

# Gender Equality Essentials #6

**SWITZERLAND:** Three She Leads advocates participated in the 56th session of the UN Human Rights Council.



## Girls' & young women's leadership

### Key numbers



#### Political representation & leadership

- In 2025, **32 women** serve as Heads of State or Government in 29 countries **representing roughly 16% of all such position globally**<sup>1</sup>.
- At the current rate, **gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years**<sup>2</sup>.
- The five **most commonly held portfolios by women Cabinet Ministers** are Women and Gender Equality, followed by Family and Children affairs, Social Inclusion and Development, Social Protection and Social Security, and Culture.
- **Only six countries have reached gender parity or better in parliament:** Rwanda (64%), Cuba (56%), Nicaragua (55%), Andorra (50%), Mexico (50%) and the United Arab Emirates (50%)<sup>3</sup>.
- Women constitute more than **35.5% of elected members in local deliberative bodies**. Only two countries have reached 50%<sup>4</sup>.



#### Activism & civil society

- In Europe, although young women display **more interest** than young men in social and political issues, their participation level in organisations is **lower than** that of young men<sup>5</sup>.
- Young men **are more likely to be involved (14%) in political parties than young women (8%)**<sup>6</sup>.
- **70% of women** human rights defenders, activists, journalists and media workers surveyed have experienced **online violence** in the course of their work<sup>7</sup>.
- In 2023, **662 million euros** was allocated by EU institutions and members states to women's rights and ending gender-based violence worldwide, representing **only 0.59% of total EU ODA**, with funding decreasing in 2024<sup>8</sup>.

# Why is it important?

**All individuals, regardless of age and gender have the right to be heard, be represented and participate in decision-making at all levels, as recognised by various human rights conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).**

Across local, national and global levels, and in both public and private sectors, **girls and young women remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making**. When they do access leadership positions, they often experience unequal treatment, limited access to financial support, and face psychological violence and sexual harassment. These barriers are reinforced by broader trends, including a shrinking civic space and a setback in the protection of human rights.<sup>9</sup>

Representation influences how decisions are shaped and implemented. Strengthening girls' and young women's power, voice and leadership **ensures that their interests are reflected in policies and investments**; it improves the quality and relevance of policies.<sup>10</sup>

Women's participation in political processes is linked to more effective public policies, **more transparent governance, and positive outcomes in education, health, gender-based violence prevention, and environmental policy**<sup>11</sup>.

## Key terms\*

**Young people:** Girls and boys from ten years and particularly youth from 15 to 24 years of age are at the heart of the change we want to see.


**Youth leader/leadership:** Children and youth with a vision of gender equality and social justice, individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes to mobilise others around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realisation of human rights for all.

**Drivers of change:** Adolescents and youth, and particularly girls and young women, taking collective action for systemic change and conflict transformation.

**Co-creation:** A collaborative process that involves young people as equal partners in shaping initiatives that affect their lives. It values their perspectives, promotes shared decision-making, and seeks to address power imbalances between young people and adults.

**Tokenism:** The symbolic inclusion of under-represented groups without a corresponding shift in power. Young people may be invited to participate to demonstrate diversity or meet participation requirements, while decision-making authority remains unchanged.

\* According to Plan International's terminology



**BELGIUM:** Halima and Fatima, youth climate researchers and advocates from Nigeria, meet the Queen of Belgium.

## What about Belgium?

- Only **14% of Belgian girls feel confident enough to run for elections**. This figure stands in sharp contrast to the global average of 28%<sup>12</sup>.
- In 2025, **women make up only 26% of ministers in the federal government** (down from 53% in the previous legislature), and **there are no ministers of foreign origin** (compared to three in the previous legislature)<sup>13</sup>.
- Women represent **38%** of Flemish aldermen, **33%** of Flemish ministers, and less than **20%** of mayors. Finally, **50%** of ministers in the Walloon Regional Government are women, but none are of foreign origin. **6 out of 9** ministers in the Flemish government are women. The head of the Flemish government however is a man.
- Belgium has had **1 female Prime Minister**, Sophie Wilmès, who took over the job temporarily for a year in 2019–2020.

# Leadership in the making: girls leading research and fighting for climate justice

With the support of Plan International Belgium, a study was published that focused on the **gendered impact of climate change on the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the Sahel** called [A Gathering Storm](#). This study used a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology, to shed light on the unique challenges faced by girls in the Sahel region due to climate change. **This approach supports girls' leadership by positioning them as researchers and decision-makers in generating knowledge about their own lives and communities.**

The study also highlights the role of adolescent girls and young women as key change-makers and actors for climate justice, adaptation, and resilience. It involved 25 young Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, as co-researchers who were involved in all stages: in design, implementation and analysis. They conducted peer-to-peer surveys, facilitated focus group discussion and engaged in other data gathering activities.

“This approach (FPAR) also builds the resilience and leadership skills of girls, allowing them to create possible solutions to issues affecting them around climate change.”

**Young woman co-researcher**

On 22 November 2024, experts and policymakers from several countries discussed the growing challenges faced by children in a world marked by conflict, climate change and structural inequalities. Together, they explored strategies to better protect the younger generation and safeguard their rights.

A highlight of the conference was the intervention of Halima and Fatima, two young researchers and Plan ambassadors from Nigeria. They presented the findings of the study [A Gathering Storm](#). They emphasized the importance of **giving due consideration to the experiences of girls and young women in public policy and humanitarian responses.**



**NIGER:** Advocating access to education for all girls.

## Girls in crisis

When crises strike, gender inequalities are exacerbated. This results in increased levels of gender-based violence, exclusion from life-saving services and decisions-making processes due to discriminatory social norms and attitude and limited mobility due to insecurity.

However, **women are leaders and agents of change.** They are often the first respondent to crisis and play a central role in the resilience of families and communities. Local women's groups are usually the best placed to respond to crises. Studies show that when women are included in humanitarian action, the entire community benefits<sup>14</sup>. **Peace lasts longer when girls and women are at the table.**

# Drivers and root causes

Girls and young women face multiple forms of discrimination that undermine their leadership. This discrimination is systemic, and is driven by several intertwined factors that reinforce each other :

## Girls and young women are held back by patriarchal norms and attitudes

- Social norms and power relations continue to restrict girls and young women by confining them to the roles associated **with the family and private spheres rather than public life**. These norms actively discourage them from engaging in politics and pursuing high-profile careers, which are widely viewed as **“male domains”**.
- At the same time, expectations around **domestic responsibilities**, and restrictions on **mobility and access to financial resources**, reduce their capacity to pursue professional, civic and political ambitions.
- Prevailing social norms and cultural attitudes also undermine **girls’ and young women’s confidence**, discouraging them from expressing their opinions or asserting their views from an early age.
- When girls and young women engage in activism and civic activities they often face **backlash, fundamentalism, and threats to their safety and security**. They also experience pressure from their families and communities to step back from political or civil action<sup>15</sup>.
- Women are often **perceived as less competent** than men; and when they display behaviours typically associated with men such as being assertive, confident or competitive, women are perceived as aggressive.

## Structural socio-economic barriers limit girls’ and young women’s ability to access leadership positions

- Limited access to **inclusive quality education**, prevents girls and young women from developing the necessary skills, knowledge, experience and confidence needed to pursue leadership positions and engage in civic and political participation.
- Girls and young women often face major **challenges in accessing financial resources and capital** to support their professional, political and civil society ambitions.

- **Sexual harassment and unequal work environments** restrict women’s opportunities for career advancement.
- The **lack of female role models and mentorship programs** limit girls and young women’s aspirations to become leaders and decision makers.
- **Media narratives often reinforce harmful gender stereotypes**, shaping public attitudes that exclude girls and young women from leadership positions.

## Laws and policies restrict girls’ and women’s ability to exercise leadership

- Limited political commitment and insufficient funding continue to restrict gender-responsive reforms. In many countries, these barriers prevent girls’ and young women’s full participation in public life and their access to leadership roles. **Nearly one in four governments worldwide reported a backlash against women’s rights in 2024**, including weakened legal protections and reduced support for equality measures, which further affects progress on gender-responsive policies.
- Employment and labour laws and policies are often based on traditional gender roles, undermining women’s career advancement. As of 2024, **47% of countries surveyed still restrict women from doing the same jobs as men**, meaning formal legal barriers persist that limit women’s economic participation and, by extension, their leadership potential<sup>16</sup>.
- Globally, women receive on average around 24.7 weeks of paid maternity or parental leave, while men receive only about 2.2 weeks of paid paternity leave<sup>17</sup>. This imbalance contributes to the **unequal distribution of care responsibilities**, increases career interruptions for women, which negatively affects their long-term career progression and access to leadership.

**BOLIVIA:** Darleyn, 17, wants to build a better world for her family and community.



## Intersecting barriers to girls' leadership

Girls' and young women's access to leadership is shaped by **overlapping forms of discrimination** that interact with **existing structures of power and privilege**. Gender inequality often intersects with factors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, migration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and geographic location which leads to unequal access to opportunities.

This is particularly evident for women of colour and women from low-income backgrounds who often face **compounded barriers**, including limited access to quality education, professional networks, financial resources, and decision-making spaces. When leadership initiatives and policies fail to take these unequal starting points into account, **they risk reinforcing existing disparities in access to leadership**.

# Common misconceptions

## Misconception 1:

“Girls are less interested in leadership roles because their primary role is domestic and caregiving.”

**Why it is false or misleading:** Research shows no gender differences in leadership competence or effectiveness<sup>18</sup>. Women express similar leadership ambitions to men when barriers such as discrimination, lack of support, and unequal care responsibilities are removed. Career interruptions and underrepresentation in leadership are largely driven by structural constraints, including unequal caregiving expectations, discriminatory practices, and inflexible work environments, rather than a preference.

**Why it is harmful:** This misconception reinforces restrictive gender norms, obscures systemic barriers to girls’ and young women’s leadership, and legitimizes discriminatory laws and workplace practices. It reduces investment in women’s professional development and shifts responsibility away from institutions responsible for enabling women’s leadership and career advancement.

## Misconception 2:

“Girls and young women lack the experience, maturity, or capacity to be effective leaders.”

**Why it is false or misleading:** Girls and young women regularly demonstrate leadership, innovation, and decision-making skills in their communities, movements, and civic initiatives. Their exclusion from leadership is not due to lack of capacity, but to age- and gender-based bias, restricted access to resources, and institutional barriers that limit opportunities to gain formal leadership experience.

**Why it is harmful:** This justifies exclusion from decision-making spaces, delay leadership opportunities, and normalize tokenistic participation. It reinforces unequal power structures, discourages investment in young women’s leadership, and weakens policy outcomes by excluding the perspectives of those most affected by decisions.



**UKRAINE:** Youth leader speaks at the FemACT! Feminist Festival.

## Misconception 3:

“Women are too emotional to be good leaders.”

**Why it is false or misleading:** Emotional intelligence, empathy, and communication skills are leadership assets and are linked to better team performance and conflict resolution.

**Why it is harmful:** This misconception promotes stereotypical portrayals of women as emotional, weak, or irrational, undermining their credibility as leaders. It delegitimizes diverse leadership styles and reinforces narrow, gendered expectations of authority that disadvantages women in professional and political spaces.

**COLOMBIA:** Daphne, 17, is a member of Plan International's Global Young Influencer Group.



# Plan International's response

**Plan International supports girls and young women as active drivers of change and contributes to empowering them to take collective action for social and political change that advances human rights and gender equality. To achieve that through our programming and influencing, we apply a gender transformative approach that involves:**

## **Building girls' and young women's agency and skills**

- Providing training and opportunities for girls and young women to develop their leadership skills.
- Facilitate networking opportunities for girls and young women.
- Create clubs for girls and young women to provide a safe space for them to discuss and learn about gender and social inequality and injustice.
- Increase girls' and young women's access to education, professional training, employment and entrepreneurship.
- Connecting girls and young women with others in global movements for gender equality and young people's rights, to catalyse local efforts.
- Improving access to resources and sustainable funding for young women and their organisations to create a more enabling environment for their collective actions.
- Supporting girls and young women to make better and safe use of social media as a tool to strengthen their organisations and networks and leverage their collective action.

## **Promoting positive attitudes, behaviours and practices**

- Working with parents and communities, by organising intergenerational dialogues, trainings, and awareness activities, to promote positive attitudes towards girls' and young women's leadership.
- Promoting positive attitudes, behaviours and practices by highlighting girls' and women's effective role as change makers through the media and collective actions at different levels.

- Working with men and boys for critical reflection/ dialogue to promote equitable gender relations, using tools such Champions of Change, Husbands Schools, Fathers' Clubs, Intergenerational Dialogues, etc.
- Include gender sensitive leadership training within the citizenship education curricula in the education systems.

## **Improving policies, laws and institutions**

- Promote and strengthen mechanisms to include girls and young women in decision-making and accountability processes.
- Advocate for increased investments and commitments to girls' and young women's empowerment at the global, national and local levels.
- Influence political frameworks and budgets to ensure that they are gender-and age-responsive.
- Train relevant institutions and actors (schools, employers, local government, etc.) and support them to foster positive attitudes towards girls and young women.



# References

- <sup>1</sup> UN Women. (2025). [Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, these figures indicate progress in women's parliamentary representation by it does not necessarily translate into meaningful political power for women.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Laden Yurttagüler Eren Pultar. (2023). "New forms of youth political participation statistical survey", Youth Partnership, European Union & council of Europe: [f5f645a3-87d0-068c-a64f-7e16d304ac53](#).
- <sup>6</sup> UN/DESA. (2016). World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement.
- <sup>7</sup> UN Women. (2025). [Tipping point : the Chilling Escalation of Online Violence against Women in the Public Sphere](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Concord (2025). "Aid Watch 2025. Ending short-sightedness, restoring ODA's purpose". [2025 Report - AidWatch Reports](#).
- <sup>9</sup> For more on shrinking civic space see Plan International. (2022). [How to better support children & youth affected by shrinking civic space](#).
- <sup>10</sup> Li, Y., Wang, X., & Wang, Y. (2025). ["The impact of gender norms on women's leadership advancement: An empirical study in China"](#). Economic and Political Studies, 13(4), 446–462.
- <sup>11</sup> World Bank. (2025). ["Promoting Women's Leadership. What works, What Doesn't and What's Missing". Policy Research Working paper"](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Vrouwenraad, <https://vrouwenraad.be/trefwoord/representatie/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Plan International Belgium. (2022). [50% des filles et jeunes femmes belges se sentent incomprises par les responsables politiques](#)
- <sup>14</sup> UN Women. (2025). [Closing the Gender Gap in Humanitarian Action](#).
- <sup>15</sup> Plan International. (2023). ["Turning the world around: girl and young women activists leading the fight for equality"](#).
- <sup>16</sup> UN SGD. (2025). [The Sustainable Development Goals Report](#).
- <sup>17</sup> ILO. (2025). ["Closing the gender gap in paid parental leavers: Better parental leaves for a more caring world of work"](#).
- <sup>18</sup> Paustian-Underdahl, Samantha & Walker, Lisa & Woehr, David. (2014). [Gender and Perceptions of Leadership Effectiveness: A Meta-Analysis of Contextual Moderators](#). Journal of Applied Psychology.



Plan International Belgium works with a group of committed young people, the Youth Advisory Panel (YAP). Its members help shape campaigns and events, advise leadership, and contribute to projects that strengthen youth participation. In 2025, the YAP took the initiative to create a podcast dedicated to the situation of girls in times of crisis. **Yapping with the YAP** gives a voice to those who are living through these realities and fighting to be heard. The young girls led the process, from writing the scripts to producing the podcast.

In Episode 1, YAP members interviewed Halima and Fatima, young activists and co-researchers for Plan International in Nigeria. They explain that they "can't sit back, relax, and watch people suffer". They shared stories from many girls and young women in the Sahel to document the impact of climate change on them and the inequalities they face. The poignant and inspiring testimonies gathered by the young people of YAP are available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and our YouTube channel.



**Listen to the podcast  
(in Dutch)**



**MOZAMBIQUE:** Champions of Change members call for equal rights for all.

### About Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is an independent humanitarian and development organisation founded in 1983, which defends children's rights and the equality of girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this potential is often stifled by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working with children, young people, our supporters, and our partners, we strive to create a just world by tackling the root causes of the problems faced by girls and all vulnerable children. In more than 80 countries, we defend girls' rights from birth to adulthood. So that every girl can feel safe. So that she can tell the world who she is and what she wants. So that she can fulfil her dreams. So that every girl can be free.

### About Gender Equality Essentials

Gender Equality Essentials are a collection of concise, informative guides designed to shed light on the critical issues impacting girls' rights and gender equality globally. Each guide provides an overview of a specific theme, ranging from girls' education and child marriage to girls' leadership and beyond. By providing these resources, we aim to empower peers, advocates, policymakers, and our broad community with the knowledge and tools necessary to drive meaningful change. Until every girl is free.



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