

The Girls LEAD Act (S. 634)

Supporting Girls' Leadership, Engagement, Agency, and Development



Photo by Jake Lyell for ChildFund

Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment are intricately linked to healthy democracies, sustainable development, and global stability. Women's political participation results in tangible gains for democracy, and research suggests that gender balance in the political sphere also promotes gender balance in the workforce, which could double global GDP growth by 2025.

We know that inclusive civic and political structures are key to encouraging women's political participation, but women and girls still face specific barriers to these spaces. **At the current rate of progress, it will take over 100 years to achieve gender parity in political participation.** Addressing this problem before today's girls reach adulthood is key.

Adolescence, in particular, is a critical period in a girl's life; it is a time when girls are at higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence, including child, early and forced marriage, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse and exploitation. Yet, it is also a period crucial to the positive development of self-confidence, ambition, and critical foundational skills. Adolescents who participate actively in their communities from early on are more likely to become engaged citizens and voters.

Moreover, girls' invisibility in policy spaces is particularly concerning; when their voices are absent, their needs are not taken into account, and critical opportunities to ensure efficient and responsive programs and policies are missed. By participating in civic and political processes in adolescence, girls can express their perspectives and build skills and confidence that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

The Girls LEAD Act is a bipartisan policy initiative that promotes girls' leadership and participation in civic and political processes through U.S. foreign assistance. It aims to improve the effectiveness of U.S.-led democracy and governance initiatives, as well as increase girls' abilities to engage in decision-making processes affecting their lives and their communities, ultimately fostering new generations of empowered women leaders. The Girls LEAD Act also complements Congress' recent efforts, such as the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017 and the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2019, to combat the underrepresentation of women at all levels of public sector decision-making by specifically addressing the civic involvement and leadership of adolescent girls.

The Problem

Currently, U.S. government assistance and foreign policy does not address girls' civic participation and leadership, failing to address a key opportunity to close global gender gaps. Programs that focus on girls' leadership or empowerment fall primarily under the health, education, and entrepreneurship sectors and do not

educate girls about civic participation or build girls' capacities to be political or community leaders. Programs that focus on democracy and governance rarely take into account gender-related barriers for women and girls and completely lack an age lens. Girls—especially in adolescence—face specific barriers to civic participation and leadership and have distinct needs due to the intersections of age and gender.

The Solution

As the global leader on democracy promotion and good governance, the U.S. Government is well-positioned to lead on addressing these glaring gaps. Passing the Girls LEAD Act will enact reforms across USAID and the State Department to ensure that girls are supported to be able to meaningfully engage in civic and political forums and processes in their communities and countries. If passed, the Girls LEAD Act would:



• IMPROVE U.S. STRATEGIES

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

• STRENGTHEN PROGRAMMING

- Direct the Secretary of State and the USAID Administrator to implement foreign assistance programs that increase girls' civic and political knowledge and skills; identify and address barriers to adolescent girls' civic engagement and political participation; integrate feedback from beneficiaries into monitoring and evaluation processes; and support girl-led and girl-focused civil society organizations.

• REPORTING

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

For more information on how to support the Girls LEAD Act, contact Save the Children's Gender Policy and Advocacy Specialist, Emily Heimsoth (ehemsoth@savechildren.org) and ChildFund International's Policy Advisor, Danielle Lilly, (dlilly@childfund.org)