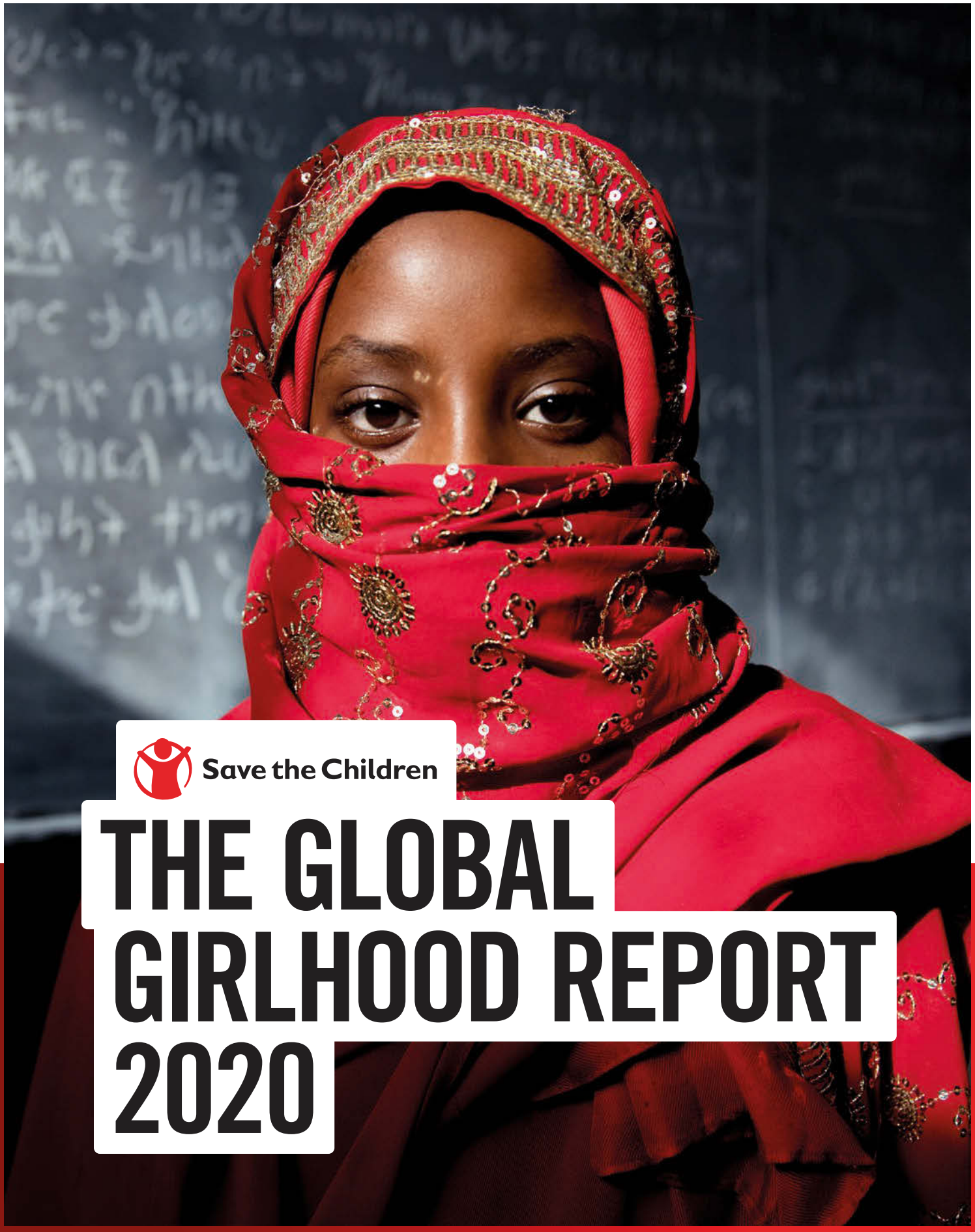

Save the Children

THE GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2020

How COVID-19 is putting progress in peril

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.

A note on the term 'girls'

This report uses the term 'girl' throughout to include children under 18 years who identify as girls and those who were assigned female sex at birth. The quantitative data in this report is based on sex rather than gender disaggregation, so the terms 'girl' and 'boy' will usually refer to children's sex without knowledge of their gender identity due to a lack of gender-disaggregated data and data on intersex children and adults globally. Children of all sexes and genders will identify with some of the experiences described in this report. The focus and terminology used is not intended to exclude or deny those experiences, but to contribute to understandings of gender inequality for all children, through examination of patterns and experiences shared based on sex and gender.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Gabrielle Szabo and Jess Edwards, with contributions and recommendations from girl advisers: Fernanda (in consultation with other members of adolescent network, RedPazMx), Krisha, Maya and Abena. We are also grateful to the many other girls who have shared experiences featured throughout the report and given permission to use their images.

Thank you to Chiara Orlassino for leading on data analysis and COVID-19 research, and to Oliver Fiala for his guidance and projections.

The report has benefited greatly from the expertise of colleagues across different thematic areas working for Save the Children's country, member and regional offices.

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

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Cover photo: Saada, age ten, goes to a girls' group at her school in Harar, Ethiopia. The group raises awareness in their community about issues girls face, including female genital mutilation, child marriage and feminine hygiene. (Photo: Hanna Adcock/Save the Children)

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PHOTO: JIRO OSE/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Salsa, 10, right, plays with a friend after school in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Salsa's home was destroyed by an earthquake. She and her family have been living in a temporary shelter made of plastic sheets.

Executive summary

2020 was supposed to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity for women and girls. The year when governments, businesses, organisations and individuals who believe in equal treatment for all people were going to develop a five-year plan for how to work together to accelerate progress for gender equality, in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Then COVID-19 struck. Now, 2020 risks being a year of irreversible setbacks and lost progress for girls. Unless the world acts fast and decisively, the impact on girls' futures – and on all our futures – will be devastating.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis hit, progress for girls on some issues was under threat. While girls' health, nutrition and access to education have improved over the last 25 years, even before the pandemic hit, progress to end child marriage and reduce adolescent pregnancy had slowed to a halt. Now, with reports of gender-based violence increasing across the world,[1] it is estimated that 9.7 million children may never return to school post-COVID.[2] And with the number of children living in poverty estimated to climb by around 100 million,[3] for girls today, gender equality feels further from reach than ever.[4]

Peer educator and campaigner against child marriage, Jasmin, 19 (pictured centre), with the group she set up in her village in Sylhet, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: TOM MERILLION/SAVE THE CHILDREN

COVID-19 IS EXPOSING AND EXACERBATING THE IMPACTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY

A dramatic surge in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy is anticipated, with up to an additional 2.5 million girls at risk of child marriage over five years and adolescent pregnancies expected to rise by up to 1 million in 2020, as a result of the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.* The greatest number of child marriages is expected in South Asia, followed by West and Central Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. The highest number of girls affected by the increasing risk of adolescent pregnancy are likely to be in East and Southern Africa, followed by West and Central Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Region†	Additional girls at risk of child marriage		Additional girls at risk of adolescent pregnancy
	1 year	*5 years*	*1 year*
East Asia and the Pacific	61,000	305,000	118,000
East and Southern Africa	31,600	158,000	282,000
Europe and Central Asia	37,200	186,000	53,000
Latin America and the Caribbean	73,400	367,000	181,000
Middle East and North Africa	14,400	72,000	7,000
South Asia	191,200	956,000	138,000
West and Central Africa	90,000	450,000	260,000
World	**498,000**	**2,490,000**	**1,041,000**

Note: Estimates are the upper limits of a range. They are, nevertheless, likely to be underestimates.

The impact of COVID-19 on girls' futures and dreams of achieving gender equality within their lifetimes depends on how the world chooses to act now. Decisions about how to respond to the pandemic will have lasting consequences. Champions for gender equality are still set to meet to design and commit to plans at two Generation Equality Forums, global conferences now scheduled for 2021. The plans they develop will set an agenda for fulfilling promises made under the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

That Declaration and Platform for Action, agreed 25 years ago, was the first international document to recognise the challenges and rights abuses faced by "the girl child", as well as her unique potential to drive positive change and promote gender equality and peace into the future. Today, that message remains decisive: the world's 1.3 billion girls are essential in building a stronger and more just future.

Girls are helping support each other and their communities through COVID-19. Now, the impact of the pandemic means they are even more critical in shaping the Generation Equality agenda.

Decision-makers today must act to protect a generation of girls from the worst impacts of COVID-19. And they must work with girls to shape both immediate responses and long-term reforms – so that girls are able to realise their rights and have opportunities to pursue the futures they choose.

* Follow this link to see our complete methodological note.

† Excluding high-income countries

HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the freedoms that every person has and needs to live a healthy life, be safe and achieve their potential. These include the right to be healthy, to get an education, to live free from violence, to be treated equally and, for children, to have their views considered in decisions that affect them. These rights are agreed to by governments and guaranteed by law.

Governments themselves are responsible for making sure all people in their country can enjoy their rights. Human rights laws are developed by governments and they are the ones responsible for making sure the laws are upheld.

Children's rights are recorded under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – read this children's version.

The rights of women and girls are highlighted under the UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Other population groups, including people with disabilities and indigenous peoples, have specific treaties that set out their rights. The treaties for children, women, people with disabilities and indigenous peoples address gaps in other human rights laws and seek to make sure no one is left behind.[5]

WHAT ARE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

In 2015, all governments promised to work together to improve the lives of people all over the world and fulfil their rights by 2030 by agreeing to a list of 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Gender equality and empowering all women and girls is one of these goals. And it's critical in helping to achieve the other Sustainable Development Goals. The goal of gender equality means closing gaps in access to opportunities and services between all men and women and boys and girls, including those with disabilities.[6] Its targets over the next ten years include:

- equitable access to sexual and reproductive health and rights
- equitable access to education
- ending harmful traditional practices like child marriage, female genital mutilation and other forms of gender-based violence
- improving women's political participation
- recognising the value of unpaid work.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS REPORT?

This report describes how girls' lives have improved since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was agreed. And it looks at the threat that the COVID-19 crisis now poses to that progress.

It is written both for policy-makers and for adolescent girls and other adolescents who are engaged in advocating for gender equality. It includes key statistics, definitions of important terms, multimedia content, girls' stories, examples of girl-led advocacy and art created by girls.

Girls were included in the writing and planning process. Members of a girls' advisory group have advised on what should be included and contributed written content for each chapter.*

25 YEARS OF PROGRESS, IN PERIL

Great progress has been made with and for girls since countries promised to work toward gender equality in 1995. Girls born today are twice as likely to survive beyond the age of five as girls in their mothers' generation, born 25 years ago. They are more likely to have the food they need to grow, learn, survive and thrive. The gender equality gap in access to education has almost closed. Before COVID-19, the number of girls engaged in child labour was shrinking, though only half as fast as the number of boys. **78.6 million child marriages have been prevented by progress to end the practice over the last 25 years.**†

But today that progress is in peril. And not just because of the COVID-19 crisis. Even before the pandemic, rates of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy were flatlining. Just two of the countries that collect data on child marriage were on track to end child marriage by 2030 for girls in the poorest households and those living in remote areas. And there are a lot of places where data is not collected. As a result, many girls who have been married or who are at risk of child marriage are uncounted.

PHOTO: JONATHAN HYAMS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Gerald and Xyril from the Philippines. Their family home was destroyed by a typhoon.

COVID-19 is putting hard-won progress for girls at risk and exacerbating existing inequalities. Given that young children are less likely to experience the most severe symptoms of COVID-19, the worst health impacts of the pandemic for girls might not result from infection with the virus. Instead, the greatest impacts on girls of the COVID-19 crisis are likely to be losing access to other health services, increasing poverty, food insecurity, losing access to education and being exposed to violence. Estimates suggest that 130 million more people could be left without enough food in 2020 as a result of the pandemic.[7] Many of them will be girls, even more so since in some households girls will be more likely to go without the food they need than men and boys.[8] 130 million girls were out of school before the pandemic hit. Now 91% of children who were in school have had their schools closed. Experience shows that girls are much less likely to return once they are taken out of school.[9]

* The girls' advisory group included girls from four regions: East and Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and Eastern Europe and North America. Unfortunately COVID-19 containment measures meant that girl representatives from the other two regions referred to in the report – Asia and the Pacific and West and Central Africa – could not be contacted for input but statements from girls in those regions, collected through other work with Save the Children, have been included.

† This calculation is based on the reduction in the rate of child marriage since 1995. See methodological note for further detail.

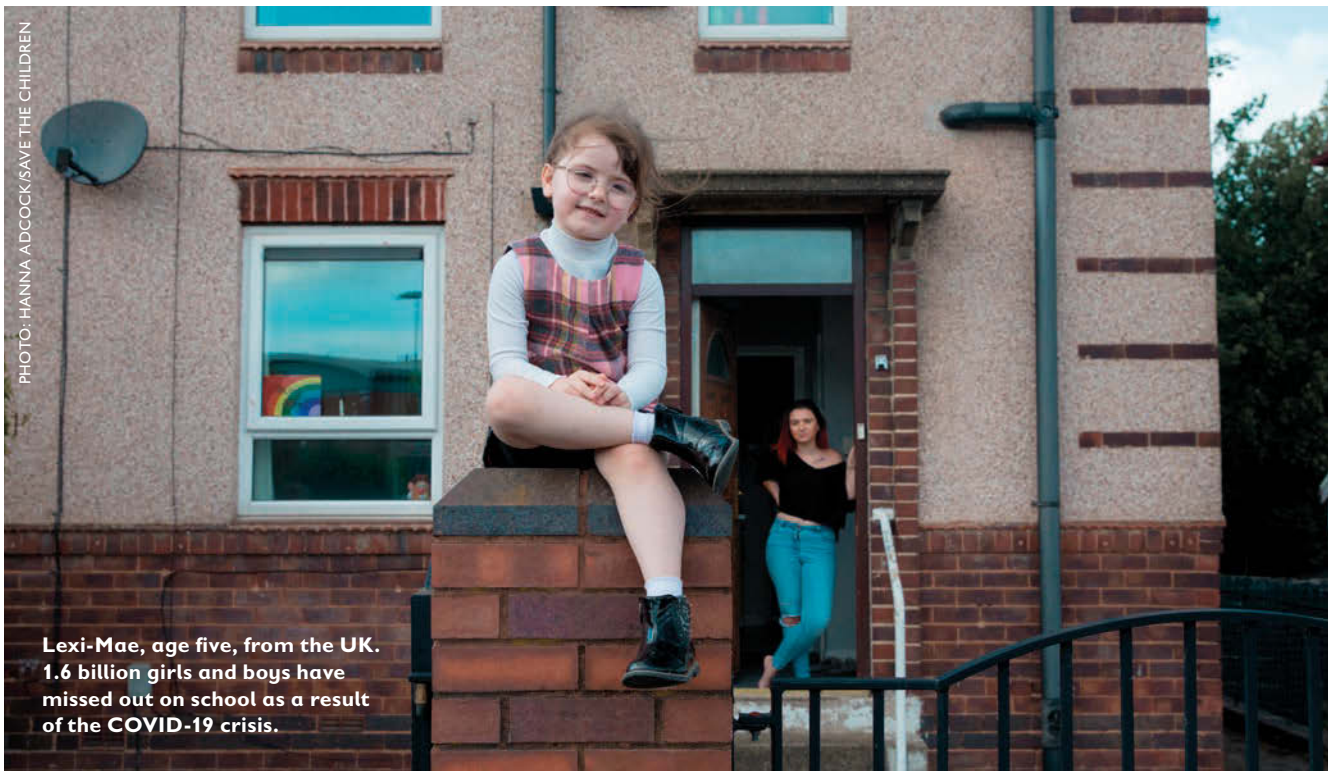


PHOTO: HANNA ADCOCK/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Lexi-Mae, age five, from the UK. 1.6 billion girls and boys have missed out on school as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

With 90–117 million more children estimated to fall into poverty in 2020, pressure on children to work to help provide for themselves and their families will increase.[10] Girls are already more likely to face sexual exploitation.‡ Reports on conditions in humanitarian settings since the pandemic began already describe incidents of sexual exploitation to meet basic needs.[11] Girls are also more likely to take on caring responsibilities for siblings who need home-schooling and for family members who fall sick or are working outside the home.

COVID-19 is increasing the risk of child marriage as a response to school closures, growing risks of violence, adolescent pregnancy, and food and economic insecurity. Estimates suggest that for the first time in almost 30 years, girls are more, not less at risk of child marriage. Progress to guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health and rights was already at risk from increasingly organised attacks on women's and girls' rights and off track to meet the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goal target by 2030. It is estimated that if the average COVID-19 lockdown period reaches six months, 47 million women and girls will lose access to modern contraception, resulting in an additional 7 million unintended pregnancies.[12] Many of these will be high-risk pregnancies among adolescent girls, particularly as COVID-19 lockdown measures and redirected funds reduce access to sexual and reproductive health services essential to reduce harm to girls and babies. Gender-based violence is also expected to increase worldwide, including harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM); sexual exploitation; intimate partner violence and domestic family violence, exacerbated by lockdown; and increased violence outside the home, associated with school closures and crises. COVID-19 interruptions to efforts to reduce gender-based violence and access to services for women and girls, like shelters and helplines, are expected to result in a one-third reduction in progress by 2030 and an additional 2 million cases of FGM (primarily among girls) in the next ten years.[13]

It is not too late to protect a generation of progress for girls. The COVID-19 crisis has made 2020 an even more critical year for girls and their allies to change the course of history. The UN Secretary-General has called

‡ Child exploitation refers to the use of children for someone else's advantage, gratification or profit often resulting in unjust, cruel and harmful treatment of the child. Sexual exploitation is the abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes; this includes profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the exploitation of another as well as personal sexual gratification. Save the Children definition.

for an immediate 'ceasefire' on all forms of violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 crisis, and so far more than 140 countries have agreed.[14] That work starts with the way the world responds to the pandemic and will continue with the commitments we make through the Generation Equality process and as we accelerate progress to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals and gender equality by 2030.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Save the Children calls on governments to work with girls and civil society to:

1. **Raise girls' voices** by supporting their right to safe and meaningful participation in all public decision-making through the COVID-19 response, recovery and beyond. This includes putting adolescent girls at the centre of the Beijing+25 and Generation Equality decision-making and accountability processes.
2. **Act to address immediate and ongoing risks of gender-based violence**:* recognise that child protection workers and those addressing gender-based violence provide 'essential services'; strengthen protective systems; act on the UN Secretary-General's global ceasefire on domestic violence; and continue to implement transformative programming to address the root causes of gender-based violence.
3. **End child marriage**† and support already married girls to realise their rights – through law reform; multisectoral national action plans; and working with communities to build support to change harmful gender norms that cause gender-based violence, including child marriage.
4. **Invest in girls now** with new, not repackaged, investments to prevent the worst outcomes of COVID-19 for girls, and to enable progress and lasting change.
5. **Count every girl** – with improved data collection to put the girls who have been pushed furthest behind first, particularly in humanitarian contexts. This includes **disaggregating data by sex, age-group and disability**; conducting and building on intersectional gender analysis; and ensuring existing databases on child marriage, including **child marriage in humanitarian contexts**,‡ fill this critical data gap in accountability to girls.[15]

For more detailed recommendations, see page 33.

PHOTO: ROBERT MCKECHNIE/ SAVE THE CHILDREN AUSTRALIA

Vive with her dad, Paternosi, in Fiji. Vive's mum was killed when a cyclone hit their village.

* Detailed recommendations for national governments, UN agencies, donors, humanitarian actors and the media are set out in our brief Beyond the Shadow Pandemic: Protecting a generation of girls from gender-based violence through COVID-19 to recovery.

† Detailed recommendations are set out in the following brief: "Working together to end child marriage: How governments can end child marriage by accelerating coordinated action across education, health, protection and other sectors"

‡ Details are set out in our Discussion Paper: Addressing Data Gaps on Early, Child and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings.

"We are children who stand against early marriage. We will fight the world to stop it," declare rappers Hiba (left), age 17, and Rama, 14, outside their home in Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan.

PHOTO: JORDI MATAS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

1 Girls' right to survive and thrive

Over a generation, there has been real progress in girls' survival. A girl born at the beginning of 2020 – before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic – was more than two times more likely to survive to the age of five than girls born in her mother's generation, 25 years ago. And she's 50% less likely to be too small for her age as a result of malnutrition.

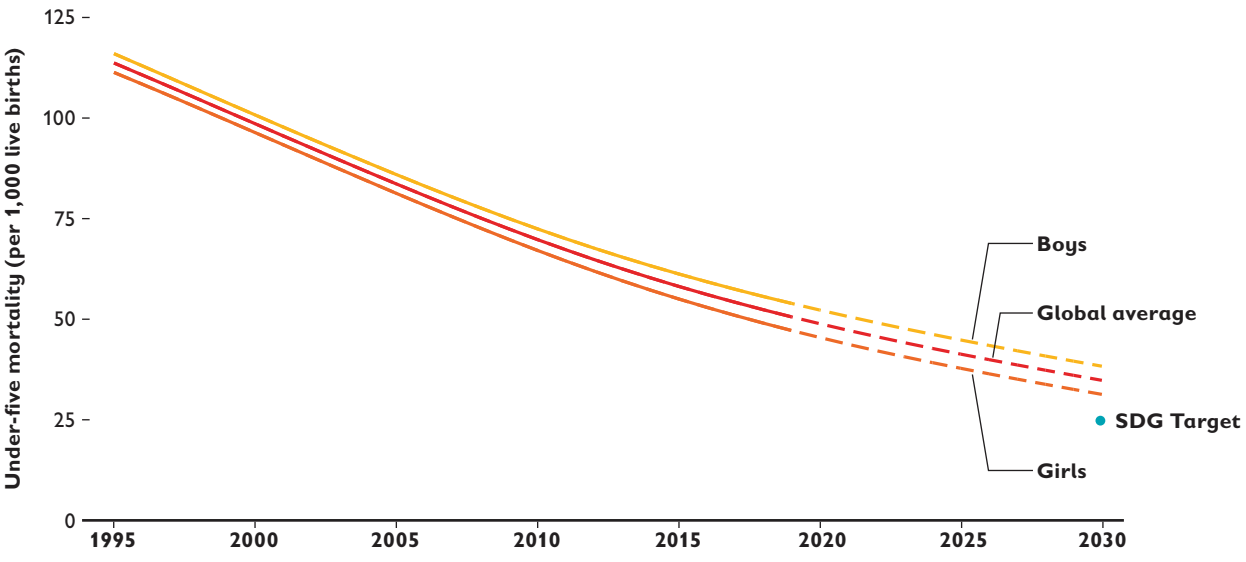
But progress in girls' health and nutrition has been uneven. Hundreds of thousands of girls die each year because they do not receive the same healthcare as boys. Signs of malnutrition in adolescent girls are actually increasing. And for the world to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target on stunting by 2030, progress in tackling it for children in the poorest households will need to increase ten-fold.[16]

Now, the COVID-19 crisis is a new threat to girls' futures. Given that younger children have tended to be spared the most severe symptoms of COVID-19, the worst health impacts for girls are likely to result not from viral infection but from loss of access to health services as a result of the pandemic, along with increasing poverty, food insecurity and famine.

GIRLS' HEALTH

Child survival rates have improved for all children but girls living in poor households and in remote areas are still far more likely to die very young than girls from wealthier families and those living in cities. In Ethiopia for example, a girl growing up in the largely rural Afar region is at more than two times greater risk of dying

FIGURE 1. THE LIKELIHOOD OF A GIRL DYING BEFORE HER FIFTH BIRTHDAY HAS MORE THAN HALVED IN THE LAST 25 YEARS



Save the Children estimates based on UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation and on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

Sample based on 75 countries (covering 67% of population), trends and projections for sex groups based on subset of 75 countries (covering 67% of global population).

before her fifth birthday than a girl in Tigray region; just 14% of children in Afar get basic vaccinations, compared with 67% of children in Tigray. In Afar, women giving birth are three times less likely to have a skilled birth attendant than women in Tigray, and half as likely to have the minimum recommended health visits after giving birth.[17]

Other groups also face severe disadvantage and discrimination. People with disabilities are more likely to be denied healthcare or poorly treated by the health system. While data is limited, children with disabilities often have lower access to healthcare than those without disabilities. Girls with disabilities are less likely than boys with disabilities to get healthcare or supportive equipment, like wheelchairs.[18] Stigma can also discourage parents from seeking healthcare for children with disabilities and gender inequalities can mean girls with disabilities are even less likely to be taken to a health facility.[19]

In addition, children with disabilities are often excluded from nutrition services.[20] Compared with children without disabilities, they are almost three times more likely to be underweight and nearly twice as likely to experience stunting and wasting.[21,22] Among children with disabilities, girls are more likely than boys to be malnourished – when food is scarce boys are often favoured.

While progress to reduce child mortality has been similar for boys and girls globally, mortality rates in almost all countries are higher for boys than for girls. This is because girls are born physically stronger and better able to survive.[23] Studies show that when boys and girls have similar access to healthcare, girls' mortality rates are *lower* than the rates for boys.[24] Where girls' mortality rates are higher than expected (based on the natural ratio of girls to boys in a population) it suggests that girls are dying because they are not getting the same healthcare as boys. In South Asia, for example, girls are physically better able to survive pneumonia but, due to poorer access to healthcare, they are 43% more likely to die from the disease than boys.[25] New research suggests that in African countries 425,000 girls aged 0–14 years die each year because they are denied the same healthcare as boys.[26]

Discrimination and harmful social norms that favour men's and boys' nutrition can also limit girls' access to the nutrients they need and reduce their chances of survival. Take breastfeeding, the single most effective way to prevent deaths of children under five.[27] Research from parts of India and countries in Africa shows sons are more likely to be breastfed longer than daughters. One discriminatory factor here is that, given breastfeeding reduces a woman or girl's chances of pregnancy, mothers with baby daughters appear more likely to cut breastfeeding short to increase their chances of becoming pregnant again in the hope of having a son.[28] One study estimates that 43–45,000 girls in sub-Saharan Africa die each year due to gender discrimination in breastfeeding.[29]

"Having poor mental health could lower our performance at school, work or any other aspect of our lives."

Fernanda, 16, adviser to Save the Children, Mexico

Fernanda lives in Sinaloa, Mexico, where she is a member of a network of adolescents called RedPazMx that works to promote children's rights through a culture of peace. She describes the harassment of girls; child marriage, including to drug traffickers (sometimes seen as a protective measure) and dowry practices; and girls, particularly those from migrant Mexican families, having to stop going to school in order to care for family. Children's right to health – which Fernanda and other young people in RedPazMx identify as a priority – is often overlooked. That includes the need for comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, and mental health services. "Mental health is important to progress in all areas of adolescents' lives," says Fernanda. "There are a lot of stereotypes around the subject. Contrary to popular belief, men tend to have higher rates of suicide."

Since COVID-19, girls from RedPazMx has been working with federal government authorities to make their voices heard as part of the response to the pandemic.

GIRLS' NUTRITION

Improvements in early childhood survival and nutrition have not been matched by investment in reducing causes of death and disability for adolescent girls. Adolescence is a time in life when puberty creates new health and nutritional needs (particularly for pregnant or breastfeeding girls), as well as a 'critical window' for catching up on growth missed out on in early childhood.[30] Adolescence is also a time when the impacts of gender discrimination often become clearer. The risk of anaemia (a sign of malnutrition) increases when girls start to get periods and can result in faintness, tiredness, and poor brain and physical development. Rates of anaemia in adolescent girls are rising.[31] Girls with acute anaemia face twice the risk of dying in childbirth or soon after;[32] among girls aged 15–19 years, complications during pregnancy and birth are the leading cause of death.[33] Malnourished girls are 15% more likely to give birth to malnourished babies than well-nourished adult mothers, and more likely to have babies born with disabilities.[34,35]

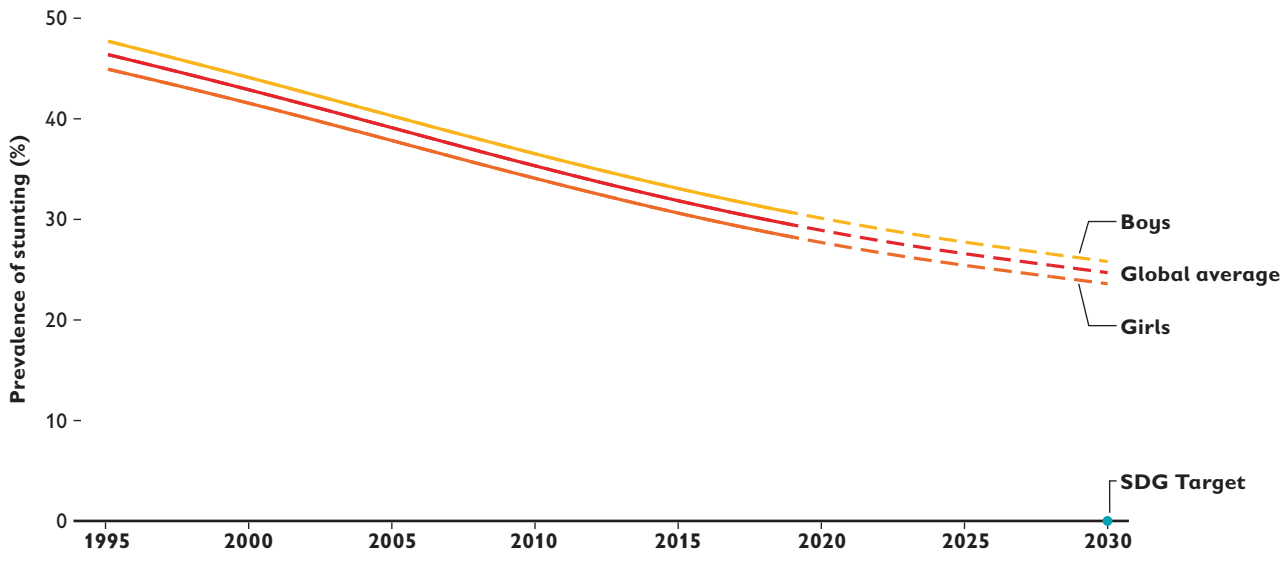
WHY IS NUTRITION SO IMPORTANT?

Good nutrition is critical for children to grow, stay healthy, develop mentally and learn. Malnutrition – not having enough of the right food or being able to use it – is an underlying factor in 45% of child deaths.[36]

Malnutrition can lead to stunting and wasting[37] – conditions where children are too small for their age or height. The impact on children's health can last for the rest of their lives.[38]

Obesity, when a child weighs too much for their height, can also be a sign of malnutrition and increases health risks in childhood and through to adulthood.[39] Obesity in girls is increasing across the world, most dramatically in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and South-East Asia.[40] In the Pacific, girls are more likely to be obese than boys, with girls as young as ten being diagnosed with diabetes as a result.[41] As responses to address obesity emerge these must include responses tailored to gendered needs and risk factors.

FIGURE 2. THE LIKELIHOOD OF A GIRL BEING STUNTED HAS FALLEN BY ALMOST 50% IN THE LAST 25 YEARS



Save the Children estimates based on UNICEF/WHO/World Bank Joint Malnutrition Estimates and DHS/MICS.

Sample based on 97 countries (covering 67% of population), trends and projections for sex groups based on subset of 98 countries (covering 67% of population).

"Certain girls my age give their bodies to older men because if they don't they'll go hungry."

Esther, 16, Democratic Republic of Congo

Esther lives in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Lockdown measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in her community have closed schools and some public spaces. She is enjoying helping her mother take care of their family's chickens for the moment but the economic impact of the pandemic is being felt – and particularly by girls.

"Many parents from my neighbourhood once sold goods at the big open-air market. But because of confinement, they don't do anything any more," explains Esther. "Girls have to turn to older men to support themselves."

The second leading cause of death for adolescent girls (and boys) is self-harm.[42] Children frequently raise mental health as a concern when asked and it is particularly devastating for children in conflict zones and children from marginalised groups, including Indigenous peoples.[43,44] Yet around the world access to mental health services is limited or entirely absent. As a proportion of aid funding, mental health and psychosocial support programming accounted for just 0.14% of spending from 2015–17.[45] Surveys of children's experiences already show that COVID-19 is affecting their mental health for a range of reasons – including school closures; increased stress at home; fear of violence, including child marriage; and isolation from friends.[46,47]

The impact of COVID-19 on access to health and nutrition is likely to hit the poorest girls hardest. These are the girls who are already left behind and denied equal access to care and support. Traditional gender roles, where girls are more likely than boys to take care of relatives, put girls at higher risk of infection with COVID-19. Disruptions to healthcare and weakening of health services due to the virus will lead to increases in child deaths. For example, death tolls rose significantly during and following the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone,[48] almost entirely due to causes of death other than Ebola and increased reluctance to seek healthcare.[49,50,51] Data from March 2020 already shows significant drops in vaccinations for children across most of India's health facilities, including those that provide some protection against pneumonia.[52] That fall is particularly significant for girls in South Asia who, before the pandemic, were 43% more likely to die from the disease than boys.[53] UNAIDS estimates that in sub-Saharan Africa, a six-month disruption in supply of medications could lead to 500,000 additional AIDS-related deaths in 2020–21.[54] If that happens, girls will be disproportionately affected: one in four new HIV infections is among adolescent girls and young women (aged 15–24 years); 80% of all infections in adolescents (aged 15–19 years) are among adolescent girls.[55,56]

The links between poverty, gender inequality and poor nutrition for girls mean that the COVID-19 crisis presents a grave threat to already inadequate progress. It is estimated that 130 million more people could be left without enough food by the end of 2020 as a result of income lost due to COVID-19[57] – resulting in 10 million more children suffering from acute malnutrition.[58] This might mean as many as 12,000 people dying due to starvation each day by the end of 2020.[59] Girls are likely to be particularly affected – especially since in some households, girls are more likely than men and boys to have to go without food.[60]

2 Girls' right to learn and to economic justice

Runa, 17, is a student, an advocate for girls' education and now, a goat farmer. Find out how farming goats has helped her to continue her education.

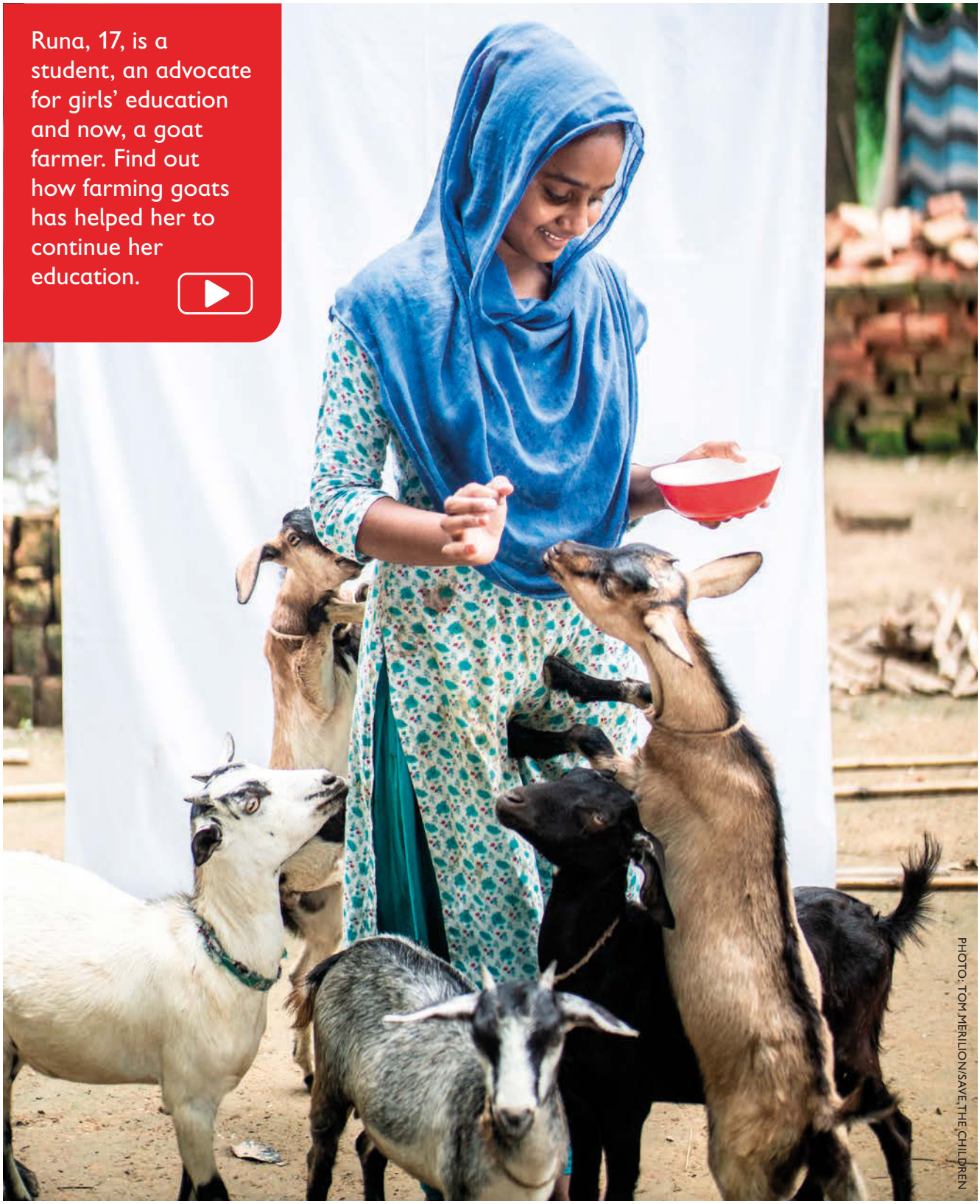


PHOTO: TOM MERLION/SAVE THE CHILDREN

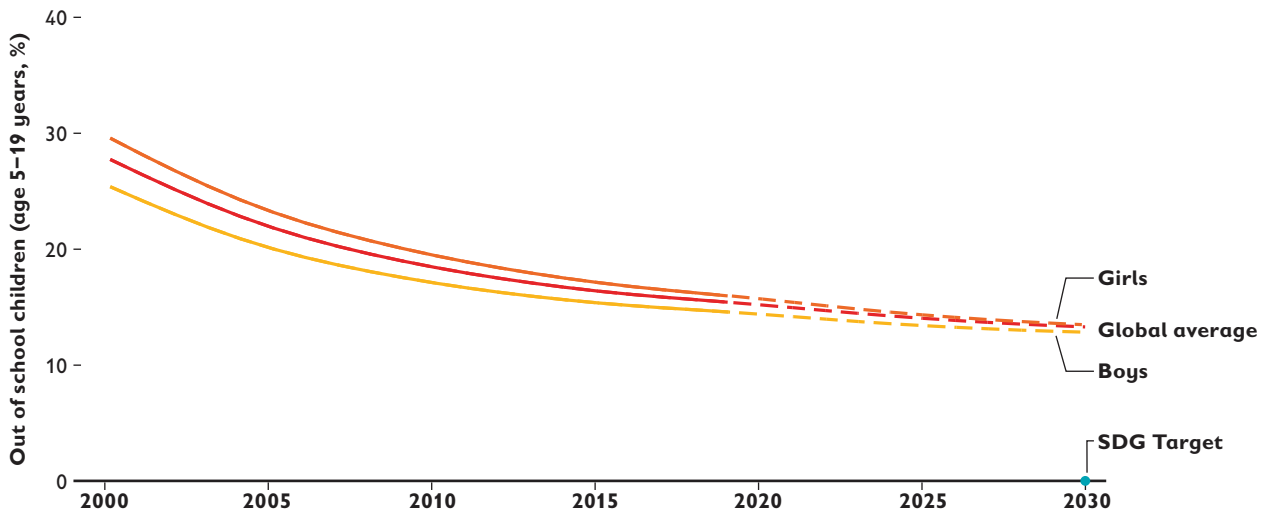
At the beginning of 2020, improving girls' access to education was one of the greatest progress stories of the past 25 years. Today, everything has changed. The world faces an education emergency. 1.6 billion learners have had their education interrupted by COVID-19 and past experience suggests that girls are the least likely to return.[61] 1.6 billion learners have had their education interrupted by COVID-19 and Save the Children estimates as many as 10 million may never return. Experience suggests that the majority of children who do not step foot in a classroom again will be girls. With the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression predicted, many girls face huge additional pressure to earn money to support themselves and their families and are at growing risk of exploitation.

GIRLS' EDUCATION

More than 130 million children have gained access to school since governments signed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. 60% of those children were girls.[62] This progress has been critical for girls and their communities – studies have found that educating girls can be the single best investment a country can make to improve its economic future and the lives of the women and girls to come.[63] Despite these promising global figures, in only two-thirds of countries are girls as likely to be in primary school as boys. And inequalities increase dramatically in secondary school.[64] Before the pandemic, 9 million girls of primary school age were likely to never step foot in a classroom compared with 3 million boys.[65] Children with disabilities made up 15% of out-of-school children.[66] Despite progress, even before forced school closures in response to COVID-19, the number of out-of-school girls had begun to rise.[67]

While girls in school are, on average, getting better grades than boys,[68] **girls continue to face gender-based barriers to learning and completing a good-quality education.** Girls living in areas affected by conflict, forcibly displaced, and recovering from disasters were often the first to be removed from school and are more than twice as likely to be out of primary school than boys in the same circumstances.[69] Attacks targeting girls' education to impose harmful gender norms (ideas about what is considered normal for boys and girls) and prevent girls' access to school – including through bombings, kidnapping, rape,

FIGURE 3. GLOBALLY, THE GAP BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF BOYS AND GIRLS OUT OF SCHOOL HAD ALMOST CLOSED BEFORE COVID-19



Save the Children estimates based on UNESCO WIDE dataset.

Sample based on 90 countries (covering 81% of population), trends and projections for sex groups based on subset of 89 countries (covering 81% of population).

forced marriage and other gender-based violence by armed groups – increased from 2014–18.[70] Violence against girls in school, including sexual exploitation for grades, is widely reported. Burkina Faso has now passed laws against a person employed in the education system having sex with a child and imposing additional penalties if a girl becomes pregnant as a result.[71] The risk of gender-based violence on the way to school can mean distance has a significant impact on girls' attendance – in Afghanistan, every extra mile of travel required for a girl to reach school results in a 19% decrease in attendance for girls compared with 13% for boys.[72] Girls often finish school in early adolescence when they are increasingly targeted for gender-based violence (including child marriage) in and on the

PHOTO: SHERBEL DISSI/SAVE THE CHILDREN

"We have a saying here: 'Your degree is your weapon'. So women's empowerment helps a woman to work and get her own income, which no one can control but her."

Maya, 14, adviser to Save the Children, Jordan

Maya is a refugee from Syria and lives in the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan. Girls in the camp are at risk of child marriage, being forced to work, and other forms of gender-based violence. The camp is now in lockdown in response to COVID-19. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Maya contributed the poem 'She was' for this report (see below).

"We don't go to school now," says Maya. "But I keep up with my lessons through TV, and I take pictures of my homework and send them to my teachers via WhatsApp. I miss my school so much because it is my second home, and I miss my teachers."

Teachers and parents can be a critical support for girls' education in refugee camps where children may have had terrifying experiences and girls and boys face different risks. "Parents and teachers need to know the differences between children and deal with them depending on that," says Maya.

SHE WAS

Hala was an extraordinary girl
Shy and away from her family and sealed off
But she has big hopes and flowery dreams
On the way to school a boy saw her
He followed her going and coming back
He spoke to her with the best words
While she smiled and listened
She didn't know that this is a form of violence
She didn't recognise that she was being harassed
And when the parents found out
They stopped her from going to school.

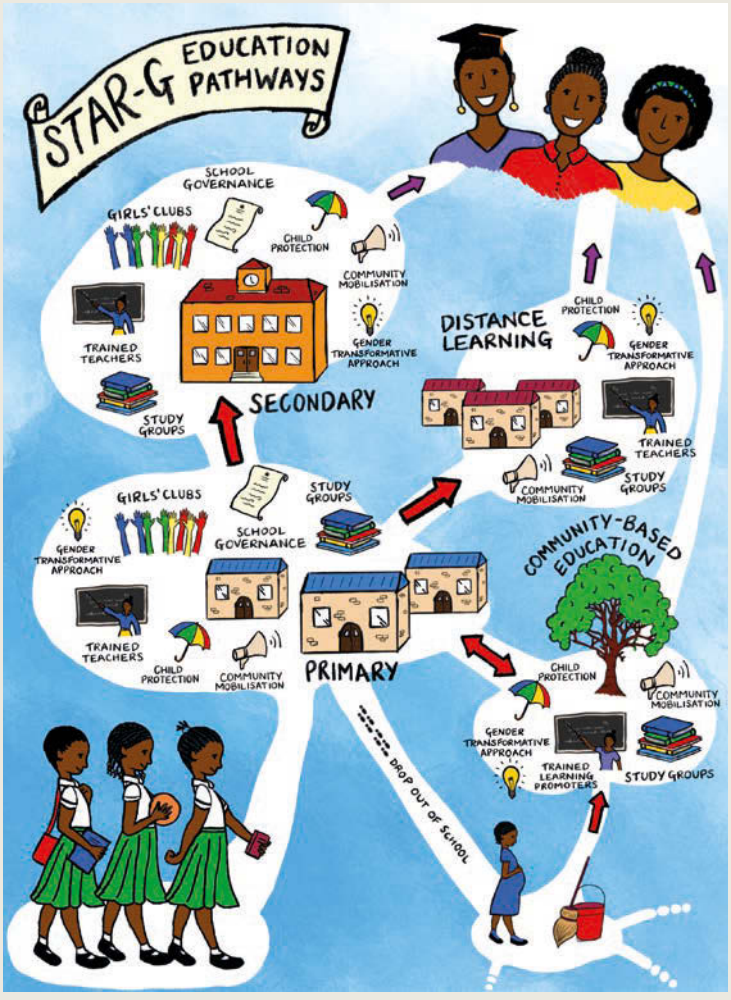
way to school, and when lack of girls' toilets and access to period management products may prevent them from attending school consistently, sometimes leading to lower grades and reluctance or reduced support from parents for their daughter to continue at school.[73]

Gender norms that value boys' education over girls' may lead to families with limited money choosing to invest only in their sons' education. That can start early. Families may be more likely to enrol sons in early learning programmes – with ongoing consequences for boys' and girls' respective access to education.[74] Gender norms may also result in discrimination in school, particularly where there is a lack of female teachers and of properly trained teachers.[75]

COVID-19 threatens to erase the progress made for girls' education over the past 25 years. Girls are likely to increase their unpaid care work and household chores to support supervision of younger siblings and where family members fall ill with the virus. This will take away time for distance education, where it is available, and make it less likely that they will return to school.[76] Following the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014–15, many children did not return to school: in one heavily affected village in Sierra Leone, school enrolment for adolescent girls dropped by one-third.[77] Falls in girls' school attendance and enrolment following the Ebola outbreak were closely linked to adolescent pregnancy, which increased by 65% in some parts of Sierra Leone.[78] Part of the increase in adolescent pregnancy was a result of increasing sexual violence. Bans on pregnant girls attending school were only lifted in Sierra Leone shortly before COVID lockdowns began. Similar bans were recently lifted in Mozambique but still exist in Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea.[79]

GIRLS IN MOZAMBIQUE TAKING EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Giving girls the chance to complete secondary school requires programming that responds to every challenge that stands in the way of them getting to school and staying there safely. The STAR-G Programme in Mozambique (part of the Girls Education Challenge) works to ensure that girls who want to go to secondary school can do so. It has worked with a group of more than 1,000 girls across three provinces from the time they were in fifth grade. By promoting gender-sensitive teaching, the programme has supported these girls to finish primary school and continue to secondary school. The programme also works with the government to provide distance learning attached to their primary schools so that girls who cannot travel – including those with disabilities, girls who are married and those who have had babies – can continue to learn. This year, advocates from the programme's girls' clubs plan to teach other girls how to make reusable period management products in a demonstration aimed at persuading the government to invest in supplies.



CLAUDIA DICKENS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

GIRLS' WORK AND CHILD LABOUR

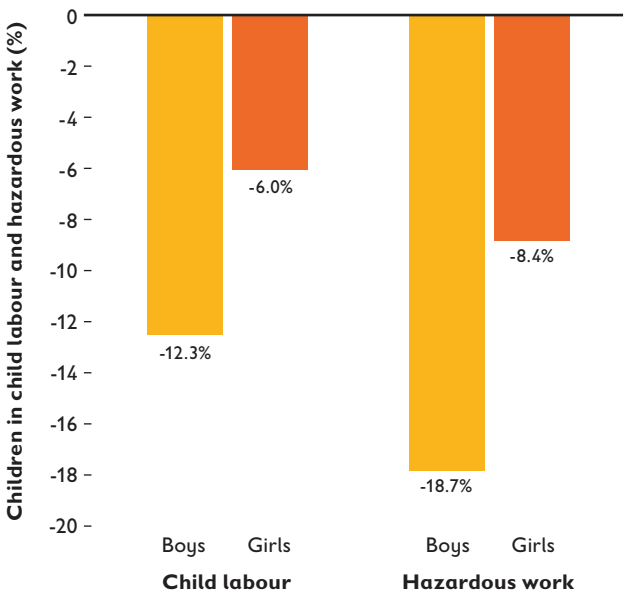
Children losing their connection to education, due to COVID-19 school closures, and growing poverty are increasing the risk of child labour and exploitation. Before the COVID-19 crisis, 64 million girls and 88 million boys were in child labour. Their experiences differed in some ways according to gender.[80] More boys are engaged in child labour and they are more likely than girls to be employed in hazardous child labour, such as working with dangerous tools and substances or in dangerous places, like underground mines. Girls are likely to work more hours and more likely to do paid *and* unpaid work, particularly chores and care work. This 'double-duty' leaves girls even less time for studies and recreational activities.[81] Research shows that doing more than 21 hours of chores a week negatively impacts a child's education. Two-thirds of children who spend this much time on chores are girls. Two-thirds of children who do more than 45 hours of chores a week are also girls.[82,83]

These differences reflect gender norms that expect boys to earn money to support their own families as adults and assume that they are physically tougher than women and girls and therefore better able to endure hazardous work. Girls on the other hand often have less freedom of movement and are expected to be good carers and to become mothers who continue to play a caring role rather than going into paid work. Chores are not counted as 'child labour'. As a result, boys' time is better protected than girls' time.

WHAT IS CHILD LABOUR?

Not all work that children do is considered child labour that should be stopped – safe work in small amounts can be a valuable experience for children (see, for example, Runa and Kisha's stories above and below). Child labour is defined as work that is "mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children" or interferes with schooling by preventing them from going to school, forcing them to leave school early or to combine school with "excessively long or hard work".[84] Work does not have to be paid to be considered child labour and some forms of child labour are more harmful than others. The 'worst forms of child labour'[85] include slavery and sexual exploitation. 'Hazardous child labour' is work that is "likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children" because of what it involves or the way it is carried out.[86]

FIGURE 4. BEFORE COVID-19, THE NUMBER OF GIRLS IN CHILD LABOUR WAS FALLING BUT AT HALF THE RATE OF PROGRESS FOR BOYS



Source: International Labor Office – Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and trends, 2012–2016.[83]

"Being respected and represented as a female isn't a privilege, it's an undeniably inherent right that no one should feel a need to 'authorise'."

Krisha, 16, adviser to Save the Children, USA

Krisha attends a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) secondary school in the USA and is a passionate entrepreneur. She recently founded a start-up company with a friend but sees the barriers that women and girls still face in male-dominated industries. Krisha's school provides work readiness lessons to help prepare students for the careers they want.

Krisha sees education, training and work conditions as critical to improving women's and girls' lives. She identifies as priorities closing the pay gap, maternity leave entitlements, implementing a minimum number of work hours so that girls don't sacrifice education for work, and supporting women and girls in STEM. "STEM isn't just for guys!" she says.

Girls also face higher risk of certain types of the worst forms of child labour, like trafficking and sexual exploitation – particularly girls living in conflict settings, girls with disabilities and girls who are on the move. Even when girls work outside their family home, they are likely to do domestic and live-in work where they are less visible. As a result, the risks girls in these situations face of abuse and exploitation are not easily checked by authorities.[87] In 2018, around 800 girls were reported to have been recruited or used by armed groups for fighting, domestic work, and for sexual abuse and exploitation, including through being married to fighters.[88] This number is likely to be a drastic underestimate: data on violations against children in conflict settings is difficult to collect and verify, and violations related to sexual violence are particularly under-reported due to stigma and other risks faced by survivors.

Children with disabilities are often involved in child labour at an early age, including for use in begging.[89] And for girls migrating for work or seeking safety, being separated from friends and family can expose them to the risk of trafficking and other forms of violence and exploitation. Reports from Syrian refugees now living in Lebanon have shown that girls are experiencing sexual exploitation in exchange for things they need to survive.[90]

The COVID-19 crisis has already led to an increase in child labour. Further increases are likely.[91] Alongside this, reports of increased sexual exploitation and abuse of women, children and girls have been recorded by organisations implementing programmes to end violence against these groups.[92,93] A number of studies reported similar findings during the 2014–15 Ebola outbreak.[94,95,96] In villages that were highly disrupted by the Ebola epidemic, the proportion of girls aged 12–17 years who were not attending school and who were working to earn money rose by 238% from numbers collected before the outbreak.[97] Research shows that a 1 percentage point rise in poverty typically leads to at least a 0.7 percentage point rise in child labour.[98] Strengthening economies and ensuring families have enough money to provide for themselves will be critical to prevent the worst impacts of increasing poverty on children. Cash transfers to families and other payments, including child benefits (payments to families with children, which could lead to universal child benefits over time), are an important way to reduce pressure for children to work and increase resilience to financial shocks in the future – such as potential pandemics, humanitarian crises and climate change. Where the delivery of cash transfers is based on gender analysis they can be effective in addressing gender inequalities, including reducing the risk of violence against girls and women, and supporting girls to stay in school.[99]

Ensuring girls can continue their education through the COVID-19 crisis and increasing enrolment when it is safe to do so will be critical to get girls' education back on track. Girls who take on additional care work during COVID-19 will have less time for distance education, reducing their connection to school and

the likelihood that they ever return.[100] Experience during the Ebola crisis showed that even a one-hour daily class was enough to reduce drop-out rates.[101] Distance learning however must take into account the gender digital-divide: in low- and middle-income countries, access to mobile internet was 20% lower for women and girls than for men and boys in 2019. In fragile contexts the gap is even bigger.[102]

Creative solutions and investment in mobile technology and online safety are needed to address this gap. Digital access for girls with disabilities needs to be part of this.[103] In some contexts, social stigma leads parents to limit girls' access to phones and the internet, and may also make girls reluctant to be seen using these technologies.[104] Engagement with girls, families and communities is needed to challenge this stigma and change attitudes.

Masie, 15, and Tina, 17, are the only female welders in their town in South Sudan. They plan to start a welding business together while they finish their studies.

PHOTO: UK STORIES TEAM/SAVE THE CHILDREN

PHOTO: HANNA ADCOCK/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Monyrath, age seven, is learning to read at school in Cambodia.

3 Girls' right to bodily autonomy and to be protected from child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence

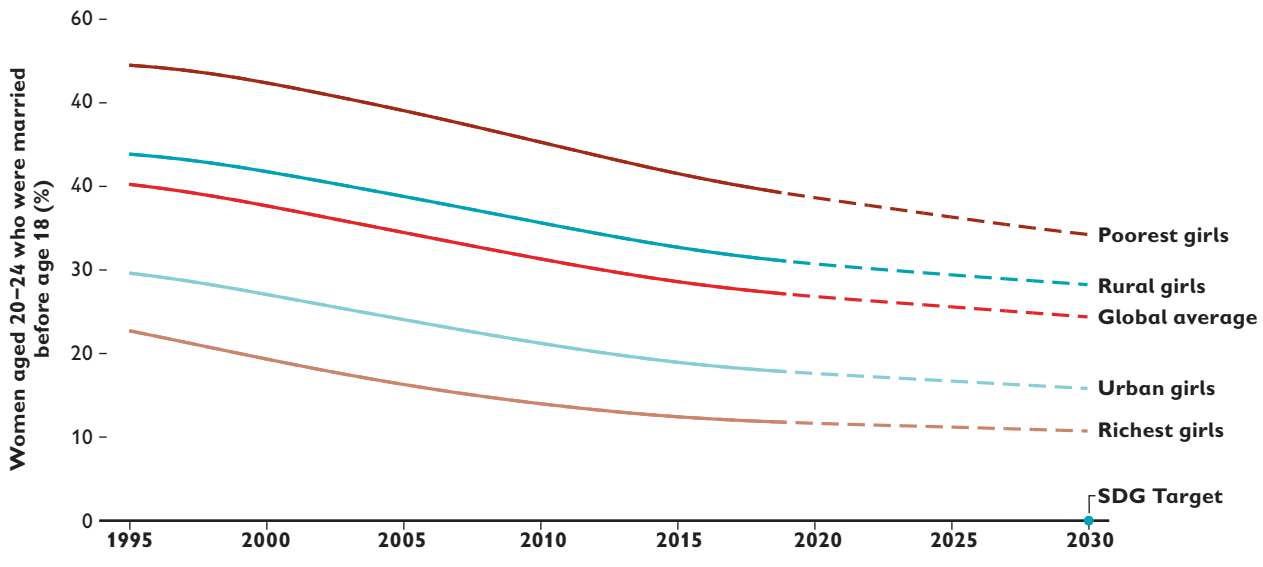
Gender-based violence was a global pandemic long before COVID-19. And even before the virus, progress to end child marriage and reduce adolescent pregnancy had flatlined. Now, at a time when the rights of women and girls face new and increasingly organised opposition across the world, the pandemic is expected to reduce access to contraception and drive an increase in adolescent pregnancy and gender-based violence against girls. Save the Children's estimates suggest that 2020 could mark the beginning of a dramatic upsurge in child marriage, halting and reversing a downward trend going back at least 30 years. This is likely to be followed by an increase in adolescent pregnancies – at a time when health systems are least prepared.

CHILD MARRIAGE

The progress made to reduce child marriage over the past 25 years has prevented an estimated 78.6 million child marriages. That's six child marriages stopped every minute.

However, progress has not been the same for all groups. As Figure 5 shows, poor and rural girls are still far more likely to be married than wealthier girls and those living in cities. And in some countries,

FIGURE 5. EVEN BEFORE THE COVID-19 CRISIS, PROGRESS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE HAD COME TO A HALT



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS.

Sample based on 87 countries (covering 61% of population), trends and projections for wealth and urban/rural groups based on subset of 86 countries (covering 58% of population).

the gaps are huge. In Nigeria, for example, 10% of girls living in families with the highest incomes marry before their 18th birthday compared with 77% of girls in the poorest households.[105] Even before COVID-19, none of the low- and middle-income countries tracking their progress were on course to end child marriage for all groups of girls; and very few were closing inequality gaps. One exception was India, which was on track to close the gap between rich, poor, urban and rural girls getting married. This progress in India, given the size of its population, is responsible for a large proportion of the global reduction in child marriage.

CHILD MARRIAGE: A CRITICAL ENTRY POINT FOR IMPROVING GIRLS' LIVES

Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence and a result and driver of gender inequality and discrimination. Ending the practice is critical to ending many of the rights abuses that stand in the way of gender equality for girls.*

* It is estimated that 115 million men and boys alive today were married before turning 18. That means a girl is more than six times more likely than a boy to be married as a child. While there is limited research on married boys, we know girls who are married are more likely to experience the sometimes deadly and lifelong risks associated with ongoing gender-based violence: UNICEF (2019) UNICEF global databases, 2019, (based on DHS, MICS and other national surveys, 2007–2017)

> **"We should boldly show the role of faith-based organisations, parents, schools, indigenous knowledge and skills to end bad attitudes towards girls – including ending child marriage and female genital mutilation."**
>
> Abena, 16, adviser to Save the Children, Ethiopia

Abena is in grade 11 and promotes children's rights as a children's parliament spokesperson in Ethiopia. Girls make up more than half of the members of the children's parliament, which works closely with the local People's Self-Help Development Organisation and the Office of Women, Children and Youth.

Abena has worked with local communities to stop girls being made to marry older men. In spite of her work on this issue, Abena's parents still wanted her to get married at 16 (to "an educated and well-to-do man"). Abena persuaded them that she should continue her education. "My answer was 'No way'," she explains. "I can never compromise my education, and the marriage request itself is a violation of a girl's rights as long as she is under 18."

Abena says her experience in the children's parliament has given her skills in asserting herself, negotiating, finding solutions to problems and making decisions. And it was those skills that gave her the confidence to refuse the marriage proposal.

Legal protections against child marriage are increasing with more and more countries setting the minimum age for marriage at 18 years. During the past five years, 15 countries have improved legal protections against child marriage, though loopholes like allowing child marriage with parental or judicial consent remain in many countries, including high-income countries.

Even in countries that have passed laws against child marriage, laws may not be the same across the country or religious and customary laws may be different or not apply to marriage-like informal unions.[110] Research by Save the Children and the World Bank shows that two in three child marriages happen in countries where 18 is already the legal age for marriage.[111]

LAWS ARE NOT ENOUGH – THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN NEPAL

Child marriage has been illegal in Nepal since 1963 but the practice has continued, particularly among poor and rural communities. In 2015, Save the Children Nepal developed a response combining policy, advocacy and programming, working in close partnership with local government on justice, education and child protection. Evaluation of the programme in nine districts found that between 2015 and 2017, child marriage declined by 11 percentage points – from 37% to 26%.

The project brought together service providers, police, religious leaders, girls, the media and communities. To raise awareness in communities of the risks of child marriage, the programme included street drama written and performed by children and public hearings led by a community-based team of journalists, children's clubs and village child protection committees.

The evaluation found that the programme's helpline and Facebook page for lodging complaints with police and the District Child Welfare Board had stopped 115 marriages. Priests have been mobilised to identify and refuse proposed child marriages. The first person to use the hotline was an eight-year-old boy worried about child marriage in his community.

Legal protections are important but laws alone are not enough. Ending child marriage and realising the rights of already married girls requires an approach that brings together all the partners who are in a position to address the different causes and effects of child marriage. This includes communities, families, girls, and a wide range of government ministries and departments, such as education, health, child protection, gender equality, youth empowerment and justice, as well as those that control financing. In other words, a multisectoral response. Governments of countries that make up the African Union have developed a Common Position as part of their Campaign to End Child Marriage and committed to introduce and fund multisectoral national action plans.[112] This campaign has accelerated change in the region and provides a strong example for other regions to follow.[113]

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, around 12 million girls were marrying each year and 2 million of those girls married before their 15th birthday. Now, the risks have increased. As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, Save the Children estimates that the number of girls at risk of child marriage could increase by up to 2.5 million. This projection is based on our analysis of the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis.[114] Our child marriage projection is likely an underestimate because it does not take into account other risk factors that the pandemic is likely to exacerbate, including interruptions to pre-COVID-19 prevention efforts. However, we consider poverty a useful indicator for risk of child marriage given higher rates of marriage among girls in poor households and the association of poverty with other risk factors – such as food insecurity, the likelihood of being out of school, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and exposure to other forms of violence.[115]

AS A RESULT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS, CHILD MARRIAGES ARE EXPECTED TO RISE

Before COVID-19, around **12 million girls married** each year. Now, an additional **1.8 to 2.5 million more girls could be at risk of child marriage** over the next five years as a result of the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis expected in 2020. The greatest number of child marriages is expected in South Asia, followed by West and Central Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Region†	Girls at risk of child marriage before COVID-19	Additional girls at risk of child marriage	
		1 year	*5 years*
East Asia and the Pacific	5,104,000	61,000	305,000
East and Southern Africa	8,630,000	31,600	158,000
Europe and Central Asia	1,427,000	37,200	186,000
Latin America and the Caribbean	7,029,000	73,400	367,000
Middle East and North Africa	2,954,000	14,400	72,000
South Asia	23,196,000	191,200	956,000
West and Central Africa	10,023,000	90,000	450,000
World	**58,363,000**	**498,000**	**2,490,000**

Note: Estimates are the upper limits of a range. They are, nevertheless, likely to be underestimates.

CHILD MARRIAGE, CONFLICT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The girls who face the greatest risk of child marriage are those affected by humanitarian crises – such as war, flooding, drought, earthquakes and disease outbreaks. Nine of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states. Risk factors for child marriage often increase in humanitarian contexts:

- schools are more likely to close
- families lose regular income and food sources
- a breakdown of law and order increases the risk of gender-based violence
- access to sexual and reproductive health services can be more limited.

Child marriage is a form of violence but in crisis situations, parents may see marriage as a coping mechanism to protect their daughters against unwanted advances and sexual abuse.[116] While gathering data in these contexts is difficult and at times dangerous, there is a growing body of evidence to show increases in rates of child marriage during humanitarian crises. Data from Lebanon shows that child marriage was increasing among refugee populations even before COVID-19. The child marriage rate across Lebanon is 6%, lower than the average for the region. But far higher proportions of refugee women (now aged 20–24) in the country were married as children:

- 40% of Syrian refugee women
- 25% of Palestinian refugee women from Syria
- 12% of Palestinian refugee women from Lebanon.

Child marriage among Syrian refugee girls rose by 7 percentage points between 2017 and 2018, suggesting that the risks associated with child marriage are growing based on the circumstances refugee girls are living in.[117] For example, among the 1.5 million Syrian refugees that Lebanon hosts,[118] half the families are unable to meet their minimum survival needs and 73% of the refugees aged 15 and older lack legal residency.[119]

Climate change and increased slow- and sudden-onset disasters are increasing the risk of child marriage. Following cyclones Idai and Kenneth, which hit Mozambique in 2019, an increase in child marriage was reported in affected areas, including marriages of girls as young as 13 and 14.[120] A locally-based organisation, Girl Child Rights, reported more than 124 child marriages across 12 villages in the Mossurize district in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai, noting that "this is just the tip of the iceberg" and that in remote communities even higher rates of child marriage were likely.[121] Increasing extreme weather conditions as a result of climate change in countries like Mozambique increase risk factors for child marriage – including food and economic insecurity, school closures and exposure to violence. Climate change is increasingly recognised as an urgent threat to efforts to end child marriage and achieve gender equality.[122]

There is a data gap that affects the countries where action is most urgently needed. Data on child marriage is usually only collected every four to ten years, but in fast-changing humanitarian contexts, data needs to be available more quickly to prevent marriages and make sure married girls have the services they need. The Human Rights Council has created a web portal to bring together information on child marriage in humanitarian settings. Nevertheless, more research, data collection and sharing is needed – with funding and support from governments and the United Nations (UN). Save the Children has conducted a study on how this might be achieved, including how data collection processes we already use in humanitarian contexts might help.[123] Measuring child marriage in humanitarian settings is crucial to ensuring girls at risk of child marriage or who are already married are not forgotten during a humanitarian response. And it is essential to measure progress towards achieving the SDGs and the Beijing Platform for Action.

WHEN CHILD MARRIAGE ISN'T MARRIAGE: CHILD UNIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

Although rates of child marriage are lower in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is the only region that has not seen significant reductions. The rates recorded are also likely to miss girls in informal early unions or living in a marriage-like relationship, which can carry the same risks as child marriage, often involving a much older man and contributing to high rates of adolescent pregnancy. These relationships are recognised under the international legal definition of child marriage but often not reported, partly because the many names they are given do not sound like "child marriage".

While these less formal relationships may be easier for a girl to leave legally, they come with fewer social and legal benefits than marriage. This increases the risk that girls in unions, particularly those who have babies, will face discrimination for having a child outside of marriage and lack financial support.[124]

Longer-term estimates from the UN Population Fund suggest that, between 2020 and 2030, 13 million more child marriages could occur than previously predicted. In part this is a result of interruptions to existing programming.[125] This increase in marriages is a violation of girls' rights on a catastrophic scale. It will lead to an increase in adolescent pregnancies, maternal mortality and psychological harm to girls. And millions more girls will end their education early.

ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

Globally, progress to reduce adolescent pregnancy had flatlined, even before COVID-19. Rates in some regions have already been rising with stark inequalities between different groups of girls.

Rates of adolescent pregnancy are highest among girls growing up in poor families and in remote areas with the least access to sexual and reproductive health rights and services. The poorest girls are 3.7 times more likely to experience pregnancy in childhood than girls growing up in wealthier households. Only 49% of countries are closing the gap in adolescent pregnancy rates between girls living in urban and rural areas. Just 52% are closing the gap in adolescent pregnancy rates between girls from rich families and from poor families.[126]

GIRL ADVOCATES IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC VOTE WITH POLITICAL LEADERS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE AND LET THEIR DREAMS FLY

On International Day of the Girl in 2019, girl advocates in the city of San Cristobel in the Dominican Republic met with political leaders to call for more to be done to reduce inequalities in education, protection, recreation and health for girls in their country. Making child marriage and child unions unlawful is a high priority for girls in the Dominican Republic where 27% of girls aged 15–19 years are married or in a union. 12% of girls are married or in marriage-like unions before their 15th birthday and 37% before their 18th birthday – similar to levels in sub-Saharan Africa.[127]

Girls and advocates for girls' rights have made important progress toward changing the law. With the help of the 'Give us a hand' campaign (watch the campaign video) more than 90,000 people have signed a petition to make child marriage unlawful and the minimum age of marriage has been raised to 16 for girls.[128]

But girl advocates won't stop till the law makes all forms of child marriage unlawful. They used the International Day of the Girl event to stage a mock vote to show support for the change among politicians running for office at the next election and the importance of allowing the girls most affected to influence decisions. Girls finished the event by writing their dreams on paper aeroplanes and letting them fly together. Highlights from the event are captured on video.

PHOTO: JONAS GRATZER/SAVE THE CHILDREN

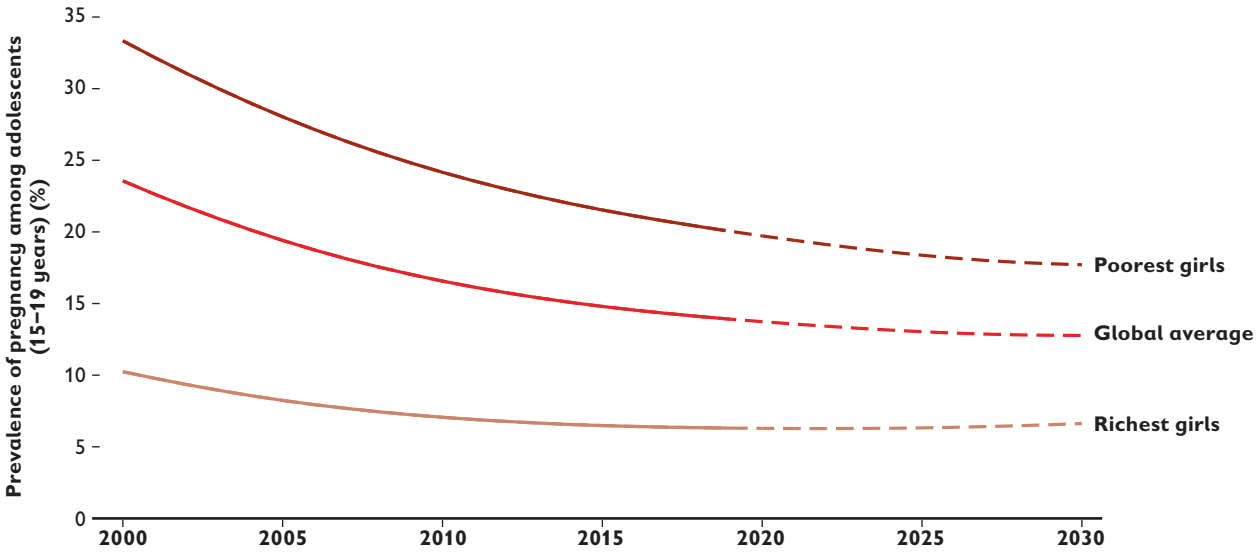
Mariam became pregnant with her son when she was just 12. She dropped out of school and lost confidence. Now 17, Mariam has enrolled in school again, with support from other mums in the Reducing Teenage Pregnancies project. "The project helped and encouraged me to look ahead positively," says Mariam.

The steepest increases in adolescent pregnancy have been in Latin America, where rates have been rising for girls living in rural and urban areas and in the poorest households since 1995. For girls in the richest households there has been no progress in that time in reducing rates of adolescent pregnancy and rates are beginning to rise for those girls as well. Inequalities in adolescent pregnancy rates among girls living in the richest and poorest households will continue to grow.

Rates of adolescent pregnancy are again rising in Asia and the Pacific (excluding high-income countries) after increases slowed for a few years.[129] Increases are steepest in Cambodia, Fiji, Malaysia and Mongolia. Other countries have maintained steadily high rates – including Bangladesh (with the highest national average), Nepal and Lao PDR.

In some countries, girls in the poorest households are far more likely to become pregnant during adolescence than those in the richest households. In Vietnam adolescent pregnancy among girls in the richest households is just over 1% compared with 20% in the poorest households,[130] in Lao PDR 3.7% of the girls in the richest homes experience adolescent pregnancy compared to almost 30% in the poorest.[131] The highest rate of adolescent pregnancy in the Asia and Pacific region is among girls in the poorest households of Bangladesh (41%).[132]

FIGURE 6. EVEN BEFORE COVID-19, PROGRESS TO REDUCE ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY WAS FLATLINING



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS.

Sample based on 68 countries (covering 52% of population).

ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY IS EXPECTED TO RISE

Save the Children estimates that **more than 1 million girls will face risk of adolescent pregnancy as a result of the economic impacts of COVID-19** expected in 2020.

The highest number of girls affected are likely to be in East and Southern Africa, followed by West and Central Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Region	Girls at risk of adolescent pregnancy before COVID-19	Additional girls at risk of adolescent pregnancy* *Year 1*
East Asia and the Pacific	2,409,000	118,000
East and Southern Africa	7,233,000	282,000
Europe and Central Asia	614,000	53,000
Latin America and the Caribbean	4,865,000	181,000
Middle East and North Africa	1,659,000	7,600
South Asia	8,666,000	138,000
West and Central Africa	6,957,000	260,000
World	**32,403,000**	**1,041,000**

* These estimates are the upper limits of a range. They are, nevertheless, likely to be underestimates.

"Every child, including every girl, has the right to an education and a good future."

Zahra, 14, youth activist, Indonesia

Zahra is a youth activist growing up in an urban slum in Jakarta, Indonesia. In 2020, she was selected to speak to the UN about the impact of child marriage in her community.

"I told the panel about a close friend of mine who got married when she was 14, back in 2015", says Zahra. "Her husband was also 14 years old. They got married because she got pregnant."

When her friend got married, she had to leave school, missing out on her education. Now her friend is 19. She and her husband have three children.

Zahra's life has been quite different, earlier this year she won a sports and public-speaking competition as part of a Football for Resilience programme and was flown to Jordan to meet with and play football with other children in a refugee camp there. "It was my first experience flying on a plane," she says.

When she is older Zahra wants to be a businesswoman and continue to promote gender equality through sport.

"Some people used to say that I would never make it… but I persisted and believed I would succeed." [133]

Isatu, 18, Sierra Leone

Isatu is a young mother and tailor. Growing up, she didn't have the financial support to stay in school. When the carer she was living with threw her out and she had to move in with her boyfriend, she became pregnant and gave birth at 16.

Soon after she became a mother, Isatu heard that Save the Children were working with adolescents with children to help them study or train for a career. The programme also provides life skills training and information about sexual and reproductive health. Isatu said that she wanted to do tailoring.

"Within one month I started cutting children's clothes," she says. "Some people were amazed at my progress. They said maybe I had done this before. But I was just determined. The next month I started cutting and sewing for my child. Now I cut and sew clothes for other people."

Isatu now sells the clothes she makes and reinvests the money to buy material and contribute to a scheme set up to support young mothers in her community.

Before COVID-19, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights was improving, but progress was slower for adolescent girls than women. Since 2000, access to modern contraception among women and girls aged 15–49 years wanting to prevent or delay pregnancy has increased in every region.[134] Gains had been greatest in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and access has increased by more than 30% in eight African countries.[135] Yet even before the pandemic, four in 10 adolescent girls who wanted to avoid pregnancy were not using a modern form of contraception.[136] While pregnancy among girls aged 10–14 years was falling in most countries, around 777,000 girls under 15 were giving birth each year,[137] and rates were rising in seven of the 18 countries with the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world.[138] While the number of children born for every 1,000 adult women in Latin America and the Caribbean halved in 30 years, among adolescent girls in the region that rate only reduced by one-quarter.[139]

Girls everywhere continue to face barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services and intentional denial of their rights. These include social taboos and harmful gender norms that treat girls who are not married and have sexual relationships or become pregnant as immoral or that oppose the use of contraception or other sexual and reproductive health services. Some laws and regulations prevent girls from accessing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and contraceptive products without approval from a parent or husband. This increases the risk of pregnancies and unsafe abortions, endangering girls' lives.

Girls' power over their sexual and reproductive lives may be limited due to lack of information, and gender-based violence, including from intimate partners and family members. And it may be undermined by social norms that encourage girls not to disagree with men, boys, or adults, or to express their own sexual choices.

Discrimination against girls with disabilities creates multiple barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights. Harmful stereotypes can label girls with disabilities asexual or hyper-sexual, unworthy of having children or incapable of raising them. These myths are used to deny girls with disabilities, particularly girls with intellectual disabilities, the right to make decisions about their reproductive health including through being forced to use contraception or sterilisation. These girls may also be denied equal recognition before the law and the ability to fight for their

rights. Information about sexual and reproductive health is often inaccessible to girls with disabilities, or denied to them, leaving these girls exposed to risk of misinformation and abuse.[140]

Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights continues to kill girls and leave them with lifelong disabilities. Pregnancy complications are the biggest killer of girls aged 15–19 years.[141] This figure includes deaths as a result of difficult pregnancies and births, as well as consequences of unsafe abortions among girls unable to access comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services. An estimated 3.9 million girls aged 15–19 years undergo unsafe abortions, due to lack of access to safe alternatives.[143] Girls under 15 are five times more likely to die due to pregnancy- or childbirth-related complications than women over 19,[144] and girls in emergency contexts are among the most at risk.[145] More than 2 million young women in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are living with a disability because obstetric fistula caused by long and difficult births has not been treated.[146]

COVID-19 threatens to increase adolescent pregnancy and subsequent death and disability. It is estimated that disruptions to health services and supply chains caused by the virus could lead to 47–49 million women and girls losing access to contraception.[147] Marie Stopes International estimates that COVID-19 related restrictions on its services alone could result in 3 million additional unintended pregnancies, 2.7 million unsafe abortions and 11,000 pregnancy-related deaths.[148] Many of these will affect adolescent girls. Save the Children estimates that increasing poverty due to COVID-19 during 2020 alone could lead to up to 1 million additional adolescent pregnancies. Again, this is likely an underestimate as other risk factors for adolescent pregnancy – including lost access to services and contraceptives, increased exposure to violence, and rising rates of child marriage – could also increase these pregnancies.

Maternal mortality has also increased in previous health crises,[149] and reduced visits to maternal health services are already being reported in India.[150] It is estimated that maternal mortality will increase by between 8% and 39% depending on the length of the COVID-19 crisis.[151]

WHAT IS GOOD SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH?

All governments have committed to delivering every girls' right to the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health, including under the Sustainable Development Goals.[142] Sexual and reproductive health is defined as "a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity". Achieving this requires sexual and reproductive health *rights* and access to an essential package of sexual and reproductive health *interventions*. See the definition agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO BREAK DOWN TABOOS AND HELP GIRLS STAY HEALTHY – EVEN IN A PANDEMIC

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality in the world. To address the high risks of adolescent pregnancy and gender-based violence in the country, Save the Children has worked with adolescents to develop a game app that addresses harmful gender norms, aims to help prevent violence, and gives information on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The interactive game takes teenagers through realistic challenges in their lives and addresses the often-taboo topic of adolescent pregnancy. The app was recently adapted and relaunched to address ongoing risks during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a safe way to share information with girls in lockdown.[152]

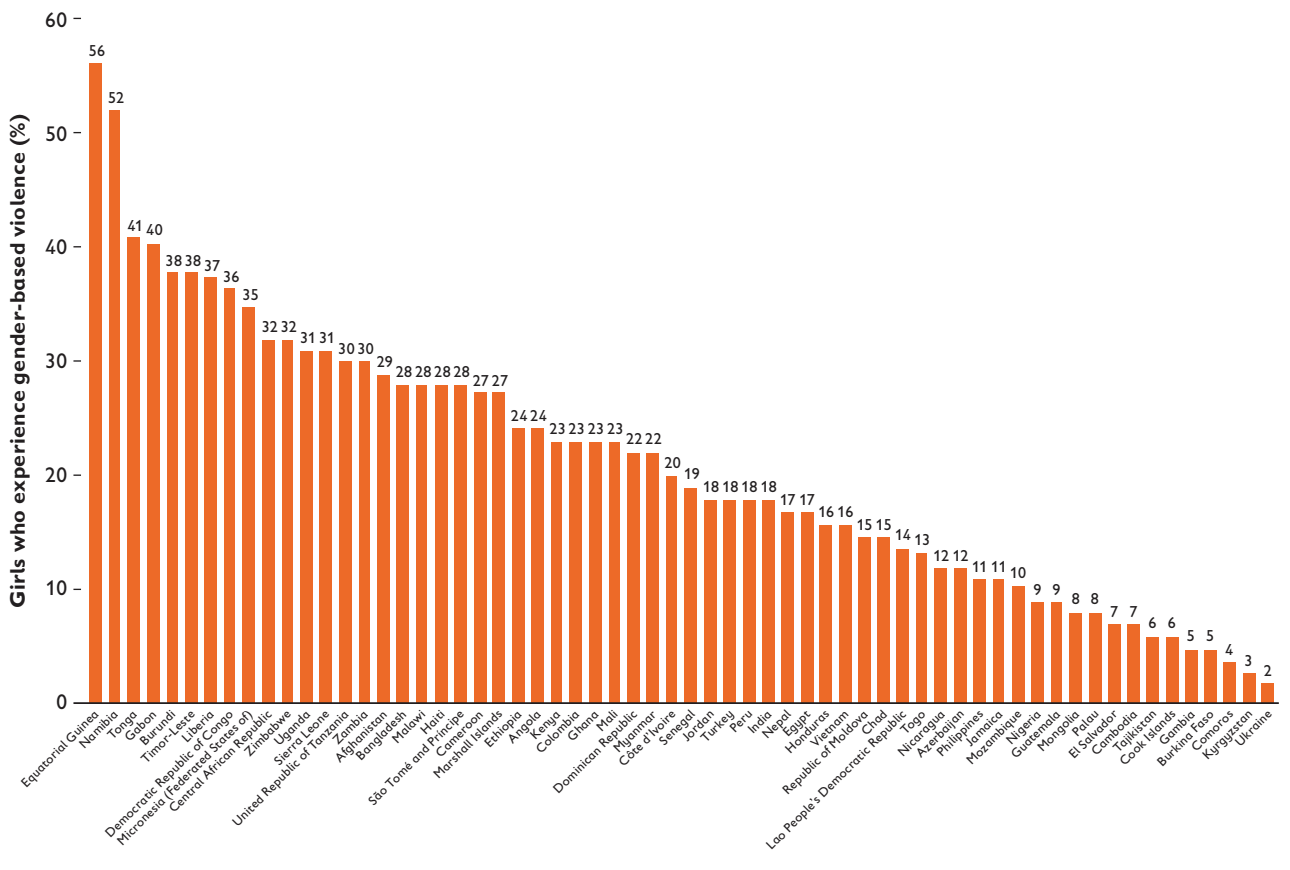
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS

Despite commitments to end violence against women and girls, violence is still used against girls because of their gender in every country in the world. The term 'gender-based violence' broadly refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It includes threats of violence and coercion and can be physical, emotional, psychological or sexual, and can take the form of a denial of resources like food or money or of access to services like healthcare or education. Gender-based violence often occurs within families and intimate partner relationships, like marriage. Child marriage and female genital mutilation are examples of gender-based violence.

While gender-based violence disproportionately affects women and girls, it inflicts harm on individuals of all ages and genders, including girls, boys, and children of non-binary gender identities and expressions.[153] Gender-based violence is a human rights violation that affects women and girls regardless of their age, education, geography, disability and wealth, although some groups are more likely to be affected and less likely to be able to access support.

Girls experience violence from a young age and throughout their lifetimes. 55–60% of children have experienced physical violence by the age of two.[154] Even in childhood, violence is often used to enforce expectations around how girls and boys are supposed to behave. Witnessing gender-based violence in early childhood, including intimate

FIGURE 7. GIRLS EXPERIENCE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN EVERY COUNTRY – THOUGH LEVELS OF VIOLENCE VARY WIDELY



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2019, based on DHS, MICS and other national surveys.

Data refer to the most recent year available. Data for Côte d'Ivoire refer to currently married girls. Data for Bangladesh, Cook Islands, El Salvador, Jamaica, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nicaragua and Palau differ from the standard definition. Data for Equatorial Guinea and Namibia are based on 25 to 49 unweighted cases and should be interpreted with caution. Data for Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Tonga refer to girls aged 15 to 24 years and differ from the standard definition. Data for Mozambique refer to girls aged 18 to 19 years. Data for Turkey refer to girls aged 15 to 24 years. Data for Vietnam refer to girls aged 18 to 24 years and differ from the standard definition.

partner violence and other family violence (usually against mothers), can also cause harm to children and continue a cycle of violence. Boys who are exposed to childhood violence and who hold sexist attitudes are more likely to perpetrate violence against girls and women. And girls who witness or experience violence in childhood are more likely to experience violence in relationships as adults.[155]

Based on links between child abuse and gender-based violence in the home it was estimated in May 2020 that over the following three months the COVID-19 crisis – with families forced to stay at home – would lead to a 20–32% increase in physical, sexual and emotional violence against children.[156] In Papua New Guinea, Save the Children asked young people about the impact of seeing violence in the home. One girl told us, "Witnessing violence in the home or in the community will have some effect on the child. When these young boys witness it, every time they will grow up to be violent – because they will think it's normal."[157]

Violence against adolescent girls is a global pandemic. But it is severely underreported. While boys are more likely to be murdered than girls, girls are far more likely to experience sexual violence in all contexts. 120 million girls worldwide (around 1 in 10) has experienced rape or other sexual violence, most commonly from an intimate partner like a current or former boyfriend or husband. Violence between girls and women in intimate partnerships is also reported, but far less often.[158] Girls are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than boys and rates range hugely between countries. In some contexts, out of every 100 girls aged 15–19 years who have ever had a partner, 2 girls have experienced intimate partner violence; in other contexts, it's more than 50. In most of the countries that collect this data, among

PHOTO: FEDERICO OBREGON/SAVE THE CHILDREN

DAY OF ACTION TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST ADOLESCENTS IN PERU

On International Day of the Girl 2019, in the Peruvian city of Huanuco, child advocates from the adolescent group 'I also have Something to Say' came together to advocate for an end to violence against adolescents. They spoke to police and members of the government and encouraged them to sign a pledge for a violence-free internet. And they marched through the city, sharing their messages with the wider community.

Watch the video about the campaign.

"I want to become a doctor and treat my patients for free."

Khadija, 16

Forced to run for her life after seeing her father murdered, Khadija is a survivor of gender-based violence. Most separated and unaccompanied children and young people, like Khadija, encounter many forms of violence on their journey of escape. Girls are often subject to rape or harassment.

When Khadija arrived alone in Egypt, she was able to access mental health and psychosocial support to help her recover from her experience, including information on her sexual reproductive health and rights to help protect and defend herself from future violence. Khadija has now been approved for resettlement and has ambitions to pursue her dream career in a new country.

girls who have or have had an intimate partner, around 1 in 5 have been treated violently.[159]

This violence is often underpinned by beliefs that support use of violence against women and girls. For example, evidence shows that some people think it is acceptable for a husband to hit his wife for burning food, arguing with him, going out without telling him, neglecting their children or refusing to have sex with him. These views are widely held in all societies by different groups of people, including girls: in many countries, over half of girls aged 15–19 years old share this belief.[160]

Girls continue to experience forms of violence that male children do not. Before COVID-19, though rates of FGM among adolescent girls had decreased from 47% to 34% in the low- and middle-income countries that collect data, there were still 4 million girls a year at risk of FGM.[161] Most women and girls who experience FGM are cut by the age of 14; and in half of the 29 countries where FGM is

PHOTO: SACHA MYERS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Maria, age 15, from Venezuela, became pregnant after she was sexually assaulted by a man she had been in a relationship with. She had to go to Colombia for medical treatment and for a safe birth.

After getting counselling, Maria is feeling more positive about the future. But it's a tough situation. Because of the crisis in Venezuela, she and her family want to stay in Colombia, but have nowhere to live.

common, the majority of girls are cut by their 5th birthday.[162] This makes FGM prevention and support particularly critical for young and adolescent girls.

Of the 92 countries where FGM is reported, just 51 have laws against the practice – though, importantly, many countries with high rates of FGM now have laws and plans in place to end the practice, including 28 countries in Africa where FGM is most commonly practised.[163] However, despite laws prohibiting it, the practice often continues. Like child marriage, eliminating this harmful practice requires support for girls to oppose it and initiatives to change social norms in communities where it is practised.

The United Nations Population Fund now expects an additional 2 million additional cases of FGM, almost exclusively affecting girls, as COVID-19 interrupts global efforts to end the practice.[164] In Somalia, which has the world's highest rate of FGM at 98%, it has been reported that families are taking advantage of school closures to carry out FGM so that girls have time to recover, without missing school or their absence being noticed.[165]

The most dangerous places for girls to live are countries affected by conflict.[166] 87% of verified incidents of sexual violence against children affected by armed conflict are committed against girls. While collecting verified data on incidents of sexual violence is a challenge in conflict settings, and under-reporting is an issue in any context, incidents of sexual violence against people of all genders are likely drastically higher.[167]

Sexual violence against girls is a weapon of war used to terrorise, control and force people to leave their homes. Armed forces and armed groups may target women and girls for sexual violence and forced marriage as a 'reward' for fighters, as a deliberate strategy to dishonour and thus demoralise males in the local community by violating their wives and daughters, or in some contexts as a form of ethnic cleansing. Each of these aims plays on harmful gender norms and traditions that support male entitlement to women and girls as spoils of war and tie the honour of women and girls (and their families and communities) to discriminatory concepts of sexual purity.[168] Sexual violence, including sexual exploitation as a way for girls to avoid other risks and get the services they need, is reported on journeys and in their new homes where they sometimes face further discrimination and violence.[169]

PHOTO: ESTHER RUTH MBABA ZI/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Rehim, aged 15, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was captured by armed men and held captive. After a year Rehim managed to escape and was reunited with her family. They now live in a refugee camp in Uganda.

"Rehim hasn't disclosed that she was raped, but she has a lot of pain in her abdomen and urinary problems," says her mother Alauna. "She keeps everything to herself."

VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES

Girls with disabilities are at particularly high risk of violence – of being neglected, abused (including sexual abuse and exploitation) abandoned, humiliated and hidden. Girls with disabilities are subjected to higher rates of violence than children without disabilities and boys with disabilities.[170] Research from the Pacific Islands indicates women and girls living with a disability are two to three times more likely to be victims of physical or sexual abuse than those without a disability.[171] Girls with disabilities are also targeted with specific forms of violence, including types of electric shock therapies, forced sterilisation and abortion. Where boys are valued more highly than girls, girls with disabilities are at particular risk of infanticide, often defended as 'mercy killings'.[172]

Isolation, including through separation from parents, not being enrolled in school or registered at birth can make children with disabilities 'invisible' to child protection services and prevent violence being reported. Girls in institutions are often systematically abused and neglected, with girls with psychological and intellectual disabilities facing the greatest risks in these settings. Violence committed by family members and caregivers is particularly prevalent. Harmful gender norms may lead to girls with disabilities being kept in a state of greater dependency than boys with disabilities. This kind of overprotection is a common form of abuse. In its worst forms it can hinder the girl's development and lead to conditioned dependency that can last throughout her life, denying her right to independent living.[173]

PHOTO: ALESSANDRA SANGUINETTI/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

Rania, 16 (left), from Gaza, with older sister, who was married as a child.

Rania was also nearly forced to marry when she was 14, until a local organisation intervened and spoke to her parents. Now Rania has avoided child marrage and is continuing her education. She wants to be a lawyer when she grows up to defend women's rights.

The COVID-19 crisis has already led to increasing reports of gender-based violence across the world and projections suggest that violence will continue to increase. Since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, rising reports of gender-based violence and violence against children have been recorded across the world.[174] These reports, of course, only capture the experiences of survivors with access to support services. In many circumstances services may be unavailable or lockdown with an abuser may make reaching out impossible. Age- and gender-based restrictions on adolescent girls' access to phones and ability to leave the house on their own, as well as a tendency for the needs of adolescent girls to fall between child protection and gender-based violence services, mean that adolescent girls may be among the least represented in these statistics. A recent survey by Save the Children, for example, found that girls in Lebanon were twice as likely not to have left the house since lockdown as boys.[175]

In June 2020, just a few months into the COVID-19 crisis, coordinators of the UN's response to gender-based violence and child protection in humanitarian settings reported increases in gender-based violence in 90% of the sites they work in.[176] In Venezuela, over the same period, the murder of women and girls has increased by 65%.[177] Data from Save the Children's programmes in Colombia shows that demand for support related to gender-based violence increased by 33% from mid-March to mid-May 2020; calls to their helplines were up by 80%; and requests for psychological first aid consultations rose by 62%.[178] Over the next ten years, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the UN predicts an additional 200 million cases of gender-based violence and a one-third reduction in progress in tackling it.[179]

Children are facing increased risk of online sexual exploitation as school closures force a huge increase in online learning. Girls are particularly vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and abuse, and make up 90% of children in online

films, photos and other material featuring child sexual abuse.[180] In March 2020, the USA's National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children reported a 106% increase in global reports of suspected child sexual exploitation compared with March 2019. Recently, the India Child Protection Fund reported a 95% increase in online searches for child sexual abuse content compared with the period immediately before COVID-19-related lockdowns.[181]

Government action to respond to gender-based violence during COVID-19 has not yet matched talk. As early as April 2020, the UN Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire on violence against women and girls in the home during the pandemic. As part of this call, the Secretary-General made a list of recommendations to governments to prevent, respond to and limit the impact of gender-based violence as part of their responses to COVID-19. More than 140 countries have now committed to the call to action.[182] However, funding to tackle gender-based violence in COVID-19 responses does not match these commitments. And in their national-level COVID-19 response plans, governments have not fulfilled their commitment to the call to action. Under the first Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19, just 0.58% of funding was proposed to tackle gender-based violence and just 6.84% of that has been funded.[183] This does not account for gender-based violence funding that may be pledged to address country- or regional-level appeals, and gender-based violence funding is notoriously difficult to track, but even being generous in the counting, gender-based violence funding gaps are striking and ongoing. The updated plan, released in July 2020, calls for scaling up of gender-based violence services. However, without a clear mandate and accountability across the entire humanitarian system, the gap between needs and available services is set to widen dramatically.[184] Gender-based violence will not end when COVID-19 is under control. In December 2020, the COVID-19 response will be integrated into ongoing humanitarian response plans. Donors will need to increase investment to end violence against women and girls.

UNDERSTANDING THE COST OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND FUNDING IT

In 2019, governments, donors and organisations met at a conference in Oslo, Norway, to discuss gender-based violence in humanitarian settings. There, governments made commitments to increase funding to address gender-based violence in humanitarian settings beyond the tiny 0.12% it received at the time.[185] One year on, many governments are yet to meet their commitments.

This film about one girl's experience of gender-based violence was shown at the conference – the widespread use of sexual violence by armed forces against Rohingya children has been documented and verified by UN reports since 2019.

Jacinta at her home in Turkana, Kenya. Jacinta had to have both her legs amputated as a child after she had polio and subsequent complications.

PHOTO: ALLAN GICHIGI / SAVE THE CHILDREN

4 Next steps on the road to Generation Equality: Building back stronger with girls

The COVID-19 crisis is catastrophic for global health, economies and human rights. Ensuring that the pandemic does not set back progress for girls requires immediate action. Together we must act to protect a generation of girls from gender-based violence and support them to be able to participate safely in building back better.

This work will not end with COVID-19. Increased and sustained reform and investment in girls will be needed to transform inequalities. That includes decision-makers making a commitment to be accountable to girls as equal partners in shaping their futures through the Generation Equality process and beyond.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognised that girls face challenges that adults do not. And their age gives them a unique potential to support work for peace and development well into the future for more sustainable progress. Girls are the experts in their own experiences. Priorities can look quite different when their voices are listened to and truly heard. **According to the largest global survey of people's priorities for sustainable development, girls aged 15 and under consider gender equality more important than any other age-group, followed by girls aged 15–19 years.**[186] **These are the voices that should be at the centre of conversations about gender equality.** Including them in policy and programme development would elevate the impacts of gender inequality in decision-making and accountability processes across a broad range of areas, including COVID-19 response and recovery.

Including girls' perspectives frequently results in more effective policies overall. It is a girl's right to participate in decision-making, and facilitating this participation benefits her whole community. Building girls' capacities to

"I never understood this discrimination between men and women, boys and girls. Do we want a society where girls have no education and are forced to get married when they are young? Equality should not be an insult. On the contrary, it is a sign that a society is functioning with strong foundations."

Raghad, 16, Lebanon

This quote is from a statement Raghad wrote on International Women's Day 2020.[187] Days later the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and plans for Generation Equality and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were delayed by the fight against COVID-19.

advocate for their rights also serves as a protective mechanism during adolescence. With increased capacity and confidence to speak out on issues affecting them, girls can better ensure their safety and wellbeing in adolescence and into adulthood. They can also become more effective political actors, holding decision-makers in their communities and at the national and international levels to account. And as many of the girls in this report have shown, they can act as decision-makers themselves, influencing policies and working with others to shape the lives of girls in their communities for the better.

Girls have a right to participate in decisions that affect them under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[188] Major world conferences and reports by civil society organisations and UN agencies now often include young people's voices and support youth participation with scholarships and by reserving spaces for young people.[189] Yet, girls below the age of 18, and girls with disabilities in particular, still face many barriers to accessing these decision-making spaces. The requirement that children travel with an adult to conferences and government meetings makes girls under 18 a more expensive choice to support and selection criteria focused on experience gained over time (including the ability to speak English) often places older youth at an advantage. Younger girls, particularly those who have not travelled outside their home country previously, can find it harder prove that they will return to their country of origin in order to meet visa requirements for countries hosting major decision-making events. Travel restrictions on countries (particularly those affected by conflict) can also exclude girls from some countries and from decision-making processes that could have important effects on their lives. It was hoped that restrictions on travel due to COVID-19 and the requirement that global events be held online would make these spaces more accessible to girls but the reality has been mixed. Girls' participation is often limited by a lack of technology for girls to use and of support to navigate often complex and sometimes exclusive protocols. These barriers should be addressed in decision-making forums that affect girls. This will be particularly important for the Generation Equality Forums now scheduled for 2021 and wider Beijing+25 processes.

Girls' experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic make their views critical to an effective response and recovery. Many girls' education has been interrupted. Some are carers of siblings and older family members affected by the virus. Many are survivors of gender-based violence. And many are growing up in households battling with increasing food and economic insecurity. And all of this is taking place in the context of existing and deepening gender inequalities. It is therefore critical that girls are counted in assessments, help shape decisions, monitor response implementation, and hold leaders to account.

The fight for equality for this generation of girls will not end when the COVID-19 crisis ends. Girls growing up today will be vital in working to deliver the unmet promises of the Beijing Platform for Action. The commitments made in 1995 are as relevant today as they were then. But the relevance of the agenda to deliver them will depend on the inclusion of girls in its design, implementation and monitoring for accountability (you can read recommendations from girls from three countries in the Middle East here). Progress towards the Beijing Platform for Action is reviewed every five years and new commitments to progress are made. This time, girls must be more than a sub-chapter in the platform for action. They must be at the centre. Six 'Generation Equality Action Coalitions' have been established to develop plans for the next five years. Girls must be a part of this architecture, its leadership and its accountability

ENSURE GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES ARE INCLUDED – SO THAT NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND

10% of the world's children have disabilities. With the COVID-19 crisis threatening to reverse progress and leave already marginalised populations further behind, the UN Secretary-General has called on governments to ensure that response and recovery measures involve people with disabilities, including girls with disabilities.[190] In the COVID-response and beyond, through collaborating with organisations that represent people with disabilities, governments and other actors should support girls with disabilities to make their voices heard and should include them in matters concerning them across sectors and contexts.

processes and their priorities must be included in the plans for each.

2020 also marks the 20th Anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and its recognition of the need for addressing the impact of conflict on women and girls and the importance of their participation in peace processes. This agenda remains critical for girls and should be a key priority for the Generation Equality Action Coalitions.

The global agenda for equality must be designed in partnership with girls and treat progress for their present and futures as the truest measure of its success.

Recommendations

> *"The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace."*
>
> (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995)

25 years later, the world still needs girls to help build a better future.

Save the Children calls on governments to work with girls and civil society to:

1. **Raise girls' voices** by supporting their right to safe, inclusive and meaningful participation in all public decision-making, through the COVID-19 response, recovery and beyond. This must include:
   - ensuring the **nine principles for meaningful child participation** are in place.
   - **putting adolescent girls at the centre of the Beijing+25 and Generation Equality process**, including the Action Coalitions, forums and blueprint for accelerating progress over the next five years. Every Action Coalition should include actions for adolescent girls with SMART objectives, as well as processes to ensure accountability to girls.*
   - increasing efforts to include **marginalised groups of girls**, including indigenous girls, girls with disabilities, married girls, pregnant girls and child mothers, and girls living on streets, in extreme poverty, or otherwise hard to reach, for example, due to migration and displacement.
2. **Act to address immediate and ongoing risks of gender-based violence**† exacerbated by COVID-19 by:
   - **recognising gender-based violence, child protection, and sexual and reproductive health services and information as essential services**, including social service providers, shelters, and adolescent girl-friendly safe spaces, which must be maintained and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic.[191] These services must be fully resourced, including with personal protective equipment and training to operate safely.
   - developing and **strengthening formal and informal protection systems** including through engagement of local women's, girls' and children's rights groups; of religious, traditional and community leaders; and of representative organisations of persons with disabilities.
   - incorporating recommendations made by the UN Secretary-General as part of his call for a **ceasefire on violence against women and girls** into national COVID-19 responses in a way that protects girls, particularly during adolescence, and tracking and reporting on implementation of those measures to ensure accountability to girls.

* SMART objectives are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound.

† See detailed recommendations in Beyond the Shadow Pandemic: Protecting a generation of girls from gender-based violence through COVID-19 to recovery.

- designing and implementing **standalone gender equality programming to transform harmful gender norms** and address the root cause of gender-based violence. This programming should include engaging with men, boys, and local community leaders, and recognise the specific risk of harm for women and girls with disabilities.
- increasing inclusive, **gender- and child-sensitive social protection** mechanisms to support families living in poverty, including progressive realisation of universal child benefits.

3. **End child marriage** and support already married girls to realise their rights by:
   - **passing laws against gender-based violence**, including harmful practices, without exception, and repealing laws and policies that create barriers to girls accessing their rights to education and sexual and reproductive health.
   - developing and implementing fully costed **multisectoral national action plans** (like those introduced under the African Union Common Approach to End Child Marriage and, more recently, FGM) with accountability mechanisms. These should engage ministries of health, education, justice, child protection and finance, as well as the departments of women and children typically responsible for this work.*
   - **working with communities**, including girls, their families and religious leaders to change harmful social norms and build support to end child marriage.

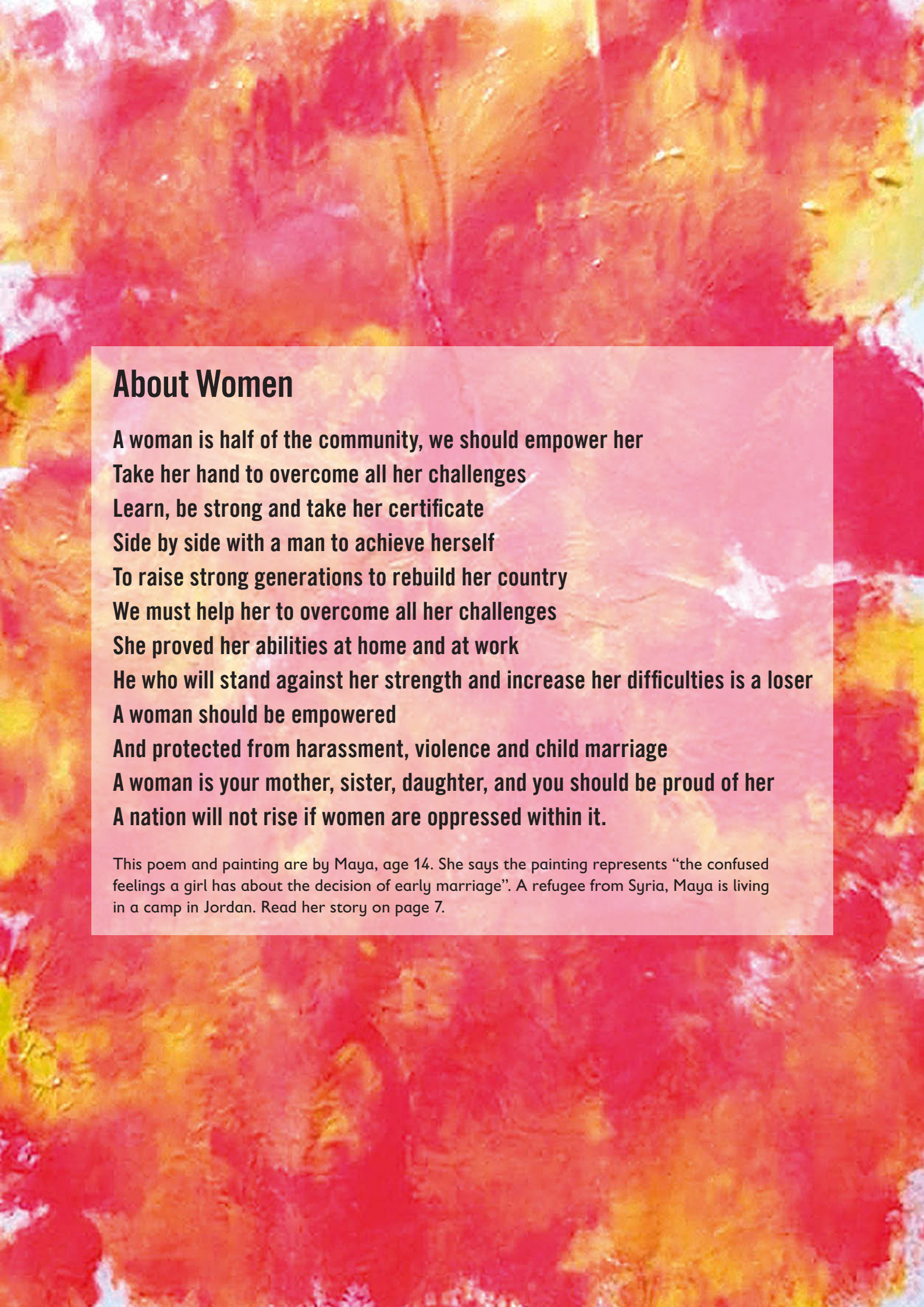
4. **Invest in girls** with new – not repackaged – investments to prevent the worst outcomes of COVID-19 for girls and to enable sustainable progress by:
   - urgently **increasing funding to address gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts**, starting by meeting the call for funding under the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, and commitments made under the 2019 Oslo Pledging Conference, and increasing pledges to meet the rising needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
   - committing to **gender-responsive and inclusive, child-sensitive budgeting** and other best practice for fair financing for girls, including to support social protection and progressive realisation of universal child benefits.
   - providing **financial support for feminist leadership through flexible funding for grassroots women's and girls' rights organisations, and girl-led** networks and groups, including representative organisations of women and girls with disabilities to support opportunities for girls to know their rights.
   - providing **expert and financial assistance to support development of national policies** and programmes for girls, including data collection, girls' participation and accountability mechanisms.

5. **Count every girl** with improved data collection, particularly in humanitarian contexts, including by:
   - **disaggregating data by sex, age-group and disability**† as a minimum, and where safe and possible, by ethnicity, geography, wealth and sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression.
   - conducting and applying an **intersectional gender analysis immediately, and at every stage of the programme cycle**, to inform all COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
   - committing to **address ongoing data gaps on child marriage in humanitarian contexts**.‡
   - **putting girls who are being left furthest behind first** – through a renewed focus on inequality across government and donor policies. This must include increased attention to girls with disabilities, girls growing up in the poorest households, girls living far from big cities, married girls, and girls in conflict- and crisis-affected areas.

* Detailed recommendations are set out in the following brief: Working together to end child marriage: How governments can end child marriage by accelerating coordinated action across education, health, protection and other sectors.

† See: Washington Group on Disability Statistics (2020) website: http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/ [Accessed 24 August 2020]; UNICEF (2018) Child Functioning (website). [Accessed 24 August 2020].

‡ Details are set out in our Discussion Paper: Addressing Data Gaps on Early, Child and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings.



About Women

A woman is half of the community, we should empower her
Take her hand to overcome all her challenges
Learn, be strong and take her certificate
Side by side with a man to achieve herself
To raise strong generations to rebuild her country
We must help her to overcome all her challenges
She proved her abilities at home and at work
He who will stand against her strength and increase her difficulties is a loser
A woman should be empowered
And protected from harassment, violence and child marriage
A woman is your mother, sister, daughter, and you should be proud of her
A nation will not rise if women are oppressed within it.

This poem and painting are by Maya, age 14. She says the painting represents "the confused feelings a girl has about the decision of early marriage". A refugee from Syria, Maya is living in a camp in Jordan. Read her story on page 7.

Endnotes

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