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The State of the World's Girls 2026

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Executive Summary

Change her Forecast

How the climate crisis fuels sexual violence, child marriage and unintended pregnancy, and limits girls' futures

Executive Summary

This year, Plan International's State of the World's Girls Report focuses on the impacts of climate change on girls' and young women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. The report, based on the experiences and ideas of adolescent girls and young women, explores how climate shocks affect access to contraception, gender-based violence, child marriage and unions,[1] and unintended pregnancy.

The report examines why and how, as health systems break down, household livelihoods are depleted, and protection safeguards are dismantled, climate events, such as floods, drought and heatwaves, restrict girls and young women's choices and have such profound implications throughout their lives. It also points clearly to where action would make the greatest difference to girls' lives.

The primary research, unique in its field, was conducted through a large-scale survey in five countries – Bangladesh, Kenya, Peru, Senegal and Zimbabwe – involving 5,000 girls and young women aged 15-24, and through face-to-face conversations with 139 girls and young women across the same five countries.

Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services helps girls and young women stay healthy, safe and empowered, enabling them to pursue education, employment, and exercise choice over who, if and when to marry, and, if and when to have a child. Currently, adolescent girls and young women are facing intensifying threats to these rights and services from multiple directions: a frightening and lethal conjunction of funding cuts, anti-rights policies and the growing impacts of the climate crisis.

> **"If we choose groups of youth leaders, they will be focused on a single goal... providing support and information to teenagers in the farthest settlements."**
>
> Anahi, 15-19 year focus group, Peru

Disclaimer: The names of the children and young people in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. Photos used in this report are not of research participants.

[1] For the purposes of this report child marriage and unions acts as an umbrella term to include informal unions and child, early and forced marriages.

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A family paddles through floodwaters in Bangladesh. After major rivers burst their banks, thousands of families were displaced. © Plan International

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Research Findings

Nine out of ten girls reported that climate events[2] are placing serious pressures on their household's survival, health and stability.

It is clear from the research that the fall-out from the climate crisis lands hard on girls' and young women's sexual and reproductive choices. Schools and clinics close, opportunities narrow, and the economic stress which families experience reinforce harmful gender norms, pushing girls and their families into damaging coping strategies: some out-of-school girls may start to see marriage or unions as the only way forward. The sexual and reproductive health information and services, which would help to lessen the potentially devastating impacts on girls' lives, struggle to function and provide care. Girls and young women, now increasingly vulnerable to child marriage and unions, sexual violence and unintended pregnancies, face a compounding crisis.

[2] Girls and young women taking part in the survey were asked about the most severe climate event they had experienced and subsequent questions around impacts were anchored against this climate event. Options were: extreme heat, flood, drought, extreme cold, severe storms, landslides/mudslides or wildfires.

Flooding, caused most damage to infrastructure and access, blocking roads, destroying schools and clinics and making homes uninhabitable.

Drought, which undermines family incomes, has the most detrimental impact on girls' lives and opportunities. Economic insecurity drives harmful coping strategies, such as child marriage and unions, and increases vulnerability to gender-based violence as family tensions escalate.

The burden does not fall equally: girls from minority backgrounds are twice as likely to struggle with access to services, nearly three times as likely to report unintended pregnancy and more than twice as likely to report pressure to marry or get pregnant.

Girls whose schooling is disrupted are twice as likely to marry before 18 or face unintended pregnancy. Findings from our secondary analysis confirm the protective effect of education: child marriage rates and rates of gender-based violence were lower among girls and young women with higher levels of schooling.

> **"Girls in schools are taught on their rights, against early marriage, taught how to protect themselves... Unfortunately, girls who are not in school miss out such important information on protection."**
> Faith, 17, Kenya

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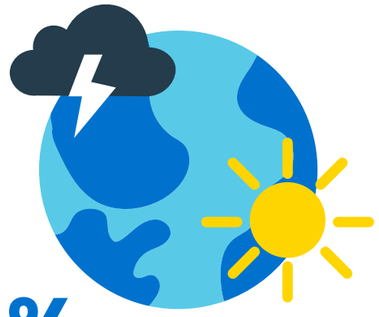
Extreme heat, floods and drought emerged as the most damaging climate events girls experienced. As services, infrastructure and communities break down, climate events impact girls' and young women's lives, and their sexual and reproductive health and rights, in a variety of damaging ways:



76%
of girls and young women said more girls and young women in their community were struggling to access at least one sexual or reproductive health service, rising to 84% for those contending with drought. 68% had struggled personally.

24%
reported girls and young women struggling to access contraception services and 17% had struggled themselves.

49%
rising to 62% of those living in drought-affected areas, noticed more girls and young women with health problems during pregnancy or childbirth-related complications. Over 20% spoke from personal experience.

28%
of girls and young women noted an increase in gender-based violence: 66%, said that an increase in sexual exploitation[4] had led to an increase in gender-based violence.

24%
of girls and young women said more girls and young women in their community were struggling to access gender-based violence prevention and response services.18.5%[3] said they had experienced this personally.

36%
of adolescent girls and young women noticed more girls getting married before 18, and 11% said they personally had got married.

33%
noticed more unintended pregnancy in the community. 11% of girls and young women said they had personally experienced an unintended pregnancy.

> **"There is clear connection [between drought and unintended pregnancies]. During drought, families lose money. Girls enter into relationships to get extra money."**
> Chenai, 21, Zimbabwe

[3] All percentages have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, apart from .5 per cent which remains as reported.
[4] Given the sample spans ages 15–24, this report uses "sexual exploitation" rather than "transactional sex": a child cannot meaningfully consent to exchanging sex for money, goods or benefits, so any involvement of a minor is exploitation and abuse, in line with international child-protection standards. However, questions in the survey employed the term transactional sex.

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Conclusion

These impacts on girls' lives are not inevitable. The **evidence points to three stand-out areas** where sustained, targeted investment would do most to protect their rights and futures:

- **Keeping girls' education uninterrupted** through climate shocks, so they stay connected to the comprehensive sexuality education, rights knowledge, and service information that school provides;
- Intensifying efforts to **end child marriage and unions** as economic and climate pressures drive it upward;
- Treating girls living in high-risk climate settings as a distinct population who need **high-quality, holistic programming,** paying attention to their sexual and reproductive health needs, and designed for sustainable outcomes.

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The research shows clearly that protecting girls' sexual and reproductive health needs, and safeguarding their education during climate events will also safeguard them from the further harms of child marriage and unions, unintended pregnancy and gender-based violence. All of which, they tell us, are increasing as the climate crisis advances.

> **"During the floods in 2022… at the shelter, the men stayed awake all night to watch over the girls because it was not safe. There were too many people, no lights, and we were afraid something would happen while everyone slept."**
> Tahira, 23, Bangladesh

A young girl salvages what is left of her belongings after her home was destroyed by floods in Kenya. © Plan International

Calls to Action

Emerging from the research are practical suggestions, from girls and young women themselves, that would protect their sexual and reproductive health and rights and help keep them safe from some of the harmful effects of climate hazards. Girls and young women require their health needs planned for and funded, the services running, access to uninterrupted education and their families' economic survival shored up.

> **"When it's difficult, we do solidarity between girls, cover up, do laundry for the neighbours, we protect ourselves, make talks on how to overcome our hardships."**
> Huguette, 23, Senegal

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- **Ensure that there is money set aside for sexual reproductive health and rights** as part of any emergency response to climate crises: channel a share of the available finance to local and girl-led organisations, especially targeting those in high-risk climate settings.
- **Keep sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services available as part of emergency response:** make contraceptive and menstrual products part of disaster provision and provide targeted and integrated support when girls and young women face violence or pressures to marry.
- **Keep girls in school, with access to uninterrupted learning:** girls recognise that continuous access to safe, quality education, including comprehensive sexuality education, before, during and after climate shocks, is critical to protecting their rights and futures. Girls most at risk of dropping out need to be identified and supported.
- **Break the economic drivers of child marriage, unintended pregnancy and exploitation:** as climate and economic shocks intensify family poverty, they push the rate of child marriage and unions, sexual exploitation, unintended pregnancy and dropping out of school, upward. In the hardest hit areas governments must plan to support food provision, livelihoods and infrastructure for families under economic pressure.
- **Involve adolescent girls and young women in the decisions that affect their lives:** girls call for financial and practical support for youth-led approaches to crisis planning. Leave nobody out; those in the highest-risk climate settings, adolescent girls from minority and indigenous groups, girls with disabilities, displaced and migrating girls, those in remote areas, and married, in-union or pregnant girls, all need to be consulted and included.

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About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

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We won't stop until we are all equal

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Front cover image: During Peru's rainy season, flooding regularly disrupts 11-year-old Ciana's education.
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