World Vision

# DREAMING OUT LOUD

## Hopes and challenges facing girls around the world

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you first of all to the over 400 girls who were willing to participate in this project. It is our hope that this report accurately represents and helps to raise your voices.

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Cover photo: Gissele, 13, Honduras. © Andre Guardiola / World Vision



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Rebecca, 15, Zambia

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While today the global data is telling us that we have achieved progress in addressing gender inequality, putting girls in schools and protecting them from violence, the reality is quite different. These gains are not evenly distributed and are threatened by rising economic and food insecurity, conflict and the impacts of climate change. Many girls continue to have to fight for their right to an education, to avoid child marriage or sexual violence, and struggle to meet their basic needs.

This report provides a "state of the world's girls" in 2025. World Vision surveyed 432 adolescent girls across 51 countries spanning Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond. We asked girls about their hopes, fears, dreams and what being a girl means in their communities today.[1]

The findings presented in this report paint a complex picture. On one hand, there is remarkable hope and resilience: girls today have aspirations that would have been unthinkable for their grandmothers. They want to be presidents, doctors, pilots, teachers – and they articulate a vision of a more equal world where girls can "do anything boys can do," where they are safe, educated and free to make their own choices.

On the other hand, girls' hopes are still too often threatened by the harsh realities of gender discrimination, violence and poverty. Far too many of the girls we spoke to worried that they or their peers would be pulled out of school to be married off, harassed or assaulted, forced to give up their dreams to care for siblings, or stigmatised for their periods. Although **84% of girls we spoke to expressed hope** – not naive optimism, but complex, multidimensional hope that encompasses dreams, strength, compassion, joy, and wisdom – 18% were also facing economic stress, 19% confronting gender–based violence, and 21% living with conflict and insecurity.

The challenges highlighted – from keeping girls in school, to ending child marriage and gender–based violence, to ensuring menstrual health and food security – are all solvable problems. We need to strengthen the empowering environment and systems that ensure that girls are healthy, educated and safe to realise their full potential, whether they live in wealthy or developing countries, stable or humanitarian contexts. This means ensuring access to primary and secondary education for every girl, access to relevant health services, and access to comprehensive child protection services that prevent and respond to sexual abuse, exploitation and other forms of violence in all contexts. It also requires enacting and enforcing child protection policies, including laws against child marriage, child labour and harmful practices, alongside programmes that support reporting mechanisms, psychosocial support and safe spaces for children.

Crucially, these efforts must be locally driven, building on community–led systems and solutions that reflect the realities, culture and capacities of the families and children they serve. The girls we spoke with are hopeful and determined to change the world by making a contribution to their families, modelling new leadership, and changing their communities. Supporting local actors – including community–based organisations, local authorities and child and youth groups – ensures that interventions are sustainable, contextually relevant and trusted by the communities themselves.

Finally, strengthening families' capacity to care for children through income generation and livelihoods programmes, alongside policies and programmes that address poverty, hunger, and harmful gender norms and inequality, is critical to creating an environment where girls are safe, supported and empowered to thrive.

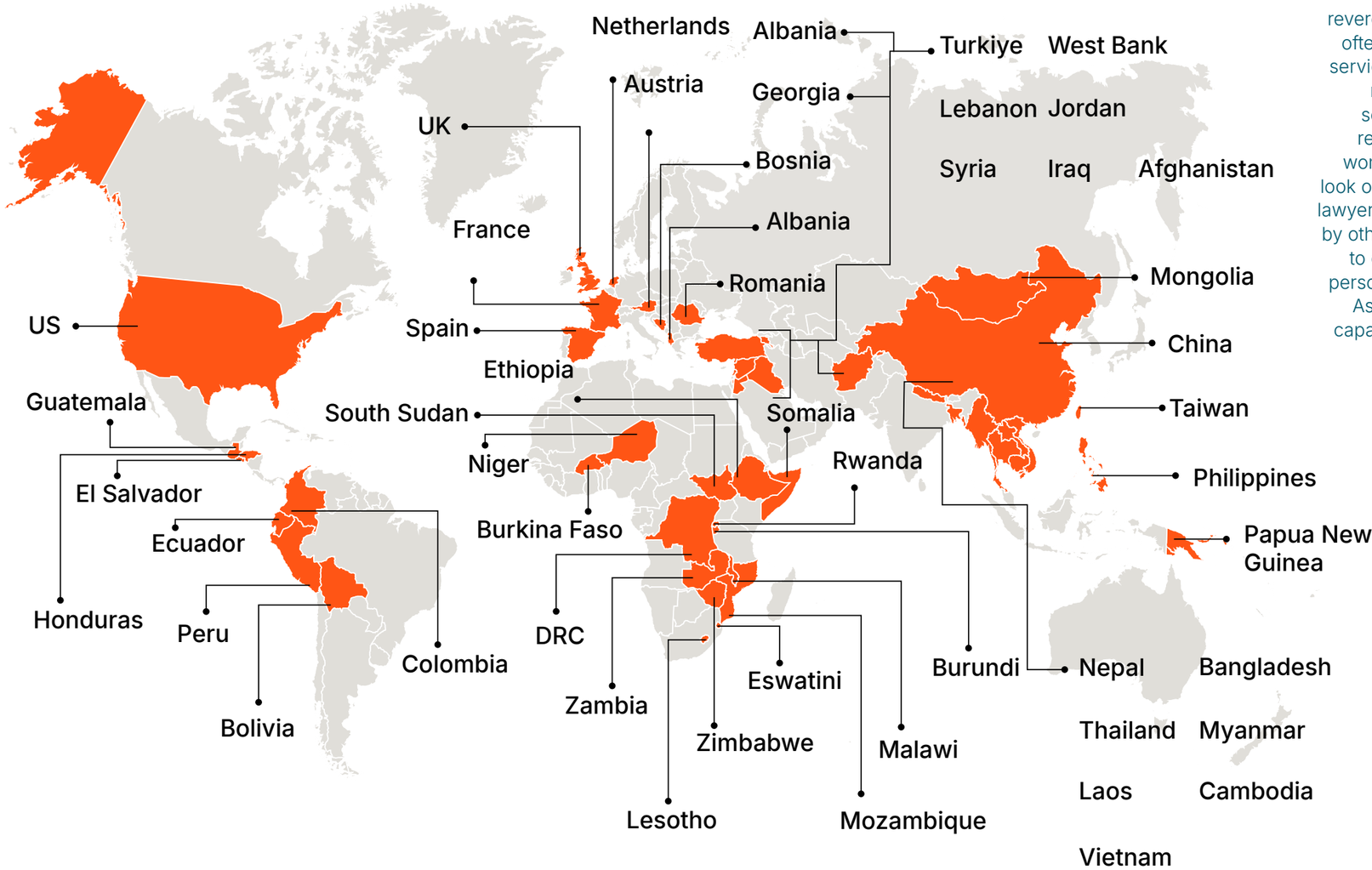
> *"For a girl, achieving her dreams is very difficult,"* **Saeeda, 13, from Afghanistan told us,** *"but she must have the strength and determination to reach them."*

[1] A selection of the interviews can be viewed at wvi.org/girls–voices

# WHO WE SPOKE TO **432** girls in **51** countries or territories

**Europe** girls emerge as fierce advocates for breaking limits and challenging underestimation, celebrating their unique combination of "softness and strength" while demanding freedom from societal constraints. "I fight for the things I believe in," says Alesia, 14, Albania; "A girl would make a good leader because she has the same capabilities as any man," notes Caitlyn, 17, England. These voices highlight a regional through–line: confidence, agency and the freedom to decide who they become – on their own terms.

In **Latin America**, girls link daily life to economic instability and pervasive violence. "What worries me most is the economy... the high prices. Some families can't afford the basics," said Alejandra, 14, Bolivia. Safety feels just as fragile: "The most challenging thing nowadays is that girls live with harassment... going out is no longer safe," said Carla, 16, Peru; "Every day we experience harassment, violence and discrimination," added Dayana, 16, Ecuador.




In the **Middle East**, girls speak with deep reverence for dignity, honour and family values, often dreaming of scholarship and community service while navigating concerns about forced marriage and economic hardship. "Despite societal pressure, Iraqi women work hard to reach places that respect and value them as women," says Taqwa, 17, Iraq. Their ambitions look outward: "My biggest dream is to become a lawyer so I can defend those who were wronged by others," says Haneen, 13, Jordan, and "I want to complete my studies and become a strong person who helps others," adds Wafaa, 14, Iraq. As one Iraqi participant summed up, girls are capable – they just need someone to believe in them and support them.

In **Asia**, girls consistently emphasise the crucial role of family support to achieve their dreams, often viewing their aspirations through the lens of community impact and service. "I think the best part of being a girl is my family. If my family allows me, I can do everything in this world," explains Rokeya, 15, Bangladesh, while in China, YuHan, 11, shares a different perspective: "I hope to live independently from my parents." Their dreams frequently centre on education and healthcare careers that serve others: "My dream is to be an English teacher...I want to inspire rural children so they can excel on the global stage," says Ratna, 17, from Bangladesh.

In **sub–Saharan Africa**, girls show extraordinary entrepreneurial spirit, dreaming of opening businesses and training other girls, displaying courage and resilience despite facing significant challenges. "My biggest dream...is to open a sewing workshop and to train young girls so they can have their own profession," shares Fleur Elodie, 16, from Burkina Faso, while from Burundi, Jeanine, 16, aspires, "I wish to become a professor in the university." Their resilience shines through enormous challenges: in the DRC, Sandra, 17, declares her hope that "peace will return and that I will achieve my dream of becoming a lawyer." Their dreams often blend personal ambition with community service: in the DRC, Amusante, 17 shares, "In the future, I would like to open my own beauty salon, because this job would help me feed my family."

# INTRODUCTION

Girls growing up today face a world of both opportunities and obstacles. Over the past decade, there has been significant progress in areas like girls' education and health thanks to investments by donors and governments. **Fifty million more girls are enrolled in school today than in 2015.**[i] The first generation of girls born after the year 2000 are coming of age and dreaming of becoming engineers, journalists and leaders in their communities. Yet, as the findings of this report show, far too many girls still see their hopes threatened by persistent inequalities, violence and crises outside their control.

This report provides a "state of the world's girls" in 2025 – through the eyes of girls themselves and supported by key data from the United Nations and other sources. It is informed by World Vision's recent survey of 432 adolescent girls across 51 countries spanning Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond. We asked girls about their hopes, fears, dreams and what being a girl means in their communities today. Their candid responses reveal common themes; while nearly all girls expressed hope and determination for their futures, they also spoke about fears of being pulled from school or forced into early marriage, of daily restrictions that their brothers don't face, of violence that has become normalised in some communities, and of missing school simply because they lack sanitary products. They also worry about issues affecting their countries and communities, including economic crises, conflicts and the effects of climate change – the effects of which often hit girls hardest.

In the pages that follow, we examine the main issues affecting girls globally, as highlighted by the girls in our survey. Each section weaves together quotes from girls who described their lived experiences – with data points that illustrate the scale of these challenges. By combining storytelling with statistics, we aim to present a comprehensive picture of what girls are up against, and what can be done.

Crucially, this report is not just a litany of problems – it also amplifies what girls want for their futures. Despite everything, these girls see themselves not as victims but as future doctors, engineers, teachers and presidents who will transform their societies – if only given the chance. Girls overwhelmingly expressed ambitions to make their communities a better place and to help others.

The onus is now on all of us – governments, communities, donors and international organisations – to remove the barriers in their way. The cost of inaction is enormous, and the potential benefits of empowering girls are even greater. A world where girls are safe, educated and free to pursue their dreams is a better world for everyone. This report calls for urgent collective action to make that world a reality.

Gabriela, 11, Bolivia
© Neva Terrazas / World Vision

# METHODOLOGY

Ru, 14, Myanmar
© Myo Oak Soe / World Vision

This report is based on a mix of field interviews and desk research. Girls' responses are not meant to be representative of the countries or regions where they live, but to provide an anecdotal illustration of the issues affecting girls where World Vision works around the world.

Field interviews were conducted between March and August 2025 as a mix of video and written responses to a standard set of interview questions. Each office in the World Vision partnership was provided with the same standard interview guide and asked to participate, with the ability to add or remove questions as locally appropriate. Some offices conducted the interviews in a traditional sense, others had a more collaborative strategy, encouraging girls to capture and create their own videos. Parents and girls all completed a consent form, acknowledging the purpose of the interviews and making it clear that participation was voluntary and would not affect any inclusion in programming. A total of **432 girls from 51 countries or territories** completed the survey. Most participants are from low– and middle–income contexts, with a small number from higher–income settings. A selection of the videos can be viewed at **wvi.org/girls–voices**.

Analysis took place in July and August 2025. As each interview was cleaned and entered into a structured spreadsheet, we conducted rolling, inductive coding to surface emerging themes. We then refined these into a light codebook and used AI–assisted text analysis (e.g., ChatGPT/Claude) to generate and test query prompts; all outputs were human–reviewed. Qualitative insights were subsequently stress–tested with simple quantitative checks, using a broad keyword/synonym dictionary to estimate how many girls referenced specific themes across the corpus. Where relevant, we have provided percentages of girls who mentioned specific topics to illustrate the prominence of the specific themes. Because not every girl answered every question, the number of girls who represent a specific percentage varies by theme.

This report is first and foremost a summary of what the girls told us, and has been led based on the issues they highlighted. Common themes, like access to education, violence and period stigma have been grouped and additional desk research conducted to highlight the global impact. All country examples and quotes are drawn from the girls themselves, who are all based in contexts where World Vision works.

# MAIN FINDINGS

## Education interrupted: Determination for a better future and fear of losing that opportunity

Overall, **70% of girls in our survey spoke about school and education**, even although they were never directly asked about education. It shows how central education is to girls' thinking about their futures and the challenges they face.

However, for many girls, the promise of education is fragile and easily broken by poverty, crisis or conservative social norms. Our survey revealed that for **a third of girls (33%)[2] their main worries focused on their education** – whether stress over their grades, or worries that their education may be interrupted due to financial struggles at home, performing poorly on an exam, expectations to marry early, or simply because their family or community does not prioritise girls' learning. These fears reflect a broader global picture: despite gains in enrolment, millions of girls never complete their education.[ii]

Lebanon
© World Vision

One major reason girls leave school is early marriage. When a girl is married off, her education typically ends. Today, an estimated 640 million women alive were married as children,[iii] and in West and Central Africa – the regions with the highest child marriage rates – one in three girls marries before age 18.[iv] "I'm taking an exam this year, and what scares me is the fear that my parents will decide to marry me off if I fail," said Hassana, 16, from Niger. "I'm not mature enough for marriage right now." Unfortunately, her worry is well–founded. Family poverty and lack of options can result in girls being pressured to become wives when they are still children, robbing them of their youth and educational potential. **Although only 4% of girls in our survey mentioned worries about child marriage ending their education, in Burkina Faso, 50% girls specifically mentioned child marriage and its impact on education**, reflecting the higher rates of child marriage in their region.

When marriage is not the reason, economic hardships often force girls to drop out. "My family's condition is not very good. I worry if I will be able to pursue higher studies or not," Preeti, 16, from Nepal told us. She added "the worst part of being a girl is that we cannot go outside our community to study because of their negative thinking." In some conservative communities, parents fear for girls' safety or honour if they travel for school, so they simply don't allow it. This underscores how social attitudes and safety concerns can intersect with poverty to curtail girls' education.

Girls repeatedly highlighted how painful it is for them to have their education cut short. In South Sudan, 16–year–old Viola shared, "If you are a girl and they have not taken you to school, your father can force you to marry someone who has more cows." In her context, bride price traditions (exchanging daughters for cattle or money) create a direct incentive to withdraw girls from school. She also noted, "Another issue is excessive work that exceeds your capacity," referring to heavy household chores interfering

[2] **125 out of 375 girls** who provided responses to the question 'what worries you most?' mentioned education

with studies. Indeed, many girls must balance schooling with hours of housework or care for siblings, leaving little time for homework.

Interrupted education is not just a personal tragedy for each girl; it's a societal loss. The World Bank estimates that **barriers preventing girls from completing 12 years of education cost the global economy between $15 and $30 trillion in lost productivity and earnings.**[v] Time and again, girls told us they aspire to be doctors, teachers, engineers, journalists – roles only attainable if they can complete their schooling. If their schooling is interrupted, we all pay the price.

Fortunately, the flip side is also true: keeping girls in school yields immense benefits. Educated girls marry later, have healthier children, earn higher incomes, and are more likely to reinvest in their families, breaking cycles of poverty. Each additional year of secondary education can increase a girl's future earnings by 10–20% on average.[vi]

These facts reinforce what girls themselves told us – that they view education as the key to their dreams, not just for themselves but to serve their communities and inspire others. Many see education as a tool for helping other girls, not just individual success. "My dream when I grow up is to work hard to pass high school...go to university and become a doctor so I can help sick people," Rorisang, 13, from Lesotho said. To honour such dreams, stakeholders must work to remove the obstacles – from child marriage to school fees – that continue to interrupt girls' education.

Ester, 14, Albania
© Alfons Cupaj / World Vision

Alisson, 12, El Salvador
© World Vision

## Harmful social norms and gender roles holding girls back

Throughout our conversations, **nearly one in four (24%) girls highlighted the social and cultural norms that dictate what they can or cannot do.**[3] In many societies, traditional gender roles mean girls are expected to be obedient, domestic and less ambitious than boys. Girls are often tasked with more chores, given less freedom of movement, and steered away from further education or developing leadership skills. Such norms can be deeply limiting – effectively drawing a boundary around a girl's aspirations.

One clear illustration is the burden of household chores. From an early age, girls are expected to cook, clean, fetch water and care for younger siblings. Globally, girls aged 5–14 spend 160 million more hours per day on unpaid care and domestic work than boys the same age.[vii] That is 40% more time spent on tasks directly impact their ability to study or enjoy childhood. "The boys don't help us with housework. They're only here to eat." Alia, 15, from Burundi told us. However, some girls saw these gender roles as benefits, preventing them from having to do other forms of hard labour. Narintip, age 18, in Thailand even said it was the best part of being a girl; "For me, the best thing is not having to do heavy labour–like lifting heavy things or carrying heavy burdens." Some girls in Papua New Guinea also echoed this. Georgina, age 13, said, "The best part of being a girl is that we don't do a lot of work in the house...we don't go cut firewood, make fire. The boys do those jobs."

[3] Interestingly, the share of girls mentioning negative norms and expectations by region seems to increase with income, probably reflecting better awareness of the issue. Just 10% of girls in Africa mentioned gender role constraints; 19% in Latin America, 29% in Asia, 30% in the Middle East and 40% in Europe.

Even if some girls see the lack of demand to do heavy work as an advantage, the increased time they spend doing housework still affects their performance at school (girls have less time for homework or rest). It also reinforces the idea that a girl's primary value is as a caregiver or homemaker, which can lead to increased risk that their education may be ended early to fill this role.

## Advantages and dangers of being a girl in conflict–affected North Kivu

The 11 girls who participated in this research from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) all come from North Kivu in the Eastern region of the country, where armed groups have recently taken control. Several of the girls cited their gender as an advantage, because it helped them to escape forced recruitment into armed groups. Amusante, 17, said, "Despite the worries, there is one thing that makes me happy to have been born a girl. When we go to the fields and the boys are taken by force, but not me." Anuarite, age 17, echoed her, "The moment that makes me proud to be a girl is when armed men come to take the young boys and leave us girls behind." These quotes are particularly striking as they show how girls in conflict zones like DRC recognise that being female can sometimes protect them.

However, others cited sexual violence as the thing that worried them the most, highlighting the double–edged sword of these gender roles. "When you go to the fields, you may encounter criminals who could rape you," Jolie, 17, said. Merveille, age 17, worried, "Sometimes I think that life would be rosy if I had been born a boy because when we go to the fields, we come across armed men who rape the girls and leave the boys…I think to myself that I would have liked to be a boy." Jolie and Merveille's worries are unfortunately reflected in the latest UN statistics on sexual violence, which show a surge in sexual violence in Eastern Congo that mirrored the spike in conflict last year.[viii] Girls living in conflict–affected contexts experience additional vulnerabilities which exasperate existing social norms and prejudices.

Cultural norms also influence whether families believe in educating daughters at all. "In my tribe, when a girl is born, people often say they would have preferred a boy…Sons are seen as the ones who can carry on the family name, while daughters are expected to grow up, get married, and leave the house," Nit, 18 from Thailand explains. Suraya, 17, from Bangladesh recounted, "People around me often say, 'What's the benefit of educating a girl so much? Marry off the girl; if she's older, good proposals won't come.'" Such attitudes, unfortunately, persist in various forms across countries. They lead to parents pulling girls out of school early or not investing in their education beyond basic literacy. Undereducated women have fewer opportunities, which perpetuates the notion that educating girls is a waste. Breaking this cycle requires strong advocacy and community dialogue to demonstrate that girls' education benefits everyone – as evidenced by the economic data in the previous section.

A young girl, about 12 years old, walks the streets selling sugarcane sticks in DRC.
© Tatiana Ballay / World Vision

Sofia, 12, Ecuador
© World Vision

Another harmful norm is the control over girls' autonomy and decision–making. In many places, girls are not expected to have a say in important life decisions – whether it's choosing a career, whom to marry, or even day–to–day choices like clothing and friendships. This was evident when we asked what else girls wanted the world to know about girls' lives in their country. "Many girls still can't choose the careers they want, and their needs are often ignored," said Tikuna, from Georgia. "For example, girls are still forced into early marriages because it's seen as tradition... These forced choices threaten their future and steal their dreams." Her words highlight a critical point: when a girl cannot direct her own life, she becomes trapped in roles others have decided for her.

Families and community leaders are key allies in transforming norms. Programmes that involve fathers, brothers, religious and tribal leaders in conversations about the value of girls have shown promise. World Vision's Channels of Hope programme works with community leaders, especially faith leaders and their congregations, to respond to some of the most difficult issues affecting their communities. First developed to fight stigma over the HIV/Aids epidemic, Channels of Hope in recent years has also been adapted to strengthen child protection in communities, highlighting the importance of protecting children in Christian, Muslim and other faiths and has been proven to change attitudes regarding child marriage and other forms of violence against children.[4]

When those in authority champion girls' rights – for example, village chiefs declaring they will not allow any girl to be married before 18 – it lends weight to changing social expectations. Likewise, empowering children through clubs and child parliaments can help them collectively challenge unfair norms, as is the case in Bangladesh where World Vision supported child clubs have successfully partnered with police and local leaders to stop their classmates from being married off.[ix] In our survey, some girls credited being part of similar clubs with giving them confidence to negotiate for their rights. It is a sign that with the right support, girls can become the authors of new norms – ones that empower rather than limit them. Wissam from Turkiye issued a call, "To all the boys out there...don't treat your sister, your mom, or any woman like a robot, just there to cook and clean. A girl should be whatever she wants to be – not just someone in the kitchen. She can be a president, a doctor, a police officer – even in the army. Whatever she dreams, she can become."

[4] Please visit https://www.wvi.org/church–and–interfaith–engagement/channels–hope–child–protection to learn more about the study results

# Violence and abuse: Threats to girls' safety and dignity

Around the world, violence against girls remains pervasive, taking many forms: bullying in schools, sexual harassment on the streets, beatings in the home, trafficking and rape in conflict zones, and online abuse, to name but a few. These abuses violate girls' most fundamental rights to safety and bodily autonomy. They also reinforce the inequality that girls face – sending the message that they are not respected or protected as equals in society. **Nearly one in five (19%) girls we surveyed spoke with painful clarity about the violence and fear they endure. It is, for many, the worst part of being a girl.**

Wafaa, 14, Iraq
© Shayan Nuradeen / World Vision

In our survey, when asked "what is the hardest or worst part of being a girl," **40% girls mentioned safety threats and gender–based violence**. Girls as young as 10 told us they feel at risk. Elisneith, 11, from Colombia put it starkly: "The worst is that there are people who harass children or kidnap them... Some mothers are even afraid inside their own homes, because someone could come and take their children away." Her fear of kidnapping and harassment is a reality in many places – whether it's the risk of human trafficking or abuse by someone in the community.

The normalisation of violence creates environments where girls face threats at multiple levels – from intimate partner violence to broader societal breakdown. As Irma, 17, from Peru observes, "I'm worried about how society today is normalising certain behaviours that are forms of violence...my biggest hope is to live in a country where no teenage girl is afraid to go out on the streets because of what might happen to her."

## Widespread bullying

Overall, **11% of girls we spoke to mentioned bullying**, with especially high rates in Latin America (23%) and Asia (14%). Globally, one in three students worldwide reports experiencing bullying at school in a given month,[x] and girls are often targeted in distinct ways. Several girls in our study mentioned that boys bully or mock them "because they think girls are weak." Enkhjin, 13, from Mongolia said, "The hardest part is that girls are often seen as weaker than boys, which can lead to bullying." From derogatory comments to physical shoving, bullying undermines girls' confidence. In some cases, it can take a sexualised form – unwanted touching, snapping bra straps, etc., which is both bullying and sexual harassment.

In Papua New Guinea, Anna told us, "The worst part of being a girl is that boys can bully us. We don't have the strength to defeat them." Her comment highlights the power imbalance that often exists; perpetrators pick on girls precisely because they perceive them as unable to retaliate. This aligns with findings that more boys than girls engage in physical bullying while girls may face more psychological or sexual harassment.[xi] Both are damaging. Wimpolpa, an 18–year–old from Thailand said, "What I worry about most is being bullied – being mocked for small flaws. Even though they seem minor, it can lead to more serious bullying." She noted that bullying, coupled with rigid expectations that "women must be polite...and always do housework," made school life stressful. This indicates how violence and gender norms intersect, as girls are sometimes bullied for not conforming to societal ideals of how a girl should behave or look.

## Sexual violence

Beyond school gates, sexual violence and exploitation cast a long shadow. By any measure, the scale is alarming: **one in ten girls in our survey expressed fears about sexual violence, exploitation or harassment**, with girls describing threats in fields, at home from family members, and on public streets. These worries were concentrated in specific countries, especially Eswatini (46%), Ecuador (42%), Peru (40%), Ethiopia (33%), Bangladesh (27%) and Lesotho (27%). Each year, 60 million girls are sexually assaulted at or on their way to school[xii] – meaning that for millions, the simple act of trying to get an education carries the threat of rape or abuse. In some countries embroiled in conflict or with high crime rates, girls face the constant fear of abduction or assault.

Zaynab, 14, in Lebanon feared "the personal security issue – not being safe on the street or even at home." She continued, "The hardest thing about being a girl is being exposed to bad behaviour, including harassment and rape, which are common among girls right now."

It is chilling that an adolescent girl speaks of rape as a common threat "among girls right now," but unfortunately, global data supports her perception. Approximately 370 million girls and women (about 1 in 8) have been subjected to forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual acts before the age of 18.[xiii] And the abusers are often known to the victims – family members, neighbours, or partners – making it very difficult for girls to seek help.

Zaynab's fears were also echoed by Sofia, 12, from Ecuador, "Sometimes you see awful things. In the street, just because you're a girl, you could be kidnapped or worse." **In Ecuador 92% girls mentioned safety concerns in general and 67% highlighted high rates of domestic violence.** Alisson, 16, chillingly said, "Living in Ecuador is challenging for girls because violence is something we face every single day. It's the country with the highest level of violence [against women]" (a likely reference to rising femicide rates).

Some girls also mentioned online harassment – a growing problem. In Romania and Iraq, girls listed "online exploitation, harassment or reputation damage" among their biggest worries, referring to cyberbullying or the non–consensual sharing of images. As more girls access the internet, cyberviolence (threats, stalking, bullying online) and new ways in which AI can make it worse, are emerging as a serious risk that can cause real psychological harm.

It must be emphasised that violence is not a "girls' issue" – it is a societal issue. Girls are targeted precisely because perpetrators (mostly men or boys) are able to act with impunity, driven by norms that have tolerated violence against women and children. To protect girls, we need both strong laws and effective enforcement, as well as norm change. Over the past decades, many countries have passed laws against domestic violence, rape and child abuse – though enforcement remains uneven.

In our data, a few girls mentioned that violence is being confronted locally. Emine Sultan, 13, in Turkiye declared, "I'll do what I choose – no threats or bias can stop me...Let them talk – say bad things if they want. Girls have the power to protect each other." Such peer support is invaluable, as one reason violence persists is that victims often stay silent out of shame or fear. Indeed, nearly half of girls aged 15–19 who experience violence never tell anyone.[5] Breaking that silence is the first step to breaking the cycle of abuse.

The girls in our survey are clear about what they want: to live without fear. As one Thai girl, Narintip, 18, said, "What I want to see in the future for girls is stronger laws. I want laws that are tighter, more protective and that truly safeguard women's rights."

Zunmy, 13, Peru
© World Vision

[5] The Guardian. (September 5 2014). One in 10 girls worldwide has experienced serious sexual violence.

# Menstrual health and stigma: Breaking the period taboo

Dorcas, 14, Zambia
© Kambani Phiri/ World Vision

For roughly half of humanity, menstruation is a natural biological process. Yet for millions of girls, getting their first period also ushers in a host of new challenges and stigma that can disrupt their education and self–esteem. **One in 10 (10%) of girls in our survey brought up issues around menstrual pain, lack of sanitary products and cultural taboos** as a significant downside of being a girl. These honest testimonies shine a light on something that was universal across income levels. Although girls in wealthier countries were more likely to focus on pain or embarrassment over stigma and period poverty, girls in Taiwan and Spain were just as likely to bring up menstruation as girls in Colombia or the Philippines.

Many described periods as painful and difficult. "Menstruation... that's the worst, that's the painful thing," said Nataly, 14, Bolivia. Beyond cramps, social treatment during menstruation was especially troubling. "We are hidden when we are on our period – we aren't allowed to go out of the house and others cannot touch the things we have touched. That is the worst part for me," said Sandhya, 16, Nepal. In Zambia, Febby, 14, echoed her: "Girls are forced to stay at home when they are on their periods."

Facilities are often missing too: "My school doesn't have bathrooms," said Kathleen, 7, from Ecuador, while in Laos, Phimchai, 11, shared a simple wish, "My hope and dream are to have a toilet and clean water system at school."

Taken together, these testimonies spotlight an often–neglected dimension of gender inequality – period poverty and menstrual hygiene management – and how shame, costs, and inadequate school facilities can push girls out of class. According to a 2024 joint UNICEF and WHO report, less than one–third of schools worldwide have facilities like bins for menstrual waste in girls' bathrooms, and in the least developed countries, the situation is worse – only one in five schools has a place to dispose of pads.[xiv] A lack of privacy (doors on toilets, separate latrines for girls, etc.) also deters girls from attending during their period.

Costs shut girls out too: "We do not have the money to buy soap, underwear, sanitary pads..." said Monica, 18, South Sudan. She was echoed by Bernice, 15, Burundi: "What disgusts us as girls is not having sanitary pads during our menstrual periods." Together, these conditions make it hard for girls to attend regularly, stay the whole day, or focus on learning – translating stigma and scarcity into lost classroom time.

Encouragingly, the fixes girls ask for are clear: affordable products, basic facilities and dignity. The cultural aspect is crucial: to dismantle harmful taboos we need to involve men and boys in the conversation too. When fathers, brothers and male teachers understand what girls go through, they can become allies. An innovative World Vision programme in Zimbabwe, funded by the UK Government, previously helped address this and other barriers to girls' education through a nine–part strategy that saw community leaders and men help make reusable pads for their girls and advocate for their inclusion in school, among other activities.[xv]

Ultimately, addressing menstrual health is an integral part of keeping girls in school and maintaining their dignity. A girl who is anxious about managing her period, or worse, not allowed out of the house during it, will not be able to focus on learning. Conversely, a girl who has everything she needs and is supported by her community is one step closer to achieving her potential. "A future where girls are heard, where there is equality, and where free sanitary pads are provided - I believe that could change the world," Thato, 16, in Lesotho told us.

Nhevea 13, Philippines
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## Wider challenges: Economic strain and conflict weighing on girls

Although their gender does play a role in the worries of many of the girls we spoke with, many of them also reflect broader crises and difficulties in their societies. Girls repeatedly mentioned economic hardship (especially rising food prices) and conflict or insecurity in their interviews. **More than one in five girls (21%) in our survey mentioned general insecurity, war, conflict, or community–level violence**. These align with global trends of recent years: a growing cost–of–living crisis and persistent armed conflicts are reversing development gains and putting millions of children at risk. Girls, especially those in vulnerable communities, keenly feel these pressures.

### Economic worries

While the majority of girls' concerns centre on gender–specific challenges, economic hardship also weighs heavily on many. **Almost 80 girls (18%) mentioned financial or economic worries when talking about their lives**. Alejandra, 14, from Bolivia said her biggest worry was "the economy…the high prices of the family shopping basket…Some families, because of the rising prices, can't afford to buy [basic products]."

**Beyond employment prospects and general poverty, food insecurity emerged as the single largest economic concern,** with 16 girls explicitly mentioning hunger or lack of food. The voices

from affected communities are stark: Keyri, 12, from El Salvador worries "that there isn't enough food at home and in the community," while Rorisang, 13, from Lesotho explains "I worry about the lack of food, people here in the village do not have food, they need food and die of hunger." The highest numbers of girls mentioning hunger and food were in Peru and El Salvador, where our 2024 food price survey found it would take more than 12 hours work to earn enough to buy a basic food basket, more than four times the equivalent in Spain or New Zealand.[xvi]

This reflects the impact of global inflation on everyday life. Rising food insecurity has touched girls' lives globally as the twin shocks of COVID–19 and the war in Ukraine have left families worldwide facing persistently high food and fuel costs.[xvii] In countries affected by humanitarian crises, high inflation combined with the turmoil of conflict, climate change and reduced levels of humanitarian aid have meant many families have gone from having two meals a day to one, or having to choose between buying vegetables or paying school fees.[xviii] Almost 300 million people in 53 countries were facing acute hunger (crisis levels of food insecurity) in 2024.[xix] It's therefore no surprise that girls are anxious about rising prices and family finances.

Keyri, 12 El Salvador
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Families under economic strain may resort to negative coping mechanisms that directly harm girls in ways beyond hunger: pulling them out of school to save fees or to have them work, marrying them off early to reduce the number of mouths to feed or to obtain a dowry/bride price, or in extreme cases, child labour or transactional sex for survival. Even without such drastic measures, poverty can chip away at a girl's opportunities. If a family can't afford school supplies for every child, a girl might be the one to go without textbooks or shoes. If food is limited, chronic malnutrition might set in, affecting a girl's health and her ability to concentrate if she is still at school.[xx]

## Conflict: When being a girl becomes a liability

Beyond economic pressures, conflict and insecurity create an environment where girls face distinct and heightened dangers. **Over 20% girls we spoke with mentioned general insecurity, war, conflict, or community–level violence.** The voices from conflict–affected regions in our survey reveal the brutal reality of growing up female in zones of violence and instability. Girls consistently report that conflict makes their gender identity itself a liability. Merveille, 17, from the Eastern DRC, reflects: "Sometimes I think that life would be rosy if I had been born a boy because when we go to the fields, we come across armed men who rape the girls and leave the boys alone."

For Merveille and her peers, basic activities like farming or traveling to school carry risks that their male peers simply don't face. During conflicts, sexual violence spikes – armed groups frequently use rape as a weapon of war, and women and girls are particularly vulnerable. The threat of sexual violence becomes a constant shadow, limiting their mobility and opportunities.

The mental toll of rising conflict and insecurity is heavy – constant fear, witnessing violence and trauma. Sofia, 12, in Ecuador described the mental toll of witnessing a shooting near her school. "My niece...started crying. She didn't

want to go back to school because she was afraid. It was very traumatic. Sometimes classes get cancelled because of shootings or gang fights…You can become a victim even if you have nothing to do with it."

We heard girls mentioning being afraid of the dark or loud noises. Sandra, 17, from DRC, describes the relentless nature of conflict: "Every day is war. Not a year goes by without displacement and families are becoming poorer because of this." In Lebanon, where children are recovering from a recent surge in displacement and violence, nine–year–old Lana said, "The conflict scares me a lot, in addition to the sound of bullets." Girls growing up in conflict–affected areas cannot plan for their futures, cannot attend school consistently and live in a state of perpetual uncertainty. For Silvia, 18 in South Sudan – a country that has seen civil war recently – the sentiment was succinct: "I hate war."

Economic devastation compounds physical dangers. Conflict doesn't just threaten girls' physical safety; it destroys the economic foundations that might otherwise protect them. Nicole, 16, from DRC, explains how "given the political instability and insecurity in the country, my parents are unable to gather all the necessary funds to finance my studies." Salma, 11, from Syria, worries that a resurgence in conflict might lead to the end of her education. "What scares me the most is going through war again or having to leave school," she says. Globally, girls in conflict–affected areas are two and a half times more likely to be out of school than those in peaceful areas.[xxi]

The collapse of social structures in conflict zones often forces girls into adult roles prematurely. Amusante, 17, from DRC, shares: "My parents abandoned me and left me in charge of looking after my little brothers. As the oldest girl, I was forced to take care of them. I gave up my studies." Conflict often leads to loss of parents or guardians, creating orphans or forcing children to take on adult roles. Girls might have to care for siblings if parents are killed, or they may end up in refugee camps where their safety and rights are at risk. This pattern – older girls sacrificing their education to care for younger siblings when families are fractured by conflict – represents a massive loss of human potential that extends far beyond the immediate crisis.

Joseline, 14, Rwanda
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It's important to note that conflict and economic problems are often intertwined. War drives inflation and hunger (as we saw with Ukraine's war affecting grain supplies), and conversely, desperate economic conditions can fuel conflict by driving competition over limited resources. For girls, these issues compound. For example, in a famine caused by conflict, a girl might face starvation (economic issue) and risk of being trafficked or assaulted (security issue) if she travels to find food.

However, girls have also proven remarkably resilient in such circumstances. We heard from some who still focus on their studies or dreams despite living in tough environments. "I don't want to see conflicts… I want to become a doctor and help people," said Lynn, 13, in Lebanon. Many girls expressed a desire for peace as a prerequisite for their dreams, with even those living in peaceful countries concerned about the possibility of conflicts for their peers abroad. Yue Yue, 12, from China told us, "My biggest worry is that the world will not be at peace, causing conflicts and wars."

# Hope and resilience: The unbreakable spirit of girls worldwide

Despite facing formidable challenges, the girls in our survey revealed remarkable reserves of hope, pride and determination. Our most striking finding is that **84% of girls express hope – not naive optimism, but complex, multidimensional hope that encompasses dreams, strength, compassion, joy and wisdom.**

This hope persists despite:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **18%** facing economic stress | **19%** confronting gender–based violence | **21%** living with conflict and insecurity |

Far from being passive victims of circumstance, these girls are agents of change who see themselves as capable of transforming not only their own lives, but their communities and the world.

## The five dimensions of girls' hope

World Vision defines hope in five distinct but interrelated dimensions, all of which came through strongly among the girls in our survey. Because we asked them about their hopes for the future directly, we excluded answers to this question in our assessment:

**Purpose** (23% of girls): Almost a quarter of girls mention future goals even when not directly asked about them. When including their hopes for the future, over half (53%) want careers that help others – doctors, teachers, nurses and engineers. "My dream is to become an engineer, and I hope to achieve my dream one day so that I can inspire others," said Saeeda, 13, from Afghanistan.

**Resilience** (43% of girls): Girls demonstrate remarkable strength, even in the most challenging contexts. "Palestinian girls are strong. I wish they could all receive full education, but unfortunately many cannot, yet they are still trying to break through the barriers," explained Shaam, 11, from the West Bank.

**Compassion** (30% of girls): The desire to help others drives many girls' ambitions. "My dream is to be a doctor so I can help my community and those who need my help," said Faith, 11, from the Philippines.

**Joy** (43% of girls): Despite hardships, girls find happiness and gratitude. Remarkably, 89% girls in Burundi expressed joy. "What makes me happy is to see girls attending schools and performing better than boys," said Roselyne, 17, from Burundi.

**Wisdom** (47% of girls): Girls demonstrated a profound understanding of self–worth and dignity. "The future I'd love to see for all girls is one filled with safety. I want a world where no girl is afraid to speak or dream. A world where we are respected fully," reflected Ami, 13, from Albania.

**Multiple dimensions: The complexity of hope**
Significantly, 30% of girls we spoke with expressed three or more dimensions of hope, revealing sophisticated emotional intelligence. They're not simply optimistic – they integrate strength with sensitivity, ambition with compassion and joy with wisdom.

"The best part of being a girl is the strength we carry. Even when we're underestimated, we rise. There's something powerful about being soft and strong at the same time," said Anika, 16, from Albania.

## Faith in female leadership: "We lead with heart and vision"

Perhaps the most striking finding from our survey is girls' overwhelming confidence in female leadership potential. Across all 51 countries, **71% of girls were positive about female leadership potential**. This confidence transcends regional, cultural and economic boundaries. As Alesia, 14, from Albania put it, "A girl can be an amazing president or leader. Not just because she's strong, but because she leads with heart, with empathy, with courage and with vision. That's real leadership."

What's particularly compelling is how girls articulate the unique strengths women bring to leadership. Unlike traditional masculine traits that emphasise dominance and control, girls consistently describe leadership in terms of empathy, listening and care for others. "Girls have the same abilities as boys. If a girl has the will and the right opportunities, she can become a leader of her country and serve her people," explained Gulsoom, 11, from Afghanistan. Her words capture both the universal belief in female capability and the conditional nature of that potential – requiring "will and the right opportunities."

Our analysis also revealed an important nuance: **girls from countries with female leadership history are nearly 20% more likely to reference concrete examples when explaining why women can lead.** This suggests that while belief in female leadership potential is nearly universal, the ability to envision it concretely is enhanced by precedent. Research supports this "role model effect" – a study in India found that villages with female leaders saw a 32% reduction in the gender aspiration gap among girls, with exposure to women in power fundamentally reshaping what girls saw as possible for themselves.[xxii] The lesson is clear: representation matters enormously, not just for whether girls believe women can lead, but for how vividly they can imagine themselves in leadership roles.

Many girls noted that attitudes are slowly changing. "Girls are fully capable of becoming national leaders and role models," said Ankhchimeg, 19, from Mongolia. Education, exposure to positive examples and community backing are powerful drivers of change.

Each time a girl from a traditional community becomes a doctor or is elected to public office, she challenges stereotypes and widens the path for others.

## The power of female relationships: "We support each other"

Throughout our survey, girls consistently highlighted the strength they draw from relationships with other females – mothers, sisters, friends and mentors. **Nearly half (47%) of all girls spontaneously mentioned positive female relationships** when asked about their lives, dreams and experiences.

Annie, 17, in the UK said, "The best part of being a girl is female relationships...It's a setting where I can truly be myself." Yasmine, 14, in Iraq, said similarly, "The best part of being a girl is the sense of sisterhood– having other girls you can count on." For many girls we spoke to, their female relationships provide emotional support, practical guidance and help them stay resilient in the face of challenges.

Bwalya, 10, Zambia
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Amy. Ecuador
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Many girls also spoke of wanting to care for their mothers as they age, seeing this not as a burden, but as a privilege and expression of love. "A daughter is very good for her parents. She can take care of her mother, especially if the mother is old or disabled... the daughter can look after her life well so that the mother can live in comfort," Saeeda, 13, from Afghanistan explained.

This emphasis on relationships aligns with research showing that female social networks are crucial for resilience and achievement. Studies demonstrate that girls with strong female mentors are more likely to complete education, delay marriage and pursue leadership roles.[xxiii] The girls in our survey intuitively understand this – many spoke of wanting to become role models for younger girls or to inspire others through their achievements. This creates a virtuous cycle where each girl's success becomes a source of hope for the next generation.

## Redefining strength: "Soft and strong at the same time"

One of the most powerful themes emerging from girls' responses is their redefinition of strength. Rather than rejecting traditionally feminine qualities like sensitivity and caring, girls embrace what one described as being "soft and strong at the same time."

"The best part of being a girl is the strength we carry. Even when we're underestimated, we rise. There's something powerful about being soft and strong at the same time," reflected Anika, 16, from Albania. "We feel deeply, love hard, and protect the people we care about with everything we've got. That's not weakness, that's power." This sentiment was echoed across regions, with girls from diverse backgrounds describing emotional intelligence, empathy and nurturing instincts as sources of strength rather than vulnerability.

Many girls described their ability to "rise" despite being "underestimated" or facing discrimination. "I'd say the best part about being a girl is when people underestimate you and you prove them wrong," Zakira, 13, from England explained. This suggests that adversity, while harmful, has also forged a generation of girls who see obstacles as temporary rather than permanent barriers.

## The complex relationship with beauty and femininity

Girls' attitudes toward appearance and femininity reveal both joy and tension. **About 14% of girls mentioned beauty, fashion or appearance as positive aspects of being female, celebrating the creative expression and confidence they feel from dressing up and feeling attractive.** This represents a healthy embrace of femininity that previous generations of feminists sometimes felt compelled to reject in pursuit of equality.

However, a small number of girls also highlighted the double–edged nature of beauty standards. While some celebrate the ability to "dress up" and express creativity through appearance, others noted the pressure to look perfect or the way appearance can overshadow their other achievements. "The hardest part of being a girl is that we're often judged more on how we look, how we dress, how we speak. We're expected to be perfect even when we're hurting inside," observed Ami, 13, from Albania.

The girls in our survey want the freedom to engage with beauty and femininity on their own terms – to dress up when it brings them joy, but not to be reduced to their appearance or judged primarily on their looks. This nuanced understanding suggests they're developing healthier relationships with femininity than previous generations who felt they had to choose between being pretty or being taken seriously.


Faith Ysabelle 11, Philippines
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## Service and purpose: "I want to help others"

Perhaps the most hopeful finding in our survey is the extraordinary focus on service and contribution to society. **Over 40% of girls (42%) expressed dreams centred on helping others** – becoming doctors to heal the sick, teachers to educate the next generation, engineers to build better infrastructure, or leaders to serve their communities. This service orientation cuts across all regions and backgrounds.

"My dream is to become a doctor to cure patients," said Lamar, 10, from Lebanon. "I dream of becoming an engineer, and I hope to achieve my dream one day so that I can inspire others," shared Saeeda, 13, from Afghanistan. These aren't just career aspirations – they're expressions of a deep desire to contribute meaningfully to the world. Many girls explicitly connected their personal success to broader social benefit, seeing their individual achievements as pathways to helping other girls.

This service orientation aligns with research showing that women's leadership often emphasises collective benefit over individual advancement. Studies of female politicians, business leaders and social entrepreneurs consistently find that women are more likely to frame their goals in terms of community impact rather than personal gain.[xxiv] By emphasising their desire and capacity to contribute, girls are asserting their value and agency. They're not asking for charity – they're asking for the opportunity to give back.

## Building on hope: The path forward

The hope and resilience evident in girls' responses provide a foundation for transformative change. Girls' confidence in female leadership, their celebration of feminine strength, their service orientation, and their support for one another all represent their enormous power and potential. They all have worries and concerns as well, but they're ready to make a change through their ambition, empathy and determination.

The key is ensuring that hope translates into opportunity. When girls say they want to be doctors, they need access to science education and university. When they express confidence in female leadership, they need civic education and mentorship programmes that prepare them for public service. When they celebrate female relationships, they need safe spaces to gather and support one another. And when they embrace both strength and sensitivity, they need societies that value these integrated qualities rather than forcing them to choose.

The girls in our survey are essentially telling the world: "We're ready. We believe in ourselves and each other. We have dreams that will benefit everyone. Now remove the barriers so we can achieve them." Their hope is not naive optimism – it's a strategic asset that, properly supported, can drive unprecedented progress for girls and society as a whole. The question is whether the world will match their hope with the concrete actions needed to turn their dreams into reality.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to strengthen the empowering environment and systems that surround girls to ensure that they are healthy, educated and safe to realise their full potential, whether they live in wealthy or developing countries, stable or humanitarian contexts. This means ensuring primary and secondary education for every girl, access to relevant health services and services that prevent and respond to sexual and other forms of violence in all contexts. This also means strengthening families' capacity to care for children through income generation and livelihoods programmes and enacting policies and programmes that address poverty, hunger and harmful gender norms and inequality.

The challenges highlighted – from keeping girls in school, to ending child marriage and gender–based violence, to ensuring menstrual health and food security – are all solvable problems. The world has the knowledge and tools to tackle each of them. In recent years we have seen what works: for example, strong legal frameworks combined with community engagement can sharply reduce child marriage.[xxv] Targeted scholarships and cash transfer programmes can help the poorest girls stay in school. Investment in WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) infrastructure can ensure every school has girl–friendly toilets and clean water. Public campaigns and comprehensive sexuality education can begin to dismantle menstrual stigma and teach both boys and girls about respect and equality. And humanitarian programmes that prioritise child protection can shield girls in conflict zones from the worst abuses, while giving them hope even when they've had to flee their homes.

Guiliana, 14, Peru
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Alesia, 14 from Albania said, *"The future I want for all girls is one where they are free, fearless, and fully seen. Where every girl has the right to dream big, to be educated, to lead and to live without fear."*

It is time to match their courage with our commitment.

**Keep every girl in school and ensure access to 12 years of quality education.** Girls' education and retention must be promoted through programmes that address barriers to learning and school completion.

**Strengthen protective systems and laws so girls are safeguarded in practice, not just on paper.** To create an environment where children are safe, supported and empowered, interventions should address multiple interconnected areas. Child protection systems should be strengthened by working with both formal and informal actors to prevent and respond to violence against children.

**Transform harmful norms and values by engaging men, boys, caregivers and faith leaders.** Efforts to mobilise communities are essential to advance social and gender norm change, fostering inclusive and equitable attitudes.

**Address economic drivers through livelihoods, savings and social protection.** Family economic support should be provided to enhance household resilience and reduce girls' vulnerability.

**Expand sexual reproductive health and empowerment programmes** so girls and boys have the knowledge, skills, and agency to choose their own futures. Sexual and reproductive health, as well as the social and economic empowerment of girls and boys, should be prioritised to enable informed choices, agency and participation in their communities.

**Amplify girls' voices and leadership in all matters affecting them.** Policymakers at every level – from village councils up to national parliaments and international forums – should create avenues for girls to share their experiences and solutions.

In summary, "nothing about us without us" should be the guiding principle. The problems outlined in this report persist in part because girls have historically lacked power in decision–making. It's time to correct that. Girls are experts in their own lives and have innovative ideas on how to solve the challenges they face. By amplifying their voices, we not only craft better solutions, we also show girls that they are important members of society whose opinions matter. This is perhaps the most empowering message of all.

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