



Save the Children



SUMMARY

GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2023:

GIRLS AT THE CENTRE OF THE STORM

HER PLANET, HER FUTURE, HER SOLUTIONS



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

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

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

Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

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

[Click here](#) to read the full report.

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



PP

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

Amina, 17, climate activist in Baidoa, Somalia.

Photo: Michael Tsegaye / Save the Children



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

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

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

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

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

PP

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

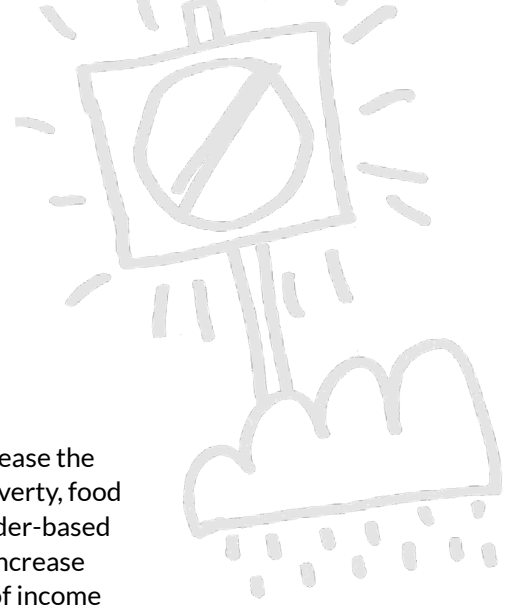
Patricia, 10, Madagascar.

What is the climate crisis?

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

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

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



How the climate crisis is increasing risk of child marriage

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

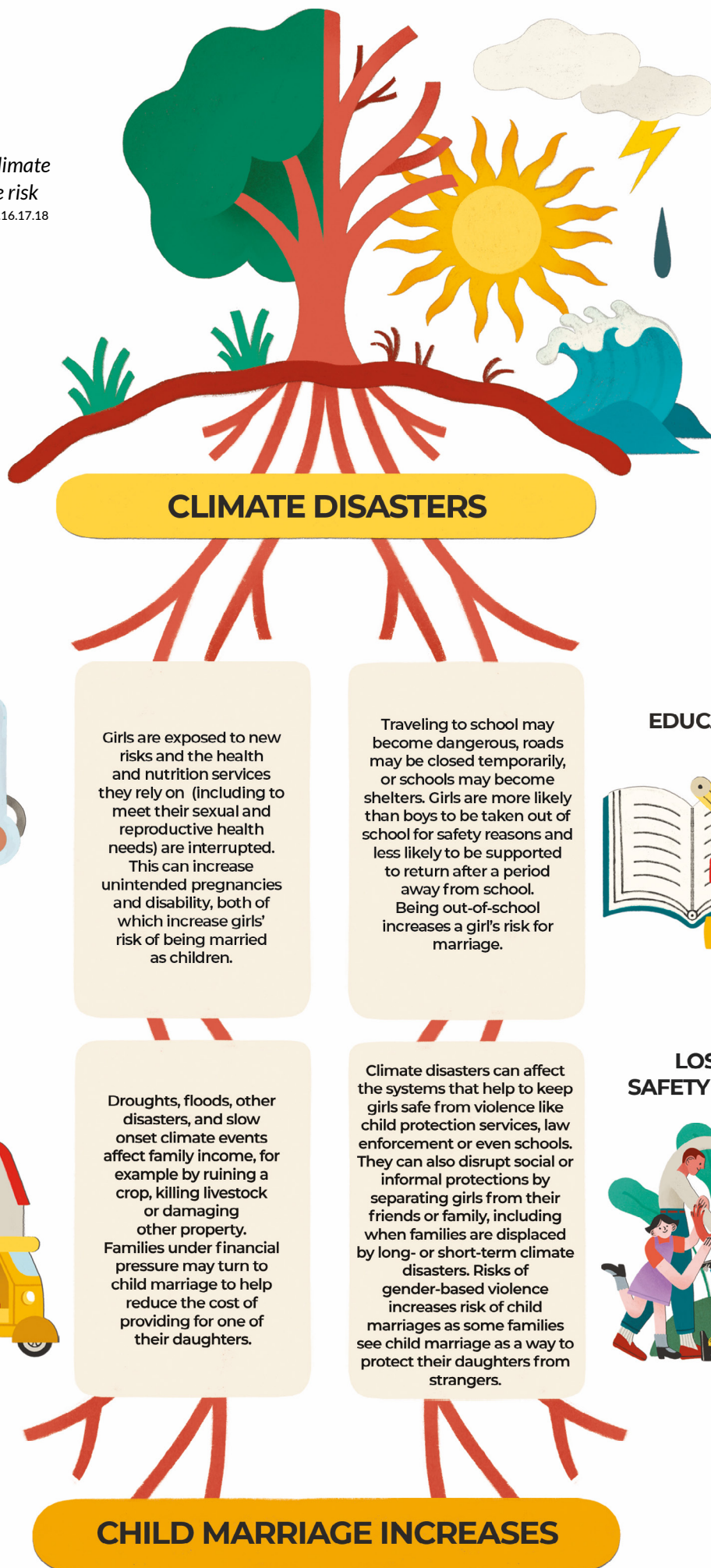
- ⇒ In parts of **Ethiopia** worst hit by drought and food shortages, rates of child marriage rose by 119% in 2022 compared to 2021.⁹
- ⇒ A 2020 study found that in **Bangladesh**, girls aged 11–14 were shown to be twice as likely to marry in years following extreme heat.¹⁰
- ⇒ In **Zimbabwe**, there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

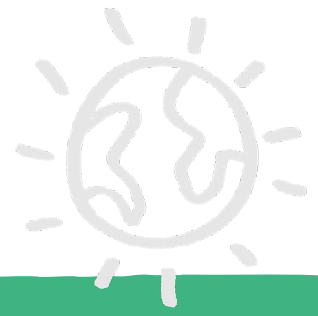
Kimsorn, 18, preparing fishing hooks for her neighbour on her home on Tonle Sap lake, Kompong Thom province, Cambodia.

Photo: Lim Sokchanlina/Save the Children



Diagram:
 How the impacts of climate disasters can increase risk of child marriage ^{14.15.16.17.18}





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

New analysis by Save the Children shows that globally almost 9 million girls face extreme risk of climate disasters and child marriage every year.¹⁹ This analysis shows that around two-thirds of child marriages happen in regions with higher-than-average climate risks.ⁱⁱⁱ

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

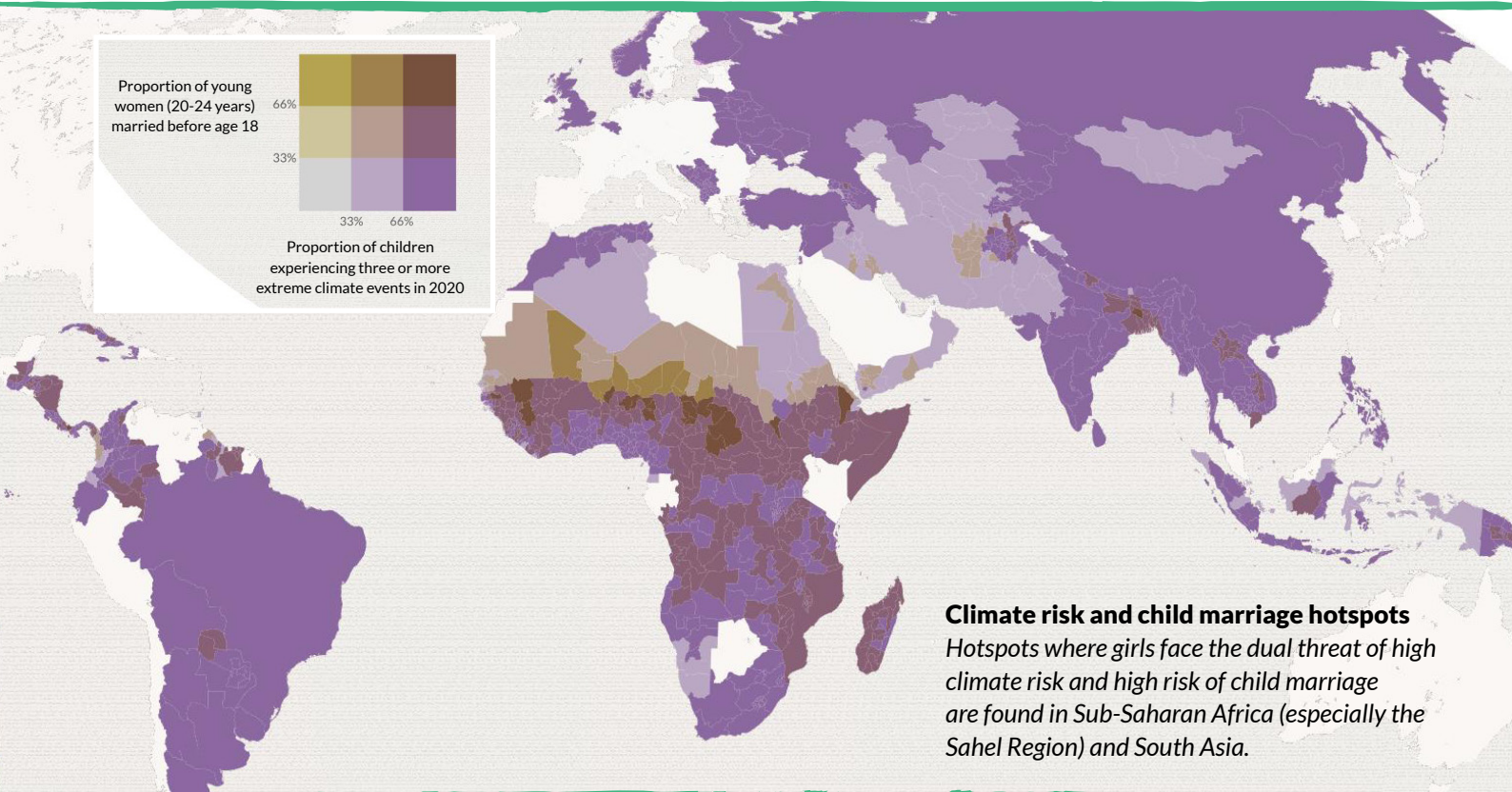
Girls in many of the countries with the highest combined child marriage and climate risk are now struggling with the worst of the current hunger crisis.

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

10 global hotspots for climate change and child marriage

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

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



Recommendations

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

Girls and their communities can –

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

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

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

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

6

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

7

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

8

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

- a. Investment in more frequent data collection.
- b. Attention to the historical and ongoing injustices that have contributed to both climate change and gender inequality.
- c. Funding research on the experiences of girls most impacted by inequality and discrimination including those growing up in low-income households, hotspots for child marriage and climate change, those with disabilities, those who are LGBTQ+, those who are displaced, from indigenous communities, married, widowed or divorced.²⁰



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

Photo Credit Delfhin Mugo/ Save the Children

References

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- ¹⁸ CARE. (2015). *"To protect her honour": Child marriage in emergencies—the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence*.
- ¹⁹ See the methodological note attached to the report page here: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/global-girlhood-report-2023-girls-at-the-centre-of-the-storm/>.
- ²⁰ UNICEF. (2023). *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach?*

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

Photo: Charles Atiki Lomodong/Save the Children



Save the Children

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

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