



Save the Children

# GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2022

## GIRLS ON THE FRONTLINE

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## Who is this report for?

This report is written to be adolescent-friendly, and to provide evidence for government policy-makers and child advocates as well as civil society organisations including grassroots girl-led, feminist and women's rights organisations, humanitarian responders and private sector champions for gender equality.

## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Gabrielle Szabo and Emily Heimsoth. Data analysis was conducted by Oliver Fiala and Chiara Orlassino. The research findings presented in Chapter 2 were collected through the *Early Marriage in Conflict and Displacement: Research to Practice and Policy* research programme conducted by Tufts University in collaboration with Save the Children. Drafting was supported through extensive expert feedback, input and review from Save the Children colleagues: Lesley Abraham, Kathryn Achilles, Leslie Archambeault, Irene Banda, Leisha Beardmore, Mangla Bhawna, Liz Bradshaw, Amanda Brydon, Florence Cisse, Natasha Dos Santos, Leah Finnegan, Tania Garcia De Gross, Andrea Gonzalez, Caroline Goodson, Olivia Henderson, Rahinatu Hussaini, Valerie Koutou, Bahjat Mansour, Stephanie McBride, Lamia Qahtan, Kristina Shaw, Caitlin Smith, Sanne Thijssen, Ana Van Dalen, Ruhama Yilma and many others across our global movement. We thank them for their time and insights. Design by Alison Wilkes.

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Some names in this report have been changed to protect identities.



Reflecting on what drives her to advocate against child marriage, Bara', 17, says, "I am just like any other girl, but my beliefs are different, and I stand by them". Conflict forced Bara to leave her hometown in Syria, she now lives in Za'atari Refugee Camp.

## Report summary

Ten years ago, governments and people working for gender equality and girls' rights around the world agreed to dedicate one day every year to celebrate girls' achievements and bring attention to the challenges they face. This led to the creation of International Day of the Girl, which has been celebrated around the world every 11th of October since 2012, making 2022 the tenth anniversary.

The theme for the first International Day of the Girl was child marriage – an issue of particular importance to girls,<sup>1</sup> which can only be prevented during childhood.

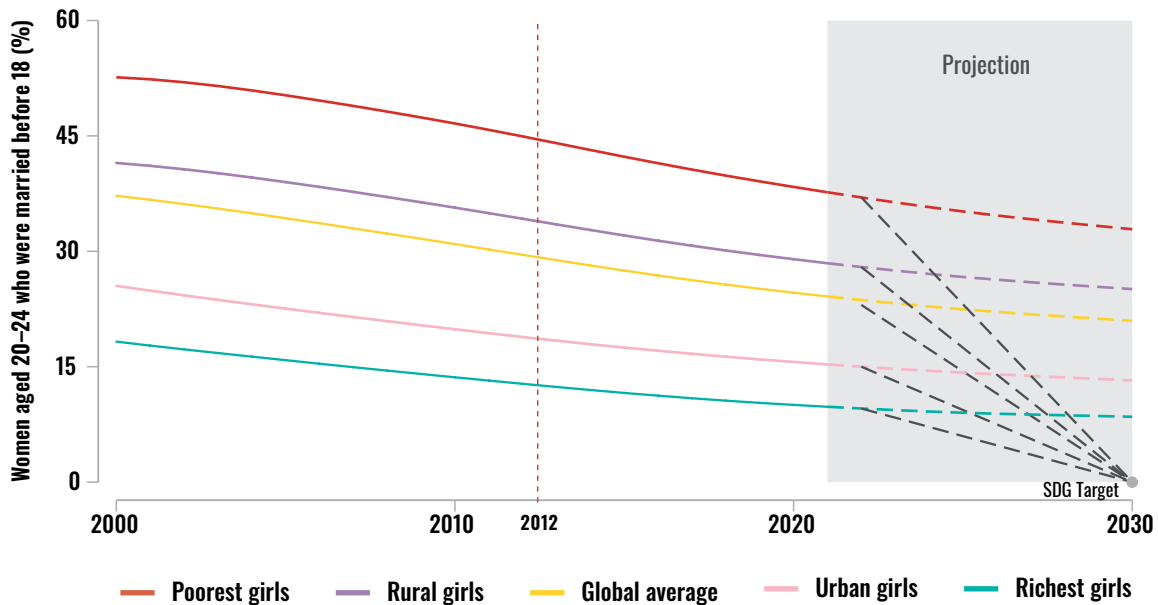
### How far have we come since the first International Day of the Girl?

Despite promises by world leaders, girls stand at the frontline of the world's most pressing issues, and child marriage continues, all over the world. Before COVID-19, global estimates of the rate of child marriage was decreasing but the world was still a long way off meeting the Sustainable Development Goal deadline to end child marriage by 2030.<sup>2</sup> The number of girls marrying each year was estimated to be around 12 million and 2 million of those girls were married before their 15th birthday.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF estimates that girls are around six times more likely to be married during childhood than boys.

<sup>2</sup> Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls sets a target to end child marriage for all population groups by 2030. SDG 5 is one of 17 goals agreed to by all countries to help reduce inequality and ensure all people's basic needs are met without harming the environment.

## Global progress toward ending child marriage



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 94 countries (covering 65% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural subgroups based on subset of 90 countries (covering 62% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

- Even before COVID-19, a steep increase in progress was needed to end child marriage by 2030.
- Progress has been unequal – between regions and different groups of girls.
- In most regions, girls growing up in the poorest households were **four times** more likely to marry than girls from the richest households. Increasing poverty could now be putting more girls at risk.

➔ **Sub-Saharan Africa** has some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world but they were slowly falling.

➔ **South Asia** has led the world in reducing child marriage.

➔ **East Asia and the Pacific** has made progress among the richest girls but the poorest girls were being left behind.

➔ **Latin America and the Caribbean** has shown no sign of progress or reducing inequalities in the last decade.

➔ **Middle East and North Africa** was making progress toward reducing child marriage but has now slowed.

➔ **Eastern Europe** has lower rates of child marriage compared to other regions, but progress has been flattening.



Luca Kleve-Ruud / Save the Children



Laura, 16, and her 2-month-old baby, fled from Venezuela to Colombia.

Pregnancy and birth complications are the biggest killers of girls aged 15-19 years globally. Pregnant girls are more likely to marry as children and child marriage often leads to early and more frequent pregnancies.

## GENDER INEQUALITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**Gender inequality** is the unfair treatment of people because of their gender (including their gender identity, what other people assume a person's gender to be and the way that they express their gender, for example the way that a person dresses). This treatment can lead to unequal access to power, opportunities, rights and resources.

**Gender-based violence** is violence used against a person because of their gender. It is used to reinforce power imbalances and restrictive ideas about how people should behave to be considered 'good' men, boys, women and girls. These norms discriminate against people whose behaviour, gender identity or the way they express their gender does not fit into these strict rules or categories. Gender-based violence can include physical, economic, sexual and emotional (psychological) abuse.<sup>4</sup> Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence.

## New and ongoing challenges

In 2021, UNICEF estimated that without urgent action, the COVID-19 crisis would cause an additional 10 million child marriages by 2030, the first increase in child marriage in more than 20 years. That number could be even higher as the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 combine with the climate emergency, increasing conflict and the rising cost of living. These 'four C's' are driving the worst global hunger crisis in more than a decade and children report that child marriage is already increasing as families struggle to put food on the table.<sup>3</sup>

**Humanitarian crises including conflict and climate-related disasters make finding work harder, disrupt education, increase costs and poverty, and weaken the protections that should be in place to keep children safe from violence. This in turn increases girls' risk of child marriage because child marriage is sometimes seen as a way to reduce financial pressures on families or can be seen as a way to protect girls from other forms of gender-based violence. Eight of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are experiencing humanitarian crises.**

<sup>3</sup> Finding from child hearings for Save the Children's new report *Generation Hope: Two billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis*, which will be launched in late October 2022 with a child-friendly guide.

<sup>4</sup> This definition is based on the Government of Canada's [Gender-Based Violence glossary](#).

## Almost 1 in 5 adolescent girls live in conflict zones, at heightened risk of child marriage

Save the Children has conducted new research to better understand how much conflict increases risk of child marriage and how many girls are affected. We analysed data for more than 2 million women across 56 countries over the last three decades, and looked at girls who got married as children living within 50km of an armed conflict.

- ✦ Around the world, **89.2 million adolescent girls currently live in conflict zones<sup>5</sup> – that’s almost 1 in 5** adolescent girls (aged 10-17 years). These girls live with the heightened risks to their rights and physical and mental health that come with conflict, including child marriage.
- ✦ Globally, girls affected by conflict are **more than 20% more likely to marry as children** than those living outside of conflict zones.<sup>6</sup>
- ✦ **Increased risk of child marriage linked to conflict was even higher for girls in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia.**

In 2021, the risk of gender-based violence was rated as severe or extreme in 95% of humanitarian crises. But action to address gender-based violence received less funding than any other form of protection provided as part of humanitarian responses. Funding for child protection was only slightly higher. Funding targets are rarely met and requests for funding are often too low in the first place because women and girls are seldom included in discussions about what they really need or asked in a way they feel comfortable participating.

Girls cannot afford to wait for proof that they are experiencing gender-based violence in every new conflict. Governments and organisations responding to humanitarian crises must work with women, girls and their communities in every conflict to plan for and fund action to prevent gender-based violence, reduce its impacts and deliver response services tailored to the needs of adolescent girls.

Efforts to end child marriage often only focus on prevention. Girls are experts in their own lives but are rarely asked about their experiences of marriage. New research by Save the Children and Tufts University asked 139 married, widowed and divorced young women and girls about their experiences of child marriage and early motherhood. The 600+ interviews with girls living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and South Sudan after conflict and discrimination forced them to leave their homes revealed stark differences in experiences across countries and cultures, highlighting the importance of working with girls to define local solutions. The girls’ control over marriage decisions varied widely, from those who were kidnapped and forced to marry, to those who married for love. All described living through difficult times and social rules that applied to them because of their gender and age, which shaped the choices available to them – reminders of the importance of changing gender norms and tackling all forms of gender inequality to end child marriage and fulfil girls’ rights.

<sup>5</sup> We define ‘conflict zones’ as areas within 50 kilometers of where an armed conflict took place, as measured by the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s Georeferenced Event Dataset](#).

<sup>6</sup> For this analysis we considered conflicts within any of the last five years before a child marriage. More detailed information on how the analysis was conducted and what data we used can be found in our methodological note published [here](#).



*After starting a literacy class for her community where girls marry young, Munnii's message to other girls in India is clear: "If we have education then we must give it to those women or our brothers and sisters, who are illiterate."*

## Recommendations

The 10th anniversary of International Day of the Girl is a wakeup call to governments, communities, the United Nations,<sup>7</sup> businesses and civil society organizations (CSOs). There is so much more we can do to end child marriage and fulfil girls' rights, even in the most challenging circumstances. Save the Children recommends working together to:

1. Increase funding and efforts to address gender-based violence against girls, including through funding child protection in humanitarian crises.
2. Scale up evidence-based initiatives to end child marriage and make them available to more girls in more places.
3. Support and invest in girls to define solutions to the challenges they face by strengthening girl-led movements. This means finding new ways of working with and providing funding to girls.
4. Develop and fully fund national action plans to end child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence and violence against children.
5. Improve understandings of how to prevent the 'four C's' reversing progress to end child marriage.
6. Ensure that governments uphold their promises for girls made in to girls in national, regional and global agreements.

<sup>7</sup> The United Nations was created after the second world war to allow all countries in the world to work together. It now includes many separate organisations working on important issues like gender equality, health and support for refugees.



Ayan, 15, moved to a camp for displaced people due to drought in Somalia. Here, she wants to grasp all available opportunities to thrive: "Now I'm here, I want to go to school to learn how to read and write so I can make a living."

## CHAPTER 1

# Progress since the first International Day of the girl: Child marriage, conflict and crises

### Why reflect on child marriage this International Day of the Girl?

10 years ago, governments and people working for gender equality and girls' rights around the world agreed to dedicate one day every year to celebrate girls' achievements and bring attention to the challenges they face. This led to the creation of International Day of the Girl, which has been celebrated around the world every 11<sup>th</sup> of October since 2012, making 2022 the 10th anniversary.

### The theme for the first International Day of the Girl was ending child marriage.

Child marriage was chosen because it is an issue of particular importance for girls and can only be prevented during childhood. Girls are far more likely to be married as children than boys, often against their will, and to much older partners.<sup>8</sup> Child marriage can expose girls to a lifetime of gender-based violence, and can lead to an early end to their education and to high-risk adolescent pregnancies. These consequences can isolate girls from other children their age and limit their freedom to choose a career, earn their own money and influence decisions about how their communities work. Gender inequality is therefore a root cause of child marriage and child marriage deepens gender inequality.

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF estimates that girls are around six times more likely to be married during childhood than boys.



## Conflict and child marriage

The negative impacts of gender inequality increase in humanitarian crises along with other risk factors for child marriage.

Humanitarian crises happen when conflict and climate-related shocks create a critical threat to the protection, health, livelihood and education of a large group of people. This can force people to leave their homes, schools and jobs to move to temporary homes (like refugee camps), which are often crowded and have limited essential services, inhibiting families' ability to earn money and weakening protections against violence. This in turn increases a girls' risk of child marriage because marriage is sometimes seen as a way to reduce financial pressures on families or to protect girls from other forms of gender-based violence.

Eight of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are experiencing humanitarian crises. because of uncertainty of control and ability of governments to provide critical services to its people, usually because of conflict.

Save the Children has conducted new research to better understand how much conflict increases risk of child marriage and how many girls are affected. We analysed data for more than 2 million women across 56 countries over the last three decades, and looked at girls who got married as children living within 50km of an armed conflict.

- Around the world, **89.2 million adolescent girls currently live in conflict zones<sup>9</sup> – that's almost 1 in 5** adolescent girls (aged 10-17 years). These girls live with the heightened risks to their rights and physical and mental health that come with conflict, including child marriage.
- Globally, girls affected by conflict are **more than 20% more likely to marry as children** than those living outside of conflict zones.<sup>10</sup>
- **Increased risk of child marriage linked to conflict was even higher for girls in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia.**

Our analysis did not find that conflict affected girls in West and Central Africa were at increased risk of child marriage. While many girls in West and Central Africa live in areas affected by conflict, many more live in poverty and areas that put them at high climate risk – circumstances that increase risk factors for child marriage in similar ways to conflict.<sup>11</sup> Given that West and Central Africa remains home to the highest rates of child marriage in the world, more research is urgently needed to better understand the impact of compound crises on risk of child marriage.

In 2021, the risk of gender-based violence was rated as severe or extreme in 95% of humanitarian crises. But action to address gender-based violence received less funding than any other form of protection provided as part of humanitarian responses. Funding for child protection was only slightly higher. Funding targets are rarely met and requests for funding are often too low in the first place because women and girls are seldom included in discussions about what they really need or asked in a way they feel comfortable participating.

Girls cannot afford to wait for proof that they are experiencing gender-based violence in every new conflict. Governments and organisations responding to humanitarian crises must work with women, girls and their communities in every conflict to plan for and fund action to prevent gender-based violence, reduce its impacts and deliver response services tailored to the needs of adolescent girls.

<sup>9</sup> We define 'conflict zones' areas as being within 50 kilometers of where an armed conflict took place, as measured by the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program's Georeferenced Event Dataset](#).

<sup>10</sup> For this analysis we considered conflicts within any of the last five years before a child marriage. More detailed information on how the analysis was conducted and what data we used can be found in our methodological note published [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> For more detail on this analysis read our new report *Generation Hope: Two billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis*, which will be launched in October 2022.

## Commitments to end child marriage

Governments around the world have committed to work toward ending child marriage. They have made these promises under international laws like the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#),<sup>12</sup> regional laws like the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#) (as well as in their own national laws)<sup>13</sup> and in global agreements like the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#),<sup>14</sup> which sets a roadmap for achieving gender equality agreed to by every country in the world. Critically, these international agreements apply during conflict settings too.

Most recently, governments agreed to end child marriage by 2030 under [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls](#). Goal 5 is one of 17 goals agreed to by all countries to help reduce inequality and ensure all people's basic needs are met without doing harm to the environment. Efforts to end child marriage also link to Sustainable Development Goal 16.2: Protect Children from Abuse, Exploitation, Trafficking and Violence.

## How much progress has been made since the first International Day of the Girl?

### Global progress

Despite global commitments and promises by world leaders, child marriage continues all over the world. Before COVID-19, global estimates of the [rate of child marriage were decreasing](#) with 25 million child marriages prevented in the ten years between 2008 and 2018. Important partnerships had been formed including the Girls Not Brides civil society network and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. But the number of girls marrying each year was still estimated to be around [12 million and 2 million of those girls were married before their 15th birthday](#).

[The effects of the COVID-19 crisis have led to the first predicted global increase in child marriage in more than 20 years](#). The COVID-19 crisis is much wider than the deaths and the lasting impact of illness. It includes long periods of lockdown, job losses, school closures, increasing poverty and exposure to gender-based violence, as well as interruptions to essential services like family planning. Girls who are out of school, orphaned, growing up in poverty or at risk of gender-based violence or unplanned pregnancy are more likely to be married as children. The wider effects of COVID-19 are therefore expected to have led to an increase in unplanned pregnancies and child marriage.

The pandemic has also interrupted research on the number of child marriages happening, meaning that the data available now does not show the impact of COVID-19. If predictions are right, the state of progress could be much worse than existing evidence suggests.



*Polaroids taken by Amira (top), Yara (centre) and Mariyan (bottom) show snippets of life in Za'atari Camp and things they enjoy and give them hope taken as part of the Save the Children/ Arsenal Foundation Coaching for Life programme.*

<sup>12</sup> Child marriage is covered by Article 24(3), which requires governments to “take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing practices prejudicial to the health of children”. The link above is to a child-friendly version. You can access the original [here](#).

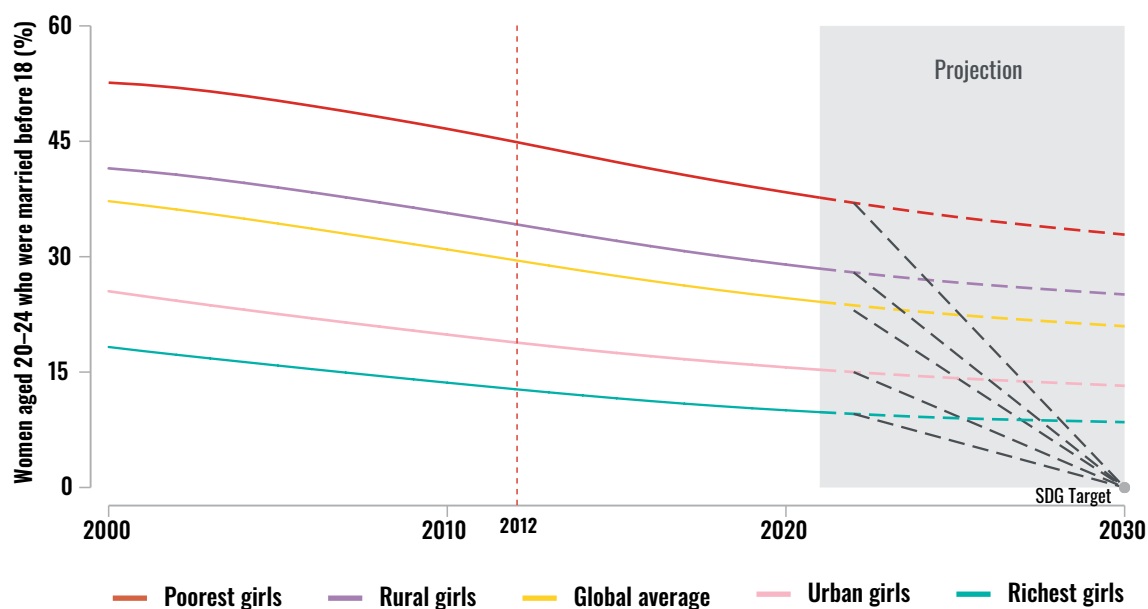
<sup>13</sup> The link above is to a child-friendly version, you can access the original version [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> This link is to a child-friendly version, you can access the original [here](#). The [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) also covers child, early and forced marriages and unions – you can read a child-friendly version [here](#).

Figure 1

## Global progress toward ending child marriage

A steep increase in efforts is needed to meet the SDG target and end child marriage by 2030



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 94 countries (covering 65% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural subgroups based on subset of 90 countries (covering 62% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

### A closer look: progress in higher-prevalence regions

At the beginning of the 2000s, rates of child marriage were highest in **South Asia**. But progress to reduce rates, particularly in India, and increasing conflict and climate disasters in other parts of the world over the past 20 years mean that the highest rates of child marriage are now in **sub-Saharan Africa** (see Figure 2).

Girls are most likely to be married as children in areas affected by conflict and other humanitarian crises such as the Sahel region in West and Central Africa. Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali are in the Sahel and have the highest rates of child marriage in the world. **In parts of the Sahel worst affected by drought and conflict, almost nine in ten girls are married.**<sup>15</sup>

Indonesia in **South East Asia** has a much lower *rate* of child marriage than many other countries, but the size of its population means it also has one of the highest populations of married girls in the world – an estimated 1,220,900 young women aged 20–24 were married as girls in Indonesia based on 2018 data.<sup>16</sup> This means that although rates are low, the number of girls needing support with the consequences of child marriage is high. Child marriage is against the law in Indonesia but parents can ask for an exception called

<sup>15</sup> You can see these regions on Save the Children's child inequality tracker GRID which uses data from surveys like the Demographic Health Survey and Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey to see where the highest rates of child marriage are.

<sup>16</sup> Rate of child marriage taken from SUSENAS (National Socioeconomic Survey), March 2019, quoted by BAPPENAS (Ministry of National Development Planning) on September 2020. The number of girls married as children is based on data included in the [2020 factsheet](#) by PUSKAPA. You can read more about progress and barriers to ending child marriage in Indonesia [here](#).



Basmana, 12, looking at what's left of her home, after surviving being trapped under the rubble during Afghanistan's deadliest earthquake in two decades.

Aashiqullah Mandozai / Save the Children

a 'dispensation' to allow their children to marry – research shows that 99% of these requests are agreed to. Limited access to family planning services, high rates of adolescent pregnancy and cultural norms that support child marriages in some more remote areas of the country are all challenges to ending child marriage.

Research suggests that conflict in countries in the Middle East could be increasing rates of child marriage both for girls living in conflict and those who have been forced to move to surrounding countries for protection. Small studies show increases in rates of child marriage among refugee girls.<sup>17</sup> But data collection on child marriage is often too slow to capture the experiences of girls living in rapidly changing circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For example: Save the Children (2019) *"No I don't": Abolishing Child Marriage in Lebanon* and UNICEF MENA and International Centre for Research on Women (2017) *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa: A Multi-country Study*.

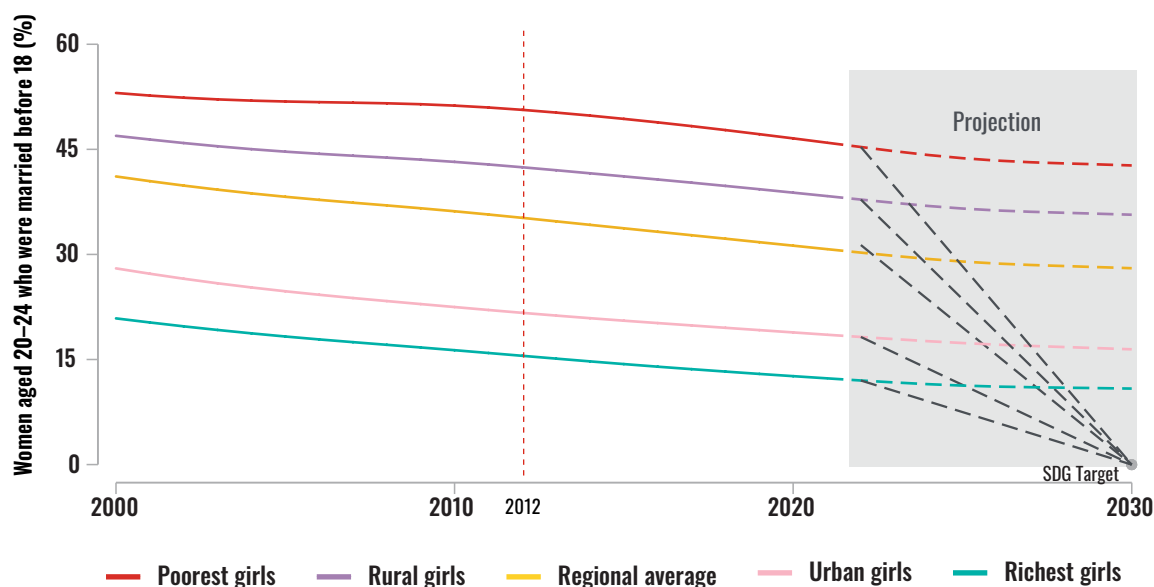
<sup>18</sup> For more information about how to improve data collection in humanitarian contexts you can read Save the Children's discussion paper *Addressing Data Gaps on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings*.

## Regional progress toward ending child marriage: Trends show clear differences

Figure 2

### Child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa has some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world but they were slowly falling despite challenges posed by conflict and climate disasters

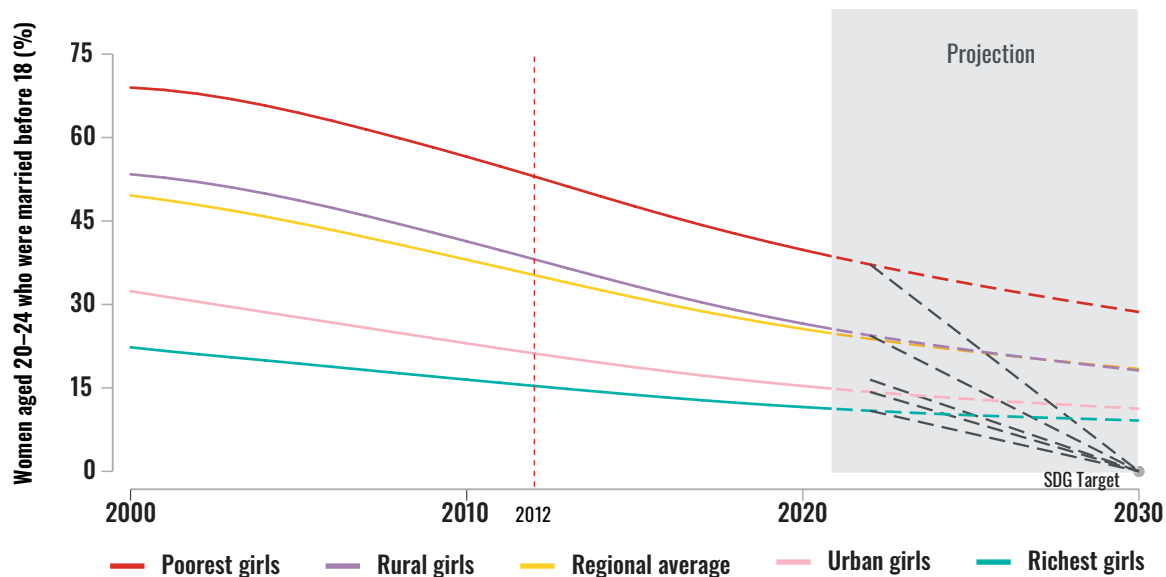


Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 39 countries (covering 94% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural subgroups based on subset of 37 countries (covering 92% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

Figure 3

### Child marriage in South Asia

South Asia has led the world in reducing child marriage

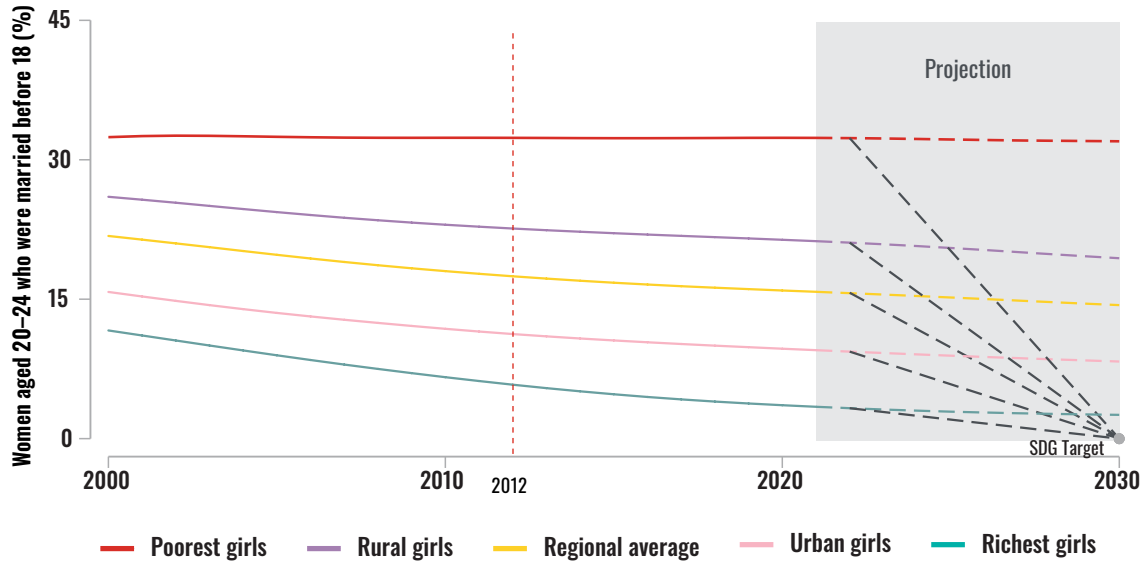


Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 6 countries (covering 95% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural subgroups based on subset of 5 countries (covering 86% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

Figure 4

## Child marriage in East Asia

East Asia has made progress among the richest girls but the poorest girls were being left behind even before COVID-19 and cost of living pressures increased

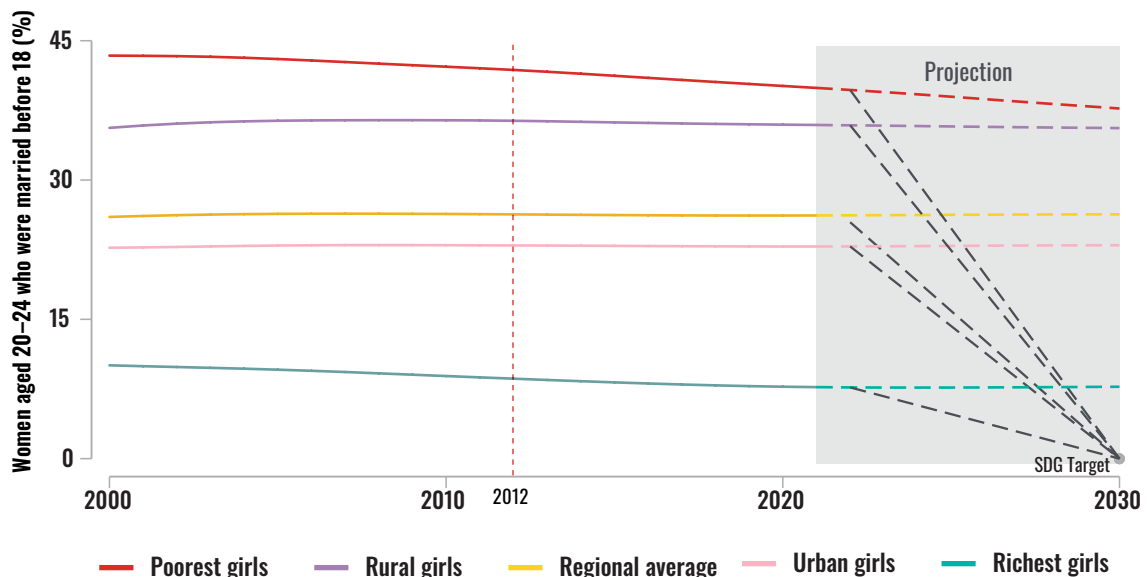


Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 8 countries (covering 32% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural subgroups based on subset of 8 countries (covering 32% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

Figure 5

## Child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean have shown no sign of progress or reducing inequalities in the last decade



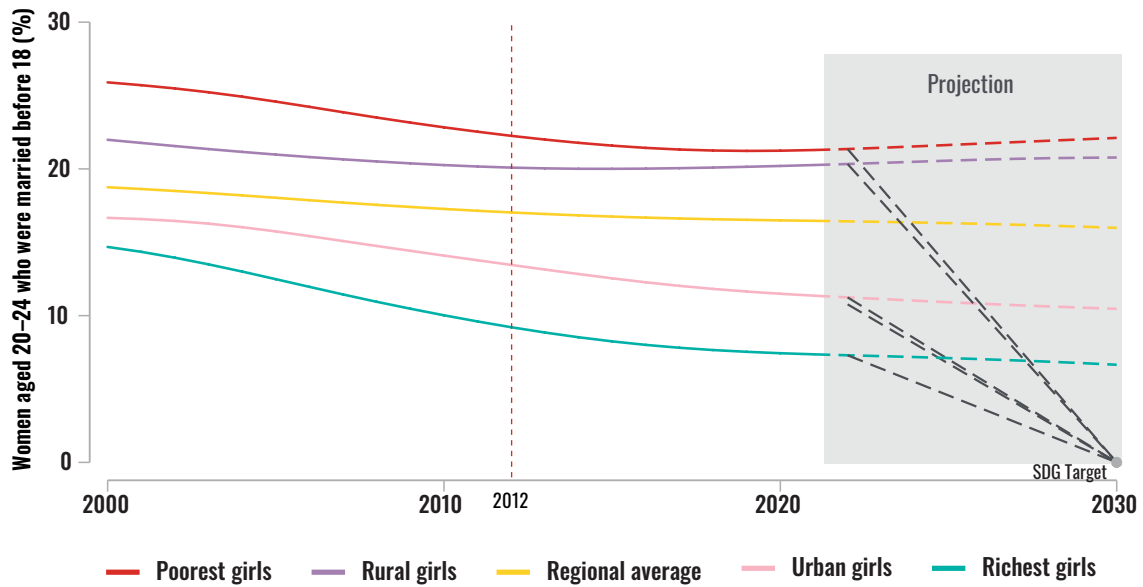
Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 15 countries (covering 60% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural subgroups based on subset of 15 countries (covering 60% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.



Figure 6

## Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa was making progress toward reducing child marriage but has now slowed.

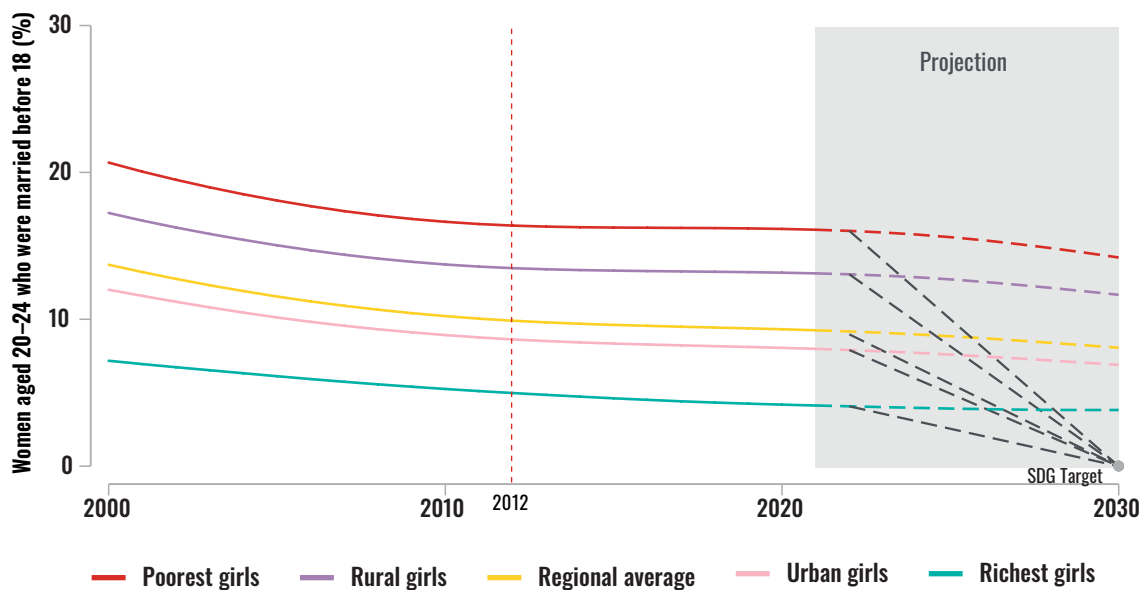


Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 7 countries (covering 62% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

Figure 7

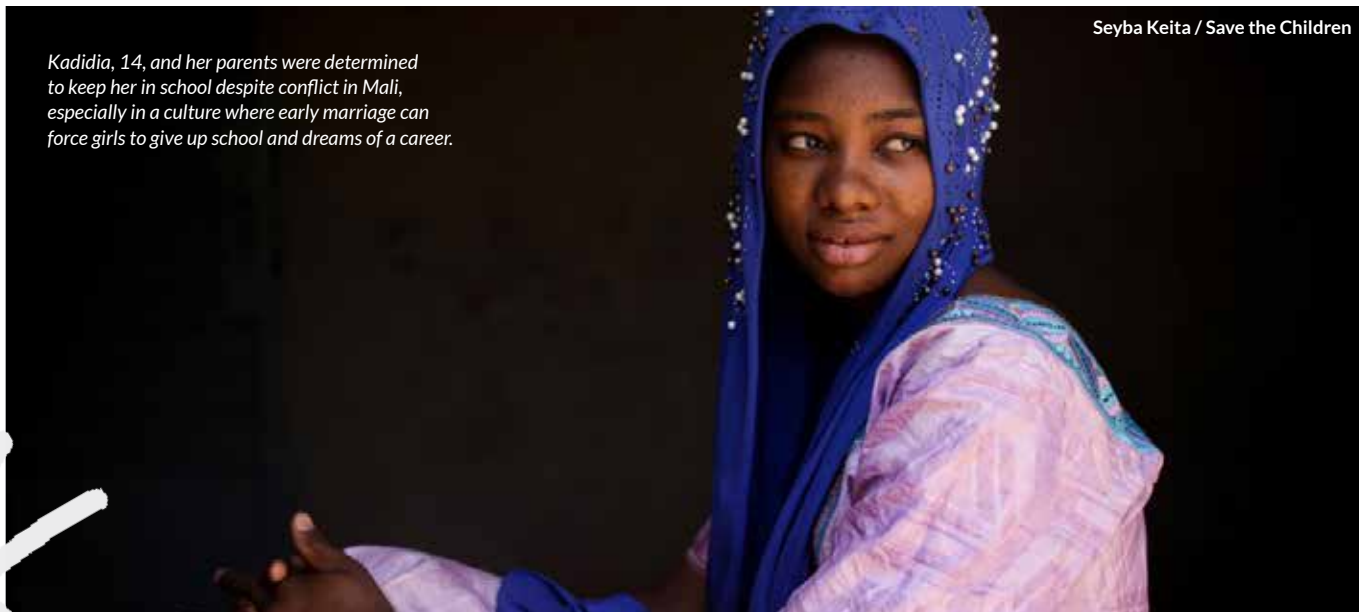
## Child marriage in Eastern Europe

Eastern Europe has lower rates of child marriage compared to other regions, but progress has been flattening.



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS. Sample based on 16 countries (covering 31% of population). Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

*Kadidia, 14, and her parents were determined to keep her in school despite conflict in Mali, especially in a culture where early marriage can force girls to give up school and dreams of a career.*



**National averages can also hide inequalities in progress among different groups of girls.** Worldwide, girls growing up in low-income families are at much greater risk of child marriage than girls living in richer households, and girls growing up in cities are less likely to marry as children than those living in rural areas. Girls with disabilities, girls who are out of school, girl mothers, girls whose lives have been affected by conflict or climate disasters and refugee and migrant girls are also likely to face greater risk of child marriage. **Finding ways to accelerate progress for girls most at risk, including those in lower income households and remote areas with less access to services, is critical to ending child marriage and fulfilling the global promise to “leave no one behind” under the Sustainable Development Goals.**

In nearly all regions, girls growing up in the poorest households are almost **four times** as likely to be married as children. The gap between the richest and poorest girls’ experiences is highest in East Asia and the Pacific, where the poorest girls are over **five times** more likely to be married, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean. Data shows that a small number of countries including Bangladesh, Cuba, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Nepal and Rwanda were starting to close these gaps but more research is needed to understand the changes that have allowed them to make this progress.

## New and ongoing challenges to progress

Important steps to accelerate progress toward ending child marriage and fulfilling the rights of married, widowed and divorced girls have been made over the past ten years. These include efforts by individual girls, women’s rights and other local organisations, legal change and global and regional campaigns. But new and ongoing challenges remain:

- Transforming the patriarchal structures that allow child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence will take time and a strong commitment to shift power to women and girls.
- Progress for girls’ rights is being met by growing opposition with girls’ right to have their views given due weight in decisions that affect them is becoming a key sticking point in global negotiations to progress human rights.
- Funding programmes to address child marriage is complicated. It requires action to address risk factors in all areas of girls’ lives from safety to health and education, as well as investing in girls’ agency and capacity. Existing research on budgeting for child marriage is limited but what we have tells us that we know too little about what is being spent and how much more is needed.

**Patriarchy** is a word that covers the many beliefs, ways of living and working (including caring for family) that organise societies in a way that gives men and boys power over women and girls. It also gives men who agree with these ideas power over men, boys and people with other gender identities who challenge or disagree with them.

In El Salvador, Aracely (left), Karla (centre) and Jennifer (right) finish their presentation at the Choices, Voices and Promises "Color of Hope" group activity, focusing on identifying gender norms.



Victoria Zegler/Save the Children

### The four C's: Conflict, COVID-19, the climate emergency and rising cost of living

Conflict, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, the global climate emergency and the rising cost of living are combining to create new risks to girls' rights.

Pandemics, food shortages and cost of living crises lead to many of the same risk factors for child marriage, such as increased poverty and loss of protections against violence like being in school, or with friends and family. At the end of 2021, UNICEF estimated that the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis could lead to 10 million additional child marriages by 2030.

The economic impacts of the pandemic are still being felt all over the world, and the conflict in Ukraine has created a growing "ripple effect" on the cost of fuel and energy and created a cost-of-living crisis. Higher prices have also led to more pressure on global food security systems that were already under strain, in part due to the impacts of drought and flooding in regions where food insecurity was already at record high levels. Many countries have been unable to produce or import the food they need and the increasing cost of fuel and fertilisers means that farmers will produce less food as long as prices stay high, creating ongoing food shortages. The harder food is to get, the more expensive it can become.

#### THE GLOBAL FOOD AND NUTRITION CRISIS AND CHILD MARRIAGE.

The worst global food and nutrition crisis in decades is putting millions of lives at risk and increasing the risk of child marriage. The combined impact of conflict, climate disasters and the COVID-19 crisis pushed the number of people at risk of falling into famine or famine-like conditions to an all-time high of up to 49 million people in 46 countries. These children and adults face growing pressure to support and provide for each other, and children in affected countries have told Save the Children they are already seeing child marriages as a result.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Finding from child hearings for Save the Children's new report *Generation Hope: Two billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis*, which will be launched in late October 2022 with a child-friendly guide.



2021 saw the greatest global increase in climate disasters in the last decade.<sup>20</sup> Unless action is taken now, to invest in reducing risks, better prepare for crises and adapt to the impacts of a changing climate, the impacts of the [worsening climate emergency](#) will continue. They will increase poverty, exposure to disasters and tension over land, food and water, as well as the spread of infectious diseases and the displacement and migration of larger and larger numbers of people. All of these changes increase risk of child marriage and new and ongoing conflicts will add to these challenges. The vulnerability to the climate crisis and chronic poverty experienced by some populations in the Sahel region – already home to the highest rates of child marriage in the world – is an example of the challenges more countries could soon face.

The growing and combined impact of the ‘four C’s’ bring a new urgency to efforts to end child marriage and protect girls’ rights.



**For the first time this year**, the Commission on the Status of Women – a meeting held each year to discuss gender equality and agree on next steps to achieve it – focused on gender and climate. The Girls’ Caucus (a group of girl advocates from around the world) sent a video recording of their demands to governments negotiating an agreement. They called for girls to be included in decision-making processes, and explained the impacts that the climate emergency is already having on girls’ lives and how to tackle them. [You can watch their video here.](#)

*Rosana, who is deaf and mute, now lives in a camp in Beira (Mozambique) after fleeing cyclone Idia. Here, she attends a child-friendly space where she can play and meet friends.*



Hanna Adcock/ Save the Children

<sup>20</sup> For more information you can read the [2021 Disasters in Numbers](#) report by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters.



*A refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Children in these camps who fled North East Syria have described feeling safer now that they're out of harm's way, but still afraid in the camp of stray animals, getting electrocuted if it rains on their make-shift electricity supply and their tents catching fire.*

## CHAPTER 2

# Their side of the story: Girls' experiences of child marriage and displacement

Efforts to end child marriage often only focus on prevention without considering the experiences of married girls. Speaking about their experiences of violence can put girls at risk of further violence from others, like people who have used violence against them, who might not want their behaviour made public. Recalling traumatic experiences of violence without proper support can also be harmful to girls' mental health so research should always be conducted carefully. Some of the stories shared in the research below describe violence, loss and other emotional suffering so please take care when reading this chapter, particularly if you have experienced gender-based violence.

Girls have important knowledge to contribute to research and responses – they are the experts in their own lives. Research and responses that don't engage with girls to understand their experiences risk oversimplifying the reasons why child marriage happens, undermining girls' ability to make decisions about their own lives and underestimating the impact of wider circumstances. Research and other processes that safely involve girls in designing the solutions they want show the value of girls' ideas, their strength and ability to make decisions in complex situations, as well as the importance of understanding their individual needs.



A recent study by Save the Children and Tufts University asked adolescent girls and young women living in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) about their experiences of child marriage. Their responses challenge some of the ways that child marriage is often understood and provide detail on how different experiences can be depending on who girls are and where they live.

All of the girls in the study had been forced to leave their homes to escape conflict and discrimination (in other words, they were displaced). Displacement interrupts girls' friendships and relationships, education, and family income. The chaos of displacement (sometimes including separation from family) can also increase girls' exposure to violence. Gender inequalities and local beliefs, traditions and expectations about gender meant that the girls in KRI and South Sudan faced very different influences and had a range of ideas about child marriage. Girls' voices and their reflections on the impact of child marriage on their lives are included below.

This study included experiences of **139** married, widowed and divorced young women and girls aged 14–23 who had been married as children<sup>20</sup>

## Findings

### Marriage by force

Girls in South Sudan described different types of marriages, some of which were forced through the act of kidnapping, or decided on by (usually male) members of their family. Bridewealth (sometimes also called brideprice) – a payment made in cattle from the groom's family to the bride's family – was a consideration in all types of marriage. One girl described being kidnapped by her future husband:

**66** When I was 15, the man that married me kidnapped me when I went to get water from the river. I was alone, and he came with three other men and carried me by force to a taxi. He was covering my mouth, and the other men were holding me by force. He took me to his home, and after one day he sent a message to my family that he had me and they should not look for me. He even sent people with cattle as bridewealth, to show that he intended to marry me soon.” — 21-year-old, South Sudan.

Some girls in South Sudan shared that their mothers had supported them to escape marriages. One such girl mentioned that:

**66** My three uncles told us that there is a man who wants to marry me, and they are ready to have the marriage negotiations with him. My mother refused, and they beat us up because we are women and we cannot argue with men. My mother and I had to run, and we went to report them to the child protection agencies.  
— 17-year-old, South Sudan.

<sup>21</sup> 600 interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, and include repeat interviews with the girls and young women, as well as interviews with family members and other key informants in their communities.





16-year-old Akuol lives in Bor, South Sudan, and does not attend school because she's busy doing chores and looking after her grandmother and her baby boy, Abdo. Her family becomes displaced every year when it floods. Akuol did not participate in the study highlighted in this chapter.

Charles Atiki Lomdong/ Save the Children

### Marriage as a way to provide for families

Some girls in South Sudan described marrying because they knew that the cattle their family would receive would help provide for them. This was particularly common for eldest daughters. One mother explained:

**66** People here, they value cows more than anything. When a girl reaches a certain age, it will be time to get the cows. They just wait for her to reach that age, and they see their problems will be solved by this girl.”

— Mother of a study participant, South Sudan.

**66** I thought about the struggles that my mother goes through to feed us, and so I just decided to get married so that I can at least reduce some responsibilities. I am the first-born child.” — Young woman with a disability, South Sudan.

### Lack of information about preventing pregnancy

While it is socially acceptable for girls to have romantic relationships with boys before marrying in South Sudan, there is still stigma around sex, so the decision to marry often follows an unplanned pregnancy. Interviews with mothers and daughters in South Sudan showed a startling lack of information about how to prevent pregnancy, and a lack of access to services, even after having a child. One girl's mother told interviewers:

**66** I do not know myself about this so can't talk to my daughter about it. Lots of girls get pregnant in school but I am just leaving it to God to protect my daughter.” — Mother of a girl mother, South Sudan.

**66** I've only ever seen married girls go there [to the family planning clinic]. People would be scared to go there if they were unmarried – scared that people would talk and say that she is sleeping with boys.” — Girl, South Sudan.

## Marriage for love or company

One-third of the girls interviewed in South Sudan said that they had married for love. Husbands married for love were described as “a good man” or “my husband and my friend”. Some eloped because their caregivers did not approve of the husband’s clan or because he could not afford to pay bridewealth. In the KRI, some girls described wanting to marry for companionship, because of the loneliness they felt after they were forced to leave their homes and lost their friends and routine.

**66** For sure getting married young is not a good thing. But now we are living in an emergency situation, people don't know their future... All of the girls my age, we need someone to trust and listen to us and support us, to not be against us. We need someone to share our feelings with.” — Syrian refugee young woman, KRI.

## Social and family pressures

Girls in the KRI described being forced to marry by their family or accepting a marriage under pressure, sometimes for financial support. Romantic relationships outside of marriage were not acceptable for girls in KRI so sometimes when a relationship was discovered a girl would marry secretly so that she could marry for love. In other cases, girls were forced to marry the boy, or someone else that the family approved of, to force an end to another relationship. One participant in the KRI was married at 13.

**66** My parents knew I was in love with someone else, so they made me marry my cousin” — Girl, KRI.

## Opportunities and freedom

Many of the girls interviewed in the KRI saw marriage as an opportunity. Some described marriage as offering freedom – from an abusive family, from strict rules about their clothes and behaviour and from harassment and gossip. Other girls described the opposite – for them moving into their husband’s home meant less freedom. In some cases, girls saw opportunities to leave the camp and move to a less restrictive life in Europe, for example, by marrying a man from their own community who was already living as a refugee in Europe. One mother of a teenage girl said:

**66** Half of the girls in the camp are wishing and praying for a fiancé in Europe.” — Mother of teenage girl, KRI.

**66** In Europe, no matter if you are a mother, single, or married, you can work, and no one will talk about you. But here if I would want to work, people would make a shame of me.” — Yazidi 19-year-old, KRI.

Other girls married early out of fear, believing that if they turned 18 before their applications for refugee status were agreed, they could be left behind while their family moved to Europe.

## Views on marriage from girls with disabilities

Girls with disabilities interviewed in South Sudan and KRI described discrimination because of their gender and disability. They had very different experiences based on being treated as less valuable than other girls. In South Sudan, although one girl described her marriage as positive, others described being married in worse circumstances including for less bridewealth or to a man who already had other wives.

**66** Yes, the girls who have disabilities don't get married. If they get married, the man pays fewer cows, because she will still stay with her parents at home but just produce children for the man.” — Girl mother with a disability, South Sudan.

Girls in South Sudan described not being able to marry (even after promises of marriage), leaving girls with unintended pregnancies without the financial support provided by marriage. Girls with disabilities in the KRI did not consider marriage an option. One explained:

**66** Because of my situation, I know that marriage is not possible. So I have removed this idea from my head. Disabled people don't have the right to love. If a man loved someone with special needs, his family would say, 'How could you be in love? She won't be able to take care of your house!'” — 23-year-old, KRI.




*Tela, 14, pictured with her mother and brother Elend, 7, live in a refugee camp in the KRI after fleeing Syria. Tela told Save the Children how pressured she feels to find a way to support her family and how, although they are currently out of harm's way, she feels like she's living in a prison. This family did not participate in the study highlighted in this chapter.*

Antonia Roupell / Save the Children

### Life after marriage

Some girls described their lives changing a lot after marriage, while others (particularly those who were already doing a lot of housework) said that things did not change much. But there were a lot of common experiences:

- **Education:** Girls in both the KRI and South Sudan described marrying because they were not in school or “had nothing to do”. This finding shows the importance of having quality education opportunities and work available and designed for girls in refugee and displacement settings. Findings also showed that most girls left school after marrying or having children but for some, education was part of their marriage negotiations. For those girls, parents agreed to a marriage only with a promise that their daughter’s education could continue.
- **Uncertainty over whether girls were married or not:** Girls in South Sudan were sometimes only treated as married after bridewealth or pregnancy price (payment from the baby’s father to the girls’ family) was paid, which could take years or may never be paid in full. The legal age for marriage in the KRI is 18, but customary practice (religious or cultural processes) allows for early marriage. Marriage can affect a girls’ ability to apply to be a refugee as part of a family as well as her children’s inheritance rights, and girls in both the KRI and South Sudan described not knowing whether they were married or had been widowed after their husbands had disappeared in conflict. The importance of marriage for financial support meant that this uncertainty had real consequences, particularly for girls with children.
- **Exposure to violence:** Many of the girls in the KRI and South Sudan experienced violence from their husbands and sometimes from their husbands’ families, but leaving or getting divorced was too difficult in most cases. In South Sudan, girls might have to repay bridewealth to get divorced and in both places, husbands are given custody of their children after a divorce. Being forced to live in a camp during conflict limited girls’ ability to get away from violent husbands.



**66** For the girl who gets pregnant, they don't see you as a human being, they only see you as betraying the family... Even the child will suffer...Everyone thinks that the girl who gets pregnant should suffer." — Girl, South Sudan.

**66** He told me if my family wants to divorce me from him, they will do so only after he has done something bad to me, like removing all my teeth or all my eyes, so that no other man will marry me... Even now when my ex-husband meets me walking around the camp he attacks me." — Girl married at 15, South Sudan.


⇒ **Mental health:** A range of experiences contributed to poor mental health for girls in the KRI and South Sudan, including living through conflict and displacement, family rejection and gender-based violence before and after marriage. Girls in South Sudan with unplanned pregnancies and others who married without their family's approval were rejected by their families. But others described taking important emotional support from their marriage and happiness at being mothers, despite the extra work and responsibilities.

## Ending child marriage means giving girls better options

Despite their differences, married girls in this study and similar studies of married and unmarried girls talk about a similar mix of experiences linked to marriage. These include pressure from family, violence and unplanned pregnancy, as well as wider conditions that lead girls *themselves* to consider marriage their best option. To end child marriage, we must ensure that girls have better options available to them. This requires a response that:

- ⇒ Makes sure girls do not have to depend on marriage for safety, to meet their needs or to look after their family
- ⇒ Gives girls the opportunities they need to build the future they want
- ⇒ Allows all girls to feel supported to express their sexuality inside and outside marriage.





Maya\*, 14, lives in Za'atari camp in Jordan. Since joining Save the Children's 'Coaching for Life' project, she's become advocate for children's rights to end child marriage. Maya wants to be a pharmacist and writer on women's issues when she's older.

Sherbel Dissi / Save the Children

## CHAPTER 3

# Recommendations

The tenth anniversary of International Day of the Girl is a wake-up call to governments, communities, the United Nations (UN), businesses and civil society organisations (CSOs). There is so much more we can do to end child marriage and fulfil girls' rights, even in the most challenging circumstances. Save the Children recommends working together to deliver on the commitments below.

GOVERNMENTS, UN AGENCIES AND CSOS

### **1. Increase funding and efforts to address gender-based violence against girls, including through funding child protection in humanitarian crises.**

Girls experience gender-based violence in all humanitarian crises but remain the least funded priority for protection. Evidence from the past 30 years shows that girls affected by conflict are at 20% greater risk of child marriage than girls living outside conflict zones. Girls cannot afford to wait for proof that they are experiencing gender-based violence in every new conflict. Prevention should be a first priority in a response and governments and organisations responding to humanitarian crises must plan for it – working with women, girls and their communities – as agreed best practice. Robust funding to prevent, reduce the impact of and respond to gender-based violence against adolescent girls, including as part of increased funding for broader child protection services, must be available for every humanitarian response.

GOVERNMENTS, UN AGENCIES, CSOS AND RESEARCHERS WORKING WITH GIRLS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS:

## 2. Scale up evidence-based initiatives to end child marriage and make them available to more girls in more places.

More research is needed, particularly in humanitarian contexts, to fully understand the complexities around preventing and responding to child marriage. However, applying what we do know is critical for accelerating progress.<sup>22</sup> Effective policies and programming must:

- ⇒ **Recognise and tackle patriarchy and gender inequality as root causes of child marriage** and other forms of gender-based violence. This requires an approach that empowers women, girls and others who are discriminated against on the basis of harmful gender norms to transform the differences in power between men, women, boys, girls and children and adults whose gender identities do not fit these restrictive categories.
- ⇒ **Engage men, boys, parents and traditional leaders** in efforts to end child marriage to achieve long-lasting social norm change and support girls' power to act within their communities (see 'What Does Girls' Empowerment Mean?').
- ⇒ **Address risk factors and consequences of child marriage.** This requires full funding and staffing of health, protection, education, justice and financial support systems for unmarried and married girls, and training and policies to support quality services. Information on sexual and reproductive health, rights and healthy relationships must be available for all children (known as 'comprehensive sexuality education'). For this to work, Ministries, including the Ministry of Finance, must work together to coordinate these responses and make sure they are fully funded.
- ⇒ **Be supported by laws** that set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years without exception.
- ⇒ **Be informed by gender and power analysis.** Gender and power analysis allows consideration of the changes required at all levels (see figure 8) from the individual to the community and system levels. Conducting a gender and power analysis that looks at additional factors like age and disability status, including to help develop national budgets, can help to understand the risk factors, traditions and ideas that affect child marriage in a specific community and address differences in girls' experiences.
- ⇒ **Be shaped by and accountable to girls and their communities.** Girls are experts in their own lives and must have safe spaces to share ideas, support one another and influence decisions about the programmes and policies that affect their lives. Safe spaces, clear targets and public reporting on progress allow girls and their communities to demand action from their leaders and ensure they fulfil their duty to uphold girls' rights. The Accountability and Follow-Up Mechanism developed to track progress made under the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa is an exciting new example.

### What does girls' empowerment mean?

**POWER TO...** A girl's ability to make life choices and act according to her best interests, including control over her own body and resources.

**POWER WITHIN...** A girl's sense of self-confidence, dignity, and self-worth and her knowledge and skills to act.

**POWER WITH...** Girls' strength gained from solidarity, collective action, and mutual respect.

**POWER IN...** Girls living in a society where systems and structures are promoting the equal exercise of rights.

**Figure 8**  
Ending child marriage and fulfilling girls' rights requires action at all levels



<sup>22</sup> See Save the Children's technical guidance: *Preventing and Responding to Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions*.

Even after fleeing her village in Niger due to an upsurge in violence, Dioura hasn't lost hope and compassion for others. "I would like to become a doctor when I finish my studies, to help people." She's never lost belief in herself either. "I know myself: I am intelligent, a hard worker and merciful."



Apsatou Bagaya / Save the Children

GOVERNMENTS, BUSINESSES, WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER CSOS

### **3. Support and invest in girls to define solutions to the challenges they face by strengthening girl-led movements. This means finding new ways of working with and providing funding to girls.**

Research looking at 70 countries over 40 years found that 'autonomous feminist movements' were the most important factor for governments making laws that protect women and children against violence. Autonomous feminist movements are made up of individuals and organisations able to push for equal rights for women, girls and all people, without fear of government. Adolescent girls and their networks are a key part of these movements and critical to ensuring progress made lasts long into the future. To build strong feminist networks girls need free time and safe spaces to meet, information (including on when and how to influence government decision-making), freedom to set their own priorities and financial support for things like internet access, transport, child-care for girl mothers and support for girls who care for younger children or elderly family members.



**Girls' perspectives are critical** to understanding child marriage and their input should be taken into account when solutions are proposed. In 2021, girl advocates living in Egypt and Lebanon wrote and performed a puppet show about child marriage, girls and their family's dreams for the future, and being a child mother and widow. **You can watch their puppet show [here](#).**



GOVERNMENTS WORKING WITH GIRLS, COMMUNITIES, WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS AND CSOS

#### **4. Develop and fully fund national action plans to end child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence and violence against children.**

Many African countries have introduced national action plans or strategies to end child marriage since the African Union launched its [Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa](#). But working out how much funding is needed for a plan that covers different areas of girls' lives like health, education and safety is difficult. In 2021, government members of the [African Union](#) agreed to work with civil society organisations and others to develop a costing framework for national action plans. This will help governments calculate the cost of addressing child marriage, including understanding how much money they are already spending on things like education that help reduce risk of marriage. Knowing the cost will help raise money to put plans into action and allow girls and civil society organisations to hold governments and businesses accountable for prioritising girls. Developing and funding national action plans on gender-based violence and violence against children will also help.

GOVERNMENTS, UN AGENCIES, CSOS AND RESEARCHERS WORKING WITH GIRLS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS

#### **5. Improve understandings of how to prevent the “four C’s” from reversing progress to end child marriage.**

Conflict, climate disasters, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis are increasing risk of child marriage and threaten to further reverse progress for girls' rights. Efforts to prevent child marriage in these challenging circumstances must build on lessons learned from past humanitarian crises and the existing COVID-19 and climate responses with:

- ⇒ Gender-balanced response teams.
- ⇒ Data that keeps up with fast-changing circumstances, including on child marriage and increasing risk factors.
- ⇒ Support (including cash payments where appropriate) to reduce the impact of economic shocks to prevent protection risks that increase with poverty, like child marriage.
- ⇒ Improved coordination, with special attention to the age- and gender-specific needs of adolescent girls, who often fall between child protection services and gender-based violence services designed for adults.
- ⇒ Increased accountability for addressing gender-based violence, including child marriage, by all humanitarian actors including policy-makers and service providers.

Improved planning and adaptation are essential to make sure that progress toward ending child marriage is not lost. If progress toward ending child marriage is made during crisis periods, for example due to increased financial support for families or increased gender-based violence or child protection services, these efforts must continue once the crisis has passed. More research and investment in effective responses for countries experiencing overlapping crises are urgently needed.





Nora, 21, joined Save the Children through our “Leave no child behind” project in Guatemala. Since then, she’s been participating as a presenter in a local radio, sharing about girl’ rights and the importance of being protected and respected. Nora wants to be a lawyer to protect other girl’s rights in the future.

GOVERNMENTS, BUSINESSES, CSOS, FEMINIST AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS AND GIRLS’ NETWORKS

## 6. Ensure that governments uphold their promises to girls.

Governments around the world have made many commitments to achieve gender equality and fulfil girls’ rights, most recently under the Generation Equality Campaign’s Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality. While over 1,000 commitments have been made to help meet these targets, more are needed.<sup>23</sup> Funding commitments and commitments from governments to change laws and policies are particularly important. Of the 243 commitments made toward feminist leadership, just 15% include financial commitments and just over half of that 15% is specifically dedicated to girls. Countries who support girls and gender equality must stand up for girls’ rights at the United Nations and other global decision-making fora.

<sup>23</sup> You can see Save the Children’s commitment to help achieve targets to end child marriage and increase investment in girl-led movements [here](#).



## WANT TO TAKE ACTION?

Girls have made clear recommendations about how they want the Generation Equality Campaign to be accountable to them and how they can help.

Many more commitments are needed to ensure that the Generation Equality Campaign drives progress for girls' rights. Use our ['Making Generation Equality Accountable to Girls' Lobby Letter Toolkit](#) to call on policymakers to uphold girls' rights. Click [HERE](#) to take action.



## Save the Children®

Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach. We do whatever it takes for children—every day and in times of crisis—transforming their lives and the future we share.

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### ON THE COVER

*"I want to be successful," Samira, 15 says. Despite the risk of early marriage hanging over her, she's determined to continue studying after having to flee her village in Burkina Faso due to violence.*

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