



## CARE AND CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED CHILD MARRIAGE AND UNIONS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), 21% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were first married or in a union before the age of 18, and 4% before the age of 15.<sup>1</sup> By entering a union, adolescents often take on responsibilities such as household chores and caregiving, which limits their freedom, access to education and opportunities for comprehensive development opportunities. This report analyses the causes, impacts and possible solutions around care and child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU).



PICTURED: Maria Lucia, Community Advisor for the Women's Rights Initiative, collects beans with her daughter Sandy at her home in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. Credit: *Girls Not Brides*/Arete/James Rodriguez

### Key messages:

- **Girls and adolescents who are married or in a union spend more time on domestic and care work** compared to those who are not in unions, and to their male peers.
- **Care work performed by girls and adolescents who are married or in a union limits their access to education**, which has a lifelong impact.
- **States need to recognise the role of girls and adolescents as caregivers**, and adopt public policies that respond to their reality and needs.
- **States should ensure a wide range of programmes** that facilitate access to health services, education – including comprehensive sexuality – and recreational opportunities for girls and adolescents who are in a union.
- **States should implement targeted support programmes for adolescent mothers**, ensuring they can continue their studies.

# 1. Care and its relation to gender inequality and CEFMU

According to UN Women and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), caregiving is "**activities that regenerate people's physical and emotional well-being on a daily and generational basis**". It is essential to sustaining life, the reproduction of the labour force and societies, generating a fundamental contribution to economic production, development and welfare. It includes everyday tasks like the maintenance of domestic spaces and properties, care for individuals' wellbeing, education and training, and the maintenance of social relations or the psychological support of family members.<sup>2</sup>

Care work – and the way it is undervalued and disproportionately assigned to women – is directly related to the patriarchal system. It perpetuates gender stereotypes that maintain the ingrained idea that women must assume the role of caregivers in the domestic and reproductive space as a lifestyle necessity, while at the same time hindering men's involvement in these tasks.

**The overload of unpaid care work carried out by women is an obstacle for their access to rights and opportunities compared to men.** Its impact is not limited to the labour market but extends to social and political participation and even includes the enjoyment of leisure time.<sup>2</sup>

**Today, in LAC and globally, the majority of care work is done by women on an unpaid basis.** Even before COVID-19, women spent on average three times as much time as men on care work. In Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, this figure increased to four and five times respectively.<sup>4</sup>

This situation was exacerbated by the increased demand for care and the reduced supply of services caused by the confinement and social distancing measures adopted during the pandemic. For example, **in Peru, women reported that during the pandemic they spent on average 4.1 hours more per day on household chores.** In Chile, women reported spending 17.8 hours per week on domestic work compared to 16.4 hours per week before the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

## Care and its intersection with CEFMU

**The disparities caused by the current distribution of domestic and care work are accentuated and affect girls and adolescents who are married or in a union the most.** According to an analysis conducted in 2021, girls and adolescents who are married or in a union spend more than twice as much time on unpaid work – including domestic and care work – than their unmarried peers.

**The time spent by girls and adolescents who are married or in a union in unpaid domestic and care work can be the equivalent of a full working day per week.** This heavy workload in the home affects the time they have left for studies, socialising and leisure, paid work, self-care, and social and political participation, among others. It can also contribute to the increased economic dependency, social isolation and a partner's control over their decisions and activities.<sup>6</sup>

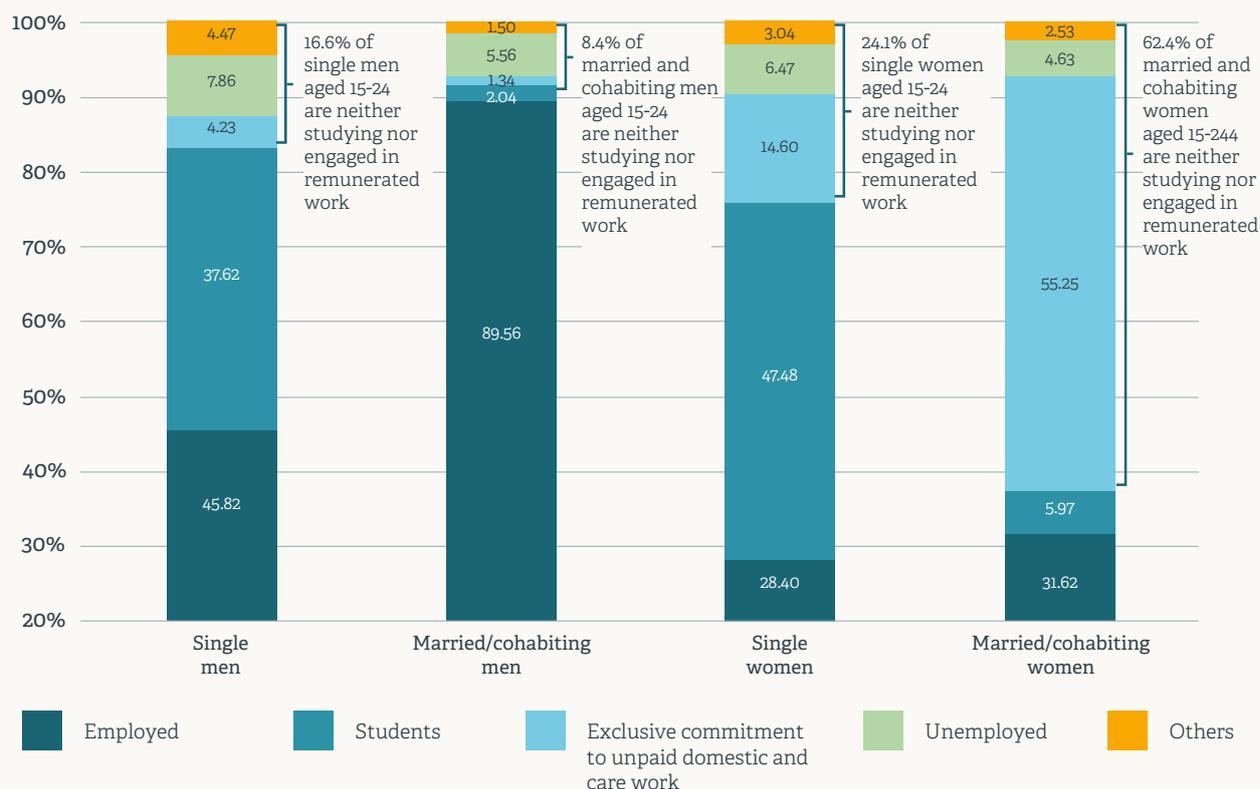
Trends in the region suggest that CEFMU has consequences for the educational trajectory and labour market integration of adolescent girls and young women during a key transitional phase into adulthood. While 47.4% of single women between 15 and 24 years of age are in school, **only 5.9% of married and/or cohabiting girls and women of the same age continue their education.** If figures related to paid work are added up, **62.4% of married and/or cohabiting women aged 15-24 do not study or work for pay,** compared to 24.1% of single women in the same age range (see graph 1, p. 3).<sup>6</sup>

### Key data from ECLAC:

- **60%** of women in households with children under 15 report not participating in the labour market because of family responsibilities.
- **18%** of women in households with no children under 15 report not participating in the labour market due to family responsibilities<sup>3</sup>

<sup>a</sup> In line with other partner organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean, *Girls Not Brides* uses the broad term child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) to refer to all forms of union where at least one party is under the age of 18. In this, we include all girls and adolescents affected by the practice – whether in formal or informal unions – and acknowledge the culturally-specific understandings of childhood and development, and the complex relationship between age, consent and force.

**Figure 1: Educational and labour force participation by 15 to –24-year-olds, by sex and by marital status**



Source: Adapted from ECLAC, based on Household Survey Databank

At the institutional level, care has been recognised as a right by the governments of the region within the framework of different regional conferences on women in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is the result of the work of feminist movements to highlight the social reorganisation of care work as fundamental to achieve more egalitarian and inclusive societies. This has been established in the Regional Gender Agenda, in the Montevideo strategy and in the Santiago Commitment of the XIV Regional Conference on Women in 2020.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, the discussion focuses on what is needed to build integrated and equitable care systems, and to redistribute and reduce unpaid care work undertaken by women. However, girls and adolescents – particularly married or cohabiting girls – remain invisible in the region's care agenda as they are seen only as recipients of care, and their role as caregivers is not recognised.

### What the work of *Girls Not Brides'* member organisations shows

Research conducted in Argentina by the Fundación para Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer (FEIM) identified a correlation between dropping out of school and caregiving among married and cohabiting adolescent girls. Out of 290 married or cohabiting adolescent girls surveyed, 40% were not attending school. **Care work and restrictions from partners were two of the main reasons for leaving school**, along with economic reasons, distance and accessibility, discrimination or cultural barriers and violence.<sup>7</sup>



PICTURED: Laura Marina, Community Advisor for the Women's Rights Initiative, hangs clothes in her home in Patzun, Chimaltenango, Guatemala. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Arete/James Rodriguez

<sup>6</sup>The weighted average for Latin America is made considering the last year with availability of variables used in the household surveys for each country: Argentina, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru correspond to 2020; Honduras, Panama and Uruguay correspond to 2019; and Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela correspond to 2014.

## 2. Perspectives from *Girls Not Brides* member organisations and adolescent girls and young women in LAC

This section summarises the perspectives and experiences generously shared by 20 *Girls Not Brides* member organisations and 24 adolescent girls and young women in LAC. Their insights were gathered through a membership survey and a survey of adolescent girls and young women participating in programmes implemented by some of these organisations. The surveys collected information on the participants' perceptions of the links between care work and CEFMU. Information was also collected for the construction of recommendations addressed to various actors.

### Perceptions of the change in a girl's or adolescent girl's life upon marriage or union and how this relates to care work

- **By cohabiting or marrying, adolescent girls often take on more responsibilities and have less time for age-appropriate experiences.** The new responsibilities mentioned include care work for the elderly, children and the sick, domestic work and paid work outside the home.
- **There is a close relationship between CEFMU and adolescent pregnancy. Once married or in a union, adolescents and young women become primarily responsible for the care of their children without being prepared for it.** Of all adolescent girls and young women surveyed, 88% reported knowing married or cohabiting adolescent girls who have children.
- **Motherhood, and the care work associated with it, constrains adolescent mothers' life plans from an early age.** The adolescents and young women surveyed do not consider that they should be forced to be wives or to raise an infant for which they do not feel they are prepared.
- **Girls and adolescents forced into marriage or unions are more likely to face unwanted pregnancy,** and be exposed to emotional, physical, economic, property and sexual violence.

*"Due to the harmful gender norms that are often reproduced within CEFMU, women carry the heaviest workload for the care of infants, the home and the ill within this environment".*

Gabriela Muñoz, IPPF Guatemala-Colombia

*"[She] changes drastically, she goes from being considered a child to being seen and treated as an adult with obligations and responsibilities that are beyond her emotional, psychological and economic maturity, she completely abandons her education, and [is more] exposed to violence".*

Verónica Buch, Levantemos, Guatemala

- **Increased care work restricts the possibilities of married or cohabiting girls and adolescents to leave the domestic space.** This limits their opportunities for leisure and involvement in social, religious and community activities, and for continuing their education. In addition, two of the young people surveyed stated that married adolescent partners control their activities and abuse them.

*"They lock themselves up at home and don't go out, the adolescents who are in unions already have a lot of children and have problems with their partners, while those who are not in unions can go out and enjoy themselves".*

17-year-old adolescent girl, Guatemala

- **Care work limits the autonomy of married and/or cohabiting girls and adolescents, directly impacting their access to rights, resources and information.** This is reinforced with every child. Those surveyed said they should not be forced to be wives or to raise an infant for which they did not feel they were prepared.  
*"Due to caring responsibilities and social constraints, when they get into a union or get married, they abandon their studies, they can no longer express themselves freely because they feel controlled, most of them cannot make decisions on their own (they depend on what their partner or their in-laws say)".*
- **Girls and adolescents who are married or in a union – or who are already mothers – miss out on the opportunity to study and achieve their dreams,** due to the time they spend on domestic and care work for their children and partners. This is related to the impossibility of attending school due to the discrimination they face, as well as the lack of time, financial resources, support networks and flexible schemes that respond to their circumstances.

Lorenza Díaz, Population Council Guatemala

Information was collected through two surveys of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations and with adolescent girls and young women participating in programmes implemented by those organisations. A total of 20 organisations from Argentina, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and two organisations with regional outreach completed the first survey. A total of 42 adolescent girls and young women completed the second survey. All respondents were between 11 and 26 years of age. The majority (37) were from Guatemala, with the remainder from Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago.

### 3. Priorities and recommendations

This last section includes priorities and recommendations from *Girls Not Brides* members organisations, and from the adolescent girls and young women surveyed .

#### Priorities

1. **States must recognise the role of girls and adolescents as caregivers and adopt public policies aimed at the redistribution, recognition and reduction of care work** not only for adults but also for girls and adolescents in unions and marriages.
2. **The crossover between care work and CEFMU particularly affects girls and adolescents from rural and/or Indigenous communities.** So participatory mechanisms must be implemented for the joint construction of care systems, that include the perspectives of adolescent girls and young women, especially those in the most marginalised situations, such as girls and adolescents from Indigenous communities.  
*“Decentralisation of health, education and recreational services to rural and Indigenous communities is needed”*

Karla Rax, Na'leb'ak, Guatemala

- **Often, girls and adolescents who are married or in a union face other issues** such as poverty and physical and mental health issues, specifically in terms of maternal health and anxiety.

*“Adolescent girls who are already married often stay at home to do domestic chores. Some I know regret getting married”.*

13-year-old adolescent girl, Guatemala

- Regarding the role of the state, **the surveys identified that girls and adolescents marry or enter into unions due to a lack of opportunities. Respondents also agreed that this type of situation is a reflection of a social justice problem** that has been neglected by both states and regional mechanisms..

*“It is a failure of the state and society in general towards girls, adolescents and women not to give them opportunities other than marriage.”*

Young woman, 24, Colombia

*“Girls and adolescents are sustaining caregiving services at an alarming rate despite their age. In the framework of regional discussions on the care agenda, the reality of thousands of girls in the region, who have to take on caregiving roles in private and public spaces, is not being taken into account.”*

Emma Puig de la Bellacasa, HIAS, Panama



PICTURED: Girls participating in the Abriendo Oportunidades® programme make handicrafts as part of their skills. In this photo, one girl teaches another to make a güipil, Guatemala. Photo: Rozana Mucú

3. **Education is a key protective factor.** This means supporting adolescent girls who are married, cohabiting or mothers to continue their education, and ensuring that girls, especially adolescent girls and young women, can continue their education.

4. In terms of cultural change, surveyed young people stated that **it is important to generate support for adolescent mothers in the community and in their families through public campaigns** to eliminate discrimination against adolescent mothers, the dissemination of information on sexual and reproductive rights, and programmes aimed specifically at adolescents who are in a union and/or who are mothers. Others highlighted the importance of dialogue with parents of adolescent girls, their husbands or partners and their families to change attitudes towards adolescent girls.

## Recommendations addressed to states

### • Related to national care systems

- Recognise care as a right and as a basis for the adoption of a national care system and allocate budgets for the implementation of a comprehensive care policy.
- Include girls and adolescents as caregivers in national care strategies, ensuring coverage of social protection services for both sides of the care relationship.
- Incorporate mechanisms for the participation of civil society organisations, academia, and girls and adolescents for the joint construction of policies.

- Facilitate and guarantee the participation of adolescent girls and young women from rural and Indigenous communities.
- Generate statistical data disaggregated by age and marital status to provide more information on the situation of girls and adolescents in unions and/or who are mothers.

### • Related to education

- Promote measures to ensure access to education – including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) – for girls and adolescents who are in a union and/or who are mothers, such as providing scholarships to support them.
- Establish full-time day-care centres.
- Implement actions to prevent discrimination in school settings against girls and adolescents who are in a union or mothers.

### • Related to health

- Ensure the provision of adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health care and child health care services.
- Generate mental health care programmes for adolescents that support the construction of their autonomy and self-care.

### • Related to employment

- Promote sources of employment and implement programmes for access to formal employment for adolescents in union and/or who are mothers.
- Seek agreements with the private sector for the generation of flexible and formal jobs that are adapted to the needs of adolescent girls.
- Develop maternity and paternity leave and other family benefits that allow for co-responsibility in caregiving.

PICTURED: Kakchiquel, a Mayan woman, washes clothes in the public washing area in a community in a community near Patzun, Chimaltenango, Guatemala. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Arete/James Rodriguez



## • Related to social norms

- Generate social programmes and communication campaigns that break down gender stereotypes and stigma about adolescent girls who are in a union and/or who are mothers, and promote the co-responsibility of men in caregiving tasks.
- Invest in and support community efforts to transform gender norms and address the needs of girls and adolescents who are in a union and/or are mothers.
- Generate spaces for community participation, recreation and the construction of support networks for adolescents in union and/or who are mothers.

## Recommendations addressed to United Nations bodies:

- Include the issue of care work in the efforts of the regional inter-agency programme for the elimination of child, early and forced marriages and unions
- Form a working group for the creation and implementation of solutions to address the needs of girls and adolescents in union and/or who are mothers.
- Conduct a regional study focused on the impact of care work for girls and adolescents from an intersectional approach.
- Collect and disseminate good practices in public policies at the regional level on comprehensive care systems for girls and adolescents.
- Recognise girls and adolescents in union and/or who are mothers as caregivers within the Inter-American Model Law on Caregiving, contemplating affirmative compensation actions through public policies and social security programmes aimed specifically at this sector.

## Recommendations addressed to civil societies

- Include girls and adolescents who are in a union and/or parenting at the top of the care agenda and demand that States develop comprehensive care policies that respond to their needs.
- Promote and facilitate the participation of adolescent girls who are in a union or mothers in advocacy and decision-making spaces.
- Create alliances between organisations working on care issues and those working directly with children and adolescents in order to exchange experiences, generate consensus and identify good practices to be replicated.
- Strengthen the documentation of in-community experiences that contribute to greater understanding of the current situation, identify successful practices, and the actions carried out by this sector to respond to this issue.

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<sup>1</sup>UNICEF, 2022, [Child marriage global database](#)

<sup>2</sup>ONU Mujeres y CEPAL, 2020, [Cuidados En América Latina y El Caribe en Tiempos De Covid-19. Hacia Sistemas Integrales Para Fortalecer La Respuesta Y La Recuperación](#)

<sup>3</sup>Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe CEPAL, 2021, [Panorama Social de América Latina, 2020](#)

<sup>4</sup>CEPAL, 2019, La autonomía de las mujeres en escenarios económicos cambiantes, sobre la base del Observatorio de Igualdad de Género de América Latina y el Caribe (OIG), Repositorio de información sobre el uso del tiempo de América Latina y el Caribe

<sup>5</sup>CEPAL, 2022, [Una década de acción para un cambio de época](#)

<sup>6</sup>CEPAL y Grupo de trabajo del Programa Conjunto Interinstitucional para Poner Fin al Matrimonio Infantil y las Uniones Tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe, 2021, [Los matrimonios y uniones infantiles, tempranas y forzados: prácticas nocivas profundizadoras de la desigualdad de género en América Latina y el Caribe. Documento de Proyectos](#)

<sup>7</sup>Fundación para Estudio e investigación de la Mujer (FEIM), *Matrimonio y Uniones Infantiles y Cuidado*

# BY ENTERING A UNION, ADOLESCENTS GIRLS OFTEN TAKE ON DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES THAT LIMITS THEIR FREEDOM, ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITIES

## CARE AND CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED CHILD MARRIAGE AND UNIONS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

*Girls Not Brides* is a global alliance of more than 1,600 civil society organisations in over 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and ensure girls can reach their full potential.

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