like, that isn’t the same with a woman? It’s not fair.”

(Workshop participant, Blackpool)

Girls talked in our workshops about how using bathrooms in schools presented several challenges, including how girls and boys might be treated differently by teachers. Toilet policies can cause anxiety for school students, distracting them from their engagement in schoolwork and harming their mental

wellbeing. This issue is happening across the UK where pupils are denied access to toilets or only allowed to go to the toilet if they have been issued a pass by a teacher²⁵⁵ — even if they are menstruating or have disabilities such as autoimmune conditions affecting their bowels.

“It feels really uncomfortable and you can’t just outright say ‘I’ve got my period’.”

(Workshop participant, Norwich)

“In lessons, there’s times when I can feel that I’ve bled through my pad and if there’s a male teacher it feels awkward saying ‘I need to change my pad’. I feel like that stigma around my period is really uncomfortable.”

(Workshop participant, Norwich)

Girls spoke of how teachers decline requests for them to go to the toilet. Girls have a right to privacy and dignity – this can’t be realised if they’re unable to access toilets freely.²⁵⁶ No

guidance is provided on when pupils should be allowed to use the toilet²⁵⁷ though Independent School Standards Regulation 23A states that they should be physically ‘easily accessible’.²⁵⁸

ROLE MODELS

“I’m very comfortable with myself, not because I conform to the normal expectations for women but I am comfortable with myself and have been raised by various women that showed me how to accept myself and I want all girls to be able to feel the same way.”

(Survey participant, 17, North West England)

Girls and young women spoke of the importance of role models. Role models play a significant part in building girls’ resilience against the multiple and competing pressures they face, and instil confidence in girls to challenge them. In workshops and interviews, participants described their role models to be women who provided support and care, as well as those who deviated from gendered norms. We asked girls and young women in our survey about how they felt about the role models in their life. Six in ten (60%) girls and young women felt that they have positive role models that they can relate to, although this was slightly more common for younger girls aged 12 to 16 year olds (62%), compared with girls and young women aged 17 to 21 (58%). Girls and young women of colour are less likely to feel they have positive role models to relate to (53% agree compared with 62% of white girls).

How women and girls are represented in the media is important for their ability to participate in society and the roles they feel they can adopt. A third of all girls and young women (33%) told us that women and girls are not well represented in the media, rising from 25% of 12 to 16 year olds to 41% of 17 to 21 year olds. Groups of girls which have not historically been widely or equally represented in the media felt this even more strongly, with 46% of girls and young women with a mental health condition, 45% of girls and young women with disabilities, 45% of LGBTQ+ girls and young women,

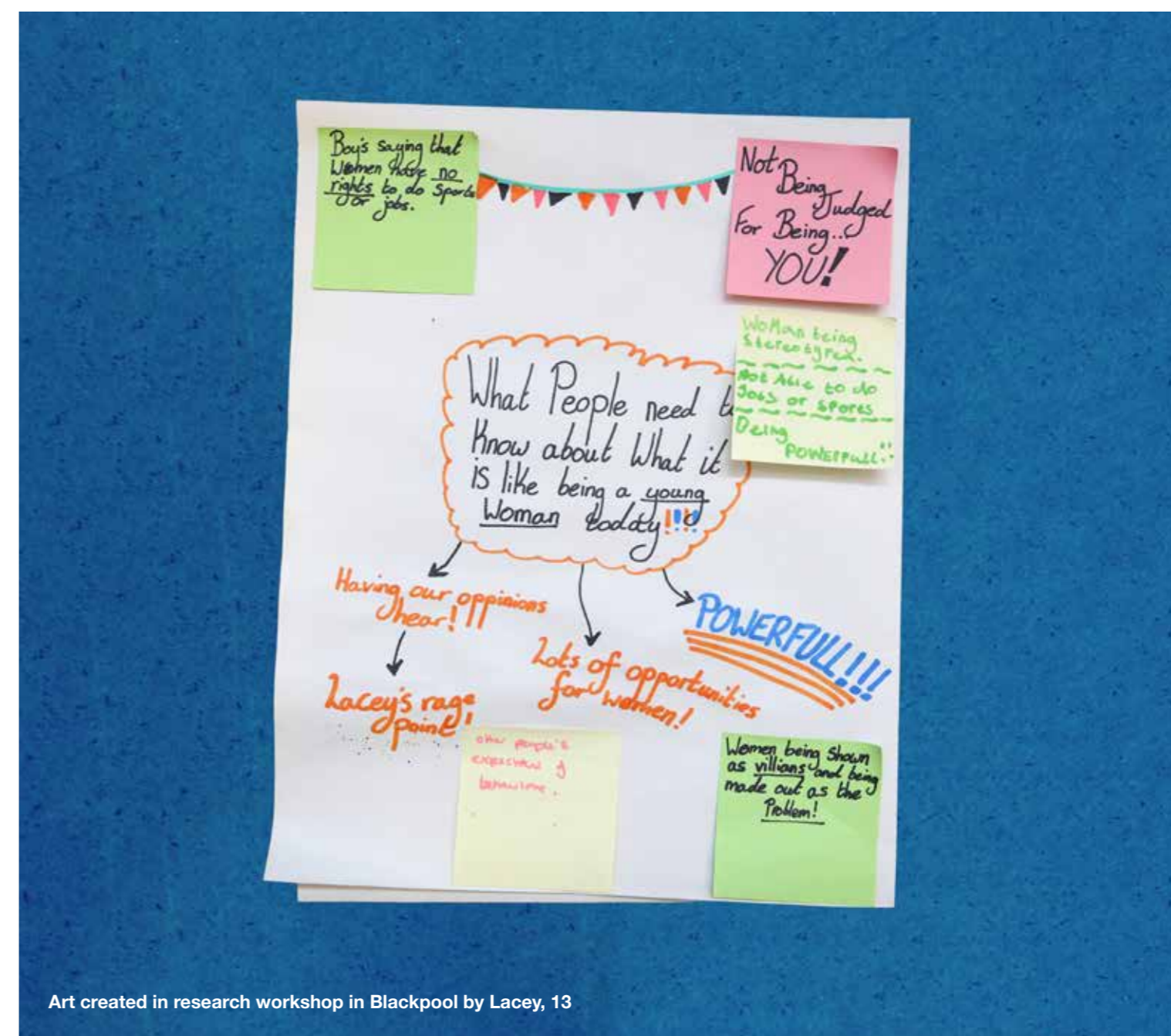
and 42% of neurodivergent girls and young women saying they felt girls and young women were not well represented in the media.

Positive representations of women and girls in the media is important for their confidence, their sense of possibility, and ability to take opportunities. They also help to break down unhelpful gender stereotypes, therefore benefiting both girls and boys. This is particularly important as Girlguiding²⁵⁹ research shows that 44% of girls and young women compare themselves to celebrities and/or influencers. Despite making up 51%²⁶⁰ of the population, the representation of girls and women is still limited, or in some cases non-existent in key areas of our society. Although women make up 40% of board roles in the FTA 350,²⁶¹ in the FTSE 100 only 10% of women are CEOs²⁶². In education, the Fawcett Society²⁶³ reports that women account for 65% of secondary school teachers, but only 40% of headteachers. This shows that women’s representation is growing but not at the highest level. Progress can be slowed by a lack of a developed pipeline of women progressing steadily through a sector.²⁶⁴

At present, women make up only 31% of parliamentarians²⁶⁵ and the UK is ranked 48th in the world for the percentage of women in legislatures.²⁶⁶ However, there are higher proportions of women in the devolved nations with 46% of Members

of the Scottish Parliament, 43% of Members of the Welsh Parliament, and 37% of the Northern Ireland Assembly being women.²⁶⁷ Between 35% and 41% of local councillors are women.²⁶⁸ The London Assembly has reached gender parity at 52%.²⁶⁹ Girls themselves are showing up in youth politics more than anywhere, except the Scottish Parliament and London Assembly – 45% of Members of the Youth Parliament are girls and young women.²⁷⁰

The glass ceiling is even more significant for women from various backgrounds. Representation needs to consider women and girls in all their diversity – not only their appearance but their class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability etc. For example, 29% of MPs²⁷¹ attended fee-paying schools compared to 7% of the population as a whole.²⁷² Only one in ten MPs elected in 2019 were not white.²⁷³



Art created in research workshop in Blackpool by Lacey, 13

SUPPORTING GIRLS' POTENTIAL FOR WORKING LIFE

“My teachers and my parents give me the best suggestions for the future.”

(Survey participant, 12, Enfield)

“Encouragement from family and teachers has allowed me to feel I can choose any career I like.”

(Survey participant, 17, Wyre Forest)

This report and our survey have focused on formal educational institutions, such as schools, colleges, and university. We must acknowledge that education happens outside these four walls and when done well, holistic education can foster wellbeing, critical thinking,²⁷⁴ “be life-sustaining and mind-expanding, and a place of liberating mutuality.”²⁷⁵ Education is “the practice of freedom.”²⁷⁶ Every child and young person should have a right to an education that prepares them to develop to their full potential. We also see girls and young women appreciating “building community

and cooperation within the classroom as well as between the classroom and its broader environment” as part of a community of growth.²⁷⁷ Girls and young people also want their educational institutions to prepare them for their future as adults, including in the world of work, ensuring they have the skills and understanding of the working world and potential career options that mean they can thrive. Schools, colleges, and universities play a role in providing essential grounding before young people transition into work.

“I am not sure what I would like to do with my future at all. I feel as though I also don't have anything around me to help gain a better understanding of opportunities that are out there for me. Even online or face to face just doesn't feel like there is much support in future goals.”

(Survey participant, 18, Hinckley and Bosworth)

Just 54% of girls and young women told us that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future — declining from 54% of 12 to 16 year olds to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds. It is clear as more young women leave school or are preparing to leave university,

that they are encountering a system that makes them unhappy. Our survey found that 15% of 12 to 16 year olds disagree that their education is preparing them well for the future, rising to 25% of 17 to 21 year olds.

61%

of 12 to 13 year olds

46%

of 14 to 15 year olds

60%

of 16 to 17 year olds

51%

of 18 to 19 year olds

49%

of 20 to 21 year olds

felt education was preparing them well for the future

Looking at this by two-year age bands, to combine data for robustness, we see peaks and dips in the positive response. The dip at 14 to 15 years old may be related

to anticipation of exams and increased pressure, and then facing similar challenges in preparation for exams, entering higher education, or leaving education altogether.

21%

of all girls and young women disagree that education has prepared, or is, preparing them well for the future. It's even higher from some groups...

28%

of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

36%

of neurodivergent girls and young women

39%

of girls and young women who are carers

43%

of girls and young women with disabilities

“It’s hard, due to the expectations expected upon any woman, and nearing adulthood makes you scared to ask for help surrounding your future as there is still judgement on any woman who chooses to do something ‘masculine’.”

(Survey participant, 17, Swansea)

“A lot of pressure to follow certain routes for years to the point we’re forced to do career things that you don’t want to whatsoever.”

(Survey participant, 20, North Ayrshire)

Girls and young women overall perform better than boys at school²⁷⁸ but have lower subjective wellbeing at school.²⁷⁹ Girls are more likely to go to university and are more likely to attain a higher grade at university than boys or young men of the same age.²⁸⁰ At an early age, girls’ options can be more limited as they are funnelled into subjects and subsequently career paths that are gendered, where we then

see lower pay in industries which are more women-oriented than made up of men. For example, Lifting Limits²⁸¹ found that girls only account for 22.6% of Physics A-levels and 38% of Maths A-levels, which directs further studies and career paths. In our research we found that some girls and young women felt they were pressurised into following routes they didn’t want to go down.

“I have the ability to pursue the jobs I wish.”

(Survey participant, 18, Newcastle upon Tyne)

“I have hopes and expectations about my future, but I am scared that it’s not going to be like that.”

(Survey participant, 17, Peterborough)

“Girls my age need to be fully supported and given the tools to be confident and have better goals. Most are not bothered about their future and don’t know what they want to do. Clearer career paths need to be laid out for them.”

(Survey participant, 16, South West England)

Girls and young women we spoke with were happy overall with their current job or future job prospects (63%). Many were excited for their future. However, 25% were unhappy with

their current job or future job prospects and this increased with age — with 15% of 12 to 16 year olds saying they are not happy, doubling to 36% of 17 to 21 year olds.



25% of all girls and young women were unhappy with their job or getting a job. It’s even higher for some groups...

35%
of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

37%
of girls and young women living alone

39%
of girls and young women with a disability

40%
of girls and young women with long-term health conditions

The majority of girls and young women say that they have access to the educational opportunities they are interested in (74%) and feel encouraged to pursue the educational opportunities that interest them the most (73%). Yet only half of the girls and young women we spoke to feel they have the same educational and employment opportunities as boys or men their age — 54% of girls and young women, declining from 58% of 12 to 16 year olds to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

When we asked girls what they need more of to help them achieve their full potential, two in

three (66%) chose straightforward, practical things to help them on their career path. These include clearer pathways towards employment, more understanding of career options available, and a wider choice of subjects or courses. One in three (32%) would like more support, guidance, and encouragement. Girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation were more likely to want support and guidance (28%) compared to those in areas of low deprivation (23%). Girls and young women of colour are more likely to want a wider choice of subjects (30%) than white girls and young women (26%).

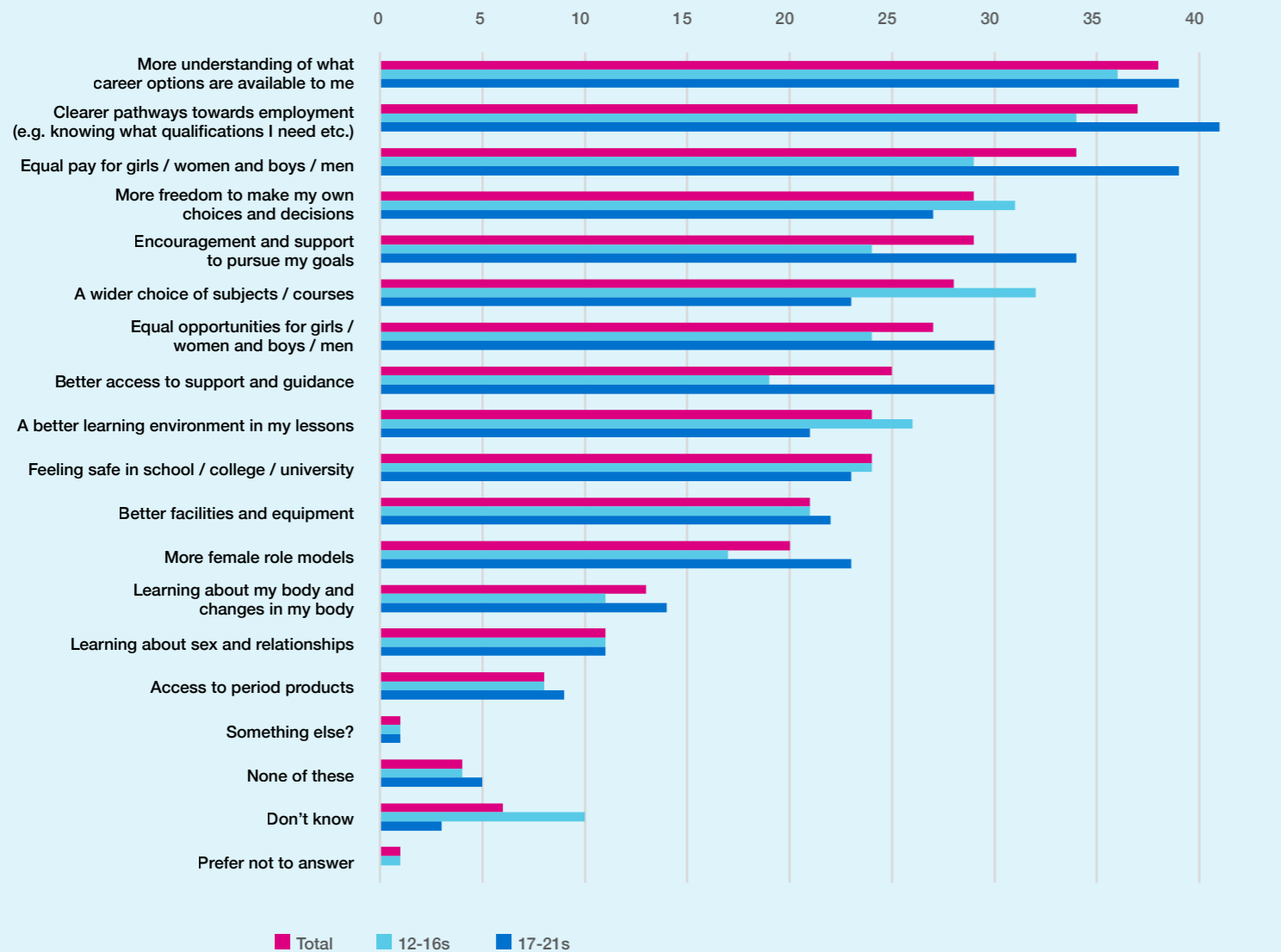


Figure 9: What participants say they would need to fulfil their potential

BARRIERS TO EQUALITY AT WORK

“I feel I can choose my own vocation and Uni course, but girls’ career opportunities are hampered by men and inequality.”

(Survey participant, 18, Hammersmith and Fulham)

“It’s often who you know and not what you know so you can’t always get the job and future you want.”

(Survey participant, 15, Havering)

The transition from school into work is a vital point in young people’s lives and development.²⁸² Girls and young women see the challenges that, in gendered expectations and attitudes from a young age, get worse as they step into employment. Young women face barriers in getting the jobs they want, being paid equally for those jobs, and making progress when there. As shown in figure 9, when asked what they need more of to help them achieve their full potential, equal pay and

equal opportunities for girls, women, boys, and men were chosen as important.

- 34% of respondents chose equal pay, rising from 29% of 12 to 16 year olds to 39% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Equal opportunities were also important, with 27% of respondents choosing this, increasing from 24% of 12 to 16 year olds to 30% of 17 to 21 year olds.

“I am wanting to enter a male dominated sector, and so could face discrimination, whether unconscious or conscious. Overall, I know that any issues I may experience will be dealt with, but I am expecting to be put in those positions in the first place, which should not be the case.”

(Survey participant, 14, South Ribble)

“As a general, being a woman in any workplace, you receive some sort of comments or judgment from other male employees.”

(Survey participant, 18, Poole)

“I have had a few experiences when I have been looked over. I work in a pub, there is a lot of men and it is male dominated. Especially people who come into the pub to drink, thinking they’re funny, and they’re just being rude. Things they wouldn’t say to a male.”

(Narrative Inquiry B, Cupar)

Experiences at work for girls and young women can be undermined by harassment or the fear of harassment. A huge barrier to girls and young women pursuing their goals, progressing at work, and feeling comfortable and safe in the workplace is the harassment and disadvantage they still experience at work. Only one in four (24%) of the girls and young women we spoke to, who access the workplace, said they feel completely safe in the workplace.^{xviii} Among the oldest, and most likely to be in work, 3% of young women aged 20 to 21 feel “not safe at all” and a further 10% feel “a little safe”. A Trade Union Congress²⁸³ poll showed that two in three young women have experienced sexual harassment, bullying, or verbal abuse at work. The research shows that in most cases these were not isolated incidents and rather patterns of repeated behaviour. The cultural conversation over harassment at work has risen in prominence with the #MeToo movement but more is yet to be done to make girls and young women safe at work.

Girls and young women tell us they are concerned about lack of pay equality as they step into the workforce. While equal pay relates to women being paid the same as men for equal or similar work, which is a legal requirement in the UK, there are broader concerns with financial inequity in work. Gender pay gap data, now published annually, shows the extent of the issue, and while it has been declining slowly, it stands at 7.7% in April 2023.²⁸⁴ Research from the Young Women’s Trust²⁸⁵ shows that young women aged 18 to 30 are currently taking home, on average, £4,194 less (or a fifth less) per year than a man of the same age. The average median salary for a young man aged between 18 to 29 is £21,582, compared with £17,388 for a young woman.

There are number of reasons for this.²⁸⁶ Women are more likely to work part time due to having children and working in sectors which are more likely to offer part time or zero-hour contracts. These roles are often more difficult to progress in and to earn a higher income.

Even when women work full time, they are more likely to work in sectors where the annual pay is lower. Women are funnelled into lower income sectors, based on gender norms of women being better suited for some of these industries due to being more nurturing or similar stereotypes. This makes adolescence a key life stage on which policymakers should focus in trying to ensure economic justice for women.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies²⁸⁷ found that despite women attaining higher grades at university than men, women are overrepresented in degree subjects with low financial returns — such as social care, psychology, and the creative arts. Gender stereotypes are a key factor in perpetuating the gender pay gap. The sectors and roles in which young women are concentrated (such as

health and social work, retail, hospitality, admin and support services, arts, entertainment and recreation, and other services like hairdressing, gyms²⁸⁸ etc) are typically seen as ‘feminine’ and are consequently undervalued and underpaid:

“These jobs are intrinsically undervalued because of gender stereotyping, where historic expectations on women mean they have carried out similar roles in the home. So called ‘women’s work’ has lower status and is seen as less valuable because the skills required for these jobs are perceived to be inherent in women, rather than learned skills, and the work is therefore not remunerated. The undervaluation of work done by women is a key strand linking together the causes of the gender pay gap, sectoral segregation, women’s unequal share in caring, and pay discrimination.”²⁸⁹

“I’m happy as I’m expecting a child, but let down as I have been put on maternity pay and I can’t afford anything.”

(Survey participant, 20, Wandsworth)

^{xviii} This proportion was rebalanced to exclude those who ticked Not Applicable, so the percentage is based only on those who felt the statement applied to them i.e. are involved in the workplace. Some younger girls may have been referring to school when thinking of this question.

The motherhood penalty, where women face disadvantages in pay, perceived competence, and working hours sees mothers earning, on average, almost a third less per hour than similarly educated fathers by the time their first child is 20 years old.²⁹⁰ Pregnant Then Screwed²⁹¹ found that “over half of all mothers (52%) have faced some form of discrimination when pregnant, on maternity leave, or when they returned to work”. When women have children, their careers are also affected by the cost of childcare, with full-time nursery for children under two years old costing an average of £14,200 a year.²⁹² Three in four mothers (76%) who pay for childcare told Pregnant Then Screwed that it no longer makes financial sense for them to work. Research by The Fawcett Society suggests that this ‘motherhood penalty’ disproportionately affects ethnic minority women, with the role of informal and part time work in reducing pay heightened for Black and minoritised women.²⁹³

The Fawcett Society revealed on Equal Pay Day 2023 – the day “when, because of the gender pay gap, women overall in the UK stop being paid compared to men” — that the gender pay gap won’t close until 2051, without

action. Working women take home £6,888 a year less than men.²⁹⁴ The gender pay gap is so significant that by the time a woman retires she will be £123,000 worse off on average than her counterpart who is a man.²⁹⁵

Campaigning led by Pregnant Then Screwed, with the March of the Mummies seeing thousands take to the streets, has seen proposals to make childcare more accessible. Rights to request flexible working have been strengthened. A new law requiring employers to tackle workplace harassment has been passed. All of this should help girls as they enter the workplace. But still not enough has been done to tackle the gender norms which set expectations about what jobs girls should do, who should take on caring responsibilities, and how girls and young women are treated at work.

24% of the girls and young women we spoke to, who access the workplace, said they feel completely safe in the workplace.

UNPAID LABOUR

“Women feel like they have to please people all the time and do stuff for other people. I don’t have to do this, but I am annoyed it has taken me this long to get to that point. I can live my life how I like, but before I was living my life to look after my brother. There is this invisible thing, like expectations of cooking and cleaning.”

(Narrative Inquiry C, Cupar)

Unpaid labour is not equally valued. Women contribute a huge amount to society and the economy in unpaid work. This includes housework, adult care, childcare, volunteering, and emotional and social labour, with an estimated economic value of at least £140 billion per year.²⁹⁶ Women perform the majority of unpaid work. They spend around twice as much time on unpaid tasks such as cooking, childcare, adult care, laundry, and housework, with transport (driving themselves and others) the only areas where men do more unpaid work than women.²⁹⁷ This is driven by gendered norms that women are the more caring and compassionate members of a family unit, and expectations are placed on them to perform these roles from an early age.

Analysis of data from the Census 2021 showed that in England and Wales, 53% of unpaid carers aged 5 to 17 and 54% of unpaid carers aged 18 to 24 are girls and young women.²⁹⁸ Globally, girls aged 5 to 15 spend 160 million additional days on unpaid care and domestic work, than boys of the same age, every day.²⁹⁹ Plan International’s research has shown that in 89% of households, women and girls do the majority of household chores.³⁰⁰ This should be formally recognised and appropriately valued as work. Girls’ and women’s invisible efforts subsidise the wider economy.³⁰¹ Unpaid labour has serious real-world implications for their growth and girls not being supported to claim their rights, as they will have less time for learning and leisure, be stripped of opportunities, and limit their potential to be the adults they want to be.

In **89%** of households, women and girls do the majority of household chores.

CHAPTER 6: MONEY WORRIES AND THE COST OF LIVING

“I WILL BE TRAPPED WHEN I’M OLDER, WORRYING ABOUT BILLS.”

A quarter of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 acknowledge they have experienced food poverty in the previous 12 months.

44%

of girls and young women with disabilities worried about money.

WHAT WE’VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Money was a common cause of concern for girls and young women, especially as they got older. Many are worried about access to basics like food and stable housing. The cost

of living crisis is having a disproportionate effect on women, just as dedicated services for girls and young women are struggling to stay afloat.

“If my mum had more money, life would be better.”
(Survey participant, 17, West Lothian)



Play International UK / Emma Trimble

Ella, 15, Blackpool

WORRIES ABOUT MONEY

“I have plenty to eat and a warm dry home. I have friends and family who I love and who love me. I’m scared about how prices keep going up and whether I will get a good job when I finish school.”

(Survey participant, 16, Gedling)

Money was a common cause of concern for girls and young women. Of the nearly 3,000 girls and young women who responded to our survey, one in three say they worry about them or their family having enough money (36%). Concerns about money doubles

with age. One in four 12 to 16 year olds told us they are worried about money (23%), rising to half (50%) of 17 to 21 year olds. This worry about their own, or their family’s finances, is affecting their ability to live life fully.

“I am struggling with anxiety and depression at the moment, and I am finding it hard to find enough money to pay for things that I need even though I am working full time.”

(Survey participant, 17, Fife)

“Financial situation is also a factor as to why I’m only somewhat happy. I’m constantly worried about money, and I don’t have the means to enjoy my life as much as I would like.”

(Survey participant, 21, Leeds)

This has a clear impact on mental health for girls and young women. When asked to choose the top five things that would help to improve mental and physical health the most, “more money” was the most frequently chosen option (46%), above mental health support (37%) and time speaking, or spending time, with family and friends (35%). Differences between age groups is notable. Money was the joint fifth most frequently chosen option at 30% among 12 to 16 year olds, but doubled in selection to 61% among

17 to 21 year olds. This is well ahead of mental health support, which placed second for the older group at 43%. The stress of living in poverty can negatively impact mental and physical health. It can contribute to causing addiction, debt, and other financial challenges. This can lead to cycles of homelessness and lack of stability. Family poverty can be associated with factors related to child abuse and neglect, such as poor parental mental health and domestic violence.³⁰²

36% of all girls and young women worried about money. It’s even higher for some groups...

43%

of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation

44%

of neurodiverse girls and young women or those with a physical disability

46%

of girls and young women with a mental health disorder

Only a third (33%) of young women aged 17 to 21 years old, many of whom would be starting to support themselves or move out on their own, reported being happy with their

financial situation. This is a big shift from 64% of younger girls aged 12 to 16 years who reported being happy with their family’s financial situation.

48% of all girls and young women are completely or mostly happy with them or their family having enough money. It’s even lower for some groups...

32%

of girls and young women with long-term conditions

31%

of girls and young women with mental health conditions

35%

of girls and young women who are carers

29%

of girls and young women with disabilities

“I don’t feel like school is giving me enough knowledge about the world, money and how to handle it or anything else that actually matters. I want to learn how to pay bills, insurance etc, at school.”

(Survey participant, 14, London)

School should be a place for girls to acquire financial literacy. However, girls and young women voiced concern that it was insufficient, and they were not being taught about how to manage their finances for the future. 29% of

girls and young women felt financial education would help their mental and physical health, rising from 24% of 12 to 16 year olds to 34% of 17 to 21 year olds.

IMPACT OF THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

“For my age, nearly 18, there are not many job opportunities and that is scary. I’ve already done two years at college and feel like that’s enough as I haven’t really enjoyed it, but I am so worried about getting a full-time job as there are not many. I need to start paying my mum as all the money she gets for me has stopped. She works hard and I can see the struggle she sometimes has keeping us, now everything has doubled in price. She doesn’t put pressure on me, but it feels like a pressure to get something work-wise.”

(Survey participant, 17, Southend)

Worries about money will have been worsening in recent years. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation³⁰³ has shown that around a million children experienced destitution in 2022 – nearly three times more than in 2017. We have seen the cost of living spike in the UK and globally. Prices have risen since the Covid-19 pandemic, caused by disruption of supply chains and driving demand for consumer goods.³⁰⁴ Food and energy prices

have risen further since 2022, with gas prices spiking, caused by instability in geopolitics and ongoing conflicts.^{305 306} Inflation has been a serious challenge since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the annual rate of inflation reaching 11.1% in October 2022 – a 41-year high. It has since eased but consumer prices in the UK, as measured by the Consumer Prices Index (CPI), were 4.0% higher in January 2024 than in January 2023.³⁰⁷

“Honestly, it’s mainly the depression and anxiety, but the fact that the world itself is in a poor state economically and environmentally really doesn’t help.”

(Survey participant, 19, Hambleton)

“I think the cost of living affects prices and stuff. It makes it more difficult to have proper access to things and, like, mothers already have it hard. They have a hard time affording stuff for their children, their babies and it’s just getting more and more expensive. It gets more and more difficult.”

(Workshop participant, Blackpool)

In our workshops, many girls and young women didn’t feel they were affected directly by the cost of living crisis, but they were conscious of the difficulties adults face. This drives their own worries for family, society, and their own future.

Women are disproportionately affected by economic crises and poverty. Evidence shows that women are more likely to be in poverty (20% compared to 18% of men).³⁰⁸ The National Education Union³⁰⁹ found that “more than one fifth of women, 22 per cent, have a persistent low income, compared to approximately 14 per cent of men.”

Not only are women financially worse off, they also disproportionately experience other burdens of poverty, as highlighted by The Women’s Budget Group.

“Poverty has a knock-on effect on most areas of people’s lives. Trying to resolve and manage all the issues related to not having enough money to live on takes a toll on people’s self-esteem, confidence, energy, and mental health. The ability of people to extricate themselves from poverty, to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, is thus diminished [...] women disproportionately shoulder the burden of managing poverty and its consequences, so they are more likely to be affected by the stress and anxiety this brings.”³¹⁰

These pressures are burdens often felt by adult women and mothers, but girls who grow up in families in poverty are also disproportionately affected. Gendered norms such as pressures of ‘perfectionism’, taking on the burden of care, and feeling like no matter what they do ‘it’s not good enough’, can have an impact on how poverty is experienced. Girls are perhaps more likely to take on, or are given, responsibilities such as supporting younger siblings, taking a higher strain of the emotional work to support their family, and having to grow up quickly within their difficult reality. This is explored more in Chapter 5.

The cost of living crisis has more indirect effects. Not being able to afford essentials like food, housing and heating, and health and sanitary products, not only has a direct impact but also limits girls’ longer-term potential to thrive. Being worried about paying for essentials means that girls and young women cannot enjoy the activities that make them happy – such as their hobbies and leisure activities. Our survey found that money was a major barrier to accessing hobbies, leisure, and sporting activities, with 49%^{xix} of girls and young women telling us that having more money would help them do these more. Access to leisure activities would increase the sense of ownership felt by girls and young women and support them to engage in their communities.

The Women’s Budget Group has found that cuts to social security disproportionately affect women “because of their generally lower income, longer lives, and greater caring responsibilities.”³¹¹ Government spending on public services had been weakened even before the Covid-19 pandemic, with spending as a share of GDP decreasing from 47% to 40% between 2010 and 2019.³¹²

Younger people are also disadvantaged by the way the benefits system works. Young people (16 to 25) make up around 15% of Universal Credit claimants in the UK. However, they receive a disproportionate proportion of sanction decisions which result in temporary reduction of payments. Between May 2016 and January 2021, young people under 25 made up 41% of all Universal Credit sanctions decisions.³¹³ Women also make up a majority (58% in January 2024)³¹⁴ of people receiving Universal Credit, potentially due to many receiving legacy benefits that tended to be claimed more by women, such as Income Support and Child Tax Credits.³¹⁵ Sanctions can make young people vulnerable to eviction, mental and physical ill-health, and force them into unsafe situations.

^{xix} Participants could choose from a list of options.

DEDICATED SERVICES FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FACING CUTS

Funding for public services has been struggling for years across successive governments in all nations.³¹⁶ Councils in England have been under intense financial pressure following a 27% real terms reduction in their core spending power since 2010/11 and the onset of public sector austerity.³¹⁷ Councils are facing rising costs — through inflation and increasing costs — as well as increasing demand, such as in children’s social care where budgets are “up by 13.6 per cent in 2023/24 compared to 2022/23.”³¹⁸ Demand is often also for support for people with more complex needs, requiring even higher spending increases.³¹⁹ There are increasing concerns over the financial viability of councils, with potentially over a hundred facing financial failure.³²⁰

In the recent Welsh Government budget, every major area has faced cuts outside health and social services.³²¹ Scotland is facing some of the “most challenging” budgets since devolution, amid high inflation, and an estimated £1.5 billion deficit.³²² Cuts to local government funding are putting children at risk, with council safeguarding teams stretched to breaking point. Interviews in the Observer in January 2024 highlighted cases where safeguarding staff in schools, without “expertise nor the resources to cope”, were unable to get support for serious cases.³²³

There are specific impacts on services accessed by young people, such as for gender-based violence and healthcare support. There is a disparity between spending on adults and children; “On average, the NHS spends just £92 per child each year on mental health services, compared with £225 for each adult”.³²⁴ Research from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that fewer than half of survivors are able to access community-based support, with only 28% saying that accessing help was easy or straightforward.³²⁵ More broadly, youth services have seen funding from local authorities in England and Wales decline by 73% since 2010 to 2023. This represents a £1 billion real terms cut.³²⁶ In Wales, cuts have been less severe but “expenditure on youth services in Wales has still reduced by £19 million in real terms since 2010/11” equating to “a 38% decrease in spending”.³²⁷ In Scotland, spending was reduced by over £11 million pounds between 2016 and 2019.³²⁸

This crisis in funding has resulted in the closure of thousands of youth clubs, the loss of crucial youth workers, and the lack of safe spaces for girls and young women to meet with their peers — with trusted adults to lean on. While there has been government action, such as an investment of £200 million for the Holiday Activities and Food programme in England, many young people need support year-round,

not just at holiday periods.³²⁹ The National Youth Guarantee has been announced to bring together the previously announced Youth Investment Fund, National Citizen Service, and funding for uniformed groups. However, it is unclear how this will impact services.³³⁰ Councils at present provide a valuable role in delivering, commissioning, or coordinating youth services. However, since Covid-19 we have seen the crisis widen with 17% of youth organisations facing closure as a result of Covid-19, while 88% of youth services anticipate reducing services.³³¹

Recent research from Women’s Aid³³² has revealed the impact of crisis on services for gender-based violence (violence against women and girls). Local authority funding does not always cover the full cost of delivering their services. Women’s Aid found that nearly every one of their members (96%) were experiencing increased rent, increased costs for essential items such as for food or supplies, or other financial issues. This includes 78% who reported that funding was not rising in line with costs. As a result, they are having to scale back on the extra “added value” support they deliver alongside core services — such as care packages for survivors, or peer group

work programmes. Providers often rely on these unsustainable short-term funding pots to support their work, meaning it is impossible to plan or appropriately resource their organisation and staff.

Many organisations rely on government contracts and grants for sustainability, especially smaller organisations working with marginalised communities. Analysis from ROSA³³³ shows that government funding for Women and Girls’ Organisations is “made up of a high number of relatively small grants and a comparatively low number of large contracts.”

This is a crisis, with 67% of Women’s Aid members saying that if this continues without intervention, it will mean they would have to turn survivors away from existing support, reduce the support available, or (in five cases) close all together. This rose to 85% of services run ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women.³³⁴ Organisations led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women face a shortfall of £63 -114 million a year³³⁵ and are five times less likely to receive statutory funding than mainstream domestic abuse organisations.³³⁶

FOOD POVERTY

“Mainly getting less food than usual, because my dad has three jobs and he has to pay the bills and rent and everything and my mum has one job full-time, she has to pay bills and everything. And we don’t have a lot of food. My Dad works in ***** so we get free food on Thursdays.”

(Workshop participant, Cupar)

During the past 12 months, nearly a third of girls and young women (31%) *‘have worried about whether their food will run out before they or their family had enough money to buy more.’* Over half (54%) of girls and young women said their ‘thoughts are preoccupied by food’ – rising from 44% of 12 to 16 year olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds. This shows a widespread challenge of food poverty during this cost of living crisis, where girls at formative ages are growing up focusing more on whether they can eat than on their education, relationships, or work.

A quarter of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 acknowledge they have experienced food poverty in the previous 12 months. For one in four girls and young women (25%), their food has run out and they didn’t have the money to buy more. The situation is worse as girls get older, rising from 11% of 12 to 16 year olds to

35% of 17 to 21 year olds. This stark difference may be partly accounted for by younger girls being less aware of food poverty, and young women more likely to be responsible for buying their own food. Girls and young women who live without a parent or who may have moved out of home (and were disproportionately 20 to 21 years old in our survey), were most likely to struggle. Over half (51%) told us that there had been occasions where the food they bought didn’t last and they didn’t have the money to buy more. There are also substantial challenges for girls and young women with disabilities and girls and young women who are carers – they may have lower incomes, and face extra costs to support them to live well with their disabilities. These include assistive equipment, care, therapies, and higher costs for essentials such as food, heating, and travel. People with disabilities are disproportionately likely to be in relative income poverty.^{337 338}

25% of all girls and young women said there have been occasions where the food they’ve bought didn’t last and they didn’t have the money to get more. It’s even higher for some groups...

32%

of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation

34%

of neurodivergent girls and young women

43%

of girls and young women with disabilities

48%

of girls and young women who are carers

“I believe we should have more money, or wages that actually match the cost of living, because as a 21-year-old girl from a small town who moved to a city to pursue my dreams, I sometimes cannot even afford to feed myself on minimum wage and am already in debt. But then there are men around me doing less or worse work than me getting more money and being promoted.”

(Survey participant, 21, Leeds)

Of the 31% of respondents who were worried that they wouldn’t be able to afford food, this became a reality for 65% of them whose food ran out and they could not afford more. 81% of those whose food ran out had worried about the potential for their food to run out before they or their family had enough money to buy more. Yet 14% of girls whose food had run out also said that they had not worried about it, showing how quickly these crisis situations can occur. This shows the reality for many girls and young women.

Looking at those living in the most deprived communities (in the first decile on the index of multiple deprivation), 44% of girls and young women said it was true that they were worried whether their food would run out before their families got money to buy more – this is a stark difference compared to an average of 29% across all other deciles.

Access to a balanced diet and healthy food is key to physical and mental health. 75% of girls and young women said they are often able to access healthy foods, but 19% say it is only sometimes true and 3% say it is never true. This also worsens with age. 85% of girls aged 12 to 16 said it was often true, but that declined to 68% of young women aged 17 to 21 who said it was often true they could access healthy food. The proportion of 17 to 21 year olds who could “sometimes” access healthy food grew to 26% from 10% of 12 to 16 year olds. Evidence shows that the cost of healthy and more nutritious food is significantly higher. The Food Foundation highlights that “more healthy foods are nearly three times as expensive per calorie than less healthy foods.”³³⁹

Food insecurity is a growing concern for young people, and particularly women.^{340 341} Food parcel distribution has risen by 37% since 2021/22.³⁴² The Young Women’s Trust³⁴³ found that half of young mothers reported skipping meals at least once a week to provide for their children — a figure that rises to two-thirds for those on Universal Credit. There are also racial and ethnic differences that are significantly associated with child poverty. In England in 2022, “20.5%” of all children were eligible for free school meals compared to “Black Caribbean (37%), Mixed White/Black Caribbean (38%) and Gypsy/Roma (47%) pupils” and “63% of pupils of Irish Traveller Heritage.”³⁴⁴

UNSTABLE AND UNSAFE HOUSING

“[I want to] have a choice as to what I want to do regarding jobs etc. However, housing prices and the current economy are making that very difficult. As not many jobs offer decent salaries to comfortably live on.”

(Survey participant, 21, Gloucester)

One in eight (12%) girls and young women with disabilities told us they do not have somewhere comfortable to live, while 6% of girls with disabilities do not have somewhere safe to live. This is compared to 3% of all girls and young women, who responded, saying they do not have somewhere comfortable to live, and 1% of all girls and young women not having somewhere safe to live.

Youth homelessness, or unstable housing, is a widespread challenge. As many as 138,930 children were living in temporary accommodation across England in mid-2023,

twice as many as were living in temporary accommodation in mid-2011 (68,770).³⁴⁵ The rising cost of rent and the depletion of affordable social housing stock, combined with challenges young people may experience because of poor mental health, abuse, and relationship or family breakdown, can lead to homelessness.³⁴⁶

Lack of stable and safe housing puts girls and young women at risk of a range of elements of violence and abuse. Rough sleeping^{xx} represents the most visible form of homelessness. However, homelessness includes a range of living situations that fall short of secure, adequate,



From a video created in research workshop in Cupar by Ellie, 13

and affordable housing^{xxi}. Boys or men are more likely to end up rough sleeping, but Centrepoin suggests women are more likely to end up as ‘hidden homeless’ — that is, in informal living arrangements, such as in the homes of relatives or friends or sleeping on night buses³⁴⁷ — and so can get excluded from statistics. Women who are sleeping in these informal arrangements face serious risks, including physical, emotional, and sexual violence.³⁴⁸

Women can also face repeated cycles of homelessness and domestic violence. They may experience an initial period of homelessness, then have a home when a new relationship is established but then experience domestic violence, which leads to more periods of homelessness.³⁴⁹ In 2021/2022, young women represented “57 per cent^{xxii} of the total number of young people approaching their local authority because they were

homeless or at risk of homelessness.” A 2023 report by Centrepoin found an increasing proportion of young people are forced out of their home due to domestic violence, especially young women. Shelter found that lone mothers are hit hardest and that 1 in 38 lone mothers are homeless in England.³⁵⁰

Our research found that 5% of respondents who were LGBTQ+ girls and young women do not have somewhere comfortable to live. Statistics also show several groups are at greater risk of homelessness. LGBTQ+ children and young people are more likely to experience homelessness.³⁵¹ Homelessness is also higher among children leaving care, living in poverty, or asylum seekers and refugees.³⁵² Girls and young women who have faced violence, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences are more likely to experience homelessness.³⁵³

^{xxi} This includes those living in temporary accommodation, such as hostels, B&Bs, or emergency shelters; those in ‘concealed’ forms of homelessness, such as ‘sofa surfing’ or living in overcrowded conditions; and those who live in insecure housing, such as those under threat of eviction.

^{xxii} 4% identified as another gender other than male or female.

^{xx} Refers to people sleeping in the open air (such as on the streets or in doorways) or in buildings or places not designed for habitation.

CHAPTER 7: LEISURE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

“I DON’T FEEL SAFE GOING ALONE.”

Only one in nine girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (11%) say that they feel completely safe in leisure spaces.

WHAT WE’VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Leisure activities such as sports, hobbies, and cultural activities are important for happiness for girls and young women. But many do not engage with these joyful activities as much as they would like. This is particularly true as people age and for girls and young women

from diverse communities, who may face additional barriers. A lack of opportunities, cost, and not feeling encouraged or supported, were important barriers. Many girls and young women reported feeling unsafe in leisure and public spaces.

“It’s really hard to do hobbies I’m interested in without being judged.”

(Survey participant, 15, Brent)

33% of girls and young women of colour take part as much as they want in cultural activities.



Riana, 15, Great Yarmouth

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEISURE IN GIRLS' LIVES

“I enjoy school and do lots of stuff like activities.”
(Survey participant, 12, Ceredigion)

“I am also happy about taking part in many activities and spending time with my loved ones.”
(Survey participant, 13, Leicester)

“I am enjoying activities at school, such as drama and music, as well as sport that I take part in too.”
(Survey participant, 20, Bromley)

Leisure activities such as sports, hobbies, and cultural activities were identified by girls and young women who took part in our survey of nearly 3,000 respondents, as the third highest ranking part of life they were most happy about. More than four in five 12 to 21 year olds (83%) say they are happy

with leisure activities. This decreases with age from 86% of 12 to 16 year olds to 78% of 17 to 21 year olds. Many girls and young women who said they are happy with their lives explained this with direct reference to leisure activities, hobbies, and sport in which they participate.

17% of respondents aged 12 to 16

| 39% of respondents aged 17 to 21

do not regularly do sport or exercise.



Tilly, 13, Evie, 14, Ella, 15, Genna, 15 and Olivia, 15, Blackpool

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

When girls who wanted to take part more in activities such as sports, hobbies, nature and cultural activities were asked what would help them take part in more of these extracurricular activities^{xxiii}, the top response was more

opportunities available locally. Feeling safe, better transport, and feeling that girls are encouraged and supported are also important across the age groups.

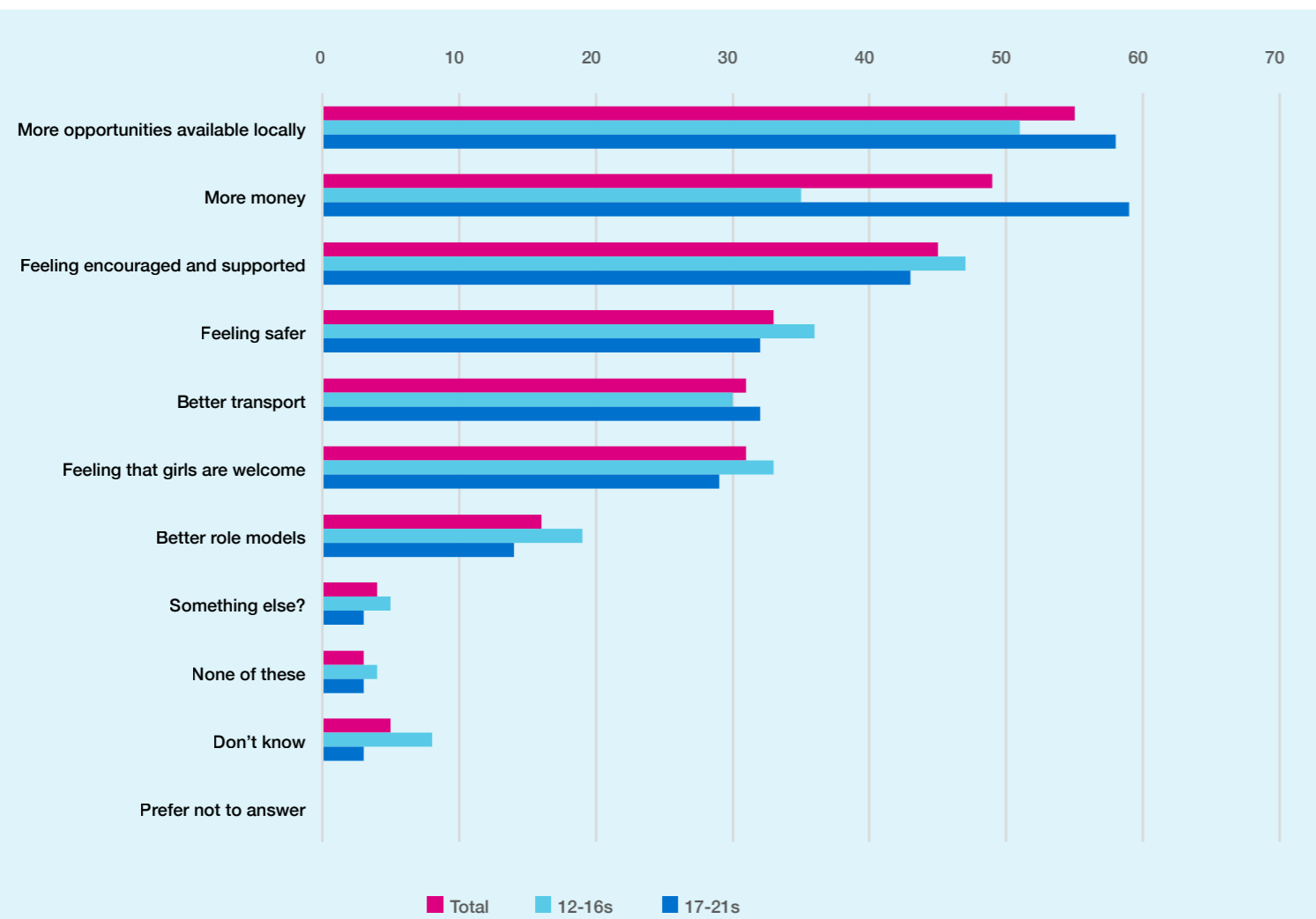


Figure 10: What girls and young women said would help them take part more in activities

Girls' participation in leisure is significantly affected by several barriers. Data shows that access to facilities to take part in sports or creative hobbies varies around the country. Factors such as age, household income, ethnicity, and geography affect girls and young women's ability to participate in these activities.³⁵⁴

For sports, Women in Sport³⁵⁵ highlight a trend that sees more girls disengaging from sport and exercise in their teenage years. This is driven by a range of factors, such as the physical and emotional impact of puberty³⁵⁶ on physical activity, receiving less support for physical activity from fathers and father figures than sons and boys receive, and challenges with

^{xxiii} We only asked participants who selected they would like to take part more. The question was in reference to sport and physical exercise, hobbies, activities in nature, art and craft, cultural activities, and campaigning.

self-belief, capability, and body image concerns. These last challenges can be significant for all girls, but even more so for girls who stop taking part. Sport has traditionally been viewed as a male-dominated institution with traditional gender roles – such as saying people “throw

like a girl” or heavy focus on competition, which has been viewed as a masculine trait. Promoting physical activity needs to clearly show that it is inclusive and accessible to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes.³⁵⁷

Feeling unsafe

Feeling unsafe has an impact on girls and young women's participation in sport and exercise. Only one in nine (11%) girls and young women say that they feel completely safe in leisure spaces, with one in twenty (5%) actively saying that they do not feel safe at all. 13% of girls aged 12 to 16 feel completely safe, declining to 10% in 17 to 21 year olds. Research by Sky Sports and the Women's Sport Collective reveals that 79% of women have felt unsafe with exercising and 43% have been harassed.³⁵⁸

As a result of feeling unsafe, harassment, and stereotypes around sport, Women in Sport³⁵⁹ argue that girls are less likely to feel they belong in sporting environments:

“By the time they are teenagers, many girls have already decided that they do not ‘belong’ in sport. Confidence and self-efficacy are on the decline, and perceptions of themselves as sporty or not sporty are often cemented and hard to reverse. This gap continues into girls’ adult lives, with women and girls of every age group being less likely to be active than boys and men.”

Feeling like they don't belong or aren't supported

Our survey found that feeling encouraged and supported was the second most important factor, at 47% for 12 to 16 year olds, in helping them to take part in activities. Nearly a third (31%) of girls and young women said that ‘feeling that

girls are welcome’ would help them take part in more extracurricular activities. A sense of belonging is key. Participants in our research expressed that gender stereotypes and inequality of opportunity can affect their participation.

“I also participate in a high level of sport and, though I wasn't able to pursue it professionally, I do believe I was hindered by the lack of opportunities available to women compared to men.”

(Survey participant, 19, St Albans)

“I feel like women aren’t given as many opportunities as men are. From a young age, I always knew that there was a massive inequality between men and women as I experienced (as a group) gender inequality. I wasn’t allowed to do certain sports because of the fact that I was a girl and every time I tried to participate, I would be ignored by the boys.”

(Survey participant, 14, Tower Hamlets)

“As a female who studies sports, I do feel we are on the rise for things such as opportunities and role models.”

(Survey participant, 20, York)

Studies show the steps we can take for girls to be more included in sport. Make Space for Girls states girls need different, more play-based, and less competitive opportunities to start engaging with sport.³⁶⁰ At the other end of the scale, Women in Sport identifies several success factors in driving up support for a more positive start for young girls in sport.³⁶¹ These include breaking down stereotypes, surrounding girls with the expectation that

they will succeed, building girls’ skills early to level the playing field, avoiding ‘dumbing it down’ for girls, expanding the opportunities available for young girls, and harnessing both school and after school environments. All girls should have access to activity that suits them, whether at a low level or to aim for a competitive standard. Neither end of the spectrum is sufficiently welcoming for girls and young women.

Accessibility and affordability

Where girls live, and their resources, impacts on their participation in sport and/or physical exercise. Having more money was the most important factor in encouraging participation for 17 to 21 year olds at 59%. Reasons for this could include issues with accessible

transport, lack of facilities close to them, and lack of activities that they can afford. These barriers can create the feeling that they are not welcome, and that sport and exercise is not for them.³⁶²

- 26% of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation say they never take part in sporting activities, compared to 19% living in areas of low deprivation.
- 39% of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation say they would like to take part more in art and craft activities, compared to 33% living in areas of low deprivation.
- 42% of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation say they would like to take part more in hobbies, compared to 36% living in areas of low deprivation.
- 44% of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation say they would like to take part more in cultural activities, compared to 37% living in areas of low deprivation.

Barriers affect some more than others

Girls and young women from diverse groups told us they are often less likely to access the leisure activities they want.

38% of all girls and young women say they take part in sport as much as they want to. It’s even lower for some groups...

- 25%** of girls and young women who have a mental health condition
- 26%** of girls and young women who are carers
- 28%** of neurodivergent girls and young women
- 30%** of girls and young women who have a long-term health condition

50% of all girls and young women say they take part in hobbies as much as they want to. It’s even lower for some groups...

- 42%** of girls and young women who have a mental health condition
- 43%** of neurodivergent girls and young women
- 43%** of girls and young women who have a long-term health condition
- 45%** of girls and young women who are carers

In our survey we found that 31% of girls and young women with a disability say they take part in sport as much as they want to, compared to 44% of girls and young women not living with a disability. People with disabilities should not be prevented from enjoying their life, sports and hobbies.

More than two in five LGBTQ+ girls and young women say they would like to take part more in

hobbies (43%), compared with marginally fewer other girls (38%). LGBTQ+ girls and young women are much less engaged in sporting activities, with almost three in ten actively saying they never take part (28%, versus 20% of girls and young women who did not identify themselves as LGBTQ+ in our survey). One in four (25%) say they take part in sport as much as they want to, compared with two in five (41%) other girls and young women.



Jazmine, 13, Mollie, 14 and Tia, 15, creating their video in the workshop in Neath Port Talbot.

ACCESS TO GREEN SPACES AND NATURE

“Sometimes I want to go for a walk in nature, but I don’t have anyone to go with and I don’t feel safe going alone. Especially in remote places like woods.”

(Survey participant, 20, Eastern England)

Only a third of girls take part in activities in nature as much as they like (36%), while a large proportion would like to do this more (41%). Interest in activities in nature increases with age from 34% of 12 to 16 year olds to nearly half (47%) of 17 to 21 year olds. More than one in ten girls (13%) say they don’t have regular

access to nature and green spaces, rising from 8% of 12 to 16 year olds to 17% among 17 to 21 year olds. For many, their only access to green spaces are local parks, yet many don’t have a park within reasonable distance from their home.³⁶³

When considering barriers to spending time in nature, girls' feelings of safety are an important factor. Only one in twenty (5%) girls and young women told us that they feel completely safe when in public spaces,^{xxiv} with one in six (17%) actively saying that they are not safe at all when in public. Green spaces will likely be reasonably 'public' open areas (even if access may be restricted to certain times, for example, in parks). These may feel unsafe for girls and young women, particularly if poorly lit, isolated, with less foot traffic in dispersed areas, or without staffing - especially at night.³⁶⁴ Make Space for Girls, which campaigns for parks, green and public spaces to be designed with teenage girls in mind, argues that "provision for young people consists almost entirely of facilities such as skate parks, Multi Use Games Areas (aka fenced pitches) and BMX tracks. These are seen as meeting the needs of all young people when in fact they are places dominated by boys. Girls feel that parks are unsafe and offer nothing for them."³⁶⁵

- 31% of girls and young women of colour take part in activities in nature as much as they would like, compared to 38% of white girls.
- 47% of LGBTQ+ girls and young women say they would like to take part more in activities in nature, compared with 39% of girls who didn't identify themselves as LGBTQ+.

Barriers to enjoying green space may include fear of public sexual harassment, challenges with affordability, accessibility, and discrimination based on race, ability, or sexuality. Research shows that families living in poverty and families of colour are more likely to live further away from green spaces and have more limited access.³⁶⁶ Some groups may not feel like they 'belong' in green spaces.³⁶⁷ Studies show facilitated access to green spaces encourages marginalised groups to enjoy nature.³⁶⁸ Groups such as Black Girls Hike have supported these groups to feel more comfortable in nature but more needs to be done to tackle the root causes of exclusion, for example, unhelpful stereotypes, stigma, accessibility, and safety so that everyone has equal access to nature.^{xxv}

36% of girls take part in activities in nature as much as they like

^{xxiv} It should be noted we asked about all public space, including green space.

^{xxv} It should be noted whilst these groups can be excluded from nature and parks, the barriers they face may overlap but are not necessarily the same.

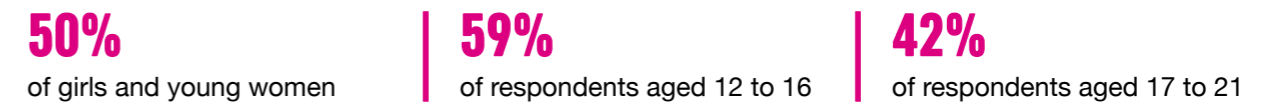
BENEFITS OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES

We know that girls and young women benefit from engaging in leisure activities. We asked them what they felt would improve their mental and physical health. A quarter (24%) of girls and young women who took part in our survey said that better access to sport and physical activity would help to improve their mental and physical health. Participation in sport supports young people with not only physical and mental wellbeing but also individual development, social and community development, and economic development, according to the 2022 Active Lives England study.³⁶⁹

Nearly a third (31%) of girls and young women felt that engaging in hobbies like arts, crafts, gaming, and the like, would improve their mental and physical health. Over a quarter (26%) felt that access to outdoor spaces and nature would improve their health. A survey by Girlguiding³⁷⁰ also showed the value of clubs

and hobbies, with most girls responding to the survey saying that they get to have fun (66%), make new friends (62%), and learn new skills (61%) when they are part of a club. Girls reported that memberships of clubs make them feel more confident, and safe, and allows them to volunteer and make a difference. Living in a greener environment can promote good physical and mental health, help bind communities together, and reduce loneliness. It can even help tackle socioeconomic-related inequalities in health.³⁷¹

Many countries such as Germany, Norway, and Sweden, and municipalities such as Barcelona, Freiburg, Ghent, Paris, Pontevedra, Rotterdam, and Tirana, have relevant national policies, guidance, or local programmes on making sure cities are more child-friendly. This can increase access to communal spaces for leisure activities.³⁷²



take part in hobbies as much as they want.

39% of respondents

would like to take part more in hobbies.

22% of respondents

say they **never take** part in cultural activities.

39% of respondents

want to increase their participation in cultural activities.

CHAPTER 8: PARTICIPATION

“NO ONE LISTENS TO A YOUNG GIRLS.”

A quarter of girls want to increase their participation in campaigning (26%). This rises with age from 20% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 32% of 17 to 21 year olds.

“I wish girls were more listened to and valued in our society.”

(Survey participant, 15, Brent)

70% of respondents aged 17 to 21 years old do not trust politicians.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

Girls and young women told us that their trust in politicians is low. They do not trust politicians to take action on issues that matter to them, such as the climate emergency or addressing inequality. Even though they do not feel listened to, they want to take action themselves to make their community and world a better place. We

need to break down barriers to activism and participation in our democratic processes, through improving resourcing for girls and women's organisations, supporting their right to protest, and reducing the harassment that activist girls and women politicians face.



Plan International UK / Sam Care

Vee, 18 and Alicia, 20, Great Yarmouth

TRUST IN POLITICIANS IS LOW

“Girls are not taken seriously.”

(Survey participant, 17, Manchester)

“Girls are not listened to as much as they should, which means we underestimate ourselves.”

(Survey participant, 14, South Ribble)

KEY DEFINITIONS³⁷³

ACTIVISM:	Efforts to promote, impede, direct, or intervene in social, political, economic, or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society toward a perceived greater good.
CAMPAIGNING OR COLLECTIVE ACTION:	Involves people planning and implementing concrete actions together to achieve change. Either by influencing decision makers to change decision-making processes and outcomes, and/or influencing relevant attitudes, behaviour, and norms of target groups to create social and political change. Collective action can be undertaken within a group or as a collective effort of multiple groups or networks.
ACTIVISTS/ ADVOCATES/ CAMPAIGNERS:	Children, adolescents, and youth, particularly girls and young women, taking (often collective) action for systemic change and conflict transformation. In certain contexts, the term “activist” may not be appropriate, and they may choose to identify as “advocates”, “youth leaders”, “influencers” or “change makers”.

Girls and young women told us they are dissatisfied with politics, politicians, and our institutions. Three in five of the nearly 3,000 girls and young women who responded to our survey told us that they do not trust politicians at all (60%). This distrust increases with age from half (49%) of 12 to 16 year olds to up to seven in ten (70%) of 17 to 21 year olds. Only one in six (16%) girls and young women we surveyed trust politicians at all.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Trust in Government survey March 2022 reported that 49% of respondents do not trust^{xxvi} the UK Government, and 39% do not trust local government.³⁷⁴ Similarly, the IPPR found that trust in politicians is “in free fall”, dropping nine percentage points in eighteen months between May 2021 and November 2022.³⁷⁵

^{xxvi} Levels of trust were reported on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “completely” trust. “Do not trust” represented scores of 0 to 4, a score of 5 was “neutral” and a score of 6-10 was categorised as “trust”. The category “Do not know or prefer not to say” for the UK government is based on a sample size of less than 30, so should be treated with caution.

Around seven in ten of those who have a mental health condition (73%), a physical disability (72%) or long-term health condition (73%), or who are neurodivergent (73%) say they do not trust politicians at all, compared with three in five (60%) girls and young women not living with a disability.

Those identifying as LGBTQ+ feel particularly removed from political decision making. Two in three (67%) say they are not at all involved, compared to half (49%) of girls and young women who do not identify as LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ girls and young women (74%) are more likely than other girls and young women to say that they do not trust politicians at all. We are not able to provide a clear answer on why this distrust exists, from the research we conducted, and this would need further investigation. It is likely to be a complex combination of reasons.

Our research indicated that politicians are not doing enough about the issues that girls and young women feel are important. When we asked girls and young women about sources of happiness and unhappiness, some of the highest scores for unhappiness were major issues confronting society. Inequality in society is a source of unhappiness for 51% of girls, rising from 41% to 62% between 12 to 16 and 17 to 21 year olds. Only 49% of girls and young women are happy with the protection of our natural world. 31% of 12 to 16 year olds are unhappy and this rises to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Girls and young women have grown up with a political and social backdrop that may impact this distrust. Gen Z, born between 1996 and 2010,³⁷⁶ have been raised against the backdrop of the 2008 financial recession and the Occupy movement which followed. They are alert to inequity in society. The oldest members of Gen Z could vote in the Brexit referendum, where the results were heavily segmented based on

age. Under 25s were more than twice as likely to vote to Remain (71%) than to Leave (29%) the European Union (EU). The opposite was true of over 65s, with 64% voting to Leave.³⁷⁷ With the Brexit transition process finalised since our 2020 research, young people have lost the right to travel and work freely across the EU. They have also lost the Erasmus+ scheme in favour of the ‘Turing Scheme’, which “duplicates what already existed, is more expensive for younger taxpayers, offers less, and does not cover tuition fees.”³⁷⁸

25% of girls and young women we surveyed feel involved in decisions about politics and the way the country is run.

Since then, their path to adulthood has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, where lockdowns have kept them from school and social connection. They have seen rising inequalities and a global decline in political rights and civil liberties.³⁷⁹ Young people growing up today have 24/7 access to news cycles and content from other young users of social media that was not available to earlier generations. This can be liberating and informative but can come with pressure. They are bombarded with the many wrongs that need righting, and it can be hard to turn away.³⁸⁰ For many girls and young women, activism can be challenging as well as rewarding. The cost of “speaking up” can be high: they are harassed, ostracised, and ignored. Some fear for their safety and their mental health. On a personal level, they have to develop qualities of self-belief, resilience, patience and courage, alongside excellent communication and research skills. They then must learn to operate in the current

political and social environment, which is hardly an encouraging one.”³⁸¹

Girls and young women don't feel that politicians are listening to what they have to say. Only 25% of girls and young women we surveyed feel involved in decisions about politics and the way the country is run. When asked to select the five things they feel most worried about, 14% of girls and young women chose their ability to create change. Despite young women being able to vote at 18 in

England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and 16 in Scotland, our data shows that 58% of young women aged 17 to 21 say they feel less involved in this area of life compared to 48% of 12 to 16 year olds. 33% of girls and young women are not happy about their ability to take action or to speak out about the issues they care about. However, while 49% of girls aged 12 to 16 are happy, this increases to 64% of young women aged 17 to 21, as girls find their voice and communities.

GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR COMMUNITIES

“I have been in a few volunteering organisations like YoungScot and the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Rights to try and teach other young people about their rights, so that every kid knows their rights and knows when they're being exploited and knows when to say, 'that goes against what I stand for.' Helping young people find their voice in politics and break through the spaces where it is not typically for young people.”

(Workshop participant, Cupar)

Activism is important for girls and young women. Activism comes in many forms and is a fundamental part of our democratic process. We know that gender equality is important. We need more girls and young women as leaders, activists, change-makers, and politicians.³⁸² Addressing these barriers would support girls and women's participation, benefitting not only their lives but also their communities and the UK more broadly. One of the most significant ways to advance gender equality is to support and resource feminist activism.³⁸³

A 2012 study of 70 countries concluded that a strong, autonomous feminist movement is significant as a predictor of government action to redress various forms of violence against women – more so than other factors considered, such as national wealth, left-wing political parties, or the number of women politicians.³⁸⁴ Evidence both nationally and globally suggests that when women are actively involved in social issues and in decision-making, communities and society at large is better off.³⁸⁵

“At school, I did buddying and I am now a prefect. I hope I can be that person that is safe, and people can come and talk to me.”

(Workshop participant, Cupar)

“I feel like they should do support groups for young women [...] you would actually help young women to speak their mind.”

(Narrative Inquiry C, Great Yarmouth)

Whether it is through activism, volunteering, or supporting their community, we know girls and young women make a huge contribution to society and the communities in which they live. Our research found lots of examples of girls and young women who are supporting others in their community. They want the world to be a better place for themselves and for others. Research from Girlguiding³⁸⁶ found that “38% of girls aged 7 to 21 have done something to help a neighbour in the last year.” The British Heart Foundation³⁸⁷ found that 46% of 16 to 24 year olds have volunteered, and that volunteering is higher amongst younger people than the older generation.

to be involved in campaigning and frustration with the inability to do so increased with age, from 20% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 32% of 17 to 21 year olds.^{xxvii} While 49% of girls aged 12 to 16 are happy about their opportunities to take action, this increases to 64% of young women aged 17 to 21 years old. Potentially this increase shows that young women are finding their voice and engaging with activist communities.

Political decision making is just one way of making political impact, and there are other ways of engaging. Some girls and young women may also prefer alternative, less 'formal', forms of political participation. For example, activism (such as taking part in rallies, marches, boycotts, or joining campaigning organisations) or community involvement (such as being part of a youth club, or church group, or taking part in volunteering).³⁸⁸ When we take these into account, it is evident that girls' motivation and participation in politics and campaigning is high. They can often participate more than boys and young men, especially in “petitioning, boycotting, and volunteering” while gendered gaps in “confrontational” types of protest are small or absent.³⁸⁹ Girls and young women are finding ways to have a voice, and campaign for change.

26% of girls and young women want to increase their participation in campaigning.

Girls want to act, to be heard, and to change things. While half of girls and young women told us they don't take part in campaigning at all, a quarter of girls want to increase their participation in campaigning (26%). Our survey shows that desire

^{xxvii} The question options were 'I take part as much as I want to' / 'I would like to take part more' / 'I never take part' / Don't know / prefer not to answer, so we assume those who want to take part more are at least doing some campaigning or have done in the past.

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

“Being a woman means you are always watching those around you. It’s scary when most of the news is about women being killed, raped, or hurt violently. It is also scary to see women’s basic rights being taken away by men who don’t understand these issues.”

(Survey participant, 21, Aberdeen)

Support and resources to encourage girls’ and women’s participation in activism are significantly limited. Research found that in 2021, less than 2% of grants recorded on open data site 360Giving went to women and girls’ organisations. The average grant value for women and girls’ organisations is significantly

lower than for all other organisations.³⁹⁰ These organisations provide a vehicle through which girls can develop political skills and take action. These spaces are important pathways to engagement for girls and young women and allow them to feel a sense of agency.

“I have no control as rules and laws are in place and then if I get an antisocial or anything on my record, then it puts me off being involved, for example in a protest. I’m scared to get involved even though I believe in the cause.”

(Survey participant, 21, West Lothian)

New legislation such as the Public Order Act 2023 has been criticised by End Violence Against Women as it “contains a number of alarming measures” that had previously been scrapped from the Policing Bill and “highlighted how attacks on the right to protest and dissent are deeply harmful to women’s rights. The right to protest is a feminist issue, firmly embedded in the struggle for women’s rights and all those fighting for equality.”³⁹¹ This legislation risks creating a “hostile environment” for peaceful civic participation.³⁹² The policing of high-profile vigils in response to the kidnap, rape, and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Metropolitan Police officer shows how the police treating a ‘vigil’ as a ‘protest’ can be “problematic”.³⁹³

Harassment and threats of violence also inhibit women’s ability to speak up and to be involved in campaigning and politics. Women who speak out, particularly women of colour, are sadly subjected to harassment and abuse. This concern for their safety can inhibit girls and young women from sharing their experiences. Girls should not be forced to live in fear. 93% of women MPs said that “online abuse or harassment has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP.”³⁹⁴ This is especially true for women of colour, who may be blamed for “inviting” online abuse “on themselves” and digital microaggressions “serve as constant reminders of the marginalised status of female and minoritised representatives, with women of colour experiencing the most problematic microaggressions.”³⁹⁵

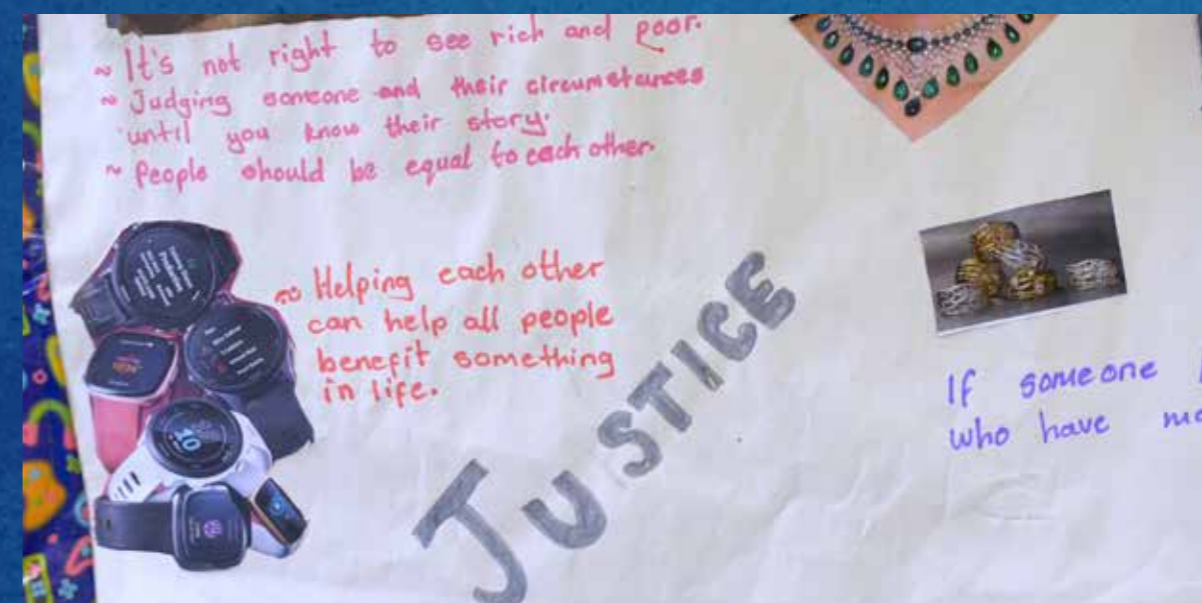
“In terms of women, there would be less barriers, more access to support, because it is almost presented by the Government that there are these really accessible routes that women can take, but we need loads of things to actually access them.”

(Workshop participant, Cupar)

A low level of trust in politicians is concerning as it is linked to consequences such as low voter turnout, political polarisation, the rise of populist parties, and a less effective government, which struggles to find consensus and gain legitimacy on progressive issues.³⁹⁶ This may lead to a generation adrift and disengaged from mainstream politics. Seeing the lack of action on crucial issues, the rise of anti-feminist political figures, and the abuse suffered by women in mainstream politics may in part drive this disconnection.³⁹⁷ We need a reform of our political culture. The voices of girls and young women need to be at the forefront of policies that impact them.

White girls and young women responding to our survey were more likely (55%) to tell us than girls and young women of colour (46%) that they do not feel at all involved in political decision making. However, white girls and young women

are less likely (31%) to feel unhappy with their ability to speak out or take action on issues they care about than girls and young women of colour (38%). This may show that girls and young women of colour feel more involved in the process, but this is in spite of the limits placed on their ability to speak out. There is some evidence from the US that protestors are more likely to be from diverse communities.³⁹⁸ Girls and young women may prefer these ways of engaging as they don’t feel that the existing structures are built for them. This suggests we need policy makers to meet girls and young women where they are, in the way that works for them, and in relation to the issues they care about the most. Furthermore, it shows that we need a broader definition of political participation to include the contributions of girls and young women to our political life. More research is needed to understand these different strands of political involvement by girls and young women.



From a video created in research workshop in Derry by Star, 12

CHAPTER 9: GENDER NORMS AND STEREOTYPES

“THE EXPECTATIONS THAT OTHERS HAVE FROM YOU ARE DIFFERENT FROM WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE BY YOURSELF IN LIFE”

WHAT WE’VE LEARNT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THINK ABOUT GENDER NORMS

Gender norms and stereotypes pressure girls to look, act, and conform — sometimes in impossible ways. Girls are very aware of the effect of gender norms in day-to-day life and are held back by expectations of them to conform. This is even more pointed in the lives of girls from diverse communities. Very few feel completely safe, and many are worried about

the threat, or actual experience, of violence at the hands of male perpetrators if they deviate from societal norms. Our relationships to gender norms are complex and need considering in an intersectional way. We need a gender transformative approach to society to enable people of all genders to access their rights.

“As a woman, I have had my future determined for me.”
(Survey participant, 14, Belfast)

Plan International UK / Emma Trimble



Olivia, 15 and Tilly, 13, Blackpool

47% of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 said that expectations about how girls and women should act, and what they should be, hold them back in life.

THE IMPACT OF GENDERED NORMS

“I feel that - from my experience - the hardships of being a woman remain not in direct objective sexism but in the deep-rooted social attitudes. Which is why it is such a difficult thing to tackle and why in some ways I am afraid to speak up; I don't want to be disliked.”

(Survey participant, 16, Cherwell)

Girls and young women told us they face pressures to look and behave in certain ways. Gender norms are pervasive throughout society and impact every area of the lives of girls and young women. The state of girls' rights and lives in the UK in 2024 can only be understood by considering the impact of gendered norms, attitudes, and expectations. Gendered expectations affect the experience of girls and young women in navigating the world safely, under threat of gender-based violence, when engaging with educational institutions, in the world of work, when accessing health services, whether they engage in hobbies or activism, and all the fields covered in this report.

Gender socialisation starts early and continues throughout a person's lifetime.

Children learn gendered attitudes and expectations about how girls, women, boys, and men should behave — and about their value and role within society. These processes shape the way that people of all gender identities are valued and treated, often in limiting ways. Adolescence is a critical time in people's lives — a time of rapid brain development, where people develop new skills and gain more advanced thoughts and emotions. Adolescents start to form stronger connections with their peers, while seeking more independence from their parents and families. They are open to new ideas, ways of relating to others, and opportunities. However, it is also a time when discriminatory gender norms can become entrenched. This can affect the long-term attitudes and behaviours of girls and boys.

“People think we all have equal rights and opportunities, but we don't. We are stereotyped, pressured, and meant to take all responsibility of looking after others or if something is wrong. Women can't just live an independent life. They are depended upon and have more duties to others than men. Men are free to do as they want, when they want. I can't go out when I like sometimes as there are concerns about my safety. I can't do what I want sometimes as I have expectations by others which I must fulfil. Men and women are not equal in society and in my opinion won't be in the near future. It is sad and unfair.”

(Survey participant, 15, London)

Girls and young women in our research told us they feel that they are being set up to live up to impossible standards. Girls who took part in this research told us they are very aware of the effect of gender norms in day-to-day life. Girls have been sold equality by society, espoused across media and social media, but society has not changed fast enough to make it a reality in girls' day-to-day lives. This leads to unrealistic expectations on them, while people fail to recognise the uphill challenge towards equality that girls still face. Girls told us they are left unable to meet societal expectations and are held back by expectations on them to conform. This is even more pointed in the lives of girls from diverse communities. This was felt across many areas of their daily lives and imagined in what their futures might be like as women. Girls and young women were acutely aware that the gender norms underlying much of their experience are difficult to shift.

They told us in our workshops that they felt it was impossible to balance the weight of gendered expectations, describing how the

multiple standards for and expectations of them often left them feeling conflicted. This idea was recently at the forefront of public consciousness with a monologue by a character in the award-winning Barbie movie from director Greta Gerwig:

“It is literally impossible to be a woman. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong. You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says, 'thank you'!

And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.”

Gendered norms and stereotypes impact girls and young women in all aspects of their lives. Norms affect every part of life on a day-to-day basis. Norms create expectations of how girls and young women should act.

Art created in research workshop in Blackpool by NV, 14



“I think the main issue with being a girl for me is the pressure in society to be a certain way and men tend to have very unrealistic expectations of women and it can make women blame themselves.”

(Survey participant, 20, South East England)

Our survey found that 47% of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 said that expectations about how girls and women should act, and what they should be, hold them back in life. This worsens with age from 40% of 12 to 16 year olds increasing to more than half of 17 to 21 year olds (54%) agreeing that these expectations of them hold them back.

The majority of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (65%) agree they are able to determine their own future and pursue their aspirations and goals, but a large proportion are unable to agree or disagree (22%), and a small minority disagree (8%). This is one of the few areas where we see positive sentiments increasing with age – going from 62% of 12 to 16 year olds to 67% of 17 to 21 year olds who agree that they can determine their own future.

“My main issue is not necessarily what I wear, but if it’s suitable for the people around me. If I’m wearing too much I’ll be called boring, but if I wear a dress or something I’ll be called like an attention seeker or a slut or whatever because apparently my body feels like it’s for everyone else, not for myself.”

(Horizon Scanning Workshop participant, Norwich)

Only half of those we spoke to (57%) feel they can make decisions about their body without outside influence. This increases from 54% of 12 to 16 year olds to 60% of 17 to 21 year olds. The rate of people “strongly” agreeing is steady across age categories. But 17% of girls and young women disagree, increasing from 16% of 12 to 16 year olds to one in five (20%) of 17 to 21 year olds. The proportion of those who neither agree nor disagree decreases from 24% of 12 to 16 year olds to 18% of 17 to 21 year olds. It may be that as they age, young women become more aware of the control, or lack of control, they feel and become more polarised. Low levels of feeling ownership of their own body may also link to feelings of lack of safety.

Gendered norms and stereotypes impact how girls and women spend their time. Abuse and fear prevent girls and young women taking part in important parts of life that others take for granted. 8% of 12 to 16 year olds are not happy with leisure activities, rising to 19% of 17 to 21 year olds. Around one in three (33%) would need to feel safer to take part more in activities in their community. Plan International³⁹⁹ research found that 62% of girls and young women have avoided doing something due to either experiencing or feeling worried about public sexual harassment. This includes exercising, socialising, hobbies, work, and education.

“Life is so much harder when you’re a girl, looked down on, you have to be and act a certain way.”

(Survey participant, 17, Tunbridge Wells)



Girls told us that expectations resulting from gender norms meant that their time was not always their own. They felt pressure to take on more chores and responsibilities at home and/or put other people's needs before their own. Girls and young women felt they were subject to external influences deciding how they could act. In our research, girls and young women spoke about how it was important to have a level of confidence — but not too much — as you may be seen as 'having a big ego', 'being cocky', or that you 'love yourself' too much. A survey by the Girl Friendly Society found that 81% of girls said they always felt proud to be a girl — yet only 58% of girls felt like they could always be themselves.⁴⁰⁰

Many girls and young women we spoke to (39%) felt under pressure to look and/or act older than they are. This increased with age, from 35% of 12 to 16 year olds to 43% of 17 to 21 year olds. A survey by Theirworld, during the Covid-19 pandemic backed this up, finding that two-thirds (66%) of girls and women in the UK aged 14 to 24 said they were "spending more time cooking for their families because of the pandemic, compared with just under a third (31%) of boys in the same age group."⁴⁰¹

More than half of girls and young women with disabilities agree that they feel the need to act or look older than they are (55%), with those who have a mental health condition (51%), young carers (51%), and those who live without their parents (50%) following closely behind. Agreement levels are also disproportionately high among those who identify as LGBTQ+ (49%), neurodivergent girls (46%), and those with a long-term health condition (46%). Those living in areas of high deprivation (11%) and girls of colour (11%) are most likely to strongly disagree with this statement. This is perhaps because these groups are already treated like they are older by adults, and so are not reporting additional gendered expectations to act older. Research shows that children of colour can be subjected to racism and bias, known as 'adultification', where they are often more likely to be treated as adults and be seen as more 'streetwise' and less vulnerable than other children.⁴⁰²

39% girls and young women felt under pressure to look and/or act older than they are.

SAFETY AND VIOLENCE

“Men might have [been] taught differently growing up but it isn't that hard to change your ways and to learn women aren't just an object but a person.”

(Survey participant, 14, Stafford)

“When I go outside, I almost feel like I'm just an object. I get catcalled or harassed almost every time I leave my house now. And preyed on by teachers too, to a point I'm a bit scared. It's gotten worse as I've become an older teen.”

(Survey participant, 17, London)

Gender norms impose ideas about how girls should look and behave in “feminine” ways. These can and will vary depending on the country context, or even within countries. Gender norms, as they are socially constructed, can also shift and change over time. In the UK, for example, dominant ideals of femininity might include Eurocentric physical attractiveness⁴⁰³ and being nurturing,⁴⁰⁴ and girls will be more likely to be socially rewarded if they conform to these expectations.

Gender norms have an impact on girls and young women as refusal, failure, or exclusion from conforming to the standard can lead to criticism, discipline and violence, for rejecting gender norms and the 'right' way to act. This can reduce the sense of agency and control felt by girls and young women, leading to worries about the future and their place in society. While many girls and young women seek to distance themselves from these idealised notions, they may be subjected to being treated differently by society or find it even more difficult to navigate social pressure arising from gender norms and expectations.

As is the case globally, girls and young women in the UK are disproportionately⁴⁰⁵ affected by violent, abusive behaviours such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, stalking, and rape.⁴⁰⁶ Chapter 2 on gender-based violence addresses this in more detail, showing how girls and young women face violence in public, in person, and online. Violence is seen as normalised, and institutions fail girls and young women. Women's Aid cite Crime Survey data that 83% of high frequency victims (more than 10 crimes) are women.⁴⁰⁷

Gender-based violence is rooted in unequal power relations between girls and boys, women and men, and is perpetuated by these norms and attitudes and frequently perpetrated by men and boys to control and dominate. There are a host of ways in which women, or those taking on feminine roles, traits, or expectations are unfairly criticised and violence against them normalised, justified, and made invisible.⁴⁰⁸ Whether they stick to gender norms or not, people face the threat or actual experience of violence in order to apply discipline and ensure conformity with societal norms.⁴⁰⁹

The real threat of violence is something girls and young women live with daily. As we shared in Chapter 2 on gender-based violence, the safest place for girls and young women is at home, where 72% of respondents feel completely safe. While girls feel at least somewhat or mostly safe in most areas, only 5% of girls and young women feel “completely safe” in public spaces, such as on public

transport or on the street. Only 9% feel completely safe in online spaces, and only 11% feel completely safe in leisure spaces. Public spaces score the highest in terms of feeling unsafe, with one in seven (14%) 12 to 16 year olds feeling not safe, increasing to one in five (20%) by ages 17 to 21, and highest among 20 to 21 year olds at one in four (24%).

“You’re afraid to be rude sometimes, or you’re faced to not have that conversation and you’re extra polite because if you’re not then [...] they can think that’s an attack and then keep on going at you. So we’re kind of taught to be polite, to be smiley, to be friendly and why should it be like that?”
(Workshop participant, Cupar)

“I can’t express enough how important it would be to teach young boys early on how to be respectful in the hopes of raising boys who will stand up for women. I am a victim of sexual harassment and I have taught myself to expect it every time I walk the streets. I don’t want to live in a world like that.”
(Survey participant, 20, Liverpool)

We heard several stories of girls and young women living in fear, facing abuse, and violence. Our research uncovered that girls feel deep psychological fear and anxiety, even when they haven’t encountered physical violence, and apprehension in pushing back. Our participants in creative workshops talked about the potential for aggression and sexual harassment and even kidnapping. Many girls and young women spoke of how they are

afraid to assert boundaries for fear of what might happen. Girls and women spoke of how they feel they need to be friendly and polite, even when they don’t want to be, to keep themselves safe. However, when girls are friendly and polite this can be interpreted by boys and/or men as an ‘invitation’. But if they are not friendly, men and boys can perceive this as a rejection.

GENDER EQUALITY FOR ALL

“I love being a woman sometimes and I love the community of girlhood.”
(Survey participant, 18, South West England)

Just over half (51%) of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 in our survey feel they have positive relationships with boys and men outside of their family – compared with two-thirds (64%) who have positive relationships with girls and women. A fifth (22%) of all girls and young women said they have positive relationships with girls and

women, but not with boys and men. Of the 64% of girls and young women who have positive relationships with girls and young women, 34% do not have this same dynamic with boys and men. This disconnect between genders shows we need to drive focus and progress on gender equality.

“All the time [...] women [are] like ‘Oh I don’t support feminism and stuff,’ that’s because there’s been negative views portrayed. But that it was like ‘Oh well it just means you hate men and you’re just angry’ and [...] they don’t actually look into it.”
(Cupar Focus Group)

“The saddest part is that other girls and women have also been taught the same values: that feminism is inherently hate-oriented or that all feminists hate men.”
(Survey participant, 16, Stockport)

Girls and young women told us of the importance of feminism, but also felt the feminist movement was often misunderstood or undervalued. Some said that they had heard other women being negative, saying that feminists ‘hate men’ or that feminism excludes men. The King’s College London’s Policy Institute and the Global Institute for Women’s

Leadership polling ⁴¹⁰ found clear gender divides on the nature of gender equality, with 9% of women aged 16 to 29 saying feminism has done more harm than good, rising to 16% of men aged 16 to 29. Around one in seven people (14%) think it’s harder to be a man than a woman (this includes 26% of men aged 16 to 25, but also 6% of women aged 16 to 29).

“I feel like as a society we need to break all these stereotypes for women and men - no one has to be a certain way.”

(Survey participant, 21, Burnley)

Boys and young men are also affected by gendered norms. The patriarchy — the structural and ideological system of power which promotes male-dominated power structures and devalues women and what is perceived as “feminine” — is sustained by promoting a specific concept of what it means ‘to be a man’. These patriarchal power structures are the root cause of gender inequality. They drive a range of harmful behaviours that oppresses women, and people of diverse gender identities, as well as men themselves who cannot conform to these masculine ideals, through violence and control.

Many of these ideal standards for boys and young men are tied up with being tough and self-sufficient, sticking to rigid gender roles around housework or caregiving, and controlling household decisions.⁴¹¹ Polling in 2023 from Hope Not Hate found that 35% of men who were fans of Andrew Tate, the influencer and self-proclaimed “misogynist”,⁴¹² said he wants “men to be real men”, enforcing an image of a ‘real’ man.⁴¹³ A report by Promundo⁴¹⁴ found that of 1,225 young men aged 18 to 30 in the UK, “over half agreed that social norms include the expectation that men will act strong (64%), be the primary earner (56%), and not say ‘no’ to sex (55%).”⁴¹⁵

This narrative risks reinforcing negative behaviours and applying pressure to men and boys to conform to gendered expectations. Young men may be tired and frustrated because they cannot live up to these ideals — especially during a time of a cost of living crisis and insecure employment, as personal finances can be precarious.⁴¹⁶ Boys and young men may be learning that moves towards gender equality are privileging women, and are oblivious to “the everyday signs indicating that they [are] mistaken about the demise of patriarchy.”⁴¹⁷ This can lead them to feel resentful and ‘retaliate’ against women.⁴¹⁸ In research cited by The Fawcett Society⁴¹⁹ young men and boys “holding rigid gender stereotyped beliefs” means they are “more likely to perpetrate partner violence.”⁴²⁰ Evidence from Rebecca Asher to the Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools inquiry of the Women and Equalities Committee, drawing on research by Lacasse and Mendelson, that amongst

adolescents “the more rigidly gendered the beliefs of male adolescents, the more likely they are to practise sexual coercion.”⁴²¹

Further research shows the connection between harmful gender norms and the impact on mental health and wellbeing. Research from The Children’s Society⁴²² shows that “children who hold more gender stereotyped views of themselves, like saying that ‘being tough’ is the most important trait for boys, or ‘having good clothes’ is the most important for girls, have lower wellbeing.” Lifting Limits⁴²³ shows how these stereotypes start at a very young age. They find that “girls as young as six believe that brilliance is a male trait” and “34% of primary school teachers witness gender stereotyping on at least a weekly basis.” These stereotypes affect all genders and limit their wellbeing and life opportunities.

Art created in research workshop in Neath Port Talbot by Naomi, 14



“I am answering using my experience as a Black young woman and I feel personally that when talking about young women’s experience there is a hierarchy in feminism. White women’s voices are prioritised and listened to more because of embedded racist attitudes towards Black people and Asian people meaning POC (people of colour) women’s voices are less heard and accounted for. I feel feminism does not benefit me or the POC community because we are always segregated from the conversation.”

(Survey, 15, Brent)

Other respondents told us they felt excluded by feminism, as girls and young women of colour. Groups may experience gendered norms and expectations more acutely as they may struggle to conform to the 'idealised' or dominant form of femininity. The impact of social pressure and gender stereotypes is not felt uniformly among girls and young women. Gender norms impact us all, yet our research finds that girls and young women from diverse communities — such as girls and young women of colour, girls and young women with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ girls and

young women — face greater unhappiness and control than girls and young women who do not belong to any of these groups.

Relationships to gender norms are complex and need considering in an intersectional way. We need a gender transformative approach to politics in the UK in every area, to address the inequalities people of all genders and all ages face. Girls and young women in all their diversity need support and encouragement to access their rights and have greater agency over the decisions that affect them.⁴²⁴

CHAPTER 10: WHERE IS IT TOUGHEST TO BE A GIRL

Where you live fundamentally affects your life chances. The support your community can provide, and the local services you can draw on, can impact your quality of life, and help or hinder access to your rights.

While there are challenges to growing up as a girl in every corner of the UK, in every community and on every street, we know that in some places there are more systemic and structural barriers which girls have to overcome to get ahead.

To understand what it means to grow up as a girl in the UK in 2024, we need to understand the impact of where you live and where these systemic challenges are the most pronounced. This is why we have prepared an Index of local authorities, looking at a range of indicators, to understand the place-based inequalities girls face.

We first did this in our inaugural State of Girls' Rights in the UK report in 2016 and updated it in 2020. In those reports, the Index only covered certain UK nations – today, we publish a full Index covering the whole of the UK. We have updated the Index with more recent data, where it is available across five domains: education and economic lives, poverty, health, violence, and participation and voice. We have used the best available indicators to measure girls' lives – the result is a series of 12 metrics spanning these five domains of girls' lives. Unfortunately, not all data was comparable across all four UK nations. In particular, there was a lack of comparable data in Northern Ireland for several indicators. Some data was not available at a local authority level,

or different indicators were used. In these instances, we have used either Northern Ireland level data or imputed data from other sources. Some data was also suppressed or unavailable for certain councils. In these instances, we sought to take an average of the relevant nation or region. This is discussed in further detail in the Methodology. These indicators are aggregated into the overall Index and provided a score, where 0 represents the worst possible outcome and 100 the best.

The goal is not to single out individual local authorities, but to show the scale of structural challenges faced both by girls and young women as they navigate through life, and also the difficulties facing local leaders in delivering services to communities in need of support. Each local authority will be facing different, and sometimes more extreme, challenges in terms of delivering services. Communities with greater needs for services, in order to give girls the best possible start in life, will inherently need to spend more in delivering public services – but this has become increasingly challenging. We have detailed earlier in this report the pressures facing local government finance generally – councils are now dealing with a 27% real terms cut in core spending power since 2010⁴²⁵ against a backdrop of increasing costs to delivery services and increasing demand from a growing population.

47% of all girls and young women feel held back by expectations of what they are and should be. It's even higher for some groups...

58%
of neurodivergent girls and young women

59%
of LGBTQ+ girls and young women

61%
of girls and young women with a disability

64%
of girls and young women with a mental health condition

36% of all girls and young women are unhappy with the pressure to be a certain way. It's even higher for some groups...

48%
of neurodivergent girls and young women

50%
of girls and young women who are carers

54%
of girls and young women with a mental health condition

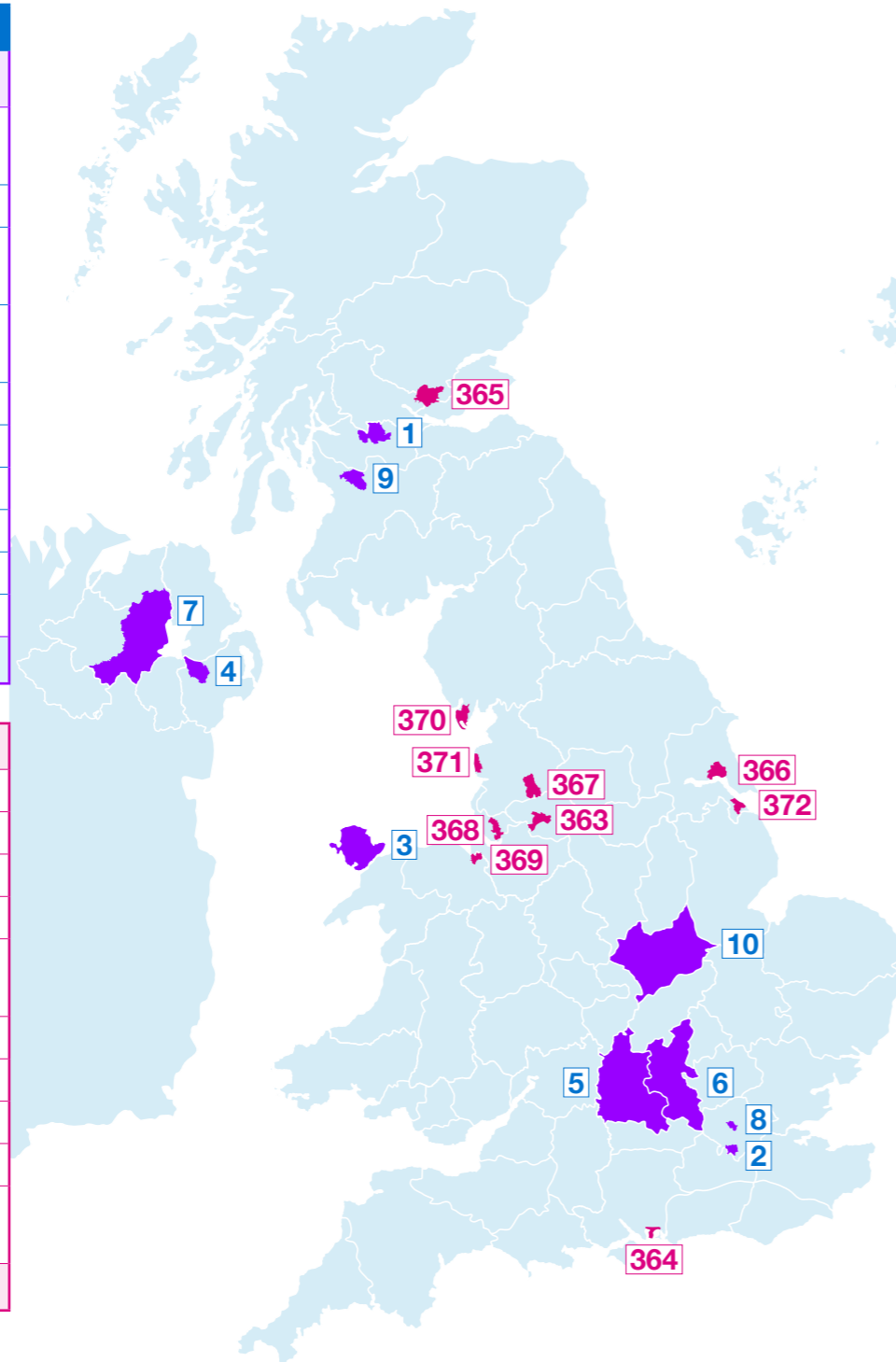
In constructing an Index like this, we must also understand the deprivation faced by communities and that many local authorities are under-resourced. Indicators which may also be tracked through indices of deprivation, such as income, barriers to housing, or the living environment, often end up being proxies

for deprivation. We have sought to avoid this in our development of the Index by balancing with indicators which do not necessarily correlate with deprivation. Quantitative national data will only ever offer a partial insight into the lives of girls, as evidenced in the appendix regarding data gaps.

WHERE IS IT TOUGHEST TO BE A GIRL?

RANK	COUNCIL	SCORE
TOP PERFORMING LOCAL AUTHORITIES		
1	East Dunbartonshire	79.74
2	Sutton	78.63
3	Isle of Anglesey / Ynys Môn	77.98
4	Lisburn and Castlereagh	77.91
5	South Oxfordshire	77.88
6	Buckinghamshire	77.45
7	Mid Ulster	77.15
8	Westminster	77.14
9	East Renfrewshire	76.99
10	Blaby	76.98
AVERAGE		77.79

TOUGHEST LOCAL AUTHORITIES		
363	Salford	70.33
364	Portsmouth	70.32
365	Clackmannanshire	70.25
366	Kingston upon Hull	70.17
367	Blackburn with Darwen	70.12
368	Knowsley	70.06
369	Rochdale	69.83
370	Barrow-in-Furness	69.49
371	Blackpool	69.19
372	North East Lincolnshire	69.07
AVERAGE		69.88



“I still can’t figure out how I’m going to turn out for the future.”

(Survey participant, 21, North East Lincolnshire)

“I would change very little about my life right now.”

(Survey participant, 17, North East Lincolnshire)

The toughest community in which to be a girl is North East Lincolnshire, with a score of 69.07 out of 100. This council centres on towns such as Grimsby, Cleethorpes, and Immingham in Yorkshire and the Humber that have been at the heart of the fishing and maritime industry for decades. An industry which has now declined in the area. There is a drive for regenerating local industry. The area now hosts the world’s largest offshore wind operations and maintenance hub, as a centre of the green economy, and is significant in the seafood processing industry.⁴²⁶ In 2018, they secured the country’s first town deal,⁴²⁷ called the Greater Grimsby Town Deal.⁴²⁸ In addition, they received significant Levelling Up funding from central government.⁴²⁹ The new Horizon Youth Zone is being developed as a local youth charity to invest “in the youngest members of the community... to ensure that every young person, regardless of their circumstance or background, can access first-rate facilities, alongside expert mentoring and support, whenever they want or need to.”⁴³⁰

Local authorities that perform well, and poorly, on our Index can be found across most of the country, although some clear patterns emerge. Many of the ten communities where it is toughest to grow up as a girl, for example, are communities in ‘post-industrial’ areas. Several communities are in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber. Notably, Blackpool is the second toughest community with a score of 69.19. It was also the toughest community in our State of Girls’ Rights Index in 2020. There

are then clear jumps to Barrow-in-Furness and Rochdale and Knowsley as the only other local authorities to score under 70 in our Index. In contrast, many of the ten communities which are top performing for girls veers towards being wealthier, and often more rural, and the South East, Northern Ireland, and Scotland are more prevalent here.

It can be distracting to focus on one or two worst performing places in an Index such as this one. However, North East Lincolnshire and Blackpool sadly underperform on so many metrics that they are notable outliers, distinct from the rest of the worst performing communities. North East Lincolnshire performs in the worst performing 5% of local authorities on: participation in education, employment and training, STEM uptake at A-Level, gender pay gap, and healthy life expectancy. Blackpool falls in the worst performing 5% of local authorities on: general health, school attainment, and healthy life expectancy (where it performs the worst). It performs positively only on one indicator – the gender pay gap – although Blackpool has among the lowest salaries in the country, so this is hardly a positive sign for girls’ future income opportunities. The challenges faced by these two local authorities are not new to our research. They have been widely documented and led to significant intervention from the Government as part of the Levelling Up agenda, which seeks to identify the most disadvantaged areas and provide targeted support to help them improve.

No local authority scored above 80 out of 100 points on our Index. In fact, with the exceptions above, all other local authorities scored between 70 and 80. Scores ranged between 69.07 (North East Lincolnshire) and 79.74 (East Dunbartonshire), but as no area comes remotely close to 100, we can see there is clear room for improvement for every council and community in supporting girls' rights. While councils aim to provide as much support as they can, given the financial challenges they face, there are structural factors which prevent them from delivering as well as they potentially could across a range of aspects of girls' lives. These challenges need central action and a clear, long-term settlement from central governments to enable councils to support girls' lives and rights.

The Government has identified 20 lower tier local authorities for "Levelling Up Partnerships" following on from their "Deep Dives", which are based on metrics for skills, pay, productivity and health. This has a notable impact with our Index, with Levelling Up Partnership communities in England scoring an average of 72.65 points and ranking 256 on average. In contrast, local authorities in England not included in the Levelling Up Partnerships score an average of 73.90 and ranked 191 — over 50 places higher. However, our Index is not solely driven by deprivation. The Government's Levelling Up Deep Dives were represented in the bottom ten local authorities with areas such as North East Lincolnshire, Blackpool, Rochdale, Blackburn and Kingston-Upon-Hull councils. However, several Levelling Up areas such as Torbay, Bassetlaw, Boston, Northumberland, Mansfield, and Torridge scored above

74 and ranked within the top 200 local authorities, along with Hastings at 73.98. This shows that support for girls and young women to access their rights is not solely linked to deprivation and local authorities can take actions which support their populations.

Transforming an area with deeply entrenched systemic challenges will take time. The results of this Index do not necessarily suggest that the work of local leaders or national policies have failed, but rather that they need further time and resources to properly bed in. Much has been written about the immense, broad, and interconnected challenges facing these communities. While this report cannot point to a quick solution that might resolve issues there, it does expose the scale of the problem as it relates to girls' lives, and the significant amount of work that will be needed to improve. It is clear that targeted funding to address long standing and broad issues in these areas will go a long way in improving the standard of girls' lives and experiences. Levelling Up Partnerships represent a real opportunity to experiment with local interventions, as suggested by the literature, that might improve the lives of girls in these communities. There were also local authorities which scored poorly on our Index which are not part of the Levelling Up Partnerships, such as Barrow-in-Furness, Knowsley, Portsmouth, Salford, Tameside, Lancaster, Manchester, Eden, Cheshire West and Chester, Wigan, Bradford and Southampton, which were in the poorest performing 20 local authorities — all of which have a score of 71.10 or below. This may show areas which would benefit from further support on specific elements that benefit girls' lives.

There are some striking differences when comparing the top performing and toughest places to be a girl in the UK.

- **A third fewer girls take a STEM subject at A-Level** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to nearly half in the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (31.4% compared to 47.3%)
- **Girls' GCSE (or equivalent) performance is 30% lower** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (55.8% compared to 80.5%)
- **Girls are 65% more likely to be living in poverty** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (35.3% versus 21.3%)
- **The pay gap between men and women is over 14 percentage points higher** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (17.9% versus 4.5%)
- **Girls are expected to live 6 fewer years in good health over their life** in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (50.6 years versus 57.0 years)

The North West and Yorkshire and the Humber score the toughest regionally on the Index. There is also variation within regions — Scotland contains one of the highest scoring local authorities in East Dunbartonshire (79.74) at rank 1, and one of the toughest places in Clackmannanshire (70.25) at rank 365. This is a notable 364 places below, showing a range of 9.49 points in our ranking of 372 local authorities. All regions varied between 71.81 in the North West and 76.54 in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland scored as our top performing area with an average score of 76.54 — however, as noted in our Methodology, more scores needed to be estimated here due to lack of comparative local authority data, and so should be treated with caution. No local authorities in Northern Ireland ranked outside the top 100. The North East is a clear underperforming region on our Index with an overall average score of 73.44, ranking it as the third toughest region, and little variation with all local authorities scoring between 72.13 and 74.34. Overall, the toughest region was the North West with an average score of just 71.81, yet here there were substantial differences between the toughest community in Blackpool (69.19) compared to Trafford (76.38) which was the 25th top performing local authority overall. The strongest regions included Wales, London, the South West and the East Midlands.

REGION	AVERAGE SCORE	RANK
Northern Ireland	76.54	1
Wales	74.99	2
London	74.85	3
South West	74.69	4
East Midlands	74.35	5
South East	74.20	6
East of England	73.92	7
Scotland	73.87	8
West Midlands	73.63	9
North East	73.45	10
Yorkshire and The Humber	72.93	11
North West	71.81	12

REGION	TOUGHEST	SCORE	BEST PERFORMING	RANK	SCORE	VARIANCE SCORE	VARIANCE RANK	
North East	Newcastle upon Tyne	330	72.13	Gateshead	158	74.34	2.21	172
Northern Ireland	Belfast	98	74.94	Lisburn and Castlereagh	4	77.91	2.97	94
South West	Forest of Dean	266	73.20	Stroud	17	76.57	3.37	249
West Midlands	Coventry	349	71.45	Lichfield	57	75.53	4.07	292
East of England	Ipswich	341	71.75	Uttlesford	23	76.42	4.68	318
East Midlands	Ashfield	333	72.09	Blaby	10	76.98	4.89	323
Wales	Neath Port Talbot / Castell-nedd Port Talbot	332	72.11	Isle of Anglesey / Ynys Môn	3	77.98	5.87	329
London	Camden	301	72.67	Sutton	2	78.63	5.96	299
Yorkshire and The Humber	North East Lincolnshire	372	69.07	Harrogate	74	75.20	6.13	298
North West	Blackpool	371	69.19	Trafford	25	76.38	7.20	346
South East	Portsmouth	364	70.32	South Oxfordshire	5	77.88	7.57	359
Scotland	Clackmannanshire	365	70.25	East Dunbartonshire	1	79.74	9.49	364

Data for our Index of local authorities comes from across the last few years due to differences in publication for different metrics utilised. We have used the most recent comparable data across the board.

In April 2023, a number of council reorganisations took place in England. Seventeen councils merged into four new authorities – Cumberland and Westmoreland and Furness in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset. Data for these local authorities is not yet regularly reportable by the time of development of the Index metrics and as such, the previous seventeen local authorities were used in the construction of the Index scores.

Similar reorganisations for Buckinghamshire, North Northamptonshire, and West Northamptonshire in 2020 and 2021 have been accounted for in this Index.

More research and data monitoring will be required in future to understand how the new council structure can aim to better address the challenges girls face locally, and the level of support provided by central government. Due to lack of robust new data and varying population sizes between preexisting local authorities, we have not sought to construct a new score for the newly merged councils. A full list of existing scores is available below for reference.

COUNCIL BEFORE APRIL 2023	NEWLY MERGED COUNCIL	SCORE
Barrow-in-Furness	Westmorland and Furness	69.49
Eden	Westmorland and Furness	70.95
Allerdale	Cumberland	71.17
Copeland	Cumberland	72.07
Sedgemoor	Somerset	73.25
Carlisle	Cumberland	73.27
South Lakeland	Westmorland and Furness	73.77
Richmondshire	North Yorkshire	74.19
Craven	North Yorkshire	74.43
Scarborough	North Yorkshire	74.46
South Somerset	Somerset	74.74
Ryedale	North Yorkshire	75.06
Hambleton	North Yorkshire	75.08
Selby	North Yorkshire	75.11
Somerset West and Taunton	Somerset	75.19
Harrogate	North Yorkshire	75.20
Mendip	Somerset	75.64

Combined Authorities

Combined authorities have been a growing force in British politics in recent years, and with new ‘trailblazer deals’ for some authorities, are likely to grow in prominence. There is not much to be gained by ranking combined authorities relative to each other, but their makeup can be revealing on an individual level. It is notable that we see a wide range of scores in some combined authorities such as Greater

Manchester and Greater London, which contain some of the highest and lowest scoring local authorities. Looking at the variations in outcomes for girls within unitary authorities shows that Britain’s geographic divides are not just broad trends like North/South or Urban/Rural. Instead, outcomes for girls can be vastly unequal even in neighbouring local authorities that fall within the same unitary authority.

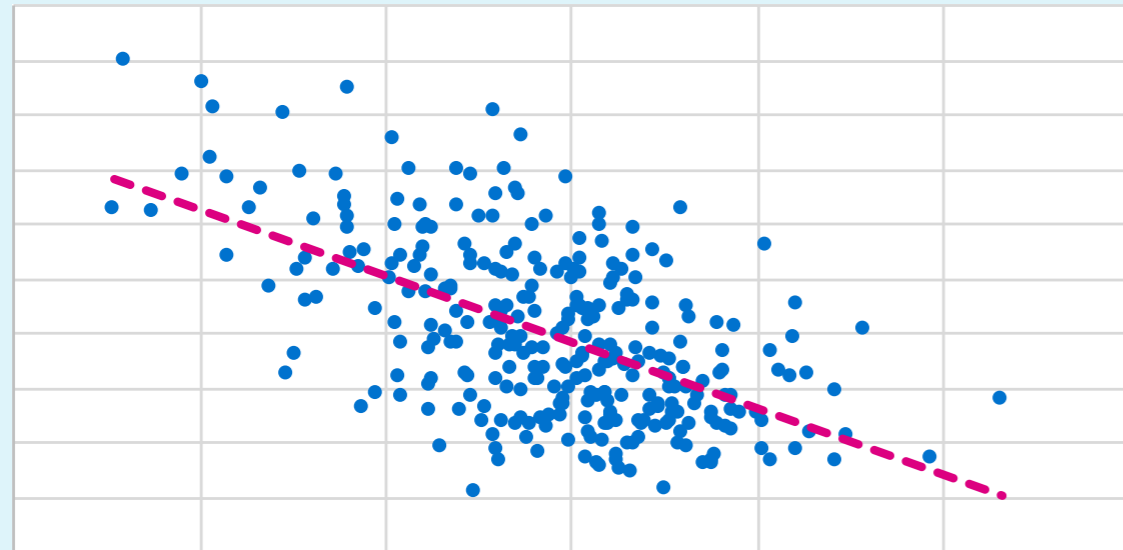
COMBINED AUTHORITY	HIGHEST AREA	SCORE	LOWEST AREA	SCORE	RANGE
Greater Manchester	Rochdale	69.83	Trafford	76.38	6.56
Greater London	Camden	72.67	Sutton	78.63	5.96
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	Peterborough	72.41	Huntingdonshire	75.83	3.42
West Midlands	Coventry	71.45	Solihull	74.08	2.62
Liverpool City Region	Knowsley	70.06	Wirral	72.42	2.36
West Yorkshire	Bradford	71.10	Wakefield	73.32	2.22
North of Tyne	Newcastle upon Tyne	72.13	Northumberland	74.20	2.07
West of England	Bristol	73.97	Bath and North East Somerset	75.60	1.63
North East	South Tyneside	72.79	Gateshead	74.34	1.56
South Yorkshire	Doncaster	71.25	Barnsley	72.45	1.19
Tees Valley	Middlesbrough	73.17	Stockton-on-Tees	73.68	0.51

Councils which over or under perform relative to their comparators

Every community faces challenges and there is clearly room to grow and improve for every local authority. Constructing an Index such as this, without paying attention to the extent to which local authorities are performing relative to the resources that the local authority itself and their residents have access to, can risk misdiagnosing the challenges they face. As discussed, some of the toughest places to grow up as a girl are also communities that are well identified as facing enormous structural challenges and tend to be deprived. Our analysis in this State of Girls' Rights

2024 report has looked at whether we can understand which communities are overperforming, relative to these challenges.

Our Index looked at local authorities in England in relation to the average index of multiple deprivation. There is no uniform way of measuring deprivation across the UK, with each of the four nations calculating its own index of multiple deprivation. For this analysis we have had to focus solely on England for comparability.



There is a modest linear relationship between higher scores showing lower levels of deprivation and higher scores in outcomes on our Index. This is unsurprising, since girls are expected to be worse-off if they are living in more deprived areas. Further, many of the ways that the deprivation is calculated overlap with the metrics that the Girls' Rights Index draws on — such as life expectancy — even if the indices of deprivation does not relate specifically to girls.

While it is unsurprising that girls' lives are generally tougher, according to our Index, in more deprived parts of the country, more richness can be gained by exploring which areas are under performing or overachieving for girls relative to their multiple deprivation scores. We can look at the distance that local authorities score compared to what we would expect them to score, based on their level of deprivation. In one group are the local authorities that have the highest Contextualised Performance Indicator and fall within the

20% most deprived local authorities in England. In other words, these are the local authorities with high levels of deprivation, but which achieve better outcomes for girls compared to local authorities with similar levels of deprivation. Torbay overachieves the most, with a Contextualised Performance Indicator of 3.22, meaning that its Girls' Rights Index score is 3.22 points higher than you might expect for a local authority of similar deprivation levels. The second group includes those local authorities that have the lowest

negative Contextualised Performance Indicator scores and fall within the 20% least deprived local authorities. In other words, these are the local authorities with low levels of deprivation, where outcomes for girls are lower than you might predict given their relative affluence. The lowest performing case is Hart, which has a Contextualised Performance Indicator of -2.38, meaning that its Girls' Rights Index score is 2.38 points lower than you might expect for a local authority of similar deprivation levels.

WEALTHY UNDERPERFORMERS

COUNCIL	REGION	INDEX SCORE	CONTEXTUALISED PERFORMANCE INDICATOR
Hart	South East	72.98	-2.38
Mole Valley	South East	72.61	-2.32
St Albans	East of England	73.25	-1.80
Guildford	South East	73.21	-1.73
Ribble Valley	North West	73.17	-1.64
Test Valley	South East	73.07	-1.59
Broadland	East of England	73.27	-1.41
Fareham	South East	73.66	-1.32
Rochford	East of England	73.53	-1.30
North Hertfordshire	East of England	73.43	-1.27

DEPRIVED OVERACHIEVERS

COUNCIL	REGION	INDEX SCORE	CONTEXTUALISED PERFORMANCE INDICATOR
Torbay UA	South West	76.12	3.22
Thanet	South East	75.21	2.66
Newham	London	74.68	1.94
Islington	London	74.89	1.93
Hastings	South East	73.98	1.75
Leicester	East Midlands	74.34	1.74
Swale	South East	74.69	1.68
Birmingham	West Midlands	73.47	1.65
Middlesbrough	North East	73.17	1.62
East Lindsey	East Midlands	74.31	1.60

THE VOICES OF GIRLS IN NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE AND BLACKPOOL

Where you grow up can fundamentally affect your life chances. Place matters — local poverty, lack of community support, poor educational and employment opportunities, and being unsafe can impact outcomes across someone's life.⁴³¹ While girls will face challenges growing up in any community, our Index of local authorities has demonstrated additional structural barriers that are most pointed in some communities.

“The negative opinion of people who are not from here. There are rough parts and nice parts wherever you go, and it is only the same here in Grimsby.”
(Katy, 23, Grimsby)

“I feel in the North West we don't really have that much of a voice.”
(Ella, 15, Blackpool)

Bridie, 25, North
East Lincolnshire



Our 2016 The State of Girls' Rights in the UK report identified Middlesbrough as the toughest community to grow up in as a girl in the UK. That's why in 2020 Plan International UK interviewed girls and professionals in Middlesbrough to understand what it's like to grow up as a girl there, and the barriers they face. Four years ago, our Index found the toughest place to grow up was Blackpool, whilst this year our newly redeveloped

Index has identified North East Lincolnshire as the toughest place to grow up as a girl, with Blackpool coming second.

We wanted to talk directly to girls and young women in North East Lincolnshire and Blackpool to understand their lives — the positives and the challenges. We hosted two workshops in May 2024 with four members of the United Youth Alliance (UYA) in Blackpool

and a group of five apprentices based in Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire, to hear their voices and share their perspectives in this research. We asked them about their wishes, hopes, and dreams for themselves and their community. These were small groups and will not be representative of the experiences

of all young people in their community, but it is important that research is grounded in the views of participants. We wanted to create a space for girls and young women to share their own experiences of their communities and lives, in the hope that this drives more research and discussion in future.

“Everyone knows everybody, so you have someone looking out for you. I feel I am safe with those people.”

(Ellie, 25, Grimsby)

“I believe that as our generation progresses, we get closer towards a society where people are treated less divided by gender and more just as mates. We surround ourselves with people who we enjoy being around, and there’s a pretty good gender diversity within that.”

(Evie, 14, Blackpool)

There were many themes in common between the two groups, who were keen to demonstrate the positives of their communities. Both groups talked about the importance of the strong local community. Our research has shown that relationships, on and offline, are a key source of happiness for most girls and young women. Strong communities and a sense of belonging are important for wellbeing and

feeling supported in taking on opportunities. Participants told us about the importance of “tight knit community, multi-generational families” and how “everyone knows everyone”. They were proud that people are often “smiling at each other, greeting each other” which contributes to the “sense of home” when you can “walk into any bar, any place, any shop, and you know people”.

“We’ve seen a rise in small businesses in the area, there’s investment in a youth centre and there are more comedy and music events in the summer. We’re passionate about community. People know each other here and you don’t get that in a city.”

(Bridie, 25, Grimsby)

“Blackpool is honestly quite a good place to live, because there are so many opportunities in which people can band together. Even in places where people struggle, there’s opportunity to change that.”

(Evie, 14, Blackpool)

“I love being a part of the social group that I’m in - the United Youth Alliance - because that also gives you another voice and more opportunities to improve the area that you live in.”

(Genna, 15, Blackpool)

Girls and young women talked about a desire for wider community action and events. Participants in our workshops talked about how having local music venues helps with mental health and community support. They were proud of local community charities which played their role in making their communities culturally vibrant and diverse. Evie, 14, talked about the “opportunities in which people can thrive” such as Youth Pride. Youth groups such as UYA were valuable as ways for girls to share their voice.

Several participants also talked about the benefits of living near the “picturesque coastline” and having fields and green spaces nearby. We know that being around nature is valuable for girls and young women. Research shows that exposure and access to green and blue spaces, such as “parks, lakes or beaches”, is associated with better mental health and lower rates of common mental health disorders, especially “for those who live in deprived communities.”⁴³² Our research has shown that four in ten (41%) would like to take part more in activities in nature.

“Opportunities and career choices are getting better compared to five years ago. A lot more is coming up for young people leaving school. Young girls ask us about our jobs because they’re interested in the opportunity.”

(Olivia, 24, Grimsby)

Much has been written about the challenges facing deprived communities. Both North East Lincolnshire and Blackpool are part of the Government’s Levelling Up Partnerships to support regeneration. The girls and young women we spoke to had a mixed image of the local economy – realistic but hopeful. Many were worried about “limited work opportunities” and said that “most people move away for university.” But there was also positive investment, such as “great apprenticeship and engineering opportunities.”

A vibrant local high street was important in both communities – participants were worried that “small businesses shut down” but there were lots of “exciting start-ups, community-led businesses, and ventures for growth.” The importance of transport links was also emphasised. Girls and young women were worried about the lack of bus coverage and expensive tickets, and the difficulties of living at “the end of a train line”, making commuting hard without driving.

“Most of the crime in Grimsby revolves around drugs, like stealing from shops, so people can feed their addiction. I don’t feel safe in some areas.”

(Ellie, 25, Grimsby)

“I don’t really walk out in the dark alone but when I do I turn my torch on, just so I can see a little bit more. The torch on my phone. Just so I can see, like, where I am and what’s around me.”

(Olivia, 15, Blackpool)

Sadly, both groups also reflected on feeling unsafe in their town. This mirrors our research, which finds that few girls and young women feel completely safe in public spaces. They talked about fear of the “high crime rate for a small area”, drug and alcohol abuse, and lack of street lighting. Events such as the unofficial Young Farmers “DIY AGM”⁴³³ in Blackpool were of particular concern. In 2018, “the National Federation of Young Farmers cancelled [their] long-standing annual event after videos of their members’ drunken antics in the town sparked local outrage” – yet groups still

arrive each year to “display behaviour so feral that many women, other locals, and families, steer well clear.”⁴³⁴

Girls and young women expressed that they often felt they had to avoid men at night in unlit areas. They told us that “we shouldn’t have had to do that” but felt they had no choice but to leave the area in order to stay safe. They reflected that the “stereotypes put on different people ... to be dangerous, and scary” were holding people back.

“With politicians, you should take in young people’s ideas because sometimes they are helpful. They are smart. Just because they’re young doesn’t mean they don’t know anything because sometimes different ranges of opinions can really help you.”

(Tilly, 13, Blackpool)

Throughout our research on the State of Girls’ Rights in the UK, girls and young women have told us that they feel let down by politicians. They have also told us that they want to be part of change and they want to have their

voices heard. We spoke to girls and young women in Grimsby and Blackpool and asked them for their top recommendations for improving their communities.

Recommendations from the girls and young women of	
Grimsby	Blackpool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More support groups for young people struggling with substance abuse or feeling under pressure to take drugs. • Hold more community events to improve residents’ spirits in the face of negative stereotypes about the town. • Provide better street lighting so girls and young women, and all residents, feel safer walking at night. • Renovate the town centre and seafront to provide a more welcoming space for girls, young women and residents, including better management of fly tipping and graffiti. • Educate adults about the need to respect girls and young women and the impact catcalling and public harassment has on them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve safety on buses, with more CCTV and lighting in new bus stops. • Provide bus passes, to make it cheaper for people to travel to school and work. • Put more funding into renovations of buildings in Blackpool centre. • Increase funding into education and pastoral services in schools to support students who are struggling with their mental health. • Work with the police force to make girls and young women feel safer in reporting violence, and ensure reports are taken seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Girls are telling us loud and clear that they aren't experiencing the progress on gender equality they've been promised, and that the future doesn't look any better.

It doesn't have to be this way. Girls want to be part of creating change. They are campaigning for their rights and those of future generations, including here in the UK, and want their voices to be heard.

They can't make change happen alone. It's time for our politicians to step up and restore girls' trust. We need politicians across the UK to listen and respond to the challenges facing girls today, with clear action, direction, and strategy. Tackling inequality and ending discrimination must be at the heart of government action. Some of our key recommendations are about the way politicians make their decisions and actively involve girls and young women. Plan International UK recommends that the UK Government and devolved governments where relevant, should:

1. Prioritise gender equality and girls' rights across all government departments, including by launching a ten-year cross-departmental gender equality strategy. The strategy, and its implementation, should include specific and targeted support for girls and young women in all their diversity, with a strong focus on tackling gender norms and misogyny. It should have gender-focused objectives and targets and be accompanied by specific and measurable objectives and a funding and implementation plan, with responsibility sitting with a member of cabinet. This should link to, and build on, the strategy on tackling violence against women and girls.

2. Ensure girls and young women in all their diversity are a meaningful part of government policies, strategies, and programmes which affect them. Relevant equality impact assessments should take an intersectional lens and recognise adolescence as a key life stage, and girls and young women should be meaningfully engaged in co-production.
3. Establish a time-bound commission on tackling gender norms to build an understanding of what works in addressing harmful norms and misogyny, with an independent chair and involvement from girls and young women throughout. This should dovetail with reviews of the gender equality strategy to feed in recommendations, the latest research, and understanding of gaps in knowledge.
4. Collect data that is disaggregated in ways that enable us to understand the experiences of girls and young women specifically, including by collecting data on adolescent girls and broader data on age, sex, and disability. Collecting data that is also available at a local government level is vital.
5. Deliver sustainable long-term funding for local government, following local government associations' recommendations across the UK, and enable the sustainable rebuilding of vital support such as youth services, support for survivors of domestic violence, and public health initiatives.

Gendered norms and stereotypes are felt in every aspect of life. This report covers many areas of public life which need action from politicians. We need alignment across governments and departments to address this. If we want a more equal world in the future, national governments must make tangible change for girls now.

We have worked with dozens of girls and young women through workshops and the Youth Advisory Panel and heard from fellow organisations through the Girls' Rights Collective to develop these recommendations. Thank you to all of them for sharing their time and expertise.

Girls and young women should feel completely safe – especially online and in public.

We need a wide-reaching and comprehensive approach from Government to addressing gender-based violence, working at different levels. The human rights frameworks needed to tackle gender-based violence should be protected and implemented. We need to see guidance from Government that robustly implements the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023 and explicitly defines public sexual harassment to close gaps in the legislation – including wording to reduce the burden on victims to prove the perpetrator intended to cause harm. We need to see investment at all levels in the resources to tackle harassment and raise awareness of what constitutes harassment.

We need to work with men and boys to tackle harmful gendered expectations and better support people who are harmed by patriarchal norms, including boys and men themselves. Governments should support bystander and allyship training in educational and community settings, which support positive narratives of masculinity and promote alternative voices to combat misogynistic influencers.

Governments and regulators should create a safe world online following the Online Safety Act 2023 by requiring accountability and transparency from tech companies in their reporting processes and increasing media literacy and digital citizenship.

Governments and commissioners need to provide long-term stable funding to the Violence Against Women and Girls sector so that they can provide trauma-informed, holistic, accessible support services and counselling. This includes ring-fenced funding for young people's and specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, D/deaf and disabled women, and LGBTQ+ survivors. Valerie's Law for mandatory cultural competency training for professionals should be introduced, as called for by Sistah Space and the Ending Violence Against Women coalition.⁴³⁵

We must support trans and gender-nonconforming students by ensuring schools fulfil their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of their students, including confidentiality, and give weight to the pupils' needs and best interests.

Girls' health and wellbeing must be a priority, especially when supporting their sex and reproductive health and rights.

Tackling the root causes of poor mental and physical health is essential, including the impact of health inequalities on girls and young women. A gendered lens should be applied to developing governmental health strategies, research, and data, and these should build evidence on debilitating health problems, which are too often deprioritised. Improving provision for early mental health intervention is essential, as well as more and better support for eating disorders, endometriosis, and sexual health and contraception. We must improve training for clinical staff on listening to patients who are less likely to be listened to, such as women and girls, people with disabilities, and people of colour, in the importance of listening to their concerns and acknowledging their expertise in their own lives.

Governments should produce, or refresh, sexual and reproductive health strategies, and action plans. This should be done with public health departments, with a focus on support for adolescence as a key life stage, improving sex and reproductive health and rights, and addressing sexually transmitted infection rates. Abortion is a human right and lifesaving healthcare, and the provision of services for safe abortion, should be available and accessible to all girls and women. The Government should advance the right to bodily autonomy through improved legislation on access to safe abortion.

The global anti-rights movement threatens the progress previously made towards gender equality and fulfilling the rights of women, girls and LGBTQ+ communities. Gains made over decades are being driven back in these areas, and progress towards ending restrictive social norms has stalled. The UK Government must develop and strengthen its internal approach to countering the anti-rights movement.

We must address gendered norms and their impact among girls and boys in school, through a whole-school approach to transform gender norms, making comprehensive gender transformative Relationships, Sex and Health Education and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education statutory for all. Schools should be provided with funding and resources to ensure that teachers are trained, equipped, confident and supported to deliver this fundamental education with proper lesson time allocated. Online resources need support so girls and young women can sort fact from fiction in their own time. We must tackle the toxic trio of period poverty that girls face in the cost of products, lack of education, and stigma⁴³⁶ through evaluating, strengthening, and extending free period products schemes and rolling out Menstrual Health Education across the UK with improved guidance.

We must not control girls' bodies.

We must change how we teach young people about how they look at their own and others' bodies and appearance — including through preventing the early policing of bodies and clothing. Government and regulators should improve standards in advertising in industries such as cosmetic surgery. School uniform codes and guidance should ensure that school approaches do not discriminate. Policies can codify gendered clothes in a way that is harmful and unnecessary. All children and young people should be able to be comfortable and flexible gender-neutral uniform policies should be supported and encouraged. School uniform guidance should explicitly prevent hair discrimination, including natural Afro hairstyles and head coverings as per Equality and Human Rights Commission guidance.⁴³⁷

Every girl should have an education that sets them up for their future.

Every child and young person should have an education that enables them to develop to their full potential, in a space that feels supportive and safe from gender-based violence. When done well, holistic education can foster wellbeing, critical thinking, be life-sustaining and mind-expanding. Leaders should take a whole-school, gender-transformative approach to equality, support for girls' rights and ending gender-based violence. This should be an explicit expectation on schools and include investing in staff training and capacity. Governments should develop strategies, which take an intersectional approach to addressing misogyny, harassment, and gender-based violence in schools and ensure relevant guidance reflects the gendered nature of gender-based violence.

Governments should improve access to school toilets and changing facilities by updating guidance to recognise menstrual needs and ensure flexibility. For example, encouraging changing school timetables to give more opportunities to access toilets between classes and not create rushes for all pupils at the same time, as well as ensuring safety and privacy for non-binary and trans young people in toilets and changing rooms.

The provision of careers advice in schools should be reviewed and improved by governments, with clearer pathways and more understanding of the career options available. There should be focus on improving awareness of the gendered uptake of careers and case studies of employers that are actively working towards better gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace, as well as links to career resources, mentoring schemes, and careers fairs should be shared.

The UK Government must make workplaces more equitable — especially in careers traditionally associated with women. This should include limiting zero hours contracts and ensuring the National Living Wage applies to everyone fairly, regardless of age.

We must free girls and young women from the cost of living crisis.

Girls and young women feel the impact of the cost of living crisis on themselves and their family, especially as they get older. Governments should improve schools' financial education to prepare young people for budgeting, but we cannot ignore the systemic challenges which individual action cannot overcome. Concerted action is needed to uphold the social safety net, such as through developing the Essentials Guarantee to ensure that Universal Credit protects people from going without essential items, as proposed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust,⁴³⁸ and ending the two-child benefit limit. Governments should provide free school meals to all children, starting with children of families in receipt of Universal Credit, as set out by the Food Foundation.⁴³⁹

The youth sector is a vital source of support. Governments should provide ring-fenced, flexible and long-term funding for girls' and women's organisations, including those led by and for girls of colour, disabled girls, LGBTQ+ girls and others, and facilitate their participation in democracy and policy-making mechanisms. Governments should develop or refresh Youth Work Sectors with aligned investment in the youth sector to support gender transformative youth services and civic engagement.

Girls and young women should be safe to enjoy their lives and hobbies.

Girls and young women feel unsafe in leisure facilities, open spaces, and taking part in activities. We must tackle the behaviours that make them feel unsafe directly, but also ensure that accessibility is built into the design stage for facilities. Governments and providers should improve signs and visual awareness in leisure facilities to promote a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual harassment; promote youth only classes and accept flexible payment options. The planning system should be reformed by governments to have regard to safety and gender equity as considerations in open spaces. This should include lighting as a specific way to support girls and young women feeling safe in green spaces.

Girls must be included at the heart of decision-making

Girls and young women want to be involved in political and community life, and care deeply about the issues which face our society. Politicians and institutions need to regain trust by platforming girls and women from youth clubs to the Cabinet — listening to their voices and supporting their involvement in public life. Governments and local authorities should develop permanent mechanisms to involve girls and young women in the decision-making that affects them, as part of long-term engagement. Governments should show commitment to girls' and young women's participation in public life through protecting the right to protest and upholding human rights legislation.

CONCLUSIONS

Girls and young women in the UK are being held back by gender inequality and feel uncertain about their future. Girls and young women across the UK told us loud and clear that they understand the complicated lives and pressures women are expected to live with every day. Gender norms are complex and need considering in an intersectional way.

The conversation on gender equality, since our last State of Girls' Rights report in 2020, has continued and evolved, however major drivers of inequalities have held us back from making real progress. Growing up in a cost of living crisis and a climate emergency, they feel anxious and uncertain for their future and the future of the world. They feel unprepared by their education, worried about future job prospects and are concerned by a rising culture of misogyny. Their lives online keep them connected but expose them to violence and harm. They feel unsafe in public spaces and feel failed by our institutions. From Lincolnshire to London, girls across the UK are angry and frustrated about the state of equality and girls' rights in the UK. Society has been increasingly telling girls that they can be and do anything, but they are frustrated and still held back by outdated stereotypes and unfair expectations. Sadly, our research has found that happiness declines as girls get older

and the reality of the pressures, norms, and limitations put on them are realised.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Girls told us they want to make change for the better themselves, in their communities, across the UK and globally. Tired of empty words of empowerment, girls want to see real tangible change in their lives.

The voices of the girls and young women in this report, who kindly gave their time, provide an insight into their lives in the UK across a variety of themes and policy areas. No single section can tell the whole story on its own, as no one girl's experience can show the experience of all girls. Collectively, we seek for them to make up a comprehensive depiction of girls' lives in 2024.

It's clear girls and young women cannot make society more equal alone. We need our leaders to take heed of the voices of girls and young women in all their diversity.

Girls and young women need support to access their rights. We need action, not empty promises. Gender equality is long overdue. It's time for politicians to restore girls' trust. Tackling inequality and ending discrimination must be at the heart of government action.

SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

This report discusses many difficult topics. If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this report, support and resources are available. Organisations in your community can also offer advice, counselling, and further information.

Black Minds Matter Resources	Black Minds Matter UK's mission is to create and champion safe and accessible mental health support with, and for, the Black community.	www.blackmindsmatteruk.com/resources
Childline Website, helpline, email, live chat, chat with counsellor with help from a British Sign Language interpreter	Childline supports anyone, under 19, in the UK with any issue. Whether it's something big or small, trained counsellors are there to offer support. Childline is free, confidential, and available any time, day or night. Visit the Childline Calm Zone to find tools to help you feel calm.	Call: 0800 1111 www.childline.org.uk www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone
Fearless Anonymous reporting	Fearless enables young people to anonymously pass on information about crime.	Call: 0800 555 111 www.crimestoppers-uk.org/fearless
Mencap Helpline, email, online form, online resources	Mencap's vision is for the UK to be the best place in the world for people with a learning disability to live happy and healthy lives.	Call: 0808 808 1111 www.mencap.org.uk
The Mix Website, online chat, discussion board, crisis messenger, online advice	The Mix is a UK based charity that provides free, confidential support for young people under 25 via online, social, and mobile.	https://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team To access a free, 24/7 crisis text support line, text "THEMIX" to 85258.
Muslim Youth Helpline Helpline, live chat, email, WhatsApp	Muslim Youth Helpline is a national listening service and a faith and culturally-sensitive helpline, providing empathetic support to young Muslims in the UK – regardless of what issue they are facing.	Call: 0808 808 2008 www.myh.org.uk

Papyrus	Papyrus provides information and support for anyone under 35 who is struggling with suicidal feelings, or anyone concerned about a young person who might be struggling.	Call: 0800 068 41 41 www.Papyrus-uk.org
Rape Crisis England & Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland Website, helpline, live chat, support centres	Rape Crisis England & Wales (RCEW), Rape Crisis Scotland and Rape Crisis Northern Ireland are networks of Rape Crisis Centres which offer free, confidential and specialist support to victims and survivors in the local area.	Call: 0808 500 2222 (England & Wales) 08088 01 03 02 (Scotland) 0800 0246 991 (Northern Ireland) www.rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help (E&W) www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk www.rapecrisisni.org.uk/get-help-now/
Samaritans Call, website, email, face-to-face, letter, live chat	Samaritans is a charity dedicated to reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection that can lead to suicide. You can talk to someone, confidentially, 24/7 and 365 days of the year.	Call: 116 123 www.samaritans.org
Scope Information and support	Scope is a disability equality charity in England and Wales, which provides practical information and emotional support.	www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/
Turning Point Website	Turning Point is a social enterprise, that designs and delivers health and social care services in the fields of substance use, mental health, learning disability, autism, acquired brain injury, sexual health, homelessness, healthy lifestyles, and employment.	www.turning-point.co.uk/support-we-offer/drugs-and-alcohol
Victim Support Helpline, live chat, website	Victim Support is an independent charity dedicated to supporting victims of crime and traumatic incidents in England and Wales	Call: 0808 1689 111 www.victimsupport.org.uk
Young Minds Resources	Young Minds is a mental health charity with resources, practical tips and advice from young people, as well as information on getting the support you need.	www.youngminds.org.uk

Whilst care has been taken to ensure the credibility of the above resources, these resources are third party services owned and operated by an independent party over which Plan International UK has no control. Plan International UK is not associated with the

providers of these services; are not responsible or liable for the goods and services offered and makes no warranties, representations or undertakings relating to the content of third party websites and services.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: METHODOLOGY

The State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2024 report was developed through a mixed methodology study. We based its development on learnings from the previous two State of Girls' Rights in the UK reports in 2016 and 2020. It included:

- **Horizon scanning with girls.** To inform the shape of our survey, we held workshops with 24 girls from across the UK.
- **Large-scale survey.** We surveyed the views of 2,963 girls and young women aged 12 to 21 across the UK, conducted in schools and via online panels.
- **Literature review.** We scanned evidence and datasets published between 2018 and 2023, principally since our last State of Girls' Rights report in 2020, focusing on the specific age group of 12 to 21 years.
- **Creative workshops.** We held five, two-day creative workshops with girls and young women in all four UK nations.
- **Index of local authorities.** We identified a set of indicators across available local authority datasets that we assessed as most relevant to capture the levels of enjoyment of rights by girls and young women where they live across the UK.
- **Recommendations.** We hosted a series of consultation events, engaging with girls and young women, as well as professionals, and took part in online engagement work with the Girls' Rights Collective of organisations dedicated to advancing girls' rights.

Feminist methodologies have much in common with participatory approaches. For example, both approaches focus on collaboration, emphasise the lived experiences of participants, challenge common ways of generating knowledge, minimise hierarchies, and have an overall motivation to support social change. Participatory action research (PAR) approaches are described as:

“Research by, with, and for people affected by a particular problem, which takes place in collaboration with academic researchers. It seeks to [democratise] knowledge production and foster opportunities for empowerment by those involved.”⁴⁴⁰

This research combines elements of PAR and feminist methodologies and is also inspired by Plan International's ambition to be youth-centred, as set out in our organisational strategy 2021-23. The key areas of the research where girls and young women participated included:

- Plan International UK's Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) were consulted on the topics of focus for the large-scale survey.
- We conducted preliminary research with girls and young women, which fed into the development of the survey.

- Our survey included open box questions where girls and young women could share what was important to them.
- Creative workshops, which enabled girls and young women to be partners and creators of the research through their use of film, images, and written word. Girls and young women could choose to create artwork on subjects that were most important to them.
- Workshops with our Youth Advisory Panel on developing recommendations.
- Sessions with youth groups in the toughest communities to grow up as a girl. Girls and young women were encouraged and supported to share their sentiments on life locally, local services, what they wanted the wider world to know, and develop recommendations for change.

Working iteratively

We adopted an iterative and sequential approach. This means that each phase informed the next and as the research progressed, the focus became more specific. Phase 1 adopted research methods (horizon scanning, the survey, literature review and Index) which helped us to gain a broad and robust understanding of the challenges and opportunities affecting girls and young women in the UK. Phase 2 focused on gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experiences of girls and young women through the qualitative creative workshops.

Methods

Several parts of the research were led by external researchers with relevant experience and expertise, all of whom are listed at the front of this report. Each of the research teams working on the substantive elements were recruited through Plan International's procurement policy and advertised publicly

on LinkedIn. The following sections will describe these methods in more detail. The total number of girls and young women who participated across all elements was over 3,000, including girls from all four UK nations.

Horizon scanning

To get a sense of the challenges and opportunities for girls and young women and to generate the most relevant questions for the large-scale survey, we conducted a horizon scanning exercise. This involved a series of workshops, across the UK, involving a total of 24 girls and young women aged between 12 and 20 years old. This research was a mix of face to face and online. Researchers recruited participants through their local networks in Norwich, Torfaen, Perthshire, and Belfast. We also conducted short, external, expert stakeholder interviews and surveys to gain insight into the current context.

Large-scale survey

We worked with CHILDWISE to conduct a large-scale survey of girls and young women across the UK. The survey was a mixed method survey including open box answers for girls and young women to write what was important to them, as well as closed questions.

To recruit participants, CHILDWISE used their panel of schools and colleges across the UK to sample 12 to 16 year old girls (five individual year groups), and an online panel of adults to sample 17 to 21 year old young women. This helped us capture key transition points in the lives of girls and young women. Two methods were used to recruit participants to reach the widest range of girls and young women possible. For example, a schools survey alone wouldn't have covered those above school age. A survey, largely with in-person support, was appropriate for engaging younger participants and the school survey gave the broadest opportunity to do this.

This project underwent a rigorous ethics and safeguarding process before conducting the survey. Given the age range of research participants, in some instances where questions were particularly sensitive, slightly different questions were asked to ensure they were age appropriate – in the reporting of data we have indicated where this is the case. For example, we only asked participants over 15 years old the extent to which they agreed with statements such as ‘it is okay for a boy / man to touch me even if I don’t want them to’. The question was also prefaced with a trigger warning saying, ‘The next question is about types of violence and abuse. If you do not feel comfortable answering this question, please click NEXT and remember please follow up with your teacher or the services listed in the banner if needed’.

The online panel used Dynata, which is one of the largest data platforms in the UK and globally. The panel strived to be as representative as possible by recruiting members from the top and bottom socio-economic groups (As and Es). The approach to using the panel was via an adult, which could be a parent, for the younger end of the 17 to 21 year old age group, or direct respondent for the older end of this cohort.^{xxviii}

Overall, we had 2,963 girls and young women, complete our survey. Well above our 2,600 target. The tables below show the sample by single year of age, by the sampling source, and by geographic region.

While we have tried to achieve a sample that is as representative as possible, we recognise that 2,963 girls and young women cannot entirely represent millions of girls and young women in the UK. Within this group there are undoubtedly demographic groups and/or experiences we would not be able to uncover. To account for this, we conducted a multi-method approach to uncover different types of information to ensure we took into account the broad range of experiences of girls and young women in the UK.

We have taken steps to ensure our survey is as representative as possible. For example, to ensure our sample was balanced by the key differentiator of age, we applied a small weighting by single year of age across all 12 to 21 year olds, down weighting the 2,963 sample to our target of 2,600 sample in total (260 respondents across each of the ten age groups). This weighting restored balance by age but had very little effect on the overall representativeness of the sample.

In the table shown, we have compared both our unweighted and our final weighted sample by English region, and the three nations, to the proportions of 12 to 21 year old girls and young women from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) mid-year population estimates for 2021 (published 2022). Our final weighted sample is broadly comparable with ONS data, with the largest discrepancies in the North West (3.3% over ONS estimates), and the South East (2.7% under ONS estimates).

REGION	NORTH EAST	NORTH WEST	YORKSHIRE	WEST MIDLANDS	EAST MIDLANDS	EAST ANGLIA	LONDON	SOUTH EAST	SOUTH WEST	SCOTLAND	NORTHERN IRELAND	WALES	TOTAL
ONS 2021	4%	11.4%	8.5%	9.3%	7.6%	9%	13.2%	13.7%	8.2%	7.6%	3%	4.6%	100%
Unweighted sample	3.2%	15%	6.5%	9.8%	6.7%	9.0%	13.7%	11%	7.6%	5.6%	5.1%	6.7%	100%
Final weighted sample	3.5%	14.7%	7.1%	9.7%	6.7%	8.7%	13%	11.6%	7.9%	6.1%	4.7%	6.3%	100%

The following tables outline the participants who took part in the survey, their location and other demographic information.

AGE	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	TOTAL
Via schools	157	408	469	310	61						1405
Via panel	72				141	263	281	269	267	265	1558
TOTAL	229	408	469	310	202	263	281	269	267	265	2963

REGION	NORTH EAST	NORTH WEST	YORKSHIRE	WEST MIDLANDS	EAST MIDLANDS	EAST ANGLIA	LONDON	SOUTH EAST	SOUTH WEST	SCOTLAND	NORTHERN IRELAND	WALES	TOTAL
Via schools	26	255	66	149	82	165	201	101	85	39	111	125	1405
Via panel	70	189	127	142	118	102	204	226	139	126	41	74	1558
TOTAL	96	444	193	291	200	267	405	327	224	165	152	199	2963

NATION	ENGLAND	WALES	SCOTLAND	NORTHERN IRELAND	TOTAL
	2447	199	165	152	2963

INDICES OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION	HIGH (1090)					LOW (1223)					NOT GIVEN	TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
	239	167	262	279	143	193	280	187	219	344	650	2963

OVERALL ETHNICITY	WHITE	NON-WHITE	NOT GIVEN	TOTAL
	2118	703	142	2963

SPECIFIC ETHNICITY	WHITE	ASIAN / ASIAN BRITISH	BLACK / AFRICAN / CARIBBEAN / BLACK BRITISH	MIXED	OTHER	NOT GIVEN	TOTAL
	2118	359	159	133	52	142	2963

OTHER SELF-IDENTIFIED IDENTITIES/CHALLENGES	MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION	NEURODIVERGENT	PHYSICAL DISABILITY	LONG TERM HEALTH CONDITION	YOUNG CARER	NONE OF THESE
	794	496	91	240	122	1778

IDENTITY	LGBTQ+	DOES NOT IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ+	NOT GIVEN	TOTAL
	664	1980	299	2963

LIVE WITH...	BOTH PARENTS	ONE PARENT	NEITHER PARENT	NOT GIVEN	TOTAL
	1694	819	306	144	2963

^{xxviii} We also used the panel to achieve some surveys with 12 and 16 year old girls where we had small deficiencies in the schools sample.

Literature review

A literature review was conducted by consultancy More in Common. To achieve this, a systematic search of 242 unique pieces of evidence was conducted across academic databases, governmental reports, charity and think tank reports, and supplementary datasets from 2018-2023, focusing on the specific age group of 12 to 21 years. This ensured that each research theme is informed by a range of different reports, articles, and other data sources, appreciating the specialised nature of the themes explored. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used by More in Common's researchers as they analysed the material found during the searching phase.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies providing insights into the target population (young women and girls aged 12 to 21 in the UK).
- Relevance to the thematic focus, such as health, education, participation, family support, economic stability, and gender-based violence.
- UK-wide and regional reports, along with global comparisons where relevant. For example, PwC's Global Gender Pay Gap Index.
- Gender-neutral data when there was a lack of gender-specific data, but where the data provides a perspective that was still pertinent for girls and young women.
- Most recent iterations of annual reports were prioritised, though exceptions were made in cases where older editions contained unique information.

Index

To develop the Index, Plan International UK worked with consultancy More in Common and a range of experts. More in Common reviewed over 25 existing composite indicators from around the world that measure either children's or women's rights, as well as an extensive assessment of the existing publicly available data landscape. The data collection process also involved conversations with statisticians at various government departments across the UK's four nations, and freedom of information (FOI) requests where necessary, to assess the availability of certain metrics that were deemed important for this report but not published publicly.

Indicators were selected for inclusion in the Index based on the following criteria, with some limitations in the data.

- **Relevance:** Indicators were sought that were relevant to the lives of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 years old. In most cases, indicators were sought that were disaggregated by sex and age, for example, healthy life expectancy for girls at age 12, or participation in education, employment or training for young women aged 16 to 17. Not all data was available disaggregated, such as child poverty data or mental health service waiting times data. In the absence of data disaggregated by sex or age, some indicators have been included as they are important indicators affecting girls' lives and their experience of governmental support. However, we note that many are likely to underestimate the extent to which girls and young women disproportionately experience issues such as poverty. We also sought data, where possible, that had been updated in the years since 2020 and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some data previously relevant has not been updated since before the pandemic and lockdowns.

- **Uniqueness:** No two indicators that describe roughly the same elements of life are used in the indicator, to avoid "double counting". For example, Healthy Life Expectancy and Disability-Adjusted Life Expectancy are not both used, since they are similar indicators based on the same mortality data and are highly correlated.
- **Accuracy:** In almost all cases, the data used in this report are certified statistics from organisations such as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for England and Wales, StatsWales, National Records of Scotland (NRS) or Northern Ireland Statistics and research Agency (NISRA). In a small number of cases, data are not national statistics but are compiled by trusted governmental, academic, or non-governmental organisations.
- **Availability:** Only publicly available data across the four UK nations was considered. Where data was collected, but not published, with the disaggregation required for this analysis, FOI requests were sent to relevant government departments for disaggregated data, and we are grateful to the statisticians in these departments who provided us with timely and accurate data.
- **Comparability:** Data points are not collected in consistent ways across the four nations of the UK. For the Index, indicators were used that were sufficiently similar for comparison between nations. This however excludes many useful indicators available in individual nations such as homelessness rates, measures of subjective wellbeing, measures of subjective satisfaction at school, participation in sport and physical activity, services for domestic abuse, and charge rates for rape. In particular, the data landscape in Northern Ireland is very different to data collection in England, Scotland, and Wales. Several elements of the Index were

unavailable in Northern Ireland. In a few cases such as for gender pay gaps, data was only available for Northern Ireland as a whole, rather than local authorities within it. Here the Northern Ireland data point has been applied to Northern Ireland's local authorities. For example, pay data is only available at an all-Northern Ireland level, rather than at local authority level. Data is also unavailable for teenage pregnancy rates, violence and sexual assault rates, and voting turnout for 18 to 24 year olds. To mitigate this, we have imputed average data for the other three nations but reflect these limitations in our analysis. Waiting times for mental health services for young people is measured differently in Northern Ireland. Instead of an average waiting time, it is measured as a proportion of service users waiting longer than nine weeks.⁴⁴¹ To include this data we have assumed a wait time of nine weeks. Because of this, the results for any specific local authority within Northern Ireland should be treated with more caution than those in other nations.

- **Completeness:** Comparable indicators were sought across all four UK nations, covering every lower-tier local authority District – a type of UK administrative geography that includes all Welsh Unitary Authorities (22), Irish Local Government Districts (11), Scottish Council Areas (32), London Boroughs (33), English Metropolitan Districts (36), English Non-metropolitan Districts (164), and English Unitary Authorities (63). Datasets with significant data gaps – in most cases, those missing more than ten local authorities – were excluded. In some cases, data was not available at the lower-tier local authority Level. In these cases, data was applied to local authorities using official ONS lookup tools. Most commonly (for example, life expectancy and some English education data), Non-metropolitan Counties were applied to Non-metropolitan local authorities. In other cases, health and

police geographies were applied to local authorities. No data was available in many metrics for the Scilly Isles and the City of London, and thus both local authorities have been excluded from our analysis. There are additional gaps in the data for local authorities with a smaller population, such as Orkney Isles Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, where reporting was occasionally suppressed. There were additional challenges on reporting STEM uptake in Knowsley, Blaenau Gwent, and Merthyr Tydfil local authorities due to small student numbers or lack of sixth form colleges in the council area. For these instances, we have imputed national (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) or regional (North West) averages.

Following these criteria, the following indicators were chosen to form the basis of the UK-wide Index.

- **Healthy life expectancy:** The expected number of years that a female 12 year old will spend in good or very good health.
- **General health:** The percentage of 16 to 24 year old women describing their health as “good” or “very good”.
- **Waiting times for young people’s mental health services:** The average number of days from referral to first appointment with child and adolescent mental health services (CAHMS) or child and young people’s mental health services (CYPMHS).
- **Teenage pregnancy:** The conception rate per 1,000 females under the age of 18.
- **Participation in education, employment, or training:** The percentage of 16 to 17 year old girls participating in education, employment, or training.

- **STEM uptake:** The percentage of female A-Level students taking at least one A-Level (or equivalent) in a science, technology, engineering, or maths (STEM) subject.
- **Attainment at KS4:** The percentage of 16 year old girls achieving a comparable benchmark at GCSE (or equivalent).
- **Child poverty:** Percentage of children living in relative poverty, after housing costs.
- **Pay data:** The difference between average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men and women as a proportion of men’s average hourly earnings (excluding overtime). It is a measure across all jobs in the UK, not of the difference in pay between men and women for doing the same job.
- **Feelings of safety at night:** The percentage of people saying they feel unsafe walking alone after dark in their area.
- **Sexual assault:** The percentage of women who say they have been sexually assaulted in the last year.
- **Voter turnout:** The percentage of 18 to 24 year olds who voted at the last General Election.

New indicators in this 2024 Index, compared to the 2020 Index, include general health, waiting times for mental health services, STEM uptake, pay, feelings of safety at night, sexual assault, and voter turnout.

Plan International UK has developed an Index based on these 12 indicators. They were combined into a single Index score for the State of Girls’ Rights and lives.

1. Each indicator was transformed into a metric to provide the same scale for all and obtain a score ranging from 0 to 100 for each indicator. Some indicators were

reversed to maintain directionality, i.e. that a score of 100 always represented the best outcome. Examples of indicators that were reversed are poverty, since a score of 100 needs to represent not being at risk of poverty. For most indicators, this score corresponds to the observed percentage. For example, 95% of 16 to 17 year old girls in employment, education, or training would receive a score of 95 out of 100. For two indicators (pay differences and waiting time), this approach is not possible due to a difference in unit, and instead the values were rescaled between 0 and 1 on the interval bound by the range \pm two standard deviations to obtain the scores.

2. The indicators were aggregated into their dimensions, providing scores for the domains of education and economic lives, poverty, health, violence, and participation and voice.
3. The five domains were equally weighted in line with similar composite indicators, such as the Women’s Empowerment Index (WEI) from UN Women and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).⁴⁴² This composite index developed similar dimensions on life and good health, education, skill-building and knowledge, labour and financial inclusion, participation in decision-making, and freedom from violence.⁴⁴³
4. The scores of each domain were then averaged to provide a final score for our index.

In short, we sought to provide an average performance of local authorities across a range of areas of girls’ lives. This provides an easily understandable representation of the range in how tough it is for a girl or young woman to live in different parts of the UK.

The methodological best practice developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) were applied.⁴⁴⁴ The correlation structure of the Index, overall and in relation to its domains and indicators, were assessed. There were no negative correlations, and most indicators and domains were correlated to the final Index score. Some indicators did not correlate much with the scores, however, despite their lower contribution to the overall scores, they remain in the final measurement framework due to their relevance to girls' lives in the UK. Robust checks were also carried out, whereby the Index was recalculated excluding one domain each time. While some variance occurred, it was not evident that any particular domain exerted too much pressure on the Index.

Creative workshops

As part of this research, we conducted creative workshops^{xxix} with five groups of girls and young women across the UK. These workshops adopted a participatory action research methodology (PAR). This methodology is focused on putting participants at the centre of the research and supporting them to develop creative outputs based on what is important to them.

Over the course of two days, girls and young women took part in the following:

- Narrative inquiry interviews where girls and young women interviewed each other about set topics and topics that matter to them.
- A focus group was conducted to establish what the main challenges and opportunities for girls and young women are today (in 2023).

- From the discussions in the focus group and narrative inquiry interviews, participants worked on a creative project. These could include poems, artwork, films, photography, cartoons and animations. The girls and young women supported each other to create their projects by sharing ideas, contributing to the drawing, cutting, and sticking etc. They were taught how to use media equipment and took photos and video footage of each other using professional photography and film equipment.
- For participating in the two-day workshop, girls and young women had the opportunity to gain a Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework certificate in Access to Media from Edinburgh College.

A total of 46 girls and young women took part in these workshops aged between 12 and 21. Workshops were conducted in Blackpool, Cupar, Derry, Great Yarmouth, and Neath Port Talbot. This was qualitative research seeking depth of understanding. Girls and young women were recruited from youth groups and schools based on elements of their identity and experiences. For example, we wanted to understand more about the experiences of refugee and asylum seekers, girls in care, and LGBTQ+ girls, so groups were recruited based on those characteristics. Furthermore, we wanted to understand what life was like for girls and young women in places which were ranked as challenging places to grow up in our 2016 and 2020 State of Girls' Rights Index reports.

The character of the workshop participants was varied. The Blackpool Group consisted of both very young (age 13) and older women who had left school (age 21). They had an interest in, and had considered, the rights of young women and the challenges they face in their own lives. In Wales, the young women came from challenging backgrounds, including living

in residential care. The Cupar Group, made up of people from Fife and Dundee in Scotland, were selected because of their homogeneous mix of gender and sexual identity. They drew on the local LGBTQ+ community and also had a good grasp of issues challenging young women today. A school in Derry was selected because they represented a range of faiths. The Derry Group were young and had only a beginner's understanding of life issues that might affect them but were aware of school system issues. In Great Yarmouth we worked with young women from different cultural backgrounds. Two were from a Lithuanian background and four had an Afro-Caribbean heritage. They were all very aware of issues facing young women and young women from different ethnic backgrounds, in particular.

For the creative workshops, a representative sample was not sought, nor was it appropriate for this form of research. Rather, we wanted to have a sample which was homogeneous and included some girls/young women from specific groups. Included in the workshops were girls from youth groups that catered for those at risk of going into care, those in residential homes, members of the LGBTQ+ youth club, school pupils and those from different ethnic backgrounds.

AGE RANGES

- **Blackpool:** 8, aged between 13 and 21
- **Derry:** 11, aged around 12 or 13
- **Fife:** 9, aged 12 to 18
- **Wales:** 12, between the ages of 12 and 15
- **Great Yarmouth:** 6, between the ages of 12 and 20

At the end of the two-day process, the creative team from Media Education worked on editing and developing the artworks. The girls and young women in the groups were then sent their finished pieces to confirm they were happy with the final product and whether they were happy to give consent for them to be published.

We used Narrative Inquiry as the method for peer interviews. Narrative Inquiry was chosen as it is a highly accessible approach to research. It involves storytelling, which is a natural form of communication, and is consistent with the objectives of this research project — which was to seek points of view, unprompted by questions which may frame the answers. The second part of each interview was more constrained, and specific questions on themes for the quantitative data were posed. Accessibility was important for young participants, for whom communication with a researcher might prove challenging. Identities are narratives; stories describe who the teller is and is not,⁴⁴⁵ which was important to our understanding of the situation in each locality. Narrative Inquiry is considered a very authentic and robust approach as, rather than framing the content of an interview from the researchers' perspectives, it allows the participants to frame the conversation themselves. Each person is an individual who cannot and should not be compared to other people. Riessman (2008)⁴⁴⁶ proposes the concept of story constellations, where stories shine with a similar light and can be compared in this way, with no suggestion that people are the same. Criticisms of Narrative Inquiry typically focus on the truth, or otherwise of stories told. This can apply, we suggest, to all verbal communication. Twenty Narrative Inquiry interviews were completed, and these were partially transcribed and analysed, using thematic and discourse analysis.

^{xxix} This part of the research went through ethical approval through the University of Dundee

Recommendations workshops

We developed recommendations for the State of Girls' Rights report through three routes.

We worked with members of our Youth Advisory Panel, the voice of young people at Plan International UK. We did this through two engagement sessions in early 2024, one online and one held in-person at our residential course.

We also held workshops with girls in Blackpool and North East Lincolnshire, to hear the voices of girls living in the toughest places to be a girl, according to the Index in 2020 and 2024 respectively.

We also engaged with third sector and campaigning organisations through the Girls' Rights Collective, holding an open call and workshop sessions to discuss potential recommendations that would reflect the wider feelings of the girls' and women's rights sector.

These inputs were then synthesised with our literature review, and other research, to develop a series of recommendations. These recommendations were split into those which were specific to each thematic chapter, and those which had overarching significance between Government portfolio areas.

Learnings from our approach

We have conducted this research every four years and this is the 3rd iteration of the State of Girls' Rights. Since the 2016 and 2020 reports, we have taken steps to further develop the research in a number of ways.

- We have foregrounded girls' and young women's experiences by centering the research around a large-scale survey. We commissioned a dedicated survey for this research project, while previous State of Girls' Rights reports used data from other Plan International UK polls. Previously, the local authority Index has taken a more central role – whilst this is a helpful overview, the data may not be derived directly from girls and young women sharing their own stories.
- We have adopted more creative research methods and opportunities for girls and young women to share their experiences, such as through our creative workshops with Media Education.
- We have found additional indicators for the Index and sought to situate the performance of local authorities in the context of overall structural challenges facing the area, to illustrate where local authorities are performing well.
- We report findings from all the methods thematically, to offer readers a rounded overview of the findings from a range of sources.
- We have taken a sequential approach, which means one phase has informed the next and decisions about the methods and themes have been informed by the data.

This comprehensive methodology section is designed to give greater transparency to readers on how the research was conducted.

As with any research project there are limitations and considerations. Based on our feminist leadership principles of self-awareness and accountability, it is important for us to outline the potential limitations with this study. Some of the main limitations include:

- The volume of data from each method meant that there was rich information that we could unfortunately not include.

Ethics and safeguarding

Plan International UK is committed to adhering to and implementing ethical standards in monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives.^{xxx}

We seek to ensure that the wellbeing, dignity, rights, and safety of children, young people, and other participants in monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives are respected and protected. As with all of Plan International UK's programmes, campaigns, and research, this research adhered to the highest standards of ethics, safeguarding, and risk mitigation. All research activities were undertaken in line with Plan International's Research Policy and Standards. Researchers were required to adhere to strict codes of conduct, including child protection and safeguarding policies.

- Whilst we endeavoured to involve the broadest range of participants, as with any research there may be groups who are inadvertently overlooked in the research process. Some of the data received from the survey on girls of colour is not intuitive compared to other studies, and what we also hear through our work. We have sought to address this directly by reflecting this, where relevant, and adding data from other sources to give a rounded view.
- There are several specific limitations of the methods used. We sought to offset these by using a variety of methods.

Additional safeguarding measures were put in place, including in the handling of data. For each phase of research that involved girls and young women, we received ethical approval from either partner universities or through the ethical approval process at the Plan International Global Hub. Plan International UK staff and external researchers working with girls and young women all had an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. As part of the ethical approval risk assessments, data management and safeguarding plans were also developed.

^{xxx} www.plan-uk.org/safeguarding-children-and-adults

APPENDIX II: DATA GAPS IN THE INDEX

Our local authority Index is a vital contribution to our understanding of the challenges girls and young women face in the UK. However, quantitative data that is publicly collected can only ever provide a partial account of the lived experience of any group of people.⁴⁴⁷ This composite indicator should not be treated as the definitive, indisputable ranking of local authorities, but rather represents a best attempt to approximate which local authorities are performing best or worst for girls, based on the available data. This is why we have sought to also conduct our biggest ever survey of around 3,000 girls and young women and talked to girls and young women in more detail through our creative workshops.

Many aspects of girls' lives are only recorded as they come into contact with their local authority. Many datasets on girls' lives are compiled by the various government systems that they come into contact with, such as the health system for health data, the criminal justice system for crime data, etc. This has the effect that data can only be reported on when it is known to the authorities, leading to underestimates on many measures. The most commonly-cited example of this is crime,

where crime rates recorded by the police are likely to be significant underestimates of true crime levels if there is underreporting – as we know is a key challenge in the reporting of sexual assault. Similarly, cases of homelessness are likely underreported, in particular as girls and young women are more likely to be trapped in so-called “hidden homelessness”, which is often obscured from official statistics. While it is relatively easy to collect metrics on, for example, how well girls are performing at school in terms of examination results at a local authority level, it is much harder to measure more subjective (but equally important) topics – for example, how girls are feeling about their school lives. Some vital components of girls' lived experience are important – such as self-confidence, body image, or relationships with parents or carers - but not easily measurable at a local authority level. Understanding topics like this about how girls are thinking or feeling often requires survey data. While a sample size may be nationally representative, many surveys and polls are typically too small to use robustly at the Local Authority level and disaggregate by age and gender.

Similarly, intersectional experiences are mostly excluded from local authority level data. Data suppression best practices, alongside practical concerns with sampling methodology, means that data becomes less available as the groups you are reporting on get smaller. Therefore, while data availability is mostly adequate for 12 to 21 year olds on a Local Authority level, any samples smaller than this are likely to lead to many more gaps in the data. As such, this Index compares the lives of girls between local authorities but says little about (for example) the differences in girls by ethnicity within any single Local Authority. In many cases, data is readily available for racial or socioeconomic inequality between girls, but other disadvantages known to affect girls are less visible in the public data. These include, but are not limited to: girls of parents with poor mental health, girls in care, girls who have experienced bereavement, and migrant girls.⁴⁴⁸

It is also worth noting that the gendered data used in this Index mostly comes from binary categories of sex or gender, which makes the experiences of young people who might not describe themselves as a “boy” or a “girl” more difficult to quantify around the country using national statistics.

This is why we have sought to also conduct our biggest ever survey of around

3,000
girls and young women.

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