

Girls' education and
climate change

The Future Online

Partnerships working
to end period stigma

UBUNTU

The magazine of Plan International Australia

Issue 06 — Spring 2021



The charity for
girls' equality

From the CEO



HELLO AND WELCOME TO ISSUE 6 OF UBUNTU!

This is our third issue since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the stories within these pages are testament to what is possible, even through difficult and unprecedented times.

In this digital era, we are increasingly inundated with bad news about what is happening in the world, from Haiti and Afghanistan, to the stark findings of the UN's IPCC report, which laid bare the fact we are running out of time to avert a climate catastrophe.

But despite all of this, people keep trying. Keep healing, keep working, keep turning up and contributing. Humans are incredibly resilient and in trying times, we must remember that.

It's important to be informed about the state of the world, but it takes its toll. However, knowing what is going on in the world also empowers us, and fuels us to do something about it.

And take it from me, there are so many people willing to contribute to making the world a better place. On a smaller scale, we've seen this locally as we've struggled through lockdowns here in Australia. We've seen it in neighbours showing up for one another and in small acts of kindness that restore people's faith in humanity. In times of great difficulty, humans hunger for these moments and stories of connection and achievement, as a reminder that things can, and will get better.

Ubuntu means shared humanity. And I hope that every time this magazine arrives in your letterbox, it reminds you that, for every challenge or struggle or injustice in

the world, there is someone (often many someones) standing up to advocate, to lend a hand, and to create change.

In this issue, you'll hear on pg. three how our Australian Youth Activists have been campaigning to end sexism and misogyny in Parliament. You'll discover the intrinsic connection between girls' education and addressing climate change on page nine. And on page eight you'll learn how, together with Sesame Workshop Bangladesh, we've been reaching children with vital and culturally appropriate health and gender transformative education during the pandemic, a long way from Sesame Street!

Whatever you are going through at the moment, please remember the meaning of Ubuntu, and know that even in your struggles, you are not alone. You are part of our community and your presence and contribution is having an impact in the world, and on the lives of girls and their communities.

Thank you for standing with us through everything. You make our work possible.

Happy reading!

Susanne Legena
CEO,
Plan International Australia

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FEEDBACK plan.org.au/privacy-policy/feedback-and-complaints

News



CALLING FOR CHANGE IN THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT

August 12th was International Youth Day, and to mark the occasion, our incredible youth activists, supported by The Body Shop, presented the Australian Government with a petition containing their powerful recommendations on how to improve the toxic culture of Parliament House and create an environment free of misogyny and sexual harassment.

Before presenting the petition, youth activists met cross-party MPs for a frank and empowering conversation where they laid out their recommendations on how to encourage and support women to become leaders by making Australia's Parliament safer for women. The recommendations included incorporating proper workplace training, stricter quotas, consent education, emerging leadership programs and creating clear pathways for young women and non-binary people to enter the political sphere.

Thanks to Shadow Minister for Youth, Amanda Rishworth, the youth activists' recommendations were submitted to an independent and wide-ranging review of workplace culture at Parliament House, by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, due in November this year.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL REPORT

This year for International Day of the Girl, we released two reports - one highlighted the unique challenges that girls face around the world when it comes to misinformation and disinformation online, and the other investigated how diverse role models, online and in the media, can transform girls' lives. Turn to page 17 to find out more and to see how we celebrated the day!

ENDING PERIOD STIGMA WITH U BY KOTEX

U by Kotex and Plan International Australia have joined forces to tackle period stigma and ensure that women, girls and people who menstruate everywhere are able to manage their periods with dignity.

Together we surveyed young Australian men aged 16-21 years to find out how much education boys are receiving on menstrual health and how this may be contributing to period stigma within Australia.

We found almost half reported a poor or non-existent education on periods. When asked what words they associate with periods, almost three-in-five (58%) said 'messy', while almost a quarter (23%) said 'embarrassing' and 'dirty', and one-in-five (19%) say periods 'should be kept secret'. In addition, more than four in 10 said they have also witnessed bullying around periods.

These types of beliefs and attitudes can have a significant impact on a girls' wellbeing and educational opportunities, and signal that more work needs to be done to destigmatise menstruation.



Dreams after displacement

When disaster strikes, finishing school can become a distant dream for young people – especially girls. It is estimated that by 2030, one in five girls in crisis-affected countries will not be able to read a simple sentence.

There are many reasons a girl and her family may be driven from their home. But more often than not it's because of a crisis. No one wants to leave the life they know. But conflict, food shortages, poverty, persecution and violence force people to make an impossible choice.

Displacement exacerbates the inequalities already faced by women and girls, increasing the risk of deprivation, insecurity, abuse, neglect and a general deterioration of their wellbeing. Their sex and age also often prevents them from making their voices heard or participating in decisions on matters that affect them. A girl who has been displaced is far more likely to face physical and sexual violence, early pregnancy and child trafficking or child marriage.

In these circumstances, education is a lifeline. It is the key to creating lasting change across generations of families and communities. An educated girl is less likely to marry and have children early, which results in fewer maternal and infant deaths. Education also improves her future employment opportunities, which can help lift families out of poverty and improve the country's economy. An educated girl can change the world.

That's why this holiday season, we are raising funds to help girls rebuild their lives after a crisis. Together we can help restore hope for girls fleeing the most unstable environments.

MAKING EDUCATION A PRIORITY IN BOKO HARAM RAVAGED NIGER

In recent years, attacks by Boko Haram insurgents in Niger's Diffa Region, caused the displacement of more than 240,000 people, mainly women and children who were forced to flee their homes under the constant threat of deadly attacks and suicide bombings.

During the height of these atrocities, hundreds of schools were abandoned leaving tens of thousands of children out of education. 28 primary schools are still closed due to ongoing security issues, with more than 2,000 students still not able to go to school.

The school closures were necessary to protect pupils as schools are considered to be legitimate targets by the Boko Haram. The shock of the conflict has had a lasting effect on the population and thousands of children are still living with the psychological after-effects.

Since then, calm has returned to the region with schools slowly starting to open again, but with people struggling to get their lives back on track, education is not seen as a priority.

Plan International Niger has implemented a targeted education in emergencies response program, working with 31 primary schools to rebuild and construct new classrooms, school latrines and boreholes benefitting 7,718 students. Our colleagues in Niger have also provided training to hundreds of teachers bringing them up-to-date with new teaching methods that will enable them to provide better quality education.

According to Maazou Mariama Kanta, a teacher at a primary school in Diffa: "Our school enjoys good support. We received two new classrooms, two separate latrine blocks for girls and boys, teacher guides, school supplies and textbooks. This supports the student's emotional development and increases children's school attendance."

You can give girls the support they need to continue learning, even in a crisis. Donate now: plan.org.au/appeal/follow-her-dreams



Girls learning at primary school in Diffa region. Photo: Amina Issa Oumarou.

Ending child marriage



Zainab, 21, and her daughter Mashallah, 3, milk a cow at her home

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we raised more than \$288,000 in our end of financial year appeal to end child marriage.

Early and child marriage isn't isolated to one culture, religion or group of people. It cuts across countries, cultures, religions and backgrounds. The root causes – which allow it to continue – are gender inequality, poverty, cultural norms and a lack of education, all of which we have the power to change.

Child marriage prevention and intervention is embedded in as many of Plan International's programs as possible and there are a number of ways we work to tackle this issue with the help of kind people like you.

Your support helps strengthen child protection systems in regions where there are high rates of child marriage. It allows Plan International to train caseworkers to intervene, and it provides resources for teachers, healthcare workers and community leaders to keep girls safe.

Through support groups and education sessions, your support helps community members, leaders and girls at risk to understand the dangers of child marriage, and the positive impact of staying in school.

And through medical treatment and psychosocial support, you're assisting girls who have experienced the trauma of child marriage to rebuild their lives.



If I get educated and get my certificate, then I can change my daughter's life and I can educate her too."

EDUCATION AFTER CHILD MARRIAGE - ZAINAB'S STORY

Zainab is 21 years old and lives in Sudan. In Zainab's community, parents are responsible for arranging their daughter's marriages, usually without consulting the bride and Zainab was forced into one of these marriages when she was 17 years old.

Her husband forced her to drop out of university, and soon after Zainab became pregnant, with her daughter, Mashallah, but she never gave up on her dream of finishing her education.

When her daughter was eleven months old, Zainab divorced her husband. "I said to myself, if I get educated and get my certificate, then I can change my daughter's life and I can educate her too and if she faces any problems in her life, she can say that her mother overcame this problem, so I can too. I want to be a role model for her."

Zainab credits Plan International with helping her gain a better understanding of gender equality and girls' rights.

Now 21, Zainab looks forward to returning to university and is very optimistic about hers and her daughter's future.

She now works at the literacy centre in her community, is a firm believer in the power of education and an advocate against early and forced marriage.

Her message to girls is clear: "Don't accept marriage while you are under 18. If you forced to do so, you should tell them that child marriage has risks. I am teaching at the school because there are some girls who have dropped out of school, they are told that education is not important and I'm trying to help them to continue their studies.

This is the life-changing impact that our supporters makes possible. They play a vital role in ensuring girls can have choices in their lives, and prevent them from experiencing the lasting trauma of child marriage.



My first Plan International workshop was in 2009. It was about women's rights and female empowerment. Another workshop I attended was about violence against women. I think I'm stronger because of them. Plan International was very supportive of me. I have started my life from scratch and soon I will resume my studies at university. I think that child marriage is a complete violation against girls and it undermines women's rights."



Zainab is now 21 years old, and teaches literacy skills to women in her local community.

Partnerships working to end Period Stigma

Girls in Indonesia take part in an activity to learn about their reproductive health rights. Photo: Plan International.



modibodi®



PLAN INTERNATIONAL
The charity for girls' equality

Together with Modibodi, we've been working to ensure thousands of girls and women in Southeast Asia can access safe and sustainable period products, live free from period stigma and participate more fully in daily life – including their education!

Periods are a natural and normal part of daily life, but for many they are also a source of stress, shame and stigma. Among many communities, cultural beliefs perpetuate the idea that menstruation is taboo. Amongst other things, this can translate into schools not effectively addressing the issue, including by not providing girls' toilets with rubbish bins to dispose of sanitary products and not including menstrual health and hygiene in the school curriculum. This impedes girls' ability to go to school and receive an equal education.

WHAT IS PERIOD POVERTY?

Put simply, period poverty is not having access to products and information to manage your menstrual cycle, either because the topic is taboo in your community or you can't afford to buy them.

The shocking reality is that many women and girls are forced to use makeshift items such as rags, newspapers, sarongs or toilet paper to absorb their period because they don't have access to, or can't afford period underwear, pads or tampons. This can

lead girls and young women to avoid school and social activities out of shame or embarrassment during their period.

Lack of education, taboos, stigma around periods, poor sanitation infrastructure and financial circumstances are all factors which contribute to period poverty. It is a global health issue which reinforces gender inequality, increases hardship and causes women and girls to miss out on education, work and social activities.

MODIBODI x PLAN INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

Modibodi is an Australian company creating reusable leak-proof underwear which replaces disposable hygiene products to manage periods and incontinence, but Modibodi isn't just committed to selling underwear – it's on a mission to help address period poverty too.

Modibodi and Plan International Australia are united in being bold, breaking down taboos and empowering girls and women to manage their periods safely and with dignity. In 2020 Modibodi and Plan International Australia teamed up to supply 300 women in the Indonesian province of West Nusa Tenggara with 1000 pairs of reusable period underwear. And now, we're teaming up again to improve menstrual health outcomes for girls and women in Laos.

This new initiative forms part of our menstrual hygiene program, and will see us deliver 22,000 pairs of Modibodi period underwear to 4,400 girls and women in the Saravan and Oudomxay provinces of Laos. This donation will help enable girls to go to school and to reduce local waste

Beyond Sesame Street

Together with Sesame Workshop Bangladesh, we've been bringing important health and gender transformative messages to children during the pandemic.

Big Bird, Elmo, Oscar the Grouch – you're probably familiar with the residents of Sesame Street, but did you know that they have friends in more than 150 countries, who are helping children reach their full potential?

Sesame Workshop is an independent nonprofit organization that provides children with access to life-changing early education, critical health lessons, and helpful tools for tough situations through research, classroom curricula and large-scale social impact projects. For more than 50 years Sesame Workshop has been addressing challenging issues from the lens of a child – from girls' education in Afghanistan, to the world's

largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, where they introduced the first ever Rohingya muppets, Noor and Aziz, to children in an early childhood education program.

In Bangladesh, Sesame Workshop, or Sisimpur as it is known in Bengali, is a pioneer in the development of child friendly television shows, and reaches more than three million children annually through television broadcast and characters that are contextualised to the local setting.

In 2019, Sesame Workshop Bangladesh and Plan International partnered to pilot an exciting Gender Transformative Early Childhood Development initiative that saw us develop print, play and video materials to be used in early learning centres.

Teachers were trained to facilitate discussions with children using these new materials, and the project aims to help shape children's earliest perspectives, and create an enabling environment for changing harmful attitudes and gender norms in girls, boys, families and communities.

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, early learning centers in Bangladesh

were closed, so together with Plan International Bangladesh and Sesame Workshop Bangladesh we pivoted the project to support children's learning at home. We developed and printed books, posters and puzzles on subjects including hygiene, and these resources were distributed to children whose parents were unable to buy story books or play materials for their children during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The lockdown also created an opportunity to develop new video content featuring familiar characters from Sesame Workshop Bangladesh, and included themes around girls' participation in science, the importance of grandparents, and hand hygiene. This was broadcast through four TV channels in Bangladesh, as well as on YouTube and Facebook, and so far it has received more than 1 million views.

We continue to see the impact of our work with Sesame Workshop Bangladesh and in 2022 we will be developing and launching a Gender Transformative parenting package together, with input from other organisations. We're also developing more resources to promote positive parenting and male engagement in nurturing care, and we will be finalising innovative approaches to involving men in early childhood care.



Australian Aid

This project was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and complemented with funds generously donated to Plan International Australia from the Australian public.

Girls' education and climate change

What if one of the missing pieces of the solution in the climate crisis was as simple, and as powerful, as educating a girl?

All over the world, girls are at the forefront of the climate revolution. They are leading sustainable farming revolutions and growth in green industries. They're leading activism and political change. They're driving creative and innovative solutions to climate change, in their own communities and globally. Educated girls become the leaders our planet needs.

But girls' education has been hit hard by lockdowns and school closures. Every day, girls are pulled from school. And every day we lose the potential of a future leader, scientist, or conservationist. If world

leaders don't step up and invest in education that responds to the needs and rights of girls, over 20 million may never return to school.

Future generations will need every incredible mind to combat the climate crisis.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND INEQUALITY

Climate change magnifies the inequalities girls and women already disproportionately face, such as lack of access to education, poor access to sexual and reproductive health services, increased child, early and forced marriages, early pregnancies, violence, and human trafficking.

Communities and countries contributing the least to climate change are impacted the most.

By investing in girls' education, we could tear down the practices and structures that are damaging our planet and causing this inequality.

Our current solutions to climate change are incomplete. We're trying to tackle the world's biggest crisis, but neglecting half the world's population. We're missing out on the leaders, innovators and change makers we need to transform the world.

SO HOW DOES EDUCATION HELP?

- We know girls' education advances climate justice – every additional year of schooling for girls leads to significant improvements in a country's resilience to climate-related disasters.



Louisa (in brown shirt) and her friends plant mangrove seedlings on beach in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. Photo: Plan International.

- Education is critical in tackling harmful gender norms, and empowering girls to have control over their own lives and to drive change in the world around them.
- The climate emergency makes this all the more urgent, and could mean another 12.5 million girls each year not finishing school by 2025.

When the world invests in girls' education, we can tear down the practices and structures that are damaging our planet. We can unlock girls' creativity, their power, their resilience and their leadership. Educated girls lift us all.

15-YEAR-OLD LOUISA IS HELPING HER COMMUNITY ADAPT

Louisa is one of thousands of children in the Philippines who are dealing with the effects of climate change, which scientists believe is causing an increasing number of deadly typhoons. None have been deadlier than Typhoon Haiyan which claimed over 6,300 lives and displaced over 4 million people.

"We experienced the typhoon in 2013 and now we fear losing



We experienced the typhoon in 2013 and now we fear losing our homes as the shore is slowly being eaten away by the sea."

- Louisa, 15, Philippines

our homes as the shore is slowly being eaten away by the sea. If we do not do something, we might be homeless in the future due to coastal erosion."

Louisa and her friends decided to act after taking part in a number of environmental training sessions run by Plan International, which put children at the centre of climate change adaptation in six municipalities in Western Samar, Eastern Samar and Leyte.

As well as planting trees to protect against erosion and cleaning up beaches, they also lead

information drives in different villages and schools to inform community members about the impact of climate change and what can be done to reduce its effects.

With support from Plan International, the group recently secured funding from their local council to carry out their work after presenting their action plan and showing how they would use the funding to help their community adapt to climate change and prepare for disasters.

GIRLS EDUCATION & EMPOWERMENT FUND



A recent Brookings Institution study found that for every year a girl stays in school, her country's climate resilience measurably improves by 3.2 points (as measured by the ND-GAIN Index, which calculates a country's vulnerability to climate change in relation to its resilience). Educated girls can foster greater climate participation and leadership, as well as develop their life skills for a green economy.

Investing in girls' education is life-changing for girls themselves – but the ripple effect it can have for entire communities and countries has the potential to truly transform our world. That's why we created our new multi-year giving initiative, The Girls' Education & Empowerment Fund.

Designed to address the barriers preventing girls from accessing and completing a quality education, the fund has the power to support an entire generation of girls to finish school and choose their own futures.

To achieve this kind of long-term change, we need a long-term plan. That's why we ask supporters of the fund to commit to a multi-year pledge of a meaningful amount for five years.

Your contributions are pooled with other donors and used to leverage further funding in the form of multi-year grants from our institutional partners, like the World Food Programme and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, effectively multiplying your impact by 2x (or more).

The Future Online - Keep Us Safe!

By Olivia Causer
and Margaret Thanos,
two members of our Youth
Activist Series for 2021.

Together with Youth Activists from Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia, we have a vision for a better online world. One in which social media platforms, governments, and each and every one of us contributes to the creation of a more inclusive, welcoming, and secure environment on the internet.

Significant acts of violence, ranging from trolling to cyberstalking to sexual exploitation, are taking place in a space that should be used for education and communication. These acts of violence are having a debilitating effect on young people all over the world, and they need to be stopped. Girls and gender-diverse people are regularly subjected to online harassment, threats, and abuse that is motivated by their race, gender, sexual orientation, and appearance. According to the Free to Be Online research conducted by Plan International Australia in 2020, 58 percent of girls from all 22 survey countries had directly experienced some sort of online harassment on social media platforms in the previous year. No one deserves to feel threatened when using the internet.

The line between onlookers and active participants in the online space is often blurred. Most people are unaware that accountability for damaging content online often extends beyond the creator. By simply following, subscribing, or promoting online sources aimed to humiliate or injure someone, you may also be held accountable for bullying or even abusive behaviour.

The Australian Youth Activists had a wonderful experience working with the young people from Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. We worked together through a series of online workshops led by YLab, to collect data, discuss the issues at hand and get to know each other. After recognising this issue, we conducted research and launched a campaign to effect change.

Our research was focused on the following question: What is required to mobilise and assist people to act as active online bystanders when they observe online gender-based violence aimed towards young people in all of our many cultures and backgrounds?

Online violence and harassment are fuelled by a variety of factors, namely cultural norms and gender stereotypes. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram (to name the main ones), are not doing enough to address the problem. Further, social media influencers can sometimes perpetuate the problem, and contribute to the broader worldwide epidemic of violence and harassment.

All of the Youth Activists were able to share both our individual experiences of feeling unsafe online, and also look at the broader, more collective issue at hand. Hearing stories from young women and non-binary people from these different countries opened our eyes to some of the issues that we might not face as Australians. We heard about how online harassment can reduce safety in real life, particularly when it comes to accessing cities.

Moreover, our research revealed that though everyone has the capacity to be powerful agents of change and can be mobilised to be positive active bystanders, they must first be educated and given the necessary tools and support. Governments, educational institutions, and social media platforms have a large and important role to play in equipping people to have a greater understanding of how we as individuals can be better, and hope to carry that into the world from now on.

Our findings, recommendations and ideas for action demonstrate that change is possible and the responsibility lies with all of us as individuals as well as with social media platforms and our government.



Photo: Plan International.



Allies for gender equality



Olivia is a Plan
International Australia
Youth Activist based
in Sydney.

Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but also a prerequisite for a peaceful and prosperous world. All across the world, people who identify as female and non-binary face discrimination and inequality because of their gender. At home, in the workplace, and in their communities, women and girls are subjected to violence, abuse, and mistreatment, and are denied opportunities to receive an education, earn an income, and become leaders. We need change now, and I believe that

we can achieve a more gender-equal future by working together with men and boys to create a strong support system for people of all genders.

Men and boys can be allies for gender justice by facing the concerns of gender inequality honestly and openly, talking about it with one another, and standing up for a society free of violence against women, girls, and non-binary people.

An ally is someone who supports a movement or group that they are not a part of. By including male allies in the fight for equality, I believe we can help to transform harmful gender norms in society.

Although there are many ways for men and boys to demonstrate allyship and support the movement for gender equality, here are three that I think are a great starting point:

LISTEN TO WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Pay attention to the girls and women in your life and initiate discussions with other men about what you hear. A good ally is a visible ally. Acknowledgment of male privilege is a key step to breaking down feminine stereotypes, and also breaks down the toxic masculine stereotypes that men are subject to. Toxic masculinity needs to be challenged because its manifestations –

violence, harassment, and abuse – are dangerous and destructive to everyone in our society, regardless of gender.

DEVELOP AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

An intersectional approach to gender equality looks at how gender overlaps with race, class, and sexuality. Intersectionality has become important in achieving a unified vision of change. It is important to see social progress for groups in society with less power, including LGBTIQ+ people, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, and people living with disabilities. Allies need to keep in mind that members of minority groups may have different needs than others.

FREE YOURSELF AND OTHERS FROM GENDER STEREOTYPES

From an early age, children are exposed to gender stereotypes. Language, games, stories, and movies all communicate signals about gender roles. Children's activities and toys can reinforce gender stereotypes, such as boys only playing with automobiles, soldiers, and superheroes while girls are only offered dolls and drawing. My mum has never told my brother and I that we couldn't be whoever we wanted to be. She has educated my brother from a young age on gender equality and treating women with respect. I am so proud that he understands and rejects the disparities that exist between men and women in society, and that he is an ally to girls and women. It is important to allow children to explore their imagination without judgement, and to not force harmful gender norms onto them.

Gender equality is beneficial for all, and boys and young men can play a powerful role in supporting the empowerment of girls and young women during adolescence and young adulthood. This will create allies in the younger generations and is an important step in combating gender inequality. The only way to create an equitable society is to fight for equality and justice together.

WHAT IS PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S YOUTH ACTIVIST SERIES?

The Youth Activist Series (YAS) is Plan International Australia's development program for young people of all genders and identities between the ages of 16 and 24, supported by The Body Shop. Together in 2020 & 2021, Plan International Australia and The Body Shop are supporting the next generation of leaders and activists, and are working to provide a platform for the Youth Activists to campaign for the issues they care about. By putting young people at the centre of our work, we're amplifying their voices to create the change we need to see in the world. Find out more at <https://planau.me/YAS-2022>

Food for Education



Saraha, 10, says the conflict in South Sudan is affecting her education. Photo: Shreeram KC.

How you are helping empower girls, boys and the entire community.

In South Sudan, girls like Rebecca and Saraha face unique challenges when it comes to completing their education.

Saraha is 10 years old and was born in 2011, the same year that South Sudan celebrated its independence. Since then, ongoing conflict has made it difficult for her to go to school, but Saraha is determined – she wants to be a doctor when she grows up!

Rebecca was forced to drop out of school to help support her family, by getting married when she was 16. “Nobody says no to early marriage because girls are considered a source of income for their families,” explains Rebecca. “The boy’s family gives cows to the girl’s family to get married. Cows are the wealth here. My family did the same, they received sixty cows in exchange for my marriage two years ago.”

Plan International is working to make sure girls like Rebecca and Saraha can complete their education despite their circumstances, and it’s thanks to your support.

In a country where 91% of the population face acute hunger and 70% of children are out of school, our teams across South Sudan and Australia have worked hard to research and develop a holistic approach – one that helps all students learn and grow.

Our Food for Education program supports students in 165 schools across five states in South Sudan. Participating schools receive deliveries of food from our partner organisation, the UN’s World Food Programme and community members are trained to store the food securely and serve a free nutritious school lunch to both male and female students every day.

This provides an incentive for families to send their daughters to school, because often girls are kept home to help the family find food. In some schools

where it’s more challenging to bring girls to school, Plan International tries to encourage them and their families by providing take home rations. When girls attend over 80% of their classes for the month, they receive a month’s rations, relieving the pressure on the entire family. This means that parents don’t have to send their daughters out to work or search for food and a dowry becomes less of a necessity.

When coupled with the school committee’s positive messaging about girls’ education and child protection, the community sees the value and opportunities education holds, not only for boys but for girls too, and sending a child to school becomes a viable option for even the most vulnerable families.

In addition, the program also champions sustainable solutions to drought and food insecurity. In 2021, school kitchen gardens were established in participating communities, giving children an opportunity to learn about the environment and grow their own food.

Alongside the regular curriculum on hygiene, nutrition and safety, Food for Education school committees were quickly upskilled during the pandemic, enabling them to also share health information and supplies to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Project staff and participants in South Sudan reported:

- a 60% increase in girls’ school enrolment
- a reduction in the number of girls experiencing forced marriage
- a reduction in the levels of stunting and physical impairments due to malnutrition
- equal participation in learning between boys and girls

Thanks to this program, 190,418 boys and girls like Saraha and Rebecca are being supported by their community to finish school. Rebecca is one of only three girls in her community to finish grade eight, and for this, she is proud. “If I have an education, I can do everything. People who learn computer skills get jobs. Once they have skills, they are recognised and respected.”

A family inheritance

Sarah Ryan’s journey to becoming a Plan International Australia supporter was set in motion long before the idea even entered her head. Her passion for girls’ rights and supporting children to reach their full potential started with her father, and inspired by his generosity, she has decided to follow in his footsteps by pledging to leave a Gift to Plan International Australia in her will.

What inspired you to first get involved with Plan International Australia?

My story starts with my father, Richard Woods. My parents married in 1949 and went on to have five children. I was the eldest and the only girl. We didn’t have much money but we had educated parents, who really encouraged and supported us at school and into university.

In his later life, Dad became a regular Plan International Australia donor. Sometime later when I was 38, my daughter Ella was born. I had waited a long time for her and I felt very, very blessed with her arrival. In my gratitude I decided I wanted to help a child who wouldn’t have the same opportunities that I could offer Ella. I remembered the child sponsorship opportunities with Plan International Australia, that my dad had done. And that began the pattern that is still in place today, 34 years later.

Richard Woods (right) with his friend, about to set off on an adventurous trip down the south coast in 1943 (image and caption supplied by Sarah Ryan).



What motivates you to continue supporting, after all this time?

It hasn’t ever occurred to me to stop and when I think about that now I realise that that would signify that I’m no longer feeling blessed with my daughter. And that certainly hasn’t happened!

I have also been very happy with the direction that Plan International has taken. I particularly endorse the focus now on girls’ equality and I’m impressed by the Food for Education program.

When Ella was little, I remember reading in a child-raising book that children grow rapidly, and being active they run out of energy quickly. Regular meals and healthy snacks between meals keep up their energy and capacity to be well behaved and to learn. I put it into practice immediately and we never had 5 o’clock blues or very much bad behaviour at all.



Dr Sarah Ryan AM.

And Ella went on to do very well at school and at university. It reminds us that it is the same principle with children the world over.

How was it that your father inspired you to include a gift to Plan’s work in your Will?

My father died in 2004. As executor of his Will, I handled the distribution of his Estate, which included a bequest to Plan International Australia. When I made my Will, I had to do the same! And that is where we are today – two generations of donors and two generations of gifts in Wills. I’m still blessed with a daughter, who works tirelessly for social justice and the environment and I hope that she will continue our Plan International tradition one day.

I’ve realised that there is a long family heritage of acting for social justice – dad’s great grandfather is on record as speaking out at the Manchester Town Hall about the working hours of shop assistants in the 1840s. I think we absorbed so much more than we realised as children. I guess that is a reflection of the inheritance of family values established over a long period of time. Dad would be tickled pink to be remembered like this. I’m also very honoured to share my story in this way.

Do you have any advice for other supporters who want to do more?

I’m sure others have their own family stories of what has led them to do this sort of thing and choose Plan International Australia. And maybe through some more sharing of these stories, we can help find new ways to reach out and expand the donor and the gifts in Wills programs.

If you would like to learn more about our Gift in Wills program, or you’d like to share what inspired you to create a legacy through Plan International, please contact our Key Relationship Manager Emily, at emily.dudgeon@plan.org.au



Sponsored child writes a letter to her sponsor.
Photo: Kenneth Assoude.

The power of a letter

Communication between a child in a sponsorship program and their sponsor has been found to have a positive impact on the child's psychosocial wellbeing. But how do you go about writing to your sponsored child?

Many of our sponsors feel proud that their contributions are helping to maintain programs providing education, sanitation and water facilities, food and nutrition, and crisis support for communities. But what they don't realise is that sponsorship directly benefits the wellbeing of the child they sponsor.

A recent study by RMIT University found that receiving and writing letters to a sponsor is linked to higher levels of school attendance, improved development outcomes, and greater self-reported health in sponsored children. This is just part of the incredible impact that sponsorship has!

Letters provide a unique way for sponsors and sponsored children to share insights into their lives, communities, and cultures. They also give children an opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions.

This process helps to shape their communication skills, preparing them for a future where they can reach their full potential.

HOW IT ALL WORKS

When you begin sponsoring through Plan International Australia, you will receive an introductory letter from the child you sponsor. After this, you are free to correspond as much as you would like.

Your letter takes quite the journey, from our Melbourne office all the way to the Plan International office closest to where the child lives. Once there, a member of our team translates it.

It can sometimes take a few months for the letter to reach your sponsored child's community, especially if they live in a remote area, but once they receive it they can begin working on their response!



Sometimes the child may be new to letter writing, or too young to write at all, so in these cases a family member or volunteer may assist or communicate on their behalf.

WHAT TO WRITE

Are you a new sponsor? Introduce yourself! You can write about your family, and ask about theirs too. Some other ideas include:

- Writing about pets or Australian animals – this is a great way to connect with anyone! You could ask about animals in their community, as well.
- Asking them about their favourite subjects at school – this is a great way to encourage learning and empower them to pursue their education.
- Talking about hobbies or sports. You might be surprised to find you share common interests!
- Telling them about things happening in your community. What news do they have to share?

Plan International Australia screens all correspondence to make sure it is appropriate.

When you sponsor a child with Plan International, you do more than just improve the life of a single child. Our child-centred, community-based approach to child sponsorship means we establish meaningful relationships with sponsored children and their families to create lasting change. By pooling our sponsorship funds together at a community level, we are able to implement programs that tackle the root causes of discrimination, exclusion and vulnerability, to benefit all children in the community, not just sponsored children.

This includes supporting vulnerable children in places where sponsorship isn't possible, such as conflict and fragile settings, urban areas and in the Pacific. And sponsorship funds also help us to leverage grants and other donations that can increase our impact for children.

Letters can be an incredibly special way to connect and bond, and the benefits empower children to learn and grow. Of course, we understand it is not always possible for child sponsors to write, and that is ok too. Rest assured your contribution is making a huge impact in the life of the child you sponsor, and beyond – letter or no letter.

To find out more about child sponsorship visit plan.org.au/you-can-help/sponsor-a-child



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I also kept a letter from a little boy of six years old from Bangladesh with just a handprint because he wasn't able to write then.

Ziyin Wang Gantner has been supporting Plan International Australia for 26 years, and she still cherishes letters from the many children she has sponsored in that time.

“I kept many letters that I received from children in different countries. My favourite was a letter from a boy in Ecuador who told me about a most exciting day in their village when they had electricity for the first time. I also kept a letter from a little boy of six years old from Bangladesh with just a handprint because he wasn't able to write then. All those things are very memorable.

There was a girl from Ethiopia I supported. The girl [wrote] telling me she was 16 and finished school. I got the letter to thank me because she no longer needed my support. All those kids are grown up, they have their own children, and if my little humble support can make them believe they can give education to their children, that will be very important.”

International Day of the Girl 2021



Girls completing online training in Vietnam. (image from the Truth Gap report). Photo: An Nguyen Quoc.

Every year on October 11th, the world is called to recognise the unique challenges that girls face globally and their enormous potential to bring about change.

As the charity for girls' equality, Plan International played a significant role in the United Nations introduction of International Day of the Girl – the day was born from our campaign to see girls on the global agenda.

International Day of the Girl is first and foremost, a celebration of girls and their enormous potential to bring about change. When girls are educated and supported, their entire family and community benefits – including boys and men.

This year's theme was *Digital generation. Our generation.* Internet access is transformative. It equals opportunity – to learn, to grow and to connect. But the same technology that brings opportunity can also expose children and young people to new risks and harm.

That's why this year for International Day of the Girl, we highlighted the unique challenges that girls face around

the world when it comes to misinformation and disinformation online, and investigated and celebrated how diverse role models, online and in the media, can transform girls' lives.

THE TRUTH GAP

The latest report in our State of the World's Girls series, *The Truth Gap* follows on from last year's *Freedom Online* research and shines a light on girls' empowerment online.

We spoke to 26,000 girls and young women from 26 countries about their exposure to false information online and how it affects their lives, learning and leadership. One in three told us that exposure to lies and false information online left them feeling stressed, worried or anxious. One in five was left feeling physically unsafe.

Girls are also witnessing women leaders targeted with malicious rumours and conspiracy

theories designed to attack their credibility and shame them into silence. This damages girls' leadership ambitions and undermines their confidence to take part in public life.

While they are certainly not the only population exposed to misinformation, girls and young women face unique consequences because of their gender. Every aspect of their lives is already impacted by gender inequality and false information online further silences them. It limits their ambition and their ability to learn about the issues that interest them. It is dangerous, it affects their mental health, and it is yet another thing holding them back.

Girls hold immense power and potential to create very real change. They want to see action and we've been amplifying their voices. Girls want the skills to navigate false information online. And they want all children to be taught digital literacy skills to prevent the spread. We need to equip girls – and all children – for an increasingly digital world.

You can support girls by signing their petition calling for action at plan.org.au/campaign/truth-gap

REPRESENT US!

To be truly equal, we need diverse female representation. It is critical that girls and women see themselves in all their diversity – online, on the sports field, in the media, in politics, and beyond. That is why we teamed up with our friends at Future Women and Witchery on the eve of International Day of the Girl, for a special online event celebrating diverse role models.

Hosted by Future Women's very own Jamila Rizvi, and panelled by AFLW player Akec Makur Chuot, comedian Tanya Hennessy and social enterprise founder Mariam Mohammed, the event was a rich and candid conversation about improving representation in every arena.

As part of this event, we launched the findings of a new polling report, *Represent Us! How diverse role models can transform girls' lives*, which highlighted the importance of leadership and representation, and points to the ways women can be more visible and supportive role models.

60% of the girls and young women surveyed reported that it was hard to find role models that reflected their diversities growing up and this lack of diverse representation has a profound ripple effect.

We also found that role models of diverse cultural backgrounds, gender identities, or disabilities have had an impact on young women's self-confidence (66%), career choices (56%), and education (52%).

"As role models for young girls, we can all help ignite their belief in their own potential," writes Jamila Rizvi. "Together, we can all help inspire girls in all their diversities to dream big. We can make sure that instead of seeing barriers, girls are met with support and empowerment when they turn to their role models."

"It's time we all step up and commit to empowering the next generation of girls to make them believe their dreams are truly possible."

“There was nobody who looked like me on television. I remember devotedly watching Captain Planet with my little sister because there was a single Asian character. Where in Asia she was from wasn't deemed relevant enough to mention. She was simply from the continent – as a whole.”

- Jamila Rizvi



Jamila Rizvi



Akec Makur Chuot



Tanya Hennessy



Mariam Mohammed

Pass it on

In the spirit of Ubuntu, we ask that you keep the ripples of change alive by passing this magazine on once you've enjoyed it.

Whether you leave it in your local café or staff room or give it to a friend, this small act of sharing will help spread awareness of Plan International Australia and the incredible work your support makes possible.

The power to inspire others is in your hands.

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The charity for
girls' equality