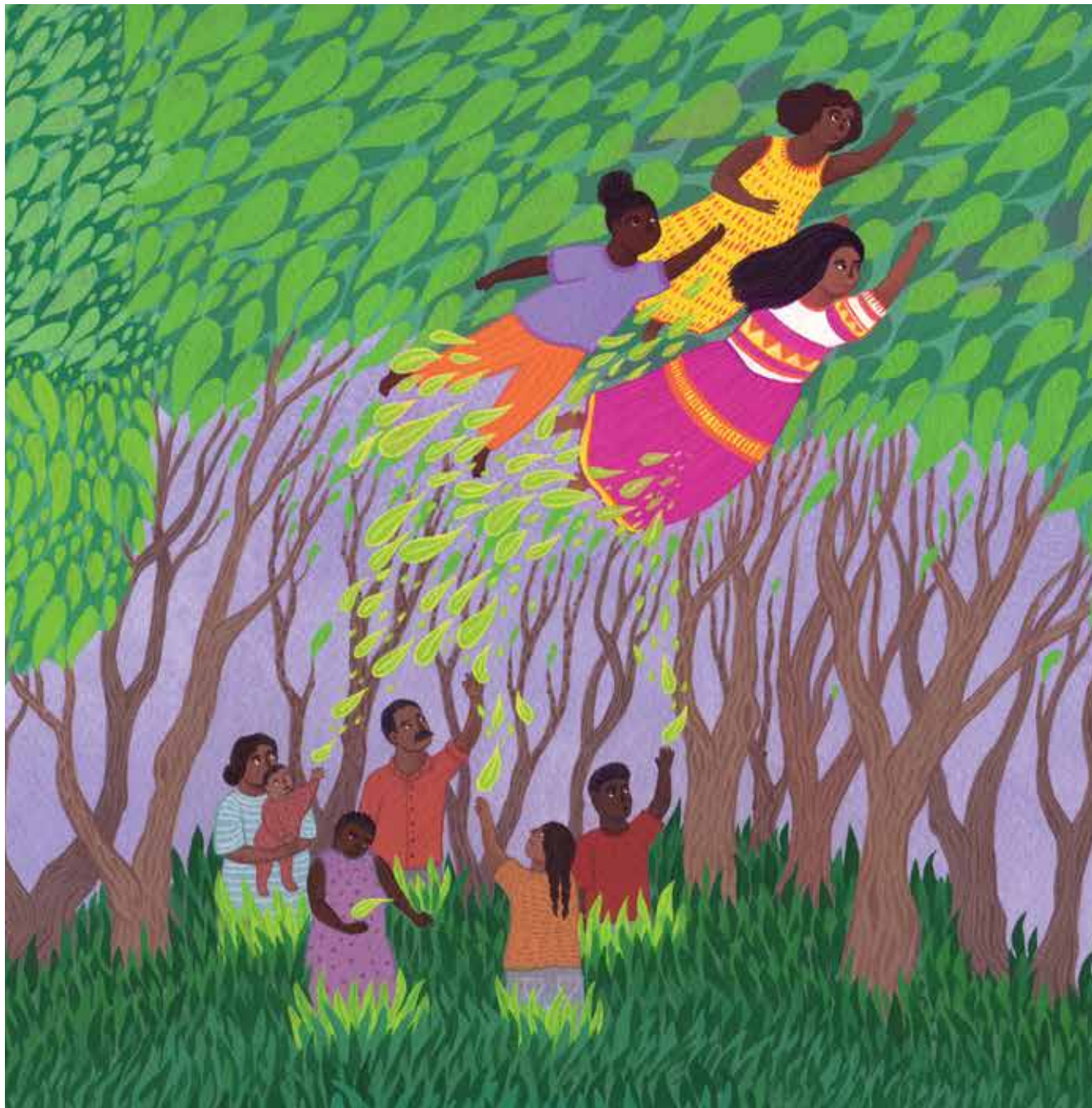


A hidden reality for adolescent girls

Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean



REGIONAL REPORT

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Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions
in Latin America and the Caribbean



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Layout and Design: Gomo | Estudio de diseño

Suggested citation:

Greene, Margaret E., and country teams of: Bolivia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Perú, with Jill Gay, Alana Kolundzija, Brian Greenberg, Alexander Munive and Emma Puig de la Bellacasa. A Hidden Reality for Adolescents Girls:Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Regional Study. Panamá: Plan International Américas and UNFPA LACRO.

THIS RESEARCH WAS FINANCED BY SIDA THE SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY. SIDA DOES NOT NECESSARILY SHARE THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN. THE SOLE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONTENT BELONGS TO AUTHOR".



THIS RESEARCH ACTION WAS ALSO FINANCIAL SUPPORTED BY PLAN INTERNATIONAL NETHERLANDS (NLNO), PLAN INTERNATIONAL GERMANY (GNO) AND UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND (UNFPA).

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Preface

“Child, Early and Forced Marriage” is the term accepted in United Nations documents at an international level to describe this practice. The term child refers to marriages and unions that take place before the age of 18, the end of childhood according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Early refers to the beginning of married life which for girls and adolescents is problematic; by competing, for example, with girls’ right to an education.

The term forced is used to highlight the structural gender inequalities that foster this reality for girls around the world. As well as to underline whether the conditions that determine the establishment of a marriage or union really imply a “choice” due to the low future expectations for girls, domestic work, the control they experience in their original homes and the limited commitment on the part of their families to their education.

Often these marriages and unions are carried out with men who are older, more experienced, having more education and better economic prospects, within clear power relations that subordinate these girls. Furthermore, it is often accompanied by gender violence in the private sphere of the home.

In addition, in the Latin American and Caribbean region, the word unions is incorporated to reflect the informal marriages or unions most frequent and which are not documented or recognized by the Church or the State. The informality of these unions makes it difficult to account for them and collect sufficient data to evidence this issue.

Several terms are used to name and describe these forms of unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, which poses specific challenges in the way in which the population of the country thinks, approaches and talks about them. The use of multiple terms reduces the visibility of this reality and makes it difficult to recognize it as an extreme violation of the human rights of adolescent girls and a practice perpetuating gender inequality.

Therefore, the importance of emphasizing that the highest proportions of marriages and unions in Latin America and the Caribbean are concentrated in adolescent girls becomes evident. In this context, this research focuses on adolescent girls in early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) to make their specific needs visible, and with the aim of working to change the social norms that perpetuate this violation of their human rights.

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Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
CEFMU	Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions	SNAP	Social Norms Analysis Plot
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child	SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education	SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
DHS	Demographic and Health Surveys	STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean		

Executive summary

1. Introduction: Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean



Child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) are a critical social justice issue of our time, yet have received limited attention in Latin America and the Caribbean. The global and the regional momentum and opportunities to make significant progress on ending child marriage have never been more favourable. For this reason, Plan International and UNFPA conducted an eight-country regional study to highlight the specificities of the region and explore in depth the great diversity across its countries. This regional report draws on this rich research conducted in Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala.

Across the region in 2017, 23% of women aged 20-24 had been married or in union by age 18 and 5% by age 15. Trend data demonstrate that LAC is the only major world region where significant declines have not occurred over the past 10 years in measures of child, early and forced marriage. The invisibility of CEFMU as an issue is reinforced by longstanding data gaps,

and basic information on child marriage is not readily updated regularly or available in a number of countries, especially in the Caribbean. Another challenge for the region is what to call the practice, since informal unions exist alongside formal marriages. Informal unions tend to be disadvantageous to women, as they have no hold over their male partners if divorce occurs and they may be left with children and no support.

Girls' early and forced marriages and unions often reflect adult views of adolescent sexuality and how it should be managed and sanctioned. The "guardians" and sexual partners in their lives manage and dominate their sexuality through imposed silence, personal neglect to control behavior, active control of physical movement and gender-based violence. The failure to educate young people about sex and sexuality, and to protect girls from coerced sex and unintended pregnancy, reflects patriarchal, discriminatory values.

2. Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Study and methodology



Teams of researchers and Plan International staff in Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Honduras and Peru, with the support of UNFPA in Bolivia, Honduras and Peru, joined forces to establish a shared research protocol and generate data that could be compared across the eight country settings. The teams recognized the particular lack of information about indigenous groups and their practices that might affect the meaning of CEFMU in their communities.

The research focused on social and gender norms and creatively adapted the Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) methodology developed by CARE. The

research also relied on semi-structured interviews with girls, members of their families and communities, and government and civil society leaders and experts. The vignettes and interview questions used in the study highlighted key themes of sexuality, choice, decision-making, femininity and masculinity, the transition to adulthood, schooling, employment opportunities, and violence. Each team also reviewed demographic and other quantitative data on the prevalence of child marriage and unions, adolescent pregnancy, rates of school attendance, exposure to violence and early childbearing, and also conducted a scan of relevant policies.

3. Legal frameworks relating to Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions across Latin America and the Caribbean



Recent legislative changes have equalized the age for boys and girls and raised the minimum to age 18 or above, consistent with international agreements, to which most countries in the region are signatories. Unfortunately, the laws often codify exceptions in which parents, guardians or judges may permit marriage before age 18. Though

civil codes have been changing, implementation and enforcement remain weak, enabling many strategies for avoiding laws. More fundamentally, informal unions often remain beyond the administrative purview of government agencies, creating large loopholes for avoiding both official sanctions and supportive services.

4. Analysis of the qualitative findings across the eight country studies



The research provided many insights into how girls and young women and their families and communities frame and understand CEFMU. The findings are organized according to the study Theory of Change (norms and gender inequality, resources and supports, and laws and policies).

NORMS AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Girls enter CEFMU to escape abuse and violence at home, yet often face violence, abuse and control by their partners. Personal histories of violence, abuse and sexual exploitation lead many girls into unions, where they may again experience gender-based violence at the hands of their partners, who often do not permit them to work, study or even go out alone. Cases that would clearly qualify as physical or sexual abuse of minors under the law are not brought to the judicial system, nor are cases of violence against children or intimate partner violence. Sex with young girls is condoned or tolerated by the community. Men themselves stated that they use violence and control with their adolescent wives, which they dominate in decision-making.

Girls enter into union as a strategy to escape poverty, but being in union then limits their opportunities for work and income. Girls in several countries stated that one motivation to enter into CEFMU was to escape the poverty manifested in their families' homes. Some of them volunteered for early marriage to spare their families from an extra mouth to feed, feeling this way they could best help their mothers. Yet girls trapped in early unions and marriages often have no recourse to income and work, having limited schooling or being prevented from working by their partners or by their childcare roles.

The abandonment of girls is a common theme in the region. Girls in the region are frequently abandoned by partners, potential partners and even family members, though often for different reasons. Sometimes men deny paternity, either before or within a union;

and even where acknowledge paternity and remain connected to young women, expectations for their engagement can be low. Migration by parents and by partners to seek economic opportunities is a second major risk factor for abandonment. The departure of the male partner can leave a woman in an informal union in doubt as to her partnership status.

Gender norms define what girls can and cannot do, before and within unions. Inequitable gender norms are entrenched from early childhood across the region and reflect a clear hierarchy in which boys are valued more and given more freedoms. Girls throughout the region are required to balance domestic chores with schooling.

A sexual double standard and the control of girls' sexuality forces them into CEFMU. Parents who worry that their daughters could be sexually active respond by limiting girls' mobility and their interactions with boys and men, rather than providing sexuality education or encouraging a girls' decision-making. Girls idealize romantic love, yet lack autonomy to decide when and under what circumstances to have sex, and discussion of sex is seen as shameful. Parents who find that their daughters are having sex pressure the male partners to marry their daughters to save the honor of the family.

Dominant masculine norms push men into unions with young girls, reinforcing men's power advantages in CEFMU. Girls face gender inequitable roles in union, often lacking basic rights and freedoms, such as being able to dress in specific clothes or leave their homes without their partners' permission. Age disparities between men and adolescent girls exacerbate these gender inequalities. Men are also validated – especially by other men – by marriage to girls.

Many girls and their partners across the eight study countries see "true men" as ones who have money, can support them financially and have a means of transport.

Parents' consent to their daughters' marriage or entry into unions. Parental decision-making is unassailable, as adolescent pregnancy and early marriage are seen as private family matters. In some contexts, unions are arranged by the girl's father and community authorities, in others it tends to be mothers and female family members who pressure girls to marry. Still other parents fight hard to keep their daughters from being entrapped in CEFMU.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

Schooling for girls is less valued than schooling for boys, and pregnancy and CEFMU lead girls to drop out of school. Gender norms stipulate that school is more important for boys than for girls, since girls are less likely to perform future work that requires them an education. The chores girls are required to do compete with their schooling, and both boys and girls abandon school for agricultural work in rural areas. Despite laws guaranteeing pregnant girls' right to schooling, it is common in practice to remove them from school to prevent their becoming "shameful examples" for other girls.

Boys and men recognize the importance of education for themselves and girls. Even men in unions with adolescent girls recognized that the price of CEFMU for girls and for themselves was that they could not get good jobs. Young mothers can sometimes fare better with regard to staying in school than young fathers in union. If a girl has a baby, and receives some support from husband or family, she is more likely to stay in school, whereas a boy has to drop out and become a provider.

Governments fail to respond to the legal needs of girls before and during CEFMU. Regulations that implement the new laws are needed, and girls need access to legal support. Not one of the countries in this study documented effective social protection or safety net systems for girls, including mechanisms to help girls access support for children from their partners.

Access to sexual and reproductive health information and services is extremely limited. Adolescent pregnancy is increasingly recognized as a problem requiring government action. Yet government measures put in place – both prior to CEFMU and once it occurs – regarding sexuality education and information and services for adolescents, have not been sufficient to improve life options to allow for schooling to be completed or open opportunities to generate income. Girls'

access to contraception is extremely limited. Protocols are inconsistent and there are insufficient trained health care providers, particularly for very young adolescents. Boys and men also have fallen through the cracks with regard to outreach on sexual and reproductive health, and do not view pregnancy prevention or childrearing as their responsibility. Once they become pregnant, girls have almost no access to medical services or safe abortion where it is legal.

LAWS AND POLICIES

Laws against child marriage are little known, inconsistent, or not implemented. Quite a few of the laws prohibiting child marriage are recent and not well known. Legal professionals across the region are unfamiliar with the issues surrounding CEFMU, and political authorities and community leaders see it as a "private" matter. Few efforts are being made to prevent child marriage; there are only sanctions for those who engage in child marriage.

Governments are not acting forcefully enough to prevent or respond to child sexual abuse, rape, and other forms of gender-based violence. Many LAC countries are signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence Against Women. This signal of support has by and large not yet translated into laws, policies and actions that sufficiently improve girls' circumstances or transform their lives. In many settings, minors cannot themselves seek protection from the government and laws. And in most settings, there is no coordination between health services and the judicial system in cases of rape.

Governments fail to provide comprehensive sexuality education, despite evidence of its benefits; this failure reflects cultural norms and fears about sexuality. Even where Ministries of Education mandate CSE, budgets to train teachers to provide sex education have not been allocated. Some teachers are reluctant to provide CSE, believing erroneously that this will spur sexual activity. Many parents also oppose sex education for this faulty reason. Despite the tens of thousands of births to very young girls across the countries in this study, government statistical systems across the region do not systematically collect data on births before the age of 15.

5. Conclusion



The eight-country scope of this review of child, early or forced marriage or union (CEFMU) in Latin America and the Caribbean helped to underscore that important common factors shape girls and women's lives across this complex, diverse region. Historical and cultural differences have been important in the formation of these societies, but important similarities in attitudes and practices with regard to gender, sexuality, marriage and 'informal marriage' or unions also stand out.

Young, with limited education and few personal or economic resources, some girls see CEFMUs as their only option, yet because of gender roles and age differences girls tend to be strongly dependent on their partners economically and interpersonally. The patterns of gender disadvantage, poverty and relationship violence that girls often face in their natal home are often replicated with their partners in their unions. The country reports convey that CEFMUs convey a

range of lifelong health, educational, economic and personal security costs to girls.

Neither political, legal, policy, judicial and community leadership nor parents seem able to sufficiently shield girls from the known risk factors for entering into unions, nor from the known hazards once they are in CEFMUs. The available data also confirm that though a significant number of girls live in 'informal unions' in almost all of these countries, this issue has little visibility or policy priority in most of them. In many cases, current laws, customs and beliefs combine to sideline constructive laws that are passed, and a lack of political will or administrative resources hamper their implementation. An additional essential task for leadership is to mitigate the harmful personal consequences of CEFMUs for girls over the course of their lives and to address the shared social and financial costs accompanying CEFMUs in areas such education, health, gender-based violence and lost economic productivity.

6. Recommendations



The country reports and regional analysis yielded the recommendations below, organized into overarching regional priorities and then clustered by the three main areas of the study's Theory of Change.

OVERARCHING REGIONAL PRIORITIES

- Develop a common perspective by forging a regional, rights-based consensus on shared terminology and understandings about the implications of child, early and forced marriages and unions.
- Mobilize researchers to highlight data and evidence gaps that constrain programs, and to advocate for stronger systems for collecting more meaningful and relevant data, including on girls 10-14 years of age.
- Include the LAC region in global discussions on challenges and highlight the prevalence and regional characteristics of CEFMU. Bring global lessons learned about CEFMU to the strengthening of LAC local initiatives.

POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND BUDGETS

Multi-sectoral and holistic responses

- Emphasize multisectoral responses to CEFMU that reflect the complexity and scale of its impact on girls' lives.

Legal reforms and implementation

- Develop and enforce a strong anti-CEFMU legal framework that harmonizes across relevant laws.

Sector-specific responses

- Provide comprehensive sexuality education to all children, adolescents and youth, whether they are in or out of school, and develop new ways of reaching adults with this information.
- Support national health systems to guarantee access to contraception, safe and accessible abortion where it is legal and address the complications of unsafe abortions.
- Strengthen systems for civil registration and vital statistics to ensure girls are recognized as citizens deserving of protection under the law and that their unions are documented.

Monitoring and accountability

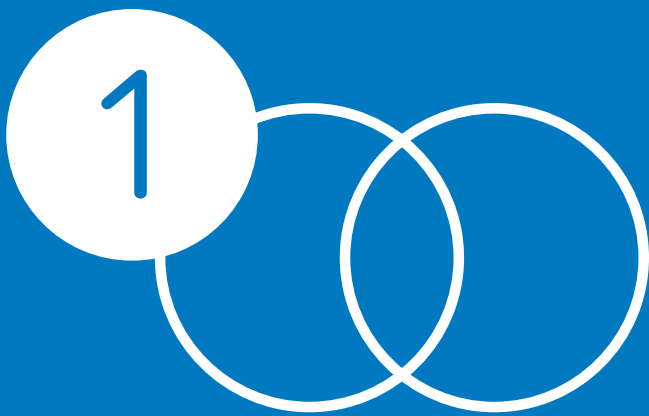
- Present and discuss legal frameworks about CEFMU with girls and boys at school so they are aware of their own rights.
- Strengthen the enabling environment and operating space for civil society to demand accountability for police and justice system to implement new laws on child marriage.

SOCIAL NORMS, ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONS

- Work to change community norms about girls' potential and roles in life.
- Strengthen girls' voices as agents of change so that girls speak up for themselves and others and speak out against CEFMU.
- Engage media to address, counter and transform the norms that shape traditional gender roles and limit girls' opportunities.
- Work with community leaders to reduce social tolerance to CEFMU.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESOURCES AND SAFETY NETS

- Enable and encourage girls to complete secondary school, and strengthen school systems that make this possible. Expand safe spaces for girls to connect with each other and interact with mentors.
- Include measures that address poverty and the financial incentives that drive the practice in efforts to eliminate CEFMU.
- Strengthen girls' economic prospects and employment opportunities.
- Build intergenerational solidarity and strengthen families by giving parents the skills and information to engage with and protect their children.
- Expand safe spaces for girls to connect with each other and interact with mentors
- Expand equitable access to quality, affordable, gender-responsive, adolescent-and-youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.



Introduction: Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean

Child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) underpins many problems facing girls around the world. It reflects the challenges girls face in the context of patriarchy and its associated harmful cultural and religious beliefs and practices. But while the international community has come to recognize the links between girls' human rights and development in Asia and Africa, it has been slow to recognize how the practice is manifested in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). As this report documents in depth, CEFMU are a startlingly important problem that has received limited attention in this region.

The global and the regional momentum and opportunities to make significant progress on ending child marriage have never been more favourable. For this reason, many organizations are working at global, regional and national levels with governments and civil society partners to mobilize girls and their families and communities to end the practice of CEFMU, to promote and protect the human rights of girls, and to develop legislation, policies and programs to address the practice.

Ending gender-based violence (GBV) and all harmful practices, including child marriage, is one of the three transformative results for 2030 that UNFPA aims to achieve in collaboration with other partners. Many of these efforts, such as the Action for Adolescent Girls Programme and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, empower girls to know and exercise their human rights, including their right to choose, as adults, whom to marry. The program focuses on enabling girls at risk of child marriage to choose and direct their own futures, supporting households in demonstrating positive attitudes towards adolescent girls, and strengthening the systems that deliver services to adolescent girls. It also seeks to ensure laws and policies protect and promote adolescent girls' rights, and highlight the importance of using robust data to inform policies relating to adolescent girls. The regional offices of UNFPA, UNICEF and UNWomen have adapted this framework to LAC and developed the inter-agency regional Joint Programme, *For a Region Free of Child Marriage and Early Unions*. This initiative looks to break the silence about this issue and generate evidence, partnerships and the political will to end the practice.

Plan International believes that securing the rights of girls is a critical social justice issue of our time. Too often, girls around the world face discrimination and abuse simply for being young and female. Millions of girls continue to be denied their right to education, to engage actively and equally in society, to take important decisions about their futures, and to be safe from GBV.

Through the implementation of Plan International's global strategy 100 Million Reasons the organization is leveraging intelligence, resources, and expertise to shape bold and ambitious new initiatives aimed at shifting global opinion, giving support to grass-roots initiatives and achieving new investments that will drive the transformative change required to ensure that girls everywhere can truly *learn, lead, decide* and *thrive*. One of the organization flagships is 18+, a gender transformative initiative designed as a comprehensive program for tackling CEFMU by addressing the root causes of the problem at all possible levels. 18+ provides girls with the skills and knowledge to understand and exercise their rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights. The programme also mobilizes families and communities to change the values and norms that support CEFMU and increases access to quality and safe schooling, health services and child protection mechanisms. Moreover, 18+ works to develop economic empowerment schemes and supports local, national and regional governments to strengthen, implement and resource laws and policies which prevent CEFMU.

Therefore, in 2017 and 2018, as part of the 18+ initiative in LAC to address the lack of evidence, Plan International's Regional Office of the Americas, in partnership with the UNFPA Regional Office in some of the countries, conducted an eight-country regional study to highlight the specificities of the region and explore in depth the great diversity across the nations that make it up. This regional report draws on the in-depth research conducted in Bolivia, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru¹.

CEFMU IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In LAC, the terms 'child, early and forced marriages and unions' (or CEFMU) brings together the complex and formidable set of factors that constrain girls throughout life. These include gender inequality, poor sexual and maternal health, limited reproductive rights, a weak commitment to girls' education, GBV and scarce economic opportunities. Recent research on the economic impact of child marriage shows the impediment that failing to address this issue poses to national development and economic growth⁵. Putting an end to CEFMU will advance the achievement of these goals, and this is why there is a specific target on harmful traditional practices in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that includes child marriage⁶.

Child marriage rates are slowly falling around the world, and while around one in three women aged 20 to 24 years reported having married as children in 2000, this figure had declined to one in five by 2018⁷.

Yet progress has been uneven, and as a consequence of population growth in places where child marriage rates are higher, the *number* of child marriages is projected to increase by 2030. CEFMU will slow the achievement of the SDGs in LAC. We must accelerate our actions to end CEFMU in the region.

THE NEAR INVISIBILITY OF A PERVERSIVE PATTERN

The historical and cultural rootedness of CEFMU in LAC is such that it is often taken for granted or viewed as natural, and as a result, it is nearly invisible as a problem. Across the region in 2017, 23% of women aged 20 to 24 years were married or in unions by age 18 and 5% by age 15.⁸ The countries in the region with the highest prevalence of women age 20 to 24 who married or entered unions before 18 years of age are the Dominican Republic and Brazil with 36%, Nicaragua with 35%, Honduras with 34%, Guatemala with 30%, and El Salvador and Mexico with 26%. In absolute numbers, Brazil still has the fourth-highest and Mexico the seventh-highest number of women married before age 18.¹⁰

Trend data demonstrate that LAC is the only major world region where significant declines have not occurred over the past 10 years in measures of CEFMU.¹¹ The magnitude of the problem across the region is likely underestimated, and in 2012, UNFPA estimated that the number of child brides marrying each year

in LAC would grow from 8.5 million in 2010 to 9.7 million in 2030 if trends continued.¹² In the past several years, many of the countries in the LAC region have taken steps to establish 18 years as the minimum age at which one can enter a marriage.

The invisibility of CEFMU as an issue is reinforced by longstanding gaps in data, and basic information on child marriage is not updated readily or regularly available in a number of countries, especially in the Caribbean.¹³ The data gaps include information on the important age differences that exist between girls who marry as children and their partners; a 2005 UNFPA report estimated this difference to be between 6 and 7 years, an important determinant of power dynamics.¹⁴

FINDING THE WORDS TO DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM

Many words are used in the countries of the region to describe CEFMU (see **Box 1** below). Unions are easier to enter than marriages, and can be easier to dissolve, though girls may become trapped by gender norms that treat them as though they are servants to the household. Research has shown that despite the many problems inherent in the patriarchal institution of marriage, its formality can sometimes protect women and children; informal unions tend to be disadvantageous to women, as they have no authority over their male partners if divorce occurs and they may be left with children and no support.

Box 1. Terms for informal unions in the LAC region and why language matters

Consensual union / Forced union / Early union / Cohabitation / Informal marriage / Unión de hecho / Unión conyugal / União consensual / Convivientes / Unión libre

The disadvantages of not having a shared vocabulary in the region include:

- Research and measurement are made more difficult by the fact that the practice and its names are different across countries.
- The variability of terminology makes it more challenging to compare across contexts.
- With no single understanding of what CEFMU is, the practice occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the law, making it much more difficult to build a movement against the practice.

What is the distinction between unions and marriages? The semantics of this distinction are important and reduce people's ability to identify the problem. In speaking with key informants in Brazil, researchers captured this revealing dialogue:¹⁵

"Do you know of any cases of marriages of girls and boys in your community?"
"Marriages, no, but I know a lot of [boys and girls] who are living together."

Across the country settings, the notion of "child marriage" was met with uncertainty or denial; but informal unions – referred to here by the euphemism "living together" as couples – were readily identified. Unions in which girls are living with their partners are, of course, quite equivalent to marriage in terms of their impact on girls' lives.

Girls' informal unions were very common in all eight countries in our study; the informality makes them harder to measure so the numbers are likely highly underestimated. Informal unions can be a way to try

living together as a couple that is more easily undone without bureaucracy [all countries]. Across the region, while marriages are, in general, formally recognized and registered either in a church or a civil office, unions are sometimes recognized as well by religious leaders. As a result, unions are perceived as more of an obligation for adolescent girls and giving the relationship a social weight that is often not conveyed by informal unions. The term 'marriage' (or *matrimonio* in Spanish and *casamento* in Portuguese) has positive associations in how it represents a formal ritual, stability, ceremony, includes witnesses that participate, serves as a declaration to community about a relationship, and it can offer some social status. In Guatemala, Bolivia and El Salvador, informants emphasized the rise in social status that occurs when a person gets married; indeed, in Guatemala you may be considered by the community as a failure if you do not marry. In addition, formal marriage confers more protection in the form of rights to child care payments and alimony.

Box 2 provides a discussion of what this phenomenon is called.

Box 2. "Child, early and forced marriages and unions"

LAC poses specific challenges to the way many people think and talk about CEFMU. The phrase "child, early and forced marriage" has become the accepted term in UN documents to describe this varied practice. The term **child** refers to marriages and unions that take place before the age of 18, the end of childhood according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). **Early** makes reference to the fact that for adolescent girls who marry, the timing of entry into marriage is problematic; for example, it competes with their schooling or physical development.

We say **forced** to highlight the structural inequalities that drive CEFMU around the world, the conditions that determine whether entering a marriage or a union is truly a "choice": low expectations of girls, the domestic work, and control they experience in their natal homes and limited commitment to girls' schooling. In addition, their marriages and unions take place with men who are often older, more experienced, more educated and have better economic prospects, thereby setting girls up for a lifetime of marital inequality and even violence.¹⁶

And we add the word **unions** to the concept to reflect the informal marriages or free unions that are common and equivalent to marriage. In the LAC region, the term "marriage" should be understood to include unions that are not formalized by church or state.

SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE CHOICES: A LACK OF ALTERNATIVES FACILITATES INFORMAL UNIONS

Although girls may sometimes exercise their own autonomy in deciding to enter a union, structural, cultural, social and economic factors shape the conditions under which girls make these highly constrained choices. Girls bear a range of disadvantages imposed by biased gender norms, limited education, and constrained livelihood opportunities. A context of unequal gender power and pervasive social disparities limits girls' opportunities and works to their disadvantage over the long term. The restricted social roles and life options typically open to girls and women underscore questions about the limits of their personal autonomy and ability to act effectively on behalf of their personal interests. Power deficits across differences of gender, age, class, education and ethnicity mean that girls and women are often faced with personal choices or decisions by others that harm or erode their interests.

For this reason, throughout the region, the term 'forced' has been used to refer to some unions and marriages because it reflects the circumstances of disadvantage in which girls navigate these decisions. The forcing of early unions and marriages can take various forms, from the seduction of young girls, to high levels of poverty and violence in their families of origin, to "selling" them to pay off family debts. In a significant number of cases, explicit or implicit threats of violence are used to influence behavior and ensure compliance. In considering specific uses of the concept of "forced" union or marriage, it is thus necessary to take into account rights, legal frameworks, community norms and the subjectivity of the girls who make decisions about their own lives and must live through the consequences.

Girls' early and forced marriages and unions often reflect adult views of adolescent sexuality and how it should be managed and sanctioned. Is sex something pleasurable about which girls themselves can decide, or does it signal a stage at which parents need to intervene? For some, girls' physical maturation as they pass through puberty signals their readiness to be married.

In LAC and elsewhere, sexuality and adolescents' emerging autonomy and desire for intimacy and sexual expression must be acknowledged. Girls themselves are likely to frame things differently from adults in their lives, and many girls, though under age 18, are

sexually active and not yet in union. Yet the expression of their sexuality is molded by the social and gender hierarchies shaping their specific cultural context. This is why young girls experience early sexual initiation across marked gender power disparities, with the result that it is not infrequently without their consent. The "guardians" and sexual partners in their lives manage and dominate their sexuality through imposed silence, personal neglect to control behavior, active control of physical movement and GBV.

The failure to educate young people about sex and sexuality – and to protect girls in particular from coerced sex and unintended pregnancy – reflects prevailing attitudes of paternalistic judgment and patriarchal controls. Girls' ability to make judgments about and be prepared for healthy sexual activity are routinely sidelined by preemptive social controls and denial of essential education, information and understandings. The same paternalism and patriarchy are often institutionalized in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services, which are largely available only when it is too late.

In contexts where it is prevalent, CEFMU is often viewed as a 'solution' – a status that can offer girls greater protection in cases of loss of virginity or pregnancy, or when escaping conditions of poverty and conflict at home. The Brazil country study, for example, observed that "The power of choosing and deciding about marriage must be viewed in relation to the alternatives, since need, or the lack of opportunities, are often highlighted more than any real desire for a union."¹⁷

Marriage practices are shifting in the region. Unlike those in Africa and Asia, most of these unions aren't organized or arranged by family members; yet family, community and economic pressures do play a role in driving and shaping these "consensual relationships." The Guatemala country report observed that in some indigenous communities, marriage historically has been a kind of union between families, with the interests and autonomy of individuals factoring less importantly. Today, parents no longer impose unions on their girls by arranging their partners between ages 12-14; instead, it is usually something a girl "chooses" between ages 15-17, when 'in love', pregnant or wishing to escape her family.¹⁸



Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean. **Study and methodology**

Recognizing the need to learn more about CEFMU and the comparative invisibility of the problem in the region, Plan International launched a regional study and invited UNFPA to collaborate at the regional level. Teams in eight countries (Bolivia, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru – with the support of UNFPA in Bolivia, Honduras

and Peru) joined forces to establish and implement a shared research protocol and generate data that could be compared across these countries. In addition to the large gaps in data of CEFMU overall, the team recognized the particular lack of information about indigenous groups and their practices that might affect the meaning of CEFMU in their communities.



From the outset, the study was designed to point toward the actions that could be taken as a result of the findings. The study was guided by Plan International's theory of change, which clusters the opportunities for action against CEFMU into three broad areas:

1. Changing social norms, attitudes, behaviors and relations;
2. Advocating for and legislating supportive policy frameworks and budgets; and
3. Ensuring access to social and economic resources and safety nets.

Plan International's theory of change and the ecological model of the UN interagency program intersect at many points. Both reflect the same ecological model that calls for working with individuals, families, communities, institutions, norms and legal and policy frameworks.

The research focuses on social and gender norms that affect girls' lives, and to a lesser extent, those of boys. The teams creatively adapted the Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) methodology developed by CARE,¹⁹ and also carried out semi-structured interviews with

girls, members of their families and communities, and government and civil society leaders and experts. The vignettes and questions used in the study highlighted key themes of sexuality, choice, decision-making, femininity and masculinity, the transition to adulthood, schooling, employment opportunities and violence. See **Table 1** for a summary of the qualitative data collected across the eight countries. The teams were guided by methodological research establishing minimum sample sizes for the collection of qualitative data.²⁰ Individual country reports have been published separately. They are fully referenced and linked in **Box 3** on page 67.

To provide essential context for the qualitative research, each team also reviewed demographic and other quantitative data on the prevalence of child marriage and unions, adolescent pregnancy, rates of school attendance, exposure to violence, early child-bearing and so on. Each team also scanned policies relevant to child marriage, not only those explicitly addressing marriage, but others related to pregnancy and schooling, school attendance requirements, treatment of GBV and the like. See **Annex 1** for the research protocol.

Table 1. Qualitative data collected across the 8 countries: Number of SNAP groups or number of individuals interviewed

	Methodology	Bolivia	Brazil	Dominican Republic*	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Peru
Boys 10-14	SNAP	12	5	----	3	3	2	4	3
Boys 15-17	SNAP	12	7	----	3	3	2	6	4
Unmarried girls 10-14	SNAP	12	6	57	3	3	2	5	3
Unmarried girls 15-17	SNAP	12	6		3	3	2	6	4
Mixed sex group of youth	SNAP	----	----	----	----	----	4	----	----
Parents of unmarried girls	SNAP	12	5	----	3	3	2	2	14
Family members of married girls	SNAP	----	1	10 SSI	3	3	2	----	----
Girls married <18	SSI	24	13	10	9	9	3	10	24
Husbands of girls married <18	SSI	36	12	10	9	9	6	15	16
Men not married with girls	SSI	----	----	35	----	----	----	----	----
Women 18-25 who married <18	SSI	24	19	----	9	9	17	25	26
Community and religious leaders	SSI	24	12	----	6	6	9	36	15
Local government officials	SSI	24	15	----	6	6	15	10	3
National government officials	SSI	24	6	----	5	4	-----	1	3
Researchers and civil society experts	SSI	24	7	----	6	6	12	3	2

SNAP methodology - organized group discussion around scenarios that stimulate the identification and evaluation of norms, approximately 10 participants per SNAP

SSI - semi-structured interview

* Study developed before regional protocol using SNAP was defined

Demographic data on an invisible problem in Latin America and the Caribbean

The problem of CEFMU is largely invisible in the region. A range of cultural, administrative and economic factors accounts for this lack of information and attention. The available quantitative data are not adequate to fully describe the problem; while marriages may be registered, “unions”, though common throughout the region, are not systematically captured in administrative records. In addition, the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) do not collect data on marriages and unions entered into before age 15, and certainly not any involving girls under age 10.

As the rich qualitative findings from each of the eight countries in this study show, the transition to early marriage reflects a complex interaction between first sex, consent and coercion, laws regarding consent and marriage, pregnancy, family attitudes and pressures and viable alternatives for girls. Four important quantitative measures provide context on the patterns of CEFMU, complementing the qualitative findings. **Table 2** presents the limited data that is available on age at first sex.

Table 2. Median age at first sex

		Women 20-24	Men 20-24
Country	Year of survey	Median age at first sexual intercourse	Median age at first sexual intercourse
Bolivia	2008 DHS	18.8	17.3
Brazil	1996 DHS	18.7	16.3
Colombia	2015 DHS	17.0	15.8
Costa Rica	2015 DHS	17.0	16.0
Dominican Republic	2013 DHS	17.6	16.1
Guatemala	2014-15 DHS	19.1	17.5
Guyana	2009 DHS	18.3	17.1
Haiti	2016-17 DHS	17.6	15.4
Honduras	2011-12 DHS	18.5	16.8
Nicaragua	2001 DHS	18.1	--
Panama	2015-15 DHS	17.0	16.0
Paraguay	1990 DHS	19.0	--
Peru	2012 DHS	18.5	--

Source: Prepared by UNFPA LACRO with data from The DHS Program. <http://www.statcompiler.com>. Obtained January 30 2019; and from Costa Rica 2015 DHS, Cuadro 2.2. <https://ccp.ucr.ac.cr/documentos/portal/Informe-2daEncuesta-2015.pdf>; and Panama 2014-15 DHS, Cuadro 5.5. https://panama.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ENASSER%202014-2015-%20version%2030%20abril_0.pdf

Given declining age at first sex in the region, it would be preferable to have more recent data. An analysis of trends in the data in the period immediately preceding these latest DHS surveys indicated significant declines in the countries for which there were data available; these declines were mitigated slightly by an increase in education levels which are associated with later age at first sex.²¹ Still, these data show differences

of at least a year in median age at sexual initiation between women and men, with women's later start hinting at the sexual double standard: the difference in Brazil and Haiti is over two years.

Table 3 presents CEFMU prevalence, percent of girls giving birth before age 18, and the adolescent birth rate among girls aged 15 to 19.

Table 3. Measures of the timing of girls' experiences of sex, union formation and giving birth

Country	CEFMU Prevalence* %	% girls giving birth before age 18 2011-2016	Adolescent birth rate (girls 15 to 19) 2009-2014
Latin America and the Caribbean	23		
Dominican Republic	36	21	135
Brazil	36	-	65
Nicaragua	35	28	92
Honduras	34	22	99
Guatemala	30	20	92
Guyana	30	16	97
El Salvador	26	18	63
Mexico	26	21	84
Belize	26	17	64
Cuba	26	6	50
Panama	26	-	89
Colombia	23	20	85
Bolivia	22	20	89
Ecuador	22	-	100
Peru	22	16	68
Costa Rica	21	13	67
Suriname	19	-	66
Haiti	18	13	65



Country	CEFMU Prevalence* %	% girls giving birth before age 18 2011-2016	Adolescent birth rate (girls 15 to 19) 2009-2014
Paraguay	18	-	63
Jamaica	8	15	72
Uruguay	No data	-	-
Argentina	No data	12	70
Chile	No data	-	50
Barbados	No data	7	49
Trinidad and Tobago	No data	-	36
Saint Lucia	No data	-	50
Venezuela	No data	24	101
Antigua and Barbuda	No data	-	67
Bahamas	No data	-	40
British Virgin Islands	No data	-	27
Dominica	No data	-	47
Grenada	No data	-	53
Montserrat	No data	-	36
Saint Kitts and Nevis	No data	-	75
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	No data	-	70
Turks and Caicos Islands	No data	-	29

* The percentage of women 20 to 24 years who married before the age of 18.

Source: UNICEF. 2017. *State of the World's Children 2017*. New York: UNICEF; and UNFPA data assembled with Statcompiler

Adolescent birthrates remain high in the region despite the downward pressures that the expansion of secondary education has exerted on adolescent fertility. Most women have their first child by their early twenties, reflecting both high rates of CEFMU and general weaknesses in sexual and reproductive health services for large sections of these populations.

Together, these data help reveal important patterns in CEFMU, even as persistent weaknesses in the data reflect the continued marginality of CEFMU as a social, gender and health issue. We see that a significant subset of girls become sexually active while young, have children shortly thereafter, and may enter into a union or a marriage along the way.



Legal frameworks relating to Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions across Latin America and the Caribbean

The majority of countries in LAC have ratified the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, which requires the full consent of both parties to marry. All of the countries have also ratified important international conventions on human rights, among them, the CRC, CEDAW, and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence against Women (the Belém do Pará Convention).

Despite these high-level commitments, just a few years ago, about a third of the countries in the region had legislation in place with different minimum ages to marry for boys and girls, with girls permitted to marry a year or two earlier than boys. This is considered a

discriminatory practice and is not in keeping with international agreements. Recent legislative changes, however, have equalized the age for boys and girls and raised the minimum age to 18 years or above, consistent with international agreements (see **Table 4**). Unfortunately, the law codifies exceptions or situations in which parents, guardians or judges may permit marriage before age 18. Though civil codes have been changing, implementation and enforcement remain weak, enabling many strategies for avoiding laws. More fundamentally, informal unions often remain beyond the administrative purview of governmental agencies, creating large loopholes for avoiding both official sanctions *and* supportive services.

Table 4. Laws Governing Age at Marriage, by Country in LAC

Country	Legal age of marriage		Age of marriage with consent of parents, guardians, or public authority	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Argentina	18	18	16	16
Bolivia	18	18	16	16
Brazil	18	18	16	16
Chile	18	18	16	16
Colombia	18	18	14	14
Costa Rica	18	18	15	15
Cuba	18	18	14	16
Dominican Republic	18	18	15	16
Ecuador	18	18	18	18
El Salvador	18	18	18	18
Guatemala	18	18	18	18
Honduras	21	21	18	18
Mexico	18	18	Varies by state	Varies by state
Nicaragua	18	18	16	16
Panama	18	18	18	18
Paraguay	18	18	14	16
Peru	18	18	16	16
Trinidad & Tobago	18	18	18	18
Uruguay	18	18	16	16
Venezuela	18	18	14	16

Source: http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2016/09/FT_Marriage_Age_Appendix_2016_09_08.pdf

Table 4 shows that the effects of advocacy in recent years has led to the establishment of the same minimum age of marriage for men and women in all of the countries of the region. But legal age of marriage *with the consent of other adults* remains below 18 years except in Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore,

it is two years higher for men than for women in Cuba, Paraguay and Venezuela, capturing different expectations for boys and girls. **Box 4** lays out the various reasons that parents in the Dominican Republic may consent to CEFMU. Although these reasons emerged from the research in the Dominican Republic, they are relevant across the region.

Box 4. Range of legally valid reasons for parental consent to CEFMU in the Dominican Republic

Parents can consent to a child's marriage for a broad range of accepted reasons.

These reasons include if their daughter:

- becomes pregnant;
- “loses” her virginity;
- is orphaned;
- is abused in the household;
- is kicked out of the house;
- is not studying;
- experiences difficult economic conditions at home;
- cannot find work;
- wants or decides to enter a union.

Or if:

- The boyfriend declares he can ‘handle’ a union;
- The parents allow it;
- The daughter is legally emancipated.

Source: Dominican Republic report, 2018: 120.

Legal frameworks are evolving in a positive direction but are often irrelevant to the life conditions of girls. Weaknesses and gaps in the laws are exacerbated by economic constraints, normative practices and systems of traditional justice. If a girl feels that entering a union is the best choice for her, and her parents do not intervene to prevent this, or if parents view a union as the best way to resolve the social problem posed by a “premarital” pregnancy, the parents and the couple may proceed without regard to the laws. In **El Salvador**, for example, local officials, including mayors and nurses, found that girls are entering unions with the full knowledge of their parents who do not denounce them, and as a consequence the police do not take action.

“Even though the laws exist on paper, in practice they don’t get applied because... they completely naturalize these acts of violence, of a different kind, toward girls and adolescents, while it is really part of the culture of the country.”

Expert interview, El Salvador

In many indigenous communities, civil law takes a back seat to systems of community or traditional justice. The laws simply do not matter if people disregard them or view them as irrelevant.

To take an example of another challenging situation typical of the region, in **Brazil**, child marriage is absent from the public agenda.²² Two important loopholes exist in the legal system, which are similar to gaps identified in other countries as well: first, that one can marry between 16 and 18 years with parental consent; and more troubling, that it is possible to marry before 16 (*idade núbil*) if it will spare a person criminal prosecution or in the case of pregnancy, meaning that if a girl experiences sexual violence/statutory rape, the perpetrator can marry the girl to avoid punishment. In this way girls are doubly harmed, first by the sexual violence and then by the “fix” of marriage, which locks them in.

Some promising developments in laws and policies in various of the country settings have occurred in recent years. For example, in August 2017, **Guatemala**, established 18 years as the legal age of marriage *without exception*. Article 83 “Prohibition to Enter into Marriage” of the Civil Code determines that you cannot enter into a marriage nor authorize in any way the marriage of young people under the age of 18 years. The law eliminated an exception clause that had previously permitted marriage under some circumstances. There is still limited awareness about this law, though a national committee is working to secure child rights in a strategic action plan (page 64). In Guatemala, as in



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most countries in the region, informal unions remain largely beyond the attention of lawmakers and administrators, in part because unions are difficult to influence through legal and bureaucratic measures. In this situation, unions serve as a kind of 'least cost and low friction' default option for many couples. Programmes to change societal perceptions and norms around unions may provide ways to help delay or redirect them, and could also help direct reproductive health services to young couples in need at critically important periods in their lives.

The Family Code of **El Salvador** was also revised in August 2017 and its new language strictly forbids marriages and unions among people under the age of 18.²³ In the approved legislation, many of the articles that weakened the earlier code were eliminated, and the last point of Article 14 indicated that marriage between an adult and a minor was always permitted if and when they had a child in common.²⁴ According to the penal code, parents/caretakers can be punished, but it is uncertain how this will be implemented. The new code establishes a higher penalty for rape if the victim is under 15 years of age. For some sectors the language also can be viewed as a restriction of the expression of adolescent sexuality, because regardless of the relationship, it is illegal for an adult to have sex with anyone 15 to 18 regardless of the relationship and age difference. No specific policy is in place to implement the prevention of CEFMU, but there is a strategy oriented toward the prevention of adolescent pregnancies. Health Units in El Salvador have a mandate to work with adolescents, and since 2017, the Inter-Institutional Policy on Pregnancy Prevention has been in place.

In **Bolivia**, the Children and Adolescent Code establishes the overriding/superior interest of every child and adolescent and specifies a minimum age of 18 years to enter into marriage.²⁵ Yet exceptions are allowed (art. 139), vacating the protections for girls, and it is possible to marry or enter a union at 16 years of age as long as a person has written authorization from legal guardian. Despite data from 2016 showing that three percent of the population under age 15 had entered a union, and 22 percent of girls had married before age 18 years.²⁶

From the perspective of the governments of a number of these countries, the existence of child marriage and unions and the importance of these laws are questionable, since they doubt the existence of this problem and see it as something as happening in a tiny minority and only in special cases. Establishing the magnitude of the problem will make it easier to identify strategies to solve it. Still, this review of the secondary literature and the qualitative interviews conducted clearly show that the problem exists, and it is complexified by sexual violence, early pregnancy, the

absence of the exercise of rights and empowerment, patriarchal culture and the naturalization of certain practices related to sexuality.

A variety of family laws and other areas that do not explicitly encompass CEFMU can help or hinder girls. In many Latin American countries, for example, laws exist that give pregnant or parenting girls the right to return to school, however the laws are not enforced.²⁷ In Bolivia, which has a great deal of relevant legislation, the application of the Constitution and the Prevention of Violence against Boys, Girls and Adolescents Code, a comprehensive law to guarantee girls and boys a life free from violence, could ensure differentiated attention to and tracking of adolescents who present sexual abuse, early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).²⁸

In 2017, Brazil's Superior Court of Justice affirmed the rape of a vulnerable individual as a crime, even if there is "eventual consent of the victim to the practice of the act, previous sexual experience or existence of a loving relationship with the agent."²⁹ Honduras's Law against Trafficking in Persons, Article 6, describes "servant marriage" as a union in which a person without being assisted in the right to object, is promised or given in marriage in exchange for money or other in-kind payment that is delivered to the person's mother, father, guardian, relatives or any other person or group of people.³⁰ The Civil Code of Guatemala Decree Law Number 106 states that divorce can be given by mutual agreement of the spouses or at the request of one of them for causes established in the law, but for this, it must be at least one year since the marriage was celebrated, which could be a problem for girls.³¹ Nicaragua's Family Code indicates that mothers and fathers have equal responsibility toward their children. Though it is not often implemented, this instrument defines paternal responsibility and support proportional to the father's income.³²

In sum, despite the emergence of laws forbidding CEFMU, they are little known or implemented. As a consequence, judicial systems, community leaders and parents do not sufficiently protect girls from CEFMU. Social norms and values continue to support CEFMU as a valid option, and institutions such as churches increasingly recognize child marriage if weddings are celebrated under their auspices. Neither are girls provided with legal tools and social support that would improve their well-being when they are in unions. These could include education; protection from violence; legal support in securing divorce, separation or child support; and comprehensive SRH services and sexuality education. These realities are discussed further in the qualitative analysis.



Analysis of the qualitative findings across the eight country studies

The purpose of qualitative analysis is to provide essential local context and understandings to complement quantitative data. Combined thoughtfully, the two knowledge tools reinforce one another to provide more textured and useful insights. The basic purpose of complementary methods here is to try make best use of the richness of the materials in the eight country studies. Complementary data and analysis also better enable us to underwrite assessments of wider patterns and practices across contexts, in this case at the regional level. An important constraint related to the available qualitative data is that we know little about

the nuanced cultural contexts and the perceptions shaping “choices” that lead to early unions. We need considerably more research into how girls and young women frame and understand their experiences.

Still, the information available from the eight study countries is copious, and provided a number of important analytic threads. The authors have reviewed, distilled and organized these into six key insights or principles, shown in **Box 5**. The analysis is organized into sections around these themes.

Box 5. Cross-cutting themes of the qualitative analysis

Resources and supports

- A. Girls flee violence in their homes by entering unions or getting married, only often to be revictimized by their male partners.
- B. Girls flee poverty in their homes of origin to enter into unions where they encounter many of the same conditions.

Norms and gender inequality

- C. Gender stereotypes and community norms trap girls and men in CEFMU.
- D. CEFMU and gender norms lead girls to drop out of school, with lasting impact.

Laws and policies

- E. Judicial systems, community leaders and parents do not adequately protect girls from child marriage.
- F. Governments fail to meet a host of adolescent girls’ needs (that ultimately contribute to trapping girls in forced unions, including child sexual abuse, GBV, school dropout, adolescent SRH, parents’ complicity in child marriage and child support).

A. Girls flee violence in their homes by entering into unions or getting married, only often to be revictimized by their male partners.

GIRLS ENTER INTO CEFMU TO ESCAPE ABUSE AND VIOLENT DISCIPLINE AT HOME

Personal histories of violence, abuse and sexual exploitation – either within girls’ families or outside the home – contribute an important part to the rationale many girls understand for opting into unions. Girls and young women often feel that unions offer greater personal and economic security than their natal households, along with greater autonomy from parental and other social controls. Though the reality in many countries is that their status within unions often comes to resemble that from which they were seeking refuge, informal unions often retain an allure that only norm changes and cultural shifts will diminish.

In Bolivia, for example, a national survey conducted in 2016 found that among indigenous communities, 2.3% had first sex between the ages of 7 and 13 years, an age range that would constitute child rape. About 16% stated that their first sexual relationship was forced.³³ It is common globally for adolescents to lack an understanding of what constitutes forced sex, suggesting that actual rates may be significantly higher.³⁴ Bolivian boys recognized that girls may choose to enter into CEFMU to escape violence and abuse from their parents, though they seemed not to appreciate or express the possibility that as men they might replicate that same pattern in their roles as partners.

The qualitative interviews in Honduras similarly found that the girls who entered into CEFMU had histories marked by violence. Likewise, in El Salvador, a girl explained that she left home and entered into CEFMU “because my mother and brother hit me a lot.”³⁵ One Honduran girl in a CEFMU stated, “the only thing I remember from my childhood...was that I was hit whether I did something right or wrong.”³⁶ Another said, “I lived with my grandmother ... who wanted to keep me as a prisoner, but I thought this was normal.”³⁷ A girl in Honduras noted that it was better to leave the house and enter into a union so that she would not be raped by her father and brother-in-law.

Some girls in El Salvador were told by family members that, “You are not worth shit and you are a whore.”³⁸ In the Dominican Republic, a risk factor for CEFMU was a history of sexual abuse; a large fraction of the girls who were interviewed stated that their motivation to enter into a union was because of violence in their home of origin.³⁹ As one girl aged 15 in a union from the Dominican Republic recounted:

“I married because I needed to flee from my house. They abused me too much. They hit me. They pounded me with sticks. They called me ‘crazy, shameless.’ One day I said, ‘I just can’t tolerate this anymore.’ ... I left at age 11 to work for a family but there it was even worse...I lived there like a prisoner. ... I wanted to get married to escape... I did not know that [marriage] would be another hell.” ⁴⁰

Girls also face threats that lead them to CEFMU. In Bolivia, girls who became pregnant were threatened with being thrown out of the family home. In Honduras, a girl in a CEFMU stated that her father would kill her if she did not marry. In some cases, girls facing violence entered unions or became pregnant to justify leaving their family home.

In Peru, unusually strong survey data affirm the strong associations between violence in a girl’s natal home and her likelihood of marrying early.⁴¹ The country report indicates that physical violence sharply increased the likelihood that a girl would marry early, and in all four regions studied, beating was strongly associated with the likelihood that girls would marry at ages 10 to 15 years, and slightly less at 16 to 17 years. In Loreto and Piura, 75% of women in union married between the ages of 10 and 15 years had been beaten by their parents.

THE NATURE OF MANY EARLY UNIONS OFTEN REFLECTS ‘PUSH’ FACTORS AT HOME

Girls’ reasons for entering into early marriages and unions reflect many constraints in their lives, and varied in priority across the study countries. The reasons given for girls’ forced marriages and unions in Brazil were, in order of importance: pregnancy, love and the desire to have a family, sexuality/loss of virginity, to get out of the parental household (conflict, poverty, violence) and to seek protection against violence and the moral judgement of the community and associated sanctions.⁴² The priority given to these causes differed somewhat in other countries. For example, the Guatemala analysis highlighted the importance of generalized poverty and machismo, along with a desire among adolescent girls for greater autonomy and a setting in which to establish their own family. In El Salvador, the analysis found that love and the desire to get out of one’s household of origin were the main causes.

In Brazil, informal unions are marked by cohabitation, often with other family members, which is especially common in rural areas. Formal marriages registered in a registrar’s office or church have lost ground to informal unions and this new type of sexual relationship. Still, this new type of relationship does not question/push norms related to gender and the sexual double standard. As more than one person stated, marriage announces to the world that you are with someone: “In marriage there is already cheating, imagine if you’re just living together!”

Conditions in Bolivia and Brazil, for example, are similar to those in the other countries: among adolescents, there is a predominance of unions (*unión libre*, *união consensual*, or *concubinato*) without any kind of religious or civil ceremony. At every age, one sees increases in the proportion who are living in unions (*unidas*) rather than officially married (*casadas*).

In Bolivia, informal unions are looking more like cohabitation, with a trial period (*tiempo de prueba*) of living together, and if it goes well, get married later. Among girls under the age 18 years in Bolivia, unions predominate in relation to marriages (85% versus 15%). From the perspective of one expert in Bolivia, “When people marry, they are more united and living in a more serious relationship. Now people 14 to 17 or so just get together, but the ones who marry are older than 35 to 40, with the younger ones just living together.” Indeed, pressure from parents can push young people to marry rather than just being together, as this young Brazilian woman captured in stating her preference: “If I had the support of my parents I would not marry, but if I didn’t have their support and my boyfriend really liked me and was willing to take me on as his partner, I would live together.”

The age difference between partners is an important condition that shapes relationship dynamics. Male partners in Peru provided interesting comments about the imbalance and how it plays out in the relationship. A 27 year-old partner in Cusco reflected:

"I would tell them not to do it, because with an older person and a girl, when you live together it's not recommended because if they don't understand, the older person thinks about big things and if your wife is a minor, she can't. She thinks like a kid. I would return to being on my own, save my money and I'd buy myself a car."⁴⁴

A 27 year-old man in Piura said that a couple has problems when he is mature and she is immature; a 24 year-old observed that the older man knows how to resolve problems while the girl might not.⁴⁵

GIRLS IN CEFMU FACE VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND CONTROL BY THEIR PARTNERS

Many girls in unions have experienced GBV at the hands of their partners. Quantitative data from a 2011 DHS survey in Nicaragua found that of those who were "in union" before age 18, 3% had been raped, 32% felt

coerced into sex because of their age, and over 48% regretted their first sexual encounter. In a survey of 152 girls in the Dominican Republic, 40% stated that a major disadvantage of being in an early union was sexual violence. Married Nicaraguan girls defined a good union as one in which "he does not hit me,"⁴⁶ a rather low bar. In El Salvador, girls talked about men as "someone who causes you harm."⁴⁷ A married girl in Bolivia described men as "violent, they come home drunk...", while another spoke of the violence experienced by her married adolescent sister, whose partner "punched her as if she was a man."⁴⁸ Affirming this violence on the part of partners, a Bolivian government official described a 17 year-old boy in union who had harmed his 15 year-old partner: "He burned her with a hot spoon because she didn't fry his eggs to his taste."⁴⁹

Across the country settings, girls, parents and experts highlighted the transformation some men would go through as they shifted from being attentive suitors to controlling, abusive partners. In Peru, for example, a 17 year-old girl in union in Cusco described how relationship dynamics had changed over time, and how her fulfillment of her domestic role and his violence was related.

"When we were boyfriend and girlfriend, everything was marvelous, we never argued, he never raised his hand against me, never hit me. But when I started to live with him, I began to live the reality, meaning we had a lot of arguments, he hit me when the baby fell, or when the baby got a scrape or fell out of bed. And all I did was cry and hide all of this, right? So that my parents would not find out."⁵⁰

Girls in El Salvador likewise observed that while boy-friends would be respectful prior to being in union, once they were in union, they began to abuse them. A community leader in Salvador, Brazil said about the male partners of girls:

“He’s even going to demonstrate how he thinks that she’s his property: ‘you have to do this [domestic work]’. He even mistreats her, beats this adolescent girl... She imagined one thing because at the beginning there was love, there was affection... and she thought that this would be for the rest of her life.”⁵¹

In Honduras, most of the girls in union who were interviewed stated that they suffered from domestic violence and abuse. Observing how a son-in-law had changed in relationship with their young daughter, parents in Bolivia said that now, “He will hit her, insult her and lie to her.”⁵² In Bolivia, of girls in early unions who experience violence, 43% of the violence comes from their intimate partner. In Guatemala, girls aged 10 to 14 years recognized that it is not possible to say “no” to sex in marriage as this would lead to violence. A Nicaraguan girl in union said, “I fear I’m in danger, as when he is angry, he threatens me.”⁵³

One member of a focus group of unmarried Brazilian girls aged 15 to 17 years offered her pronouncement on the consequences of entering a union or marrying at an early age:

“Yeah, I think that marrying isn’t the solution because... If she married him, it would be a lot worse for her because it would increase the chances of her being assaulted, because when a person gets together with someone else so young, it increases their chances of being assaulted, raped, and to have a life that’s really... how do you say it?”⁵⁴

Girls in union often “consent” to sex in order to keep their partners or to avoid other violence. As one Nicaraguan girl said, “He told me that he would leave me if I did not go [have sex] with him.... I saw myself between a rock and a hard place to make the decision.”⁵⁵

In many countries of the region, the violence within unions was often linked to broader social violence and patriarchal gender norms. A physician in rural Bolivia, for example, reported that due to the myth that sex with a virgin cures STIs, men rape adolescent girls, who then become pregnant and are forced into CEFMU. Girls in Honduras feared being left single follow-

ing rape, as this would lead to being used as a drug mule.⁵⁶ In El Salvador and other contexts with pervasive gangs, girls may face pressure or threats to marry gang members, bringing them closer to the violence inherent in gang life. In sum, most girls’ idea of a union is that the partner will care for and protect them, but the reality can be quite different.

Male partners exert a great deal of control over girls. Partners of Nicaraguan girls often do not allow the girls to either work or study, further isolating girls in union, increasing their dependence on their partners, and consolidating the control of partners over their lives. One mother in Nicaragua noted: “Girls in unions become more dependent personally and socially on their partner. They no longer have many friends, they can’t study or see people because their partner will become jealous.”⁵⁷ In Bolivia, girls in union also said they could no longer see their friends. An unmarried girl in one of the focus groups of 15 to 17 year-olds in Brazil shared some detail about her sister who married at age 15:

“She’s fifteen. I don’t think she finds married life good, because she can’t dress the way she wants because he fights with her. She puts on a pair of shorts and he says, ‘You can take that off!’ If I were her, I’d say that I wouldn’t take it off because he didn’t buy it for me (giggles).”

In El Salvador, a girl in union said that she had to ask her partner even if she wants to go outside.⁵⁸ One Nicaraguan girl described her isolation, saying, “I don’t visit any one, I am only shuttered inside at home.”⁵⁹

Girls in CEFMU faced violence for their lack of knowledge of how to cook and clean according to their partner’s standards.⁶⁰ As one girl in El Salvador warned, “Do everything for the man... otherwise you will be abused.”⁶¹ A key informant in Honduras summed up the issue of violence and CEFMU by saying, “The man who marries or gets into union with a girl feels that she is his property, he treats her like a slave, uses her, prostitutes her and then when she is no longer useful, he abandons her...”⁶²

Men themselves state that they use violence and control with their adolescent wives. Nicaraguan men in union with girls under age 18 years stated that they are the ones who make decisions. This is echoed in the Peru study, where men say that they require about five years of union to discipline the girls into submission.⁶³ In Honduras, while the male partners of girls in union said that they were happy and there was no physical or

psychological abuse, the girls told a markedly different story of control and abuse. In the Dominican Republic, one man married to an adolescent girl stated, "If she has another man, she is looking for me to kill her."⁶⁴ Though girls often find themselves, in essence, trapped in unions, they also express the notion that being controlled by their partners with the sanction of violence is a sign of love. Relationship norms are such that it is acceptable for their male partners to tell them whether they can go out, whom they can see, and to demand sex in order for them to prove their love.

Married men in Codó, Brazil offered a contrasting image of women as "jealous", "naïve" and "controlling", and *men* as the victims of this control.⁶⁵ Men in union attribute to their young female partners the loss of their own liberty, represented by the right to play ball, drink and go out with friends. The way it happens, as young unmarried men explained is that:

"The boy loses his youth because he has to stay at home more, without going out. No playing, no parties, no drinking, he's not going to take advantage of his youth. And if he wants to go out, he has to take her." (Focus group of boys aged 15 to 17 years).

"If he marries, he's not going to be able to play ball any more." (Focus group of boys aged 10 to 14 years).

IF A GIRL LEAVES A UNION, SHE WILL OFTEN RETURN TO VIOLENCE IN HER FAMILY OF ORIGIN

Girls are blamed for failed marriages or unions. In El Salvador, girls in union who became pregnant but who were then abandoned by their partners faced harsh sanctions from them: verbal abuse and rejection to punish them for having been sexually active in the first place. In Nicaragua, if a union fails and a girl returns to her family of origin, she faces emotional abuse, being "punished" for this mistake, as one girl described.⁶⁶ The early sexual activity can be overlooked if a girl stays in the union and doesn't bother her family of origin further, but her presence back at home continually reminds mothers and fathers of the error of her ways. Fathers seemed to have a harder time accepting their daughters' sexual activity and relationships, as illustrated by the focus groups of parents in Codó, Brazil.⁶⁷

In this context, the findings highlight what could be a difference in the reaction of mothers and fathers, affirming that men would have more difficulty accepting a pregnant daughter who did not want to marry and would stay in the household. As in Bahia, the groups of Codó affirmed that the father has greater rigidity with regard to this issue, and would certainly oblige... the daughter to marry.

The explanation seems to lie in men's "machismo", which includes judgement and control with regard to daughters and their sexual behavior.

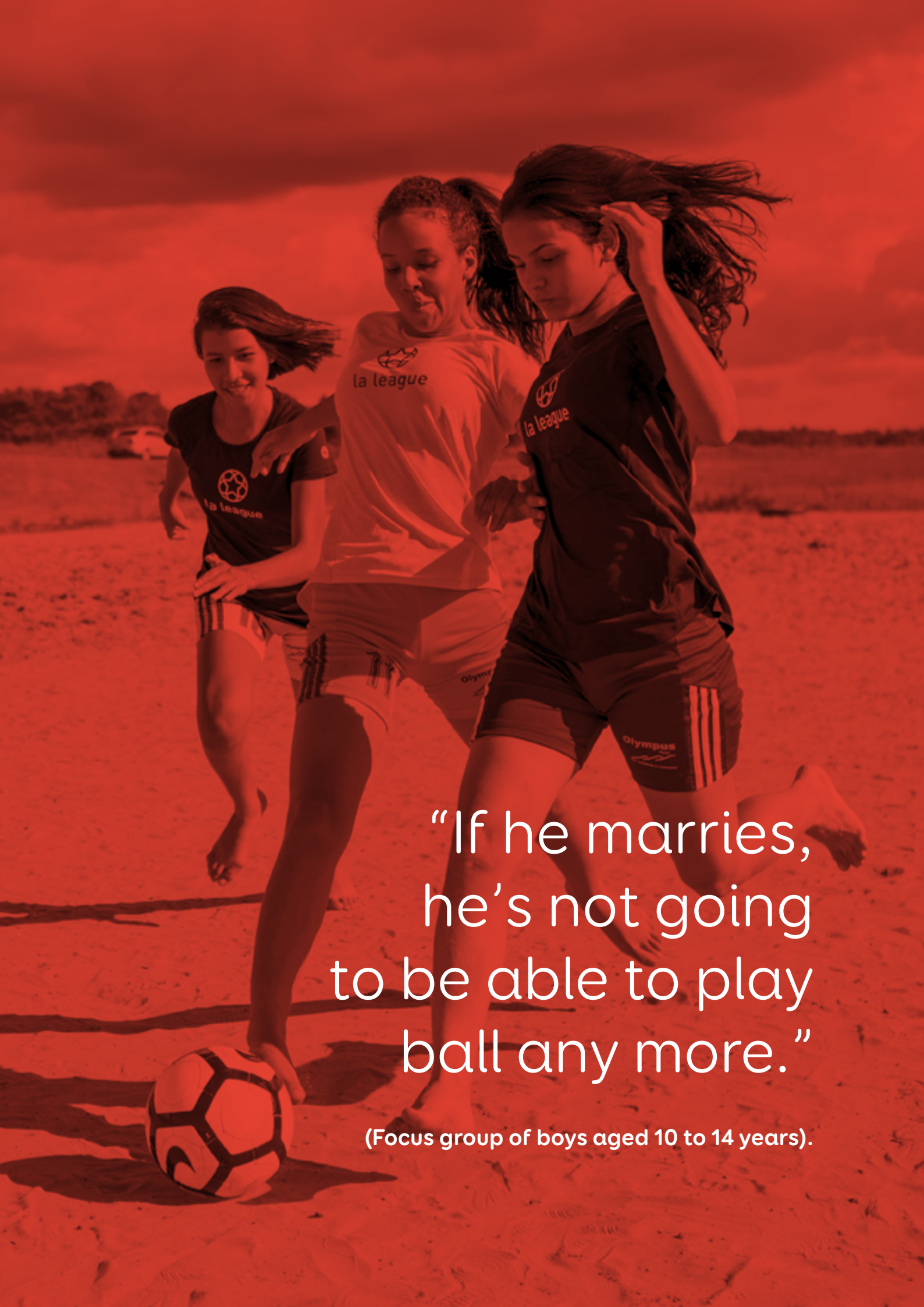
In contrast, the research in Peru found that parents were not always rigid in their attitudes toward their daughters' unions:

For the mothers, it isn't essential that the girls form a family with these men, it is enough to bring the girls [back] home so that "they don't fill up [the house] with children," and can return to their previous activities, especially studying. This is why many of the girls return to their family homes, encouraged by their mothers, who have often reluctantly accepted the partner...

Mothers themselves often experienced early unions, and they accept the return of their daughters so that they do not have to suffer the same fate they did. The daughters also offer another set of hands to help with housework. Fathers may also be accepting of their daughters' return, in part to regain control they have lost over their daughters. Parental flexibility seems to reflect both concern for the girls and a dose of self-interest.

LAWS TO PROTECT GIRLS AGAINST CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE LACK VISIBILITY AND ARE OFTEN UNIMPLEMENTED

Even in countries where child sexual abuse is illegal, the laws are generally unknown or not implemented. For example, in El Salvador, a 2017 law stating that child marriage is illegal means that rape no longer is an excuse for a man to "save the girl's honor" by marrying her and is now outlawed. While this law is an advance, one national expert noted, "I can't confirm to you whether the law is applied or not."⁶⁸ Given the immense amount of violence in El Salvador, many public servants would be unwilling to denounce the sexual abuse of children

A photograph of three young women playing soccer on a sandy beach. They are wearing dark-colored soccer jerseys with 'la league' and a soccer ball logo on the front. The woman in the foreground is kicking the ball, while the other two are running towards her. The background shows a beach with some trees and a cloudy sky. The entire image has a red color overlay.

“If he marries,
he’s not going
to be able to play
ball any more.”

(Focus group of boys aged 10 to 14 years).

out of fear for their own lives. In Honduras, a key informant noted, “We are the country with the best laws, but the problem that we have is that we do not implement these laws.”⁶⁹ The study in Nicaragua found that government institutions that are required to protect children from sexual abuse do not pursue cases. In El Salvador, even government officials noted that, “Girls are just seen as sex objects for men...”⁷⁰ Honduras has a policy⁷¹ that guarantees girls, adolescents and women a life “free of violence with the State adopting policies to prevent, sanction and eradicate violence throughout a woman’s life cycle in both private and public spaces.”⁷² Even in cases where laws exist on violence, girls often do not know their rights.

COMMUNITY NORMS AND FEAR PREVENT REPORTING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS

Cases that would clearly qualify as sexual abuse of minors under the law are not brought to the judicial system, as sex with young girls is condoned or tolerated by the community. For example, girls in Nicaragua noted, “Yes, it’s illegal, but parents allow it.”⁷³ The research in Nicaragua found cases of girls as young as age 13 already married, which constitutes rape and sexual abuse of a minor, as sexual relations with anyone under age 14 is considered a crime. In Honduras, most families hide incidents of violence, both because they fear how admitting that their daughter was raped will affect their reputation and because high levels of impunity mean that it is unlikely that a case will be resolved in a girl’s favor. One problem that is especially acute in Central America is not reporting violence to the authorities. A Honduran woman said, “I would not go to the police... I do not trust them, I could show up

dead.”⁷⁴ As other studies have found: “[...] a law... was not sufficient to change the social hierarchy, racism and discrimination embedded in social relations...”⁷⁵ Those courageous enough to denounce CEFMU in Nicaragua are fearful to do so: “Here no one goes into the issue [of CEFMU] nor says anything because of fear,” fear of others and distrust of the State.⁷⁶ This problem is especially acute in Central America.

While some girls talked about how teachers encouraged them, other girls mentioned that teachers and principals would rape them. Girls felt that they had no choice but to leave school to escape from the continued threat of rape but did not feel they could explain to their mothers why they abandoned their schooling. Girls in the Dominican Republic noted that in their daily lives, they suffer from abuse in school and also cyber bullying.

MEN AND BOYS BLAME GIRLS FOR RAPE AND GBV

Young men in Honduras stated that girls “provoke” boys into raping them by wearing inappropriate dress and because masculinity means that men and boys can’t control their sexual impulses: “The flesh is weak,” noted one boy from Honduras.⁷⁷ Girls noted, “We need to dress like virgins.”⁷⁸ And girls in the Dominican Republic stated that to be a good woman, you have to “sacrifice” yourself, placing girls at risk of condoning violence against themselves. In the Dominican Republic, men married to adolescent girls stated, “girls incite violence if they behave badly.”⁷⁹ In Bolivia, men are seen as naturally violent, that it is part of their biological make up which becomes exacerbated by alcohol use.

B. Girls flee poverty in their homes of origin to enter into unions where they encounter many of the same conditions

GIRLS ENTER INTO UNION AS A STRATEGY TO AVERT HUNGER AND POVERTY; BEING IN UNION THEN LIMITS THEIR OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORK AND INCOME

Girls who enter into CEFMU are often vulnerable to hunger and poverty in their households of origin. Peruvian data show the close connection between poverty and early unions, with the 2017 DHS documenting that 46% of girls in union were very poor, while only 19% of girls who are not in union are poor.⁸⁰ A representative of a civil society organization working nationally in Brazil presented a similar picture of poverty as a key driver of CEFMU in that country: “The main cause: poverty. The girl has a whole construction in her head about how her marrying is better than remaining in a state of

poverty. The guy has to offer her better conditions.”⁸¹ Girls sometimes volunteer for early marriage to spare their families from an extra mouth to feed, feeling this way they could best help their mothers. One Bolivian woman said, “I got married [as a child] by necessity, I don’t have family or support.”⁸² Boys in Bolivia noted that girls enter into union to have enough to eat: “Some girls are poor and don’t have enough to eat, they think that entering into union will solve their problems.”⁸³

Girls in El Salvador and the Dominican Republic talked of how one motivation to enter into CEFMU was to escape the poverty manifested in their families’ homes. In Guatemala, boys aged 10 to 14 reported that parents oblige

their sisters to marry due to poverty in the household and to relieve themselves of one more mouth to feed. Nicaraguan girls said that a major reason to enter into CEFMU was to escape the adverse economic conditions of their parents' home. They also talked about how family members wanted to be relieved of the economic responsibility of one more mouth to feed, with one girl in union sharing this story:

"When I lived with my godmother, it seemed to me that she did not want to be responsible for me, and she asked me if I wanted to get married, and I said that it is the dream of every adolescent girl.... And then I realized that she did not want me in her house..."⁸⁴

Girls trapped in early unions and marriages have no recourse to income and work. According to the 2012 census of Bolivia, by age 18, 70% of girls who are married or in union stated that they are housewives, compared to 13% of unmarried girls. Being a "housewife" is a socially sanctioned role for girls who are married or in union, but it leaves them without access to income or resources to make any decisions independently. One girl in union in El Salvador noted that paid work is hard to come by for adolescents who have left school, and therefore girls remain doing unpaid domestic chores, limiting their possibilities in life.

Of the Dominican girls included in the country study, 48% reported they could not work because they were underage. Once in a union, girls in Nicaragua found that they lived in precarious economic conditions and lacked support to either study or work, as their male partner would be "jealous." As one girl put it, "I don't study, because he does not want me to study. I also don't work, but once he leaves me, I won't have any profession and this is a source of fear."⁸⁵ Without their own income, girls in Nicaragua report they don't have access to any money or cash, further disempowering them. When girls do access the world of work, it is precarious, piecemeal work that mirrors their domestic chores, such as taking in wash, ironing, etc. Bolivian girls who do work tend to be poorly paid, engaging in activities such as baking bread. In the Dominican Republic, girls talked about how precariously they live in union. One married 16 year-old girl said:

"I depend completely on what my mom gives me... My husband does not always have money, he drives a motorcycle and there are days when he doesn't make very much... It's important... not to be hungry. There are days when, if not for my mom, we would have nothing to eat..."⁸⁶

THE ABANDONMENT OF GIRLS IS A COMMON THEME IN THE REGION

An important finding of this eight-country research is that girls in the region are frequently abandoned by partners, potential partners and even family members, though often for different reasons. The first major reason results from men's denial of paternity, either before or within a union. In Peru, for example, one young woman described the departure of the father of her baby and the position his parents and her own father took on the situation:

"My father is from Abancay... and they made me go home [from Cusco] and he denounced him here... He wasn't around, but because I was pregnant, he should have been involved, but he wasn't... Then his parents said he had gone, that he was in the jungle. His parents made him call, because they said that he was going to go to jail because after he left me pregnant he went away. And then he came and denied it, saying, 'It's not my child.' Yes, he denied it and said I'd have to get his DNA, so I said 'Okay, that's fine, you'll do that.' Since I was 15, they went to find him, and they brought him, even though he was denying it..."⁸⁷

Even when young men acknowledge paternity and remain connected to young women, expectations can be low, as this description from a group of unmarried Brazilian boys 15-17 years old shows:

"Generally he gets her pregnant, and then lets the mother care of the child... She continues going to school, some of the girls do... And the father works ... and just sends a monthly payment of R\$50 to buy a package of diapers. These kinds of things. So it's relative. In other families, they say, 'Ah, you two are going to live together.'"⁸⁸

A group of parents and guardians in Camaçari, Brazil went even further to comment on many men's minimal interest in taking responsibility:

"There are a lot [of men] who even leave their jobs, because if they don't, they are going to be obliged to pay child support. Or when they don't take responsibility for the wife, the girl, they only want to take responsibility for the child... Most times he even just stays unemployed... I have already heard many say this: 'That blessed creature is going to want me to pay support, and I'm not going to pay.... She got pregnant because she wanted to.'"⁸⁹

The second major set of risks of abandonment for girls has to do with migration by parents and by partners to seek economic opportunities. Lack of money and the need for migration to earn money is also a reason for the short duration of many CEFMU. Given the extent of informal unions/*uniones de hecho*, the departure of the male partner can leave a woman in doubt as to her status. In light of the short duration of many CEFMUs and the extra relationship strains imposed by separation, girls' concerns about abandonment are often justified.

The Honduras country analysis of CEFMU describes the situation this way:

Migration is a cause of abandonment by caregivers, guardians or parents of the girls, who... are obliged to take on the role of mothers. They quickly become responsible caregivers for their siblings or fathers, older people and anyone sick in their families; they have to fulfill these caregiving roles, which bring as one consequence having to leave school in the majority of cases. This leaves them more vulnerable to rape, sexual abuse, and to believe that looking for an early union they can be liberated from the domestic burden of their family of origin.⁹⁰

In Honduras, as in other countries in the region, many women migrate to the United States for better opportunities, leaving their older daughters to care for their younger siblings. In the Dominican Republic, nearly a third of girls in union stated that family income is supplemented by remittances from outside of the country. According to the Migration Policy Institute, over one million Dominicans live in the United States.⁹¹ One girl in Nicaragua noted the departure of her partner and the distance – geographical and affective – it put between them:

"(...) he went to work in Panama, and that's why we didn't last. He was not there for the most important parts of my life, such as my pregnancy, raising children, and that's why he does not care for our daughter, nor provide her any [economic] support."⁹²

Box 6. Girls' sexual autonomy, consent, choice and CEFMU in LAC

The motivations that emerged in the eight country studies for marrying or entering unions at an early age were overwhelmingly negative. Yet there is no doubt that some fraction of girls are entering early marriages and unions with a sense of possibility, and have the resources and skills to counteract some of the disadvantage arising from their youth and gender inequality. Adolescents are protagonists of their own lives and require their rights to be respected, and they are also minors who require the protection of society and the law.

Indeed, the fact that girls – and boys – in LAC have slightly greater sexual autonomy than in some other regions of the world highlights the limitations of an entirely protectionist focus. The experiences of the LAC region are distinctive and may perhaps shed light on other parts of the world.

A recent article on sexual consent observes that while international agreements affirm age 18 as the minimum age for consent to marriage, there is no similar minimum age for sexual consent.⁹³ These agreements tend to call for the recognition of adolescents as rights holders. The authors note that,

*"(...) the majority of the world's young people are having sex before the age of 18 years. Laws that increase the age of sexual consent can be harmful and are often used to curb adolescents' autonomy, including denial of adolescents' rights to make decisions about whether, when, and with whom to have sex... Raising the legal age of sexual consent risks restricting adolescents from accessing the health care they need to protect themselves, and there is no evidence that it prevents consensual sex or sexual coercion."*⁹⁴

They add that raising the minimum age at marriage and working to end child marriage should be accompanied by activities to *empower* adolescents, not to curtail their emerging sexuality.

Adding nuance to this argument is the fact that our definition of "child, early and forced marriages and unions" crudely lumps together 10 year-olds and 17 year-olds, whose sexual autonomy will obviously diverge. Research on the "depth" of child marriage has attempted to estimate the costs and implications of entering a union at different ages.⁹⁵ When marriage occurs at age 10 to 14 years, particularly with a man who is significantly older, it cannot be thought of simply as the realization of a girl's desire and choice. Nor can a consensual sexual relationship between peers aged 16 be easily classified as forced or coercive.

What is really at stake here is our inability to separate the *fact* of adolescent sexual activity from the *conditions* under which it often occurs. Adolescents have the right to explore their sexuality, and their societies must move from fear and avoidance to protection and recognition, as well as from hiding information to empowering them on their sexual and reproductive rights and choices through processes such as comprehensive sexuality education, which promotes critical thinking and decision-making.

C. Gender stereotypes and community norms trap girls and men in CEFMU

For girls, gendered expectations and stereotypes drive them toward unions, while for boys and young men, though there are attractions, the gendered stereotypes make early unions look unattractive. A group of boys 15 to 17 years of age in Codó, Brazil, described warning their male friends:

"If the guy is dating, his friends already start with him:

'No, dude, you're dating, don't tie yourself down! Go out and enjoy your life! Leave this behind.'

Or he wants to enjoy the evening with his girlfriend, and his friends call out to him: 'Let's go!'

'Ah, no, I'm not going out today.'

'She isn't letting you go out any more, is she?'"⁹⁶

Male gender stereotypes of freedom and control, loose commitment to relationships, and concern with entrapment condition their feelings and behaviors about relationships. As a consequence, unions have a strong negative dimension as assessed by their peer groups, while girls more consistently view them as positive at the outset.

GENDER NORMS DEFINE WHAT GIRLS CAN AND CANNOT DO, BEFORE AND WITHIN UNIONS

Inequitable gender norms are entrenched from early childhood across the region. For example, Bolivian men interviewed recognized inequitable gender norms starting at a young age: "Boys and girls are unequal. Girls do not have the same strength as boys."⁹⁷ Bolivian men also conveyed that having a son is better than having a daughter: "Here in our community, when a girl is born, no one says anything, but when a boy is born, we say 'what a pleasure!,' and we know we hope more to have a boy than a girl."⁹⁸

In the Dominican Republic and Honduras, girls were described in the interviews as obedient, delicate and helpful. Boys were seen as independent, needing less care and attention, self-sufficient, able to work and bring in money, and parents do not need to worry that they will become pregnant. Girls in the Dominican Republic, starting at a very early age, are clear about what they are allowed to do as compared to what boys may do. Girls are allowed to play inside the house with dolls and pretend to be princesses. It is prohibited for girls to climb trees, play outside or play any game that requires physical force, even baseball. Boys, by con-

trast, are encouraged to play with cars and trucks, play sports, play games of war and explore the outside world, taking risks. Boys are prohibited from playing any role that mimics caretaking, lest they be labeled as homosexuals ("faggot"). Thus, the distinctions between the roles of boys and girls are defined and sanctioned from an early age, with homophobic epithets being one element of normative control.

The distinctions drawn between boys' and girls' roles are not simple differences, but rather reflect a clear hierarchy in which boys are valued more and given more freedoms. Guatemalan girls ages 15 to 17 years talked about the differences between the roles reserved for boys and girls:

"The girls in our communities are not valued because they are girls. Girls should help in the kitchen, fetch water, clean clothes, and take care of their siblings. The boy... is the one who plays and has liberty to go out with his friends... She is not valued like he is." ⁹⁹

Dominican girls spent an average of 3 to 7 hours per day on domestic chores, none of which are carried out by boys. One married Dominican girl, age 14, talked of her day as "getting up at 6 in the morning and taking care of my younger brothers, making breakfast, making sure they are bathed and dressed... Two days a week, I wash clothes if there is enough light and water. It is difficult to get my brothers to do any chores."¹⁰⁰

Despite national policies in El Salvador that enshrine gender equality, girls confront gendered domestic roles that compete directly with schooling: caretaking, cooking, cleaning and housekeeping. Girls throughout the region are required to balance domestic chores with schooling, as one girl in Nicaragua put it, "When I studied, I got up at 3 in the morning to help my mom make tortillas... And after school and homework, I washed the corn..."¹⁰¹ Education for girls is sometimes seen as a waste of time as their role is to care for their younger siblings. In Bolivia, girls said that "If you are a woman you are the housewife, you ...take care of your children and when you get married, you have to cater to your husband."¹⁰² Girls in Bolivia and Peru are expected to mirror the activities of their mothers, such as cooking and cleaning, and the Peru study highlights that, "We are talking about double shifts, starting in childhood."¹⁰³ In Guatemala, even when girls study, their life plans consist of unremunerated housework and serving their husbands and children, rather than a life plan for themselves with income-generating work.

Girls are expected to be submissive, first to their parents, and then to their partners, and they have few aspirations. In the Dominican Republic, adolescent girls rarely state emotional or economic autonomy as a possible aspiration. There, adolescent girls listed the following attributes for being a woman: reserved and discrete, delicate, friendly and loving, compliant, and willing to sacrifice for others. Girls did not define being a good woman as intelligent or independent. In Bolivia, girls said that their role is “to think about their children, take care of the house, and obey [their husbands].” In Peru, the country analysis highlighted a remarkably explicit exchange of girls’ time and sexuality for their partners’ material support, particularly in Loreto, as described by this 17 year-old girl in union:

“(...) he went to Mazán, and then I went to Mazán to get myself registered for school. ‘First I’ll go and see if the job is secure; if it is secure, then you come with me,’ he said. ‘So you can wash my clothes, cook for me, like that.’ So that’s how it was: when the job was secured, he took me with him.”¹⁰⁵

A SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD AND THE CONTROL OF GIRLS’ SEXUALITY FORCES THEM INTO CEFMU

Parents, who worry that their daughters could be sexually active, respond by limiting girls’ mobility and their interactions with boys and men, rather than providing sex education and/or contraception as needed and/or encouraging a girls’ autonomous decision-making. Parents fear that girls who have sex are worthless and will not be able to get married. In El Salvador, parents warn their daughters to stay virgins, lest they be “ruined” or “have less value.”¹⁰⁶ In Nicaragua, girls internalize this and say that if they have sex, “Who will want me?”¹⁰⁷ Parents who find that their daughters are having sex pressure the male partners to marry their daughters to save the honor of the family; one of their pressures include threatening to send him to jail for having sex with an underage girl. Ironically, their “solution” is to ensure the girls marry at a young age.

Sometimes, if a family discovers the girl is sexually active (even if not pregnant) they force her to get married, with loss of virginity as the impetus. In Brazil, the loss of virginity and subsequent pregnancy can represent a moral crisis for families faced with adolescent sexual activity, and marriage may be seen as the best solution. This was the case for a girl who entered into a union at 14 years of age, *after only one month of being with her boyfriend*, because of pressures from the family once they discovered that she had been sexually active.

GIRLS IDEALIZE ROMANTIC LOVE

Girls idealize what their life will be like in marriage or union – only to find out that the reality is often isolation, a lifetime of unremunerated work, or abandonment to fend for themselves and their children. Girls who were interviewed in El Salvador imagined that once married, they would go out to parties and have fun, only to realize later that once married or in union, they are required to stay home, perform domestic chores and take care of their children. Girls in Guatemala imagined that they would be able to continue in school, but once married, girls no longer had any decision-making power nor any income, saying: “I had dreamed something different... Now I can’t do anything, just suffer and endure.”¹⁰⁸ A girl in Bolivia realized after entering into a union that, “I wanted to have my partner and be happy. I imagined many things that did not happen, as he only wanted to have sex with me.”¹⁰⁹ Sometimes a girl will enter into a union after only meeting her partner once, as noted by a Bolivian man in union with a 13 year-old girl. In Bolivia and elsewhere, girls are meeting older men by using cell phones.

Once pregnant, girls are told to be married “for the sake of the baby” and to counter the dishonor that parents express that their daughter became pregnant. Women also encouraged their young daughters to marry once they became pregnant in order to prevent her partner leaving for someone else. Girls in El Salvador believe that their partner will love them and this will lead them to a better life, as compared to the abuse suffered at the hands of their parents. In Bolivia, parents stated that a man can choose to stay with a girl and her baby or abandon them, and girls are taught that this is normal.

Motherhood is highly valued by adolescent girls in the Dominican Republic, more so than educational attainment. Being a good mother means that a girl should forget her own needs. A girl’s value is taking care of her children, not as an independent human being. As a group of young people in Honduras put it, “Everyone thinks about the well-being of the baby, no one thinks about the girl who is pregnant.”¹¹⁰ Girls in Bolivia see taking care of children as the sole responsibility of the woman. Having a child at a young age is an aspiration: “It is good to have a child when you are young,”¹¹¹ stated a 15 year-old married Dominican girl. A Bolivian girl was told by her in-laws once she was pregnant, “at least now you will help me with cleaning.”¹¹²

In Peru, the mother-in-law participates with her son in molding the girl into submission. Guatemalan boys aged 10 to 14 years said that girls enter into CEFMU in order to not be alone in life, and also because girls

are treated as being without any value. Guatemalan girls learned that once in CEFMU, they are forced to stay with a partner, even one who is abusive, as their parents will no longer take them back.

Gender norms stipulate that girls are meant to be married as their goal in life, and according to community leaders, a girl's highest aspiration should be to get married. In Bolivia, it is seen as normal for an adolescent girl who is pregnant to get married. Girls internalize their value only if a man gives them attention. A 13 year-old married Dominican girl said, "I never thought I would find anyone who would value me. But... finally someone noticed me."¹¹³

Girls are largely expected to be submissive when engaging in sex, an activity that many associate with shame. Girls lack autonomy to decide when and under what circumstances to have sex, and discussion of sex is seen as shameful. In the Dominican Republic, a 16 year-old married girl stated, "Because you are ashamed to speak you never dare say what you want or don't want."¹¹⁴ Another married 16 year-old girl in the same country said, "Sometimes you want them to just take you, but afterwards you feel bad."¹¹⁵ Girls value that their male partners are more sexually experienced, while their mothers' aspiration is for their daughters to become brides dressed in white.

MEN TEND TO ASSESS RELATIONSHIPS IN TERMS OF AUTHORITY, ENTITLEMENTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Men described sex, love and marriage differently, seeing girls as sexual objects meant to serve others and engage in self-sacrifice. Men who entered into union with adolescent girls feel they can persuade the girls to lose their virginity, as girls lack both experience and knowledge. Once girls lose their virginity, these girls are seen as "ruined."¹¹⁶ Men who married adolescent girls in El Salvador also described formal marriage as a "mandate from God."¹¹⁷ Men see marriage as the entire life goal of a girl. Despite this, in El Salvador, eight of the nine men interviewed who were in partnership with adolescent girls were not married, nor had plans to do so, as their informal unions required fewer obligations.

Informal unions also mean that if there is a separation, the man has no legal requirement to support his ex-partner. Yet if the relationship fails, the girl is the one who is blamed and seen as worthless. Sometimes girls will enter CEFMU only to find out that their partners already had other families with wives and children elsewhere. In the Dominican Republic, numerous men had multiple partnerships simultaneously. In Nicaragua, men are not seen as taking marriage as seriously as the girls do. As a young man put it, "Wom-

en see things differently, girls want commitment but boys do not... boys lie to girls... guys are unfaithful..."¹¹⁸ Men in Honduras who are unfaithful to their wives are seen as normal. Guatemalan men said they married in order to have someone to care for them if their parents were old or to have someone to help their parents.

Country reports from across the region convey important similarities and variations in context and culture. One characteristic that surfaced frequently was that understandings of masculinity seem to be closely linked to and directly indexed by the number of men's sexual partners. Monogamy is not an assumed commitment for men, reflecting the sexual double standards that are pervasive in the culture and the region. Interviewed men frequently characterized having numerous sexual partners as a marker of masculinity, and as 'inevitable' for men. In the Dominican Republic, men talked about how "You never marry the person you really love... The woman we choose for our homes, the wife is not who we like or whom we love, a lot of times it is the most convenient or we are pressured into marrying them."¹¹⁹

Yet men pressure adolescent girls to have sex as a way to "prove their love" and obtain the desired commitment. Girls want to prove that they are "real women," and be viewed as an adult, which can be achieved by having sex. Ironically, in attempting to satisfy that wish, girls subordinate their preferences, sexual autonomy and personal decision-making to their partners. This arrangement reflects and contributes to a widely reported lack of self-esteem among girls. It is therefore not surprising that a risk factor for CEFMU in the Dominican Republic, for example, is lack of self-esteem among girls.

In the Dominican Republic, having a sexual relationship with an adolescent girl is seen as a marker of masculinity, with viewing the girl as a sexual object, such as as "fresh meat" or a "new broom"¹²⁰, where the man can demonstrate his control and strength and a girl is "more obedient."¹²¹ Men openly talked about how they engage in pedophilia and find that girls who are virgins are more desirable sexually, starting when the girls are as young as 10. One 50 year-old Dominican man said:

"I think that from age 10 a girl can fall in love, because then her breasts start to grow, you can already start to tell her things and look for her, because her body is already prepared... You can't even stop yourself because you see these little bodies and you must have them for yourself. I tell you the truth, nothing draws your attention like those little girls who... have everything new and are little used."¹²²

But some men want their sons to have different lives from their own. Men in Guatemala who were married to adolescent girls said that they would raise their sons differently so that they would not marry early and continue to study. Men said that a boy is ready to marry after finishing school, obtaining a good job, buying a house, car or land to generate income, in addition to knowing what he wants in life and being able to resolve problems.

GIRLS IN CEFMU FACE GREATER GENDER INEQUITIES

Once in CEFMU, girls have gender inequitable roles, lacking even the most basic rights and freedoms, such as being able to leave their house without their partner's permission.

Girls in El Salvador are required, according to accepted gender norms, to be extremely submissive, even asking permission for what kind of clothes they are allowed to wear. Girls are told that they are feminine if they are concerned only with domesticity or reproductive roles in giving birth and raising children. In Honduras, girls who become pregnant are supposed to only live for their child. Girls in CEFMU in El Salvador noted that they are required to do all chores within the household: "You have to take care of the [man, he'll say]: 'Do this, bring me this,' and he's comfortably lying down not doing anything..."¹²³ Men enforce these gender stereotypical tasks, with one girl saying, "I don't work because...he prefers to be the one to work, and tells me to occupy myself with our daughter and our home."¹²⁴ Men expect to be waited upon once they arrive at home. Girls in CEFMU expect their partners to protect them from other men, but this can also isolate girls.

Age disparities between men and adolescent girls exacerbate gender inequalities. Often, the men who girls marry are much older than they are. In the Dominican Republic, according to the 2013 DHS survey, among girls ages 15 to 19, 20% are in union, 0.5% are married and 8.5% are separated – but only 4% of boys aged 15 to 19 are in union. In other words, a higher percentage of girls have already *separated* than boys who have entered a union in this age group. In Guatemala, boys 10 to 14 years old noted the age disparities between girls and the older men they marry. Among some indigenous communities in Bolivia, men see the ideal age for union for girls starting at age 13 and for boys, starting age 18. As a Dominican man put it, "You want someone who is 10 or 12 years younger than you... You prefer young ones because... women who have experience are more difficult to bend to your will."¹²⁵ In Bolivia, girls want an older man who is sexually experienced and has access to money, land and car. Girls

feel the burden of the age disparity in the context of unions and marriage. One Nicaraguan adolescent girl in union noted, "I no longer get to enjoy my youth."¹²⁶

However, there are positive deviants who defy gender norms, whether by mutual choice or by necessity. For these couples, the adolescent girl and her partner do domestic chores and work. As one girl in Nicaragua noted, "The two of us do household chores, because he does not have salaried work, we survive from the grocery store we have, the food we grow and the pigs we keep..."¹²⁷

DOMINANT MASCULINE NORMS PUSH MEN INTO UNIONS WITH YOUNG GIRLS, REINFORCING MEN'S POWER ADVANTAGES IN CEFMU

Men pay some price emotionally, socially and with regard to their health for adhering to predominant norms of masculinity. Dominican men, for example, talked of how they felt emotionally abandoned. One 46 year-old man said, "You grow up without talking, without saying anything of what you feel. If you cry... the whole world will mock you... As a boy, you never get a hug or any affection... I grew up with a man who was not my dad and all he did was hit me and my mom."¹²⁸ Men are seen as inept in taking care of themselves, and they also identify the need to have women to care for them.

Many girls across the eight study countries see "true men" as ones who have money, can economically support them and have a means of transport, such as a car; and men, for their part, share this view. In Bolivia, in the town of San Lorenzo, for example, men stated that they are the ones in the relationship who make the decisions, and perceive that only they have the value and strength to do the work of hunting and fishing. As they stated, "For the man it is more difficult. He has to work to maintain the household and has to buy everything." But they consider entering an informal union as an advantage, since the woman will help out with the obligations of the household.¹²⁹

A statement from a girl in union in El Salvador affirms this sentiment: "The man works to... make money, but the woman takes care of everything within the house."¹³⁰ Girls and young women expect men to be decisive, know what they want and to be brave. Men agree with this requirement, as one 30 year-old Dominican partner stated, "We always have to pay the bills; if you imagine that any woman would do this, you would look bad in front of people."¹³¹

A sign of masculinity among Dominican men is to hide emotion, especially from other men. One man said,

"You never cry publicly... If you see a man crying, the whole world would say he is a faggot homosexual... You have your little heart, but you never let anyone see it."¹³² In El Salvador, men are seen as more likely to comply with the norms of masculinity that require them to provide income if they are married, rather than just in union. Girls expect their partner to provide economically for her and any children, but sometimes find the reality is different as men abandon them, leaving them to fend for themselves and their children. Men are seen as protectors.

Many girls in El Salvador see men as only wanting sex and someone to be a housekeeper, rather than wanting a relationship for any emotional connection: "Men only want sex... and once they get you pregnant, they leave you."¹³³ Boys in Bolivia see women as submissive, obedient and who should only be involved in housework and childcare; they see a man in the home as "the one who makes decisions in the house."¹³⁴

Norms of masculinity make men married to adolescent girls fear that as the girl recognizes his older age, she will be unfaithful to him. Salvadoran men who married adolescent girls noted that, once married, as one man put it: "I feel more pressure, I have to make sure that my family does not need anything, and I felt better when I was by myself, but it is seen as weird if a man is on his own."¹³⁵ Men justify their unions with adolescent girls by saying that they are the economic support for the girl, as did one 32 year-old Salvadoran man married to a 14 year-old girl.

Men expressed that once married, they no longer do some of the things that used to bring them joy, such as seeing friends and playing sports. Men felt they suffered more than their wives, as they were obliged to be faithful and to go out less. However, in Bolivia, men noted that a marker of masculinity is to have multiple partnerships, whether they are in union or not. They also felt that women were prone to deceiving men, and would leave them for someone with more resources or with better looks.

Not all men expressed gender inequitable attitudes. Some men recognized the disadvantages of marrying adolescent girls, such as the immaturity of the girls and the fact that the man could go to jail for breaking the law. Also, some recognized that marriage would deprive both the girl and themselves access to further education. Younger Salvadoran boys aged 15 to 17 who were interviewed said that, "some men are like that, *machistas*, they want to get married and enjoy a young girl... but they are not thinking of the future."¹³⁶ Boys recognized that girls get trapped into marriage because the parents of the girl believe she is living in sin if she has sex and is not married.

Other Salvadoran boys aged 15 to 17 stated, "It's important that you know each other well to commit yourselves to something as serious as marriage."¹³⁷ Boys throughout their teens stated that it was important for boys to be able to study, get a job and then marry. Ironically, some men, even though they were married to adolescent girls, expressed apparently gender equitable ideals for young girls, as one man in El Salvador did:

"There are some who get married early and then are mothers or single mothers. I would tell a girl of 15 or even 18 years of age: 'Take care of yourself, achieve something of what you want in life, because all of us have something to be in this life, all of us have opportunities. Do what you most like to do... and finally, you will be of the age in which you can marry.'" ¹³⁸

Of course, the assumption that girls can hold off until age 18 for the inevitable experience of marriage is hardly non-traditional. Yet some Bolivian men also recognized the harm of CEFMU: "Sexual relations begin early, then they get pregnant and that's not good because they suffer in the long term, they join in union for the sake of the baby."¹³⁹

Girls recognize that very early marriage is not good for young men. As a group of unmarried girls 10 to 14 years in Salvador, Brazil, exclaimed, "What boy under age 18 wants to marry, for the love of God? Not even if they are over age 18 do they want to marry."¹⁴⁰ Although many girls expressed gender equitable ideas, the studies uncovered little questioning or critical analysis of these roles. "These days, all women are trying to do away with *machismo*. Women are warriors, they can work like men," said a 16 year-old in union in Camaçari, Brazil. But within marriage, the unequal roles remain the same: "For a man, it's more the financial responsibility; for a woman, it's taking care of her husband, her child, the house," said the same girl. Understanding why some women and some men are positive deviants is critical to charting ways to address CEFMU. Yet most women and men do not challenge the rigid gender norms that limit their lives.

MEN ARE ALSO VALIDATED - ESPECIALLY BY OTHER MEN - BY MARRIAGE TO GIRLS

Men saw marriage and union as ways to affirm their masculinity and be recognized as adults. In Bolivia,

only married men in some indigenous communities can be considered for community leadership posts, so men see marriage as an advantage, in addition to having someone take care of household tasks. Some men also felt pressured to marry, with people questioning their virility and saying that if you don't marry "(...) you are not a man, just a faggot."¹⁴¹ Here again, homophobia emerges as a sanction for men who do not jump into marriage.

In the Dominican Republic, having sexual relations with a girl under age 18 brings a man validation from the community with regard to his masculinity. Men also saw marriage and union as an advantage as now they had someone to take care of their needs. Men in Nicaragua married or in union with adolescent girls regretted the relationship, saying they should have studied more prior to this responsibility, and also that it was better to have a partner who was older as "young girls give problems."¹⁴² There might be opportunities to encourage men themselves to consider the pros and cons before marrying.

The Brazil analysis picked up on the role played by peer pressure among men as part of their stereotypical gender role to retain the upper hand in their marriages and keep control over their female partners. It highlighted that, "when friends tell men that they should 'stay firm' and don't let the 'woman boss him around,' it points to the reproduction and perpetuation of machismo in social relationships..."¹⁴³

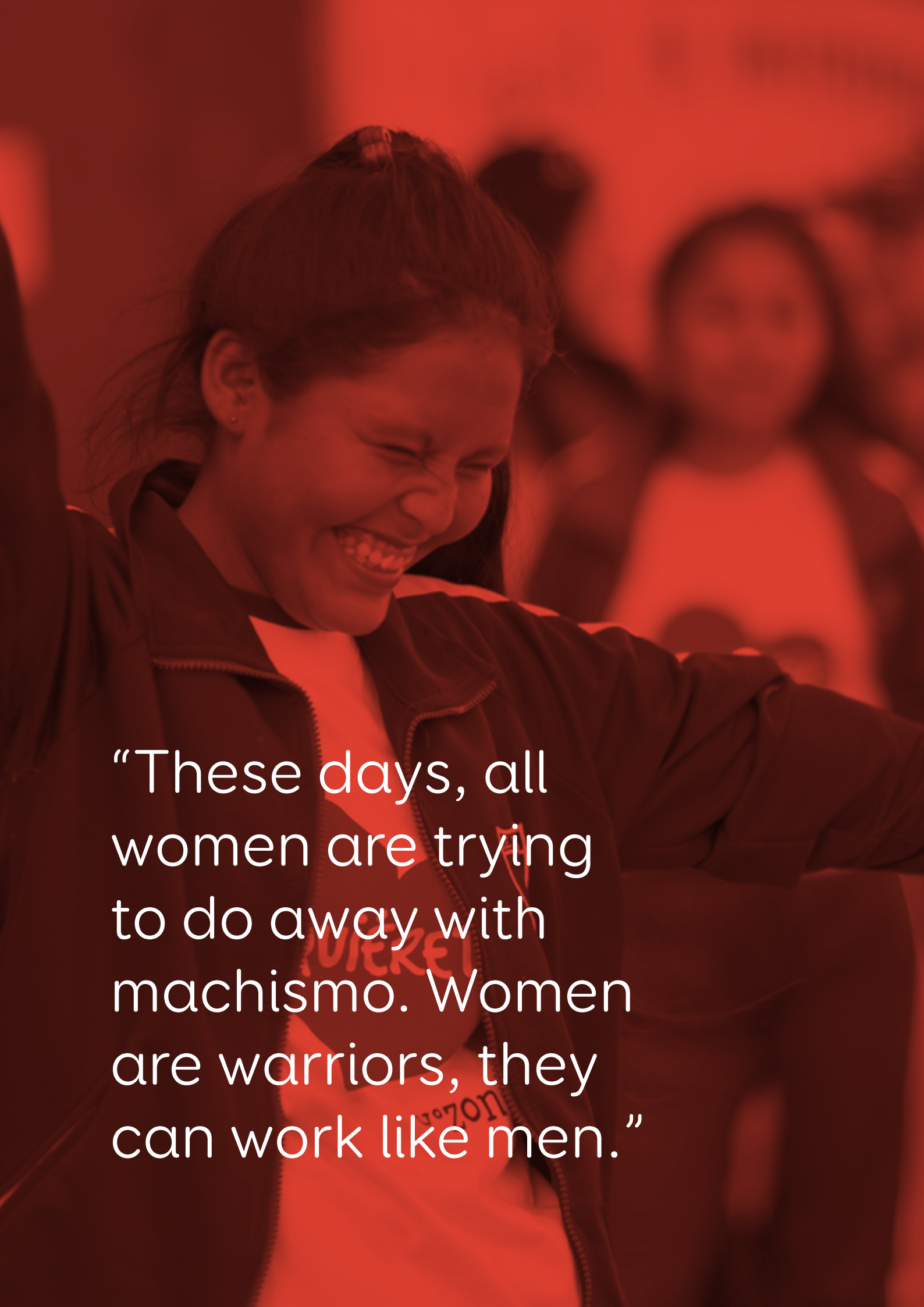
D. CEFMU and gender norms lead girls to drop out of school

As girls become older, prevailing norms about the value and appropriate duration of their education create increasing challenges to staying in school. Similarly, norms about women's roles in CEFMUs create additional risks to continued education. As a general pattern, relatively small minorities of girls in school remain there after entering CEFMU. In Nicaragua, girls who have had a child in union are even less likely to achieve secondary schooling than single mothers.¹⁴⁴ Among girls who enter into union, 30% of creole girls, 13% mestizo girls and 20% of urban-residing girls continue their education. Early sexual initiation – before age 16 – is also associated with significantly lower school attainment than girls who debut later. In that country, one in five Miskito girls abandons school prior to age 15.¹⁴⁵ In 2014, three out of five Miskito girls ages 12 to 17 were not studying in the correct grade that corresponded to their age, but studied in lower grades.

SCHOOLING FOR GIRLS IS LESS VALUED THAN SCHOOLING FOR BOYS

Gender norms stipulate that school is more important for boys than for girls, since girls are less likely to perform future work that requires an education. A national survey in Bolivia found that many families are quite explicit about valuing education as more important for boys than for girls.¹⁴⁶ In Guatemala, unmarried girls observed that, "Our parents say that girls can't study because she is female but boys can study because he is male."¹⁴⁷ And it is estimated that in that country early unions reduce by over 16% the fraction of girls who stay in secondary school.¹⁴⁸

The chores that girls are required to do compete with their schooling. Among some populations in Peru, girls are required to replace their mothers at home, and perform cooking, cleaning and taking care of siblings as the mother takes up wage labor in agricultural

A photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, laughing heartily. She is wearing a dark jacket over a white t-shirt that has the word 'QUIERET' printed on it in red. The background is blurred, showing other people, suggesting a crowd or protest. The entire image has a strong red color overlay.

“These days, all women are trying to do away with machismo. Women are warriors, they can work like men.”

industries, such as banana and grape production. By age 13, many girls and boys abandon school to work in agricultural industries.

An interesting tension stood out in the Peruvian analysis of the qualitative interviews on schooling. While girls' school participation is viewed with pride in rural areas, girls are both gaining an education and running the risk of falling in love with older men, because their families do not offer them the security and affection they need.¹⁴⁹ The authors observed two competing structural forces: growing mass education for women and an appreciation of the opportunities it brings, and at the same time, traditional gender expectations for marriage and childbearing that undermine educational aspirations.

GIRLS ARE PRESSURED TO MARRY RATHER THAN STUDY

Cultural norms and family pressure often tightly constrain girls' alternatives to early marriage. Throughout the region, child marriage is associated with lower levels of schooling. The power of traditional expectations about appropriate early marriage for girls is often overwhelming. The role of young wives and the practical demands placed on newly married women often force them to drop out of school. Even if marriage is not an immediate consideration, girls face negative stereotypes should they stay in school. In Honduras, for example, a taunt directed at unmarried – and quite possibly better educated – girls who continue in school expresses the high value attached to marriage and the disapproval and shame associated with being unmarried: “The train has left the station, you are only here to dress the saints.”¹⁵⁰ In Honduras, girls in CEFMU are less likely even to be literate, a reflection of the fact that they're much less likely to be in school and have lower school attainment. In the Dominican Republic, of girls who marry before age 18, only 64% completed primary school.

Withdrawing from education increases a number of other risks to girls' well-being. Girls in CEFMU who have given birth are more likely to drop out of school. In rural Bolivia, girls who were single mothers, by contrast, did not abandon their studies. Girls dropped out of school not just because of CEFMU but also to obtain work by migrating to cities within Bolivia but also to other countries, such as Chile, where they work cleaning houses. Sometimes, families cannot afford to send their daughters to school and with no option for gainful employment, marriage or union becomes her only option. Girls face negative feedback and adverse consequences if they make education their priority.

ONCE IN UNION OR PREGNANT, THE CHALLENGES OF GETTING AN EDUCATION ARE ENORMOUS

Staying in school for girls in union is challenging, and in some settings are even greater than for girls who stay with their families of origin as single mothers. Some girls face prejudice within the school system for becoming pregnant without being married. In Nicaragua, a key informant observed the challenges faced by pregnant girls, observing that, “There are *machista* male teachers who do not support a girl to be in school because they think, ‘How can she have a child, she is not even married?’”¹⁵¹ In Bolivia, girls also reported cases of older male teachers who impregnated young girls in his school. Pregnant girls are commonly thrown out of school in Honduras,¹⁵² and one girl spoke of a 15 year-old friend who “got pregnant... and did not return to school and got married.” Religious authorities in Honduras have said that pregnant girls should get married and no longer study.

Once in CEFMU, girls find that their partners discourage them from studying, and they are more likely to drop out of school. Most girls in union in the Dominican Republic drop out of school in order to work, despite the limited work opportunities for them. As one woman in El Salvador who was in CEFMU when she was younger noted, “I wanted to study, but he said, ‘Why bother to study when you are just going to be a housewife?’ But I had wanted to study.”¹⁵³ Most of the Salvadoran girls interviewed in Plan's study dropped out of school once they entered in union.

Girls are more likely to drop out or fall behind if they become pregnant. If a girl has a baby in Bolivia she is often denied access to the classroom, unless she can find reliable childcare: “Teachers get angry because babies mess up the whole class because they make noise so it's difficult.”¹⁵⁴ While in Nicaragua, it is illegal to deny pregnant girls or girls in union access to education; in practice, girls reported that if pregnant, they are thrown out of school, lest they become “a bad influence.” One girl in union in El Salvador talked of her struggle to study while she was pregnant, and after giving birth: “I only rested a few days and went back to studying again. It is a huge responsibility and it is not easy.”¹⁵⁵ Another Salvadoran girl in union noted that “To continue studying... now that I have children it is so much harder...”¹⁵⁶ In Bolivia, there is a law that allows pregnant girls to stay in school, however, in practice, parents withdraw her from school “to hide her as it is so shameful.”¹⁵⁷ In Nicaragua, girls noted that they pay a heavy price for CEFMU: “I have a daughter to raise and this makes me sad because it's hard, I am not a professional. I regret that I did not study before.”¹⁵⁸

MANY GIRLS IN UNION LONG TO COMPLETE THEIR EDUCATION AND STAY IN SCHOOL

Girls in union talked of their longing to complete their education, a goal that seemed out of reach once they were in CEFMU. Or if they did attend school, they would fall behind, studying with children much younger than them. In Bolivia, girls talked of how their partners prevented them from going to school, a source of much sorrow for them. Most girls in union said they longed to be single and return to school: "I would have liked to be alone, to not have gone through this, to first have studied and then looked for work and then had a family."¹⁵⁹ One Bolivian girl who was raped at age 15, became pregnant and was forced into marriage described her experience and said regretfully, "It is better to be in school and study."¹⁶⁰

Unmarried girls in Bolivia realized how being in a union could deter one from school: "I decided not to get married because I am a minor, I want to finish my studies and get ahead."¹⁶¹ Girls realize how key education is to their future, with a girl in Bolivia saying, "If I don't have a profession, I just have to humiliate myself with my husband."¹⁶²

Despite the negative attitudes of some teachers, others are very supportive of girls in union so that they can continue in school. "There are pregnant girls who are supported by teachers... in the case of my sister, when she didn't show up in school after four months, she was supported to return after giving birth and to get her high school diploma."¹⁶³ In Bolivia, Peru and Guatemala, alternative centers for education or radio programs support education for adolescent mothers and others who cannot go to school. Single girls in Honduras voiced their support for friends in union to continue their schooling: "You will always have my support, we have always done things together and I am so happy that you returned to school,"¹⁶⁴ one girl told her friend. Some girls can count on the support of their parents or even their partner for childcare so that they can continue to study.

BOYS AND MEN RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION FOR THEMSELVES AND GIRLS

Even men in partnership with adolescent girls recognized that a price for CEFMU for the girl was that "if you don't study and you don't work, you will not get a decent job."¹⁶⁵ Some men in partnership with adoles-

cent girls advised girls to study, rather than enter into CEFMU. However, in Nicaragua, if a girl becomes separated from her partner, she is more likely to resume her studies, as one girl said, "I want to make up for lost time and study so that I can make progress for me and my baby."¹⁶⁶ Boys aged 14 to 17, interviewed in El Salvador, recognized the importance of education for young girls: "When she has studied and she is older, she can get married, because having studied, she'll have a good job and she won't be in poverty, as she would if she got married young."¹⁶⁷ This was echoed by boys in Guatemala aged 15 to 17. Boys also recognized the importance of education for themselves. Salvadoran boys aged 15 to 17 stated that: "If you don't have your studies, you have nothing."¹⁶⁸ Boys in Bolivia recognized that if they have a child, they may be forced to leave school to work.

The Brazil country study found that boys who entered unions were much more likely to drop out of school to enter the work force, especially after having a baby. One young man who married at age 15 talked about how he had dropped out of school and had to start working to support his wife and child, even acknowledging that, "For an adolescent to work, it's a crime, isn't it?"¹⁶⁹ Young men in El Salvador observed the change in their own lives that entering a union meant for them, noting that, "With a child, you really can't play round anymore," and "Now I have to look for work to go forward in my life with my wife."

Interestingly, young mothers can sometimes fare better with regard to staying in school than young fathers in union. If a girl has a baby, and receives some support from her husband or family, she is more likely to remain in school, whereas a boy has to drop out and become a provider. As a married 17 year-old girl from Brazil shared:

"Not even having a child messed things up for me. Because there was a time when I continued going to school while I was pregnant; and then I shifted to a night session so I could stay with my son and at night there are people who can stay, and you don't have to pay other people for childcare. And with the passage of time, I got used to the new routine". ¹⁷⁰

E. Judicial systems, community leaders and parents do not protect girls from child marriage

LAWS AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE ARE LITTLE KNOWN OR NOT IMPLEMENTED

Where laws have been created to outlaw child marriage, these have been extremely recent. In Guatemala, a law was approved in September 2017 that outlaws marriage before 18 years of age. Due to the efforts of a number of actors in Guatemala, the new legislation is widely known. Indeed, boys aged 15 to 17 commented on the law, saying that “We know that today, as young people, that we should not get married until we are 18 years of age.”¹⁷¹ Even girls knew that “You can complain with the mayor. Men can go to jail.”¹⁷² However, in practice, community leaders may support a child marriage, particularly if the girl is pregnant.

The Guatemalan law has had some positive effects, but has also resulted in some less welcome unintended consequences. Although data does not exist on this, some sectors argue that the law may push more adolescents into informal unions, which provide girls in most contexts significantly less protection than marriage. One girl explained how the new law put her at a severe disadvantage: “The law forced the father of my daughter to leave me. If he did not leave me, he would have to go to jail... It is painful that the law says we can’t be together until I turn 18.”¹⁷³

A confusing scenario can be seen in some countries. Some public officials in Bolivia have stated that because there is a code now prohibiting child marriage in the country, the practice no longer exists and is a problem only in other countries.¹⁷⁴ Others say that no efforts exist to prevent child marriage, only sanctions for those who engage in child marriage. However, some officials recognize that child marriage exists and that this represents a violation of girls’ rights.

Despite the new code, many authorities do not know about it. As an official in Bolivia’s Legal Services for Municipalities stated, “The situation [concerning child marriage] can change through education, which should come from the government, which has been launched but a lot is lacking, we need to change thinking on a national level.”¹⁷⁵ A representative of a municipality stated, “I don’t think there are any norms about marriage, maybe there are, but we don’t know them...”¹⁷⁶ In more remote rural areas, Bolivian men who are in CEFMU or who are known to commit rape of a minor are sometimes protected by the community. Those who go to the authorities to report rapes of minors are then expelled from the community and such expulsion can lead to an inability to survive. In other cases, if the adolescent

signs that she wants to live with her rapist, the government authorities are then limited in any action.

Governmental, religious and community authorities fail to implement laws to protect girls in CEFMU. Judges have supported girls’ entry into unions “for the good of the pregnant girl and the baby.”¹⁷⁷ No judicial authority is responsible for the rights of girls and there is no budget to implement laws concerning CEFMU. In El Salvador, experts noted, “[...] this country has the most laws in the world, but implementation is where we have a gap.”¹⁷⁸ In fact, El Salvador has no policy on CEFMU through which to translate its law against child marriage. In Honduras, girls said that religious leaders as well as parents accept CEFMU, as men need to “have a home.”¹⁷⁹

In Nicaragua, a judge recently affirmed that if a girl or boy becomes a parent between the ages 16 and 18, they are considered to be capable of making their own legal decisions. However, girls 14 years or younger who become mothers have no judicial standing. Religious leaders in Honduras and Nicaragua encourage girls in CEFMU to marry rather than be in union. In Nicaragua, women remarked that no one will oppose CEFMU, as it is commonplace. Community leaders also sanction CEFMU, such as one community leader who opined that a single mother is not as valuable or respected as someone who is married or in union, and therefore girls who get pregnant should get married. However, in Nicaragua some community leaders recognize the heavy price that girls in union pay: “She closes the doors to opportunities to a better life...”¹⁸⁰

GOVERNMENTS FAIL TO RESPOND TO THE JUDICIAL NEEDS OF GIRLS PRIOR TO AND DURING CEFMU

In addition to the new laws in place in a number of countries in the region, girls need access to judicial authorities to prevent CEFMU, and the regulations that would implement the laws. In the Dominican Republic, there are no specific sanctions against CEFMU and communities lack any knowledge of factors that could protect adolescent girls. Moreover, legal professionals are unfamiliar with the issues surrounding CEFMU, and political authorities and community leaders see it as a “private” matter. Judicial processes are inaccessible due to cost and bureaucratic procedures. Cases of CEFMU are not followed up and girls who would dare to bring a lawsuit would be stigmatized. Even where laws protect girls from CEFMU, governments have not disseminated this information in

plain language or indigenous languages in ways that are accessible to vulnerable girls. Girls in the Dominican Republic lack the knowledge of their legal rights and are not informed of them. While it is laudable, for example, that civil society organizations have disseminated information on the laws in the region that state that marriage can only occur after age 18, dissemination of girls' right to remain unmarried until age 18 is a responsibility of the government.

Girls who are married or in union, once they are pregnant and have children, are sometimes abandoned by their husband or partner and talked of how they both have to raise their children plus survive financially. One of the important shared features of the country studies is that none documented effective social protections or safety net systems for girls. Missing also were accounts of mechanisms to help girls in union access support funds for children from their husbands or partners.

PARENTS CONSENT TO THEIR DAUGHTERS' MARRIAGE OR ENTRY INTO UNIONS

Parents also sanction CEFMU. Mothers in Nicaragua noted that "the reality is that by the time the girls are 12 or 14, parents either marry them off or engage them in a union."¹⁸¹ While CEFMU is illegal in Nicaragua, communities see marriage – as young as 14 or 15 – as normal, and do not bring CEFMU to the attention of judicial authorities. Girls in Nicaragua noted, "Yes, it's illegal, but parents will give their consent for the girls to be married."¹⁸² In some indigenous communities in Peru, union is arranged by the girl's father and community authorities, who give the wishes of the girl and her mother little weight.

Nicaraguan men in communities know the law, but also understand that it is not enforced, saying, "Here no one says anything if a girl gets married to an older man..."¹⁸³ In El Salvador, community leaders criticize CEFMU, but also accept it when it seems to go well, with one saying, "One neighbor took a 15 year-

old girl, but when she got pregnant, they got married. The boy works and he has a nice house, they even have a car."¹⁸⁴ In the Dominican Republic, parents are key to the negotiations to their adolescent daughters joining in union, but no governmental efforts are made to inform parents of the harms of CEFMU. In Bolivia, parents can likewise authorize their daughters to marry or enter into unions. In Guatemala, boys aged 15 to 17 stated, "Parents are the one who make the decision for girls to marry or join in union, but both boys and girls must consent. But most of the time, it is because the girl is already pregnant."¹⁸⁵ Pregnancy is taken as the mitigating factor that makes marriage acceptable, when it would not otherwise be legal. And the parental decision-making is unassailable, as adolescent pregnancy and early marriage are seen as private family matters.

Yet other parents fight hard to keep their daughters from being entrapped in CEFMU. In Guatemala a mother said, "It is better if our daughters study and then work."¹⁸⁶ One mother in Nicaragua told of how:

"When my daughter was 14 years old, I had to go in circles with the police because [the male partner] was more than 30 years old, I denounced him... Even the Nicaraguan Ministry of Family took her away from me. Then I finally got her back home and my daughter was pregnant. He spent a year in jail but his family got him out, now they live together. Here people don't denounce old men with young girls because they see examples like mine and say, 'See they did nothing.' That's why this keeps happening."¹⁸⁷

In Brazil, it tends to be mothers and female family members who pressure girls to marry. And the church plays a strong role in providing moral sanction for pregnancy outside of marriage.

F. Governments fail to uphold the rights of adolescent girls, before and within CEFMU

In the eight study countries, quantitative data on child-bearing, sexual relationships and pregnancy provide evidence that these are closely connected to forced unions or early marriages, and often provide an impetus for them. At the same time, cultural values and beliefs that shape sexual relationships often impose structural disadvantages for girls and women in negotiating healthy sexual and reproductive outcomes. For this reason, this analysis prioritizes SRH and rights

as a key area for improved intervention by the governments of the eight countries.

The education sector is the most logical and important platform from which the challenge of CEFMU must be addressed. Government education systems often struggle to meet the needs of girls in a range of challenging areas, but CEFMU still seems to be accorded a lower priority than should be the case given its impact

on the lives of girls. LAC governments have agreed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which include the goal of gender equality. Yet even in countries where the law states that men and women have equal rights, they have failed to implement policies and programs to make this a reality, particularly for the most vulnerable – girls who may enter into or who are already in CEFMU. Education systems throughout the region have handicapped future generations by failing to address the topic of girls' forced unions and marriages in the context of the curriculum.

GOVERNMENTS FAIL TO PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION, DESPITE EVIDENCE OF ITS BENEFITS

In all the countries included in this regional study, effective and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is lacking or limited. This situation tends to reflect the significant opposition such norm shifts can elicit, despite global evidence confirming that sexuality education leads to fewer unintended pregnancies, STIs and rates of HIV.¹⁸⁸ CSE can also be an important tool for improving partner communication, and promoting more equitable attitudes in boys and girls.

Girls are at risk for a number of reasons, including unequal gender power relationships, and their general lack of access to basic information about their bodies, sexual health and reproductive rights. In the Dominican Republic, for example, 23% of adolescent girls interviewed did not know their age at their first menstruation. One girl in Honduras said, "I only remember that my first pregnancy was before I had my first menstruation."¹⁸⁹ While in 2011, a book on sex education was approved by the government for use in Nicaragua, teachers were not given any training or information on how to teach the material. There, sex education is taught more commonly in communities of mixed indigenous and European descent than in communities with predominantly mixed European and African descent. In the latter population, churches are often seen to have more influence regarding acceptable topics in sexuality education.

In the Dominican Republic, policies around sexuality education are limited and vague, and are rarely enforced in school settings. The lack of government involvement means that educational curricula can be intentionally filled with inaccurate gender-inequitable and stereotypical information concerning sex and personal relationships, such as: that contraception does not work and is harmful; menstruation is dirty; being jealous is a sign of love; you become a woman when you first have sex; and that talking about sex will mean you will have sex. These concepts articulate and reinforce a sexual double standard.

Girls and boys see condoms as only for "women of the street," i.e., those that engage in the sex industry. In many countries where virginity among girls is highly valued, asking a man to use a condom is viewed as a sign of the girl's promiscuity or that she is sick with an STI. This is reinforced by prevailing gender norms. Men tend to see condoms as something that they should control, and for use only when they are young and experimenting sexually with women whose sexual histories they don't really know. An important trope for men's sexuality is that when they are aroused, they "cannot" stop to put on a condom. Men generally do not choose to use condoms in marriage or a union, in which they assume women's faithfulness and procreation is often an explicit goal.

Ministries of Education do not systematically require sexuality education, though the gap cannot be attributed only to the formal education system. In Bolivia, as in most other contexts explored in this study, even girls in formal unions or marriage generally have not received sexuality education.¹⁹⁰ As a consequence, girls all too often don't know about contraceptive options and lack sufficient autonomy to prevent or delay pregnancies: "I did not know much about sex education and that's why I think I got myself pregnant."¹⁹¹ One Bolivian woman who married as a child said, "It is important that there should be sex education in school with education on how to prevent pregnancy at an early age, if I had known I would not have gotten married and I could have continued to study."¹⁹² Another girl said, "I did not know how to take care of myself [to avoid getting pregnant], I did not know what I needed to do."¹⁹³ In Bolivia, many schoolteachers are men, making it awkward and difficult for girls to ask any questions around sex or preventing pregnancy. Some teachers have been reluctant to provide sexuality education, believing erroneously that any information provided to youth spurs sexual activity. This attitude reflects cultural viewpoints more generally, and many parents also oppose sex education for the same erroneous reason.

Sexuality education is also needed for girls who are married or in union, so that they can prevent or delay subsequent pregnancies and better maintain their SRH.¹⁹⁴ Some limited progress has been made. UNFPA is supporting a strategy using *brigadistas* in schools, along with street theater and other interventions. In Bolivia, joint efforts by UNFPA and Plan International have provided some training in schools around pregnancy prevention.



“When my daughter was 14 years old, I had to go in circles with the police because [the male partner] was more than 30 years old, I denounced him... Even the Nicaraguan Ministry of Family took her away from me. Then I finally got her back home and my daughter was pregnant...

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE GOVERNMENT WITH REGARD TO THE HEALTHY MANAGEMENT OF ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY REFLECT CULTURAL VALUES

It is important to emphasize that the aversion to children learning about sex and sexuality is reinforced outside of schools, which reflect their wider social context. In the Dominican Republic, for example, a number of churches teach only that sex is a sin and should not be discussed. In Honduras, as in many other settings, men and boys learn about sexuality from pornography, which introduces a range of problematic viewpoints on sex and relationships with girls. Boys also need to learn about the contraceptive options so that they can make sound choices about sex, support their partners and plan for parenthood. In the absence of comprehensive and accurate information, boys and girls rely on myths and misunderstandings. In Bolivia, for instance, young people report the misconception that contraception can cause cancer, or that girls use it to facilitate having sexual relationships outside of marriage.

An important piece of the puzzle in preparing and educating girls more effectively around these issues is facilitating cultural changes in attitudes and understandings that could help reduce the associated stigma and reticence. Parents should be able to talk to their daughters about changes in their bodies during puberty, as well as help them understand about the links between sex, reproduction and health. Parents in Bolivia recognized this: “We mothers don’t talk to our girls and we don’t tell them anything about when their periods start... and that’s why our girls get pregnant.”¹⁹⁵ In El Salvador, girls said they did not learn about sex from their mothers. One girl in El Salvador said, “Parents don’t communicate, in my case I did not know anything about the development of my body. In other words, I did not understand what it meant to have a [sexual] partner.”¹⁹⁶ In Honduras, “the subject of sex is taboo.”¹⁹⁷ In the Dominican Republic, a girl stated that no information is given on how to prevent pregnancy or negotiate sex: “At home, they just tell you: ‘take care of yourself,’ without clarifying exactly how one is supposed to do that.”¹⁹⁸ Another Dominican girl stated, “There is no one you can talk to. I prefer to look things up on the Internet. If you have a question... then everyone has contempt for you...”¹⁹⁹

A closer relationship between parents and children, especially mothers and daughters, would open channels of communication. But making the challenge more complex is that parents often also do not understand the biological basics of sexuality. As one mother in Nicaragua said: “If you give them... a seafood soup, then this will upset the girls’ hormones and she will

then have sex.”²⁰⁰ At the same time, other mothers realize that there is a lack of sexuality education for their daughters in school or through health services. When health services provide adolescent girls with sexuality education, parents see results: “My 19 year-old daughter had training from the health center and therefore she waited longer to enter into union.”²⁰¹

Among adolescent girls in Nicaragua who had had sex, all of those interviewed stated that they wished that had waited longer to have sex, but that they had felt pressured by their partner to have sex. Girls in the Dominican Republic said they feared being thrown out of the family home if anyone found out that they were having sex. The first sex is perceived as something that should be accepted as painful so that a girl can become a woman and a man can demonstrate strength and control. One Dominican girl said, “You always hope it will happen in a special place. Silk white sheets, candles, music, wine... But many times [first sex] is not like that, it is something that happens on a street corner, in a bathroom, in a hideous motel or anything but what you dreamed it would be.”²⁰²

In Nicaragua, girls who have sex are obligated to get married: “Here girls have to get together [join in union] with whichever man they have sex with.”²⁰³ In El Salvador, girls who are impregnated by men are socially sanctioned if they do not get married: “Their parents tell them: ‘if you don’t get married you will be taunted and mocked,’ so then parents obligate the pregnant girl to get married.”²⁰⁴ In Guatemala, adolescent pregnancy is seen as legitimate justification for CEFMU, despite a law that says that marriage under 18 years of age is illegal. In Bolivia, girls understand that if “a girl gets pregnant, there is a concern that she join in union quickly.”²⁰⁵

GIRLS’ ACCESS TO CONTRACEPTION IS EXTREMELY LIMITED, RESULTING IN RISKS TO GIRLS

In Nicaragua, an official from the Ministry of Health stated that as a matter of policy “contraception is not given to adolescent girls who are not in a union.”²⁰⁶ As a result, girls who have sex are likely to be unprotected, increasing the likelihood of an early or unwanted pregnancy, with all the social and health risks this can entail. In 2015, the leading cause of death for adolescent females in Nicaragua was maternal conditions.²⁰⁷ Adolescent girls who give birth before age 15 are at particularly high risk of adverse health events, as are their babies.²⁰⁸ Youth in Guatemala recognized these risks, stating: “Young girls who get pregnant can die during pregnancy or while she gives birth and her health can deteriorate because her body is not ready to have a child.”²⁰⁹ In Bolivia, over half of girls who were married or in union used no contraceptive meth-

od, and of those who did, a significant proportion used withdrawal or the rhythm method, both of which have higher failure rates, particularly among those who lack experience in practicing these methods.

Adolescent pregnancy is increasingly recognized as a problem requiring government action. Yet official measures to address it for girls – both prior to CEFMU and once in CEFMU – with sexuality education plus information and services with contraceptive options for adolescents, have not reversed increased maternal deaths for adolescent girls or improved life options to complete schooling or obtain gainful employment.

In most of the study countries the value of providing health services to adolescents is appreciated by many. However, there are often no consistent protocols and no trained health care providers, particularly for those under age 15. Girls who are married or in unions also need contraceptive counseling and provision to delay or prevent unintended second pregnancies.²¹⁰ Boys in Bolivia who tried to get condoms were heavily stigmatized: “In the pharmacy, when I went to get a condom, they react badly, they see you very negatively.”²¹¹

In Nicaragua and Guatemala, girls knew about contraception, but usually did not use it during their first sex because they reported feeling shame and embarrassment in seeking and obtaining it. Most girls started using contraception only after the birth of their first child. In the Dominican Republic, pregnancy is a key factor for girls to enter into CEFMU, but there are no youth-friendly places for girls to access contraception or information on SRH and rights. Among indigenous populations in Guatemala, which faced campaigns of extermination under military dictatorships, fecundity is seen as extremely important as a survival strategy. However, this leads to a risk that girls will be seen as sexual objects who should give birth to many children, rather than having any rights of their own. Additionally, in earlier years, the Guatemalan government wanted adequate human resources for low wage agriculture, and thus did not discourage child marriage.

Boys and men also have fallen through the cracks in terms of outreach and information about contraception and/or the health and life-course risks to young girls that sexual activity at a young age can pose. Men in the Dominican Republic and Honduras see contraception as a concern only for women. Men had inaccurate beliefs about contraceptive use, such as that contraception could make their partners fat or result in cancer. They assumed that girls using contraception have many partners and are not faithful to them. They do not see children as their responsibility to care for and pregnancy is not to be planned. Men in Bolivia asserted that “there

are no planned pregnancies.”²¹² Men did not access health services unless they were bleeding profusely or had sharp physical pain that could not be ignored. However, some young people in Honduras had more gender transformative approaches to planning pregnancy: “It’s not just the responsibility of the woman, but of both, if they are a couple, there should be communication, and a child should be planned by the couple.”²¹³ Salvadoran adolescent boys, ages 10 to 14, talk of how sex is a temptation, but once married, sex is allowed. Yet these boys also recognized that the bodies of adolescent girls are not suited to giving birth and also thought that adolescent girls should not marry.

Health services in the Dominican Republic are seen as off-limits to adolescent girls, with hours that conflict with being in school, lack of funds for transport to services, lack of privacy and confidentiality, and prejudice and stigma for any girl who wants information on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Even beyond reproductive health, youth in Guatemala recognized that for married girls, “These girls suffer too much for getting married early... they get sick for lack of money... They are less healthy and age rapidly.”²¹⁴

GOVERNMENTS ARE NOT ACTING FORCEFULLY ENOUGH TO PREVENT OR RESPOND TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, RAPE, AND OTHER FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Many LAC countries are signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence Against Women. This signal of support has, by and large, not yet translated into laws, policies and actions that sufficiently improve girls’ circumstances or transform their lives. Tracking actual public investments in this area is imprecise and faces critical information gaps. In 2017, Bolivia, for example, published a public budget on resources allocated to infants, children and adolescents, but did not specify what was allocated and spent on CEFMU.²¹⁵ Human resources and budgets for addressing child rape were extremely limited and no programs exist to prevent child sexual abuse or GBV, particularly in CEFMU. One study suggested a wide distrust of the government office charged with protection of children, the Defensoría de Niños y Adolescentes.²¹⁶ In many settings, minors themselves cannot seek protection from the government. When girls have the courage to report violence, it is common that no actions are taken. Or worse yet, sometimes the girls themselves will be blamed for rape by those charged with protecting them. In El Salvador, there is currently no national program to address the needs of girls who have experienced violence, rape and abuse. And in most settings, there is no coordination between health services and the judicial system in cases of rape.

The relative inability of CEFMU programs to compete for support with other areas of public investment was reflected in the Bolivia example in higher budget allocations for more established and influential program areas. While there are of course many areas legitimately competing for investment, few can make a stronger value proposition in terms of sustained development benefits than CEFMU. Part of the challenge for CEFMU programs is expanding their visibility and better communicating their value to policymakers and funders. The positive ripple effects from investing in and better caring for girls extend throughout their lives and the lives of their children.

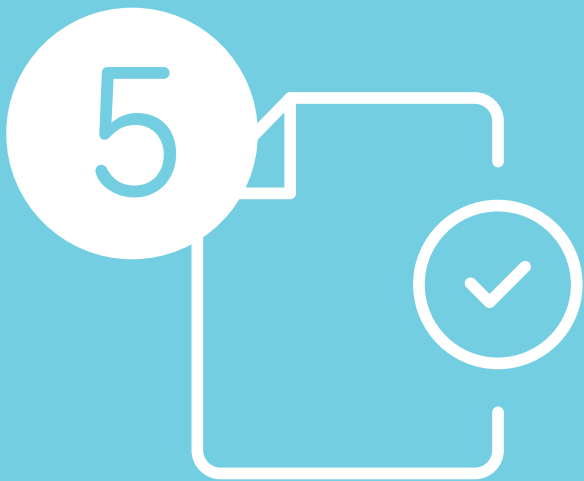
ONCE THEY BECOME PREGNANT, GIRLS HAVE ALMOST NO ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES OR SAFE LEGAL ABORTION

Most countries in the region allow no access to safe legal abortion services, particularly for adolescent girls, with some exceptions in cases of rape. The criminalization of abortion – with prison time as a threat – intimidates medical caregivers, service providers and the young women who seek their assistance. Girls in informal unions face the dual disadvantage of remaining in the ‘informal’ sector without access to social or legal protections, while also being viewed as a ‘child’ and stigmatized for becoming pregnant. The significant risks posed by medically unsupervised pregnancies are increased by poverty, often creating long-term health consequences for mothers and children. For many girls, however, the legal and medical risks from illicit abortion are equally daunting. With safe abortion not an option, girls bear the medical, social, economic and legal consequences.

In El Salvador, girls are blamed for getting pregnant, rather than the older men who impregnated them. Once pregnant, a girl has no option to obtain a legal, safe abortion and this is why so many are obliged to enter unions when they are not ready. In Brazil, a married girl aged 17 said, “I thought about marrying, but not under those conditions, at that age. I wanted to marry and then have a child, and not have a child and then get married.”

In Bolivia, abortion was legalized in December 2017, but then reversed a month later. In the qualitative research, girls there noted that abortion could enable them to resist CEFMU. When abortion is legally allowed in cases of rape, the judicial procedures to do so are overwhelming, requiring girls to go to the police, contrary to best practice based on evidence. A Honduran girl told of her 16 year-old cousin who tried to get an illegal unsafe abortion from a witch, but this failed and she continued to carry the pregnancy to term.

While many governments in the region have adopted strategies to prevent adolescent pregnancy, governmental statistical systems across the region do not systematically collect data on births before the age of 15. This limits their capacity to support multisectoral prevention programs geared toward those in the most vulnerable situations.



Conclusion

The eight-country scope of this review of child, early or forced marriage or union in Latin America and the Caribbean helped to underscore that important common factors shape girls and women's lives across this complex and diverse region. Historical and cultural differences have been important in the formation of these societies, but important similarities in attitudes and practices with regard to gender, sexuality, marriage and 'informal marriage' or unions also stand out. One of the more prominent shared features across the region is that girls face a range of gendered disadvantages throughout their lives – as daughters, partners, wives and mothers. The country review materials illustrate that girls' life options tend to be quite limited, especially among poorer girls, and this creates predicaments and pressures for them and their families as they become older.

Being poor and female result in social expectations and economic realities that often create very difficult circumstances for girls. In the event that they become pregnant – given the constraint that abortion is largely illegal and threatens jail time for all involved – girls and their families often perceive that they have a limited set of options for responding. Because they are young, with limited education and few personal or economic resources, girls tend to try to resolve these pressures by entering CEFMUs, a status with few social, legal or personal protections. At the same time, because of gender roles and age differences, girls tend to be strongly dependent on their partner economically and interpersonally. As the data show, over the longer term and across various stresses, that dependence and reliance is often misplaced, with costly consequences for girls/young women and their children.

The country reports also convey that CEFMUs lead to a range of lifelong health, educational, economic and personal security costs to girls. Girls tend to drop out of school shortly before or after they enter unions, and because of weak social protections and safety nets, often find themselves with little economic security or access to health care, and with very limited legal recourse to seek support for children from husbands or partners. The patterns of gender disadvantage, poverty and relationship violence that girls all too often faced in their natal home are often replicated with their partners in their unions.

The available data also confirm that though a significant number of girls live in 'informal unions' in almost all of these countries, this issue has little visibility or policy priority in most of them. The ramifying negative social, economic and personal consequences of CEFMUs seem not to be well understood, at least as judged by the disproportionately low level of resources committed to this issue and the counter-productive-but-durable policy and legal frameworks that help to per-

petuate it. Abortion laws drastically limit and penalize abortion, imposing harmful choices for mothers who choose that route and unacceptable consequences for her children's well-being if they are born into poverty and a new cycle of deprivation. In many cases, current laws, customs and beliefs unite to sideline constructive laws that are passed, and a lack of political will or administrative resources hamper their implementation.

In short, traditional social structures, gender norms, legal frameworks, political institutions and economic arrangements together create unhelpful or harmful constraints and challenges for vulnerable girls and women in the eight study countries. The social roles and contexts in which they spend their lives – as daughters, partners or wives – often work against their interests, health and well-being. The reviews presented in the country studies suggest that what seems to perpetuate this persistent pattern is a kind of tacit collaboration across many institutions of society to protect or at least accept CEFMUs. Neither political, legal, policy, judicial and community leadership, nor parents, seem able to sufficiently shield girls from the known risk factors for entering into unions, nor from the known hazards once they are in CEFMUs. An additional essential task for leadership is to mitigate the harmful personal consequences of CEFMUs for girls over the course of their lives and to address the shared social and financial costs accompanying CEFMUs in areas such education, health, GBV and lost economic productivity.

This analysis of underlying forces driving CEFMUs across these eight countries suggests a wide range of potential areas for policy and program initiatives. Program pilots or more established programs are underway in many places to address the complex drivers and undesirable consequences of these early unions. Though the scale and range of responses nowhere matches the underlying need or the potential payoffs, the problem is becoming better recognized and responses more ambitious. Both the country-level and comparative perspectives provide abundant examples of the inherent complexity of CEFMUs and the rationale for appropriately multisectoral responses. The country studies suggest that an important opportunity for CEFMU as a relatively young or emerging area of focus is also to increase its strategic coherence and consistency at the country and regional levels. The range of negative impacts on girls' well-being associated with CEFMUs makes it a high impact/high payoff and potentially transformative area of work. Supported by a robust theory of change able to capture the complexity and importance of CEFMU, programs working in this area have the potential to craft a persuasive case for investing. These should improve the competitive appeal of integrated CEFMU work versus more traditional single-sector approaches.

A photograph of three young women with dark, curly hair, all with their mouths wide open as if shouting or chanting. The image is tinted with a teal/blue color. The woman on the right is in the foreground, looking slightly upwards and to the right. The woman in the middle is partially obscured, looking towards the left. The woman on the left is wearing glasses and looking towards the left. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with some structures.

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Recommendations

Analysis of the eight country studies, presented above, included an effort to identify key issues, opportunities and constraints to CEFMU programs. The recommendations offered below are an effort to constructively respond to main issues from that process, and to pair various constraints with suggestions for improving or advancing them. Major issues that surfaced in more than one country setting were selected, and some potential responses were suggested based on experiences or lessons learned from programs. An advisory group composed of Plan International global staff, representatives of UNFPA and other partner organizations also developed and provided recommendations. These have been brought together, consolidated and edited for consistency.

The recommendations are organized as much as possible according to the broad theory of change of Plan International's 18+ flagship that shows areas of convergence with the theory of change of the UNFPA-UNICEF-UN Women Regional Joint Programme to

end child marriage and early unions, represented in **Figure 2**, below. The three main categories (circles) or pathways help organize various strategies and interventions according to main areas of policy or program work. This sorting helps clarify and focus disparate topics and recommendations. But because many issues are cross-cutting, disentangling them too clinically and completely risks missing or minimizing important connections or synergies between these three principal categories.

These recommendations are not presented according to a priority ranking of main topics or the items nested under them. They are by no means meant as an exhaustive list and do not imply a selection process should occur between more or less equally worthy options. A broad menu of entry points and activity areas is implicit in these recommendations, which can be transcribed into norm change, policy and social safety net activity areas.

Figure 2. 18+ Theory of Change for Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions (CEFMU)



Overarching regional priorities

Develop a common perspective by forging a regional, rights-based consensus on shared terminology and understandings about the implications of child, early and forced marriages and unions.

Efforts to reduce and manage CEFMU are fragmented and inadequate. Shared understandings and a joint platform can activate a much wider response. Also, there are important linkages with other problems in the region, such as sexual violence or early and forced pregnancy.

Mobilize researchers to highlight data and evidence gaps that constrain programs, and to advocate for stronger systems for collecting more meaningful and relevant data, including on girls 10-14 years of age.

Important data gaps hamper decisive, coherent responses to CEFMU. Greater research attention as well as strengthened program monitoring can help build the credibility and effectiveness of CEFMU interventions. Disaggregate data on CEFMU as well to analyze the problem and orient policies and programs.

Include the LAC region in global discussions on challenges and highlight the prevalence and regional characteristics of CEFMU. Bring global lessons learned about CEFMU to the strengthening of LAC local initiatives.

The experiences of LAC around CEFMU has not been well documented or shared with global discourse on the topic. LAC countries have not benefitted to the extent possible from experiences in the many other countries grappling with forms of CEFMU. Better exchanges will help the global CEFMU community and LAC countries gain more from experiences neither would have benefited from previously.

Policy frameworks and budgets

MULTI-SECTORAL AND HOLISTIC RESPONSES

Emphasize multisectoral responses to CEFMU that reflect the complexity and scale of its impact on girls' lives.

CEFMU is interwoven with patriarchal institutions, culture and values in ways that cut across traditional administrative and disciplinary domains at all levels. Better coordination and collaboration across sectors and institutions in areas such as gender, inclusion, child protection and child rights, health, education and justice can more suitably match the complex, multi-dimensional needs of girls in CEFMUs with support services. More strategic alignment across government,

civil society, international agencies, citizens and the private sector can introduce synergies and achieve the level of effort required to end CEFMU. More robust and effective CEFMU programs should then help to attract and reinforce additional CEFMU resources. Strategic alignment enables various agencies to work on related but different aspects of an issue without the complexities and costs of more formal integrated work. Many line ministries currently lack the technical capability to integrate CEFMU issues or activities in the ways or at the scale needed. Appropriate capacity building can help ensure that existing public sector resources are effectively used to reduce CEFMU as an important objective.

LEGAL REFORMS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Develop and enforce a strong anti-CEFMU legal framework that harmonizes across relevant laws.

Legal frameworks have been slow to catch up with current understandings of the consequences of CEFMU for girls' well-being. Legislative and legal interventions are too often fragmented, contradictory and inadequate. Legislative assemblies and parliaments may require support to incorporate CEFMU issues and measures in appropriate legislation. A strong anti-CEFMU legal framework matched with adequate enforcement can significantly change the status quo and should be widely publicized. This framework should not attempt to regulate age at consent.

Three areas deserve special attention:

- ***Legislation on GBV, child sexual abuse and physical, psychological and sexual violence against girls, whether they are in union or not.*** These common forms of violence that underpin CEFMU remain neglected throughout the region, and the lack of coordination across areas of legislation limits girls' access to justice.
- ***Enact and enforce laws that keep girls enrolled until they complete secondary school, regardless of pregnancy or marital status.*** Ministries of Education lack policies, programs, budgets and commitment to protect girls' rights to education, especially girls who become pregnant, give birth or enter unions.
- ***Parental consent laws that undermine minimum age at marriage. 'Parental approval' or 'customary law' should not create exceptions to laws against CEFMU.***

SECTOR-SPECIFIC RESPONSES

Provide comprehensive sexuality education to all children, adolescents and youth, whether they are in or out of school, and develop new ways of reaching adults with this information.

CSE contributes to improved outcomes in areas such as sexual and reproductive health, delayed age at marriage, violence prevention and gender equality. Governments, educators, civil society organizations and community-based organizations should be supported and trained to provide CSE services to various populations, starting at an early age and extending into adulthood. Adopting international norms would boost the quality of curriculum since these norms entail content that is non-judgmental, inclusive, scientifically accurate, accessible, rights-based and gender transformative, and also entail providing legal information and awareness of rights.

Support national health systems to guarantee access to contraception and safe and accessible abortion where it is legal; and address the complications of unsafe abortions to save girls' and women's lives.

The absence of contraception and abortion forces girls in many settings into unions that they would not otherwise choose. The desire to avoid that pathway often leads girls to seek unsafe abortions. Girls' access to medical care is vital to ensure their health and survival.

Strengthen systems for civil registration and vital statistics to ensure girls are recognized as citizens deserving of protection under the law and that their unions are documented.

Weak documentation of girls' civil and personal data makes them invisible to the state and boosts their risks in CEFMU. In Brazil, for example, the registration of girls who leave school because they are pregnant does not include information on their union or marital status. Improving registries and monitoring of CEFMU, age of first pregnancy, highest education level achieved by sex and age to assess if a child is falling behind in school is therefore pivotal.

MONITORING AND SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Present and discuss legal frameworks about CEFMU with girls and boys at school so they are aware of their own rights.

Many people have heard about the laws prohibiting marriage before age 18, but are not familiar with any particulars and understand little about its relevance to them. Laws against CEFMU are not well understood, and schools are an important institution that supports education and awareness raising.

Strengthen the enabling environment and operating space for civil society to demand accountability for police and justice system to implement new laws on child marriage.

Civil society has an important role to play in accountability and oversight for judicial and security system responses to the rights of children and gender equality.

SOCIAL NORMS, ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONS

Work to change community norms about girls' potential and roles in life

Traditional cultural norms across the region often severely limit the social roles and personal autonomy available to women and girls. The disadvantaged status of girls in CEFMUs is a direct reflection of their relative lack of viable pathways as they enter adulthood, attempt to manage their health and sexuality, and seek economic security. Prevailing community norms shape all aspects of this situation but are susceptible to intentional change, especially if influential leaders, gatekeepers and parents become more involved. The 'work' here should be to empower girls while working with men and boys at the family, community, school, and religious institutional levels. Ensuring parental leave that facilitates men's sharing of responsibility for childrearing, and requiring men to provide child support when a union ends both reposition men as equally responsible for children.

Strengthen girls' voices as agents of change so that girls speak up for themselves and others and speak out against CEFMU

Girls cope with relative deficits in education, health, economic potential, legal status and personal autonomy. Starting with girls 10 to 14 years of age, it is necessary to develop a sense of empowerment and entitlement so that girls speak up for themselves and others and speak out against CEFMU. To improve their situation, girls and women will need to become more effective advocates for their own interests, more influential agents of change, and more involved decision makers.

Engage media to address, counter and transform the norms that shape traditional gender roles and limit girls' opportunities.

Media wield an unrivaled cultural power to make clear the links between CEFMU, control of girls' sexuality and the lack of opportunity girls face. Media can help citizens – girls and boys, women and men – gain exposure to new ideas and values, including that girls have a right to education, even if they are in union, pregnant and/or parenting. They can promote gender equitable models for men, particularly as engaged fathers and partners. Media images and story lines can powerfully promote girls' education and their ability to make choices regarding marriage or unions. They can use drama to counter-message to boys and men on the ubiquity of violent images – including GBV – and on the disservice that mainstream male sexuality and identity often do the well-being of boys and men. Models of equitable masculinity should be integrated into other norm change efforts to improve the wellbeing of men, women, children, and families.

Work with community leaders to reduce social tolerance to CEFMU

Traditional cultural values often encourage or tolerate CEFMU, but community leaders often do not have the opportunity to discuss and question the practice and to strategize about how they can contribute to change. Involving leaders in community mobilization, social media and public service messaging can contribute to catalyzing change. Key to reducing CEFMU is ensuring that girls have safe environments in which they can make choices about relationships with men that are not forced by personal crisis, poverty or pregnancy.

Social and economic resources and safety nets

Enable and encourage girls to complete secondary school, and strengthen school systems that make this possible.

Girls' rates of participation in school tend to decline as they become older, especially when they become sexually active, often in their mid-teens. The risks of entering a union and/or getting pregnant, both of which contribute to girls' dropping out. So high are the personal and social costs to girls leaving school that many multilaterals have recommended cash transfers for girls who are pregnant or in union on the condition they attend school. Schools can do much more to encourage girls to stay in school by providing CSE from a young age, by ensuring a safe school environment, and by addressing gender barriers in content and delivery. And schools can track and report on girl students through the upper primary and secondary school levels as a way of identifying 'at risk' girls who may be considering leaving school.

Include measures that address poverty and the financial incentives that drive the practice in efforts to eliminate CEFMU.

Interventions that increase household economic security, such as social protection programmes, can provide effective measures to help keep girls in school and reduce the prevalence of CEFMU.

Strengthen girls' economic prospects and autonomy.

Economic independence is fundamental to creating an alternative to CEFMU and to reinforcing girls' power and autonomy within union. Girls' poverty and lack of economic prospects constraints their choices and makes them vulnerable to violence and abandonment. Quality, relevant schooling must be pursued in tandem with opportunities for economic autonomy that offer girls appealing alternatives to early union formation and parenthood.

Build intergenerational solidarity and strengthen families by giving parents the skills and information to engage with and protect their children.

Traditional understandings of appropriate modesty make it difficult and uncomfortable for many adults to have intergenerational conversations about sexuality. Outreach to parents can open their eyes to new ways of understanding their children, and open children's eyes to new ways of communicating with their parents. Greater solidarity and communication among fathers, mothers and daughters could improve a host of outcomes for girls. Fathers could play a transformative role in talking about sexual relationships and marriage, and encouraging boys' respect and communication with girls.

Expand safe spaces for girls to connect with each other and interact with mentors

Girls' mobility and social contacts are often restricted to conform with the traditional values and norms in many communities. The pattern extends to many CEFMUs, in which partners often restrict girls' movement because of insecurities about their fidelity. Community spaces need to reach out to girls in and out of union to welcome and engage them, making them more visible, contributing to their empowerment and participation, and linking them to official services and systems of government protections when they are exposed to GBV.

Expand equitable access to quality, affordable, gender-responsive, adolescent-and-youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.

Unintended youth pregnancy contributes significantly to CEFMU, pointing both to a lack of understanding about sexuality in this age group and a scarcity of services aimed at youth sexual and reproductive health. Health centers can provide more youth-friendly services to help overcome incipient challenges ranging from transportation to protecting the privacy, confidentiality and security of youth populations. Pharmacists can be trained to promote condoms and other methods of contraception to make options safely and readily available for girls and boys. Community health workers can be encouraged to reach out directly to girls.

Box 3. List of country reports

Bolivia

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You can review and download the national and regional reports at www.plan-americas.org

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