Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

CYPE 86

Ymateb gan : Rhwydwaith Cydraddoldeb Menywod Cymru

Response from : Women's Equality Network Wales (WEN)

The Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales is a network of over 900 individuals and organisations working to advance gender equality in Wales. Plan International UK is a global children's charity. For over 79 years we've been taking action and standing up for every child's right to fulfil their potential. Globally, our *Because I am a Girl* campaign has helped 58 million girls to be free from violence and to get the education, skills and support they need to become powerful forces for change in their communities. In 2016, for the first time, we're shining the spotlight on the situation for girls in the UK.

Over the past year WEN has been working alongside Plan International UK, the leading expert on girl's rights around the world, to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the state of girl's rights across the UK. Analysis poses the question, 'What is the current state of girls' rights in the UK?' Sadly, the answer is clear. We may be the fifth-richest country in the world, but we are failing our girls, and failing to meet international standards set out in human rights frameworks and the United Nation's new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By exploring the real experiences of girls in the UK, our intent is to provide evidence and fresh gender based analysis for policy makers and decision makers.

The report, launched on Monday 12th September has received extensive media coverage. It is the first attempt to map girls' rights at local authority level in the UK using comparable datasets. Researchers also interviewed 103 girls, a large proportion of these in Wales and the results paint a worrying picture. We believe the findings need to be acted on to tackle inequalities of place and to ensure the wellbeing of all girls in Wales.

1. **What are the girls telling us?**

1.1. **Education, Future Careers and Stereotypes**

The report finds that the assumption that girls outperform boys at school is misleading, as it doesn't paint the full picture. While girls perform well in exams, the testimony here strongly

1

suggests that their experience in the school environment can adversely impact the opportunities and experiences they will enjoy in the future. Whether we are delivering on girls' right to a quality education is therefore debatable. We find that the school environment tends to reinforce stereotypes about girls' capabilities, whether that's through the sports they play or the subjects they choose. School can also be a location for abuse and harassment for girls. Lastly, we see that when girls leave education, many feel confined by expectations of what jobs they should do, with a tendency towards traditionally female dominated careers. Girls' choices of Apprenticeships remain constrained by narrow ideas about the work girls should do, leading them to choose the lowest paid careers.

1.2. Health and quality of life

The research emphasised the need for mandatory sex and relationships education for all girls in school. There are significant gaps in girls' access to healthcare, especially when it comes to child and adolescent mental-health services and self-harm support for girls.

1.3. Violence and safety

Violence and the right to safety were clear themes. Concerns around these issues are having real impacts on girls' behaviour, driving decisions about what to do, or not do, in their daily lives. Offline as online, girls are held back due to concerns about their safety. The school and the street were identified as key locations for violence and harassment for girls.

1.4. Citizenship and voice

Interviewees eagerly debated issues around politics and citizenship, such as the lack of female and young role models and the voting age. What emerged was that girls feel that stereotyping, discrimination and harassment against them bars them from meaningful contributions to securing change in these areas. Existing laws and policies, social norms and media dynamics perpetuate these problems: this must be recognised and challenged. Moreover, with digital communication channels increasingly the primary mode of access to public and political spheres for young people, the risk, thanks to harassment and abuse in the digital space, is that girls find themselves squeezed out. This compounds the impression that politics is separate from girls' lives, and is a 'boys' game'.

1.5. Digital health

The testimony in this report highlights that digital communication is a fundamental part of girls' lives – not an 'optional extra'. While this can be a source of pleasure, girls are clear about the immense pressures to meet certain standards and the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying. Worse, the research suggests that too frequently, measures designed to protect girls are ineffective or even have negative consequences for girls. Barring girls from digital spaces in the

name of protection is a counter-productive solution that reinforces a sense of voicelessness. Measures to prevent harm from activities such as sexting also too frequently place undue or uneven responsibility on a girl's actions over those of a boy

1.6. Body image

It comes as little surprise that pressures around body image were raised time and again by interviewees. Girls tell us that their choices are constrained by expectations about their bodies that are reproduced and reinforced across society – and strongly amplified in the digital world. Concern about body image, and its link to sexuality, comes through as a significant barrier to girls' freedom of expression. It inhibits girls' participation in the world around them, and wider evidence suggests can lead to poor mental-health outcomes too.

1.7. Identity discrimination

Gender is just one factor contributing to identity. Throughout the girls' evidence, it is clear that the interrelationship between being a girl and also being a particular race, class, sexual orientation, or religion, or living with a disability, have particular impacts on girls' experiences growing up. Formative experiences such as experiencing poverty or being in care or the criminal justice system should also be considered. While the cross-cutting themes outlined here clearly emerge, it is important to acknowledge that girls are not a homogenous group and policy responses must always take into account an individual's circumstances.

What we can conclude from this work is that growing up as a girl in Wales comes with a specific set of challenges that require a specific set of solutions, tailored to meet the needs of girls. We hope that the Children, Young People and Education Committee will prioritise the fulfilment of the rights of girls in their future work.

2. What the data says

Geography and place are confirmed in this report as having a major impact on girls' life experiences. To ensure that girls are able to realise their rights, policies must be reflective of different realities in different parts of the country. For the first time, the report presents a detailed examination of available data about girls' lives that paints a picture of experiences in different regions, mapping where the critical challenges lie and setting out the priorities for policy makers. Using five indicators, we have been able to map the delivery of girls' rights across England and Wales in terms of the key themes raised by girls, and answer the question: where are the best and worst places to be a girl? The five indicators, drawn from local and unitary authority data, are:
- Child Poverty
- Life Expectancy
- Teenage Conception Rates

- GCSE Attainment
- Those not in education, employment or training (NEETs)

Table 1: Wales Unitary Authorities ranked from best to worst

Unitary Authority	Rank	Unitary Authority	Rank
Monmouthshire	1	Neath Port Talbot	12
Powys	2	Denbighshire	13
Ceredigion	3	Wrexham	14
Vale of Glamorgan	4	Newport	15
Gwynedd	5	Torfaen	16
Flintshire	6	Blaenau Gwent	17
Swansea	7	Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	18
Carmarthenshire	8	Bridgend	19
Isle of Anglesey	9	Caerphilly	20
Pembrokeshire	10	Cardiff	21
Conwy	11	Merthyr Tydfil	22

What is especially telling about the Welsh ranking is that the best ranked (Monmouthshire) and worst ranked (Merthyr Tydfil) areas are separated by 270 local authorities, clearly demonstrating the depth of inequality in outcomes that exist. The Vale of Glamorgan ranks 4th as one of the best places to be a girl in Wales, yet Cardiff, just across the Bay and less than a mile away, is 21st.

3. Key recommendations

To support further dialogue and action, we have selected a number of the recommendations.

3.1. We must listen to girls

Policy makers must start from the position that girls understand best what is happening in their own lives. Combining their first-hand testimony and ideas with relevant expert opinion can create powerful solutions to the problems girls are facing. Investments should be made to enable meaningful participation of girls at the local level. We should expand on outreach strategies already implemented in some areas, creating Girls' Committees, where girls and policy makers can pool ideas about how services can better meet girls' needs.

4

3.2.   We must tackle root causes of gender inequality – and this starts in schools

We must tackle root causes of gender inequality – and this starts in schools. Our research shines a light on persistent, harmful stereotypes that limit girls' opportunities and wellbeing. A whole school approach, including engaging boys and parents, is required to tackle gender inequality. **Mandatory status for sex and relationships education should be the cornerstone of this effort.**
We recognize the positive work that the Welsh Government is carrying out through the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. We support the provision of healthy relationships in schools as recommended in the national strategy and delivery plan that will support the Act**.** We also welcome the recommendations for action from the UK Parliament Women and Equalities Select Committee report on sexual harassment in schools and hope their impact will be reflected in the priorities of the Committee**.**

3.3.   We need better data

In order to respond to the needs of girls, policy makers need data at local authority level to invest in the right thematic and geographic responses. This data should be publicly available so that civil society, including girls, can hold those in power to account.

3.4.   We must involve men and boys

This report in unapologetic in its focus on girls and their lives. However, to tackle gender inequality men and boys must be part of the process. Given that much of the sexism, harassment and violence experienced by girls and young women comes from their peers, it is critical to work with and engage boys and young men. Their lives too are affected by negative gender stereotypes and expectations and they too must be part of the solutions.

The full report can be accessed here: http://www.plan-uk.org/because-i-am-a-girl/girls-rights-in-the-uk/