PLAN INTERNATIONAL: GIRLS' RIGHTS

Plan International is a child-centered and girls' rights organization that focuses on international development and humanitarian assistance.

We have been in operation since 1937 and are currently active in more than 75 countries. More than 50 million children benefited from our work in 2020. Our work is locally driven and amplifies the voices and priorities of girls, young women and young people both in our programs and internal decision-making.

STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS

Since 2007, Plan has published an annual State of the World's Girls report, an in-depth global study into the barriers and enablers in girl's lives. The first report to touch on online harassment and abuse was published in 2010. Subsequent reports in 2019, 2020 and 2021 have documented how stereotypes in the media limit girls' opportunities and how online harassment and abuse are silencing girls' voices and leading to self-censorship.

2010: **Girls in a changing landscape:** Urban and digital frontiers
This research and report looked at the lives of adolescent girls in the fastest growing arenas of the time – urban spaces and the digital world. Both present new opportunities and risks.

2019: **Rewrite her Story**
This research and report explored how film and media stereotypes affect the lives and leadership ambition of girls.

2020: Free to be online?
> *This research and report uncovered and provided a better understanding of girl's experiences online and on social media platforms. It covered 14,000 girls in 31 countries.*

2021: The truth gap
> *This research and report explored how adolescent girls engage with political, civic and social topics online, particularly focusing on how they deal with mis/disinformation.*

## What does the research tell us?

Online spaces are seen as hostile, toxic and frightening environments that silence girls' voices.

— **58% of girls** have experienced some form of online harassment on social media platforms.

— Most girls first experience social media harassment between the **ages of 14-16**.

— Girls who are **Black, from an ethnic or religious minority, have a disability, identify as LGBTIQ+ or are outspoken**, particularly about feminism or equal rights, are harassed more.

— **Nine in 10** say false information has negatively impacted their lives.

— Exposure to lies and false information online left **35% of the girls and young women feeling stressed, worried or anxious.**

— One in four **feel less confident** to share their views.

— Research findings have made clear that experiences girls are having online are **causing real-life, offline consequences:**
  o One in 4 abused online feel physically unsafe as a result.
  o In relation to COVID-19: Girls and young women from low- and middle-income countries are more likely to believe a myth about COVID-19 and are twice as likely to have questioned whether to get the vaccine.
  o The impact from false information:
    ▪ One in five (18%) stopped engaging in politics or current affairs.
    ▪ 19% say it reduced their trust in election results.

42%
of girls lose
self-esteem or
self-confidence
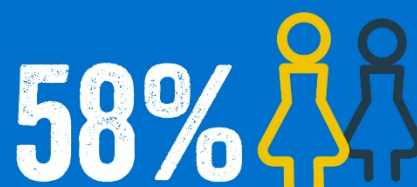
58%
of girls surveyed have been
HARASSED AND ABUSED ONLINE

plan-international.org/freetobeonline

1 IN 4 GIRLS
abused online feel
physically
UNSAFE
as a result

1 IN 5 GIRLS
leave a social channel
or significantly reduce
their use of it after being
harassed

RESULTS

The greatest impact that we are seeing is self-censorship and the silencing of girls' voices.

One in five girls who had been harassed online either left or significantly reduced their use of a social media platform because of harassment. It's clear we cannot separate online and offline violence. Gender discrimination and violence in digital spaces should not be treated with any less importance.

Online violence and misinformation are corrosive, undermining girls' and young women's confidence to take part in society and public life. They are losing trust in key institutions that should be able to provide them with accurate information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Laws and policies need to catch up to what girls and women are actually experiencing online.** Online violence needs to be acknowledged as a legitimate and harmful manifestation of gender-based violence, as does the connection between disinformation/misinformation.
   a. The National Gender Strategy and Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse present an opportunity to work on this issue, as is the planned update to the 2016 U.S. Strategy to Combat Gender-Based Violence Globally.

2. **Girls need to be part of the conversation.**
   a. Girls provide unique perspectives and solutions rooted in their digital realities and experiences.
   b. To date, the focus around girls has been on tackling the more extreme forms of violence, but our research shows it's the build-up of the everyday gendered micro-aggressions and harassment that's impacting girls' lives in every country around the world.

3. **Social media companies** need to take proactive steps to ensure their platforms do not enable the spread of harmful content. If they don't then government regulation is inevitable and should focus particularly on transparency and accountability.

4. **A cultural shift.** There's a role for both governments and social media companies to promote positive attitudes around gender and equality and to also state what is unacceptable behavior on social media platforms.

HOW CAN WE **ALL** STOP ONLINE HARASSMENT OF GIRLS?

Social media companies create stronger reporting mechanisms

Governments implement legislation to deal with online harassment and violence

We can all be allies supporting girls who experience online abuse

Read our report: plan-international.org/FreeToBeOnline