

Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality

Leadership, civic engagement and changing youth aspirations

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.

YOUNG PEOPLE STILL WANT EQUAL LEADERSHIP — BUT LESS INTENSLEY

A large majority of adolescents want women and men represented equally in positions of leadership. Eighty-five percent agree they want equal numbers of men and women who are leaders in work, politics and life. Overall support remains broad, but the share who strongly agree has fallen: 58% strongly agreed in 2018, compared with 44% in 2026.

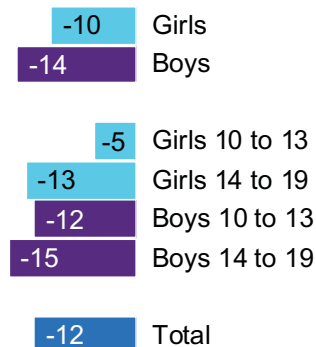
85% want equal numbers of men and women leaders in work, politics and life

58% → 44% strong agreement with equal leadership, 2018 to 2026

ASPIRATIONS FOR ELECTED OFFICE FELL

Fewer adolescents are picturing themselves in elected office than eight years ago. In 2026, 21% said they have considered becoming a politician or running for office, down from 33% in 2018. Another 4% in both years said they had thought about it many times. Overall, 79% in 2026 said they had never thought about running for elected office, compared with 67% in 2018.

Difference in having thought about running for office in 2026 vs. 2018



LEADERSHIP RANKS LOW AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE'S TOP PRIORITIES

When adolescents were asked about what life goals were very important to them, being a leader was rated third lowest on the list (29%), only outranking getting married (25%) and having kids (23%). By contrast, 74% selected having enough money and 79% selected being their true selves as very important priorities.

THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE IS STILL THERE

Despite lower interest in public office, half of adolescents already see themselves as leaders. Girls and boys are equally likely to do so: 50% of girls and 49% of boys say they think of themselves as leaders. Black adolescents are the most likely to identify this way, with 70% saying they see themselves as leaders.

Black adolescents are also more likely than adolescents overall to say being a leader is a very important life goal: 45% compared with 29% overall.

FOR GIRLS, TEAM SPORTS MAY BE ONE PATHWAY TO LEADERSHIP

Among girls, participation in team sports is correlated with both seeing themselves as leaders and considering a career in politics. Younger girls are about as likely as boys to play team sports (48% vs. 52%), but the gap widens with age: 41% of girls ages 14 to 19 play team sports, compared with 50% of boys their age.

TODAY'S PRIORITIES ARE AUTHENTICITY, SECURITY AND PEACE

The broader aspiration data help explain why public leadership may not be top of mind. Being their true self is adolescents' highest-ranked life priority (79%), followed by having enough money (74%), feeling at peace (72%) and having a successful career (64%). These priorities do not mean young people reject leadership; they show that leadership is competing with more immediate goals around identity, stability and well-being.

THE OPPORTUNITY: MAKE LEADERSHIP FEEL RELEVANT, ACCESSIBLE AND WORTH PURSUING

For the future of democracy and gender equality, the findings point to an opportunity to strengthen civic engagement and leadership development earlier in young people's lives. Adults, schools and youth-serving institutions can connect leadership to the goals adolescents already value — being authentic, building financial security, improving their communities and creating a fairer future — while giving young people visible pathways to practice leadership and participate in civic life.

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.