



LEAD – Girls, Boys and Youth as Active Drivers of Change

A snapshot of our evidence from 2025

Through our global strategy All Girls Standing Strong, Plan International works in over 80 countries and focuses programming in six priority thematic areas, as well as responding to humanitarian emergencies. We stand with girls to tear down barriers, save lives and build a world where equality for girls leads to progress for all.

At the end of 2025, we reviewed the evidence available from projects and countries working in each thematic area – covering evaluations and results, key internal research and annual reporting metrics. We also scanned some of the external evidence, to situate our work in the global context. This short snapshot summarises some of the insights from this year in our work on girls, boys and youth as active drivers of change (LEAD) and what we can learn from it.



A 14-year-old from Nepal hopes to become a lawyer one day.
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Plan International’s work under LEAD centres on ensuring that girls, boys and young people shape decisions that affect their lives by leading change within their own communities and influencing decisions at higher levels. Core focus areas include:

- Supporting young people and youth-led groups to work together and **take collective action** on the issues that are important to them.
- Advocating with duty bearers (including governments) to create spaces for **young people to meaningfully participate** in decision-making spaces.
- Working with the **media** on how young people – and the issues that are important for them – are portrayed.

Learn more about our work [here](#).

Key insights:

Our programming and the global context

01 **Young people are eager to lead and participate and are having an impact.**

While participation in formal political spaces remains low in many contexts, young people are increasingly active in other ways and in informal civic spaces – for example, mobilising around social, environmental, and humanitarian issues. Research shows how youth coming together to take joint action on the issues that are important to them can thrive, with particular examples this year in advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

02 **The external, political and fundraising environment is changing, and young people face persistent barriers to their ability to drive change.**

Civic spaces are shrinking, and progress on gender equality is being rolled back in many places, which threatens youth-led movements. Funding cuts and restrictive donor requirements further limit access.

03 **Plan supports young people to take action on the issues that are important to them.**

This includes through work on building both soft and technical skills, creating safe spaces for young people to collaborate (including for networking) and involving families, communities and duty bearers. As a result, children, adolescents and youth were able to actively participate in a range of decision-making and public spaces.

04 **Combining both financial and non-financial support to youth-, girl- and women-led groups remains fundamental.**

It's vital to understand the knowledge, skills and capacity needs and gaps of different groups and provide quality, tailored capacity building activities. This should continue and be reinforced. However, this must go alongside other support, including to strengthen their own organisations and access flexible, multi-year funding.

05 **We must continue to push for safe and institutionalised frameworks for young people to meaningfully participate in decision-making at local, national and international levels.**

Creating spaces and environments for collaboration between children and young people, civil society, government and other duty bearers, alongside targeted advocacy and capacity building, can result in leaders taking action on issues important to young people. However, long term change at scale needs a continued focus on embedding the frameworks that allow young people to participate in a safe and inclusive way.

2025 figures at a glance

Our global reach footprint in LEAD¹

1.1 million girls

supported to be **active citizens** that can drive the changes that are important to them.

8.8 million children and adults

reached with programming that supports girls, boys and youth to act on the issues that they prioritise.



Examples of our results across projects and offices: Supporting youth-led groups

Plan supported and strengthened

2,906

youth-led organisations

in **25 countries** to improve their ability to advocate and act on issues that affect youth.²



81%

of Plan offices

are directly resourcing youth-led organisations and groups.³

Equality Accelerator: Our movement-building digital platform⁴

Plan's unique platform to accelerate and support youth activism allows young activists to access **tailored funding opportunities, resources, and network** with other youth activists globally.

This year, the Equality Accelerator »

Distributed

€167,030

in flexible funding to youth-led groups.

Is set to reach

€1 million

distributed to over **240 youth-led groups** across **41 countries**.

Expanded

its centralised education funding by

US\$55,000

enabling the awarding of its largest grants, with four groups receiving US \$10,000 grants and two receiving US \$7,500 grants.

Supported

country-led initiatives

including the *Youth Climate Action Accelerator* in **Kenya and Uganda** and **Brazil's 'Beat the Clock' Fund**, each distributing €50,000 to youth-led groups.

Advocacy for girls' leadership⁵

54 influencing successes

in relation to girls' leadership, including »



18 changes or developments

in laws, policies, regulations, or guidelines.



5

examples of progress

with the adoption, replication and/ or scaling up of Plan International's programme models by powerholders or partners.



1. Based on annual reach reporting by country offices, July 2024 to June 2025.
2. Results are aggregated based on data reported by projects this year, including both those operating in development contexts and those responding to crises. They represent a sub-set of overall reach figures since they are specific to particular project activities and depend on individual project reporting cadence. Best efforts have been made to adjust for double counting during the aggregation through careful review and adjustment where projects have reported more than once during the year. For specific data related to humanitarian programming, please refer to the Humanitarian Snapshot for 2025.
3. Based on the youth survey, July 2024 to June 2025.
4. Based on annual progress reporting for the Equality Accelerator, July 2024 to June 2025.
5. Based on annual reporting against our [Global Advocacy Strategy](#), July 2024 to June 2025.



What are some of the key issues?

Selected findings from research



Three girls from Guatemala are leadership school members.

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There is an evolving landscape of youth civic and political engagement, particularly among girls and young women. While formal political participation remains low, young people are increasingly active in informal civic spaces, mobilising around social, environmental, and humanitarian issues. Civic education is a key enabler of youth engagement, especially in countering authoritarianism and the erosion of democracy. However, structural barriers persist, including low representation of women in politics and limited institutional support for youth participation in international forums and decision-making spaces. Despite these challenges, youth-led initiatives have demonstrated significant impact in crisis response, peacebuilding and advocacy, with growing trust from governments and communities.

At the same time, youth activism faces mounting repression and funding constraints. Shrinking civic space and the rollback on gender equality globally pose serious threats to youth-led movements.

Financial support remains minimal, with 1 per cent of gender-focused aid reaching women's organisations and even less to girl-led groups – a resourcing shortfall that will likely only become greater due to the shifting funding landscape for the development and humanitarian sector.⁶ Funding cuts and restrictive donor requirements further limit access, pushing youth organisations to rely on **alternative financing methods.**

Plan International research from 2025 reveals that girls and young people are eager to lead and participate in civic, political, and community life, but face persistent structural, cultural and digital barriers. Government and institutional actors often fail to create inclusive environments for youth to meaningfully participate. In conflict and crisis contexts, young people- especially girls- express a strong desire to contribute to peacebuilding and development, yet are frequently excluded from decision-making processes. Marginalised adolescents, including those in institutional care or from minority communities, face compounded barriers to their participation.

6. AWID, 2019, Towards a Feminist Funding Ecosystem

Participants from the [Still We Dream](#) report expressed:

“ Because there are young people who have lived [through conflict] in their town, they know what the conflict is and they can provide a different perspective to the older people or to those who are not involved.”

Female, 18 years old, Colombia

“ The youths are future builders and need to be involved in peace talks.”

Female, 24 years old, Cameroon

“ I want to go back to school to broaden my knowledge about what’s happening outside [in the world]. To learn [more] as well.”

Adolescent girl, 15 years old, Philippines

“ I believe it is the youth that can build a country and to achieve this the youth must be given an opportunity to play a role in the development of their country. Starting from myself, I want to play my own role in the development of my country.”

Adolescent girl, 16 years old, Ethiopia

Civic space is shrinking, particularly for girls and young women, due to anti-rights movements, restrictive legislation, and online abuse.

International policy language around girls’ rights is increasingly diluted, with vague terms and parental authority undermining girls’ autonomy. This rollback is not limited to international forums. In the United Kingdom, girls report low trust in political institutions and feel excluded from traditional political processes, preferring grassroots activism and protest.

Only 8.6% of UN Treaty Body recommendations between 2018 and 2023 mentioned girls, and most of these references were subsumed under the broader category of “women and girls,” obscuring age-specific needs.

Data cited in [Strengthening Girls’ Rights as Human Rights](#)

“ 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.”

Female, 20 years old, South East England⁷

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

Adolescent girl, 14 years old, North West England⁸

A 16-year-old is a leader of change in her community in El Salvador.
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7. Survey participant from [The State of Girls Rights in the UK in 2024](#)
8. Survey participant from [The State of Girls Rights in the UK in 2024](#)

Despite these constraints, youth collective action – i.e. young people coming together on the issues that are important to them – is often thriving, with particular examples from research this year on advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights. Youth-led organisations are implementing impactful sexual and reproductive health and rights initiatives, building leadership and solidarity, and influencing policy at multiple levels.

“ By seeing girls that actually [have avoided early pregnancy and] made it from primary school to secondary school and then into college and hearing neighbours say that I inspired them to do this ... That has helped me to maybe see myself as somebody that can be a role model and change somebody’s ways of thinking or be able to impact another person.”

Female Participant of a Girls and Youth Led Organisation⁹

Girls involved in these activities often become role models, inspiring others through their personal journeys and demonstrating the transformative power of collective engagement. Testimonials from youth leaders show how these organisations become safe spaces for healing and growth, reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and community. However, these groups often operate with limited funding and capacity, which restricts their sustainability and reach.

Digital spaces, while offering potential for empowerment, are increasingly unsafe for girls. Youth collective action is amplified through digital platforms, but online abuse and harassment silence voices and discourage participation. Girls call for systemic changes to ensure safer digital environments, including improved reporting tools, legal protections, and digital literacy education.

“ Internet is now quite a lot toxic. And [the] internet destroys people’s mental health.”

Adolescent girl, 15 years old, Philippines¹⁰



Girls take part in activity at school in Kon Tum, Vietnam, to learn about online safety.

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9. Respondent from Guglielmi, S., Jones, N. and Pincock, K. 2024 [Resourcing girl- and youth-led sexual and reproductive health rights activism: potential and challenges](#).

10. Respondent from research by Plan International and CNN as Equals: [Building Digital Resilience: Girls and young women demand a safer digital future](#)

Creating enabling environments for youth to take a lead requires addressing structural barriers, promoting inclusive education, and supporting youth-led movements. Across reports and contexts, inequalities in education, safety, and representation persist, especially for girls from marginalised backgrounds. For example, research from Ukraine reveals how institutionalised adolescents were routinely excluded from decisions about their futures, while LGBTQIA+ youth often feared public participation due to stigma. However, safe spaces such as community hubs enabled some to engage actively in decision-making. The [Changing Lives 2024](#) study also showed that sponsorship programmes can have positive impacts on adolescent empowerment and shifts in norms around gender equality.

“ If I didn’t get involved with the sponsorship programme of Plan, today I would have two children. They would have married me off a long time ago. They wouldn’t let me go to school much either. My family’s mentality wouldn’t have changed. They used to have the same mindset as those who marry off girls early. My life would have been completely different ... Thanks to Plan, positive things have happened. I have been able to pursue education because child marriage has stopped. I couldn’t speak before. Brothers used to come, and I used to sit behind rows. Now I can say a lot in front of people. Even if they asked my name, I couldn’t say it before, I felt embarrassed. Now this shyness is decreasing from what it was before.”

Female, 20 years old, Bangladesh



A 15-year-old in Bangladesh is breaking gender stereotypes through karate.

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Our research underscores the need for governments and other duty bearers to ensure meaningful participation of young people – especially girls and young women – in decision-making across peacebuilding, humanitarian, and political contexts. This includes establishing inclusive and permanent mechanisms at all levels, with attention to marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+ youth, ethnic minorities and youth living with disabilities. Girls must be recognised as autonomous agents in policy and law. Building trust requires leaders to listen and respond to girls’ voices with clear action, while also elevating them from grassroots spaces to national leadership. Policies should be shaped through multi-dimensional assessments that reflect the diversity and distinct needs of adolescent girls and young women.

What have we learned?

Selected findings from evaluations



A 24-year-old is tackling child marriage and early unions in his community in Guatemala.

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This year saw our programming consistently supporting young people to take action on the issues that are important to them. Projects focused on building youth skills and capabilities (including those of youth-led organisations and networks), and on supporting youth to come together and drive change. Increases in visibility and legitimacy of young people were evident across various projects, as well as strengthened capacity of youth led organisations and networks. Key factors for success were a focus on skills building (including use of the [Champions of Change](#) methodology), providing safe and protective environments, bringing children, adolescents and young people together to build networks and alliances, and active engagement of community and family members and leaders. With increased knowledge and capacities in a range of soft and technical skills, children, adolescents and youth were able to actively participate in a range of decision-making and public spaces, provide recommendations, proposals and/or draft action plans alongside key stakeholders (including community leaders, local authorities and government officials).

For example, in Colombia, the project “*Empoderarte por la paz*” provided young people with technical training (through dynamic and artistic methodologies), platforms and spaces for collaboration and opportunities for them to lead activities and training, acting as role models for peers in their communities. A focus on gender equality was core, encouraging children and young people to question stereotypical gender roles and other social norms. The project also collaborated with community members and mechanisms to foster support for activities led by children, adolescents and youth. By the end of the project, boys and girls had strengthened their abilities in leadership and 83 per cent of girls felt empowered, compared to only 24 per cent before the project.

Across various projects, youth collaborated and took joint action to hold duty-bearers to account on issues and commitments important to them.

For example, the multi-country “*Programa Regional de Juventudes*” worked with youth-led organisations, federations and networks in five countries across the Region of the Americas to position youth as right holders and agents of change within social and political spaces.

Depending on the country context, Plan International implemented a tailored combination of interventions, including providing opportunities to participate in regional spaces to increase visibility and share achievements, supporting access to key funds and collaborations with civil society organisations and international entities; fostering solid relationships with various organisations and state agencies; and ensuring strong youth-led organisations' internal structure and safety for its members. As a result, youth-led organisations supported by the project have stronger administrative structures, are more sustainable and form strategic alliances. They are active in networks and coalitions, advocating for policy change and enriching interventions at local and regional level. This is further supported by the 100 per cent of surveyed youth organisations reporting actions related to decision-making by children, adolescents and young people about their sexual and reproductive health.

Use of the Champions of Change methodology was linked to results on knowledge and skills of young people and improvements in gender equality, among others. The Champions of Change methodology creates safe spaces for children, adolescents and youth to ask questions, share ideas and engage in dynamic and participatory learning activities, such as drama, real-life examples, art, media campaigns, and role plays on a wide range of topics, depending on the project's focus. For example, a project focused on strengthening civil society for children's rights implemented Champions of Change Clubs where children, adolescents and youth, especially girls, were empowered through intergenerational dialogue, involving men's committees to discuss a range of topics (including gender equality, sexuality, child leadership and parent-child relationships). In the clubs, children, adolescents and youth were trained in activism, leadership and self-confidence enabling them, especially the girls, to better position themselves in their communities.



A 15-year-old from Vietnam is leading change in her community.
©Plan International

“ Last year, my eldest daughter's performance at school had fallen back a lot because her brother didn't help her with the household chores. She was tired all the time and didn't have time to study. It wasn't until her brother became a member of the CoC [Champions of Change] group that the situation changed completely. He became aware of the situation and started by helping his sister with the chores. In the second semester, his sister was able to get back on track and move up to the next class.”

Pupil's mother, Benin

There is also some evidence of projects effectively navigating restrictive and challenging civic spaces. For example, a multi country project in Bangladesh, Nepal and Thailand faced multiple cultural, legal, political and institutional issues. Youth activists and leaders navigated a space of conservative attitudes, deep rooted gendered norms, cultural resistance, political pressures, shrinking civic space and threats to safety of human rights defenders, as well as a lack of legal recognition and a restrictive enabling environment for youth-led organisations and civil society organisations.

Despite these, the project managed to achieve positive trends in almost all its outcomes, across all countries through a complex package of interventions aimed at youth, youth-led organisations, duty bearers and the media. More generally, findings related to relevance (*are we responding to needs?*) and sustainability (*will changes last?*) showed how capacity building and empowerment interventions, alongside facilitating of networking, dialogue and participation spaces are supporting children and youth to respond to the challenges they face. Use of evidence – in the form of needs, risk, partner, conflict analysis and consultations – strengthened relevance, allowing tailoring of activities to needs and enabling transparent and open selection of target groups and partners.

Project reports highlight a range of activities, project design features and changes that can contribute to sustaining gains after project activities close. This includes:

.....

Capacity building efforts with key stakeholders. Through various training/educational activities, children, adolescents and youth, in particular, become empowered to act as role models to peers and parents, including through dialogue and learning across generations.

.....

Partnerships, relationships and networking mechanisms with key actors, such as governments, youth groups, schools, community leaders, youth led organisations and civil society, including supporting alliance formation.

.....

A focus on **organisational strengthening of youth-led organisations and groups and civil society**, including on access to diversified funding sources and strategic planning.

.....



We are also influencing for change, achieving gains through our advocacy work this year. For example, in Cameroon, there was a historic stride toward inclusive governance this year by hosting national consultations in preparation for the United Nations Summit of the Future, culminating in the adoption of the Yaoundé Declaration. This marked the first time that youth – particularly girls and young women – were formally engaged in shaping national priorities for long-term development and global cooperation.

The resulting declaration commits to:

- a) institutionalising intergenerational dialogue in governance processes;
- b) prioritising youth-led accountability and gender-responsive planning; and
- c) aligning national strategies with global goals for peace, sustainability, and equity.

This progress sets a precedent for youth inclusion in policymaking. By supporting youth delegates – both nationally and globally – Plan International is ensuring that young people, especially girls and young women, are not only heard but actively shape the future they will inherit.

Where we need to keep going deeper ...

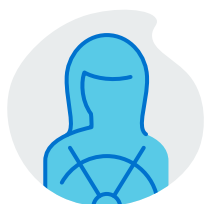


The evidence available this year has informed insights which are relevant for Plan International but also the wider sector, in terms of how investment is targeted and how programmes are designed, to support young people in their ambitions to act as active drivers of change:



Continuing to draw on our convening role

A strong theme from across the reports related to the value and relevance of work in supporting linkages between young people (including youth-led organisations and groups) and duty bearers such as governments. Creating diverse formal and informal opportunities for young people to influence decisions, and advocating for embedding these systems at local, national, and international levels should be an ongoing focus of our work. Protection and safety for young people must be central, requiring that these considerations are built into the wider engagement mechanisms (for example, in policies, guidelines and budgets among others).



A focus on organisational support to youth-, girl- and women-led groups

Youth-, girl- and women-led organisations and groups face multiple challenges, often operating with limited funding, relying heavily on volunteers and small-scale resources, which restricts their reach and ability to engage long-term. Efforts to strengthen knowledge, skills and empowerment (including through approaches such as Champions of Change) are valuable – and valued – but need to go alongside sustained structural support that builds capacity in areas such as fundraising, strategy, partnerships and financial management.



Capacity building, awareness raising and education must continue

Educating individuals and/or groups, whether these are children, adolescents and youth themselves, youth-led organisations, duty-bearers, family members, community leaders, school cadres, or others, was a key enabler to success. Acknowledging the knowledge, skills and capacity needs and gaps of all these groups and providing quality activities that respond to their priorities should continue and be reinforced, including with a targeted focus on boys and young men as key to driving gender equality.



Ensuring tailored and diverse approaches

The evidence this year demonstrates the multiple intersecting barriers that different groups can face to participation in decision-making forums and other spaces. There is a need to ensure tailored approaches, based on evidence and consultation, that respond to the needs of diverse groups of young people in a variety of contexts. In particular, a closer focus should be paid on populations facing the biggest challenges with access (whether these are linked to living with a disability, being part of ethnic/religious minorities or facing migration or displacement).

Read more



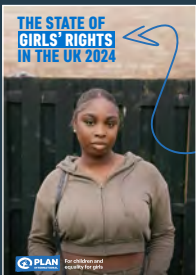
[Strengthening girls' rights as human rights: An in-depth study into the status of girls in international policy-making at the United Nations](#)

This report examines the status of girls in international policy-making, exploring changes from 2018 to 2023 to shed light on progress, gaps, and opportunities related to girls' rights and their protection within key human rights frameworks.



[State of the World's Girls 2024: Still We Dream](#)

The 2024 State of the World's Girls Report focuses on the experiences of young people whose lives are dominated by conflict, involving a large-scale survey of 9,995 participants from ten countries plus 104 in-depth interviews from four countries.



[The State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2024](#)

Results from listening to over 3,000 girls' voices in the United Kingdom, to explore their feelings about the issues they face growing up a girl.



[Changing Lives 2024: The impact of Plan International's child sponsorship programmes in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda](#)

An action-oriented research series – conducted in collaboration with RMIT University – on the impact of child sponsorship, and how we can continually improve.



[Reports from the Real Choices, Real Lives Research Series](#)

A study that has been following the lives of over 100 girls in 9 countries around the world from their birth in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024.



[Humanitarian Programming in 2025](#)

Our Humanitarian Evidence Snapshot provides a deeper look into our evidence from research and programming in emergencies this year, including in the area of youth leadership.



A young woman is a girl leader
in her community in Guatemala.

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Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crisis and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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Note: Images used throughout this report are not of research participants. Consent was received for the use of all images.

Front cover image: Young friends from a youth club in Cambodia. © Plan International