



WorldYWCA



**Young Women's
Leadership across
the regions of Asia and
the Pacific in the Face of
Major Challenges:**
A World YWCA RiseUp! Study

Acknowledgements

This report was written on the unceded lands of the people of the Kulin Nation and the Jagera and Turrbal peoples and the authors pay their respects to First Nations elders past, present and emerging. The authors further wish to acknowledge and pay their respects to all Indigenous peoples across the regions of Asia and the Pacific, and particularly to those Indigenous youth leaders who participated in this research.

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Executive Summary

Young women's leadership is essential to peace, security, justice and the realisation of human rights across the regions of Asia and the Pacific.

This research, conducted between 2020 and 2026, amplifies the voices of young women across nine countries in Asia and the Pacific: Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It does so for three reasons: first, to build understanding of the challenges young women face as they seek a better future for themselves and their communities; second, to identify how their work can be supported and upscaled; and finally, to showcase their strength, resilience, creativity and the impact of their work.

To respond to the urgent need to build and sustain peace, security and justice in the regions, it is essential that young women's leadership is recognised and supported by families, civil society, governments, regional actors and donors. As a regional community, we can do this by better understanding young women's unique experiences, acknowledging the barriers and challenges they face in their leadership journeys and by seeking creative, committed and comprehensive solutions that will allow their leadership to flourish. Doing so will enhance their lives, promote gender equality and build peace, security and justice in our regions.

Drawing on the accounts of over 400 young women across the regions, this report identifies the following **core challenges to young women's leadership**:

- **Patriarchal cultures** that undermine young women's claims to legitimate leadership in both formal and informal spaces.
- **Ageist bias** by older generations that fail to recognise young women's leadership and exclude young women from leadership opportunities.
- **Gender inequality**, including gender-based violence, which can manifest in unique and disproportionate challenges for younger women.

This research focuses on four major regional challenges: **violence against women and girls, conflict and political violence, the climate crisis and the ongoing impact of COVID-19**. As a result of these intersecting and compounding crises, **young women report**:

- Increases in gender-based violence, including early and forced marriage
- Restrictions on their movement outside of the house
- Denial or removal from education and loss of employment and opportunities
- Increases in care and unpaid work
- Increases in mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression

Nonetheless, young women lead in inspiring and impactful ways. The research offers evidence of how **young women support themselves and others to create meaningful and positive change in their communities**.

This is seen in:

- The use of safe spaces to share and build knowledge and support one another in times of crisis
- The building of feminist networks that seek transformative change, through advocacy, education and community-based activities
- Speaking up, and supporting others who speak up, to promote, defend and insist on their rights

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Consolidated Findings

Young women's experiences of regional crises

1. Young women's experiences of major regional crises — such as natural disasters, economic shocks, conflict, violence and health pandemics — can be significantly different from those of girls (under 18 years old), young men and older women (over 30 years of age).
2. Regional crises increase young women's vulnerability to violence (including forced marriage).
3. Regional crises undermine young women's access to education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, resources and their freedom of movement.
4. Young women report significant and widespread poor mental health among their cohort as a result of crises.
5. Young women feel excluded from both formal and informal decision-making regarding the management of crises in their community.

Young women's leadership

1. Young women's leadership is critical to addressing global challenges.
2. Young women describe their leadership as providing essential peer support and education and encouraging attitudinal change within their family

and communities.

3. Outside of their peer group, few young women feel they are taken seriously as leaders within their broader community.
4. Many young women believe that community attitudes to young women's leadership are improving with each generation, though significant barriers remain.

Enablers and barriers to young women's leadership

1. Safe spaces are essential to strengthening young women's leadership.
2. Network-building among young women is essential to strengthening young women's knowledge, skills and confidence.
3. Families can be both significant enablers and barriers to young women's leadership.
4. Older women can be both facilitators and barriers to young women's leadership.
5. There is little evidence of strong and persistent commitment to young women's leadership in organisations across the regions.
6. Gender inequality, patriarchy and gender-based violence fundamentally undermine young women's leadership.
7. When young women are forcibly married, their opportunities for education, paid work and engaging in leadership activities vanish.

Consolidated Recommendations

These recommendations are for civil society, non-governmental organisations, governments, intergovernmental organisations, donors and allies working on social justice and major challenges in the regions of Asia and the Pacific.

Enable young women's leadership

1. Provide opportunities for young women to network with others in their community (including other young women) in order to strengthen their skills and share their knowledge on issues affecting them.
2. Create spaces for young women's leadership in formal and informal forums to address the major challenges facing the regions.
3. Develop cultures of intergenerational leadership by engaging directly with women of all ages.

Address the barriers to young women's leadership

1. End violence against women and girls, including child, early and forced marriage.
2. Address the drivers of gender inequality, including patriarchal structures and cultures, gendered norms and attitudes and discriminatory practices.

Whole-of-society education

1. Educate communities by supporting programs and information campaigns on the importance and value of supporting young women and their rights.
2. Design and implement awareness-raising campaigns on the legal rights of young women.
3. Strengthen community understanding of the unique ways in which young women experience the major challenges facing the regions of Asia and the Pacific.
4. Engage in, and promote, impact studies on the value of young women's leadership on major regional issues.



Introduction

The regions of Asia and the Pacific are the most youthful regions in the world. Twenty-five per cent of people in these regions are between the ages of 15 and 29. The regions are home to 60% of the world's young people, including over 350 million young women (UNFPA, 2025; UN DESA, 2022; Youthpolicy.org, 2023).

The regions are a microcosm of the global challenges we all face. The regions of Asia and the Pacific have a legacy of armed conflict and political violence; they are the most disaster-prone areas of the world, and they can expect to be the regions worst affected by the climate crisis. The regions have hosted major epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Indonesia and continue to endure persistent cultures of violence against women and girls.

This report explores young women's leadership in the face of four major crises:

- Violence against women and girls
- Armed conflict and political violence
- The climate crisis
- The ongoing impact of COVID-19

It focuses on the experiences of young women in nine country case studies: Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Experiences of these challenges are diverse within and across these countries, with women and girls often disproportionately impacted. History, geography, political and leadership practices, dominant cultures, social attitudes and dynamics, religious traditions, caste systems, age, gender, familial and economic status all shape how countries, communities and individuals experience crises. As explored throughout the report, this is seen in how crises emerge, the impact they have, and the ways (and by whom) they are addressed.

Importantly, these crises feed, and are fed by, cultures of violence against women and girls. Again, this can occur in unique ways across the regions. Socio-cultural practices embedded in gender norms can interact with crises in very specific ways to generate harm to women and girls. For example, the research demonstrates that early and forced marriage has spiked in several, but not all, countries

in the regions in the aftermath of COVID-19 and climate-induced disasters.

If the regions are to address these overarching challenges – now and into the future – strong, confident, considered, inclusive, transformative and intergenerational leadership is needed. Critically, young women's leadership is needed.

This research seeks to better understand the structural barriers and critical enablers that shape young women's capacity to engage in transformative leadership across the regions and in response to these major challenges.

Transformative leadership is “the interplay between knowledge, skills and feminist values, resulting in positive changes in individuals and in social systems, thereby shifting power structures” (World YWCA, 2022). This type of leadership can occur in formal spaces (such as within organisations, governments or regional forums) and in informal spaces (such as within families, community and friendship groups).

The young women in this research demonstrate their capacity to lead by sharing their knowledge and experiences with their peers, speaking up for their rights, seeking constructive conversations with their families and communities on issues of social justice, educating themselves on these issues and building their networks to identify creative, sustainable and empathetic responses to the regions' major challenges.

The research finds that, across the regions of Asia and the Pacific, many young women lead in this way to make positive changes in their lives and their communities. It is this type of leadership that is urgently needed to address the growing and intersecting challenges being faced.

Yet their leadership is undervalued and undermined. Widespread gender inequality, patriarchal cultures, ageist attitudes and a lack of opportunities are among the challenges that young women leaders face.

Strengthening young women's leadership requires listening to them, supporting them and creating space for them. In this report, young women speak about their positionality and their unique experiences throughout the regions of Asia and the Pacific. In doing so, they provide us with pathways to enhance their leadership and build stronger, more resilient regions for all.



Methodology

This research draws on the Feminist Consultation Methodology designed by the World YWCA (2022). It seeks out, centres and amplifies the voices and experiences of young women. It positions young women as authorities in accounts of their own lives, their experiences of the world and in identifying the ways in which challenges to their lives should be addressed.

The research adopts a critical feminist research ethic. Firstly, this approach deliberately seeks out the voices and experiences of young women in areas and on issues where they have been traditionally marginalised.

Secondly, the approach identifies gendered power relationships that exist within communities. These power relations occur interpersonally and in the ways people of

diverse genders interact with cultures, structures, discourses and institutions within their communities.

Thirdly, this project adopts an intersectional lens which understands that not all women experience the world in the same ways. More specifically for this research project, it recognises that young women's experiences of the world are shaped by the ways that different aspects of their identities intersect with one another and with the outside world. This might be as a result of race, age, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, caste and familial situation.

Finally, the approach taken to this research is explicitly feminist. It seeks to better understand the causes and enablers of gender inequality and proposes ways that harmful and unequal gender norms can be transformed.

Data Collection

In line with this methodology, this research undertook a three-part data collection strategy between 2022 and 2026.

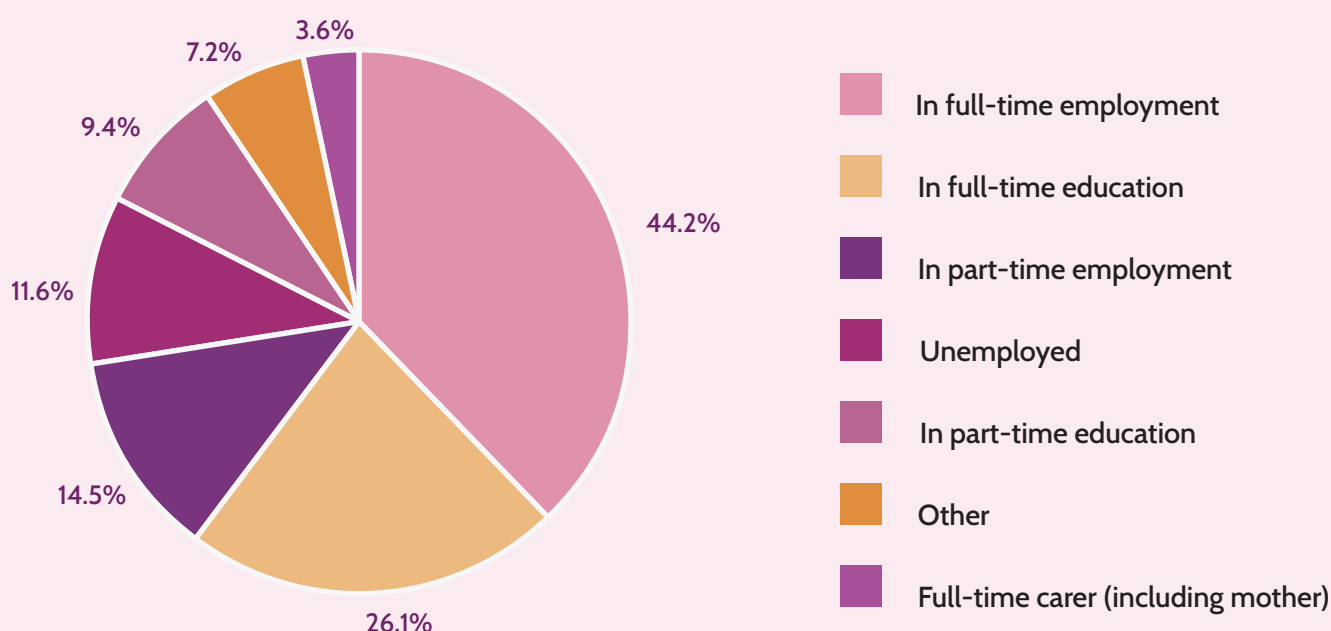
First, a desk-based analysis of government reporting, sector material and scholarly literature was undertaken.

Second, a regional survey was conducted, targeting young women in the regions of Asia and the Pacific between the ages of 18 and 30. It asked a series of Yes/No, multiple-choice questions, ranking and open-ended questions about the four main regional challenges considered in this research and about young

women's leadership. The survey attracted 165 respondents from 19 countries, 96 of whom are from seven of the nine country case studies: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Sri Lanka and Thailand. All but four respondents identified as female (two identified as male and two as non-binary) and 86% were aged between 18 and 30. Respondents identified as single (54%), married (22%) or in a relationship (23%). Most were either in full-time education or full-time employment (Graph 1).

The findings of the survey are discussed throughout the report and in conjunction with the project's qualitative research.

Graph 1: Survey respondents' employment/education status (multiple answers allowed) (N=138)



Third, locally-based peer researchers conducted 130 key informant interviews and 12 focus group discussions (Table 1) across the nine target countries (Image 1). These interviews were conducted in a language the respondent was comfortable with and, where necessary, the transcripts were translated into English. In addition, the authors conducted 22 key informant interviews with regional stakeholders. These included leading civil society actors with extensive experience working in gender equality, women's rights and social justice issues across the regions (Table 2). While this report focuses on raising the voices of young women, the views and insights of these stakeholders have informed the research findings. All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, coded and then analysed by the research team.

This research received Human Research Ethics approval from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Image 1: Research sites across the regions of Asia and the Pacific.



Table 1: Interviews and focus group discussions with young women

Country	Number of key informant interviews	Number of focus group discussions
Bangladesh	20	4
India	18	2
Myanmar	16	0
Nepal	15	4
Papua New Guinea	10	0
Samoa	7	0
Solomon Islands	8	0
Sri Lanka	20	2
Thailand	16	0
Total	130	12

Table 2: Interviews with regional stakeholders

Location	Self-identified area of focus	Number of key informant interviews
India	Climate Change	1
	Women's Rights	2
	Social Justice	1
Myanmar	Women's Peacebuilding Humanitarian Response	1 1
Nepal	Climate Change	4
Sri Lanka	Climate Change	1
Thailand	Women's Rights	1
Pacific	Women's Rights Climate Change Peacebuilding	2 1 2
Regional	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion	5
Total		22

Research Design

The research project was designed by the authors in consultation with a research advisory committee that consisted of young women leaders from across the nine research countries. The research advisory committee participated in the design of the overarching research questions and project scope and the creation of data collection tools.

The research advisory committee members were also the project's local peer researchers.

All peer researchers were young women who were active leaders within their community (Table 3). They were all trained by the Monash University research team on how to conduct ethical, feminist and robust data collection. This included modules on preparing for data collection, conducting interviews and focus group discussions, research ethics, and data protection and storage. The training involved a series of video-based lectures, practical sessions, guidebooks and open-ended discussions.

Table 3: Peer Research Team

Peer researcher	Country
Tanya D'Souza	India
Gloria Maung Maung	Myanmar
Anu Gurung	Nepal
Helena Seneka	Papua New Guinea
Marie Kelemete	Samoa
Kithmini Palihawadena	Sri Lanka
Clarine Toki	Solomon Islands
Natkana Kunasawat	Thailand

Two data validation processes took place with young women. Following analysis of the data by the research team, the research advisory committee was invited to respond to the preliminary findings through one-to-one meetings. This allowed the peer researchers to reflect on the resonance of the findings for their country and to align the analysis with their own experiences of data collection. Two subsequent research validation workshops took place, each with eight young women from the case study countries who had not been involved in the research.

They were presented with the findings and recommendations of the draft report and discussed the resonance of these within their own communities.

The research team will work with these young women on the dissemination of the research into their communities. Alongside the publication of this report, research findings will be shared with local communities through a series of accessible and, where appropriate, translated short reports, posters, postcards and social media campaigns.

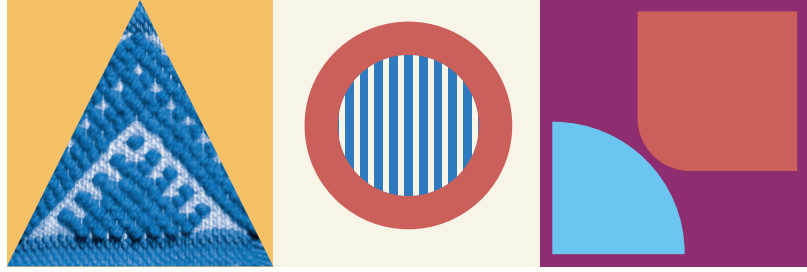
Amplifying young women's voices

The analysis centres and amplifies young women's voices. As much as possible, this has been done by using direct quotes, which are in the report's text and data visualisations. The quotes and views are presented as young women's truths. Therefore, they are not 'fact-checked', edited or corrected. Where appropriate, further contextualising research is presented. The quotes are anonymous but are referenced according to country, interviewee number and transcript number (noting that longer or follow-up interviews ran over two transcripts). Where the data was collected as part of a focus group discussion, the letters 'FGD' are in the reference. For example, reference (B12-1) refers to a young Bangladeshi woman, interview number 12, transcript 1. The country

Table 4: Reference Codes

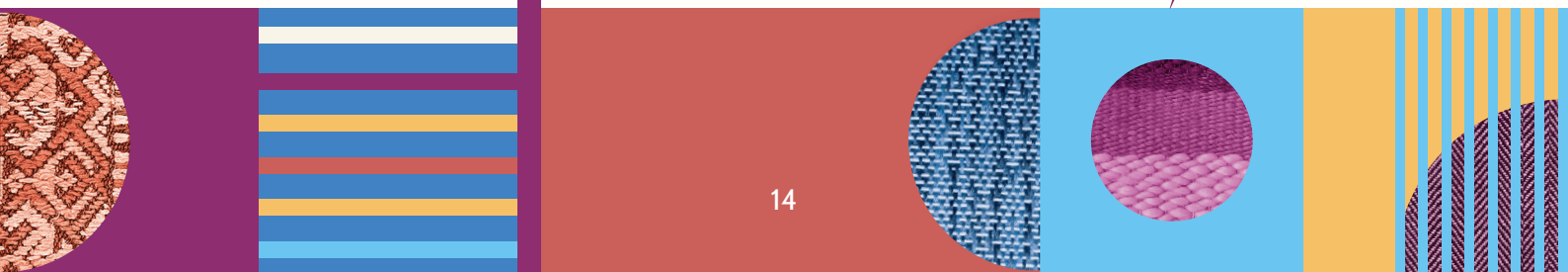
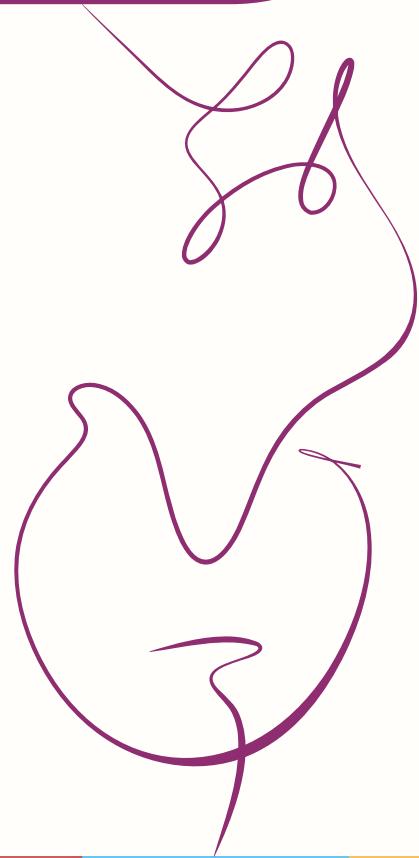
Code	Country
B	Bangladesh
I	India
M	Myanmar
N	Nepal
PNG	Papua New Guinea
S	Samoa
SI	Solomon Islands
SL	Sri Lanka
T	Thailand





Young Women's Leadership

Young women's leadership is about being "an advocate for others who have less ability to stand up for themselves. It is about supporting each other in all settings" (SLO2-1).



High Level Findings

Young women's leadership

1. Young women are motivated to lead by a desire to share knowledge, participate in feminist networks and safe spaces, build their skills and confidence, and drive positive change in their communities.
2. Young women largely lead in informal, collaborative and community-oriented ways, rather than through formal or official channels, sometimes through choice but often by necessity.
3. Young women lead by sharing knowledge, supporting others to access information and resources and engaging with community-based groups.
4. Young women generally do not feel listened to or respected by their communities.
5. Young women generally lack strong and positive female role models within their communities.
6. Strong intergenerational leadership is largely absent across the regions of Asia and the Pacific.

Barriers to young women's leadership

1. The predominant barriers to young women's leadership are the persistence of patriarchal cultures that sustain gendered violence, gender inequalities and discriminatory social attitudes towards young women.
2. The major barriers to young women's leadership are:
 - a. early and forced marriage
 - b. a disproportionate care and unpaid work burden
 - c. denial of education
 - d. a lack of autonomy.

Enablers to young women's leadership

1. Family support is critical to enabling young women's leadership.
2. Well-resourced and high-quality education and training programs are critical to strengthening and creating networks for young women's leadership.

3. Feminist networks and safe spaces help build young women's knowledge, skills and confidence to lead.

Recommendations

Strengthen young women's leadership

1. Enable families to support young women's leadership through socio-economic and awareness-raising programs.
2. Develop intergenerational leadership through strengthening networks of women and facilitating mentorship.
3. Support and facilitate high quality education and training programs that are embedded in young women's leadership journeys and are delivered in a participatory, responsive and integrated manner.
4. Establish and support young women-only networks and safe spaces.
5. Provide bespoke support for young married women, mothers and other young women with caring responsibilities to participate in leadership opportunities.
6. Create opportunities to listen to, document, communicate and celebrate young women's leadership achievements.
7. Create and support avenues for young women to articulate their diverse and dynamic needs in advancing their leadership.
8. Advocate for reserved spaces, with sustained funding, for young women in civil society, community-based organisations and regional decision-making forums.
9. Undertake research that documents the sustained impact of young women's leadership within communities and over time.
10. Increase community understanding of young women's rights and capacity to lead and safeguard their right to participate in leadership activities.

Address the barriers

1. Raise awareness of and address the patriarchal cultures that sustain gendered violence, gender inequalities and discriminatory social attitudes

towards young women. This can be pursued through information campaigns and lobbying for structural and legislative reform and implementation.

2. Recognise and address the unique barriers to gender equality that young women face, particularly the nexus of early and forced marriage, denial of education and loss of personal autonomy.
3. Raise awareness of and minimise the risks faced by young people (young women and men) who advocate for change or engage in protests or human rights and social movements.

Background

Young women are motivated to lead in their communities by a desire to:

- share knowledge with one another
- provide and receive support within a safe network
- build their own skills and confidence
- strengthen access to their rights
- drive positive change in their communities.

This model of transformative leadership deviates from the traditional forms of leadership that routinely dominate the public sphere across the regions of Asia and the Pacific. Traditional approaches to leadership tend to be hierarchical, top-down, formal and exist predominantly in public spaces. Moreover, they tend to be dominated by adult men. Young women speak about their leadership in the opposite way. Their approach to leadership is collaborative, grows from the grassroots, is shared with others and is often practised in informal roles that move seamlessly across the public and private spheres.

This is evident in the responses we received from young women when they were asked how they lead in their communities. In our survey of 165 young women, young women sought to create positive change in informal ways (Image 1). They do this through constructive conversations, self-education, shared learning, supporting one another to speak out about issues affecting them, and participating in community activities.

In many cases, young women adopt these approaches because of their exclusion from public and formal forms of leadership and because the issues on which they lead

Image 2: Young women speak about how they lead in response to our survey question



are often marginalised from public discourse.

Young women navigate leadership

Young women must often navigate through complex social, cultural, economic, political, religious and attitudinal terrain in their efforts to lead. While each context is different, this terrain is often challenging – even hostile – towards young women's leadership in ways that are unique to both their gender and their age.

The word cloud below (Image 3) represents young women's responses when asked in interviews and focus group discussions what they saw as the major barrier to their leadership. The larger bubbles reflect the more common responses.

Several of these themes are explored below. Some can be either a barrier or an enabler to leadership, such as the role of a young woman's family.

Image 3: Young women identify the barriers to their leadership



Family support

Young women's leadership journeys often begin and end with the support of their family.

Without the support of their families, young women reported that they would struggle to succeed as leaders. As a Bangladeshi young woman noted: "our leadership can be killed because of our family" (B02-1 FGD). Another young woman from India reported that her family does not support her leadership journey. She said that her grandmother makes fun of her, saying "What can she do anyway, she's just a girl!" This respondent noted that "I want to be an entrepreneur, my goal is to start my own business someday. If I even tell my family my plans they laugh at me and criticise me, saying that I will not be able to do it on my own because I am a girl" (I18-1). Also in

India, another young woman noted that families may not support young women to attend leadership programs because they "fear that the girls will get corrupted if they go" (I13-1), while a Bangladeshi young woman said that some families "think like, why will I teach my girl because one day she will be married off" (B02-2 FGD).

Conversely, family support is one of the primary enabling factors for young women's leadership (Image 4). Across the regions young women reported that their ability to engage in transformative leadership was a product of their family's direct support and the opportunities their families had given them, particularly with regard to education and the role models they provided. A young woman from Bangladesh spoke about the example her mother had set her:

" If I can talk about someone who motivated me then I'll definitely talk about my mother. She grew up in a very small village. And from there, she got married at 14. And she had children at age 17 and 19. And she continued her studies, and she is a graduate in philosophy, as she did her Master's and also did a LLB. So I think she has motivated me since my childhood. She was the first graduate of her family. And she motivated me to come to Dhaka to pursue my higher studies. And now I am the first girl from my family to come to Dhaka for my studies. So I think yeah, she motivated me. She has that leadership in her that she motivated herself even in those situations that I couldn't even imagine. So I think yeah, she is my leader (B15-1).

In Papua New Guinea a young woman similarly noted that "...if my Mum and Dad hadn't supported my vision and my goals and my dreams, then I wouldn't be where I am today" (PNG03-1). This was also the case in Thailand where a young woman reported: "yeah, support starts with family, then we can move to the community and the society" (T02-1). A young woman in Samoa agreed with this by noting "What supports young women is empowering both male and female parents" (S05-1).

Image 4: Young women reflect on the importance of their family's support in their leadership



In some cases, young women point out that while their families supported them, they were concerned about the challenges and potential risks that young women leaders face, particularly in public spaces. This was evident in two ways: first, some young women described their families' concern about the levels of discrimination and gender-based violence in their society. Their families were worried that communities would target young women leaders because of their transgression of traditional gender and age norms and, in some cases, because of their ethnic or religious identity. This was particularly evident in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Second, there was heightened concern from families in countries experiencing significant political unrest that young people (both men and women) might be targeted because they were seen as disruptors or protestors. This was raised as a concern for young people and their families in focus group discussions and interviews in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. Student-led and youth social movements have been significant in challenging military rule in both Myanmar and Thailand. A young woman from Myanmar noted that "My family is supportive [of my leadership work], but they also think about my security first, like if I'm safe or not, when, and where I'm going. So I think sometimes these can become an obstacle in the path of leadership" (M04-1).

Social attitudes

Across the regions, discriminatory social attitudes towards young women – rooted in gender inequality – remain the primary barrier to young women's leadership.

All young women reported that leadership by young women is not encouraged within the mainstream elements of their communities. They argued that they are not recognised as legitimate or capable leaders, are not given the same opportunities to lead as others, not recognised when they do lead, are marginalised in public or leadership spaces, and are often negatively judged or looked down on by the community (Image 5). In our second validation workshop, a young woman leader from Nepal noted that when she travels into communities to run leadership programs, she receives negative community attitudes: "when we are going to the field, and when we are going to the community [to] lead the program, they are judgement[al]. 'You are very young, you cannot [...] run the program. And you are not to be a leader because your age is so young. If you are a leader, you need to be male, or you have to be like 38, 40.'"

Image 5: Young women report negative community attitudes to their leadership



Several young women noted that these experiences undermine their confidence to speak up in their communities. In Sri Lanka, young women persistently reported that they felt both judged and ignored by their community (Image 6). These views were echoed around the regions. In Myanmar, a young woman responded that "stereotypes and discrimination are barriers to young women's leadership [even though] in some cases, women can lead better than men" (M14-1). Similarly, in Nepal, a young woman reported that society questions any "young woman who dares to take the lead" (N12-2). In India, another young woman responded "...even if we try to explain ourselves, no one listens, so we can't say anything. We don't get any support from society, we are always the ones who are made to bow down" (I15-1). Moreover, some noted that for women leaders the focus remains on their appearance rather than their abilities. One young woman from India noted:

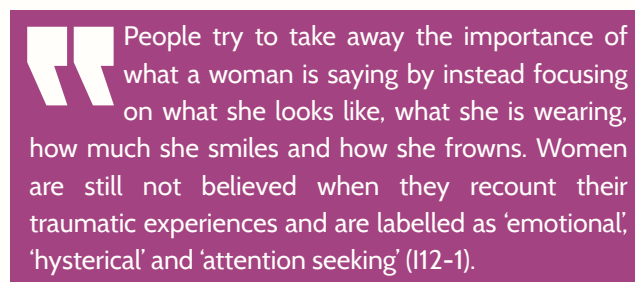


Image 6: Young Sri Lankan women reflect on their society's attitude to their leadership



The dominance of patriarchal cultures

Underpinning discriminatory social attitudes, young women identify patriarchy as a major structural and social barrier to their leadership. Patriarchy is where men in a society control a disproportionate amount of the social, economic, political and religious power, and maintain dominant decision-making authority.

Some young women described patriarchy in terms of the androcentric bias in the 'system' and its ability to create structural inequalities for young women, particularly when compared to young men. One young woman in India noted that "I do not feel that there are enough structural mechanisms in place in local governments and communities that can actually fully support young women's leadership" (I12-1).

³ Androcentric means pertaining to men or masculinity. Androcentric bias refers to sexism or gender bias, which leads to discrimination or prejudice based on gender.

Many young women in Bangladesh noted that the “system” created barriers to their access to political, economic and educational resources that were not the same for young men (B01-FGD). A young Bangladeshi woman argued that women don’t have access to decision-making forums (B13-1) and the legal frameworks in their country, while another noted that laws protecting young women’s rights were not well enforced (B02-1). Similarly, in the second validation workshop a young Nepalese woman reflected on the 2025 appointment of Nepal’s first female prime minister and other women in parliament. She argued that while there are reserved seats for women, they are often filled by privileged women or are seen in tokenistic ways: “We have got first female speaker of parliament in Nepal [in 2015], and also currently our Prime Minister is female in Nepal, but that doesn’t represent bigger picture of Nepal; they are tokens.” Meanwhile, a young woman in Thailand noted that “I am not sure how supportive government bodies are of young women’s issues – I personally find them dismissive” (T07-1).

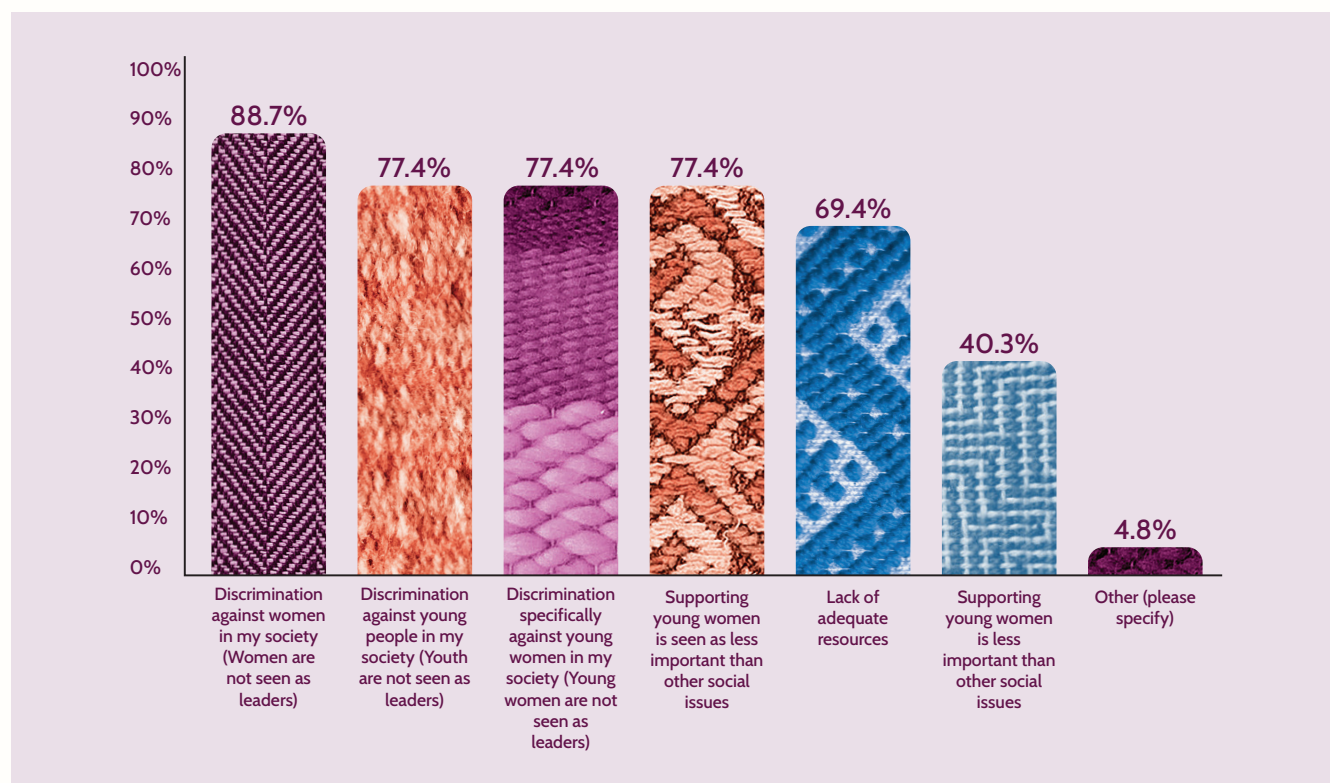
The cultural aspects of patriarchy were also emphasised. One young woman summed it up as follows: “Everything

a man is served is on a silver platter, a woman must fight for. And even if she somehow triumphs and gains a seat at the table, she should remember that her opinions only matter when they don’t have real implications” (I12-1). In another case, a young woman spoke extensively about the situation of young women in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of 2021. She noted:



I can remember feeling dreadful and depressed and angry when the Taliban took over Afghanistan. And the first thing they did was to ‘ban’ women’s education and access to public spaces, access to their workplaces – in a single instance, women in Afghanistan lost all the rights they had fought for – right to education, right to self-determination, right to work, right to step out and have a voice – basic rights that one just assumes everyone has. And for what? Because men decided to fight among themselves. And this is not just an Afghanistan story. Women are often subjected to violence and threats especially when there’s a conflict between different communities/religions. Unfortunately, we have enough examples around us (I07-1).

Graph 2: Women aren’t adequately supported in society to be leaders because... (n=62)



However, cultures are dynamic. In some cases, young women identified changing attitudes within their communities. While several young women in Bangladesh described the patriarchal cultures they live in as oppressive, others acknowledged perceptible changes. In a focus group discussion there was recognition of some changes, with young women commenting: “People have become very open minded about leadership and parents are more aware that young women should learn to be independent” (B02-2 FGD) and “change always starts with a small thing. So, we cannot bring change within a day. It will be slow, but we need to start at some point, that is the main thing” (B02-2 FGD). Moreover, many young women agreed that there had been positive advances towards gender equality when compared to stories told by their mothers and grandmothers.

Mentors and the role of women in supporting young women

Young women demonstrated mixed feelings regarding the role that older women can play in both supporting and undermining their leadership journeys.

Many young women reported negative experiences with older women who have either failed to support them when there were opportunities to do so or have actively undermined their confidence and efforts to lead. A young woman in India explained that in her community, “the internalised misogyny is so deeply ingrained in all of us that sometimes the greatest barriers to a movement challenging these issues is women themselves” (I12-1). In fact, across India there were references to the ways in which mothers, mothers-in-law and neighbourhood ‘aunties’ sought to patrol and undermine young women’s independence. This view was also evident in Nepal, where a young woman reported that women take on the dominant patriarchal mindset that pervades her community. She noted that “It’s irrespective of gender. Because women can also be very patriarchal, you know, so I feel that changing mentality is the first and foremost thing towards women, and attitudes towards women” (N02-1).

Young women in both Samoa and Papua New Guinea similarly reported negative experiences where older women had belittled them in public or had actively denied them opportunities to lead or speak on issues affecting them (PNG03-1; S04-2). In Sri Lanka, a young woman

also noted that “there are very few instances where women stand up for younger women” (SL20-1) with a young woman in India further noting that “sometimes standing up for ourselves does not work when our own people [other women] are not supporting us” (I18-01).

These responses speak to the challenges facing intergenerational leadership across the regions. The unwillingness of older women to relinquish some of their power and engage in shared or collective leadership has been documented across the regions and remains a persistent concern (Spark et al., 2020; Lee-Koo and Pruitt, 2025).

Many young women also lamented the absence of formal and informal role models in their communities. In some cases, younger women felt that older women should have done more to build a pathway for them. Indicative of this is the disappointment voiced by a young woman from India when she referred to her highly educated neighbour who chose a traditional stay-at-home wife role rather than working. The young woman noted: “What’s the point of being so educated and holding degrees if you can’t support other women? Women are women’s biggest enemies” (I12-1).

Yet, many young women found valuable role models in other young women. In fact, young women overwhelmingly agreed in our survey (99%) that it’s important to have peer role models. In Papua New Guinea, a young woman spoke at length about the difference that her role model (another young woman who was older than her) had made in her life. She noted: “She’s always passionate about women, women in leadership. And so it was through her that I really saw the importance of young women in leadership and I continue to build myself up as a young person” (PNG02-1). Similarly in Nepal, a young woman noted that “I think young women can be the best support of a young woman, then our society can rise up, can lead to the better future” (N09-2). In Bangladesh, young women in a focus group discussion noted that young women in leadership positions have the capacity to inspire and encourage young women but many noted that, unfortunately, there just aren’t enough in public life for this to be a consistent feature.

In the Solomon Islands, one young woman recommended that more emphasis be placed on network building and forming “collaborative groups” so that pools of mentors could be easily accessible to young women (SI05-1). In Papua New Guinea, young women similarly noted the value of connecting organisations and engaging in movement building to create opportunities for collaboration (PNG04-1). In fact, across the Pacific the value of young women’s networks was acknowledged, with one young woman in Samoa saying that her “Pacific sisters teach me and lift me up” (SO5-1).

The impact of early marriage and care responsibilities

In India and Bangladesh particularly, early and forced marriage remains a major barrier to young women’s access to education, economic independence and independent decision-making. For these reasons, it presents a significant barrier to young women’s leadership.

Despite positive changes in legal frameworks across the regions, early and forced marriage remains a persistent issue. In terms of undermining their leadership, young women in India and Bangladesh noted that once married,

young women become isolated from broader public and social life. As a young woman in India noted: “Life changes so much after a woman gets married. Once they get married and have children, they become incapable of fulfilling their dreams and end up living their life to please others” (I19-1). In Bangladesh, another young woman noted that “after getting married, [young women] cannot do so many things in the context of our society” (B12-1).

Expectations that women undertake unpaid care responsibilities are also recognised by young women as having a negative impact on their capacity to engage in leadership roles. As noted by a young woman in Bangladesh: “Most women are stopped from doing anything because they are expected to raise their children and take care of their homes” (B14-1). Another young woman noted that in villages in India, young women often have added responsibilities to look after their family members and this denies them opportunities to explore their leadership options (I11-1). In our survey, a young woman from Australia further noted that “I often see that ‘women in security’ events never include any mothers. Leadership seems to be for those without children.”



The role of education and training

Across the regions young women agreed that access to formal education and training opportunities is an important enabler to their leadership development.

Education and training provide knowledge and skills, social networks and safe spaces. Moreover, they can increase confidence and create opportunities to practise leadership skills. As a young woman in Thailand noted: “I think the most important thing [to enhance young women’s leadership] is education and the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge” (T06-1).

Many of the young women in this research had participated in short-term training and education courses provided by non-government organisations or community groups. Young women acknowledged the diversity of these programs, in terms of the types of programs they had undertaken, their quality and their impact.

In reflecting on their experiences, young women acknowledged the importance of participating in quality training. When asked what ‘quality’ programs look like, many responded that they should recognise the challenges that young women face in their own communities, they should have a participatory approach – including being delivered by young women from the regions – and they should seek to ensure some kind of follow-through or long-term pathway. When this occurs, young women report seeing significant impact. One young woman in Samoa noted that when young women participate in training “they’re able to influence change in their communities and also in their homes” (S03-1). In India, a young woman reported that:

“These activities absolutely do make a difference. They amplify the voices of young women, who represent change and hope in the dire present. They tell us that we are not alone in this, that our battles against the deep-rooted systems of patriarchy are a collective experience which will one day certainly bear fruition. These activities raise awareness about the ‘traditions’ that have been imposed on women to keep them subdued and submissive. I think most importantly, these activities offer solidarity and support to those women who may never have had access to it in any other circumstance (I12-01).

Similarly, many young women reflected on how their participation in training programs has built their confidence and courage to speak out about many issues. A young woman in Thailand noted how her participation in leadership training had given her the opportunity to start forming her own opinions and to start voicing them to her peers (T05-1). In India, a young woman also reported that her participation in training had given her the “courage to stand up for ourselves no matter what others have to say” (I15-1).

However, not all young women reported having access to training opportunities. As noted below, the onset of crises can have a major impact upon young women’s access to education and training. In our second validation workshop young women from Bangladesh noted that once education or training opportunities become disrupted due to crisis, young women rarely return to them as they are married, sent to work or take on unpaid work. Crises also disrupt educational and training provision. Discussed in further depth below, the increase in conflict and political violence in Sri Lanka and Myanmar has curtailed the presence of civil society and non-government organisations (NGOs) and shifted their priorities, leaving fewer opportunities for young women’s training.

Furthermore, not all training programs were seen as useful. In the Pacific, young women reported that some of the training programs that they had participated in or had witnessed were ineffective and poorly designed. One young woman from Papua New Guinea noted that “too many NGOs are duplicating the same, you know, programs” (PNG04-1). This was also noted in Samoa where one young woman reported that the programs she had participated in were “a waste of time” as she had “heard it all before” (S05-1) while others used terms such as “out-of-touch” (PNG03-2), “not relevant” (S04-2), “colonial” (S103-1) and “inappropriate to our lives” (S106-1) to describe training programs they had encountered. For some, programs that were run by external actors in a fly-in, fly-out model had negative impacts on the community. Young women described them as “not understanding of our local needs and experiences” (PNG 04-1).

Pacific young women reported the availability of training programs in urban areas but noted the lack of funding for programs in rural, regional and remote areas. Often this disproportionately impacts ethnic and religiously marginalised groups of young women, as well as those

from lower socio-economic groups. In Papua New Guinea, young women leaders noted that they struggled to run their programs in rural areas: “It’s a bit of a challenge trying to get to the rural areas each year, it costs money to get there” (PNGO6-1) while another noted “So one thing I’ve learned that I’m trying to be accustomed to recently is the ideas of raising funds to fund my own programs” in remote areas (PNGO7-1). Noting the diversity of geographies and populations across Myanmar, one young woman noted that “knowledge and financial support is what is needed to offer young women’s leadership opportunities” in conflict-affected and regional areas (MO4-1).

Image 7: Young women speak about the impact of training on developing their leadership



Respect and listening to young women

Young women noted that recognising their leadership and the contributions it makes to their communities is central to supporting their leadership.

Across the regions, young women and their allies agreed that, in the words of one young woman, “I don’t think we give young women leaders enough recognition” (IO4-2). Many spoke of the need for their society to acknowledge and celebrate their leadership, particularly in light of the challenges they face. Young women generally agreed that there is not enough curiosity about their work and, therefore, their work is not visible in the broader community and its impact is not understood. As a young woman in Nepal reported:

“Listen to young women and don’t dismiss their voices. Give them the centre stage. Don’t assume what’s right or wrong for them. Take into account their struggles and concerns. Women have just been told to do things, follow the rules, stick to patriarchy but how about listening to them for a change (NO5-1).

For some young women, this also requires that they have the courage to speak out about the issues impacting them and their leadership. Young women recognise that in some circumstances their ongoing silence undermines their ability to address the issues impacting them. As one young Indian woman noted: “Most young women remain silent because they feel alone and lack support from others” (I18-1). As noted in Image 8, across the regions many young women lead by example in terms of speaking out about the issues that impact them and by supporting and encouraging others to do the same.

Image 8: Young women encourage others to speak out about the issues impacting them



Safe spaces

Across the regions, young women confirmed the importance of safe spaces in enabling their leadership.

Safe spaces are accessible and safe locations – either temporary or permanent, physical or online – where young women can meet to share information, experiences and ideas with privacy, safety and respect. They are spaces that are convenient to young women, where they can be assured of confidentiality and be able to access, and provide, support to one another (World YWCA, 2021). When asked how young women's leadership might be enhanced, many spoke of the need for more safe spaces (Image 9). As one young woman in Sri Lanka explained: "There is a limit to what we can share with our parents. Sometimes we feel more comfortable in sharing our problems with our friends, with someone who will motivate us" (SL 201-1).

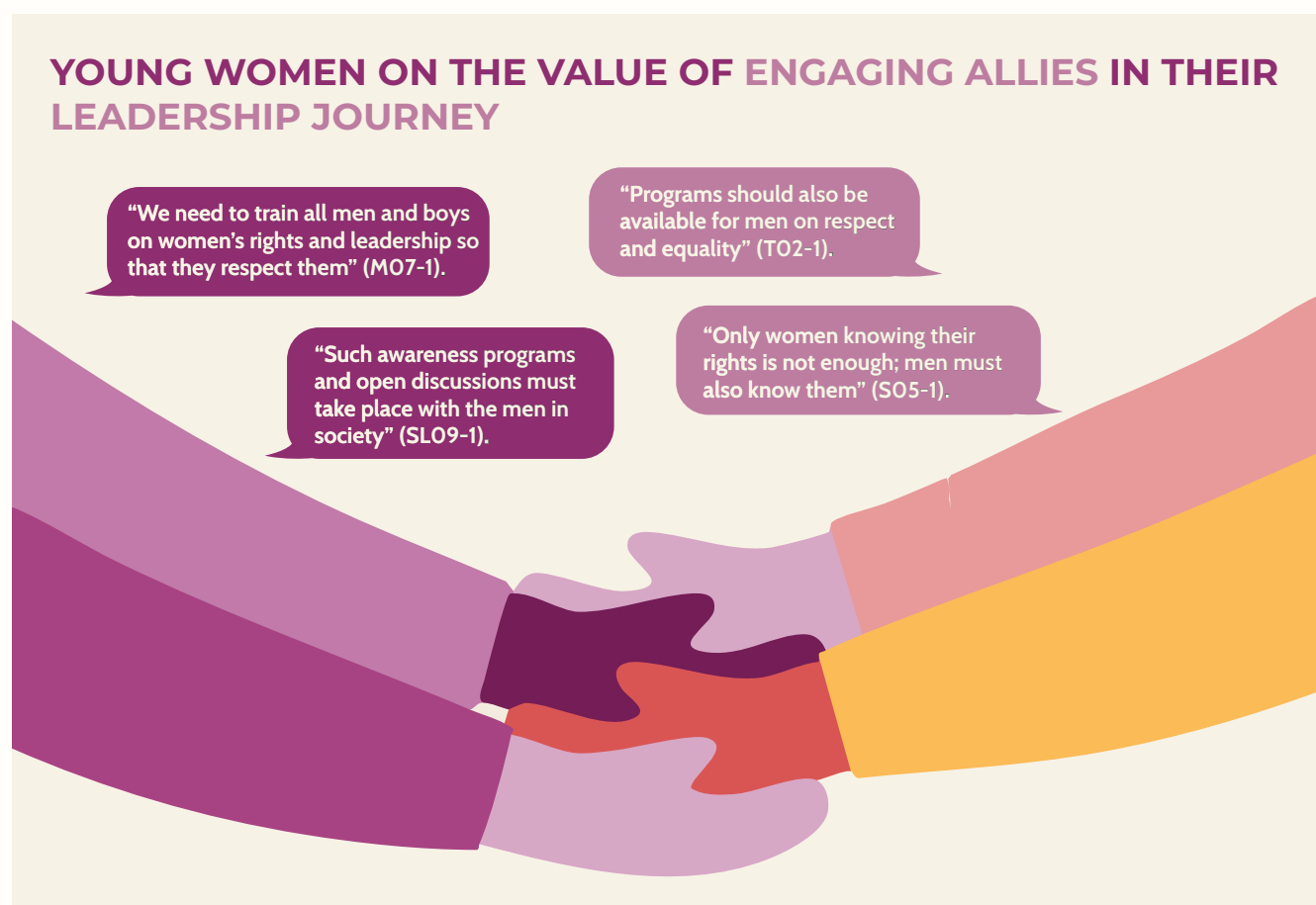
Image 9: Young women talk about the value of creating safe spaces to strengthen their leadership



Engaging allies

Attitudinal change within a community regarding gender equality is essential to enhancing young women's leadership. It should not be left to young women alone to lead this change.

A young woman in Thailand noted: "I think it [gender inequality] is not a problem that only one person or group can address. Like change, it needs more, you know, for the whole society to help, like together, to make these changes" (TO5-1). Throughout the regions, many young women talked about the need to engage men, boys, older women, community leaders and parents in the journey to support young women's leadership. This, they argued, should be achieved through awareness-raising campaigns of young women's experiences, training programs and broader efforts at societal and attitudinal change.

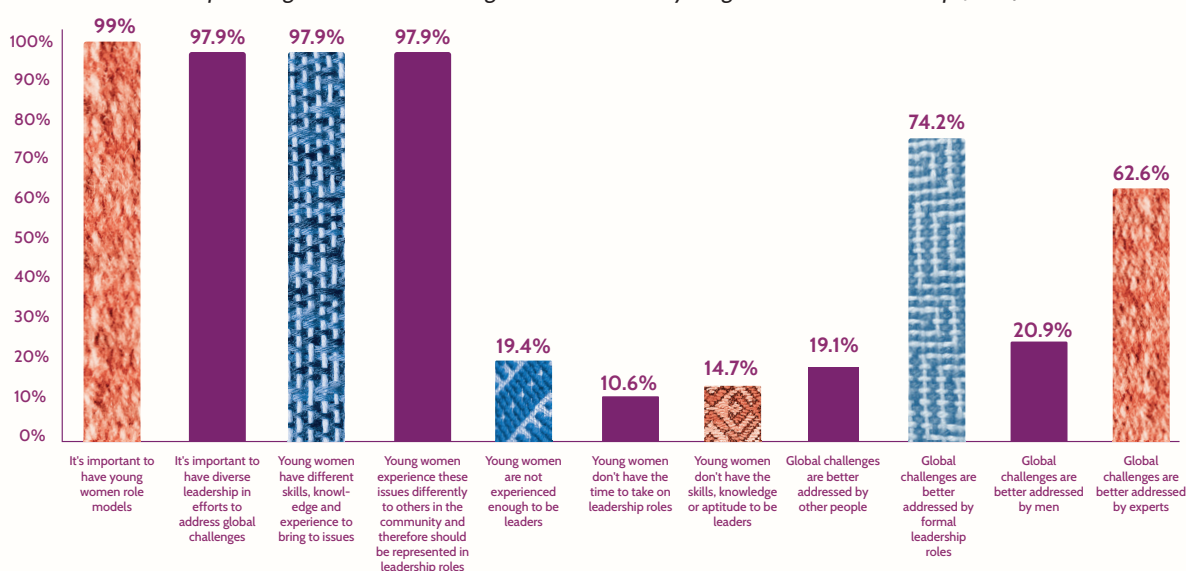


The value of young women’s leadership

The vast majority of young women agree that they should be visible as leaders in addressing major regional and global challenges. In our survey, 98% of young women (n=96) agreed that diversity is important for leadership and that young women have different skills, knowledge and experience to contribute. However, it is also

important to note that between 15% and 20% of young women were less sure: 15% of our survey respondents did not think that young women had the skills, knowledge or aptitude to be leaders, while 19% agreed that young women are not experienced enough to be leaders and major regional challenges are best addressed by older people.

Graph 3: I agree with the following statements about young women and leadership (n=96)



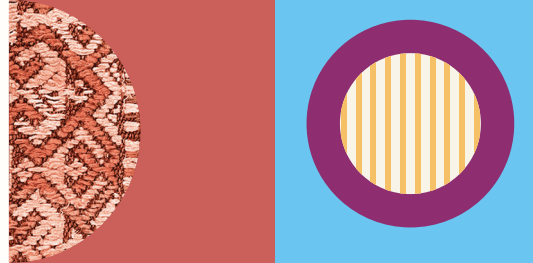
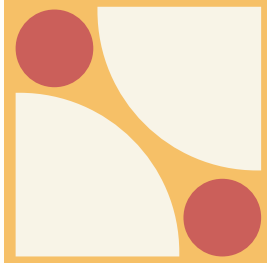
When asked how young women’s leadership could be better supported, young women across the regions recognised that a multi-pronged approach is necessary. The word cloud below (Image 11) presents the most common responses by young women in the interviews and focus group discussions, with the larger bubbles representing the more frequently referenced recommendations.

As this demonstrates, enhancing young women’s leadership requires a whole-of-society approach, with significant investment needed by young women, their families, communities, governments, civil society and non-government organisations.

Image 11: Young women’s responses when asked how their leadership can be supported.

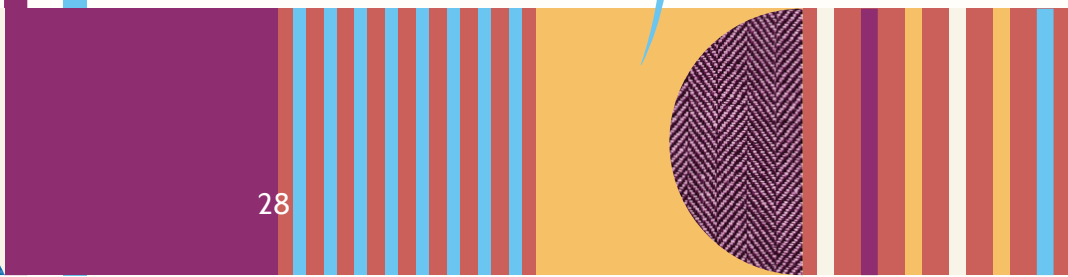
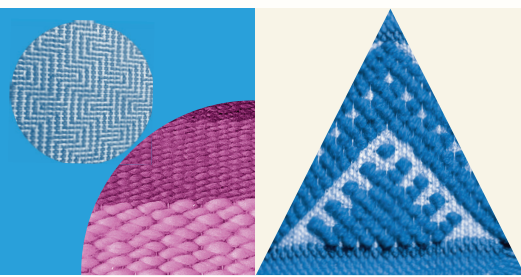
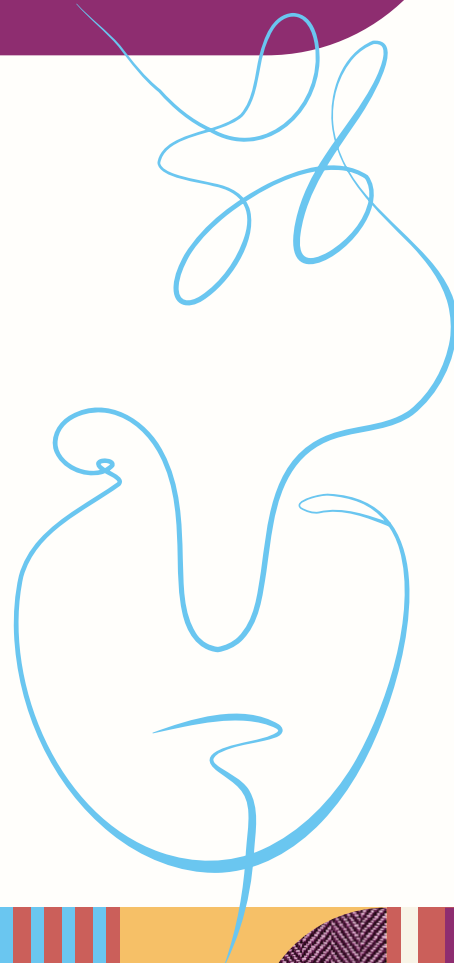
ENABLERS TO YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AS IDENTIFIED BY YOUNG WOMEN





Violence against Women and Girls

"The violence has like a ripple kind of effect where it's ... a traumatic experience that can damage you, your self-esteem and your ability, as a young woman, to form healthy relationships with other people" (PNGO8-1).



High Level Findings

1. Among our respondents, young women in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India universally report gender-based harassment in public places (so-called 'eve teasing') and sexual harassment and sexual assault on public transport.
2. Young women report high rates of early and forced marriage of girls and young women, particularly in Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.
3. Rates of gender-based violence against young women are exacerbated by crises such as natural disasters, COVID-19 and associated economic or food insecurity.
4. Young women report that their age cohort is disproportionately impacted by sex trafficking and online gender-based violence.
5. Generally, young women do not feel safe to speak about their experiences of violence.
6. Young women report feeling judged and stigmatised when they report violence.
7. Young women do not believe that there is adequate access to justice for women who experience gender-based violence.
8. Young women report that experiences of violence cause physical and mental health challenges and undermine their confidence and self-esteem, which compromises their leadership.
9. Young women lead on this issue by creating safe spaces for one another to speak of their experiences, supporting one another to speak publicly about these issues, and supporting each other to access services and resources in the aftermath of violence.

Recommendations

1. Understand the unique ways in which young women experience gender-based violence, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence.
2. Build community awareness of the negative effects of violence against young women for the victim/survivor, their families and communities.
3. Advance a survivor-centred approach by supporting young women who choose to speak out about their

experiences of violence, remaining attentive to the risks that young women can face when speaking out.

4. Understand and address the drivers and triggers of violence against women.
5. Support communities to challenge patriarchy and call out sexist behaviour.
6. Advocate for full and proper implementation of legal and justice mechanisms addressing gender-based violence.
7. Create safe spaces, including but not limited to crisis centres, for young women to share experiences and support one another, where privacy and confidentiality are assured.

Background

Young women report that violence against women and girls has a pervasive impact on their lives and significantly undermines their leadership potential.

Across the regions of Asia and the Pacific, unacceptable rates of violence against women and girls persist. It occurs against women and girls of all ages and takes multiple forms. For example, according to 2021 research conducted by UNESCO, over 37% of women in South Asia, 40% of women in Southeast Asia and 68% of women in the Pacific have experienced intimate partner violence (UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, UN Women reports that the regions of Asia and the Pacific had the highest number of intimate partner or family-related femicide in 2021, with 17,800 deaths in Asia and 300 in the Pacific (UN Women, 2022). The latest available prevalence studies show that 54.2% of women in Bangladesh have experienced intimate partner violence and 27.8% have experienced non-partner violence, while 58.3% of women in PNG have experienced intimate partner violence (UNFPA, 2024). Across the regions, 75% of women have experienced sexual harassment (UN Women, 2022). UNICEF (2025) suggests that one in 13 young women in the regions of Asia and the Pacific aged between 20 and 24 were married before their 18th birthday and UN Women (2022) have found that women constitute 68% of all trafficked persons from East Asia and the Pacific.

Violence against women and girls refers to all forms of violence that occurs at home and in the community, including in workplaces, schools, places of worship, public

spaces and online. This can include physical violence (which causes physical harm as a result of unlawful physical force, such as assault, deprivation of liberty and unlawful killing), sexual violence (any sexual act performed without consent, including rape and sexual assault), psychological violence (any act that causes psychological harm to an individual, and can include coercion, defamation, verbal insult or harassment), economic violence (acts or behaviour that cause economic harm to an individual, such as restricting access to financial resources, education or the labour market) and technology-facilitated violence (acts such as deepfakes, sextortion, doxing, image-based abuse and online grooming and harassment) (see European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023 and UN Women 2024). Violence against women and girls is enabled by unequal gender power relations that are sustained by, and help to sustain, gender inequalities. These forms of violence can directly impact young women in unique and sometimes disproportionate ways because of the intersection of their gender, age and perceived or actual relative powerlessness.

However, young women also lead in addressing this issue. They raise awareness about violence against women by engaging in community-based campaigns and activities; providing peer support to other young women experiencing violence; educating themselves on their rights; advocating for legislative, judicial reform and

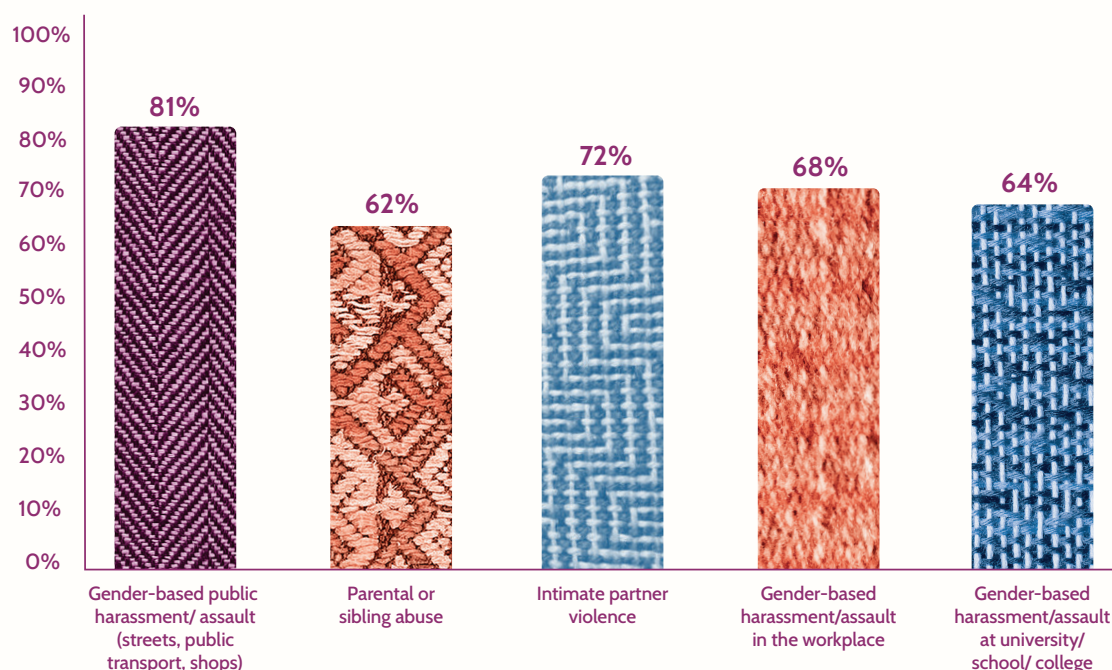
justice; and building community momentum to prevent and respond to this violence.

Young women's experiences of gender-based violence

Across the regions of Asia and the Pacific, young women spoke about the pervasive presence of gender-based violence in their lives (Graph 4). Young women agreed that all women face gender-based violence, but the types of violence differ depending on their age, location and life situation. In our survey, 96% of respondents (n=126) were concerned by this issue, with 83% of respondents describing the impact of violence against women and girls to be 'very' or 'extremely' negative.

Young women agreed that their experiences of gender-based violence can be unique to their age cohort. In our survey, 77% of young women (n=111) described their experiences of gender-based violence as different from older women (over 30) and 81% described their experiences as different from girls (under 18). Survey respondents pointed to gender-based public harassment and sexual assault as the most widespread form of gender-based violence in their community. In the interviews and focus group discussions, young women agreed, but also noted, that violence from parents and in-laws, online gender-based harassment and abuse, and early and forced marriage are also significant forms of violence that uniquely impact their age group.

Graph 4: The following forms of violence against young women in my community are widespread or 'very widespread' (n=99)



Harassment in public places

Young women in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal) spoke extensively about their experiences of harassment and assault in public places. Many young women reported that they have experienced so-called 'eve teasing' (unwanted sexual remarks or harassment in public). Similarly, sexual harassment and sexual assault on public transport are widespread throughout the regions. As one young woman from Bangladesh reported:

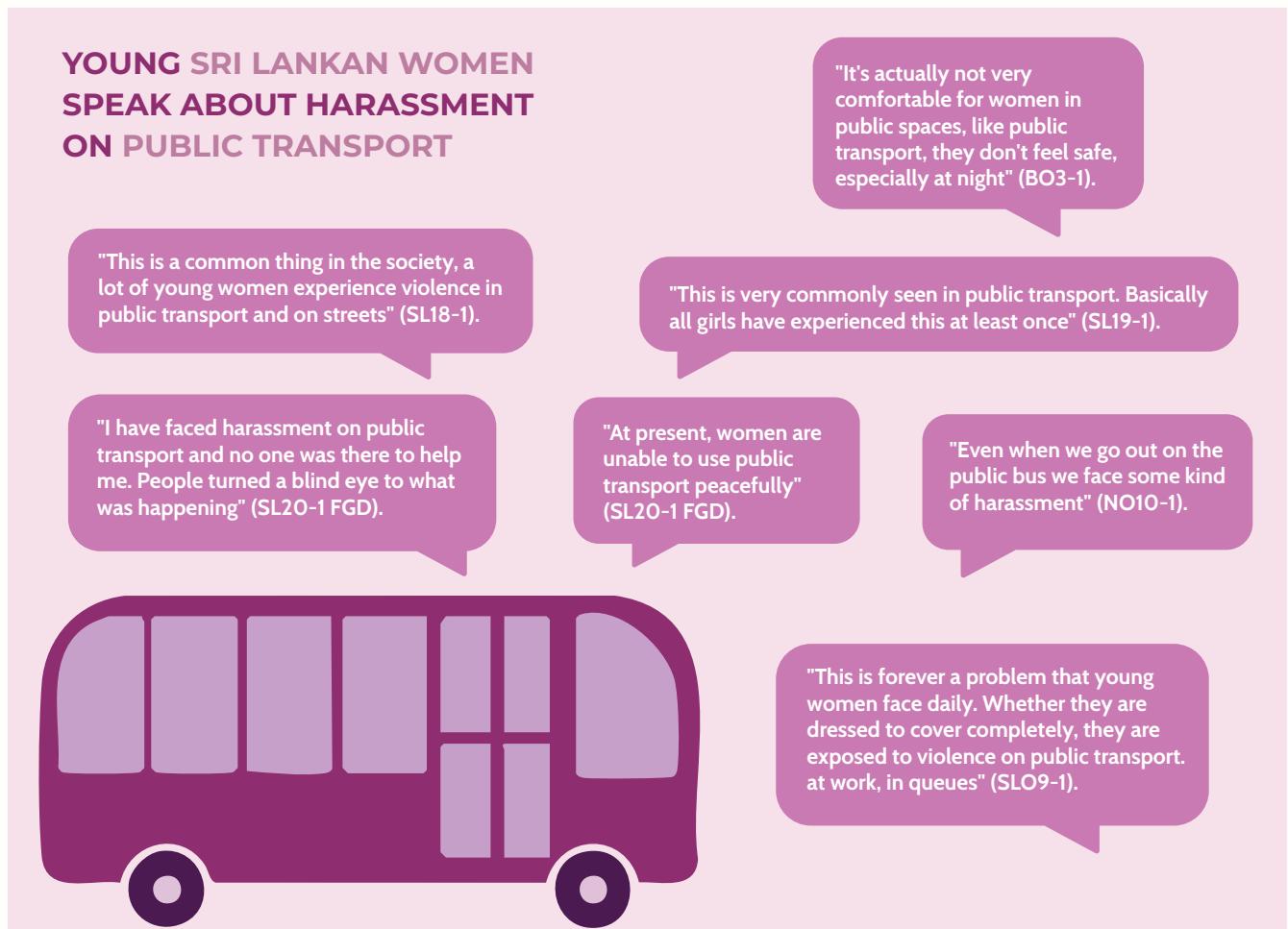
"If, for example, I'm using a public bus, and when I'm trying to get on the bus, there are men standing, they give bad touches. So these sorts of things happen very often. Or even when I'm walking on the street in our public place or in a market and somebody's walking past by me and give those touches. So these kinds of harassment are very, very common and every single young woman in our country, whether they are young women or girls, face this sort of harassment in their life (B12-1).

In Sri Lanka, a young woman similarly reported:

"This is commonly seen in public transport. I don't think that there is any girl who has not faced violence in public transport. Girls are forced to change their dress patterns into fully covered clothes due to such instances. I am personally not allowed and do not wear skinnies or short sleeved clothes which are above the knee when going in public transport or walking publicly on the road (SL15-1).

Young women similarly reported experiencing harassment when in public places, particularly when alone or at night. As a result, young women feel unsafe being out in public. Many fear that if they report this to their parents, they will be forbidden from leaving their home. Being excluded from public spaces, fed by victim-blaming narratives, would curtail young women's opportunities to access education, employment, safe spaces, friendship and support networks, and undermine their leadership ambitions. Young women are therefore often torn between the fear of harassment and other forms of violence and the fear of their freedom and opportunities being curtailed.

Image 12: Young Sri Lankan women speak about harassment on public transport



YOUNG WOMEN SPEAK ABOUT THEIR CONCERNS OF HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC

"We are constantly sexualised wherever we go. No matter what outfit I wear, I get stared at badly and they also pass comments at me" (I18-1).

"Girls do not have the freedom to wear whatever they want to go out due to the lack of safety" (SL19-1).

"It is dangerous for young women to go out alone" (SL14-1).

"There is no safety for young women to go out by themselves at night" (SL19-1).

"In Dhaka, my parent don't allow me to go out alone at night because they say it is not safe for me" (BO1-1).

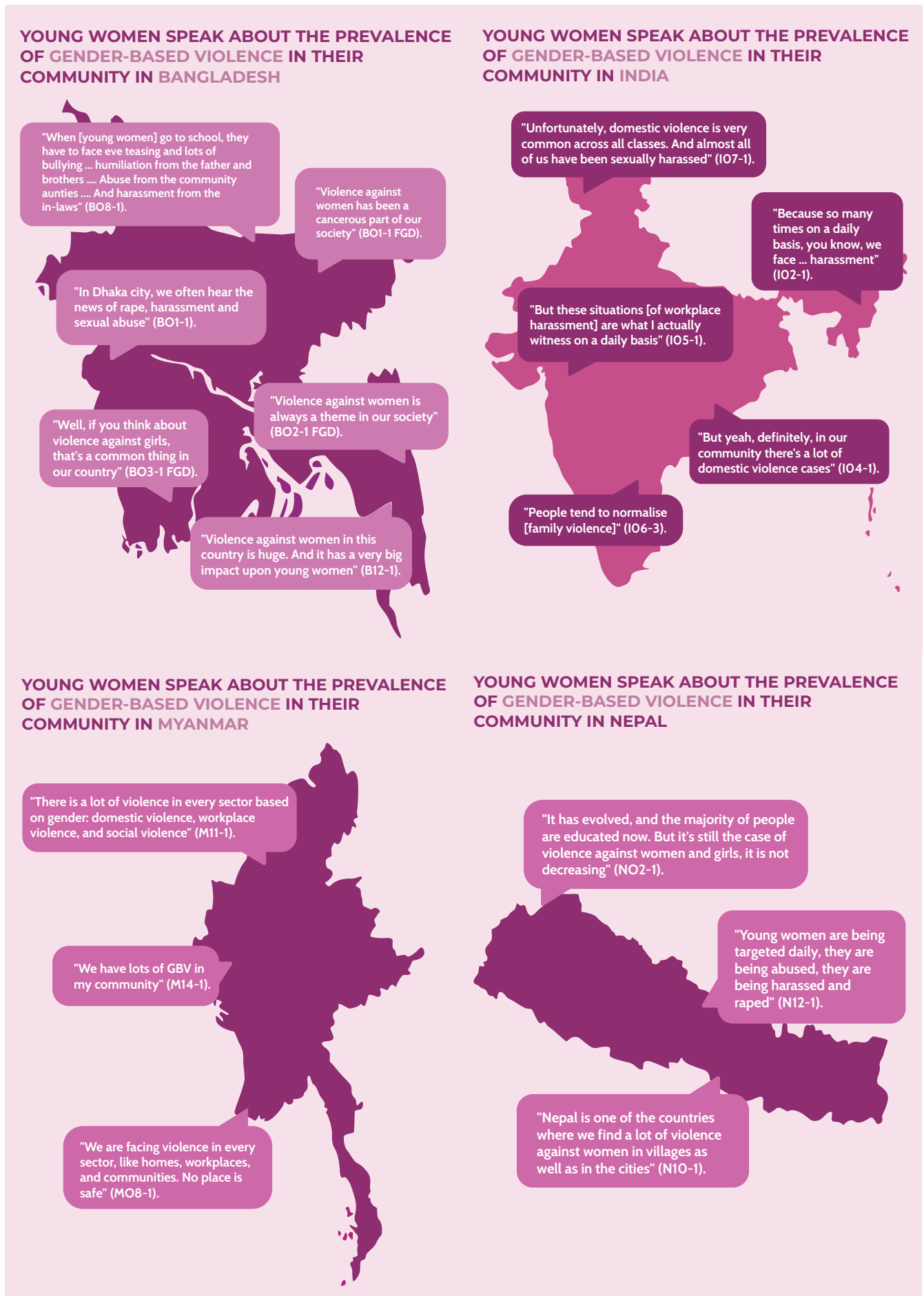
"But nowadays, it's like before sunset, you need to come in. Because if it's getting dark, it means you're not safe outside. So, you know, I think our life and our freedom is threatened by this kind of violence" (BO2-1 FGD).

"I don't think it's safe to walk at night or in the daytime alone" (SLO1-FGD).

"I mean, I'm not safe while walking in the evening, by myself" (NO9-1).



Image 14: Young women across South Asia speak about their the prevalence of gender-based violence.



YOUNG WOMEN SPEAK ABOUT THE PREVALENCE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

"Violence against women and girls in public transport, at home, workplaces, queues, politics, local communities is faced daily" (SL12-1).

"Young women face a lot of harassment in public transport. This also occurs in workplaces and in politics" (SL14-1).

"Violence against women is seen and felt almost everywhere" (SL1-1).

"Violence against women is a widespread issue in the country although it is not seen or talked about" (SL20-1).



The bride, I have seen, like, she didn't want to get married, she wanted to continue her studies. But her family forced her to get married. And that's why she had to do that. It's not good for her future, it's not good. Her parents in law have been forcing her to have children. And she isn't mature enough yet to get pregnant (BO4-1).

Family violence

Family violence and intimate partner violence are pervasive across the regions and can impact young women in unique ways. As one young woman said: "domestic violence is a big issue and we must work on it. We must deal with it" (NO9-1).

Young women reported that, like early and forced marriage, family violence increased during times of crises, with economic hardships among the main triggers. Many young women noted that while their age cohort can experience violence directly, they can also be significantly impacted by witnessing violence against their mothers and are forced to take on extra care work because of violence within the family unit.

Some young women in South Asia spoke particularly of abuse by in-laws as a form of family violence that impacted younger women. In Bangladesh, a young woman recounted the story of an acquaintance who was married young and experienced violence at the hands of her in-laws. When she returned to her own parents for protection, the young woman was sent back to her in-laws (BO6-1). Similarly, a young woman in Myanmar spoke of in-law abuse in her community (MO7-1) while a young woman in Nepal described it as a form of female-on-female violence: "Because after marriage, the young bride goes to them [the in-laws]. And it's the woman that oppresses the new bride, not her father, or her father-in-law or her husband, but the mother-in-law" (N11-1).

Conflict-related gender-based violence

Conflict-related gender-based violence remains a persistent concern across the regions, with eight of the nine case studies in this report being conflict-affected countries (with Samoa as the exception).

In Myanmar, young women spoke of experiencing gender-based violence at the hands of armed forces.

Child, early and forced marriage

Child, early and forced marriage is a significant form of gender-based violence that uniquely impacts girls and young women. As demonstrated throughout this report, early and forced marriage for young women is exacerbated by crises, including conflict, COVID-19 and the climate crisis.

Prevalence rates of child marriage (under the age of 18) remain high across the regions (Girls not Brides, 2025) despite all countries having legal frameworks to stop it. While there is insufficient quantitative data available on rates of early and forced marriage among young women (between the ages of 18 and 30), our research suggests that it remains similarly high.

In South Asia particularly, young women spoke extensively of families feeling forced to respond to economic and social crises by marrying their daughters. In our interviews, young women were fiercely opposed to early and forced marriage. They described the negative impact on their education, their mental health, and their abilities for autonomous decision-making and independent lives. As one young woman in Myanmar reported: "Young girls are getting married at the age of 16-17. When girls get married too early, they lose the opportunity to get an education" (MO6-1). In Bangladesh a young woman reported that in her village many people still believed in child and early marriage. She recounts the story of a girl in her village:

Since the military takeover of Myanmar in February 2021, the police and armed forces have been linked to cases of gender-based violence including at military sites and detention centres (OSR-SViC, 2021). This compounds an already poor record of gender-based violence in the country which is described as emerging from “decades of military rule, deep-seated patriarchal norms across all ethnic and religious groups, and hierarchical societal structures, together with male dominance in public life and institutions” (Buchanan, 2022).

The persistence of conflict-related gender-based violence was confirmed by our interviewees. One young Burmese woman noted: “Gender-based violence is not new to our country, especially where the civil war happens. Both boys and girls are not safe. Girls have been raped” (M04-1). Another noted “There is one case that happened in my city, a young woman student was raped by a soldier who was deployed at a military base, which is at a school. I heard so many cases that women are victims” (M05-1). Other young Burmese women noted being harassed or feeling threatened and intimidated around the militarised presence and at security checkpoints, with one noting: “We are currently living in fear with no freedom of movement. When we go near the military base, the soldiers verbally attack us and sometimes show us a gun and threaten us” (M12-1).

Alarming rates of conflict-related gender-based violence have been reported in other countries in the regions. In Papua New Guinea, for instance, gender-based violence has spiked in conflict-affected environments, such as in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (George, 2018). In Sri Lanka and Nepal, survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and children born of rape continue to be stigmatised, lack justice and remain excluded from social, economic and political life (Gomez, 2017; Rana, 2017). In Bangladesh, displaced Rohingya from Myanmar residing in the Cox’s Bazar refugee camps remain at very high risk of forced prostitution, trafficking and other forms of violence (Santana, 2022).

Trafficking in women

While it was not a widespread concern among respondents, several young women across the regions (in India, Myanmar, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Thailand) spoke about human trafficking in women in their communities.

Three young women from Thailand spoke about it at

length. Trafficking remains a persistent issue in Thailand. In 2023, the Thai government identified 392 female victims of trafficking (US State Department, 2024) though estimates are thought to be much higher. Research conducted in 2022 by a senior Thai police officer suggests that between 10,000-15,000 Thai women and children were trafficked for the purposes of sexual slavery to Japan alone (The Nation, 2022). One respondent argued that trafficking particularly impacts younger women. She described sex trafficking in women as “a huge problem here. And we’re almost known for that. I think people come to Thailand already having that mindset, like, ‘oh, we have pretty beaches and we also have stuff like that’” (T05-1). Another young Thai woman (T08-1) described her experiences working for an anti-trafficking NGO and noted the physical and emotional harms that trafficked women endure, including assault, severe mental health consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and disconnection from family, friends and other support networks.

Online violence

Across the regions, several young women noted a rise in online gender-based violence that uniquely targeted their age group. Digital tools and technology are increasingly being used to inflict physical, sexual, psychological, economic and other forms of violence on women and girls, with young women and girls especially vulnerable. This has taken the form of the creation and dissemination of deepfake images, intimate image abuse (sharing intimate images without consent), doxing (revealing personal information), and misogynistic hate speech (UN Women, 2024). While these forms of violence are an extension of other forms of violence against women and girls, they have rapidly escalated in recent years and pose a significant threat to the safety and wellbeing of women and girls. Online violence also feeds other forms of violence that can be inflicted offline, including sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking (UN Women, 2024).

This became particularly pronounced during the pandemic as young women spent more time online for work, education, to access services and for social activities. Global research by The Economist Intelligence Unit in 2021 found that younger women were more likely to have personally experienced online violence, with 85% of women they surveyed reporting that they had witnessed online violence against other women. The research determined that in the region of Asia and the Pacific, the prevalence rate of online violence against women is 88%

(EIU, 2021).

These findings were supported by young women in this research, who reported having seen or experienced online content that had made them uncomfortable. In Nepal, a young woman noted: “Young women are very vulnerable online” and “they will be harassed there, they will be taunted there. It is creating other kinds of discrimination or let's say violence in digital ways” (NO2-1). Another young woman stated that “violence has taken new forms. There are more risks nowadays especially online, on social media. I think this is going to be an issue for our generation” (NO4-1). Similarly in Thailand, a young woman reported that she had experienced “sexual harassment and bad messages” online (TO2-1).

Other forms of gender-based violence

Across the regions, young women spoke about multiple types of gender-based violence that they had experienced, witnessed or heard spoken of in their communities, beyond the forms of violence discussed above. These include violence associated with accusations of witchcraft, violence against menstruating women, and the intersection of gender-based violence and the climate crisis.

In Nepal, for example, one young woman spoke about ‘witch hunting’ where, as she described it, widows are held responsible for the death of their husbands and targeted for community-driven violence. Accusations of witchcraft and violence against women associated with ‘witch-hunting’ remain persistent in some areas of Nepal with poverty, lack of education and gender inequality identified as key contributing factors, particularly in rural areas where the practice is more common. Atreya et al. (2021) wrote that “A wide range of issues, including mental-health problems, physical illness or disability, livestock damage, premature death or natural calamities such as floods, earthquakes and landslides, may be blamed upon a particular woman, who is said to possess supernatural magical powers to influence things and create problems for other people”. This then becomes the justification for public violence against the accused woman. Research has also highlighted the prevalence of violence against those accused of witchcraft in Papua New Guinea, frequently resulting in the torture and killing of women, with high levels of impunity for the perpetrators (Forsyth, Losoncz, Gibbs, Hukula & Kipongi, 2021).

In Nepal, one young woman described what she referred

to as violence against menstruating women. “So, whenever [my mother] goes on a period, she is not able to touch anything in the kitchen and she's not able to go to the temples. Why? Just because she is blamed and tagged as an impure lady. This is the biggest violence and we have to bring the change now” (N12-1). Even though the banishment of menstruating women to huts (referred to as chhaupadi) is now illegal following a change in the criminal code in 2017, the practice remains in rural areas of the western part of Nepal (Thapa & Aro, 2021).

In Papua New Guinea, one young woman discussed the links between climate change and violence against women. She noted that in her coastal community, there had been heavy coral bleaching which had destroyed the ecosystem and limited the number of fish available. As women are primarily responsible for gathering food, they were held responsible by men for the lack of fish. She noted that when “there's no fish to feed the family and they go back home and it triggers men in the homes and that's when violence becomes the norm” (PNG07-1). This young woman further noted that women were similarly held accountable for the lack of agricultural produce such as cocoa, due to climate change: “So the men, they blame the women, saying you just didn't work hard enough, or you did something to the land” (PNG07-1).

Young women's leadership in the face of ongoing gender-based violence

Young women's capacity to lead on addressing gender-based violence can be circumscribed by their own experiences of violence and by the potential for backlash or further violence. In some circumstances however, there is clear evidence of young women's leadership on this issue. Where their situation permits, young women lead by raising awareness about violence against women in their families and communities (Image 15); providing peer support to other young women experiencing violence; educating themselves on their rights; advocating for legislative and judicial reform and for justice; and building community momentum to prevent and respond to this violence.

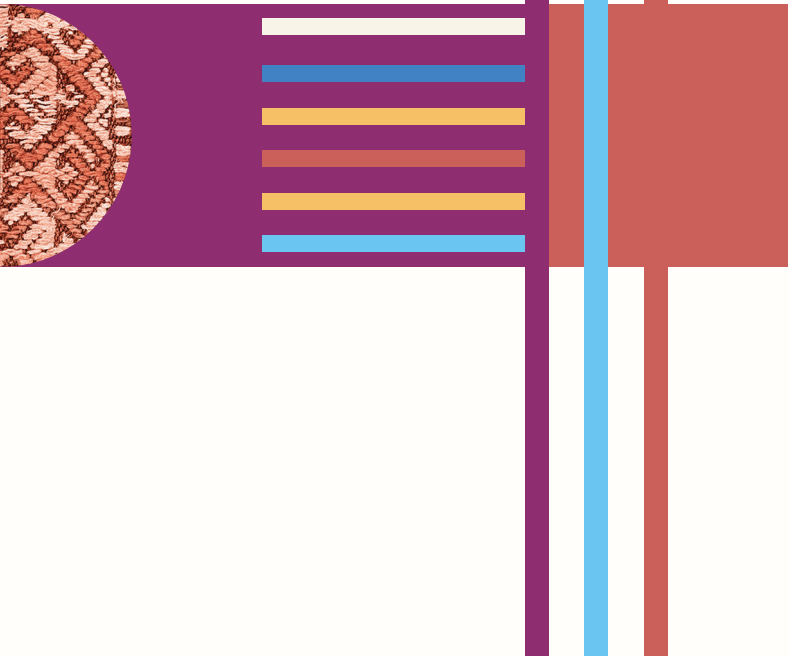
Image 15: Young women speak about the importance of dialogue on gender-based violence



Across the regions, young women spoke about the ways they and their peers were speaking out about violence against women and girls. In doing so, they consistently noted that they had more relative freedom to do so than previous generations. Young women from Nepal saw this change as positive. One young woman noted: "And the optimistic part is that nowadays, people are more vocal about it. And there are cases filed in the Court. And this is hopeful" (N04-1). Similarly, another reported: "...nowadays you can see lots of girls and women coming out, reporting about the violence they have faced, and it feels good" (N05-1). In Bangladesh, young women agreed that over time women "are becoming more aware of their rights, they are raising their voices, which is a very great

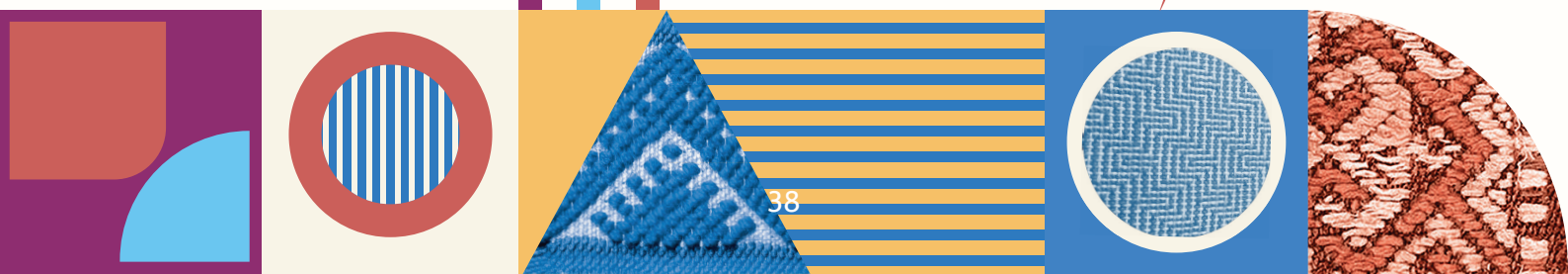
thing" (B12-1). Similarly, another young Bangladeshi woman noted: "Women now can speak up. Women do have that voice. Even if they are being 'eve teased' on a bus, they just make a recording and they post it on Facebook" (B02-1).

While these are positive reflections, addressing the persistent and entrenched nature of violence against women and girls requires a whole-of-society commitment. It cannot be left to young women alone to agitate for change or to speak out about these issues. Freedom from violence is a fundamental human right and central to young women realising their leadership potential.



Armed Conflict and Political Violence

"First of all, every woman should be able to feel peaceful and secure in their country" (N11-1).



High Level Findings

1. Young women understand peace and security as interconnected concepts: one cannot exist without the other, and a young woman's 'inner peace and security' cannot be disconnected from her peace and security in the home, workplace/school, society, country or world.
2. Political violence and armed conflict increase young women's insecurities across multiple aspects of their lives. They compound economic and food insecurities and increase vulnerabilities to violence, including early and forced marriage.
3. While political violence and armed conflict disrupt all members of society, young women's experiences can be unique when compared to young men or older women:
 - their movement is more likely to be restricted as public spaces become more dangerous
 - they are more likely to be removed from education
 - they will take on greater care responsibilities
 - they experience gender-based militarised violence in unique ways
4. The long-term absence of peace and security can create intergenerational trauma for women that can negatively impact young women and their relationships with their grandmothers, mothers and daughters. It can also feed family violence, noting the intersection between public and private forms of violence.
5. Young women can identify impressive examples of peace leadership among their cohort. Yet, they note that their leadership is undermined by a lack of autonomous decision-making, freedom of movement, community support, access to resources and formal peace and security forums.
6. Young women describe their leadership on peace and security issues as typified by honesty, empathy and respect for others.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the understanding of communities, civil society and actors engaged in conflict response and recovery of the unique ways in which young women

can be impacted by conflict and political violence.

2. Support young women in conflict-affected communities by providing targeted resources and services.
3. Create space in formal and informal settings for young women to participate in and lead efforts to build and sustain peace.
4. Support intergenerational peace leadership among women by facilitating inclusive and safe spaces for all women to engage.
5. Facilitate young women-only peace leadership training to build young women's knowledge, skills and confidence to lead.

Background

Young women report that conflict and political violence significantly compound their insecurity. They further their vulnerability to gender-based violence and denies their opportunities for education, employment and freedom of movement, while undermining their economic security and access to healthcare.

The regions of Asia and the Pacific are among the most conflict-affected regions in the world (ACLED, 2023). Except for Samoa, each of the case study countries has recently experienced or are currently experiencing armed conflicts and/or political violence (Box 1). Consequently, the majority of young women interviewed for this research live with the realities or aftermath of political violence. In addition to armed conflict, this violence may include political and civil unrest, religious and ethnic community tensions, sporadic instances of extremist violence or terrorist acts and military rule.

These circumstances create challenges for young women's physical safety, emotional wellbeing, access to resources, ability to be heard within their community and their freedom to live their everyday lives. Even when conflict or political violence has subsided, insecurities can continue. The dividends of peace may not be evenly shared and this may lead to inequalities and ongoing discrimination against young women. Moreover, communities may still be fearful and distrustful or experience unaddressed traumas, which impact young women's sense of safety.

Young women across the regions are worried about the threats posed by armed conflict and political violence in

their community. In our survey, 88% of young women (n=126) described themselves as concerned about the threat posed by conflict or political violence. Most respondents (86%, n=126) described the current or likely impact of conflict and political violence to be negative, with 34% considering the impact to be 'extremely negative'.

Young women are, however, also ambitious in seeking peace and security for themselves and their community. The young women interviewed for this research

overwhelmingly wish to be heard, to have access to the resources and platforms they need to pursue peace, and to make a positive difference.

Moreover, for peace and security to endure, their communities need them. Peace leadership must be intergenerational if peace and security are to be sustained. For this to occur, young women's insecurities in the face of armed conflict and political violence must be understood and addressed, their leadership acknowledged and supported, and their visions for peace and security taken seriously.

Armed conflict and political violence across the regions of Asia and the Pacific

Myanmar

Armed violence, serious violations of human rights and oppression have continued in the years since the military coup in 2021. In 2024, at least 1,824 people were killed, including 531 women and 248 children, sharply up from the previous peak of 1,639 verified deaths in 2023 (UNHRC 2025). Over 18.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, and over half the population lives below the poverty line (HRW 2025). Targeted attacks against the Rohingya community are ongoing in Myanmar.

Thailand

Armed conflict continues in southern Thailand while attacks against pro-democracy movements and civil unrest continue. In August 2025 widespread protests preceded the removal of the Thai Prime Minister from office.

Papua New Guinea

Armed violence persists in the Enga, Hela and Southern Highlands provinces, with over 200,000 people in need of humanitarian assistance after an escalation of violence, combined with environmental disasters (IOM 2025).

Solomon Islands

Political unrest and protests which can become violent, continue. The 2025 National Security Strategy identifies

land disputes, regional inequality and political marginalisation of groups as the key sites of political tension (Aumae 2025).

Bangladesh

There are high levels of political violence, particularly around elections and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and violent eruptions of border disputes with India. In 2024 student-led protests led to major clashes with security forces who killed an estimated 1,400 protestors (UN News 2025).

India

Political violence in India is marked by rising communal clashes and ethnic unrest, with sporadic violence in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra and ongoing violence in Manipur causing mass displacement. Militant attacks persist in Jammu and Kashmir, while tensions with China over the Arunachal Pradesh border add to security challenges.

Sri Lanka and Nepal

The longstanding effects of civil war continue to be felt in Sri Lanka and Nepal with threats to stability brought on by unprecedented economic and political crises in both countries. Violent extremist groups and terrorist attacks have also posed threats to the security of countries in the region.

Young women's experiences of conflict and political violence

Young women across the regions of Asia and the Pacific generally do not feel secure or at peace.

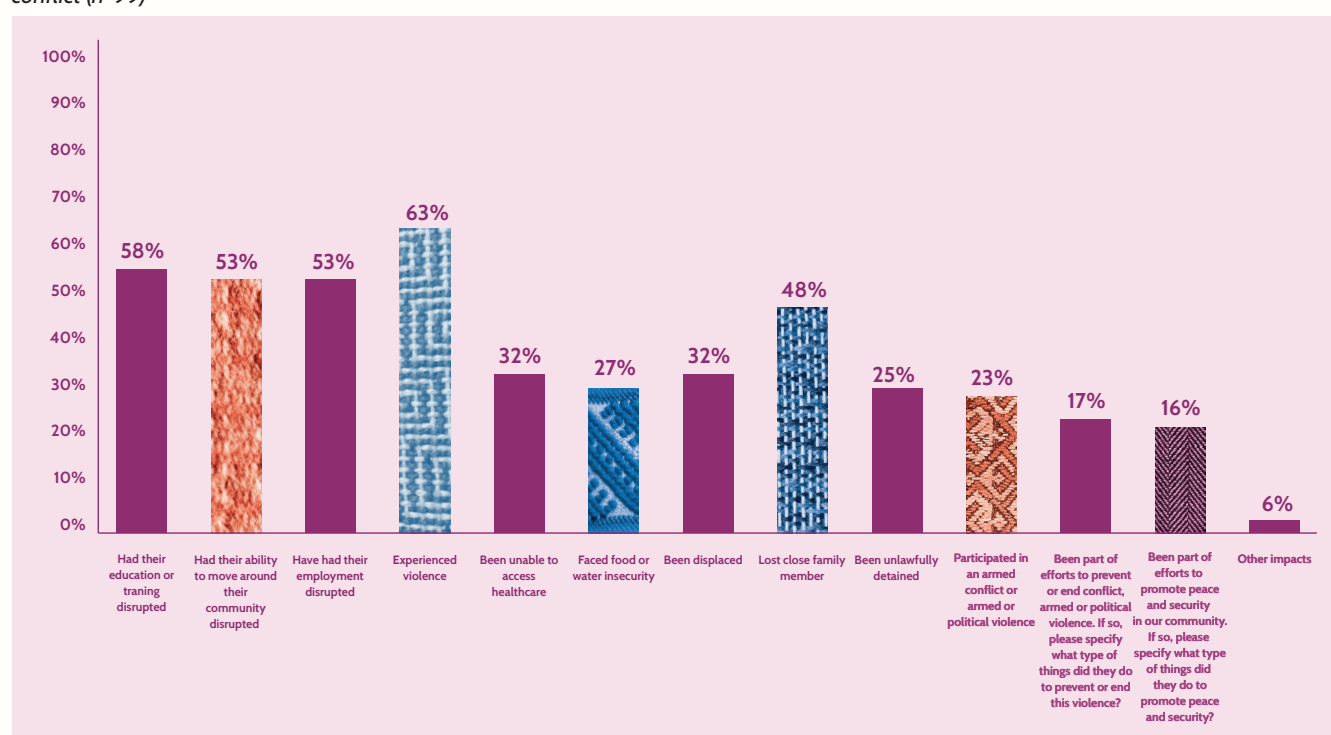
A young Sri Lankan woman noted in the aftermath of political unrest in her country: “there is no proper security, especially for young women. When there is no security, there is no peace of mind. Women are scared to travel alone, to send their young daughters out to work, school, etc” (SL12-1).

Similarly, conflict-affected young women in Myanmar noted that they feel unsafe in public and also in their homes. In India, young women described feeling as though they can be a focal point in religious and ethnic tension. This might be because of the ways that they dress

and how they look (which may indicate their ethnic, tribal or religious belonging). In such cases they feel physically vulnerable and concerned they might be targeted by other groups. One young woman noted that: “Many young women [are] traumatised with insecurity” (IO3-1).

In our survey, most respondents reported that they knew of young women who had suffered as a result of political violence or conflict. As demonstrated below (Graph 5), these impacts include physical violence, disruption of education, inability to access healthcare, displacement and unlawful detention. While young women recognise the broad and diverse impacts of conflict and political violence on the entire community, they overwhelmingly described at least some of their experiences as unique to their age and gender, and in some cases disproportionate to others.

Graph 5: I know young women who have experienced the following as a result of political disruption/violence or armed violence, including conflict (n=99)



Young women's conceptualisation of peace and security

Young women recognise that armed conflict and political violence are detrimental to their peace and security. As a young Sri Lankan woman noted: “Peace and security go hand in hand. Where there’s conflict, there’s no peace and security” (SL17). However, their understandings of these concepts are expansive and consider the impact of political violence across the community.

Young women describe peace and security as two equal

and interconnected parts of a whole concept. For young women, there cannot be peace (which young women in the research commonly regard as a sense of calm within the community) without security (which is typically regarded as freedom from threats) and that security is meaningless if there is no peace. As one young Papua New Guinea woman described: “I think in terms of peace and security, when you think about peace, you think about harmony. And also, when you think about security, you think about safety” (PNG04).

Moreover, for these young women, the concepts of peace and security have no boundaries. Unlike mainstream political debates, where peace and security are primarily a public sphere concern, young women intimately interconnect conflict and violence to their own lived experiences. For peace and security to occur, it must transcend the spaces in which they live: in their own bodies, in their homes, communities, nations and world. In other words, societal peace and security are meaningless if young women experience violence in the home, have limited access to education and other rights, or feel a sense of disquiet or unease within themselves. One young Nepalese woman described peace as requiring a “peace of mind” (NO5) while in Papua New Guinea one young woman noted that “I also think about [peace as] being at ease in your surroundings” (PNGO5-1) and another described it as “harmony or living...without being disturbed or without being stopped in what you want to do with your life” (PNGO2). A young Sri Lankan woman reported:

“Peace - whether it's inner peace that you require, peace within your family, a peaceful work environment, a peaceful country and world peace is equally important to everyone whether he or she is a young woman/ man or an older woman/man (SL11-1).

Young women across the regions identified the ways conflict and political violence disrupts their inner peace and compounds their insecurities. As outlined below, political violence undermines young women's public safety, which in turn denies them access to education and livelihood options, and can increase their vulnerability to violence.

Freedom of movement

Across the regions, young women persistently noted that in times of political tensions and violence, the first direct impact on them was the restriction on their freedom of movement. This, they argued, was particularly felt by young women.

In Myanmar, the persistence of armed conflict in several states and the 2021 military coup have impacted young women's movement across the country. One young woman based in Yangon noted: “In the past, we could go out and enjoy ourselves with friends in the evening. We feel secure. But at the moment, starting around 6pm, we dare not leave the house because we feel insecure” (MO2-1).

Most young Burmese women agreed: “You cannot do what you want freely. When you want to do something and you feel unsafe, you cannot achieve your goals” (MO3-1). Another noted that “Nowadays it is not easy to go around, there are some check points for security; the way they check feels uncomfortable for women and girls. This kind of security checking is unacceptable” (MO5-1).

In India, young women similarly reported that in the aftermath of violence associated with religious tensions, young women were kept at home. A young Indian woman spoke about the impact of ethnic violence in her community: “So this impacted many of us, even for basic necessities. It stopped us going to school” (IO3-1). Many young Indian women reported that they felt like their cohort was being directly targeted by rival religious groups, explaining “it was not safe for us to go out at least for a few months. We had to stay at home, especially young women” (IO7-1). Another young woman spoke about the establishment of a hijab ban in her community. She explained:

“Students were said to have been anxious that their parents would not allow them to go to college without their religious clothing. In this tug of war between a state government's stubborn and inexplicable decision to suddenly enforce a dress code... the only group which was impacted was the young college women whose only desire had been to attain an education and not be discriminated against at their academic institution (I12-1).

Young women agreed that their experiences were different from young men. A young Indian woman noted that “compared to boys, it's more difficult for girls. Girls don't have the freedom to get out of their homes” (I13-1).

However, in Myanmar, political violence had a different effect. One young woman noted: “We are facing so many difficulties because of the conflict. For example, young women are unsafe to stay at home and boys can get arrested when they go out” (M10-1). Another young Burmese woman noted: “Boys are taken in these mountainous areas and forced to work as porters. Thus, in order to hide from the military, they must go to the forest. Only girls are left to stay in their homes. They are the ones who must put up a fight if anything horrible occurs to them at home. There is high risks to become a victim” (MO2-1 KII PR).

Several young women directly attributed these gendered differences to the specific gender-based social norms within their society. As one young Sri Lankan woman pointed out: “Yes, females face more issues in society than males. Females have been given a set of rules that they need to follow or obey in the society” (SL11-1). In a similar vein, a young woman from Thailand noted that girls face greater challenges during a political crisis “because we have less power in our country” (TO7-1). In India, a young woman noted that:



I think young women in any society and especially here in India have to face the worst consequences of any conflict. They are the first ones to be affected. Young women experience these conflicts very differently – they do not hold ‘power’ or influence within their families or communities (IO7-1).

Thus, young women consistently described a sense of insecurity during crisis because of their lack of societal power and autonomy. Indeed, this lack of societal power and autonomy compounds the threats young women face during times of crisis, including armed conflict, political violence and disasters. Their relative powerlessness increases their vulnerability to other risks, including as a result of their rights and liberties being curtailed.

Denial of education and employment

Many young women in conflict-affected communities highlighted the impact their restricted movement had on their access to education and livelihood opportunities.

A young Indian woman noted: “When it comes to their security, you know, they might just choose to stay home, this might affect their studies, their career opportunities, if they want to go explore. They give up their own freedom because they want to be safe” (IO5-1). In Myanmar, a young woman noted that “this conflict has a big impact on girls. Their parents will not allow them to ... go to other places for their education.” In Bangladesh, a young woman noted that during political crises and tensions in her country young women “may have their access to education and employment disrupted and may be excluded from decision-making forums” (BO2-1).

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, restricted movement due to political unrest has limited opportunities for young women.

As one young Sri Lankan woman explained: “In my view, the recent events that took place in the country with protests and violent attacks has made it unsafe for women and girls” which created “economic insecurity and difficulty in getting jobs” (SL13-1).

Impact on mental health

Several young women identified the impact that political violence can have on their mental health. Witnessing and experiencing violence cause direct trauma. Likewise, the associated impacts of political violence can cause significant trauma and distress. These can include curtailed access to education and employment, increased food and water insecurity, stresses and trauma in the family home and limited freedom of movement, creating isolation and separation from social networks.

In India, violence and civil unrest are common in several areas. One young Indian woman noted during times of tension in her region: “They [young women] stop venturing out of their homes. They can’t share their problems with anyone; they live in constant tension and fear. They don’t eat or drink properly....” A young Nepalese woman confirmed that “peace and security plays a vital role in young women’s mental and physical wellbeing” (N12-1).

Young women’s leadership in times of conflict and political violence

Across the regions of Asia and the Pacific, several young women reflected on the importance of their leadership during times of crisis. Many young women said they lead by engaging in protests for justice, human rights or democracy, organising community events, contributing to awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns, participating in community dialogue, providing and facilitating access to services for others and contributing to relief efforts for conflict-affected communities.

In Myanmar and Sri Lanka, young women reported that the presence of community service organisations had decreased since the onset of acute violence. Young women observed that, as a result, it has been predominantly women (both older and younger) who have been left with the responsibilities of social care within their communities (MO6-1 and SL09-1). In Myanmar, young women described how women in their communities had become the first responders when

there was a crisis or need to support vulnerable individuals, while in Sri Lanka women took on roles of food and other resource distribution.

In other contexts around the regions, young women reported that their peace and security leadership begins with listening to the experiences of others. When reflecting on women's leadership in Myanmar, one young woman reported that "I helped and listened to the people who have faced violence or fled from their homes. In the conflict area, I have seen the women help by listening, sharing knowledge and connecting young women to resources" (MO4-1).

Others noted the importance of creating a safe space that young women can join to discuss the issues affecting them. A young Nepalese woman noted that if there can be such a "peaceful place ... then they can openly talk about their problems, and they can openly share their problems with other people" (NO6-1).

In the Pacific, several young women noted that the success of young women leaders in their community was due to their truthfulness, honesty and the respect they showed others in tense times. In the Solomon Islands, one young woman noted that young women's "honest leadership gains respect and earns many hearts within and worldwide" (SI03-2) while in Samoa another young woman agreed that "as a young leader you must show peace and respect towards the people in your house,

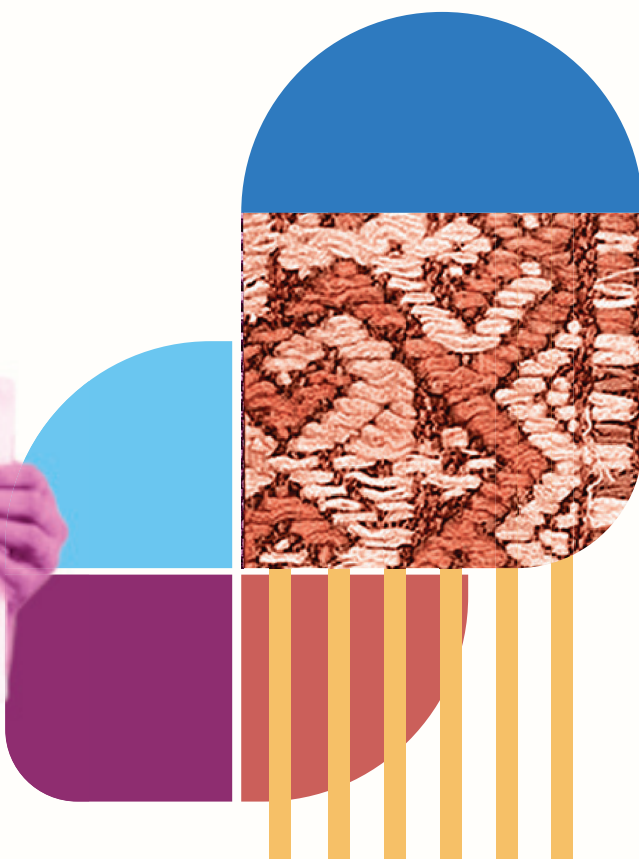
community and the environment" (SO8-1).

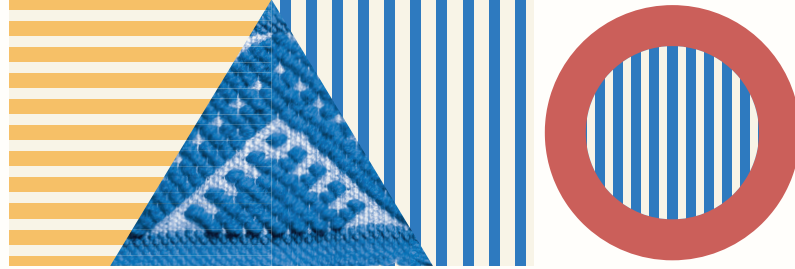
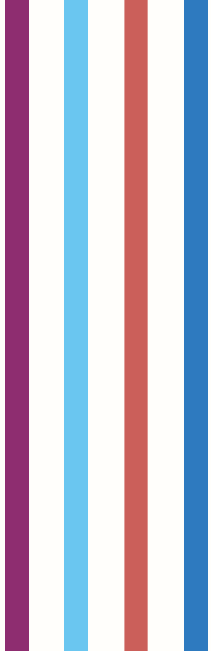
Acknowledging the substantial risks that young women can face when they do engage in peace leadership during times of crisis, many described 'speaking up' as itself constituting leadership. In the Solomon Islands, one young woman reported that speaking up about their experiences of crisis "empowered young women to become agents of change" (SI05-2).

This view was common among young Thai women who have become increasingly involved in pro-democracy protest movements. One young Thai woman noted that young women are "not afraid to stand up for their beliefs and ideas, even if it means that they have to face oppression and mistreatment. Young women have strong leadership skills and they commit to making a positive impact in their communities" (TO6-1). Another Thai woman agreed, arguing that:

“Young women are starting to understand how the government rules the country. And a lot of young women stand up and speak out about what should be done. They speak up about what is not right and what should be done. Yeah, women should have more voice like that (TO3-1).

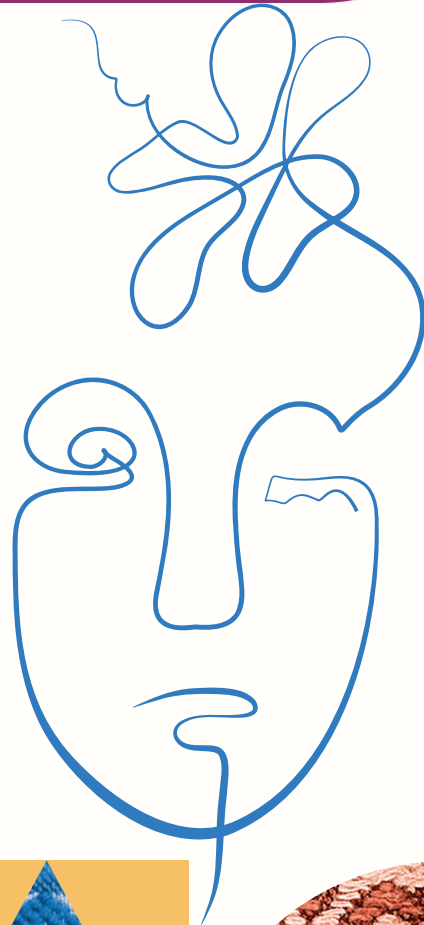
Young women's leadership is essential to ensuring that efforts to bring peace and security to a community are both gender-responsive and intergenerational. Without this, any subsequent peace will be limited and fragile.





The Climate Crisis

Young women experience the climate crisis “differently than others in their community as they may have less access to resources and decision-making power” (BO4-1).



High Level Findings

1. Gender inequality exacerbates young women's negative experiences of the climate crisis due to inequitable access to information, resources and decision-making.
2. The climate crisis compounds insecurities for young women, such as health and safety risks, increased care burden, denial of education and economic insecurity.
3. The climate crisis increases vulnerability to gender-based violence due to displacement, trauma and economic stress.
4. Climate anxiety is widespread among young women.
5. Young women are afforded few formalised leadership opportunities to address the climate crisis.

Recommendations

1. Build understanding within the community, civil society, policymakers and practitioners of the unique ways in which young women can be impacted by the climate crisis.
2. Create space in formal and informal settings for young women to develop, participate in, lead and evaluate climate adaptation, resilience and recovery projects.
3. Support young women in disaster-affected communities by providing targeted information, resources and services.
4. Support intergenerational leadership among women by facilitating inclusive and safe spaces for all women.
5. Create and support education and training opportunities for young women to increase their knowledge regarding the climate crisis.

Background

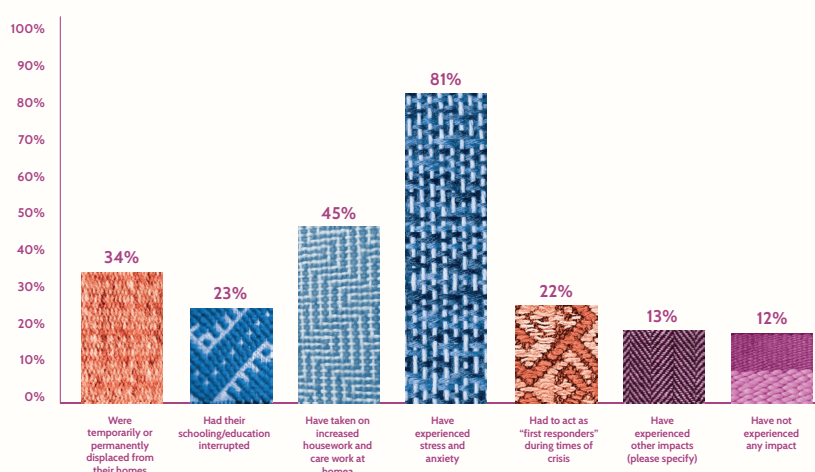
While the impacts of the climate crisis are widespread, young women report that they are sometimes uniquely impacted by climate change and natural disasters. However, they also note that they are uniquely positioned to assume leadership roles to support their communities through this crisis.

The regions of Asia and the Pacific are among the world's most vulnerable regions to climate change (ESCAP, 2023). The regions are challenged by rising sea levels, more frequent floods, storms and landslides, escalating droughts and heatwaves, and environmental damage to oceans and waterways. This will not only have environmental impacts but will also create widespread human insecurity, undermine development gains, generate fragility in governance and exacerbate economic challenges to the regions of Asia and the Pacific. The World Bank (2023) estimates that an additional 7.5 million people will fall into poverty by 2030 in East Asia alone due to climate change.

Young women's experiences of the climate crisis

The climate crisis is a major concern for young women. Falling only slightly below violence against women and girls, 93% of young women in our survey (n=126) described themselves as concerned or extremely concerned about this issue, with 91% (n=126) describing the current or likely impact of the climate crisis to be 'extremely', 'very' or 'somewhat negative'. As demonstrated below (Graph 6), some of the major impacts of the climate crisis on young women include a dramatic increase in their experiences of stress and anxiety, an increase in their experiences of violence, an increase in their care and unpaid work burden and being forced to leave their home.

Graph 6: I know young women who have experienced the following as a result of the climate crisis (n=101)



Gender inequality

Most young women recognise that their experiences of the climate crisis will be uniquely shaped by gender inequality.

Across the regions, young women recognise that the climate crisis impacts all members of their community.

While some young women (21% in our survey, n=117) did not think that they were impacted differently than other members of the community, the remainder believe that, at least to some extent, young women experience the climate crisis in unique or sometimes disproportionate ways (Image 16).

Image 16: Young women speak about the intersections of gender inequality and the climate crisis

YOUNG WOMEN REFLECT UPON HOW GENDER INEQUALITY SHAPES THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

"The effects [of the climate crisis] are particularly felt by young women and girls, [who are] often limited in accessing resources and decision-making" (PNGO2-1).

"Young women will have less access to basic human rights, like the ability to freely move to different places, because they will be stopped by families or by their spouses" (IO3-2).

"Women, who make up the majority of the developing world's 1.4 billion poor, generally have lower income, less access to credit and decision-making authority, and limited control over resources, increasing their vulnerability to the impact of climate change" (I10-1).

"Climate change can have significant impacts on young women ... as they may have less access to resources and decision-making power" (BO4-1).

"Women and girls can be more vulnerable ... because [they] are given limited rights by the society and big boundaries, rules, norms and values, less mobilities and which can give them lots of stress to overcome" (NO5-1).



Many young women argued that gender inequality and lack of access to resources and decision-making profoundly shape young women's experience of the climate crisis. As one young woman from Nepal noted: "Women and girls can be more vulnerable... because [they] are given limited rights by the society and big boundaries, rules, norms and values, less mobilities and which can give them lots of stress to overcome" (N05-1). Such gender norms and limited access to resources and decision-making equally inform young women's experiences of other societal challenges beyond the climate crisis, and equally frustrates their efforts to contribute towards addressing these challenges.

Compounding insecurities

1. South Asia

Young women across South Asia described the ways in which the increased number and unpredictability of floods in their communities compound their insecurities.

For example, young Bangladeshi women explained that the floods in their villages trigger a chain effect of negative impacts. The roads and homes become swamped and the schools are destroyed, forcing young women to flee their homes and abandon their education. One young Bangladeshi woman noted: "The floods are really severe. So in most cases, girls have to stop their studies to help the household" (B15-1). This was confirmed by a young Bangladeshi woman in our validation workshop who noted that: "when [there is] flood and heavy rains, young women can't go to school. So her family thinks, 'if she [is] spending most of the time in home, why [do] we have to educate her more? Because she is not going to school half of the year'. So gradually, she becomes dropout and stays in the home."

Young women also described health and safety risks when they are displaced by weather events, including greater vulnerability to violence. Another noted that young women experience "lack of food and clean water, their access to reproductive healthcare is limited, they may lose their job or chance to be educated, and when they do, they get married" (B07-1). In our validation workshop two young Bangladeshi women noted temporary evacuation shelters are often ill-equipped to support young women's needs. They indicated that shelters did not have appropriate sanitary standards, access to menstrual healthcare, or clean drinking water.

They further noted that shelters could increase the risk of gender-based violence with authorities sometimes responsible for committing such violence.

This was similarly reported in Sri Lanka where annual floods have taken a major toll on the country. One young woman noted that "Often young women face greater health and safety risks as water and sanitation systems become compromised and take on increased domestic and care work as resources disappear" (SI06-2). Young women from Nepal also spoke about the compounding impacts of floods in their country, noting that:



It creates a spiral into poverty that might begin with family separation and forced migration of the father to find work, leaving women and children in poverty and more prone to harassment, the floods can also disrupt education and create health problems (water borne diseases) and young women become more vulnerable to child and early marriage (N11-1).

In India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, young women spoke of the impact of drought on their work and care burden, particularly because collecting drinking water is a responsibility that culturally falls to young women (Image 17). Crises tend to increase care work, as family members may have additional needs, including due to increased economic insecurity or loss of employment, the closure of schools and sources of support, or physical or mental harm. The highly gendered, undervalued and overlooked nature of care work further depletes the resources of women, often young women, in South Asia and the Pacific - and their resilience to other harms. In our validation workshop a young woman from India argued that the care and physical labour of recovery after a climate event is disproportionately placed on young women who are seen as fit and resilient. She noted that: "So whenever a natural disaster hits young women are expected to move the family to another place for safety. And the whole pressure comes down to the young women there, or the young, girl who takes care of the family, because, as I mentioned, she's expected to be the homemaker and make everything normal."

Heavy care work burdens can harm mental and physical health, and result in young women curtailing their other activities, including participation in social and public life, and result in young girls leaving education, paid

employment or their engagement in civil society and social movements. It thus can have a significant impact on their current and future leadership prospects, removing their engagement in efforts to address these societal

challenges and thereby reducing the likelihood that challenges are addressed in inclusive, responsive and effective ways.

Image 17: The impact of the climate crisis on women's unpaid work

YOUNG INDIAN WOMEN REFLECT UPON CLIMATE-INDUCED WORK BURDEN

"When there are floods in my village there are no resources, well very few resources left, so women have to go the extra distance to get the resources, like wood or food, particularly for the household livestock like cows" (I01-2).

"Agriculture is the most important employment sector for women in my village and during periods of drought and erratic rainfall women work harder to secure income and resources for their families. This puts added pressure on girls, who often have to leave school to help their mothers manage the increased burden" (I11-1).

"Women are the ones who are responsible for collecting water and managing food and water, especially in semi-urban and rural areas. Climate change affects women much more; they have to travel twice as far just to collect drinking water" (I07-1).

"Due to the rising temperatures during summer, many young rural women need to walk long distances to fetch drinking water because of the scarcity of water. Many times they need to travel many times, back and forth, on foot in the scorching heat to meet their family's daily water needs" (I09-1).



"Women are burdened with additional physical work to access resources, like going miles to fetch water, fooder, etc" (I08-1).

2. The Pacific

Pacific Island nations are uniquely vulnerable to climate change. As one young woman explained: “For an island nation, it affects a whole lot of us” (PNG07-1).

Many Pacific Islands already experience higher temperatures, shifts in rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and changes in the frequency and intensity of extreme climate events (CSIRO, 2023). Islands across the regions will be uniquely vulnerable to floods, drought, volcanic activity, tsunamis and rising sea levels, not to mention

the impact of temperature and sea level changes on coral reefs, fishing, agriculture and migration (World Bank, 2023). This was well recognised by young women in Papua New Guinea. As one young woman noted: “In terms of climate change in PNG, that depends on the geographic location of where a woman is situated in life. So for example, a woman up in the highlands will have a different experience of climate change than those in the coastal regions” (PNG04).

Indeed, across Papua New Guinea young women described a range of climate-induced insecurities. One young woman noted:

“And like I mentioned earlier about Manus Island [an island in PNG], some of these young women will have to relocate. And then that’s going to cause a change of environment for them, you know, a loss of their culture, their land, their tradition, and also their identity. So I believe it truly affects young women (PNG05-1).

Speaking about Manam Island, off the coast of the Madang Province in PNG, a young woman from our validation workshop noted that: ‘Due to climate crisis young women have been displaced, they have experienced violence, more responsibilities on them, a lot of rape cases, and less opportunities for them in terms of going back to school.’

Climate-induced mobility is already a reality in Samoa. As a small Pacific Island nation with most of the population living along its coastline, Samoa is already experiencing these direct effects of climate change, both within the country and externally (Latai-Niusulu et al., 2023). Young women in Samoa reflected on this, noting the disruptions it can cause to their schooling and friendship networks.

One Samoan noted that “young women must relocate to new places that they are not fond of” (S07-1) while another noted the strength and importance of kinship communities in helping young women adapt to changes in location (S05-1).

In many countries in the Pacific, climate change has also created erratic and unpredictable access to food and water. This often results in increased unpaid and care work responsibilities for young women. One young woman in Papua New Guinea noted that where she lives in East New Britain there had been drought.

“We were facing drought and young women and girls, they were forced to go out further leaving their home to go look for more water, because there was no water, everything was just dried out, like, from house to house, so they have to go, they have to walk far distances to get water. So when they go out, they are taking risks, risks to their safety. And it’s, it’s, it’s a big issue (PNG06-1).

In another part of Papua New Guinea, a young woman noted how floods in her village affected access to clean water and destroyed crops, which particularly impacted young women because “young women and girls are often responsible for food production” (PNG-01). This responsibility was highlighted by a young woman who had lived through the 2018 earthquake that hit the Hela Province. She noted that when people were relocated:

“.... [the] responsibility of maintaining some form of normalcy in that new environment was passed to the young women, they had to help the family relocate and adapt, as the boys were given priority to be educated, and they were able to go to school ... whereas young women were supposed to go and look for land to grow crops, and they were supposed to look for water, and they were supposed to look for resources to build homes and all of that. So when it comes to a climate change issue, the women, young women are at the forefront, they would feel because most of the time, they are the ones that are nurturing the homes and supposed to be out there looking for shorts and everything like that (PNG07-1).

Similarly, in the Solomon Islands, several young women commented on their increased unpaid and care work burden as a result of the climate crisis, and the

subsequent impact this has on them. One noted that it was young women who had to “fetch water in far places” (SIO2-1) while another noted that young women “take on increased domestic and care work as resources disappear” (SIO6-2) due to the “changes in weather patterns” (SIO1-1). Another noted that young women were “more likely to miss class or drop out of school, this is due to the fact that men think that women should do all the household chores” to prepare for, or in the aftermath of, extreme weather events (SIO4-1).

The unique direct and indirect impacts of the climate crisis on young women are compounded as they are often marginalised from decision-making processes to address or mitigate the threats of climate change. One young woman in particular argued that women in Samoa generally are excluded from decision-making processes and forums regarding climate policies, and this created further vulnerability for young women (SO3-1).

Access to healthcare during climate crisis

Young women noted that one of the unique ways in which they are impacted by the climate crisis is through the challenges they face in accessing healthcare. This included access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care, clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), mental health and general health services.

In particular, young women noted that during extreme weather events, they have limited access to SRH services, resources and information. Among those young women who had been forced to leave their homes due to a climate event, many noted that the shelters and facilities where they stayed did not have adequate SRH facilities. This has been noted throughout the SRH sector with researchers demonstrating that:

“Access to SRH services is already limited due to economic, cultural and social constraints that prevent women from making decisions concerning their bodily autonomy. During and post climate disasters, such constraints are worsened. Limited access to SRH services increases women’s risk of physical, mental, and psychological harm; it also impacts their ability to build capacity and resilience to climate change (Huasini & Davies, 2022).

Access to WASH facilities was also noted as something that can uniquely impact young women during a natural

disaster. As one young Bangladeshi woman noted:

“...we know that the impact of climate change is more on women than men, because women face some of the issues that men don’t face in the case of disaster. For example, if I talk about flood, when a flood takes place, women face a lot of sanitary issues because they do not get any kind of WASH facilities (BO1-1).

In India and Bangladesh, young women connected the illnesses associated with poor WASH facilities to school dropouts and domestic violence. A young Indian woman noted that young women in her rural community drink the same water they use to wash their clothes, causing them to suffer from water-borne diseases. She explained: “This causes them to skip school because of all this, which eventually makes them feel inadequate when they go back to the classroom, finally dropping out altogether” (IO9-1). In Bangladesh, young women in a focus group discussion noted that “women and girls face greater health and safety risks as water and sanitation systems become compromised”. They added that this can increase tension and stress within families, leading young women to take on greater domestic responsibilities and, in some cases, triggering family violence. The increase in care work was also noted by a young woman in Papua New Guinea who explained that climate events can lead to the spread of diseases which impact young women because “our young women are more responsible in family units for taking care of sick people” (PNGO3-1).

Young women spoke of a range of physical health hazards they faced as a result of the climate crisis. Speaking generally, a young woman in Sri Lanka noted that “Climate change can also impact human health by worsening air and water quality, increasing the spread of certain diseases and changing the frequency or intensity of extreme weather events” (SLO3-1). In Thailand, a young woman noted that “air quality is a major issue for young people” (TO3-1). In Nepal, a young woman spoke about how the degradation of the natural environment is causing a range of healthcare issues, creating diseases, some of which particularly impact young women. She notes that “we are eating the foods with so much pesticides, chemical fertilisers and I feel this is proportionately affecting women’s health, their sexual and reproductive health.” She also noted that young

women in her rural village:

“ go to the jungles to accumulate the woods... to use while cooking. And I feel that the smoke that produces, it affects a young woman and their health, and it is causing a kind of... I feel that it is causing a kind of asthma and lung diseases. I know it is very vague, but I feel it affects young women in this way (NO2-1).

Finally, climate anxiety is a major impact of the climate crisis on young women. Climate or eco-anxiety is a rational emotional response to the climate crisis (therefore does not necessarily imply a mental illness,

though many young women described it in those terms). It is connected to emotions including fear, anger, grief, despair, guilt, shame and also hope (Hickman et al., 2021). Recent research published in The Lancet (Hickman et al., 2021: e866) found that across the world 60% of young people reported being “very” or “extremely” worried about climate change. Our research produced similarly high findings with 80% of young women (n=117) reporting that they knew of young women who had experienced stress or anxiety as a result of the climate crisis. In interviews, young women also reported feeling distressed by the climate crisis (Image 18).

Image 18: Young women describe their climate anxiety

YOUNG WOMEN REFLECT UPON CLIMATE ANXIETY

“I think this climate change is overall affecting everyone's mental health” (B03-1 FGD).

“Yes, it has affected us mentally... Because nowadays, though, youth are concerned about the environment, how it has been changing in our lifetime” (NO1-1).

Climate change “will affect your health. I mean, like right now in Bombay, like you know we have such bad weather. It's affecting our life ... on a personal level. I am not really feeling well, in terms of like, I don't want to go out, it's affecting my mood. But that's a very personal opinion” (IO5-1).

“As a young woman living in India, I have a lot of climate change related anxiety. I see news headlines around irregular weather patterns, unseasonal drought or rains, floods, water shortage or deforestation, etc - all of this is very worrying as a young person living in a global south country... I am not sure if every young woman around me is thinking or worried about climate change, but I know it has a drastic impact on a lot of young women - especially those who do not belong to privileged backgrounds”(IO7-1).

“...Climate change can be a source of poor mental health among young women or young people, including PTSD. Stress and anxiety around disasters” (B03-1 FGD).



Gender-based violence

Across the regions, young women identified increased vulnerability to gender-based violence as a major impact of the climate crisis.

For some young women, this vulnerability was a result of forced migration or the need to seek temporary shelter following an extreme weather event. This was noted across the Pacific with a young woman in Papua New Guinea reporting that young women “are forced to migrate to urban centres in terms of work, which can lead to vulnerability, exploitation and abuse” (PNG02-1). Similarly in the Solomon Islands, a young woman reported that she has been forced to relocate to a new place that she did not like and where she did not feel safe (SI07-1). As noted earlier, in coming years Samoa is expected to experience an increased number of cyclones and extreme heat and humidity and one young woman noted the impact this could have on young women’s safety in temporary shelters and evacuation centres: “these shelters are not always safe for young women to stay in, especially when they are without their families” (SO3-1). Another noted that gender-based violence is prevalent in shelters that “do not have enough security or safety considerations for young women” (SO5-1).

Young women also noted that the stress that climate change places on a family can increase cases of domestic and family violence. In India, a young woman recounted her experience with a family in a rural area where she was undertaking a fellowship. She spoke about how the frustration caused by unpredictable monsoon seasons and crop destruction generated family stress and violence. She noted that the girls were unable to study, the mother struggled to manage the household and “the father, who is a farmer and had the responsibility to work, was so frustrated that he indulged himself into drinking. And he came around every night and used to, you know, abuse his wife and she would take the abuse because she couldn’t leave her children” (IO6-1). This report is consistent with research conducted in India, Nepal and Pakistan recently that found that a one degree Celsius increase in average annual temperature was connected to an increase in intimate partner violence of 4.49% with an estimate that prevalence would increase by 21% by the end of this century (Zhu et al., 2023).

In countries with existing high prevalence rates of child, early and forced marriage, the climate crisis provides

another trigger. Existing research suggests that the climate crisis increases the known drivers of child marriage as families marry off daughters to alleviate economic and food insecurity, or as a means of dealing with forced displacement and education disruptions (Pope et al., 2022, 1; Doherty, 2023). One study in Bangladesh found that extreme heat waves that had lasted longer than 15 days nearly doubled the likelihood that girls/young women aged between 11 and 23 would be married (Carrico et al., 2020:102160). This was confirmed by young women in Bangladesh. Speaking about the aftermath of floods in her area of Sylhet in the northeast of Bangladesh, one young Bangladeshi woman noted that “young women are dropping out of school here and child marriage is occurring” (BO5-1). Another noted that:



So most of the people try to marry their daughters off so that they don't have to educate them or don't have to feed them.

So childcare is also another issue that is increased by climate change, you know, so that is another issue because in rural areas, child marriages, is that issue in Bangladesh already, but because of climate change, it has increased more and more (BO1-1).

Young women's leadership on the climate crisis

There is clear evidence of young women’s leadership on addressing the climate crisis. Young women do so by raising awareness about the issue in their families and communities and engaging in community-run campaigns and activities. In our survey, a quarter of our respondents had participated in a social action campaign or activity regarding climate change, while 16% responded that they had been involved in leading one (n=95).

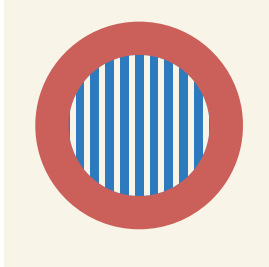
Climate change education is a key priority for young women. Around one-half of our respondents described themselves as actively educating themselves on the topic with several young women in our interviews noting that they had participated in a climate change education program. One young woman in Nepal reported that she had undertaken an eco-tourism training program that developed her understanding of the impacts of climate change (NO1-1), while another had participated in a program on the future of agriculture in her community (SO3-1). Across the regions, young women indicated their desire to strengthen their knowledge on

climate-related issues.

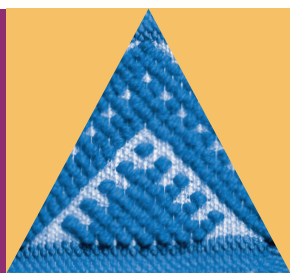
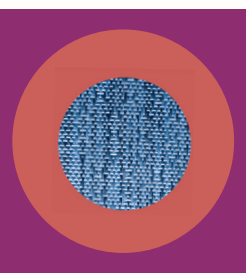
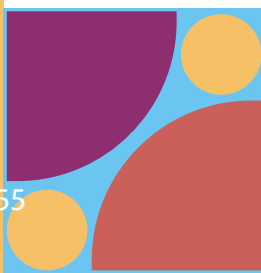
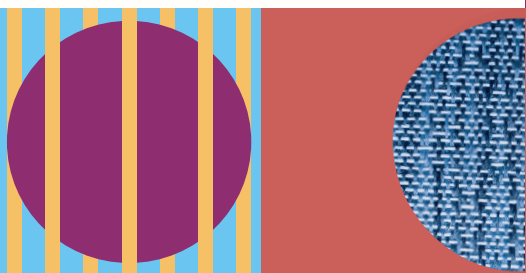
Young women also lead by innovating land and resource management. In Samoa, a young woman noted: “We just can’t treat the land in the same way that my grandmother did, it’s too unpredictable now” (S03-5). Such comments demonstrate the intergenerational knowledge that is passed down through generations of women across the Pacific and the ways they are adapting it to changing conditions.

Finally, several young women in the interviews were active in agitating for policy reform and for their inclusion in decision-making forums. Organisations such as the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change provide youth-only spaces for climate change activism and engagement with formal decision-making bodies. Young women in the Solomon Islands and Samoa, in particular, commented on the importance of young women being a part of such groups.





COVID-19 Recovery



V COVID-19 Recovery

High Level Findings

1. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded existing insecurities for young women, increasing the likelihood that they would be removed from education, lose their jobs, be forcibly married or married early.
2. Young women reported an increase in their care and unpaid work as they took on greater family responsibilities as a result of school and childcare closures and in the aftermath of illness and death.
3. In many cases, the pandemic increased young women's economic precarity.
4. Young women's vulnerability to family violence increased due to economic hardship, family stress and social isolation.
5. Young women reported negative mental health impacts as a result of lockdowns.
6. Young women highlighted compromised access to sexual and reproductive healthcare during the pandemic.
7. Young women were afforded few opportunities to drive policy and community responses to COVID-19.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen understanding of the unique ways in which young women have been impacted – in the short and long term and directly and indirectly – by COVID-19.
2. As communities continue to manage COVID-19, young women's access to mental healthcare, and sexual and reproductive healthcare, should be prioritised in addition to general healthcare.
3. Ensure young women are consulted throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of formal and informal public health responses.

4. Improve young women's access to information during health crises, including how to protect oneself from communicable diseases, domestic violence and other threats.
5. Draw lessons from COVID-19 to invest in online training, support and information-sharing to advance more inclusive and sustainable young women's engagement and leadership.

Background

Young women across the regions of Asia and the Pacific have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that are sometimes unique and disproportionate to other groups within their community. Importantly, many young women across the regions reported that they had lost opportunities for education and employment and have been forcibly married or married early, ensuring that the impacts of the pandemic on their lives are long-term. Moreover, the ongoing mental health impacts associated with the crisis continue to emerge and shape young women's lives.

Across the regions, over a quarter of a billion people had been infected with COVID-19 by the end of 2021. Vaccination rates remain low in many parts of the regions. In Papua New Guinea, only 3.6% of the population is fully vaccinated, while the figures are 38% in Samoa and Myanmar 51%. However, at the other end of the spectrum, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Samoa have over 80% of their population fully vaccinated (Holder, 2023).

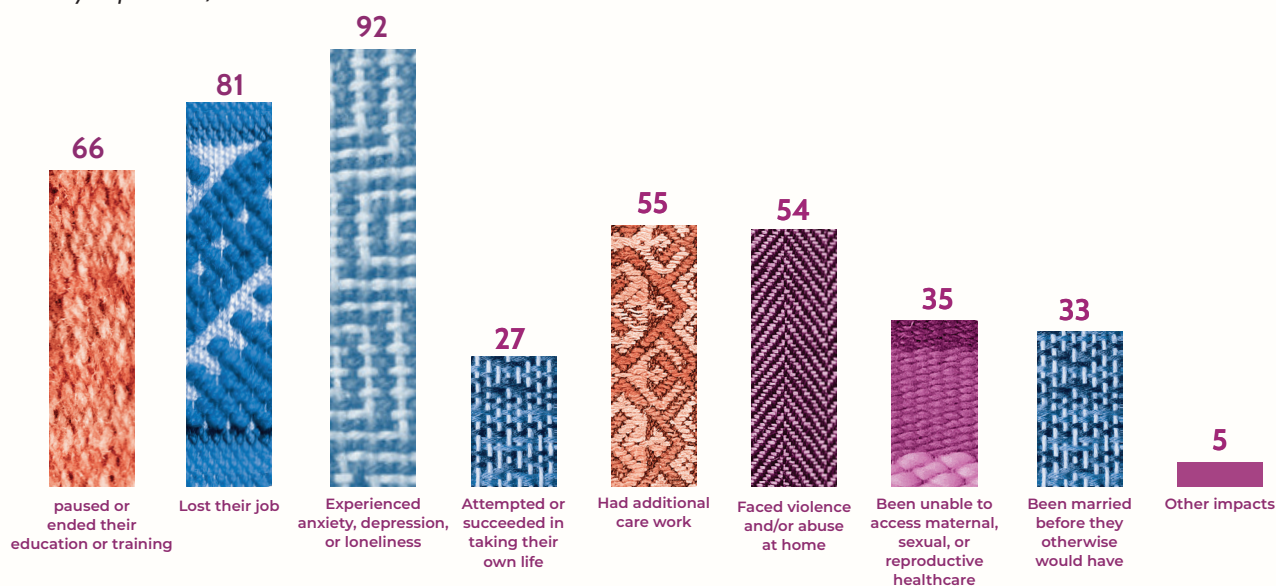
The threats and effects of COVID-19 persist and have had a significant impact on the economies in the regions of Asia and the Pacific, intensifying socio-economic inequalities and reversing progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This has put pressure on governance structures and has decreased community resilience to withstand other threats to security and wellbeing. However, the impacts haven't been evenly felt and continue to emerge and change.

Young women's experiences of COVID-19

Young women across the regions remain concerned about the medium and longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has taken a significant toll on young women's mental health as they deal with disruptions to their education and employment, and the impacts of social isolation (Graph 7). As a young Sri Lankan

woman noted: "During COVID-19 young women are being exposed to new risks, including child, early and forced marriage, violence, early pregnancy and sexual exploitation, as well as limited or not access to education when schools are closed" (SL03-1). Another noted "I personally think that because of COVID-19, the resources that we used to have, like access to education and schools and basic sanitary products were not reachable" (SL01-1).

Graph 7: In my community, I know of young women who have experienced the following as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (101 survey respondents)



Impact on mental health

In our survey, over 90% of young women (n=117) reported that anxiety, depression and loneliness were consequences of the pandemic for young women. This was similarly reported in our interviews and focus group discussions (Image 19). As one young Bangladeshi woman noted: "We're having a monotonous life being particularly nothing, not having any friends or relatives close to you, not celebrating any occasions, we're having just life in those four walls and getting the news that people are dying" (BO3-1). In India, a young woman also noted "I - myself would suffer long periods of anxiety, living with family and would get into regular fights with them. This caused a lot of emotional and psychological distress" (IO7-1). In the aftermath of the immediate crisis, young

women continue to report trauma as a result of their experiences during the pandemic. In the 2025 validation workshop young women reported that their cohort continues to experience poor mental health from having to care for and witness family members die or become critically unwell from the disease. In particular, one young woman argued that the rise in suicide rates among young women in her country could be attributed to the mental health impacts of COVID-19.

The negative impact of COVID-19 on mental health is supported by research elsewhere. For example, one study highlighted the prevalence of major mental health disorders in the regions of Asia and the Pacific during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the prevalence of depression increasing from 4.9% to 43.1%, anxiety from 7% to 43%, and stress from 3.4% to 35.7% (Samy et al.,

2021). Other studies have similarly shown the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on young people's mental health with one study of 593 youth in Australia reporting 48% presenting with clinical depression, 51% with anxiety, and widespread reports of loneliness (Bell et al., 2023). A 2020 survey conducted by UNICEF of over 8,000 adolescents and young people in Latin America and the Caribbean similarly found high rates of distress, with higher rates among young women (43%) than men (31%) reporting that they feel pessimistic about the future (UNICEF, 2020). A 2025 study found that young women may be particularly susceptible to depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, especially in cases where a close relative had contracted COVID-19 (Lee "et al". 2025).

Image 19: Young women speak about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health



Access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive care

Across the regions, access to adequate healthcare became a major issue during the pandemic, however it impacted young women in unique ways. As health systems sought to cope with the increased demand for COVID-19 care,

other health services, such as sexual and reproductive health, were compromised.

In Papua New Guinea, a young woman spoke about her lack of access to pregnancy care during the pandemic. She noted that the maternity hospital had been diverted to the COVID-19 response which meant that she no longer had access to midwifery services. Furthermore, she found travel difficult during the lockdown. She reported: "During that time when we had Covid I was pregnant. And this is like getting pregnant after I lost my first daughter. So I sort of stopped getting medical help and all that because there was a lockdown" (PNG07-1). Another young Papua New Guinea woman similarly noted that she was directed away from the hospital for her maternity care to a local clinic which, she learned, did not have the facilities or equipment to support her. She noted that "the epidemic placed an additional strain on the health system around the country" (PNG02-1).

In South Asia, several young women spoke about the way lockdowns impeded their access to menstrual healthcare. In Nepal, a young woman reported that not only could young women not go out to buy menstrual products, they could not access information regarding SRH (NO3-1; N12-1). Similarly, in India a young woman reflected: "We had to make do with cloth. All the shops were closed so we could not buy pads.... This went on for about 2-3 months (I17-1). A 2023 study on the perceived effects of SRH healthcare provision in the regions of Asia and the Pacific similarly found that across the regions, access to SRH information and healthcare declined for women and girls, with vulnerable communities (such as victims of violence) particularly impacted (Marzouk et al., 2023).

Disruptions to education

Across the regions of Asia and the Pacific, young women reported that the COVID-19 pandemic created major disruptions to their education. In some cases, young women who left education due to pandemic-related reasons did not return. This not only impacts educational attainment but also social wellbeing as school or college is often a safe space for young women. As one young woman noted: “For most girls, they see school as the escape route” (PNG06-1).

In Papua New Guinea, one young woman described her experience:

“Okay, from my point of view, Covid-19 has affected young women, especially some of us; we didn’t complete our education because of Covid-19. Covid-19 is the reason I withdrew from school. Because during a lockdown, people are going to work. I came home from college, withdrew. In the following year, when I was trying to return to school, my place had already been taken by someone else. So I had to apply for a space. They told me I’ve been rejected. So basically, Covid-19 has made a big impact on me personally, on my education (PNG01-1).

Similar narratives were reported across the regions. In Samoa, young women noted that because they had missed too much class, they found it difficult to catch up and ended up dropping out (SO8-1; SO4-1). Similarly, in the Solomon Islands one young woman noted: “Maybe some of them did not finish the grade because they missed too much” (SI08-1). In India, a young woman reflected on the experience of her friend:

“A friend of mine from school dropped out because she didn’t have a smartphone and could not attend online classes. The school told her if she did not attend online classes her attendance would not be marked and she would not be able to give her exams. Her family then took her out of school (I17-1).

These experiences align with broader research in the regions which maps the ongoing impact of school closures on children and young people. Data collected by UNICEF and other international organisations shows that even after lockdowns subsided, students across the

regions were not returning to school (UNICEF, 2021).

As classes moved online, access to the internet and a networked device also presented a challenge for many young women (Image 20). One young woman from India noted that where there were multiple children in the home, preference for online learning was given to boys: “For school going female children, if the resources were limited, such as computer/mobile for online classes, male children were prioritised” (IO8-1). This young woman further noted that “The drop out of girls from the school skyrocketed “since covid” leading to aggravate the already existing gender gaps in education” (IO8-1). In Nepal, a young woman noted that online education was under-valued by her family and did not encourage them to continue to support young women’s education. She noted: “And in the rural areas of Nepal, girls are really not supported for online education. Parents say: “It’s just online, so you can’t even go, so you don’t need to do it. You just marry” (N11-1).

Image 20: Young women reflect on lack of resources for online learning

YOUNG WOMEN REFLECT UPON LACK OF RESOURCES FOR ONLINE LEARNING

“We didn’t get a proper education. Majority were online classes. We had lots of network issues and couldn’t study properly. I knew students who faced financial problems and did not have a smartphone” (SL20-1).

“Various young people did not have access for education during this period due to lack of resources or the geographical area had a poor signal” (SL15-1).

“Most of the education was online. So many people don’t know how to work with it” (B10-1).

“We don’t get good internet connections or regular electricity” (MO7-1).



Across the case study countries, Myanmar presented a unique case. As a result of both COVID-19 and the 2021 military coup, Myanmar experienced the longest school closures in the regions. In 2023, enrolment rates remained low (57%) among six-to 22-year-olds (Roy et al., 2023), whereas rates had recovered reasonably well across the regions. In addition to the pandemic, economic hardship has been cited as a major barrier to education, and as noted in Roy et al. (2023), 30% of the teaching staff joined the civil disobedience movement and were dismissed by the military. Where young Burmese women did attend online classes during the pandemic, they noted that it allowed them to avoid the militarised context in their community. As one noted: “In a good way, women have to stay home and can avoid the security checks. They can attend online classes” (MO5-1). Another also noted: “And then the coup happens, so everything is messed up. On the bright side, we can attend classes online and find knowledge online, even though the connection is poor in this area” (MO6-1).

Loss of employment and financial hardships

COVID-19 impacted young women’s experiences of work throughout the regions of Asia and the Pacific in different ways. In many cases, young women lost their jobs, in other cases their paid work increased, while most young women experienced an increase in their unpaid and care labour. By the end of 2020, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that 81 million people had lost their jobs in the regions of Asia and the Pacific as a direct result of the pandemic, reducing labour income by an estimated 10% in the first three quarters of 2020 and pushing up to an additional 25 million people into working poverty in the regions (ILO, 2020). The ILO and Asian Development Bank (ADB) also reported that young people were at particular risk, bearing more substantial and longer-term economic as well as social costs (ILO & ADB, 2020).

In all countries, young women reported that their cohort experienced “loss of employment and reduced income”

(BO2-1). One young woman in India spoke of her own experience of job losses: “During Covid I worked for SBI Life Insurance Company, I did the scanning there. During Covid I was terminated. If I had got to complete one year of work there I would have got a permanent government job with them. Due to Covid I lost that chance” (I19-FGD). In some cases, young women noted that the attending impact on financial security made some young women vulnerable to early and forced marriage.

In other cases, young women noted that the pandemic increased expectations from employers regarding their paid work. In Bangladesh, a young woman noted: “My previous employment... my boss did not have any respect of the time. So I used to log in, in the zoom.... and I used to start working at 9am and maybe get done with my work by 9pm, maybe 10pm” (BO2-1). Similarly in India, a young woman noted: “I had to work from home, obviously, but like it was a good 16-17 hours of work. And that hampered by mental wellbeing and I had to quit.... there was absolutely no work-life balance because people expected you to be available like, like all of the time because you’re at home” (IO5-1).

In the years since the acute crisis, views are mixed. It was noted by many respondents across the regions that young women have struggled to find employment in the aftermath of the crisis. This is supported by recent research. In 2024 the ILO reported that in South Asia particularly “young men have had greater success than young women in finding work during the [COVID-19] recovery period,” attributing this to the lower educational attainment rate of young women (ILO, 2024, 3). However, some young women noted that the socialisation of ‘working from home’ has increased opportunities for young women who can more readily manage their home and work responsibilities. In our validation workshop a young woman from India stated: “COVID-19 had a lot of devastating effects on [...] the young women, but there is also another positive [...] impact it has made. The work culture has slightly shifted from work from office to the hybrid mode, so this has given a lot of opportunities for [...] young mothers or young women to work and be part of [...] the professional workspace without even having to leave from their home.”

Increase in care and unpaid work

Across all case study countries, young women reported that they experienced an increase in their care and unpaid work burden. This work disproportionately fell on the shoulders of women, and young women reported that they were required to support the home-schooling of children and siblings, care for ill family members, shoulder responsibility for managing the household, and take on increased care work in the aftermath of the death of family members. Research by the ADB and UN Women (2022) has shown that unpaid care and domestic work in the regions significantly increased as a result of the pandemic and had not markedly decreased two years

after the outbreak, with women disproportionately impacted. For instance, 88% of women in the regions of Asia and the Pacific spend more time than any other family member cooking and serving meals (compared with 5% of men) and 82% of women spend more time than any other family member cleaning and doing laundry (compared with 5% of men). This disproportionate workload also increased during the pandemic. For example, 63% of women (compared with 8% of men) said that they spend the most time among all family members looking after children, and 23% said that this time increased since the onset of the pandemic (compared with 17% of men who said their time increased).

Image 21: A young woman reflects on the impact of COVID-19 on her life

A YOUNG WOMAN REFLECTS UPON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19



"When the classrooms and the workplaces shifted to our computer screens, the already hazy boundary between work life and personal life blurred into obsolescence. Women, with their assigned role as a "natural caregiver" bore the brunt of this change with

a sharp increase in professional workload while having to be at the beck and call of every family member 24x7. It came as no surprise when many had to quit their jobs to support their households, with the virus significantly increasing the burden of unpaid care, which is disproportionately carried by women" (I12-1).

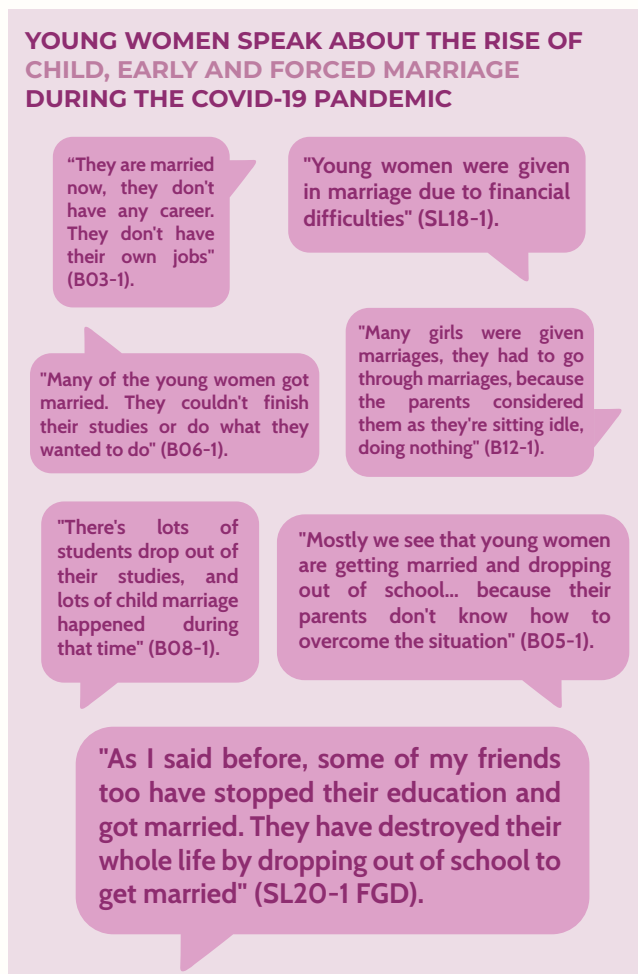
Reflecting this, a young Indian woman noted “all of that burden of taking care of the family was normally on women’s shoulders” (IO4-1). Similarly, in Papua New Guinea young women agreed “It was more work for the mums because you have to be the mum and the teacher at the same time” (PNGO6-1). This was also the case in Thailand where another young woman noted that “as a result of lockdowns, the responsibility of domestic chores increased and it was allocated especially to young women who were simultaneously doing their work from home” (IO8-1).

Across the regions, young women noted that the death of family members could increase their care work. In India, a young woman relayed the experience of her colleague who had lost both parents in the pandemic and then was required to take care of her sibling. She noted “So yeah, she lost both her mother and her father. And her sister was mentally disturbed, so all of that burden was on my colleague. She has to take care of her sister and her in-laws” (IO3-1). In Sri Lanka, a young woman similarly reflected that “I think some young women were burdened with additional responsibilities as a result of loss of parents or adults in the family.” (SL12-O1).

Vulnerability to violence, including early and forced marriage

Across the regions, young women reported that they were aware of increases in violence against women and girls, particularly family and intimate partner violence and early and forced marriage as a result of the pandemic. This is consistent with research across the regions which consistently demonstrates that gender-based violence increases during crises (Nagashima-Hayashi, 2022). In this research, some young women identified the risk factors as being the stress and economic insecurities associated with lockdowns and job losses, while others pointed to issues including alcohol abuse. A young Indian woman noted “As the country went into lockdown, a lot of young women were forced to live in close quarters with their families and/or partners. Instances of domestic violence and intimate partner violence shot up” (IO7-1). In Myanmar, another pointed to the economic stress in the community, noting: “And right now, as prices rise and many things change, husbands blame their wives for their inability to manage things well and provide enough food for the family” (M13-1).

Image 22: Young women speak about the rise of child, early and forced marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic



The most prevalent form of violence reported by young women was early and forced marriage (Image 22). In Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka it was widely reported. In Bangladesh, one young woman noted:

“ So I think so many students, especially young women, they were dropped off [out] from school because their parents thought there is no point to send them in school anyway, just get them married... So some of my friends who are female, they had to get married, like, but they didn't want to, so they had to leave their studies (BO2-1).

Similarly, another reported:

“ Because during Covid, the schools and colleges were shut for more than one and a half years. So most of them got married at a very young age. Maybe some of them thought they would be able to continue their studies further. But after the lockdown was revoked, they couldn't and some of them have babies too – so it's quite impossible for them to return to studies (B15-1).

This was similarly the case in India where a young woman spoke about the experience of her neighbour, who was under the age of 18:



During Covid she was made to drop out of school and was married off at a very young age by her parents [who] were worried that they may not have enough money later to get her married, so they got her married that time. They ruined her life and her future. She could not even complete her education.... She must have been about 16-17 during that time (I16-1).

This is consistent with the global research, which consistently notes a spike in child, early and forced marriage during crises. UNICEF (2021) estimated that the pandemic would generate an increase of 10 million additional child marriages by the end of the decade.

Young women's leadership on COVID-19

Importantly, young women were able to identify some positive impacts that the pandemic had on their lives and their leadership. For some young women, it encouraged them to build their skills and knowledge in new areas (NO2-1), particularly around online communication (PNGO2-1). Others noted that it gave them the time for independent learning (MO5-1), while a young Indian woman reflected that the pandemic had challenged her to understand “the importance of self-dependence” (IO3-1). Across the regions, several young women welcomed the opportunity to spend more time with their families and learn new hobbies.

In terms of their leadership, some young women noted that they were not consulted on, or given opportunities to lead on, the public health response to COVID-19. A young woman in India noted that the implementation of COVID-19 response programs in her community through local response task forces was dominated by traditional male community leadership, “so women are supposed to stay home, cook and take care of their children” (IO4-1). This was also noted in Papua New Guinea with a young woman reporting that men, in their role as community leaders, had greater authority and capacity to move around the community than women (PNGO4-1).

Nonetheless, young women described their leadership through the COVID-19 crisis and in its aftermath as focused on a commitment to supporting their families, friends and communities. They did this by seeking out and sharing information with others, particularly around vaccinations, COVID-19 prevention and healthcare, providing support to those in acute crisis and supporting each other's general wellbeing through networks and open discussions.

The impacts of COVID-19 on young women's lives, as noted above, far exceed the immediate consequences of the virus, with medium- to longer-term impacts only now becoming clear. Experiences triggered by the pandemic, such as early marriage, denial of education or job losses, are likely to have lifelong consequences for young women while mental health impacts will continue to emerge and change. To better advocate for the issues that uniquely impact them, young women need to be given space and support to participate as leaders in formal and informal decision-making roles.

Conclusion

The regions of Asia and the Pacific continue to face major challenges. Among these challenges are the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing effects, the climate crisis, the persistence of gender-based violence, and conflict and political violence.

This report has highlighted the unique and sometimes disproportionate ways in which young women in the regions are impacted by these challenges. In many cases, these impacts have been unexplored or overlooked by the communities in which young women live.

By amplifying the voices of young women, this report has shed light on these issues and on the ways that young women lead to address them. This report has highlighted the many examples of young women's strength, resilience, creativity and the impact of their work. Their leadership generates positive change in their own lives, in their families and their communities. It is a significant contribution to peace, justice and security across the regions.

However, persistent barriers to their leadership remain. It is incumbent on all actors invested in the regions' future to acknowledge these roadblocks and adopt creative, committed and comprehensive solutions, co-designed with young women, to allow their leadership to flourish. Doing so will enhance the lives and leadership potential of young women, promote gender equality, and strengthen peace, security and justice in our closest regions.



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