



**GIRLS  
GET EQUAL**

Geena Davis Institute *of* on Gender in Media

# TAKING THE LEAD

**GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ON  
CHANGING THE FACE OF LEADERSHIP**



# TAKING THE LEAD:

## GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ON CHANGING THE FACE OF LEADERSHIP<sup>1</sup>

This research is an in-depth and ambitious look at female leadership: close to 10,000 girls and young women in 19 countries share their ideas and experiences.



## CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	3	WHAT GIRLS TOLD US .....	11	WE ARE TRAILBLAZERS .....	21
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	4	CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP .....	12	A LEADER FOR TODAY .....	22
INTRODUCTION .....	6	ASPIRATIONS AND CONFIDENCE ....	14	CONCLUSION .....	24
METHODOLOGY .....	10	SEXISM AND STEREOTYPES .....	16	RECOMMENDATIONS .....	25
		EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP .....	18	REFERENCES.....	30

# FOREWORD

BY ANNE-BIRGITTE ALBRECHTSEN, CEO, PLAN INTERNATIONAL

**“A leader treats everyone equally. She should know about everybody in her community. She should have experience; she should not discriminate. She wants to make her society better.”**

This is the inspiring feminist vision of leadership of a girl from India, interviewed by Plan International and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Hers is just one of the powerful insights on leadership of 10,000 girls and young women, from 19 countries, in the **Taking the Lead** report.

Girls are redefining what it means to be a leader and projecting powerful self-assurance about their own potential. Almost two thirds of the girls and young women who participated told us they are confident in their ability to lead and three-quarters actively want to become leaders in their careers, communities or countries.

This is good news for the future. Countries that are led by women and are more gender-equal have greater economic success,<sup>2</sup> governments that are less corrupt<sup>3</sup> and societies with a higher quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Sparking a new revolution in girls' power could therefore be the paradigm shift the world needs to succeed on the Sustainable Development Goals – the global roadmap aimed at positive progress for people and planet.

We know it won't be easy, and the girls we interviewed are only too aware of what stands in their way. “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down,” was the bleak view shared by one girl from Japan. Of the girls we spoke to, 94% believed that being a leader involved being treated unfairly as compared to men and 93% felt female leaders experienced unwanted physical contact. Alarming, this perception was stronger among young women who had some experience of leadership than those who had none. “Sometimes there is violence against ladies when they want to become leaders; they will see you as nothing in front of them because of your gender,” said one girl from South Sudan. As they get older, girls start to be held back by the knowledge that women leaders have a hard time, by the lack of female role models, and by pervasive and deep-rooted sexism. They see the hard truth that only 18% of government ministerial positions worldwide are held by women<sup>5</sup> and only 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, with Plan International's new Girls' Plan,<sup>7</sup> we can start to turn things around. We have found a way forward for busting norms and stereotypes and addressing the root causes of what holds girls back. A holistic girls-led investment strategy that's complete with costed, tested and scalable solutions for changing the future with and for millions of girls. It's time now to make the vision of girls' leadership into a global reality. Join us before it's too late for the next generation of girls.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**“Leadership is an ability to lead, set a good example, and give the best of oneself to serve people.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, SENEGAL**

Research across 19 countries, involving close to 10,000 girls and young women, has taught us a lot about girls’ aspirations to lead: about what holds them back, what encourages them and what needs to be in place for their aspirations to become reality. We know that many girls want to be leaders, they want, too, to be a particular type of leader – compassionate, dedicated to their community, to upholding girls’ rights and listening to the needs of others – but they are not encouraged in their ambitions. They are held back by society’s limited expectations of what is “appropriate” for them as young women and by a leadership model of authority and hierarchy that they cannot identify with: denied the places and spaces, and the role models, that would enable them to realise their dreams.

- ▶ **Girls and young women aspire to lead:** 76%<sup>8</sup> of girls and young women aspire to be a leader in their country, community or career.
- ▶ **Girls and young women have confidence in their leadership abilities:** only 5% said they felt no confidence at all, with 62% confident or very confident in their ability to lead.
- ▶ Girls and young women **have a different definition of leadership:** one that is collaborative and brings about positive change, rather than authoritarian and controlling.

- ▶ Career aspirations **increase with education and social status** and decrease with marriage.
- ▶ Wanting to be a national leader **increases with social status and marriage.**
- ▶ Girls with lower social status are **more likely to aspire to become leaders in their communities.**

**Girls are also acutely aware of the barriers they are likely to face if they follow their aspirations.**

- ▶ **Gender discrimination, blatant sexism and stereotyping** are all named as barriers: these are tied in with pervasive social and cultural norms and the gendered expectations around balancing work and family life.
- ▶ Overall girls perceive **a lack of respect for**, and harsher criticism of, female leaders.
- ▶ 60% of girls and young women believe women have to **work harder than men** to be respected.
- ▶ 93% believe female leaders will have experienced **unwanted physical contact.**
- ▶ **Young women who have actual experience of leading often reported even higher expectation of gender discrimination** than respondents with less or no experience of leading.



**“Balancing between work and personal life may be difficult. I don’t think it’s difficult for men to balance between work and their personal life. However, it seems much tougher for women to balance their personal life and work when they become a leader. I feel women leaders are pressured to choose between work or their personal life.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 15-20, JAPAN**

The research clearly reveals that young women want to be change-makers. And that they are advancing definitions of leadership based on community, collaboration, social justice and gender equality. They rate interpersonal skills, kindness and fairness over more traditional notions of leadership such as power, ambition, status and hierarchy. Girls’ definition of leadership is one of serving others not being served by them.

**“A good leader will always think about her people.”** **GIRL, 15-17, SOUTH SUDAN**

There are regional differences across the survey and differences as a result of educational and income levels, some of which are analysed later in the report, but there are also marked similarities between the opinions and experiences of girls across the globe. Everywhere the role of families and communities is critical to harnessing the leadership aspirations of girls

and young women. They are influenced most by their immediate environment and look to their family members as role models and supporters and to release them from restrictive stereotyping. Whilst family support alone will not be enough to overcome the structured barriers to girls’ and women’s leadership, achieving progress and equal representation without it, is likely to be impossible.

#### **WHAT MUST BE DONE**

The girls and young women in the study know what will strengthen them in their leadership ambitions:

- Family backing is key: policy makers, community leaders and civil society organisations must **support families to value girls** and champion their leadership ambitions.
- Governments, the media and the corporate sector should, through example and public campaigning, **challenge sexism and discrimination at all levels.**
- **Transform the role of leadership**, to value collaboration and gender equality above hierarchy and control.
- Education authorities and funders must **provide girls with quality education and opportunities to strengthen their skills and knowledge.**
- Crucially **girls need role models and leadership experience**: governments, corporations and civil society organisations must encourage female leaders and mentors.

Only then will they be able to transcend the restrictions of the gendered expectations which surround them from birth to play their part as equals in their families, workplaces, communities and countries.

# INTRODUCTION



**“...I want to be a leader who can listen to and respect every opinion, and yet not give in to others, and provide a new solution.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, JAPAN**

**“Have the vision of a better world. Make good forecasts, plans for the future, must be the light of change, always project and inspire hope.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18-19, SENEGAL**

This report by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and Plan International is an in-depth and ambitious look at female leadership. It seeks to fill the gap in our understanding of what it means for girls and young women to be leaders and what encourages and discourages their leadership aspirations. The research cuts across economies, cultures and societies and includes the voices of close to 10,000 girls and young women in 19 countries. It is part of an ongoing enquiry into girls’ and young women’s aspirations to lead – at home, in the workplace, in their communities, or on the wider national or international stage. The research looks also at how girls become leaders – what hinders them and what helps them – with a second phase of the research planned to focus on the specific role of media in shaping girls’ aspirations and either restricting or enabling their success.<sup>9</sup>

## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LEADERSHIP?**

For the purposes of this study, we define “leadership” as leading a group of people or an organisation. Leaders necessarily have followers, whether they be family members, employees, grassroots activists, or political constituents. However, it is clear from our research that girls are defining leadership for themselves and, according to the girls and young women who took part in the study, the most prominent leadership qualities are striving for social and gender justice, making decisions collectively and leading in a way that empowers and helps others.

**“A young female leader treats everyone equally. She should know about everybody in her community. She should have experience. She should not discriminate. She wants to make her society better.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, INDIA**

**“She sees an equal society without discrimination. She wants to stop discrimination based on gender, disabilities and race. This is her ideal future.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, JAPAN**

Their comments are indicative of more collaborative forms of leadership: their vision is of a force for collective good, embedded in bringing about positive change, particularly for girls and young women. But what girls and young women see around them is not encouraging. In terms of power and control – who makes the decisions at family, local, corporate and national level – we are a long way from their vision of leadership and from achieving gender equality.

Girls’ and women’s voices in decision-making are critical to ensuring society takes their interests into account, yet their representation in politics and business remains dismally low. At the current pace of progress, it will take over 100 years to achieve parity in political participation.<sup>10</sup> The corporate world is no better: according to research undertaken in 2018, just 24% of senior corporate roles were held by women, a decline from previous years.<sup>11</sup> This under-representation has persisted, despite a decade of evidence that gender diversity at the highest levels is linked to higher profits.<sup>12</sup>



## KEY FACTS

- › Globally, women hold just 24% of parliamentary seats.<sup>13</sup>
- › Less than 2% of the world's parliamentarians are under the age of 30, with a 60:40 ratio of men to women.<sup>14</sup>
- › 18% of government ministerial positions worldwide are held by women.<sup>15</sup>
- › In 2018, there were only 17 women heads of state or prime ministers across 149 countries.<sup>16</sup>
- › One-in-four companies have no women in senior management roles.<sup>17</sup>
- › A study of approximately 22,000 companies in 91 countries found that companies with female CEOs produce higher profits.<sup>18</sup>

**“Sometimes there is violence against ladies when they want to become leaders, they will see you as nothing in front of them because of your gender.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, SOUTH SUDAN**

It is evident that deep-rooted stereotyping and widespread discrimination influence and shape girls' ambitions, limiting their sense of what is both possible and appropriate for them: one research study shows that girls lose faith in their own talents and abilities by the time they are six.<sup>26</sup> The research for this report paints a less pessimistic picture but nonetheless, for many girls their ambitions shrink as they get older. This is true at work and at local and national level: girls set their sights lower the more they become aware of the barriers and discrimination in the way of putting their dreams into practice.

**“In Japan, there is still prejudice and men are more likely to become a leader and reach higher rank. Many say, ‘The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.’ Everyone should be eligible to pursue higher rank, but if it's a girl who has a dream or ambition to become a leader, people start criticising. It's true of any woman who is working to become a leader.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, JAPAN**

This research examines various dimensions of what leadership means and looks like to girls and young women in different country and cultural settings. Its findings offer a unique insight into their experiences on the road to leadership and equal representation, which lie at the heart of achieving gender equality. Two overarching questions inform the research.

### **1. What factors encourage and discourage girls' leadership aspirations?**

### **2. How do girls become a leader?**

Based on the voices and ideas of girls and young women themselves, this research seeks to gather a stronger, global understanding of their potential and find ways to help them achieve their ambitions and change the face of leadership so that it more truly reflects the world we live in.

## THE LEADERS OF TODAY

The ideal of leadership many girls and young women articulate is not entirely in tune with the qualities most prominent in today's leaders. Across many cultures, the characteristics that are associated with being a leader are the same character traits societies associate with men (controlling, dominant, forceful, assertive),<sup>19</sup> while the communal characteristics societies associate with women (affection, sympathy, nurturing and helpfulness) are not at all aligned with ideas of leadership.<sup>20</sup> When asked to describe leaders, most people use masculine terms.<sup>21</sup> Across the globe, feminine characteristics are viewed as appropriate for caretaking, while masculine characteristics are seen as better suited to the world of business and politics.<sup>22</sup> In line with these expectations, girls from all over the world report behaviour such as downplaying their physical and intellectual abilities to avoid being perceived as masculine.<sup>23</sup> This means that men are viewed as “default leaders”, while women are seen as “atypical leaders”.<sup>24</sup> Traditional gender role expectations discourage girls from seeking leadership positions, and produce prejudice against female leadership.<sup>25</sup>



When women seek positions of power, they are “punished” for going against gender stereotypes,<sup>27</sup> and “female politicians are defined more by their deficits than their strengths.”<sup>28</sup> Female bosses are judged against a harsher standard, so people evaluate female leaders more negatively than men and consistently perceive women as lacking key leadership skills.<sup>29</sup>

Girls learn at an early age that it is not appropriate for them to be ambitious. Studies confirm that boys and girls have similar levels of ambition when they are young, but girls grow into women with significantly less ambition as they internalise gender role expectations.<sup>30</sup> A girl's childhood ambition of becoming a member of parliament or the CEO of a company are eventually forgotten and replaced with pursuits that are more conventional.<sup>31</sup>

Boys also receive more encouragement to be politically ambitious from their family, friends, and peers, and adult men receive significantly more encouragement to run for public office from their support network than women do.<sup>32</sup> Family encouragement is especially important – encouragement increases the likelihood of political ambition by 43%.<sup>33</sup> And parental academic support is linked to greater academic expectations for female adolescents.<sup>34</sup>

The visibility of women in powerful positions is also an important factor: multiple studies find that girls are more likely to have leadership ambition if they have a role model who is a female leader.<sup>35</sup> A study looking at 11-15-year-old adolescents found, that in Indian villages that are female-led, compared to villages that had no female leaders, girls career aspirations began to match those of boys, the gap between them closing by 32% after two election cycles.<sup>36</sup>

Another study conducted with girls in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the UK found that girls have more leadership ambition when they are given opportunities to practise and develop leadership skills.<sup>37</sup>



# METHODOLOGY<sup>38</sup>

Research was carried out by survey in 19 countries,<sup>39</sup> supplemented by in-depth focus group discussions in five of them.<sup>40</sup> The overall survey sample size was 10,064, with 413 focus group discussion participants who, in each country, were divided into 12 groups of between six to eight. The average age of survey respondents was 22, with 54% of the sample ages 15 to 20 and 46% of the sample ages 21 to 25. Half of the respondents had completed secondary, and just over one-third had completed tertiary education. 14% of girls and young women in our sample were married.

Alongside demographic questions including age, marital status, self-defined disability and level of education the **survey** included ten questions on aspirations to lead, experience of leading, confidence, encouragement, role models and discrimination. **The survey asked young women about their leadership aspirations in terms of career, country, community and family.** The survey design meant that it was not possible to add follow-up questions. Despite this, and other limitations, the survey did, nevertheless, allow us to capture young women's perspectives and interpretations on broad leadership issues.

The **focus group discussion** tool was designed to be participatory and was pinned around two key activities: body mapping and an activity that sought to gauge the main sources of influence and inspiration in the lives of young women. In the body mapping exercise, participants were asked to reflect what kind of characteristics and attributes a young female leader might have. The goal of this activity was to understand how young women define leadership and the qualities involved in it. The second activity, on influence and inspiration, required the participants to identify critical people in their lives – either known to them or popular figures from outside their immediate community – and rate the extent to which those people influenced or inspired the decisions and directions of their lives.

All processes in this research were approved by Plan International's internal ethics approval process. Additionally, where possible, the research was submitted to the external approval bodies for the countries concerned.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

- ▶ The survey methods used included only young women who were literate and had access to the necessary technology. Though the use of SMS will have increased access to some extent, the methodology will not have allowed access to the most marginalised young women and therefore are not generalisable across whole populations.
- ▶ Without face to face survey administration we cannot verify that each respondent was definitely female.
- ▶ Due to ethical considerations the research was only conducted with 15-25-year-olds, and therefore does not tell us anything about girls in early adolescence, where many critical changes may be taking place.
- ▶ Focus group discussions did include some of the most marginalised populations, as participants were from Plan International programmes. However, recruitment methods varied and this may have affected the findings in each country and, in some countries, participants have had access to Plan International programming, which may have increased their awareness of issues around gender and equality.
- ▶ Levels of experience and confidence in facilitation and notetaking skills varied considerably between the researchers across all five countries and sometimes within countries. Whilst all focus group discussions were audio recorded, there was some variation in the quality of the transcriptions and the translations into English.
- ▶ Due to ethical considerations the research was conducted with girls over the age of 15, and therefore does not tell us anything about girls in early adolescence, where many critical changes may be taking place.
- ▶ Girls and young women aged 15-24 were the target in both the survey and focus groups. However, for reasons that are unclear, the survey data included responses from 317 25-year-olds. All responses are included in the analysis.

# WHAT GIRLS TOLD US:

## AMBITIONS AND REALITIES

**“... when we see the example of the [former] President of Liberia and the Secretary of USA, it means girls can also lead.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 21-24, SOUTH SUDAN

Girls' aspirations and ideals came across very strongly in the research but so too do the challenges they face. Girls and young women everywhere articulated their confidence and willingness to become leaders, particularly in the workplace, but always the barriers of sexism and discrimination get in their way. They expressed little doubt in their own abilities but cannot be sure that their efforts will be welcomed and supported by their families, their communities or their colleagues.

**“Sometimes a female leader may not be liked by everyone ... she may be ignored, laughed at and mocked; she may also hear negative talk about herself.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, SOUTH SUDAN

In this section we discuss the research findings under four headings:

1. CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP
2. ASPIRATIONS AND CONFIDENCE
3. SEXISM AND STEREOTYPES
4. EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP

Findings about qualities of leadership are informed solely by focus group discussions. Other findings come from the 19-country survey and the focus group discussions.



# CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

**“I think that the woman leader has to see the future in a different way to other people, because that’s why she is a leader, to guide and advise other people on what we have to do to make our dreams come true.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

In the focus group discussions, girls and young women were asked about the qualities and characteristics of a non-specific “young female leader”. In most groups this was interpreted by participants as the *ideal* characteristics and qualities of a young female leader. The four most common characteristics and qualities are below:

**A WAY WITH WORDS**

**WORKING TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S AND GIRLS’ RIGHTS**

**KINDNESS, FAIRNESS, CONSIDERATION AND COMPASSION**

**HELPING THE COMMUNITY, MAKING CHANGE**



With the exception of Japan, where participants described a more global interpretation of leadership, by far the most cited characteristics of leadership fell under the category of helping and advancing one’s community.

**“A young female leader should be educated, she should have knowledge of her community, her rights and duties. She should be aware of legal aspects of such.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, INDIA**

**“She should have knowledge that allows her to develop her community.”** **YOUNG WOMAN, 17-21, SENEGAL**

Leadership qualities involve being able to listen to, understand and relate to the community, including listening to and respecting differing opinions; identifying and responding to community need, giving advice and guidance, and championing and campaigning on behalf of the community. A young female leader needs to be educated and articulate, have the experience to represent her community, have clarity of vision, be a critical thinker and support girls’ and women’s rights:

**“She helps us to study, not to miss out on opportunities, she is always by our side and when we’re losing interest and are no longer so motivated, then she approaches us and talks to us so that we don’t leave school, and she tells us that it’s an opportunity we shouldn’t miss. She advises us not to leave school, because if we don’t get qualifications we won’t be able to succeed and be a little bit less poor.”** **YOUNG WOMAN, 18-22, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

When asked to assign characteristics to a young female leader, some of the qualities mentioned by participants, particularly those from South Sudan, India and the Dominican Republic, reflected the gendered norms and expectations of women and girls. Attributes included:

- humility and modesty
- soft-spoken and “silent most of the times in case of non-agreement”; a young female leader is “more of an observer” and is “obedient”
- good at domestic chores and motherhood
- has correct morals and advises other young women on morality
- dresses appropriately (including to avoid unwanted attention).

Whilst the above characteristics were by no means the most commonly described characteristics of female leadership, they highlight how gender roles and stereotypes continue to shape ideas of what women and girls can and should be. Some participants believed that, rather than rejecting the domestic female role, the experience would help them as leaders:

**“I think she sees a bright future. Women tend to think about environment and sustainable future because she is more likely to be conscious about environmental contamination, because women use detergent at home when they do the washing.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18-24, JAPAN

Others, however, were more wary of the effects of stereotyping:

**“People think that females are emotional, they are not aware of the social issues and thus say that females cannot work properly in comparison to males. People think that females use their heart instead of brain and that’s why females get less chance for their development.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18-21 INDIA

Overwhelmingly girls and young women wanted someone with the compassion to understand and support community issues and the strength to be an effective champion of their rights. Additionally, they saw that leaders do also need to be able to represent their

communities nationally, and sometimes internationally, to bring peace, unity and stability to their people. This was mentioned across the five countries but most forcefully, as you might expect, in South Sudan.

**“She shares the message of peace, she speaks out against the problem facing the community, she speaks of conflict problems, she speaks of human rights as a leader.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, SOUTH SUDAN

Central also to the way girls and young women perceive leadership is bringing about change. That is why, they say, people become leaders and key areas most in need of changing were identified as:

- education
- poverty
- child abuse, exploitation and labour.

There were country variations: education was by far the most popular response in Japan, poverty was a common response in Japan, India and South Sudan, while child abuse and exploitation were a more common response in India and didn’t feature at all in South Sudan.

Additionally, participants thought that a large part of changing the world was improving the lives of girls and young women, in particular by:

- addressing gender-based violence
- ending forced and early marriage
- building a community of women leaders.

Overall, in terms of their emphasis on leadership for the collective good, these findings support alternative ideas of leadership: decision-making in pursuit of women’s rights and social, political, economic and cultural equality, not authority exercised to entrench individual power.<sup>41</sup>

**“If the leader has a strong vision it’s a good thing to pursue it. But if you go headlong into it without listening to others, no one could follow such a leader. If a leader wants to get the members to cooperate, she needs to care for and listen to others and take their opinions into consideration before taking action.”**

GIRL, 15-17, JAPAN

# ASPIRATIONS AND CONFIDENCE

The survey measured young women's aspirations for leadership in their careers, in politics, and in the household. Overall, a large majority of respondents - 59% – say they would like to be a leader in their career or job. This high rate of career leadership aspiration is encouraging for moving more women into leadership positions in the workplace. However, aspiration to be a leader in their career decreases with age, suggesting that ambitions shrink as young women are faced with the reality of their everyday lives. This is supported by the finding that among young women who are not married, 61% are significantly more likely to say they want to be a leader in their job or workplace compared to 50% of those who are married.

Findings from the focus group discussions, also showed that girls' aspirations decrease with age and once they enter the adult world:

**“I went to a girl’s high school and a girl’s university, where all the students were girls. There I took a position of a leader without any hesitation. Girls were very positive and powerful in those communities. At that time, I thought that the future would be bright. However, I started working, I found that gender problems are deeply rooted. Most of the leaders are men. There is a woman who is an assistant manager in my company. But she is disliked by her colleagues. They think she is too self-assertive.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18-24, JAPAN**

Aspirations increase with education: in the survey, two-thirds, 67%, of respondents with tertiary education say they want to be a leader in their workplace compared to 58% of those who completed secondary school, 42% of those who completed primary school, and 32% of girls who have no schooling at all. 62% of young women who self-identified as having higher levels of social standing say they want to be leaders in the workplace compared to 51% of girls further down the social scale.

Young women, however, are considerably less likely to aspire to political leadership on a national or local level, again this aspiration decreases with age and increases with social standing. Only one-in-five girls, 21%, say they would like to be a leader in their country, or in their community, 19.3%. This is despite the fact, that in the focus group discussions, leadership is identified with serving the community and it is obviously viewed as an important task.

**“I think that a woman leader should see a community with its problems, but we should also all work together and she should advise us so that we improve, for the community to progress and overcome its problems, by finding what we need.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

This means that a major barrier to advancing women's political leadership is girls' and young women's reluctance to seek out prominent positions: a reluctance which is the result perhaps of a growing awareness of the barriers in their way and the price they may have to pay.

Young women's reluctance to put themselves forward in other areas of leadership again serves to emphasise how difficult they perceive female leadership to be. Only 23% of respondents aspire to leadership within their families, with those who are married (29%) significantly more likely to want to be a leader in their family than those who are not (21%).

There is also considerable variation between regions: young women in West and Central Africa are the least likely to want to lead in their careers, yet the most likely to want to lead in their country, community or family. Across the board, young women from low-income countries are more likely to aspire to be a leader in their country, community or family than those from middle- or high-income countries. The reasons for this are not immediately clear and require further research.

Young women not putting themselves forward for leadership roles does not appear to be due to a lack of confidence: overall, 62% of them said they were confident or very confident in their leadership abilities and only 4.7% reported not being at all confident. Their

disinclination to put themselves forward as community and national leaders may in fact be due to a very clear understanding of the personal cost to be paid: girls and young women, as we will see in more detail later in the report, perceive that women leaders are judged harshly, may be subject to unwelcome attention and will still have to shoulder the lion's share of the domestic burden at home.

Confidence in leadership abilities increases with education and social standing. Young women from wealthier backgrounds who have completed tertiary education express the most confidence in their leadership abilities and those from poorer backgrounds with no schooling, the least.

The young woman who most clearly embodies confidence in her leadership abilities is about 22, married, from a low-income country in Africa, is educated to tertiary standard, and is from a wealthier, generally more educated background. Interestingly married young women are more confident about their leadership abilities in some respects than single ones. They are more likely to want to be leaders of their country but less likely to see themselves as leaders as far as their career is concerned. Finding out why is again a question for further research.



## KEY FACTS

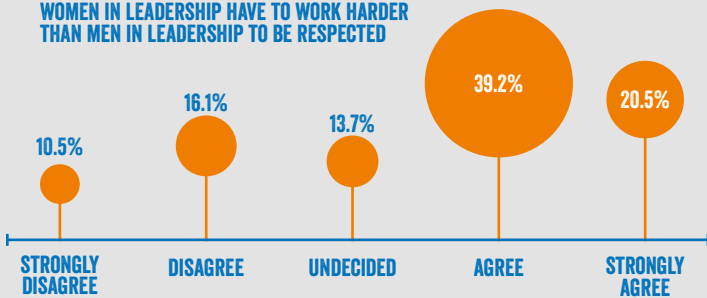
- ▶ 59.3% of girls and young women want to be a leader in the workplace.
- ▶ 22.5% want to be a leader at home, rising to 28.9% of young married women.
- ▶ 20.6% aspire to national leadership.
- ▶ 19.3% want to be a community leader.
- ▶ Young women from low income countries are more likely to want to be leaders of their country, community or family than those from higher income countries.
- ▶ 62% are confident or very confident in their ability to lead, should they choose to do so.

# SEXISM AND STEREOTYPES

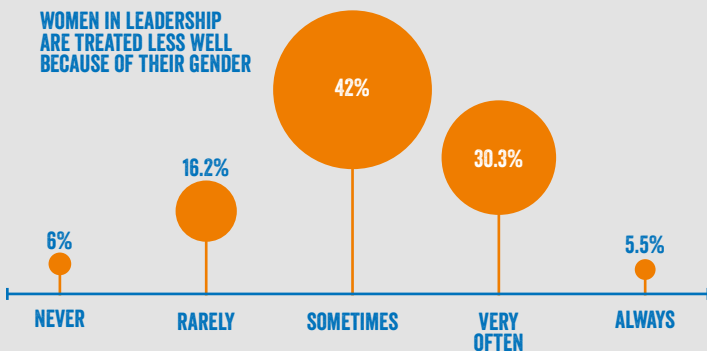
**“Our society is a male dominant society, so the girls don’t get a chance to come forward and orthodox thinking prevents girls from coming forward for leadership.” GIRL, 15-17, INDIA**

Girls and young women in the survey were asked a series of questions to measure their perceptions of sexism as it pertains to leadership. In general, respondents thought that women leaders are held to a different standard than male leaders. A majority, 60%, of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that women in leadership have to work harder than men in leadership to be respected, while an overwhelming 94% believe that women in leadership are treated less well because of their gender – findings which cut across age and social and marital status.

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP HAVE TO WORK HARDER THAN MEN IN LEADERSHIP TO BE RESPECTED**



**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ARE TREATED LESS WELL BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDER**



Levels of education play an important part in identifying discrimination in survey responses: young women who had completed any level of schooling were more likely to believe that women are treated less well due to gender than girls who had not.

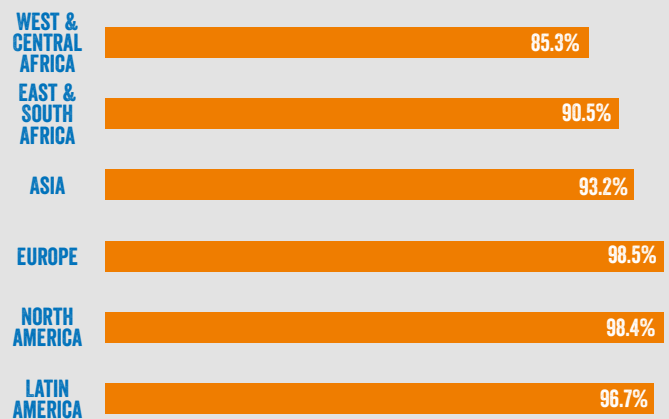
93% of the young women believe that women in leadership experience harassment (phrased as “unwanted physical contact”). Taken together, these findings suggest that girls see leadership as a negative, hostile place for women and these perceptions, whether accurate or not, can act as a strong deterrent to pursuing leadership positions.

**“Even in the work environment, she is not well received, because people think that a woman leader is interfering.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 17-21, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

Perceptions of sexism faced by women in leadership vary considerably by region. Respondents from Europe and North America were more likely than those from other regions to agree that women in leadership are treated less well because of their gender, and that they experience harassment.

**PERCEPTION OF WOMEN BEING TREATED LESS WELL BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDER RARELY, SOMETIMES, VERY OFTEN OR ALWAYS / BY REGION**





In the focus group discussions, young women also stated that becoming a leader is significantly harder for females because of a lack of opportunities and because any woman who does become a leader is likely to face constant criticism and a lack of support from those around her.

**“People say the atmosphere is not safe for girls to work, so they don’t allow girls to go out to work. Society opposes girls becoming leaders so if one girl has done something wrong then society thinks all girls are bad and they should not be allowed to go out of their houses.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, INDIA

More encouragingly, young women in the survey, 81% of them, overwhelmingly embraced the notion that women in leadership can be good mothers. Again, education levels matter: 83% of young women who have completed tertiary education and 82% who have completed secondary school, are more likely to believe women leaders can be good mothers compared to 74% of those who have completed primary school and only 60% of girls who have not attended school at all. This finding varies considerably by region: 88% of young women in Latin America believe that women leaders can be good mothers, compared to 76% in West and Central Africa, with East and South Africa the least likely to believe it at 75%. Those who are already married (70%) are less likely to think that women can be leaders and good mothers than those who are not married (82%).

In the focus group discussions, young women reported deeply ingrained ideas about gender roles in their communities and societies, often in terms of their role in the home and family. However, in line with the survey responses, participants also tended to challenge the stereotypes:

**“...I find it unacceptable that women’s place is only at home. Women should be educated and participating in the change of their country.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18-24, SENEGAL

**“Even my boyfriend regards it natural for girls to take care of the house, although we study the same amount. Of course, I do not think everyone thinks that way, but I wish that we do things equally. If I was a housewife, I would do the household chores, but I wonder why I would be the only one to have more burden even though I study as much as my boyfriend.”** YOUNG WOMAN 21-24, JAPAN

In South Sudan and India, participants flagged that girls’ and women’s mobility can be restricted, and they were often confined to the home:

**“Women have more challenges because men do not want their women to go for work.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 21-24, SOUTH SUDAN.

There is also, in some of the comments, a sense of vulnerability: the underlying threat of violence directed at women who stand out as leaders:

**“Many times, female leaders have to face problems in travelling alone for official purposes.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 21-24, INDIA

# EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP

We asked about young women's current leadership experience with a question on whether they had ever been in a position where they led others or made decisions for others. The vast majority of survey respondents, 85%, have had at least one experience of leading, with 26% reporting multiple leadership experiences.

Respondents' experience of leadership varies by age and education. Young women aged 21-24 are more likely to report a lot of leadership experience than girls aged 15-20. 90% of young women who had completed tertiary education were more likely to say they have had at least one experience of leading, compared to 68% of young women who had not completed any schooling. Young women who self-identify as being of higher social status have had more leadership experiences, 89%, than those of middle and lower social status at 86% and 78% respectively. Girls' leadership experience does not vary by whether or not they are married.

The one-in-four girls who report multiple leadership experiences are twice as likely as girls with no leadership experience to report high confidence in their abilities. It is unclear whether girls seek out multiple leadership experiences because they are confident in their abilities, or whether they are confident in their abilities as a result of multiple leadership experiences. Either way, this finding demonstrates the importance of exposing girls and young women to opportunities to lead early on in life.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, respondents with multiple experiences are more likely to identify discrimination than those without leadership experience and to think that:

- ▶ women in leadership positions have to work harder than men to be respected, 65% compared to 54% of girls with no leadership experience.
- ▶ women leaders are treated less well because of their gender, 94% compared to 88%.
- ▶ women in leadership roles experience unwanted physical contact, 93% compared to 87%.

These findings indicate that **the more leadership experiences a young woman has, the more she sees leadership as a hostile space for women.** Furthermore, since the qualitative data found that experience was the greatest *enabler* of leadership ambitions, these findings present a Catch 22 situation. One potential explanation might be that if experience does not put you off entirely, it makes you stronger, more determined and more aware of the way forward.

## FINDING THEIR WAY

**“I think that she became a leader because when she was a little girl her parents helped her, they advised her and gave her motivation to be strong and taught her that she had to know how to get on well with people, listen to them and help them.”** GIRL, 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Throughout the research girls and young women were asked about the factors that helped or hindered them in claiming and carrying out leadership roles. Family support was probably the key component: during the focus group discussions all five countries reported that female leaders faced a general lack of support and criticism from society but it was the lack of support from family which seemed to be more detrimental to leadership ambitions.

**“If you want to become a leader, your parents marry you off because they think there is no money in leadership.”**

GIRL, 15-17, SOUTH SUDAN

Conversely, support from family from an early age, including encouragement to defy gender stereotypes, was found to be one of the essential enablers of leadership.

**“She [mother] says all the girls should be educated otherwise they have to face domestic violence and she always supports me for my education.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18-21, INDIA



The research also shows how much girls value education and understand that higher education increases their opportunities across the board: it enhances both their confidence in their abilities and their chances of becoming a leader. The importance of education to a future leader is entwined, also, with the issue of child and forced marriage and early pregnancy, particularly in South Sudan, India and the Dominican Republic.

**“Women are taken to the villages and involved in early marriage and don’t continue with education.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, SOUTH SUDAN**

**“Well, I think she should know about sex education, because it’s a big problem in our community now. Lots of young girls get pregnant because they don’t know how to look after themselves, they don’t know what to do. Men say things to them and they fall for it and go off with them, they get pregnant and things don’t go well for them. The men disappear and they are stuck with the problem.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 15-21, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE MODELS

Participants in the focus groups were also asked about the people who inspire them. They often named their mothers, grandmothers, sisters and female teachers, reinforcing again the importance of family support to girls and young women.

**“My role model is my mother... I feel I’m nothing without her support. I want to bring positive changes in my society by getting inspiration from my mother as she is also a social worker.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 21-24, INDIA**

They also named inspirational women leaders from international to national level: from author and former first lady Michelle Obama to Kiran Bedi, a female retired Indian Police Service officer, social activist and politician; from Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai to Mariama Ba, a Senegalese author and feminist; from actor and campaigner Emma Watson to Nunu Kumba, a South Sudanese female politician.

The **absence** of female leaders was acknowledged as a barrier to girls becoming leaders but was not the most significant or common barrier. The **presence** of female leader role models, however is crucial: girls with women leaders as role models in their community and in media are more likely to aspire to a leadership position in their community, their country and their career.

Girls and young women were inspired by the courage, determination and fighting spirit shown by these role models, often in difficult circumstances. They also articulated how their presence encouraged them to believe and be confident in their own abilities, their rights to education and their potential to succeed.

**“In life one needs a person to give us an example and to tell us ‘you can do it, you can do it’. Someone to encourage us.”**


**GIRL, 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

# THE POWER OF STEREOTYPES

Girls and young women need all the help they can get. Sexism and stereotyping remain a very real deterrent to girls' ambitions whether at community, career or national level and unfortunately it is proving hard for girls themselves, particularly as they get older, to escape from the indoctrination they are subject to:

**“Men spend more time on business and women spend more time at home. Sometimes men are more logical and women are more emotional and emotion is required in some areas and logic is required in other areas. As there are situations and categories where one's talent can flower, young women should try when they have chances. On the other hand, if knowledge or experience are required, it would be difficult for young women to be a leader. It is not that they should not become a leader, but it would be rather difficult.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 21-24, JAPAN

This quote is one of several examples which illustrates that young women, even when they wholeheartedly agreed that women can and should be leaders, appear to buy into the very stereotypical ideas about gender roles and characteristics which they are seeking to change.



“Because I am a woman  
doesn't mean I am weak,  
because I am a woman  
doesn't mean anything bad.  
Because I am a woman  
I am strong,  
because I am a woman  
I am aware of my inequalities.  
If you are interested in me,  
don't give me the eye.  
If you touch me I will get mad.  
We are free women and that's  
something you should respect”

Song by La Siembra

# WE ARE TRAILBLAZERS:

## LA SIEMBRA FROM COLOMBIA ON RAP AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

**We are La Siembra**, a musical group that conducts social activism through rap and we are a family: Adriana, 49, and her two daughters Estefania, 24, and Sara, 11. We seek to make visible, and reject through song, the many forms of violence that Colombian women experience in their lives: in childhood, youth and as adults.

We write our music together. That way we reflect what each one of us has experienced and we use our music to empower girls, adolescents and adult women.

Sara is restless, curious and direct when it comes to expressing what she feels. She has great talent and is currently studying drums and singing. She has a passion for photography and enjoys rapping. She defends girls and encourages everyone to know their rights and not to suffer in silence.

Adriana is the mother of four children, a housewife and a singer. She loves to play the piano. She struggles every day to transform the machismo, the toxic masculinity, that exists in her family and her home and encourages women to raise their voices and fight for their rights.

Estefania is studying for a degree in the arts. She is an urban street dancer, rapper, singer, multi-instrumentalist, teacher and activist. In her work

she gives women the artistic tools they need to strengthen ties and work together for their rights. She firmly believes that the key to the struggle lies in co-operating with others and creating a collective power.

Being women of different generations and doing rap has not been easy. The genre is still led by men and many of us are not taken seriously. However, those who see us singing love and support us. Our feminist and activist lyrics cause surprise and break long-standing stereotypes.

We feel that in many different spaces leadership is exercised with masculine strength, even in female environments, but we have also met women who have fought against any type of stereotype and are today building a leadership forged in struggle, union and of course, in sisterhood.

That's what we share in our workshops and concerts. We encourage other girls to rebuild and weave the bonds between women. We meet as a group to learn, inform and support each other in a spirit of sisterhood. Everyone is our sister and our ally.

There are still spaces where people do not want to hear our voices. But every day we grow. We are united fighters, who together will show the world the truth about the importance

of equality.

For us a woman leader is one who gives her all to work for the common good. She recognises we are navigating a long road, but one where all voices are heard and respected. A leader is someone who promotes the equality of girls and women, who makes visible the faces of our sisters who have suffered the scourge of discrimination. With every new sister and ally who adds something new to our group, we are able to rethink what makes the qualities of great leadership. A leader is a woman who recognises her own insecurities and shortcomings and transforms them into the greatest strength to fight against inequality and discrimination. She is the one who shakes hands with other women, who raises her voice and little by little overcomes her fears.

When women take formal and informal spaces to make our struggle visible, we have the ability to recognise the greatness of others: we are informed, organised and focused on our task. We are trailblazers, striving each day to win the fight for true equality.

# A LEADER FOR TODAY

Our research into girls' leadership has made one thing quite clear, girls need role models. They are inspired by seeing women in leadership roles and one young woman in the Dominican Republic spoke for many when she talked about the importance of "someone to encourage us".

With this in mind Plan International has introduced many young women activists to female community and national leaders both to inspire them, and to help prepare them for the challenges ahead.

## MRS NGO THI MINH, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY MEMBER, VIETNAM

**"We have to dare to think, dare to do."**

In Vietnam, Linh, working with Plan International's Girls Get Equal campaign, interviewed Mrs Ngo Thi Minh, a member of the National Assembly, Quang Ninh Province since 2002 and Vice-Chairwoman of the Committee for Culture, Education, Youth and Children.

Linh told us afterwards how meeting Mrs Ngo Thi Minh, seeing her passion for her work and the difficulties she had overcome, had made her optimistic that she, and other girls like her, could do the same.

This is an edited version of their conversation.

► **Linh:** How did you achieve the success that you have today?

**Mrs Ngo Thi Minh:** To be honest, to be in my current position, I have had to overcome many barriers. And, of course, you need real motivation to achieve success. For me this is firstly, my passion and enthusiasm for my job. Secondly, I am inspired by the support from family, friends and colleagues, and specially the trust from the community. It is also really important to make a choice about your career right at the beginning. I really wanted to do something that helps girls in general achieve equality and sustainable development. That aim helps me to overcome many difficulties in life.

**Linh:** I have a younger brother in my family so sometimes I'm under pressure, as I can feel the inequality in the way my parents treat their boys and girls. Have you ever experienced the same thing?

**Mrs Ngo Thi Minh:** In my own life, I can also see the inequality pretty clearly. In my family, I am the oldest sister, and I have 3 brothers. Girls have to do additional chores on top of their school work and we need

to arrange time so carefully in order to get everything done, when usually boys don't have to worry. In our country, paternalism is still a huge barrier, but not only in our country. The problem here is the belief that girls don't have to study much. My mother believed that women need to take care of their husbands and children, so a boy's education was more important. When I was the same age as you, that belief was very common.

**Linh:** As a female leader, do you see any difference compared to male leaders?

**Mrs Ngo Thi Minh:** It is harder for women. The difficulty here is that we have the same amount of to do at work - we need to be enthusiastic and try to create our own image and contribute to society, and confirm our role and our status - but at the same time we need to find a balance between work and home. Society judges women very strictly. Women's responsibilities in the family are to be a mother, a wife and a daughter. We are responsible for our parents, our husband's parents, our husband and children. There is a lot of unrecognised work. "Balance" is what I have been trying to achieve since I was young. It's a huge difference compared to male leaders.

**Linh:** As a female leader what will you do differently to a male leader to create a better environment for boys and girls?

**Mrs Ngo Thi Minh:** In the workplace, women have different perspectives and a different way to care for women so as to create chances for women to make use of their potential. We have to be better organised and our gentler personality helps us to complete the job in an effective way.

**Linh:** Based on your own experience, can you share advice with me, and also other girls, so we have more motivation to achieve success, contribute to create a better society, and create a more equal environment for boys and girls.

**Mrs Ngo Thi Minh:** To be honest, I think there are many difficulties. I think firstly we need to have a professional manner. Secondly, when we choose our career, we need to do what we really love. Anything we do needs passion and enthusiasm. Thirdly, we need to understand ourselves, our potential, our strengths so we can develop them. To develop them we need to have a strong belief that we can do it: if others can do it why can't we? We need to set a high standard for ourselves so we can balance between family and work. If we only care about our job, we don't have time for family. If we can only spend time for family, it's hard to have time for our career. I really hope that girls get more and more confident so we can see that any barriers are just temporary and we should never give up. We have to dare to think, dare to do. To be a female leader we need to study always, every time, everywhere, in every situation. We need to be hard working, to read, to research, never give up, never be conservative.

**Linh:** Thank you for spending time with me today. You're a huge inspiration to me and my friends to develop and try to achieve success as you do. ■



## HER EXCELLENCY, GHADA WALLY, MINISTER OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

**“Never stop learning and you will achieve your dreams.”**

In Egypt, Mai, who had interviewed Ghada Wally, the Minister of Social Solidarity, for International Day of the Girl in October, met her in March to catch up and talk about female leadership.

**This is an edited version of their conversation.**

► **Mai:** What was your dream when you were young? And if your dream was to become a minister, what were the steps you followed?

**Her Excellency:** I never dreamed of becoming a minister. I hadn't even thought about it and when I became a minister, I thought I would stay in the position for like three or five months maximum and not five years as I have now. Some positions have a growth line, meaning that you know how you can grow and what steps you need to take to get to the next level. For example, to become a university professor you have to get a masters and PhD degrees. Yet, with political positions, such as a minister, there is no blueprint on how to get a certain position and how to stay in that role.

**Mai:** What was the driving force behind you?

**Her Excellency:** I have always been keen to work hard and not to spare any effort in anything I do. As a mom I am always on top of everything related to my children and support them in everything they do. In my work I spare no effort to do my job the best

way possible and I keep learning new things to help me innovate in what I do.

**Mai:** What else do you see as factors of success in leadership positions?

**Her Excellency:** Beside continuous hard work and learning, you need to ensure that you are surrounded with strong, skilled, capable, innovative and honest team because working with such a strong team with diverse skills will enable you to achieve all that you dream of.

**Mai:** What is your advice for young girls who wants to follow in your footsteps?

**Her Excellency:** Be genuine in all you do, never stop learning and you will achieve your dreams. My aim was not to become a minister but rather to bring about positive change in the lives of people, through whatever I do.

For Mai her meetings with Her Excellency Ghada Wally have been inspirational: *“Interviewing her has strengthened my idea about female leadership and that women can do everything. The new thing that I learned is that I should not judge something from a*

*distance and think that what I have in my mind is the only right solution. She made me realise that being in a leadership position a person should think in a more comprehensive way and tackle different angles. Her Excellency also inspired me in the interview by her words around being positive, keep learning new things and excel in what I do and this will be my way to success and growth.”*

Mai's experience motivated her to send a message to girls and their parents: *“I want to send my message to parents first and tell them to listen to their daughters, support and trust them. They are capable and can do a lot. My message to the girls is that you are capable, you are skilled, every human being is unique with something, and you as girls are not little so don't see yourselves as so as this will be reflected in the way people around you perceive you. So, trust yourselves, pursue your dreams and don't think that there is something called impossible. All female leaders, such as her Excellency Ghada Wally, were once young girls like you. You don't have to be a minister but you have to seek your dream and achieve it. Remember that females are capable of multitasking by nature so make use of this.”*

Mai is well on the way to realising her own dreams. Now working as a graphic designer, she recently had a drawing in an exhibition of young Arab artists. ■

# CONCLUSION

**“Even though I am studying in the second year of my degree. People of my community are against my education. They always told my father to stop sending me for education and plan my marriage soon. But my father supports me for my education. So, people always demotivate a young female leader and tell them to stay away from their children as they are afraid a young female leader can ‘spoil’ their child.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18-20, INDIA

Girls and young women want to be leaders. From adolescence and into early adulthood, they are motivated to effect change in their lives and they want to work towards improving their community and country. Whilst there are variations across regional and income groupings and individual characteristics, overall girls and young women aspire to lead and are confident in their ability to do so. However, girls are also acutely aware of the difficulties that lie in wait for them should they choose to pursue their ambitions. They face significant barriers: gender discrimination, blatant sexism, harassment and violence, a lack of respect and the expectation of balancing work and home life. It is hardly surprising that girls’ and young women’s leadership aspirations wane as they get older. Society is not set up to nurture girls’ ambitions: families support boys, and girls and young women are not given the opportunities, the spaces or the encouragement they need. In addition, the findings suggest that, from an early age, girls and young

women internalise gendered stereotypes which both shape and limit their ideas of female leadership.

Nevertheless, despite the pressures to conform, this research has shown that girls and young women are defining leadership for themselves: according to those who participated in this study, developing community, striving for social justice and gender equality, listening to others, making decisions collectively and leading in a compassionate way that empowers and helps others, are among the most important characteristics of leadership.

In order to put their ideals into practice, in every sphere, girls need encouragement, education, role models and opportunity. Their social and marital status affects their confidence and their chances of becoming a leader as do the opportunities they have to experience leadership as they are growing up. The way forward is not easy.

Everyone has a role to play from family members to government legislators. Providing girls with education and the relevant experience, re-examining definitions of leadership and combating gender stereotypes are all well within the bounds of possibility. Families, the media, those in positions of power and wider society can all help in challenging negative gender norms and promoting more positive portrayals of women in leadership. It is necessary to show girls that they belong in the places and spaces where they can drive change – from the household and the workplace, to their communities and countries.

In the following section we lay out some recommendations which will enhance the opportunities for leadership of girls and young women and in doing so improve the communities – local, national and international – in which we all live.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

# HOW TO CHANGE

# THE FACE OF LEADERSHIP

These recommendations, based on the findings from this report, are built on the experiences and priorities of girls and young women and are focused on four key areas that they have identified.

From an early age, girls and young women internalise gendered stereotypes which both shape and limit their ideas, ambitions and self-confidence. At the heart of any of these recommendations is the urgent need to challenge and transform social and gender norms that hold girls back from acting on their leadership aspirations.

These are the four calls to action.

## 1. CULTIVATE YOUNG LEADERS STARTING AT HOME

Work in partnership with families, local leaders and communities to create a strong support network that nurtures girls' leadership aspirations instead of reinforcing gender stereotypes that both shape and limit their ideas, ambitions and self-confidence.

## 2. ENCOURAGE NEW VISIONS OF LEADERSHIP

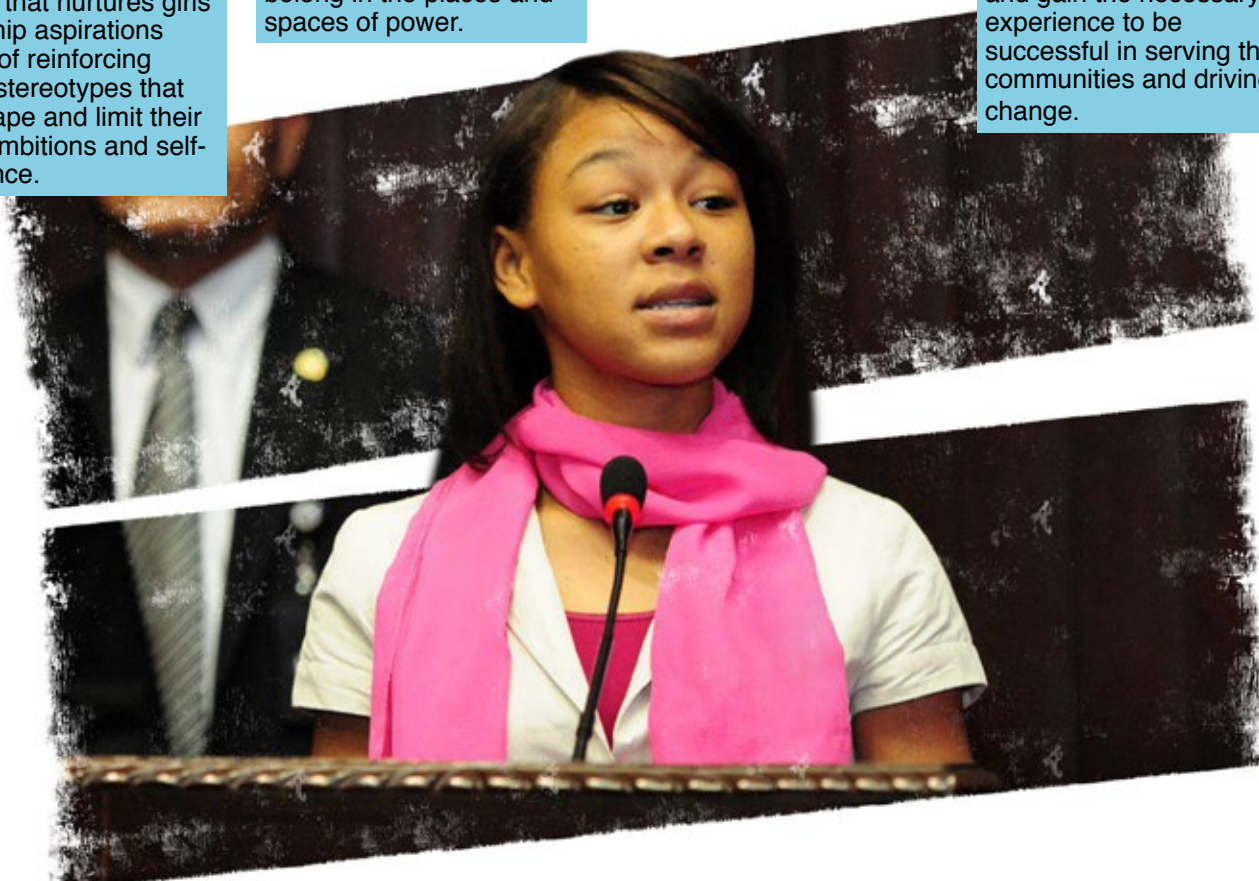
Challenge the very perception of what it means to be a leader and reinforce the message that girls and women belong in the places and spaces of power.

## 3. CHALLENGE SEXISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Urgently tackle the pervasive discriminatory culture that deters girls from pursuing their leadership ambitions

## 4. SET GIRLS UP TO SUCCEED

Direct efforts towards education and opening up further opportunities to empower girls to exercise their leadership skills and gain the necessary experience to be successful in serving their communities and driving change.



# 1 CULTIVATE YOUNG LEADERS, STARTING AT HOME

Girls have said they are most influenced by their immediate environments and we know that age is critical when it comes to nurturing their leadership ambitions. Investments are most likely to be effective during adolescence and any efforts to support women's leadership must begin in childhood and increase and adapt as girls become young adults. Therefore, governments, corporates, the media, and civil society organisations must work in partnership with families and local communities to challenge and transform the cultural and gendered expectations that dictate the value and roles of girls and boys within the family and wider society.

1. Parents, schools, religious and cultural organisations **should be seen as key entry points to creating a strong support network** that nurtures girls' leadership aspirations. Efforts should be focused on making families more aware of their unique ability to foster equality in society by enabling girls to become leaders.
2. Civil society and non-governmental organisations should work with families and local communities to provide encouragement, opportunities and spaces equally to girls and boys. **Participation in decision-making processes** at family and community level can not only help girls to gain necessary skills but will also help challenge the social and gender norms that often dictate that political and civic leadership is reserved for men.
3. Mothers, fathers and brothers can all act as champions within the home and the local community. Fathers and brothers can **share the burden of domestic responsibility** as it relates to housework and childcare in order to undermine stereotypes and **promote girls' and young women's leadership**.
4. Within family, community and country environments, there is a need to **create safe spaces** where girls and young women can discuss issues that matter to them. Community and country leaders should work with girls and young women to create and co-design safe avenues for their civic and political participation.



## 2

## ENCOURAGE NEW VISIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Girls will only be encouraged in their ambitions when the concept of leadership itself is transformed to embrace a more collaborative, less authoritarian style and structure which girls feel they can work with. Critically, there is a need for those in positions of authority to **start an authentic discussion around alternative forms of leadership** to create greater awareness and understanding of how girls and young women are interpreting leadership styles and agendas. They should work with girls and women to assess what actions can be taken within existing structures and organisations to better reflect and operate within this more collaborative style. Governments, the private sector and the media should be seen to be visibly promoting a more inclusive and diverse society, not least within their own organisations, including sending out a clear message through public campaigns that girls and women belong in the spaces and places of decision-making and power.

1. For girls and young women, the presence of female role models is crucial to nurturing their leadership ambitions. Government departments, corporations and civil society organisations **must support mentorship schemes and other ways to connect women who hold leadership positions to younger generations** to provide a critical intergenerational exchange. This will help girls navigate challenges and provide a crucial source of encouragement as they pursue their ambitions to become leaders and to effect change.
2. Additionally, media organisations in particular must recognise their role in perpetrating stereotypes around women leaders. **Diversity, positive images and affirmative language** could transform the way women are portrayed, providing girls and young women with the encouragement they need, promoting gender equality rather than adding to the discrimination and hostility that girls currently experience.
3. Outside of this, key changes to public policy and legislation are required to ensure more women can enter into and stay in leadership and decision-making spaces and become the role models that girls need. **Governments, national parliaments, political parties and corporations need to recognise and address patriarchy and gender bias** at the outset of formal processes, and seek to create terms of engagement that are enabling for young women: through actions that could include quotas, debating rules about respect and active listening, allowing young women to speak first, and supporting women-only dialogue forums in advance of formal processes so that they can strengthen their agency and voice.



## 3

# CHALLENGE

## SEXISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Any campaigns to encourage more women into positions where they can drive change must go hand in hand with efforts to tackle the sexism and discrimination, including violence and the threat of violence, often directed towards women leaders within different power structures and organisations. It is completely unacceptable. Girls and young women see the price that many women leaders pay as they take up prominent positions, and this has a negative effect on their own aspirations to lead.

1. Governments and other workplaces must take concrete steps to prevent and respond to the very real and/or perceived experiences of sexual harassment and violence, that women leaders of all ages are subjected to, by enforcing existing laws and policies and strengthening reporting mechanisms. **Public campaigning** against all forms of violence against women must be funded and promoted.
2. It is everyone's responsibility to **condemn harassment** and violence against girls and women, including those who choose to speak up. Men and boys need to recognise that sexist behaviour will not be tolerated and instead be engaged, through public campaigning, as allies and champions in promoting gender equality and women's leadership.



## 4 SET GIRLS UP TO SUCCEED

Girls and young women value education and understand that higher education increases their opportunities across the board: it enhances both their confidence in their abilities and their chances of becoming leaders. The quality of the education they receive also matters and education should be gender transformative, leading not only to certificates and degrees, but to skills and knowledge that range from information about sexual and reproductive health and rights to the ability for critical thinking and practical action.

During the research it also became evident that experience was the largest enabler of girls' leadership aspirations. Girls and young women need safe spaces and opportunities to craft leadership experience and skills early on in childhood and adolescence if they are going to be able to pursue their ambitions in their careers, in the community and country. Participation in school governance is a critical first step towards developing agency and leadership skills and supporting girls and young women to join social networks and engage in civic action will also help them gain leadership experience. These spaces should provide opportunities for girls to exercise a different style of leadership, one which is more collaborative than the hierarchical and traditional leadership structures they see around them.

1. Governments, international organisations, school governing bodies and other key stakeholders must increase girls' access to schools and to wider **educational opportunities** which will empower them to take up leadership opportunities and to **make informed decisions** about their lives and futures. They need to equip girls with the tools, resources and support to challenge the status quo and demand an inclusive and equitable world that reflects their needs, rights and aspirations.
2. Education ministries must **remove any gender bias and discrimination** within and across education systems, ensuring that learning materials are non-discriminatory, gender sensitive, inclusive and do not reinforce gender stereotyping around leadership roles and styles. Governments should undertake a gender review of their curricula, textbooks and games, accompanied by teacher training and supervision to ensure learning environments are free from gender stereotypes and instead promote equality, non-discrimination and human rights.
3. Governments and civil society must **support and encourage girls' and young women's groups, networks and youth-led civic action**, recognising that youth-driven collective action is one of the main avenues for adolescent girls to act on their aspirations to drive social change.
4. Opportunities for girl and young women leaders should be tied to additional support mechanisms including safe spaces, networking and mentor programmes all of which have been identified by girls and young women as important to **support their collective action and their leadership ambitions**. These should be flexibly funded and include access to decision makers, as well as increased support to girls and young women in managing safety and self-care.

**“YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS SHOULD SEE A  
WOMEN-FRIENDLY FUTURE, BECAUSE THEY  
CAN BE ONE OF THOSE WOMEN.”**

**GIRL, 15-17, JAPAN**

# REFERENCES

- 1 The full technical report can be found at <https://plan-international.org/TakingTheLead>
- 2 Perkins, S.E., Phillips, K.W. and Pearce, N.A. (2017) "Ethnic Diversity, Gender, And National Leaders". *Journal For International Affairs* 67 (1): 85-103.
- 3 Dollar, D., Fisman, R. and Gatti, R. (1999) "Are Women Really The 'Fairer' Sex? Corruption And Women In Government". Policy Research Report On Gender And Development. Washington DC: World Bank.
- 4 Center for Gender Research (STK) "Gender equality and quality of life (GEQ) – a study of Norway and Poland (completed)", post-doctoral project. Available at: <https://www.stk.uio.no/english/research/projects/geq-project/>; Lahn, A.L. (2015) "Gender equality gives men better lives", Science Nordic website. Available at: <http://sciencenordic.com/gender-equality-gives-men-better-lives>
- 5 Single House or Lower House. Inter-Parliamentary Union. "Women in national parliaments, as of 1 November 2018.
- 6 Grant Thornton, 2018. Women in Business: Beyond Policy to Progress, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://www.grantthornton.global/globalassets/1.-member-firms/global/insights/women-in-business/grant-thornton-women-in-business-2018-report.pdf>.
- 7 <https://plan-international.org/girlspan>
- 8 All percentages in the text have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole figure.
- 9 Report due October 2019.
- 10 World Economic Forum, The Global Gender Gap Report 2018 [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf)
- 11 Catalyst, 2018. Quick Take: Women in Management, July 30, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-management>.
- 12 McKinsey Research, 2018. Delivering Through Diversity, January, accessed August 25, 2018, [https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20functions/organization/our%20insights/delivering%20through%20diversity/delivering-through-diversity\\_full-report.ashx](https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20functions/organization/our%20insights/delivering%20through%20diversity/delivering-through-diversity_full-report.ashx).
- 13 Single House or Lower House. [Inter-Parliamentary Union. "Women in national parliaments, as of 1 November 2018.](https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/youth-participation-in-national-parliament)
- 14 IPU's Youth Participation in National Parliaments (2016) <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/youth-participation-in-national-parliament>
- 15 Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women. "Women in Politics 2017 Map" Available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/4/women-in-politics-2017-map>
- 16 World Economic Forum, Gender Gap Report 2018, accessed, 08 May 2019, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/>
- 17 Grant Thornton, 2018. Women in Business: Beyond Policy to Progress, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://www.grantthornton.global/globalassets/1.-member-firms/global/insights/women-in-business/grant-thornton-women-in-business-2018-report.pdf>.
- 18 Marcus Noland, Tyler Moran, and Barbara Kotschwar, 2016. Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Study. Peterson Institute for International Economics, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://piie.com/publications/wp/wp16-3.pdf>.
- 19 Janet T. Spence and Robert L. Helmreich, 1978. *Masculinity and Femininity: Their Psychological Dimensions, Correlates and Antecedents*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- 20 Jeane Twenge, 1997. "Changes in Masculine and Feminine Traits Over Time: A Meta-Analysis," *Sex Roles*, 36(5-6): 305-325.
- 21 Anne M. Koenig, Alice H. Eagly, Abigail A. Mitchell, and Tiina Ristikan, 2011. "Are Leader Stereotypes Masculine? A Meta-Analysis of Three Research Paradigms." *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(4): 616–42.
- 22 Alice H. Eagly, and Steven J. Karau, 2002. "Role Incongruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders," *Psychological Review*, 109(3): 573–98.
- 23 Robert Blum, Robert Wm. 2017. "Adolescence: Age and Stage. Understanding the Golden Threads That Connect the Adolescent Girl Experience Worldwide, Girl Effect, Accessed October 3, 2018, [https://prd-girlffect-corp.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Adolescence\\_Age\\_and\\_Stage.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWVYO5R6RMTXA2NA&Signature=1eZd-KdmjfbmP1w2c0d3g2FrBuO0%3D&Expires=1523375650](https://prd-girlffect-corp.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Adolescence_Age_and_Stage.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWVYO5R6RMTXA2NA&Signature=1eZd-KdmjfbmP1w2c0d3g2FrBuO0%3D&Expires=1523375650)
- 24 Susan Nierenberg and Serena Fong, 2007. "Damned or Doomed – Catalyst Study on Gender Stereotyping at Work Uncovers Double-Bind Dilemmas for Women." *Catalyst*, July 15, accessed August 6, 2018, <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/double-bind>.
- 25 Eagly and Karau, "Role Congruity Theory..."
- 26 Science (magazine): Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests, published 27 January 2017. Available at: <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/355/6323/389>
- 27 Monica C. Schneider and Angela L. Bos, 2014. "Measuring Stereotypes of Female Politicians," *Political Psychology*, 35(2): 245-266.
- 28 Ibid., p. 260
- 29 Catalyst, "Damned or Doomed – Catalyst Study on Gender Stereotyping at Work Uncovers Double-Bind Dilemmas for Women," *Women in Management Review*, vol. 22, no. 8, (2007).
- 30 J.D. Nordell, Positions of Power: How Female Ambition in Shaped (The Slate Gist, 2006), Available from: [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/the\\_gist/2006/11/positions\\_of\\_power.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_gist/2006/11/positions_of_power.html) 2016 Accessed 8 August 2018.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Jean M. Gerard and Margaret Z. Booth, "Family and School Influences on Adolescents' Adjustment: The Moderating Role of Youth Hopefulness and Aspirations for the Future," *Journal of Adolescence*, vol. 44, (2015).
- 35 KPMG, 2017. KPMG Women's Leadership Study, accessed August 16, 2018, <https://home.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/ph/pdf/ThoughtLeadershipPublications/KPMGWomensLeadershipStudy.pdf>; see also Archard, 2012.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 36 Lori Beaman, Esther Duflo, Rohini Pande, and Petia Topalova. 2012. "Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India". *Science*, 335 (6068): 582–86.
- 37 Archard, Nicole, 2012. "Preparing Adolescent Girls for School and Post-School Leadership: Recommendations to School Educators from Educational Staff, Female Students, and Women Leaders," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 18(3): 158-175.
- 38 For further information about the methodology please go to <https://plan-international.org/TakingTheLead>
- 39 Benin, Canada, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Finland, Honduras, India, Japan, Netherlands, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sweden, Vietnam, Uganda, USA, Zimbabwe.
- 40 Dominican Republic, India, Japan, Senegal, South Sudan
- 41 Disabled Women's Network (DAWN) Ontario, The Feminist Principle of Leadership, (2008) cited in Srilatha Batliwala, "Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud" (New Delhi: CREA, 2011), p.1-79.

This research was undertaken by Plan International in partnership with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The report team included Drs. Caroline Heldman and Soraya Giaccardi at the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media; and Emma Langley, Sophie Tanner, Dr. Jacqueline Gallinetti, Amy Ashlee, Miriam Gauer at Plan International. Thanks are due to staff at Plan International offices in all of the countries that participated in both the survey and qualitative focus groups. In particular we would like to thank:

- **Dominican Republic:** Tania Fajardo, Michela da Rodda, Laura Breton and Santa Hilma
- **India:** Soumen Ghosh, Prakash Gus, Shanu Somvanshi, Ritu Sahni, Poonam Mehta, Charu Anand
- **Japan:** Maki Enokita, Mariko Inoue and Naoko Shiroya
- **Senegal:** Mamadou Ndiaye, Madina Dia and Oumou Mbaye
- **South Sudan:** Stella Drate, Anthony Kamba and Allen Poni

We would also like to thank Alex Munive, Anja Stuckert, Madeleine Askham, Rosamund Ebdon, Danny Plunkett, Davinder Kumar and Carla Jones for providing comments and inputs into the technical report. Likewise, thanks to Sarah Lewis for providing additional input into the literature review. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the input from the following young people who work with Plan International for contributing to the design of the study: Caren, Chamathya, Aneeka, Erika and Marie Augustine. We would also like to acknowledge the input from the following young people in the development of the qualitative tool: Sophie, Gonzalo, Bhavana and Sifat.

Finally, we would like to thank the girls and young women taking part in this research for their time and insights.

Lead editor and report author: Sharon Goulds

Layout design: Sandra Dudley

## Picture credits

- Cover, p.26 ©Plan International / Vivek Singh  
 p.5 ©Plan International / Patrick Kaplin  
 p.7 ©Plan International  
 p.9 ©Plan International / Quinn Neely  
 p.11 ©Girls Advocacy Alliance / Ilvy Njokiktjien  
 p.15 ©Plan International / Fran Alonso  
 p.19 ©Plan International / Alexander Caballero Diaz  
 p.21 © Paola Cañizares  
 p.22 ©Plan International  
 p.25 ©Chamber of Deputies of the Dominican Republic  
 p.27 ©Plan International / John Ternan  
 p.30 ©Plan International / Jani Laukkanen

Note: Photos in this report do not depict research participants



## Partners

**This report is based on research produced by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and Plan International.**

The mission of the **Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media** is to engage, educate, and influence media content creators, marketers, and audiences about the importance of eliminating gender bias and stereotypes in media. The Institute has amassed the largest body of research on gender prevalence in family entertainment, spanning more than 20 years. Research findings are in high demand by companies and organisations interested in the empowerment of women and girls. The Institute's research serves as the basis for education and outreach programmes that help families, studios, educators and content creators become critical consumers and producers.

---

**Plan International** is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, Plan International drives changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children and we are active in more than 75 countries.

---

## Girls Get Equal

Plan International has been campaigning for girls' rights for over a decade and the current Girls Get Equal campaign aims to ensure girls and young women have power over their own lives and can help shape the world around them. Promoting young female leadership is central to the Girls Get Equal campaign. While this includes access to formal positions of power and authority, such as increasing the numbers of young women and girls in decision-making roles in public life, it also looks beyond this. The campaign seeks to redefine leadership to better reflect how girls, young women and young advocates and activists are choosing to lead: working with them to ensure that leadership is feminist, gender transformative and inclusive. It means not reinforcing a narrow male-defined set of leadership skills and behaviours or replicating the male-dominated power and leadership structures that currently exist. Throughout the campaign there will be ongoing research, partnering with girls and young women to fully understand what it means to them to be a leader.

---

## Plan International

Global Hub  
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,  
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155

Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

E-mail: [info@plan-international.org](mailto:info@plan-international.org)

**[plan-international.org](http://plan-international.org)**

Published in 2019.

Text © Plan International unless otherwise noted