



Save the
Children

GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2024

FRAGILE FUTURES

GIRLS' RIGHTS, CHILD MARRIAGE

AND FRAGILITY

GLOBAL REPORT

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This report provides a global overview – for more detail on specific regions you can access the full briefs [here](#).



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

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



Aamira*, 14, makes a heart with her hands outside her home in Cairo, Egypt

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 build, 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 to 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.

Box 1: '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 discrimination and 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 countries that were colonised are 50 times more likely to have high rates of intimate partner violence.⁶

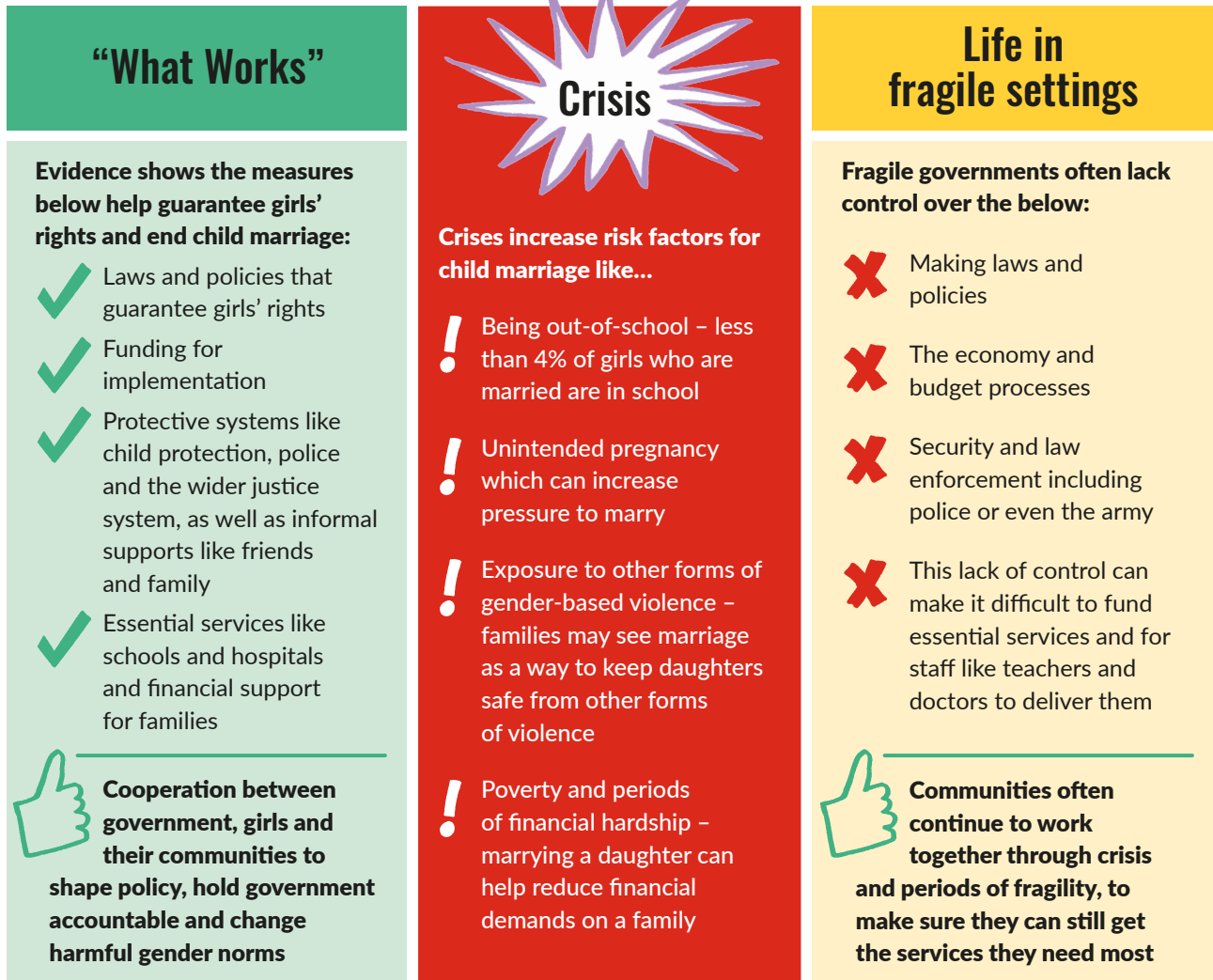
It is critical that work on fragility and girls' rights addresses these problems. For example, by:

- ★ 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.



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



Masika Charlotte*, 11, at school in Ituri, Democratic Republic of Congo



PHOTO: PATOU DOMBI/SAVE THE CHILDREN

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.



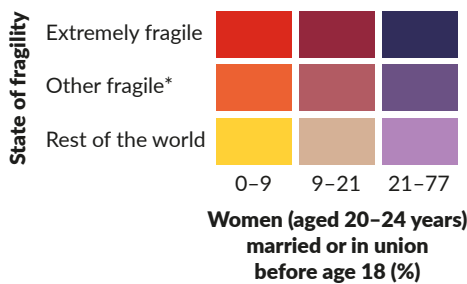
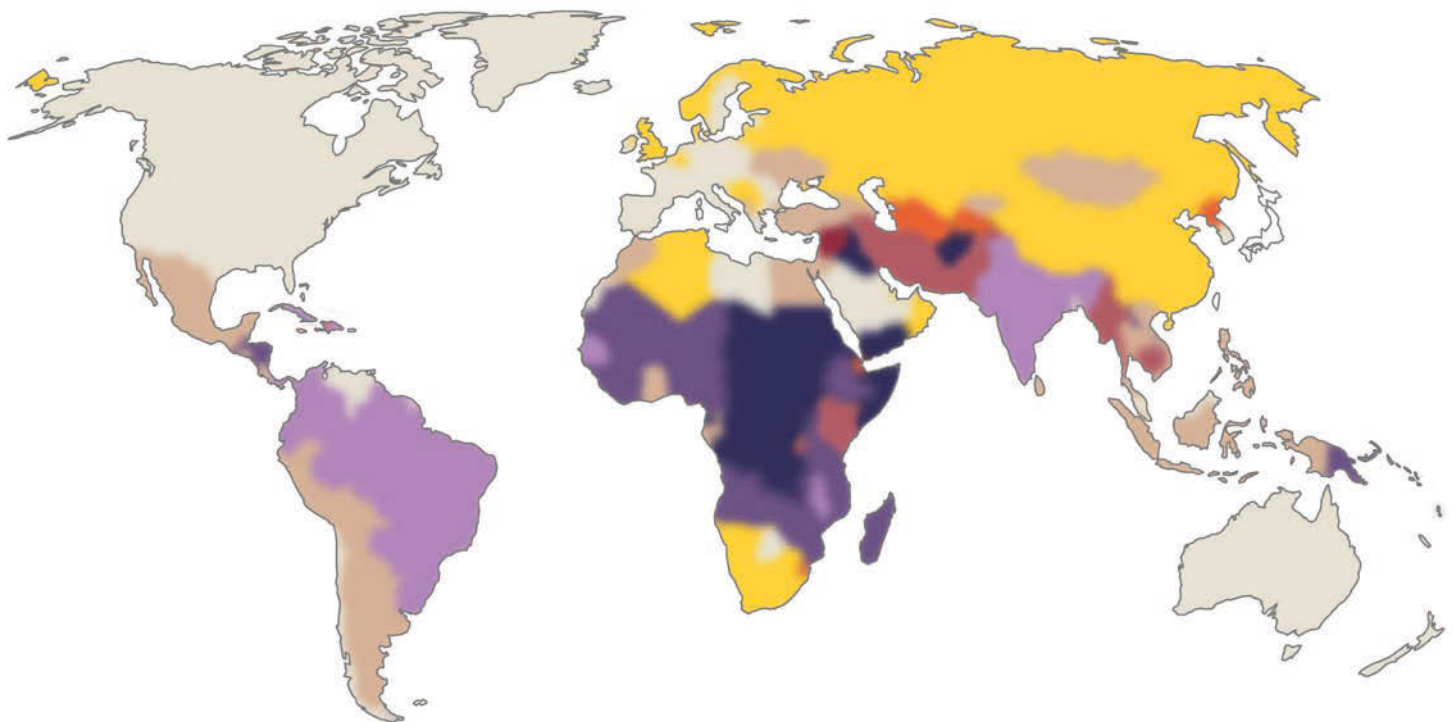
Ratana, 12, paddling a boat on Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia

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 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 organisations (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: AYSE NUR GENÇALP/SAVE THE CHILDREN TÜRKİYE

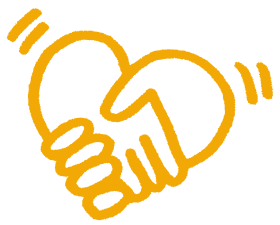


Jesica, 15, and her mother Filomena in El Alto, Bolivia. Jesica and her family have a mattress manufacturing business and have received support from Save the Children

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.

Part 1: What is fragility?

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 generations of girls before them. Yet every crisis threatens to reverse progress, and persistent inequalities, the climate emergency and anti-rights backlash 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*.



Fragility (see Box 1) has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic and is linked to many of the new crises we have seen since, including coups (when a government is thrown out by force), wars between people living in the same area, and conflict between countries.¹⁵ Fragility threatens progress and human rights, including progress toward the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) – 17 commitments to improve wellbeing for people and the planet that all governments agreed to reach by 2030. Right now, no fragile country is on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals on ending hunger, health for all, or gender equality.¹⁶

At the current rate of progress, it will take more than 300 years for women and girls around the world to be treated as equal to men and boys and enjoy the same opportunities in life.¹⁷

Today's generation of girls will help build that more equal future.¹⁸ As survivors of complex and interconnected crises, their experiences and demands can help build

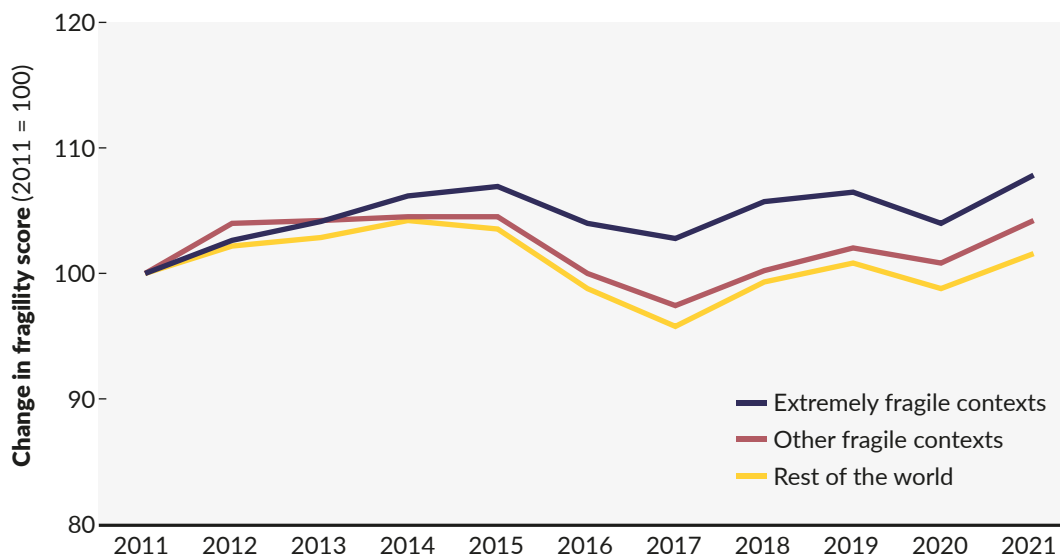
Box 1: Defining fragility



Under international law, all governments have a duty to ensure the rights of the people in their country – as a result, governments are sometimes referred to as 'duty bearers' for human rights, the people in their country are 'rights holders'. Experts use a number of different definitions for 'fragility' but most agree that **an area is fragile when the government is not fulfilling its responsibilities as a duty bearer for example by making and enforcing laws or managing the economy and the services that people need to be safe and healthy.**¹⁹ This could be due to lack of ability, resources or control in parts of the country, or willingness to provide services.²⁰ 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 build peace, with institutions like courts and parliaments that remain very weak and parts of the country affected by widespread violence and lawlessness and countries can move back and forth between times that are more or less stable.

communities and systems that are better prepared for crisis, and can accelerate progress for human rights and sustainable development. The governments of *all* countries need to find ways to learn from girls and address risk-factors for fragility and its impacts through the laws, policies and services that girls rely on to safeguard their rights and prevent child marriage.

Figure 1: Fragility is increasing around the world



Source: OECD (2022), States of Fragility 2022.

‘Fragility’: A useful idea with some important problems



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What can cause fragility?

Sometimes a crisis sparks a period of fragility, for example:

-  Violence – such as war with another country or violence between groups inside a country, for example violence carried out by groups trying to take over government, organised criminal groups that governments can't control, or widespread protests by people who are unhappy with government decisions and the services they provide, who believe there is no other way to create change.
-  Disasters – including climate-related disasters like floods and fires or other disasters like earthquakes that can significantly affect most aspects of daily life.
-  Economic crises – including rising prices that lead to people not having the money they need to look after themselves and governments not having enough money to provide essential services.

Sometimes, the build-up of challenges over time can make countries increasingly fragile. For example, a country may struggle with high levels of poverty and inequality (including gender inequality) as well as more frequent climate disasters that cost people their income and increase their reliance on government support – support that the government may not be able to provide effectively due to costs, capacity, political will or other factors. As people become more desperate, they may have to compete to access things like food, water, housing and education, particularly where the government and a small number of powerful people have a lot while the rest of the population has very little. These challenges mount up, making it harder to recover from every new crisis and harder for the government to deliver what people need.

The build-up of challenges over time can make countries increasingly fragile





Alia*, 11, poses for a portrait with twins Polina* and Nastia*, 10, in Bucharest, Romania. All three girls became refugees when the war in Ukraine made their once stable country fragile, almost overnight.

Case study: The war in Ukraine and ‘cascading’ fragility around the world

When the war escalated in Ukraine in 2022, life in the country changed instantly for girls like Alia*, 11, Nastia*, 10 and Polina*, 10. “I didn’t plan to leave Ukraine until the very last minute”, Alia’s mother Margot explains. “Everything happened so fast and suddenly” she says, “a missile struck not far from our home, and my husband told me not to wait anymore; get things ready and leave. That night I called to get on an evacuation train”. The train took Margot and Alia to Bucharest, Romania – there Alia has had to learn a new language, start at a new school, make new friends and find a new place to live. “When I arrived in Bucharest, I didn’t like it at first. It was all different. Different people, a different language... I couldn’t connect with people. But after some time, I felt better in Romania. I like it here now,” says Alia.

In addition to forcing families like Alia’s to flee their homes for safety, the full-scale war transformed Ukraine from a relatively stable country to extremely fragile. The war has also had devastating flow-on effects for other countries, described as ‘cascading fragility’.²⁴ The war itself, interruptions to food production and rising energy prices combined with the ongoing economic impacts of COVID-19 and the worsening climate crisis. Many of these impacts are considered risk factors or drivers of fragility and countries already considered fragile have been the worst affected.²⁵

Entha, 10, has her hair braided by a friend in Haiti.

PHOTO: CRISTINA BAUSSAN/SAVE THE CHILDREN



Case study: Post-colonialism and resilience in the face of external interventions and fragility in Haiti

Entha's home country, Haiti is currently among the most fragile countries in the world.²⁶ Like many fragile countries, Haiti's past and present have been shaped by colonisation, exploitation and interventions by foreign countries and international organisations.

When Haiti won its independence, colonial powers responded with policies aimed at preventing its economic success. In the two centuries since, inequalities between communities, political instability including coups, anti-democratic leaders and an almost 20-year occupation by the US have made Haiti's institutions fragile, allowing corruption and human rights abuses. Vulnerability to climate change and disasters has combined with these factors to increase fragility. In 2010, a devastating earthquake was followed by a cholera outbreak, traced to a sewerage leak from a base set up by UN Peacekeepers in the country to support with the earthquake response.²⁷

Throughout its history, Haiti has moved between periods of fragility, recovery and progress. In 2017 the election of President Jose Moïse was considered an important step toward stability and the country was ranked 'most improved' in the Fund for Peace's Fragility Index.²⁸ Since then, the country has faced further challenges like the earthquake that damaged Entha's home and President Moïse was assassinated, triggering a new period of political instability.²⁹

Haiti is often presented as a 'classic' example of a fragile country but these descriptions rarely recognise the role of Haitians like Entha and her mother in rebuilding after disaster, even at a time when the government is too fragile to provide support. Interventions in fragile countries must ultimately allow governments to take responsibility for essential services but where financial support is needed, it should put money into the hands of people in need. A small cash transfer, for example, helped Entha's mother to repair her home after the earthquake, feed her children and pay scholarships so that they could go to school.³⁰



How does fragility affect girls and their rights?

Under international law, all girls have the right to be safe, healthy, get a safe, good quality education, and make decisions about their own lives.³¹ To realise these rights they need access to services like schools, food, and healthcare, as well as protective laws, that are enforced. Governments should provide all these things. In fragile countries, governments are often unable to afford or effectively provide these services or enforce laws, which means many girls are denied their rights.

Fragile countries are also often affected by crises like wars and climate disasters. Research shows that crises can increase gender inequality and gender-based violence (see Box 2). This can affect girls in different ways, shaped by factors like their race, where they live, class and disability. These power differentials can overlap or 'intersect' with inequalities based on girls' age and gender.³²

Intersecting inequalities that exist before a crisis mean that girls are often less prepared for the consequences of a crisis. For example, they may be less likely to have been sent to school and taught about how to stay safe in a crisis than boys.

Loss of income, chaos and overcrowding in the immediate aftermath of a crisis can increase girls' risk of exposure to violence.

Box 2: Gender inequality, gender equality, patriarchy and gender-based violence



Gender inequality is the unfair treatment of people because of their gender. This includes their gender identity, what other people assume about their gender, and the way that they express that gender, for example the way they dress. This treatment can lead to unequal access to power, opportunities, rights and resources.

Gender equality refers to the equal enjoyment by women, girls, men and boys – of all ages, sexual orientations and gender identities – of rights, opportunities, resources, rewards and quality of life.³³





Gender inequality usually privileges men and boys and is closely linked to patriarchy. **Patriarchy** is a word that covers the beliefs, ways of living and working that give men and boys power over women, girls and others who disagree with those ideas.

Gender-based violence is violence used against a person because of their gender. It is used to reinforce patriarchy, power imbalances and restrictive ideas about how people should behave to be considered 'good' men, boys, women or girls (these restrictive ideas are called **gender norms**). Gender-based violence can include physical, economic, sexual and emotional (psychological) abuse.³⁴ Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence.

Case study: Conflict, fragility, grave violations of girls' rights and interruptions to support services – examples from West and Central Africa



Gender-based violence has been used as a weapon in conflict across West and Central Africa. And conflict has interrupted protection and response services:

-  More than 11,000 cases of gender-based violence were reported in the **Central African Republic** in the first half of 2023 alone, almost one-third of these instances were rape.³⁵
-  In 2023, more than 40% of people who experienced gender-based violence in the **central Sahel** did not have access to adequate health or other support services.³⁶
-  In the first half of 2023, 4,920 incidents of human rights violations were reported in **Mali**; 39% of these were sexual violence.³⁷
-  Widespread violence, mass displacement, and conflict-related sexual violence continues to violate girls' rights in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**.
 - More than 61,000 cases of sexual violence were reported in the first six months of this year – 11 per cent higher compared to the same period last year.³⁸
 - At least 123,000 GBV cases were reported in 2023, with about 90 per cent of the survivors being women and girls. But given the significant underreporting of GBV, the real number of cases is presumably far higher.³⁹



Samira*, 14, at her home in a settlement in Yatenga province, Burkina Faso. She and her family were forced by armed men to flee from their village as violence swept across the region.

Case study: Conflict in Mozambique robs girls of their rights

Northern Mozambique is experiencing an acute humanitarian crisis driven by armed conflict.⁴⁰ For the past seven years, communities in Cabo Delgado, the northern province most affected by conflict, have endured violent attacks, rapes, abductions, and loss of access to essential services, with devastating effects.⁴¹ More than three-quarters (76%) of Mozambique's total population of internally displaced people are living in Cabo Delgado.⁴²

The Cabo Delgado region has the highest rate of adolescent pregnancies and the second highest rate of child marriage in the country.⁴³ The current conflict has deeply affected girls and hindered their rights. In Palma and Chiúre, towns within the province, parents have resorted to sending their daughters to marry men from organised armed groups for protection or for money to flee the conflict area.⁴⁴ According to the latest figure across the province:

- ★ 61% of women were married or living with a partner before the age of 18.⁴⁵
- ★ 39.7% of women 15–49-years old did not complete primary school.⁴⁶
- ★ 55% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were already mothers, or pregnant.⁴⁷

Girls have been abducted and sexually exploited, as essential services such as healthcare, education and law enforcement are interrupted.⁴⁸ Access to essential services in Cabo Delgado has always been limited and the conflict has further reduced the availability and quality of protection and support services for girls at risk of child marriage. In the Palma district, legal and protection services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are not available due to insecurity.⁴⁹

Lack of alternative livelihood opportunities and interventions, including the lack of access to income generation activities, cash and saving groups, and education services is also pushing ever-married girls – girls who have been married at least once in their lives – who are still children but no longer married – to consider another marriage to survive.

Children in Mozambique take part in an activity at a focus group discussion event connected with producing the “Amplifying the voices of returnee children in Macomia and Palma, Cabo Delgado” report.



PHOTO: RUI MUTEMBA/SAVE THE CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL

Part 2: Child marriage and fragile settings

Child marriage: A result and a driver of gender inequality

Child marriage is form of **gender-based violence, a predictor of future experiences of gender-based violence and an abuse of human rights**.⁵⁰ 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).⁵¹

Girls who marry as children may be denied the right to choose if, when and who to marry. They often drop out of school early to start having children and can be isolated from friends and family.⁵² Adolescent pregnancy puts girls at higher risk of birth and pregnancy complications, the leading cause of death for girls aged 15–19 years.⁵³ Girls who are married are also more likely to face gender-based violence throughout their lives, including from their husband and members of his family.⁵⁴

Despite progress to reduce child marriage, around 12 million girls still marry each year, 2 million before their 15th birthday.⁵⁵ Child marriage can affect children of any gender but estimates suggest that girls are six times more likely to be married as children than boys.⁵⁶



Soumba, 16 (right), in Mali, is explaining the consequences of early marriage to her peers Afouchata, 15, and Siguitio, 16

PHOTO: MOUSSA D COULIBALY/
SPONSORSHIP MALI

What is the connection between fragility and child marriage?

Fragility increases risks to girls' rights including risk factors for child marriage

More than half of the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered 'fragile'.⁵⁷

Fragility does not cause child marriage but fragility is often driven by crises like conflict, climate disasters or economic shocks that increase common *risk factors* for child marriage.⁵⁸ Those risk factors might include breakdown of protective systems (including through separation from family), being out-of-school or pregnant outside marriage.⁵⁹ Crises also increase girls' exposure to other forms of gender-based violence and create financial pressure for families – these circumstances can push families to consider child marriage as a way to help make sure that their daughters are kept safe or provided for by another family.⁶⁰ Unfortunately this decision exposes girls to the harmful experiences associated with child marriage.

Ensuring girls' rights requires long-term prevention and action, collaboration between different groups, and funding for services and the people needed to deliver them.⁶¹ For example, preventing child marriage and ensuring the rights of married, widowed and divorced girls, and girls wanting to leave marriages or unions requires:⁶²

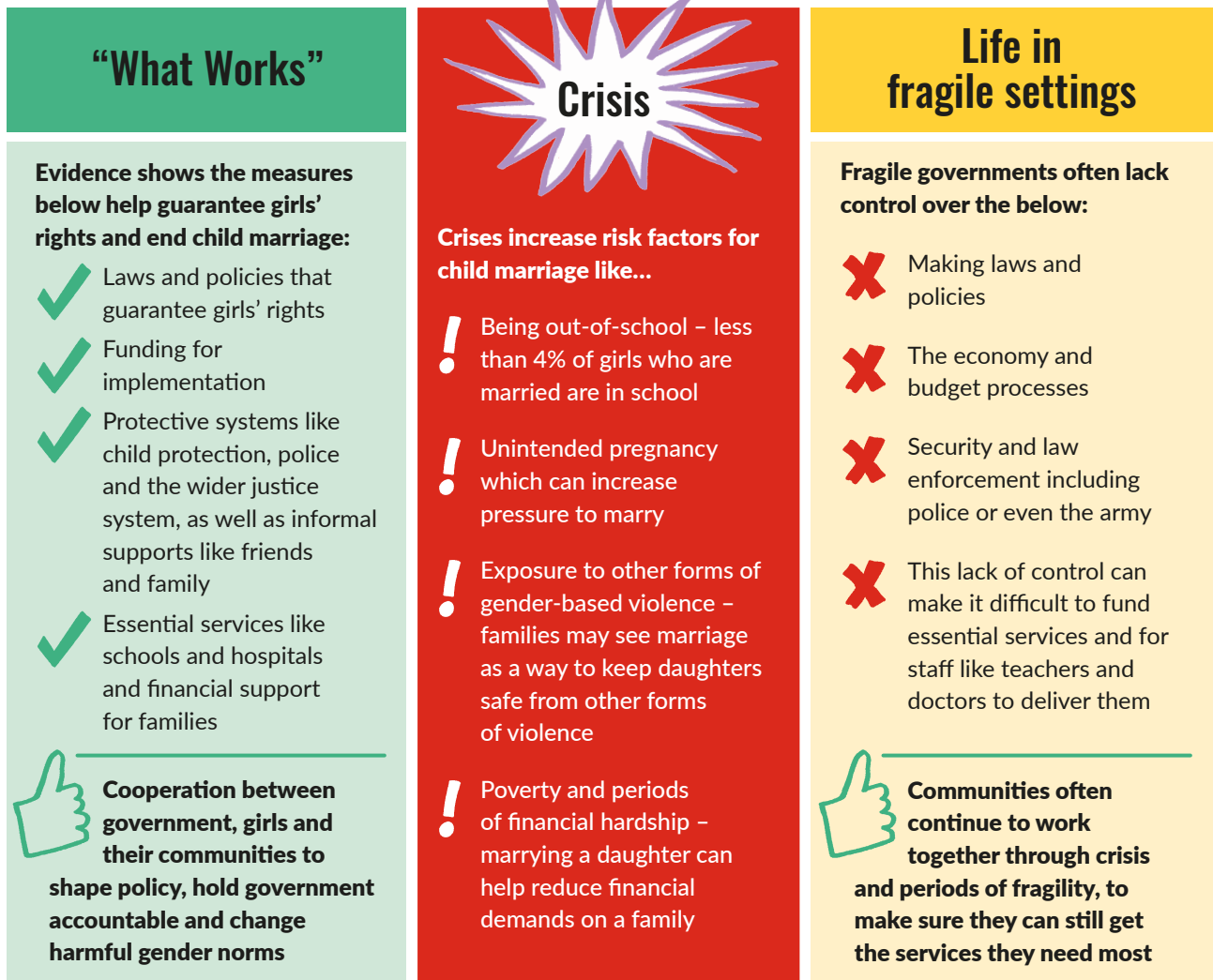
- ★ different government ministries like health, education, justice and finance to work together with each other and communities, including girls
- ★ clear laws, policies or strategies that take account of the ways that age and gender affect needs and the way girls are treated, to help coordinate the above groups and make sure they have the people and budget they need
- ★ aligned commitment at national, sub-national, and international levels to promote girls' rights
- ★ reliable, long-term support for all of the above because many of the changes needed, such as changing gender norms about marriage and girls' rights, can take a long time.

Governments in fragile settings often lack the ability or resources needed to make laws, fund services like healthcare, food, and schools, and coordinate the many different people and organisations that need to work together for change. This leaves girls with limited or no support to meet their needs or realise their rights, including rights to refuse or leave a marriage.

Governments in fragile settings face the dual challenge of needing to do *more* to protect girls' rights at a time when risks are increased and governments are *less* able to deliver that support.



Figure 2: 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 support⁶³



New data: Child marriage–fragility hotspots

170 million adolescent girls are currently growing up in fragile countries, 36 million in countries considered *extremely fragile*.⁶⁴

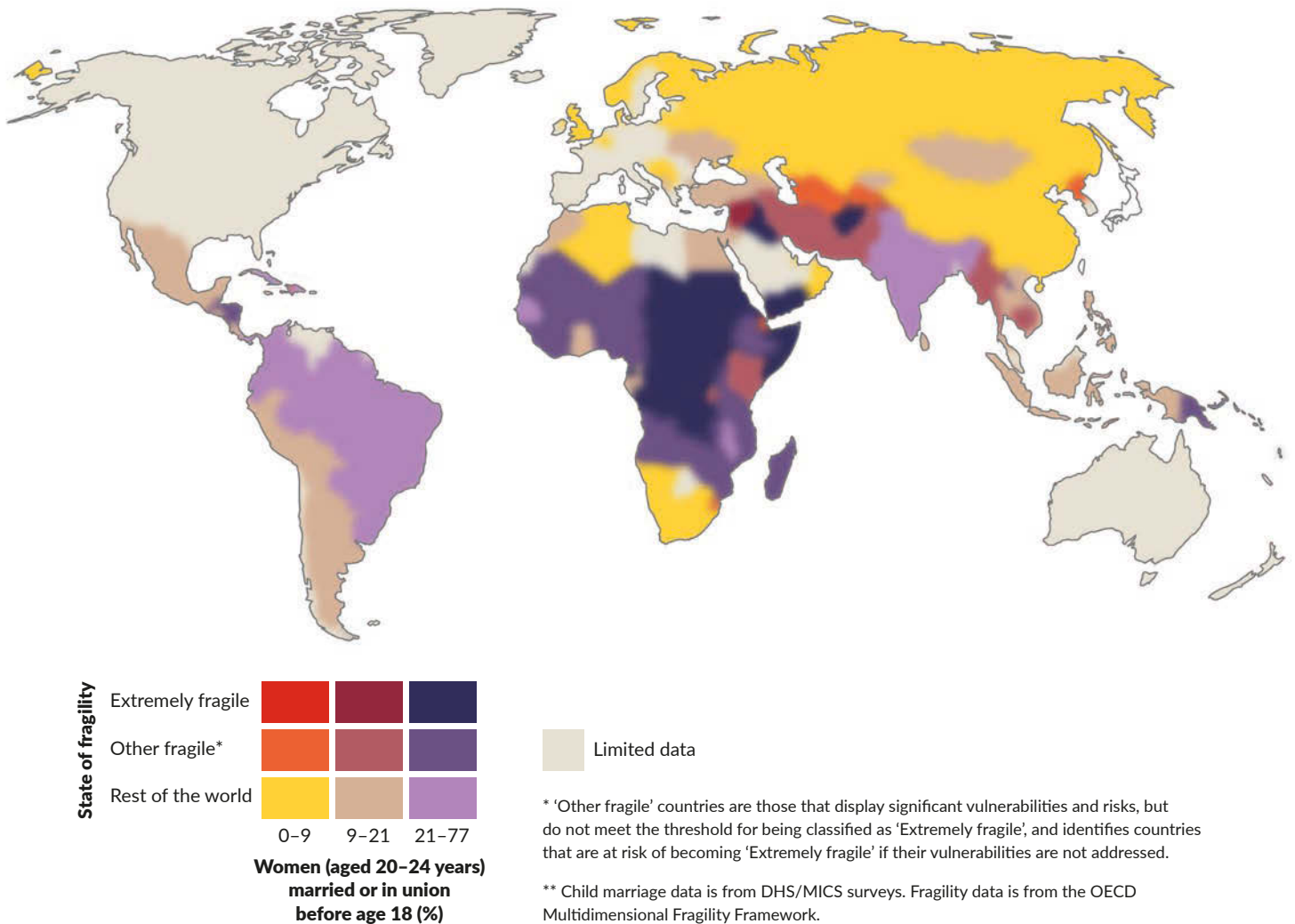
- ★ Four of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are currently extremely fragile.
- ★ One in ten child marriages occurs in extremely fragile states.
- ★ Girls living in extremely fragile settings are twice as likely to marry as girls in countries experiencing periods of greater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



32 million adolescent girls are currently living in child marriage–fragility hotspots worldwide. 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'.⁶⁵
- ★ 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 3: Child marriage–fragility hotspots where girls face high rates of child marriage and the challenges associated with fragility



Part 3: The way forward

New guidance is needed to support girls' rights in fragile settings

Existing guidance does not reflect the realities of life in fragile places

A lot of the guidance on how to support girls' rights – including how to address child marriage – does not consider the realities of life in a fragile setting. It is based on assumptions that:

- ★ governments have the ability, resources and will to create make and implement laws, policies and budgets, and
- ★ conditions in a country stay stable over a long enough period of time for these efforts to make a difference.

For governments, civil society organisations and communities (including girls) in fragile settings the available guidance can feel unrealistic and unhelpful: they need guidance that reflects the challenges they face, so they can work better together for girls' rights.

PHOTO: MUSTAFA SAIED/SAVE THE CHILDREN



Fasia*, 12, playing outside at a displaced persons camp in the Bari region, Somalia

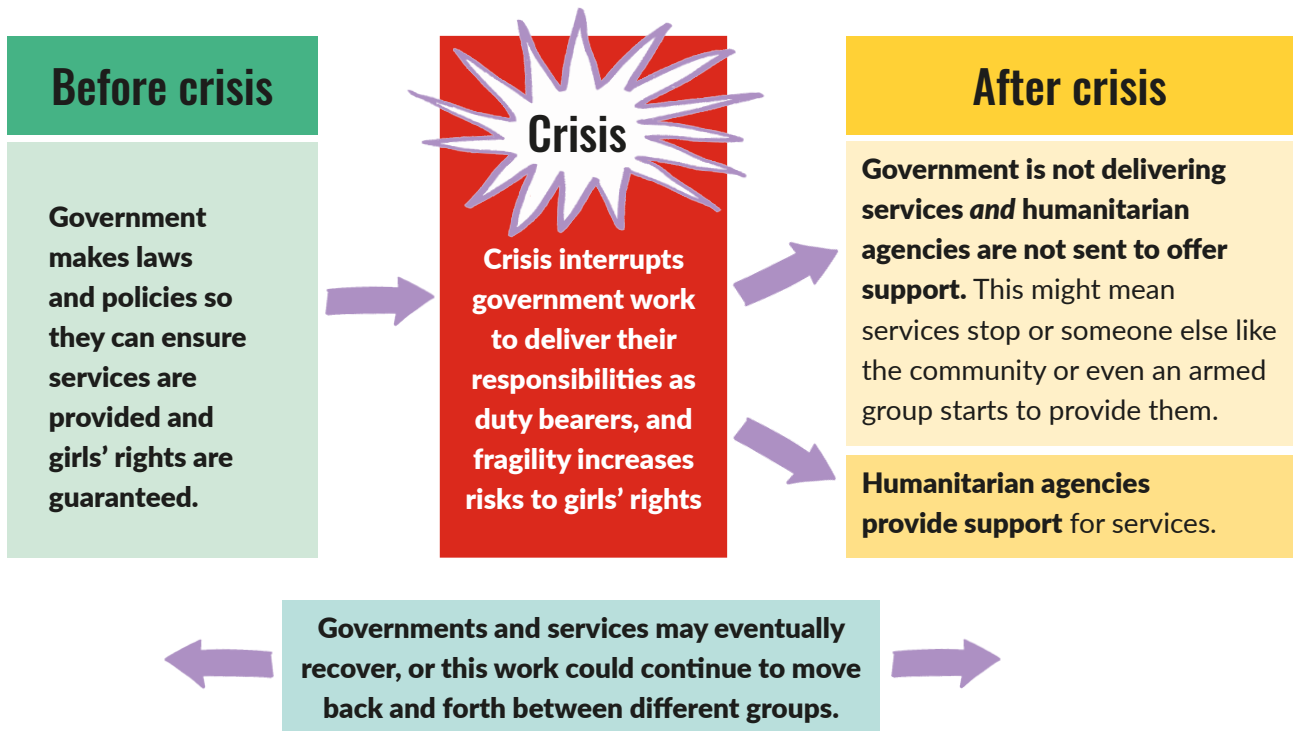
Fragile countries can move in and out of humanitarian crisis

Fragile countries may be affected by conflict and humanitarian disasters more often than more stable countries and conflict and humanitarian crises can further increase fragility. Humanitarian settings sometimes require outside help from other countries or non-government organisations because the government and systems that provide healthcare, education, protection, safe drinking water, food or housing have been damaged or overwhelmed. Countries can move back and forth between:

- ★ times when outside support is provided, for example by humanitarian agencies
- ★ times when the government is unable to fulfil its responsibilities but no humanitarian support is provided
- ★ times when services recover, and the government can start to fulfil its duty to ensure human rights.

Guidance for supporting girl’s rights in *humanitarian* settings does exist. It is intended for areas experiencing the worst impacts of a crisis, often in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or during conflict – when humanitarian agencies are supporting essential services. Guidance for *fragile* settings should help manage these shifts between who is providing essential services, whether that is governments or humanitarian agencies and civil society organisations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: In fragile countries, who is delivering or supporting essential services can move back and forth between government, humanitarian agencies and other groups



All countries can work to reduce fragility and its impacts on girls' rights

Drivers of fragility can also act as early warning signs that can be addressed to prevent a country becoming more fragile. These signs can include:⁶⁶

- ★ **conditions that make conflict (violent or non-violent) more likely** within a community, such as power sitting with a small group of people so that it feels impossible for people outside that group to create change, and inequalities between different groups (including gender equality).
- ★ **security challenges**, including poor policing, terrorist attacks, attempted coups (overthrow of the government), high levels of crime and owning weapons.
- ★ **issues that affect a country's wealth** such as unstable or rising costs of living, some groups or areas of a country having more resources or opportunities to earn money than others, and high levels of migration out of a country so that there are too few people left with the qualifications needed to deliver critical services (like doctors).
- ★ **political challenges** like poor service delivery, abuses of human rights (particularly by the government) and loss of trust in the government to do its job.
- ★ **changing population needs** that governments cannot keep up with, for example due to forced migration as a result of violence or climate change ('environment' is one of the six dimensions of the OECD's Multidimensional Fragility Framework).⁶⁷
- ★ **intervention by outside countries**, such as invasions, providing support (for example during humanitarian disasters), and efforts to influence government decisions and who holds power.

Every country faces at least some of these risk factors and it is possible to take action to stop them from getting worse and making a country more fragile.

For example, actions can be taken ahead of a predicted crisis to prevent or reduce its impact, before it occurs. These actions could include identifying risks, developing ways to predict future crises and early warning systems, putting plans in place for when a crisis does hit, and making sure that each of these steps is funded.⁶⁹

Gender equality is a core component of understanding how well a country or community is prepared to cope with challenges. Gender inequalities can make crises more serious and more likely and leave governments less prepared to respond. Simply put, countries suffering from gender inequality are more likely to be fragile. This makes gender equality critical to addressing fragility.⁶⁸



Steps can be taken to reduce fragility and prevent it from becoming more severe by:

- ★ addressing drivers of fragility early, for example by reducing inequalities, corruption and abuses of human rights.
- ★ preparing for climate disasters (including through climate adaptation)⁷⁰ and other humanitarian crises, drawing on lessons learned from disaster risk reduction approaches.⁷¹
- ★ increasing investment to support governments to meet growing population needs before they become overwhelming.
- ★ making sure that outside interventions intended to support fragile countries do not worsen risk factors for fragility. They must prioritise strengthening governments and communities to lead design and delivery of solutions.

Community engagement and working toward gender equality must be at the centre of all these efforts.⁷²



Delmy, 10, Anabely, 11 and Maria Elena, 12, at school in Quiche, Guatemala.

Case study: Rising seas and changing risk factors for fragility in the Solomon Islands

Josephine and Lucy (pictured right) live in Malaita Province on one of the largest of the 900 islands that make up the Solomon Islands. These islands are home to distinct communities with different languages, cultures and access to services and government. They were first brought under a single point of political power in 1893 when the British established a protectorate over the islands – a form of colonial control that also included measures to reduce rights abuses (including forced exportation and exploitation of Solomon Islanders ‘with all the hallmarks of slavery’).⁷³ While individual islands started to move toward governing themselves after World War Two, they did not gain independence from Britain until 1978.

This history of colonisation, interference with the way islands governed themselves and use as a strategic military location during World War Two left the once resource-rich archipelago with a weak economy, services and institutions, as well as conflict between communities from different islands. Over time tensions and violence made governance more and more difficult and in 2003, the central government asked the Australian government to help restore order.⁷⁴ While stability improved, underlying challenges remain including ethnic tensions, political corruption, limited economic opportunities and high rates of violence against women and girls. The Solomon Islands has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world: the latest survey (2009) found that two in every three women and girls (64%) experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner (mostly husbands or boyfriends) during their lives.⁷⁵

The Solomon Islands is the second most at risk country for natural disasters and the worsening climate emergency presents a growing risk factor for fragility.⁷⁶ Rising sea levels are reducing land available for housing, services, farming and other businesses. These changes could add to other risk factors for fragility by increasing inequalities between islands and eventually forcing people living on ‘shrinking islands’ to migrate.⁷⁷

Josephine and Lucy’s family were forced to move by a climate disaster. “We escaped with only the clothes on our back”, their mother Alison says. “I do not want my children to go through that again”. Alison has now joined a group of women and young people training to keep bees to help maintain the mangroves that protect wildlife and food sources like crabs, whilst acting as a barrier to rising sea levels near their home. This project by local NGO Mai Maaasina Green Belt also helps members of the group to earn money by selling honey to help pay for services like education reducing the impacts of existing fragility and addressing ongoing risk factors.

Sisters Josephine, 7, and Lucy, 4, walking along the beach near their home in Malaita Province, the Solomon Islands.



PHOTO: CONOR ASHLEIGH/
SAVE THE CHILDREN




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 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.⁷⁸
- 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 organisations (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.
- 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).⁷⁹

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- 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.⁸⁰
- 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.



Zaynab*, 16, is a Girl Champion for Save the Children Nigeria, focusing on child marriage and how conflict in her region has affected children

Endnotes

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Cover photo: Aya*, 9, and Ranya*, 1, two sisters who have been displaced by fighting to a camp in Gezira state, Sudan. Photo: Ibrahim Mohammed/Save the Children