

The GIRLS LEAD ACT (S.634, H.R.1661)

The Girls Leadership, Engagement, Agency, and Development Act

The Girls LEAD Act is a bipartisan bill that complements Congress' recent efforts on women's empowerment, such as enactment of the Women, Peace, and Security Act and the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment (WEEE) Act. It combats the underrepresentation of women at all levels of public sector decision-making by specifically addressing the civic and political involvement and leadership of adolescent girls, an area where there is currently a gap in U.S. foreign assistance policy and programming.

Quick Facts:

- Despite comprising over 50 percent of the world's population, women are underrepresented at all levels of public sector decision-making. At the current rate of progress, it will take 145.5 years to achieve gender parity in political participation.¹
- Adolescence is a critical period in a girl's life, and it is a time when girls are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, and education disruptions, as well as child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, which are detrimental to their futures.
 - 5.2 million girls of primary and secondary age are at risk of not returning to school due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on top of the approximately 132 million girls who were already out of school.²
 - Despite global progress, 100 million girls under the age of 18 will be married in the next decade, with up to 10 million more at risk of child marriage over the next decade due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³
 - Globally, every 10 minutes, an adolescent girl dies as a result of violence.⁴
- Adolescents who actively participate in their community and civic processes from early on are more likely to become engaged citizens and voters, with higher levels of ambition for future leadership positions in both politics and the private sector.⁵ Their safe, meaningful and appropriate participation is key to creating inclusive democracies with informed and engaged citizens.

The Girls LEAD Act Would...

- Improve U.S. Strategies - Establishes U.S. policy to promote the support and empowerment of adolescent girls and directs the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to create a single strategy on strengthening the participation of adolescent girls in democracy, human rights, and governance programming.
- Strengthen Programming - Directs the Department of State and USAID to implement programming designed to strengthen girls' civic and political participation and to prioritize funding made available to the agencies in accordance with the strategies and policies established by this legislation.
- Require Reporting - Requires annual reporting to ensure progress on the new policy and strategy.

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[1] World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap report](#), 2021.

[2] UNESCO, [UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response](#), 2020.

[3] UNICEF, [COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage](#), 2021.

[4] UNICEF, ["Empowering adolescent girls is investing in a brighter future"](#), 2017.

[5] UNDP, Youth Strategy, 2014-2015.

Why Invest in Girls' Leadership?

Girls' leadership and gender equality result in more stable societies

Women's and girls' empowerment are intricately linked to inclusive democracies, sustainable development, and global stability. Higher levels of gender equality are strongly correlated with a nation's relative state of peace, a healthier domestic security environment, and lower levels of aggression toward other states.⁶

Women's leadership in politics is beneficial across a number of indicators. Their participation results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs.⁷ Research shows that women's involvement in peace processes makes them 64% less likely to fail.⁸

Moreover, evidence suggests that gender balance in the political sphere promotes gender balance in the workforce, which could double global GDP growth by 2025.⁹ Increasing women's leadership in the private sector has also catalyzed economic development. The presence of women on corporate boards has been seen to increase growth, suggesting that their perspectives contribute to better collective decision-making.¹⁰

A long way before gender parity in political participation

It will take 145.5 years to achieve gender parity in political participation.¹¹ While many countries can claim progress, the same assessment finds that women hold just 16.1% of parliamentary seats and 22.1% of higher-level ministerial roles in 156 countries.¹²

Engaging more adolescent girls in civil and political activities could, over time, contribute to increased presence of women in these spaces. However, discriminatory laws and a lack of established pathways for their civic participation remain common. This is true regardless of a country's GDP or how high it scores on other markers including girls' and women's education, health, or legal equality — slowing progress towards sustainable development.¹³



A window of opportunity exists even before adulthood

Women are less likely to fully engage in civic and political processes if they are discouraged and excluded from these processes in childhood. Research shows that adolescents who actively participate in their community from an early age are more likely to become engaged citizens and voters.¹⁴ New generations of girl and women leaders will have an exponential effect, as evidence shows girls with a female role model are more likely to have leadership ambition.¹⁵

By empowering adolescent girls with leadership skills as they transition into adulthood, we invest in their leadership potential and establish pathways to enshrine their participation in policymaking processes. Bolstering human capital is the most sustainable and effective form of development assistance,¹⁶ where reaching girls early allows them to navigate adolescence and set them up for success later in life.

[6] Brookings, September 2017

[7] The World Bank, 2013

[8] [Council on Foreign Relations](#), 2018

[9] [McKinsey Global Institute](#), 2015

[10] [MSCI](#), 2016

[11] [WEF](#), 2021

[12] Ibid

[13] [Council on Foreign Relations](#), 2019

[14] UNDP, Youth Strategy, 2014-2017

[15] KPMG, 2017

[16] [World Bank](#), 2019

What is the Impact of Girls' Leadership?

More empowered girls

Girl-hood, and adolescence in particular, is an extremely formative period in a woman's life and crucial to the positive development of feelings of confidence and value.

Research has shown that as early as age six, girls' levels of ambition and self-confidence in their abilities are impacted by gender discrimination and harmful stereotypes.¹⁷ Early development of civic participation and political leadership skills lay the foundation for continued leadership in both political and economic spheres into adulthood.

Leadership skills also serve as a protective mechanism. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to safety and health risks, as well as disruptions to their education. With increased capacity and confidence to speak out on issues affecting them, girls can better ensure safety and wellbeing.

More effective and inclusive policies

Girls are the experts of their own experiences, priorities, and needs. When their voices are missing from policy spaces, their perspectives are not taken into account. At best, this results in ineffective policies and programming. At worst, it leads to initiatives that put them at risk of experiencing harm or increase their marginalization.

Girls should be present for civic and political discussions at every level — from local school boards to national and global-level policy-making forums. When they are supported in these spaces, they are empowered to be drivers of positive change in their communities. They can hold decision-makers to account in their communities and beyond to ensure policies and programs accurately reflect their needs. See case studies on girl participation programming on [pages 5 and 6](#).

What is the Role of Men and Boys?

Creating an enabling environment and transforming institutions

If girls and women are to succeed in civic and political processes, men and boys must help create more inclusive and supportive environments. This means addressing and transforming both practical barriers and social norms that inhibit gender equality. Even the most empowered and capable women and girls will not be able to create change if the systems they operate in are discriminatory.

For example, if policy spaces are difficult to access via safe public transportation, then women and girls may not be able to physically reach them. If participation in politics requires financial capital, women and girls are at more of a disadvantage because of the compounding barriers they face to economic resiliency. If men in power are prejudiced toward women leaders and uninterested in taking their priorities into account, women leaders will not be as effective, even if they are at the table. In a survey of five regions, 82 percent of women parliamentarians reported experiencing psychological violence, including threats towards themselves and their families, and 65 percent were subject to sexist remarks, often by male colleagues.¹⁸

It's especially critical that boys' understanding of leadership is shaped by principles of equality and egalitarianism and examples of leaders that share these values. The Girls LEAD Act aims to do this by ensuring that adolescents—regardless of gender—are better able to participate in policy processes. By putting girls' participation front and center, girls will not be excluded or left behind in these programs, paving the way for boys to understand equal representation as the norm rather than the exception. In doing so, many of the gendered stereotypes around girls' and women's leadership will erode. It is impossible to achieve gender equality in politics without men and boys' allyship. They must actively work to support greater parity in civic processes.

[17] Science, "[Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests](#)", 2017

[18] [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), 2016

What are the Barriers to Girls' Participation?

Few opportunities exist for child participation

Encouraging adolescent girls' political participation requires inclusive civic and political structures. This would enable them to better transition into leadership positions in adulthood across both public and private spheres.

The **participation of children in decision-making can have a marked impact on how effectively their concerns and experiences are integrated into response plans and transitional and recovery processes.** Yet children are rarely considered as stakeholders in policy and program development, implementation, and accountability. Most global governance structures lack both formal and informal child participation mechanisms. When children do have the access and ability to speak out on issues important to them, they are often subject to harassment or not taken seriously, and harmful gender norms exacerbate this risk for girls. Even when mechanisms exist, structural and institutional barriers are more likely to hinder girls from accessing them than boys.

Gender and age are intersecting barriers for girls

The obstacles girls and women face when taking on leadership roles are often numerous, interlinked, and compounding. **Due to their age and gender, girls are doubly discriminated against in civic engagement processes.**

This includes being prevented from completing their education, undermining their future potential, or being unable to access appropriate and safe economic opportunities. An unfair burden of unpaid domestic labor and care-work may prevent them from dedicating time to political pursuits. They may face context-specific roadblocks, such as discrimination or stigma when taking on leadership roles. They are likely to confront difficulty gaining the respect of their male counterparts, a symptom of deeply entrenched power dynamics that devalue girls' perspectives, and often silence their voices.

For example, girls are more likely than boys to be victims of forms of gender-based violence. This includes child marriage. When a girl is married, she is less likely to complete her education. This in turn robs her of skills and knowledge that will allow her to develop the ability and desire to participate fully in society, particularly in civic or economic capacities. Girls are also unable to navigate many public spaces in the same way men, women, or boys can. Where women face security risks and mobility restrictions, girls are even more vulnerable. Where boys may be rewarded for speaking out and taking on leadership roles, girls may be punished with physical violence or emotional harassment. To bolster girls' leadership, it's critical that their distinct barriers are understood and addressed.

GIRLS' LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL IS AFFECTED BY...

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Around 120 million girls worldwide (slightly more than 1 in 10) have experienced rape or other forced sexual acts. (UNICEF, 2014)

Globally, every 10 minutes, an adolescent girl dies as a result of violence. (UNICEF, 2014)

Despite global progress, 100 million girls under the age of 18 will be married in the next decade, with up to 10 million more at risk of child marriage over the next decade due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (UNICEF, 2021)

UNFAIR BURDEN OF WORK

Girls account for two-thirds of the 54 million children aged 5-14 who perform chores for at least 21 hours per week. (ILO, 2017)

Girls are more likely than boys to perform double work duty – meaning in employment and in household chores. (ILO, 2017)

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Girls are more likely to be permanently excluded from education, where 9 million primary school aged girls will never read and write, compared to about 3 million boys. (UNESCO, 2019)

GLOBAL CASE STUDIES: What Does Girls' Participation Look Like?

1. Girls' Networks in Nicaragua



In Nicaragua, the majority of members on local and municipal children's councils were male adolescents, which resulted in planning and activities that frequently centered around boys' priorities. Girls felt held back from participating because the forum was not a space where they could discuss their experiences comfortably.

As a result, Save the Children began supporting an independently-operated structure of the children's councils called the Girls' Network, which promotes the organized participation of girls and adolescents and provides a safe space where girls can discuss issues important to them.

Now present and formally incorporated into all 43 municipalities where children's councils operate, the Girls' Network helps girls recognize and claim their rights, develop the capacity to stand up for themselves, and to use legal resources when their rights are threatened or violated.

"I learned that men and women are the same...This had a great impact on me because my family is very traditional, and I thought women belonged in the household...The network changed my life."

- Girls' Network Participant

2. Girl Youth Leaders in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, ChildFund created the Alliance of Youth to End Violence Against Children (AYEVAC). Through AYEVAC, participating youth activists advocate at the local and national level on child protection issues including violence in schools and child labor. To ensure these leaders have the skills they need to feel confident participating in civic and political spaces, ChildFund conducts youth camps, skill development trainings, and one-on-one coaching, as well as provides technical guidance.

Through these activities, girls like Ruwani, who led her district group's participation in AYEVAC's national launch event, are empowered to become leaders in their community. In addition to continuing her leadership in AYEVAC, Ruwani plays a key role in the government-run Puttlam District Youth Federation and acts as a role model in her community for other girls, encouraging them to speak out on issues that matter to them.



AYEVAC members, including Ruwani and other girl leaders, have developed and shared solutions for child protection issues with Sri Lankan government officials, conducted awareness campaigns, led a protest against corporal punishment and psychological aggression in schools, and collected 120,000 signatures for a petition encouraging the government to prioritize ending violence against children that was delivered to the Minister for Women and Child Affairs.

"I want to become someone who can make a change in the lives of children and youth and ensure they have a safe environment for them to bloom."

- Ruwani, Girl Youth activist

3. Unlocking Leadership Opportunities in Central America



Through the Children Believe (ChildFund's Canadian affiliate) led project, Preventing Irregular Migration in Central America (PICMCA/CONFIO – "I Trust"), ChildFund and Educo are working to increase youth participation and leadership in civic and political spaces in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

To ensure girl and boy participants receive equal opportunities, PICMCA/CONFIO incorporates a gender-responsive approach in its activities and emphasizes the importance of gender equality and girls' empowerment. PICMCA/CONFIO recognizes that creating spaces for children and youth's civic and political engagement helps develop and increase their sense of citizenship, social integration, and agency in their communities, as well as builds their confidence and supports the development of key life skills.

Participating youth receive advocacy and skills trainings, support in establishing youth-led committees, and guidance on how to lead awareness campaigns and workshops on gender equality, gender-based violence prevention, civic participation, and leadership.

"CONFIO gave me the tools to talk about my rights. I have developed self-confidence, made my mother aware of my rights as a girl, and made her realize I have the right to study."

- Edenisse, CONFIO participant in El Salvador

4. Promoting Girls' Leadership Through Children's Councils in Tanzania

Asia, 17, is a form five student from Tanzania, who has been working to campaign for children's rights and the fight against violence in the Isles. She is a member of the children's council, where she is able to discuss issues affecting children and advocate for positive change. According to Asia, being in the children's council has made her very strong and confident through the knowledge and skills to achieve her life dreams.

She says children face a number of challenges including low awareness about their rights, which sometimes results in them being afraid to report when they are abused. She also says that the councils educate the public, especially those in rural areas, on the importance of protecting children's rights as well as registering them in children councils. She urges the government to strengthen policies and laws to punish those who abuse children.

Asia's father, Makame, is very supportive of Asia's campaigning and is thankful for efforts to ensure that Zanzibar's children access their rights and remain protected. Makame says after getting information that there are children councils in the Isles, he came back home and talked to his children including Asia and took all of them to the council for registration.



ADAPTING EXISTING PROGRAMMING TO BETTER INCLUDE ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Decreasing the existing gap around adolescent girls' participation can be achieved in part through adaptation of existing U.S. government foreign assistance initiatives on democracy and governance. This includes:

- Expanding age requirements for participation in existing democracy and governance programs.
- Ensuring that age-appropriate and gender-sensitive child-safeguarding provisions for all programs that engage participants under the age of 18 are in place.
- Adapting programs to better address the barriers to adolescent girls' and women's civic engagement and political participation, such as child, early and forced marriage, access to quality primary and secondary education, unequal domestic and childcare responsibilities, gender-based violence, early pregnancy and motherhood, adolescent maternal mortality, mobility constraints, malnourishment, displacement, lack of safe and reliable female sanitation and hygiene facilities, harmful social norms, HIV infection, physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers faced by adolescent girls with disabilities, and discrimination based on religious or ethnic identity.
- Adapting or adding program components that would increase adolescent girls' civic and political knowledge and foundational skills, advocacy, confidence, leadership and research skills, leadership opportunities, intergenerational mentorship opportunities, and data and media literacy.
- Including program components that promote girls' participation and leadership in programs whose participants can be influential in the transformation of existing structures that present barriers to girls' participation. For example, programs targeted to men and boys or traditional and religious leaders can include elements that promote allyship and/or inclusive governance.
- Including adolescent girls in feedback mechanisms that inform monitoring, evaluation and learning processes of democracy and governance programs.
- Including girl-led and girl-focused civil society organizations alongside other civil society organizations that have been the traditional recipients of funding and technical support for democracy and governance efforts.
- Including mentorship components for adolescent girls into existing youth-focused or women-focused democracy and governance efforts.
- Collecting data disaggregated by, at a minimum, sex and age throughout program cycles to gain a better understanding of how many and which adolescent girls are more likely to participate in programs, which then can inform solutions to better reach those who are being excluded.

The Programming and Policy Gap

U.S. government assistance and foreign policy do not currently address girls' civic and political participation and leadership and lack the infrastructure to close global gender gaps in political and civic spaces. It's critical that U.S. policy and programming address gender and age-specific barriers and proactively prioritize girls' engagement in these processes.

Democracy & Governance Programming Gap

Funding for democracy and good governance promotion is deeply integrated into U.S. foreign policy institutions. More than \$2 billion annually has been allocated from foreign assistance funds over the past decade for democracy promotion activities managed by the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other agencies.

Current USG-funded programs that focus on elections, democracy, and governance engage with young people in the post-adolescence age demographic, defined as 18-30 years old. These programs may engage citizens to hold their governments accountable through civil society organizations or the elections process, or to participate in the electoral system as voters, candidates, or political party members.

Programs with the goal of educating children, and particularly girls, about their role as citizens in their communities do not exist.

Girls' Empowerment Programming Gap

U.S. Foreign Assistance programs focused on girls' leadership or empowerment are largely in the health (including child marriage, FGM, GBV and HIV/AIDS), education, and entrepreneurship sectors. These activities empower girls to have the skills and confidence to make decisions about their own life in these areas. However, they rarely include information about civics, politics, or government, and do not build girls' capacities to be political or community leaders.

Where programs that address children's civic engagement do exist, they are not funded by the U.S. government.

The Policy Gap

The USAID Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) states that "inclusive democracy and governance are fundamental objectives and critical foundations for sustainable development and global peace." Yet, DRG processes will not be truly inclusive until girls and women are meaningfully and safely incorporated into the systems that drive them.

Girls LEAD seeks to fill critical gaps in policy initiatives that aim to increase gender parity in civic and political engagement—

- The **Women's Global development and Prosperity (WGDP) Initiative** and the **Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment (WEEE) Act** have contributed to women's and girls' capacities for leadership through greater economic independence and stability. Both acknowledge the need for enabling environments that challenge and transform harmful social norms so girls may group up safe and educated. We also must ensure girls gain skills such as leadership, public speaking, and data literacy to take on decision-making roles.
- The **Women's Peace and Security (WPS) Act** moves beyond economic capacities to promote women's participation in peace processes. We know that inclusive democracy and good governance are means of conflict prevention and critical to sustainable peace. We also know that today's conflict contexts are increasingly protracted. Investing in girls' leadership in political spaces prior to a conflict is foundational to ensuring that, when the conflict ends, young women are prepared to enter those spaces with the skills and experience to contribute meaningfully. The Girls LEAD Act goes beyond conflict and post-conflict contexts to how to best promote inclusive democracy and governance as a means for sustainable development and peace. Women and girls are essential to those efforts.
- The **Keeping Girls in School Act (KGISA)** addresses barriers girls face to accessing and staying in school, particularly at the secondary level. The Girls LEAD Act is complementary, as education is one part of a comprehensive foundation for addressing the gender leadership gap in the public sphere. To fully close this gap, we must also support girls' skills development in leadership, understanding of civic and political spaces and processes, and access to these platforms from adolescence, all of which the Girls LEAD Act aims to do.

The Solution

Supporting girls' participation in civic and political spaces is key to ensuring resilient and sustainable communities. Girls are powerful catalysts for a more equal world. As a global leader on democracy promotion and good governance, the U.S. Government is uniquely positioned to address critical gaps in girls' political and civic participation and accelerate progress around the world. **Passing the Girls LEAD Act will enact reforms across USAID and the State Department to ensure that children, particularly girls, are consulted and able to meaningfully engage in civic and political forums and processes in their countries.**

The Girls LEAD Act Will:

Enhance Programming

- Support the increased capability of girls to assume leadership roles and influence decision-making in their households, schools, and broader communities.
- Ensure the meaningful engagement and consultation of girls and boys so that U.S. development initiatives are responsive to their input and perspectives.
- Ensure that initiatives to support girls' civic and political leadership utilize an evidence-based and best practices approach.
- Ensure that specific barriers to girls' and women's civic and political engagement are identified and addressed, including but not limited to child marriage, girls' and women's access to education, unequal childcare burdens, sexual and gender-based violence, mobility constraints, and harmful gender norms.
- Support the capacity of formal and informal civil and political institutions to meaningfully engage with girls as agents of change.
- Prioritize support for girl-led and girl-focused civil society organizations at the local and national level as key to democracy and good governance.

Require Public, Annual Reporting

- Mandate a publicly available annual report on progress made by the relevant U.S. government agencies towards increasing civic and political participation of children and adolescents, particularly girls.

Authorize funding

- Mandate that the Secretary of State and USAID Administrator direct a portion of U.S. foreign assistance funding appropriated to democracy, human rights, and governance programs so they are spent in accordance with the policies set forth in the bill.

Mandate Coordinated Strategies

- Mandate the State Department and USAID to create a single democracy and governance strategy, in consultation with civil society and including the meaningful participation of adolescent girls, that includes a specific implementation plan from each agency.
- Ensure that the updated or new democracy and governance strategy includes:
 - strategic objectives and activities to advance the leadership and civic and political engagement of adolescents, particularly girls;
 - an explanation of how strategic objectives and activities are aligned with existing U.S. foreign assistance policies and strategies;
 - an explanation of how a gender analysis—as required by the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act, Public Law No: 115-428— has informed the strategy; and
 - a monitoring and evaluation plan to ensure accountability and effectiveness.

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The following civil society organizations and networks endorse the Girls LEAD Act:

4Girls GLocal Leadership (4GGL)
Alliance for Peacebuilding
Aware Girls
California Women Lawyers
CARE USA
Chemonics International
Child Labor Coalition
ChildFund
CHURCH WORLD SERVICE
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Educate the Children
Equal Access International
Feminist Majority Foundation
Futures Without Violence
Girl Determined
Girl Up, UN Foundation
Global Campaign for Education - US
Global GAIN
Global Girl Media
Heartland Alliance International
Helen Keller International
IHC Global
InterAction
International Action Network for Gender Equity & Law (IANGEL)
International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)
International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)
International Youth Foundation
IREX
Islamic Relief USA
Jewish Women International
Justice for Migrant Women
Kakenya's Dream
Light for the World
Media Voices for Children
Men Can Stop Rape
Mina's List
National Association Social Workers
National Conference of Women's Bar Associations
National Consumers League
Nursing Network on Violence against Women International (NNVAWI)
Oxfam America
PDRC International
Peace Direct
Promundo-US
Rainforest Alliance
Rukmini Foundation
Rus Funk Consulting
Save the Children
She's the First
Soroptimist International
The Hunger Project
Together for Girls
Together Women Rise
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
UNICEF USA
United Nations Association of the USA
Women for Afghan Women
Women's Action for New Directions
World Vision