

Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality

The overall state of gender equality

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.

VAST MAJORITY SUPPORT EQUALITY — BUT MANY SEE A GAP

94% Agree men and women should be treated equally

64% Say full equality for women has not yet been achieved

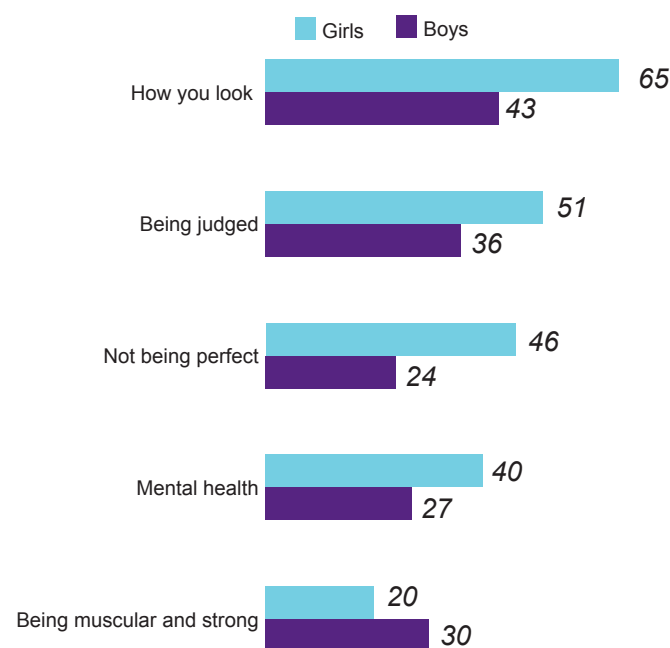
These findings are consistent with the 2018 research in that a strong majority of teens continues to recognize an ongoing equality gap.

GIRLS AND BOYS CARRY DIFFERENT PRESSURES AND WORRY. GIRLS CARRY A HEAVIER LOAD.

Girls are more likely than boys to worry about how they look, being judged, not being perfect and their mental health. Boys were more likely than girls to worry about how muscular and strong they were.

Among girls ages 14 to 19, 67% feel pressure to be confident, 60% to look pretty, 58% to always be positive, 51% to be perfect and 47% to look perfect. Social media appear to intensify that pressure: 69% of older girls on

social media see, at least weekly, female influencers who look perfect.



Source: % who worry at least once a week

Among all adolescents, girls navigate more pressures than boys. The areas where boys reported more pressure than girls were around having muscles (41%), being tall (35%), being interested in playing sports (40%), dating or being in a relationship (34%) or hooking up with someone (30%).

Girls are more likely to say gender equality does not exist. Their experiences suggest they are in peer environments where sexist and demeaning comments are common: 79% of girls hear boys make sexual comments or jokes about girls at least once a month; 54% hear at least one type of sexist, demeaning, racist, uncomfortable or unsafe comment from boys every week.

AUTHENTICITY IS WINNING OUT OVER TRADITIONAL MILESTONES

Being their true selves is adolescents' top life priority. Financial security and feeling at peace also rank high, while marriage and having children land at the bottom of the list.

TEENS' HIGHEST PRIORITIES:



Compared with 2018, girls are 11 points less likely to say getting married is a very important goal and 7 points less likely to say the same about having children.

NEW GENDER TRENDS ARE VISIBLE — BUT NOT DOMINANT

18% of girls would want to be an at-home housewife and mother

22% of boys would want their wife to be an at-home housewife and mother

16% of girls are interested in cosmetic procedures such as lip fillers or Botox

27% of boys have heard of “looksmaxxing”; most who have heard of it reject the trend

The bigger signal is not a return to rigid roles. Young people describe wanting room to be themselves — without tradition, trends, peer pressure or online expectations defining who they should be.

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.