

Youth manifesto

EUROPEAN WEEK OF
ACTION FOR
GIRLS

How do we move towards a world where **girls' rights** are fully respected? How do we make our societies truly gender equal? On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the International Day of the Girl Child, on October 11th, the EWAG coalition of civil society organisations and young advocates from around the world share five powerful ways **EU external action** can truly support girls and transform our societies! When reading the manifesto, it is important to remember: these issues affect young women and girls differently according to their identity and lived experiences. We need to make sure our societies work for everyone - no exceptions.

We want

**equal political
and civic
participation**

**to eradicate
harmful gender
norms and
stereotypes**

**respect for
Sexual and
Reproductive
Health and
Rights (SRHR)**

**youth economic
empowerment**

**inclusive and
quality
education**

**a world where
girls in all their
diversity can
grow up to be
their truest,
and as a result
best, selves.**



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The 2022 edition of the European Week of Action for Girls is a bit more special than usual: The International Day of the Girl Child celebrates its' 10th anniversary!

10 years of activism to put girls' rights at the core of EU external action!

10 years of building relationships with EU decision-makers!

10 years of creating space for girls and young women to speak their minds in front of EU institutions!

It surely is a moment to look back with a smile at everything that has been achieved to improve the lives of girls all over the globe in these last ten years. However, it is also a moment to roll up our sleeves and look forward to everything that there is still to do. For this, young advocates have come together to share a few messages and recommendations for this 10th anniversary and tell us how we can look back in 10 years time and be proud of how far we will have come!



We want **equal political and civic participation**

Girls and young women face a great number of challenges when it comes to breaking stereotypes and changing the political climate that affects their lives and existence. Some progress has definitely taken place during the last decades, but this progress remains too slow. Girls and young women remain one of the **most discriminated groups** when it comes to political and civic participation. Laura shared a simple example: how **women in positions of power** face harassment and increased scrutiny for every action they take and how this affects the confidence of young girls who aspire to lead. EWAG young advocates know very well that building girls and young women up, and enabling them to have a voice is one of the most effective ways for them to become changemakers – for themselves and for their communities. Claudia thinks that **encouraging girls and young women to advocate and protest for the things that matter to them is crucial**. How? By connecting them, by creating safe spaces and by bringing boys and men onboard as equal partners in the struggle. We want a world where girls and young women feel empowered from a young age. One of the ways to do that? Ensuring that they are exposed to **leadership opportunities**, including work experience and shadowing leaders so that they can really see themselves in such roles in the future.

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We want **respect for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)**

Too often girls face multiple barriers preventing them from accessing health services, including those related to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Moreover, due to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes, girls are often **denied the right to exert control over their bodies** while also lacking access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) which is crucial for them to better understand their bodies and their rights, to address power relations in their lives, and to counter harmful gender norms and stereotypes. COVID-19 even exacerbated some of these challenges, as John Jessy confirms: *"In our communities, we saw an increase in teenage pregnancy rates and early marriages, which led to an increase of school dropouts, especially for girls. This goes hand in hand with increased challenges in accessing family planning services, like modern contraception, because of lockdown measures and the restrictions to access health facilities."* Amal stresses the importance for SRHR to be protected and promoted also within Europe, especially for those people that are in more vulnerable situations, such as migrant women. EWAG youth advocates agree that **increasingly involving young people** in decision-making processes and making sure they can access quality youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services and information is key for youth, and girls in particular, to make **informed choices about their lives and bodies**.

Only by having full knowledge about their sexual and reproductive health and rights, youth can make informed decisions about their bodily autonomy.

John Jessy

We want **to eradicate harmful gender norms and stereotypes**

Gender norms and stereotypes have far-reaching societal influence and are detrimental to the lives of children and youth. Gender matters in most everyday realities – in education, work, family and relationships, health, leisure, determination of identity, and social life. Despite some positive changes in discourse and society, **gender stereotypes remain deeply ingrained, vivid and consistent**. Moreover, despite concerning everyone, gender norms affect people differently depending on their identity. Because of these insidious effects, gender stereotypes must be addressed at all levels and by all relevant actors. Leah illustrates the consequences of harmful gender norms with the perpetuation of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In her experience, FGM is linked to gender norms, to the idea of what it is to be a woman, in this situation girls are also perpetrators. It shows that the line between victims and perpetrators of harmful gender norms is often blurred. The young advocates wanted to highlight the necessity for decision-makers to have a **complete and full understanding of harmful gender norms and stereotypes** to effectively tackle this issue. For Jennifer (DSW), decision-makers' actions should be **more grassroots-focused**. She also believes that the education of children is key *"because breaking down stereotypes encourages them to take up different paths in life according to what they really want"*. Gender norms and stereotypes need to be addressed everywhere, at the political level, in school, at home and even in Church, Temples and in Mosques. Approaching them from every angle is key to creating a world where every child feels free to be what they want to be.

Youth manifesto

We want youth economic empowerment

Girls and young women make up the majority of the world's 628 million unemployed young people who have neither an education nor vocational training. Investing in girls' and young women's economic empowerment is an essential step in the path to achieve gender equality. In the words of Nyasha: *"When girls and women are empowered, society has a whole benefit from it. When girls have access to practical learnings that fit the job market, they manage to access jobs and financial independence. With the right efforts, we can transform societies."* Economic empowerment should start early, when gender stereotypes begin, and should continue throughout girls and young women's lives. Efforts should aim at **challenging perceptions about what girls and young women can and can't do**, providing vocational training and life skills, and access to financial support. That's why, as emphasized by Sofia, education is incredibly powerful as a first step towards economic empowerment. Enabling girls and young women to learn throughout their lives and develop key skills can transform lives, communities and entire countries. We want an EU that stands up for girls and young women's right to paid traineeships, vocational training, and for the right to financial support for people from all backgrounds, globally. We also want an EU that can support in raising awareness about opportunities that exist for girls and young women, making sure that the **knowledge is accessible** and enlarging access to education at all levels.

We want inclusive and quality education

Education is one of the most powerful means to achieve gender equality. As Burnice said, by empowering young people with education, they can make informed choices about their lives. Through inclusive education, they can eliminate challenges and they can empower themselves. When we make education accessible to all, there will be empowerment and development that will make young people able to support themselves. However, today, **too many children are excluded from access to quality education** because of social, economic, and cultural stigma and discrimination. This not only constitutes a huge personal loss for children, but also limits their potential contribution to society and country. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation. It's estimated that 11 million girls might not return to school this year due to the unprecedented education disruption of COVID-19. This not only **threatens decades of progress** made towards gender equality, but also



puts girls around the world at risk of adolescent pregnancy, early and forced marriage, and violence. During conflicts and crises, girls' right to education is also severely affected: they are almost 2.5 times more likely to be out of primary school, and nearly 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict. These challenges are heightened for girls with disabilities, who are often considered non-productive members of society. For Hajar, accessibility is the key and it is the biggest problem: **education should be accessible and free for everyone**. The opportunities each child has are different, but all children should be put to the same level and all barriers of any kind should be eliminated.

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Meet the EWAG young advocates



Amal
25, Spain



Anthony
25, Lebanon



Burnice
25, Kenya



Claudia
24, Ghana



Hajar
20, Italy



Inès
24, Benin



Jahir
23, Bangladesh



John Jessy
23, Uganda



Laura
33, France/UK



Leah
25, Ireland



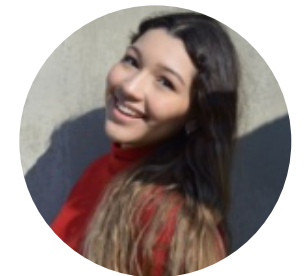
Liana
23, Kyrgyzstan



Mwanaima
25, Tanzania



Nyasha
21, Zimbabwe



Sofia
22, Belgium

Meet the EWAG civil society organisations



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The manifesto through the eyes of the artists

