



“Girls’ rights are definitely overlooked in the UK – people don’t understand that we have rights, or they just ignore them.”

Plan International UK Youth Advisory Panel member

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Photography by Joyce Nicholls, www.joycenicholls.com

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Plan International UK



**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

THE STATE OF GIRLS’ RIGHTS IN THE UK

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Plan International UK

THE STATE OF GIRLS' RIGHTS IN THE UK

For 79 years, Plan International UK has fought to deliver and protect the rights of millions of children – especially girls – across Latin America, Africa and Asia. In this report, marking an exciting new phase in our history, we turn our attention for the first time to the UK. Our analysis poses the question, ‘What is the current state of girls’ rights in the UK?’ Sadly, the answer is clear. We may be the fifth-richest country in the world, but we are failing our girls, and failing to meet international standards set out in human rights frameworks and the United Nation’s new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By exploring the real experiences of girls in the UK, our intent is for policy makers and decision makers to recognise this reality – and act.

Plan International UK is the expert on girls’ rights. Decades of global experience tell us that due to their gender and age, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to having their rights denied. This is now a widely accepted premise in the sphere of international development, yet little understood in the UK domestic space. Taking its lead from Plan International’s flagship ‘State of the World’s Girls’ report series, this report shows that, as in other parts of the world, being young and female in the UK comes with specific challenges – challenges that today seem greater than ever. For instance, research we conducted into sexual harassment in schools has shown:

- One in five women (22 per cent) in the UK reported some experience of sexual touching, groping, flashing, sexual assault or rape while they were in or around school.¹
- Reports of sexual offences in UK schools have more than doubled in

recent years to an average of 10 each school day.²

- Two thirds of victims of reported sex offences on school premises are girls or women (66 per cent).³

We also discover that a girl’s location is critical: Middlesbrough is named the worst place in England and Wales to be a girl, while Waverley, Surrey – ranked as the best – is somewhere that girls are likelier to fully enjoy their rights based on life expectancy, child poverty, reproductive health and educational outcomes.

Despite this, we don’t talk enough about adolescent girls as a particular demographic group; we talk about ‘children’, ‘teenagers’ and then ‘women’. Nor do we understand with sufficient depth their complex identities: as girls, but also as being a particular race, class, sexual orientation or religion, or living with a disability. Very seldom do we talk about girls’ rights. Yet human rights, most recently expressed through the SDGs, can help us to better understand – and tackle – the problems that girls face. At a global level, Plan International argues that to achieve the SDGs, girls must be able to learn, lead, thrive and decide. And critically, the SDGs are universal: a girl’s rights are the same wherever she lives, and so too must be our commitment to securing them, including in the UK.

We argue that in the UK, often discussed problems need to be understood from girls’ particular perspectives, and in terms of human rights. What’s more, digital technology is throwing up new problems for girls that we haven’t begun to conceptualise. So, through two methodologies, qualitative and quantitative, and supported by

existing evidence, we bring new depth and breadth to our understanding of what it means to be a girl in the UK.

- First, through focus group interviews with 103 girls and young women from across the UK, we listen to what girls say about their own lives, with clear themes emerging. This is supported by interviews with relevant professionals.
- Second, an unprecedented analysis of available data paints a quantitative picture of some of the critical challenges girls face, highlighting stark regional variations.

The conclusions we draw are clear, and worrying. Across a range of themes and indicators, girls are being denied their rights. Readers will be familiar with particularly shocking rights violations such as sexual exploitation. This report seeks to shine a light too on the everyday barriers to girls’ rights and quality of life that have become an accepted part of their lives. By bringing our experience to bear in the UK, we hope to see a step change in how girls’ lives are understood, and an urgent commitment to tackling the challenges they face. We’re one of most developed countries on the planet: we can do better.



Elinor,
Year 10,
South Wales

What are girls telling us?

Girls are the experts in their own lives. This report draws on the accounts given by 103 girls from diverse backgrounds and areas through focus group interviews. While this sample size is insufficient for statistical analysis, the girls' voices give us a valuable depth of understanding. Their testimony is supported by 36 expert witness interviews as well as existing literature. The evidence presents several thematic areas in which it is clear girls' rights are not being met, or at least not in full.

Education, future careers and stereotypes

"People stereotype girls and expect them to not be as strong and determined as men."

Louise, 16

The report finds that the assumption that girls outperform boys at school is misleading, as it doesn't paint the full picture. While girls perform well in exams, the testimony here strongly suggests that their experience in the school environment can adversely impact the opportunities and experiences they will enjoy in the future. Whether we are delivering on girls' right to a quality education is therefore debateable.

We find that the school environment tends to reinforce stereotypes about girls' capabilities, whether that's through the sports they play or the subjects they choose. School can also be a location for abuse and harassment for girls. Lastly, we see that when girls leave education, many feel confined by expectations of what jobs they should do, with a tendency towards traditionally female-dominated careers.

Apprenticeship options for girls, meanwhile, are narrow.

Health and quality of life

"I really do not understand how you can put policy towards something that you cannot understand unless you have been through it. You cannot stop someone's right to choose."

Jane, 24

Inconsistencies in reproductive health laws across the UK, and the impact this has on girls and young women, were a focus of discussion in the interviews. The analysis also emphasised the need for mandatory sex and relationships education for all girls in school. There are significant gaps in girls' access to healthcare, especially when it comes to child and adolescent mental-health services and self-harm support for girls.

Violence and safety

"In my school, there's loads of boys who sexually harass girls. Teachers are completely oblivious, and we don't say anything because, honestly, we're scared..."

Megan, 14

Violence and the right to safety were clear themes. Concerns around these issues are having real impacts on girls' behaviour, driving decisions about what to do, or not do, in their daily lives. Offline as online, girls are held back due to concerns about their safety. The school and the street were identified as key locations for violence and harassment for girls.

Citizenship and voice

"I do feel like politics generally, as an abstract concept, is a boys' club. I felt it had nothing to do with me, that I shouldn't voice my opinion; it's a bunch of white men in a conference room."

Niamh, 22

Interviewees eagerly debated issues around politics and citizenship, such as the lack of female and young role models and the voting age. What emerged was that girls feel that stereotyping, discrimination and harassment against them bars them from meaningful contributions to securing change in these areas. Existing laws and policies, social norms and media dynamics perpetuate these problems: this must be recognised and challenged.

Moreover, with digital communication channels increasingly the primary mode of access to public and political spheres for young people, the risk, thanks to harassment and abuse in the digital space, is that girls find themselves squeezed out. This compounds the impression that politics is separate from girls' lives, and is a 'boys' game'.

Digital health

"There is no other life than technology. Remove the technology and there is no life."

Jackie, 17

The testimony in this report highlights that digital communication is a fundamental part of girls' lives – not an 'optional extra'. While this can be a source of pleasure, girls are clear about the immense pressures to meet certain standards and the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying. Worse, the research suggests that too frequently, measures designed to protect girls are ineffective or even have negative consequences for girls. Barring girls from digital spaces in the name of protection is a counter-productive solution that reinforces a sense of voicelessness. Measures to prevent harm from activities such as sexting also too frequently place undue or uneven responsibility on a girl's actions over those of a boy.

Body image

"I feel pressured by the people I see around me every day, and I think about how they look compared to me. But I also feel pressured by the girls I see in the media, both on TV and social media."

Anna, 16

It comes as little surprise that pressures around body image were raised time and again by interviewees. Girls tell us that their choices are constrained by expectations about their bodies that are reproduced and reinforced across society – and strongly amplified in the digital world. Concern about body image, and its link to sexuality, comes through as a significant barrier to girls' freedom of expression. It inhibits girls' participation in the world around them, and wider evidence suggests can lead to poor mental-health outcomes too.

Identity discrimination

"As a young girl in primary school I knew I wasn't attracted to boys. But I still dated boys because I thought that's what I was meant to do. That's what everyone else was doing. It was never said it's okay not to be a certain thing."

Jackie, 17

Gender is just one factor contributing to identity. Throughout the girls' evidence, it is clear that the interrelationship between being a girl and also being a particular race, class, sexual orientation, or religion, or living with a disability, have particular impacts on girls' experiences growing up. Formative experiences such as experiencing poverty or being in care or the criminal justice system should also be considered. While the cross-cutting themes outlined here clearly emerge, it is important to acknowledge that girls are not a homogenous group and policy responses must always take into account an individual's circumstances.

We spoke to Lexian, 19, from London, about her thoughts on being a girl in the UK:

“On my basketball team... there’s only boys there. Like, I’m the only girl and they still just don’t get it in their head we can do as much as you can... most of them say, ‘She can’t do it because she’s a girl’...”

“In the basketball community when you’re a girl it’s kind of harder, because the boys think you’re weak and you’re slow because you don’t have [as] much strength as them so sometimes my coach would be, like, ‘You guys, you got to understand that Lexian’s not as strong as you, so you got to take some responsibility and not give her so much things to do, because she’s weaker.’ I’m a girl. And I’m thinking, umm, ‘Because I’m a girl doesn’t mean that I’m actually that weak.’ You can give me a little credit, ‘cause I’m doing the same thing as them but they make it seem like I’m fragile because I’m a girl...”

“I just keep on playing as best as I can and attend training and become more healthier and fitter so I can’t keep up, but show them that even though I’m younger and a girl, I can still flip you out of your chair...”

Lexian is one of 55 girls photographed and interviewed by Joyce Nicholls to accompany our 2016 research into the state of girls’ rights in the UK.



Girls' experiences: analysing the data

Geography and place are confirmed in this report as having a major impact on girls' life experiences. To ensure that girls are able to realise their rights, policies must be reflective of different realities in different parts of the country.

For the first time, we present a detailed examination of available data about girls' lives that paints a picture of experiences in different regions, mapping where the critical challenges lie and setting out the priorities for policy makers. Using five indicators, we have been able to map the delivery of girls' rights across England and Wales in terms of the key themes raised by girls, and answer the question: where are the best and worst places to be a girl?

The five indicators, drawn from local and unitary authority data, are:

- Child Poverty
- Life Expectancy
- Teenage Conception Rates
- GCSE Attainment
- Those not in education, employment or training (NEETs)

The missing data

The data is not as complete as we would have liked: lack of uniformity means our local or unitary authority analysis has had to exclude Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as a number of indicators which would be useful additions. These include hospital admission rates for substance/drug misuse, self-harming and child obesity. We know gender has a bearing in these areas – but the data isn't available to analyse this in full.

The indicators span key quality of life and rights measurements and, through a ranking system, are used to identify the best and worst places to be a girl in England, Wales and London. Across England and Wales, the best place to be a girl was identified as Waverley, Surrey, and the worst place was Middlesbrough. The majority of the highest-ranking areas were in the south east of England, while towns such as Blackpool and Manchester ranked poorly in comparison. In Wales, Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiff and Caerphilly ranked behind their neighbours in Monmouthshire and Powys, while in London, Richmond upon Thames ranked best, with Barking and Dagenham worst.

Violence against girls

Critically, data on violence, collected at police force level, is not comparable to the other indicators (which are based on local or unitary authority data). Given the need for local authority action as well as police force action to tackle violence against girls, this is disappointing. Furthermore, what data there is rarely breaks down by age, gender and local area to provide an adequate picture of the problem. Girls have told us for years that violence and harassment in schools pose a significant barrier in their lives. Our research shows that reports of sexual offences on school premises have doubled in recent years, to an average of 10 each school day. Nearly two-thirds of alleged victims are girls, with 94 per cent of alleged perpetrators men or boys.

Best 10 Local Authorities in England and Wales by Individual Indicators Ranking

Local/Unitary Authorities	Child Poverty Ranking	Life Expectancy Ranking	Teenage Conceptions Ranking	GCSE Ranking	NEET Ranking	Total	Rank
Waverley	5	26	7	23	1	62	1
Rushcliffe	5	26	25	1	25	82	2
Chiltern	16	1	14	3	53	87	3
Mole Valley	5	33	2	47	1	88	4
Epsom and Ewell	28	10	24	28	1	91	5
Rutland	16	9	6	59	1	91	5
Elmbridge	5	21	33	43	1	103	7
Wokingham	1	52	21	8	25	107	8
St Albans	16	26	1	2	76	121	9
East Hertfordshire	16	33	22	6	76	153	10

Worst 10 Local Authorities in England and Wales by Individual Indicators Ranking

Local/Unitary Authorities	Child Poverty Ranking	Life Expectancy Ranking	Teenage Conceptions Ranking	GCSE Ranking	NEET Ranking	Total	Rank
Sandwell	323	320	329	283	283	1538	337
Salford	294	334	280	300	338	1546	338
Kingston upon Hull, City of	323	337	323	341	248	1572	339
Hastings	294	304	327	325	332	1582	340
Knowsley	294	337	298	342	323	1594	341
Liverpool	312	337	313	311	340	1613	342
Nottingham	334	309	333	339	303	1618	343
Manchester	342	344	328	315	303	1632	344
Blackpool	323	344	343	332	319	1661	345
Middlesbrough	331	346	340	316	345	1678	346

Conclusions

It is clear that the UK is failing girls. Girls are not consistently able to enjoy the rights that they are entitled to as set out in international agreements to which the UK is a signatory. And while much time has been spent seeking to understand social problems through certain lenses – such as income deprivation – we have failed to understand them from the perspective of adolescent girls. For girls, blatant rights violations such as sexual violence are underpinned by a reality too often defined by gendered expectations and everyday harassment. The digital sphere, while at times presenting a positive environment, all too often amplifies this reality, while school, ideally a critical location for tackling these problems, can be found to

reinforce them. We also conclude that a girl's ability to enjoy her rights is bound to where she lives. Effective solutions must be tailored to local needs; this will involve devolved authorities in particular.

We recognise that some positive steps have been taken, notably the UK Government's strategy to end violence against women and girls, which highlights prevention as well as response, including with younger age groups, and includes two national campaigns on abuse in relationships. A recent inquiry by the Women and Equalities Committee into sexual harassment and sexual violence in school represents a significant step. However, much more needs to be done.

Drawing together these findings, Plan International UK wants to see the UK Government treat girls as a priority group to highlight and address their needs in a way that hasn't been done before. Girls' Rights Champions should be appointed at national, devolved and local levels, to work with existing structures and bodies and bring within them a new focus on girls.

Recommendations

We must listen to girls

Policy makers must start from the position that girls understand best what is happening in their own lives. Combining their first-hand testimony and ideas with relevant expert opinion can create powerful solutions to the problems girls are facing. Investments should be made to enable meaningful participation of girls at the local level. We should expand on outreach strategies already implemented in some areas, creating Girls' Committees, where girls and policy makers can pool ideas about how services can better meet girls' needs.

We must involve men and boys

This report is unapologetic in its focus on girls and their lives. However, to tackle gender inequality men and boys must be part of the process. Given that much of the sexism, harassment and violence experienced by girls and young women comes from their peers, it is critical to work with and engage boys and young men. Their lives too are affected by negative gender stereotypes and expectations and they too must be part of the solutions.

We must tackle root causes of gender inequality – and this starts in schools

Our research shines a light on persistent, harmful stereotypes that limit girls' opportunities and wellbeing. A whole school approach, including engaging boys and parents, is required to tackle gender inequality. Mandatory status for sex and relationships education should be the cornerstone of this effort.

We need a more joined-up approach to end violence

If we are serious about ending violence against girls, a holistic approach is necessary, one that joins up different thematic areas as well as geographical areas. A good starting point would be to ensure greater breadth in the cross-departmental engagement in the delivery and development of the government's existing strategy to end violence against women and girls.

We need better data

In order to respond to the needs of girls, policy makers need data at local authority level to invest in the right thematic and geographic responses. This data should be publicly available so that civil society, including girls, can hold those in power to account.

We need a UK SDG delivery strategy

There is an urgent need for a cross-departmental UK Government SDG delivery strategy that includes a focus on how the SDGs are being met in the UK and for girls.