

THE STATE OF **GIRLS' RIGHTS** IN THE UK 2024 YOUTH FRIENDLY REPORT



For children and
equality for girls

Riana, 15, Great Yarmouth

INTRODUCTION

“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 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.”

Clara (18, London) and Nova (16, Glasgow), Plan International Youth Advisory Panel members, 2023 - 2025

Have you ever felt like no one listens to you because you're young? You're not alone. Many girls across the UK are speaking up about the challenges they're facing- and they're demanding change.

Although some girls are doing really well, many feel like their rights are being ignored. They're saying loud and clear that progress on gender equality isn't moving fast enough, and their rights are under attack. Bold action is needed to make sure that all girls can grow up feeling **safe, happy and achieve high for their future.**

WHAT ARE GIRLS' RIGHTS?

When we talk about girls' rights, we mean the basic freedoms and opportunities that all girls should have to feel safe, happy and able to thrive- no matter who they are or where they come from.

This report highlights some of the challenges girls face, and what can be done to make their rights a reality. Whether you read it all at once or in sections, use the supporting questions and activities to guide your thinking and explore how these issues relate to your life.

So...Let's dive in.

Who are Plan International UK?

Plan International is a charity striving for an equal world. One where every child can reach their full potential, and every girl can choose her own future. Each year, Plan International releases a report called the “The State of the World's Girls” to explore how girls' rights are being realised and what still needs to change. We in the UK have also released similar reports every few years. For the 2024 report, Plan International UK worked with **over 3,000 girls and young women aged around 12-21 from across the UK.** These girls shared their stories, hopes, views and ideas for the future. The report is shaped by their voices because your experiences and ideas matter.

This report is a shorter version of the State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2024 report and is designed for young people aged 12-21. If you want to dive deeper into any of the issues explored, you can read the full report here: plan-uk.org/state-of-girls-rights.

What is in the report?

This report covers many areas which impact the lives of girls and young women in the UK. Each section focuses on one aspect of life including education; working life; health and wellbeing; and joy and happiness. It is important to remember that these areas are all connected to each other. As you read through the report, think about the connections that you would make between the themes that emerge from the different sections.



Genna, 15, Blackpool

The report highlights several challenges faced by girls and young women which you might find upsetting. If you have been affected by any of the issues covered in the report, there is a section at the end that highlights resources and places you can reach out to for additional support.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “GIRLS”?

When we talk about girls, we mean anyone who identifies as a girl. That includes girls from all backgrounds and experiences. This includes cis or cisgender girls (whose gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth), trans or transgender girls (whose gender identity is not the same as their sex assigned at birth) 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. Using this definition when we talk about girls is all about fairness, respect, and making sure no one is left out.

Joy and happiness

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

Survey participant, Bournemouth

Life isn’t always easy for girls in the UK, but they are still finding pockets of joy and connection in their everyday lives. **Nearly 9 in 10 told us that they are happy to some extent.** 87% of girls say that relationships with friends and family are their main source of happiness, followed by “being online” and “taking part in leisure activities”. It is clear from the girls we spoke to, that feeling valued and connected, whether in person or offline is incredibly important to girls.

Sadly, the joy and happiness that girls feel lessens as they get older. **12% of girls aged 12-16** feel completely happy but only **8% of 17-21-year-olds do.**

It is super inspiring how resilient girls can be even in the face of challenges, find ways to support each other, speak out for what they believe in and hope for a better future. But it is really important that UK, devolved, and local politicians listen to girls and make sure that they are putting the right strategies in place so that girls can live lives that are full of happiness and joy, however old, and wherever they are.

REFLECTION:

What brings you happiness or makes you feel hopeful?

ACTION IDEA:

Create a collage of images, words, and objects that represent the things that bring you happiness or make you feel hopeful.



Beauty, body image and appearance pressures

Although society tells girls that they can be anything, many girls feel held back by out-of-date stereotypes and unfair expectations which are ideas that boys and girls should only like or do certain things because of their gender. These stereotypes and unfair expectations can often limit girls’ choices and opportunities because it can feel like there are invisible “rules” about what it means to be a girl.

For example, nearly half of all girls feel pressured about how they look, saying that this holds them back.

“There’s too much pressure to look perfect all the time.”

16-year-old participant

Breaking free from these stereotypes takes support and encouragement. By challenging out of date ideas and harmful expectations, we can work together to create a world where every girl feels confident to be herself. We need politicians to prioritise gender equality, and make sure that girls are being included in decision making that impacts them.

REFLECTION:

What action would you like to see in your local community to tackle outdated gender stereotypes?

ACTION IDEA:

Write these ideas down and create a poster or placard that reflects the issues in your community, and the change you would like to see.



Girls' education and futures

“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 and young women told us that schools and educational spaces are mostly positive and important spaces in their lives. **But many also worry about the future and are feeling unprepared for jobs or nervous about sexism**, which means treating someone unfairly just because of their gender, in the workplace. This is even harder for girls from marginalised groups who might get left out or treated unfairly, like those with disabilities or those from minority communities (for example young people with diverse backgrounds, religions and cultures).

Only **just over half of girls feel as though their education has or is preparing them well for their futures**, and only half of girls felt that they had the same education and employment opportunities as boys their age.

We need politicians to support every girl's right to have an education that sets them up for the future and make sure that schools are safe spaces, free from violence and inequality.

REFLECTION:

What are your favourite things to learn about in your school or learning centre? If you were in charge for the day, what would you change to help you feel more prepared for the future?

ACTION IDEA:

Write a letter with your ideas to a local leader (e.g. headteacher, local politician) to describe the change that you would like to see in your education to help you feel more prepared for the future.



Girls' safety

All genders are affected by gender inequality and patriarchy, but it can be particularly tough for girls. One impact of this is on girl's safety. Only 5% of girls and young women felt “completely safe” in public spaces, such as in public spaces or on public transport, and only 9% felt totally safe online.

“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

High profile figures and online platforms are spreading harmful and sexist (or misogynistic) ideas about women, making many girls feel unsafe in real life and online. It can show up in different ways, including bullying, saying mean things, not letting them have the same opportunities as boys and men, or even

violence. One solution that girls suggested was to have better education for boys and men to change negative behaviours and attitudes that some have towards women and girls. 56% of girls agreed that this this would help them feel safer and more protected.

REFLECTION:

What would make a space, for example school or a local park, feel safe for you?

ACTION IDEA:

Imagine your ideal space (e.g. a local park) that feels completely safe for everyone to use. Draw a picture of this space and describe what makes it feel safe.



Money worries and the cost of living

“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

Many girls and young women do not have access to basic things that they need, including food, a safe home, and period products:

- One in three girls worry about them or their family having enough money.
- A quarter of girls experienced “food poverty” in the previous 12 months, when the food at home runs out and there’s no money to buy more.
- One in five girls also say that they struggle to afford period products.
- One in eight girls and young women with disabilities told us that they do not have somewhere comfortable to live.

Worrying about money affects girls’ ability to live their lives as they would like.

Girls talked about how school would be a good place for them to learn more about how to manage money for the future.

“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

We need politicians to extend and increase programmes that provide free period products to make sure that every girl has access to the products they need.

We also need to see better guidance for schools to deliver education about periods and menstruation, as well as education about money to help prepare young people for the future.

REFLECTION:

If you met with your local politician, what would you want to tell them about how the cost-of-living crisis has impacted girls in your community?

ACTION IDEA:

Write your ideas and turn them into a letter for your local politician that describe the changes you want to see in your community. Guidance on writing a letter to your local politician is available at the end of this resource.



Health and wellbeing

Many girls and young women we spoke to felt positive that they can share how they feel with each other. Having a supportive friendship group was really important to them. But this isn’t the case for all girls.

“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.”

Survey participant, 16, Stockport

Many girls said that they are not happy with their physical and mental health, including feeling anxious about climate change, dealing with physical health issues and not feeling like doctors have taken them seriously when they have sought help. Many girls also did not feel like they had learnt enough about sex, healthy relationships and their bodies and highlighted that they want everyone to learn about these things in a thorough way.

Girls are calling for their health and wellbeing to be a priority for the government, including making sure that strategies to address poor mental health and physical health effectively look at issues faced by girls and young women. **We need politicians to make sure that Relationships, Sex and Health Education provides all young people with the information that they need to understand what healthy relationships look like, and how to live a happy, safe and healthy life.**



Tilly (13),
Evie (14)
and Ella (15),
Blackpool

Taking action to tackle uncertainty

“Life can be stressful and sometimes frustrating. It feels like the future is uncertain.”

(Survey participant, 17, South Northamptonshire)

Too many girls feel uncertain or anxious about their future, and the future of the world. Girls want to see real change in their lives, but don't always feel that they can trust those in charge, such as politicians and police, to make these changes.

One great thing is that in the UK, and also across the world, girls are taking action for the world to be a better place 😊 **26% of girls and young women want to increase their participation in campaigning** to make their communities a better place. Keep reading to find out how you can get involved in local campaigning.

“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.”

Workshop participant, Cupar

Vee (18) and Alicia (20), Great Yarmouth



REFLECTION:

Can you think of an issue you really care about? Maybe you would like to take action on it or already have.

ACTION IDEA:

Write a poem or story that talks about the issue you really care about and why you are inspired to take action.



Leisure

Leisure activities like sports, hobbies or cultural activities are really important for girls' happiness. But many do not get to take part in these activities as much as they would like to. The most common reasons for this were feeling unsafe, unsupported, cost, feeling that facilities were not accessible due to issues including lack of transport, distance, and a lack of facilities that meet their needs.

“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

Only 1 in 9 girls aged 12-21 say they feel completely safe in leisure spaces and less than half say that they take part in hobbies as much as they want to. Girls are calling for action so that they can have better access to leisure activities including sport.

All girls should have access to activities that suit them, and politicians need to make sure that they address the issues that stop girls from being to access activities, including lack of transport, safety concerns and supporting those with less money to be able to participate.

Where you live still matters

Girls' lives can be very different depending on where they live and that is not fair. It's hard to be a girl everywhere, but in some areas there's extra barriers to overcome. For example, 30% fewer girls get five good GCSE's (or equivalent) in the 10 regions that were scored as the toughest areas to be a girl, compared to the 10 regions that were scored the highest in meeting girls' needs.

That's why it is important for governments and people in charge to make sure that they are not failing girls wherever they live. They need to give girls the support they need to live healthy lives, have fair access to the education they want, and are able to feel safe in their communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

It's time for politicians to gain back girls' trust, and make sure that tackling inequality and ending discrimination is at the heart of their work.

Plan International UK recommends that the UK Government should:



1. Make gender equality and girls' rights a priority in all areas of government, by creating a ten-year plan where all government departments need to work together. This plan should support girls and young women from all backgrounds and should focus on breaking harmful gender norms and ending sexism and misogyny. It should have clear goals and targets, a plan for funding its activities, and a Minister should be in charge to make sure it happens. The plan should also connect with the Government's strategy to tackle violence against women and girls.

2. Make sure that girls and young women from all backgrounds are included in government policies, plans and programmes that affect them. When reviewing policies, the government should consider how different parts of girls' identities, like their gender, race, age or disability, work together to affect their experiences. They should recognise that being a teenager is an important stage in life. Girls and young women should also be actively involved in helping to create these plans.

3. Set up a commission, which is an expert group, to work on tackling harmful gender norms. The commission should be led by someone who is independent and should make sure that girls and young women are involved in the process. The group should help to check how well the government's action to advance gender equality is going. They should suggest new ideas on how the government can improve based on the latest research.

4. Collect good data on the experiences of girls, which involves breaking down information into smaller groups, like by age, sex, disability, or race and ethnicity, so we can better understand how different parts of a girls' identity might affect their experiences and challenges. It is also important to collect this information at a local level, for example by city or town, so we can see what's happening in different areas.

5. Make sure there is funding for local governments so that they can create and keep important services like youth programmes, support for survivors of domestic violence and projects that help keep people healthy.



Tilly (13), Evie (14) Genna (15) and Ella (15), Blackpool

We need to see change

It doesn't have to be this way. Girls are raising their voices and saying NO MORE. They want to be a part of creating change, and around the world, girls and young women are standing up for their rights, and for those of future generations.

Your voices deserve to be heard, but you can't be expected to do it alone. Politicians need to step up, listen and respond to the challenges girls face today with clear action, direction and strategy.

We need to see the UK Government take action, and make sure these recommendations become realities. **You can play a role in making this happen.**

What can you do?

You have the power to make a difference. Change doesn't happen overnight, but when we work together, amazing things can happen. Here are some simple steps you could take to help make the world a more equal place for girls:

1. WRITE TO YOUR MP

Your voice matters. You can send a letter or email to your local Member of Parliament to share your thoughts about the issues in this report. Include a link to the report or write a summary of the key points that matter most to you. Ask them what they are doing to help make life better for girls in your community, and in the UK, and most importantly, don't forget to share your ideas.

- Look at Plan International UK's Influencing Toolkit for tips on writing to your MP: plan-uk.org/influence
- Find your MP's contact details online at TheyWorkForYou.com
- Use this report or the full report to pick issues you care about
- Write a short, clear letter asking for action, or why not use your creativity to get your message across, e.g. write a poem or a song, create a piece of art.

2. DIVE DEEPER

If you're curious to know more about any of the issues you read about in this report, you can check out the full report plan-uk.org/state-of-girls-rights It's packed with real life stories, facts and ideas that can inspire you to take action.

3. START A SCHOOL CAMPAIGN

You don't have to wait for someone else to make change happen- you can start right now.

Pick an issue that's important to you, like period poverty, safety for girls or equality in sports, or take a look at which of the recommendations you think is most important. Talk to your friends, teachers or school council about starting a campaign, and think about creative ways to raise awareness. You can check out Plan International UK's campaign toolkit online here: plan-uk.org/toolkit

4. JOIN A LOCAL YOUTH GROUP OR SUPPORT GROUP

There are lots of youth groups and organisations across the UK working on issues that you care about. Joining one can give you the opportunity to meet new people, learn new skills and make a big impact together.

5. SPREAD THE WORD

Whether it's standing up for a friend who is being treated unfairly, or meeting with your local MP to demand change- you're not alone in this. No matter how small it might seem, every action you take can bring us closer to a world where all girls can thrive. You are the experts of your own lives and the UK government and decision makers need to listen to your voices, respect your ideas and take action. based on your experiences. They need to hear your collective call: **"Nothing about us, without us!"**

ARE YOU READY TO GET STARTED?

Support and Information

This report discusses many difficult topics. If you have been affected by any issues raised in this report, support and resources are available.

If your mental health is feeling low it's important to reach out and talk to people about it, this might be someone in your family, a good friend, a teacher or someone you can trust. There are also lots of services and organisations that can offer specific support to you and the people around you, depending on how you are feeling. These are listed below:

Speak to your GP

If you haven't already, you can speak to your GP about accessing support for your mental health. Young Minds have a helpful guide to how you can start with your GP here: www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/your-guide-to-support/how-to-speak-to-your-gp/

Exercises:

- [Finding What Self-Care Works For You](#), Young Minds
- [What helps to manage panic attacks?](#), Young Minds
- [Breathing exercises for stress](#), NHS

Support organisations:

- Childline – Calm Zone
- You can go to the Childline Calm Zone to find tools to help you feel calm: www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone

NHS – Every Mind Matters

The NHS Every Mind Matters website has videos and ideas about self-care tips for young people. It also shows you some other places you can go to access help: www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/youth-mental-health

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. Helpline: 0800 068 41 41. Website: www.papyrus-uk.org

Young Minds

Young Minds has a website with resources, practical tips and advice from young people, as well as information on getting the support you need: www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person



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

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



With special thanks to Clara and Nova from the Plan International UK Youth Advisory Panel for editing this Youth Friendly Policy Report.

Photo credits: Sam Care.



For children and equality for girls

Giovana, 16, Alicia, 20, Vee, 18 and Riana, 15, Great Yarmouth



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