



ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE AND ACCELERATING PROGRESS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

EGYPT

STATUS OVERVIEW: GIRLS' RIGHTS AND GENDER INEQUALITIES IN EGYPT

More than

1 in 6 (17%)

girls **marry as children** in Egypt, 2% before their 15th birthday.¹

Just over

1 in 10 (11%)

girls experience **adolescent pregnancy** in Egypt.²

Almost

1 in 3 (30%)

girls and women who have ever had a partner have experienced **intimate partner violence**.³

More than

1 in 10 (14%)

girls experience **female genital mutilation/cutting** between the age of 6 months and 14 years.⁴

Egypt ranks

129 out of 156

in the **Global Gender Equality Index**, which compares countries' gender gaps across four dimensions: economic opportunities, education, health and political leadership.⁵

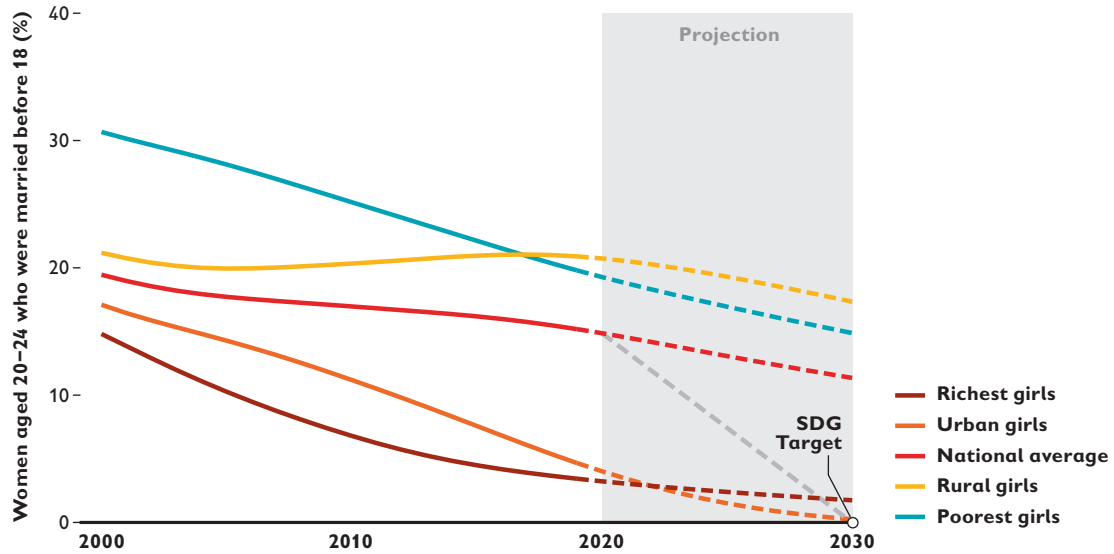
DATA TRENDS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19

Even before COVID-19, progress toward ending child marriage in Egypt presents a complicated picture. While falling rates among some population groups slowed between 2008 and 2014, others have seen alarming rises. While pre-pandemic projections (see Figure 1) suggested that these rises would slow, the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis mean an unpredictable future for girls in Egypt. The most recent national survey (2014) shows that while rates among girls living in wealthier households and urban areas were falling, rates

were increasing among poorer girls and those in urban areas. Rates among girls in the poorest households were an exception, falling while rates among girls in the next poorest income group rose. Adolescent pregnancies were also falling among girls from the poorest households whilst rising among girls from rural areas and most starkly among the richest girls (see figure 2). Decreases in child marriage and rates of pregnancy among girls from the poorest households are likely linked.

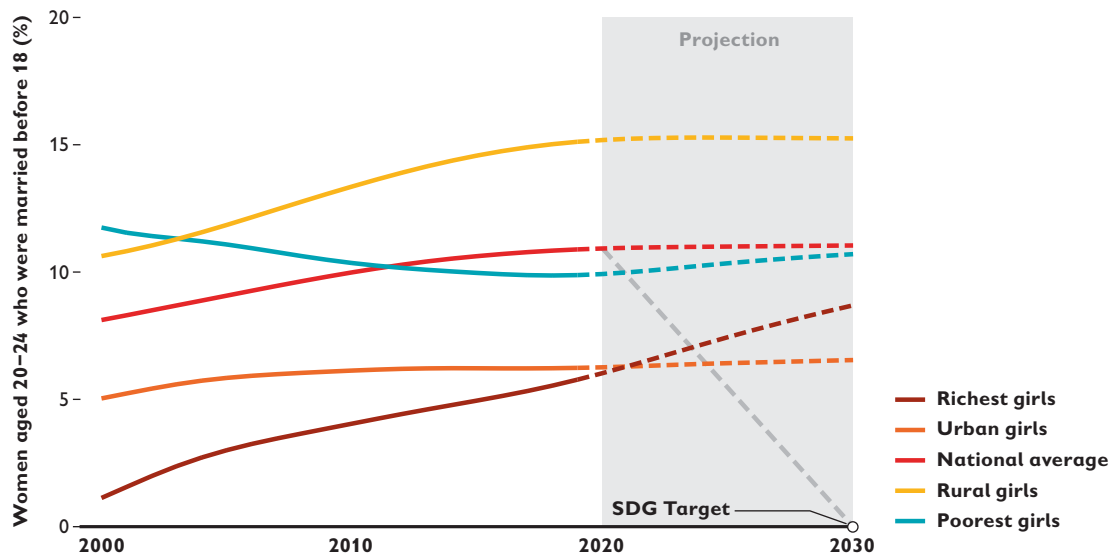
continued on next page

Figure 1: While rates of child marriage were falling before COVID-19 there were stark increases among some population groups



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS.
Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

Figure 2: Adolescent pregnancy is rising among several population groups in Egypt



Save the Children estimates based on DHS/MICS.
Projections based on pre-COVID trends.

Reasons for these decreases however are not known, though may be attributable to increased interventions or the impact of poverty on families' ability to pay bride prices or afford to hold weddings or for prospective couples to start a family.

With around 20% of girls in poor and rural households marrying compared to 9% among girls in urban areas and just 4% among the richest some girls were at much higher risk of child marriage than others before

COVID-19. Location is strongly associated with risk of child marriage in Egypt, with girls in the Upper Egypt region were twice as likely to be married as children as girls living in the Urban Governorates (30% compared to 14%) before the pandemic. With the exception of girls in urban areas, no group was on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goal target to end child marriage by 2030 and inequality gaps were only projected to close between rich and urban girls.

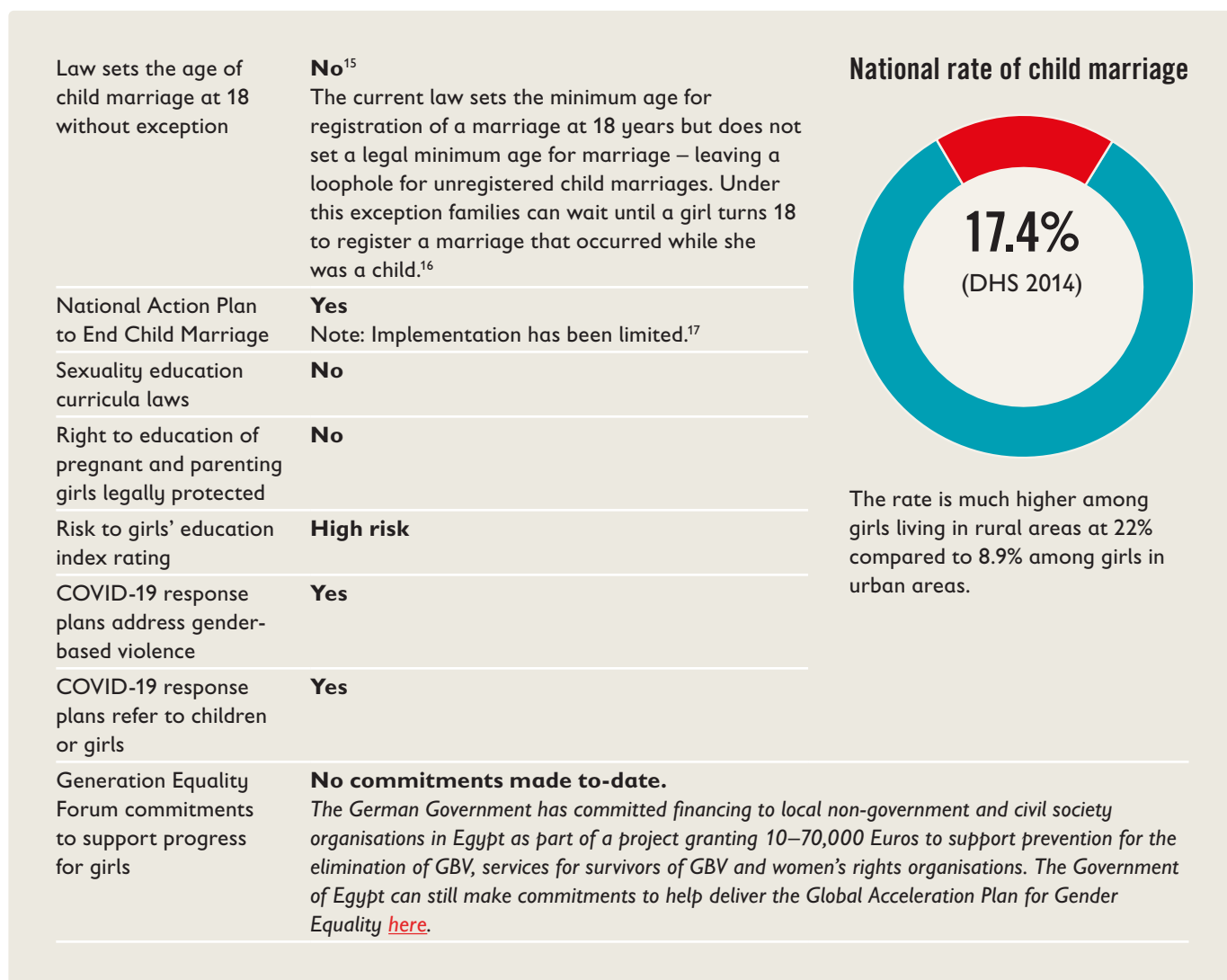
Save the Children estimate that 7,000 girls in the Middle East and North Africa region may have become pregnant due to the economic impacts of COVID-19 in 2020 alone, and that an additional 72,000 girls may be at risk of child marriage by 2025 as a result of the same increase in economic insecurity.⁶ With the pandemic having lasted far longer than expected UNICEF now estimates that the impacts of the crisis could lead to 10 million additional marriages globally by 2030.⁷

COVID-19 has disrupted lives and livelihoods for girls in Egypt. COVID-19 containment measures led to schools being closed for 16 weeks and partially closed for a further month, impacting education for an estimated 23 million children.⁸ Calls for support to children’s helplines relating child marriage increased since the pandemic,⁹ as did reports of gender-based violence among adults, with one in five women reporting increased experiences of violence.¹⁰ At the same time, women and girls (whose access is already too often limited by age-discrimination) faced increased

challenges accessing sexual and reproductive health services. Those in rural areas and from poorer households were more likely to have missed out, delayed treatment or received lower-quality care, increasing health risks, including through unintended pregnancy. Adolescent pregnancy is a driver and consequence of child marriage and pregnancy and birth complications are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15–19 years globally.¹¹

While Egypt was one of few countries to experience positive growth in 2020, one survey found that more than 70% of responding households lost income as a result of the economic impacts of the pandemic.¹² Women were disproportionately affected, with only 40% able to return to their jobs compared to 96% of men.¹³ In a country where, pre-pandemic 81% of women had never been employed, these impacts further limit women’s economic empowerment and the perception that girls’ education will lead to a career and economic independence.¹⁴

Figure 3: COVID-19 and child marriage vulnerability in Egypt – policy snapshot



DRIVING PROGRESS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE AND OTHER FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN EGYPT

Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence and a violation of girls' rights. Egypt is working to end child marriage, address risk factors that drive this harmful practice, and eliminate other forms of gender-based violence through political leadership and by strengthening its legislative and policy framework.

In 2014, Egypt's National Population Council launched a national strategy to reduce child marriage by 50 percent within five years. However, political instability slowed the implementation of the strategy.¹⁸ 2017 saw a series of renewed efforts to address the practice. Egypt's National Council for Women launched a "No to Underage Marriage" campaign, alongside Christian clerics, and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, to address early unregistered customary marriages.¹⁹ That year, Maya Morsi, the head of Egypt's National Council of Women's Rights, called for Parliament to criminalize child marriage and raise the legal age to register a marriage from 18 to 21 years old.²⁰ The Ministry of Health announced it was in the process of drafting a law criminalizing child marriage in 2018 but there have been few updates on the law's progress since then.²¹

BARRIERS TO PROGRESS

The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, including school closures and growing economic insecurity have exacerbated the following existing barriers to progress for girls' rights in Egypt:

Legal loopholes and lack of enforcement

Although Egyptian law prohibits the registration of marriages where one party is under 18 years old, enforcement remains a problem as most child marriages are customary and are not legally recognized.²⁶ Families may choose to marry their daughters as girls through an unregistered religious marriage, then have the marriage legally registered once she turns 18, without facing sanction. However, not registering or delaying marriage registration can leave a girl and her children in a precarious legal situation until the marriage is registered.²⁷ The use of customary marriage papers to prove the lineage of children born prior to a girl turning 18 and being able to legally register a marriage has been reported. This however relies on families being able to find legal officials they trust not to report the child marriage, and that are willing to sign the papers.²⁸

Humanitarian context

Girls in humanitarian crises are more likely to experience risk factors associated with child marriage – twelve of the twenty countries with the highest rates of

Support from religious leaders is recognised as critical to ending child marriage and some individuals and institutions have taken clear steps to address the practice. In 2019, the deputy Grand Imam of al-Azhar, a prominent religious official, issued a fatwa against child marriage.²² Additionally, religious scholars from Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Church of Egypt reviewed religious texts and concluded that child marriage and forced marriage are cultural practices that have no basis in Islam or Christianity and should be forbidden.²³

Since COVID-19, steps to support married girls and girls at risk of child marriage have been taken in response to clear demand. The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) has established a hotline, and has used social media, for citizens to report cases of child endangerment. In the first half of 2021, the NCCM received 6,169 calls related to child marriage.²⁴ Penalties for guardians who participate in FGM/C were raised to 10 years in prison in April 2021 and in August, the deputy of the parliamentary Manpower Committee called for harsher punishments for families who allow their children to marry early.²⁵

child marriage also struggle with severe humanitarian crises.²⁹ Egypt hosts more than 250,000 refugees, mostly from Syria. While rates of child marriage within Syrian refugee communities in neighboring countries have risen, in Egypt, displacement has been found to both drive and moderate child marriage for refugee families. For some families, separation from older family members and a lack of suitable grooms have stalled traditions that have previously perpetuated child marriage.³⁰

Internal conflict has also presented challenges to Egypt's efforts to reduce rates of child marriage. During the Egyptian revolution of 2011, some families married their daughters early as a protection mechanism against rising rates of gender-based violence.³¹ Political instability was also recognised as slowing progress to implement the 2014 national strategy to reduce child marriage.

Harmful norms around gender and adolescence

Child marriage and other harmful practices like FGM/C are linked to harmful norms around gender and adolescence including those that associate virginity with family honour, stigmatise premarital sex and pregnancy, and value girls primarily as wives and mothers. Rates of child marriage vary by region in Egypt and in areas where the practice is most common marriage may be seen as a way to prevent premarital sex and pregnancy

or to avoid associated stigma.³² Egypt has the highest rate of FGM/C in the world, despite a strategy to end FGM/C and laws criminalising the performance of FGM/C, loopholes remain.³³ The persistence of FGM/C and child marriage may also be linked. Rates of both harmful practices are highest in the Upper Egypt region and significantly for age of marriage, girls are typically cut at or before puberty and FGM/C is considered proof of adulthood and readiness for marriage.³⁴

A recent study by Save the Children and reports to UNICEF and International Centre for Research on Women found that girls were being married temporarily through so-called “summer” or “tourist marriages” in exchange for money. The marriages are typically to older men from wealthier Gulf states and Egyptian law regulates rather than outlawing these marriages, specifying a minimum amount to be paid (\$6,400) where the bride is more than 25 years younger than the groom.³⁵ Despite their temporary nature, these marriages expose girls to the same risks as other forms of child marriage, in addition the social stigma attached to divorce. While officials argue that the law ensure girls’ financial rights, other argue, in line with international law, that it legalises the sexual exploitation of children where a bride is under 18 years of age.³⁶

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To realise the potential of ongoing efforts to end child marriage and eliminate other forms of gender-based violence, the Government of Egypt should:

- 1. Eliminate loopholes that allow harmful practices including FGM/C and child marriage, to continue.** The law should set the legal age of marriage at 18 years without exception and further resources should be allocated to popularise and implement national strategies and legislation to end child marriage and FGM/C, in light of significant linkages and shared drivers. These practices, including “summer” or “tourist marriages” should be recognised as gender-based violence against children. Similarly, loopholes in FGM/C legislation should be closed, and implementation strengthened, including through communication of laws (particularly in areas where literacy is limited), improved reporting of cases and services for girls at risk.⁴¹
- 2. Develop and implement a multisectoral national strategy that addresses the root causes of child marriage** in line with the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage and the Common African Position.⁴² Multisectoral responses must bring together the education, finance, health, child protection and justice sectors, work with communities, traditional leaders, parents and girls themselves with adequate funding and accountability

Disrupted access to education

Education can play an important role in reducing exposure to gender-based violence, including child marriage. Girls with low levels of education are more likely to marry early than girls with higher levels of education, and girls who marry are more likely to leave school early.³⁷ Education interventions are among the most powerful ways of reducing child marriage.³⁸ In 2018, Save the Children calculated that globally, just 4% of married girls aged 15–18 years were in school and that achieving universal secondary education could prevent as many as 51 million child marriages by 2030, putting the world on track to end the practice by 2030.³⁹

The parents of Syrian refugee children in Egypt report that poor education outcomes in the public school system and high tuition costs for private schools increase the likelihood of girls leaving school early to marry, contributing to higher rates of marriage among these girls.⁴⁰ COVID-19 related school closures have also increased barriers to education. Low-quality distance education and fees deny girls throughout Egypt their right to education.

- 3. Provide services for girls who have been married.** Efforts to address child marriage must include response services for girls who are married, divorced or widowed, as well as prevention. These should include education and be informed by survivors to ensure the resources and services they need most are covered.
- 4. Empower child marriage survivors to become advocates against child marriage.** Girl advocates against child marriage are important allies in the fight against child marriage, especially at the local level. These advocates should be supported in all regions with child-friendly resources, technical and financial assistance, training and advocacy to institutionalise mechanisms for accountability to girls and to promote their meaningful participation in decision-making.⁴⁴
- 5. Implement a gender-sensitive national COVID-19 response** to address the unique ways that girls are affected by the pandemic, including through protections to curb drivers of child marriage like poverty and limited access to education.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ UNICEF/DHS 2014
- ² UNICEF/DHS 2014
- ³ WHO 2018. Data refers to women aged 15–49 years.
- ⁴ UNICEF/DHS 2015.
- ⁵ World Economic Forum (2021) [Global Gender Gap Index 2021](#).
- ⁶ Save the Children (2020) [Global Girlhood Report 2020: How COVID-19 is putting progress in peril](#).
- ⁷ UNICEF (2021) [COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage](#).
- ⁸ UNICEF (2020) [Data snapshot "COVID-19 in Egypt": UNICEF efforts to protect children and youth during the pandemic](#).
- ⁹ UNICEF (2021) [Child Marriage in the context of Covid-19: Analysis of trends, programming and alternative approaches in the Middle East and North Africa](#).
- ¹⁰ UN Women, National Council for Women and Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research (2020) [Women and COVID-19 Pandemic](#).
- ¹¹ World Health Organization (2018) [Global Health Estimates 2016: Disease burden by Cause, Age, Sex, by Country and by Region, 2000–2016](#).
- ¹² UN Women, the National Council for Women, Baseera Centre (2020) [Women and COVID-19 Pandemic](#).
- ¹³ Magdi, N (5 July 2021) ["19% of Egyptian women experienced increased gender-based violence since COVID outbreak: Survey"](#), Egypt Today.
- ¹⁴ UNFPA (2015) [The Egypt economic cost of gender-based violence survey \(ECGBVS\)](#).
- ¹⁵ https://sherloc.unodc.org/res/cld/document/egy/2002/egypt_child_act_english.html/Egypt_Child_Act_English.pdf
- ¹⁶ Save the Children International (2021) [Married by Exception: Child marriage policies in the Middle East and North Africa](#).
- ¹⁷ UNICEF and ICRW (2017) [Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – Egypt Country Brief](#).
- ¹⁸ Girls Not Brides (2020) [Egypt](#).
- ¹⁹ Egypt Today (1 December 2020) [Egypt to issue law criminalizing child marriage](#).
- ²⁰ Egypt Independent (27 September 2017) [Head of Egypt's NCWR Calls on Parliament to Ratify 21 as Legal Age of Girls' Marriage](#).
- ²¹ Girls Not Brides (2020) [Egypt](#).
- ²² Maclean, R (21 June 2019) ["Senior Islamic Cleric Issues Fatwa Against Child Marriage."](#) The Guardian.
- ²³ Save the Children (2021) [Married by Exception: Child Marriage Policies in the Middle East and North Africa](#).
- ²⁴ Al-Monitor (2021) [Demands for Tougher Penalties against Child Marriage Grow in Egypt](#).
- ²⁵ Above.
- ²⁶ Above: Save the Children (2021) [Married by Exception](#).
- ²⁷ Above.
- ²⁸ Above: Al-Monitor (2021) [Demands for Tougher Penalties against Child Marriage](#).
- ²⁹ Girls Not Brides (2020) [Egypt](#).
- ³⁰ Above: Save the Children (2021) [Married by Exception](#).
- ³¹ Girls Not Brides (2020) [Egypt](#).
- ³² Above.
- ³³ 28 Too Many (2018) [Egypt: The law and FGM](#).
- ³⁴ Above.
- ³⁵ Above: Save the Children (2021) [Married by Exception](#).
- ³⁶ UNICEF and ICRW (2017) [Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – Egypt Country Brief](#).
- ³⁷ Above: Girls Not Brides (2020) [Egypt](#).
- ³⁸ Save the Children and Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law (2018) [Toward an End to Child Marriage: Lessons from research and practice in development and humanitarian sectors](#) and World Bank and International Centre for Research on Women (2017) [Economic impacts of child marriage: Global synthesis report \(conference edition\)](#).
- ³⁹ Save the Children (2018) [Working together to end child marriage: How Governments can end child marriage by accelerating coordinated efforts across education, health, protection and other sectors](#).
- ⁴⁰ Above: Save the Children (2021) [Married by Exception](#).
- ⁴¹ See analysis of loopholes and recommendations in 28 Too Many (2018) [Egypt: The law and FGM](#).
- ⁴² AU (2015) [African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa \(2014-2017\): Call to Action](#); AU (2015) [Draft African Common Position on the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage](#).
- ⁴³ Above: Save the Children (2018) [Working Together to End Child Marriage](#).
- ⁴⁴ Save the Children (2021) [Lead like a Girl: Ensuring adolescent girls' meaningful participation in decision-making processes](#).

This document is based on key informant interviews with staff from Save the Children Egypt and secondary research. The authors are Caitlin Flynn and Lavinia Loperfido with assistance from Gabrielle Szabo and technical input from Ingy Akoush, Heba El Azzazy and Sara Hassan.