

BECAUSE
I AM A GIRL

POWERED BY PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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About Plan International USA

Founded in 1937, Plan International USA is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances girls' equality and children's rights. Plan believes in the power and potential of every child. Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, Plan strives for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

Plan's Because I Am a Girl is a global movement for girls' safety, education and ability to share their own futures. The progress we protect today determines what's possible for girls tomorrow.

Methodology



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PerryUndem conducted a national survey of **1,037 adolescents ages 10 to 19 from April 28 through May 5, 2026**, using Ipsos' KnowledgePanel. The final data was weighted by demographic variables to align with U.S.

Census Current Population Survey data. The margin of sampling error for the total sample is ± 3.5 percentage points.

Following the survey, PerryUndem conducted two focus groups on July 20, 2026 — one with girls and one with boys ages 14 to 17. The focus groups were designed to hear how adolescents perceive and talk about gender and to explore their reactions to selected survey findings.

Where relevant, the 2026 findings are compared with Plan International USA's 2018 survey of 1,006 adolescents ages 10 to 19. The 2018 survey was conducted from April 26 through June 25 using NORC's AmeriSpeak panel, with a margin of error of ± 5.0 percentage points. Because the two surveys used different panels and were conducted eight years apart, comparisons should be understood as longitudinal indicators rather than as a single continuous panel of young people.

Introduction: Why now?

In 2018, Plan International USA and PerryUndem released *The State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents* at the height of the #MeToo movement, when public conversations about gender were dominated by sexual harassment, consent and justice for survivors.

Eight years later, the environment surrounding young people has changed dramatically. The proliferation of social media, addictive algorithmic feeds, deepfakes, influencers and emerging technologies has created an environment in which young people are exposed to idealized bodies and lives, rapidly changing cultural messages and new forms of harassment and objectification.

As an organization dedicated to advancing children's rights and equality for girls, we were interested in how this new environment affects how adolescents think about gender equality today. Do they support gender equality? How have new trends on gender, social media and the online world changed their views and behavior? What has shifted since 2018 and what could be contributing factors? Because adolescence is a pivotal period for forming identity, values and expectations, young people's perspectives offer a critical window into what the next generation expects from society — and where they believe society is falling short.



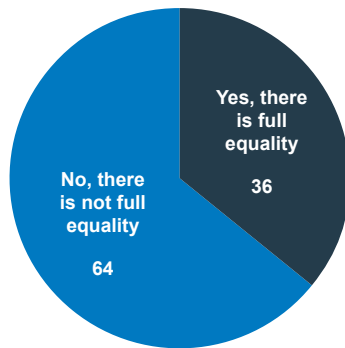
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Yet youth voices remain underrepresented in many of the institutions shaping their lives. Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality provides an opportunity for policymakers, media, parents, educators and others to listen before making assumptions about what young people believe, what they need and what is shaping their behavior.

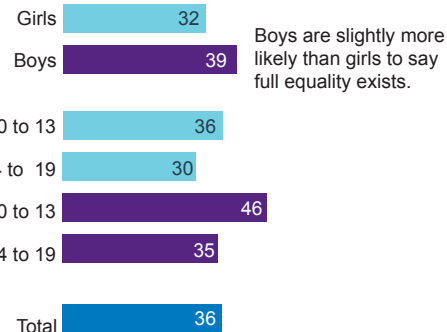
Summary of Findings

A majority of adolescents (64%) say women do not have full equality.

Do you think there is full equality for women in work, politics and life right now or not?



% Yes, there is full equality



Boys are slightly more likely than girls to say full equality exists.

White adolescents (45%) are much more likely to say full equality exists compared to Latin/e (29%), Black (28%) and AAPI (23%) adolescents.

The State of Gender Equality: Adolescents support equality but many do not see it

The vast majority of adolescents support equality between men and women.



I feel like [gender equality is] important so everyone gets an equal chance in society, like the right to vote, the right to get a lawyer in court, stuff like that, equal pay and all that. And if everything's kind of more equal in the world, the world becomes more peaceful, more of a happy place. If men have all the power, then there's going to be more wars."

— 14- to 17-year-old boy

While 94% of adolescents agree that "men and women should be treated equally" and 84% agree that they "want equal numbers of men and women in leadership across work, politics, and life," there is a gap between ideal and reality. Nearly two-thirds (64%) say full equality for women in work, politics and life has not yet been achieved. Older girls are among the most likely to perceive continuing inequality. On the flip side, nearly half (46%) of boys ages 10 to 13 think there is full equality for women in work, politics and life right now. There are also substantial racial differences: 45% of White adolescents say full equality exists, compared with 29% of Latin/e adolescents, 28% of Black adolescents and 23% of AAPI adolescents.

The differences in adolescents' everyday experiences can help explain this disconnect because despite their overwhelming support for equality, certain behaviors persist as young people take cues from the adults in their lives. Seventy-nine percent of girls report hearing boys make sexualized or demeaning comments at least monthly, and 54% hear such comments weekly or more. Girls also report feeling treated unfairly more often than boys, particularly in areas such as sports and social media. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a 2018 finding was that parents' comments and views appear to have a role in shaping views and experiences around equality.

The research also challenges the assumption that cultural trends such as "trad wives" and "looksmaxxing" are ushering in a resurgence of traditional gender roles among adolescents: Only 18% of girls say they would want to be an at-home housewife and mother, while 22% of boys say they would want their future wife to occupy that role.

Traditional milestones may actually be losing importance for girls, who are significantly less likely today than in 2018 to view marriage (-11 points) and children (-7 points) as "very important" goals. Meanwhile, overall support for gender equality remains high (84%), but conviction around equal representation in leadership has softened: The proportion who "strongly agree" with having equal men and women leaders dropped from 58% in 2018 to 44% in 2026.

4 IN 5 GIRLS

who use social media have taken at least one action to **protect themselves online**, compared with 64% of boys.



2. Digital safety, online harassment and mental health: Young people are trying to protect themselves

Gendered pressures increasingly intersect with adolescents' digital lives. Digital environments intensify comparison, conformity and appearance-related pressure. Among girls ages 14 to 19, 58% feel pressure to always be positive. Sixty-nine percent of older girls who use social media say they see female influencers who look perfect at least weekly, while boys mention peer pressure and fear of being excluded as barriers to being their true selves.

These pressures are associated with mental health. Forty-two percent of girls ages 14 to 19 and 25% of boys the same age rate their mental health at six or below on a zero-to-10 scale. The strongest correlates of lower mental health ratings for girls include pressure to hide feelings, compare oneself with others, look perfect and be perfect and, for boys, withholding emotions, pressure to fit in and worry about family finances.

Among girls who have experienced sexual harassment online, 71% report lower mental health ratings, compared with 33% of those who have not experienced it. A similar pattern appears for online harassment generally.

Girls are also regularly exposed to sexualized and demeaning behavior. About one in five girls ages 14 to 19 know someone who has shared nude photos of girls without consent. Girls are twice as likely as boys to say someone has made sexist comments to them or about them online.

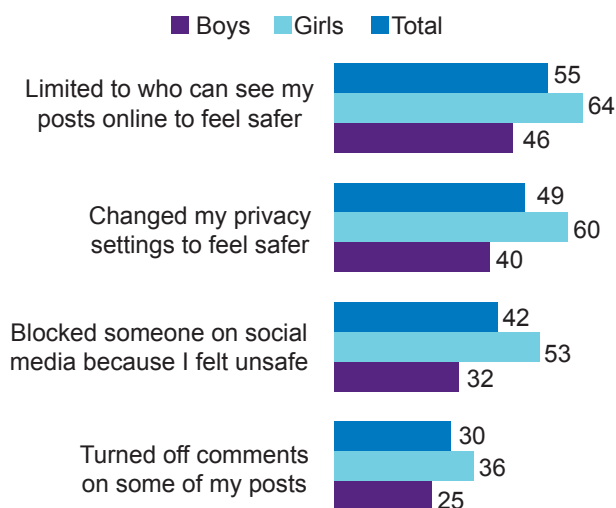
Boys are not immune to harmful online experiences either. Girls and boys are about equally likely to encounter hateful comments online, and one in five boys report having experienced forms of online sexual harassment, such as receiving unsolicited sexual content or being asked to send a sexual photo or video.

Yet adolescents are often responding to these problems themselves. Four in five girls who use social media have taken at least one action to protect themselves online, compared with 64% of boys. These actions include limiting who can see posts, changing privacy settings, blocking people, turning off comments, filtering what they share or choosing not to post. Among older girls, 84% have taken at least one such action. However, most adolescents (63%) who have experienced online harassment say they have not reported it to a social media company.

harassment; many simply lack the knowledge, confidence or trust needed to do so. Sixty-eight percent of social media users say they would feel comfortable reporting someone who harassed them online, and 88% say they have an adult they trust to take action. Yet only 59% say they know how to report harassment, and only 52% say an adult has talked with them about how to report it. While 59% said they trust their school, only 14% said they trust social media companies to take sexual harassment and assault seriously.

Have you ever ...

N = 774 adolescents on social media



There is an important opportunity for intervention. Adolescents are not necessarily unwilling to report

“

I think [institutions that don't take sexual harassment and assault seriously make girls] feel not seen and...like they're worth something that's below human, like their feelings and their situations [are] just discarded to the side because it's not being taken seriously. And that can affect them, because their self-worth is lowered now. They're like, oh, I guess I'm just not that important — but that's not true."

— 14- to 17-year-old girl

Trusted adults can play a pivotal role in digital safety. Adolescents whose parents or teachers have discussed sexual harassment are more knowledgeable, comfortable and trusting when it comes to reporting incidents and relying on their schools to act.

3. Authenticity, self-expression and belonging: Being yourself is a core adolescent aspiration

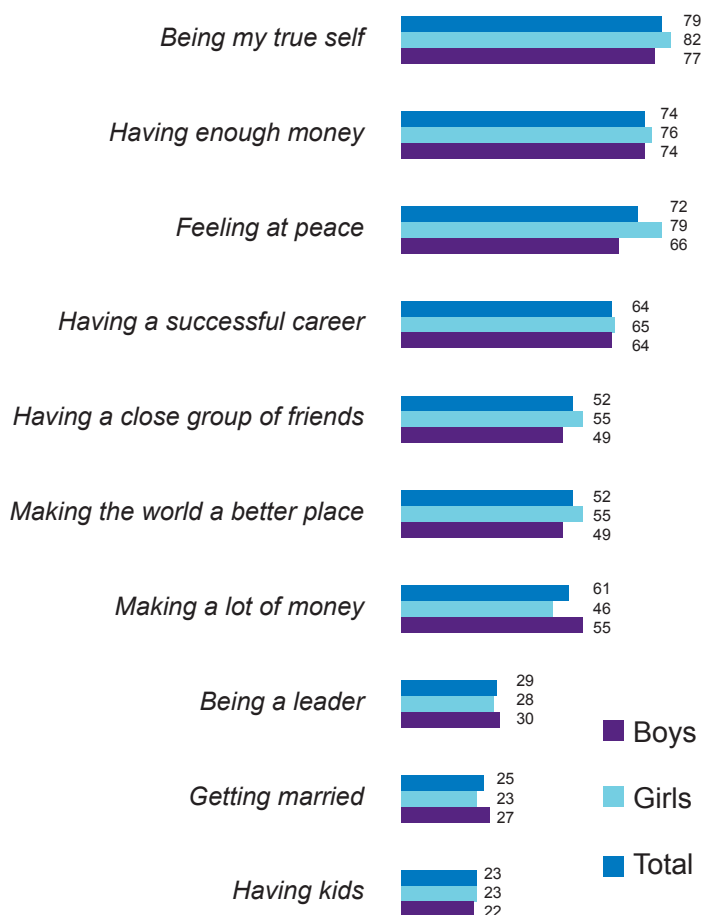
Perhaps the most striking finding across the research is the importance adolescents place on authenticity.

“Being their true self” ranks at the top of adolescents’ list of life priorities. Financial security is also a major priority, while feeling at peace is especially important to girls.

The focus groups help explain why authenticity has become so important.

How important is each of these goals for your life?

% Very important



“

I feel like people find it more important recently to be themselves because...a lot of people are falling into the same category. And sometimes when you see people being their authentic self, it's like, man, I could do that, too. And so, ... it feels nice to just be who you want to be and not fall into the crowd of what everybody else expects you to be.

— 14- to 17-year-old girl

Girls describe social media as creating intense pressure to conform — to look a certain way, follow trends, present an idealized version of themselves and avoid being singled out. In that environment, being authentic can feel like an act of relief and independence. For boys, being their true selves is connected to relationships, acceptance, happiness and finding people who value them for who they actually are. Both groups, however, identify conformity and fear of exclusion as barriers.

This creates a paradox. Adolescents are telling us that authenticity is what they want, while simultaneously describing environments that make authenticity difficult.

79% rank true self as top priority

50% OF GIRLS

and 37% of boys didn't post their opinion because of the potential of mean comments

Girls are more likely than boys to worry about how they look, their weight or body, being physically attractive, looking perfect and being skinny. Latina girls report especially high levels of appearance-related pressure: 63% feel pressure to look perfect, 75% worry weekly about how they look and 69% regularly see women and girls with unrealistic bodies online. Boys' pressures are focused more on being strong physically and emotionally, having muscles and being interested in playing sports.

For girls and boys alike, the ability to be oneself depends in part on whether young people believe they can express themselves without losing acceptance.

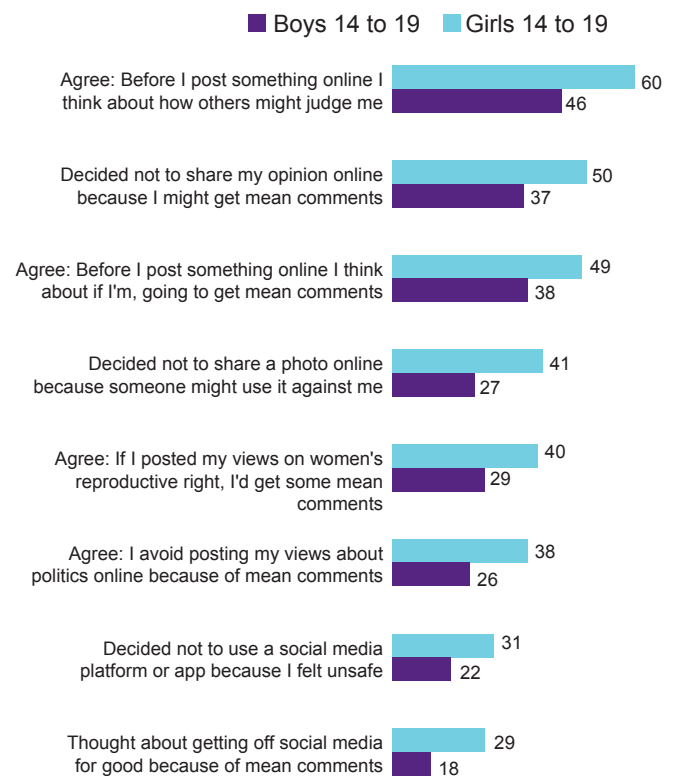
For many girls, online safety is directly correlated to self-expression. Concerns about judgment and negativity can lead girls to self-censor or withdraw from online spaces altogether. Girls are 14 percentage points more likely than boys to avoid posting about politics because of concerns about mean comments — 37% versus 23%.

While boys are less likely to say they engage in self-censoring behavior, nearly half (46%) say they think about how others might judge them before they post.

This has implications beyond individual well-being. When young people avoid expressing themselves because they anticipate harassment or judgment, the digital environment can shape whose voices are heard.

Self-censoring and bracing for negativity online

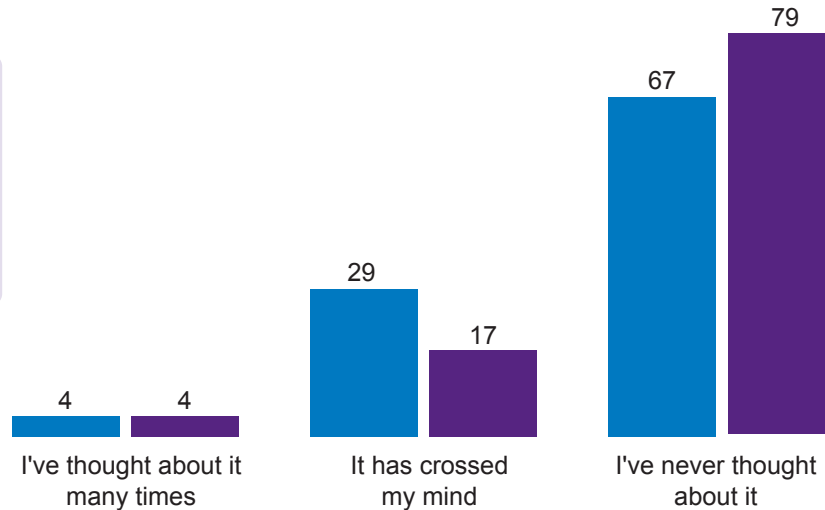
N = 560 adolescents 14 to 19 on social media



4. Leadership, civic engagement and changing youth aspirations: Leadership is there, but public life is losing its pull

Have you ever thought that, when you are older, you might want to be a politician or run for elected office?*

Increase in teens who never thought about running for elected office from 67% in 2018 to 79% in 2026.



**2018 wording: Have you ever thought that, when you are older, you might want to be a politician?*

Adolescents see themselves as capable of leadership, but fewer appear to be imagining themselves participating in formal public life.

Half of girls and 49% of boys say they think of themselves as leaders, yet only 20% of girls and 21% of boys say they have thought about being a politician or running for elected office. Black (27%) and AAPI (26%) are the most likely, while Latino/e (18%) adolescents are the least.

From 2018 to 2026, the number of respondents who said running for office has “crossed my mind” dropped 12 percentage points, while the number who said “I’ve never thought about it” increased at the same rate.

The decline in interest in formal public life, coupled with the decline in the share who strongly want equal numbers

of men and women in leadership, suggests a need to reconnect adolescents with the possibility that they can shape institutions.

The research also reveals an encouraging pathway. Among girls, participation in team sports is correlated with seeing oneself as a leader and considering a career in politics. Yet the gender gap in sports participation grows with age: 41% of girls ages 14 to 19 currently play team sports, compared with 50% of boys the same age.

STEM aspirations show a somewhat different pattern. Younger girls are less interested in STEM than boys, but by older adolescence, girls and boys are about equally interested. Black adolescents report particularly high interest in STEM, at 43%, compared with 35% of Latino/e adolescents and 33% of White adolescents.



5. The role of sports in empowerment and well-being: A promising pathway for girls

Among the most actionable findings is the relationship between team sports and positive outcomes for girls.

Girls who play team sports report better mental health than girls who do not (36% rate mental health low vs. 46% of non-athletes) and show higher rates of seeing themselves as leaders and considering political careers. These findings do not establish that sports directly cause better mental health or greater leadership ambition; rather, they identify a meaningful relationship.

The gender gap in sports participation also grows as adolescents age. Younger girls are about as likely as boys to play team sports — 48% compared with 52%. Among

14- to 19-year-olds, however, participation falls to 41% for girls while remaining at 50% for boys.

For girls, team sports may offer an environment in which they can build confidence, experience belonging, develop leadership skills and participate in an activity associated with better self-reported mental health.

Sports can also provide an important counterweight to some of the gendered pressures adolescents describe elsewhere in the research. Instead of emphasizing appearance, perfection or social approval, team sports can create opportunities to develop collaboration, resilience and leadership.

Conclusion & strategic takeaways

This research makes clear that today's adolescents are actively shaping their own identities and defining their futures. They want to be themselves, have a voice, feel safe and have the opportunity to lead. They overwhelmingly believe girls and boys should be treated equally, and many see themselves as leaders. At the same time, they are navigating persistent gender expectations, pressure to conform, online harassment and environments that do not always make them feel safe, heard or supported.

For Plan International USA and other organizations committed to children's rights and gender equality, advancing equality starts with understanding the different realities girls and boys face — and addressing the barriers that stand in their way. That means creating meaningful opportunities for both girls and boys to share their experiences, challenge limiting expectations and

help shape the solutions that affect their lives. Girls should be engaged as partners in developing solutions to the inequities they experience, while boys should be equally supported in examining the pressures and expectations that can reinforce gender inequality.

By working with young people as partners, rather than simply designing solutions for them, organizations can help create the conditions for every child to be safe, heard, empowered and able to shape their own future. When young people have equal opportunities to be safe, learn, lead and be their true selves, everyone benefits. The task now is to build the conditions that make that possible.

To read the full report, visit planusa.org/research.

Ways to take action

1. Call on elected officials to protect young people online.

The findings show that many young people are already taking steps to protect themselves, while too few report harassment to platforms and many do not trust technology companies or institutions to respond effectively. Policymakers should pass and enforce robust legislation that protect young people from online harassment and other forms of digital harm, shifting the burden of safety off youth and onto platforms through meaningful regulation and accountability.

2. Urge technology companies to put young people's safety at the center of product design.

Technology companies have a responsibility — and an opportunity — to build platforms that incorporate safety and clear content transparency tools into the earliest stages of product development. That begins with listening to young people to design technology that protects and empowers them while supporting learning, connection and self-expression.

3. Listen to girls and boys, and help both overcome the barriers to equality.

The research shows that girls and boys are growing up with different experiences, pressures and expectations around gender. Girls are more likely to face concerns about appearance, perfection, safety and sexual harassment, while boys encounter their own pressures around masculinity and emotional expression.

It is essential to listen to young people to understand where gender expectations are creating barriers — and then provide solutions that give both girls and boys the opportunity to question limiting stereotypes, develop healthy relationships, express themselves freely and build the confidence and skills to participate and lead.

4. Create environments where young people can be their true selves.

Authenticity is central to how adolescents envision a good life. Yet girls in particular face significant pressure around appearance, confidence, perfection and conformity. Online environments can intensify those pressures.

Parents, educators, youth-serving organizations, technology companies and other institutions can help create environments where young people do not have to choose between belonging and being themselves. That means challenging restrictive gender expectations, making room for different ways of expressing identity and ensuring that young people have trusted spaces where they can be accepted without judgment.

5. Invest in the places where young people already find connection and empowerment.

The research points to the potential of spaces such as team sports to support girls' well-being, leadership and sense of belonging. Expanding access to these opportunities can give young people places to develop skills, build confidence and develop relationships while providing a counterweight to some of the pressures they encounter online.



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Acknowledgements

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Most importantly, we thank the girls and boys who participated in the national survey and the adolescents who took part in the focus groups for their candid insights and perspectives.

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