

Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality

Digital safety and mental health

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.

ONLINE HARASSMENT IS COMMON — AND GIRLS FACE MORE SEXUALIZED ABUSE

About half of girls and boys on social media have encountered mean or hateful comments online. Girls are twice as likely as boys to receive sexist comments (27% vs. 13%). Among 14- to 19-year-olds, 36% of girls have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment online or by text, compared with 19% of boys.

Specific experiences are common even when teens do not use the label “sexual harassment”: 27% of older girls have received unwanted sexual content and 26% have been asked to send a sexual photo or video. While girls are more likely than boys to experience sexual harassment online, about one in five boys has had these experiences.

When we ask adolescents if they've ever experienced “online harassment,” alongside a definition, only 21% say yes. That suggests a need for more education or for using different terms among teens.

DIGITAL HARM SHOWS UP IN GIRLS' MENTAL HEALTH

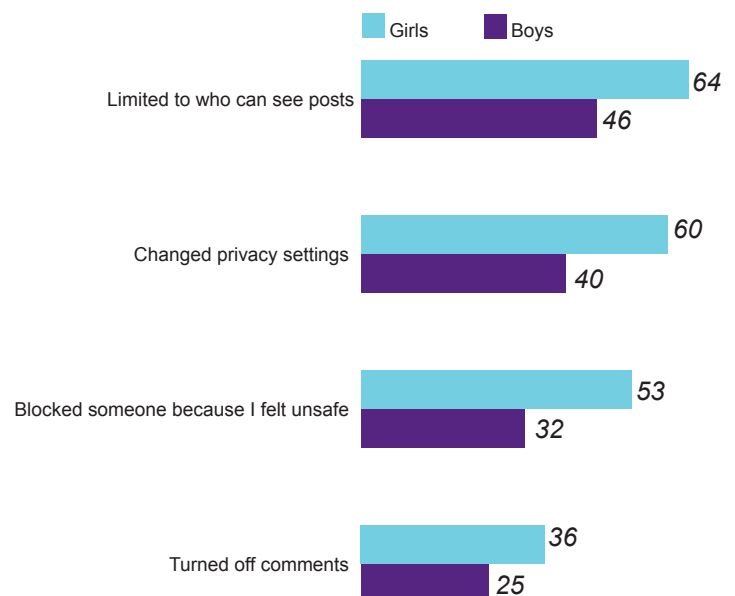
Girls are more likely than boys to worry about their mental health at least weekly (40% vs. 27%). Among those ages

14 to 19, 42% of girls rate their mental health at 6 or lower on a 0-to-10 scale, compared with 25% of boys.

For girls, lower mental health ratings are correlated with pressure to hide emotions, comparison and perfection culture and harassment. Girls who have experienced sexual harassment online are more than twice as likely to report lower mental health ratings as those who have not (71% vs. 33%).

GIRLS ARE DOING MORE OF THE WORK TO STAY SAFE ONLINE

Teens are taking safety into their own hands by limiting audiences, changing privacy settings, blocking people and turning off comments. Girls (80%) are more likely than boys (64%) to take every one of these steps.



Source: adolescents on social media (n=774).
Percent who say they have ever taken each action.

TEENS HAVE TRUSTED ADULTS — BUT AREN'T REPORTING HARASSMENT

88% have an adult they would trust to take action

68% would feel comfortable reporting the person responsible

37% of adolescents who experienced online harassment have reported it

Most adolescents say they would turn to an adult, but fewer know how to act. Only 59% know how to report online harassment, and just 52% say an adult has talked with them about how to report it. Among adolescents who have experienced online harassment, 63% have never reported it to a social media company.

TRUST IS HIGHEST CLOSE TO HOME — AND LOWEST IN INSTITUTIONS

Parents and guardians are the most trusted source of support: 93% of adolescents trust them to take sexual harassment and assault seriously. Trust falls sharply for social media companies (14%) and the government (20%). Girls are less likely than boys to trust their school (54% vs. 65%) or the police (60% vs. 67%) to take these issues seriously.

A TEACHABLE MOMENT FOR ADULTS, SCHOOLS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Young people already have adults they trust, and adolescents whose parents or teachers have talked with them about preventing sexual harassment feel more prepared to report it. Adults can build on that trust by talking proactively about digital safety and explaining how and where to report harassment. Meanwhile, institutions like tech platforms, schools and the government can build trust with youth by responding consistently and showing young people that reports will be taken seriously. They can also build trust by listening to and including young people in designing solutions.

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.