



Save the Children



GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2023:

GIRLS AT THE CENTRE OF THE STORM

HER PLANET, HER FUTURE, HER SOLUTIONS

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This adolescent-friendly report is written to give governments, non-government organisations, the UN and girl and other feminist activists the evidence they need to work together to tackle the climate emergency and work toward gender-equality. We use the term ‘girl’ throughout this report. This often refers to statistics about female adolescents because of the lack of research about differing gender identities (such as non-binary youth), as well as the dangers of collecting such data in some contexts. But if there are experiences in this report that feel familiar to you or someone you care about, this report is meant for you.

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

Cover: Luana, 14, is from Cabo Delgado in Mozambique and has been affected by consecutive crises, including Cyclone Kenneth in 2019, violent conflict in 2020 that forced her from her home and the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children



Executive summary

The climate crisis is already changing girls' lives and futures.

Save the Children's analysis shows that between now and 2030, almost 60% of girls - that's 931 million - will experience at least one extreme weather event, like flooding, drought or heatwaves.¹ An estimated 4 million girls in lower income countries (countries where individuals have the smallest incomes) missed out on completing their education due to climate-related events in 2021.² And right now, at least 49 million people, including girls and their families are on the brink of starvation, unable to learn and grow because longer-lasting droughts and the war in Ukraine have combined to create a hunger crisis the size and severity of which has not been seen before.³



PP

We are seeing and living the climate crisis. We have seen the drought ruin our farm. Now the sun is very hot, everything is so dry and the trees are dying. You can't walk along the road because the dust is so bad. The dust is everywhere...Without climate change I would have had a better life. That is something that really upsets me.

Amina, 17, climate activist in Baidoa, Somalia.



These experiences increase risks of harm that particularly affect girls, including gender-based violence and child marriage. The impacts of climate change are a threat multiplier, meaning that they increase existing threats and inequalities.⁴

Floods, heatwaves, cyclones and droughts have all been linked to increases in child marriage. A recent review of related research conducted between 1990 and 2022 showed that the majority of studies found links between climate disasters and an increase in child marriage.⁵

Around the globe, the impacts of more frequent climate disasters like floods, cyclones, wildfires and heatwaves are:

- ⇒ Exposing girls to risk of sexual harassment and abuse in the chaos, overcrowding and lack of safe services in the aftermath of a disaster.⁶
- ⇒ Pushing families into poverty, which can lead to harmful coping strategies such as child labour and child marriage.ⁱⁱ
- ⇒ Driving families and wider communities to leave their homes, forcing girls out-of-school and increasing risks to them such as child marriage and unions and other forms of gender-based violence.
- ⇒ Reducing girls' access to the food and services they need to be safe, healthy and make decisions about their lives and bodies.

Despite these impacts on girls, less than 2% of national climate plans mention girls and less than 4% of climate finance projects name or meaningfully consider girls for inclusion in activities, for consultation or investment.⁷

PP

I am afraid of the arrival of the cyclones because of the difficulties we are going to face: we are forced to leave our houses for fear of collapse, our daily life is also destroyed because we have nothing to eat, our crops are flooded or blown away.

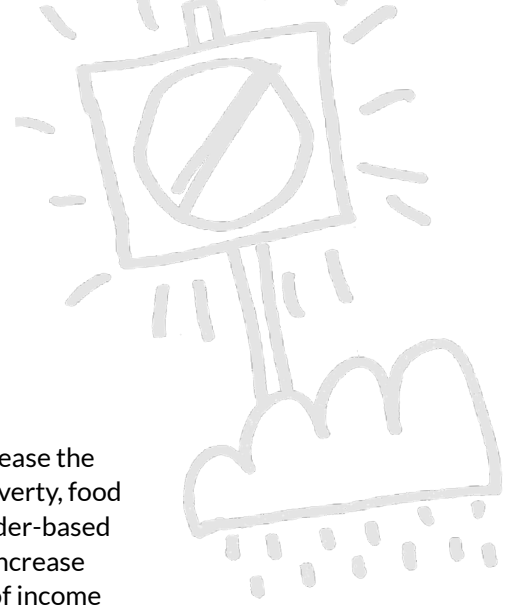
Patricia, 10, Madagascar.

What is the climate crisis?

Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane trap heat around the Earth. In the right amounts they create a blanket that keeps the planet at a stable temperature. But human activity – including burning fossil fuels like oil, gas and coal – has increased the amount of greenhouse gases so that the blanket is getting too thick, causing the Earth to get hotter. And as the world heats up, the climate is changing. This is causing a crisis that includes slow changes like rising sea levels and prolonged droughts, as well as sudden and extreme weather such as heatwaves and storms. Without the ability to quickly adapt and bounce back, these changes are contributing to increased poverty, inequality and other harms to children.ⁱ

ⁱFor more information, see UNICEF's climate handbook for children, [Our Changing Climate](#)

ⁱⁱThis report uses the UNICEF definition of child marriage, which includes informal marriage-like unions.



How the climate crisis is increasing risk of child marriage

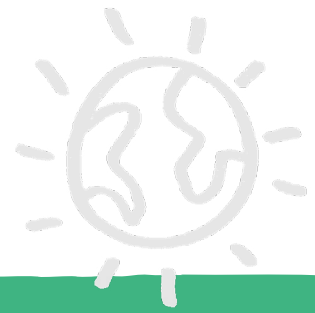
Gender inequality is the root cause of child marriage, but other risk factors increase the likelihood of a girl being married. These include being out-of-school, living in poverty, food shortages, being pregnant or having a baby and exposure to other forms of gender-based violence. Climate disasters and the long-term impacts of the climate crisis can increase these risk factors.⁸ For example, disasters can lead to school closures and loss of income for families. Gender-based violence also increases during crises and families may decide to remove girls from school or have them marry to keep them safe from stranger violence or to make sure their daughters are provided for by another family.

- ⇒ In parts of **Ethiopia** worst hit by drought and food shortages, rates of child marriage rose by 119% in 2022 compared to 2021.⁹
- ⇒ A 2020 study found that in **Bangladesh**, girls aged 11–14 were shown to be twice as likely to marry in years following extreme heat.¹⁰
- ⇒ In **Zimbabwe**, there have been recent reports of girls initiating their own marriages in the hope of increasing their access to food.¹¹
- ⇒ Devastating floods in **Pakistan** in 2022 have since left an estimated 640,000 adolescent girls vulnerable and at increased risk of coercion, gender-based violence and child marriage.¹²
- ⇒ Analysis of historical data shows that a 10% increase or decrease in rainfall is associated with a 1% increase in child marriage, **globally**.¹³

Kimsorn, 18, preparing fishing hooks for her neighbour on her home on Tonle Sap lake, Kompong Thom province, Cambodia.

Photo: Lim Sokchanlina/Save the Children





New data: Child marriage and the climate crisis – an emergency for girls’ rights

New analysis by Save the Children shows **that globally almost 9 million girls face extreme risk of climate disasters and child marriage every year.**¹⁴ This analysis shows that around **two-thirds of child marriages happen in regions with higher-than-average climate risks.**ⁱⁱⁱ

The combination of climate risk and child marriage has created emergency hotspots for girls’ rights in Bangladesh and across sub-Saharan Africa. These countries are not just affected by severe and frequent climate disasters or weather events but in many cases conflict, high levels of poverty and gender inequality.

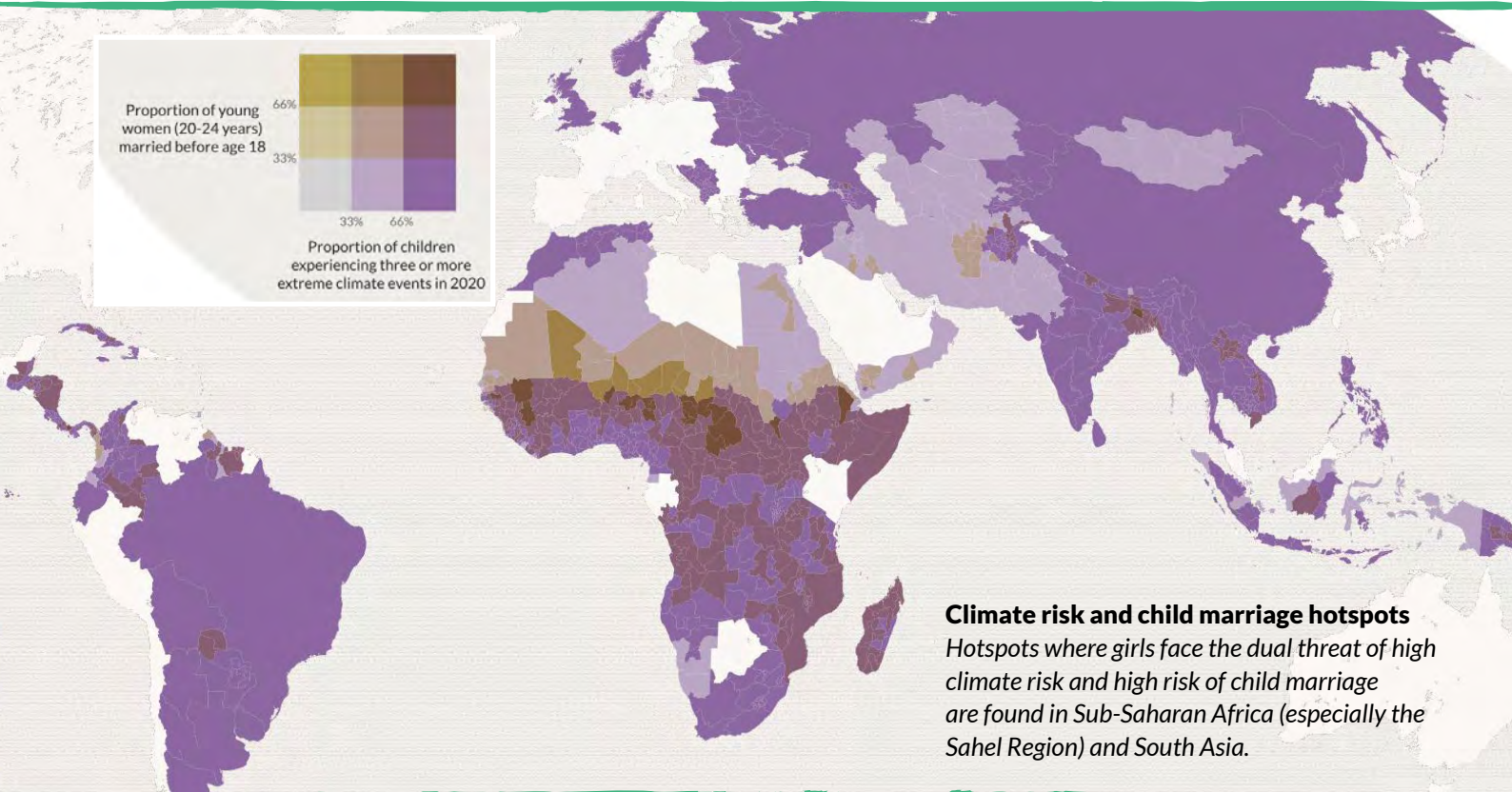
Girls in many of the countries with the highest combined child marriage and climate risk are now struggling with the worst of the current hunger crisis.

The number of girls at high risk of extreme climate events and child marriage is set to increase. These hotspot countries have some of the youngest and fastest growing populations in the world. **The number of girls growing up in the top 10 hotspots is expected to increase by 2.3 million from 29.9 million to 32.2 million by 2030.** By 2050, the number of girls growing up in these hotspots will be 39.9 million, an increase of one-third. Living with this dual threat will be a reality for many more girls.

10 global hotspots for climate change and child marriage

- ⇒ Bangladesh
- ⇒ Burkina Faso
- ⇒ Central African Republic
- ⇒ Chad
- ⇒ Guinea
- ⇒ Malawi
- ⇒ Mali
- ⇒ Mozambique
- ⇒ Niger
- ⇒ South Sudan

ⁱⁱⁱOn average 80% of children experience at least one extreme climate event (like for example wildfires, crop failures, droughts, floods, heatwaves and cyclones) each year.



Climate risk and child marriage hotspots
Hotspots where girls face the dual threat of high climate risk and high risk of child marriage are found in Sub-Saharan Africa (especially the Sahel Region) and South Asia.

Recommendations

See more details on these recommendations at the [end of this report](#).

Girls and their communities can –

- 1 **Use this report to learn, form their own views and educate people** they know about girls' rights, gender inequality and how to disrupt the systems that are driving the climate and inequality crisis.
- 2 Work with other organisations to collectivise and **build girl-led movements for climate action**.
- 3 **Develop their own asks and demand action and accountability from leaders** at the local, national and global levels.
- 4 **Model behaviours and attitudes that challenge harmful gender norms, promote gender equality and reduce gender-based violence** by treating all people fairly and respectfully, engaging in conversations about the harmful impact of gender inequality and supporting girls' power to make a difference in efforts to address the climate crisis.

Governments, NGOs, the UN, businesses and wealthy individuals must –

- 1 **Recognise the climate crisis, including the current hunger crisis, as an emergency for girls' rights. Girls and their rights** must be at the centre of immediate action, as well as anticipatory action. (Anticipatory action refers to proactive planning based on the understanding that crises will become more common and severe as the planet continues to warm.)
- 2 **Accelerate efforts to end child marriage** to stop this abuse of girls' rights. Allow girls and the planet to access the benefits of educating girls, enabling them to make decisions about if, when and how many children they want to have and to strengthen policies for climate action, now and into the future.
- 3 **Make gender equality and protection from gender-based violence (including child marriage) central priorities in all responses and plans to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis**.
- 4 **Shock-proof the systems and services girls need** so that they work for girls, even in climate disasters, and are fit for a warming planet. For example, designing buildings in ways that are less impacted by flooding or heatwaves, and designing services to be accessible by phone or radio, to ensure they can still reach girls on the move or during crises.
- 5 **Support girls' agency and autonomous feminist movements**, including those led by girls – starting by asking girls what they need.
- 6 **Unlock financing to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fund urgent climate action** by making the global financing system work for everyone. This means ensuring wealthy countries pay their fair share so lower income countries can afford to invest in girls and safeguard progress against climate shocks.

- 7 **Urgently scale-up gender- and child-responsive climate finance, with a particular focus on reaching girls and other groups of children most at risk.** This must be in addition to ODA (Official Development Assistance – also known as aid) and include payments for child-critical services to help adapt them to the changing climate and pay for losses and damages already caused by the climate crisis.¹⁵
- 8 **Increase research and data collection to ensure efforts to tackle the climate crisis and gender inequality are intersectional,** meaning that they take account of different experiences based on for example a person's gender, race, disability, indigeneity, or sexuality.

PP



My grandfather said his generation experienced flooding, but never like this. The river is now five metres wide and dangerous. When it starts to rain heavily and the river starts to flood, I know what to do and where to go for safety. But we cannot keep rebuilding each year after the rainy season.... We need global action to stop polluting the atmosphere and help to protect our world.

Corrinne, 17, Solomon Islands.




Cinderella sitting in the village church where they took cover during the devastating cyclone on New Year's Eve in 2018.

Photo: Collin Leafasia/Daily Mirror

Chapter 1:

The impacts of the climate crisis on girls, so far



Esther, 17, Climate Champion
photographed outside her home knocked
down during floods, Zomba, Malawi.

Photo: Chikondi/ Save the Children

BASEBALL

The climate crisis is a crisis for the planet, human rights and equality. And girls are particularly impacted.

Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane are increasing and trapping heat around the Earth. In the right amounts they create a protective blanket that keeps the planet at a stable and liveable temperature. But human activity – including burning fossil fuels like oil, gas and coal – has increased greenhouse gases so that the blanket is getting too thick, causing the Earth to get hotter. As the world heats up, the climate is changing, causing a crisis that includes extreme weather events like floods, heatwaves, storms and droughts, as well as increases in poverty and other harmful effects.¹⁶ Climate change also contributes to “slow onset events” that happen more gradually, such as sea level rise, ocean acidification and land degradation.¹⁷

High-income countries have been overwhelmingly responsible for the climate crisis. The richest 1% of countries were responsible for 23% of global carbon dioxide emissions while the bottom 50% of countries were responsible for just 16% between 1990-2019 alone.¹⁸ This imbalance and lack of accountability from high-income countries is part of a long story of injustices and inequality shaped by the ongoing impacts of colonialism. Colonialism involves taking control of the leadership, resources and people of many countries, and committing many human rights abuses. Some of the ongoing impacts of colonialism can be seen in unfair trade relationships and international institutions that are dominated by higher-income countries. The results of colonialism can also be seen in the reality that those who have contributed the most to the climate crisis have been the least impacted, and girls in formerly or still colonised lower-income countries face the greatest challenges.

Young people will feel the effects of climate change more and more as they grow into adulthood; data suggests that a child born in 2020 is on average likely to experience nearly seven times as many heatwaves in their lifetimes as someone born in 1960, and over twice as many wildfires, crop failures, droughts and river floods.¹⁹ Yet, children and young people are rarely part of decision-making conversations on how to solve the climate crisis.

Between now and 2030 almost 60% of girls globally – that’s 931 million girls – will experience at least one extreme climate event. Analysis by Save the Children suggests that at least:²¹

50.4 million girls

will experience floods



23.5 million girls

will experience drought



239 million girls

will experience a heatwave



Girls must navigate the climate crisis on top of the gender- and age-related risks they already face in their everyday lives, such as lack of access to education, adolescent pregnancy, and forms of gender-based violence like child marriage. Girls who have been historically marginalised – such as girls with disabilities, girls living in poverty, Indigenous girls and girls living in conflict settings or who have been forced to leave their homes (displaced) – face additional barriers when it comes to surviving and thriving through climate change.

What is gender-based violence?

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 ideas or 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.²¹ Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence.

Case study: Drought, conflict, displacement, poverty and child marriage in Ethiopia



Asma, 14, grew up in a family of 12 and has lived in a displacement camp for 5 years. Asma remembers losing close family members during the conflict in her country, which forced her family to move from their home. Asma's family was then forced into poverty due to drought. As pastoralists, they were dependent on livestock for their income. When the family lost their livestock due to the conflict and drought, they had no income and struggled to access food and water.

When a wealthy older man approached Asma's parents and asked to marry her, her parents agreed due to their economic situation.

"Because he was a wealthier person than us, my parents advised me that if I got married to him my life would become better than theirs.

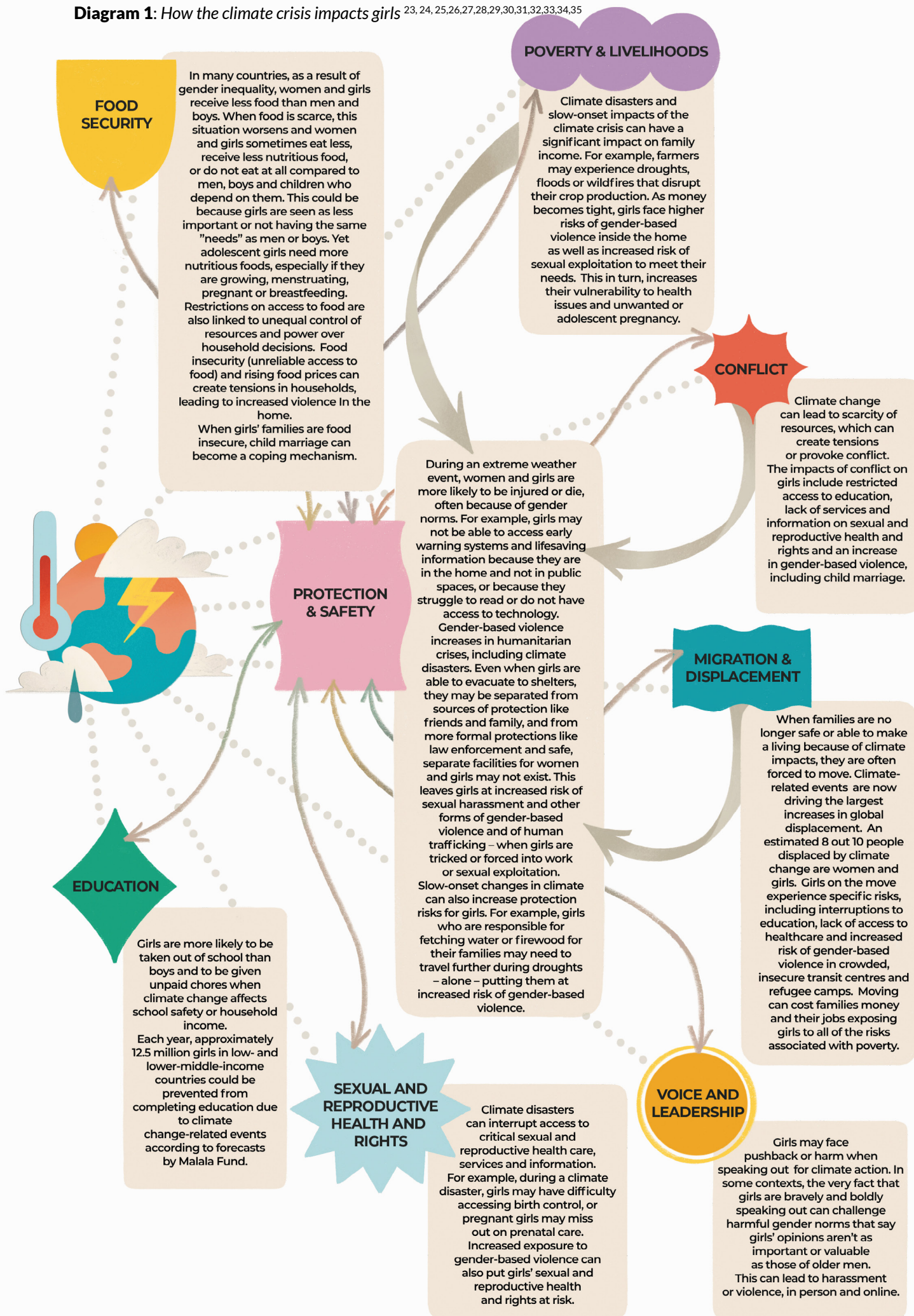
I told [my friends] that my parents wanted me to marry an older man. My friends told my teachers and then my teachers offered me advice. Eventually my teachers came to my parents and told them how I would be affected. They tried more than four times and finally my parents accepted [their recommendation]."

Asma, 14, photographed by Ethiopian photographer Mahader Haileselassie as part of a series of images showing the devastating impact extreme weather events like droughts can have on girls' lives and the children campaigning for change in their communities.

How the climate crisis impacts girls

The climate crisis is a threat multiplier, meaning it increases existing risks, threats, and inequalities.²² It presents a number of risks to girls' safety and wellbeing, known as protection risks, which can overlap and combine. The relationship between climate change and child marriage – which is a critical protection risk for girls – will be explored more in Chapter 2.

Diagram 1: How the climate crisis impacts girls ^{23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35}



66

Climate change is making people impoverished. Child marriage is taking place. Their beautiful dreams are being shattered.

Smriti, 15-year-old girl, Bangladesh.³⁶

Global (in)action for girls on climate change

Scientists predict that, if the global community does not take action to address the climate crisis, the Earth's temperatures will rise by 2.9 °C by the year 2100.³⁷ Rising temperatures are already causing more harmful events like floods, landslides, droughts, wildfires, crop failures, and heatwaves. Scientists agree that a global rise of just 2°C would cause catastrophic damage. To prevent these extreme weather impacts, governments, businesses, and individuals must work together to stop the temperature from rising.

The Paris Agreement and National Climate Plans

In 2015, 196 governments signed on to the Paris Agreement, an international treaty that aims to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 °C. The Paris Agreement also acknowledges that governments should promote gender equality while taking action on climate change.³⁸

However, girls are not specifically mentioned anywhere in this document.

To achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement, countries must submit climate action plans called nationally determined contributions (NDCs) every five years. NDCs outline how governments will reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Around 75% of NDCs reference gender equality,³⁹ but less than 2 percent specifically mention girls.⁴⁰ National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) are another tool that governments develop to address climate change, though NAPs are more focused on resilience and adaption to climate change impacts already happening within their countries, instead of plans for reduction of emissions, like NDCs.⁴¹

COP climate negotiations

Conference of the Parties (COP) sessions are another forum for global action where governments that are party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) come together to review progress and make decisions towards addressing the climate crisis. The importance of gender equality has

become more and more visible at COPs, however this visibility is usually limited to the role of women in climate action, and does not address girls.⁴² For example, the Gender Action Plan adopted at COP23 in 2017 stressed the importance of women's participation in climate action, but neither girls nor measures that take age into account are mentioned.⁴³ An updated Gender Action Plan at COP25 only mentions girls in relation to increasing their involvement in science and technology, so that they can contribute to climate solutions.⁴⁴

In 2022, leaders at COP27 agreed to create a Loss and Damage Fund. Loss and damage refers to the negative impacts of climate change that cannot be avoided through mitigation or adaption efforts, sometimes meaning impacts that have already occurred. These can include monetary losses or losses that we can't assign value to, such as loss of biodiversity or trauma following a climate disaster.⁴⁵ This is especially relevant for girls living in countries facing the worst impacts of the climate crisis, as these girls may have experienced the death or injury of family members, damage to their family's property, loss of their parents' income, or forced displacement due to climate change. COP27 leaders agreed to establish a Loss and Damage Fund to help those most impacted by climate change rebuild their lives and help their communities recover. These leaders agreed that the meaningful participation of girls and other children must inform the Loss and Damage fund.

Climate finance

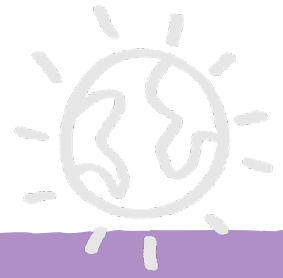
When it comes to money being spent on the climate crisis, girls are most often considered a "vulnerable group" rather than agents of change.⁴⁶ Yet girls and other groups of children who face discrimination and inequality are meaningfully considered in less than 4% of projects supported by four of the major multilateral climate change funds.⁴⁷ Even though global climate processes do not uplift girls' voices and priorities, girls have the right to be heard,⁴⁸ and they are already making positive change in their communities and countries.



Chapter 2:

Child marriage and the climate crisis





Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence and a human rights violation.

Progress to end child marriage was uneven before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the girls most impacted by poverty, inequality and discrimination were most at risk. Now, four C's – conflict, COVID-19, the climate emergency and rising cost of living – are combining to further increase challenges for girls, undermining their right to choose if, when and whom to marry. In 2015, all countries committed to end child marriage by 2030. Save the Children estimates that based on current rates of progress, of the 414 million girls who should complete primary school between now and the SDG deadline, 67 million will marry before their 18th birthday.⁴⁹

New analysis by Save the Children shows **that globally almost 9 million girls face extreme risk of climate disasters and child marriage every year.**⁵⁰ It shows that around **two-thirds of child marriages happen in regions with higher-than-average climate risks.**^{iv}

The combination of climate risk and child marriage has created emergency hotspots for girls' rights in Bangladesh and across sub-Saharan Africa. These countries are not just affected by severe and frequent climate disasters but in many cases conflict, high levels of poverty and gender inequality.

Girls in many of the hotspot countries are now struggling with the worst of the current hunger crisis.

The number of girls at high risk of extreme climate events and child marriage is set to increase. These hotspot countries have some of the youngest and fastest growing populations in the world. **The number of girls growing up in the top 10 hotspots is expected to increase by 2.3 million from 29.9 million to 32.2 million by 2030. By 2050, the number of girls in these hotspots will be 39.9 million, an increase of one-third. Living with this dual threat will be a reality for many more girls.**

10 global hotspots for climate change and child marriageⁱ

- ⇒ Bangladesh
- ⇒ Burkina Faso
- ⇒ Central African Republic
- ⇒ Chad
- ⇒ Guinea
- ⇒ Malawi
- ⇒ Mali
- ⇒ Mozambique
- ⇒ Niger
- ⇒ South Sudan

^{iv}On average 80% of children experience at least one extreme climate event (like for example wild fires, crop failures, droughts, floods, heatwaves and cyclones) each year.

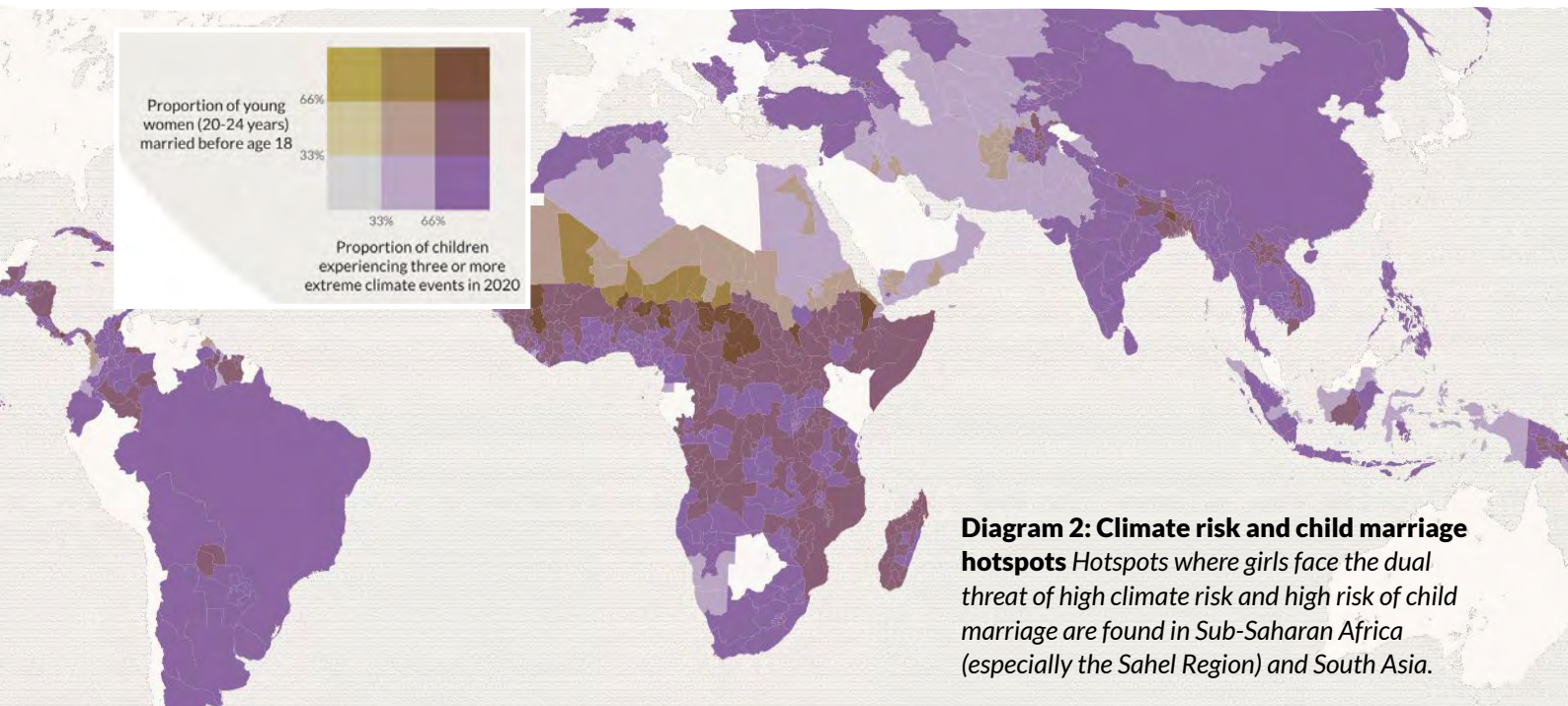
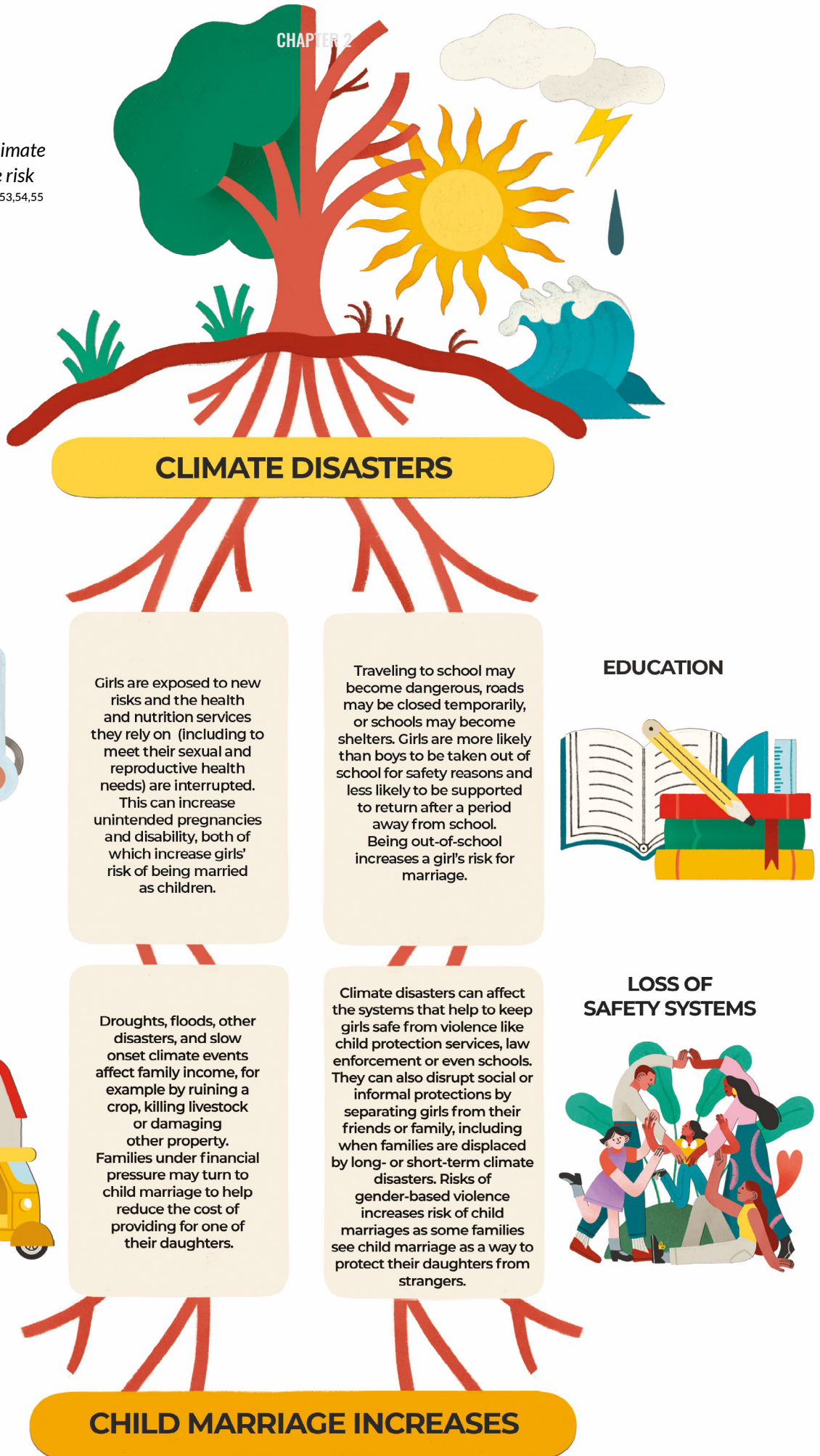


Diagram 3:
How the impacts of climate disasters can increase risk of child marriage ^{51,52,53,54,55}



From crisis to marriage: Evidence from around the world

National data on child marriage is usually only collected every 2-4 years (data from some countries has not been collected since 2006).⁵⁶ Information about the immediate impacts of a climate disaster on child marriage can be hard to measure and often comes from smaller rapid assessments or studies.⁵⁷ Collecting data on child marriage takes time, expertise and funding, and it was severely impacted by COVID-19. Humanitarian settings and conflict zones have additional barriers that complicate data collection.

However, the data that we do have provides clear evidence that climate disasters and the long-term and slow onset impacts of the climate crisis can increase risk factors for child marriage (see Diagram 3).⁵⁸ Floods, heatwaves, cyclones and droughts have all been linked to increases in child marriage. A recent review of related research conducted between 1990 and 2022 showed that the majority of studies found links between climate disasters and an increase in child marriage. But this was not always the case. Different factors including norms, costs and financial benefits associated with marriage impacted how likely communities were to turn to child marriage following a disaster.⁵⁹ Analysis of historical data shows that a 10% increase or decrease in rainfall is associated with a 1% increase in child marriage, globally.⁶⁰ This part of the report looks at examples of increases in child marriage taken from countries facing the current hunger crisis and a range of climate disasters including floods, droughts and cyclones.



Spotlight: Child marriage and the hunger crisis

The world is currently grappling with a worsening hunger crisis, the size and severity of which has not been seen before. At least 345 million people across 82 countries are facing or at risk of acute food insecurity, and 49 million are on the brink of starvation.⁶¹ The ongoing economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine has led to higher food prices, leaving families struggling to afford basic needs. The types of food adolescent girls need to stay healthy are often more expensive (for example, meat and nuts to support growth and increased needs due to menstruation) making high food prices particularly problematic, especially for girls who are pregnant or breastfeeding.⁶²

Child marriage has been used to respond to loss of income or food shortages in many parts of the world, either because of payments linked to marriage (like bride-price or dowry), or simply to make sure that a different family is responsible for covering the costs of food and care for a girl.⁶³

PP

I was pressured to get married when I was 15 years old because we were starving at home...girls think that by getting married their living conditions will improve ...but not always ...everything depends on luck...

Young woman, 22, Mozambique.⁶⁴

PP

Sometimes we did not have a meal all day and slept without eating.

Girl, 14, Madagascar.⁶⁵

PP

We have been up to four to five days without eating, because it is expensive.

Girl, 9, from Honduras living in Mexico.⁶⁶

PP

Due to climate change, parents are losing their only source of livelihoods, which is livestock, and they are committing suicide. Children are left as orphans and they may die due to hunger.

Girl, 17, Kenya.⁶⁷



The **Horn of Africa** in the eastern part of the African continent has been the most severely affected by the current crisis and evidence of increasing child marriages is emerging.



- * In parts of Ethiopia worst hit by drought and food shortages, **rates of child marriage rose by 119%** in 2022 compared to 2021.⁶⁸
- * Nearly **1 in 4 people** interviewed in Somaliland reported a **rise in gender-based violence** – including child marriage, domestic violence and sexual violence – following the extended drought, with **increases of more than 50%** in some locations.⁶⁹
- * In Zimbabwe, there have been recent reports of **girls initiating their own marriages** in the hope of increasing their access to food.⁷⁰
- * UNICEF estimates that **female genital cutting/mutilation** – sometimes considered a requirement for child marriage – **has increased by as much as 27%** in areas worst affected by the current food crisis.⁷¹



PP

I left our house because my mother died and my father wanted to give me out for marriage, so I ran away and right now, I have no support, so I work in people's houses so that I can eat.

Girl, 13–17, South Sudan.⁷²

The **Central Sahel** region (including Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) faces conflict, poverty and the world's highest rates of child marriage. It was also heavily financially affected by COVID-19 lockdown measures.⁷³ The Central Sahel experienced the worst of its current hunger crisis in 2022. This followed an unpredictable rainy season in 2021 that harmed crops and combined with rising food and fertiliser prices as a result of the war in Ukraine, which has affected international grain supplies.⁷⁴ Long-term instability and heavy reliance on rain for crops and farming practices means even slight shifts in rainfall – droughts or floods – can devastate food supplies in these countries.⁷⁵

Save the Children found that in Burkina Faso and Niger, this combination of challenges is pushing more families who don't have access to food to give their girls away to marriage in order to alleviate the burden.⁷⁶



- ⇒ Parents described feelings of shame and failure at not being able to provide for their children and being forced to consider child marriage. One said, “marriage is an opportunity to free your child. In a way, it's one less person to feed.”
- ⇒ 1 in 4 people responding to the study from both countries reported increases in child marriages due to the hunger crisis.
- ⇒ 11% of respondents in Burkina Faso and 34% in Niger said that they believed it was right for parents to give their daughters up for marriage when they had difficulty feeding their family.

Spotlight: Child marriage as a response to poverty and climate change in Bangladesh and Pakistan



South Asia is responsible for the greatest reduction in child marriage globally but is still home to the highest number of women and girls married as children. Bangladesh still has one of the highest rates of child marriage (51%) in the world.⁷⁷ While Pakistan has halved the rate of child marriages over the last two decades, its population size means that it still has the 6th highest number of girls married before 18 globally. Girls in both countries have long been exposed to some of the worst impacts of the climate crisis – including climate disasters and slow onset impacts. There is a clear overlap in the countries and regions most affected by the climate crisis, and the areas facing the highest risks of poverty, inequality and child marriage.

In Bangladesh, higher numbers of dry months are associated with an increased risk of child marriage in rural areas most reliant on farming, with the worst impacts in the areas with the lowest levels of income.⁷⁸ A 2020 study found girls aged 11-14 were twice as likely to marry in years following extreme heat. In the five years following 2007 cyclone Sidr, 62% of all child marriages occurred

within the first year of recovery.⁷⁹ 4.5 million children live in coastal areas in Bangladesh that are regularly struck by powerful cyclones, these include almost half a million Rohingya refugee children at even greater risk due to risks linked to life in settlement camps.⁸⁰

In Pakistan rates of child marriage for girls aged 15-17 increased from 10.7% to 16% following floods in 2010.⁸¹ In 2022, flooding across the country covered one-third of the land area and claimed the lives of at least 528 children.⁸² Women suffered notable losses to their livelihoods, negative impacts on their economic empowerment and increased vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV) related to displacement and lack of secure infrastructure. An estimated 640,000 adolescent girls were vulnerable and at increased risk of coercions, GBV, and child marriage.⁸³ These floods also triggered food shortages, loss of income and price rises, forcing many families to seek shelter in camps, creating many of the circumstances known to increase risk factors for child marriage.⁸⁴





Case study: Kuji and Kpemeh – Cousins and champions for ending child marriage in the changing Sierra Leonean climate

19-year-old Kuji's life became difficult after the death of her father when she was just 9 years old. Without his support Kuji had to drop out of school and when she was 15 years old she became pregnant. Determined to pursue her education, Kuji took on manual labouring jobs and collected firewood to sell in order to pay for her own school fees and resume her education.

Kuji's cousin, Kpemeh was also forced to leave school early. When Kpemeh was just 12 years old, a man expressed his interest in marrying her. As subsistence farmers, her parents felt financial pressure, and agreed to the marriage. Kpemeh resisted the marriage for the next three years. Eventually she was forced to move to another village to seek support from her relatives, including her cousin, Kuji.

"I said if you are planning a marriage for my cousin then I am going to report you. And my elder sister urged me not to say anything to avoid family dispute, and I said I don't even care..."

Cousins Kpemeh, 18, and Kuji, 19, walk hand in hand in Kailahun, Sierra Leone.

Photo: Shona Hamilton/GCCU Save the Children.

"I vowed to fight for her."

Thanks to Kuji, the case was reported to the village chief, the marriage was stopped and Kpemeh was able to go back to school. Now the cousins are close friends and do everything together, including advocating to end child marriage in their community.

Kuji and Kpemeh's stories show how poverty and financial shocks – including due to climate change - increase risks for girls. Kpemeh sees how climate change is impacting girls' access to education and power to make decisions about their own lives.

"The climate has changed and our parents rely on farming. Rain does not fall when it is supposed to fall... Plants are destroyed... Because our families are poor, if this situation persists it could hinder our schooling. Because poverty will stop you from going to school."

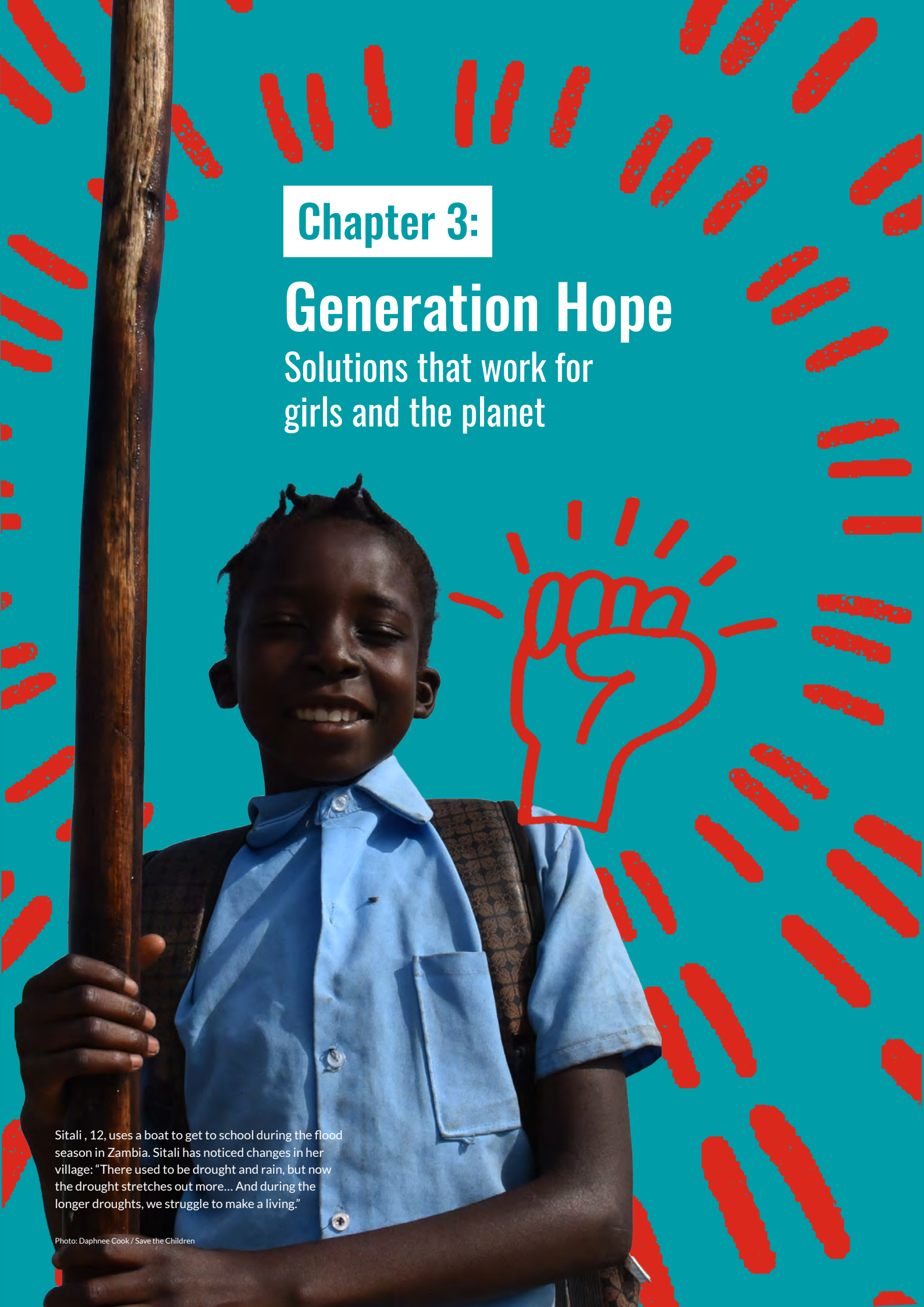
Kuji, 19, studies at home with her 3-year-old son in Kailahun, Sierra Leone.

Photo: Shona Hamilton/GCCU Save the Children.

Chapter 3:

Generation Hope

Solutions that work for
girls and the planet



Sitali, 12, uses a boat to get to school during the flood season in Zambia. Sitali has noticed changes in her village: "There used to be drought and rain, but now the drought stretches out more... And during the longer droughts, we struggle to make a living."

World leaders have known about the growing climate crisis for decades, including the need to rapidly reduce (or end) activities that contribute to warming the planet and increase funding for solutions. This chapter focusses on three ways to respond to the specific impacts of the climate crisis on girls and work toward gender equality as a form of climate action.

1

Making gender equality and protection from gender-based violence central priorities in climate action

The climate crisis is not just a threat multiplier for girls - it is also an inequality multiplier. By increasing the threats and inequalities that girls already face, the climate crisis is putting what progress has been made toward gender equality in peril. Responses to the climate crisis must consider how girls are impacted and the increased risks of gender-based violence that they now face, particularly during climate disasters. This should include:

⇒ Prioritising programming that promotes girls' rights and addresses gender-based violence.

Ending gender-based violence will require a change to the social norms that allow gender-based violence; ideas that give men and boys power over women, girls and people who don't look or act in line with strict ideas about what is normal for a man, woman, boy or girl. Programmes for girls' empowerment like Save the Children's Girls' Decide! curriculum⁸⁵ can help change these social norms and be adapted for use through climate disasters. This curriculum is designed for 'girls on the move' including girls who have left their homes in response to the climate crisis.⁸⁶

⇒ Urgently and drastically scaling up child-responsive climate finance with a focus on girls.

Girls and their needs must be included in local, national, regional and global plans to address the climate crisis. Support for climate finance from high-income countries must be increased.⁸⁷ Countries needing support could be encouraged to

consider girls in their climate plans by requiring all climate finance project proposal to show that they have taken gender equality and children's rights into account to qualify for support.⁸⁸

⇒ Upholding the principle of 'centrality of protection' and consulting directly with girls on climate change and in times of crisis. Centrality of protection means ensuring that protection from violence and other harm is at the heart of all humanitarian responses.⁸⁹ Gender-based violence increases in humanitarian crises, including climate disasters, yet girls remain the least funded priority for protection.⁹⁰ Funding targets are rarely met and often set too low because women and girls have not been included in discussions about what they need.⁹¹ Every humanitarian response plan should consult with girls and fund their needs.



Lucy, 12, a Mayan girl, was affected a year ago by Eta & Iota storms which lost her family's harvest and partially destroyed their home in Cunen, Quiche, Guatemala.

Photo: Beatriz Bejarano / Save the Children

2

Investment in anticipatory action to shock-proof the systems and services girls need

The services that girls need to learn, be healthy and stay safe are often interrupted during climate disasters, just when they need these services the most. As the long-term impacts of the climate crisis worsen and climate disasters become more common, the services girls need must adapt to provide support in a less predictable world. This requires ‘anticipatory action’ – proactive steps to reduce the impacts of threats like climate disasters, extreme weather events and slow onset impacts of the climate crisis before they happen or get worse. Anticipatory action to support girls in the climate crisis should include:

⇒ **Increasing investment in child-centred adaptation with attention to the services that are most important for girls.** Changes may need to be made to schools, hospitals, roads, public transport and water, sanitation and hygiene facilities to cope with the changing climate. This might mean changing buildings so they are less easily damaged by flooding or being better prepared for disasters with online, remote or mobile services. Making sure that schools continue to operate in some form through disasters is particularly important for girls as they are less likely to return than boys after a temporary closure.⁹² Some services like sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence response services are also more heavily relied on by girls, so girls are worst affected when these services are interrupted. For more examples you can read [Child-Centred Adaptation: Realising children’s rights in a changing climate](#).

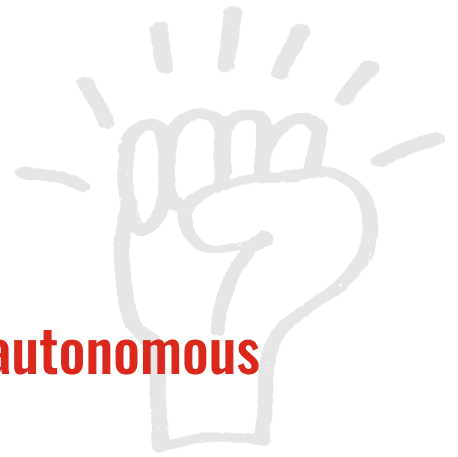
⇒ **Making sure no girl goes hungry.** The many impacts of food insecurity on girls – from increased risk of malnutrition and starvation to loss of education and exposure to gender-based violence – make ensuring access to food a critical priority for girl-centred climate action. Food systems – everything that’s related to the food people eat, from how the crops grow to how they’re farmed and transported and sold – are often impacted by climate disasters. Anticipatory action is critical to adapt these systems as the climate changes and lessen reliance on just a few parts of the world to provide important foods like grains so that disasters that affect particular areas cannot create food shortages, like those we are seeing now.

⇒ **Supporting families financially through climate and economic shocks.** In many countries, governments provide payments to help families afford essentials like food, school, clothing, housing and healthcare (sometimes called ‘social protection’ or ‘child’ or ‘family’ benefits when it is intended for children). These sorts of payments are critical to reduce the impacts of the climate crisis and should be available and able to be increased after a family experiences a loss in income or resources, like crops or property following a climate disaster (shock-responsive). These payments must take into account the needs of children (be child-sensitive), people with disabilities (be disability inclusive) and how gender inequality could affect these payments (be gender responsive). Despite its importance, only 1 in 4 children around the world is supported by social protection.⁹³ 1.77 billion children and their families receive no child or family benefits.⁹⁴



3

Supporting girls as decision-makers and autonomous feminist movements



Research has shown that women in leadership are more likely than men to prioritise environmental concerns, social welfare, inclusion and community well-being when making decisions.⁹⁵ These are the kinds of considerations that are critical to tackling the climate and inequality crisis. A 2019 study found that parliaments with better representation of women created stricter climate policies resulting in lower carbon emissions and further research has found that engaging women in decisions about how land and natural resources are used at the local level results in better environmental management.⁹⁶

Girls do not have to wait until they grow up to influence climate policy. They have a right to have their views given “due weight in all decisions that affect them” under international human rights law.⁹⁷ In 2022, Save the Children heard from 58,035 children in 46 countries, and many of those girls and other children were already advocating for climate action. They told us about changing weather in their communities, increasing child marriages, inequalities between high- and low-income countries and the need for more, urgent action.⁹⁸ Girls are the experts in their own lives and the best placed to tell policymakers what they need. Girls participating effectively in decision-making and holding leaders accountable might look like:

- **Governments establishing safe, meaningful and inclusive child-friendly mechanisms for decision-making, both on and offline.** Save the Children has published guidance on how to make global decision-making processes accountable to girls ([see here](#)) and how to make COP Climate Summits fit-for children.⁹⁹
- **Investing in accessible, inclusive education and child-friendly resources.** Girls must be able to understand, question and seek out information. Save the Children has included developing and sharing child-friendly research like this report in its commitments to the Generation Equality campaign.¹⁰⁰

- **Creating the time, space, and safe and inclusive environment needed to work with one another and build movements for change.** Girls need to feel safe to speak out at home, in their communities, online and in front of powerful institutions like parliaments and have safe places to share ideas with each other.



Patricia, 10, and her friends with their new school bags on the way home after a cyclone in Madagascar.

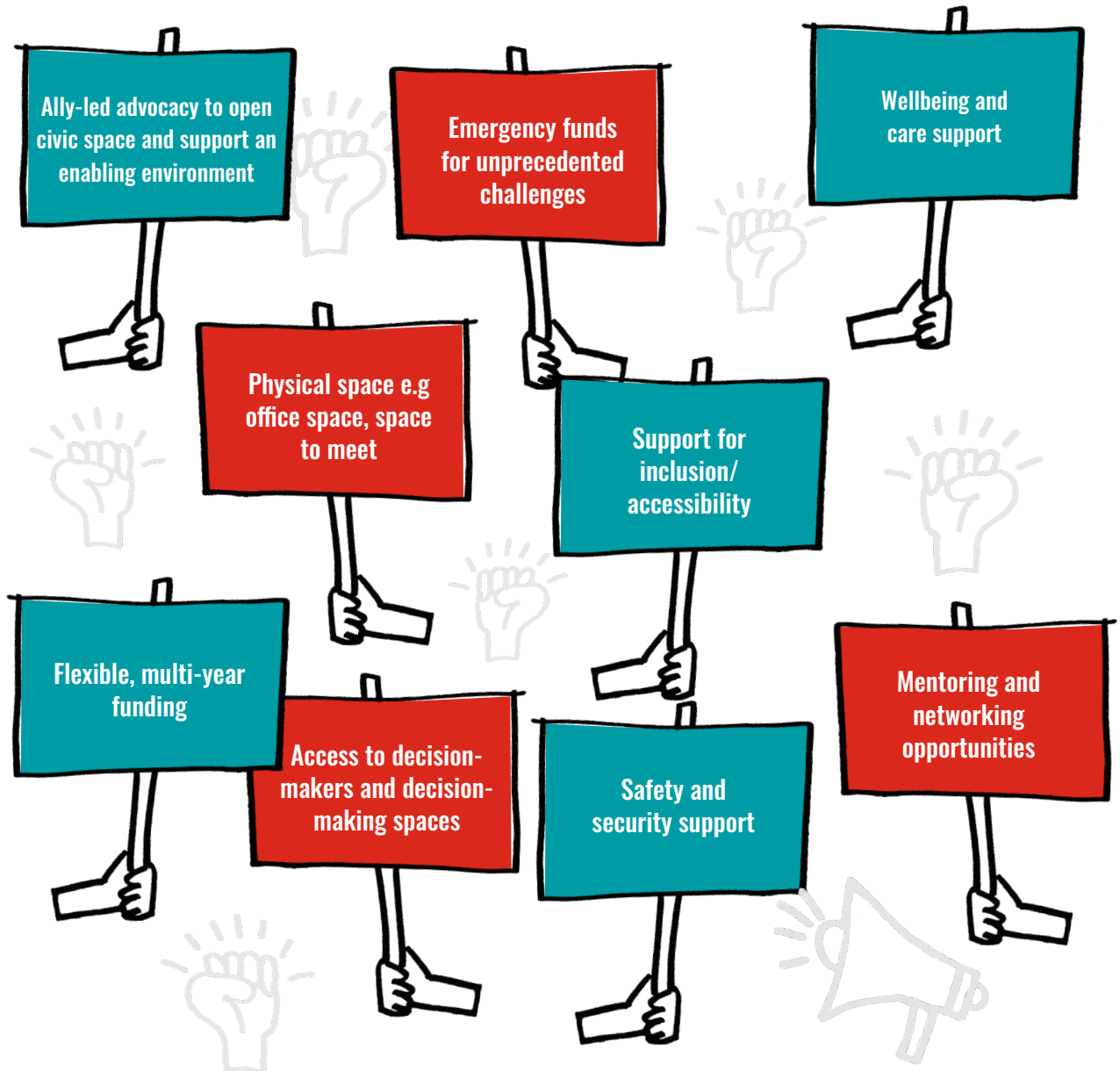
Photo: Ny Antsa Tafaraso/Save the Children

Girl-led movements

A study of 70 countries over 40 years found that autonomous feminist movements (meaning shared action to create change for gender equality led by individuals and groups independent of government) were the key factor in a country introducing policy protections for violence against women and children.¹⁰¹ The leaders and drivers of these movements are both women and girls.

Growing recognition of the importance of investing in girl-led movements is not matched by financial support. In 2022, Save the Children worked with independent experts and a girl-reference group to develop a toolkit on how to support girl-led movements.

Diagram 4: The support girl advocates told Save the Children they want.



Spotlight: Education – Girls’ greatest power in the fight against the climate crisis



Education is every girl’s right. It builds problem solving and negotiation skills, and the ability to find and question information required to influence decision-makers.¹⁰² It also helps keep girls and their communities safe. Nations that put resources into girls’ education have lower deaths from droughts and floods compared to countries that have invested less.¹⁰³ Studies estimate that increased investment in girls’ education in lower income countries between 1960 and 2003 could have resulted in the rescue of 465 million people from injuries, shielded 667 million people from droughts and prevented 60,000 deaths caused by floods.¹⁰⁴

Girls’ education is essential to contribute to better outcomes for the planet. Since child marriage can be both a cause and a consequence

of girls being out-of-school, ending child marriage is a critical part of the fight against climate change, and to support girls to realise their right to education.



I have to work, and most of the time its tasks like carrying bricks and stones, or to cut grass for farmers to feed their animals. I get about 1500 BIF per day (50 US cents). I work from 5am until 6pm in the evening... My dream is to go back to school and gain knowledge.

Annabelle, 17, Burundi.



Annabelle, 17, and her family lost her home in a landslide in Burundi.

Photo: Daphnee Cook / Save the Children

Case studies: Girls leading climate action



Supporting environmental causes through entrepreneurship in Bolivia

Senobia saw the impacts of climate change and began looking for solutions at 7 years old, when her family's and community's potato crops began to fail due to drought. Now 23, she continues to support environmental causes in her community.

Senobia established the first ice cream parlour in Bolivia to be ecologically certified by the National Service of Agricultural Health and Food Safety. She buys natural products from women in her community, uses biodegradable packaging, and trains and employs single mothers and others with limited resources and opportunities. She also works with more than 400 community members on tree planting initiatives. "I feel committed to the environment and to the communities with which we work," she says. "It is a principle of life."

Senobia uses her business to support environmental action.

Photo: Leticia Romero/CEMSE



In Vanuatu, girls bear the brunt of climate disasters¹⁰⁵

In Vanuatu, girls are one of the groups most impacted by climate induced disasters. In early 2023, two major tropical cyclones hit this Pacific archipelago of more than 80 islands, devastating homes, schools and communities. Children - one-third of the population - were the most affected group and girls carried the disproportionate weight of the recovery process. Social attitudes and cultural norms towards gender heavily influenced labour roles of the building and recovery process.

Cleaning tasks often fell to girls, particularly in communities where fathers and mothers were away on overseas seasonal work, leaving single caregivers and children to rebuild on their own. Lack of water and sanitation effected health outcomes for girls and heightened child protection issues. The costs of rebuilding diverted family funds from basic needs at the expense of education costs such as school fees and access.

As one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change, Vanuatu is also considered a leader in innovative climate policies and continues to advocate to global leaders to continue their support to secure strong, healthy and safe futures for girls, and children as a whole.

Rachel, a 15-year-old climate campaigner, in front of her family's house that was badly damaged during the tropical cyclones - Judy and Kevin - that hit Vanuatu in March 2023.

Photo: Damian Mobbs/Save the Children





Speaking on the climate crisis and inequality in Gaza

Sara, 15, loves nature and has a dream of being a Minister of Environment when she's older. She hasn't had access to green space at her home in Gaza and believes in increasing green space for people living in remote areas. She also sees the impact of the climate crisis on her life and community in Gaza as a lack and abundance of rain affects crops and agriculture.

Sara has been part of empowerment sessions run by Save the Children's partner - Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR)- and took part in the Save the Children child hearing for the Generation Hope Campaign in May 2022, where she spoke up about the climate crisis and inequality. During this hearing, Sara shared her opinions to make sure that children's views and demands are heard by decision-makers, because "we share this world, adults and children."

Sara, 15, lives in a refugee camp in Gaza, occupied Palestinian territory. Sara loves nature and has a dream of being a Minister of Environment when she's older.

Photo: Mohammed Nayef / Save the Children.



Recommendations

Girls, their communities, governments and non-government organisations (NGOs), the United Nations (UN), businesses and wealthy individuals all have the power to help tackle the climate crisis and achieve gender equality. Governments have a duty to ensure the human rights of people living in their countries, while NGOs, UN agencies, businesses and wealthy individuals have a role in pushing governments to fulfil their promises and support their efforts.

Girls and their communities can –

- 1 **Use this report to learn, form their own views and educate people** they know about girls' rights, gender inequality and how they relate to the climate crisis.
- 2 Get support from youth-led organizations, feminist women's rights organizations, and other NGOs to **collectivise and build girl-led movements for climate action**.
- 3 **Develop their own asks and demand action and accountability from leaders** at the local, national and global levels. This could include calling on governments to fulfil commitments they have already made under the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, or any of the recommendations set out below. [See our lobbying toolkit for Generation Equality](#) as an example of how to advocate to decision-makers.
- 4 **Model behaviours and attitudes that challenge harmful gender norms, promote gender equality and reduce gender-based violence** by treating all people fairly and respectfully, engaging in conversations about the harmful impact of gender inequality and supporting girls' power to make a difference in efforts to address the climate crisis.

Governments, NGOs, the UN, businesses and wealthy individuals must –

- 1 **Recognise the linked climate and hunger crises as emergencies for girls' rights.** Girls and their rights must be at the centre of immediate action, as well as anticipatory action (anticipatory action refers to proactive planning based on the understanding that crises will become more common and severe as the planet continues to warm). [See *Dangerous Delay 2: The Cost of Inaction*](#) for details.
- 2 **Accelerate efforts to end child marriage** to stop this abuse of girls' rights. Girls must be allowed to access the benefits of education, be empowered to make decisions about if, when and how many children they want to have and to strengthen policies for climate action, now and into the future. [See our *Technical Guidance on Preventing and Responding to Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions*](#).
- 3 **Make gender equality and safety from gender-based violence top priorities in all responses and plans to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis by:**
 - a. Working to shift the harmful gender norms that allow gender-based violence like child marriage. This includes investment in girls' empowerment by working with girls, their families, and communities and to change the laws and policies that run their countries.
 - b. Specifically including girls in local, national, regional and global plans to address the climate crisis. [See for example *A COP Fit for Children: How to Support Children's Participation*](#), and [Making Generation Equality Accountable to Girls](#).
 - c. Increasing funding and efforts to address gender-based violence against girls, including through funding child protection in humanitarian crises.
- 4 **Shock-proof the systems and services girls need** – including child protection, gender-based violence, education and sexual and reproductive health services, as well as social protection and food systems - so that they work for girls through climate disasters and are fit for a warming planet.
- 5 **Support girls' agency and autonomous feminist movements**, including those led by girls, by:

- a. Ensuring child-friendly information about policy issues that affect girls (like this report) is available, including in local languages and in ways that are accessible to girls with disabilities.
- b. Making sure that girls, in all of their diversity, have safe, meaningful access to policy-making processes and ways to hold governments accountable for girls' rights and climate action at the local, national, regional and global levels, including all future COP Climate Summits.
- c. Finding new ways to work with and provide funding to girl-led groups, including in places affected by climate and other humanitarian disasters. See our [Girl-led Movement Building Toolkit](#).

6

Unlock financing to deliver the SDGs and fund urgent climate action by making the global financing system work for everyone. The SDGs and COP processes provide the best roadmap we have for addressing the climate and inequality crisis but without financing for delivery they are empty promises. We must strengthen global tax and debt systems and policies to ensure the wealthy pay a fair share and lower-income countries can access affordable lending to drive and safeguard progress against climate shocks.

7

Urgently scale-up child-responsive climate finance, with a particular focus on reaching girls and other groups of children most at risk. This must be in addition to official development assistance and include payments for child-critical services, to help adapt them to the changing climate and payments for losses and damages already caused by the climate crisis. See detailed recommendations on how to do this in [Falling Short: Addressing the Climate Gap for Children](#).

8

Support research and evidence-based action to ensure efforts to tackle the climate crisis and gender inequality are intersectional (meaning they take account of different experiences based on for example a person's gender, sexuality, disability and race). This requires:

- a. Investment in more frequent data collection.
- b. Attention to the historical and ongoing injustices that have contributed to both climate change and gender inequality.
- c. Funding research on the experiences of girls most impacted by inequality and discrimination including those growing up in low-income households, hotspots for child marriage and climate change, those with disabilities, those who are LGBTQ+, those who are displaced, from indigenous communities, married, widowed or divorced.¹⁰⁶



Samia, 12, lives in an IDP camp with her mother and siblings in Somalia due to intense drought forcing them to leave their home behind.

Photo Credit Delfhin Mugo/ Save the Children

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Achol, 13, now lives in a temporary shelter area after terrible flooding forced her and her family out of their home, Bor, South Sudan.

Photo: Charles Atiki Lomodong/Save the Children



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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