

Listening to U.S. adolescents on gender & equality

The role of sports

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.

TEAM SPORTS ARE LINKED WITH GREATER OPTIMISM AMONG GIRLS

Girls who participate in team sports are more likely to feel very hopeful about achieving their future goals. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of girls who play team sports report feeling very hopeful about reaching their goals, compared with 51% of girls who do not participate.

64% girls in team sports feel very hopeful about reaching their goals

51% girls not in team sports feel very hopeful about reaching their goals

44% of girls currently play team sport

SPORTS PARTICIPATION COINCIDES WITH BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

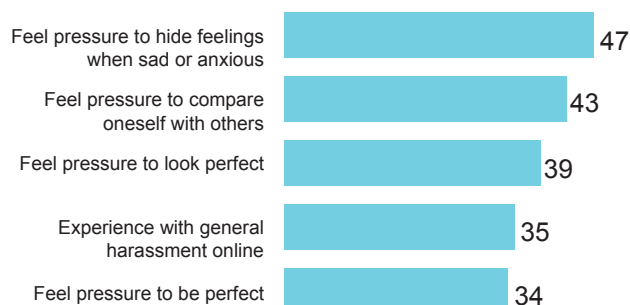
The survey also identifies team sports as a bright spot for girls' mental health. Among girls playing team sports, 53% rate their mental health between 8 and 10 (out of 10), and 35% say they worry about their mental health at least once a week which is lower than for girls who do not play sports.

Among girls ages 14 to 19, those who play team sports are also less likely to report lower mental health ratings: only 36% rate their mental health from 0 to 6 (on a 0 to 10 scale), compared with 46% of girls who do not play team sports. This relationship is notable in a broader environment where girls report substantial pressures around perfection, comparison, appearance and emotional suppression. These findings do not establish that sports directly cause better mental health or greater leadership ambition; rather, they identify a meaningful relationship.

Girls who play team sports show stronger optimism and lower rates of poor mental health.

Correlations with lower mental health ratings for girls in order of strength

(N=296) girls 14 to 19



TEAM SPORTS CAN HELP GIRLS SEE THEMSELVES AS LEADERS

Among girls specifically, participation in team sports is correlated with seeing themselves as leaders and considering a future career in politics.

Yet girls' participation declines with age. Among 10- to 13-year-olds, girls are nearly as likely as boys to play team sports (48% vs. 52%). By ages 14 to 19, the gap widens: 41% of girls are playing team sports compared with 50% of boys.

50% of girls think of themselves as leaders
(correlated with team sports participation)

41% of girls ages 14 to 19 currently play
team sports

50% of boys ages 14 to 19 currently play
team sports

BOYS ALSO NAVIGATE PRESSURE AROUND SPORTS AND STRENGTH

For boys, sports sit within a broader set of gender-based expectations. More than half feel pressure to be confident (53%) and physically strong (52%). Four in 10 feel pressure

to be interested in playing sports (40%), while 41% feel pressure to have muscles. Older boys also report pressure around dating and relationships, and nearly one-third of boys feel pressure to hide feelings when they are sad or anxious.

Focus group participants described the persistent cultural message that "boys don't cry" and the idea that showing vulnerability can make boys appear weak. This suggests that sports environments can be valuable not only for physical activity, but also as spaces where coaches and peers can reinforce confidence, connection, teamwork and healthier norms around emotion.

THE OPPORTUNITY: EXPAND ACCESS TO TEAM SPORTS

The data show meaningful associations between team-sports participation and outcomes that matter for the next generation: hopefulness, mental health, confidence, leadership and aspirations for public life. Expanding access to safe, inclusive, affordable sports opportunities can help more children experience these potential benefits.

This is especially important as girls' participation falls during adolescence. Schools, families, community organizations, coaches and youth-serving institutions can help remove barriers to participation and create sports cultures where girls and boys can build skills, belonging, resilience and leadership without being constrained by gender expectations.

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.