



Child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean

Child marriage is a global issue which happens across regions, cultures, and religions. However, it has yet to be recognised as a major issue in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Yet the region has four countries among the most affected globally and trends over the past 30 years have shown that it is the only region not to see a significant change in rates of child marriage.^{1 2} More research and evidence is needed to understand differences between sub regions and address the issue in the region.

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union involving a boy or girl under the age of 18.³ In LAC, the often informal nature of child marriage – informal unions marked by cohabitation without any civil or religious ceremony - contrasts with more formalised practices in other parts of the world. For instance, in Honduras, three times as many couples are in informal unions as those married legally.⁴ These informal unions, which often appear consensual, tend to be seen neither as “marriage” nor as involving “children”. As such, different terms are used: “matrimonio infantil”, “uniones tempranas”, “uniones impropias”, “matrimonios tempranos” and “casamientos precoces” among others.⁵

Child marriage prevalence in LAC

- 23% of women aged 20-24 were married by age 18 and 5% by age 15.⁶
- Rates vary significantly across the region (between 8% - 41%). LAC hosts one of the top 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage (Nicaragua has the 17th highest rate) and three with the highest burden of child marriage (Brazil has the 4th highest and Mexico the 8th highest burden of women married before 18. Colombia has the 20th highest burden for marriage before 15).
- A number of countries - especially in the Caribbean – have no data available on child marriage.⁷ As a result, the scale of the practice in the region may be underestimated.⁸

¹ Among the [37 countries](#) in LAC, Nicaragua, Mexico and Brazil have among the highest rates or numbers of women who married before 18. Colombia has one of the highest number of women who married before 15. UNICEF global databases 2016, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and other national surveys. As published in The State of the World's Children 2016.

² UNICEF, [Ending child marriage: progress and prospects](#), 2014.

³ In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the definition of child marriage accepted internationally.

⁴ Murphy-Graham, E. & G. Leal. *Child marriage, agency and rural schooling in Honduras*. *Comparative Education Review* 59 (1), pp. 24-49, 2015. Only 22-31% of young couples are estimated to be married legally compared to 69-79% in informal unions.

⁵ “Child marriage”, “early unions”, “inappropriate unions”, “early marriages” and “early weddings”.

⁶ UNICEF, [State of the World's Children](#) 2016.

⁷ Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, Chile, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela. Op.Cit. UNICEF, 2016.

⁸ USAID, [Child, early, and forced marriage resource guide](#), 2015

Country	Child marriage prevalence (%) ⁹
Nicaragua	41
Dominican Republic	37
Brazil	36
Honduras	34
Guatemala	30
Belize; Cuba; Panama	26
Uruguay; El Salvador	25
Colombia; Guyana; Mexico	23
Bolivia; Ecuador	22
Costa Rica	21
Peru; Suriname	19
Haiti; Paraguay	18
Barbados	11
Jamaica; Trinidad and Tobago; Saint Lucia	8

Country	Number of women married before 18	Number of women married before 15 ¹⁰
Brazil	2,928,000	864,000
Mexico	1,282,000	285,000
Colombia	N/A	116,000

Context

Socio-economic trends in the region are important to consider when looking at how and why child marriage happens: LAC is a mostly Catholic region¹¹ with changing economic landscapes and persisting inequalities within and between countries¹²; increased urbanisation and internal migration; and higher school completion rates for girls with under participation of boys in secondary and tertiary education¹³, amongst others. While evidence is limited, we know that:

- In Latin America, like in the rest of the world, child marriage disproportionately affects girls.¹⁴
- Child marriage tends to happen more in **rural areas** than in urban areas.¹⁵ In Guatemala, over half of rural girls (mostly from Mayan indigenous populations) are married before 18,

⁹ Percentage of women 20-24 years old who were first married or in union before 18.

¹⁰ Number of women 20-24 years old who were first married or in union respectively before 18 and 15.

¹¹ While religious identities are shifting, LAC is still the most heavily Catholic region in the world. In 2010, 72% of the population in the region reported being Catholic. Pew Research Centre, "[The Global Catholic Population](#)", 2013.

¹² While a majority of countries have transitioned towards upper and middle income countries with higher economic growth rates, Latin America is said to be the most unequal region in the world and some population groups have high levels of poverty. In 2014 the richest 10% of people had amassed 71% of the region's wealth. A. Bárcena Ibarra, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and W. Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International, "[Latin America is the world's most unequal region. Here's how to fix it](#)", World Economic Forum, 17 January 2016.

¹³ However, high education attainment for girls has not translated into better economic opportunities for young women. UNESCO, Education for all global monitoring report, [Regional overview: Latin America and the Caribbean](#), 2009.

¹⁴ For instance, in 2010, in Brazil, 488,381 adolescent girls (15-17) were married or in union compared to 78,997 boys of the same age. Taylor, A.Y., Lauro, G., Segundo, M., Greene, M.E. "She goes with me in my boat." [Child and Adolescent Marriage in Brazil. Results from Mixed-Methods Research](#). Rio de Janeiro and Washington DC: Instituto Promundo & Promundo-US. July 2015.

¹⁵ UNICEF Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, [legal minimum ages and the realization of adolescents' rights](#), A review of the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016

compared to 30% in the country as a whole.¹⁶ In other countries like Brazil and El Salvador, child marriage also happens in **urban areas**.^{17 18}

- Recent research from Central America and Brazil found that **poverty** can also drive child marriage in the region.¹⁹ **Indigenous girls living in impoverished areas** can be especially vulnerable to the practice.²⁰
- The **age difference** between underage brides and grooms **varies** across the region, with big differences in some contexts and smaller in others.²¹ In Central America, the average difference is 5 to 7 years, a significant gap given the girls' young ages and the power difference between teenagers and people in their twenties.²²

Drivers

- In LAC, like globally, child marriage is rooted in **gender inequality** and discriminatory social norms around girls' and women's roles in the family, communities and society.
- In this region, which has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world, early pregnancy, sexual violence among minors and child marriage are closely linked, either as a driver or a consequence of one another.²³
- In many countries in the region, providing open, comprehensive **sexual and reproductive health information** for adolescents can be taboo and prove difficult.²⁴ Seeing teenage pregnancy as a sign of lack of respect for social and cultural rules,²⁵ parents often pressure girls to marry or co-habit with men and avoid the **social stigma** associated with motherhood outside of what is considered to be an acceptable union.²⁶
- In some contexts girls themselves may see marriage as a way of finding some freedom where families place strong restrictions on their **sexuality**, or where they come from violent homes.²⁷ Marriage and motherhood can also be a way for adolescent girls to gain **respect** as they become women in the eyes of society. Girls may see this as a way to give a meaning to their life, especially where there are few alternatives.²⁸

¹⁶ Op.Cit. USAID, 2015.

¹⁷ Op.Cit. Promundo, 2015 ; Population Council, *Exploratory research to assess the problem of child marriage in five Latin American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and southern Mexico*, 2013.

¹⁸ A *Girls Not Brides* partner working on child marriage in the region pointed out that it remains difficult to compare child marriage in rural and urban contexts across the region, as reliable data is lacking at national and local levels.

¹⁹ Op.Cit, Promundo, 2015 ; Op.Cit. Population Council, 2013.

²⁰ For instance in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. ECPAT, [Commercial and sexual exploitation of children in Latin America](#), 2014.

²¹ Conversations with *Girls Not Brides* partners working on child marriage in the region, 2016.

²² Plan and UNICEF, [Experiences and accounts of pregnancy amongst adolescents](#), 2014.

²³ The World Bank data, Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19), accessed 17 October 2016; Conversation with a *Girls Not Brides* partner working on child marriage in the region, 2016; CLADEM, [Child Mothers: Child pregnancy and forced child maternity in Latin America and the Caribbean](#), 2016.

²⁴ Op.Cit. Plan and UNICEF, 2014.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Conversations with *Girls Not Brides* partners working on child marriage in the region; reported by regional experts in Melania Trejo, Report produced for *Girls Not Brides: Exploratory research: child marriage in Latin America*, 2015; *Girls Not Brides, summary of the regional sessions on the causes and consequences of child marriage in Latin America* at *Girls Not Brides' Global Member Meeting*, 2015.

²⁷ Ibid.; Op.Cit. Plan and UNICEF, 2014; conversation with a partner in Bolivia. More research is needed to explore both how girls' agency may influence decisions of child marriage and how intra-family violence can affect decisions of marriage across different contexts in the region.

²⁸ UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO/WHO, UNAIDS, [Reforming the legislation on the age of marriage: successful experiences and lessons learned from Latin America and the Caribbean](#), 2016.

- Child marriage in contexts of **urban violence and criminality** (e.g. drugs, street violence, etc.) increases risks for girls.²⁹ For instance, in El Salvador and Honduras, many girls enter into union with gang members as this is perceived as a way of providing protection for girls and their families and is seen as safer than being alone in the streets.³⁰ These unions can also be formed against girls' and their parents' wishes, as refusing a proposal from a gang member might have life-threatening consequences.³¹

Consequences

- Child marriage traps girls and their family in a cycle of **poverty** and often results in profound physical, **psychological and emotional consequences**.
- Child marriage and **early pregnancy present significant health risks for girls, including** obstetric fistula, higher child morbidity, and unsafe abortions. The risk of maternal death in LAC is four times higher among adolescents under 16 than among women over 20.³²
- Married girls are at greater risk of contracting **HIV and sexually transmitted infections** than their unmarried counterparts. They have less power to negotiate safe-sex - especially when they marry older and more sexually experienced men. In Nicaragua, about 70% of married adolescents aged 15-19 reported having unprotected sexual relationships compared to only 9.8% of unmarried young women.³³
- Girls who are married before 18 are more likely to suffer **violence** from their partner, including sexual, physical, psychological and emotional violence.³⁴
- Child marriage and **education** are closely linked: 12% of young women who received secondary education were married before the age of 18, compared to 25% with no education.³⁵ While the causal relationship between teenage pregnancy and school dropout among adolescent girls in LAC has been shown,^{36 37} less is known about the causal relationship between child marriage and education.

Legal and policy context in Latin America and the Caribbean

- Most countries in LAC have ratified the **Inter-American Convention on Human Rights**, which requires full consent of both spouses to marry.^{38 39} All countries have also ratified major **international human rights conventions**.⁴⁰

²⁹ Op.Cit. *Girls Not Brides*, 2015.

³⁰ Anastasia Moloney, "Gang violence fuels child marriage in Central America, researchers say", Thomson Reuters Foundation, 5 June 2015.

³¹ An 11-year-old girl from Honduras reported that her friend was raped and killed as a result of refusing to become the girlfriend of a gang member. Nicholas Kristof, "We're helping deport kids to die", The New York Times, paper edition, 11 July 2016, p.9

³² World Health Organization, [adolescent pregnancy](http://www.who.int) (www.who.int, accessed 11 July 2016).

³³ Op.Cit. Promundo, 2015. DHS data from 1996-2004. Women aged 15-19 reporting having unprotected sex in the previous week

³⁴ Ibid.; Op.Cit. UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO/WHO, UNAIDS, 2016.

³⁵ Op.Cit. UNFPA, 2012. Percentage of women 20-24 years old who were married or in union before 18 by region and level of education. UNFPA database using DHS or MICS data from 78 developing countries over the period 2000-2011.

³⁶ Op.Cit. UNICEF Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, 2016.

³⁷ Promundo, [She goes with my boat. Child and adolescent marriage in Brazil](#), 2015 p.92

³⁸ Equality now, [Protection the girl child. Using the law to end child, early and forced marriage and related human rights violations](#), 2014.

³⁹ CIDH, B-32: [American convention on human rights](#) (accessed 12 July 2016)

⁴⁰ For instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

- It is **illegal** to marry before the age of 18 in most LAC countries. However, most have **exceptions** allowing children to marry with parental consent or judicial authority at 16 and below. A number of countries also allow women to marry at younger ages than men.^{41 42 43} Other challenges include the existence of **loopholes**, the lack of law enforcement, and the difficulty to regulate **informal** unions, which are often not included in legal definitions.⁴⁴
- In the last two years, four countries have changed their laws to delay marriage. In 2017, **Costa Rica** and **Honduras** passed new laws prohibiting marriage under 18.⁴⁵ In 2015, **Ecuador** raised the legal minimum age from 12 for girls and 14 for boys to 18 for both, without exception.⁴⁶ In **Mexico**, where the minimum legal age used to vary across the country, a reform of the Federal Civil Code was approved and will harmonised the national legal age to 18 for both boys and girls. In Mexico City, however, while the legal minimum age is 18, girls can still marry at 16 with parental consent or at 14 if they are pregnant.⁴⁷ **Panama** changed the law to set the legal minimum age at 18 while it used to be 14 for girls and 16 for boys with parental consent.⁴⁸ Guatemala also removed an exception that allowed girls and boys to marry respectively at 14 and 16 with parental consent, but girls can still marry at 16 with a judge's permission.⁴⁹

Efforts to address child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean

Like in many other regions, work on child marriage faces many challenges in the context of backlash towards work on sexual and reproductive health and gender equality. However, critical efforts have been made by civil society organisations, UN agencies and the Organization of American States:

- A number of organisations have sought to raise public awareness of the issue and call for legal reform in the region. In 2014 the “18si14no” campaign led by youth organisations and UNICEF in **Guatemala**, led to a new law raising the minimum age to 18.⁵⁰ In 2016 civil society organisations reacted against opposition to amending the Marriage Act in **Trinidad and Tobago**, which allows children as young as 12 to marry.⁵¹ In January 2017, the Attorney General announced the development of a new bill to raise the legal minimum age to 18.⁵²
- In 2014, several **UN agencies** launched a flagship initiative to end child marriage and remove legal exceptions to the age of marriage. In 2016, UNICEF, UN Women and UNFPA developed a joint programme and a regional platform to address child marriage in the region and published a new report on reforming the legislation on the age of marriage.⁵³

⁴¹ Interagency Meeting: *Current Evidence, Lessons Learned and Best Practices in Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2014 (See [power point](#) for a map of countries).

⁴² WORLD Policy Analysis Center, [Child Marriage Database](#), June 2013, Map 4.

⁴³ Op.Cit. UNICEF Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, 2016.

⁴⁴ Conversation with a *Girls Not Brides* partner working on child marriage in the region.

⁴⁵ Website of the President of the Republic of Costa Rica “[Costa Rica fortalece medidas para proteger a las personas menores de edad mediante la Ley de Relaciones Impropias](#)”, 19 January 2017; Thomson Reuters Foundation “[Honduras bans child marriage, no exceptions](#)”, 13 July 2017

⁴⁶ UN Women, “[UN launches regional flagship programme to eradicate child marriage](#)” 27 November 2015.

⁴⁷ The reform of the civil code has not officially entered into force yet. UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO/WHO, UNAIDS, [Reforming the legislation on the age of marriage: successful experiences and lessons learned from Latin America and the Caribbean](#), 2016.

⁴⁸ Conversation with a *Girls Not Brides* partner working on child marriage in the region, 2016.

⁴⁹ UNICEF Guatemala, [Annual report 2015](#), Guatemala.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Girls Not Brides*, “[Religious defence of child marriage sparks debate in Trinidad and Tobago](#)”, 31 May 2016.

⁵² Trinidad Daily Express, “[3,404 child brides in last two decades](#)”, 11 January 2017.

⁵³ UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO/WHO, UNAIDS, [Reforming the legislation on the age of marriage: successful experiences and lessons learned from Latin America and the Caribbean](#), 2016.

- There are an increasing number of promising programmes addressing child marriage in the region. One example showing positive results in reducing child marriage is Population Council's [Abriendo Oportunidades](#) programme with indigenous girls in rural Guatemala. Facilitated by young mentors, it encourages girls to stay in school, provides them with services, skills, and information on sexual and reproductive rights.⁵⁴ Other interesting work is happening at the grassroots level, yet more documentation of promising approaches is needed.
- Some important steps have been taken to increase regional attention to the issue. In 2015, civil society organisations and UN agencies from **several countries** met in El Salvador. They highlighted the need for more **research** to inform effective strategies, more **work with communities** and **efforts across sectors**. They also highlighted the importance of framing the issue within the **Sustainable Development Goals** and integrating the LAC's regional reality into the **global dialogue**.⁵⁵
- In the past couple of years, the **Organization of American States** (OAS) has taken important steps towards addressing child marriage in the region. After hosting an international forum to identify priority areas for action on child marriage in 2016, the OAS General Assembly passed a resolution that for the first time gives the OAS a mandate to work on child marriage. It provides a framework to work for the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) with Member States and civil society organisations to identify strategies to address child marriage across different countries in the region.
- As of July 2016, twelve members of *Girls Not Brides* work in the LAC region and are based in 15 countries.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Girls Not Brides*, Theory of Change, case studies, [Abriendo oportunidades](#), 2016.

⁵⁵ Ford Foundation, The Summit Foundation, Inсад, and UNFPA, *Meeting report: towards the end of early marriage and unions in Latin America: lessons learned and next steps drawn from research, programs, advocacy and activism*, 2015

⁵⁶ Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, and Paraguay.

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