

Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality

Authenticity, self-expression and belonging

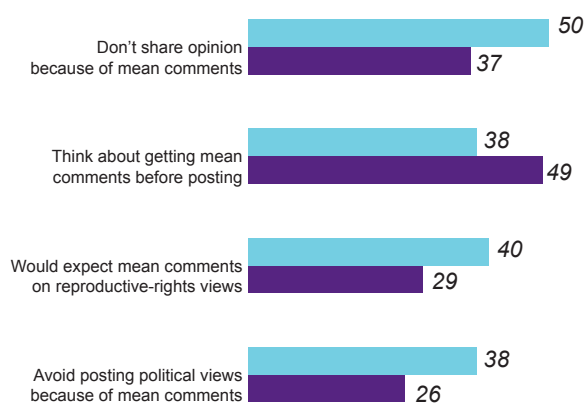
In 2026, Plan International USA commissioned research to explore the experiences of adolescents today, especially as it relates to gender equality. To complement the qualitative data, research firm PerryUndem held focus groups with adolescents to add rich, personal context to the survey's findings. This research builds on a similar study conducted in 2018 to examine what has changed over the past eight years.

BEING THEIR TRUE SELVES TOPS ADOLESCENTS' ASPIRATIONS

Authenticity is adolescents' top life priority. Nearly eight in 10 adolescents (79%) say "being their true self" is very important — including 82% of girls and 77% of boys. For girls, it outranks financial security, career success, marriage and having children.

There are shifts from eight years ago. In 2018, 71% of girls and 75% of boys rated having a successful career as very important, compared with 65% of girls and 64% of boys today. Similarly, the importance of getting married has dropped, falling from 34% to 23% among girls and from 31% to 27% among boys.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAN MAKE AUTHENTICITY HARDER ON THEMSELVES



Teens in the focus groups describe social media as a powerful source of conformity — from how people dress and pose to what they post. Girls, in particular, say pressure to follow trends can make it harder to be themselves. Forty percent of girls report pressure to keep up with trends, compared with 22% of boys.

One girl described the dynamic plainly: When people do not follow trends, they can be bullied, which can push them to try to be perfect and fit in. At the same time, young people say seeing others be authentic can give them permission to do the same — creating a sense of relief, connection and belonging.

FEAR OF JUDGMENT IS CHANGING WHAT GIRLS SHARE

The desire to be authentic runs against a digital environment where many girls anticipate judgment or hostility before they post. Among girls ages 14 to 19 on social media, 60% think about how others might judge them before posting, and half have decided not to share an opinion because they might receive mean comments.

ONLINE NEGATIVITY CAN NARROW YOUNG PEOPLE'S PUBLIC VOICE

Girls are especially likely to hold back from public expression. Among girls ages 14 to 19 on social media, 38% say they avoid posting political views because of mean comments, and 40% say that if they posted their views on women's reproductive rights, they would expect mean comments. While boys are less likely to say they engage in self-censoring behavior, nearly half (46%) say they think about how others might judge them before they post.

These patterns suggest that online hostility does more than hurt feelings — it can shape whose voices are heard in public conversations.

SELF-EXPRESSION AND BELONGING ARE CONNECTED

Focus group participants connect authenticity with happier relationships and a stronger sense of belonging. Teens say being themselves helps them find people who genuinely like the "real" person they are rather than a performed version. By contrast, peer pressure and fear of exclusion can push young people to change how they act or suppress what they think and feel.

The research also shows that fitting in is a real pressure for adolescents, while social media can intensify comparison culture and expectations to conform. For girls, the pressure is often layered: look right, act confident, stay positive, keep up with trends and avoid saying something that could draw negative attention.

DIGITAL SPACES SHOULD MAKE ROOM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE THEMSELVES

60% of older girls think about how others may judge them before posting

50% of older girls have withheld an opinion because of possible mean comments

38% of older girls avoid posting political views because of mean comments

Young people are telling us that authenticity matters deeply — but many are learning to edit themselves online. This has implications beyond individual well-being. When young people avoid expressing themselves because they anticipate harassment or judgment, the digital environment can shape whose voices are heard.

Adults, parents, educators, platforms and other institutions have a role in creating safer digital networks where young people can explore identity, express opinions and participate in civic life without targeted vitriol or harassment.

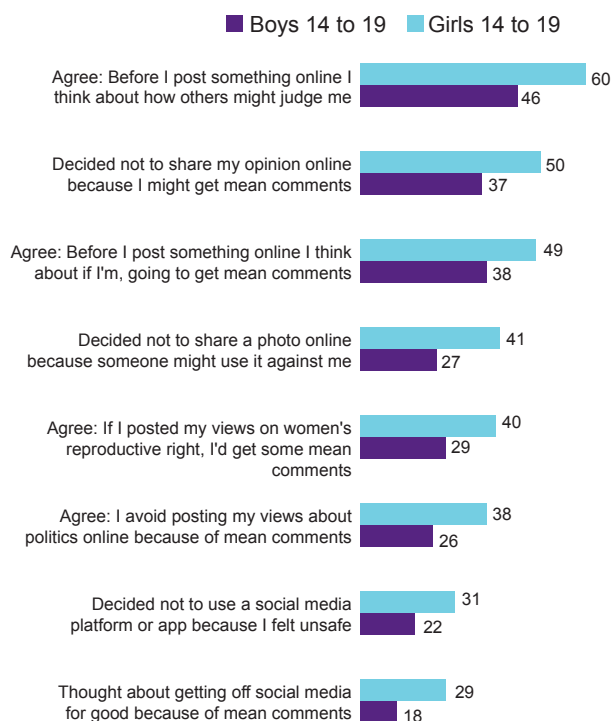
That means reinforcing norms of respectful dialogue, intervening when harassment occurs, teaching young people how to navigate disagreement without abuse and building digital environments where speaking up does not require sacrificing safety or belonging.

THE OPPORTUNITY: PROTECT THE RIGHT TO SPEAK AND THE FREEDOM TO BELONG

Adolescents are not asking to escape difference or disagreement. They are asking for room to be themselves. When digital spaces support both safety and self-expression, young people are better positioned to form authentic relationships, share ideas, participate in public life, use their voice for change and find communities where they belong.

Self-censoring and bracing for negativity online

N = 560 adolescents 14 to 19 on social media



To learn more about the research and how Plan is working with young people, visit planusa.org/research.



LISTEN TO GIRLS AND BOYS.

CHALLENGE LIMITS.

EXPAND POSSIBILITY.

Source: PerryUndem for Plan International USA, July 2026. National survey of 1,037 U.S. adolescents ages 10 to 19 (April 28-May 5, 2026), weighted to Census data; margin of sampling error +/-3.5 points. Focus groups with 14 adolescents ages 14-17 were conducted July 20, 2026.