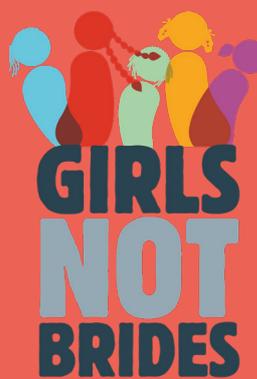


OPTIONS, NOT SANCTIONS:

**Non-Punitive Strategies to Address Child,
Early and Forced Marriages and Unions
(CEFMU)**



La Alianza Global para Terminar
con el Matrimonio Infantil

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La Alianza Global para Terminar
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INDEX

1. Introduction 5

2. Context and basis for action 8

2.1. Manifestations of CEFMU in Mexico

2.2. Social factors

2.3. Cultural factors

2.4. Economic factors

2.5 Consequences of CEFMU

Non-punitive approach: What does a non-punitive approach mean?

3. Current strategies for addressing CEFMU 29

3.1. Government actions

3.1.1. Legislative strategies

3.1.2. Public policy strategies

3.2. Actions by civil society organisations

3.3. Lessons learned

3.3.1. In terms of legislation:

3.3.2. In the strategies implemented:

3.4 Elements that promote the effectiveness of strategies

4. Tool for addressing CEFMU 50

4.1. Guiding principles

4.2. Guidelines for public policy design

4.3. Strategies:

4.3.1. Prevention

4.3.2. Support and response

4.3.3. Reparation, Recovery and Social Reintegration

4.3.4. Transformation

5. References 74

1. INTRODUCTION



Child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) represent a critical issue that violates the fundamental human rights of children and adolescents, perpetuating gender inequalities and reproducing cycles of impoverishment and structural exclusion. These practices are deeply rooted in social norms, gender stereotypes, cultural expectations, and systematic inequalities that differentially affect adolescents in diverse ways—particularly adolescent girls, but also LGBTQ+ adolescents, as well as those who are Indigenous, Afro-Mexican, migrant, disabled, or living in urban contexts—each of whom faces specific vulnerabilities in relation to CEFMU.

The purpose of this document is to support the development of criteria for addressing CEFMU from a non-punitive perspective that prioritises human rights, progressive autonomy and the evolving capacities of children and adolescents.

It seeks to outline an approach that does not reduce the issue to criminal sanctions but instead addresses its structural and cultural causes. This includes an analysis of regulatory frameworks, public policies, and the experiences and knowledge shared by civil society organisations, as well as by children and adolescents themselves in Mexico.

This document serves as a tool for a range of key actors who play an essential role in efforts to end child marriage and forced early unions in Mexico. It is primarily designed to support civil society organisations that are part of the Girls Not Brides membership, and secondly to guide other decision-makers responsible for the design and implementation of public programmes and policies.

To this end, the document draws on a theoretical framework that defines CEFMU as practices¹ that affect both the holistic development and the exercise of fundamental rights of children and adolescents. It highlights the need to transform social norms, address structural inequalities, and ensure enabling environments that promote individual well-being and autonomy.

The tool has been developed using a participatory, intersectional and rights-based methodology, framed within a non-punitive approach. This process incorporates the experiences and knowledge of the organisations that are part of Girls Not Brides membership in Mexico, as well as the perspectives of children and adolescents, recognising their right to express their views, their evolving capacities and their progressive autonomy.

The methodology combined:

- ✦ Documentary analysis of reports, assessments, academic studies and existing laws to understand the regulatory frameworks and public policies related to CEFMU.
- ✦ Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, designed to capture the experiences and perceptions of both civil society organisations and adolescents. These tools were applied across a range of contexts— rural, indigenous, and urban – to reflect the diversity of realities and the different ways in which CEFMU manifests. Interview participants included adolescents aged between 13 and 20.
- ✦ Focus groups with Girls Not Brides members, aimed at identifying shared findings, challenges in the non-punitive approaches and innovative strategies developed by the organisations themselves.

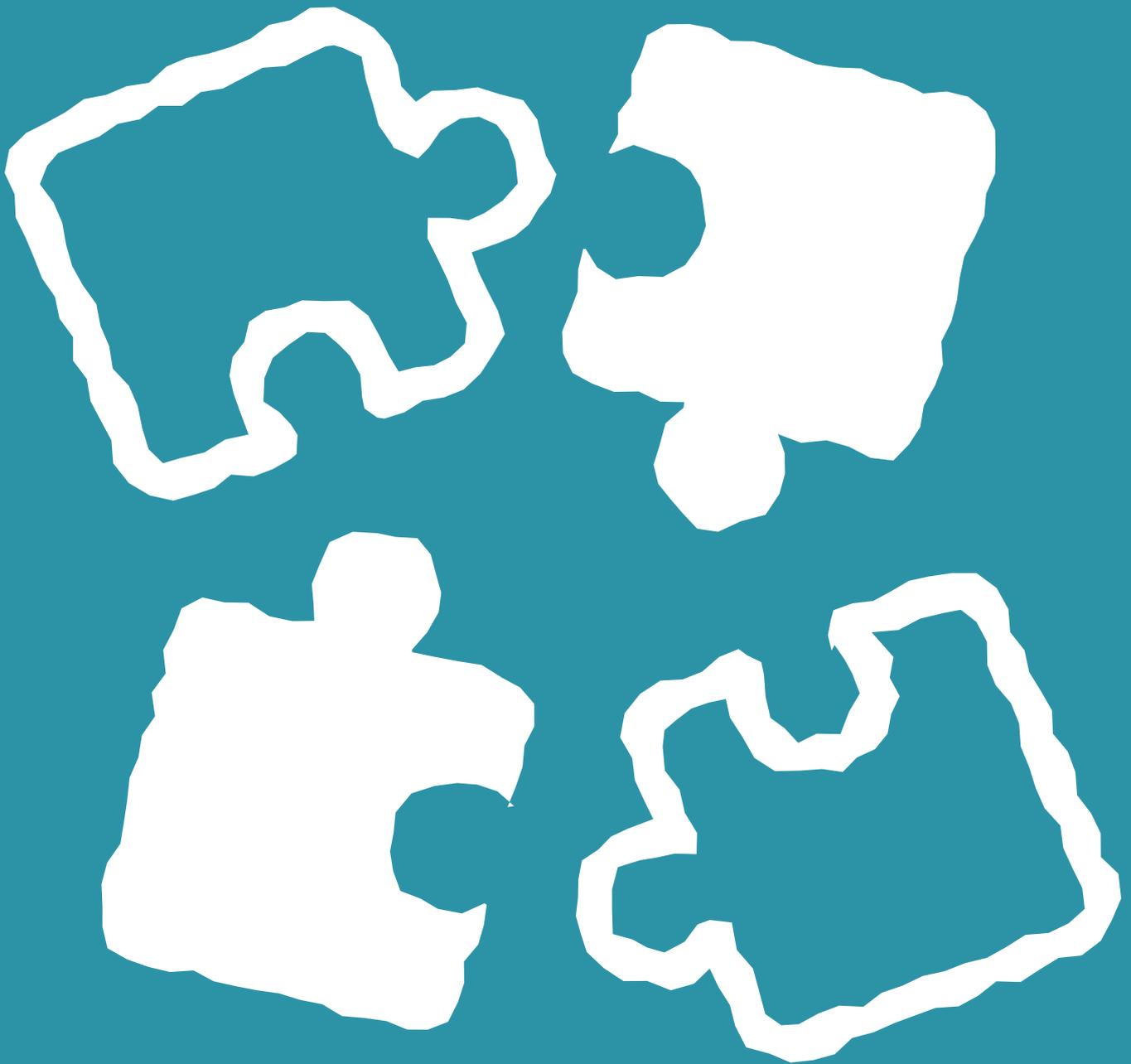
The first part of this document develops the conceptual and analytical foundations, integrating both the regulatory and institutional framework and the findings derived from interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and feedback from member organisations. This section defines the characteristics of the CEFMU in the study areas, identifies the structural and symbolic factors that sustain them, and analyses their impacts across different dimensions of development.

The second part examines the strategies currently implemented by government institutions and civil society organisations, identifying relevant actions, common limitations, and lessons learned. This analysis highlights the need to move towards more coordinated, sustained, and culturally relevant responses that recognise the agency of adolescents' agency and work with communities through respect and social transformation.

Finally, the document provides guidance for the design of public policies, along with a practical tool to support territorial interventions with a non-punitive perspective. **These guidelines propose differentiated courses of action according on the type of union, and across the areas of prevention, support/responses and reintegration.** The tool aims to serve as a practical resource for civil servants, organisational staff and communities seeking to accompany these situations in a respectful, effective and transformative manner.

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 18 (2014): Harmful Practices, adopted jointly with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. United Nations, CRC/C/GC/18, 2014.

2. CONTEXT AND BASIS FOR ACTION



2.1 Manifestations of CEFMU in Mexico

Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions (CEFMU) refer to unions between —whether formal (legal marriages) or informal (de facto or common-law unions)—in which one or both persons are under 18 years of age.

These practices constitute a violation of human rights, as they restrict the holistic development and full exercise of fundamental rights of children and adolescents.² Although the impact is greater on adolescent girls due to gender inequalities, these practices also affect adolescent boys. Likewise, distinct vulnerabilities are experienced by LGBTQ+ adolescents, as well as those who are Indigenous, Afro-Mexican, forcibly displaced, migrant, disabled or living in marginalised urban contexts.



² UNICEF (2021). Child Marriage. Disponible en: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

There are different forms of CEFMU depending on the circumstances and context:³



Marriages or **formal unions recognised by the State (civil)**: Legally established and officially registered unions.



Formal Marriages or unions **NOT recognised by the State (religious or customary)**: Unions validated through religious ceremonies or community traditions, but without official legal recognition.



Informal unions or partnerships: Couples who live together without any formalisation, but who experience the same dynamics as a marriage..

The term “early” is used to highlight the negative impacts these unions have on the physical, psychological, emotional, and social development of children and adolescents, as well as on the exercise of key rights during these stages of life, such as the right to education or to a life free from violence.⁴

3 In the Mexican context, it is important to distinguish between formal marriages or unions recognised by the State and those that are not. Unlike in some other countries, Mexico does not automatically recognise unions carried out through religious or community rituals; only those formalised before State institutions receive official recognition.

4 Inter-Agency Joint Programme Working Group to End Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, *Los matrimonios y uniones infantiles, tempranos y forzados*, Santiago, 2021, p. 9; Greene, Margaret E., *Una Realidad Oculta para Niñas y Adolescentes: Matrimonios y uniones infantiles, tempranas y forzadas en América Latina y el Caribe*, Regional Report, Plan International Americas and UNFPA, p. 16.

Several adolescents mentioned in the interviews that marrying or entering into a union meant leaving school, taking on domestic responsibilities, or being subjected to family and community control. One of them shared:

“SHE USED TO BE VERY OUTGOING; SHE WENT OUT A LOT... AND NOW SHE DOESN'T, WE NEVER SEE HER ANYMORE; SHE'S ALWAYS AT HOME.”

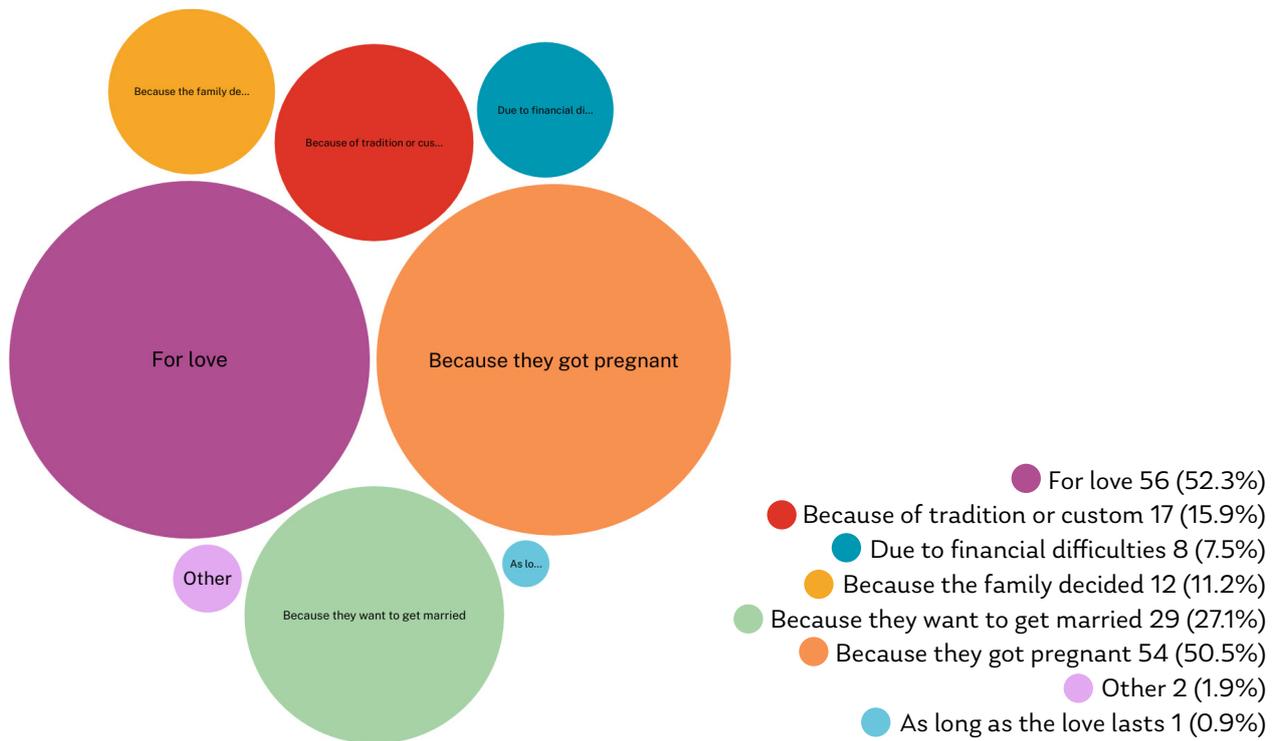
The term “forced” is a key element of CEFMU, referring to the denial of children and adolescents’ ability to make free decisions about their lives in the context of these practices. Many of these unions occur because they face conditions of inequality, prejudice or cultural norms that push them to accept marriage or a union as a “solution”.⁵

The instruments used in this research—interviews, focus groups and questionnaires—**show that the ways in which these unions occur are highly diverse, and that they are not always perceived by adolescents themselves as strictly “forced”, even though they are often shaped by factors such as impoverishment, violence, prejudice, pregnancy or family expectations.**

For example, interviews revealed that in several cases it was adults—family members, school staff or community authorities—who decided that adolescents should enter a union. In the questionnaires, adolescents reported knowing of peer unions, and most indicated that these were not always free decisions.

5 Idem, p. 10.

CHART 1: IF GIRLS AND ADOLESCENTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY MARRY OR ENTER A UNION, WHY DO YOU THINK THIS HAPPEN? (107 RESPONSES)



“Voluntary” unions were also identified which, nevertheless, occur in contexts where there are few viable alternatives for developing a different life trajectory. This raises questions about how free these decisions truly are. From a rights-based perspective, this means recognising that consent and choice cannot be understood in isolation from context, and that a non-punitive approach must address both the structural causes and the emotional and social motivations that shape these unions.

Accordingly, marriages and unions can be classified by how they occur:



Forced: When one or both persons are compelled to enter a union through threats, coercion, or even violence.⁶



Conditional: When circumstances (such as impoverishment, stigma or the lack of alternatives) push individuals to accept these unions without a direct threat (e.g. due to migration status, the stigma associated with adolescent pregnancy, or other social pressures).



Voluntary: Cases in which individuals decide to enter into a union without external pressure, exercising their autonomy.

6 Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 18 (2014): Harmful Practices, adopted jointly with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. United Nations, CRC/C/GC/18, 2014, para. 20

It is important to note that these categories do not occur in “pure” or rigid forms in reality. A single union may be shaped simultaneously by elements of coercion, social pressure, genuine affection or a lack of alternatives. This classification should therefore be understood as an analytical tool rather than a strict definition of each situation.

Child, early and forced marriages and unions do not occur in isolation; they are connected to a range of social, cultural and economic factors that sustain these practices and make them an accepted—or even expected—option in certain communities.

According to the documentation available, in Mexico these unions are more frequent in rural and Indigenous communities, and in areas with high levels of poverty⁷, highlighting the need for a contextualised approach to address CEFMU comprehensively. The following section outlines each of these factors and their relationship to this issue:

2.2 Social factors

IMPOVERISHMENT AND INEQUALITY

Recent studies indicate that, in Mexico, CEFMU is more common in states with high levels of impoverishment, such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Tabasco.⁸ In some contexts, families view marriage or the union as a strategy to reduce economic pressure, transferring responsibility for children or adolescents to their partners. In addition, in some communities, economic exchanges such as dowries or forms of “compensation” may be associated with the marriage of a person under 18.⁹



Evidence: Across the instruments used in this research, it was identified that adolescents sometimes enter unions “voluntarily” as a way of coping with adverse situations in their homes or communities. One adolescent interviewee explained:

“THEY TAKE EVERYTHING AWAY FROM THEM—SCHOOLING AND ALL—BECAUSE THE ONE WHO IS SUPPOSED TO SUPPORT THE WOMAN IS THE MAN. BUT HE NEVER SUPPORTS HER; HE JUST TAKES HER AWAY AND SHE STAYS IN HIS HOUSE, AND THAT’S IT. THE PARENTS NO LONGER HELP; THEY ONLY ASK FOR MONEY AND SOFT DRINKS, NOTHING MORE.”

7 UNFPA, Approach to early and/or forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) in Mexico: the cases of Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca.

8 National Meeting of State Groups for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy (GEPEA), 27 April 2018.

9 UN Women, Early Marriage and Unions of Girls, Mexico, 2016, p. 7.

LACK OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Globally, children and adolescents who are not in school are three times more likely to enter a union before the age of 18.¹⁰ Without access to education, their opportunities narrow, and a union becomes one of the few options perceived as viable. When early motherhood is added to this, a cycle is created that leads to low levels of schooling and dependency, reinforcing economic dependence and limiting autonomy.¹¹



Evidence: In Mexico, the prevalence of CEFMU rises from 21% at the national level to 50% among children and adolescents whose highest level of education is primary school.¹²

SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE

Early unions often represent an escape from contexts of violence or lack of opportunities, particularly in places where violence and impoverishment coexist.



Evidence: Among the most frequently cited social factors in the data-collection instruments were 'family pressure' in response to adolescent pregnancy and the lack of institutional or community support. As one adolescent interviewee shared:

**“THEY GET MARRIED BECAUSE THEY HAVE CHILDREN
OR BECAUSE THEY ARE THROWN OUT OF THEIR HOMES...
AND THEY SAY IT'S THEIR OBLIGATION TO MARRY, BECAUSE OTHERWISE.
WHO IS GOING TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN?”**

In addition to these forms of violence, organisations highlighted the need to raise awareness of spiritual or religious violence, which involves the use of religious beliefs or practices to coerce decisions, restrict rights or impose early unions. Although specific documentation in Mexico is limited, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has recognised this form of violence as encompassing emotional pressure, psychological violence and sexual violence.¹³

10 Girls Not Brides, Matrimonio infantil y educación, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.es/aprendizaje-recursos/matrimonio-infantil-y-educaci%C3%B3n/>

11 Idem

12 Datos de Matrimonio Infantil de UNICEF, con datos de la ENADID 2023. <https://childmarriagedata.org/data-centre/>

13 Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH), Las mujeres indígenas y sus derechos humanos en las Américas, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 44/17, 17 de abril de 2017.

CONTEXT OF INSECURITY AND VIOLENCE

Early unions continue to be perceived as a means of escape from environments of widespread insecurity. In contexts with high levels of violence and organised crime, girls and adolescents face additional risks of trafficking and forced unions.¹⁴



Evidence: Organisations also noted that in contexts of mobility or migration, unions with adults are sometimes perceived as a strategy to access safety or regularise migration status. This often places adolescent girls in relationships characterised by significant power imbalances.

DIGITAL CONTEXTS

Social gender norms and the stereotypes of ‘romantic love’ normalise patriarchal roles by promoting early unions as an achievement for adolescents, particularly through “aspirational” roles for girls as mothers and wives. These narratives are widely disseminated and reinforced in digital environments



Evidence: Member organisations highlighted the need to make visible the new forms of influence shaping children’s and adolescents’ perceptions through social media and digital platforms, which have transformed ideas about relationships, motherhood and personal success. Idealised lifestyle models—promoted by influencers or trends such as the “Tradwife” phenomenon—normalise early unions and reinforce gender stereotypes. Moreover, grooming and other forms of online harassment enable unequal and coercive relationships.

14 Follow-up Mechanism of the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI), Hemispheric Report on Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in the States Parties to the Belém do Pará Convention, p. 42.

2.3 Cultural factors

COMMUNITY NORMS AND PRACTICES

In some communities or contexts, early unions may be perceived as part of socially accepted life cycles. In certain communities in Chiapas and Guerrero, there have been documented cases in which children and adolescents are informally united or married at an early age as a result of family agreements, notions of honour, or expectations of adulthood.¹⁵ These situations should not be understood as cultural traditions in themselves, but rather as practices that have acquired social legitimacy in certain contexts and that need to be transformed through community dialogue, the strengthening of rights and the participation of adolescents themselves.

Evidence: According to the organisations consulted, in some communities early unions are seen as a way to access certain economic or social benefits. Once couples are formalised, they may receive land, houses or furniture. However, these benefits often reproduce gender inequalities: women frequently cannot hold land titles, while men receive social recognition and access to community assemblies. Organisations also reported communities where not being married results in exclusion from benefits or restrictions, such as limited access to payments or to political positions.



Interviews with adolescents revealed that these practices are not only accepted but expected as part of the life course. As one participant explained:

“IN MY FAMILY, MOST OF MY @USINS—BOYS
AND GIRLS—HAVE MARRIED FROM A VERY YOUNG AGE.
NOT LEGALLY MARRIED, BECAUSE THEY CAN'T,
BUT THEY LIVE TOGETHER.”

It was also noted that, although early unions may initially provoke negative comments, they are quickly normalised as part of the expected social trajectory for adolescent girls: *“At first people criticise them, but afterwards they see it as normal, because that’s how it has always been for the other girls.”*

In some territories, forms of pressure or even direct intervention were identified on the part of school committees or community leaders, who monitor or sanction relationships between adolescents, leading to “formalised” unions as an institutional or family response.

15 The Hunger Project, They Decide: About Their Bodies, Communities and Territories, available at: <https://thp.org.mx/7890-2/mx/7890-2/>

GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES

Gender roles and stereotypes have historically assigned lower social value to women, limiting their opportunities to shape their own life trajectories and confining them to traditional roles such as “mother” or “wife”. This situation is exacerbated in communities where early unions are perceived as the only acceptable path for girls, significantly restricting their ability to develop autonomy and pursue different goals, including access to education and the full exercise of their rights.

Within these gendered roles and stereotypes, narratives of romantic love play a significant role by idealising romantic relationships as a source of personal fulfilment and autonomy, thereby reinforcing expectations of entering unions at an early age. These narratives are closely tied to the cis-heteronormative model, which presents heterosexual relationships—with traditional divisions of roles—as the single legitimate form of intimate life.

These stereotypes also affect adolescent boys, who are socialised to assume the role of providers and protectors, burdened with expectations of strength, economic independence and control over the household. This can lead them to leave school to enter the workforce or to take on adult responsibilities prematurely, limiting their right to develop diverse life projects free from restrictive expectations.



Evidence: Interviews with adolescents reflected a persistent view of girls as destined for domestic care, motherhood and obedience, making it seem “natural” for them to take on adult responsibilities from a young age. Adolescent boys, in contrast, are perceived as providers-in-training, with greater mobility, autonomy and legitimacy to continue studying or working after entering a union. As one participant shared:

“HE SAID IT WAS DIFFICULT BECAUSE HE FELT
HE HAD OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME;
HE FOCUSED ONLY ON WORKING, AND SHE STAYED IN THE HOUSE
DOING ALL THE CHORES. HE FOUND IT QUITE COMPLICATED.”

Organisations also noted that these gender roles and stereotypes affect adolescents with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+), sometimes as a way to “correct” or sanction non-normative identities or orientations, expressed through homophobic, lesbophobic or transphobic practices.

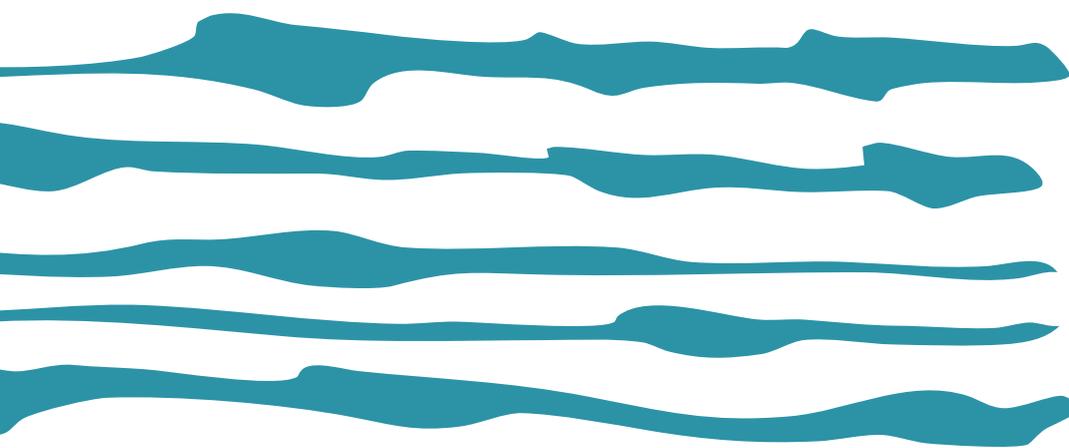
STIGMATISATION OF SEXUALITY AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

In Mexico, adolescent pregnancy remains one of the main reasons why children and adolescents enter unions at an early age. Families and communities often exert pressure to “formalise” the relationship to avoid the social stigma associated with pregnancy outside marriage,¹⁶ as well as to enforce gender norms that frame marriage as a means of preserving “purity” or “honour”.¹⁷

Evidence: Testimonies from interviewed adolescents show that these unions often arise following unplanned pregnancies, in contexts where few alternatives are perceived beyond entering a union or getting married:



“SOME GIRLS BECOME PREGNANT, AND THEY SAY IT’S THEIR OBLIGATION TO GET MARRIED—OTHERWISE, WHO IS GOING TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN?”



16 National Population Council, Undersecretary for Human Rights, Population and Migration, Ministry of the Interior, Interrupted childhood, child and adolescent marriage in Mexico, Mexico, 2023.

17 Rivero, Estela and Palma, José Luis, Report on Early Marriages in Mexico, Executive Summary, Health and Demography Research S.C. (INSAD), Mexico, 2017, p. 5; Annual Report A/HRC/26/22 submitted by the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

2.4. Economic factors

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Communities facing historical economic exclusion have fewer opportunities for young people's development, including limited access to employment, basic services and education. These constraints lead families to view marriage as a survival strategy or a means of securing resources. Studies have shown that the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas have high rates of CEFMU,¹⁸ reflecting historical inequality and oppression experienced by communities in these regions.



Evidence: Social and economic inequality is a consistent driver of early unions. As expressed by both adolescents and participating organisations, the lack of access to employment, education and basic services leads many families to consider marriage or union as a strategy for survival or family restructuring:

“WHEN THERE ARE PROBLEMS, SOMETIMES PARENTS FORCE THEIR DAUGHTERS TO GET MARRIED AND LEAVE SCHOOL —ESPECIALLY IF THE BOY HAS LAND, OR HIS PARENTS DO, OR IF HE HAS SOME MONEY.”

LACK OF BASIC SERVICES

Limited access to health, education and social protection services in many rural and marginalised communities in Mexico increases the vulnerability of children and adolescents. The absence of information and resources related to sexual and reproductive health also contributes to adolescent pregnancies, which in turn become triggers for forced unions.



Evidence: In Mexico, the birth rate among mothers aged 15 to 19 is 60.3 births per 1,000 (2023), according to CONAPO.¹⁹

These factors demonstrate that there are multiple reasons why children and adolescents enter unions or marry. Identifying them is essential to addressing this practice comprehensively, without oversimplifying its causes, and to tackling the structural inequalities that sustain it.²⁰

18 UNFPA, Approach to early and/or forced child marriages and unions (CEFMU) in Mexico: the cases of Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca, p. 51

19 CONAPO, Birth rate among mothers aged 10 to 19. <https://www.gob.mx/conapo/prensa/deciende-mas-del-16-por-ciento-la-tasa-de-fecundidad-de-adolescentes-septiembre-2023?idiom=es>

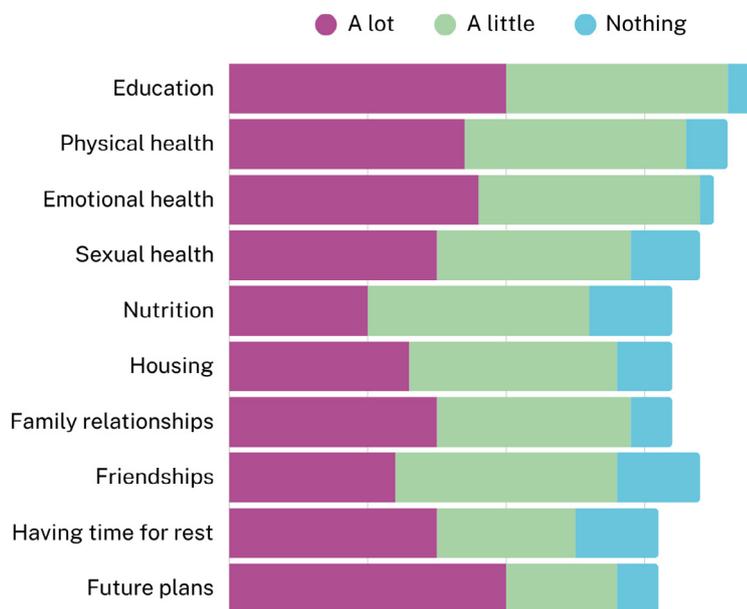
20 According to UN Women, many girls do not marry because of pregnancy but for other reasons. See UN

2.5 Consequences of CEFMU

CEFMU have profound and multidimensional consequences for the lives of children and adolescents, with effects that span physical, psychological, social and economic dimensions.²¹ These effects not only restrict their individual development and well-being, but also perpetuate cycles of impoverishment and inequality, affecting their families and communities.

It is important to recognise that these consequences are not experienced uniformly; they are shaped by factors such as gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic conditions. The questionnaires applied indicate that more than 60% of adolescents believe that entering a union greatly affects their future plans, particularly their right to continue studying:

GRAPH 2: DO YOU THINK THAT MARRYING OR ENTERING A UNION CAN AFFECT ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN THEIR...?



Addressing these effects requires comprehensive interventions that promote access to education, health and social protection, alongside strategies to transform the social and cultural norms that perpetuate these practices.

21 Documented by various sources. See ECLAC Gender Affairs Division, Gender Equality Bulletin No. 1. Child marriages and early unions Inequality and poverty among women, girls and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean, December 2023; Working Group of the Joint Inter-institutional Programme to End Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, Child, early and forced marriages and unions, Santiago, 2021; Rivero, Estela and Palma, José Luis, Report on Early Unions in Mexico, Executive Summary, Health and Demography Research S.C., Mexico, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Practices for adopting a human rights-based approach to eliminating preventable maternal mortality and morbidity (A/HRC/18/27 and Corr.1 and 2); UN Women, Early Marriage and Unions of Girls, Mexico, 2016; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 21: Equality in marriage and family relations. United Nations, A/49/38, 1994; Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4 (2003): Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations, CRC/GC/2003/4, 2003.

EFFECTS ON DEVELOPMENT

CEFMU affect the right of children and adolescents to grow and develop fully, as they are pushed into assuming responsibilities such as working, doing care work or managing the household long before they are prepared. This limits their opportunities to learn, play, and develop in age-appropriate ways, affecting their well-being and future prospects.



Evidence: Testimonies gathered during interviews show that, once in a union, adolescents often experience an abrupt change in their daily lives: they leave school, take on domestic or income-generating responsibilities, and lose spaces for social interaction.

These responsibilities fall differently according to gender: while boys may retain relative autonomy to work or socialise, girls report being subjected to stricter norms of control. As one adolescent explained: *“If she’s a girl, she leaves school and dedicates herself to the home, to looking after the animals, and she no longer has any rights.”*

EFFECTS ON PHYSICAL HEALTH

Children and adolescents who marry or enter into early unions are more likely to face pregnancy at a very young age, which increases the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.

Furthermore, in unions where there is a marked difference in age and power, girls are more vulnerable to physical, psychological, economic and sexual violence, with lasting impacts on their well-being.



Evidence: According to studies based on ENDIREH data, women who marry or enter into a relationship before the age of 18 experience more violence from their partners than their peers who enter into relationships after the age of 18.²²

22 Data Report on violence and CEFMU in Mexico, by Girls Not Brides 2025.

EFFECTS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Early unions often generate high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, especially in contexts where adolescents face violence, isolation, or lack of support. The testimonies reflect profound emotional changes:

“HER MOOD CHANGED. AT THE BEGINNING SHE WAS MORE RELAXED, SHE WENT WITH THE FLOW, BUT AFTERWARDS SHE BECAME MORE SERIOUS, QUIETER. I SAW HER MORE STRESSED, MORE TENSE.”

“FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN YOUR MOOD IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM WHEN YOU’RE LIVING WITH SOMEONE, BECAUSE, LIKE I SAID, THERE ARE FIGHTS AND THINGS AREN’T GOOD EMOTIONALLY”

The denial of their autonomy or the loss of control over their own decisions, bodies, and lives can generate feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem, affecting their emotional development. The adolescents reported that:

“WHEN YOU GET MARRIED, IT’S NO LONGER THE SAME AS BEFORE. YOU’RE NOT WITH YOUR PARENTS ANYMORE, YOU DON’T GO BACK TO THE SAME HOUSE—A LOT OF THINGS CHANGE. I’VE SEEN YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE CHANGED; THEY’RE NOT THE SAME. THEY NO LONGER HAVE CLOTHES BOUGHT FOR THEM, THEY DON’T LIVE LIKE THEY DID IN THEIR HOMES. THEIR FACES LOOK SADDER, THEY DON’T LOOK AS CHEERFUL —EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT.”

EFFECTS ON EDUCATION AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

In Mexico, school exclusion²³ is one of the most common consequences of early unions. This limits children and adolescents' access to educational opportunities and, therefore, their possibilities of securing paid employment and developing independent life projects.

One adolescent shared:

“PEOPLE WERE SURPRISED BECAUSE THEY WERE SO YOUNG TO START LIVING TOGETHER — THEY WERE 16. THE GIRL HAD TO MOVE INTO THE BOY'S HOUSE. SHE LEFT MANY THINGS FROM HER OLD LIFE BEHIND BECAUSE SHE COULD NO LONGER BE FREE LIKE BEFORE, AND THE BOY ALSO STOPPED GOING OUT AND SPENDING TIME WITH HIS FRIENDS — HE BEGAN TO STAY IN MORE. THE GIRL STOPPED STUDYING, AND THE BOY CONTINUED. SHE WANTED TO KEEP STUDYING, BUT HER PARENTS DIDN'T LET HER BECAUSE SHE WAS GOING TO LIVE WITH HIM BUT THEY DID LET THE BOY KEEP STUDYING — I IMAGINE SO HE COULD GET PAPERS AND FIND WORK IN THE CITY MORE EASILY.”

By not completing their education, adolescents have fewer opportunities to earn their own income, perpetuating cycles of impoverishment and economic dependence on their partners. Because gender inequality intersects with these patterns, girls and young women are disproportionately affected, limiting their ability to move out of marginalised contexts.

Interviews with adolescents revealed that school exclusion is often one of the first consequences following a union — whether due to their own decision, family pressure, or instructions from community authorities. In some cases, sanctions such as fines for “leaving school to be in a relationship” were reported, imposed by school committees:

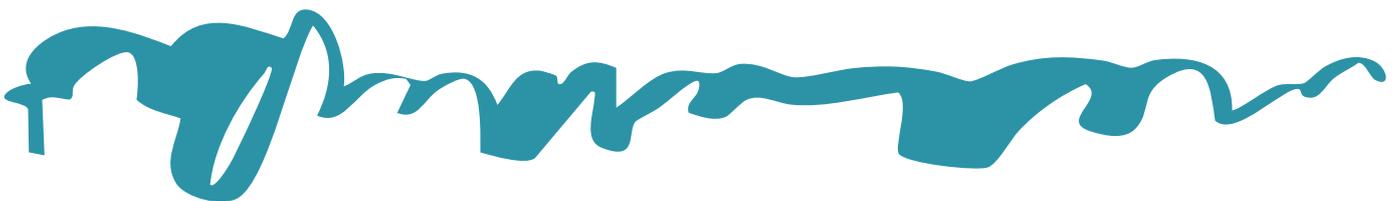
“IN MY SECONDARY SCHOOL, MANY GIRLS DROPPED OUT BECAUSE THEY GOT MARRIED. SOME WERE FINED, AND THEY WERE BROUGHT TOGETHER RIGHT THERE AT THE SCHOOL”

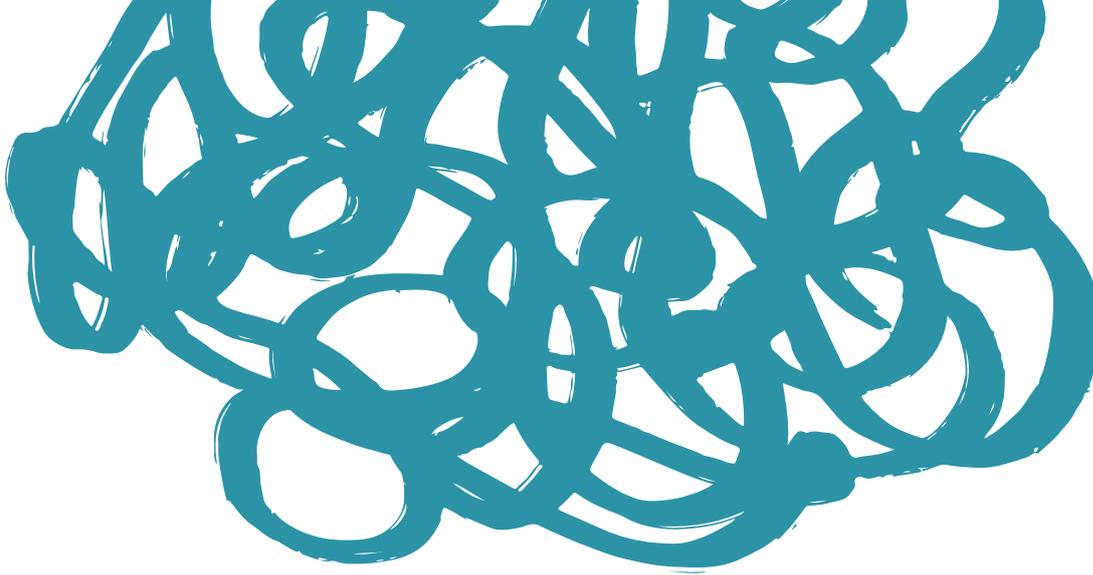
23 The term ‘school exclusion’ is used to recognise the complexity of the reasons why a person or persons may interrupt their studies, beyond a simple individual decision. Exclu

In communities where CEFMU are common, these practices contribute to the normalisation of gender inequality and gender-based violence as social norms. This affects not only adolescent girls, but also boys and adolescents with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, who may be pressured or forced into heteronormative relationships as a way of “correcting” or concealing their identities. Such practices reinforce traditional gender roles and structural inequalities.

Findings from the research instruments show that early unions do not only affect the individuals involved, but are embedded within broader community dynamics. In some contexts, these unions are promoted or accepted by families, school authorities and community structures as a way of resolving situations considered problematic (such as pregnancies, romantic relationships or school dropout).

“FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN YOU’RE MARRIED TO SOMEONE,
OBVIOUSLY YOU HAVE TO LOOK AFTER YOUR HUSBAND.
YOU DON’T HAVE THE SAME FREEDOM TO GO TO A PARTY,
OR TO GO OUT WITH FRIENDS TO THE PARK, OR THINGS LIKE THAT. INSTEAD,
YOU HAVE TO DEDICATE YOURSELF MORE TO THINGS AT HOME.





Non-punitive approach. What does this mean?

In recent years, the response to early and forced marriages in Mexico has been shaped by a predominantly punitive and prohibitionist approach, focused mainly on legislative reforms aimed at criminalising these practices.

A punitive response refers to the use of legal sanctions, such as imprisonment, to address behaviours that violate protected rights or values. Punitivism, however, goes beyond the use of sanctions: it is characterised by excessive or populist reactions to social problems, as if criminal punishment alone could solve them.

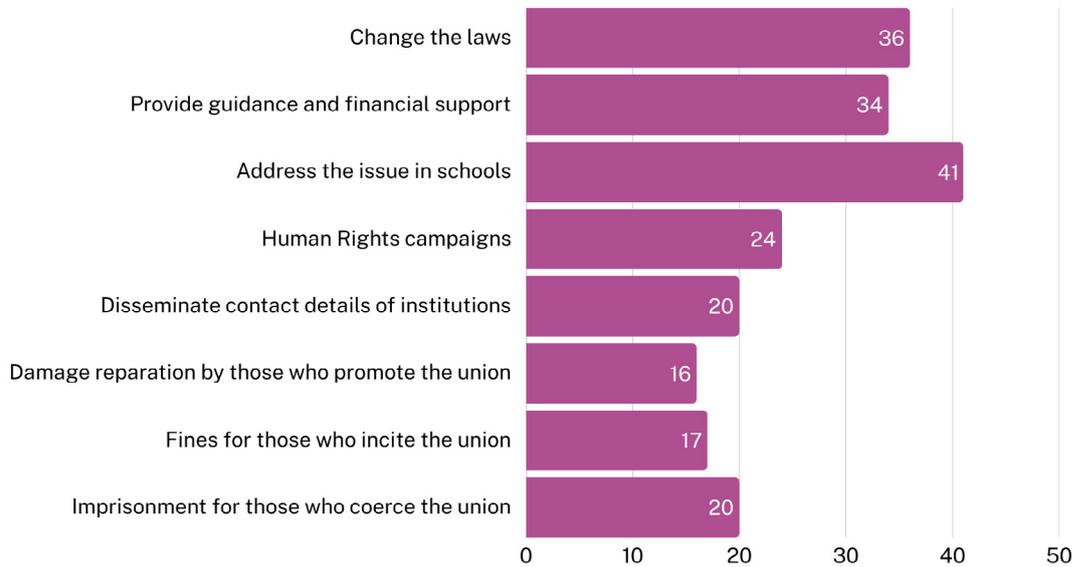
Punitivism relies on “quick fixes” or “exemplary measures” (e.g. increasing sentences or creating new offences) as a way of signalling immediate political action, while ignoring the structural causes of the issue—such as impoverishment, inequality and discrimination. This approach focuses on punishing individuals, often the families or communities themselves, without transforming the conditions that cause the problem. As a result, it generates unintended consequences such as revictimisation, clandestinity and distrust towards institutions, especially when adolescents or their families fear being criminalised.

Although criminalisation may have symbolic value, interviews and focus groups show that this strategy is insufficient and can even be counterproductive. As organisations noted, punitive approaches tend to:

- ✦ Ignore the structural conditions that give rise to CEFMU, such as impoverishment, gender inequality, or lack of access to services.
- ✦ Place responsibility on individuals without addressing the social, family, community or institutional context.
- ✦ Produce harmful effects such as revictimisation, clandestinity or exclusion, particularly when adolescents or their families are themselves criminalised.
- ✦ Undermine trust in institutions, reducing the possibilities for preventive intervention.

In the questionnaires applied, **only 24.4% of adolescents considered imprisonment to be the main response to CEFMU**, compared to 50% who indicated that schools should provide spaces for information sharing and reflection, and 41.5% who prioritised guidance and emotional support:

GRAPH 3: DO YOU THINK THAT MARRYING OR ENTERING A UNION CAN AFFECT ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN THEIR



These findings reflect a strong demand for approaches centred on care, accompaniment and the creation of real alternatives.

In the case of CEFMU, the approval of new criminal offences aimed at addressing these practices constitutes a response that may be considered punitive, as it fails to address the structural causes that perpetuate them, such as economic inequality, gender norms, lack of access to education, or violence. Moreover, as will be discussed later, such reforms treat all manifestations of CEFMU in the same way, disregarding the complexity of their contexts.

Poorly designed criminal provisions tend to exacerbate the revictimisation of children and adolescents by subjecting them to judicial processes or coercive mechanisms that not only fail to consider their contexts, needs, and evolving capacities,²⁴ but also do not guarantee effective State intervention. The imposition of strict legal responses, without complementary strategies grounded in social justice and human rights, limits the implementation of comprehensive and restorative solutions that promote the progressive autonomy and well-being of the children and adolescents involved.

24 Office of the Ombudsman for Children's Rights, *The Child Victim of Crime: Foundations and Guidelines for Criminal Procedure Reform*, Volume I of the collection "The Child Victim of Crime in the Criminal Justice System," Mexico, 2005.

, pp. 33–37 https://www.inm.gob.mx/static/Autorizacion_Protocolos/SSP/Tomo I NiNo victima del delito.pdf

What does the non-punitive approach propose?

The non-punitive approach seeks to go beyond criminalisation, focusing instead on prevention, the transformation of social norms, the rebuilding the social fabric and comprehensive reparation for harm. This approach prioritises the creation of protective environments, the promotion of rights, and the active participation of communities to generate sustainable changes that respect people's autonomy and rights.²⁵

The approach adopted by this tool does not call for the elimination of criminal law –correspond to an *anti-punitive stance*– but rather recognising its limits and challenges, reserving it for the most serious and violent cases, in line with the *ultima ratio* principle of criminal law. It is based on the idea that criminal law alone does not transform the structural causes of CEFMU, and that its indiscriminate use can produce harmful effects.

In this sense, the tool proposes actions that complement or, in certain cases, replace criminal responses, prioritising social, educational and community interventions that promote prevention, support, autonomy-building and the development of life projects for children and adolescents.

From this perspective, **the non-punitive approach provides an opportunity to address early marriages and unions without resorting solely to repressive measures or criminal sanctions, which are often insufficient to address the structural factors that perpetuate these practices and may even aggravate those.**

25 Equis, Justice for Women, Violence against Women and Impunity: Beyond Punitive Measures?, Mexico, 2019, p. 7.

Inequalities. This approach seeks to address, prevent, repair and transform these underlying conditions, prioritising the rights of children and adolescents.

Some key elements of this approach for addressing CEFMU in the national context include:

1. **Recognition of progressive autonomy and evolving capacities:** children and adolescents acquire greater skills and capacities to make decisions and exercise their rights as they grow. Respecting these capacities—and ensuring their meaningful participation in decisions about their lives, while protecting them from situations that pose risks to their development and well-being—is essential within a rights-based approach.²⁶

It is important to recognise that adolescents can make autonomous decisions in certain contexts, but that these decisions may also be shaped by factors such as impoverishment, exclusion or structural violence. For this reason, the role of institutions is to guarantee the real conditions necessary for genuine choice.

2. **Prevention:** prevention efforts should seek to address the factors associated with CEFMU by promoting access to education, health and economic development, while strengthening the autonomy of children and adolescents so that they can build independent and sustainable life projects.



26 Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2006). General Comment No. 7: Realising children's rights in early childhood (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1). United Nations, para. 17; Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016). General Comment No. 20 on the effectiveness of children's rights during adolescence (CRC/C/GC/20). United Nations, para. 18.

3. Transformation of social and gender norms: this involves fostering the active participation of communities to question and transform the norms and traditions that perpetuate CEFMU. This includes working with community leaders, families and key actors such as teachers and religious leaders.

4. Recovery and social reintegration: prioritises the well-being and development of children and adolescents who have experienced forced unions. From a rights-based perspective, the response to CEFMU must be separated from the notion of “reparation of harm”. Instead, it should focus on measures that support the “recovery and social reintegration”²⁷ of children and adolescents, enabling them to build alternatives and regain control over their lives.

A non-punitive approach does not equate all unions with violence or abuse; rather, it requires analysing their specific contexts, listening to those who experience them, and offering pathways for accompaniment and the restoration of rights.

This does not mean eliminating criminal law in cases involving violence, coercion or abuse, but reserving it exclusively for such situations. Criminal law should remain a measure of ultima ratio, applied only in the most serious cases of violence, coercion or abuse, while social, educational and

27 Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises personal rehabilitation and reintegration into a safe and appropriate environment, taking into account the evolving capacities and specific vulnerability of children. The CRC adopts language and measures aimed at the protection, rehabilitation and comprehensive development of children as a priority. While comprehensive reparation for harm may be broader, it is linked to the determination of human rights violations and a formal process of recognition of harm. Furthermore, comprehensive reparation for harm, although important, has a more general scope and does not always respond specifically to the development and protection needs of children.

community responses must form the central axis of prevention and support in relation to CEFMU.

This non-punitive approach:

✦ **Is not impunity.** Violence, coercion or abuse must be sanctioned, but not every union necessarily involves violence.

✦ **Is not invisibilisation.** It takes a clear stance in favour of the rights of children and adolescents, but prioritises for social and non-punitive responses.

✦ **Is not deregulation.** It proposes clear laws, administrative protocols and specific responsibilities for all institutions.

The non-punitive approach is not a concession, it is an ethical and legal imperative. It is grounded in international human rights standards and recognises that in contexts of deep inequality, justice is not achieved through punishment alone, but through structural changes, dignified accompaniment and the restoration of rights.

As one participating organisation explained:

“ADOLESCENT GIRLS ARE ALREADY MAKING DECISIONS—SOMETIMES WITHOUT REAL OPTIONS, BUT THEY ARE MAKING THEM. OUR ROLE IS NOT TO IMPOSE WHAT THEY SHOULD DO, BUT TO WALK ALONGSIDE THEM, STRENGTHEN THEIR TOOLS, AND CREATE THE CONDITIONS THAT ALLOW THEM TO TRULY CHOOSE.

In the Mexican context, this approach is particularly relevant, given the deep social, economic and cultural inequalities that perpetuate CEFMU.

Myths and realities of the non-punitive approach

MYTH

The non-punitive approach “justifies” CEFMU or minimises them.

If there is no punishment, there is no justice.

Only criminal law can protect girls.

Criminal sanctions deter CEFMU.

Adolescents “do not know what they are doing”, therefore limits must be imposed through punishment.

The punitive approach is faster and more effective.

REALITY

It does not justify them. It seeks to transform them by addressing the structural causes and prioritising comprehensive protection.

Justice is not only about punishment. It also reparation, restitution, listening and prevention.

Effective protection involves health, education, emotional support, economic conditions and safe environments, —elements that criminal law alone cannot provide.

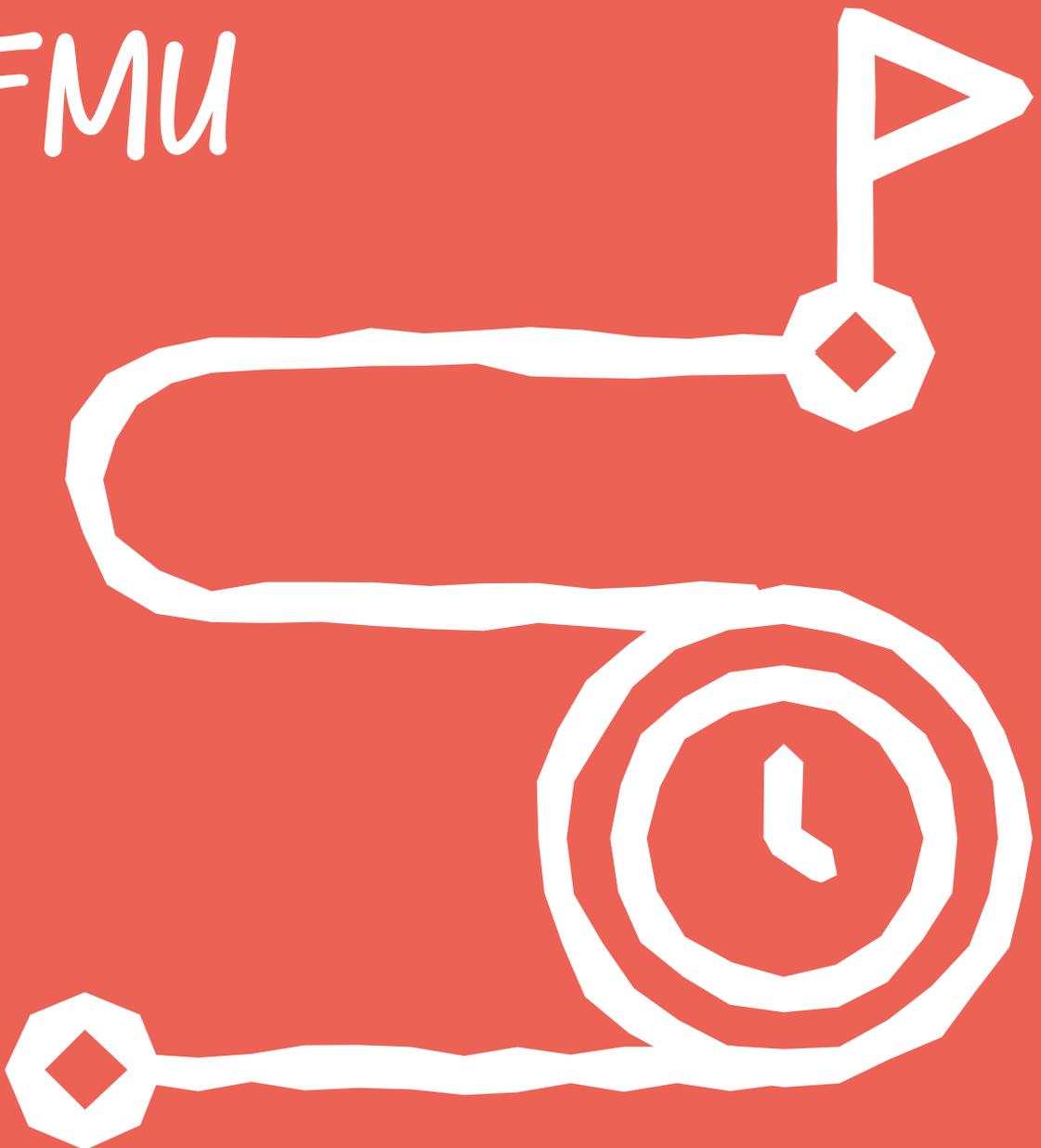
There is no evidence that criminalisation reduces unions; on the contrary, it increases clandestinity and revictimisation.

Adolescents are actively developing their autonomy and evolving capacities. They need accompaniment and support, not punishment.

It may seem immediate, but the legal processes can take years, offer no certainty of outcome, and do not address or prevent the reproduction of these practices.

Actions implemented by Girls Not Brides member organisations have shown that meaningful change is possible when working directly with communities, offering educational alternatives, raising awareness and strengthening the capacities of children and adolescents to make informed decisions.

3. CURRENT STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING CEFMU



The current strategies for addressing CEFMU in Mexico include a wide range of policies, programmes and actions implemented by government institutions and by civil society organisations within the Girls Not Brides membership. Although many of these actions are not designed specifically to address CEFMU, they influence the factors that perpetuate them, such as gender inequality, adolescent pregnancy, lack of access to education, and poverty. Identifying these efforts makes it possible to strengthen a comprehensive and context-specific approach to prevention and response.

Six main categories of strategies have been identified in the current approach to early and forced marriages and unions:



Legislative strategies: aimed at establishing a clear regulatory framework that prohibits CEFMU and includes measures to prevent these practices, as well as applicable sanctions when they occur.



Strategies addressing social factors: seeking to reduce family violence and strengthen community support networks.



Strategies addressing cultural factors: through awareness-raising campaigns or educational programmes aimed at transforming norms and traditions that justify CEFMU.



Strategies that address economic factors: aimed at alleviating economic pressures on families and promoting the economic independence of women, adolescents and young people.



Educational strategies: focused on strengthening school attendance among adolescents and supporting the re-enrolment of adolescent mothers or those in vulnerable situations in the education system.



Health strategies: aimed at increasing access to sexual and reproductive health services, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), free contraception for adolescents, and comprehensive care services for pregnant adolescents and young women, ensuring their physical and emotional well-being.

Although these actions are valuable, they are often perceived as isolated and lacking follow-up or accompaniment when situations such as pregnancy or school dropout arise. Participants also highlighted the absence of strategies specifically directed at adolescents who have already experienced early unions, who are frequently excluded from institutional responses.

Adolescent participants reported that they are not always able to identify specific programmes or services aimed at preventing early unions. Even so, they mentioned certain actions as useful, such as school talks, the distribution of contraceptives, and workshops on sexuality. However, many expressed that they had not received support when they needed it, or that they did not know how to access these services:

“THERE ARE TALKS, BUT THEY DON'T ALWAYS TELL US WHAT TO DO IF IT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED, OR IF YOU WANT TO LEAVE THAT RELATIONSHIP.”

“SOMETIMES THE TALKS ARE VERY LONG, WE DON'T UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING, OR YOU DON'T FEEL CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO SPEAK.”

3.1. Government actions



Within the scope of government actions addressing CEFMU, both legislative changes and public policies and programmes designed by the State for the protection of children’s and adolescents’ rights, as well as the regulation of situations related to these practices, are considered.

These strategies demonstrate that a wide range of actions are currently being implemented and that many of them are useful for addressing these practices. The aim here is not to provide an exhaustive description of each programme, but rather to identify those with cross-cutting reach—often involving multiple public institutions and projects—in the response to CEFMU and its associated factor

Findings from interviews, questionnaires and focus groups reveal a common perception regarding governmental actions: although relevant institutional efforts exist, many responses are perceived as insufficient, fragmented and lacking continuity over time.

3.1.1 Legislative strategies

Legal reforms—such as the prohibition of child marriage or the criminalisation of “forced cohabitation”—are an essential component for analysing CEFMU, as they establish the framework within which all other public, social and programmatic responses are implemented.

There are **two main approaches** through which this regulatory component can be analysed. The first relates to **explicit regulation of child and early marriages and unions within civil and criminal law**. The second concerns the **regulation of the age of sexual consent**, which, from a punitive perspective, criminalises sexual relations involving adolescents.

A. Regulation of child marriage

In Mexico, laws on child marriage have undergone significant changes in recent years to protect children and adolescents from this practice. **Today, it is prohibited for anyone under the age of 18 to marry anywhere in the country**, regardless of parental or guardian consent, and no special authorisations are permitted.

A key milestone was the adoption of the **General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescent** in 2014. Article 45 establishes 18 as the minimum age for marriage and obliges authorities at all levels of government—federal, state and municipal—to protect children and adolescents from any harmful practices.²⁸

Beginning in 2015, the states began adapting their civil legislation to align with the **General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescent**. In 2019, the Federal Civil Code was reformed, and in 2020 Baja California became the last state to establish 18 as the minimum age for contracting marriage. These reforms eliminated the

28 In 2023, a paragraph was added to Article 45 of the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescent to require states and municipalities to adopt specific protection measures for vulnerable populations, such as indigenous, Afro-Mexican, disabled, or impoverished children and adolescents.

exemptions that previously allowed people under 18 to marry with the consent of parents, guardians or judges, ensuring that no exceptions to this rule remain. These measures aim to protect children and adolescents from premature decisions or those imposed by third parties.²⁹

Since these laws entered into force, Mexico has seen a significant reduction in the number of formally registered marriages involving people under 18. However, there has also been an increase in informal unions, which do not require civil registration and are therefore more difficult to monitor and regulate.³⁰

In December 2022, the criminal offence of “forced cohabitation” began to be introduced with the aim of sanctioning informal unions involving people under 18. This offence was incorporated into the Federal Criminal Code in 2023, under Article 209 Quáter, which defines it as any act that forces, coerces, induces, requests, arranges or offers a union (to cohabit in a constant manner comparable to marriage) between a minor and another person (whether also a minor or an adult), whether with or without the minor’s consent.

The article establishes prison sentences of 8 to 15 years for those who commit this offence with penalties increased by up to half when the victims belong to Indigenous or Afro-Mexican communities. **Currently,³¹ four states have incorporated similar provisions into their criminal codes: Guerrero (the first to do so in 2022), the State of Mexico, Oaxaca, and Tamaulipas, as shown in the map on the following image.**



29 This has been endorsed by international bodies such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the CEDAW Committee, which consider 18 to be the minimum age for marriage. Although the conventions themselves do not establish a minimum age for marriage, they have specified this in their respective recommendations and general comments.

30 Girls Not Brides, Report on the Meeting “Early and Forced Child Marriages and Unions in Mexico”, 5 and 6 June 2023, Mexico City, p. 4; Girls Not Brides, Evidence from Latin America and the Caribbean on the impact of laws on child, early and forced marriages and unions, June 2024, p. 7

31 According to the consultation of the Penal Codes of the States carried out in December 2024.

It is important to note that, prior to the nationwide standardisation of the minimum age of marriage at 18, there were already criminal provisions such as “illegal marriages”, which sanctioned marriages carried out in contravention of the legal requirements (legal impediments). Although these provisions were not created specifically to address CEFMU, their implementation following the prohibition of child marriage now includes these practices within the range of punishable offences. The states that classify this offence include Querétaro, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Veracruz and Yucatán.

However, there is a notable difference between the penalties established for the offences of “forced cohabitation” and “illegal marriages”. While the former range from 5 to 15 years’ imprisonment, the latter range from as little as 3 days to a maximum of 4 years, depending on the state.

PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE WIDESPREAD BELIEF THAT “THE LAW HAS ALREADY SOLVED THE PROBLEM” FOLLOWING THE LEGAL PROHIBITION OF CHILD MARRIAGE. THEY POINTED OUT THAT THIS VIEW HAS LED TO INSTITUTIONAL DISENGAGEMENT, REDUCING THE RESPONSE TO A PURELY NORMATIVE ISSUE, WITHOUT CONSIDERING REAL IMPLEMENTATION OR COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT.

B. Regulation on Ages of Consent

In Mexico, **the minimum age of sexual consent is regulated through state Criminal Codes and the Federal Criminal Code.** These laws prohibit and sanction any sexual interaction involving persons under the age of 18. For example, the Federal Criminal Code establishes severe penalties for offences such as “sexual abuse”, which carries sentences of 6 to 13 years’ imprisonment even where the under-age victim has given consent; and “statutory rape” (violación equiparada), which can be punished with up to 30 years’ imprisonment if sexual intercourse occurs with a person under the age of 18, even in the absence of violence.

These legal provisions aim to protect adolescents from exploitative or abusive relationships. However, **they also carry negative implications by failing to distinguish between consensual relationships between adolescents and cases involving abuse of power or coercion by an adult.**

From a non-punitive perspective, it is necessary to differentiate between types of relationships and levels of risk, recognising that not every relationship between adolescents constitutes, in itself, a violation of rights, and that **protection should not entail denying their decision-making capacity or their progressive autonomy.**

This does not mean withdrawing protection, but rather building legal and policy frameworks that safeguard without indiscriminately criminalising, and that provide children and adolescents with environments where they can develop affective and sexual relationships free from violence, coercion and stigmatisation.

3.1.2 Public policy strategies

The Public policies implemented to address CEFMU in Mexico include various social, educational and awareness-raising programmes that seek to improve the living conditions of children and adolescents, guarantee their access to basic rights and foster cultural changes that promote their comprehensive development and autonomy.

These government actions, outlined in the programmes and strategies summarised below, are presented as follows:

Type of action	Objective	Characteristics	Examples
Awareness-raising and communication actions	To modify social norms, perceptions and attitudes.	Mass or community actions. Often disconnected from individual follow-up or personalised support. Effective for visibility, but limited without complementary actions.	Campaigns on sexual and reproductive rights (PROIGUALDAD, ENAPEA). Dissemination of educational materials and media spots (PROJUVENTUD). Digital publications on child marriage (PRONAPINNA).
Educational actions	Promote school retention, training and rights education	Oriented towards preventing or addressing structural factors (school dropout, lack of information). Effectiveness depends on access, coverage and continuity.	Comprehensive Sexuality Education (ENAPEA). Scholarships for girls, adolescents and young mothers (PROJUVENTUD, PROIGUALDAD). "I decided" workbook and school training (PROJUVENTUD).
Economic empowerment actions	Reduce the conditions of inequality that drive CEFMU	Direct impact on material conditions. require sustained investment and differentiated monitoring based on characteristics or vulnerabilities.	Support for women heads of household (PROJUVENTUD). Promotion of economic autonomy and recognition of care work (PROIGUALDAD).
Protection and Support actions	To guarantee rights in situations of risk or harm.	Interventions triggered once a risk or rights violation is identified. Generally oriented towards adolescent girls, with limited engagement of boys or community actors.	Access to sexual and reproductive health services (ENAPEA, PRONAPINNA). Strategies for responding to pregnancies in girls under 15 (NAME Pathway). Actions to address violence against girls and adolescents (PROIGUALDAD). Fund for the Well-being and Advancement of Women



Institutional coordination actions	To align efforts across sectors and levels of government.	Key to ensuring continuity and coherence in interventions. In practice, rarely used to plan specific actions on CEFMU.	Strengthening SIPINNA and coordinated work among state and municipal systems (PRONAPINNA). Intersectoral coordination through GIPEA (ENAPEA).
Diagnostic, research and planning actions	To generate information and proposals for future interventions.	Essential for evidence-based design. Often implemented in isolation and lacking mechanisms for follow-up or feedback	Diagnostics on the prevention of CEFMU (PROIGUALDAD).

ONE OF THE PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS HIGHLIGHTED THE STRATEGY OF THE CENTRO DE ATENCIÓN A LA SALUD DEL ADOLESCENTE (CASA), PART OF THE IMSS-BIENESTAR PROGRAMME, AS A GOOD PRACTICE DUE TO ITS PREVENTIVE, COMPREHENSIVE AND ADOLESCENT-FRIENDLY APPROACH. IN ADDITION, CASA INCORPORATES A PEER-TO-PEER TRAINING MODEL THROUGH YOUTH TEAMS, WHICH STRENGTHENS THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND GENERATES SUPPORT NETWORKS WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES.³²

In the focus group and the questionnaires directed at civil society organisations, it was noted that many public policies tend to treat CEFMU as a secondary component of other strategies, such as the National Strategy for the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy (ENAPEA), the Pathway for the care of girls and adolescents who are pregnant and/or mothers under the age of 15 (NAME Pathway), and differentiated scholarship programmes for girls and adolescents, without developing specific or sustained interventions to address this issue.

32 Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS). Adolescent Health Care Centre (CASA). IMSS-Bienestar. Accessed in July 2025, available at: <https://www.imss.gob.mx/imss-bienestar/casa#:~:text=por%205%20m%C3%B3dulos-,Salud%20mental,Preveni%C3%B3n%20de%20la%20violencia>

Below is a table summarising national-level public policies (programmes and strategies) that have a cross-cutting reach in addressing factors related to CEFMU, highlighting their objectives, strategies and relevance to these practices:

NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR EQUALITY BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN (PROIGUALDAD) 2020-2024³³

ANALYSIS

Main objective

To promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination against women and girls..

Focus on CEFMU

Proigualdad is the programme that reports the largest number of actions related to CEFMU at the national level, although with a particular emphasis. The priority objective **“Combating the types and forms of violence against women, girls and adolescents”** concentrates most of the actions linked to CEFMU and focuses mainly on information campaigns and rights promotion, with limited reach.³⁴

Strengths

- ✦ The approach has focused on communities, considered priority populations.
- ✦ There are efforts aimed at children and adolescents are (e.g., workshops on the rights and the consequences of marriage).
- ✦ The programme is linked to the prevention of adolescent pregnancy, which is closely connected to CEFMU (FOBAM 2023).

Limitations³⁵

- ✦ The states with the highest prevalence of CEFMU (such as Guerrero, Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Tlaxcala) do not always coincide with the territories where these actions are implemented.
- ✦ Workshops tend to prioritise a prohibitionist and punitive approach, sidelining strategies that recognise and guarantee adolescents’ progressive autonomy.
- ✦ The lack of differentiation between CEFMU and adolescent pregnancy can limit a comprehensive approach to CEFMU as a multifactorial issue that extends beyond adolescent pregnancy.

Ongoing project

There are relevant ongoing projects and diagnostics, such as the **“Dialogues and alternative community actions for the prevention of marriage among Me’phaa Bathaa indigenous girls and boys”** and the **“Diagnostic Project on the Prevention of Child Marriage and Early Forced and Non-Forced Unions”**. However, these are focused solely on prevention measures, and there are still no available or accessible results to assess their impact or effectiveness.

33 National Institute for Women, National Programme for Equality between Women and Men 2020-2024, http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos_download/Proigualdad%202020-2024%20Web.pdf

34 Digital campaigns reported reaching only 83,708 people and generating only 3,763 interactions.

35 National Women’s Institute, National Programme for Equality between Women and Men 2020-2024, Progress and Results January 2023 – June 2024 https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/941102/20240829_Avance_y_Resultados_PROIGUALDAD_2023-2024.pdf

NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR THE PROTECTION OF GIRLS, BOYS AND ADOLESCENTS (2021-2024)³⁶

ANALYSIS

Main objective

To guarantee the comprehensive protection of the rights of girls, boys and adolescents in accordance with the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

Focus on CEFMU

The programme does not specifically address CEFMU. Despite the thematic relevance, it is not mentioned in the lines of action or in progress reports, which limits its capacity to address the issue in a structural manner.

Strengths

- ✦ Dissemination of publications related to child marriage within strategies on sexual and reproductive rights.
- ✦ Emphasis on coordination between institutions through state and municipal SIPINNAs.

Limitations³⁷

- ✦ Lack of any specific reference to CEFMU as a priority issue affecting children and adolescents, despite its clear links with violations of the rights to education, health and protection from violence..
- ✦ CEFMU is not integrated into other strategic lines of the programme, such as violence prevention, poverty eradication or educational inclusion, reducing its potential to address the structural causes comprehensively

Potential

To date, the programme has not been used to integrate concrete actions related to CEFMU at the local level, representing an opportunity to address the issue from a community-based and inter-institutional perspective.



36 Executive Secretariat of the National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents, National Programme for the Protection of Children and Adolescents 2021-2024, 31 December 2021, available at: https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/691437/PRONAPINNA_2021-2024.pdf

37 PPRONAPINNA. Progress and Results Report January 2023 - June 2024. https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/940976/Informe_de_Avance_y_Resultados_2023-2024_PPRONAPINNA.pdf

ANALYSIS

Main objective

To promote the holistic development and participation of young people in social and economic life..

Focus on CEFMU

The programme does not specifically address this issue, nor does it consider its implications for the lives of adolescents and young people. It refers to union formation as one of the main reasons for school dropout, but without examining the structural factors that lead to such unions.

Strengths

- ✦ Incorporates gender-perspective elements such as Comprehensive Sexuality Education and the distribution of the “I Decide!” workbook in support of the ENAPEA campaign.
- ✦ Includes the programme “Support for Mexican Women Heads of Household to Strengthen their Professional Development”, which benefited 4,471 women, mostly young women.

Limitations³⁹

- ✦ Actions are limited in scope and do not directly address early or forced unions, reducing the opportunities to develop broader and more effective interventions that take into account the various factors associated with CEFMU, particularly in communities with high prevalence.
- ✦ It does not include specific actions to rebuild or strengthen the life projects of children and adolescents who have experienced CEFMU or are at risk of doing so, nor does it incorporate concrete measures to support those already affected, leaving a gap in care, recovery and reintegration.

38 Mexican Youth Institute, National Youth Programme (Projuventud 2021-2024), accessed in December 2024: https://simejuv.imjuventud.gob.mx/uploads/PROJUVENTUD_2021_2024.pdf

39 Mexican Youth Institute, National Youth Programme 2021-2024, Progress and Results January 2023 – June 2024, accessed in December 2024 https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/939652/PROJUVENTUD_2023-2024.pdf

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE PREVENTION OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY (ENAPEA)⁴⁰

ANALYSIS

Main objective

To reduce adolescent pregnancies—particularly among girls under 15—through the strengthening of Comprehensive Sexuality Education.

Focus on CEFMU

ENAPEA is specifically designed to prevent adolescent pregnancy and its impacts on the lives of girls and adolescents, and does not have a direct focus on the prevention or response to CEFMU. However, in its second phase of implementation, the strategy acknowledges as a key element the need to make visible and differentiate interventions aimed at girls and adolescents with the objective of eliminating child, early and forced marriages and unions among those under 18.

Strengths

- ✦ The work of the Inter-institutional Group for the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy (GIPEA) on legislative harmonisation led to all 32 Mexican states establishing 18 as the minimum age of marriage without exceptions by 2020.
- ✦ It demonstrates its strategic relevance to the CEFMU agenda by recognising the direct relationship between child pregnancy and early/forced unions, and by laying the groundwork for complementary interventions oriented towards transforming the structural causes of these issues.

Limitations⁴¹

It is necessary to complement the implementation of this strategy with broader and more comprehensive actions that include concrete measures for the prevention, care and recovery of those affected by CEFMU at all levels.

40 Microsite of the National Strategy for the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy (ENAPEA), accessed in December 2024 <https://enapea.segob.gob.mx/>

41 Second phase of the National Strategy for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy 2021-2024, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/703251/Segunda_fase_de_la_ENAPEA_2021-2024_ajuste_forros_030222_small.pdf

3.2 Actions by Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations have also played a crucial role in addressing CEFMU, particularly in communities facing structural disadvantage.

The Girls Not Brides membership in Mexico is composed of a diverse network of organisations⁴² which, through community-based, educational, advocacy and youth empowerment approaches, work to prevent and address child, early and forced marriage and unions. Several of these organisations contribute specialised knowledge, resources and context-specific strategies to transform the factors that perpetuate CEFMU.

These civil society organisations have developed valuable and culturally relevant strategies to prevent and address CEFMU, especially in rural, Indigenous, urban low-income and mobility contexts. Unlike many institutional actions, CSOs tend to operate with sustained territorial presence, enabling them to understand local realities, build relationships of trust and design responses that are better aligned with the needs of children and adolescents.

Based on the categories of strategies outlined above, and their relationship to the factors associated with CEFMU, the following actions have been identified:



42 Las Vanders Accompaniment and Art for Women's Rights; Elige Network of Young People for Sexual and Reproductive Rights A.C.; Girl Up Mexico (GUM); Yo Quiero Yo Puedo; Balance Promotion for Development and Youth A.C. (Balance A.C.); Mano Vuelta A.C.; Maternal Mortality Observatory (OMM); Psychological, Sexological and Educational Care Unit for Personal Growth (UNASSE A.C.) Information and Educational Designs for Healthy Actions A.C. (IDEAS Ch'ieltik); Free Moons and United in New Sororal Actions (LUNAS A.C.); Kinal Antzetik Guerrero A. C.; Mexican Foundation for Family Planning (MEXFAM); Save the Children Mexico; Central America and Mexico Youth Fund (CAMY Fund); Oxfam Mexico; The Hunger Project Mexico; Rise Up Mexico; Amnesty International Mexico.

Type of strategy

Type of actions implemented

Organisations implementing it

Legislative strategy

- ✦ Advocacy campaigns for legislative harmonisation on child marriage
- ✦ Research and diagnostics to support legislative harmonisation.⁴³
- ✦ Technical and legislative support to local governments to include specific budgets aimed at addressing CEFMU.

- ✦ Save the Children México
- ✦ Elige Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales
- ✦ Mano Vuelta A.C.
- ✦ THP México

Strategies that address social factors

- ✦ Creation of safe spaces for girls and adolescents.⁴⁴
- ✦ Providing information on gender-based violence, support networks and emergency services for women.⁴⁵
- ✦ Follow-up on investigation files and measures adopted to address violence within the criminal justice system.⁴⁶
- ✦ Legal and psychological counselling.⁴⁷
- ✦ Creation of support networks in rural communities to prevent structural violence affecting girls and adolescents.
- ✦ Accompaniment children and young people to strengthen and enforce their rights and socioemotional skills.⁴⁸
- ✦ Engaging with authorities to promote structural changes in community norms.⁴⁹

- ✦ Save the Children México
- ✦ Balance A.C.
- ✦ Kinal Antzetik Guerrero
- ✦ Las Vanders, Acompañamiento y Arte por los Derechos de las Mujeres
- ✦ Mano Vuelta A.C.



43 Choose Youth Network for Sexual Rights. (n.d.). This is what we do. Choose Youth Network for Sexual Rights; Save the Children, World Report on Children 2024: Fragile Futures, Girls' Rights, Child Marriage and Fragility. Save the Children Mexico in collaboration with the Centre for Community Studies and Strengthening Mano Vuelta A.C, Voices of Girls and Adolescents An Approach to the Causes of Child Marriage

44 Save the Children, Safe spaces for children, <https://savethechildren.mx/espacios-seguros-para-ninas-y-ninos/>

45 Liberas Platform, <https://liberas.balancemx.org/>;

46 Balance A.C. (2023). Annual Report 2023. Balance A.C.

47 UNASSE A.C. (n.d.). Psychological, sexological and educational services. Psychological, Sexological and Educational Care Unit for Personal Growth. Retrieved from <https://unasse.org/Home/Servicios>

48 Mano Vuelta A.C. Anual report 2023,

49 Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo. (2022) Annual Report 2022. Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo; IDEAS Ch'ieltik. (n.d.-b). Creativity. Information and Educational Designs for Healthy Actions A.C. Retrieved from <https://www.chieltik.org/creatividad-1>

Strategies that address cultural factors

- ✦ Creation of youth spokespersons and community promoters to disseminate information on sexual and reproductive rights.
- ✦ Comprehensive sexuality education programmes aimed at children, young people, parents and educational and health personnel.
- ✦ Strengthening of social and emotional skills through playful, artistic, and educational methodologies with an anti-racist approach.
- ✦ Capacity-building of girls and women who were inflicted violence, enabling them to sustain and drive changes in their lives and environments that support a life free of gender-based violence.

- ✦ UNASSE A.C.
- ✦ Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo
- ✦ IDEAS Ch'ieltik
- ✦ Observatorio de Mortalidad Materna
- ✦ GESmujer

Estrategias que abordan factores culturales

- ✦ Use of art and culture as tools for awareness-raising.⁵⁰
- ✦ Community workshops to transform social norms.
- ✦ Awareness and visibility campaigns on gender equality (film screenings, fairs, dialogues, podcasts).
- ✦ Creation of clubs where adolescents and young people promote local actions for women's empowerment, gender equality and human rights.
- ✦ Escuela de Familias (Family School), fostering reflection on the role of families in building community wellbeing for girls, boys and adolescents.⁵¹
- ✦ Production of materials in Indigenous languages (Tsotsil and Tzeltal) on consent, masculinities and sexual health (radio, videos)
- ✦ Implementation of community campaigns on the right to decide and self-care, co-designed by Indigenous adolescents.
- ✦ Use of art and culture as tools for raising awareness.⁵²
- ✦ Community workshops to transform social norms.

- ✦ Las Vanders
- ✦ Acompañamiento y Arte
- ✦ IDEAS Ch'ieltik
- ✦ Elige Red de Jóvenes
- ✦ Girl Up México
- ✦ Observatorio de Mortalidad Materna



50 Las Vanders, IDEAS Ch'ieltik. (n.d.-a). Being a woman. Information and Educational Designs for Healthy Actions A.C. Retrieved from <https://www.chieltik.org/ser-mujer>

51 The Hunger Project, Biannual Report THP-2021-2023, <https://thp.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Informe-Bianual-THP-2021-2023.pdf>

52 Las Vanders, IDEAS Ch'ieltik. (n.d.-a). Being a woman. Information and Educational Designs for Healthy Actions A.C. Retrieved from <https://www.chieltik.org/ser-mujer>

Strategies that address cultural factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Awareness and visibility campaigns on gender equality (screenings, fairs, community dialogues, podcasts). ✦ Creation of youth clubs where adolescents and young people promote local actions for women's empowerment, gender equality and human rights. ✦ <i>Escuela de Familias</i> (Family School), fostering reflection on the role of families in building community wellbeing for girls, boys and adolescents.⁵³ ✦ Production of materials in Indigenous languages (Tsotsil and Tzeltal) on consent, masculinities and sexual health (radio, video). ✦ Implementation of community campaigns on the right to decide and self-care, co-designed by Indigenous adolescents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ UNASSE A.C. ✦ THP México ✦ Observatorio de Mortalidad Materna ✦ GESMujer
Strategies that address cultural factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Economic empowerment programmes for adolescent mothers. ✦ Funding for community projects designed and led by young people to improve their economic opportunities and autonomy.⁵⁴ ✦ Academic and vocational training for adolescents. ✦ Formation of the network of women providers within the <i>Cooperativa de Economía Social para las Mujeres Oaxaqueñas</i> (COMUNALI), with the participation of young people.⁵⁵ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Central America and Mexico Youth Fund (CAMY) ✦ Kinal Antzetik Guerrero ✦ GESMujer
Educational strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Programmes to promote school retention and prevent dropout. ✦ STEAM programmes for adolescents, including leadership development and strengthening of their life projects. ✦ Sexuality education training in school settings through the sessions "<i>How to Teach Sexuality from the Classroom</i>". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Yo Quiero Yo Puedo ✦ Save the Children México ✦ IDEAS Ch'ieltik ✦ Girl Up México ✦ Balance A.C.



53 The Hunger Project, Biannual Report THP-2021-2023, <https://thp.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Biannual-Report-THP-2021-2023.pdf>

54 Central America and Mexico Youth Fund (CAMY), <https://seaif.org/es/programas/>

55 GESMujerCooperativa Comunal, <https://www.gesmujer.org/sitio/cooperativa-comunal/?v=6ee8cb899cf7>

Educational strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Promotion of training projects in technical skills and youth leadership to strengthen local capacities. ✦ Training processes aimed at the private sector, schools and community spaces on topics such as digital violence, masculinities and self-care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Yo Quiero Yo Puedo ✦ Save the Children México ✦ IDEAS Ch'ieltik ✦ Girl Up México ✦ Balance A.C. ✦ Central America and Mexico Youth Fund (CAMY Fund) ✦ GESMujer
Health strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Provision of sexual and reproductive health services and free contraceptives. ✦ Comprehensive sexuality education. ✦ Accompaniment, access to information, and financial, logistical and/or material support for pregnant people seeking access to abortion.⁵⁶ ✦ Promotion of the social decriminalisation of abortion, affirming abortion as a right and a public health matter, and developing communication tools for political advocacy, such as the documentary “<i>Procurarnos la vida</i>” and the microsite “<i>Abortar es mi derecho</i>”.⁵⁷ ✦ Care for pregnant adolescents.⁵⁸ ✦ Prevention of sexually transmitted infections, contraception, menstruation education, maternal mortality and obstetric violence, as well as accompaniment for legal termination of pregnancy.. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ MEXFAM ✦ Balance A.C. ✦ UNASSE A.C. ✦ Save the Children México ✦ Elige Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales ✦ Observatorio de Moralidad Materna ✦ LUNAS A.C. ✦ Kinal Antzetik Guerrero ✦ GESMujer

In addition, several organisations reported the use of innovative methodologies, such as art, community radio, youth clubs and family schools to encourage intergenerational reflection and the transformation social norms:

“WE RUN WORKSHOPS WITH GIRLS, BUT WE ALSO WORK WITH FAMILIES, BECAUSE THAT OFTEN WHERE THE PPESSURE TO ENTER A UNION IS PEPRODUCED.”

56 Balance A.C. (2023). Anual report 2023. Balance A.C

57 Choose Youth Network for Sexual Rights, <https://eligered.org/esto-hacemos/>

58 Maternal Mortality Observatory, <https://omm.org.mx/ssr-adolescentes-y-jovenes/> ; Lunas Libres y Unidas en Nuevas Acciones Sororales, A.C., <https://www.girlsnotbrides.es/nuestra-membresia/directorio-de-membresia/lunas-libres-y-unidas-en-nuevas-acciones-sororales-lunas-ac/>

3.3. Lessons learned

The actions implemented both by civil society organisations within the Girls Not Brides Mexico membership and by government institutions aimed at preventing and addressing CEFMU reveal key opportunities, as well as factors that enhance their effectiveness.

3.3.1 Legislative Framework

While the legislative harmonisation that prohibits child marriage across all 32 federal entities represents a significant step forward, important challenges persist in how these regulations are implemented and in how they interact with the diverse realities faced by children and adolescents.

As discussed earlier, the criminalisation of early unions has prompted criticism from a human rights perspective. In addition to failing to address structural drivers, penalisation can, in some contexts, push unions further into hiding, making it more difficult to identify and support affected children and adolescents. Participating organisations noted that, in certain contexts, criminalisation reinforces longstanding prejudices against Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities, creating additional barriers to accessing justice and perpetuating discrimination and stigmatisation.

Furthermore, the legal frameworks regulating sexual consent often fail to recognise adolescents' evolving capacities and progressive autonomy. This results in tensions, as the law does not distinguish between abusive relationships and consensual ones. These legal norms treat all relationships between adolescents in the same way, overlooking contextual factors such as the nature of the relationship, the ages of those involved and the type of bond, ultimately stigmatising adolescent sexuality and restricting their ability to make free decisions about their sexual and affective lives.

A review of sexual consent regulations is therefore necessary to ensure coherence with a non-punitive approach to addressing child, early and forced marriages and unions.

The focus group with organisations revealed that the criminalisation of early unions has pushed many practices further underground, making them more difficult to identify and reducing the possibilities for timely support. In some cases, reports of relationships between adolescents have generated fear, stigmatisation or the breakdown of community networks, particularly when institutional responses fail to differentiate between contexts of violence and consensual peer relationships:

“MIGRANT ADOLESCENT GIRLS HAVE BEEN CRIMINALISED FOR ENTERING UNIONS WITH SOMEONE THEIR OWN AGE THERE WAS NO RECOGNITION OF THEIR CONTEXT OR THEIR RIGHT TO MAKE DECISIONS.”

For this reason, it is essential that governmental and civil society interventions to address CEFMU focus on recognising and guaranteeing the rights of children and adolescents. **This approach must take precedence over responses based solely or primarily on criminalisation, reserving punitive actions for the most serious cases—those involving violence, abuse, exploitation or coercion—while ensuring that the protection of girls and adolescents does not lead to measures that criminalise or stigmatise their decisions or circumstances.**

Criminalisation should be a complementary tool, not the central response, in order to avoid pushing these practices into hiding and perpetuating situations of vulnerability.

3.3.2 Implementation of current strategies

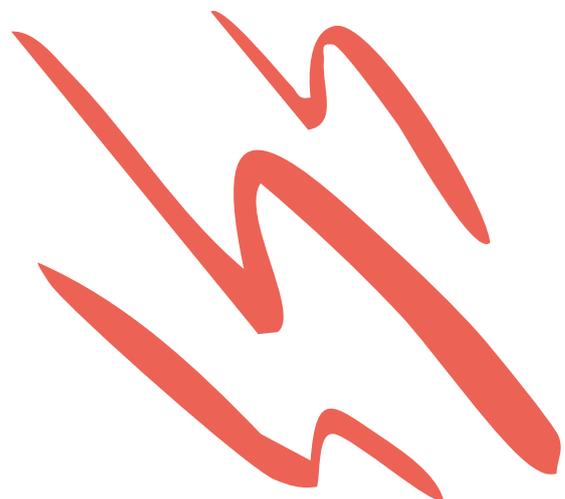
Strategies targeting the factors associated with CEFMU require coordinated action between government institutions and civil society organisations to expand their reach and effectiveness. While there are numerous initiatives focused on awareness-raising and information campaigns, there are far fewer concrete actions aimed at supporting children and adolescents who have already experienced CEFMU or its associated factors.

In fact, programmes directed at those who have already lived through a CEFMU are practically non-existent. As a result, adolescents who have left school, have children, or are currently in a union are left outside prevention frameworks and do not access reintegration measures, comprehensive support, or accompaniment.

Civil society organisations play a crucial role in accompaniment, policy advocacy and social transformation. However, they face significant limitations that restrict their reach and influence, such as:

- ✦ Insufficient territorial coverage in relation to the scale of the problem.
- ✦ High dependence on international and short-term funding, making long-term sustainability difficult.
- ✦ Lack of formal recognition and institutional collaboration.
- ✦ Challenges in influencing sustainable public policies.

These limitations highlight the need for public policies not only to recognise the work of civil society organisations, but also to strengthen their capacities through stable funding, formal participation spaces and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms.



3.4 Elements that promote the effectiveness of strategies

Despite the challenges, the actions implemented by civil society organisations and government institutions have identified key elements that increase effectiveness.

The strategies most closely aligned with a child-rights approach are those that combine prevention, response and rights restitution, and that place the rights of children and adolescents at the centre of interventions. Examples include programmes implemented by organisations such as OMM, GESMujer, Mano Vuelta, Las Vanders, Girl Up México, IDEAS Ch'ieltik and Balance A.C., which promote the autonomy of children and adolescents, comprehensive sexuality education, and capacity-strengthening.

With regard to forced unions, work with community leaders and families has proven to be an effective pathway for transforming the social and cultural norms that sustain CEFMU. This is demonstrated by the work of organisations such as Rinal Antzetik Guerrero, Mano Vuelta, Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo and IDEAS Ch'ieltik.

In relation to early unions, educational programmes that promote school retention and access to comprehensive sexuality education have shown positive results by strengthening the autonomy and informed decision-making of children and adolescents, helping them envision futures outside early unions.

As noted earlier, it is essential that responses to CEFMU prioritise the protection of the rights of children and adolescents, rather than punitive measures, in cases where the circumstances do not justify criminal intervention. This approach protects children and adolescents from stigmatisation and, crucially, from the secondary victimisation associated with engagement with the criminal justice system.

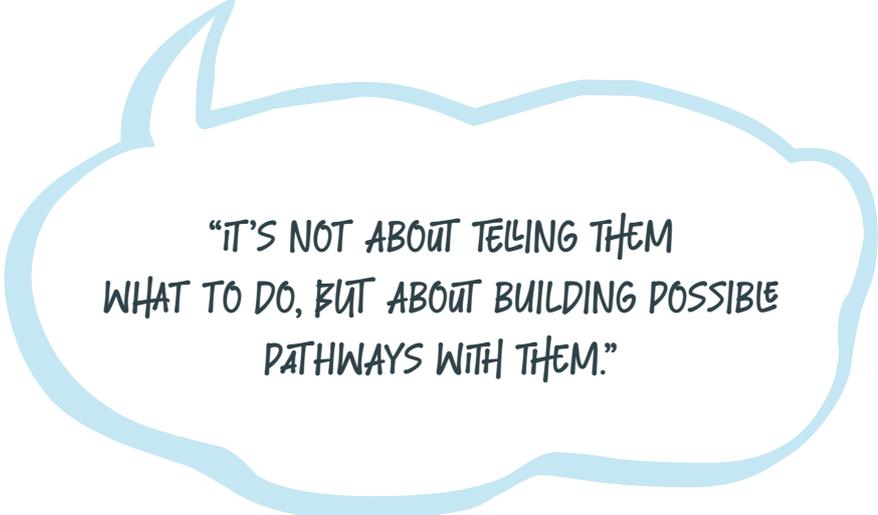
In line with this, it is important not to conflate minimum age of marriage regulations with sexual consent laws, as these frameworks address different rights and needs:

- ✦ **Minimum age for marriage:** protects against abuse and ensures the conditions for the full and healthy development of girls and adolescents.
- ✦ **Sexual consent:** recognises the evolving capacities and progressive autonomy of adolescents, enabling them to make free, informed and safe decisions regarding their sexuality.

Recognising that adolescents have evolving capacities does not mean reducing their protection; rather, it requires developing laws and policies that:

- ✦ Differentiate between abusive and consensual relationships.
- ✦ Promote access to comprehensive sexuality education and health services.
- ✦ Support their sexual and affective development in environments free from violence and coercion.

Organisations emphasise that what truly makes a difference is not the type of intervention itself, but how it is implemented—through listening, respect, and the recognition of adolescents' progressive autonomy. As one organisation summarised:



“IT’S NOT ABOUT TELLING THEM
WHAT TO DO, BUT ABOUT BUILDING POSSIBLE
PATHWAYS WITH THEM.”

ELEMENTS THAT ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC POLICIES:

- ✦ **Active, non-judgemental listening.** Adolescent girls particularly value spaces where they can talk about their experiences, doubts and decisions without being reprimanded or ridiculed. This strengthens their self-esteem and builds trust.
- ✦ **Sustained presence in communities.** Interventions that go beyond isolated campaigns or one-off visits and instead build long-term relationships demonstrate a greater ability to influence social norms and accompany personal processes.
- ✦ **Culturally and linguistically appropriate methodologies.** Using tools in Indigenous languages, accessible formats such as podcasts, community art or family learning circles makes it possible to reach a wider audience and foster reflection in everyday settings.
- ✦ **Adolescent participation.** Programmes that involve adolescents in the design, implementation or evaluation of actions strengthen their autonomy, sense of belonging and capacity for advocacy.
- ✦ **Real access to services and opportunities.** The most transformative strategies are those that not only provide information but also offer concrete pathways to study, work, access healthcare or leave situations of violence. The connection between the symbolic (empowerment) and the material (opportunities) is essential.

4. TOOL FOR ADDRESSING CEFMU



4.1 Guiding principles



non-punitive approach to child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU), grounded in a rights-based perspective for children and adolescents, requires a solid foundation to guide all actions and interventions.

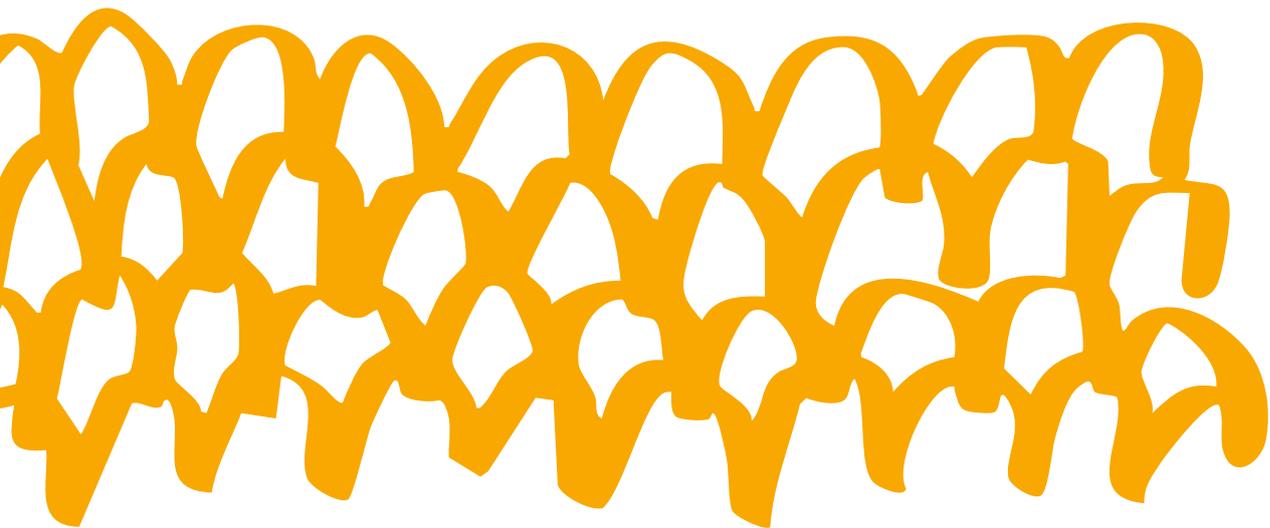
The following principles summarise the lessons learned from fieldwork, documentary analysis and the experience of Girls Not Brides member organisations in Mexico. Together, they provide direction for transformative, respectful and effective action.

- 1. Non-punitive approach:** This approach recognises that criminal law is not a sufficient response to CEFMU. As highlighted by GNB member organisations, strategies that rely exclusively on punishment tend to overlook structural causes, push practices into hiding and revictimise children and adolescents—particularly in contexts of precarity. A non-punitive approach prioritises social transformation, respectful accompaniment and the creation of real alternatives to early unions.
- 2. Recognition of progressive autonomy and evolving capacities:** Children and adolescents are rights-holders with increasing capacity to make decisions about their lives. This principle implies moving away from the assumption that adults always know what is best, and instead working with adolescents to build pathways that enable them to exercise their autonomy safely, informedly and with support.
- 3. Meaningful participation of children and adolescents:** The voices, experiences and proposals of children and adolescents must be taken seriously in the prevention and response to CEFMU. Incorporating their perspectives—collected through diverse participatory tools—ensures that this framework aligns more closely with their concerns, priorities and lived realities.

4. Intersectional and gender-transformative perspective: Addressing CEFMU requires recognising how gender inequalities intersect with other forms of exclusion, such as poverty, ethnic discrimination, migration, age, disability or sexual orientation..

5. Territorial, cultural and community contextualisation: CEFMU do not occur in isolation or in a homogeneous way; rather, they reflect the specific norms, conditions and social dynamics of each territory. Effective actions are those that understand these realities, are built with and from the communities, and respect their knowledge and organisational practices. Rather than imposing external models, the aim is to walk alongside communities to jointly transform the conditions that perpetuate these practices.

6. Centrality of care and accompaniment: : Care—not surveillance or punishment—must be the foundation of interventions. This means providing support grounded in respect, attentive listening and trust, to create safe environments; protecting without stripping adolescents of agency; and building community networks that enable them to exercise their right to live free from violence, to make decisions, and to imagine and pursue possible futures.



4.2 Guidelines for the design of public policies

Addressing child, early and forced marriages and unions requires comprehensive, sustained and specific public policies that go beyond legal prohibition and are grounded in a deep understanding of the realities experienced by children and adolescents across different contexts in the country.

Drawing from the data collection and analysis process, key principles and recommendations were identified to guide the design and implementation of public policies from a human rights, progressive autonomy and social justice approach.

A. Making the issue visible and recognising it as a priority

Although there are laws and strategies that address aspects related to CEFMU, there is still no specific public policy that recognises them as a structural and multifactorial issue. Participating organisations noted that this absence contributes to fragmented efforts and the persistence of partial responses.

It is also necessary to broaden the understanding of the contexts in which CEFMU occur, moving beyond approaches that situate them exclusively in Indigenous or rural communities. Interviews showed that they also take place in urban, migratory, school and family settings marked by stigma and social control.

It is therefore essential for this category to be explicitly incorporated into the various national public policy programmes relevant to addressing CEFMU, not only as a cross-cutting issue but as a component with its own identity, as shown in the following table:

NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAMMES WHERE CEFMU-RELATED ACTIONS CAN BE INCORPORATED

National Programme for Equality between Women and Men (Proigualdad 2025-2030)

- ✦ Recognising CEFMU as a specific form of structural violence against girls and adolescents, distinct from other forms of violence.
- ✦ Establishing prevention, support, accompaniment and restitution measures outside the criminal justice system, prioritising progressive autonomy.
- ✦ Promoting community-based strategies to transform gender norms.

National Programme for the Protection of Children and (PRONAPINNA 2025-2030)

- ✦ Recognising CEFMU as a structural issue rather than solely as an expression of violence or adolescent pregnancy.
- ✦ Creating a specific line of action focused on comprehensive prevention and care, including protection pathways and guidance for restitution plans.
- ✦ Coordinating actions with state and municipal SIPINNA systems to identify and accompany cases through a non-punitive approach.



**National Youth
Programme
(Projuventud
2025–2030)**

Developing educational, economic and psychosocial reintegration strategies for adolescents who have already experienced CEMU.
Clearly distinguishing between adolescent pregnancy and CEFMU, with specific lines of action tailored to each issue.
Strengthening access to culturally relevant sexual and reproductive health services.
Designing specific measures for adolescents who are already in unions or are adolescent mothers, ensuring access to education, psychosocial support and informed decision-making.

B. Designing inclusive and intersectional public policies

Organisations highlighted the need to make visible the specific conditions faced by certain children and adolescents that place them at heightened risk of CEFMU. These include LGBTQ+ adolescents, those with disabilities, Indigenous and Afro-Mexican adolescents, those in contexts of mobility or forced displacement, and those living in marginalised urban areas.

To respond to these realities, public policies must incorporate an intersectional and differentiated approach, with measures that acknowledge the diverse forms of vulnerability and discrimination experienced by children and adolescents. This requires generating disaggregated data not only by gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, ethnic origin and migration status, but also by educational level, socioeconomic context, and rural or urban setting.

At the same time, it is essential to promote research and collect qualitative data using participatory and collaborative approaches, working alongside civil society organisations that hold territorial knowledge, community-based methodologies and relationships of trust with local communities.

Such efforts will help make visible the specific impacts of CEFMU on different groups of adolescents and support the design of more precise, inclusive and culturally relevant public policies. The absence of comprehensive and disaggregated data makes it difficult to identify those in situations of greatest vulnerability and limits the effectiveness of both state and community-based interventions.

C. Moving beyond prohibitionist and punitive approaches

While criminal law may have a role to play in serious cases involving violence, coercion or abuse of power, it should not be the only—or the main—tool of intervention. Criminalisation without accompaniment can deepen clandestinity, generate fear and exclude adolescents from institutional support.

It is crucial that public policies recognise the diversity of forms that CEFMU can take and respond with differentiated measures. This requires distinguishing between these forms of unions according to the degree of agency involved and the conditions that surround them:

- 1. Voluntary unions between adolescent peers:** refers to decisions made without violence or direct pressure, generally between individuals of similar age and circumstances. Although these unions may involve risks such as school dropout, they require an approach based on accompaniment, access to rights, and respect for adolescents' evolving capacities and progressive autonomy.
- 2. Coerced or context-driven unions:** refers to situations where, although there is no direct violence, decisions are heavily shaped by factors such as poverty, pregnancy, lack of support networks, community pressure, or the perception that "there is no other option". These unions call for policies addressing structural prevention, psychosocial support, and real alternatives (educational, economic, social) that make free decision-making possible
- 3. Forced unions due to family or community pressure:** refers to cases in which adolescents are explicitly compelled—through imposition or pressure—to enter a union. These situations require non-penal interventions and tools to relieve or resolve such pressure without criminalising family members.
- 4. Forced unions involving violence or exploitation:** represents the most severe forms of unions, in which consent is entirely overridden, involving direct violence and multiple, systemic human rights violations. These cases often stem from criminal conduct used to conceal sexual offences, sexual exploitation, servitude, or other forms of trafficking in persons. Here, the union serves as a mechanism to perpetuate or disguise abuse. Given their severity, such unions warrant investigation and sanctioning of perpetrators under the applicable criminal framework, while recognising that the response cannot be limited exclusively to punitive measures.

This distinction makes it possible to design more effective interventions, without criminalising adolescents' decisions or overlooking real forms of violence.



How can the use of criminal law be justified in certain cases without contradicting a non-punitive approach?

The non-punitive approach proposed in this tool advocates for the proportional, contextualised and human-rights-centred use of criminal law. Punishment alone does not address the structural causes of child, early and forced marriages and unions. However, it is also recognised that there are situations of extreme gravity in which the integrity, freedom or life of a person under 18 is at risk, where criminal intervention is not only a mechanism of control but can also serve as a measure of protection.

This tool does not promote the automatic use of criminal law. Instead, it proposes three guiding principles for determining when its application may be appropriate::

- ✦ Proportionality: criminal intervention is only justified when there is severe harm to fundamental rights (for example, sexual violence, trafficking, exploitation).
- ✦ Subsidiarity: the criminal system is activated only when other mechanisms have been insufficient to protect the adolescent, or when the conduct constitutes an offence that goes beyond the union itself.
- ✦ Protection without revictimisation: even when criminal processes are activated, they must operate under a human-rights approach, avoiding harm to the adolescent's autonomy, dignity and evolving capacities.

In other words, criminal law may play a role, but never as the sole or primary response. It should remain a measure of last resort (*ultima ratio*) for the most serious cases, always subordinate to the wellbeing and informed decisions of the adolescent concerned.

What does this mean in practice?

1. Adolescents' decisions are not criminalised, even when those decisions may be complex or influenced by external circumstances.
2. Families or communities are not criminalised for cultural practices unless their actions involve violence or offences that warrant proportionate sanction.
3. Exploitation, sexual violence and trafficking are sanctioned, as part of the State's obligation to protect those who are at risk.

D. Ensure effective access to Rights

Public policies must focus on guaranteeing the structural conditions that prevent children and adolescents from being pushed into unions as the only perceived option. Likewise, for those already in a union, policies must ensure access to services that allow them to maintain or rebuild a dignified life project.

This implies ensuring, in a comprehensive manner and with a rights-based perspective:

✦ **Access to flexible and inclusive education** recognising interrupted school trajectories and offering specific support (such as scholarships, materials, blended learning modalities, or psycho-educational guidance) for those who have been unable to continue their studies due to early unions or early motherhood/fatherhood.

✦ **Free, confidential and culturally relevant sexual and reproductive health services.** with gender, adolescent and intercultural approaches. This includes access to contraception, information on sexual and reproductive rights, care for unwanted pregnancies and access to safe, legal abortion.

✦ **Comprehensive protection against violence, including emotional support, psychological care, and legal guidance.** Responses should focus on care, not surveillance or punishment, and ensure that children and adolescents who have experienced relationships are not revictimised.

✦ **Educational, employment and economic opportunities for adolescent parents and/or those in relationships,** enabling them to maintain or build a dignified, autonomous and violence-free life. This requires specific training programmes, job placement, financial support and childcare services.

Este enfoque debe traducirse en políticas con asignación presupuestal clara, indicadores de seguimiento, participación adolescente en su diseño y evaluación, y articulación entre los sectores involucrados.

E. Promote territorial and intergenerational interventions

Systematised experiences from member organisations show that sustainable transformations occur when actions are rooted in communities and involve all relevant actors: families, local authorities, schools, community committees, religious leaders and adolescents.

Civil society organisations working in rural, Indigenous, urban-peripheral and mobility contexts have demonstrated that processes are most effective when:

✦ They recognise the central role of communities in driving transformation.

✦ They provide accompaniment without imposing, building trust and dialogue with all actors: families, traditional authorities, schools, community committees, religious leaders and, above all, adolescents.

✦ They are sustained over time, with continuous presence and affective relationships.

Public policies must learn from these practices and move beyond centralised design, strengthening inter-institutional work and collaboration with civil society. This includes integrating territorial organisations as strategic allies, not merely temporary project implementers; ensuring funding for community-based processes; and strengthening local child-protection systems by equipping them with the tools, training and resources needed to provide close, sensitive and rights-based accompaniment.

In addition, policies must recognise that children and adolescents are not merely a “vulnerable population” to be protected, but persons with agency, analytical capacity and their own proposals. Therefore, public policies should:

- ✦ Include the direct participation of adolescents in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of actions that affect them, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but have real influence.
- ✦ Avoid tutelary or adult-centric approaches that silence young people or reduce their participation to symbolic or decorative mechanisms.
- ✦ Promote the creation of safe, caring and community-based spaces where adolescents can access information, express themselves, imagine alternatives and make decisions without fear, judgement or punishment.

4.3 Strategies

The strategies presented here were developed through qualitative analysis of information gathered from interviews, questionnaires and focus groups conducted with civil society organisations within the Girls Not Brides Mexico membership, as well as with adolescents from different regions of the country. These voices and experiences help identify which practices are most useful, accessible, relevant and respectful of the rights of children and adolescents.

Rather than proposing single models or universal responses, these strategies are intended as **flexible tools** that can be adapted to the specific characteristics of each community, always grounded in the principles of a **non-punitive, rights-centred approach**.

4.3.1 Prevention

Prevention is a constitutional duty of the Mexican State, framed within its obligation to protect the human rights of children and adolescents,⁵⁹ including their right to live free from violence, to make decisions about their own bodies, to have opportunities to build a life project, and to develop holistically

From a rights-based approach, prevention means adopting the necessary measures to avoid human rights violations,⁵⁹ which, in this context, requires designing and implementing conditions that reduce vulnerability and strengthen the capacities of girls, boys and adolescents to exercise their rights.

Information aimed at children and adolescents

There is a clear need to strengthen and diversify systematic and culturally relevant actions to disseminate information on:

- ✦ **Sexual and reproductive rights**, presented clearly and without stigma, and framed within an approach that recognises the structural inequalities faced due to sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, migratory status, disability and ethnicity.
- ✦ **Consent**, understood as an ongoing, free, and informed practice within affective and sexual relationships.
- ✦ **Autonomy and fundamental rights of children and adolescents**, recognising their capacity and right to participate in decisions that affect them.
- ✦ **Consequences of early unions**, highlighting the real effects and the alternative pathways available.
- ✦ **Social and emotional skills**, such as assertive communication, conflict resolution, self-care, and emotional expression.
- ✦ **Support for building life projects**, enabling adolescents to imagine and plan for desired and dignified futures.
- ✦ **Digital education**, including the prevention of grooming, identifying risks on social media and gaming platforms, and critically reflecting on the unequal relationship models promoted in digital environments.

59 Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Case of González et al. (“Cotton Field”) v. Mexico, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment of 16 November 2009, Series C No. 205, para. 258.

Incorporating a perspective on masculinities is essential to ensure that this information is not directed exclusively at girls and adolescent women. It is crucial to include boys, adolescent boys and people with masculine identities as part of the transformative process. This implies:

- ↑ **Challenge traditional masculinity norms** that legitimise control, emotional silence or the validation of unequal relationships.
- ↑ **Promote ways of being or identifying as a man that are rooted in respect, care, consent, and shared responsibility.**
- ↑ **Engaging adolescent boys in reflective and participatory processes** that help them build more equitable relationships and understand the impact of their decisions and behaviours.

Additionally, it is necessary to integrate activities that provide information on sex-gender dissidence, in order to promote respect for diversity and prevent the reproduction of stigma or violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity. These activities should create safe spaces for dialogue in which adolescents can reflect on gender norms, egalitarian relationships and the recognition of diversities.

This must be done through accessible and appealing formats for children and adolescents, recognising their languages, media and ways of engaging with knowledge. For example, adolescents noted that although they frequently use digital platforms and video games, these channels rarely include information that is useful or relevant to them.



Interviews with adolescents also revealed that school is the most valued space for receiving this type of information. However, many expressed that current content is insufficient, disconnected from their interests, or presented in an adult-centric manner.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

- ✦ Support processes for producing materials on diverse topics with adolescents.
- ✦ Promote collaborations with schools, community media and digital content creators to disseminate relevant and respectful messages.
- ✦ Work to ensure that school programmes include Comprehensive Sexuality Education with a rights-, gender- and interculturality-based approach.
- ✦ Promote safe spaces for dialogue —such as reflection circles, youth clubs, and mixed and non-mixed groups (e.g., groups for adolescent boys, or for girls and adolescent girls)— where participants can talk without judgement about their lives, relationships, bodies and rights.
- ✦ Promote the use of active methodologies: theatre, art, life-mapping, cooperative games, visual storytelling.
- ✦ Document good practices in education for equality and CEFMU prevention.
- ✦ Develop practical digital literacy workshops in communities and schools.

WHAT CAN AUTHORITIES DO?

- ✦ Promote the inclusion of updated, comprehensive content with a gender perspective in school programs.
- ✦ Include compulsory content on sexual and reproductive rights, consent, autonomy, gender, diversity and masculinities in primary and secondary curricula, adapted to age and cultural context.
- ✦ Provide continuous training for teachers, school leaders and support staff in Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), gender perspective, intercultural and participatory methodologies with children and adolescents.
- ✦ Facilitate alliances with community radio stations, digital content creators and local media to produce and disseminate accessible and culturally relevant content.
- ✦ Develop specific indicators to measure the involvement of adolescent boys in State-led prevention efforts.
- ✦ Promote the creation of student councils of adolescents to participate in defining preventive content and strategies.
- ✦ Fund community-led projects run by young people—such as clubs, campaigns or creative labs—in rural, Indigenous or high-incidence CEFMU contexts.
- ✦ Include digital education and risk prevention in school programs.
- ✦ Collaborate actively with civil society and community-based organisations to ensure the sustainability, cultural relevance and scalability of successful interventions focused on CEFMU prevention.

Intervention with families and communities

Promoting changes in the social norms, beliefs, and practices that legitimize or encourage early unions is essential. This requires working directly with families, local authorities, community leaders, and significant adults to transform perceptions about adolescence, motherhood, sexuality, and the social value assigned to girls.

Families were identified as key actors who, in many cases, incentivize unions—especially in situations involving pregnancy or economic hardship. In some contexts, the decision to enter a union is not made by adolescents themselves, but negotiated among adults as a “solution” to a situation that is socially disapproved of or economically unsustainable.

The organisation **Las Vanders** develops community and family spaces for intergenerational dialogue, such as the *Escuela de Familias* (Family School), where topics such as wellbeing, adolescent autonomy, and the redefinition of caregiving roles are addressed. These actions have helped dismantle family pressures toward forced or early unions.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

- ✦ Conduct participatory community assessments to understand the realities, beliefs, concerns and practices surrounding early unions—drawing directly from the voices of community members. This helps identify key actors, trusted communication channels (community radio, churches, health centres, etc.), and local narratives around CEFMU.
- ✦ Design interventions grounded in the community context, using language, timing, and values that resonate locally.
- ✦ Implement workshops or community dialogues in collaboration with traditional and family leaders.
- ✦ Facilitate safe intergenerational spaces for conversations on autonomy, gender, and adolescence.
- ✦ Acknowledge and work through resistance as part of the process.
- ✦ Promote local media campaigns that challenge the normalization of early and forced unions.

WHAT CAN AUTHORITIES DO?

- ✦ Through state and municipal SIPINNA bodies, develop community-based diagnostics and specific lines of action focused on transforming social norms, roles, and gender stereotypes to prevent CEFMU—engaging community leaders, traditional authorities, school committees, and local health networks.
- ✦ Create or strengthen programmes that promote reflection on autonomy, adolescence, caregiving, and egalitarian relationships.
- ✦ Train community promoters, health personnel, teachers, and local officials in gender perspectives, diversity, evolving capacities, and the rights of children and adolescents.
- ✦ Finance and implement communication campaigns aimed at families and communities about the impacts of CEFMU and the value of adolescent life projects, using narratives that are close to the community and free of stigma.
- ✦ Identify, document, and scale successful practices and experiences that are already taking place in different territories

Institutional and Community responsibilities

Establishing clear administrative mechanisms that assign responsibilities to local institutions—educational, health, and social protection systems—is key to identifying risk factors and activating preventive measures. Authorities across sectors must understand themselves as responsible for prevention.

Focus groups and interviews revealed that school committees, teachers, municipal authorities, and health personnel often know about early unions but do not intervene—or even legitimize them. Some institutions adopt measures that effectively encourage formalizing the union (such as notifying families or applying school sanctions related to dating).

In several communities, **Ch'ieltik** has worked with schools to activate local protection protocols when adolescent pregnancies or risks of school dropout are identified, prioritizing accompaniment rather than punishment. This type of intervention has prevented early or forced unions in multiple cases.

This requires developing administrative and community mechanisms that go beyond criminal sanctions, such as school protocols, care pathways in health centers, guidelines for municipal authorities, and community protection systems. These mechanisms should establish how and when to intervene, clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each actor, and always within a framework that respects adolescents' autonomy.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

- ✦ Monitor the response of local authorities and schools when facing risk situations.
- ✦ Support the development of protocols for addressing CEFMU and related risk factors, as well as early warning signs (school dropout, adolescent pregnancy, community rumors).
- ✦ Promote the adoption of community and inter-institutional prevention protocols grounded in a rights-based approach.
- ✦ Participate in municipal SIPINNA bodies or school committees as strategic allies, strengthening the functions of local, state, and federal protection systems through their interventions.

WHAT CAN AUTHORITIES DO?

- ✦ Design and disseminate specific protocols for schools, health centers, municipal authorities, and DIF systems on how to respond to CEFMU risk factors (adolescent pregnancy, school dropout, community rumors, etc.).
- ✦ Clearly establish the concrete responsibilities each sector must assume (education, health, protection, municipal justice) in preventing early unions.
- ✦ Establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms for school, municipal, or health authorities who, through actions or omissions, legitimize, allow, or promote early unions as an institutional response.
- ✦ Ensure that all municipal and local SIPINNA bodies include CEFMU prevention in their agenda and have a specific action plan.

Harmonisation of the legal framework (Civil and Administrative)

It is essential to establish clear regulations that prohibit CEFMU and assign specific preventive responsibilities to local authorities, without shifting this obligation to the criminal justice system. The legal framework must be accompanied by monitoring mechanisms and administrative consequences for authorities that act negligently or fail to act. Although Mexican civil legislation already prohibits child marriage, its implementation remains weak, as there are no operational obligations for civil registry offices, community authorities or educational institutions that detect situations of early unions.

Thanks to legislative advocacy efforts by civil society organisations, the minimum age of 18 for marriage has been harmonised across all 32 states, eliminating exceptions. However, the legal framework still lacks administrative instruments to ensure effective preventive compliance at the local level.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

- ✦ Identify state and community regulations related to the responsibilities of authorities in the protection and guarantee of the rights of children and adolescents.
- ✦ Advocate, when relevant for the territory, for the regulation of civil laws to incorporate specific preventive obligations.
- ✦ Monitor compliance with legal provisions in communities where unions have been detected.
- ✦ Promote citizen oversight and social accountability mechanisms to ensure that local authorities fulfill their preventive role.

WHAT CAN AUTHORITIES DO?

At the federal (national) level

- ✦ Issue (through the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Women or the National SIPINNA) minimum criteria for the civil and administrative regulation of the prohibition of child marriage, adopting a non-punitive, rights-based approach.
- ✦ Consider amending the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents to strengthen preventive actions on CEFMU and establish a regime of non-criminal responsibilities in cases of non-compliance.

At the state level

- ✦ Consider reforming civil registry regulations to include concrete measures to prevent informal unions, such as the obligation to notify Child Protection Offices when a union involving a person under 18 is detected, in order to enable support and follow-up.
- ✦ Through state-level child rights laws, establish explicit duties for preventing CEFMU.

At the municipal level

- ✦ Incorporate specific clauses in municipal police and good governance regulations that recognise CEFMU as a harmful practice and prohibit its institutional legitimisation.
- ✦ Promote the creation of municipal inter sectoral action protocols (civil registry, health, education, security, social development) for responding to risk situations, prioritising accompaniment and the restoration of rights.

4.3.2 Support and Accompaniment

Support and accompaniment, as part of the State's obligation to guarantee and protect fundamental⁶⁰ rights, entail the duty to act immediately, in a coordinated manner, and with a rights-based approach when situations arise that affect the wellbeing, safety, and development of children and adolescents.

In the context of CEFMU, this means responding when a union has already occurred or is taking place — not to punish, but to **support, accompany, protect, restore rights, and ensure that dignified alternatives are available.**

Responses cannot be reduced to criminal complaints or to forcing a separation, nor should they ignore the complexity of the decisions, emotions, contexts, and relationships that shape the lives of those under 18 involved in these unions. It is essential to avoid revictimisation, adult-centrism, and the criminalisation of adolescents or their families, particularly in contexts of poverty, migration, or marginalisation.

A non-punitive response

Not all unions entail the same level of violence or occur under the same conditions, and responding to all of them in the same way obscures important differences and can cause further harm.

Inter-institutional support pathways must be developed that prioritise integral protection, active listening, access to services, and meaningful accompaniment. These pathways should be grounded in an understanding of the individual, emotional, educational, health-related and life-project needs of children and adolescents who have experienced early or forced unions.

Balance A.C. offers accompaniment and legal guidance to adolescents in early unions who have experienced violence, and to pregnant adolescents seeking abortion care, without moral judgement or criminalisation.

From a feminist and reproductive justice perspective, they center wellbeing, autonomy, and access to clear and respectful information. Based on the findings collected in this research, the following differentiated support pathways are proposed for four types of situations:

60 Article 1 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States.

Types of unions

Voluntary unions between adolescent peers

	Risks	What can organisations do?	What can the authorities do?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ School exclusion ✦ Family or social isolation ✦ Gender-based inequalities within the relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Provide clear information on rights, sexual and reproductive health, and the possible consequences of early unions. ✦ Offer emotional, educational and legal support and accompaniment, without judgment or pressure. ✦ Facilitate access to essential services (schooling, health, legal guidance) without imposing separation. ✦ Engage the family environment in the process from a standpoint that respects adolescents' decisions and contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Assess the situation carefully, using a rights-based approach and ensuring the adolescent's meaningful participation. ✦ Acknowledge the relationship as part of adolescents' affective development, without sanctions. ✦ Ensure that both adolescents have priority access to social programs (education, housing, childcare, food support, sexual and reproductive health, employment). ✦ Prevent any form of criminalisation, including punitive school measures or family sanctions encouraged by local authorities.

Conditioned unions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Abandonment of personal projects ✦ Family or partner control ✦ Suppression or invisibilisation of the adolescent's true wishes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Offer real and accessible alternatives (educational, economic, emotional). ✦ Ensure psychosocial support and accompaniment without resorting to criminalisation. ✦ Build community-based care networks that actively involve boys, men, and masculinities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Provide priority access to social programs on education, housing, childcare, food support, sexual and reproductive health, and employment. ✦ Offer scholarships or incentives for school retention for adolescents in unions or those who are mothers/fathers. ✦ Establish non-intrusive, non-moralising follow-up mechanisms that respect adolescents' agency and decisions.
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Unions under family or community pressure

- ✦ Loss of autonomy
- ✦ Institutional revictimisation
- ✦ Family conflict or rupture
- ✦ Normalisation of coercion

- ✦ Activate non-punitive protection pathways.
- ✦ Prioritise the adolescent's will and provide comprehensive accompaniment.
- ✦ Offer spaces for building life projects.
- ✦ Facilitate access to programs on education, housing, child-care, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, and employment.

- ✦ Ensure that child-protection institutions respond immediately with an individualised plan, avoiding punitive or invasive actions.
- ✦ Avoid forced separation from the family unless a real, assessed risk exists and with the adolescent's consent.
- ✦ Use municipal child-protection systems to convene restorative dialogue processes with families, centring the adolescent's wishes.
- ✦ Guarantee priority access to programmes on education, housing, care, food, sexual and reproductive health, and employment.

Forced unions involving

- ✦ Physical and sexual violence
- ✦ Trauma
- ✦ Exploitation or risk of trafficking
- ✦ Impunity if the State fails to respond

- ✦ Guarantee urgent protection through non-penal mechanisms such as protection orders or child-protection institutions.
- ✦ Activate psychological and social support.
- ✦ Facilitate access to restorative justice processes.

- ✦ Activate immediate protection pathways through Child Protection Offices.
- ✦ Provide urgent protective measures.
- ✦ Ensure free, specialised legal representation with a gender and child-rights perspective.
- ✦ Evaluate the need for penal action, avoiding the criminalisation of adolescents or their families.

Adopting approaches to address CEFMU from a non-punitive perspective requires recognising that not all child or early unions have the same origins or effects, and therefore each one demands differentiated responses that take into account adolescents' experiences, levels of autonomy, available resources, and life contexts.

Keys to recognising consent and autonomy in adolescent relationships

With the aim of avoiding indiscriminate criminal responses and ensuring effective protection for children and adolescents, the following criteria are proposed to help distinguish between abusive relationships and consensual relationships between adolescent peers, acknowledging the nuances and diverse realities that shape these situations:⁶¹

61 Some of these elements are taken from the General Recommendation of the Committee of Experts of MESCEVI (No. 3): The concept of consent in cases of gender-based sexual violence against women; MESECVI/CEVI/doc.267/21, December 2021. Available at: https://www.oas.org/es/mesecvi/docs/MESECVI_CEVI_doc.267_21. ESP. RecomendacionGeneralConsentimientoSexual.XVIII%20CEVI.pdf

1. **Age difference:** This is a key indicator for identifying potential power asymmetries. Some comparative legal systems establish a close-in-age exception, which allows for differentiation between relationships where adolescents are of similar ages.⁶²
2. **Progressive autonomy and consent:** This may involve an informal assessment of whether the adolescent expressed their consent freely and in an informed manner, taking into account whether family, community or emotional pressures may have influenced their decision.
3. **Power or dependency dynamics (abuse of power or oppression):** This includes identifying whether there is a relationship of authority or subordination (such as a teacher, guardian, employer, community authority, or a family member in a dominant role). In such cases, even when consent appears to exist, structural limitations may prevent it from being exercised freely.
4. **Context and nature of the relationship:** This includes identifying signs of control, manipulation, blackmail, isolation, or the exchange of favours.
5. **Consequences for the adolescent:** This involves assessing whether the relationship has caused harm to the adolescent's physical, emotional, educational, or social wellbeing. In such situations, an intervention focused on comprehensive protection may be required even if no criminal offence has occurred.

These criteria are not intended to justify abusive relationships, but rather to guide decision-making processes that are more proportionate and centred on the best interests of children and adolescents. Their application ensures that punitive measures are used only when the circumstances genuinely warrant the State's penal powers.

4.3.3 Recovery and Social Reintegration

Recovery and social reintegration are State obligations aimed at restoring the full exercise of rights for children and adolescents who have experienced child, early or forced marriages and unions (CEFMU).⁶³ From a rights-based perspective, the aim is not to "correct" a decision, but to support the reconstruction of their life projects, recognising that these experiences often interrupt or derail essential developmental processes.

This component of the approach requires building conditions that enable those under 18 to regain their autonomy, emotional wellbeing, access to services, and their place within the community—free from stigma or exclusion. It demands sustained, non-punitive responses grounded in care, respect, and active listening.

62 This is generally considered an exception to sexual consent. It is in force in countries such as Canada and some states in the United States.

63 In accordance with Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Educational and economic reintegration

Developing specific programmes that allow adolescents who have experienced CEFMU to resume their studies, access autonomous livelihoods, and receive institutional support adapted to their circumstances, including:

- ✦ scholarships,
- ✦ flexible educational options,
- ✦ technical and vocational training,
- ✦ access to childcare,
- ✦ care services, and
- ✦ pathways to labour-market insertion.

The analysis found that adolescents who have experienced early unions often struggle to return to school or access existing social programmes, as these rarely take their particular life trajectories into account. In many cases, their circumstances—such as motherhood, domestic responsibilities or periods of isolation—exclude them from general public policies..

Girl Up Mexico, Ch’ieltik and Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo have developed programmes that combine youth leadership strengthening, access to STEAM training (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics), and psychosocial support, with particular attention to adolescents who have interrupted their studies. These initiatives have shown impact in rebuilding self-esteem and enabling the construction of autonomous life projects.



WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

- ✦ Promote the design of school and labour reintegration programmes with differentiated criteria for adolescents who are in a union or experiencing early motherhood/fatherhood.
- ✦ Support training processes for employment grounded in gender and rights perspectives.
- ✦ Facilitate community tutoring, reading circles or peer-learning spaces to strengthen confidence and basic academic skills.
- ✦ Support access to existing economic assistance programmes to prevent exclusion due to age, marital status or other barriers.
- ✦ Build partnerships with vocational training institutions, cooperatives or socially responsible businesses to facilitate adolescents' entry into the labour market.
- ✦ Advocate for the creation of care systems that reduce the burden on adolescents with caregiving responsibilities while they study or work.
- ✦ Support the development and visualisation of a life project shaped by adolescents' own desires and capacities.
- ✦ Document and highlight the structural barriers faced by adolescents when attempting to return to school or work.

WHAT CAN AUTHORITIES DO?

- ✦ Issue mandatory guidelines requiring all public and private schools to admit adolescents who are pregnant, mothers/fathers, or in early unions, without conditions or stigma.
- ✦ Explicitly prohibit restrictions based on marital status, pregnancy, age or appearance.
- ✦ Implement flexible and adapted education models (semi-presential, adjusted schedules, itinerant or community-based) for adolescents with caregiving responsibilities.
- ✦ Include academic support and tutoring strategies.
- ✦ Expand the public offer of free childcare centres, community care services and early childhood centres for adolescent mothers and fathers.
- ✦ Eliminate age, schooling or marital-status requirements that exclude adolescents from programmes related to cash transfers, food assistance, housing or youth employment.

Long-term impact

These experiences generate cumulative effects that can shape adolescents' emotional health, educational trajectories, economic autonomy, and personal relationships well into adulthood. It is therefore essential to recognise that the consequences of early unions do not end when the union takes place. Recovery requires sustained, long-term action rather than brief or purely assistance-based interventions.

Interviews show that adolescents who experienced early unions often face social isolation, school dropout, economic dependence, and feelings of frustration or low self-esteem—even years later. Some never received any support, and when they attempted to re-enter school or training programmes, they encountered regulatory barriers, stigma, or a lack of realistic options.

MEXFAM has developed pathways for psychosocial support and sexual and reproductive health care for adolescents in unions, through sustained processes that include emotional support, rights-based education, and referral to public services.

The Hunger Project Mexico promotes long-term accompaniment processes for adolescents who are already in unions but seek to regain control over their lives. Through community strengthening and youth participation, these adolescents are able to reorganise their life projects without being stigmatised or pushed out of the social fabric.

Thus, recovery and social reintegration processes must not aim to “correct” or impose decisions, but rather to restore rights, rebuild relationships, and open pathways for girls and adolescents to regain control over their life projects in conditions of dignity, care, and freedom.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

- † Promote community processes of emotional accompaniment and peer support networks.
- † Design safe spaces where adolescents can rebuild their self-esteem, speak about their experiences without judgement, and plan new life projects.

WHAT CAN AUTHORITIES DO?

- † Enable in community centres, cultural houses, or school spaces places where adolescents can meet, share experiences, rebuild self-esteem, and plan new projects.
- † Incorporate specific measures within Development Plans, Youth Plans, Gender Equality Plans, and Comprehensive Child Protection Plans.
- † Establish mechanisms for the participation of adolescents who have experienced unions in the design of programmes, policies, and plans.
- † Promote community campaigns to destigmatise adolescents in unions and foster their inclusion in local social, cultural, and economic life.

Accompanying the reconstruction of life projects is only one part of the process; the other is transforming the environments that shape and constrain them.

4.3.4 Transformation

Transformation is a responsibility of both the State and communities, going beyond addressing consequences or preventing risks. It requires modifying the structural, cultural and symbolic conditions that reproduce discrimination, gender-based violence and impunity, which give rise to human rights violations,⁶⁴ in this case, those related to CEFMU.

64 In accordance with Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

From a non-punitive perspective, transformation does not mean imposing new norms by force. Rather, it means creating sustained processes of social change in which children, adolescents and communities can build new ways of relating to one another, exercising their rights, and making free and safe decisions.

Gender transformative approaches (GTAs) seek to challenge and transform the root causes of gender inequality, prompting deep reflection in order to question and change the social norms and roles that directly affect girls, adolescents, young women and people of diverse gender identities. Rather than merely asking whether an intervention has a gender perspective, GTAs seek to identify whether an intervention genuinely questions and shifts the social imaginaries on which gender inequality is built. They recognise that gender-transformative interventions emerge from long-term processes of learning, unlearning and collective reflection that require the participation of multiple actors.

While various approaches aimed at transforming the prevalence of CEFMU have already been presented, below are the perspectives that most directly foster transformation:

1. VISIBILITY AND RECOGNITION OF THE PROBLEM.

- ✦ The adolescents interviewed noted that early unions occur frequently in their surroundings, but these are not always named as such.
- ✦ The lack of sustained visibility leads many adults and decision-makers to underestimate the magnitude and complexity of the issue.
- ✦ It is therefore essential to recognise that CEFMU does not only occur in rural or Indigenous communities; it is also present in urban, migratory and diverse family contexts, although it is often concealed under other relational forms or hidden due to stigma and fear of judgement.

2. TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS THROUGH GTAS

- ✦ In many communities, CEFMU are normalised as part of the “natural path” for adolescent girls. In this context, gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) are a fundamental tool, as CEFMU are rooted in a system of beliefs, practices and structures that reinforce gender inequality. This means that actions to address CEFMU should not be analysed solely through external sanctions, but rather through sustained, collective and critical reflection processes involving families, traditional authorities, schools and young people. The aim is to explore alternatives and opportunities that help identify and shift behaviours and collective imaginaries that reinforce gender inequality and perpetuate CEFMU.
- ✦ Transforming the collective imaginaries that link the social value of girls to marriage, motherhood or obedience requires challenging gender stereotypes, imposed family roles and norms that subordinate adolescent girls. This can only be achieved when transformative strategies are participatory, intergenerational and culturally relevant.



3. PARTICIPATION OF ADOLESCENTS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE.

✦ Many adolescent girls who have lived or been at risk of CEFMU have clear ideas about what they need in order to build different paths for themselves. However, they are rarely included in decision-making spaces, policy formulation or programme design.

✦ Adolescents must not be seen solely as beneficiaries of policies, but as protagonists in transforming their own contexts. Strengthening their capacity for advocacy, leadership and collective organisation is essential for ensuring that transformations are genuine, deep and sustainable.

4. POLITICAL ADVOCACY AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION.

✦ Many public programmes have addressed CEFMU as a secondary or incidental issue, without dedicated resources or long-term strategies. However, CEFMU must be tackled as a distinct structural problem, through a specialised and cross-cutting public policy with its own budget and long-term vision.

✦ Creating normative, budgetary and policy conditions that support community-level change is essential to prevent transformation efforts from becoming isolated or weakening over time.

✦ Coordinated action across sectors (education, health, justice, protection) and levels of government is fundamental.

✦ Girls Not Brides membership in Mexico highlighted the importance of strengthening internal understanding of CEFMU within member organisations, to consolidate a shared position and develop more effective advocacy strategies. This includes producing executive briefs and clear materials for decision-makers, enabling influence in legislative analysis, policy formulation and the development of more appropriate regulatory frameworks.

5. LEGISLATION WITH A NON-PUNITIVE APPROACH

✦ The increase in criminal offences such as “forced cohabitation” has raised concerns among organisations, as these norms are often applied without distinguishing between abusive relationships and consensual adolescent relationships. This can lead to stigmatisation and persecution of adolescents, particularly in Indigenous and impoverished contexts.

✦ It is necessary to build a legal framework that prohibits and prevents CEFMU without systematically resorting to punishment. Legislation should reserve the use of criminal law for serious cases—such as those involving violence, coercion, abuse of power or significant age differences—and avoid criminalising consensual relationships between adolescents of similar age.

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