



# EVERY LAST GIRL



Save the Children

Free to live, free to learn,  
free from harm

Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, the chance to learn and be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.

### Acknowledgements

This report was written by Amanda Lenhardt, Lisa Wise, Giorgiana Rosa, Hollie Warren, Frances Mason from Save the Children UK and Rukayah Sarumi from Save the Children International. The Girls' Opportunity Index was calculated by Dimitri Gugushvili and Alexis Le Nestour.

We are grateful to colleagues from across Save the Children for their comments and suggestions, in particular Kitty Arie, Deanna Duplessis, Helen Elliot, Dimitri Gugushvili, Kirsty McNeil, Cicely McWilliam, Nora O'Connell, Patrick Watt, Ravi Wickremasinghe and all contributors from Save the Children's Gender Equality Working Group. We are grateful to Victoria Love and Haley Curran for coordinating this report. We would also like to thank our external reviewer Anne Quesney for her very helpful comments and input to an earlier draft of the report.

**Some children's names have been changed to protect identities.**

Published by  
Save the Children  
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First published 2016

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Cover: Neema, age nine, was forced to flee her home as a result of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since then she has been unable to go to school because she has to look after her younger brothers and sisters, while her parents work in the fields. "It makes me feel sad when I see other children getting an education while I have to stay at home," she says. "I'd like to learn to read and write, and get my diploma, so that I can become a nurse." (Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children)

Typeset by Grasshopper Design Company

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Sameena, age six, from Peshawar, Pakistan.

# Foreword

In January 2016 when I decided to stand up on behalf of thousands of young girls in my country and pursue a legal case to challenge the Marriage Act – which allowed girls as young as 14 to get married – I didn't do it because it was easy. It wasn't even just to save girls who were fleeing the plight of child marriage and forced to stay far from home. I stood up because of the multiplier effect that is unleashed in educating a girl child, in allowing a girl child to take control of her own life and achieve her dreams. I saw the ripple effect of investing in a girl child, because a girl doesn't win alone – everybody does.

This report reveals a lot of barriers to young girls realising their full potential. It comes out at a crucial time, when our leaders have committed to a number of international conventions that require them to put in place enabling frameworks to enhance girls' protection and to get rid of harmful customs and traditions that still hold girls back. It's time for our leaders to commit to what they have signed up to – and it's time for them to act. We need to finally free girls from all the barriers they face, and empower them to stand up for their rights and make their voice heard. This cannot wait.

Save the Children's work in advancing children's welfare is commendable globally and this report will enhance our ability to recognise and tackle

barriers that stop girls being able to unleash their potential. By addressing these barriers we'll reach every last girl. While the world's clock is ticking in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, it's crucial to note how important it is not to leave girls behind, and to act urgently on the barriers they face. The more we wait, the more we put on hold the realisation of all other development goals.

With more than 700 million women in the world married before their 18th birthday and one out of three of them married before they were 15, we need to work together – and work with girls – to ensure that every last girl is free to live, free to learn and free from harm. This is only possible if we collectively pledge to advance girls' rights to access education, to access information on sexual and reproductive health rights, and to make their voices heard.

But girls' voices must not just be heard: they must also be acted on. This report shows us the way.

**Rebeca Zakayo Gyumi**  
Girls' Rights Advocate  
Founder and Executive Director,  
Msichana Initiative  
Tanzania



# Executive summary

*“I don’t want to be remembered as the girl who was shot. I want to be remembered as the girl who stood up.”*

Malala Yousafzai

All across the world girls are standing up as never before. They are demanding to be free. Free to pursue their hopes and dreams, and free to live the life they choose to build for themselves. Their courage and their power is what this report is about – and what those who benefit from the silence of girls fear most.

With empowerment and the right support girls can change the world. Many of them are already doing just that.

Girls like Malala. Girls who have stood up at great personal risk and who are asking us to stand with them.

Malala is far from alone in facing terrible danger because of her power as a girl. The kidnapping of the Chibok girls in northern Nigeria and the sexual enslavement of Yazidi girls in Iraq are motivated by the same pernicious notion – that girls should not be free to learn or to make decisions about their lives. Other girls – such as those who have been trafficked across the Mediterranean, or who are forced to live in a brothel in Bangladesh – are subject to the most extreme violations of their rights because of another noxious idea: that girls are tradable commodities.

Save the Children’s Every Last Child campaign is fighting to change how the world thinks about – and tackles – the exclusion millions of the world’s poorest and most disadvantaged children face. Standing up for every last girl is at the heart of our campaign. Everybody the world over must recognise that girls are nobody’s property and nobody’s victims. Rather girls are the most powerful catalysts for a different world.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed in 2015 by the international community, are our starting point. In addition to gender equality and girls’ and women’s empowerment being recognised as a goal in their own right, it is increasingly understood that achieving progress for girls and women is vital to unlock achievement in many of the goals. A leading predictor of a country’s improved health outcomes, for example, is girls’ secondary school completion. Supporting girls to be agents of change is at the heart of the sustainable development agenda.

## BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ EQUALITY

If the world is to meet its commitment under the SDGs to ‘leave no one behind’, we have to fight the exclusion and discrimination that stop lots of different groups of children fulfilling their potential. In this report we address some of the many barriers faced by girls in particular:

**Child marriage:** More than 700 million women in the world today were married before their 18th birthday and one in three of those women was married before age 15.<sup>1</sup> Child marriage can trigger a cycle of disadvantage across every part of a girl’s life.

**Gender-based violence and harmful practices:** An estimated 30 million girls are at risk of female genital cutting in the next decade. Adolescent girls are more likely to experience certain forms of violence, including sexual violence, than boys.<sup>2</sup> 2.6 billion girls and women live in countries where marital rape is not explicitly criminalised.<sup>3</sup> Physical, sexual and psychological gender-based violence can take place at home, in schools or within communities; it is rooted in discrimination and exclusion.

**Poor access to good-quality sexual and reproductive health services:** Maternal mortality is the second leading cause of death for adolescent girls aged 15–19 years old (after suicide).<sup>4</sup> An estimated 70,000 adolescent girls die each year from complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Every year 2.5 million girls under 16 give birth.<sup>5</sup>

**Economic exclusion:** When household resources are limited, social norms in many places dictate that boys be prioritised, leaving girls with limited opportunities for education and at risk of poor health and nutrition. Many girls are neither in school nor paid work: over a third of young women in developing countries are jobless – out of the formal labour force and not in school.<sup>6</sup>

**Lack of voice and recognition:** Girls are often marginalised in household and public decision-making and their needs are under-represented in government. Girls may be uncomfortable expressing themselves, and when they do, they often aren't heard or valued. Information about girls' exclusion is also limited by a lack of gender-sensitive and disaggregated data, reflecting a historic, systematic lack of recognition of girls' rights and needs.

**An education and learning gap:** Globally, 62 million girls are out of school.<sup>7</sup> In the vast majority of countries where the average educational attainment is low, the poorest women and girls are the worst off. Girls can face barriers to education from both school and home, including school fees, inadequate sanitation facilities, families prioritising boys' education over girls, and unsafe schools where they may face sexual and gender-based violence or harassment.<sup>8</sup>

**Conflict, disasters and gender:** Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflict, climate change and natural disasters – for example, as a result of negative 'coping mechanisms', such as child marriage. During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, the closure of schools and lack of protection for girls contributed to a sharp rise in teenage pregnancy: it is estimated that more than 14,000 teenage girls became pregnant during the outbreak, including 11,000 who were in school prior to the crisis.<sup>9</sup>

**Trafficking and slavery:** Girls in search of better lives may be deceived or pushed into forced labour or sexual exploitation. Of the 21 million victims of forced labour around the world, just over a quarter (26%) are children. Girls are disproportionately affected, particularly by forced sexual exploitation.<sup>10</sup>

## CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Tackling the root causes of girls' exclusion and disempowerment is not easy – that's an understatement. But with sustained effort and investment, change is possible. It is possible to build a world that guarantees the equal rights and freedom for every last girl to fulfil their potential. This requires working to support the empowerment of every last girl, while simultaneously working with stakeholders at all levels, including men and boys, to enable environments where girls can realise their full and equal rights and thrive.

Our Every Last Child campaign has identified three Guarantees – of Fair finance, Equal treatment and Accountability – that governments must make to reach excluded children.

## THREE GUARANTEES TO ALL CHILDREN

1. Fair finance	2. Equal treatment	3. Accountability
Increased public revenue, collected and spent equitably, and supported internationally	Laws and policies to remove discriminatory barriers to services	Better data disaggregation
Removal of cost barriers to services	Public campaigns to challenge norms and behaviours	Governance at all levels includes children
Minimum financial security for all children	Every birth registered	Budget transparency and monitoring

This report, the second in our *Every Last Child* series, identifies the three specific Guarantees to Girls that governments must make, and the actions that are needed (see page 23).

Taken together, these three Guarantees to Girls will help governments to reach the girls who are furthest behind – such as those who live in fragile and conflict-affected states, those who are on the move as refugees, those in the poorest countries

and in disadvantaged regions, and those who face multiple forms of discrimination.

Realising the three Guarantees to Girls is what it will take to ensure girls are free to live, free to learn and free from harm. This report and our campaign are about how we can help promote gender equality and get power where it belongs – in the hands of every last girl.



PHOTO: JONATHAN HYAMS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Break time at a children's space funded by Save the Children at Heleweyn refugee camp in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia.



# 1 Introduction: Girls left behind

*“As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.*

*“Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.”*

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, paragraphs 4 and 20.

In September 2015, the world’s leaders committed to reverse the long-standing neglect of the poorest and most excluded people, pledging that no one will be left behind in the next era of global development. Girls must be at the heart of that pledge, not only because excluded girls are often among the poorest and most marginalised in society, but also because when a girl is empowered and has agency to transform her life, whole societies are transformed in the process.

Girls need to be empowered and supported to fulfil their equal rights. They must be able to exercise freedom from childhood marriage, from forced labour, from early pregnancy, and free to speak their minds.

Save the Children is working to make this happen as part of our campaign to reach Every Last Child. Our vision is for a world where every child attains their equal right to survival, protection, development and participation. By prioritising gender equality, we are addressing persistent discriminatory barriers across all areas of our work, and in order to improve lives – of girls, women, boys and men – at the individual, family, and community levels.<sup>11</sup>

This report explores three key barriers\* that hold girls back – and that we focus on in our work: child marriage; poor access to good-quality services – including good-quality health and education services; and girls’ lack of voice in private and public spheres.

These three barriers are violations of girls’ rights. They also pose formidable obstacles to progress in other areas of development.

In addition, this report highlights countries where girls’ rights are most at risk. Our Girls’ Opportunity Index (see page 24) sheds light on levels of gender discrimination around the world.

While this report is focused on girls and their needs, we recognise the gender-based barriers faced by boys, and their risk of emotional, psychological and physical damage as a consequence of harmful norms around masculinity. Our programmes include boys’ perspectives on these barriers and aim to address their needs in tackling them. We also recognise boys and men as critical agents of change in working towards gender equality and in supporting girls’ empowerment.

## GUARANTEEING GIRLS’ FREEDOM TO LIVE, LEARN AND BE PROTECTED

Girls’ freedom to make their own life choices and to drive change is circumscribed by others – by the individuals and institutions in their lives. They include girls’ mothers, fathers and caregivers, members of their community, social institutions – from school to marriage to religion – and government and legal systems. The power these actors and institutions

\* This is not a comprehensive list of barriers faced by girls but is rather a focus on selected issues that Save the Children is working on.

exert can encroach on many dimensions of girls' lives, including:

- resources girls need to make informed choices, including power, knowledge, networks and assets
- girls' sense of agency – including the confidence, motivation, and freedom to take action
- enabling environments – made up of wider social, legal and political factors – which can enable change.<sup>12</sup>

Factors that influence girls' freedom – or lack of it – to make decisions about their lives can operate across these dimensions simultaneously and in mutually reinforcing ways. For example, many girls are excluded from school or denied opportunities to take part in community organisations and governance processes because they are kept at

home to do care work. Discriminatory social norms concerning the different roles that girls, women, boys and men have in society are often so entrenched that they are internalised by girls themselves, reducing their sense of agency and making them hesitant to participate and less likely to challenge discrimination. And when girls do demand change, their voices are often not taken seriously or are drowned out by powerful actors and institutions.

At the same time, different forms of disadvantage – poverty, disability, membership of a minority ethnic or religious group, and geographical location – overlap to put particular groups of girls at greater risk of disempowerment and exclusion.<sup>13</sup> For example, income poverty often exacerbates gender discrimination when households have to



**Saja, age 11, and her family were forced to flee conflict in their home town in Iraq. After a traumatic journey, they made it to a camp for displaced people. Here Saja is being supported by staff at a children's space that Save the Children runs.**

make difficult decisions about how to allocate scarce resources and preference is given to boys over girls.

### REACHING EVERY LAST GIRL

Tackling the root causes of girls' exclusion and disempowerment is not easy – that's an understatement. But as progress over recent decades in tackling extreme poverty and child mortality has shown, through sustained effort and investment, change is possible. Save the Children is calling on governments and donors to make three Guarantees to Girls:

**Fair finance** – Improving domestic resource mobilisation, particularly through progressive and gender-sensitive taxation, and translating it into sufficient budgeting and spending on girls.

**Equal treatment** – Challenging discriminatory laws, policies, norms and practices to address harmful norms and build enabling environments for change.

**Accountability** – Ensuring that governance is inclusive, transparent and accountable to all girls.

Implementing these global Guarantees to Girls, alongside other strategies to eliminate gender discrimination, can help empower girls and positively transform the norms, systems and structures that prevent girls from fulfilling their rights and reaching their potential. The three Guarantees to Girls will help ensure that girls have the resources and sense of agency to challenge the status quo, and that the wider social, political and economic environment is conducive to transformative change.

The road ahead will not be easy, but we are not starting from scratch. A long history of advocacy, policies and programming to achieve gender equality by feminist, gender equality, and women's and girls' rights movements – from the suffragettes to Malala – has shown that shifting the balance of power and transforming discriminatory norms and practices with and for girls is possible. The challenge now is to build on the progress that has been made to accelerate change. To achieve that we will need to bring all sections of society on this journey – girls and boys, mothers and fathers, traditional and religious leaders, government officials, private companies and the media – to ensure that no girl is left behind.

Tamrea, 17, and her daughter Indris, 5



## Married, pregnant and abandoned – at 12 years old

**Tamrea, 17, Ethiopia<sup>14</sup>**

*“I was given to a husband at 12. I wasn’t happy to get married at that age, but my father said there was nobody to look after me since my mum wasn’t around. I wasn’t happy. I was crying. I wasn’t able to get used to what marriage was.*”

*“The family of the boy came to my house and asked if he could marry me. He was physically big. I didn’t know how old he was.*”

*“When I became pregnant my husband left me. When I had my baby I didn’t go to a health centre, I gave birth at home. I went to health centre when I was pregnant, but I wasn’t able to go back. Labour took me six days.*”

*“When I think back I have mixed feelings. I feel sad, but after all that suffering, I saw my baby and felt happy. I feel so much anger. When I hear someone is getting married I give counselling. I don’t want anyone to go through what I have. If a girl goes to school she can have a better life. My friends go to school and I feel really bad.”*

# 2 Free from child marriage

## CHILD MARRIAGE IN NUMBERS

- Each year, 15 million girls are married before the age of 18.<sup>15</sup> In developing countries one in three girls is married before the age of 18 and one in nine before the age of 15.<sup>16</sup>
- In Dominican Republic 37% of women aged 20–24 are married before 18 years.<sup>17</sup>
- In most countries, girls from poor families are more likely to be married early than their richer peers. In Nigeria, 40% of the poorest girls are married by age 15 compared to 3% of the richest girls.<sup>18</sup>
- Girls in particular regions of some countries are disproportionately affected. In Ethiopia more than half of girls in the Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz and Afar regions marry by age 18 compared to 12% in Addis Ababa.<sup>19</sup>
- The majority of the 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states or at high risk of natural disaster.<sup>20</sup>

Child marriage\* affects a huge proportion of the world's girls, and is only declining slowly.

Child marriage isn't a one-off rights violation – it triggers and exacerbates a cycle of disadvantage:

It leads to large-scale violations of girls' right to education and health; exacerbates girls' risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; and increases girls' vulnerability to multiple forms of violence.<sup>21</sup> The majority of child brides have received limited education and vocational opportunities and, as a consequence of child marriage, often drop out of school or are not allowed to return. This in turn undermines their ability to generate their own livelihood and shuts off the potentially empowering knowledge and networks that education can provide. Ending child marriage would have a multiplier effect – improving levels of learning, survival and protection, and leading to benefits from the individual and community level right up to the national economy and society.

Child marriage is rooted in gender discrimination and structural inequalities. In many contexts, it is sustained as a result of harmful social norms and practices associated with the roles and expectations assigned to girls, and the negative consequences of poverty and deprivation.<sup>22</sup> Girls affected by multiple forms of overlapping disadvantage are most at risk, including those from poor families, in remote locations and from minority ethnic and religious groups (see box).

## CHILD MARRIAGE: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES

The burden of child marriage is not evenly distributed. When we look beneath national averages, we see that girls from some groups are much more likely to marry early. In Tanzania and Nepal, for example, poor girls are four times more likely to marry early than the richest girls.

Geography is also a major determinant of child marriage; some sub-national regions have alarmingly high levels of child marriage. In Northern Nigeria, for example, one girl in four is married by age 15, compared with one in 25 in the south of the country.

\* Child marriage is defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child as any legal or informal union that involves a boy or girl aged below 18.

## CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Girls in humanitarian and fragile contexts are at far greater risk of being married. For example, one in four girls aged 15–17 was married among the Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2013.<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between fragility and child marriage is complex, and further research is needed to understand it better. Nevertheless, we know there are various ways in which fragility might lead to more girls being married. Humanitarian crises result in increased poverty, insecurity and a lack of good-quality essential services – each drivers of child marriage.<sup>24</sup> Resource scarcity, limited employment opportunities for parents, caregivers and working-age young people, and a lack of protection mechanisms often push families into marrying their daughters to ease the household burden and secure dowry payments.<sup>25</sup>

Girls in humanitarian crises are also highly susceptible to various forms of violence including sexual assault and rape.<sup>26</sup> Girls' heightened vulnerability in humanitarian contexts can cause families to marry their daughters as a form of protection and to preserve a girl's honour in the face of external violations and vulnerabilities such as sexual violence and harassment.<sup>27, 28</sup> In such contexts, families see girls as having only two options: to be victims or to be wives.

Finally, in many conflict-affected contexts, sexual and gender-based violence, including forced marriage, is also a weapon of war used against girls. In Northern Nigeria, the insurgent group Boko Haram abducted more than 270 girls and subjected them to violence, including selling girls into forced marriage.<sup>29</sup>

### TACKLING NORMS ACROSS MULTIPLE LEVELS: CHOICES, VOICES, PROMISES

Save the Children's Choices, Voices, Promises programme<sup>30</sup> is an example of one initiative tackling child marriage. The programme works in eight countries to tackle discriminatory gender norms across three levels: at the individual level with girls and boys, within the family, and at the community level. The programme works across these levels to ensure girls and boys feel empowered to challenge gender inequality and discrimination, and that family and community members support change.

- The **Choices** element of the programme consists of a series of participatory activities to stimulate girls and boys to reflect on gender inequality, power dynamics and aspirations in life.
- The **Voices** component works with parents to facilitate dialogue about gender equality

in the household, tapping into the emotional drivers of behaviour through video testimonials.

- The **Promises** initiative works with influential people in the community to catalyse dialogue about the impact of early marriage and violence on girls' opportunities to access education.

Project evaluations of the programme have revealed successes, including:

- girls being empowered to talk to their parents about staying in school and delaying marriage
- brothers advocating to their parents about challenges they and their sisters face
- fathers and mothers recognising their daughters' ability to contribute to the community and the dangers of child marriage.

## LEGAL AND NORMATIVE CHANGES TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Progress has been made in recent years in building an enabling legal and policy environment for ending child marriage. Governments have committed to eliminate harmful practices, including child marriage, through target 5.3 of the SDGs. This is supported by target 16.2 to end all forms of violence against children.<sup>31</sup> Following concerted efforts by women's and girls' rights activists, civil society, and other actors, both the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council have adopted resolutions to eliminate child marriage.<sup>32, 33</sup> In 2015, the African Union (AU) adopted the African Common Position on the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage.<sup>34</sup> A number of states – including those with high levels of child marriage – have ratified legislation banning child marriage.

However, there are a number of contexts in which legislation to ban child marriage needs to be implemented and existing laws upheld. In seven countries there is still no national minimum age of marriage, and in 30 countries, girls are allowed to marry at 14 and 15 with parental consent.<sup>35</sup> In Yemen, where 32% of girls are married before 18, there is no minimum age of marriage.<sup>36\*</sup> In some contexts, customary law plays a significant role in reinforcing gender inequality on the age of marriage. In Tanzania, the Local Customary Law Order allows each ethnic group to follow and make decisions based on their customs and traditions. In El Salvador the legal framework (the Family Code) allows girls to be married if parents/caregivers approve the union if a girl is pregnant or has children.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside legal changes, discriminatory social norms that approve of child marriage and other harmful practices must be challenged in order to ensure that laws are upheld. Awareness raising campaigns and capacity building training with families and community members are needed to increase understanding of the risks of child marriage, and to promote coping mechanisms other than child marriage that can be employed to support households. Girls and boys must also be empowered to learn about their rights, to stand up for one another and themselves, and to have a dialogue with community members about child marriage and ways to prevent it.

## INVESTING IN GIRLS' EDUCATION

A good-quality education is every girl's right. Keeping girls in school is key to enabling them to realise their potential, including their future economic opportunities, and supporting girls' confidence and influence in public decision-making.

Education is also central to protecting girls from child marriage.<sup>38</sup> A study from India found education to be the most important factor in delaying marriage and pregnancy.<sup>39</sup> Several studies have found that compulsory education laws that require girls to stay in school up to the age 16 significantly reduce the likelihood of child marriage.<sup>40</sup>

While education can play a critical role in delaying child marriage, the right to education is not only for unmarried girls. Ensuring that girls who are married or are young mothers continue to access learning opportunities is key to improving their life chances.

The quality of education and learning is also crucial in preventing child marriage. Research in a number of countries shows that girls doing poorly in school, not learning well and falling behind, are sometimes pulled out of school by their parents in order to marry.<sup>41</sup> The ability to read and write is also strongly correlated with reduced child marriage. Only 4% of literate girls in sub-Saharan Africa and 8% of literate girls in South and West Asia are married as children compared with 20% of illiterate girls in sub-Saharan Africa and almost 25% of illiterate girls in South and West Asia.<sup>42</sup> Evidence suggests that a high-quality education empowers girls to make decisions about whether, when and whom to marry by providing them with knowledge, networks and confidence.<sup>43</sup>

In seeking to encourage girls to stay at school – with associated benefits in delaying marriage and pregnancy – the importance of decent school sanitation facilities should not be overlooked, especially when girls reach puberty.<sup>44</sup>

Ensuring that adolescent girls stay in school, return to school or receive vocational training not only improves their life chances but also has wider societal benefits. UNESCO predicts that providing all girls with primary education in low- and middle-income countries will reduce

\* In 2014, a Children's Act (to be included in the New Constitution of Yemen) was drafted, seeking to set the age at 18. The New Constitution is on hold given the current context.

## TACKLING CHILD MARRIAGE THROUGH THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN TANZANIA

In Tanzania, 37% of women aged 20–24 were married before age 18. In rural areas, some girls marry as young as 11 years old. Tanzania also has one of the highest adolescent fertility rates in the world. To tackle the issue of child marriage, Save the Children is:

- campaigning to end pregnancy testing in schools to ensure pregnant and married girls can remain in education and for improved sexual and reproductive health via the education system
- ensuring that girls are safe from sexual violence and harassment at school and travelling to and from school, so that girls and their parents feel comfortable about them attending school
- campaigning for the educational curriculum to address harmful gender norms that contribute to girls being married as children
- working with Baba Bora (Best Father) campaign to engage boys and men in fighting violence and gender inequality
- working in coalition with the Tanzania Ending Child Marriage Network, youth champions and others on amending the statute of the Marriage Act of 1971 that allows marriage before age 18.

child malnutrition by 1.7 million.<sup>45</sup> Healthy and well-nourished girls become stronger and more productive adults, improving their own prospects and those of their children.

### MINIMUM FINANCIAL SECURITY FOR ALL CHILDREN

Child sensitive social protection – including social transfers, social insurance and social services – can be an effective tool to help prevent child marriage, improve resilience and prevent negative household coping strategies, such as child marriage.<sup>46</sup> To ensure social protection mechanisms benefit children, particularly girls who face discriminatory barriers even within their homes, these mechanisms must be designed to be gender-sensitive and child sensitive. Child-sensitive social protection ensures

that social protection policies, programmes and systems address the specific patterns of children's poverty and vulnerability, and recognise the long-term developmental benefits of investing in children.

### A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Child marriage is a complex problem that requires multi-sectoral solutions. Several studies have shown that a combination of child-sensitive social protection (including cash transfers), schooling, legal change, gender equality awareness-raising campaigns and capacity building, and providing girls with financial and vocational skills is most effective. A review of more than 150 initiatives to prevent child marriage demonstrated that a focus on the empowerment of girls and their families was more effective than changing laws and policies alone.<sup>47</sup>



## PREVENTION OF CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN SOMALILAND

This Save the Children initiative focused on supporting the empowerment of girls to prevent and eliminate child marriage in their local communities. Girls clubs were set up and life skills training was provided to enhance girls' knowledge of their rights and how to protect themselves, and to give them the skills to increase their power over life decisions. Women from vulnerable households were also provided with income to support their daughters' education. This was designed to help prevent girls from dropping out of school and being forced to marry early for economic and financial security.

The initiative also worked to establish, strengthen and engage community-based structures such as Child Welfare Committees and Women's Lobby Groups to support advocacy and

awareness-raising activities on child marriage with communities and local government authorities. These community structures have proven to be important and efficient community-based child protection mechanisms to prevent and respond to child marriage.

In addition to girls' empowerment and community engagement, the programme also recognised the need to engage with the government and to help build government capacity to develop and enforce legal measures against child marriage. Save the Children supported the development of a Code of Conduct and of a certification and registration system for traditional marriage ceremony providers (known as Qaadis).

## ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage threatens the futures of millions of girls. It must end.

It's a huge challenge. But there are signs of hope. Leaders from around the world have made a clear commitment in the SDGs to end child marriage by 2030.

Achieving that goal will require action by governments across all three Guarantees to Girls that we have identified:

- Fair finance – ensuring sufficient government budgeting for good-quality essential services, increasing the minimum financial security for girls and the removal of cost barriers that prevent or limit access to good-quality essential services
- Equal treatment – to raise the minimum legal age of marriage and challenge discriminatory social norms
- Accountability – to ensure girls can hold decision-makers accountable for protecting them.

# “What future do I have?”

Genesis, 15, El Salvador<sup>48</sup>

*“We wanted to get away from this place, away from all the violence, to be with our grandmother. When I realised I was pregnant I was surprised. I was so sad because I wanted to continue at school. But the authorities just look at you differently once this happens. I felt like they wouldn’t accept me any more. I knew I was going to be uncomfortable in that place. I knew they would judge me.*”

*“I knew I was pregnant before we made the journey. I was only two months. I felt like I was going to be able to reach the US and start a new life. I did worry that something might happen though. But I just wanted to go.*”

*“When we were on the journey I felt scared all the time. When we were separated from the rest of our family at that hotel, it was really scary. We are just three girls you know. People told me that there was a girl who was killed while we were travelling, and that another guy was beaten and killed. When the coyote\* abandoned us, people told us these stories. I was so scared something might happen to us.*”

*“When we realised we had to go back I felt so bad. We thought the worst of everything. My mum with no job. Me with a baby. I thought I would have a better future in the US. I wanted to change my life. There are so many things I wanted to do. I can’t now. I would like to study but I can’t. I’m pregnant. How can I do this? I can’t do anything now. I wanted to be a secretary. There are other girls with babies but they don’t go to school. What future do I have?”*

\* Colloquial term for a person who helps people migrate to the USA

# 3 Free to access good-quality sexual and reproductive health services

## GIRLS' ACCESS TO GOOD-QUALITY SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES IN NUMBERS

- Maternal mortality is the second leading cause of death for adolescent girls aged 15–19 years old (after suicide).<sup>49</sup>
- Approximately 19% of girls in developing countries become pregnant before age 18, and 3% become pregnant before age 15.<sup>50</sup>
- An estimated 16 million adolescents aged 15–19 give birth each year – accounting for 11% of all births worldwide but 23% of the burden of disease due to pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>51, 52</sup>
- Pregnancy during adolescence is associated with a 50% higher risk of stillbirths and neonatal deaths compared with infants born to women aged 20–35.<sup>53</sup>
- Adolescent girls who become pregnant are more likely to have poorer nutrition and health, increasing the risk of foetal, perinatal and maternal death and disability by up to 50%.<sup>54</sup>
- Young women and adolescent girls account for one in every five new HIV infections in Africa and are nearly three times as likely as men of the same age group to be living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>55</sup>

Access to good-quality sexual and reproductive health information and services is a fundamental right. For women and girls these services are essential in order to protect their health and wellbeing (including protection against sexually transmitted infections); to enable them to make informed and autonomous decisions concerning their sexuality; to choose whether to have children; and to decide on the number, spacing and timing of their children. Men and women have the right to be informed of and have access to safe, effective and affordable methods of contraception. Women and girls have the right to access good-quality

healthcare services that support them through pregnancy and childbirth, providing the best possible conditions for having healthy children.

Gender inequality and harmful social norms influence girls' ability to protect and promote their sexual and reproductive health. Societies' and communities' expectations about girls' roles can constrain their autonomy, freedom and opportunities. The threat and reality of gender-based and sexual violence, child marriage and harmful practices all represent a denial of girls' rights and hinder their ability to exercise agency in decisions about their health.

Good-quality sexual and reproductive health services must be available and accessible to all adolescents, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status, and there must be an integrated continuum of care that is free at the point of use and takes into account their specific needs.

## DISCRIMINATORY LEGAL AND SOCIAL BARRIERS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

Adolescents in general, and girls in particular, face many barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services. Administrative or legal barriers may prevent girls from using services or they may receive poor-quality, biased and stigmatising treatment by providers. For example, third party consent by parents or other adults may be required to access contraception or other services such as HIV testing.

Stigma and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, HIV status, disability or marital status can also prevent girls from seeking and receiving services, or lead to biased, non-evidence-based and inadequate or inappropriate healthcare, or result in girls being denied sexual and reproductive health information and services altogether. Further barriers to sexual and reproductive health services include broader socio-cultural and religious norms and practices;

lack of knowledge and understanding about sex and contraception; geographic isolation for adolescents living in rural areas with limited access to health clinics and contraceptive services; the costs of contraception; and the lack of adolescent-friendly services.<sup>56</sup>

Human rights standards require states to make sure that adolescents have full access to appropriate and comprehensive information on sexual and reproductive health – including contraception, the dangers of early pregnancy, and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS (see Box).<sup>57</sup>

Girls who are married very young have particular difficulties in accessing sexual and reproductive health services and may not have the knowledge, confidence or the means to access pre-natal and post-natal care, or to make choices about pregnancy and childbearing. They may be isolated geographically and socially, have limited access to affordable and safe transportation, lack knowledge of where and how to access services, and often have very limited decision-making power.

A significant proportion of girls become pregnant during school-going age. Approximately 19% of girls in developing countries become pregnant before age 18, and 3% become pregnant before age 15.<sup>58</sup> If girls leave or are taken out of school they have even fewer chances of gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to protect their health and the ability to access services.

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Humanitarian crises and fragile settings exacerbate existing risks to girls' health. The risk of children dying before age five is almost twice as high in fragile contexts.<sup>59</sup> The percentage of births attended by skilled health workers is lower in fragile settings, while adolescent birth rates and unmet need for family planning are higher.<sup>60</sup> In these settings, women and girls are also at heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence, unintended or unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and maternal mortality and morbidity.<sup>61</sup> Gender-sensitive sexual and reproductive health interventions are therefore central to humanitarian action – from prevention and preparedness to response, building resilience, recovery and long-term development.<sup>62</sup>

Adolescent girls face specific health risks during humanitarian crises. They often do not have access to sexual and reproductive health information and services when other necessities such as food and water are prioritised in humanitarian responses. Where sexual and reproductive health services are provided, they may be targeted at women only and unavailable or inaccessible to adolescent girls.<sup>63</sup>

### GUARANTEEING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS FOR ALL

Sexual and reproductive health is at the core of the right to health. Numerous national laws and international human rights treaties and agreements – including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the UN Convention on the

Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women – specify the need to ensure the prevention of infant, maternal and child mortality, and the provision of good-quality sexual and reproductive health services, including access to family planning, pre- and post-natal care, and emergency obstetric care.<sup>64</sup>

## SUPPORTING GIRLS' SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN BOLIVIA

In Bolivia, a myriad of problems over accessing healthcare services have been reported, ranging from lack of money to needing family permission to receive treatment. Girls in particular – especially those from the poorest communities and with the least education – are often unable to make decisions about sex or to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy.<sup>65</sup>

Save the Children works with young adults' centres around three key goals: personal empowerment, sexual and reproductive health, and economic opportunities. In 2015, we reached 6,615 adolescents and young people who created or began the process of formulating their 'Life Plan' by reflecting on their future.

## LAWS, POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TO REMOVE DISCRIMINATORY BARRIERS TO SERVICES

All legal impediments to girls' access to sexual reproductive health services must be eliminated and health services designed to ensure they are suitable for excluded groups. There are particular challenges in reaching the most marginalised adolescents facing multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage, including girls who are not in school, who are

married, who live in extreme poverty, who have disabilities, and who engage in transactional sex in order to survive.<sup>66</sup>

Within education, comprehensive sexuality education has been shown to positively affect knowledge and behaviour, especially if it is grounded in gender equality and human rights. These programmes have been shown to delay the age boys and girls first had sex; to reduce the frequency of sex, number of sexual partners and sexual risk-taking; and to increase contraceptive use.<sup>67</sup>

## GENDER EQUALITY TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS IN AFGHANISTAN

Save the Children has supported child rights-based organisations in Afghanistan in carrying out gender-sensitive health and nutrition programming. Training sessions have been designed to facilitate the participation of frontline health workers and suggest concrete ways in which community health workers can integrate a gender equality approach in their existing activities.

The training, which provides front-line health workers with concrete skills for gender-sensitive counselling, and social and behavioural change

communication, is centred around three key social determinants of health:

- opportunities: how gender influences access to health and nutrition information, such as through education opportunities
- resources: how a person's gender may influence their access to and control over family resources
- decision-making: how gender influences household decision-making, affecting whether a person can freely decide to seek healthcare or health information.

## BUILDING A MOVEMENT FOR CHANGE IN NEPAL

Deep inequalities exist in Nepal between girls and boys in health and education outcomes. Girls from poor families, minority groups and lower castes fare particularly badly. Patriarchal norms and income poverty combine to restrict the extent to which disadvantaged girls can participate in decision-making and local governance, exacerbated by weak accountability and patronage.

Save the Children is working in Nepal to support excluded girls to campaign for their rights at national, district and village levels, challenging the discriminatory barriers that reinforce cycles of exclusion and poverty. A critical first step in the campaign is engaging with excluded girls to identify barriers that are holding them back, and exploring social accountability approaches through which they can make their voices heard and hold leaders and local administration to account.

## INCREASED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC REVENUES, COLLECTED AND SPENT EQUITABLY

*“State parties shall not discriminate against any child or category of children through resource mobilization or the allocation or execution of public funds. Spending equitably does not always mean spending the same amount on each child, but rather making spending decisions that lead to substantive equality among children.”*

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Alongside laws and policies guaranteeing access to good-quality essential services, including education, and sexual and reproductive health services, resources are needed for their implementation. The mobilisation of resources and the ways in which they are allocated and spent are critical to ensure girls have access to good-quality essential services and are able to realise other rights as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Domestic resource mobilisation, particularly through progressive taxation, is one of the most significant and sustainable sources of revenue for governments. Many countries could mobilise far more domestic revenue by reforming their tax systems and improving compliance. Fiscal space could also be expanded by cracking down on corruption and waste. Public participation, including by girls, is also essential to ensure government accountability for investment in girls.

Domestic resource mobilisation needs to be supported internationally; donor countries should meet their commitments to increase support to help countries mobilise more of their own resources in equitable, transparent and accountable ways. Poorer countries will not be able to increase public revenues without international action to stem illicit financial flows and tax avoidance, along with other financial reforms. Furthermore, the poorest countries will continue to require development aid; countries providing official development assistance should fulfil their commitments, promote gender equality, and support the implementation of all children’s rights.

Allocation and spending on children, and specifically girls, must also be made visible in budgets. Budget classifications must at a minimum be designed to make it possible to track allocation to children by age, gender, geographical area and other categories of exclusion.<sup>68</sup> Governments should use gender-sensitive child rights impact assessments to identify the effects of legislation, policies, programmes and budgets on different groups of children, especially on excluded groups of girls and boys who might have special needs and therefore require a larger share of spending to ensure their access to good-quality public services.<sup>69</sup>

Women’s and girls’ value as citizens needs to be prioritised and reflected in national budgeting, with governments across the world accountable for their spending on women and girls. A recent paper published by the Council on Foreign Relations

noted: “Gender equality funding by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries was estimated at only 5 percent of aid flows in 2012–2013, dramatically lower than funding for other development sectors. Investment in women’s economic empowerment amounted to only 2 percent of overall aid from OECD countries. And in some areas, such as preventing violence against women, funding actually declined between 1995 and 2011.” Creation of a pooled multi-funder mechanism represents one way to generate revenue and ensure the prioritisation of funding for women and girls by governments.

Fees for good-quality essential services can have a disproportionately negative impact on girls. The removal of user-fees for primary education in many sub-Saharan countries has led to significant increases in girls’ enrolment.<sup>70</sup> Access to free public education at both primary and secondary stages is key to increasing knowledge, agency and opportunities for adolescent girls. Increasing household income and incomes for adolescent girls will also help to reduce early marriage and pregnancy.

## INCREASING ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ ACCESS TO GOOD-QUALITY ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Ensuring girls can access good-quality essential sexual and reproductive health services will require concrete action across all three Guarantees to Girls that Save the Children is calling on governments to make:

- Fair finance – to ensure education and sexual and reproductive health policies and budgets are inclusive of services for girls, including as part of efforts to achieve Universal Health Coverage
- Equal treatment – to remove legal, policy and discriminatory barriers that restrict girls’ ability to access services
- Accountability – to ensure that girls can influence health budgets and policies, and that there is good-quality, disaggregated data on sexual and reproductive health, broken down by different age groups and gender.



PHOTO: LOUIS LEESON/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Young women are given free contraception in Susan’s Bay, one of the slum areas of Freetown, Sierra Leone.



## Girl power

### Jerlyn, 23, the Philippines<sup>71</sup>

Jerlyn, 23, is a volunteer peer facilitator with Save the Children's Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in Emergencies programme in Tanauan in the Philippines. Her story demonstrates the role that community organisations can play in making girls' rights issues visible through data collection and collective action, and empowering girls to control the course of their own lives.

*"After I graduated from high school, my father told me that I should no longer pursue college. He said I should just quit school, go to Manila and find a job. I refused to submit myself to his decision. I have always dreamed of graduating from college, and I persevered to achieve it.*

*"I stopped schooling after high school because of a lack of finances. In order to save up for my plan to go back to school, I worked in a small restaurant in Tacloban to earn some money. After two years, I applied for a scholarship, and I was immediately accepted. I became a student assistant to qualify for the discounted tuition*

*fee in college. Basically, I worked really hard to earn my diploma and be where I am now.*

*"Since we've opened the youth-friendly space here, I – along with my fellow volunteers – report from Monday to Friday to disseminate information and gather pertinent data in our community*

*"Based on the data we have gathered so far, it seems that we need to focus on teenage mothers. There was one barangay that has a lot of teenage mums, with the youngest as young as 14 years old. Children should be given the right information on how to avoid unplanned pregnancy. As for the existing teenage mothers, they should be oriented on how to properly care for their young ones.*

*"The provision of the youth friendly space here is truly beneficial for young people. Before, there was no particular group here in our municipality focusing on the different concerns and issues of teenagers."*



# 4 Free to speak out and influence decisions

## GIRLS' POLITICAL VOICE IN NUMBERS

- Two thirds of girls feel they can't take decisions about critical issues in their lives in Ecuador, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. And only one in three feels confident to speak up and be heard when in the presence of boys and men.<sup>72</sup>
- 74% of children surveyed in India agree that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family. 66% agreed in Rwanda, and 11% in the UK.<sup>73</sup>
- 53% of men and 41% of women think men make better political leaders than women according to the World Values Survey conducted in 86 countries.<sup>74</sup>
- Globally, 23% of parliamentary seats are held by women and 18% of speakers of parliament are women.<sup>75</sup>
- Rwanda has the world's highest percentage of women parliamentarians at 64%. Qatar, and Vanuatu have no women in parliament. Only 2% of Egypt's parliamentary seats are held by women, and only 6% in Nigeria and 9% in Mali.

Listening to and valuing girls' own expression of their needs is essential for designing policies that

will enable these needs to be met. Amplifying girls' voices will be central to fulfilling the pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to 'leave no one behind'.

Girls have the right to voice – to express ideas and opinions and to influence decisions, from the household through to national and international levels.<sup>76</sup> The right to be heard is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (see Box). Being able to express ourselves and influence decisions that affect us is fundamental to our wellbeing and sense of self-worth. This is an essential component of personal empowerment – the process through which people who have been excluded gain the knowledge, confidence, networks and opportunities needed to make their own life choices and determine the course of their own lives.<sup>77</sup>

Working with girls to amplify their voices is particularly important during adolescence. This is a time when changing and increased responsibilities for girls are often not accompanied by corresponding increases in opportunities to take part in decision-making in the household or public spaces, putting them at risk of feeling disempowered and having low self-esteem.<sup>78</sup>

### THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD (ARTICLE 12) – A GENERAL PRINCIPLE OF THE UNCRC

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously under Article 12 of the UNCRC. This principle recognises children as actors in their own lives and applies at all times, throughout a child's life. This means that when adults make

decisions about a child's life, the child should be asked what they think and feel, and the adults' decisions need to take these into account. The Convention recognises that the level of a child's participation in decisions must be appropriate to the child's age and maturity.<sup>79</sup>

Voice and influence are also fundamental for other aspects of girls' health and wellbeing. Ensuring that girls' voices are heard and equitably valued is particularly important for understanding and challenging social norms that are holding girls back across all the areas covered by the SDGs, and that lie at the root of harmful practices such as child marriage.

## GIRLS' VOICE AND INFLUENCE IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Girls and boys are affected by household-level decisions about healthcare, education, household chores and the freedom they have to meet with friends or undertake activities outside of the home. Evidence suggests that children's contribution to decision-making varies between households, and is affected by wider cultural norms about children's roles.<sup>80</sup> In some societies girls feel they have less power in the household than boys. For example, in Ethiopia and Peru a higher percentage of girls than boys agree with the statement, "other people in my family make all the decisions about how I spend my time".<sup>81, 82</sup> This gender difference increases among poorer households,<sup>83</sup> reflecting a wider trend of gender norms working in tandem with poverty to influence decisions about how households should allocate resources in times of hardship.<sup>84</sup>

Parents' decisions are often influenced by wider social norms about the different roles that girls and boys should play in the home and in society. For example, in some communities girls are more likely to be kept at home to help with chores and care work.<sup>85</sup> In Andhra Pradesh, India, girls spend nearly an hour and a half more each day on domestic work than boys.<sup>86</sup> In Ethiopia and India caring for siblings is a primary reason why girls drop out of school early.<sup>87</sup> Gendered divisions of care and unpaid work in the home can reinforce gender norms among children themselves, and can also have knock-on impacts over the course of girls' lives, particularly given the importance of education and participation in civil society groups in defining individual pathways to empowerment and participation in public life (see below).

Inequalities in household decision-making between women and men can also affect health and education outcomes for children, and girls in particular.<sup>88</sup> Research in India shows that women who make a greater contribution to household income have greater influence over household decision-making. This is associated with an increase in school attendance and attainment, particularly for daughters and children in the poorest families.<sup>89</sup> Research in Kenya, Nigeria and Niger revealed that women's autonomy over decision-making in the home is linked to improvements in care-seeking for children suffering from pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria.<sup>90</sup>

## GIRLS' VOICE AND INFLUENCE IN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

Many children engage actively in public and political life across a range of issues through being members of children's groups and civil society organisations, and through participating in mainstream and social media, and in formal channels that allow for their input into budget and policy processes. However, even where opportunities for children's participation are in theory available, girls often face more significant barriers to exercising voice and influence than boys. Gendered norms that keep girls in the household, focused on domestic tasks or away from risk of sexual harassment, prevent them from participating in children's associations and community activities.<sup>91</sup>

The lack of opportunities and capacities that girls have to influence policy-making directly is exacerbated by their lack of indirect representation by female politicians and leaders.<sup>92</sup> Evidence shows that having a higher proportion of female leaders in public office is linked to policies that better address the needs of girls and women. A poll of members of parliament revealed that female parliamentarians were more likely to prioritise social issues, such as childcare, equal pay, parental leave, and pensions; physical concerns, such as reproductive rights, physical safety, and gender-based violence; and development issues, such as poverty reduction and service delivery. Across the OECD, countries with more female legislators spend more on education.<sup>93</sup>



PHOTO: SUZANNE LEE/SAVE THE CHILDREN

**Bhawani, 16, talks about child marriage and the importance of family planning at a children's club meeting in her district in Nepal. Following advocacy by girls and boys, three local priests agreed to stop solemnising child marriages.**

## EMPOWERING GIRLS TO ENGAGE IN DECISION-MAKING AND GOVERNANCE AT ALL LEVELS

Different processes and channels can help to enhance excluded girls' voices and influence private and public spheres. These include organisations that provide space and networks for change; working with decision-makers from household through to national and international levels, including men and boys, to tackle gender norms; increasing the inclusivity, transparency and accountability of institutions and policy processes; and ensuring that girls are visible and accounted for in data and reporting.

Children's own spaces, including clubs and organisations, can provide important spaces in which girls can learn about their rights, share experiences, and gain the confidence and networks they need to speak out in their households, communities and through national and international processes.<sup>94</sup> Girls' clubs can also be important incubators for leadership skills, and can therefore be critical to address wider gaps in women's representation and participation in public life.<sup>95</sup>

A number of clubs and personal empowerment programmes have been specifically designed by governments and development agencies to help enhance girls' voice and decision-making power. For example, Ishraq – a programme supported by Save the Children in Egypt – provides safe spaces for girls who have dropped out of school to learn, socialise and develop life skills. The programme has had demonstrable impact on participants' attitudes towards child marriage and their sense of empowerment, and has led to many girls re-enrolling in school.<sup>96</sup>

Children's and girls' organisations and movements can also support girls to speak with a collective voice on important issues and mobilise for change. Children's organisations that bring together boys and girls also have an important role to play in helping to foster understanding between genders, helping to break down gender norms and foster collective action by children.<sup>97</sup> For example, children's councils supported by Save the Children in Tanzania have provided important spaces for boys and girls to come together to discuss social issues. A number of seats are reserved on the councils for the most excluded children, helping to ensure their voices are heard.

A male youth ambassador was recently elected from one of the councils to speak out about maternal and newborn health and child marriage at national and global citizens' hearings, demonstrating the important role that boys can also play as advocates and allies for girls' rights. Similarly, women's groups and movements that bring together people from across the age spectrum can help to foster understanding and bridge differences in outlook and beliefs that persist between generations.<sup>98</sup> To be able to engage meaningfully in different public decision-making and governance processes, girls also need access to age-appropriate and timely information in a language they can understand.

One of the key barriers to children's voices being heard and their participation in public life is adults' failure to take children seriously.<sup>99</sup> Shifting the discriminatory norms that stifle girls' voices and influence requires not only fostering personal and collective empowerment among girls themselves, but also working with key decision-makers who exert considerable power and control over girls' lives. The most effective programmes work across these multiple dimensions, supporting girls and boys to recognise and speak up about damaging beliefs and practices, while at the same time supporting positive change among parents and in the wider community (see Box – Choices, Voices, Promises, page 6).

Girls' voice in public life can be amplified through formal child-friendly mechanisms and spaces that allow them to participate directly in policy-making, budgeting and accountability processes. Governments have the responsibility to ensure that funding is available for the meaningful participation of girls and boys in all decisions affecting them.<sup>100</sup> For girls to engage in civic action and governance processes in a safe, inclusive and meaningful way, governments must provide an enabling environment for civil society where the rights to expression, association, peaceful assembly and access to information are guaranteed in law and practice.

The education system can also support girls and boys to engage in public decision-making and governance by teaching them about their rights and how to access information, and by helping them to strengthen their communication skills and confidence to speak out.<sup>101</sup>

Women leaders can also help to represent girls on the political stage, as well as acting as role models and helping to shift societal norms about the suitability of females for leadership positions. Particular attention should therefore be paid to achieving gender parity in leadership and policy-making positions, in the private sector as well as in the political sphere. This can be achieved through approaches such as quota systems and mentoring programmes, although it should be recognised that increased representation does not always translate into influence.<sup>102</sup>

## KISHOREE KONTHA – GAINING CONFIDENCE THROUGH SAFE SPACES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Save the Children's Kishoree Kontha (Adolescent Girls' Voices) programme<sup>103</sup> in Bangladesh was a social and economic empowerment initiative, supporting girls to develop strong voices and shape their own futures. Safe spaces were established that allowed girls aged 10–19 to come together to discuss and learn about a range of issues, including health, marriage, critical thinking and financial literacy. This was combined with a group savings pilot, community mobilisation, and peer and parental education initiatives.

Evaluation of this work, encompassing more than 450 villages, revealed positive impacts on

girls' lives, although some challenges – such as reaching the most marginalised girls and shifting deep-rooted norms – were difficult to address. As a result of participating in the programme, girls not only reported having developed practical skills and new knowledge, but also demonstrated a new confidence and reported feeling more respected in their households and communities. Many also supported each other to navigate life challenges relating to early marriage and pregnancy, demonstrating the importance of mutual support and collective action to challenge norms and harmful practices.

Securing equal and meaningful representation of women in public life will also require working with girls when they are young. The barriers that girls and women face to making themselves heard in public life are compounded over the course of their lives.<sup>104</sup> Negative decisions relating to their health and education in childhood can close off opportunities later in life. By contrast, support for girls to build their confidence, skills and networks from an early age can help set them onto pathways towards empowerment, control and leadership.<sup>105</sup> Boys and men – including community, government and religious leaders – must also be engaged around gender equality, and the potential and power of girls’ and women’s equal leadership, to ensure all stakeholders are working together to create an enabling environment for girls’ equal rights.

## MORE AND BETTER DATA DISAGGREGATION AND GENDER-SENSITIVE DATA

Disaggregated data and information on development and rights issues are limited, effectively rendering some of the world’s most excluded girls invisible to policy-makers. Without good-quality data and information, governments cannot fully understand or address the barriers that are holding girls back in life. Data and information need to be

freely available to the public in a timely manner, broadly disseminated, and converted into formats that are easy to understand and use, while also protecting the privacy and safety of individuals and groups. Girls need to be able access information and data that they can understand. Without access to this, people, including girls, lack vital evidence and information to hold leaders to account.

Data gaps are particularly significant for some of the most entrenched barriers to women’s and girls’ empowerment, reflecting the lack of priority given to these issues by policy-makers. Only half of all countries report data on intimate partner violence, and data that do exist are often poor quality and not comparable.<sup>106</sup> No country systematically collects data on the prevalence of physical and sexual violence, and only 19 developing countries have data for female genital cutting.<sup>107</sup>

Most internationally agreed indicators, including those for monitoring the SDGs, relate primarily to women’s rights, with few focusing specifically on girls. Sex- and gender-disaggregated data are not available for many indicators, with most surveys focusing on the household unit as a whole, or on respondents aged 15 to 49.<sup>108</sup> It is necessary to ensure that all relevant indicators are disaggregated by meaningful age bands (eg, ages 10–14, 15–19) and by sex.

## SIERRA LEONE: WOMEN LEADING CHANGE ON CHILD MOTHERHOOD AND GIRLS’ RIGHTS

Girls in Sierra Leone are among the most likely in the world to be child mothers. 28% of girls aged 15–19 have already had a child or are pregnant. Teenage girls account for 40% of all maternal deaths in the country.<sup>109</sup> Girls are being forced to turn to transactional sex as an economic coping strategy, particularly in the wake of the Ebola crisis, and young mothers are blamed, stigmatised and often excluded from their communities.

Save the Children is working with the First Lady of Sierra Leone to tackle teenage pregnancy by encouraging powerful traditional leaders, including paramount chiefs and societal heads,

to sign Memoranda of Understanding on child marriage and violence against children. The success of the initiative so far demonstrates the important role that strong women in positions of leadership can play in representing girls and campaigning for their rights. Save the Children is also:

- working with other role models, both women and girls, to engage with girls in schools and communities
- hosting dialogues between adolescents and decision-makers to help give girls a voice
- supporting children to advocate through budget and policy processes to ensure a greater focus on girls’ rights.

Availability of disaggregated data for ethnic, regional and religious groups is also poor, making it difficult to identify overlapping disadvantage and target the most excluded girls. Particular groups of excluded girls are not covered by household surveys, including street children, girls in pastoral and traveling communities, and girls living in institutions.

The SDGs have given new impetus to address critical data gaps for women and girls, with 11 of the 17 goals having gender-sensitive targets and indicators. In May 2016, a group of 11 donors, development agencies and foundations issued a joint commitment to increase their focus on and investment in resolving core gender data challenges linked to SDG implementation.<sup>110</sup> Such initiatives should be expanded and complemented by qualitative data collection. Particular focus should be placed on data to shed light on the extent and nature of exclusion among the world's most vulnerable girls.

## INCREASING GIRLS' VOICE AND INFLUENCE

Amplifying girls' voices will require concrete action across all three of the global Guarantees to Girls that we are calling on governments to make:

- Fair finance – ensuring minimum financial security to break the cycle of poverty and to improve girls' opportunities to engage in public life, and ensuring the necessary budget allocations and spending to secure the meaningful participation of girls and boys in all decisions affecting them.
- Equal treatment – challenging discriminatory norms related to girls' roles in household and public spheres and promoting gender equality in all spheres of decision-making.
- Accountability – to ensure that girls are empowered to engage in decision-making and governance at all levels, and are visible in high quality, disaggregated data.

# 5 Giving every last girl the chance to thrive

It is possible to build a world in which every last girl has the chance to live, thrive and reach her full potential in life. But it won't just happen by itself.

Concrete action is needed to tackle power imbalances that rob girls of the personal resources and sense of agency that they need to make their own life choices, and to build supportive social, legal and political environments for change.

We're calling on governments and other stakeholders to make three key Guarantees to Girls that governments must make:

## 1 FAIR FINANCE

Improving domestic resource mobilisation – particularly through progressive taxation – and translating this into sufficient budgeting and spending on girls is needed to:

- ensure minimum financial security for all households to spur economic empowerment and prevent girls from dropping out of school or getting married due to poverty, conflict or disaster
- remove cost barriers to health, nutrition and education services – key sectors that affect girls' resources and agency.

## 2 EQUAL TREATMENT

Guaranteeing the equal rights of all girls, including the most excluded, is critical to:

- challenge discriminatory laws, policies, norms and practices and building enabling environments to transform children's lives
- ensure all births are registered so that excluded girls are visible to policy-makers and can claim their equal rights, and ensure all marriages are registered for the realisation of property rights.

## 3 ACCOUNTABILITY

Guaranteeing that governance is inclusive, gender-sensitive, transparent and accountable to all girls by:

- amplifying girls' voices via meaningful opportunities for participation in civic action and policy and budget processes, with equitable access for the most excluded girls
- improving the quality, coverage and disaggregation of data to ensure that the extent and nature of exclusion that girls face is fully understood.

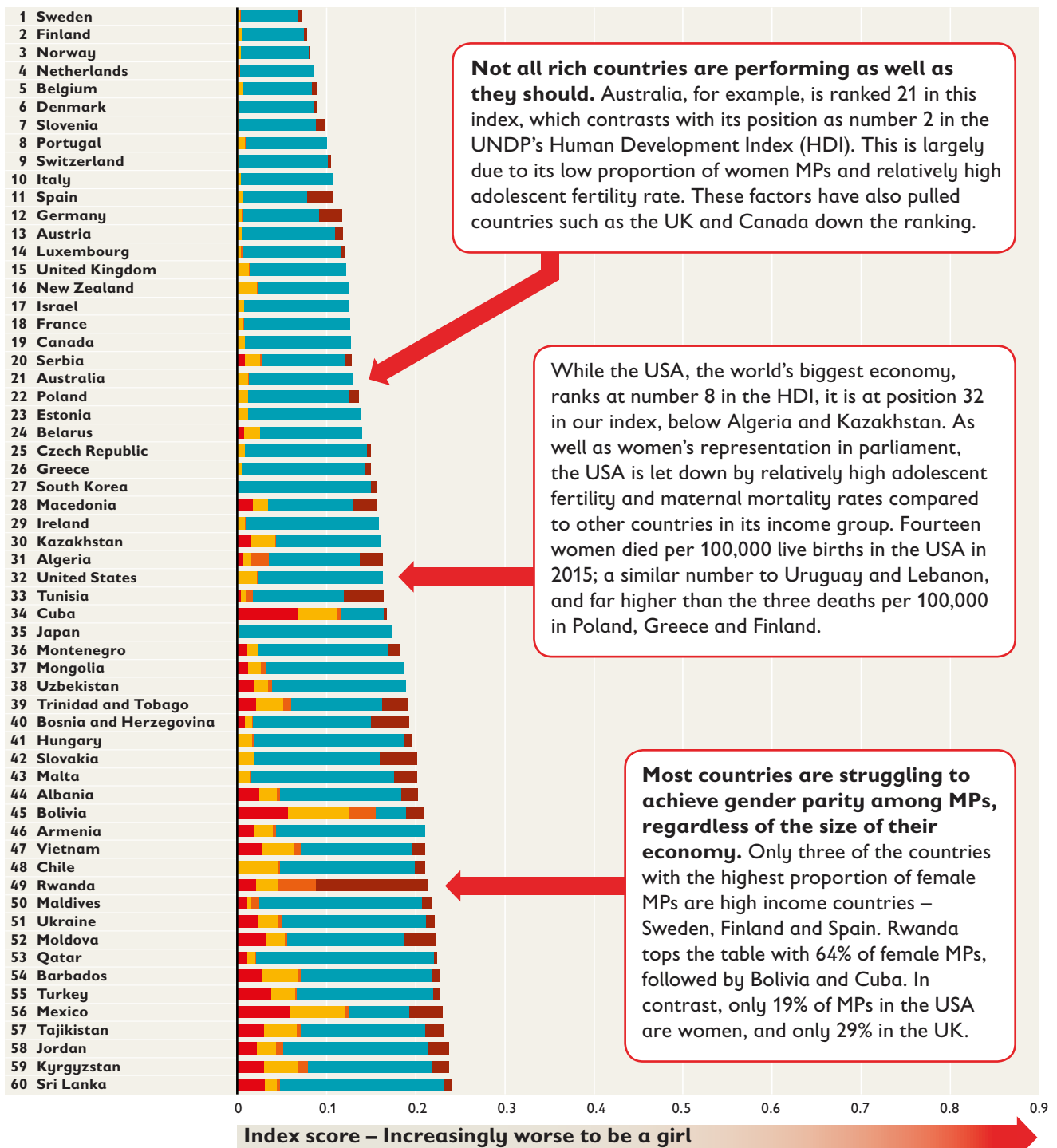
Efforts to fulfil these key guarantees must focus on excluded groups of girls who are being left behind by development progress. The furthest behind must be reached first, including girls who face multiple, intersecting inequalities – including girls in poverty, girls with disabilities, those from minority groups, from disadvantaged regions, and girls in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Ending extreme rights violations against girls – and in the process unlocking progress across the Sustainable Development Goals – will take a concerted global effort. But the prize is huge. Girls across the world will be supported to take back power and control over their lives. It's time to ensure every last girl is free to survive, free to learn and free from harm.

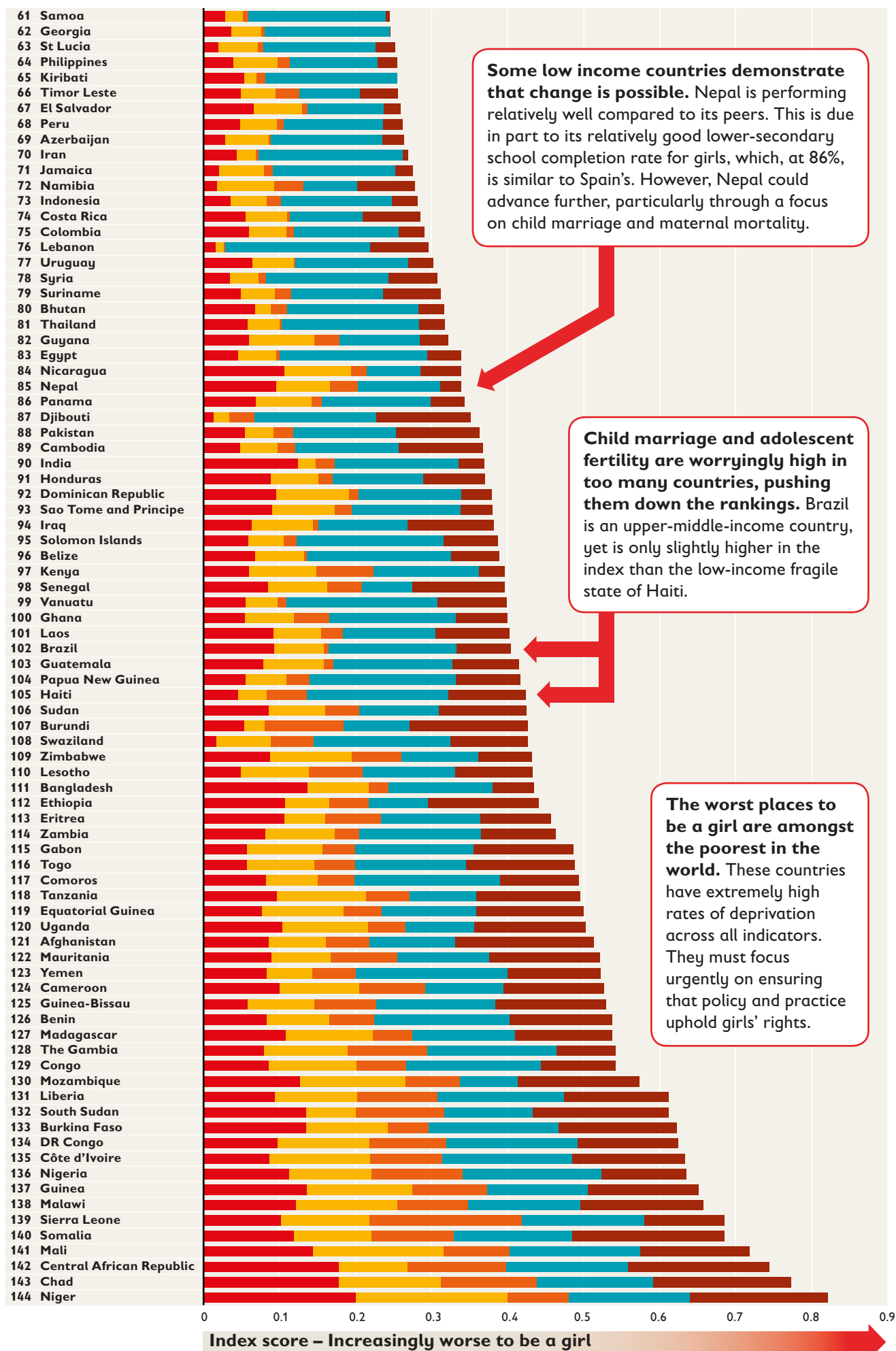
# 6 Girls' Opportunity Index

KEY: HOW EACH INDICATOR CONTRIBUTES TO THE OVERALL INDEX SCORE

- Child marriage
- Adolescent fertility
- Maternal mortality (as an indicator of girls' access to good-quality healthcare)
- Women MPs (relative to male MPs)
- Lower-secondary school completion







## A SNAPSHOT OF GIRLS' SITUATIONS AROUND THE WORLD

The Girls' Opportunity Index provides a snapshot of the situation of girls in countries the world over – their opportunity to control their own lives and to fulfil their potential. While it is impossible to capture the full range of barriers that are holding girls back in life in a single index, we have sought to identify issues that provide insights into some of the most extreme violations of girls' rights, which stem from deeply entrenched discriminatory norms as well as from economic and political barriers. Other criteria for selecting indicators included alignment with SDG targets and good country coverage of data.

The indicators that form the basis of the index are:

- **Child marriage:** one of the most extreme violations of children's rights, often reflecting power imbalances and girls' limited autonomy and control over their own lives.
- **Adolescent pregnancy:** becoming mothers while still children themselves profoundly affects the course that girls' lives take – often resulting in exclusion from education, entrenched poverty and social stigmatisation (see page 11).
- **Maternal mortality:** an extreme violation of the right to survival and to the best possible standard of healthcare, this indicator provides insights into the quality of health services that girls have access to.
- **Women in parliament:** this provides insights into the prevalence – or absence – of women's voices in public life and the likelihood of girls taking on political leadership roles when they grow up. A higher proportion of female MPs in parliament has been linked to more attention being paid to issues that affect girls' rights (see page 18).
- **Lower-secondary school completion for girls:** Lack of education shuts opportunities off for girls and is linked to poor outcomes such as social mobility and economic empowerment. Lower-secondary school completion represents the basic minimum level of education that all children must receive, and it is during the transition from primary to secondary school that many girls drop out of the system.

The Girls' Opportunity Index includes data for 144 countries across all income groups and geographical regions. See technical note (page 27) for further details of methodology and data coverage.

## WHAT DOES THE GIRLS' OPPORTUNITY INDEX SHOW?

**The worst places to be a girl are the poorest countries in the world.** The 20 countries at the bottom of the index are all low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa. These countries have extremely high rates of deprivation across all of the selected indicators. In Niger, for example, 76% of young women were married before they were 18, and one in five adolescent girls gives birth a year on average. All countries at the bottom of the ranking must focus urgently on ensuring that policy and practice uphold girls' rights in health and education, as well as in the household.

**Change is possible.** The good news is that countries with levels of economic development similar to those at the bottom of the ranking have made significant strides in some areas, boosting their ranking and demonstrating that significant improvements are achievable. Rwanda, for example, has the highest proportion of female MPs in the world, and is also doing comparatively well in preventing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy compared with other low-income countries. As a result, it is at 49 in the index, compared with its neighbours Burundi and Tanzania at 107 and 118 respectively.

Nepal is another low-income country that is performing relatively well compared to its peers. This is due in part to its relatively good lower-secondary school completion rate for girls, which, at 86%, is similar to Spain's. However, Nepal could advance further, particularly through a focus on reducing child marriage and maternal mortality.

**Not all rich countries are performing as well as they should.** A number of high-income countries perform considerably worse than might be expected. Australia, for example, is ranked 21 in the Girls' Opportunity Index, which contrasts with its position as number 2 in the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI). This owes largely to its low proportion of women MPs and relatively high adolescent fertility rate. These factors have also pulled countries such as the UK, Canada and USA down the ranking.

While the USA, the world's biggest economy, ranks at number 8 in the HDI, it is at position 32 in the Girls' Opportunity Index, below Algeria

and Kazakhstan. This is explained by low women's representation in parliament and high adolescent fertility and maternal mortality rates compared with other countries in its income group. Fourteen women died per 100,000 live births in the USA in 2015; a similar number to Uruguay and Lebanon, and far higher than the three deaths per 100,000 in Poland, Greece and Finland.

**Most countries are struggling to achieve gender parity among MPs, regardless of the size of their economy.** Only three of the countries with the highest proportion of female MPs are high-income countries – Sweden, Finland and Spain. Rwanda tops the table with 64% of female MPs, followed by Bolivia and Cuba. In contrast, only 19% of members of Congress in the USA are women, and only 29% of members of Parliament in the UK.

**Child marriage and adolescent fertility are worryingly high in many countries, pushing them down the rankings.** A number of countries in Latin America are performing worse on these indicators than they are for education and maternal mortality. The Dominican Republic and Brazil are cases in point – both upper-middle-income countries, which are at positions 92 and 102 respectively in the index, only slightly higher than Haiti. Both Dominican Republic and Brazil have high adolescent fertility and child marriage rates.

## GIRLS' OPPORTUNITY INDEX – TECHNICAL NOTE

### OBJECTIVE OF THE INDEX

The objective of the Girls' Opportunity Index is to rank countries according to the opportunity that girls have to shape their futures and reach their full potential.

### INDICATORS AND SOURCES

To construct the index we took five commonly used indicators, which are also part of the SDG monitoring framework. The actual data were obtained from the most reliable public sources, including UN agencies and the World Bank.

Indicator	Source
Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births)	WHO, UNICEF, UN Population Fund, World Bank Group, and the UN Population Division
Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15–19)	UN Population Division, World Population Prospects
Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18	UNICEF using Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, AIDS Indicator Surveys, Reproductive Health Surveys, and other household surveys.
Lower-secondary school completion rate, female (% of relevant age group)	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)	Inter-Parliamentary Union

### MISSING DATA

The index comprises 144 countries which had recent data (from 2006 and onwards) for the five indicators. Many high income OECD countries do not collect or publish data on indicators such as lower-secondary school completion and child marriage. To ensure that the index included a sufficient number of OECD countries we ascribed the same values to those countries that lacked data on these two indicators. OECD countries with missing child marriage data were ascribed a value of 0 as those with data had a value of less than 1%. For lower secondary completion, countries with missing data were ascribed the average value for high-income OECD countries – 96.7%.

### DATA ADJUSTMENTS

Available lower-secondary completion data is calculated in gross terms – the total number of children completing schooling divided by the number of children in the relevant age group. This implies that in some cases the country value may exceed 100% because some children who graduate may be younger or older than the statutory age and consequently there may be more graduates than the actual number of children in the age group. To correct for this, in a few cases where country value exceeded 100% we capped it at 100%.

## STANDARDISATION

Given that the index comprises five indicators which are measured on different scales (ie, some are rates while others are ratios) we standardised each indicator on a scale from 0 to 1. For standardisation we used the following formula:

$$X_{st} = (X - \text{Min}) / (\text{Max} - \text{Min})$$

Where:

$X_{st}$  is the standardised value

$X$  is the actual value

Max is the maximum value of the indicator for all countries

Min is the minimum value of the indicator for all countries

For three indicators – child marriage, adolescent fertility and maternal mortality – a higher value implies bad performance, and for two – lower-secondary school completion and share of women MPs – the opposite is true. To ensure consistency between standardised indicators so that in each case the lower value implies better performance, for those two indicators we reversed the formula:

$$X_{st} = (X - \text{Max}) / (\text{Min} - \text{Max})$$

## AGGREGATION METHOD

Each indicator was ascribed an equal weight. The index score was derived by summing the standardised scores of each indicator and dividing by 5. Lower scores indicate better performance.

# Endnotes

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# EVERY LAST GIRL

## Free to live, free to learn, free from harm

This report looks at how we can help promote gender equality and get power where it belongs – in the hands of every last girl.

It explores three key barriers that hold girls back – and that we focus on in our work:

- child marriage
- poor access to good-quality services – including health and education
- girls' lack of a voice in private and public spheres.

These three barriers are violations of girls' rights. They also pose formidable obstacles to progress in other areas of development.

In addition, our Girls' Opportunity Index sheds light on levels of gender discrimination around the world, and highlights the countries where girls' rights are most at risk.

*Every Last Girl*, the second report in our Every Last Child series, also identifies three specific Guarantees to Girls. These three guarantees will help governments reach the girls who are furthest behind – such as those who live in fragile and conflict-affected states, those who are on the move as refugees, those in the poorest countries and in disadvantaged regions, and those who face multiple forms of discrimination.

Together, through realising the three Guarantees to Girls, we can ensure girls are free to live, free to learn and free from harm.

[savethechildren.org.uk](https://savethechildren.org.uk)

Registered charity England and Wales (213890) Scotland (SC039570)