

THE TRUTH GAP



How misinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women.

Executive summary

This year's State of the World's Girls report from Plan International explores how adolescent girls and young women engage with political, civic or social topics online, and in particular how they deal with misinformation and disinformation. How does the mass of information circulating on the internet, positively or negatively, affect girls' learning, their activism and their ability to make their way in the world?

“The first topic I like to research online is human rights to get informed about this topic: this is the main topic related to my activism, the human rights of girls and young women.” Lisa, 15, Brazil

Research was conducted across 33 countries, involving a survey with more than 26,000 adolescent girls and young women in 26 countries and in-depth interviews with girls and young women across 18 countries.

False information affects us all — it is pervasive and inescapable — but for girls and young women, learning about the world and their place in it, it can be devastating. The vile stories told about women in public life — the stereotypes depicted, the struggle to disentangle fact from fiction, opinion from evidence and the assumptions made — all undermine girls' ability to see themselves as leaders with ideas worth listening to and the ability to change the world.

“I think misinformation is something that's very prevalent. I feel like it does matter. I feel like it'll always matter. I think when it comes to sharing information, informing yourself and educating yourself, and also educating others, I feel like you have to trust what you're reading to be able to go on and then share with other people. I can't think of anything where misinformation would not be an issue.” Lily, 19, Ireland

Additionally, girls and young women are often particularly dependent on online information about topics — like sex and sexuality, girls' rights and feminism — that may not be freely discussed at home or at school, so false information is especially challenging and has profound consequences on their health, future and ability to engage in civic and political life.

“On the issue of sexuality. I didn't really have a chance to get to talk about the issue, or what happens when you're growing up, because in my country, adults, they don't really talk about those issues. So, the only place I will learn about everything is through the internet.” Lisa, 22, Malawi

The internet can open up the whole world and present opportunities for learning beyond formal and informal education. It is imperative to ensure that this is grounded in truth and that girls and young women are in a position to identify and avoid compromised information and can take full advantage of all the internet has to offer.



What girls are saying

“The one thing I am really afraid of is that, maybe, I will get manipulated without me noticing it. And then I will share misinformation.”

Nabila, 18, Germany

The research clearly illustrates the benefits of using online sources and social media platforms. It connects girls and young women to like-minded people all over the world, provides information about topics taboo in their homes and communities and enables civic participation and activism. Unfortunately, it also opens up a whole world of disinformation, misinformation and misogyny. Learning how to navigate through this morass of half-truths, prejudice and downright lies to find useful and truthful information is crucial.

“Most of the information is just half-truth. So, most times, people get misinformed. So that’s why it’s good to always verify the information and the sources you get the information from. So, you don’t pass it on to people and misinform others.” Tife, 22, Nigeria

Survey participants who identify as LGBTQIA+ or a racial, ethnic or religious minority are more likely to be very or extremely concerned about misinformation and disinformation online.

Access to the internet and the skills to navigate it are essential in today’s world. The digital gender divide means many girls are denied access to online devices and high-quality connectivity and without the ability to verify information and learn online, they risk being left behind.

“Currently we are in a world where everything is being done in the internet. We are doing everything digitally. So I think it should be taught in the schools from the pre-nurseries, the primary schools to secondary schools to universities. So that when we grow up, we have a better view on how to use our digital platforms.” Mia, 20, Kenya

*Credit: Plan International Cover credit: Plan International
Note: Photos in this report do not depict research participants*

We surveyed more than 26,000 girls and young women in 26 countries.

91% of girls and young women surveyed are **concerned** about misinformation and/or disinformation online.



40% of those surveyed are **extremely or very concerned**.



46% of girls feel **sad, depressed, stressed, worried or anxious** as a result of online misinformation and disinformation.



Misinformation and disinformation are having a **negative impact** on **87%** of the girls and young women we surveyed.

Misinformation and disinformation restrict girls' activism.

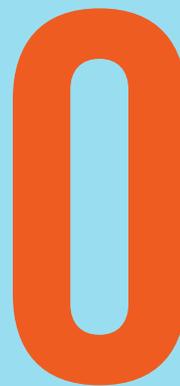
1 out of 4 girls feel less confident to share their views.



1 out of 5 girls stop engaging in politics or current affairs.



7 out of 10 girls and young women have never been taught about how to spot misinformation/disinformation at school or by family members.



There was **no single online source of information** that the majority of girls and young women surveyed actually **trusted**.

What needs to be done

Girls and young women want change. Not only do they want targeted support with their own — and young people’s — digital literacy but they hold governments and those profiting from social media and online connectivity responsible for preventing and countering misinformation and disinformation. They are quite clear that, although educational institutions need to help girls and young women navigate the internet, they are not responsible for the information posted on it, nor are parents or community leaders.

“But I definitely do think they [social media companies] need to do a better job on their behalf of stopping the spread of misinformation and disinformation and be more proactive in taking on posts that are being reported and making sure that stuff comes from a source or some kind of fact checking system.” Rachel, 18, United States

Governments must:

- **Build comprehensive digital media literacy programs** including, where possible, in school curricula, to meet the specific needs of girls and young women.
- **Recognize and address the implications of misinformation and disinformation on girls specifically**, connecting this with efforts to address online gender-based violence.

Online platforms must:

- **Work with girls and young women, in all their diversity, and civil society to build on and create solutions to increase girls’ and all young people’s digital literacy on their platforms.** Interventions should be grounded in their experiences and needs: this could include tools and initiatives for fact checking and verifying content, as well as awareness raising.

Civil society and non-governmental organizations must:

- **Provide financial and technical support** to young feminist organizations and groups working on girls’ digital rights, specifically those campaigning against misinformation and disinformation and online gender-based violence.

Intergovernmental and supranational organizations must:

- **Meaningfully engage girls and young women** in discussions on regulation, standards and policies, ensuring that their experiences and views are reflected.
- **Investigate the issue of misinformation and disinformation** and the impact it has on individuals’ human rights. This includes ongoing research on the gendered and age impacts and dimensions of disinformation and misinformation and strongly encouraging greater transparency and accountability within and throughout the tech sector.

Media outlets must:

- **Collaborate with other organizations** to share expertise and disseminate good practices around fact checking, alongside other verification methods. Share sector insights and expertise with governments and network providers to inform digital and media literacy programs that focus on developing critical thinking, digital navigation and safety skills.

Network providers must:

- **Work with governments** to increase meaningful connectivity and make mobile internet access more inclusive, focusing particularly on freely accessible educational content, increasing data allowances and lowering costs.