



Regional research on girls' civic engagement and activism for gender equality in Asia-Pacific: breaking down barriers and unlocking their potential

Research report

Prepared for Plan International Asia-Pacific Hub
Institute for Sustainable Futures

18 June 2021



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Citation

Megaw, T., Winterford, K., Arifiani, S. D., Low, I., and Robinson, L. (2021). Regional Research on Girls' Civic Engagement and Activism for Gender Equality in Asia-Pacific, Prepared for Plan International Asia-Pacific Hub, by Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

About the authors

The research project is led by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, an interdisciplinary research and consulting organisation at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS-ISF) and also draws on specialist expertise in Indonesia and Fiji. The team is comprised of Tamara Megaw and Dr Keren Winterford from UTS-ISF in Australia, an independent consultant Sandra Dewi Arifiani based in Indonesia, and Iris Low and Leaine Robinson from CoLAB Consulting in Fiji.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Plan International for their funding and support in coordinating the research. We would also like to offer warm thanks to the female youth advocates and sector-based experts who contributed time and valuable insights. We hope this research will support your ongoing struggles for gender equality and social inclusion in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Executive summary

In acknowledging the role girls and young women have in shaping society, Plan International has invested in research on girls' civic engagement and activism to promote girls' leadership. The research team, led by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney (UTS-ISF) has prepared this research report for the Plan International Asia-Pacific Regional Hub.

Research purpose

This regional research sought to understand what support young female advocates across the Asia-Pacific region need from their governments, supporters and key stakeholders to become active change agents who promote gender equality and inclusive societies. We hope these research findings, which are based on learnings from current and emerging actions, will influence and inform the actions of government and civil society as well as inform the strategic direction of Plan International in its efforts to support and catalyse girl and youth-led movements. The research is also intended to support female youth advocates in their ongoing work for gender equality and social inclusion in the Asia-Pacific.

Research questions guided the enquiry:

1. What are the emerging trends and issues related to gender-transformation and social inclusion that girls and young women in the Asia-Pacific region are advocating for?
2. What can better enable and support girls and young women in future civic engagement and activism in the Asia-Pacific?
3. In what ways have girls and young women used digital technologies and social media in civic engagement and activism and how might they use these tools in the future to influence social change and promote gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region?
4. What have been national governments' responses to a rise in youth activism for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region and how might positive responses be enabled in the future?

Research methodology

The research was qualitative. It drew on both primary and secondary sources of data and was guided by the use of key conceptual frameworks including 'Appreciative Inquiry' and 'Power cubes'. Research methods included document review, seven interviews with female youth activists and five interviews with sector-based experts across the Asia-Pacific region. This report contains three stories of successful youth activism connected to three of the young women we interviewed. Social media listening was conducted linked to the stories of success.

Research findings

Girls and young women across the South Asia, Southeast Asia and Pacific regions are concerned about a similar range of gender-transformation and social inclusion issues. Understandings of gender-transformative change was framed by Plan International's Global Policy Gender Equality and Inclusion (2017) that describes three domains. Our research found more evidence of girls and young women focusing their advocacy on the first domain of 'norms, attitudes and behaviours', and the second domain of 'social and economic resources and safety nets'. The major structural changes required in the third domain of 'policy frameworks and budgets' tended to be tackled by adult feminist activists and feminist INGOs.

Girls and young women advocates are building their movements with a range of approaches including working together with boys and men; education strategies; self-conscientisation; and

connecting with networks or coalitions of organisations. They are using a variety of tactics. There are many creative tactics which are being used to raise awareness, mobilise youth, and influence public opinion or policy towards gender-transformative change.

In our analysis of emerging trends of civic engagement and activism, we found girls and young women were mobilising in both invited and claimed spaces. Girls and young women are represented in some government-invited spaces for policy consultation, and these spaces also give opportunities to strengthen girls' and young women's capacity for citizen engagement. NGOs also invite girl and young women activists into friendly spaces to develop their leadership skills and voice. Girls and young women have actively claimed spaces, such as public demonstrations, campaigns and press releases, for voicing their messages. Online spaces are also being claimed for consciousness-raising and empowerment.

Our research found that girl and young women activists are operating at all levels – local, national and supranational. Girls and young women need to be recognised and supported in their local communities, so that they can build confidence, skills and networks for activism at the national level. Most youth activists who engage at the supranational level will do this in combination with national activism. Advocacy can be effective when it is grounded in local realities but is able to link across levels.

Key enablers for successful activism for gender equality included a positive rights-based approach and adults' belief in the value of engaging with girl and young women advocates. Girls and young women need the support of their families and friends, as well as friendly girl- and young women-only spaces to build confidence and solidarity. Young activists were more effective working in partnerships and coalitions with like-minded organisations, and they hope to create a diverse intergenerational movement for gender equality and social inclusion.

Informed by the research findings, NGOs such as Plan International that are seeking to support girl and young women activists should provide mentoring, training and networking across the Asia-Pacific region. Programs should create spaces for youth activists to occupy leadership and decision-making positions, and they should adopt an intersectional approach to promote the meaningful participation of diverse girls and young women.

Successful digital activism by girls and young women was enabled by their fast uptake of new digital technologies and their comfort with interacting on and creating content for social media networking sites. Activists made safer and more inclusive digital spaces to build their movements, and activists interacting online often also connected "in real life" (offline). Girl and young women activism was also enabled by support provided to access the internet and guidance in the use of social media for campaigning.

NGOs including Plan International should leverage the existing knowledge and capabilities of girls and young women with digital technologies to support their use for civic engagement and activism for gender equality. Types of enabling support include the promotion of improved safety and security for girls and young women using social media, and providing guidance and advice on its use for campaigning. NGOs should build digital databases and websites to make it easier to track the policy commitments of governments related to gender equality and social inclusion.

National government bodies and regional bodies can support girls' and young women's activism by building a more supportive legal and financial framework for advocacy. There are several existing international agreements for gender equality and social inclusion that governments need to uphold. NGOs also have a role to play in advocating for strengthened mechanisms of youth civic engagement, building activist networks and making spaces for the meaningful participation of girls and young women in planning and decision-making for programming.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
CSO	civil society organisation
GSM	gender and sexual minorities
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/ questioning +
NGO	non-governmental organisation
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. Plan International supports youth activism and the rights of girls and young women to respond to gender inequality and fundamental human rights breaches. Engaging in social movements can empower girls and young women, nurture leadership ambitions, build confidence and provide the skills needed to drive change.

In acknowledging the role girls and young women have in shaping society, Plan International has invested in research on girls' civic engagement and activism to promote girls' leadership by commissioning this regional research. The research team, led by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney (UTS-ISF), has prepared this research report for Plan International's Asia-Pacific Regional Hub. The Hub provides leadership and technical expertise to support the work of country offices in the Asia-Pacific region.

Following this introduction, Section 2 describes the research focus, and outlines the key research questions, research audience and users. Section 3 presents the research approach including methods, sampling, ethics and research limitations. Section 4 contains the research findings and stories of successful youth activism. Section 5 presents the conclusion. There are several annexes to the report.

2. Research on girls' civic engagement and activism for gender equality in the Asia-Pacific

This regional research sought to understand what support young female advocates across the Asia-Pacific region need from their governments, supporters and key stakeholders to become active change agents to promote gender equality and inclusive societies.

2.1. Research focus

The research sought to learn from current and emerging actions, and utilise these findings to influence and inform the actions of government and civil society, as well as inform the strategic direction of Plan International in its efforts to support and catalyse movements led by girls and youth.

The research was also intended to support female youth advocates in their ongoing work for gender equality and social inclusion in the Asia-Pacific.

The purposes of the research as outlined in the terms of reference are:

- to identify and analyse emerging trends/patterns of girls' and young women's civic engagement and activism for gender equality and inclusive societies including issues they are advocating for and barriers they are facing in the Asia-Pacific region
- to assess the rising role of digital technologies and social media in youth activism and engagement and how it can be used to influence social change and promote gender equality
- to strategically utilise research findings as an influencing tool to draw attention of the public and policy makers at national and regional levels, encouraging them to increase engagement with youth, especially female youth advocates, and include them in meaningful decision-making processes.

2.2. Key research questions

The following research questions were informed by the research purpose stated above.

1. What are the emerging trends and issues related to gender-transformation and social inclusion that girls and young women in the Asia-Pacific region are advocating for?
2. What can better enable and support girls and young women in future civic engagement and activism in the Asia-Pacific?
3. In what ways have girls and young women used digital technologies and social media in civic engagement and activism, and how might they use these tools in the future to influence social change and promote gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region?
4. What have been national governments' responses to a rise in youth activism for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region, and how might positive responses be enabled in the future?

Annex 1 details the research plan and sets out sub-questions and definitions linked to the key research questions.¹

¹ Barriers girls and young women are facing as they advocate for gender equality and inclusive societies were revealed through the key questions and sub-questions, and through a constructive and future-focused research inquiry informed by Appreciative Inquiry (see Annex 1 and 2).

3. Research approach

3.1. Methodology

This section provides a summary of the research approach. Further details are available in Annex 2. The research was qualitative and drew on both primary and secondary sources of data. It was guided by use of key conceptual frameworks.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)² provided an overarching framework to guide the research, data collection tools and analysis tools. AI seeks to reveal what is working well, and to identify enablers of these 'highpoints' as a means of creating constructive change.

Power cubes provided an analytical framework to analyse research participants' responses and guide the document review. We employed the power cube framework³ to make sense of the different types of girls' and young women's activism and the ways these represent different forms of civic engagement and connection with decision-making processes.

The cube has multiple dimensions – it is a framework for analysing the spaces, places and forms of power and their interrelationships, as illustrated in Figure 1. Findings related to the power cube are provided in Section 4.1.

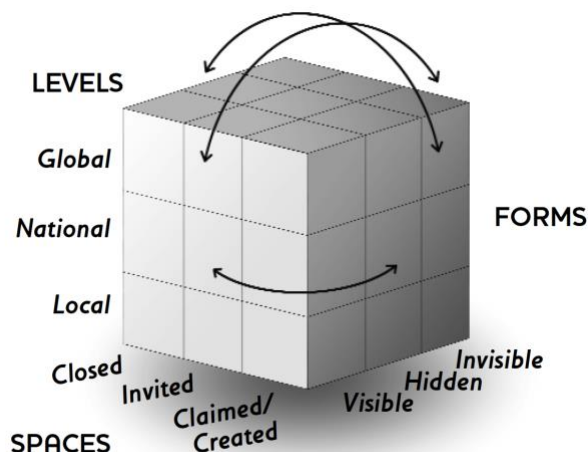


Figure 1: The 'power cube': the levels, spaces and forms of power (Gaventa 2006)

3.2. Key concepts for the research

Children are defined as under 18 years of age – as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).⁴ Plan International uses the UN's definition of **youth** as people between 15 and 24 years of age. Many of Plan International's programs and advocacy activities focus on adolescent girls. The term '**adolescent**' refers to girls, boys and those with other gender identities aged 10–19 years. This approach considers adolescence as part of an overall life course, within which circumstances in one phase of life influence the later phases.⁵

Digital activism is activism in which digital tools (the internet, mobile phones, social media) are used to bring about social and/or political change. Compared to other media, activists may use the internet because it is more unregulated and open for peer-to-peer sharing.

² Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

³ Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis. *IDS Bulletin*, 37(6), 23-33.

⁴ UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>.

⁵ UNICEF (2020)

UNICEF (2020) *Engaged and Heard! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement*, <https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf>, p.6.

From our document review, we found that girls and young women activists relate to one another offline and online, and the collective goals of the movement for gender equality and social inclusion are formed in their specific cultural and social contexts. Ito et al. (2015) describe **youth activism** as a specific form of participatory politics which involves “young people’s agency within peer cultures and public spheres; their deeply felt identities, interests and affinities; and civic engagement and opportunity”.⁶

In framing activism and civic engagement for **gender equality**, we employ understandings of gender-transformative change as described in Plan International’s *Global Policy – Gender Equality and Inclusion (2017)*⁷. The policy describes the multi-dimensional nature of change in three areas: norms, attitudes and behaviours; social and economic resources and safety nets; and policy frameworks and budgets.

Further details about key concepts which framed the research are provided in Annex 2.

3.3. Research methods

The research employed four different methods: a document review of 22 publications from sector-based and academic literature; seven interviews with female youth activists and five interviews with sector-based experts; and three stories of success and social media listening, all of them focused on female youth advocates. The methods used, including the sampling strategy, are detailed in Annex 2. Annex 3 lists the documents reviewed.

3.4. Analysis

Qualitative data from documents, interview transcripts and social listening excerpts were analysed using Dedoose software. The first stage of coding was deductive, based on the research sub-questions defined in the design stage of research. The second stage of coding used frameworks such as the Power cubes and the gender-transformative framework to categorise the data. The third stage of data analysis was more iterative, inspired by a grounded theory approach to generate themes.⁸ Data was compared and contrasted to build an understanding of similarities and differences between stakeholders.

In the drafting of the research findings, learnings from interviews with female youth advocates were the primary focus while the document review provided supplementary material. Learnings from sector-based experts provided triangulation and different perspectives on girls’ and young women’s activism.

3.5. Ethical practice

The research gained ethics approval through the University of Technology Sydney review committee. The research team employed the ISF Code of Ethical Research Conduct. We followed the ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation which are: respect for human beings; beneficence; research merit and integrity; and justice. The team complied with Plan’s Child Protection Policy and advice on child safeguarding related to the project.

⁶ Ito et al. (2015:15) in Parahita, G. (2019) The Rise of Indonesian Feminist Activism on Social Media, *Jurnal Komunikasi*, <https://doi.org/10.25008/jkiski.v4i2.331>, p.2.

⁷ Plan International (2017) Plan International’s Global Policy – Gender Equality and Inclusion, <https://plan-international.org/publications/policy-gender-equality-inclusion>.

⁸ Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

3.6 Limitations

There are several acknowledged limitations to the research.

First, we used a limited sample of data sources across the Asia-Pacific countries included in the research, due to time and budget constraints. While the interviews conducted provided rich learning, we do not claim that our findings are applicable to each of the entire geographic regions. Second, the research team requested a shortlist of youth advocates from Plan country offices and selected a sub-set of these individuals to invite for interviews. Due to their connections to Plan programs and networks, particularly in Asia, these participants may not be representative of a broader demographic of youth advocates. Third, while the research team requested inclusion of girls aged 15–17 in the shortlist of youth advocates, none were put forward by the Plan International country offices or other programs in the region. This means that girls' perspectives were not included in the primary data collection, only in the document review.

Fourth, a limitation of the interviews was that most were conducted remotely and had to contend with the challenges of poor internet connections and language differences between the research team and the research participants. While the research team tried to establish rapport with participants through informal conversations and sharing about themselves at the beginning of each interview, the quality of insights gained may have been constrained. Lastly, in this research there wasn't as much learned about governments' responses to civic engagement and activism as we had hoped. The document review revealed this as a gap, with more government perspectives shared in media articles than in academic or grey literature. Also, interviews with government stakeholders were not included in the scope by Plan Regional Hub. Recognising the challenges associated with research, and with the evaluation of advocacy campaigns that may challenge or oppose government positions, this may be an area for further research.

4. Research findings

The research findings are presented in order of the four key research questions listed in Section 2.2.

4.1. Emerging trends related to gender-transformation and social inclusion issues that girls and young women in the Asia-Pacific region are advocating for

Research findings are shared about emerging trends in three areas: gender and social inclusion issues that girls and young women are advocating for (4.1.1); approaches, tactics and tools used by girl and youth activists (4.1.2); and types of civic engagement and activism for gender equality and social inclusion (4.1.3.).

4.1.1. Issues related to gender-transformation and social inclusion

Girls and young women are concerned about issues which hinder the fulfilment of their human, economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, as well as the rights of other beings on this planet. Some issues occur in the private sphere (self, family, household) while others are in the public sphere (workplace, market and government).

A comparative analysis of South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific conducted on the research findings found that there wasn't strong variation between the issues of concern in the three regions. That is, most issues described below were reported in all regions. Issues that are more prevalent in particular regions are noted in brackets below.

Girls and young women described issues and changes they would like to see related to norms, attitudes and behaviours. For many, patriarchal norms allowing sexual harassment and exploitation are a key concern, along with the cyberbullying of girls and young women. Compounding the threat of gender-based violence is the lack of child-appropriate services to support victims. Commercial sexual exploitation of girls and women and child trafficking are two other issues of concern.

Girls and young women want more bodily autonomy, including a culture of body and sex positivity, access to comprehensive sexual education, and respect of their sexual and reproductive health rights. Lack of sexual education, barriers to contraception as well as other factors contribute to high rates of unplanned pregnancy among adolescent girls (see Pacific-based research⁹). Girls are also concerned about forced and underage marriage.

Related to bodily autonomy, girls and boys would benefit from more healthy family relationships and abolition of the corporal punishment of children. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a persistent controversial issue in some countries (e.g. Indonesia), though not a major focus of youth activism.

Due to exclusionary norms, attitudes and behaviours about normative genders and sexualities, the LGBTIQ+ community experiences multiple forms of marginalisation from social spaces and institutions. Members of the LGBTIQ+ community have lower confidence and experience more threat of persecution when interacting with state authorities than cisgender and heterosexual people.¹⁰

Denying the voice, agency and autonomy of girls and young women was another key issue. Girls and young women experience exclusion from political discourse, debates and decision-making. In

⁹ McMillan, K., Linhart, C., Gorman, H., Kim, M., O'Connor, C., O'Connor, M., & Rokoduru, A. (2020). Adolescent unplanned pregnancy in the Pacific: Chuuk. Sydney: School of Public Health and Community Medicine, UNSW.

¹⁰ Plan International (2020). Plan International's policy position on engaging girls, boys and youth as active citizens, <https://plan-international.org/publications/engaging-girls-boys-and-youth-active-citizens>

most countries across the Asia-Pacific region, there is gender inequality in political leadership and parliamentary representation.

Gender norms and stereotypes were identified as a barrier to young women's mobility and opportunities. For example, girls and young women want more opportunities to study and work in the male-dominated STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.¹¹

Girls and young women described a range of issues related to social and economic resources and safety nets.

There is persistent gender-based inequality in educational institutions, and in access to education. There are also barriers to employment for young women, including a lack of work opportunities for educated youth, and gender norms discourage young women from working. Access to decent, affordable and safe housing is also a concern.

Due to cultural and religious norms, women may not have the same inheritance rights or ability to borrow money and own land as men. This has material consequences for women's economic independence.

Girls and young women want more access to health services tailored to their needs. This includes access to menstrual hygiene and sexual health services, and mental health support.

Another concern is the impacts of state conflict, humanitarian crises (including natural disasters and pandemics) and the onset of climate change which have a disproportionate effect on children and young women due to their existing vulnerabilities.

Issues about policy frameworks and budgets were identified as factors affecting gender equality and social inclusion in the Asia-Pacific.

Our document review found that greater public investment in the participation of children, especially girls, in civil society agendas and structures is needed. While women's issues receive some attention, girls are rarely identified as a particular demographic group with specific needs and interests to be addressed. In core conventions for protecting and promoting girls' rights – the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – girls' rights and the challenges they face are concealed either under the ageless category of 'women', or the gender-neutral category of 'children', 'adolescents' or 'youth'.¹² Girls' issues or initiatives currently receive very low funding.¹³

Legal reform is needed in a variety of areas for the fulfillment of girls' and women's rights – including inheritance, land ownership, borrowing and loans, marriage and the prevention of gender-based violence. National child protection laws and international human rights treaties need to be implemented comprehensively and without reservations across the Asia-Pacific region.

Our research found evidence that girls and young women focus their advocacy on the first domain of norms, attitudes and behaviours, and the second domain of social and economic resources and safety nets. The major structural changes required in the third domain of policy frameworks and budgets tended to be tackled by adult feminist activists and feminist INGOs, perhaps because a higher level of resources and networks was needed than what was available to girl-led initiatives.

4.1.2. Approaches, tactics and tools used by girl and young women activists

Girl and young women activists are mobilising and building their movements with a range of approaches.

¹¹ Interview with sector-based expert

¹² Plan International (2017) Girls' rights are human rights: executive summary, <https://www.girlsrightsplatform.org/page/fzrzmmac6i9#>.

¹³ Plan International (2020)

Our document review found that some girls are leading their own initiatives, and these initiatives range from formally registered organisations to unregistered informal groups. Some young women interviewed were supported by the scaffolding of established (feminist) organisations¹⁴ that encouraged them to lead their own activities, initiatives or groups. In their approaches to organising, girls and young women preferred horizontal and democratic structures in which all members are equally valued and consulted.¹⁵

Girls and young women work together with boys and men to change gender norms and mitigate gender-based violence. For example, Equal Playing Field runs school programs in Papua New Guinea using sport to promote respectful relationships and prevent violence against women through promoting gender equality.¹⁶

While female youth advocates acknowledged the importance of working with boys and men, they still find value in maintaining safer spaces for girls and women and the LGBTIQ+ community to discuss their issues and concerns privately.¹⁷

Some initiatives adopt the strategy of educating both children and their parents and teachers on gender-transformative change. While children gain a broader education on gender roles, consent and sexual health, parents and teachers also need this education to enable them to create a safe space in homes and classrooms for children to enact their rights and seek support from adults regarding any concerns.¹⁸

In their approaches to activism, girls and young women include self-conscientisation and transformation within themselves, in parallel with their activism for gender transformation and social inclusion in their communities. This self-conscientisation process involves reflection on their own gender identity, assumptions and beliefs about gender and subordinate position in society, in order to change and empower themselves. Initiatives of girl and young women activists focus on personal growth, building their confidence and nurturing their leadership ambitions.¹⁹

Girl-led initiatives connect with networks or coalitions of organisations working on similar intersectional feminist issues. The networks are at the 'glocal' level and connect activists who are in a particular geographical hub, such as a major city, with activists who are in rural areas of that country, or those who are situated in transnational feminist movements in other countries. Girls and young women who may have connected across borders and identities through digital technologies and social networking sites from an early age, once involved in activism, are reproducing open networks with a multitude of locally active leaders.²⁰

Our research suggests the above approaches to activism are often used in combination with each other. These approaches involve actions from a broad range of different actors including girls, boys, women, men, and gender and sexual minorities (GSM), as well as teachers and parents.

Girl and young women activists are using a range of tactics in their civic engagement and activism to raise awareness, mobilise youth, and influence public opinion or policy towards gender-transformative change.

As a precursor to collective action, activists raise awareness and educate youth on gender and social inclusion issues, and build a shared understanding of values and ideologies within groups of concerned individuals. Activists raise awareness online using social media content such as stories, memes, and short films, or through radio talkshows.

¹⁴ Examples are Plan International, CARE, Fiji Women's Rights Movement and Mama Cash.

¹⁵ Mama Cash and FRIDA (2018) *Girls to the Front*, https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GirlsToTheFront_Report_web.pdf

¹⁶ Equal Playing Field, (2021) *Equal Playing Field: About Us*, <https://equalplayingfield.global/about>.

¹⁷ Interviews with female youth advocates

¹⁸ Interview with female youth advocate

¹⁹ Mama Cash and FRIDA (2018)

²⁰ CIVICUS (2021), State of Civil Society Report Overview, <https://civicus.org/documents/SOCS2021Overview.pdf>, p.10.

Activists use WhatsApp and Facebook groups or pages to mobilise youth and recruit volunteers for campaigns and other activities. Our research suggests that social networking sites are effective for expanding networks to build a supportive ‘sisterhood’, creating the kind of solidarity and influence needed to sustain their social movements.

Online advocacy tactics that are used to influence public opinion or public policy include online petitions, the use of hashtags to raise the profile of certain campaigns or ideas, and mobilising support through ‘social influencers’. In-person advocacy tactics include presenting a youth manifesto to members of parliament, public demonstrations, and planning actions around special days such as International Women’s Day.

Activists are also building evidence through research and fundraising for campaigns.

More details and examples of tactics used by girl and young women activists are in Annex 4.

Girl and young women activists use particular tools to implement their approaches and tactics.

Multimedia is used to educate with age-appropriate messages and empower girls and young women. The Wan Smolbag Theatre in Vanuatu²¹ and the Talitha Project in Tonga use drama and the arts for advocacy and for engaging with policy makers.

In order to reach a broad audience, educational materials are shared in local languages. For example the ‘I Am Digital’ online safety campaign for adolescents disseminated materials in English, Fijian iTaukei, Fiji Hindi, Samoan, Tok Pisin and Tongan languages.

Youth activists share instructional templates online for organising events and other materials for advocacy and organising. Social media services act as an electronic repository for instructional resources that the gender equality movement can use in the future.²²

Girls and young women are producing their own short videos to make their views heard on issues affecting them. Instagram, Tiktok and YouTube are platforms widely used to produce and share videos to their audiences.²³

Across the approaches, tactics and tools described in these research findings, girl and young women activists focus on awareness-raising, community education, youth mobilisation, networking and influencing public opinion or policy. There is a diverse range of online and in-person advocacy strategies which are blended by girl and young women activists.

These approaches, tactics and tools are explored further in the section on types of civic engagement and activism below.

4.1.3. Types of civic engagement and activism for gender equality and social inclusion

Spaces of civic engagement and activism

We analysed types of girls’ and young women’s activism in invited and claimed spaces for participation. These spaces can be decision-making arenas, or also opportunities and channels where citizens can potentially affect policies, discourses and decisions.

²¹ Wan Smolbag Theatre (2016) *Annual Report*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/vanuatu-wan-smolbag-theatre-annual-report-2016.pdf>

²² Tye, M.; Leong, C.; Tan, F.; Tan, B.; and Khoo, Y. H. *Social Media for Empowerment in Social Movements: The Case of Malaysia’s Grassroots Activism*, 2018, Communications of the Association for Information Systems: Vol. 42 , Article 15. DOI: 10.17705/1CAIS.04215 Available at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/cais/vol42/iss1/15>

²³ Interview with sector-based expert

Invited spaces for the involvement and consultation of citizens may be set up through invitation from government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations (NGOs).²⁴

Our research found some government-invited spaces that were specifically designed for consultation with children and youth on development issues. Examples are Child Parliaments, the Youth Union in Vietnam, the regional ASEAN Children's Summit, the ASEAN Youth Forum, and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development Goals. In some cases, INGOs facilitate the engagement of girls and young women in these government-invited spaces.

National governments invite young women to participate in workshops for developing leadership and public speaking skills to strengthen their capacity for citizen engagement. These initiatives include the Solomon Islands Young Women's Parliamentary Group linked to UNDP's Global Programme for Parliamentary Strengthening. Another example is the training of climate change negotiators selected from CSOs and government officials in the Pacific Islands.

For the capacity building of children, some local governments invite children's groups to engage with them. Children's clubs in the Philippines work with village councils, municipal councils or city councils to advocate for better public investment in children's rights.²⁵ The Honiara City Council invites youth from the Solomon Islands to meet at their venues and learn administrative and technical skills through volunteer positions.²⁶

There are also NGO-invited spaces in which girl and young women activists can learn and develop leadership skills and have a platform to voice their opinions. Examples are the girls' empowerment camps of Talitha Project; youth groups organised through the Girls Alliance program of Plan International; the YWCA Rise Up program, the Bougainville Young Women's Leadership Project of the International Women's Development Agency; Suitcase Radio from Femlink Pacific; the Fiji Women's Rights Movement theatre; the Fiji Emerging Leaders Forum of Fiji Women's Rights Movement; Kids Link Fiji of Save the Children Fiji and various activities of the Pacific Girl Program.

In other cases, girls and young women are invited to participate in and contribute their voices to civic engagement spaces which are primarily adult spaces. For example, in 2019 Habitat for Humanity New Zealand organised the Asia Pacific Housing Forum in Thailand and invited Pacific youth representatives who had been winners of an essay-writing competition. Another example is the 'I Am Digital' campaign led by Save the Children and several Pacific Island governments which invited children to share their views and be part of the consultation for improving safety of social media use.

Claimed and self-created spaces are made by groups excluded from closed spaces. They may comprise like-minded individuals or they may mobilise around similar issues. These spaces range from ones intentionally created by community associations and social movements, to organic spaces where people gather to debate issues and discuss strategies, outside of institutionalised policy arenas.²⁷

Public demonstrations are one example of a claimed space where activists seek to influence public opinion and mobilise others to join their cause. Demonstrations on gender equality and social inclusion issues are often organised by activists to coincide with International Women's Day.

Public campaigns and press releases are other types of claimed spaces where activists aim to influence the political agenda by raising their issues of concern. The campaign "Take Back the Streets" was a self-organised initiative to combat street harassment faced by girls and women in Fiji during 2012, where members organised a Facebook group to document instances of street

²⁴ Institute for Development Studies (2011) *Powerpack: Understanding Power for Social Change*, University of Sussex, www.powercube.net, p.16

²⁵ Interview with sector-based expert

²⁶ Interview with female youth advocate

²⁷ Institute for Development Studies (2011) *Powerpack: Understanding Power for Social Change*, University of Sussex, www.powercube.net, p.16

harassment, particularly by public service vehicle drivers. The activists collated the data that had been collected on the Facebook group and presented it as a submission to the Land Transport Authority as part of consultations to amend the LTA Code of Conduct and Land Transport Act.²⁸ A similar campaign by a feminist organisation, the Coalition for Safe Public Space (KRPA) in Indonesia, collected data from an online survey related to street harassment for evidence to support the Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill (RUUK), and also conducted trainings and other advocacy activities.

Other forms of self-created spaces facilitate connection within the movement and consciousness-raising as important steps in self-empowerment as citizens. Sista Vanuatu is a feminist organisation that uses arts, media and communications for raising awareness and advocating on girls' and women's rights issues. Samoa Brown Girl Woke provides scholarships, educational and empowerment programs for girls and young women "to lead culture and policy changes for a transformative society".²⁹ These spaces may also be considered as invited spaces, depending on who is leading or taking the initiative.

Closed spaces are where decisions are made by authorities or elites behind closed doors with little broad consultation with the people whose lives might be affected by those decisions.³⁰

This research found that in a general context of shrinking spaces for civil society in the Asia-Pacific, there are many spaces closed by governments to girls and young women. In these spaces there are policies made by governments that affect girls and young women, yet they have no opportunity to participate and influence decisions. While spaces for civil society to promote rights and pursue social justice has always been contested, in recent years there have been a greater range of governments and anti-rights groups attacking civil society.³¹

In this regional research we did not identify the particular closed spaces that girls and young women are excluded from, as the research sought to learn from current and emerging actions of civic engagement and activism and utilise these findings to influence and inform future actions.

National governments and NGOs are providing girls and young women with invited spaces to develop advocacy skills and to enable them to have a voice about gender equality and social inclusion issues. Government invitations are often linked to international agendas for youth engagement on development issues. Selected youth advocates are sometimes invited to represent a youth voice in primarily adult spaces.

Girl and young women activists are claiming spaces through public demonstrations, campaigns, and press releases. Online spaces for consciousness-raising and the empowerment of girls and young women are being claimed.

There were no differences found between the Asian and Pacific regions, although it should be noted that in-person actions were riskier in contexts where political dissent was not tolerated by authorities.

Levels of civic engagement and activism

We analysed places of participation at the local, national and supranational levels to make sense of youth activism.

²⁸ Brimacombe et al. (2018) A new frontier in digital activism: An exploration of digital feminism in Fiji. Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies. Vol. 5. Issue 3, September 2018. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1002/app5.253>

²⁹ Brown Girl Woke, (2021) <https://browngirlwoke.co>

³⁰ Institute for Development Studies (2011) Powerpack: Understanding Power for Social Change, University of Sussex, www.powercube.net, p.16

³¹ CIVICUS (2021), p.12

The local level includes the personal and household level of action, as well as the arenas of everyday public life in which people are able to mobilise for change.

At the local level, female youth advocates connect with the personal lives of individuals in their close communities on issues specific to their local contexts. Local activism includes sharing stories and information about gender equality and social inclusion issues with friends and families. Another example is leading campaigns and educational programs in local schools, such as the work of Wemen View in Bangladesh and the roadshow of the 'Let's Talk About it' (*#Mulai Bicara*) campaign by Lentera Indonesia. Both of these initiatives focus on consent, gender roles and preventing sexual violence.

The national level is also a relevant level to consider citizen engagement and activism. The nation state is still a significant locus of power and public authority, and so are national political parties and courts. National government officially commit to global conventions related to gender equality and social inclusion and represent citizens in international governmental arenas.

At the national level, advocates promote campaigns on priority issues for gender equality and social inclusion. Coalitions of feminist organisations often work together to influence public agendas, national policies and national budgets. Girls and young women sometimes engage with government as citizens and hold government to account for fulfillment of their citizen rights, when there are mechanisms to do so. Citizen engagement activities include youth consultations convened by governments on particular policy topics, or youth-led submissions or petitions to parliament.

National level engagement and activism are explored more in Section 4.4., as it relates to national government responses to activism on gender equality and social inclusion.

The supranational level includes international consultative spaces and regional bodies. This level recognises that globalisation and new forms of global governance have created formal and informal places for participation beyond the nation state.

At the supranational level, networks of children and young women are working with each other and alongside formal institutions. Child Rights Coalition Asia is a regional network of child and human rights organisations, and the ASEAN Youth Forum is a regional consultative forum. International campaigns include 16 Days of Activism organised by UN Women and the International Day of the Girl organised by UNICEF. Activists involved in these initiatives may draw inspiration or a sense of solidarity from working across a regional context.

In addition to these places we also considered the 'glocal' digital spaces, where local understandings and ways of activists organising online meet with the transnational activist movement. Digital activism is explored more in Section 4.3.

Our research found that girl and young women activists are operating at all levels – local, national and supranational. Girls and young women need to be recognised and supported in their local communities before they can build the confidence, skills and networks for activism at the national level. Most youth activists who engage at the supranational level will do this in combination with national activism. Advocacy can be effective when it is grounded in local realities but is able to link across levels.

Voice and influence in civic engagement and activism

Consideration of types of power inform what kinds of participation strategies are needed for youth advocates to address gender inequality and social inclusion.

Forums which exercise visible forms of power include legislatures, local assemblies and consultative forums. These are the public spaces of formal decision-making bodies where different interests are contested.

A pathway to increase the power of women and gender and sexual minorities is to increase their representation in legislatures and other government bodies. In decision-making spaces it is important to pay attention to whose voices are present, whose interests prevail in key decisions, and whose voices are not represented and why.³² It is the goal for adolescent girls and young women to increase their influence and voice through making use of opportunities to express their views in public forums and policy submissions.

Sometimes the visible power of dominant actors is being challenged through the public advocacy and lobbying of female youth advocates. In public and formal spaces where gender equality and social inclusion issues are discussed, those who have visible power are global leaders, policy-makers and professional campaigners. Sometimes there are also leaders of development organisations who make way for diverse voices.³³ Youth activists use public demonstrations and self-created campaigns to promote their interests and to demonstrate their visible form of power, to influence decision-makers.

Hidden forms of power are used by vested interests to maintain their power and privilege by controlling the political agenda. Alternatively, people use hidden forms of power to resist domination and control. Invisible forms of power involve the ways in which the awareness of subjugated groups of their own rights and interests is silenced by the influence of dominating ideologies and values, and by socialised forms of behaviour. Strategies to address hidden and invisible power challenge the dominance of those who want to maintain the status quo.

This research identified strategies to address hidden power by strengthening the voices of girls and young women to speak about their issues through consciousness-raising and skill development to be champions and advocates for gender equality and social inclusion. Girls and young women also used research and media to challenge the ways in which issues are customarily framed. For example, the Civil Society Movement for the Elimination of Child Marriage effectively used media coverage to share information about child protection, mobilise public support and achieve legislative change in Indonesia.

Youth advocates are seeking to influence policies in the decision-making arena by increasing the representation of minority voices, changing narratives and implementing strategies to achieve success in gender equality and social inclusion issues. Another element of changing power relations more fundamentally is building the awareness of those who are excluded, and creating opportunities for their meaningful participation.

4.2. How best to enable and support the future civic engagement and activism of girls and women in the Asia-Pacific

4.2.1 Successful civic engagement and activism in the past and present and enablers

In this research we adopted a positive viewpoint to identify what was working well and to identify successful efforts by girls and young women to promote civic engagement, gender equality and inclusive societies. Below, we present highlights in civic engagement and activism where external actors responded positively to girls' and young women's activism. The research findings provide insights into what current practices need to continue and how they should be augmented for the future.

³² Institute of Development Studies, (2011) p.10.

³³ Interview with sector-based expert

Girl and young women activists mobilised themselves in groups with collective identities, and provided support to each other. The use of social media has enabled activists to find a ‘home’ online with peers who have had similar experiences and hold similar views. These activists might feel isolated within physically based communities or families.³⁴ Some felt their existence as a collective to resist oppression was a success in itself:

*We are successful because despite racism, sexism, lesbian and trans antagonism and other systems of oppression, we decided to organise ourselves as a group to combat them.*³⁵

Girls and young women exercised their voice and had opportunities to speak publicly on issues of gender equality and social inclusion. Through building their skills and confidence as agents of change, adolescent girls were able to share their opinions and engage with governments and other stakeholders. For example, the Pacific Girls program facilitated girl representatives to raise their voices in a UN Child Rights Committee meeting.³⁶ In Asia, Vietnamese youth were invited to speak in front of the National Assembly and shared their perspectives on issues of girls’ rights.³⁷ Girls Alliance members in Timor-Leste issued press releases about the needs of girls for health, education and protection during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Minister of Administration responded to their advocacy messages with actions.³⁸

Girl and young women advocates were recognised for their contributions to positive change. The success of WeMen’s advocacy work was affirmed with the “Best Volunteer Group Award” for their contribution to countering gender-based violence³⁹ and winning the “Equality Award 2020” by Plan International. WeMen View was also recognised as a Youth Organisation working for Gender Equality on Women’s Day 2020 by Ain o Salish Kendra, a legal and human rights organisation in Bangladesh.⁴⁰ Following this acclaim, the woman-led organisation was able to attract small grants, funds and donations.⁴¹ In another example, girl advocates presented a manifesto of children’s perspectives to the Parliament of Fiji through Kids Link Fiji, and was acknowledged with a certificate award from the President of Fiji.⁴²

Girls and young women used educational platforms and materials which they created for gender-transformation. Youth advocates were successful in the education of children about biology and sexual and reproductive health. They facilitated educational initiatives in Bangladesh and ‘Champions of Change’ in Solomon Islands with child-friendly activities to discuss sensitive issues such as bodily autonomy and consent. Youth leaders of these educational initiatives gained support from school boards and teachers to run the programs in schools.

Girls and young women influenced government policy. Vietnamese youth attended a STEM SPEAK forum where they contributed to a position paper about changes to legal frameworks and policies to increase gender equality in STEM fields, and they shared their advocacy messages in media interviews.⁴³ Another example at the national level from Fiji is the National Youth Climate Action Summit which focused on youth-provided input to Fiji’s climate change bill.⁴⁴ While

³⁴ Devpolicy (2017) #Feminism: digital technologies and feminist activism in Fiji , 14 March 2017, <https://devpolicy.org/feminism-digital-technologies-and-feminist-activism-in-fiji-20170314/>

³⁵ Mama Cash and FRIDA (2018)

³⁶ Interview with female youth advocate

³⁷ Interview with sector-based expert

³⁸ Interview with female youth advocate

³⁹ This was awarded by United Nations Volunteers Bangladesh, Action Aid Bangladesh and VSO Bangladesh.

⁴⁰ The Daily Star (2020) ‘What does your ideal digital world for women look like?’, 21 November 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/shout/news/how-does-your-ideal-digital-world-women-look-1998741>, accessed 15 April 2021.

⁴¹ Interview with female youth advocate

⁴² Interview with female youth advocate

⁴³ Interview with sector-based expert

⁴⁴ UNICEF (2021) ‘Hundreds of Fijian youth add their voice in national summit on the nation’s climate agenda’, Press release 16 March 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/press-releases/hundreds-fijian-youth-add-their-voice-national-summit-nations-climate-agenda>

consultations with children and youth in four Pacific countries influenced the content policies and strategies to improve online safety in the 'I Am Digital' initiative. At the local level, children in Indonesia who were part of Child Forums at the regency level were part of consultations and conducted research for the Local Development Planning Community Discussion⁴⁵.

The research identified several aspects of current practice which enable girls' and women's civic engagement and activism for gender equality and social inclusion. These aspects offer insights into how best to enable and support future girls' and women's civic engagement and activism in the Asia-Pacific.

A positive approach and a belief in the value of girls and young women enables effective engagement. The meaningful participation of girls and young women is facilitated by champions within institutions and policy-making spaces who provide them support and help keep spaces of participation open:

*[We] have champions ... in institutions who believe in the power of young girls and young advocates and who are willing to go an extra mile in their work to create those spaces for exchange and for them to [influence] decision-makers or you know, policy makers.*⁴⁶

If decision-makers have a positive attitude towards creativity and an openness to young people's fresh views and visions of the world, this can create more enriched and robust policies. Adults who are in a position to influence child and youth participation require a knowledge of children's rights, adolescent development, participation and how to safeguard children. They also need to have a commitment to gender-transformative change and social inclusion. Adults need respectful non-discriminatory attitudes and skills in self-reflection and negotiation.⁴⁷

Taking a rights-based approach to working with children may support them by recognising their right to participate and have a voice. It is the responsibility of adults to create a safer space for children to meet, share their ideas and lead actions. Adults can support children who are developing their leadership skills by providing mentoring and facilitation support.⁴⁸

Respect and support from their families and friends enables girls and young women to be effective in their advocacy. Starting at home, Girls Alliance members educated their family members to stop gender discrimination and make a safer space for children to have a voice. They also shared their views on gender-transformation and social inclusion issues with peers in their neighbourhoods, which helped gradually change attitudes and norms in their local communities. UNESCO also recognised the importance of family support, and worked with parents in Vietnam to build their awareness of feminist issues and LGBTIQ+ rights through the We Are Able project.⁴⁹ The Fiji Women's Rights Movement's GIRLS (Grow Inspire Relate Lead Succeed) program used community theatre to help girls to learn about their rights, and to engage with the parents and guardians of the girls. Some fathers who recognised the empowerment of their daughters and how this benefitted them became advocates of this program.⁵⁰

The creation of friendly spaces for girls and young women to connect with each other is an enabler of their activism. Our research found that girls often became more confident as activists when they were connected with a supportive group of other girls. To gain confidence as activists in the public sphere, girls and young women needed a series of opportunities to voice their views to decision-makers, rather than one-off engagements. They needed safe spaces to work through their doubts and learn to trust themselves.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Interview with female youth advocate

⁴⁶ Interview with sector-based expert

⁴⁷ Mama Cash and FRIDA (2018)

⁴⁸ Interview with sector-based expert

⁴⁹ Interview with sector-based expert

⁵⁰ Interview with sector-based expert

⁵¹ Interview with sector-based expert

Working together in partnerships and coalitions can also enable girls' and young women's civic engagement and activism. Young female advocates stated it was important that their activities were respected and supported by the older generation of feminists, for example by older activists attending youth-initiated events. The Youth Coalition for Girls worked effectively in Jaringan AKSI, a coalition of different youth and feminist organisations, on the campaign to stop child marriage in Indonesia. The coalition gave them a broad reach to influence society and decision-makers. The campaign to make public spaces in Indonesia free from harassment and violence towards women collaborated with public transport service companies Trans Jakarta, KRL Indonesia, Grab and Gojek. This collaboration of CSOs with the private sector also supported their advocacy to government with the 'Let's Talk About It' (#Mulai Bicara) survey. Another outstanding example is the We Rise coalition made up of seven feminist organisations focused on advancing women's and girls' leadership in the Pacific.⁵²

For social movements working towards gender equality and social inclusion to be sustained, girl and young women activists need to celebrate small wins in their activism. As one stakeholder said,

*It's just good to see your work having an impact, ... Advocacy work is a long process and it's very hard for us to be a winner in advocacy work, but ... in the middle of doing advocacy work, we can have a lot of wins, small wins and small wins are important I realise.*⁵³

If children and young advocates were encouraged by small wins in their activism, they were able to keep momentum towards change.

4.2.2 Preferred futures for successful civic engagement and activism

The research identified a range of visions for the future for girls' civic engagement and activism. These visions offer insights into current barriers or constraints and how best to enable and support future girls' and women's civic engagement and activism in the Asia-Pacific.

Activists hope to create a diverse intergenerational social movement for gender equality and social inclusion. The Pacific Feminist Charter Action Plan includes specific mention of supporting solidarity amongst diverse girls. Two-way learning between younger and older activists could strengthen the leadership capacity of girls and young women, as well as bring fresh energy, approaches and ideas to the movement.

In recognition of the fact that girls and young women are not a homogenous group, an intersectional approach which recognises diversity needs to be promoted. In the public sphere, there should be inclusion and visibility of diverse girls and young women, such as trans, disabled and indigenous women.⁵⁴ In invited programs and forums, children and young women could elect their own representatives/participants, rather than have adults control the selection.

Girls and young women need to be better supported by adults in developing their capacity as activists. In some contexts, lack of support from families and fear of community backlash was a barrier to more girls becoming active advocates for change. Their safety and wellbeing need protection, and they need to be provided with mentoring and positive female role models. Young people need to be equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, critical consciousness and experience to be effective in civic engagement and activism.⁵⁵

Girl and young women advocates would benefit from better networking with other advocates, both within their countries and across the region. To maximise their effectiveness, activists should continue to strengthen their networks and collaborate on campaigns for similar

⁵² IWDA, (2021) *We Rise Coalition Announces New Partners*, <https://iwda.org.au/we-rise-coalition-announces-new-partners/>

⁵³ Interview with sector-based expert

⁵⁴ Interview with female youth advocate

⁵⁵ Plan International (2020)

causes. Female youth advocates want to connect with each other in different countries to gain insights and new ideas from different contexts.⁵⁶ An example of an existing regional platform is the Pacific Feminist Forum, which brings together diverse young and adult women activists.⁵⁷ NGOs which work internationally may support female youth advocates in building a platform for regional connection.

In the future, girls need to occupy leadership and decision-making positions. In development programming, there should be girl advisers engaged in the design and implementation of programs to benefit girls, such as the successful Pacific Girls model.⁵⁸ There should be support for girls and young women to do their own research, monitoring and evaluation of youth engagement programs. Girls' and young women's voices should be considered in policy-making at the national government and supranational levels. There should be regional-level consultation with girls and young women to enable them to feed into policies, such as the SPC youth agenda, to achieve more gender-equal and socially inclusive policies.⁵⁹

National governments should have more mechanisms which ensure they are held accountable to girls and young women. Governments will be more responsive if they are held accountable for taking specific measures to support the empowerment of girls and young women. Young citizen score cards are an example of a child-friendly, gender-responsive and easily accessible feedback mechanism to community and government. Girls and young women should be informed about, and be able to exercise, their right to report any concerns regarding human rights violations.⁶⁰

Girl and young women advocates should have a more supportive legal and financial framework for their work. Girl and young women need support to find sources of funding, and to network with potential donors. Some groups may choose to apply for legal registration, while others will operate unregistered to maintain their autonomy, which may restrict their opportunities for international funding. Mama Cash's report found that girl-led groups recognised financial support was important. They also identified other forms of support that they needed to ensure their sustainability: knowledge strengthening, and building up technical and management skills.⁶¹

Key enablers for successful activism for gender equality included a positive rights-based approach and adults' belief in the value of engaging with girl and young women advocates. Girls and young women need the support of their families and friends, as well as friendly girl- and young women-only spaces to build confidence and solidarity. Young activists were more effective working in partnerships and coalitions with like-minded organisations, and they hope to create a diverse intergenerational movement for gender equality and social inclusion.

Preferred futures for successful civic engagement and activism reflect the importance of protecting girls and young women as they assert their identities, challenge their lack of visibility and demand full and equal rights. Due to the intersecting factors of age and gender, girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to backlash from political and economic elites that have a vested interest in preventing change. Different types of actors can play roles in mitigating risks to youth advocates and empowering girls and young women, including older-generation activists, family members and governments at the local and national level.

NGOs such as Plan International that are seeking to support girl and young women activists should provide mentoring, training and networking across the Asia-Pacific region. Programs should create spaces for youth activists to occupy leadership and decision-making positions, and they should

⁵⁶ Interview with female youth advocate

⁵⁷ Alver, J. (2019) *How Pacific Feminists are Challenging United Nations Leadership Roles*. 7 August 2019, <https://impakter.com/pacific-feminists-challenging-united-nations-roles/>

⁵⁸ Pacific Women, (2017) *Pacific Girl*, <https://pacificwomen.org/our-work/initiatives/pacific-girl/>

⁵⁹ Interview with sector-based expert

⁶⁰ Plan International (2020)

⁶¹ Mama Cash and FRIDA (2018)

adopt an intersectional approach to promote the meaningful participation of diverse girls and young women.

4.3. Past and future use of digital technologies and social media in civic engagement and activism in the Asia-Pacific region

4.3.1 Success and enablers of success in using digital technologies and social media in civic engagement and activism in the past and present

This research explored girls' and young women's use of digital technologies and social media in civic engagement and activism, and what enables them to be successful. Below are highlights of the successful use of digital technologies and social media to influence social change and promote gender equality.

Girls and young women mobilised online campaigns for gender-transformative outcomes.

For the 'Let's Talk About It' (*#Mulai Bicara*) campaign, women's rights organisations Lentera Sintas Indonesia and Magdalene organised a survey on sexual violence and gathered thousands of signatures for a petition they presented to the Parliament of Indonesia. There were almost 7000 Instagram posts with the *#Mulai Bicara* hashtag.⁶² Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, young women advocates maintained momentum lobbying for an Elimination of Sexual Violence bill (RUUK) and better support from the authorities for women's safety. Another successful example of online activism is the Youth Coalition for Girls campaign in Indonesia against child marriage (*#Indonesia Tanpa Perkawinan Anak*), which built public awareness of this issue with a social media campaign for 16 Days of Activism for the Elimination of Violence against Women. This campaign was far-reaching, receiving around 2000 mentions on social media. Advocates from Jaringan AKSI collected information through digital platforms for their evidence for the judicial review on the marriage law.⁶³

Issues of gender equality and social inclusion are being addressed through digital platforms for sharing the personal stories of girls and women.

In Bangladesh a women-led organisation, Swayong, has created an online storytelling platform which provides diverse people the space to share individual stories, including hijra/transgender communities, solo female travellers and female frontline healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two young women who co-founded Swayong wanted to create content that encouraged people to interact meaningfully on sensitive topics, breaking down inhibitions about women's issues, in an educational and empowering way.⁶⁴ An alumni of KidsLink Fiji created a Facebook page called "Our voice matters Fiji" that invited people of any age to share personal stories related to injustice or discrimination they had faced. Another example of the power of personal stories is the takeover of CARE Australia's social media accounts to tell personal accounts of the impacts of climate change in Tonga.⁶⁵

Youth forums and conferences have achieved more diverse participation of young people through prioritising accessibility through digital platforms.

An example was the UN75 Youth Forum which used a hybrid model of offline and online participation. The event was promoted through Facebook and a film crew made a live stream of the forum discussions, which participants could contribute to remotely, enabling young people who were located in rural areas, or who came from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, to join.⁶⁶ Another example was the APASD

⁶² Online Campaign on the Prevention of Sexual Violence Instagram account, accessed 12 April 2021.

⁶³ More detail is given in the story of success for Ferny in Section 4.5.

⁶⁴ Dhaka Tribune, (2021) *Women are so often treated as a collective; one woman does something wrong, and the entire population carries the blame for it*, March 2021, dhakatribune.com.

⁶⁵ Interview with female youth advocate

⁶⁶ Interview with sector-based expert

Youth conference which supported a female youth advocate who was living with physical and visual impairments to participate and deliver her advocacy message.⁶⁷

Social networking sites and blogs were successfully used to raise consciousness and expand awareness about issues of gender equality and social inclusion. Girls and young women interacted through Facebook and Instagram to build connections and discuss issues. ‘Sisterhood solidarity’ online can make digital activists feel connected and engaged despite being geographically distant from each other.⁶⁸ Social media also enables activists to gain exposure to a range of alternative narratives on issues beyond the scope of their immediate social networks or personal perspectives.⁶⁹ Learning and becoming inspired by the content shared, girls and young women have become members or followers of such groups. Some examples are the Jakarta Feminist Discussion Group with 2300 members, Girls Alliance Timor-Leste (Aliansa Labarik Feto) with 3911 followers and We Men View with 5311 followers.⁷⁰

The research found several enablers of the successful use of digital technologies and social media by girl and young women activists. These enablers offer insights into how digital activism might be used in the future to influence social change and promote gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region.

Girls and young women can be quick and adaptable in their use of learning digital technologies. Female youth advocates reported to this research project that they are savvy with social media, and had the awareness and skills needed to protect themselves online. Generations Z and Alpha, who grew up with the internet, are more comfortable in engaging in digital spaces and building relationships through online conversations than older generations.⁷¹

Girl and young women activists use many forms of interesting content and applications for digital engagement. Social media accounts which promote gender-transformation and social inclusion use posters, data infographics, story narratives, competitions, videos and short films. Live discussions can be carried out using Facebook livestream or Instagram television.

Girl and young women activists create safer and inclusive spaces to express themselves and build solidarity. According to Kabeer, building relationships and solidarity based on shared experiences in spaces where women can safely discuss issues of common concern is instrumental for promoting collective action and achieving strategic gains in the public arena.⁷² Social media allows individuals to edit their ideas and maintain control of conversations. LGBTIQ+ youth felt more comfortable talking about their identities and views online without the pressure of having a physical presence or having to respond immediately.⁷³ Marginalised groups may feel safer sharing their stories using a different or anonymous identity online, so their offline identity is protected.

In many cases of successful digital activism, there are key actors who facilitate connections between offline and online activities and engage in relationship-building between youth advocates “in real life” and on digital platforms. New media scholars remain cautious about the potential for sustained social movements existing solely online.⁷⁴ Social media sites which are dynamic require the knowledge and energy of some key individuals to drive them forward. For example, the original members of Jakarta Feminist Discussion Group have personal contact with each other offline and conduct public events such as community gatherings, book clubs and film screenings. From a core group meeting in Jakarta, their Facebook page has built a network across

⁶⁷ Interview with female youth advocate

⁶⁸ Devpolicy (2017)

⁶⁹ Brimacombe et al (2018)

⁷⁰ WeMen View (2021) WeMen View Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/wemenview>, retrieved from Facebook on 10 May 2021

⁷¹ Interview with sector-based expert

⁷² Brimacombe et al (2018)

⁷³ Lucero, L. (2017) *Safe spaces in online places: social media and LGBTQ youth*, *Multicultural Education Review*, 9:2, 117-128, DOI: 10.1080/2005615X.2017.131348

⁷⁴ Brimacombe et al (2018)

the region which includes Yogyakarta and other cities. Some of these members are also administrators on Indonesian feminist accounts on Instagram and frequently coordinate on strategy and tactics for campaigning on intersectional gender issues. They share relevant information and mediate what content reaches outward-facing social media, to avoid backlash from their opponents.⁷⁵ Digital labour is essential for establishing and maintaining an online presence, though this labour is often unpaid.⁷⁶

Choosing appropriate technologies and building the digital literacy skills of different societal groups has enabled the successful use of digital technologies and social media.

When asked to identify the enablers of her successful social media campaign, a female youth advocate identified an INGO's support in providing data to access the internet and training in social media use.⁷⁷ This indicates that those promoting inclusive child and youth engagement should invest in digital technologies that can be accessed by young people with disabilities, and should provide support to set up facilities for individuals with special needs. Youth activists also highlighted the benefit they gained from training and guidance in how to use social media effectively for their advocacy. Building the digital literacy of people of all ages can support the use of digital technologies and social media, enabling the involvement of a broader segment of the population in citizen engagement and activism.

4.3.2 Preferred futures for use and success using digital technologies and social media for civic engagement and activism

In this research, several visions for success in using digital technologies and social media for girls' and young women's civic engagement and activism were identified. These visions indicate how digital activism might be used in the future to influence social change and promote gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region.

Social networking sites will be safe for girls and young women to use for civic engagement and activism, and they will be free from the threat of cyberbullying. Digital platform providers will be held accountable for safety online, and harassment of girls and young women will not be tolerated.⁷⁸ There will be improved safety and security for users of social media through measures to protect and empower children and young people.

The potential for social media to educate the public on gender equality and social inclusion issues, and to promote public dialogue, will be realised. Multiple digital platforms can be used for strengthening social networks, mobilising the social movement and promoting campaigns. Users of social media, including girls and young women activists, will be equipped to deal with the issue of misinformation and fake news. Digital databases and websites might also be used for tracking the policy commitments of governments and holding them accountable.

Social media and digital technologies will enable more inclusive use for civic engagement and activism. People living with disabilities will be involved in the design of digital technologies so that they can be better suited to their needs. Boys, girls, men and women in all their diversity will have the skills and confidence to participate in civic engagement and activism online. The voices of girls will be amplified through the creative use of stories, art, images and video to reach a broad audience.⁷⁹

Successful digital activism by girls and young women was enabled by their fast uptake of new digital technologies and their comfort with interacting on and creating content for social media

⁷⁵ Parahita (2019)

⁷⁶ Turley, E. and Fisher, J., *Tweeting back while shouting back: Social media and feminist activism*, 2018, *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol. 28, Issue 1, 128-132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517715875>

⁷⁷ Interview with female youth advocate

⁷⁸ Plan International (2020)

⁷⁹ Interview with sector-based expert

networking sites. Activists made safer and more inclusive digital spaces to build their movements, and activists interacting online often also connected "in real life" (offline). Girl and young women activism was also enabled by support provided to access the internet and guidance in the use of social media for campaigning.

NGOs including Plan International should leverage the existing knowledge and capabilities of girls and young women with digital technologies to support their use for civic engagement and activism for gender equality. Types of enabling support include the promotion of improved safety and security for girls and young women using social media, and providing guidance and advice on its use for campaigning. NGOs should build digital databases and websites to make it easier to track the policy commitments of governments related to gender equality and social inclusion.

4.4. National governments' responses to a rise in youth activism for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region, and how positive responses might be enabled in the future

4.4.1 National governments' responses to a rise in youth activism

This section provides an overview of national governments' responses to a rise in youth activism for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Our literature review found a lack of sources on the topic of governments' responses to the rise in youth activism. While governments' responses are not usually described in formal documents, some government comments and emerging actions have been reported in media articles. Interviews provided a broader range of perspectives on governments' responses to the actions of female youth advocates and the activist networks they were connected to. In describing governments' responses, we note that governments are made up of agencies and individuals with differing views and power, and that governments are also spaces where issues are debated and contested. It is not possible to come up with findings about a single perspective or response from 'government'. Findings for Asia and Pacific are separated below to show regional trends.

National governments' responses to youth activism in the Asia region

National governments in the Asia region have some positive responses to youth activism with changes in discourse and policy, and other responses are mixed.

To some extent, governments have expanded the spaces of youth consultation and influence. One example is that the Timor-Leste Government responded positively to Plan International's Girls Alliance advocacy about the education and health rights of children. Government agencies demonstrated their support by sharing the advocacy messages of the Girls Alliance on both social media and in traditional news outlets.⁸⁰ Through their press conference message to the Minister of Education and Minister of Health, girls were able to influence official discourses in Timor-Leste. Similarly, in Indonesia some House of Representative members quoted on their individual social media accounts research provided by female youth advocates about violence against girls and women in the 'Let's Talk About It' (*#Mulai Bicara*) campaign.⁸¹

On the other hand, some governments limit youth activism through penalising protestors and dissenters. Authoritarian tactics to restrict the activities of human rights advocates have emerged, including security force repression of demonstrations and arrests of demonstrators, censorship, surveillance and repression of sharing of information through 'fake news' laws.⁸² Our research found that some youth activists are concerned about legislation that has been passed under the guise of anti-terrorism, which restricts their freedoms and strengthens the power of the

⁸⁰ Interview with female youth advocate

⁸¹ Interview with sector-based expert

⁸² CIVICUS (2021), p.14.

state to silence any political dissenters. For example, the Human Security Act passed in 2021 by the President of the Philippines greatly expands the definition of terrorism and powers of the state for surveillance on citizens and to detain suspects without charge for up to 24 days. Rights advocates are concerned the legislation is used to suppress human rights and have launched challenges in the Supreme Courts.⁸³ Civic freedoms must be defended and respected, including the right to peaceful assembly and association, outlined in The Human Rights Act and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Female youth advocates called for more dialogue between gender activists and the government, as well as more support from law enforcement agencies to protect girl and young women activists.⁸⁴

Opportunities for youth advocates at the national level are complemented by forums for youth consultation at the international level. For example, the Ministry of Home Affairs in Vietnam and the Youth Union at the UN created a Youth Advisory Group. Composed of young people from different disciplines and societal groups including minorities and people living with disabilities, this Youth Advisory Group was tasked with shaping a revised youth law.⁸⁵ A regional stakeholder comments that open and youth-friendly mechanisms for enabling young people to voice their opinions and contribute to policy and law development are limited in Asia.⁸⁶ Youth engagement strategies such as the Youth Advisory Group to government can support outcomes for young people.

While there have been mixed responses from governments to calls for policy changes on gender and social inclusion issues, there have been some successful reforms during the last five-year period from 2015 to 2020 we researched. Previously under the 1974 marriage law in Indonesia, the marriage age for girls was 16 and there was no minimum age if the marriage was given judicial consent, meaning there were many forced marriages of young girls with the approval of parents and courts. In 2019 the Constitutional Court ruled that the marriage age of girls should be increased to 19, the same as boys, and parliament made a commitment that changes to existing laws will take place in three years.⁸⁷ This was a victory for gender activists in the AKSI network, including many girls and young women who had been campaigning for many years on prevention of child marriage. This issue continues to be discussed in the public domain by NGOs, religious organisations and government. Recently, the concerns of the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Cultural Affairs were reported in Kompas about the increase in child marriages during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Minister promised a strong target to reduce the incidence of child marriage and protect children.⁸⁸

Issues which are socially controversial and connected to religious beliefs are more challenging for governments to address. For example, the elimination of the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Indonesia will require stronger political will and the cooperation of religious authorities. The experience of lobbying by Jaringan AKSI over several years to finally achieve a legislative change preventing child marriage may provide hope that the government will respond positively to awareness-raising on other sensitive issues to fulfil girls' rights in time. While in Bangladesh, due to religious norms about men's control of women's bodies and mobility,

⁸³ NPR (2020) *Why Rights Groups Worry About The Philippines' New Anti-Terrorism Law*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law>, retrieved 20 May 2021

⁸⁴ Interview with female youth advocate

⁸⁵ Interview with sector-based expert

⁸⁶ UN Vietnam (2018), *Youth offer policy solutions to the revised Youth Law*, 10 August 2018, <https://vietnam.un.org/en/4096-youth-offer-policy-solutions-revised-youth-law-commemoration-2018-international-youth-day>, retrieved 4 May 2021

⁸⁷ CNN, (2019) *Indonesia raises minimum age for marriage to curb child brides* (17 September 2019) <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/17/asia/indonesia-marriage-age-raise-intl-scli/index.html>, retrieved 3 May 2021

⁸⁸ Kompas (2020) *PMK Ministry: Family and children have a role in preventing child marriage* (February 2020) <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/02/15/15513921/kemenko-pmk-keluarga-dan-anak-punya-peran-dalam-mencegah-perkawinan-anak>

enforcing penalties on men for violence against women is sometimes resisted, including from parts of the Bangladeshi government.⁸⁹

National governments' responses to youth activism in the Pacific region

In the Pacific region, several governments are inviting girls and young women to be part of civic engagement programs and public consultations. Our research did not find specific examples of policy changes related to gender equality and social inclusion in the Pacific resulting from youth activism, this is an area for further research.

Most Pacific Island Countries have recognised the importance of youth participation in national development and some have set up specific structures and mechanisms to provide youth with opportunities to participate in development at the national and sub-national levels. The Pacific Youth Development Framework provides a regional framework for youth participation. Within these structures, gender equality and social inclusion still needs to be actively promoted and monitored to ensure that diverse youth voices are heard.

Opportunities for girls' leadership have been facilitated through partnerships between NGOs and national and subnational governments. In the Solomon Islands, Plan International⁹⁰ and Honiara City Council have been working together on gender equality and safe spaces for girls. Honiara City Council reaches out to young people in Honiara and provides them a venue to meet and participate in trainings on different topics including gender equality, prevention of sexual harassment, and sexual and reproductive health.⁹¹ Informed by girls and boys coordinated by Kids Link Fiji, the Fiji Government supported a forum for online safety for children and youth. According to one female youth advocate in Fiji, the views of girls and boys were listened to and contributed to the guidelines of the Online Safety Commission. In these different invited spaces, governments recognised girls' and young people's value as agents of change.

The opportunity for girls and young women to influence the political agenda for gender equality is limited in country contexts where governments are censoring media and public debates. Activists in Fiji have reported concerns over government attempts to regulate and control social media and censor traditional media, as well as online stalking and digital surveillance by national security forces because of their activism.⁹² While the protection of girls and young women by governments as duty bearers of their rights is crucial, sector-based experts warned that this protection should not extend to controlling girls and young women. It is important that different values and political views can be expressed, without policing or surveillance from the state.⁹³ In incidents where girls are victims of cyber-bullying or revenge porn, they have been shamed and threatened with expulsion from school, which influences other girls to feel unsafe reporting these threats or crimes. Instead, girls and young women should receive support and justice from their governments and communities.

4.2.2 Enablers for positive responses of national government to youth activism in the future

For governments to respond positively to youth activism in the future, there are opportunities to leverage existing practices and strengthen national government agendas and commitments to gender equality and social inclusion.

The valuing of girls and young women's meaningful participation and voices by national governments can be strengthened and this would provide a foundation for effective youth activism.

⁸⁹ Interview with female youth advocate

⁹⁰ Plan International Solomon Islands provides funding and mentoring for the youth advocates.

⁹¹ Interview with female youth advocate

⁹² Brimacombe et al (2018)

⁹³ Interview with sector-based expert

When governments act on the knowledge that building inclusive and peaceful societies is dependent on the active participation of young people, meaningful engagement can be fostered. Promoting the participation of children and young people in local and national government decision-making processes is crucial to fulfilling their civil and political rights, and is a key indicator of good governance.⁹⁴ One female youth advocate shared her vision:

Hopefully in 10 years things will get better ... as youth we can work with government and are allowed to be involved before the government makes a decision regarding policy, and ... our thoughts are listened to and taken into consideration. I hope in the future youth will be invited to be involved more in advocacy.

Governments need to address harmful framings of youth and instead promote young people as agents of positive social change with unique abilities and contributions to make. Our research found that many policies and programs on youth issues can associate adolescents with undesirable behaviour such as drug use, crime and unprotected sexual activity. A reframing of young people as agents of positive change, and the creation of programs which build young people's critical thinking skills and unleash their creativity, can open the way for new youth-led solutions.⁹⁵ Our research also found that when children are invited to participate in government forums or programs, there may be a bias towards those who are well-performing at school or who are considered model children in other ways. For broader inclusion in citizenship spaces, invitations need to reach a greater range of girls, boys and children of diverse genders from different societal groups. For example, it is hoped that in the Pacific girls who are pregnant, or young mothers with children, will be given the space at forums to discuss unplanned pregnancy.⁹⁶

Governments should also facilitate spaces for interaction between senior leaders and child and youth leaders. Through interaction with children and youth leaders, senior political leaders such as national ministers can hear opinions and become champions for their interests in decision-making forums. In addition, governments can enable research and gather information from young people to be included in their national reports, and they can disseminate this information widely so that it informs policy.⁹⁷

National governments can play an active role in broader leadership for societal change in norms, attitudes, relations and structures.

Governments can work together with civil society organisations to change harmful norms and strengthen the bureaucracy to protect the interests of girls and young women.⁹⁸ Our research found that in several cases, the joint advocacy of progressive government agencies and civil society can shift norms and mobilise change. Where legislation is in place to protect girls and young women, but there remain pockets of resistance to full legal implementation, governments can play a role incentivising compliance or asserting consequences for non-compliance.

In fostering inclusive governance, governments have a role to play in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue. This dialogue between people of different faiths, languages, ethnicities and cultures can lead to more respect and space for diversity – and in doing so it can help to address the needs of girls and young women who face intersecting forms of discrimination.

Girls' aspirations and confidence and their development of the skills they need to be political leaders can be enabled by legislatures and governments which demonstrate gender equality in their membership. Greater representation of women and people of diverse genders in political leadership can both demonstrate positive role models for girls, and potentially enable a space for influencing gender-transformative decisions by more diverse representation. Governments may

⁹⁴ Plan International (2020)

⁹⁵ Interview with sector-based expert

⁹⁶ Interview with sector-based expert

⁹⁷ Interview with sector-based expert

⁹⁸ Interview with female youth advocate

reform their own institutions by introducing measures to redress gender imbalances, such as quotas and earmarked funding for female candidates.⁹⁹ Capacity building programs for women parliamentarians should be prioritised.

Funding from national governments for initiatives that promote youth activism can be extended to influence gender-transformative outcomes.

Governments should strengthen their support to CSOs by adopting or funding campaigns and programs that promote a gender-transformative approach and the value of girls' and young women's participation. Our research found that very little funding was allocated to addressing the needs of adolescent girls, although adolescent girls have unique perspectives, vulnerabilities and opportunities in their life stage. Donor investments in ending violence against children make up just 0.5% of global humanitarian funding.¹⁰⁰ In the Pacific region, less than 1% of grant funding is directed to women's organisations in the region.¹⁰¹ Investment must be targeted, or funding reinvested to support adolescent girls in situations where investment has been undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰²

For national policies and the allocation of resources to be informed by the needs and priorities of girls and young women, governments need to create consultation spaces to hear their ideas and recommendations. However, invited spaces for girls' participation may not have much potential for change, unless there is strong political will on the inside to hold the space open and ensure girls voices are listened to.¹⁰³ Governments can also assist by providing funding to build the capacities of girls and young women in citizen engagement.

National governments and international bodies such as the UN can support the creation of an enabling economic and legal environment for activists. Firstly, the livelihoods of activists should be considered, and their advocacy rewarded with financial compensation so they can continue their work.¹⁰⁴ Secondly, the legal environment should be reformed to enable political dissent and a diversity of views expressed without fear of repercussions. The work at the international level by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to develop a general comment on children's digital rights¹⁰⁵ should be prioritised.

National governments need to provide an enabling environment for the inclusion of girls and young women in digital spaces, while promoting their safety and engagement as valued citizens.

For more inclusion in digital activism and online information sharing, the accessibility to the internet needs to be improved by government investment in ICT infrastructure. Young people's access to the internet and social media is a strong factor in forming social networks, and increasing education and political participation.¹⁰⁶ By increasing the affordability and availability of broadband internet across the Asia-Pacific region, including for marginalised groups and those living in rural areas, governments can help girls and young women to participate more fully in digital activism and civic engagement.

National governments can contribute to making digital spaces safer places for young gender equality advocates to interact online and share their opinions. Our research found that female youth advocates in several country contexts were concerned about, or had personally experienced,

⁹⁹ Plan International (2020)

¹⁰⁰ Plan International and Save the Children (2020) *Because we matter: Addressing COVID-19 and violence against girls in Asia-Pacific*, <https://plan-international.org/publications/because-we-matter>, p. 10

¹⁰¹ Fiji Women's Fund, (2020) *Where Is the Money For Women and Girls in the Pacific*, https://fijiwomensfund.org/where_is_the_money/

¹⁰² Plan International and Save the Children (2020)

¹⁰³ Institute of Development Studies, (2011), p.17

¹⁰⁴ Interview with sector-based expert

¹⁰⁵ Plan International (2020)

¹⁰⁶ UNESCAP (2018) *Realising Youth Inclusion for a more sustainable Asia-Pacific*. 2018.

<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD%20Realizing%20Youth%20Inclusion%20Report%20draft.pdf>

online harassment or threats because of their advocacy. Governments could improve safety by ensuring that law enforcement agencies respond to threats, and by publicly supporting gender-transformative change and young gender activists. A female youth advocate shared,

If the government starts preaching that we are supportive of these youth women and we are supportive of these gender activists and their activities then a lot of these threats would automatically go down.

Governments should also continue and expand programs for social media online safety such as “I Am Digital” in the Pacific.

Governments’ efforts to mitigate cyberbullying and inappropriate online content should increase safety, without restricting the spaces available for youth and gender activists to express their views and mobilise support. The outcomes of an excessively regulatory approach in cyber-security can be the closing of spaces for civil society and additional danger for activists if they are arrested or taken to courts for expressing their views. Government may use an approach of public education around online expectations and responsibilities (and possible codes of conduct for online behaviour) to mitigate the bullying of girls and young women. This can be accompanied by civic education about existing legal frameworks and sanctions with the intent of curtailing genuinely harmful online communication that is against public interest.¹⁰⁷

There is a range of existing international agreements that national governments can uphold and implement to enable youth activism.

National governments can promote and monitor progress towards the fulfilment of all international and regional agreements that refer to government commitments to work towards achieving gender equality. These agreements include the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, CRC, CEDAW, International Conference on Population and Development, UN Security Council Resolutions on Women and Youth, Peace and Security and the annual Commission on the Status of Women’s agreed conclusions.¹⁰⁸ Agreements for progressing social inclusion are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Governments should withdraw all reservations to international agreements that provide protection for girls listed above, with provisions that cover sexual and reproductive health and rights, equality in marriage and family life and freedom from gender discrimination.¹⁰⁹ In addition, national governments can extend their gender equality frameworks and ensure there is a clear process for engaging children and young people, and that it is followed.

National governments should uphold legislation that protects girls and young women when they choose to be politically active. Children and young people who take action to promote, protect and fulfil their own human rights deserve the same protection as adults as detailed in the Declaration of Human Rights Defenders.¹¹⁰ The protection of human rights also includes governments refraining from coercion or violence to limit young people’s participation in public demonstrations. Young people’s freedom of expression and right to demonstrate publicly must be respected.

¹⁰⁷ Brimacombe et al (2018)

¹⁰⁸ Plan International (2020)

¹⁰⁹ Plan International (2017) Girls rights are human rights.

¹¹⁰ Plan International (2020) Engaging girls, boys and youth.

4.5. Stories of successful youth activism for gender equality and social inclusion

Ferny

Youth Coalition for Girls, Indonesia

Promoting the prevention of child marriage in Indonesia through digital activism

Ferny, 21 years of age, is playing her part to prevent child marriage through the Youth Coalition for Girls, an organisation that works for the fulfilment of child rights and equality for Indonesian girls. Ending child marriage in Indonesia is a priority issue in the National Mid-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020-2024. The national social and economic survey (Susenas) 2018 showed that one in every nine girls (under the age of 18) was married, and the number of women aged 20–24 who were married before the age of 18 was estimated to be 1,220,900.¹¹¹ The prevalence of child marriage is spread unevenly between provinces of Indonesia, and in 11 out of 34 provinces the rate of child marriage increased between 2018 to 2019. Although the national rate of child marriage has been steadily decreasing every year, change is still very slow¹¹², and the absolute number of child marriages in Indonesia still ranks the eighth in the world.¹¹³

Ferny has been focused on the campaign to prevent child marriage and violence against women for the last four years. She has coordinated and joined several initiatives, and this has kept her engaged in efforts to stop child marriage. Among them are public discussions and knowledge sharing on gender equality; a fundraising campaign selling T-shirts with hashtag *#IndonesiaTanpaPerkawinanAnak*; online discussions on child marriage issues; and an online survey of the child marriage situation in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mobilisation as a child and youth advocate

Ferny's serious concern with the child marriage issue began when she joined a child forum. She first learned about children's issues such as child abuse, child marriage, and human trafficking, in the child forum from the facilitator who happened to be a member of the Plan International's youth advisory panel. When she became a youth, she felt more concerned about these issues and wanted to contribute more. She looked for a youth organisation that shared her focus and values of gender equality, and found the Youth Coalition for Girls. That's where her activism on child marriage issues started, according to Ferny:

I felt my concern raised there, I felt I was part of it, and I did not want any children to experience child abuse or child marriage. I have not experienced child marriage myself but I see around me that the consequences are terrifying. I think the poverty chain will not break while child marriage still exists and the rate of maternal mortality and [school] drop out will increase.¹¹⁴

Awareness-raising approach to youth advocacy

Ferny believes in the importance of awareness-raising among youth to stop child marriage. She acknowledged that persuading youth to be aware of child marriage issues is not easy, especially

¹¹¹ Badan Pusat Statistik (2020), Prevention of Child Marriage: Acceleration that cannot wait, Jakarta: Kementerian Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional, <https://www.unicef.org/indonesia/sites/unicef.org/indonesia/files/2020-06/Prevention-of-Child-Marriage-Report-2020.pdf>, p. x.

¹¹² The rate of child marriage in was 11.2% in 2018, 10.8% in 2019 and 10.2% in 2020.

¹¹³ Badan Pusat Statistik (2020)

¹¹⁴ Interview with Ferny, 29 March 2021.

because child marriage issues might not seem as relevant as mental health issues to many youth. Most youths are aware of or exposed to mental health issues, but not all of them experience child marriage, and some may not even be aware that child marriage is a problem. In response to that situation, Ferny and her friends in Youth Coalition for Girls initiated an intense online campaign ‘16 days of activism for HAKTP (The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women)’ in November 2020 to build awareness of the child marriage issue.

Online campaign on the prevention of child marriage for 16HAKTP 2020.

The Youth Coalition for Girls (YCG) conducted this campaign for 16 days from 18 November to 13 December 2020 on Instagram National YCG (@ycg.id) and the sub-national YCG groups (@ycgkotakupang, @ycg.riau), supported by the feminist coalition *Jaringan AKSI* and NGO Plan International Indonesia on “Hari Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan/ HAKTP” (The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women). The child marriage issue was selected for this online campaign because in 2020 a YCG online survey found that the rate of child marriage had been increasing during the pandemic. The campaign was launched by inviting youth to download pictures and fact sheets about child marriage from YCG and share in their own Instagram accounts with the hashtag “#IndonesiaTanpaPerkawinanAnak” (Indonesia without Child Marriage).

More than 300 youth joined the WhatsApp group and uploaded information about the prevention of child marriage and its consequences online via Instagram (IG stories, feed), and they did it for 16 days consecutively. In total, there were almost 2,000 Instagram posts with the hashtag #IndonesiaTanpaPerkawinanAnak and all content was related to YCG’s Campaign on 16HAKTP.¹¹⁵ The YCG also invited youth to join the live discussion on YCG’s Instagram in collaboration with sub-national YCG groups, such as YCG Kupang and YCG Riau organisations.

Social media successfully used to reach and mobilise youth

Ferny has intertwined her interest in social media with the gender equality issues she is concerned about. She uses Instagram as her main social media platform for digital activism. For her, Instagram has many useful features for sharing information, such as feed posts; interactive story features; polling; asking opinions, and live discussion. She creates content related to gender equality and child protection issues, including child marriage and mental health, and recently she also advocated as part of the campaign to influence the national government to pass the sexual violence eradication bill (RUU PKS). Ferny said that although at first she couldn’t see the impact of her digital activities, after five years of work she found that social media activism had been appreciated by other youth who noted her posts are informative and insightful.

In the online campaign on the prevention of child marriage for 16HAKTP 2020, Ferny, was very proud to see how YCG could influence many people to be aware of the child marriage issue. As of April 2021, there were 13209 posts with #16HAKTP hashtag in Instagram, linking to various campaigns from different organisations and individuals.¹¹⁶ Volunteers were mobilised to publicise the issue on social media, which was zero-cost, as all participants were voluntarily involved. For her, advocating on child marriage issues is not easy, and having many people give their time to share and post about child marriage on their social media accounts will open doors to reach more people. The experience of being heard and influencing people is essential for her because it has made her more enthusiastic about continuing to advocate to prevent child marriage.

¹¹⁵ Indonesia tanpa perkawinan anak (Indonesia without child marriage) Instagram account, accessed on 12 April 2021.

¹¹⁶ 16HAKTP Instagram account, accessed on 12 April 2021.

“I was very happy because ... persuading many people to be aware of the child marriage issue is not an easy thing. I was very happy that many people were willing to make time to share posts on their Instagram and I was like wow, so many young people care about this issue! ... Although it was exhausting and we were nervous and worried if we made a mistake, the result made me very happy. I was also happy because we did it together. We received a good response as well and that makes us happier. It motivates us to continue our campaign for preventing child marriage” says Ferny.¹¹⁷

The use of digital technologies and social media for advocacy and to build support for youth activism is even more relevant because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite social media making activism activities easier, Ferny has realised that online interactions are different to offline activities. They require digital literacy and good internet connection. Therefore, the online campaign will be limited in scope as it is only targeted to youth who have mobile phones and good internet connectivity in their areas.

Ferny also acknowledges that there are risks that may arise from creating online content for campaigns to end child marriage. One of the risks is hoax content in social media platforms, which create the potential for YCG’s sensitive content to be flipped or mislabelled to represent the wrong message. The other risk is people’s reactions, such as questions and protests, especially from specific communities that believe child marriage is acceptable. When YCG receive that kind of response, they usually discuss it and find a way to respond to it together.

Personal motivations and attributes of youth advocates

Ferny felt that she could be involved as a youth advocate, because she has both strong willpower and privileges. Growing up in a village, Ferny was exposed to situations where there was low awareness of gender equality issues. However she had better opportunities than other girls to receive a good education, connection, and the opportunity to engage in youth activism. Meanwhile, many girls face obstacles to accessing information and some of them cannot afford the transportation costs associated with joining in such activities. Ferny explains:

*Youth like me have opportunities because I have willpower and privilege as well as connections ... I see that young people around me are not aware of such issues but I’m different because I’m educated and my school has enough connection and also opportunity. In the Child Forum, they reimbursed my travel cost so I could go to their headquarters. Some girls do not have access to information. Maybe some other girls do but they do not have money to travel. It’s difficult for them.*¹¹⁸

Ferny also recognises there are educational and class gaps among youth themselves. When she moved to Jakarta to pursue her degree, she found out that most youth came from prestigious backgrounds and had excellent English skills, which was not the case with her. She thinks that she would not be a youth advocate if she didn't have a strong will to learn.

Ferny emphasises that people need to know that youth activism exists, and that young people can prevent child marriage. While many young people have made efforts to promote gender equality, she explains that many youth in rural areas do not have the opportunity to be aware of gender issues because there are no spaces where they can discuss them. By promoting child marriage

¹¹⁷ Interview with Ferny, 29 March 2021.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Ferny, 29 March 2021.

prevention in social media, she hopes that more youth can be exposed and interested to join YCG or even follow their activities. She believes that the child marriage issue needs young people to engage and take action to prevent it.

Youth networks and collaboration as important factors to enable youth civic engagement and activism

YCG has extensive networks at the national and sub-national levels, and Ferny believes that good collaboration between youth through national and sub-national networks was a key strategy in the 16 days of action for the campaign. She also took advantage of her network in various forums and communities, such as *Jaringan AKSI*, a participatory, collaborative network containing many activists, CSOs, and NGOs that work on intersectional feminist issues, including Plan International Indonesia and UNICEF. The networks are not only for mobilising youth activism, but also for sharing information about opportunities for youth to join activities on various related topics and issues. Ferny describes the importance of working in youth activist networks:

Actually our friends have helped to popularise it [the child marriage issue] since the beginning. And what makes us succeed is how we utilise our network. We involve youth from other areas as much as we can...Some activists are also involved with other organisations besides YCG ... So in my opinion this campaign is booming because we have all collaborated very well, national YCG, YCG Riau and YCG Kupang. And the youth indeed, since we share a common concern we really have done this together. How we work together, that's what makes this campaign successful.¹¹⁹

Collaboration with other stakeholders, such as NGOs and the government, is no less important for advocacy on gender equality. Plan International Indonesia has been involved in capacity building for YCG's members and contributed funds for an online survey on child marriage. Ferny said that the government is rarely directly involved in the YCG campaign activities, but they appreciated it when young people carried out advocacy activities. The YCG members were also invited to join various government activities on gender equality through their CSO and NGO networks. For example, in 2018 Ferny was invited to join the regional-level Asian Youth Forum in South Korea where she talked publicly about inclusivity of women in the workforce.

Ferny realises that more and more youth communities are being established with an awareness of gender equality. She hopes that in the next five years, all of these youth communities will continue working together and collaborating in a large network. She feels they cannot work alone and need to continue working together to improve gender equality in Indonesia. In her vision, she wants the government to support youth and involve more of them in the decision-making process so that youth interests will be heard. She hopes that the government can be more responsive in handling cases and strengthening its role in implementing the amendment of the marriage law for a minimum age of marriage.

"Hopefully in 10 years things will get better ... as youth we can work with government and are allowed to be involved before the government makes a decision regarding policy, and...our thoughts are listened to and taken into consideration. I hope in the future youth will be invited to be involved more in advocacy" concludes Ferny.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Interview with Ferny, 29 March 2021.

¹²⁰ Interview with Ferny, 29 March 2021.

Khadiza

WeMen View, Bangladesh

Countering gender-based violence through education and digital campaigns

Twenty-four-year-old Khadiza immerses herself in promoting gender equality in Bangladesh by leading *WeMen View*, a registered Voluntary Social Welfare Organisation that aims to counter sexual harassment. The organisation focuses on children and young people and seeks to change pre-existing gender perceptions and develop a vivid understanding of consent. By promoting the importance of understanding gender-based violence, she engages youth in looking at gender-based violence issues in their own environments and nurtures ideas on how to reduce the incidence of this form of abuse in Bangladesh.

Sexual harassment, intimate partner violence and dowry-related violence are grave concerns in Bangladesh. A 2015 survey found that over 70 per cent of married women and girls in Bangladesh had faced some form of intimate partner abuse. Over 70 per cent of these survivors had never told anyone about what they had been subjected to, and only three per cent took legal action.¹²¹ According to the legal aid and human rights organisation *Ain o Salish Kendra*, 201 women reported being harassed, 1627 women were raped and 53 were murdered after being raped in 2020.¹²² The number of actual cases of abuse is much higher than the number reported. A 2020 Human Rights Watch report found that government response to gender-based violence is inadequate, there is a shortage of shelters and other support services for survivors, and there are barriers to reporting assault or seeking legal recourse.¹²³ As in many other parts of the world, violence against girls and women in Bangladesh increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁴

Khadiza started *WeMen View* in 2018 with eight youth volunteers who shared the goal of reducing gender-based violence. She started working with the team and then recruited more people in 2019. The primary work of *WeMen View* is teaching young people about gender roles, personal space, consent, good touch and bad touch, and intervention techniques in case witnessing someone getting harassed. In the education of boys and girls, they hope to combat the sexism, rape culture and toxic masculinity that contribute to gender-based violence. *WeMen View* provides teaching to underprivileged children who mainly study in public primary schools. In 2020, *WeMen View* had reached more than 1000 students and teachers all over the greater Dhaka area and had collaborated with more than ten non-governmental organisations.¹²⁵

“There is a lot of rape and sexual harassment in Bangladesh that girls face every day. You could go ask around anyone and like at least 70-80% would say that yes, they have been at least harassed once in their life. So what came into my mind was that I want to work with the cause, I want to work with children ... so that we can protect the future generation” says Khadiza.¹²⁶

Addressing taboo issues in a conservative society

¹²¹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2016), *Report on Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2015*, https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Bangladesh_VAW_survey_report_2015_compressed.pdf.

¹²² Ain o Salish Kendra (2020), *Statistics on Human rights Violations, Victims of Rape, Violence Against Women*, 31 December 2020, <https://www.askbd.org/ask>.

¹²³ Human Rights Watch (2020), *I Sleep in My Own Deathbed: Violence against Women and Girls in Bangladesh: Barriers to Legal Recourse and Support*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/29/i-sleep-my-own-deathbed/violence-against-women-and-girls-bangladesh-barriers>.

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch (2020).

¹²⁵ *WeMen View* (2021) *WeMen View* website, wemenview.org.

¹²⁶ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

Working on gender-based violence issues in Bangladesh is not an easy road for Khadiza and her team in *WeMen View*. They put forward some ideas on gender issues that are controversial in conservative parts of society. At first, it was difficult for the organisation to get access to schools because gender-based violence is classified as sensitive. When she told schools that *WeMen View* wanted to teach the students about good touch and bad touch, consent and personal space, some teachers were scared to raise these topics because they knew parents might have issues with this.

“There are religious issues and conservativeness in our society where people if they get to know that we’re working with stuff like this like body autonomy or anything ... they could even take away their children from the school. So it’s very risky. It was very hard to, hard for us to get access and with proper consent and permission” says Khadiza.¹²⁷

Khadiza understands that there are risks associated with activism on gender issues. Potential risks include threats, both to female activists and their family members and this might make people too scared to join the movement.

“Whenever we start working in the field of gender we know that we could get killed, but it’s fine. What we actually fear is the danger to our family members and friends ... volunteers that I work with, I try not to engage with them in too controversial projects because a lot of them are under 18 and I cannot really put them at risk” says Khadiza.¹²⁸

Stories on education activities

In *WeMen View* teaching activities, Khadiza acknowledges the importance of building rapport with the students and the roles of school teachers in supporting the gender-focused education. She believes the key to successfully teaching gender-related material is to make the students comfortable through different activities before the workshops. In her experience, teachers also contribute a lot by supporting students to go along with those processes because students feel safer around their teachers.

Khadiza doesn’t really identify a single success story from her activism educating children about gender-based violence, but she is motivated when she sees the impact of her work on children’s lives. In her journey, she has been influenced by stories from girls and boys who have benefited from the *WeMen View*’s teaching projects.

*There were moments when they [WeMen View] taught good and bad touch, and a girl stood up and said, “Does that mean that what was happening to me all these days was actually wrong but I didn’t know anything?” The child was being harassed almost every day and she did not understand that. So she cried and thanked us and said that, “Now I know what I had been going through, and I did not realise that before”.*¹²⁹

Speaking of another case, Khadiza recalled:

A boy started asking very specific questions like, “What if someone tries to pin me down inside my room, what do I do then”? So after that we answered his questions, and he started realising and then he told us that he had been facing a lot of issues but he did not know that

¹²⁷ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

¹²⁸ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

¹²⁹ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

*these were wrong and now he knows who to talk to and how to talk and who to go to when he faces this abuse.*¹³⁰

Based on experiences like these, Khadiza has become convinced that they are on the right track in the education project, that many child and youth need their support, and that working in the issue of gender-based violence is extremely necessary.

*So this is when I particularly felt very satisfied that yes, what we are doing is correct. And these were moments ... I felt really satisfied that ... what we are doing is very much needed because these children do not even know that they're being harassed and they need to know this and they need to be aware of what they can do about it.*¹³¹

Digital campaign as an approach in mobilising youth to join the movement

Social media is being used by many youth movements, and Khadiza explained that *WeMen View* also uses digital campaigns to attract people by sharing information on social media about their organisation's activities and actions. For her, social media plays a huge role in connecting people who think the same way as *WeMen View*, and in creating platforms for girls, women and activists who believe they can contribute to the movement for gender equality.

As the use of social media has increased in Bangladesh, Khadiza has begun to see her personal activities on social media as being about more than her personal interests. Social media is also a valuable tool to influence people and attract volunteers to join the movement against gender-based violence. Khadiza usually uses Facebook to share her work because she knows many people will be inspired or interested in the work on eliminating gender-based violence. With around 1500 followers on Facebook, she frequently posts articles about gender equality, prevention of sexual violence and digital security, shares referral services contacts details and promotes opportunities for youth to join activism. She believes that social media will play a massive role in bringing everyone together in this journey.

*Because it's a voluntary organisation, it's really hard to get volunteers who will dedicatedly work for the cause without any remuneration. So it was really crucial for me to prove to them that this could be a good thing and the causes that we work on could actually impact a lot of people. So that's one of the biggest ways I use social media. I usually showcase a lot of my work, to encourage others to also do this work.*¹³²

WeMen View recently conducted an awareness-raising event called 'Digital Utopia: An Ideal Online World for Girls' co-hosted by Plan International Bangladesh. This project shared stories about gender-based violence through a mobile short movie competition to put forward a female-centric vision of an ideal, safe, and secure online world for women. According to a recent report in the *Daily Star*, 80 per cent of the victims of cyberbullying in Bangladesh are adolescent girls and women in their early twenties.¹³³

¹³⁰ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

¹³¹ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

¹³² Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

¹³³ The Daily Star (2021) *A Cyberspace Unsafe for Women*, 8 April 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/shout/news/cyberspace-unsafe-women-2073937>.

Digital Utopia: An Ideal Online World for Girls

- Taking a cue from Plan International Bangladesh’s theme of “Online Freedom – Digital Safety and Security for Girls” for the 2020 Equality Awards, *WeMen View* arranged the ‘Digital Utopia’ event.
- It was an all-girl project – the judges were girls, the event was organised by girls and it was for girls.
- On the interactive platform of ‘Digital Utopia’ short films on themes about women’s freedom, safety and security in the digital realm were showcased and discussed.
- The focus was on what an ideal, safe and secure online world would look like for Bangladeshi girls and women. The event raised awareness about digital security for girls and young women.
- Through this competition, the organisers promoted the work that the women filmmakers and cinematographers are doing in Bangladesh so that more girls are encouraged to become cinematographers and filmmakers.
- Anonymous real stories of girls and women facing sexual harassment in public places were also shared on the platform.

Shifting the focus from children to youth due to COVID-19 pandemic impact

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, *WeMen View* had to change its entire advocacy plan. Before the pandemic, the primary focus of *WeMen View* was on face-to-face educational activities with children. As the pandemic hit Bangladesh, Khadiza and her team moved to online platforms, worked more closely with youth, and added relief projects to support children and communities in dealing with the pandemic.

To date, *WeMen View* has educated around 50 youth volunteers on gender issues, including different tiers of gender-based violence, how these take place and how they can be changed. In conjunction with their advocacy using social media, they have partnered with many organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic for different projects, including providing humanitarian assistance and other advocacy activities. As individuals, families and communities were suffering after the lockdown, *WeMen View* contributed by providing food, including for transgender communities and vulnerable girls and their families.

Creating a safer environment and support services for future activism

For future activism, Khadiza emphasised the importance of a safe environment and support services for youth activists. She felt that girls and young people are highly motivated to create gender equality, and they need protection.

To support the youth gender activists, the government needs to provide a safer environment to enable them to voice their opinions and address the threats they receive from their opponents. In Bangladesh, women and girls frequently do not trust police to respond appropriately to their complaints and provide protection, and they fear that contacting the police will place them at further risk of abuse.¹³⁴ The government needs to give practical support to youth activists through law

¹³⁴ Human Rights Watch (2020).

enforcement agencies, and these agencies need to let the public know that they are aware of gender issues and are working on creating change.

There is also a controversial digital security act in Bangladesh that some activists believe restricts their freedom and their ability to express their opinions. The government should consider changes to the digital security act to ensure the safety of youth activists working on gender issues.

"If these are not taken care of, if these policies are not changed, and if they cannot provide a safer environment for us, eventually, many great movements will die down because of the safety issues" says Khadiza.¹³⁵

The provision of mental health support services for youth activists is no less crucial. Many youth activists experience mental health issues, especially those working to support victims of gender-based violence. They could be referred to legal aid organisations, and to relevant organisations or counsellors, even government services. However, *WeMen View* does not have dedicated funding for mental health support services. Gender activists need professional mental health support to stay healthy and keep working.

Expand the network to engage stakeholders

A key enabler for future activism is continuous support from key stakeholders. So far, dialogue sessions between gender activists and the government have rarely happened. Khadiza thinks that having more dialogue sessions where they can work together is very important because they would enable the government to gain more understanding of what is needed to support gender equality and reductions in gender-based violence. Currently, she is also working on expanding the network with the government and other stakeholders in the hope they can work together with *WeMen View* in the future.

I expect the adults, or the older generation, to actually not stop us in voicing our opinion, not bully us, and not harass us. Instead, in the future they will come with us to support these (gender equality) causes.¹³⁶

Five to ten years from now, Khadiza expects youth and the next generation of children to be sensitised about gender issues. She wants to see youth activists bring about a change, and she wants them to keep talking about consent, harassment, and policies that should be changed. She also hopes to see comprehensive sexual education and more measures to ensure gender equality.

¹³⁵ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

¹³⁶ Interview with Khadiza, 29 March 2021.

Anamalia

Talitha Project, Tonga

Empowering girls and young women in Tonga to stand up and take action for change

For eighteen-year-old Anamalia, the absence of girls and women in decision-making processes at home, in the community and in her country motivates her to support and empower girls and young women in Tonga.

Anamalia is a youth mentor with the Talitha Project, an NGO committed to empowering girls and young women aged 10–24 years to make informed decisions through informal education, life skills and development programs. In 2017, Anamalia started as a participant in Talitha programs and now she is helping to inform and shape the program for girls, particularly in the areas of empowerment and leadership, issues she is very passionate about.

In the Pacific, traditional leadership and education systems tend to prescribe more traditional roles to women as home-makers and/or participants in more feminised sectors such as teaching and nursing. Generally, limited attention is given to educating young women regarding their potential as leaders and the opportunities for them to participate in decision-making. High rates of gender-based violence in the Pacific region, although they do not impact all women equally, affect young women's potential to engage in leadership and decision-making.¹³⁷

NGO provides the platform to build girls activism and agency

Through her affiliation with the Talitha Project, Anamalia has been able to participate in forums and workshops in Tonga and other Pacific Island countries, establishing herself in the Pacific feminist movement as a genuine and passionate advocate. *"She [Anamalia] is a great advocate, very articulate but very genuine. She is not a performer. It's just what she has to say"* (Sector Specialist). Anamalia has also been invited to youth engagement activities by international NGOs such as Habitat for Humanity New Zealand and CARE Australia (described in more detail below). She has also had the opportunity to engage with regional programs such as the Pacific Girl program (an initiative under the Australian Aid Program's Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program) in which she was able to work alongside girls from Papua New Guinea Equal Playing Field, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, CARE Vanuatu and other organisations.

Being invited to participate in national and regional forums and workshops has enabled Anamalia to use these platforms to advocate on girl's empowerment and leadership. *"In these places I am able to speak and channel discussions about how important it is for women to be in leadership, and how important it is to create a society that young girls and women feel safe to live in"*¹³⁸ says Anamalia.

The Talitha Project provides a platform for girls and young women in Tonga to discuss and advocate about issues affecting girls and women in Tonga and internationally such as domestic violence, cyber bullying and sexual reproductive health. In 2018, the Talitha Project started an initiative in partnership with telecommunications company Digicel Tonga to address cyber bullying. They held a competition for high schools to compile one-minute videos shared on Talitha Project's

¹³⁷ Pacific Women Support Unit, (2017) *Women in Leadership Roadmap Synthesis Report: Informing the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Roadmap*, https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Leadership_SynthesisReport_FINAL_April2017.pdf, p. 9.

¹³⁸ Interview with Anamalia, 7 April 2021

Facebook page as a means to raise awareness about cyber bullying. Anamalia featured in Tonga High School's submission to the competition as the lead singer for the advocacy song called "Think Again" which she composed with friends.

Talitha Project also focuses on the empowerment of girls and young women to take up leadership opportunities through building their knowledge, confidence and skills. In an interview featured in a news article on the Tonga Broadcasting Commission website, Anamalia talks about her experience at a Regional Housing Forum she attended in 2019:

"So I did not have formal information or statistics but I spoke from the heart by emphasising that we youth should be included in all decision-making regarding housing because it is our future that we are talking about and we do not want to be left out because our voices and our opinions do matter in this situation ... I also want to emphasise to youth that if they want to see change in their country, if they want to see a change in their communities, they have to shape that change, they can't just sit around and always expect and rely on the older generations to do the work to make the change that they want to see." Anamalia added, "You have to start now because this is the time to make the change and you have to be the change because you are the solution to all the issues in our community and in our society".¹³⁹

Engaging with men and boys is an important component of programming which aims to end violence against women, and through the Talitha Project's *Front Row Against Violence* program, rugby tournaments are held for girls and boys. Participation of both girls and boys is controversial since rugby and touch rugby are often considered men's sports. Anamalia is supporting the implementation of activities in this program to encourage a positive shift in attitudes and behaviours.

In 2019, with the support of Habitat for Humanity New Zealand, Anamalia travelled to Thailand to be on a panel in a Housing Forum. Anamalia has used platforms such as this to represent, advocate, and raise awareness on the problems girls and young women face. Anamalia considers these experiences a high point in her activism:

Although being so nervous, I spoke on the topic, how I think government and stakeholders, and everyone should come together and work together. After my speech, I got a standing ovation. I think that point was probably the highest point for me because, you know, it really showed me that I am doing something ... that I'm being acknowledged and my message that I'm trying to get across is being acknowledged by all these people in government and people who are way older than me, who have all these positions like CEOs or directors or something like that. But also – every time that I'm at forums, I am able to represent all the young people like me, in addressing issues such as climate change or domestic violence. And I think every time that I'm up on that stage, I always take it to heart, the others ... the thousand other people that I'm representing. And that for me is always the highest point.¹⁴⁰

In 2020, Anamalia attended the global gathering of the National Child Rights Committee on the Rights of the Child held in Samoa, representing the Pacific Girl program. It was a historic occasion, given it was the first time any of the UN treaty body had held a regional session outside of Geneva or New York. Anamalia shared her perspective on the lived realities of children in the Pacific region

¹³⁹ Tonga Broadcasting Commission (2019), *Local schoolgirl emphasises importance of Safe Housing at Regional Forum*, 24 September 2019, <http://www.tonga-broadcasting.net/?p=15987>.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Anamalia, 7 April 2021

and the issue of violence against children. She called for actions to prevent bullying, domestic violence, economic violence and sexual violence towards children. Anamalia concluded her speech by encouraging Pacific children to take action: *“We cannot always rely on our leaders, elders and parents to do everything for us, we Pasifika children can be leaders in our own homes, schools and society. Our leaders and elders have done so much for us, now it’s time for us to do ours”*.¹⁴¹

Supporting and mentoring young activists

Leaders in NGOs can provide mentoring for youth activists to hone their decision-making and leadership skills. This foundation in leadership skills is further enhanced by the opportunities young leaders have to participate in various networks. When girls and young women engage in activities that they define and control, this helps them take on responsibilities, gain vital skills and acquire the confidence necessary to become empowered and successful activists. Anamalia draws inspiration and empowerment from her family and from the Director of the Talitha Project, Vanessa Heleta. *“She really encourages me when I’m given opportunities such as this [representing youth at an international forum], to really use the opportunity to do the best I can in expressing my opinions as well as representing the voices of others behind me”*¹⁴², says Anamalia.

CARE Australia supported Anamalia’s growth as an activist and creates opportunities which ensure the voices of young Pacific women are heard. In 2020, Anamalia was given the opportunity by CARE Australia to use its social media accounts to advocate on the issue of the climate crisis and its impact on young people in Tonga. To support Anamalia with this online activism, CARE Australia provided her with internet connectivity and internet data. Internet access problems are a barrier to online activism that Anamalia highlighted, as internet connectivity is not reliable in Tonga. She was also provided access to CARE Australia’s social media accounts to enable her to post stories. She was provided technical support to identify the type of language that should be used online, and to understand how to use social media effectively in her advocacy work. Anamalia believes this type of support was important for her as social media is an important platform in advocacy because most people communicate and engage on social media networking sites. Especially for young people, social media enables wider reach.

Continuing activism for gender equality despite the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the challenges faced by adolescent girls in Tonga and other Pacific Island countries. Key issues identified in the ‘Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey’ included disrupted education, increased anxiety and loneliness, feeling isolated and unsafe at home and online, increased care burdens at home, and disrupted access to menstrual hygiene and sexual health services.¹⁴³

For Anamalia, COVID-19 brought a lot of challenges to the Talitha Project and the activities she is involved in. Due to the government-sanctioned lockdown at 8 pm each night to prevent the spread of COVID-19, she was not able to do many activities after school. She was also restricted from travelling, and due to challenges in accessing the internet, she could not always attend workshops

¹⁴¹ Talitha Project Tonga (2020) <https://www.facebook.com/TalithaProjectTonga/posts/2450940758344328>, posted 5 March 2020, accessed 14 April 2021.

¹⁴² Interview with Anamalia, 7 April 2021

¹⁴³ Gibbs, L. (2020) *Don’t be afraid to interrupt! Injecting the voices of adolescent girls into the COVID-19 pandemic response*, <https://pacificwomen.org/news/dont-be-afraid-to-interrupt-injecting-the-voices-of-adolescent-girlsinto-the-covid-19-pandemic-response/>, 26 October 2020.

and forums that shifted from being face-to-face activities to being held online. These challenges with internet connectivity are commonly experienced in Tonga, especially in rural areas, and may be a barrier to activist networking.

Despite these challenges, Anamalia and other youth activists have continued their work during 2020 and 2021, and their voices promoting gender equality and girls rights have not been stifled.

Working together for gender equality

There has been positive progress in recent decades in advancing gender equality but there are still barriers faced by girls, women and gender and sexual minorities. For Anamalia, culture is still a barrier to advancing gender equality in Tonga, and her vision for the future is that everyone will work together to advance gender equality:

I feel like there's very small opportunities out there for girls to really speak. I hope that our culture, in the next five to ten years' time, would not be one of the biggest barriers, as it is now, because one of the biggest barriers to really advocating in gender equality is culture. We have a rich culture here in Tonga that identifies males as decision-makers in everything. So, that is a dream for the future, that government and everyone, our communities, would work together to really help break that barrier down because that is quite a big and tough one to break, which is culture. But just to get everyone to work together – that is my dream for the future.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Anamalia, 7 April 2021.

5. Conclusion

This research presents insights from past and current experiences of female youth advocates for gender equality and social inclusion. It gathered information about citizen engagement programs and from key stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region, and also obtained insights from a document review.

The research found that girls and young women across the Asia-Pacific are advocating for similar issues related to gender-transformation and social inclusion, and on themes such as respect, autonomy, voice and resources.

In analysis of emerging trends of civic engagement and activism, we found girls and young women mobilising in both invited and claimed spaces. Girls and young women are represented in some government-invited spaces for policy consultation, and these spaces also provide opportunities for girls and young women to increase their capacity for citizen engagement. NGOs also invite girl and young women activists into friendly spaces to develop their leadership skills and voices.

Girls and young women have actively claimed spaces, such as public demonstrations, campaigns and press releases, for communicating their messages. Girls and young women are working at the local, national and supranational levels to address visible and hidden power imbalances and challenge the status quo in order to create a more gender-equal society.

Girls and young women advocates are building their movements with a range of approaches including working together with boys and men; education strategies; self-conscientisation; connecting with networks or coalitions of organisations. There are many creative tactics used to raise awareness, mobilise youth, and influence public opinion or policy towards gender-transformative change.

Girls and young women can be enabled in their future civic engagement and activism in institutions and policy-making spaces by adult champions who believe in their value and make spaces for their contributions. Girls and young women need respect and support from their families and friends, as well as friendly spaces in which to connect with each other and build their confidence as activists. Activists hope for a future with a diverse intergenerational social movement for gender-transformation and inclusion, and for being better networked with other advocates across the region. Girls hope to occupy leadership and decision-making positions, especially on programs and policies designed to benefit them.

Digital technologies and social media have been used effectively by girls and young women to mobilise online campaigns for gender-transformative outcomes. Digital platforms and social networking sites have been used successfully to expand awareness about issues of gender equality and social inclusion. Girl and young women activists can be further empowered through building digital literacy skills and choosing appropriate technologies that are inclusive and participatory. Governments and social media providers need to promote safety and security for girls and young women in digital technologies and social media sites.

National government bodies and regional bodies can support girls' and young women's activism by building a more supportive legal and financial framework for advocacy work. There is a range of existing international agreements that governments are obligated to uphold and implement as duty bearers for girls' and women's rights. NGOs also have a role to play by advocating for increased civic engagement of girls and young women and by including them in planning and decision-making roles for gender-transformative programming.

Informed by the research findings, the following considerations have been identified for Plan International to support and catalyse girl and youth-led movements:

- Continue to invite girls and young women into enabling spaces to build confidence, express their voices and influence others, as well as support girls and young women to join invited spaces of civic engagement with governments.
- Recognise that youth advocates are a diverse set of individuals and they work in diverse ways using both on-line and in-person approaches. Therefore, programming needs to be responsive and flexible to accommodate a broad set of youth activist initiatives for gender equality and social inclusion.
- Ensure girls and young women have leadership roles and decision-making authority to inform program designs and implementation, especially those which are intended to have gender-transformative outcomes.
- Foster multiple types of networks which can provide support and mentorship to youth advocates. Networks might include youth advocate networks; inter-generational networks of activists; and networks at different levels (local, national, regional and global).
- Mitigate risks to girl and young women by creating an enabling environment for activism and gender transformative change, such as through education of parents, teachers, NGO and government representatives who interface with young people.
- Advocate to governments to provide supportive frameworks for youth activism and mechanisms for girls and women to hold governments accountable for gender-transformation and social inclusion.
- Advocate for safe and inclusive digital technologies for girls' and young women's activism and prevention of cyber-bullying, without restricting spaces for political dissent.
- Leverage international commitments as well as lobby national governments, who are ultimately responsible for fulfilling gender equality and social inclusion commitments.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Research Plan

No.	Research questions	Sub questions	Data source	Data collection method	Theoretical Framing /Analysis	Reporting of Research Findings
1	What are the emerging trends and issues related to gender-transformation and social inclusion that girls and young women in the Asia-Pacific region are advocating for?	<p>1a. What <u>types of issues related to gender equality and inclusive societies</u> in the Asia-Pacific region?</p> <p>1b. What <u>types of tactics, approaches, and tools</u> are being used by girls and young women activists in the Asia-Pacific for <u>mobilisation and building their movements</u>?</p> <p>1c. What <u>types of civic engagement and activism</u> are girls and young women employing to advocate for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region?</p>	<p>Researchers and programs who have documented practices / issues</p> <p>Youth advocates who have documented practices / issues</p> <p>Female youth advocates</p> <p>Regional experts/ government stakeholders</p>	<p>Desk review:</p> <p>Academic and sector-based documentation / /media stories / blogs on youth activism</p> <p>Social media listening</p> <p>In-depth interviews with youth advocates</p> <p>KII with sector-based actors (researchers, program staff, government representatives)</p>	<p>Types of issues related to gender equality and inclusive societies – gender-transformative change framework</p> <p>Thematic analysis to identify common and outlier themes</p> <p>Types of civic engagement – power cube</p> <p>Comparison of South Asia, Southeast Asia and Pacific regions</p> <p>Comparison of age groups of activists</p>	<p>Emerging trends:</p> <p>types of issues related to gender equality and inclusive societies</p> <p>types of types of tactics, approaches, and tools for mobilisation and building their movement</p> <p>types of civic engagement and activism</p> <p>any comparison between South Asia, Southeast Asia and Pacific regions</p> <p>any comparison between age groups</p>
2	What can better enable and support girls and young women in future civic engagement and activism in the Asia-Pacific?	<p>2a. What are highpoints and enablers of civic engagement and activism to date?</p> <p>2b. What are the preferred futures for civic engagement and activism?</p>	<p>Researchers and programs that have documented practices / issues</p> <p>Youth advocates who have documented practices / issues</p> <p>Female youth advocates</p> <p>Regional experts/ government stakeholders</p>	<p>Desk review:</p> <p>Academic and sector-based documentation / /media stories / blogs on youth activism</p> <p>Social media listening</p> <p>In-depth interviews with youth advocates</p> <p>KII with sector-based actors (researchers,</p>	<p>Appreciative Inquiry – Discover (high point to date) Dream (preferred future)</p> <p>Types of civic engagement – Power Cube</p> <p>Types of issues related to gender equality and inclusive societies – gender-transformative change framework</p>	<p>Success to date and enablers of success</p> <p>Preferred futures – barriers to address / opportunities to leverage</p>

No.	Research questions	Sub questions	Data source	Data collection method	Theoretical Framing /Analysis	Reporting of Research Findings
				program staff, government representatives)	Thematic analysis to identify common and outlier themes Comparison of Asia and Pacific region Comparison of age groups of activists	
3	In what ways have girls and young women used digital technologies and social media in civic engagement and activism and how might they use these tools in the future to influence social change and promote gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region?	3a. What are highpoints and enablers of use and success using digital technologies and social media? 3b. What are the preferred futures for use and success using digital technologies and social media?	Literature Social media sources of activists Female youth advocates Regional experts/ government stakeholders	Desk review: Academic and sector-based documentation / /media stories / blogs on youth activism Social media listening In-depth interviews with youth advocates KII with sector-based actors (researchers, program staff, government representatives)	Appreciative Inquiry – Discover (high point to date) Dream (preferred future) Types of use of digital and social media and connection to civic engagement – Power Cube Types of issues related to gender equality and inclusive societies – gender-transformative change framework Thematic analysis to identify common and outlier themes Comparison of Asia and Pacific region Comparison of age groups of activists	Success to date and enablers of success Preferred futures – barriers to address / opportunities to leverage
4	What have been national governments' responses to a rise in youth activism for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region and how might positive responses be enabled in the future?	4a. What have been national governments' responses to a rise in youth activism for gender equality and inclusive societies in the Asia-Pacific region?	Focus on countries where there are selected female youth advocates as can't cover all countries Documents Media sources	Desk review In-depth interviews KII	Appreciative Inquiry – Discover (high point to date) Dream (preferred future) Types of use of activism and connection to civic engagement /	Success to date and enablers of success Preferred futures – barriers to address / opportunities to leverage to have positive government

No.	Research questions	Sub questions	Data source	Data collection method	Theoretical Framing /Analysis	Reporting of Research Findings
		4b. How might positive responses from governments to youth activism be enabled in the future?	Policy Regional experts/ government stakeholders Female youth advocates		government response – Power Cube Types of issues related to gender equality and inclusive societies – gender-transformative change framework Thematic analysis to identify common and outlier themes Comparison of Asia and Pacific region Comparison of age groups of activists	response to girls and young women activism any comparison (intra-Asia) and between Asia and Pacific regions

Annex 2: Detailed methodology

The detailed methodology for this research was set out in an Inception Report approved by Plan International Hub. Key aspects of the design are provided below.

Methodology

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)¹⁴⁵ provided an overarching framework to guide the research including design of data collection tools and analysis. AI seeks to reveal what is working well and identify enablers of these 'highpoints' as a means of creating change, building on the success of the past. AI provides a constructive approach to influencing change and seeks to influence and motivate decision-makers and power holders to change towards preferred futures. The future orientation of AI means that problems or challenges from the present are revealed and addressed through identifying future preferred scenarios and actions to achieve this change.

The research followed an adapted version of the AI process focusing on two parts: discover; dream.¹⁴⁶

Discover: The research took a positive stance to identify what was working well, success to date and highpoints of girls' and young women's civic engagement and activism for gender equality and inclusive societies. Inquiry topics included positive experiences of digital technologies and social media and positive government responses to girls' and women's activism.

Dream: The research identified preferred futures for girls' and young women's civic engagement and activism for gender equality and inclusive societies. Research findings were informed by in-depth interviews with female youth advocates and sector-based stakeholders. A document review augmented the primary research.

AI recognises that by asking questions, research engages in a change process. Asking research participants to reflect on past experiences, identify success stories and their enablers, and reveal preferred futures seeks to motivate future action and positive actions. Whilst it does not ask the question directly, AI does reveal what needs to change (i.e. barriers, challenges or constraints currently experienced) in order to achieve preferred futures.

Power cubes provided an analytical framework to analyse research participants' responses and guide the document review. We employed the power cube framework¹⁴⁷ to make sense of the different types of girl and young women activism and the ways these represent different forms of civic engagement and connection with decision-making processes.

The cube has multiple dimensions – it is a framework for analysing the spaces, places and forms of power and their interrelationship:

- Spaces for participation are invited, closed¹⁴⁸ or claimed.
- Places of participation are at the global, national or local level. In addition to these places we also need to consider the 'glocal' digital spaces, where local understandings and ways in which activists organise online meet with the transnational activist movement.
- Forms of power are defined as visible power – observable decision-making; hidden power – setting the political agenda; and invisible power – shaping meaning and what is acceptable.

¹⁴⁵ Cooperrider and Whitney (2005).

¹⁴⁶ 'Deliver' as part of the AI cycle is beyond the scope of the research. It is intended that use of the research findings by key stakeholders will constitute 'Deliver'

¹⁴⁷ Gaventa (2006)

¹⁴⁸ In line with the research focus on activism and civic engagement we explored only invited and claimed spaces.

These notions of power and our emphasis on interrelationships provided the research an avenue to strategically explore how girls' and women's civic engagement and activism influences gender equality and inclusive societies.

Key concepts for the research

Gender equality

We employed understandings of gender-transformative change as described in Plan International's *Global Policy – Gender Equality and Inclusion (2017)*¹⁴⁹. Gender-transformative change recognises the multi-dimensional nature of change:

- norms, attitudes and behaviours
- social and economic resources and safety nets
- policy frameworks and budgets.

The use of this framework helped us to identify the ways in which civic engagement and activism seek to influence gender equality outcomes. Changes can be monitored at different levels: the household level, the local public arena (schools, communities and workplaces) and the broader public arena (governments, economies, and media). Use of gender-transformative change also highlighted the importance of multiple actors in achieving change: girls and women but also boys and men. Gender-transformative change also goes beyond the gender binary to include sexual and gender minorities.¹⁵⁰

Taking an intersectional feminist approach, we paid attention to the multiple exclusions and the heterogeneity of needs and capacities within identity groups. Use of this understanding of gender-transformative change ensured we captured insights from a holistic perspective.

Social inclusion

All people have the right to be respected as valuable members of their communities. However, marginalising social forces jeopardise these rights in public and private spheres. People with disabilities and other marginalised groups may experience discrimination or stigma which, coupled with a scarcity of information or services, results in their needs being unmet.

Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society – improving the ability, opportunity and dignity of those disadvantaged based on their identity. Measures include supporting the development of skills and confidence among those likely to be excluded on the basis of their identity, to increase their ability to participate. Social inclusion also involves addressing attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers that hinder the participation of any disadvantaged individual or group on an equal basis with others.

Civic engagement

Globalisation, changes in governance and emerging transnational social movements are changing the nature of citizen engagement and creating new global spaces. While ideas of citizenship vary from culture to culture, citizenship itself is becoming multi-scalar, as governance increasingly involves both state and non-state actors which are often transnational. This change is affecting the lives and futures of citizens, and also reshaping where and how citizens engage to make their voices heard.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Plan International (2017)

¹⁵⁰ Winterford, K., Megaw, T., Gero, A. (2020). Literature review of gender-transformative change and social accountability. Gender-transformative social accountability -Working Paper 1. Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, p.17.

¹⁵¹ Gaventa, J. and Tandon, R. (eds), (2010) *Globalising Citizens: New Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion*, Zed Books, London, p.3

One of the main pathways to empowerment is the collective action of subordinate groups – in other words, actions taken by the group to contest an existing social order. This collective action might be related to a social movement – a network-based organisation with a common interest and recognised leadership that sustains challenges to authorities and structures.

Digital activism

Digital activism can be framed by three intersecting relations between:

- the collective agenda – producing a public self or community as the first step in showing as citizens
- the civic network – sharing of feminist knowledge through producing and reproducing content
- digital infrastructure – using the internet to gain recognition and publicity of different voices and aspirations, in competition with traditional structures of institutional power where agenda issues are already defined.¹⁵²

Categorisations of digital activism may include ‘active/reactive, mobilising and awareness raising’.¹⁵³ Tools might be categorised as online petitions; social networks; blogs; micro-blogging; mobile phones; and crowdsourcing platforms.

Personal empowerment factors affecting citizens’ capacity to engage in digital activism include skills, age, resources, and media information literacy.

These definitions of digital activism are further explored in Section 4.1, where we identify ‘tactics, approaches, and tools’ of digital activism through an inductive approach with our research findings.

Youth activism

Plan International has a strong focus on youth activism. Plan International describes youth activism using text: “Young people must have the opportunity to lead change within their own communities. We seek ways to enable vulnerable children to understand and defend their rights. Across the world girls suffer injustices every day simply because they are young and female. We aim to help the girls’ rights movement to grow, to take it from grassroots to global, so girls have greater control in their lives. We encourage boys and young men to respect girls and women, and empower them to become allies to the global girls’ rights movement”.¹⁵⁴

Plan International has a position paper related to youth activism *Engaging girls, boys and youth as active citizens*. The position paper notes “All children and young people have the right to freely speak out and influence the decisions that shape the world around them”

Research methods and sampling

The research employed four different methods: document review; interviews; stories of success; and social media listening.

i. Document review

A document review was conducted as the initial data collection method. Documents included grey literature (inclusive of Plan International documentation of relevant programming) and a small number of academic texts. Some documents were supplied by Plan International, while others

¹⁵² Parahita (2019)

¹⁵³ Vegh, S. (2003). *Classifying forms of online activism*, in Ed McCaughery, M., and Ayers, M.D. (2003). *Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice*, Routledge, New York.

¹⁵⁴ Plan International (2020) <https://plan-international.org/youth-activism>

were sourced by a key term search using Scopus and Google Scholar. Learnings from the document review were synthesised and included in the research findings section of the report.

The documents were selected based on their relevance to the practices of girls and young women activists in the Asia-Pacific region, in line with the research purpose and key questions. Recognising the scope / budget of the research, the document review examined only key documents and was limited to those published within the limited timeframe of 2015–2021.

See Annex 3 for list of documents reviewed.

ii. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with members of two different stakeholder groups: female youth advocates and sector-based experts/stakeholders. The interview guides were prepared in the research design phase, and refined later, informed by insights of the document review. The interview guides linked questions asked of research participants to the key research questions which framed the research inquiry. The semi-structured approach allowed for a conversational and informal style to gather data from participants, and the interviews began with some icebreaker questions to help build rapport between interviewer and research participant. Interviews were mostly conducted remotely with Zoom video-conferencing, with the exception of two interviews in Fiji which were conducted in person. For interviews conducted in person, COVID-safe protocols were followed by the research team and participants. In some interviews with female youth advocates, a child safeguarding delegate from Plan International was also present with the interviewer. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, with the exception of one interview conducted in Indonesian.

Sample of female youth advocates

Region	Country of female youth advocate	Type of initiative
South Asia	Bangladesh	Local woman-led organisation
Southeast Asia	Timor-Leste	INGO
	Indonesia	Local NGO
	Vietnam	INGO
Pacific	Solomon Islands	Local government
	Tonga	Local NGO
	Fiji	INGO

Considerations for sampling female youth advocates for in-depth interviews included:

- Initial identification by Plan International or other relevant programs in the region¹⁵⁵ for a shortlist of participants
- Voluntary participation and informed consent
- Availability within timeline of research
- Appropriate communications to meet with research team
- Provided best learning to inform research questions
- Whilst not intending to be representative of different regions, the sample of advocates included individuals from South Asia (1), Southeast Asia (3) and the Pacific (3) region
- Whilst not intending to be representative, the sample of advocates employed (i) different ‘tactics, approaches, and tools’ (ii) focused on different aspects of gender equality and inclusive societies
- Whilst not intending to be representative, the sample included young women of different ages within the range of 18-24 years, acknowledging priorities and experiences may be similar but also distinct for different ages¹⁵⁶
- Focus on young women’s experiences, while young men also contribute to gender equality and inclusive societies this was out of the project’s scope

Sample of sector-based experts

Region	Country of sector-based expert	Organisation type
Southeast Asia	Indonesia	Intergovernmental organisation
	Indonesia	National research centre
	Vietnam	Intergovernmental organisation
	Philippines (Regional Asia)	INGO
Pacific	Pacific region	Multilateral program

Considerations for sampling sector-based experts for key informant interviews included:

- Initial identification by Plan International or other relevant programs in the region¹⁵⁷ for a shortlist of participants
- Initial identification by Plan International
- Voluntary participation and informed consent
- Availability within timeline of research
- Appropriate communications to meet with research team
- Provide best learning to inform research questions
- Whilst not intending to be representative of different regions, the sample included individuals from Asia and the Pacific regions
- Whilst not intending to be representative of different types of sector-based experts, the sample included (i) policy and programming staff within Plan International and other NGOs/donor funded development programs nationally or regionally or (ii) academic experts who have researched civic engagement or activism led by girls/young women for gender equality

¹⁵⁵ The research team have connections and networks with relevant programs in the Pacific which were drawn on to identify youth advocates for in-depth interviews

¹⁵⁶ The research team requested participation of girls aged 15-17, but none were put forward by the Plan International country offices or other programs in the region

¹⁵⁷ The research team have connections and networks with relevant programs in the Pacific which were drawn on to identify youth advocates for in-depth interviews

iii. Stories of success

The research report includes three success stories of young women in the Asia-Pacific region who have been engaged in civic engagement and/or activism for gender equality and inclusive societies. The stories drew on data from in-depth interviews; social media listening; key informant interviews and other documentation to create a rich picture of successful activism. The stories highlight promising gender-transformative practice in existing civic engagement initiatives and share insights about the challenges young women activists face and the enablers of their success.

These stories are designed as stand-alone advocacy pieces, but also complement the learning in the research report.

From within the sample of female youth advocates who participated in in-depth interviews, three took up the offer to have a detailed record as a story of success. These participants provided insights on the research questions, and worked on different issues of gender-transformation and social inclusion in South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Participants were willing to be identified through the story of success, being informed about the potential opportunities and risks.

iv. Social media listening

We conducted social media listening to provide further depth of understanding on the stories of successful female youth advocates. For this research, we utilised the definition of social listening as “an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic and social channels”.¹⁵⁸

We trialled a media monitoring service of Media Toolkit, subscribed to by Plan International, with traditional media outlets and social networking sites Facebook and Twitter. We ran several queries using key words but found the service’s use limited because it only harvested data from the last 30 days, while we wanted to undertake a more historical analysis.

The research team undertook a manual process of listening to social media accounts of selected female youth advocates that were related to the gender equality campaigns they were promoting in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Tonga. Messages about youth advocates’ activities and gender-transformation issues were harvested through social media listening, either textual or visual messages, and then analysed using a coding process.

The social media listening sample was linked to the female youth advocates for stories of success. The excerpts of social media messages harvested were selected within the time period the individual had been an active in gender equality advocacy and on selected events and key terms which were related to the youth advocates’ activities.

Ethical research

The research team includes staff from ISF which as part of the University of Technology Sydney, has rigorous ethics processes for undertaking research. ISF accessed ethics approval processes for research with children through standard university arrangements and appropriate internal review committees. The research team employed the ISF Code of Ethical Research Conduct. We followed the ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation which are: respect for human beings; beneficence; research merit and integrity; and justice.

The team complied with Plan’s Child Protection Policy and advice on child safeguarding related to the project. The team also complied with internal ISF guidance on creating a safe space, child protection and child rights in research.

Considerations included:

¹⁵⁸ Stewart, M. C., & Arnold, C. L. (2018). Defining social listening: Recognizing an emerging dimension of listening. *International Journal of Listening*, 32(2), p. 86.

- *Informed consent* – central to ethical research, we required timely preparation and translation of background information on the research, partnership with Plan International and early delivery of information to research participants for their informed consent.
- *Compensation* – based on the principle that research should create benefit for research participants and not a financial loss, Plan International were asked to provide female youth advocates compensation to cover the cost of data for their internet connection during the interviews.
- *Research topics surfaces trauma / creates despair for the future*) – research methods employed used a strengths-based approach and Appreciative Inquiry framework that inspires and motivates. A rights-based approach affirmed the agency of children. Another safeguard used was to ask Plan International country staff to provide details of local referral services for counselling/support which interviewees could access if required.
- *Ethical research in partnership* – ISF is experienced in conducting research in partnership and drew on internal guidance and wealth of knowledge to ensure that in-country researchers were briefed and equipped for ethical research.
- *Anonymity* – all interview participants were intentionally de-identified within the body of the research report. Care has been taken to ensure that all context, actions, perceptions or views expressed do not reasonably result in identification of individuals.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Female youth advocates were asked if they were interested in being recorded as ‘stories of success’ where they will be identifiable. It was communicated by the research team that there was no obligation to be recorded in a success story. Draft write up of stories were provided to individuals (youth activists) for approval before finalisation and publication to ensure that they are comfortable with the record and that the write-up is a truthful representation of their civic engagement or activism.

Annex 3: List of documents reviewed

Resource	Region	Type
ASEAN and UNFPA. (2017) <i>First ASEAN Youth Development Index</i> .	SE Asia	Grey literature
Brimacombe et al. (2018) <i>A new frontier in digital activism: An exploration of digital feminism in Fiji</i> . Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies. Vol. 5. Issue 3, September 2018. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1002/app5.253	Pacific	Academic
Cho, A., Byrne J. and Pelter, Z. (2020) Digital civic engagement by young people, published by UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Digital-civic-engagement-by-young-people-2020_4.pdf	Global	Grey literature
DevPolicy Blog (2017) <i>#Feminism: digital technologies and feminist activism in Fiji</i> , 14 March 2017, https://devpolicy.org/feminism-digital-technologies-and-feminist-activism-in-fiji-20170314/	Pacific	Media
Lucero, L. (2017) <i>Safe spaces in online places: social media and LGBTQ youth</i> , Multicultural Education Review, 9:2, 117-128, DOI: 10.1080/2005615X.2017.131348	Global	Academic
Mama Cash and FRIDA. (2018) <i>Girls to the Front</i> . https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GirlsToTheFront_Report_web.pdf	Global	Grey literature
Pacific Women and the Pacific Islands Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS), (2019) <i>Co-designing online safety with young Pacific women</i> , https://www.portable.com.au/work/cybersafety-pacific-girl	Pacific	Grey literature
Pacific Women, <i>Women in Leadership Synthesis Report</i> , 2017, https://pacificwomen.org/key-pacific-women-resources/pacific-women-women-leadership-synthesis-report/	Pacific	Grey literature
Parahita, G. (2019) <i>The Rise of Indonesian Feminist Activism on Social Media</i> , Jurnal Komunikasi, https://doi.org/10.25008/jkiski.v4i2.331	SE Asia	Academic
Plan International UK and ADB. (2018) <i>Youth engagement and the Sustainable Development Goals</i> .	Global	Grey literature
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Annex 4: Tactics used by girl and young women activists

Online civic engagement and activism for gender equality and social inclusion

- **Awareness-raising**
 - Using social media (e.g. Facebook) to raise awareness of issues, develop a shared understanding of values and ideologies, which is a precursor to collective action¹⁶⁰
 - Through storytelling support people to interact meaningfully with sensitive topics (e.g. *Swayong* online platform that aims to dismantle social injustices in Bangladesh through storytelling)¹⁶¹
 - Uploading memes or comics covering intersectional feminist issues to Instagram account¹⁶²
 - Short-film competition to promote female-centric, safe and secure online world¹⁶³
- **Youth mobilisation and outreach**
 - Using WhatsApp groups to coordinate and mobilise youth advocates¹⁶⁴
 - Use of social networking groups to share information beyond government sanction (e.g. As a result of decreasing space for public dialogue in mainstream media in Fiji, Facebook's 'Letters to the Editor Uncensored' emerged)¹⁶⁵
- **Advocacy tactics to influence public opinion or policy**
 - Online petitions (e.g. raising awareness about wide-spread harassment of women in public spaces and advocating for preventative legislation)¹⁶⁶
 - Use of hashtags to raise the profile of campaigns and promote advocacy and changes of legislation (e.g. *#kitaagni* (we are Agni) intended to promote advocacy for rape survivors who reported their cases in Indonesia)¹⁶⁷
 - Hijacking conservative spaces in social media of their opponents with hashtags of gender equality and social inclusion¹⁶⁸
 - Building off social issues that are viral online or have momentum¹⁶⁹
 - Mobilising support through 'social influencers' such as actors, news anchors and celebrities posting content to prevent sexual violence¹⁷⁰
 - Takeover by youth advocate of major civil society organisation's social media accounts to advocate about climate change¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁰ Interviews with female youth advocates

¹⁶¹ Dhaka Tribune (2021)

¹⁶² Parahita (2019)

¹⁶³ More information about project of WeMen View is in Section 4.5 Stories of successful activism

¹⁶⁴ Interview with female youth advocate

¹⁶⁵ Brimacombe et al (2018)

¹⁶⁶ Parahita (2019)

¹⁶⁷ Parahita (2019)

¹⁶⁸ Interview with sector-based expert

¹⁶⁹ Interview with sector-based expert

¹⁷⁰ Lentera (2021) lentera_id Instagram account, retrieved 12 April 2021

¹⁷¹ Interview with female youth advocate

In-person civic engagement and activism for gender equality and social inclusion

- **Awareness-raising**
 - Radio talkshow around feminist issues (e.g. talkshow by the Women’s and Children’s Crisis Centre in Tonga)
- **Youth mobilisation and outreach**
 - Expanding network to build a supportive ‘sisterhood’ that increases solidarity and influence¹⁷²
 - Recruiting a team of volunteers to work on campaigns together¹⁷³
- **Advocacy tactics to influence public opinion or policy**
 - Girl activists contributing to a manifesto and presenting to members of parliament¹⁷⁴
 - Supporters organise street protests and manikin protests during COVID-19¹⁷⁵
 - Plan actions around special days such as International Women’s Day, International Day of the Girl Child and 16 Days of Activism¹⁷⁶
- **Evidence-building**
 - Research on gender equality and social inclusion issues relevant to children and young people¹⁷⁷
- **Fund-raising for campaigns**
 - Donating money through crowdfunding platform¹⁷⁸
 - Fundraising through selling campaign merchandise¹⁷⁹

¹⁷² This finding is consistent across country contexts included in the study

¹⁷³ This finding is consistent across country contexts included in the study

¹⁷⁴ Interview with female youth advocate

¹⁷⁵ Interview with sector-based expert

¹⁷⁶ Interviews with female youth advocates

¹⁷⁷ Interviews with female youth advocates

¹⁷⁸ Parahita (2019)

¹⁷⁹ Interviews with female youth advocates



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