Save the Children

GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2021
GIRLS' RIGHTS IN CRISIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five-year-old Feliza* from the Philippines wears a mask to protect herself from the coronavirus.

Lei Tapang / Save the Children

Predicting a crisis for girls' rights

From its outset, the COVID-19 pandemic was more than a devastating global health emergency. Crises—including climate change-driven disasters, past epidemics such as Ebola and Zika Virus, and violent conflict—have long been understood to have disproportionate consequences for women and girls.[1] The COVID-19 crisis is no exception, with early evidence revealing that containment measures and the resulting economic instability have increased girls' exposure to violence, reduced access to essential services and information, and directly impacted girls' ability to realise their rights.[2]

Since the pandemic was declared, more than half the world's population has experienced periods under complete or partial containment measures introduced to mitigate the spread of the virus.[3] Along with infections, these lockdowns and school closures have disrupted the protection programmes and services meant to prevent some of the worst outcomes of COVID-19 for girls.

Within weeks of national lockdowns, reports of increasing calls to domestic abuse hotlines were recorded across the world and early predications painted a bleak picture.[4]

Predications were especially troubling for forms of gender-based violence and discrimination that only occur in childhood.

In April 2020, UNFPA estimated that disruptions to prevention programming could lead to 2 million cases of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) over the next decade that would not have occurred otherwise.[5] Save the Children estimated that the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis alone could lead to an additional 1 million adolescent pregnancies in 2020, and UNFPA research now shows that pandemic-related interruptions to contraceptive use led to 1.4 million unintended pregnancies that year.[6] The most recent estimates from UNICEF suggest that an additional 10 million girls may be married by 2030 as a result of the pandemic—most during the next few years.[7]

Over a year and a half since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, data collection remains significantly disrupted, limiting access to real-time evidence of girls' experiences and rendering updates to global datasets nearly impossible. Quantitative evidence on whether early projections have been realised is scarce, and girls' experiences have, in some instances, become even less visible than before the pandemic. These data gaps have direct implications for whether response plans and recovery policies and budgets can effectively meet girls' needs. The Global Girlhood Report 2021 attempts to enhance our collective understanding of how the predicted impacts of the pandemic have been realised for girls while also recognising how much is still unknown.

Aissata*, aged 11, outside her home in Mopti region, Mali. In communities like Aissata's, an escalation of violence has led to mass displacement and school closures. Being out of the classroom exposes children to risks like domestic violence or being forced into early marriage or child labour – risks that become more likely in areas where schools remain closed due to COVID-19.

Seyba Keita / Save the Children

Emerging evidence

Though the experiences of girls vary widely across countries and communities, available and emerging evidence supports widely held fears that the pandemic is exacerbating existing gender and other inequalities with girls' futures in the balance.

Girls and adult champions for their rights delivering programmes in low-income countries provide the most consistent reports that adolescent pregnancy, child marriage, and other forms of gender-based violence are increasing in their communities. Nationally representative data on increases in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy is not yet available. A 27% increase in the rate of child marriage was reported in one state in India and notably high numbers of interventions to prevent child marriages have been reported by civil society organisations in Ethiopia and Mozambique.[8] Most changes reported to Save the Children through girls in our programmes and our staff relate to school closures increasing pressure on girls to marry as getting a good education seems increasingly less likely, and due to growing risk of pregnancy through consensual relationships as well as increased exposure to violence due to less time spent supervised in school.[9] Worsening financial insecurity and related decreases in the cost of weddings have also been identified as incentives for child marriage during the pandemic.[10] Research in East and Southern Africa has identified sexual exploitation in exchange for essential resources as the primary cause of unintended pregnancies in their communities since the pandemic.[11]

Girls face significant challenges getting back to school and catching up on lost learning. Over 1.6 billion children had their educations interrupted by COVID-related school closures in 2020 and millions of girls remain out of school.[12] On average, girls in poorer countries have missed out on 22% more days in school than boys.[13] In sub-Saharan Africa, girls lost an average 69 days of education in 2020.[14] While data on whether girls have proven less likely to return to school remains limited and mixed,[15] multiple studies suggest that girls have had less access to remote education through lockdowns than boys.[16] Save the Children's global survey found that in 2020, girls in our programmes were twice as likely to have increased their domestic work during school closures to the extent that it interfered with their studies.[17] Staff in Burkina Faso now fear that economic hardship caused by the ongoing pandemic means that families cannot sustain themselves without girls' assistance in the home, and staff in Somalia report that parents' concerns about girls contracting COVID-19 in school have created an additional barrier.

COVID-19 has further restricted girls' already limited access to decision-making spaces, and the shift to virtual spaces has not increased their access to the leaders making the decisions. Global events have not become more accessible to girls through online platforms. The digital divide, lack of effort to make these spaces more accessible (particularly to non-English speaking girls), and a

growing tendency for leaders to pre-record messages have excluded girls from effective participation in critical decision-making moments, including the Generation Equality Forums. No girls have been included in national COVID-19 taskforces and Save the Children staff in Somalia, Burkina Faso, and the Dominican Republic report that COVID-related closures of schools and girl-friendly spaces have denied girls access to community-level decision-making.

Responses to the pandemic have struggled to address the needs of girls impacted by multiple forms of inequality and discrimination. Governments and civil society have adapted services in an effort to deliver them safely throughout the pandemic.[18] However, Save the Children staff in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Somalia report that reaching girls with disabilities and those living in rural areas—already too often excluded from essential services—was made more difficult during the pandemic and at times ceased altogether. Girls on the move have experienced a combination of forced migration and lost freedom of movement due to border closures and lockdowns. Those living in humanitarian contexts have faced intersecting COVID-, climate-, and conflict-related crises, and reports describe increasing exposure to gender-based violence, including child marriage.[19] By November 2020, 27 of 32 operations in humanitarian settings reported an increase in gender-based violence and 89% of responses described the risk of gender-based violence as severe or extreme.[20]

Responses to COVID-19 have recognised the increased risk of gender-based violence, but evidence of specific attention to girls and funding to support implementation is limited. More than 70% of COVID-19 responses include measures to address gender-based violence, but with limited age-disaggregated data it is difficult to tell whether girls' specific needs are addressed.[21] Consistent civil society pressure over the course of 2020 eventually led to 97% of requested funding to address gender-based violence under the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan being met. Yet despite far greater recognition of the need to address violence in planning for 2021, a mere 11% of necessary funds for protection programmes for gender-based violence have been received.[22]

Postponement and new COVID-19 driven priorities have impacted the pivotal Generation Equality process, but important targets and new architecture for further commitments and multisectoral collaboration have been established. The Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality set a target to prevent nine million child marriages in five years and has attracted important commitments to support delivery,[23] including from high-prevalence low- and middle-income countries like Burkina Faso and Nigeria.[24] However, further commitments (particularly funding), a strong accountability framework, and improved, meaningful engagement with girls will determine whether the worst impacts of the pandemic can be averted to put the world on track to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Uwase (17) was married in exchange for the promise of a dowry.*

Hugh Kinsella Cunningham / Save the Children

Eloge (15), a member of the Youth Council, in Kinshasha wears a facemask. Before activities were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, she spent her time between school and youth council activities.

Recommendations

One year after Save the Children published grave projections on the impact of COVID-19, data on the effects of the crisis on girls remains scarce and desperately needed to inform evidence-based responses. Emerging qualitative evidence, however, supports widely held fears that the pandemic is exacerbating existing gender and other inequalities with girls' futures in the balance. As countries and the international community continue to respond to the shifting demands of the pandemic and look to "build forward better", while also meeting increased needs and rights violations resulting from protracted conflicts and climate change-related disasters, Save the Children makes the following recommendations to national governments, UN agencies, humanitarian actors, donors, and civil society.

National Governments

National governments should meet their obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil girls' rights. They must serve as primary duty bearers to implement policy and action to support girls negatively impacted by COVID-19, conflict, and climate change-related disasters in line with needs identified, and lead national agendas and campaigns to support girls' rights. They should:

1. **Institutionalise adolescent girls' safe and meaningful participation in policy-making and accountability processes** through the establishment, resourcing, and implementation of local- and national-level laws, policies, and guidelines recognising adolescent girls' agency and rights as key stakeholders in their own lives by:

   a. **Ensuring the Nine Basic Requirements for meaningful child participation** set out under the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No 12 are in place.[25]

   b. **Dedicating sustained and flexible financial and technical resources** to support adolescent girls' civic knowledge, skills, and capacity;[26] exposing girls to spaces and mentors to cultivate their leadership potential; and creating pathways for leadership.

   c. **Identifying and addressing gender-related barriers to adolescent girls' safe and meaningful participation in decision-making** through targeted strategies, and address other structural barriers adolescent girls may experience in all their diversity.[27]

2. **Put the rights of girls in all their diversity at the centre of COVID-19 response and ongoing humanitarian and development policy, planning, and programming** by:

   a. Conducting and applying intersectional gender and power analysis to inform evidence-based and inclusive policy and programme responses.[28]

   b. Increasing and improving safe and ethical data collection, analysis, and reporting. All data should be disaggregated by age-group and sex at a minimum and, where safe and possible, by disability, ethnicity, geography, wealth, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression.

   c. Committing to gender-responsive, inclusive, and child-sensitive budgeting and other best practices for fair financing for girls.

3. **Address critical barriers to girls' rights and gender equality,** including preventing and responding to child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence and violence against children by:

   a. **Recognising gender-based violence, child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health services and information as essential services,** including social service providers, shelters, and adolescent girl-friendly safe spaces, which must be maintained and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and future public health crises.[29] These services must be fully and sustainably resourced, including with personal protective equipment and training to operate safely. They must also be accessible to all girls, regardless of legal, immigration, or refugee status.

   b. **Developing and strengthening formal and informal protection systems** through engagement of local women's, girls', and children's rights groups; of religious, traditional, and community leaders; and of representative organisations of persons with disabilities; including within humanitarian, refugee, and forced displacement settings.

   c. **Working with communities,** including girls, their parents and caregivers, their extended families, men and boys, and traditional and religious leaders to challenge harmful gender norms and build support to end child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence.

   d. **Ending child marriage and supporting already married girls to realise their rights**

by passing laws against gender-based violence, including harmful practices; setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 years without exception; and repealing laws and policies that create barriers to girls accessing their rights to education and sexual and reproductive health services and information. These measures should form part of fully funded and implemented multisectoral national action plans with accountability mechanisms.[30]

   e. **Promoting the realisation of girls' right to education** by supporting Save the Children's 8 Point Plan to Build Forward Better.[31]

   f. **Joining the Generation Equality movement to drive critical progress for girls' rights through effective delivery of the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality by making a concrete and fully-resourced commitment** in support of an action in furtherance of girls' rights under the Acceleration Plan and setting an age-disaggregated target and indicator.

   g. **Promoting accountability to girls under the Generation Equality Accountability Framework,** including through requirements to report on progress for adolescent girls using age-disaggregated targets and indicators.

   h. **Supporting the Generation Equality Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group** including through technical and financial support, amplification and uptake of their recommendations, and through facilitating the opportunity for girls in their country to connect with the group and participate in national-level accountability processes.
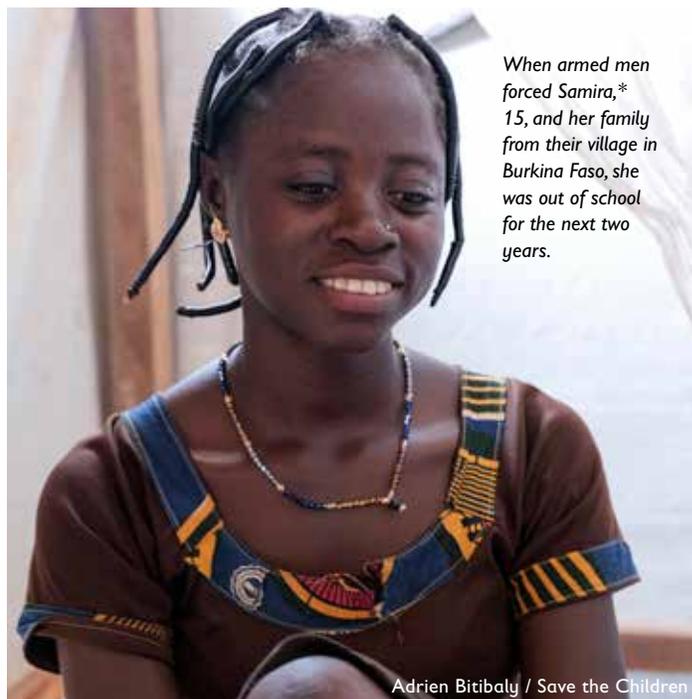
UN Actors

UN actors, including UN agencies, should:

1. **Systematically include adolescent girls' safe and meaningful participation in international policy-making and accountability processes** that affect them, including Generation Equality, the Commission on the Status of Women, the High-Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals with a particular focus on Goal 5, the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, and Human Rights accountability mechanisms such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Universal Periodic Reviews, and reporting on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). UN actors should ensure adolescent girl-friendly and girl-specific platforms are available for them to safely engage with decision-makers in a meaningful, ongoing fashion.

2. **Maintain, update, and expand the COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker** to promote ongoing accountability for girls' rights and addressing gender inequality through national pandemic response and recovery plans, including through additional age-disaggregated data wherever possible.

3. **Work to ensure the Generation Equality Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality delivers for girls** by:

    a. Including age-disaggregated performance indicators in the Generation Equality Accountability Framework.

    b. Establishing a clear and meaningful mandate for the Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group and providing financial and technical support, including standing staff capacity to support the Advisory Group to operate effectively.

When armed men forced Samira,* 15, and her family from their village in Burkina Faso, she was out of school for the next two years.

Adrien Bitibaly / Save the Children

Donors

Donors, including governments, UN Actors, foundations, and private sector champions for gender equality should:

1. **Provide financial support for feminist leadership** through flexible funding for grassroots women's and girls' rights organisations, and girl-led networks and groups, including representative organisations of women and girls with disabilities.

2. **Mandate that an intersectional gender and power analysis informs the development of all requests for proposals** for COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and beyond. All proposed projects should be gender-sensitive at a minimum.

3. **Deliver technical expertise and financial assistance to support development of national policies and programmes** for girls, including girls' participation, accountability mechanisms, gender-and child-responsive budgeting, and safe and ethical data collection, analysis, and use in all settings.

4. **Make financial commitments to girl-focussed actions under the Generation Equality Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality**, including to support girls' effective participation in the process and accountability mechanisms like the Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group.

Humanitarian Actors

Humanitarian actors including UN Agencies, governments, donors, and civil society organisations should:

1. **Ensure that all humanitarian needs assessments and humanitarian response plans are informed by a rapid intersectional gender and power analysis** and the safe and ethical collection and analysis of sex-, age-, and diversity-disaggregated data. Humanitarian needs assessments and humanitarian response plans must ensure that the needs of adolescent girls are identified and addressed.

2. **Increase humanitarian funding for gender-responsive child protection services and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation, and response efforts**, commensurate with urgent need and chronic underfunding within humanitarian response.

3. **Use existing evidence-based guidelines in COVID-19 response efforts and other humanitarian crises**, including the Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming;[32] Inter-Agency Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action;[33] Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action;[34] Minimum Standards for Education Preparedness, Response and Recovery (INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies);[35] and Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Toolkit for Humanitarian Settings.[36] Gender-based violence prevention and risk mitigation and the promotion of gender equality throughout humanitarian response are the duty of all humanitarian actors at all times, as per the IASC Gender Equality Policy and Accountability Framework.[37]

4. **Ensure the continued commitment and implementation of a principled humanitarian response at all times**, including the safe and unrestricted participation of female humanitarian staff in needs assessments, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all humanitarian services at every level. Without the full participation of female staff, humanitarian assistance will not be delivered in a manner that upholds core humanitarian principles and standards and will be ineffective in addressing the needs of girls.

Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations (CSOs) including international non-governmental organisations, grassroots women's rights organisations, feminist networks, girl-led groups and networks, and child-led community-based organisations should:

1. **Consult with girls during internal decision-making processes**. Girls should be stakeholders for internal strategic or oversight processes, for example, through their participation on advisory boards or through engagement in strategic planning.

2. **Develop or adapt programming to increase adolescent girls' participation, using an intersectional gender and power analysis.** CSOs should identify, co-create or adapt, and directly support initiatives that would increase adolescent girls' abilities

to participate in decision-making processes. Examples of programming elements include advocacy and research skills, civic and political knowledge, leadership opportunities, intergenerational mentorship opportunities, data and media literacy, or any other initiatives identified by the girls themselves. CSOs should work across contexts, supporting girls in development, humanitarian, forced displacement, and nexus contexts, and ensuring the inclusion of girls most affected by inequality and discrimination, including indigenous girls, girls with disabilities, girls from the LBTQIA+ community, married girls, pregnant girls and child mothers, and girls living on streets, in extreme poverty, or otherwise hard to reach, for example, due to migration and forced displacement.

3. **Demand accountability to girls** by maintaining pressure on governments, UN agencies, and humanitarian actors to report on and be accountable for the impact of COVID-19 response planning and policy, as well as future development and humanitarian planning and policy, by:

    a. Facilitating adults to partner with girls to call for the institutionalisation of mechanisms for accountability to girls.

    b. Supporting girls and their networks to participate in and connect with accountability mechanisms like the Generation Equality Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group, as well as local and national accountability processes.

Baby Ismil* is comforted by his mother Azida* and grandmother Fatima*. 19-year-old Azida* (pictured right) was eight months pregnant when she fled Myanmar. The stressors of migration and displacement can increase the health complications young mothers face while impacting their ability to access care.

Hanna Adcock / Save the Children

Endnotes

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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.

ON THE COVER
"Children's voices are not heard by elders and even society don't bother about us. They decide about our future without asking us. I hope that it will be a long time before I'm made to go and live with my husband," 13-year-old Preeti* says.

Photo: Laura Bailey / Save the Children