



GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2022

GIRLS ON THE FRONTLINE

REPORT SUMMARY



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.

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,¹ which can only be prevented during childhood.

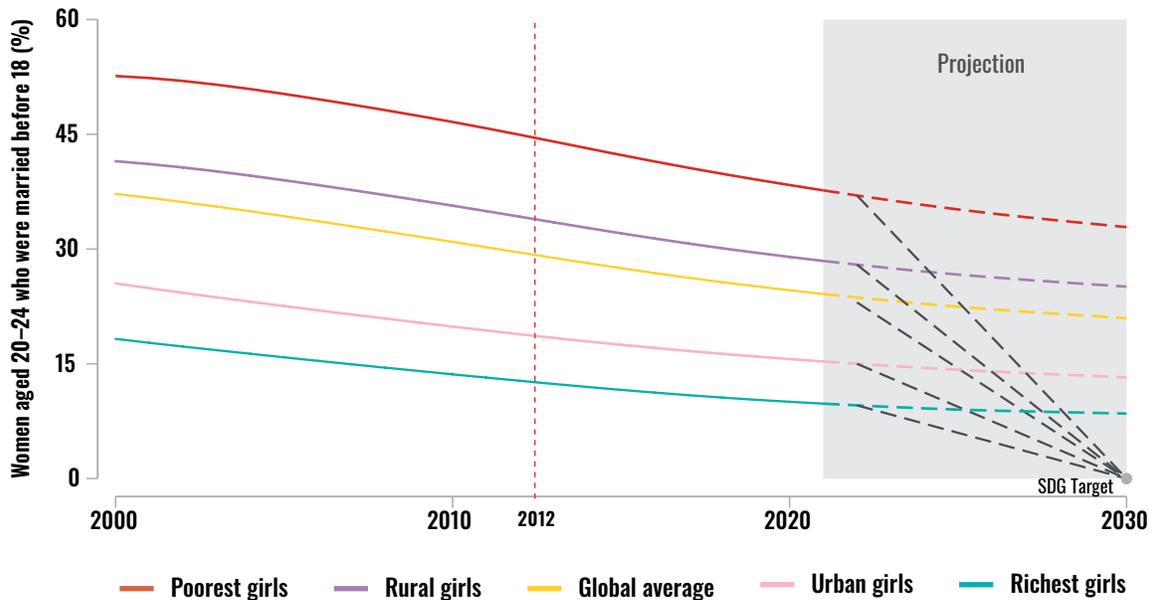
How far have we come since the first International Day of the Girl?

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 2030.² 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.

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

² 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 then 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.⁴ 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.³

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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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 zones⁵** – 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.⁶
- ⇒ **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. 600+ interviews with girls living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and South Sudan after conflict and discrimination forced them to leave their homes. These interviews 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.

⁵ 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](#).

⁶ 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, Munni'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."

CJ Clarke / Save the Children

Recommendations

The tenth anniversary of International Day of the Girl is a wake-up call to governments, communities, the United Nations,⁷ 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:

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.

⁷ 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.

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.⁸ 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'). 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 1) 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 1
Ending child marriage and fulfilling girls' rights requires action at all levels



⁸ See Save the Children's technical guidance: *Preventing and Responding to Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions*.

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

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.



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 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.

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



Hanna Adcock/ Save the Children

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.⁹ 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.

⁹ 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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Some names in this report have been changed to protect identities.

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.

Photo: Adrien Bitibaly / Save the Children