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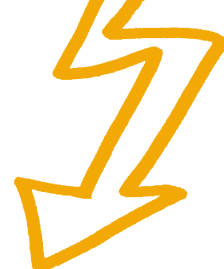
GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2024

FRAGILE FUTURES

GIRLS' RIGHTS, CHILD MARRIAGE

AND FRAGILITY

SUMMARY



On average, girls today are better educated, more likely to survive to adulthood and be free to make decisions about their own lives and bodies than previous generations. Yet every crisis threatens to reverse progress, and persistent inequalities, the climate emergency, conflicts and anti-rights backlashes around the world mean that girls' lives will continue to be shaped by a cycle of crisis and recovery. Over time this cycle makes the systems communities rely on for healthcare, safety, protection, education and income weaker and more easily broken – more *fragile*.

Under international law, all governments have a duty to ensure the rights of the people in their country. This is why governments are sometimes referred to as 'duty bearers' for human rights and the people in their country are 'rights holders'. Experts define 'fragility' in different ways, but most agree that **a country or area is fragile when the government is not fulfilling its responsibilities as a duty bearer responsible, for example, for making and enforcing laws or managing the economy and the services that people need to be safe and healthy.**¹ This could be due to lack of ability or resources, lack of control in parts of the country, or unwillingness to provide services.² Fragile countries might also be affected by conflict and humanitarian disasters more often than more stable countries.

Many countries are caught between ongoing internal or external conflicts and long-term efforts to recover, with institutions like courts and parliaments that remain very weak, and areas affected by widespread violence and lawlessness. Fragile countries can move back and forth between levels of fragility.

Girls have the right be safe, healthy, and educated and make decisions about their own lives. To make those rights a reality they need services like schools, healthcare and law enforcement.³ In fragile countries, where these services are inaccessible, girls' rights are often denied, increasing gender inequality and risks of gender-based violence like child marriage.



A note on language



This report is written to give governments, non-government organisations, the UN and activists, including girls, the evidence they need to work together to tackle the impact of fragility on gender-equality. It is intended to be 'adolescent-friendly' so that girls can use it to demand action.

We use the term 'girl' throughout this report. This often refers to statistics based on sex rather than gender 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 and to raise awareness among others.

Names marked * have been changed to protect anonymity

‘Fragility’: A useful idea with some important problems



The word ‘fragile’ can make it sound as if some countries are fragile and others are not. This is not true. There are risk factors for fragility in all countries (for example inequalities between people) that all governments need to work to improve.⁴

The word ‘fragile’ is typically used by wealthy countries to describe lower-income countries that were colonised – for example they were invaded, controlled or had their resources taken – by those wealthier countries. Labelling a country ‘fragile’ can help wealthier countries justify continuing to intervene in the way those lower-income countries are run.⁵ Research also shows that being colonised can increase the likelihood of fragility – research shows that countries that were colonised are 50 times more likely to have high rates of intimate partner violence.⁶

It is critical that work on fragility and girls’ rights addresses these problems. For example by:

- ★ finding ways to reduce risk-factors for ‘fragility’ and its impacts in *all* countries and
- ★ ensuring that support to manage fragility prioritises national and community-level solutions by strengthening governments and communities in those countries rather than imposing solutions from outside, in line with guidance like [the Grand Bargain](#) (an agreement between big donors and humanitarian agencies on how to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian responses).

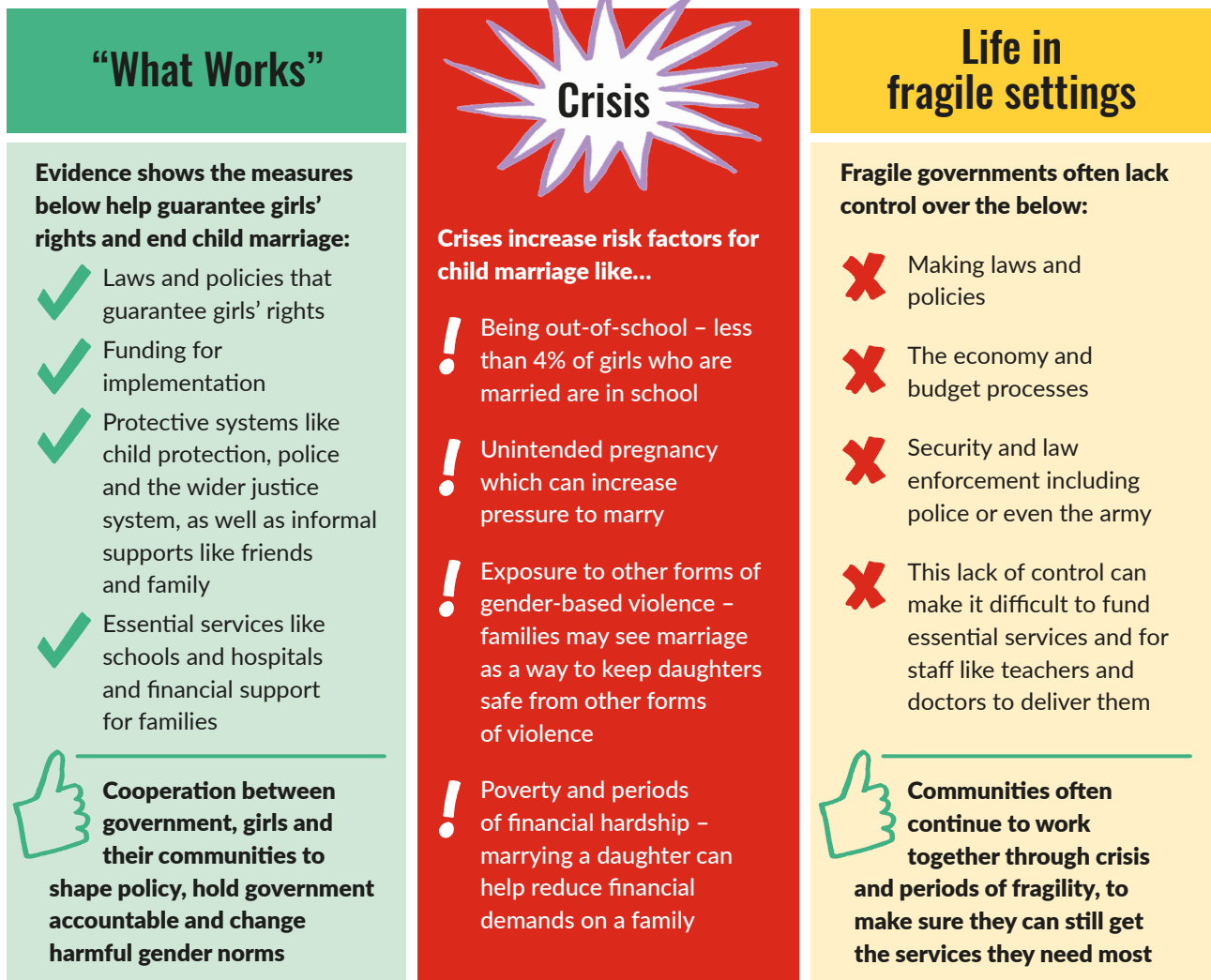
At Save the Children we use the word fragility because of its widespread use in most of the research on this subject, despite its complicated history and ongoing use.



Ratana, 12, paddling a boat on Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia

PHOTO: LINH PHAM/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Figure 1: Governments in fragile settings face the dual challenge of needing to do more to protect girls' rights at a time when they are less able to deliver that support⁷



New data: Child marriage and fragility

Fragility does not cause child marriage but fragility is often driven by crises like conflict,⁸ climate disasters or economic shocks that increase common *risk factors* for child marriage. These risk factors include being out of school, exposure to other forms of violence, and poverty, all of which can lead families to consider child marriage.⁹ Child marriage is usually a strong sign that girls' rights are being denied.

170 million adolescent girls are growing up in fragile countries today, 36 million in countries considered *extremely fragile*.¹⁰

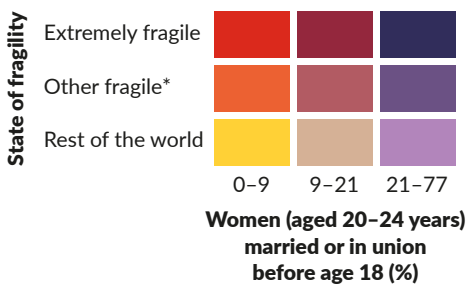
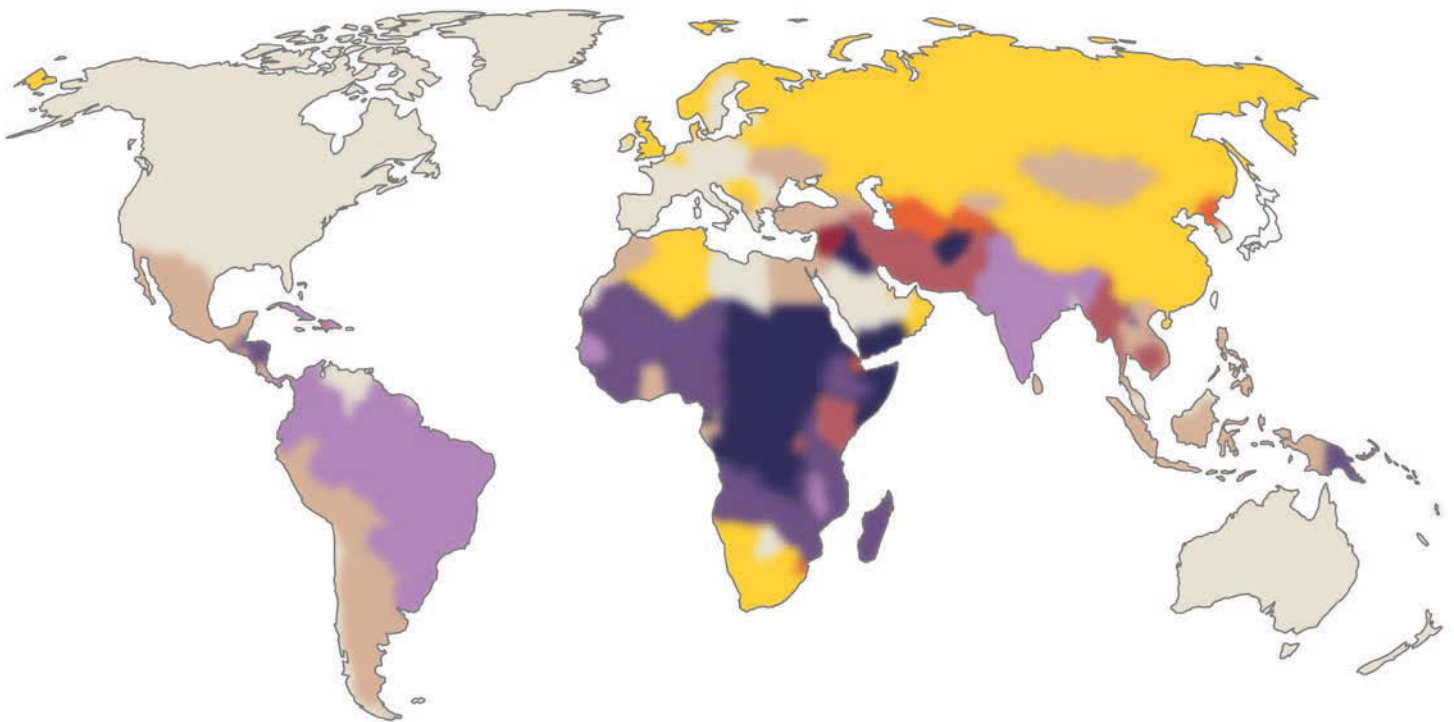
- ★ Four of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are currently extremely fragile.
- ★ One in ten child marriages occurs in extremely fragile states.
- ★ Girls living in extremely fragile settings are twice as likely to marry as girls in countries experiencing periods of greater stability.

New analysis by Save the Children shows that 32 million adolescent girls are currently living in child marriage–fragility hotspots. These girls face the dual risk of child marriage and the challenges associated with fragility. In extremely fragile countries:



- ★ Two girls marry every minute.
- ★ Almost 558,000, or one-in-four girls gives birth before her 18th birthday.
- ★ 5.9 million girls are refugees or ‘living in refugee-like circumstances’.¹¹
- ★ More than two-thirds of girls in their mid to late teens (the age when they face the greatest risk of child marriage) are out of school, denied their right to education.

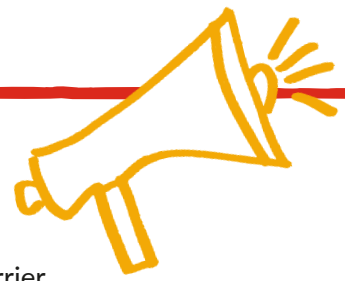
Figure 2: Child marriage–fragility hotspots where girls face high rates of child marriage and the challenges associated with fragility



■ Limited data

* ‘Other fragile’ countries are those that display significant vulnerabilities and risks, but do not meet the threshold for being classified as ‘Extremely fragile’, and identifies countries that are at risk of becoming ‘Extremely fragile’ if their vulnerabilities are not addressed.

** Child marriage data is from DHS/MICS surveys. Fragility data is from the OECD Multidimensional Fragility Framework.




Recommendations

Fragility is a risk factor for child marriage and other abuses of girls' rights, a barrier to achieving [Sustainable Development Goal 5 \(Gender Equality\)](#) and a threat that could reverse progress to-date. With fragility increasing around the world, urgent collaboration is needed to find better ways to drive defend girls' rights and accelerate progress toward gender equality. Save the Children recommends:

- 1 Strengthen governments as duty bearers**
All efforts to address risk factors for fragility and its consequences must ultimately enable governments to take full responsibility for ensuring the rights of all people within their country, supported by policies, funding and resources for implementation and service delivery.
- 2 Address fragility in *all* countries**
Governments in all countries should act to address risk factors for fragility, with a focus on gender inequality and intersecting forms of discrimination and power differentials like disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity and family income.¹²
- 3 Increase investment in fragile countries**
Governments, UN agencies, civil society organisations and donors should urgently increase investment in fragile countries, guided by the commitment to localisation (ensuring that those who are affected participate meaningfully in making decisions impacting their needs) under [the Grand Bargain](#).
- 4 Build new coalitions**
Governments, UN and humanitarian agencies, donors and civil society, including international non-government organizations (INGOs), grassroots feminist, girl-led and women's rights groups, girls and communities must build new coalitions with a focus on addressing the impacts of fragility, bringing together groups that usually work in either humanitarian crises or low-income (developing) countries.




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Aslı*, 9, with her favourite doll. Her family's house in Adıyaman province, Türkiye, was destroyed in an earthquake

PHOTO: AYŞE NUR GENÇALP/SAVE THE CHILDREN TÜRKİYE



Jesica, 15, and her mother Filomena in El Alto, Bolivia. Jesica and her family have a mattress manufacturing business and have received support from Save the Children

5 Develop and implement guidance based on ‘what works’

These new coalitions should collaborate to improve guidance for ensuring girls’ rights in fragile countries, building on existing evidence of ‘what works’ by:

- a. Putting gender equality at the centre of legal, policy and programme development and implementation. Girls need fully-funded laws, policies, programmes and services to guarantee their rights by responding to their needs and experiences of inequality and discrimination based on age, gender and other intersecting power differentials (meaning that they are age-sensitive and gender-responsive at a minimum).¹³
- b. Investing in feminist, girl-led and women’s rights organisations to strengthen movements independent of government so that they can lead their own agendas and hold governments and other members of these coalitions accountable to communities.
- c. Recognising girls as experts in their own lives by ensuring girls have the ways and means to safely and meaningfully advocate for and feed into research on their experiences, the development of policy, humanitarian interventions and funding decisions to support implementation in line with the right to have their views given ‘due weight in decisions that affect them’ under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁴
- d. Building on emerging understandings of how to reduce the impact of a crisis before it happens and make national systems – like health, education and law enforcement – more resilient (better able to survive or keep working through crises).



6 Learn and innovate

Governments and donors must increase investment to enable safe, ethical and systematic research, data collection and evaluation of innovative approaches to ensuring girls’ rights and addressing child marriage in fragile countries.



Fardowsa*, 12, lives in Ethiopia, where drought and food shortages are placing girls at increased risk of child marriage

Acknowledgements

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Cover photo: Liliane*, 13, in the displacement camp in the Democratic Republic of Congo where she is now living. Photo: Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/Save the Children

Endnotes

- ¹ Based on definitions from the World Bank, OECD's International Network on Conflict and Fragility and Fund for Peace.
- ² Save the Children (2010) [Policy Brief: Fragile States | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#).
- ³ See for example the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1990).
- ⁴ Saeed, R (2000) "[The Ubiquity of State Fragility: Fault lines in the Categorisation and Conceptualisation of Failed and Fragile States](#)". *Social and Legal Studies*, 29(6).
- ⁵ Lemay-Hebert, N and Jerrems, A (2023) "[The afterlives of state failure: echoes and aftermaths of colonialism](#)", *European Journal of International Relations*, 30(1). See also: Bøås M, Jennings KM (2005) "[Insecurity and development: the rhetoric of the 'failed state'](#)". *The European Journal of Development Research*, 17(3); Clausen M-L, Albrecht A (2022) "[Fragile states: analytically vacuous, politically useful](#)", Working paper no. 2022: 04202204, *Danish Institute for International Studies*.
- ⁶ RF Tusalem (2014) "[The Colonial Foundations of State Fragility and Failure](#)", *Polity*, 48(2); Jenevieve Manell (2022) [Opinion: How colonialism is a major cause of domestic abuse against women around the world](#), University College London.
- ⁷ Save the Children (2021) [Preventing and responding to child, early and forced marriages and unions: Technical Guidance](#); Save the Children (2018) [Toward an End to Child Marriage: Lessons from research and practice in development and humanitarian settings](#); Save the Children (2021) [Child Marriage in Humanitarian Crises: Girls and parents speak out on risk and protective factors, decision-making, and solutions](#).
- ⁸ UNICEF (the United Nations organisation that leads work for children's rights) defines child marriage as *any marriage or union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child* (a union is a relationship like a marriage that is not legally or formally recognised): UNICEF, "Child Marriage", 2023.
- ⁹ Save the Children (2022) [Global Girlhood Report 2022: Girls on the Frontline](#); Save the Children (2018) [Working Together to End Child Marriage](#); UNFPA (2015) ['Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage'](#); CARE (2015) [To protect her honour: Child marriage in emergencies – the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence](#).
- ¹⁰ Based on 36 million adolescent girls in 15 countries rated 'extremely fragile' and 134 million girls living in countries rated 'fragile' in OECD's Fragile States Index, referred to as 'other fragile' countries in our analysis.
- ¹¹ UNHCR (2024) [Refugee Data Finder](#); World Bank (no date) [Classification of Fragility and Conflict Situations \(FCS\) for World Bank Group Engagement](#).
- ¹² See Save the Children (2022) [Gender and Power Analysis: A child-centred and intersectional approach](#).
- ¹³ See Save the Children (2022) [Gender and Power Analysis: A child-centred and intersectional approach](#).
- ¹⁴ Article 12, [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (1989).

