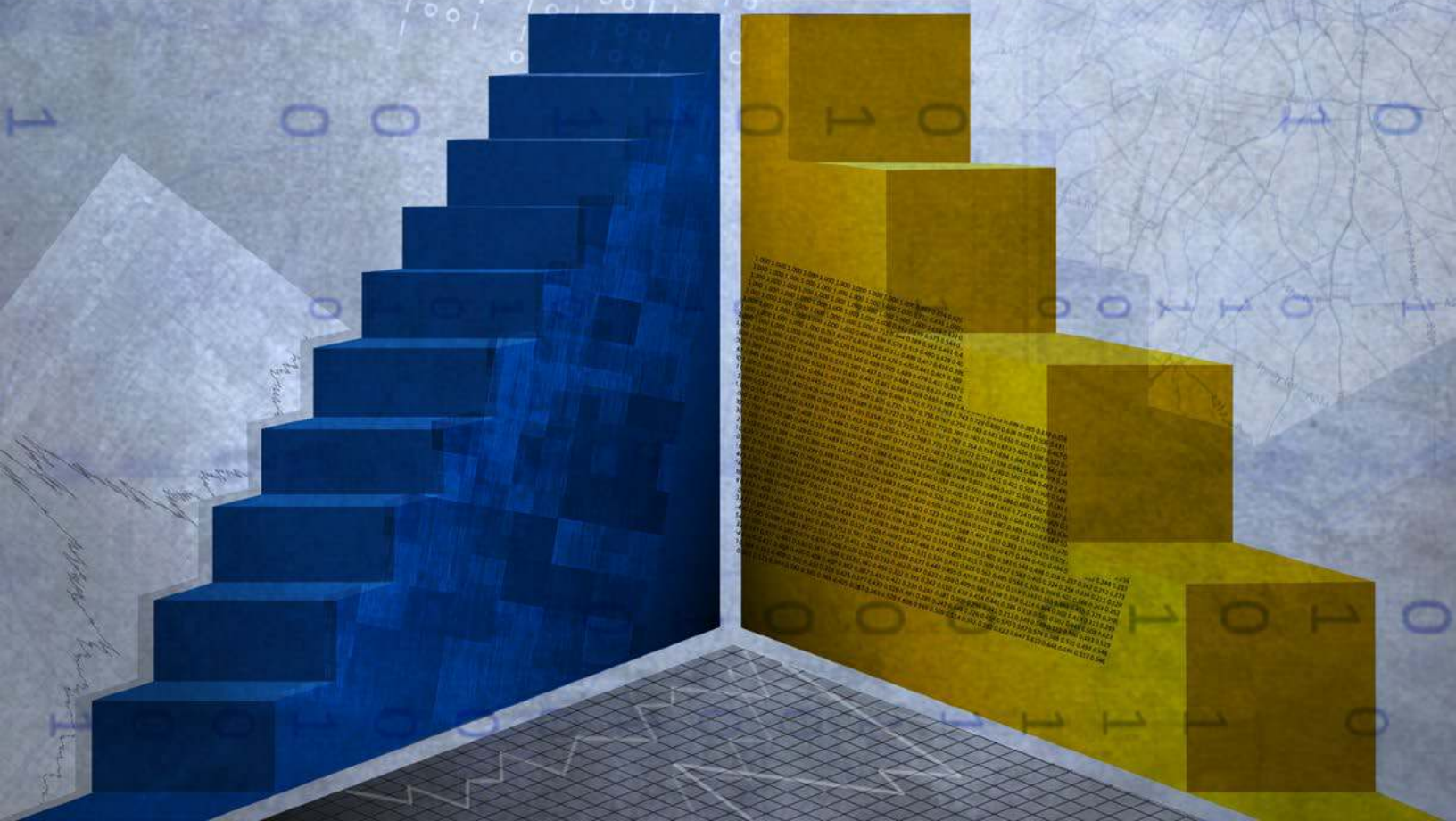




# The State of **GENDER EQUALITY** for U.S. Adolescents





## The State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents

### Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Introduction	1
Methodology	1
Summary of Findings	1
Belief in Gender Equality	1
Perceptions of The State of Gender Equality	2
Girls' Experiences and Perceptions	3
Boys' Experiences and Perceptions	4
Aspirations	6
Influences	6
Impact of #MeToo	9
Conclusion	10



## The State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents

### Acknowledgments

This report was written by Tresa Udem and Ann Wang. The research was commissioned by Plan International USA and undertaken in partnership with PerryUdem, a non-partisan public opinion research firm based in Washington, DC that conducts research on public policy issues.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the many colleagues who provided guidance and support throughout the research and publication process: Shanna Marzilli, Robin Costello, Maria Holsopple, Patrick Maguire, Laura Brazee, Kate Ezzes, and Marcia Odell.

Thanks also to the team at M+R for their collaboration and feedback regarding survey design and outreach. In addition, thanks to PerryUdem for its expertise in shepherding this survey from inception to completion.

Finally, the authors would like to thank the adolescent girls and boys who participated in the survey. Without their contributions and insights, this research would not have been possible.

Layout and design: Jennifer Teichman

### About Plan International USA

Founded in 1937, Plan International USA is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances girls' equality and children's rights. Plan believes in the power and potential of every child. Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, Plan strives for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

**Plan International USA**  
155 Plan Way  
Warwick, RI 02886  
800.556.7918

1255 23rd Street, NW  
Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20037  
202.617.2300

[planusa.org](http://planusa.org)





## Introduction

In the past few years, gender equality has resurfaced as a major issue in the U.S. public sphere. The 2016 presidential election fueled a massive Women's March, one of the largest protests in U.S. history, in January 2017. An anniversary Women's March took place across the country in January 2018. The #MeToo movement erupted in 2017 and continues through today. Discussions ranging from parental leave to the gender pay gap and sexual harassment in the workplace have made front-page headlines and sparked national debates—but the voices of adolescent girls and boys on these issues have not often been heard.

As an international development organization focused on girls' rights, with more than 80 years of experience working with children, families, and communities around the world, Plan International USA also recognizes the issue of girls' equality is one that is still far from having been adequately addressed even in this country. How do American adolescents feel about gender equality? Are they more progressive than the adult population on gender roles? Do they think equality exists between boys and girls? Men and women? What shapes their views? Does playing with gender-specific toys or having a mom in a traditional gender role relate to their opinions on equality? What gender-related societal pressures do they perceive and internalize? Has the #MeToo movement made an impact?

Our study sought to explore the answers to these and other questions, in an effort to understand how children and youths' views on gender equality are influenced and perhaps provide a starting point to ensuring girls everywhere—in the U.S. and overseas—are valued and provided equal opportunities to learn, lead, decide, and thrive.

## Methodology

Plan commissioned PerryUndem to conduct an extensive public opinion study of adolescents, ages 10 to 19, on issues and

experiences related to gender equality. The goal of the research is to provide a resource for policymakers, media, and others who want to understand how children are internalizing inequality and how their views may take shape.

Public opinion surveys among adolescents are relatively rare. A primary reason is cost. A robust methodology requires a representative sample of U.S. households, from which parents of 10- to 18-year-olds are selected and asked if they would allow their child to respond to a survey. We used one of the best survey research panels in the country, the AmeriSpeak panel from NORC at the University of Chicago. The survey was conducted among  $n = 1,006$  10- to 19-year-olds, from April 26 through June 25, 2018. The margin of sampling error is  $\pm 5$  percentage points for total results.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the survey we report results based on the total, as well as by girls and boys. The survey asked respondents: "Which best describes you: male, female, neither/something else." A total of  $n = 1,001$  respondents identify as either male or female. We followed with questions about transgender identity. A total of  $n = 29$  14- to 19-year-olds say they think of themselves as transgender. Respondents who identify as transgender girls are included in girls' results. Respondents who identify as transgender boys are included in boys' results.

## Summary of Findings

### BELIEF IN GENDER EQUALITY

Overall, the vast majority of adolescents (92 percent) says they believe in gender equality. At the same time, there is some uncertainty around specific aspects of equality.

For example, about half of adolescents (54 percent) strongly or somewhat agree that they are "more comfortable with women having traditional roles in society, such as caring for children and family." As other research has

<sup>1</sup>More detailed methods, as well as the questionnaire with topline results, can be obtained upon request.



These findings suggest that—while there is general acknowledgement among adolescents that gender equality should be the norm—actual behavior and attitudes may not always reflect this belief.

suggested, this proportion is higher among adolescents than adults.

Further, only half of boys (51 percent) strongly agrees that they want “equal numbers of men and women to be leaders in work, politics, and life.” Sixty-four percent of girls strongly agree.

Our analysis also suggests a number of influences might play a part in shaping these behaviors and attitudes—and the types of influences are different for girls than they are for boys. We explored statistical correlations<sup>2</sup> between views around gender equality and other feelings, perceptions, and demographics and found a number of statistically significant relationships.

The following factors are correlated with agreement with this statement: **“I’m more comfortable with women having traditional roles in society, such as caring for children and family.”**

#### **Among boys**

- Having a mom who does not have the final say in family decisions;
- Not perceiving gender inequality;
- Having a Republican parent; and
- Not having a mom who feels strongly about gender equality.

#### **Among girls**

- Not perceiving gender inequality;
- Being in a lower-income household;
- Not having a family member who has strong feelings about gender equality; and
- Feeling pressure to not have strong opinions.

The following factors are correlated with only somewhat agreeing or disagreement with the statement: **“I want there to be equal numbers of men and women who are leaders in work, politics, and life.”**

#### **Among boys**

- Not seeing sexism as a problem or perceiving inequality;
- Exposure to online pornography;

- Having a Republican parent;
- Not having a parent or teacher who talked about the #MeToo movement;
- Having mostly played with “boy” toys growing up (e.g., trucks, guns, etc.); and
- Hearing dads or other male family members make sexual comments and sexual jokes about women.

#### **Among girls**

- Not feeling judged often as a sexual object;
- Not seeing sexism as a problem;
- Feeling they are not treated with less respect because they are a girl;
- Less frequent exposure to online pornography;
- Not feeling pressure to look “hot or sexy,” physically attractive, or a number of other pressures;
- Not having a teacher who talked about the #MeToo movement; and
- Having a Republican parent.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF THE STATE OF GENDER EQUALITY**

Most respondents say there is not yet equality across genders and that sexism is a societal problem. That said, these perceptions are particularly pervasive among girls.

Only one in five (21 percent) girls says there is equality for girls right now, compared to 44 percent of boys.

Overall, adolescents of color tend to be more progressive around gender equality and are more likely than white respondents to perceive inequality.

Adolescents are no less likely than adults to perceive sexism as a societal problem: 79 percent say sexism is a big problem or somewhat of a problem (compared to 76 percent of adults in a 2016 PerryUndem survey<sup>3</sup> and 82 percent of voters in a 2017 PerryUndem survey<sup>4</sup>).

<sup>2</sup>Correlation analysis does not mean causation, rather that a relationship exists between two variables that is likely not due to chance. Causation may or may not be at play.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.scribd.com/document/336804316/PerryUndem-Gender-Equality-Report>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.scribd.com/document/366406592/PerryUndem-Report-on-Sexism-Harassment-Culture-And-Equality-compressed>

Girls ages 14 to 19 are more likely than boys and adult voters to say sexism is a “big” problem.

Girls are much more likely than boys to perceive sexism as a big problem: 51 percent of girls ages 14 to 19 v. 19 percent of boys ages 14 to 19. Girls 14 to 19 are also more likely than adult voters (44 percent) to perceive sexism as a big problem.

These findings are particularly concerning because the burden is being placed on girls—who are more likely to recognize that gender inequality is an issue—to shoulder the responsibility of “solving the problem.” To boys and adults who may think gender inequality isn’t a “big” problem, there is not as much incentive to be part of the solution—yet in many cases their participation and leadership are critical in efforts to change the language, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding girls.

**The following factors are correlated with girls saying sexism is a big problem in our society.**

#### **Among girls**

- Perceiving boys harassing and assaulting girls as linked to power and control;
- Feeling treated with less respect because of being a girl;
- Agreeing with wanting equal numbers of men and women in positions of power;
- Having talked with someone about gender equality in the past year;
- Feeling judged as a sexual object;
- Feeling unsafe as a girl;
- Frequent exposure to boys making sexual comments and jokes;
- Having a parent who is not Republican;
- Feeling treated unfairly at school; and
- Exposure to online porn.

**The following factors are correlated with boys saying sexism is *not* a problem in our society.**

#### **Among boys**

- Perceiving that gender equality exists;
- Not perceiving boys harassing and assaulting girls as linked to power and control;

- Less agreement with wanting equal numbers of men and women in positions of power;
- Less likely to have “making the world a better place” as a very important life goal;
- Less likely to have a teacher or parent who talked to them about #MeToo;
- Not having talked with someone in the past year about gender equality;
- Does not have a parent who feels strongly about gender equality; and
- Less agreement that men and women should be treated equally.

### **GIRLS’ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS**

Several findings further illuminate why girls perceive sexism as a problem and why they say gender equality does not exist.

By far, girls perceive physical attractiveness as the most common trait or characteristic our society values in girls. About half of girls (53 percent) look in the mirror at least once a day and imagine how others might see them. About one in three girls ages 14 to 19 (31 percent) do so “many times a day.”

Nearly two-thirds of girls (64 percent) say they are exposed several times a week or more to women and girls in the media who have unrealistic bodies. Half of girls 14 to 19 (49 percent) say they see these bodies every day. Half of girls (52 percent) say that several times a week or more they see female characters on TV or in movies whose bodies and looks are more important than their brains or abilities. One in four (27 percent) sees these examples every day.

Seven in 10 girls ages 14 to 19 (69 percent) feel judged as a sexual object in their daily life at least once in a while. Eight in 10 girls 14 to 19 (81 percent) have had at least one friend who has been asked by a boy to send her a “sexy or naked” picture. One in three girls 14 to 19 (33 percent) says all or most of their friends have experienced this request.

The majority of adolescent girls are receiving the message that they are less powerful, less safe, and overall less valued than boys.

A majority of girls (55 percent) say they hear boys making sexual comments or sexual jokes about girls at least several times a week. Almost half of girls 14 to 19 (47 percent) hear boys making these comments every day. One in four younger girls (25 percent of 10 to 13) hears these comments daily. One in three girls ages 14 to 19 (34 percent) has heard sexual comments or sexual jokes about women from men in their family, including 18 percent from their dad.

A majority of girls 14 to 19 perceive a link between boys sexually harassing and assaulting girls and a “desire for power and control over girls” (85 percent) and “boys living in a culture where they have more power than girls” (83 percent).

Three in four girls ages 14 to 19 (76 percent) feel unsafe as a girl at least once in a while. Seven in 10 girls ages 14 to 19 (72 percent) say at least once in a while they feel treated with less respect because they are a girl. More than half of girls (56 percent) say they have felt treated more unfairly than boys in sports. Close to one-third of girls have felt unfair treatment as a girl at school (36 percent) and on social media (30 percent).

These responses paint a stark picture of girls’ daily lives and the messages they receive from those around them, including peers and even parents. In combination with the images they view on TV and in other popular media, the resounding perception is that girls are valued for their physical traits and bodily characteristics. Despite the emphasis placed in recent years on changing that narrative—with increased awareness on the part of corporate America, including the media and advertising industries—the majority of adolescent girls are receiving the message that they are less powerful, less safe, and overall less valued than boys.

## BOYS’ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

The survey also explores how boys might internalize and feel pressures based on gender norms and expectations.

While adults say that honesty, morality, ambition, and leadership are the traits that society values most in men,<sup>5</sup> boys are much more likely to say that society most values strength and toughness in boys (35 percent). Only two percent say honesty/morality and eight percent say ambition or leadership.

Seven in 10 boys in the survey (72 percent) say they personally feel pressure to be physically strong. Forty-four percent of older boys (14 to 19) feel pressure to be “willing to punch someone if provoked.” About one in three younger boys feels the same (35 percent).

The strongest correlation with feeling pressure to be physically strong and ready to fight is exposure to boys making sexual comments and jokes about girls. The more frequently boys are around other boys who make these comments, the more likely they are to feel pressure to be strong and ready for violence. This finding suggests that something about an atmosphere in which sexual jokes and comments are common also relates to an atmosphere in which boys feel pressure to be strong and willing to fight.

**One in three boys (33 percent) feels pressure to dominate or be in charge of others. Feeling this pressure is correlated with a number of variables including:**

- Feeling pressure to be physically strong, pressure to punch someone if provoked, and pressure to join in when other boys talk about girls in a sexual way;
- Feeling pressure to hide their feelings when they feel sad or anxious;
- Being around boys who frequently make sexual jokes and sexual comments about girls;
- Having friends who have asked girls for sexy or naked pictures; and
- “Being a leader” is an important life goal.

Eighty-two percent of boys have heard someone tell a boy he was “acting like a girl,” which they interpret to mean behavior that is emotional, crying, sensitive, weak,

<sup>5</sup>Pew study: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/12/05/on-gender-differences-no-consensus-on-nature-vs-nurture/>



Yet about half of boys (49 percent) want to learn more about having the “right to feel any way you want and it doesn’t matter what people think.”

feminine, and moody/dramatic—and implicitly unbecoming. One-third of boys (33 percent) thinks society expects boys to hide or suppress their feelings when they feel sad or scared. Another third (34 percent) says society expects them to be strong, tough, “be a man,” and “suck it up.” When they feel angry, a plurality of boys says society expects them to be aggressive or violent (41 percent), followed by doing nothing, keeping quiet, and “suck it up/be a man” (35 percent). Yet about half of boys (49 percent) want to learn more about having the “right to feel any way you want and it doesn’t matter what people think.”

Many boys also face pressures around sex. Four in 10 heterosexual boys ages 14 to 19 feel pressure to “hook up with a girl” (40 percent v. 29 percent of heterosexual girls 14 to 19 who feel pressure to “hook up with a boy”). One in three boys ages 14 to 19 (32 percent) feels pressure to “join in when other boys talk about girls in a sexual way.” Feeling pressure to join in is most strongly correlated with having male family members who make sexual comments and jokes about women and frequent exposure to boys making sexual comments and jokes about girls.

Close to half of boys ages 14 to 19 (47 percent) have heard their dad or other male family members make sexual jokes and comments about women (vs. 34 percent of girls). Six in 10 boys (62 percent) hear boys making sexual comments or sexual jokes about girls at least once a week. One-third of boys 14 to 19 (36 percent) say they hear these comments daily. One in three boys (34 percent) say that several times a week or more they hear male characters on TV or in movies who make sexual comments and sexual jokes about women characters.

**About half of boys say several times a week or more they see the following in movies, TV, music videos, games, and YouTube:**

- Women and girls who have bodies that are not realistic (50 percent);
- Female characters on TV or in movies whose bodies and looks are more important than their brains or abilities

(46 percent); and

- Female video game characters who look sexy or hot (47 percent)—one in four boys ages 14 to 19 (24 percent) see these female video game characters “every day.”

Two-thirds of boys ages 14 to 19 (67 percent) say they have at least one friend who has asked a girl to send them a sexy or naked picture. One in four boys of this age (27 percent) says “all or most” of their friends have made this request of a girl. Similar proportions (23 percent) say all or most of their friends have received sexy or naked pictures from girls.

Two-thirds of older boys (65 percent) say it is not okay for a boy who is not in a relationship with a girl to ask for a sexy or naked picture. One in seven (15 percent) says this is okay and 19 percent are unsure.

The strongest factors correlated with thinking it is okay to ask a girl for sexy or naked pictures is exposure to online porn, having friends who have asked girls for pictures, and having a dad who has made sexual comments and sexual jokes about women.

Boys are clearly under pressure to behave in certain ways that are deemed “appropriate” for their gender: being physically and emotionally strong, not exhibiting weakness, and showing interest in sex. They are also receiving the same messages as girls do—that girls should be valued for their physical traits and sexuality rather than their abilities or intelligence.

One of the most startling findings from the survey is the frequent rate at which boys are hearing their fathers or male family members making sexual jokes and comments about women. The fact that girls are hearing less of these comments from family members is somewhat encouraging, in that such language may be understood to be inappropriate for girls to hear. However, that almost half of adolescent boys are still hearing such jokes at home is a glaring reminder that the messages being communicated to boys could be perpetuating continued harmful attitudes and



behaviors toward girls, particularly in light of more awareness around sexual experiences, the importance of consent, and what constitutes harassment.

## ASPIRATIONS

We find very few gender differences when it comes to adolescents' life goals and aspirations. Girls are much more likely to say having a successful career is a very important goal than getting married or having kids—just like boys.

Seventy-one percent of girls and 75 percent of boys say a successful career is a “very important” goal in their life. Getting married is very important to 34 percent of girls and 31 percent of boys. Girls are slightly more likely to say having kids is very important (30 percent v. 23 percent). Girls are slightly more likely to say making the world a better place is very important (61 percent v. 53 percent of boys). Boys are slightly more likely to say making a lot of money is very important (44 percent v. 36 percent of girls).

However, gender differences do emerge around interest in a STEM career.<sup>6</sup> Forty-two percent of girls are extremely or very interested in a STEM career v. 51 percent of boys. Girls are twice as likely to be uninterested: 33 percent say they are not too or not at all interested v. 14 percent of boys.

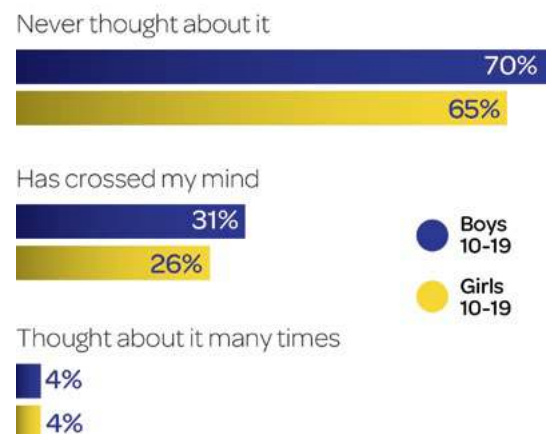
The strongest correlations for girls being interested in a STEM career include living in a higher-income household, saying that “being a leader” is a life goal, having talked about gender equality with someone in the past year, and playing on team sports.

Interestingly, fairly similar proportions of girls and boys like math and science subjects at school. However, girls are more likely to like English or language arts than boys (67 percent v. 58 percent). Additionally, girls are more likely than boys to say their favorite subject is art (21 percent v. 13 percent), music (14 percent v. 8 percent), or English (14 percent v. 7 percent).

We do not find much of a gender gap in political ambition. Thirty-five percent of boys say they have thought about being a politician when they are older, as have 30 percent of girls.

What these survey results tell us is that girls and boys are—with a few exceptions—equally interested in leadership and career opportunities for their futures, with both genders also equally wanting to get married and start families. Between adolescence

“Have you ever thought that, when you are older, you might want to be a politician?”



and “career-hood,” however, there is clearly a drop-off in the number of women in STEM-related<sup>7</sup> or corporate leadership<sup>8</sup> jobs—while men go on to assume those roles at much higher percentages.

## INFLUENCES

Girls and boys are not growing up in a vacuum—they are absorbing the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives of those around them when it comes to gender roles, pressures, and expectations. The survey explores a number of factors that may shape adolescents' views around equality—whether their parents perform traditional gender roles in the household and which ones; the types of toys they play with growing up; how men in their families talk about women; whether a teacher has talked to them about the #MeToo movement; exposure to online porn; and a number of other factors.

<sup>6</sup>Question wording: “Even if it’s a long ways away, how interested are you in a job someday that deals with science, technology, math, or engineering? (Engineering is about building or designing things.)”

<sup>7</sup><http://www.esa.doc.gov/sites/default/files/women-in-stem-2017-update.pdf>

<sup>8</sup><https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2017/05/21145352/WomenLeadershipGap2017-factsheet1.pdf>; <https://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/statistical-overview-women-workforce>; <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/03/17/the-data-on-women-leaders/>; <https://www.mercer.com/our-thinking/when-women-thrive-2016-report.html>

When it comes to parental influence, we do not find many correlations between respondents' views and which parent does household tasks, such as cleaning and grocery shopping. We do find that, among boys, having a mom who does not have a final say in family decisions is correlated with feeling more comfortable with women having traditional gender roles.

Not surprisingly, parents' comments and views appear to have a role in shaping views and experiences around equality. For example, having a mom or dad who has strong feelings about gender equality is positively correlated with more egalitarian views.

Having a parent who has talked about how to prevent or stop sexual harassment as a result of the #MeToo movement is correlated with respondents' perceiving sexism as a problem in society and wanting equal numbers of men and women in leadership.

**As we allude to earlier in the section on Boys' Experiences and Perceptions, among boys, having a father who makes sexual comments and sexual jokes about women is correlated with several feelings and behaviors:**

- Feeling it is okay to ask a girl for a naked or sexy picture;
- Viewing online pornography;
- Feeling pressure to join in when other boys talk about girls in a sexual way;
- Feeling pressure to "hook up with" a girl;
- Feeling pressure to hide sad or anxious feelings;
- Feeling pressure to be physically attractive;
- Feeling pressure to control and dominate others;
- Feeling pressure to not have strong opinions;
- Only somewhat agreeing or disagreeing that men and women should be treated equally; and
- Only somewhat agreeing or disagreeing with wanting equal

numbers of men and women as leaders in work, politics, and life.

**Having a parent who identifies as a Republican is also correlated with a number of views:**

- Feeling more comfortable with traditional gender roles;
- Only somewhat agreeing or disagreeing with wanting equal numbers of men and women who are leaders in work, politics, and life;
- Only somewhat agreeing or disagreeing that men and women should be treated equally (significant among boys with a Republican parent, not girls with a Republican parent);
- Not perceiving sexism is a big problem in society;
- Thinking full equality exists between boys and girls;
- Not having a mom who has strong feelings about gender equality; and
- Wanting kids and getting married as important life goals.

This is not surprising given recent research among adults and voters<sup>9</sup>—Republican men and women tend to be least progressive on gender equality.

That parents have a tremendous influence on how girls and boys view equality is to be expected—yet it is telling that children and adolescents are not only watching what their parents do, they're listening closely to what their parents are—or are not—saying. We know the old adage that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is not actually true, and when it comes to behavior and beliefs around gender equality, words—and the absence of them—can certainly contribute to perpetuating the traditional narrative that gender equality is not that important or that men and women shouldn't be treated equally.

In addition to parental influences, we explored the role of gender-specific and gender-neutral toys in shaping views around gender equality. We asked respondents whether they mostly

played with boy toys growing up, girl toys, or toys made for everyone.<sup>10</sup> About half of girls (54 percent) and half of boys (52 percent) say they played mostly with toys made for their gender. About four in 10 (38 percent girls, 43 percent boys) say they mostly played with toys made for everyone. The remaining (8 percent, 4 percent) mostly played with toys made for the opposite gender.

**We find several correlations between responses to this question and others in the survey. Among boys, there is a correlation with mostly having played with boy toys growing up and (in order of strength):**

- Thinking more about girls' bodies and how they look than their thoughts and personalities;
- Not having talked about gender equality in the past year;
- Only somewhat agreeing or disagreeing with wanting equal numbers of men and women who are leaders in work, politics, and life;
- Placing less importance on "making the world a better place" as a life goal (and more importance on making money, having kids, and getting married);
- Not liking English as a subject in school;
- Thinking gender equality already exists;
- Not perceiving sexism is a big problem;
- Not feeling pressure to be liked by others; and
- Not identifying as a feminist.

**Conversely, these views are correlated with boys having mostly played with gender-neutral toys (in order of strength):**

- Thinking more about girls' thoughts and personalities than their bodies and how they look;
- Having talked about gender equality in the past year;
- Liking English as a school subject;
- Placing higher importance on "making the world a better place" as a life goal and less on "making money;"

- Less pressure to look hot or sexy;
- Perceiving sexism as a problem in society;
- Identifying as a feminist;
- Strong agreement with wanting equal numbers of men and women who are leaders in work, politics, and life;
- Feeling less pressure to be willing to throw a punch if provoked;
- Perceiving gender inequality; and
- Feeling more pressure to be liked by others.

**Among girls, there is a correlation between mostly having played with girl toys growing up and:**

- Having parents whose childcare responsibilities are not equal;
- Feeling more pressure to dress like older women;
- Feeling more pressure to dominate or control others;
- Having more friends who have been asked by boys for naked or sexy pictures;
- Feeling more pressure to have positive comments on social media;
- Placing less importance on "having a successful career" as a life goal;
- Feeling more pressure to look hot or sexy;
- Feeling more pressure to be physically attractive;
- Not identifying as a feminist; and
- Having a dad who has made sexual comments and jokes about women.

**Among girls, there is a correlation between mostly having played with "toys made for all kids" and:**

- Having parents who share childcare responsibilities equally;
- Feeling less pressure to dress like older women;
- Feeling less pressure to get positive

<sup>9</sup><https://www.scribd.com/document/366406592/PerryUndem-Report-on-Sexism-Harassment-Culture-And-Equality-compressed>

<sup>10</sup>Question wording: When you were younger, what types of toys did you play with most of the time? ROTATE: Toys that are made for girls (like princesses, jewelry, dolls); toys that are made for boys (like trucks, superhero figures, guns); or toys that are made for all kids (like Legos)?



comments on social media;

- Being less likely to have a lot of friends who have been asked by boys for naked or sexy pictures;
- Having a dad who has strong feelings about gender equality;
- Having parents share cooking duties equally;
- Feeling less pressure to be physically attractive;
- Placing less importance on “getting married” as a life goal; and
- Not having a dad who has made sexual comments and jokes about women.

While correlations are not causation, these findings suggest that—unsurprisingly—children who are exposed to more gender neutral toys and conversations about gender equality grow up with more awareness of the issue and the desire to change the status quo. It may seem intuitive that gender-specific toys (such as princesses for girls or superheroes for boys) would perpetuate existing stereotypes—but now we have corresponding data from adolescents themselves that these constant reinforcements do matter when it comes to long-term views.

## IMPACT OF #METOO

Given all the media attention around sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement, the survey explored adolescents’ exposure to and the influence of the #MeToo movement in shaping perceptions around gender equality.

We found that, while seven in 10 survey respondents (71 percent) have heard of the #MeToo movement, only one in three girls (36 percent) and 28 percent of boys say a parent has talked to them about how to prevent or stop sexual harassment as a result of the #MeToo movement. About one in five girls (23 percent) and boys (21 percent) says a teacher has talked to them about how to prevent or stop harassment as a result of #MeToo.

About half of girls (55 percent) says the #MeToo movement has made them feel like

they could tell someone if they were sexually harassed or assaulted, but fewer boys (34 percent) said the same.

**We asked survey respondents why they think some girls do not report things like boys making unwelcome sexual comments and sexual jokes. Among girls the most common answers are:**

- Being worried people will not like them (53 percent);
- Not believing reporting comments will make a difference (51 percent);
- Not being sure if the comments are serious enough to report (48 percent); and
- Being worried they will not be believed (46 percent).

These mirror some of the reasons women do not report sexual harassment in the workplace, according a recent Vox/Morning Consult poll.<sup>11</sup>

We explored factors that might relate to girls not reporting harassment. Girls ages 14 to 19 in the survey are more likely than boys to feel “a lot” of pressure to manage other people’s emotions at the expense of their own.

## Conclusion

Since the U.S. women’s movement emerged in the late 1960s, great strides have been made to level the playing field for women and girls in almost every area, from workplace policies to sexual and reproductive health rights. At the same time, there still exist deeply entrenched cultural, social, and economic biases that negatively affect women and girls and result in pervasive—if not as explicit as previous decades—gender inequality. As we have seen through these survey findings, such biases can be internalized at a young age and may perpetuate sometimes harmful gender stereotypes that, at best manifest in traditional gender roles (women taking on the majority of childcare, men working outside the home) and at worst result in dangerous

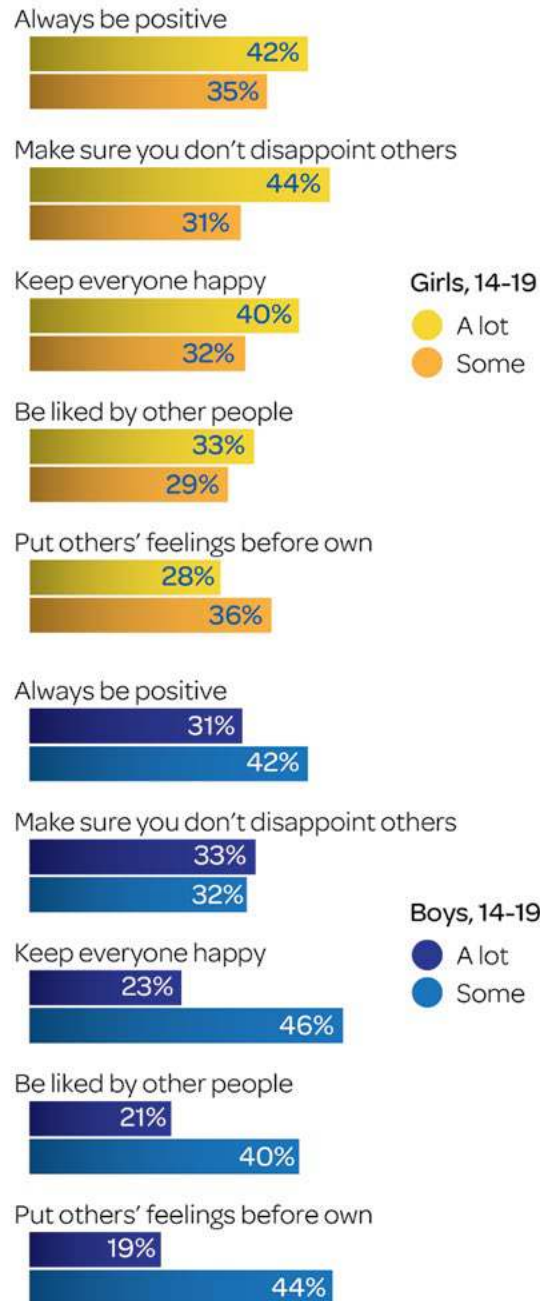
<sup>11</sup>[https://morningconsult.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/180313\\_crosstabs\\_VOX\\_ALL-WOMEN-1.pdf](https://morningconsult.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/180313_crosstabs_VOX_ALL-WOMEN-1.pdf)

Girls ages 14 to 19 in the survey are more likely than boys to feel “a lot” of pressure to manage other people’s emotions at the expense of their own.

power dynamics or mental health challenges.

It is clear that adolescent girls and boys are receiving messages from multiple sources—media, parents, teachers, role models, peers,

### Feel pressure to...



and corporate influences—that they are expected to conform to certain roles and expectations. These fixed ideas of what a “man” should be or what a “woman’s place” is often place more value on outward appearances or emotional restraint and can prevent children from taking advantage of opportunities to fulfill their potential. It’s not surprising that girls who are constantly bombarded with ads, TV shows, and movies portraying women with unrealistic bodies—combined with hearing remarks from friends and parents concerned about their appearance—end up thinking their external qualities are more important than pursuing academic interests or leadership opportunities. Boys who are expected to never display emotion or only show strength may end up in positions of power but with harmful ideas of how to exercise authority.

But we have seen with recent movements like #MeToo and Time’s Up that there are changes in the works. As an international non-profit focused on girls’ equality and children’s rights, Plan International USA is committed to raising awareness of the barriers that girls—and boys—face in their journey to adulthood, and we are focused on working with them to develop solutions to the issues of gender inequality. Throughout history, young people have demonstrated they are powerful, and they know their futures are at stake. Our job is to support their efforts to lead and decide how they want their world to change for the better.

*For more information on the survey, or to learn how Plan is working with girls and boys on the issue of gender inequality and get involved in next steps, visit [www.plan4girls.org](http://www.plan4girls.org).*



## The State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents

**For media inquiries, please contact:**

Robin Costello  
Senior Communications Director  
Plan International USA  
401.562.8427  
401.829.2796  
Robin.Costello@planusa.org

[plan4girls.org](http://plan4girls.org) | [planusa.org](http://planusa.org)

