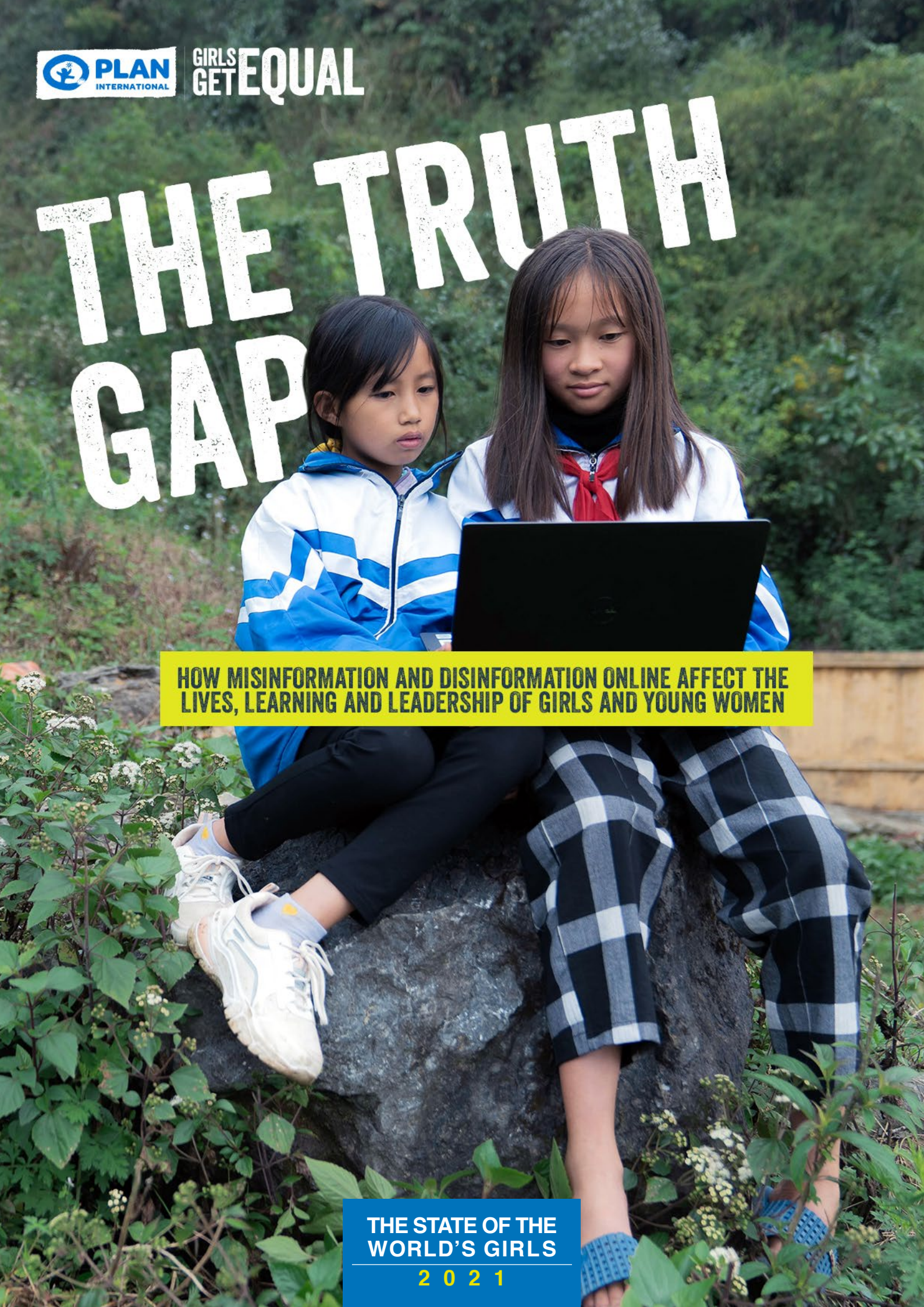
PLAN INTERNATIONAL | GIRLS GET EQUAL

THE TRUTH GAP



HOW MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ONLINE AFFECT THE LIVES, LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS

2021

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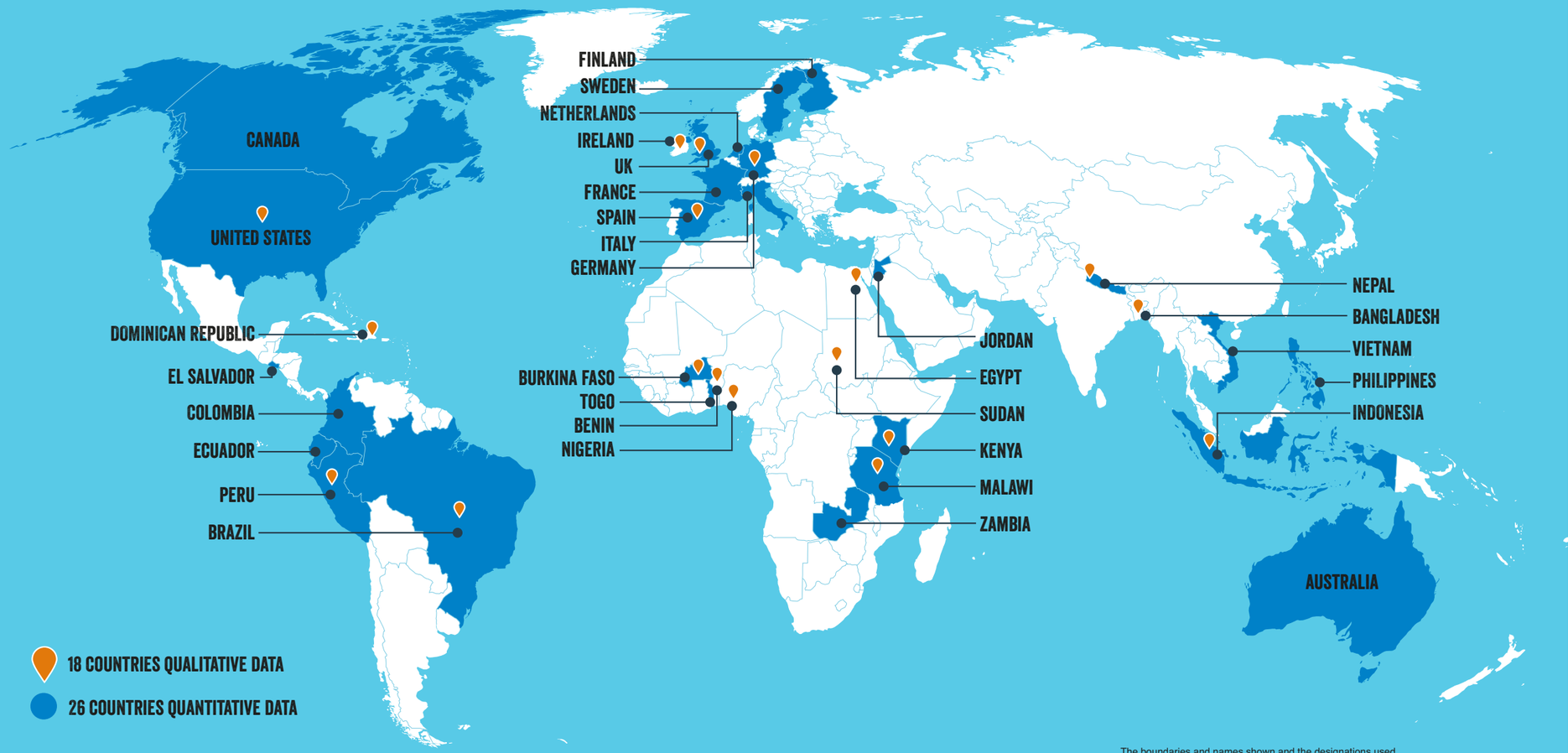
THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS REPORTS

Plan International first published the ***State of the World's Girls*** report in 2007. The 2021 report on how misinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women is the fourth in a new series that each year will examine the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that limit girls' freedom and opportunities in specific environments or sectors.

This year's research was conducted across 33 countries, involving a survey with over 26,000 adolescent girls and young women in 26 countries, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews, in 18 countries.

For a full description of the research methodology see page 43.

N.B. The names of the girls and young women in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity, in nearly all cases they themselves chose the names they would like to use. Photos in this report do not depict research participants.



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by Plan International.

Cover credit: Plan International

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PREFACE

Disinformation and misinformation have become more intense since the COVID-19 pandemic and are a real obstacle to girls' online freedom. Social networks in Benin, Cameroon and elsewhere have been polluted by false information and content, which create environments that are **not conducive to civic and political participation, especially for girls and young women.**

We, as young people, must not only be protected from online abuse and harassment, **we also need to be able to navigate the internet safely, to find accurate information and know how to distinguish between what is true and what is false.**



Online platforms are a powerful tool for young women and girls to create change. But on the other hand, **misinformation and disinformation fuel prejudice and disrupt girls' actions**. It can lead to physical harm, censorship and threaten freedom of expression. It can also affect girls' mental health and greatly reduce their self-esteem. False information creates a hostile environment online, instils fear in girls, and blocks the use of good information for useful purposes. These impacts are a barrier to girls and young women using the internet and learning online.

To combat this, so girls can express themselves freely online, it is necessary to encourage internet users to check the facts they are exposed to, to develop a critical mind and to question the reliability of information before believing and sharing it. It is **also necessary to have relevant laws in place.** And when we talk about laws, we must also recognise the importance of protecting freedom of speech and expression.

What is needed is a transformational response to improve girls' and young women's ability to use online spaces safely. **Girls should be listened to without fear of abuse and have equal access to freedom and safety.** We talk about this to continue to safeguard girls' and young women's rights and provide equal opportunity to all. **These scourges must be fought with all our strength!**

Photo above - credit: Arouna / Sessi

FOREWORD



Bhagyashri Dengle
Executive Director Asia-Pacific & Policy
And Practice, Plan International

It is difficult to overstate the importance of digital spaces in today's world, an importance that COVID-19 has rapidly increased. Many of us, particularly young people, are spending a significant portion of our lives online, and this raises challenges. The internet no doubt brings people together and provides crucial information and connections. But online and social media interaction can also be overwhelming, and the mass of often false information from different individuals and groups is confusing rather than enlightening: too many half-truths, misinformation, and propaganda dilute the useful facts and discussions.

Last year, Plan International's ***State of the World's Girls*** report looked at the harassment and abuse girls, and young women in all their diversity are experiencing online. This abuse is pervasive and frightening and all too often drives them offline. This year we are scrutinising the impact of online misinformation and disinformation, which many young people are ill-equipped to deal with. This, too, is silencing girls' voices, restricting their opportunities and damaging their wellbeing. Many report that false information online makes them depressed, sad, and anxious and that there are no online sources they feel they can absolutely trust. For girls and young women making important decisions — planning their future in terms of education and careers, deciding who to vote for and needing advice about sexual and reproductive health — access to reliable, factual information is absolutely fundamental.

The internet can be a powerful tool for advancing gender equality: enabling girls to fulfil their potential and pursue their ambitions as leaders and active citizens. It can also amplify the voices of adolescent girls, bringing together ideas and minds across borders and cultures. Holding back girls and women, in terms of access to the internet and the skills to navigate it, will hold them back in almost every other aspect of their lives.

Through our research we found that girls themselves are asking for digital literacy to be built into education systems from primary school onwards. To do this effectively the particular needs of girls and young women in all their diversity must be recognised. A clear understanding of how the intersection of age and gender affects the inequalities that are perpetuated in online spaces is crucial. So is addressing these issues, both through government action, particularly with regard to education, and with online platforms making a genuine effort to deal with false information with all the means at their disposal. Ultimately, we all need to step up and take responsibility if we are to avoid leaving behind a whole generation of girls and young women.

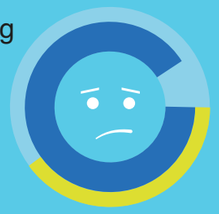
"On the internet I learn about gender equality and feminism, climate change, mental health, gender-based violence, sexuality and sexual health, COVID-19, and disability rights…what motivates me is my empathy and my determination to commit myself to the fight for justice." Lola,18, Benin

Photo above - credit: Plan International / Paul McCabe

KEY FINDINGS

We surveyed over 26,000 girls and young women in 26 countries.

91% of girls and young women surveyed are **concerned** about misinformation and/or disinformation online.



40% of those surveyed are **extremely or very concerned**.



46% of girls feel **sad**, **depressed**, **stressed**, **worried** or **anxious** as a result of online misinformation and disinformation.



Misinformation and disinformation are having a **negative impact** on **87%** of the girls and young women we surveyed.

Misinformation and disinformation restrict girls' activism.

1 OUT OF 4 GIRLS feel **less confident to share their views.**



1 OUT OF 5 GIRLS **stop engaging in politics** or current affairs.





7 OUT OF 10 GIRLS and young women **have never been taught about how to spot misinformation/disinformation** at school or by family members.



There was **no single online source of information** that the majority of girls and young women surveyed actually **trusted**.

Girls and young women spend huge amounts of time online. Access to the internet, where the gender gap remains very much an issue, is crucial in today's digital world. So, too, are the navigation skills to make the most of all the internet has to offer.

This research clearly illustrates the benefits of the online sources and social media platforms which girls and young women use: they can connect to like-minded people all over the world, find information about topics taboo in their homes and communities and gain support for their activism. There is a downside to this. They are also exposed to a whole world of false information, misogyny and stereotyping. It can mean wading through half-truths, prejudice and downright lies, to unearth the undoubtedly useful and truthful factual information and interesting opinions. False information affects everyone, but there are specific consequences for girls and young women. Gender inequality effects every aspect of their lives and false information online further silences them, limiting their ambition and their ability to learn about the issues that interest them.

Misinformation and disinformation online is a human rights issue: affecting girls' rights to participation, to education and to freedom of expression. As girls and young women struggle to disentangle truth from fiction, facts from propaganda, their trust in all sources of information — governments, academics, journalists, community leaders — is undermined. We all need to be aware of this, to understand the specific effects of online misinformation and disinformation on girls and young women so we can tailor solutions to meet their needs.

"I can't think of anything where misinformation would not be an issue." Lily, 19, Ireland

Governments must:

- **Provide comprehensive digital media literacy programmes**, including, where possible, in school curricula, to meet the specific needs of girls and young women and support gender equality.
- **Meaningfully engage** girls and young women in discussions on digital media literacy and on regulation, ensuring that their experiences are reflected.
- **Provide financial and technical support** to young feminist organisations and groups working on girls' rights: digital, civil and political.

Online platforms must:

- **Recognise and address** the implications of misinformation and disinformation on girls specifically, connecting this with efforts to address targeted online violence against women and girls.

"The first topic I like to research online is human rights to get informed about this topic: this is the main topic related to my activism, the human rights of girls and young women." Lisa, 15, Brazil

INTRODUCTION

Over the past four years Plan International's annual ***State of the World's Girls*** report, based on extensive global research with girls and young women, has painted an often bleak picture of their lives, opportunities and experiences: a picture only countered by the energy, initiative and creativity with which girls deal with the challenges they face.

In 2018, ***Unsafe in the City,*** revealed the extent of the harassment and fear experienced by girls and young women on the city streets. 2019's report, ***Rewrite Her Story***, focused on how film and media stereotypes affect their lives and leadership ambitions and last year, ***Free to Be Online,*** demonstrated the opposite. Rather than free and empowered to express themselves online, girls are all too often harassed, abused and driven from online spaces.

Four years of research has illustrated just how far there is to go before girls and young women in all their diversity can take their place as equal citizens, able to overcome prejudice and recognise and reach their potential. It demonstrates that fear is very much a driver of young women's lives and combines with lack of confidence – the result often of negative stereotyping and an absence of positive role models and safe spaces — to undermine their ambition. Girls, in many different circumstances, struggle to overcome the barriers that silence them and restrict their access to power and leadership.

This year, 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic has massively increased everyone's dependence on the internet, the ***State of the World's Girls*** report is staying online. The research is focused not on the relentless harassment and abuse girls and young women experience but on how their overall engagement with the world they live in is shaped by their exposure to online spaces. How do information, images and ideas on the internet positively or negatively affect their education, their activism and their ability to make their way in the world? What is girls' and young women's experience of accessing information online – including misinformation and disinformation – and what do they learn there about their place in the world and about the civic, political and social issues that matter to them most?

"I definitely think it's brought way more opportunities than barriers…misinformation happens because it's so easy to freely share information, but because it's really easy to freely share information that means that we can all learn and grow as well." Abbie, 19, Ireland

While in this year's report we move away from the theme of online harassment, what has been clear from the findings is that disinformation is inextricably bound up with online violence against women and girls.

Disinformation methods have become weapons in the manufacture of false and misleading content, designed to smear girls' and women's personal and professional reputations, hold them up to ridicule, humiliate them and undermine their credibility. Girls and young women see the relentless trolling, the threats and lies told about women in the public eye. They are fed images and stories on what is "appropriate" behaviour for girls and stepping into the limelight becomes frightening and out of reach. Ambition is too dangerous.

What we have also learned from the findings is that misinformation makes girls afraid to come forward online: they worry about sharing false information accidentally or believing something untrue. Combined with the more pernicious issue of disinformation, this creates a toxic and frightening online eco-system where girls' voices are silenced.

"The one thing I am really afraid of is that, maybe, I will get manipulated without me noticing it. And then I will share misinformation." Nabila, 18, Germany

Misinformation

False, misleading and often harmful information, which is shared mistakenly by people.[1]

Disinformation

False, misleading and often harmful information, which is shared deliberately to cause harm and/or for profit.

Why is misinformation and disinformation online an issue for girls and young women, surely it affects us all?

False information does affect us all — it is pervasive and inescapable — but for girls and young women, learning about the world and their place in it, it can be devastating. One of the things we have learned from four years of research with and about girls and young women is that misogyny assumes many shapes and guises. The harassment research respondents told us about last year was personal and targeted at individual girls and young women because of their gender and many other intersecting characteristics: race, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, age, class. It was often violent and nearly always frightening. In this year's research the misogyny takes a different form. It is found in the stories told about women, in the stereotypes depicted, in the struggle to disentangle fact from fiction, opinion from evidence and in the views not listened to and the assumptions made, which undermine girls' ability to imagine a different life — to see themselves as leaders, as having ideas worth listening to and the ability to change the world.

Additionally, girls and young women are often particularly dependent on online information about topics — like sex and sexuality, health issues, girls' rights and feminism — which may not be freely discussed at home or at school, so that false information is especially problematic. When they have to find their way through a maze of untruths, half-truths and prejudices they are denied the right to amass the knowledge and skills that will help them disrupt the expectations laid down for girls and young women over centuries.

In today's world, everyone needs to be able to deal effectively with a potentially endless stream of online information and to build skills and critical thinking in order to recognise, organise, and filter out misinformation and disinformation. Girls grapple also with the digital gender divide: denied access to online devices and high-quality connectivity, and without the ability to verify information and learn online, they risk being left behind.

The internet can open up the whole world and present opportunities for learning beyond formal and informal education – it is imperative to ensure that this learning is grounded in truth and that girls and young women are in a position to identify and avoid compromised information as they make their way in the world.

"You have to read so many articles and…that's when you get to understand the information much better. And then there are also people who share the information so that they can mislead others. And then there are other people who share the information so that you can have a better view on something. So, I think it's not easy. It takes a lot of reading and passion." Mia, 20, Kenya

The research conducted for this report explores how diverse girls and young women engage with political, civic or social topics online. Where do they get information from, how does online information influence their activism, what are their concerns about online misinformation and disinformation and the challenges this brings? And finally what strategies need to be employed to tackle the issue?

"I think the online world…can be very, very vulnerable, and I think sometimes there's that lack of accountability in the online world where people can just do things without getting repercussions." Charlotte, 23, Wales

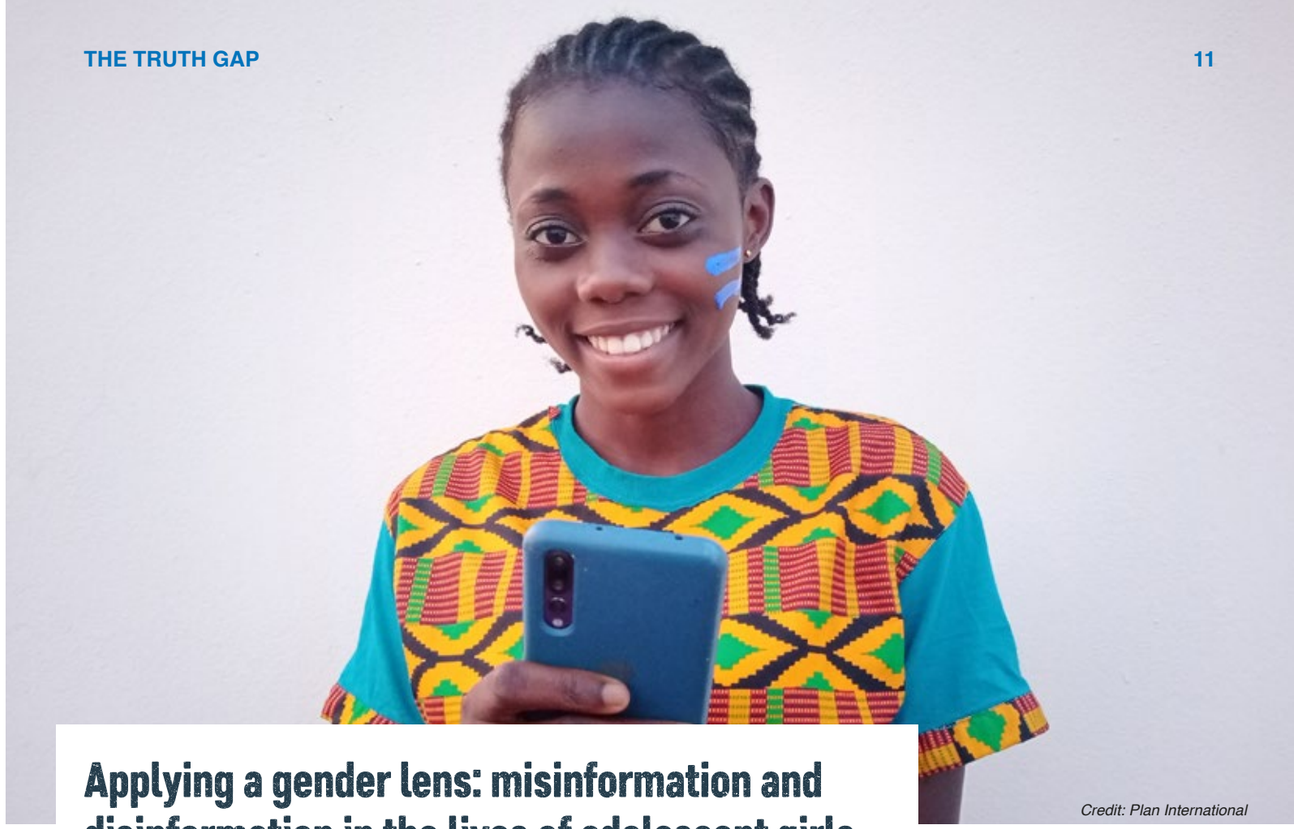
SETTING THE SCENE

In 1995, less than one per cent of the world's population was connected to the internet.[2] By 2019 more than half of the world had begun to participate online and the latest data estimate indicated that there were 21.7 billion connected devices, with over 74,500 GB of data being sent over the internet every single second.[3] The growth of online users that has happened over the past year has also been staggering. As of April 2020, Statista claimed there were 4.57 billion active internet users and 3.76 billion active social media users with the global online penetration rate being 59 per cent.[4] In January 2021, Statista updated these figures to estimate that there were now 4.66 billion active internet users globally, constituting 59.5 per cent of the global population – a rise of 0.5 per cent of the global population in eight months.[5]

While this growth in online users is positive progress the Broadband Commission highlights that gaps in access and the digital gender divide, which includes a digital skills gap in the ability to navigate and use technology[6], continue to proliferate around the world. Men are 21 per cent more likely to be online than women and this rises to 51 per cent for countries in the global south.[7] In a world immersed in the global COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide is being exposed like never before.[8] The World Economic Forum notes that billions of people have been going online to work, learn and stay in touch but still almost half of the world's population has no access to the internet, with fewer than one in five people in low-income countries being connected.[9] This lack of connectivity has also had an impact on girls' ability to continue their education with an estimated 11 million girls unlikely to return to school; particularly those of secondary school age in low and lower-income countries.[10] COVID-19 is regarded as the world's first social media pandemic and the last 18 months has clearly illustrated the strengths and weaknesses of online information. People have relied heavily on social media, and the quarantine measures to contain the pandemic have encouraged them to search for answers online.[11] This has given governments, health authorities and schools the ability to share information and learning and helped people feel less isolated but it has also led to the spread of misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic, its treatment and, most notably, anti-vaccination propaganda.

During March and April of 2020, Facebook reported placing warning labels on approximately 90 million pieces of content because they were allied to COVID-19 misinformation.[12]

In Ghana, where rumours were circulating offline and online that people who had recovered from COVID-19 remained infectious, Plan International's response was to make and distribute a video making it clear that this was not true. The video was shown on television and posted on the social media platforms hosting the false information which was stigmatising members of the community and discouraging them from being tested.



Credit: Plan International

Applying a gender lens: misinformation and disinformation in the lives of adolescent girls and young women

The body of research on disinformation and misinformation online is growing rapidly, but little of it applies a gender lens, it is revealing when you do: for example, false, sexualised information and images are used to target and discredit female politicians to a greater extent than male politicians.[13] A recent analysis also found that, following Kamala Harris's nomination for the 2020 vice presidency in the U.S., false claims about her were being shared at least 3,000 times per hour on Twitter, in a coordinated attack.[14] Similarly, Amnesty International tracked abusive tweets towards all female MPs in the United Kingdom. This included disinformation as an insidious form of abuse where false narratives are designed to undermine personal and professional credibility.[15] Half were directed at Diane Abbot, a Black female politician. This and the Kamala Harris example draw a direct correlation between disinformation, abuse and prejudice.[16] Although this problem manifests across the world it can be particularly pernicious in the global south.[17] An analysis by the Economic Intelligence Unit revealed that over 90 per cent of women interviewed in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East experienced misinformation and defamation as the most common tactics for undermining their legitimacy.[18]

Disinformation like this is part of wider violence and harassment against women of all ages off and online but misinformation and disinformation are also gendered in less direct ways. For example, some proponents of false information online draw upon, and amplify, negative gender stereotypes.[19] In other instances, disinformation campaigns specifically seek to undermine progress on gender equality by claiming that women's empowerment is Western propaganda.[20] Disseminating false information and statistics that relate to key gender equality issues is another tactic: for instance, the false information spread in Ireland linking abortion to depression, cancer and Down's syndrome, around the time of the abortion referendum, or white supremacist groups sharing fake statistics on the perpetration of violence against women and girls by immigrants.[21] The way misinformation and disinformation online play out differently in people's lives needs to be better understood: particularly for groups, like girls and young women, already experiencing the impacts of gender inequality, harassment and violence both online and offline.

The Economist Intelligence Unit and Google studied online violence across 51 countries and found that 67 per cent of online harassment involves "rumours or slander to discredit or damage a woman's character."[22] They also found that young women (Generation Z and Millennials) were more likely to have experienced online violence than older women.[23] The Quint, an Indian news website, reported on several instances of this, such as the disinformation campaign online against 21 year old climate activist Disha Ravi, and the sexualised false information that was used to target Safoora Zargar, an MPhil student who had participated in protests.[24] Rana Ayyub, a journalist and author, was also subjected to a video being created with her face morphed onto a pornographic video which was then sent to her family and friends.[25] Examples like this are only too likely to deter other young women from speaking out and so infringe their right to political participation.

There is little available research about young women's and girls' experiences of misinformation and disinformation online and its effect on them, but we know from research for *Rewrite Her Story* in 2019, that representation, how women are publicly portrayed, does have an impact:

"When we see women playing secondary roles, young women can think it's normal life to play a secondary role and lose ambition." Young woman, 23, Senegal[26]

The importance of women in public life and how they are portrayed is also backed up by Plan International's 2019 ***Taking the Lead*** research which found that 76 per cent of girls and young women aspire to leadership roles in their country, community or career but the lack of role models undermines their ambition and confidence.

"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

Research into COVID-19 related disinformation online also confirmed that during the pandemic false information has often been gendered, either drawing on narrow and harmful gender stereotypes to support false claims about the virus, or by using the pandemic to drive home regressive views of gender roles and women's rights.[27] The UN supported HerStory network, noting the lack of reliable information on the impact of COVID-19 for women and girls in Arab states, established a taskforce to monitor social media in order to track occurrences of misinformation and harmful gender stereotyping.[28] In the first two months of the media monitoring, over 600 stories, articles and information pieces from news outlets and social media were documented in order to inform programme interventions to combat harmful stereotyping of women and men, and to address misinformation around COVID-19 and its impacts on women and girls.[29]

In two months the HerStory network collected over 600 examples of harmful gender stereotyping online.



Credit: Plan International / Bishal Ranamagar

Prevalence and spread of misinformation and disinformation

Disinformation tactics date back as far as Ancient Rome,[30] but new technology certainly increases their reach and power. In light of recent cases such as Russian interference in the 2016 United States of America presidential election, the 2017 general elections in France, the 2017 general elections in Kenya and the UK European Union membership referendum,[31] investigations into "the rise of the misinformation society"[32] have risen sharply.

The perpetrators of disinformation campaigns taking place in countries across the world are many and varied: including government representatives, political parties, populist politicians, hate groups, interest groups, profit-seeking individuals, independent trolls or conspiracy theorists.[33] They are launched on various mediums, both online and offline, at different times and rely on a combination of 'natural reach' (enabled by humans and traditional media) and automation (enabled by bots and advertising).[34]

So, while social media companies can play a positive role in civic and political participation, including that of girls, by providing access to news and information, space for political debate and for galvanising action,[35] it is also evident that it: "provides a plethora of actors with a quick, cheap and data-rich medium to use to inject disinformation into civic conversations."[36]

To make matters worse, research has also discovered,[37] from a study of fact-checked Twitter rumours, that **untruths travel farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly, with misinformation spreading virally through peer-to-peer processes.**[38] It has also determined that false political news spreads deeper and more broadly, and was more viral, than any other category of misinformation.

Online sources of misinformation and disinformation are not limited to social media and search engines have received far less scrutiny than social platforms over their role in furthering false information.[39]

STEMMING THE FLOW

There is sense that the flow of potentially harmful information is out of control and a lot of argument about who should be controlling it. There are no simple answers. A human rights approach, while useful, can come up against the issue of conflicting rights: the right to health, in the context of COVID-19 for example, coming up against the right to freedom of expression.[40] International organisations have created common standards and guiding principles to help curb the spread of fake news,[41] and during the coronavirus pandemic the UN are taking a number of steps to address the 'infodemic' – or widespread sharing of false information about the virus.[42] Verified, a UN initiative to help people to spot misinformation and refrain from sharing it with others, was launched in May 2020 and includes the #PledgetoPause campaign.[43]

The European Commission recently released details of the Digital Services Act (DSA) which builds on the EU's voluntary Code of Practice.[44] The DSA includes the removal of illegal goods, services and content, advertising transparency measures and obligations for large platforms to take action against the abuse of their systems. Tech companies could face severe fines for noncompliance, with a very large online platform facing fines of up to six per cent of global revenue for a serious breach of the rules.[45] An oversight structure will also be established, with the ability to directly sanction platforms that reach more than ten per cent of the EU's population of more than 45 million users.

National governments have also put in place laws and policies to tackle disinformation and misinformation.[46] Some of these actions address the issue in a way that safeguards freedom of speech, but in other cases authoritarian regimes utilise this issue as a way to limit freedom of the press and protect themselves from criticism.[47]

Online platforms taking action

The rise of misinformation and disinformation relating to COVID-19 has forced many online spaces and platforms to strengthen their policies to tackle the issue with a new urgency. In a joint statement published on Facebook's website in March 2020, Facebook, Google, YouTube, Microsoft, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Twitter said that they would be working together to address the issue.[48] A report written for the think-tank New America's Open Technology Institute, examined whether they had successfully lived up to this statement and concluded that the majority of platform efforts during this time have centred on:[49]

- Connecting users to authoritative information: Reddit started using banners to highlight content that has been verified and deemed legitimate on the Reddit homepage and in search results, YouTube announced that it would expand the use of its algorithmically-recommended information panels to connect users to authoritative information when they search for COVID-19-related queries.
- Moderating and reducing the spread of misleading content, for example TikTok has introduced an enhanced in-app reporting feature.
- Altering advertising policies to prevent exploitation and the marketing of misleading products and items, for example Twitter is using its "Ads for Good" programme to provide advertising credit to non-profit organisations so that they can run advertising campaigns for fact-checking services and promote reputable health information.

Google is funding a new programme – created by Google, YouTube and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue – called *Be Internet Citizens*. Working in conjunction with UK Youth it is an educational programme designed to teach young people how to be safe and responsible online, alongside empowering them to learn, share and express themselves online.[50] It is focused on media literacy, developing a critical awareness of emotional manipulation and teaching participants how to recognise and react to hateful content online, including the use of tools such as reporting, flagging and blocking.

Despite all this, the sheer quantity and global nature of the content that platforms have to moderate means that social media companies are struggling to be 100 per cent effective in moderating false information. A recent study by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) with the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), reported 832 posts containing misinformation to Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, of which only 12.5 per cent (or one in eight) were acted upon.[51] In other research, 90.6 per cent of posts flagged by volunteers from Youth Against Misinformation were not acted on by social media.[52]

Change requires, not only a commitment to removing blatant sexist content, but an understanding of the more nuanced stereotyping that reinforces gender inequality: including an acknowledgement that, while false information is an issue for everyone, it has a particularly harmful impact on girls and young women. It can also be argued, and has been, that social media companies are doing more to address misinformation than disinformation: it is only by changing the systemic drivers – such as the advertising revenue which makes spreading disinformation profitable – that real change will become possible.[53]

"We believe that the internet is a public good and should be used, managed and governed as such…For children, the internet is a means, a tool, a crosscutting mechanism to the realisation of all other rights."[54] World Wide Web Foundation

It is vital, if this role as a public good is to be effective, that digital and media literacy be taught to everyone. They both draw on the same core aptitude of critical thinking, but the fact that most digital media are networked and interactive raises different issues and requires additional habits and skills: media literacy generally focuses on teaching youth to be critically engaged consumers of media, while digital literacy is more about enabling youth to participate in digital media in wise, safe and ethical ways.[55] While both are distinct, they have to work in parallel in order for people – in this case girls — to be fully aware of the potential and the perils of being online. The benefits of digital and media literacy are clear: even brief exposure to some training can improve competencies,[56] including a better understanding of news credibility,[57] and a more robust ability to evaluate biases.[58]

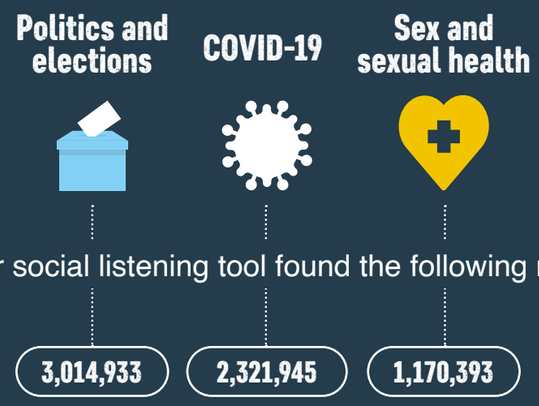
Most importantly, if these initiatives are to succeed, they need to involve young people in all their diversity.



Credit: Plan International

LISTENING IN

In order to see the kind of misinformation and disinformation girls and young women might be exposed to online, we conducted a social listening exercise, collecting information from the public profiles of social media platforms, across three topics:



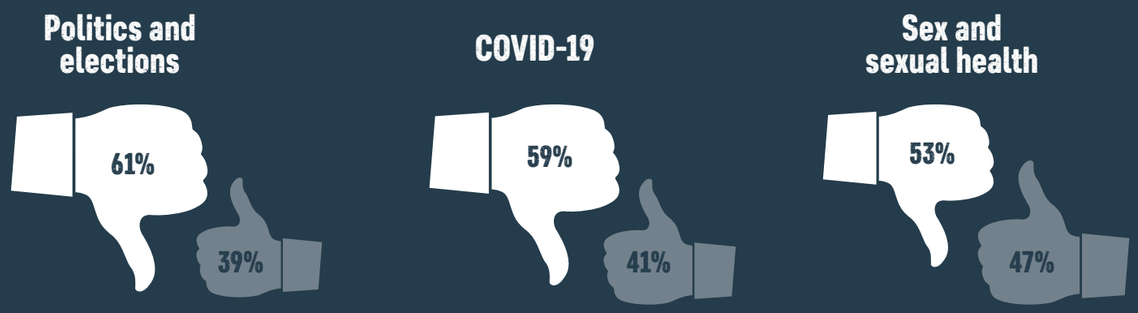
Over a month, our social listening tool found the following number of posts:

Politics and elections	COVID-19	Sex and sexual health
3,014,933	2,321,945	1,170,393

For all three categories the majority of posts stemmed from the North America region and were on Twitter which has more scannable public profiles than Facebook and Instagram.[59]



The analysis also looked at whether the posts could be categorised as negative or positive and in all three categories there were more negative posts.



WARNING: Some of the following quotes contain misinformation / disinformation, and/or add to misogyny and reinforce harmful gender norms.

The wording of some of these quotes has been slightly changed to protect identities without changing the aim and meaning of the quotes.

In general, posts around politics demonstrated the mistrust people had in politicians and political institutions. Posts related to COVID-19 also often overlapped into the area of politics and seemed a way for people to vent their frustrations with government-mandated rules as well as the general handling of the pandemic. Overall, **posts around COVID-19 had the most examples of misinformation and disinformation**; examples were also found in the area of politics and elections and sexual health but they were less frequent.

Warning: false information

> *"Bill Gates is funding 'DNA' mining through COVID tests and vaccines."*

Users' frustration at the amount of misinformation and disinformation online were clear and there were also **frequent posts warning about false information**:

> *"Unfortunately, there's misinformation circulating around this #HIV vaccine study. A person CANNOT get HIV from the HIV vaccine studies because these vaccines do not contain real HIV.."*

In all three areas under investigation, there were frequent posts containing misinformation and disinformation, not to mention sheer misogyny, that reinforced **harmful gender norms**:

Warning: misogynistic post

> *"Women in political life are a disaster – whenever I see political change there are a pack of fibromyalgia ridden middle-aged office worker women trying to crack their way into high places."*

Sex and sexual health had the most positive sentiment score of the three categories, and this corresponds with the sample of posts reviewed. Many posts were trying to raise awareness around sexual health and a large number were from charities and community organisations. Online platforms were also used to **talk more generally about issues around sex and sexual health**:

> *" We provide counselling services and voluntary tests to detect #HIV. For more information contact us through..." [Translated from Spanish]*

Although the keywords search was mainly concerned with identifying content around misinformation and sex and sexual health, the search found a lot of posts around sexual harassment: the two issues are inextricably linked and this is further demonstrated by the number of women and girls who use online spaces to **voice their concerns about harassment and assault**.

> *"I really hate men I'm sorry but I do. I understand the 'not all men' thing but I've endured sexual assault and sexual harassment since I was 11. I can't change how much I fear men."*

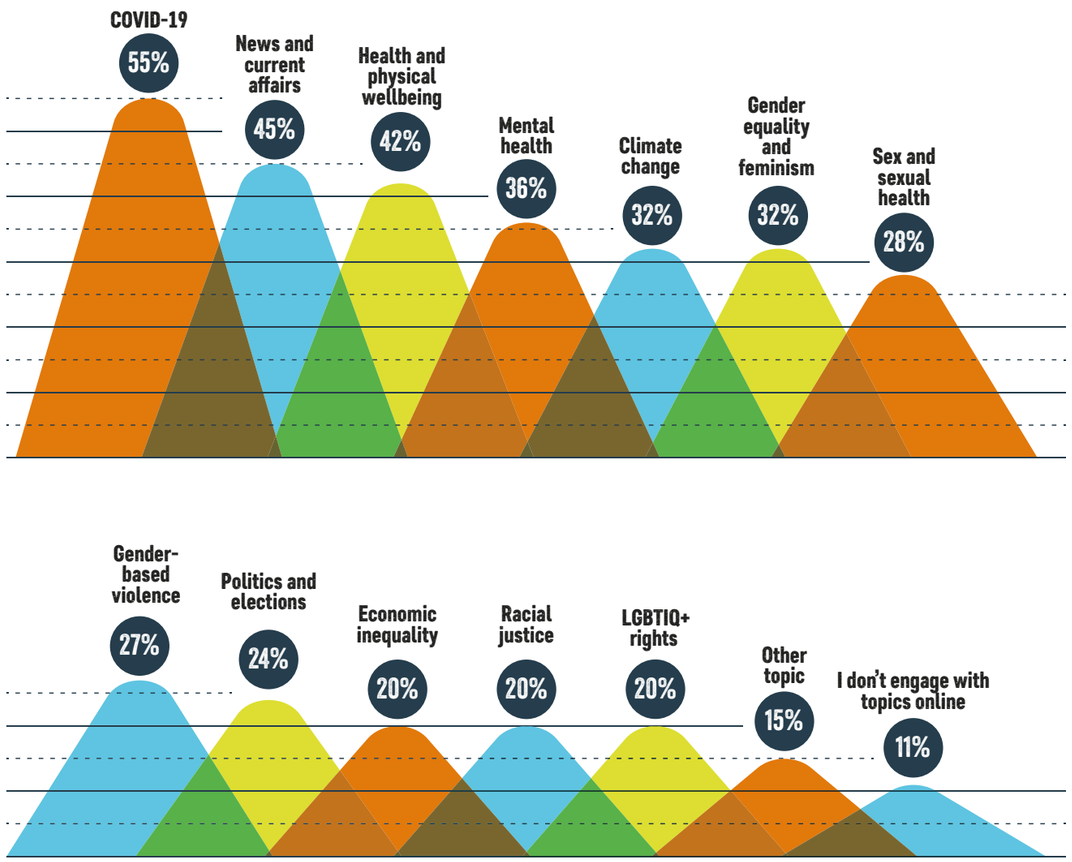
BENEFITS AND RISKS

Despite the preponderance of negative posts what became clear through the social listening exercise is that online platforms do offer a lot of benefits in terms of expanding knowledge, connection and activism. Numerous posts shared information that was useful and beneficial. There were also a number helping to combat the issue of misinformation and disinformation by flagging false content. This was particularly the case in the areas of sex and sexual health where women and girls shared their alarm about posts concerning sexual health and sexual harassment. However, the number of posts that contained misinformation and disinformation remain, over-ridingly, a cause for concern. There were also a considerable number of posts categorised as grey areas, where it was hard to decipher what was true and what was not. This is precisely what girls and young women have to contend with on a daily basis. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming – over one month the search drew over six million posts.

> *"More community spaces for political education are needed as social media is not enough to talk about such important issues!"*

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

DO YOU REGULARLY ENGAGE WITH ANY OF THE FOLLOWING TOPICS ONLINE? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



1. The importance of social media and online connectivity to girls and young women

Fifty-five per cent of girls and young women surveyed spend more than seven hours a day online, 16 per cent spend more than twelve hours.

It is abundantly clear from the research just how an important a part of their daily lives social media and online connectivity is. Almost one in five of the survey participants spends more than twelve hours online and only four per cent spend less than an hour a day online. These high numbers may be related to COVID-19 restrictions:[60] in many countries education at all levels was being carried out online during the survey period. However, particularly in the in-depth interviews, it was accessing information and the opportunities for activism that emerged as key to the online use of many young women and girls.

Nine out of ten girls and young women regularly engage with social topics online.

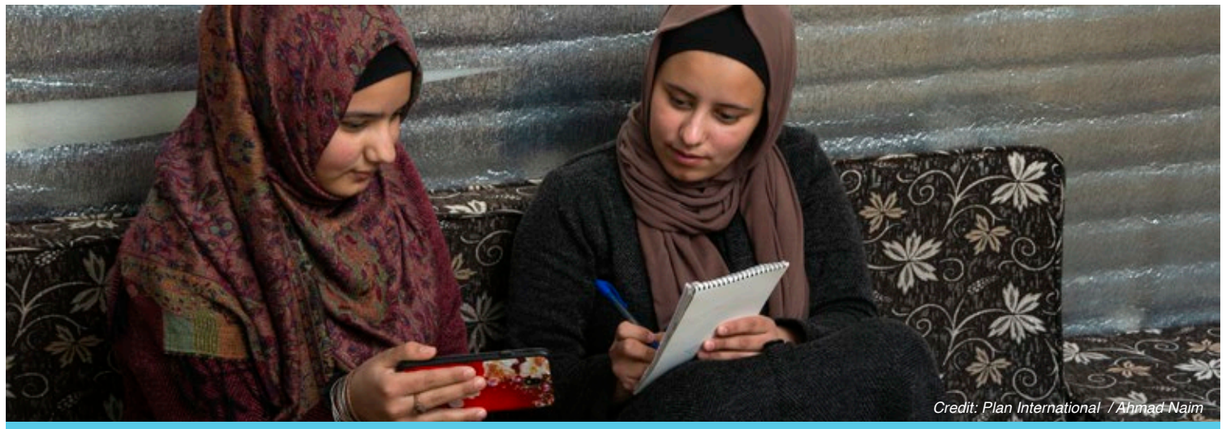
A large majority (89 per cent) of the survey respondents regularly engage with social topics online.[61] The most popular are: COVID-19, news and current affairs, and health and physical wellbeing. About a third of the girls and young women surveyed regularly look for information about climate change, gender equality and sexual health.

Generally, respondents who identify as a member of a minority group are more likely to engage with social topics online, particularly with mental health topics, compared to those who do not.

Forty-three per cent of those who identify as an ethnic or racial minority engage with mental health topics online, compared to 36 per cent of those who do not.

The relatively high numbers of minority group members reaching out online underlines the importance of internet access. Girls and young women, who may feel isolated, are able to extend their information sources beyond their immediate circle and these sources must be accurate and truthful.

Six out of ten survey participants who identify as LGBTIQ+ regularly engage with mental health topics online: they are twice as likely to engage in topics related to gender-based violence, sexual health and gender equality than those who do not identify as LGBTIQ+.



Credit: Plan International / Ahmad Naim

YOUNG ACTIVISTS SPEAK OUT

Insights from the qualitative interviews revealed gender equality and feminism as the most popular topic, with nearly half of the interviewees selecting this as the subject most important to them. This could be partly due to the girls and young women being selected from Plan International programmes and likely to be particularly engaged with gender equality and politics.

However, the issues that girls and young women liked to explore in this area varied greatly: some girls discussed feminism or women's rights more generally, others included discussions on intersectional feminism, and Black feminism. Two had specific areas of interest such as women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and girls' social entrepreneurship. Girls also mentioned **sexual and reproductive health rights** (SRHR), which included discussions on menstrual health and hygiene and period poverty. Others talked about **gender-based violence**, with particular reference to the elimination of child and early forced marriage and unions (CEFMU).

The second most important topic was **politics** with **racism and climate change** mentioned as important issues. The interviewees' main motive for learning online about their chosen topics was education: either to educate themselves on a topic, or to teach or support others by sharing their learning and cascading information.

"I learn online to have the necessary knowledge to serve women and girls in my community. I always try to stay updated and informed about women and girls' issues and collect information and material for awareness campaigns so I can cascade this knowledge to other girls in my city. For example, we produced a short film on girls' rights in education, this was done with zero cost and posted on our advocacy pages on social media to spread awareness of the importance of girls receiving quality education." Gana, 24, Egypt

Previous research also suggests that the anonymity and accessibility of the internet may help to overcome some of the factors that have traditionally hampered access to sexual health information including embarrassment and lack of confidentiality.[62] As our interviewees confirmed going online is seen as an important source of information about taboo topics:

"On the issue of sexuality. I didn't really have a chance to get to talk about it, or what happens when you're growing up, because in my country, adults, they don't really talk about those issues. So, the only place I will learn about everything is through the internet." Lisa, 22, Malawi

2. Girls and young women use both traditional media sources and social media for information and learning online

Overwhelmingly, the most commonly discussed platforms for learning about their chosen social topics online among the young activists interviewed were social media platforms. Although most of them used a combination of platforms, the following were mentioned most**: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, news websites, search engines, namely Google and Google Scholar, and YouTube.** For the young activists social media is preferable to more traditional sources of information because it gives them access to a younger audience, is easily digestible, cheaper, more accessible and faster paced.

"When it comes to looking to vote I just didn't have a clue...And then I followed this page on Instagram, it's called simple politics, and even the Welsh government posts things to that account, but it's just very simple, digestible information about what's going on: 'This is the date of the election, these are the candidates, this is what you're voting for, etc.' And that doesn't detract from you actually reading people's policies and manifestos, but I've just found a lot simpler information online." Charlotte, 23, Wales

However, the survey results paint a slightly different picture with a pretty even split between traditional media sources and social media.Young women aged between 20-24 taking part in the survey are more likely to engage with mainstream media than the 15-19-year-olds and there are some interesting regional and income-related differences.

> **Girls and young women from high-income economies are less likely to get information from alternative news media, 26 per cent, compared to 46 per cent of girls and young women from other countries.**

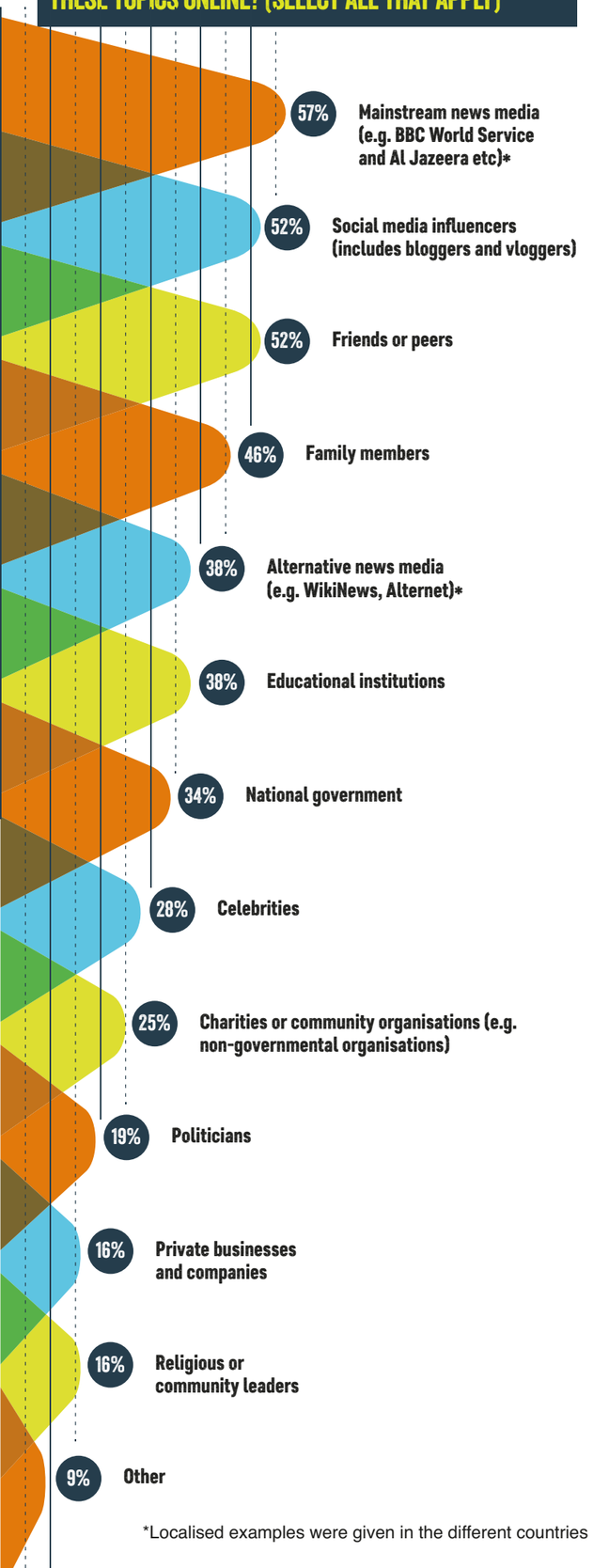
Whatever the platform, being online is an important part of girls' and young women's lives and a crucial factor in increasing their knowledge and opportunities. About half of the girls and young women who participated in the survey feel that online information has helped them understand and feel more confident about the topics they care about, while 39 per cent have changed their opinion on a topic because of online information and 38 per cent have learned about a new issue online and began actively engaging in it.

> **Globally, five out of ten girls and young women surveyed have changed their behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic because of online information: seven out of ten in Africa and the Middle East.**

The internet seems particularly important for older participants who found jobs, accessed health services and changed their behaviour in terms of activism, COVID-19 and voting intentions in greater numbers than the younger age group. The internet is similarly important to members of minority groups.

"I think when you're a minority in our country, you have no other choice than searching for information on social media platforms and searching for your peers on social media…and it's normal because everyone always searches acceptance, and I think it's okay to not share everything, with everyone. And I think social media is really, really helpful for finding your peers with the same experiences." Nabila, 18, Germany

WHICH SOURCES DO YOU USE TO GET INFORMATION ON THESE TOPICS ONLINE? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



*Localised examples were given in the different countries



"Online platforms made it easy for me to take several trainings to support me running my online advocacy initiatives as many information are accessible online and also the target is more reachable online." Gana, 24, Egypt

The overwhelming majority of girls and young women interviewed in depth felt that learning online had enabled them to become activists. Accessibility, learning opportunities (especially during lockdown), and connecting with people across the world were some of the most stated reasons.

"It actually helped me be more engaged with youth activism, and I feel like online, since you don't have to travel to meet other people and you can even attend online events, you can chat on online forums, that the online platform really helped me a lot in my activism." Alyra, 24, Burkina Faso

However, others noted that there were downsides: examples including increased vulnerability in online spaces and the issue of performative activism.

"During the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, there was a ton of people who were reposting all these infographics and all these posts, but they weren't necessarily donating to any funds that would actually have made concrete change in different communities around the country." Rachel, 18, United States

The young women and girls from Nigeria, Sudan, Peru and Bangladesh also noted issues with access and DF from Indonesia referred to limitations due to power outages. Access can be an issue in many ways: girls are less likely to be given priority at home when data, access to smart phones or computers, and time are all limited. This is limiting and puts girls and young women at risk of being left behind in the digital age. It can restrict their access to more formal education and their ability to engage with the issues that matter to them.

"I need to know what is being talked about. I need to know what the government is saying. I need to know what other sectors are saying about that…I also examine the works of other people, of other activists, of other girls, what they are saying, so that I can use that information in my work." Lisa, 15, Brazil

Another pitfall pointed out by young activists was the question of reliability, with many feeling that information needed to be constantly verified.

"Most of the information is just half-truth. So, most times, people get misinformed. So that's why it's good to always verify the information and the sources you get the information from. So, you don't pass it on to people and misinform others." Tife, 22, Nigeria

This anxiety about passing on misinformation was widespread: girls and young women interviewed described online information as being clouded with personal opinions and the sheer volume of fake news made them more wary when using it for activism. Nearly all of the interviewees felt that the internet contributed to making societies more divided: with some feeling that opinion around politics, feminism, environmental or climate issues, and religion had become particularly polarised.

"I think it's made people more divided because people start to attach their identity to the thing that they believe in. So say even having a bio you'd have your name, 19, sexuality, BLM, climate change is real. And you've now attached that to who you are as a person. And even though personally, I think those are great things, they're good, but if somebody disagrees with one of them, for whatever reason, they now can't be bothered to even talk to you or reason with you. Because they just see you as so wholly different to them that there's no point. Your entire identity is completely opposed to them." Abbie, 19, Ireland

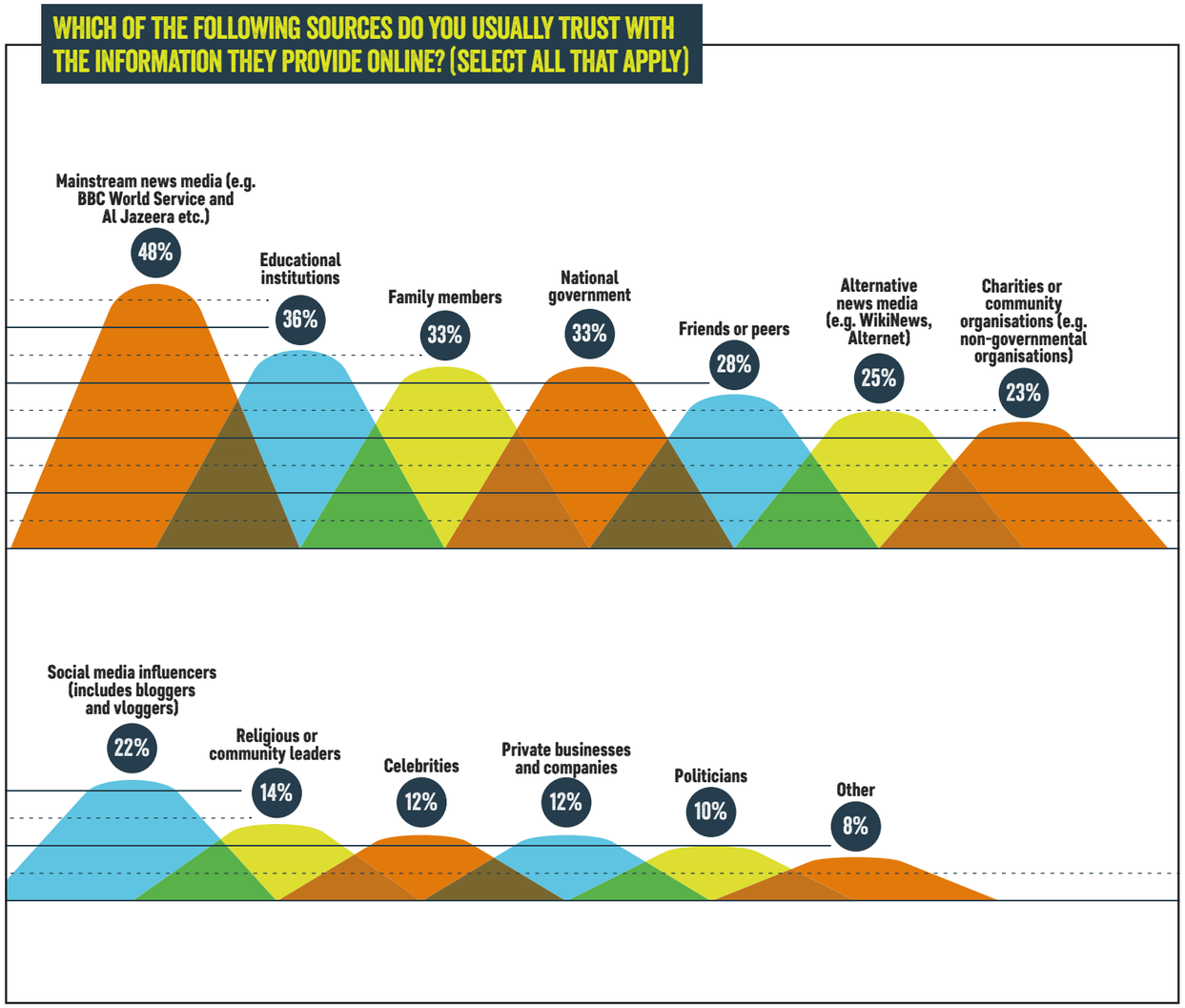
Rachel in the United States also emphasised that she is witnessing more extremism on both sides of the political divide because people are only consuming whatever political view they align with. Tife in Nigeria remarked that, during protests in her country, social media had heightened tensions:

"These ones will push their own hashtags. The other ones from the other divide will push their own hashtags. So many people were confused, they didn't even know which ones to follow or to support. It really created a lot of enemies." Tife, 22, Nigeria

While Lilly in Malawi talked about tensions online being gender-related making it difficult to speak out on issues in her country as a woman, but she still tries:

"It's mostly men versus women, because it's very hard for women to speak up, for them to give them a platform. So, when they speak out, the men are very angry and people are quarrelling online, or something. So mostly, it's gender-related." Lilly, 23, Malawi

3. Girls and young women are wary of online sources and concerned about misinformation and disinformation



Ninety-one per cent of girls and young women surveyed are concerned about misinformation and/or disinformation online. Forty per cent of those surveyed are extremely or very concerned.

There is no online source that the majority of surveyed girls and young women trust to provide information on the social topics they are engaged with: the most trusted, at 48 per cent of respondents, is mainstream news media.

"One of the problems I think with online outlets — there's such a push to get people's attention instantly, because there's so much you could be reading and consuming online — that there's a risk that things are presented very inaccurately." Charlotte, 23, Wales

This is backed up by the comments of the young activists interviewed:

"I think misinformation is something that's very prevalent. I feel like it does matter. I feel like it'll always matter. I think when it comes to sharing information, informing yourself and educating yourself, and also educating others, I feel like you have to trust what you're reading to be able to go on and then share with other people. I can't think of anything where misinformation would not be an issue" Lily, 19, Ireland

In the interviews, the girls and young women spoke of their concerns about the accuracy of information online and about the difficulty of recognising bias and manipulation. Interviewees also worried that sharing misleading information and misleading others, could sometimes put people at actual physical risk:

"If the information is about an event taking place somewhere at a certain time, I am kind of scared of showing up somewhere and...I am scared about my security, my personal security, and the personal security of the people I am sharing the information with." Alyra, 24, Burkina Faso

Ninety-six per cent of girls and young women surveyed believe that social media platforms have misinformation and/or disinformation.

The topic that most girls and young women have seen misinformation and/or disinformation on is COVID-19, followed by politics and elections, and news and current affairs. Almost a third of girls and young women have seen misinformation on gender equality and feminism, health and wellbeing, sex and sexual health and climate change. Very few topics of interest to them escape the deluge of misleading information and fake news.

Facebook, was selected by 65 per cent of those surveyed, as the platform with most misinformation/disinformation.

Girls and young women selected three other open social media platforms – **TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube, all at 27 per cent** — as the runners up in terms of unreliability of information.

Again, the in-depth interviews with young activists largely backed up the survey findings. Facebook was the least trusted platform, followed, for the activists, by Instagram and Twitter. The girls and young women frequently cited seeing fake posts about COVID-19 and the vaccines. Tife in Nigeria remembered seeing a pastor, with a large following, post on WhatsApp that COVID-19 vaccines were a plan for the United States government to take over Nigeria. Lisa in Brazil recalled

seeing a post about tampons causing cancer. Another girl mentioned a murder taking place in her village and lots of online news outlets were falsely reporting and speculating before the facts of the case had been released.

When asked where they had seen these examples of misinformation and disinformation, the response was **social media platforms** and particularly, as we have seen, Facebook. According to Lola from Benin, however, it can be found on "almost all platforms."

It is very clear from the research how big an issue misinformation is and for minority groups the anxiety around this topic is even greater.

Survey participants who identify as LGBTIQ+ or a racial, ethnic or religious minority are more likely to be very or extremely concerned about misinformation and disinformation online.

Overall, members of minority groups are particularly likely to have seen misinformation and disinformation online and these results point clearly to an issue of minority rights. Communities seen as outside the mainstream not only suffer more abuse online but their attempts at reaching out for information and taking part in activism are also severely hampered by the proliferation of half-truths, prejudice and lies they have to sift through in many online spaces. We have seen in previous reports[63] how intersectionality – gender + race, gender + disability, gender + sexual identity – attract greater abuse, restrict girls' and young women's ambition and threaten their safety and happiness.

CHECKING AND CROSS-CHECKING

In the in-depth interviews girls and young women were also asked if they ever had to change their online behaviour because of misinformation and disinformation online. The majority had, involving thorough checking of the author and cross-checking with other sources:

"The way that I used social media and digital platforms three years ago, isn't the way I use it now. Before I messed with lots of things. Just because I thought 'Oh, this organisation, say, wouldn't lie – it must be true.' So now, I guess, I go and I take much more time, I check, I click on the link and give it a look. So yeah, in fact, I have changed the way I use social media". Dora, 15, Peru

Some interviewees had stopped using certain platforms and were more conscious of using official webpages. Others unfollowed or blocked sources they were unsure about, including friends:

"I just go to their account and unfollow them, because they might be spread any kind of disinformation to me and that can hamper my consumption or mental health. So, I just ignore them deliberately." Anchal, 21, Bangladesh

Worryingly some girls and young women said it has stopped them wanting to engage altogether**.** The whole process of sifting through so much false information, and calling it out, was so exhausting they chose to limit their online activity.

4. Misinformation and disinformation are restricting girls' and young women's lives and having a negative effect on their mental health

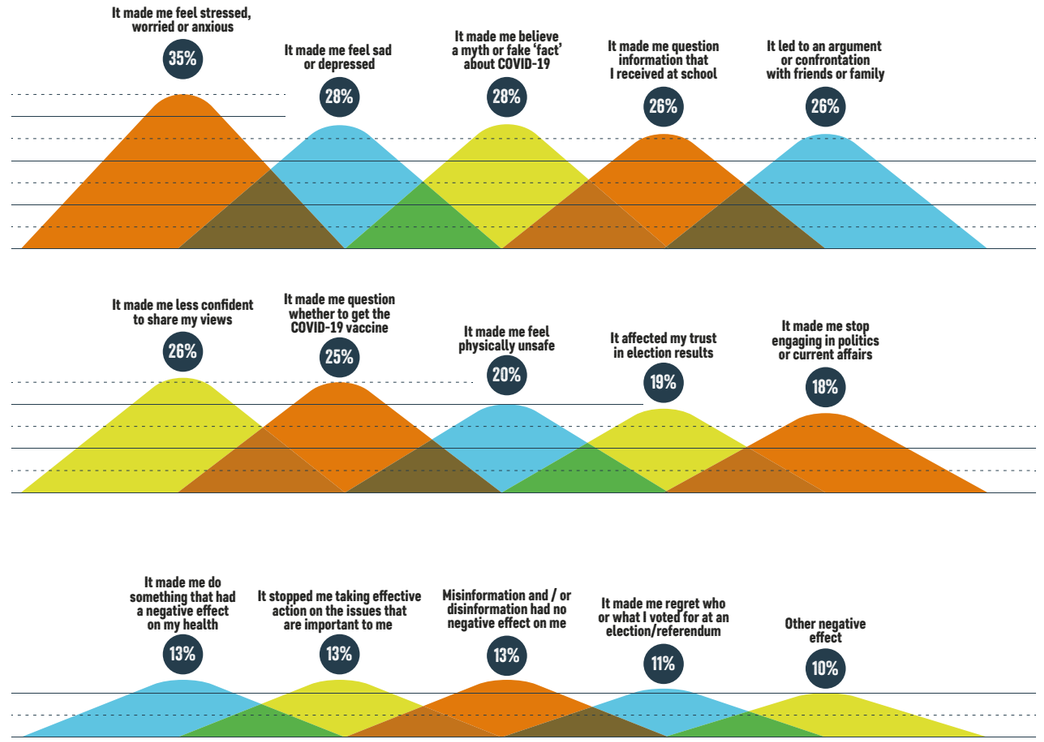
Forty-six per cent of the girls and young women taking part in the survey have felt sad, depressed, stressed, worried or anxious because of misinformation or disinformation online.

"I think when you're going on social media, you need to be a psychologist or you are psychologically fit, and you have to get your mind straight, because there's a lot of negative comments, and a lot of bad things happening on the internet that can make you…not to want to use the internet." Lilly, 23, Malawi

In line with our previous findings, girls and young women who identify as belonging to at least one minority group are more affected by misinformation/ disinformation online, with 91 per cent of them negatively affected. There are regional differences too, with girls in Africa and the Middle East more adversely affected than respondents from other regions. A worrying number of girls also reported feeling physically unsafe.

Twenty per cent of girls and young women surveyed feel physically unsafe because of misinformation and disinformation online.

HAS MISINFORMATION AND/OR DISINFORMATION ONLINE EVER CAUSED YOU ANY OF THE FOLLOWING NEGATIVE EFFECTS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



This finding is both unexpected and troubling and needs further research. While it is not entirely clear why so many reported feeling physically unsafe, it is in line with the concern reported by young activists about bogus events advertised on social media putting girls and young women at physical risk, and might also be down to incorrect information harming girls' health. Some of the interviewees also talked about online exchanges increasing social tensions in their communities which could also result in physical danger.

What is clear from the research, including the in-depth interviews, is that misinformation and disinformation deter girls and young women from speaking out – they are concerned about spreading misinformation themselves — from learning and from active participation in their communities.

One in four girls feels less confident to share their views and one in five has stopped engaging in politics or current affairs as a result of misinformation/disinformation online.

"In politics I do not enter so much because it is more raw...on Instagram I try to avoid politics, despite the fact that feminism is clear for which side it pulls. But I try not to post anything." Cripaam, 17, Spain



In the qualitative interviews girls and young women gave numerous examples of how misinformation had affected them or someone they knew. Dira in Indonesia described being harassed online to the point of needing to deactivate her Twitter account after refusing to spread something online she knew was untrue.

"But he kept sending it over and over and over and he threatens me: 'You need to retweet it. You need to show it to people. You need to spread it and stuff.' At this point, it really disturbed me, so I decide to deactivate it and then he put some bad words, and I'm just a middle schooler back then. It is annoying and scary at the same time, because I don't know him." Dira, 18, Indonesia

Lisa in Malawi had an experience where a male classmate, jilted by Lisa's friend, had posted on social media that this friend had died. It spread to the point where the girl's parents were being contacted to find out what was happening and after a number of hours it was confirmed as untrue.

"Actually, it made me not associate with people, that made me separate myself from people even more. I was scared." Lisa, 22, Malawi

Many of the girls and young women talked about stress, worry and anxiety as a result of false information online: some described emotional reactions such as guilt, anger, fear and upset, while for others their trust was affected. This continuing tension exacted a heavy toll on their mental health.

"My friends were very scared as especially girls as the hackers can post impolite content which would affect their reputation among their other friends, one of my female friends, the hacker posted photos from her personal studio on her cell phone." Gana, 24, Egypt

The girls and young women in the qualitative interviews were also asked if misinformation or disinformation had caused any barriers to them becoming politically and socially active on the topics they care about. For several of them, though not all, the answer was "yes." One young woman said she didn't like to be active on political rights because of the lack of reliable information, while another said she didn't like to participate on political or climate issues because, if she got too much attention for it, she felt it would put her in danger.

Several girls and young women felt it had not caused any barriers: it was always possible to check other sources to clarify. One also mentioned the importance of not being too hard on herself: we are all only human, we can make mistakes and learn.



Credit: Plan International

5. Girls and young women can struggle to identify false information online and would benefit from digital media literacy guidance

Seven out of ten girls and young women surveyed have never been taught about spotting misinformation/disinformation at school or by family members.

Only about half of the survey respondents felt confident in being able to identify false information online, with the older age group, as might be expected, more confident than the 15-19-year-olds.

This uncertainly is reflected also in the comments by the young activists interviewed: with the doubt seeming to stem from false information often being well articulated and therefore more convincing. Poorly written articles were easier to spot but identifying misinformation or disinformation was confusing or difficult when it was more sophisticated.

"I mainly resort to two approaches, I look for the writing style of the news or information, if they are exaggerating or overstating certain opinion or trying to direct people in a certain way, then I doubt the info and I start double checking the info through Google and only from official websites, I try to look for official data supporting their claim." Gana, 24, Egypt

They all struggled with the sheer volume of information. By and large girls felt left to their own devices, teaching themselves to navigate through the confusion.

"I think it can be kind of confusing sometimes, but I think it's one of the skills that I've deliberately taught myself to try to figure it out. Like if this wasn't something that I'd tried to learn how to do, then I feel like I would get duped very easily." Abbie, 19, Ireland

Education on this subject is important and influences the strategies girls and young women employ to assess whether online information is truthful. Those who have been taught are statistically significantly more likely to:

- **use an online fact-checking tool**
- **check if they have provided evidence**
- **check if it was from a reliable and trustworthy author and/or institution**
- **look at the profile of who posted the content to see if they are credible**
- **look for signs of low-quality information such as grammatical errors**
- **check if the image(s) look sensationalist or are click-bait images**.



In the qualitative interviews, girls and young women were asked whether they had been taught how to assess the accuracy of online information by anyone, and if not whether they thought this was a problem. The majority of girls and young women said they were not taught how to do this and many saw it as problematic.

The majority of girls and young women said they had **never been taught how to assess the accuracy of online information by anyone**. They relied largely on themselves to work it out. Dira in Indonesia said she sometimes attended webinars to teach herself these skills and Lisa in Brazil said she had seen some helpful TV campaigns. Only Nabila in Germany had been taught at her school about issues that stem from social media use specifically. Some mentioned help from family members.

"The book also called Safe Online. The book really helped me, how to protect my privacy online, how to not give out confidential info online, how to remain anonymous, especially when I'm talking about something touchy that can cause me my safety...It was given to me by my brother." Tife, 22, Nigeria

"I definitely rely on my sister a lot. She's a defence attorney and she lives super close to me in Los Angeles. She constantly has to be the devil's advocate in her work. Recently I've seen her do that a lot in our conversations, but it's very interesting because she gives me a whole new perspective to these activist issues that I'm posting on social media. She's definitely somebody that I would rely on to help me feed through all the information that I'm consuming online and come to concrete opinions that are based on reliable sources." Rachel, 18, United States

A number of girls provided answers that suggest they had received some teaching. However, these were usually short sessions run by youth clubs or online by charities and related mainly to online safety or cyberbullying rather than comprehensive digital media literacy lessons.

The girls and young women were also asked during the qualitative interviews whether they thought digital media literacy should be taught in schools or other education institutions. All of the participants answered "yes." Most said it should be taught at secondary level but others advocated for a more comprehensive approach:

"Yes, I think it should be taught. Because currently we are in a world where everything is being done in the internet. We are doing everything digitally. So I think it should be taught in the schools from the pre-nurseries, the primary schools to secondary schools to universities. So that when we grow up, we have a better view on how to use our digital platforms." Mia, 20, Kenya

Additionally, the girls were asked who else, outside of schools and other educational institutions, should be responsible for educating young people on the issue. Power holders held accountable included governments, social media companies, community or religious leaders. Respondents also emphasised the role of charities or youth networks (which included community associations, extracurricular clubs, youth and school clubs and NGOs). Following that it was parents, although it was acknowledged that some parents did not have the skills needed to help their children with the subject.

"But I definitely do think they [social media companies] need to do a better job on their behalf of stopping the spread of misinformation and disinformation and be more proactive in taking on posts that are being reported and making sure that stuff comes from a source or some kind of fact checking system." Rachel, 18, United States

The participants were also asked if they were offered digital media literacy lessons at school what they would most like to learn. Overall, being taught how to navigate online spaces, such as social media and general digital media literacy was the most frequent request. More specifically, the girls and young women were interested in ways to identify misinformation and disinformation, including media manipulation and online safety. Other areas mentioned were digital skills (coding, website development), data privacy, online well-being and digital rights.

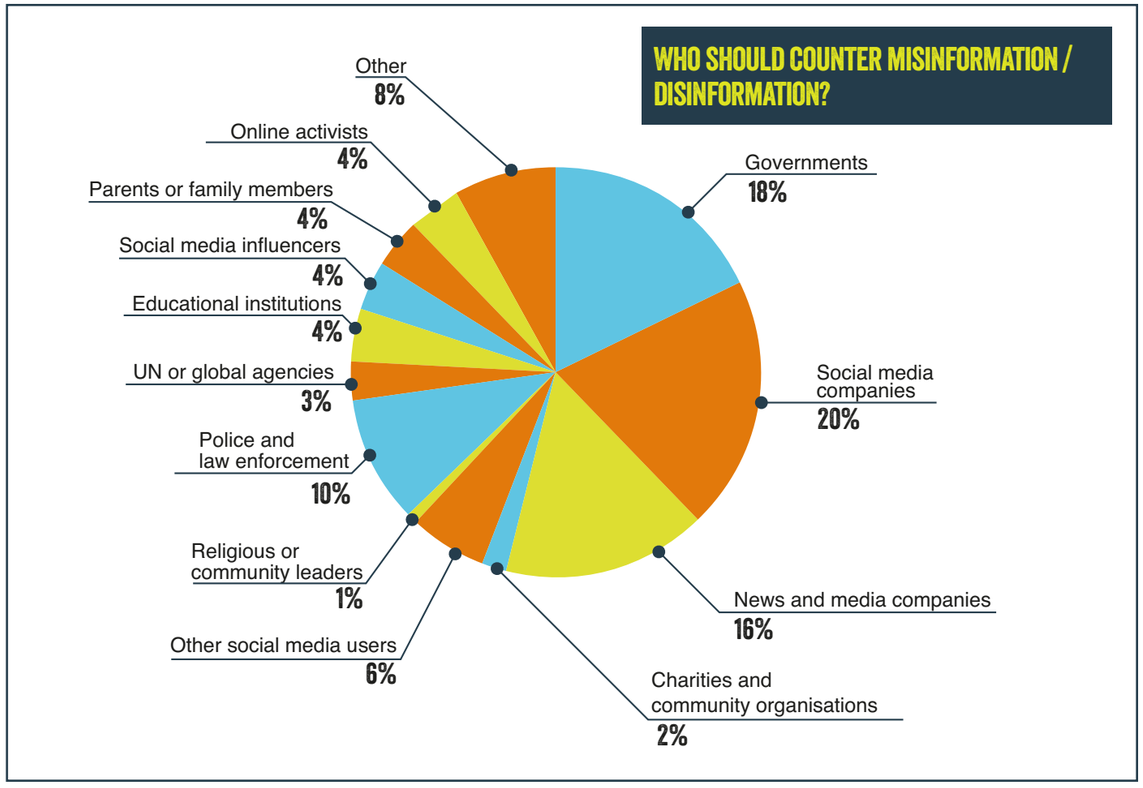
"Right now, especially since the pandemic, everyone's used digital spaces. We do everything online. I mean, maybe in the future we will get more engaged with online spaces. I think it is important for us to know this and it will be more helpful if we get this in our educations, especially for those children who are under ten years old, who are still young but already use digital spaces." Dira,18, Indonesia

Finland: Resisting fake news

Finland begins teaching information literacy and critical thinking to children in kindergarten as well as running media and information literacy classes for older people. Its aim is to make sure that everyone — from school students to journalists, teachers and politicians — can spot various forms of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.[64] This has resulted in Finland topping a European index of nations in being the most resistant nation to fake news.[65] In 2014, the government embedded media literacy into the curriculum, teaching children from the age of six to read sources critically.[66] Teachers encourage children to evaluate and fact check websites, ask students to hunt for dubious news and find its source, and demonstrate how easy it is for statistics to be manipulated, and it's taught across all disciplines — in art children are shown how images can be digitally altered; in history propaganda campaigns are analysed; and in science vaccine disinformation is put to the test.[67]



Credit: Plan International



6. Girls and young women want change: governments, social media companies, and traditional news and media need to step up

Overwhelmingly girls and young women hold the authorities, and those profiting from social media and online connectivity, responsible for countering misinformation and disinformation. They are quite clear that, although educational institutions may need to help girls and young women navigate the internet, they are not responsible for the information posted on it, nor are parents or community leaders.

Holding governments, social media companies and news and media companies in general responsible for taking action to tackle misinformation and disinformation is unanimous across the regions. It is backed up by the qualitative in-depth interviews with young activists who also point out the complexity of the situation and the need for all sectors of society to work together.

"It's kind of tricky because it depends on what misinformation we're talking about...But I think in preventing the issue, kind of at its root, I think it should be working together between the government, schools, the guards [the police], reliable news media, all working together." Abbie, 19, Ireland

As well as discussing *who,* the girls and young women also had lots of ideas about *how* to stop misinformation and disinformation online. These were addressed primarily to governments and social media companies, revolved mainly around education and regulation, and included:

- the provision of digital media literacy education from primary school onwards
- stronger punishment for those who post misinformation and disinformation
- more regulation of media outlets and social media platforms by governments
- all social media companies having warnings on posts that contain misinformation and disinformation
- users having to do short training before opening a social media account
- improving reporting mechanisms on social media platforms
- fact checking systems in place
- detecting and taking down misinformation and disinformation and fake accounts.

State involvement in regulating online platforms tends to be a contentious issue: there is a fine line between the regulation of false information and stifling free speech or targeting groups or individuals who express opposition to a government. The UK's Online Safety Bill for example, designed to force social media companies to root out content that incites racial hatred and violence has been criticised as being "catastrophic for free speech."[68] Legislation may be necessary but its misuse by authoritarian regimes, and by the tech companies themselves, is a real danger.

Some of the girls and young women remarked that we also have a collective responsibility as users of these platforms to curb the spread of misinformation and disinformation and call it out:

"I think that, beyond what we could receive at school, it also depends on us ourselves – the issue of reflecting whenever we receive information…that certain information isn't trustworthy. But also, we can organise in groups, in collectives, to be able to debunk it, to say it like that. I think it's the responsibility of everyone, but it's also a matter of doing it together, to identify information that isn't true and to address it." Dora, 15, Peru

PROGRAMME AND PRACTICE

As the girls and young women surveyed and spoken to have emphasised, digital media literacy provides the key to empowering girls and young women to deal with misinformation and disinformation online. To this end Plan International has been both adapting current programmes and initiating new ones in order to help girls and young women develop the skills they need.

A. Plan International Thailand: in partnership with Telenor

Building Digital Skills and Resilience

Plan International and Telenor Group, a multinational telecom company with data and media communication services, have been in a global partnership since 2018 to address SDG 10 and reduce inequality in our society through programmes that increase digital literacy among vulnerable groups of children and youth.



In January 2021, Plan International Thailand and dtac (Telenor in Thailand), expanded their existing partnership with the new initiative, Young Digital Resilience Leaders project. The project aim is to produce capable and creative young digital leaders with the skills and knowledge to build movements for social change online.

Forty-five teams have been selected and two-thirds of them are girls. The youth teams will join a cyber-camp and follow a mandatory online training programme. The programme goal is to increase their overall digital media literacy and raise their awareness of cyberbullying, cyber privacy and security and online resilience particularly with regard to fake news. The teams are designing their own online campaigns to reach out to other young people to enhance awareness and pass on online skills to help tackle the many and varied challenges young people experience online.

Each team will receive seed funding, and guidance from a mentor appointed to help them implement their ideas and reach their target audience.

The project aims to help young people take full advantage of the potential of the internet and develop tools and skills to implement positive change and cascade their knowledge to others. It is key to the project that young people's ability is acknowledged and their potential to become positive change-makers is understood and encouraged.

The project is based on Plan International's existing youth empowerment programmes and strategies, and focused on engaging young people as leaders for collective action against discrimination and gender inequality. It is adapted to a COVID-19 context, therefore run and monitored on an interactive online platform developed by dtac. About 100,000 young people are expected to actively participate in the groups' online activities.

B. Girls Out Loud

Girls Out Loud is a safe online space for girls and young women (13-24-years-old) to discuss issues that are important to them. In private Facebook groups moderated by Plan International, they ask questions and talk about self-image, gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, abortion, LGBTIQ+ rights and currently COVID-19 which has become the most discussed topic in all groups. With restrictions on social gatherings and schools closed all around the world, the traditional safe spaces for girls and young women are disappearing. In Girls Out Loud, they can ask questions related to the pandemic, receive accurate information and exchange experiences with other girls.

"Thank you for all the information you are giving us, it is really important to take care of ourselves." Girl, 16, Guatemala

Girls Out Loud started in Colombia in 2017 and is now live in 11 countries: Benin, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Timor Leste and the UK where it is called Girls Shout Out.

"Hi girls, let's start a conversation about how we can raise awareness among the people so we can fight together against the COVID-19 propagation." Senegal (No age supplied)

For Plan International, Girls Out Loud is an opportunity to continue community engagement and understand how COVID-19, amongst other important topics, is affecting the lives of girls and young women.

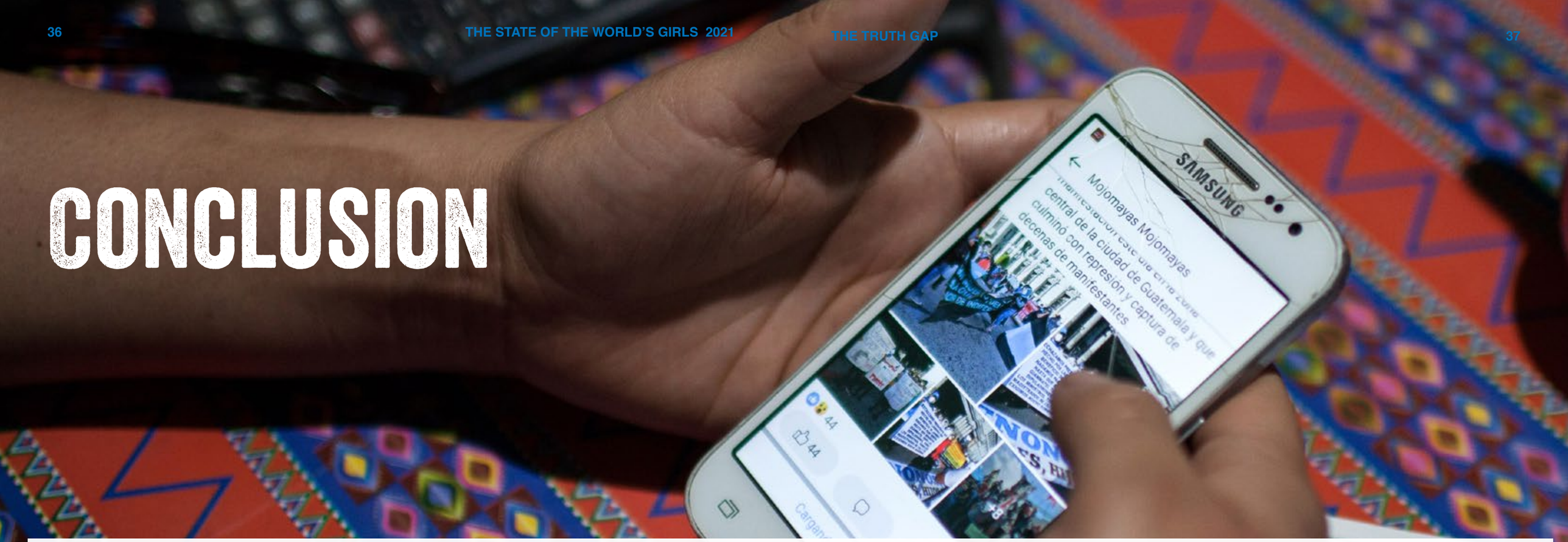
Spending time on social media exposes girls to risks, so we help them stay safe not only in our group but on Facebook in general. We discuss how to set profile settings to private, block users, or report upsetting content. We also talk about recognising misinformation and disinformation and what to do about it and how to keep your account details safe when you use a shared device.

"I love this information, honestly I was worried because I was receiving and believing all the fake news in the social networks." Girl, 15, Colombia

In **Sierra Leone**'s Girls Out Loud group the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a host of queries about false information concerning the virus. Girls often shared the misinformation — including the misleading 'fact' that, "Africans cannot get Covid-19" – that they were hearing in their communities. The Girls Out Loud group was used to promote reliable information about COVID-19 and where this could be found online. Additionally, an in-person workshop was held at the Country Office where girls were given advice on how to identify misinformation and disinformation and messages to combat it were developed.

In the Girls out Loud group in **Nepal,** Srijana, like many others, was "new to internet. I have to get online because the schools are closed in the pandemic." Disinformation led her to befriend on Facebook someone whose activities later became suspicious and frightening. Srijana reached out to Girls Out Loud and the moderator explained on how she could report the account. Being able to discuss the situation has helped Srijana develop a much better awareness of the issue of false information online and one of the girls in the group suggested that she make her account private and not allow strangers to message her.

CONCLUSION



Ninety-three per cent of the girls and young women surveyed have been influenced by information online.

"I always try to find information about what's going on in the world, politics, how states are developing in terms of early marriage, laws that they pass. I'm also very interested in what kind of activism different global organisations practice…and how we can, through this information, create alliances to work on these topics." Ana, 22, Dominican Republic

Girls and young women are spending huge amounts of time online, driven by a quest for connection and information — the desire to extend their knowledge beyond the borders of their own families, schools and communities. The opportunities it presents are boundless. You can find almost anything online and in particular it provides contact with like-minded people all over the world. For girls and young women, especially those from minority groups, this is invaluable.

"The internet is the town square of the 21st century. It is where debate takes place, communities are built, products are sold and reputations are made."[69]

The benefits for campaigners and activists are self-evident. But, there is a downside: it is very hard for them to know where to go for robust information and how to distinguish truth from falsehood. Both the interviews and the survey point to an overall mistrust of online platforms.

There was no single online source that the majority of girls and young women surveyed actually trusted.

Social media platforms were the most popular places for the youth activists interviewed to find the information they needed, but at the same time they were rated, by both sets of respondents, as being the space where most misinformation and disinformation is found.

As with the issue of online harassment and abuse studied in 2020, girls and young women are largely left to their own devices in tackling the issue of misinformation. One of the startling findings from the study was that girls and young women have had to change their behaviour, have had to teach themselves to endlessly cross-check and validate information, with only a handful of countries having comprehensive digital media literacy programmes in place. Even when specifically asked who they sought help from, most of the young activists confirmed they were on their own. As the quote below reveals there is a sense that it is all up to the individual user, not the platform providers or government legislators.

"It depends on how we use social media. If we use properly and correctly it will connect with others having different ideology, or caste but if we misuse it will definitely divide." Nani, 19, Nepal

Nearly half of the research respondents report feeling **sad, depressed, stressed, worried or anxious because of misinformation or disinformation online.**

It has a disproportionate effect on girls and young women already struggling with gender discrimination, and harassment online and offline, and with a society where gender stereotyping is very much the norm. Misinformation and disinformation are corrosive: undermining the rights of girls and young women to participate in political and community life, denting their confidence and restricting their voices. It is a problem that must be tackled, with the interests of girls and young women clearly acknowledged. It is vital for gender equality and part of the spectrum that extends from petty discrimination, to the representation of women and girls in the media, to violence against women and girls in all its manifestations. An additional brick in the wall of misogyny that shapes the society we live in.

"I think actually every one of us plays an important role to make these digital spaces a lot safer, a lot better for us. But those who came from institutions that have a power, that have privilege to make laws, to inform a bigger, wider group of people about what's happening and then what to do, I think it would definitely help with these issues." Dira, 18, Indonesia

Credit: Plan International / Sandra Sebastián

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the research respondents have emphasised, everybody is responsible for tackling misinformation and disinformation online: it is essential for all of us to **always assess information before sharing it, report suspected misinformation and disinformation and raise awareness about the issue.** But some have more power than others.

The recommendations that follow, addressed to key power-holders, are based on suggestions from girls and young women taking part in the research.



Credit: Plan International

1. GOVERNMENTS MUST

A PROMOTE DIGITAL LITERACY

- **Invest in ICT education and digital literacy** by supporting community-led and peer-driven digital skills and empowerment initiatives for all children, particularly girls and young women in all their diversity, and their families: focused on problem solving, group mentorship, information and data literacy, content creation, and leadership skills, in addition to technical skills.
- **Introduce or build digital literacy**, including critical thinking, in school curricula from primary school level. Girls and young women must be able to confidently and knowledgeably navigate online spaces and learning these skills needs to be part of an overall education system that promotes gender equality.
- **Work with civil society** to develop and deliver digital literacy and awareness raising initiatives, so that communities, families and civil society are better informed about both the opportunities and risks of being online. They must facilitate broader discussions aimed at eliminating gender inequality and the gender digital divide: acknowledging the harmful norms that restrict girls' digital inclusion, and the online violence and abuse that misinformation and disinformation contribute too.
- **Meaningfully engage girls and CSOs** in policy and legislative discussions to ensure that the regulation of online platforms, strategies to encourage girls' connectivity and tackle digital violence and the roll-out of digital literacy initiatives are fit for purpose — reflecting girls' diverse needs and lived experiences. Initiatives should also include steps to mitigate the stress and psychological impact of experiencing hostility whilst navigating online spaces.

B PROTECT AND MONITOR RIGHTS

- **Ensure government legislation, regulations and policies recognise children's digital rights,** taking active measures to incorporate the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.[70] These emphasise the importance of promoting digital citizenship for children and adolescents: in particular with reference to accessing information, promoting civic participation, protection and privacy, in accordance with their evolving capacities, and in a way that ensures a gender and diversity approach.
- **Recognise, investigate and address the implications of misinformation and disinformation on girls,** connecting this with efforts to address online gender-based violence through programming and policy interventions. Governments should update legislative frameworks and enact policies relating to digital violence, harassment and hate speech and their prevention, reflecting how disinformation and misinformation contribute to misogyny, racial abuse and other harmful content online.
- **Ensure discussions around government regulation of social media companies** and other internet platforms centre on reforms to practices and product designs that ultimately make online experiences safer, particularly for girls and marginalised individuals. Regulatory frameworks must include independent oversight bodies, that meet calls for greater transparency and accountability.
- **Ensure government policies on internet access are inclusive** and prioritise more affordable, meaningful connectivity for everyone, especially girls and young women. Governments should adopt meaningful connectivity as a new target for the internet, focusing on four components: regular internet use, an appropriate device, enough data and a fast connection.

2. ONLINE PLATFORMS MUST

A PROMOTE DIGITAL LITERACY

- **Work with girls and young women and civil society** to build on and create solutions to increase all children's digital literacy. Interventions should be grounded in the experiences and needs of girls and young women in all of their diversity: they should include tools and initiatives for fact checking, nudges to change users' behaviour and verifying content, as well as awareness raising.
- **Initiate innovative public-awareness raising campaigns about disinformation and misinformation,** including those that are age-appropriate and targeted to a younger audience.

B TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

- **Recognise that online platforms have a responsibility and duty of care** to ensure content published and promoted as a result of their own procedures, algorithms, and decision-making, automated or human, does not perpetuate misinformation and disinformation that could jeopardise consumers' physical and mental wellbeing.
- **Investigate and address the implications of misinformation and disinformation for girls specifically,** connecting this with efforts to address and reduce online gender-based violence through their systems and processes.
- **Recognise** that where gender intersects with race, ethnicity, sexual identity or disability, girls and young women can be particularly at risk and their rights — specifically, to freedom of expression, assembly, and psychological and physical safety – undermined.
- **Amend existing policy statements** and community guidelines to explicitly acknowledge the gendered and intersectional dimensions and impacts of misinformation and disinformation and commit to implementing gender-sensitive solutions and penalising perpetrators.
- **Build on measures initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic** when online platforms worked together to implement technical solutions to tackle misinformation and disinformation: including connecting users to credible, authoritative information, and moderating and reducing the spread of misleading content. It is vital to work with girls and young women and civil society organisations to create new technical solutions that recognise the gendered dimension of misinformation and disinformation and address this across a broader spectrum of issues that affect girls' and young women's lives. Too much reliance on automation should be avoided as it is less effective at identifying unacceptable content, or understanding context, than a trained human moderator
- **Be transparent and accountable** with regards to the delivery and impact of initiatives to address misinformation and disinformation. In particular — while still protecting the data privacy of platform users — online platforms should facilitate the publication of data which is disaggregated by age and gender to provide insights into the effects of misinformation and disinformation on girls and young women. Data should be made available to external stakeholders, including academia and civil society, and analysed regularly to gather evidence of the true extent of misinformation, and disinformation. Their input will help to identify shortcomings, positive examples of impact and opportunities to strengthen procedures — with children's and young people's interests particularly in mind.

3. MEDIA OUTLETS MUST

- **Collaborate** with other organisations to share expertise and disseminate good practices around fact checking alongside other verification methods. Share sector insights and expertise with governments and network providers to inform digital media literacy programmes that focus on developing critical thinking and on practical digital navigation and safety skills.
- **Commit** to not spreading misinformation and disinformation on their channels and networks and when it does occur, adequately addressing it as a correction; bearing in mind the danger of amplifying or conferring legitimacy on information that is simply untrue.

4. NETWORK PROVIDERS MUST

- **Work** with governments to take measures to increase meaningful connectivity: make mobile internet access more inclusive with a particular focus on freely accessible educational content through zero-rating relevant websites as well as increasing data allowances and lowering costs.

5. CIVIL SOCIETY AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS MUST

- **Provide** financial and technical support to young feminist organisations and groups working on girls' digital rights, specifically those campaigning against misinformation and disinformation, providing solidarity with activists and strengthening and amplifying intergenerational movements.
- **Facilitate** collaboration and coordination between the different stakeholders: specifically collaboration between lower and higher income countries collaboration — including girls and young women, girl-led organisations, civil society, government representatives, academia and the tech sector – to amplify impact for change.

6. INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND SUPRANATIONAL ORGANISATIONS MUST

- **Meaningfully engage** girls and young women in discussions on regulation, standards and policies, ensuring that their experiences are reflected. It is crucial that the EU Digital Services Act, and related proposals such as the AI Regulation and European Democracy Action Plan, currently being debated, is properly accountable to girls and young women, ensuring the systemic risks they face are prevented and mitigated, consistently and transparently.
- **Investigate** the issue of misinformation and disinformation and the impact it has on individuals' human rights. This includes ongoing research on the gendered and age impacts and dimensions of disinformation and misinformation and strongly encouraging greater transparency and accountability within and throughout the tech sector: providing public information on tech reform, the use of algorithms, data and privacy and combating harmful content. Use these insights to inform public awareness campaigns to combat the spread of harmful content, building on the UN's existing Verified campaign which tackles COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation.



Credit: Plan International / Sandra Sebastián

Methodology

The research was conducted across 33 countries, involving a survey with over 26,000 adolescent girls and young women aged between 15-24, in 26 countries, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews, in 18 countries, to further uncover girls' and young women's experiences and ideas.[71]

The research collected primary mixed-methods data through a large-scale survey, qualitative interviews and a social listening tool scanning online platforms.

SURVEY

The survey was conducted in **Australia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Netherlands, Peru, Philippines, Spain, Sweden, Togo, Vietnam, United Kingdom, United States** and **Zambia**. The questionnaire was translated into different languages and had 16 closed questions; most of them allowed respondents to select multiple answer codes. Questions were structured around four areas: demographic (age and minority group), online engagement with social topics, misinformation and disinformation, and digital media literacy. Data collection was done in three different ways: by phone, by conducting face to face interviews with the help of tablets or large screen mobiles, or respondents filled in an online survey on a dedicated website. Data was collected by two marketing research companies — Ipsos and GeoPoll — from 5 February to 19 March 2021.[72]

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The interview questions were organised into three sections that asked:

- What topics the girls and young women engage with online and their behaviours and practices when learning and engaging online
- About their experience of misinformation and disinformation online
- How much knowledge of and exposure to digital media literacy did they have and what should be done to tackle issue of misinformation/ disinformation.

Data was collected 24 March to 5 May 2021. The interviews varied in time but usually lasted about 45 minutes to an hour and were conducted via Microsoft teams, Zoom and WhatsApp. Overall, interviews were conducted with 22 girls and young women aged between 15-24, across 18 countries: **Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Spain, Sudan, Wales and United States.**[73]

The girls and young women are described in the report as young activists. This included a broad range on the activist spectrum: from seasoned campaigners in leading roles, to those who spoke out from time to time on an issue or topic they were passionate about, or were volunteering around certain issues.

N.B. The names of the girls and young women in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity, in nearly all cases they themselves chose the names they would like to use.

SOCIAL LISTENING TOOL

This is an online tool that gathers information across social media platforms to see what people are posting in regard to a certain topic. Data was collected from 15 March to 14 April 2021 and a search was run on weekly basis for a four-week period. The search was based on a list of primary key words around misinformation and disinformation and these were then searched against words in three areas: politics and elections, COVID-19, sex and sexual health.

ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING

Research ethics approval was granted from two international child rights academics from the Department of Public Law and Jurisprudence, University of Western Cape in South Africa and Professor of Children's Rights in the Developing World, University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

The survey contractors had to sign a code of conduct confirming that they will adhere to Plan International's global Safeguarding Policy. Consent was obtained from all participants and from parents/guardians of 15 to 17-year-olds. In line with ethics and safeguarding procedures qualitative interviews were conducted by two members of Plan International staff. Information sheets were provided ahead of time, and informed consent and assent were given prior to the interviews; verbal consent was also given to record the interviews.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write up process.

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ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

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. The Girls Get Equal campaign, created with youth activists around the world, aims to ensure girls and young women have equal power over their own lives and can shape the world around them. In order to achieve gender equality in an increasingly digital world, online spaces must be made safe, accessible and affordable for everyone. Girls and young women, in all their diversity, must be free to be themselves: to campaign, take collective action, and make decisions about the issues that affect their lives, wherever they are.

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