

# Child Marriage and Environmental Crises: An Evidence Brief



**Climate change and related environmental crises are exacerbating the drivers of child marriage. Upholding sexual and reproductive health and rights during climate change and environmental instability means taking action on child marriage.**

## INTRODUCTION

Changes to the environment have profound implications for our health and well-being, including for our sexual and reproductive health and rights. Crises such as climate change pose a major threat to the human-centred vision of sustainable development, as outlined in the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD PoA). Within this context, the effects of environmental crises on harmful practices such as child marriage are under increased scrutiny.

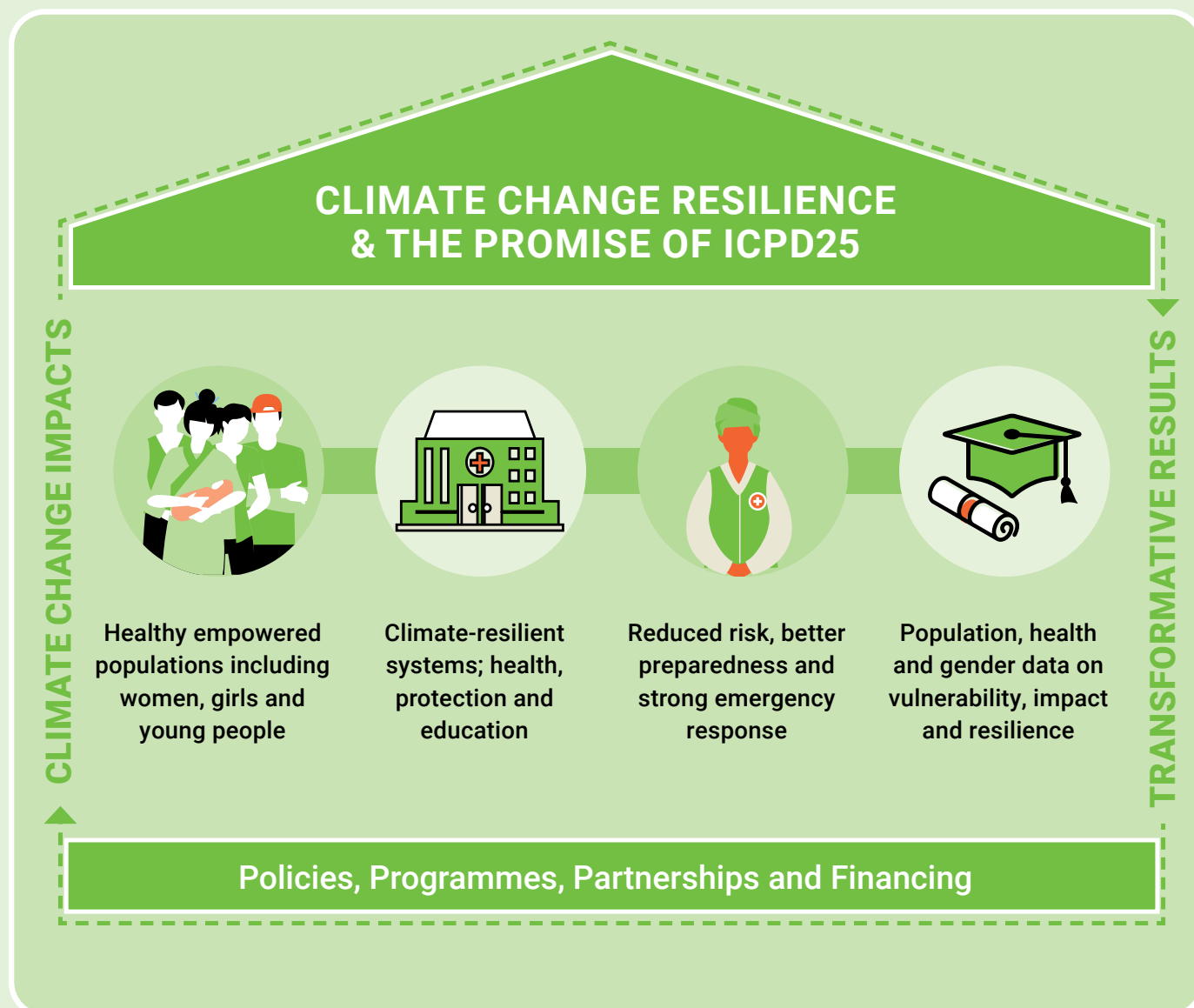
Defined as a formal marriage or informal union in which at least one of the parties is under 18, child marriage affects 21 per cent of girls globally, though rates are highest in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNFPA, 2020). Child marriage denies girls their human rights and is associated with higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and earlier first pregnancies (with a concomitantly higher risk of maternal and neonatal complications) (UNFPA, 2012; Ganchimeg et al., 2014; Olamijuwon, Chisumpa and Akinyemi, 2017; Irani and Roudsari, 2019; WHO, 2021). Child marriage can enable intimate partner violence and domestic abuse, and girls married as children face reduced access to education and employment (Lloyd and Mensch, 2008; UNFPA, 2020). In some areas, child marriage is associated with female genital mutilation (FGM), which is the partial or total removal of female external genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

### UNFPA and the Climate Crisis

Climate change is a significant threat to the vision of human-centred sustainable development, as outlined in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and reinforced by the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25. Climate change is a multiplier of existing health vulnerabilities, including insufficient access to safe water and improved sanitation, food insecurity, and impacts on access to health care and education. In addition, climate-related displacement and livelihood impacts are challenging both protection and the realization of human rights.

Recently, UNFPA launched a value proposition outlining its work on climate change and building staff capacity to integrate climate change components across all areas. It puts forward a programmatic framework with four pillars connecting the ICPD25 promise and the achievement of climate change adaptation and resilience.

Please refer to this link for further details:  
<https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/unfpa-and-climate-crisis>



The decision for a child to marry is shaped by a web of intersecting factors that may include social pressures, gender norms, household economics, dowry and bride-price practices, harassment and intimidation, sexual violence, and pregnancy or fear of pregnancy (Spencer, 2015; Avogo and Somefun, 2019; McLeod et al., 2019). In particular, lack of access to resources is a key driving factor for child marriage, with girls whose families' incomes fall in the lowest quintile more than twice as likely to marry before the age of 18 than those whose families' incomes are in the highest quintile (UNFPA, 2012). In contrast, education is protective; girls with a primary education are twice as likely to experience child marriage as those with a secondary or higher education (UNFPA, 2012).

Climate change and other environmental crises exacerbate existing inequalities in access to resources and education. Notably, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) notes that warming of 1.5°C could force millions of people into extreme poverty and most severely in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the two regions with the highest current rates of child marriage and FGM (IPCC, 2014; UNFPA, 2021). In an unstable and changing climate, the effects of environmental crises on child marriage are important to understand so as to safeguard human rights and take action to build resilience to the shocks and impacts of climate change.

## In this evidence brief, we summarize the findings of a scoping review of the academic and ‘grey’ literature on the link between environmental crises\* and child marriage.

\*We use the term environmental crises to describe all forms of environmental breakdown, including climate crises, biodiversity loss and other challenges to sustainable development that centre on environmental factors.

### Loss of Resources

Child marriage occurs worldwide but is more common among those with the least access to resources and opportunities for generating income, particularly those in rural areas who are most dependent on the local environment for their livelihoods.

In interviews with families and civil society organizations in Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, the economic effects of environmental crises were described as a driver of child marriage (Chamberlain, 2017; Chamberlain et al., 2017; Otzelberger, 2014; Mudavanhu, 2014). Marrying a child is perceived as a coping strategy in response to the loss of assets and income after crises such as droughts and floods.



**“The floods took all our harvest...I tried to negotiate to tell my parents that I wasn’t ready, that I didn’t want to get married, but they told me that I had to because that would mean one mouth less at the table. I had to get married because they didn’t have enough to feed the whole family. I was sent to be married because of shortage of food in the house.”**

(Chamberlain et al., 2017) **MALAWI**

In Bangladesh, studies have shown higher rates of child marriage after reductions in household resources caused by periods of drought or extreme heat (Tsaneva, 2020; Asadullah et al., 2020). Interviews with families support this finding, with families describing lack of resources as a key driving factor in how environmental crises shape decisions on when their children should marry (Ahmed et al., 2019; HRW, 2015). In Indonesia, natural disasters have been linked to increases in child marriage, with the greatest rises in areas with higher rates of poverty (Dewi & Dartanto, 2019). Extreme weather events exacerbate poverty, and child marriage is seen as a means to reduce household economic costs.

A loss of resources following environmental crises not only affects child marriage directly as outlined above, but also indirectly through effects on disrupting education and causing families to be displaced from their homes. Changes to a family’s access to resources can also lead to a loss of status in the community. Arranging marriage for a girl before the situation becomes worse can be understood as an important strategy for maintaining family status.

### Dowry and Bride Price

Dowry is paid by a bride’s family to the groom, while bride price is paid by the groom or his family to the bride’s family. Dowry practices are most common in South Asia, while bride price practices predominate in Western, Central and Eastern Africa (UNFPA, 2021). Younger girls often require smaller dowries or command higher bride prices (HRW, 2015; UNFPA, 2020).

Dowry and bride price may be a lens through which the economic effects of environmental crises shape child marriage decisions. Uganda's National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) notes that environmental crises leading to famine can increase child marriages as bride price incentivises families with few resources to encourage their daughters' marriage (GoU, 2007). Several further studies in sub-Saharan Africa have linked bride price practices with increases in child marriage after droughts or floods (Corno & Voena, 2016; MRGI, 2019; Corno et al., 2020; Camey, 2020), while in South Asia, dowry practices have been linked to reductions in child marriage after environmental crises (Corno et al., 2020; Trinh & Zhang, 2020). In one study comparing 31 countries from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (where bride price is predominant) with India (dowry predominant), drought is associated with a 3 per cent increase in the annual hazard of child marriage in SSA, but with a 4 per cent decrease in India (Corno et al., 2020). However, in Eritrea (where, unlike many other areas of SSA, dowry is predominant) the study finds drought is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of child marriage.



**"The impact of climate change is worsening the situation of child marriage among the Maasai. The prolonged droughts are causing many families into desperate situations of hunger and young girls (as young as 12) are being given away as brides in exchange for cattle." (MRGI, 2019) KENYA**

The prevalence of dowry or bride price practices appears to contribute to how economic shocks from environmental crises can affect decisions around child marriage. However, some Bangladeshi families note that dowry costs are actually lower in the immediate aftermath of environmental crises, which may alter how these practices influence child marriage rates (Ahmed et al., 2019).

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## Education

Education is widely understood to be protective against child marriage. Environmental crises disrupt education both directly (e.g. destruction of school infrastructure) and indirectly (e.g. worsening poverty, displacement of families and lack of educational provision in temporary shelters), with consequent effects on child marriage.



**"When my father told me I had to get married I didn't want to. But I understood his reasons...It's not that my father wanted me to marry, but he couldn't support me [financially] to go to secondary school." (Chamberlain et al., 2017) MOZAMBIQUE**



In a 2015 report, the Government of Malawi described how floods destabilized the education system, and linked this directly to increases in child marriage (GoM, 2015). In a study in Indonesia that showed increases in child marriage after natural disasters, secondary education was found to be protective against child marriage (Dewi & Dartanto, 2019). Similarly, work in India and Vietnam found that both parental education and child school enrolment were protective against child marriage after floods or droughts (Trinh & Zhang, 2020).

In Bangladesh, many families report taking their children out of school as a strategy for adapting to the effects of climate change (Alston et al., 2014). Others highlight close links between education and access to resources, with economic shocks from environmental crises causing families to struggle to meet costs associated with education (school fees, books and materials, transportation) (Ahmed et al., 2019). Some families report prioritizing male education when they have insufficient resources (HRW, 2015), highlighting how education, access to resources and gender inequality can all intersect to influence decisions around child marriage.

## Displacement

Child marriage has been seen to increase during humanitarian crises, with higher rates of child marriage among displaced populations (Lemmon, 2014; UNFPA, 2020; Islam, Khan and Rahman, 2021). Environmental crises often cause families to migrate either pre-emptively or in the aftermath of disasters and this can influence decisions around child marriage.

In Bangladesh, one study finds that girls in 'abasan' housing (low-cost housing provided by the government for rural populations that have been displaced, largely due to environmental changes) were twice as likely to undergo child marriage as those in non-abasan housing (Ainul & Amin, 2015).

Child marriages are often virilocal, meaning the girl moves to live with or near the groom's family. Some families describe child marriage as a way to move their daughters away from areas at high risk of environmental disasters (Ahmed et al., 2019). Similarly, families report arranging marriages proactively before a gradual or predictable catastrophe (e.g. river level rise) forces the family to move from their home (HRW, 2015)



**"During the floods, when we were in the primary school as a shelter house, my youngest girl was grabbed by a younger man who also regularly followed her when she went to take a bath or [go] to the toilet. And so the longer the flood periods last, the more my worries about the possible sexual violence on my girl increase. Last year after the flood I arranged the marriage of my 15-year-old girl as I had no way of protecting her reputation and that of the family."**

(Ahmed et al., 2019) **BANGLADESH**

## Sexual Violence

Sexual violence or the threat of sexual violence in the aftermath of environmental disasters is described by some families as a key driver of child marriage (Alston et al., 2014; Ahmed et al., 2019). Disaster shelters are often felt to be unsafe and lacking in privacy, while structured systems for reporting abuse may be lacking (Swarup et al., 2011). In this context, families fear not only for the effects of sexual violence on their children, but also for how sexual violence can jeopardise their 'family honour' (Spencer, 2015; Ahmed et al., 2019). In this context, child marriage is perceived as a means to protect children and the family's reputation from sexual violence.

## Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

In some regions, there are well-established links between child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), including that girls who have undergone FGM may be perceived by grooms' families as more desirable for marriage.

In a study in Kenya, droughts are linked to both FGM and child marriage, as families seek to respond to the economic shocks from droughts by arranging for their girls to undergo FGM and get married, with the families receiving a bride price in return (Esho et al., 2021). As with child marriage, educational disruption by environmental crises is also cited as a key driver of FGM (Esho et al., 2021).



## Summary

- Many of the areas with the highest current rates of child marriage are also those facing the greatest effects of climate change and other environmental crises.
- Environmental crises worsen known drivers of child marriage, including loss of resources, educational disruption and displacement of communities.
- Environmental crises cause economic shocks, particularly for rural populations that are most dependent on the environment for their livelihoods. Child marriage is perceived as a potential means to secure the family's economic future in the face of such crises.
- The local prevalence of dowry or bride price practices may shape the ways in which economic shocks from environmental crises influence the decision for a child to marry.
- Environmental crises disrupt education both directly, through effects on infrastructure, and indirectly, through effects on displacement and access to resources. In doing so, they remove a factor that is protective against child marriage.
- Natural disasters and other more gradual environmental crises, such as water level rise, can cause people to be displaced from their homes. Some studies find higher rates of child marriage among displaced groups.
- In the aftermath of environmental crises, increases in conflict and violence, including sexual violence, are common. This may result in increases in child marriage, as families seek to protect their daughters and their 'family honour'.
- Harmful practices such as FGM are sometimes linked to child marriage, and environmental crises may worsen shared drivers of both practices.
- In the context of an unstable and changing climate, action on child marriage requires action to mitigate and adapt to environmental crises. In one study, disaster early warning systems were seen to be protective against child marriage after natural disasters (Dewi & Dartanto, 2019), highlighting a potential area for greater research and action.



### CALL TO ACTION

#### **UPHOLDING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS DURING CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL INSTABILITY MEANS TAKING ACTION ON CHILD MARRIAGE.**

Child marriage is a violation of a girl's human rights and can present challenges for her health and well-being across the life course. Climate change increases vulnerability and, as a result, can erode the ability of families and communities to ensure and uphold sexual and reproductive health and rights. Building resilience to climate change means tackling the complex issues of rights, health and justice, including child marriage.



## Policy and programming:

Programmatic responses to climate change should consider the impact of crises on child marriage. The impacts of climate change on harmful practices related to sexual and reproductive health and rights should be considered as part of climate change adaptation and resilience strategies and should be reflected in related funding.

## Research

More research is required on the relationship between child marriage and other harmful practices and environmental crises, including across a wider range of geographical locations.

In particular, the majority of the current evidence is from South Asia, and Bangladesh specifically. This focus is understandable in that Bangladesh has high rates of child marriage and is one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of environmental crises. However, the degree to which this evidence can be generalized to other contexts is limited, given how dependent child marriage is on local norms and traditions. Further work in other locations and cultural settings would be beneficial in allowing a broader understanding of the relationship between environmental crises and child marriage.

Better understanding of how climate change and other crises shape lived realities for women and girls is important for determining responsive policy and practice and for safeguarding rights.

## Gender, climate and SRHR

Climate policy should work to increase and uphold gender equality and safeguard SRHR. As climate change challenges the ability to maintain bodily autonomy and enact rights, it is critical that SRHR and the impacts of climate shocks on women and girls continue to be engaged with at the policy and programmatic level, and that the voices of those most affected are amplified.

**BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW CLIMATE CHANGE AND OTHER CRISES SHAPE LIVED REALITIES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS** is important

for determining responsive policy and practice and for safeguarding rights.



## UNFPA Publications: SRHR and the Climate Crisis

**UNFPA Value Proposition: Strengthening Resilience and Protecting Progress during the Decade of Action** <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/unfpa-and-climate-crisis>

**Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in National Climate Policy: A Review of 50 Nationally Determined Contributions Documents** <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-national-climate-policy>

**Executive Summary** <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/how-are-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-represented-national-climate-policy>

### Please look out for our forthcoming academic paper:

#### What is the Current Evidence for the Relationship between the Climate and Environmental Crises and Child Marriage? A Scoping Review

Daniel Pope, Heather McMullen, Angela Baschieri, Anandita Philipose, Chiagozie Udeh, Julie Diallo, David McCoy. (Currently under review with the journal Global Public Health)

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