



## Child marriages and early unions

Inequality and poverty among women, girls and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean

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### Prevalence of child marriages and early unions in the region

Child marriages and early unions are a systematic and persistent harmful practice in Latin America and the Caribbean

Child, early and forced marriages and unions are defined as a union in which at least one of the parties is under the age of 18. The overwhelming majority of formal and informal child marriages and unions involve girls, although in some cases their male spouses are also under 18. As stated in the Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices, and Human Rights Council resolution 29/8 of 2 July 2015, on strengthening efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, child marriage is considered a form of forced marriage, as it is practiced without the full, free and informed consent of one or both parties (United Nations, 2015b). The definition used to address this violation of the human rights of children and adolescents includes marriages involving a conjugal union recognized by legal, customary or religious norms, as well as informal conjugal unions.

In the region, the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, has been the main intergovernmental forum on the rights of women and girls in all their diversity and on gender equality in the United Nations, since the first Conference held in Havana in 1977 up to the most recent session, held in Buenos Aires in 2022. This body has built a meaningful, progressive and comprehensive Regional Gender Agenda, cementing the region's position as the only one in the world with an Agenda that guides countries' public policies for gender equality in law and in practice,

ensuring women's rights and autonomy (ECLAC, 2023). The Buenos Aires Commitment, adopted at the fifteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, includes an agreement to "promote the adoption and implementation of laws, policies, comprehensive and multisectoral action plans and educational awareness-raising programmes to prevent, address, punish and eliminate all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination against women, adolescent girls and girls in all their diversity, in different areas and manifestations, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and early unions" (ECLAC, 2023).

The Gender Equality Observatory of Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>1</sup> identifies child, early and forced marriages and unions as a harmful practice, in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals: eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation (United Nations, 2015a).

According to the Gender Equality Observatory of Latin America and the Caribbean, in 2022 in the region, the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in a stable union before age 18 (SDG indicator 5.3.1) stood at 21.2%. Among the countries that provide information on this indicator to UNICEF, this percentage exceeds 30% in Suriname (36%), Nicaragua (35%), Honduras (34%), Belize (34%), the Dominican Republic (32%) and Guyana (32%). This percentage is below 20% in only four countries: Costa Rica (17%), Argentina (16%), Peru (14%) and Jamaica (8%).<sup>2</sup> Girls continue to be disproportionately subjected to this harmful practice, with one in five young women aged 20–24 years married before 18, compared to 1 in 30 young men (Murray and others, 2019). There are limitations to the measurement of child marriages and early unions, primarily with regard to underreporting, as highlighted in box 1.

In the region, informal early unions are more prevalent than marriages. In adherence to human rights standards, 13 countries prohibit marriage before the age of 18.<sup>3</sup> Informal unions are an increasingly common component of the Latin American family system in all populations. They are referred to in a variety of ways, including free or consensual unions, de facto unions, cohabitation and visiting relationships,<sup>4</sup> and their occurrence stems from cultural factors as well as economic and social conditions. Although historically this practice was more widespread in lower-income groups, it has increasingly become an alternative entry point to marriage among middle and upper-income segments as well, so much so that across Latin America as a whole, the percentage of women aged 30–34 who live with a partner without being married doubled between 1990 and 2010, from 22% to 44% (Binstock and Cerruti, 2022).

<sup>1</sup> The Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean is a tool created by ECLAC pursuant to the agreement adopted by governments at the tenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (Quito Consensus, 2007), which requested the Commission and other United Nations system organizations to create the Observatory. The purpose of the Observatory is to contribute to the strengthening of national machineries for the advancement of women, to make official information from the governments of the region available to the public, and to facilitate the monitoring of international agreements on women's rights. It also contributes to the fulfilment of the commitments forming the Regional Gender Agenda, adopted by governments at sessions of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent available country-by-country data on this indicator can be found on the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/es/indicadores/matrimonio-infantil>.

<sup>3</sup> Thirteen countries and territories have legislation that prohibits marriage before the age of 18: Antigua and Barbuda, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad and Tobago. Eleven other countries and territories allow marriage from the age of 16 with approval: Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Barbados, Brazil, Dominica, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Turks and Caicos Islands, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and Uruguay. In six countries, legislation allows marriage before the age of 16 on specific grounds: Anguilla, Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Guyana, and Saint Kitts and Nevis.

<sup>4</sup> Visiting relationships refer to a social and sexual relationship without cohabitation, considered a form of informal union, observed primarily in some countries of the Caribbean (UNICEF, 2019).

- **Box 1**

- **Breaking the statistical silence: measuring child, early and forced marriages and unions in Latin America and the Caribbean**

Child, early and forced marriages and unions have been defined as harmful practices because they constitute a form of violence against women and girls, and are deeply rooted in discrimination based on sex, gender, age and other factors (United Nations, 2014).

The elimination of these practices was therefore included in target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, progress on which is measured using the indicator on the “proportion of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in union before the age of 15 and before the age of 18”. The custodian agency for this indicator is the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the main data sources are multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS), which correspond to a UNICEF initiative to provide countries with assistance in generating statistical information on children and women worldwide, demographic and health surveys (DHS), and national surveys on the health of the population (ECLAC, 2022). The use of an indicator with a common definition allows for meaningful comparisons of how widespread the practice is across contexts, among different populations and over time (UNICEF, 2023).

The indicator comprises both a definition of child marriage (which includes formal marriage and informal unions before the age of 18) and a reference group to which the definition is applied (women between the ages of 20 and 24).

The use of this reference group has the benefit of indicating complete prevalence, i.e. it is a cohort in which all the women have already lived through the period in which they were at risk of child marriage or union, but who are closer in age to the group under observation (girls under 18 years of age) than their older peers (UNICEF, 2023).

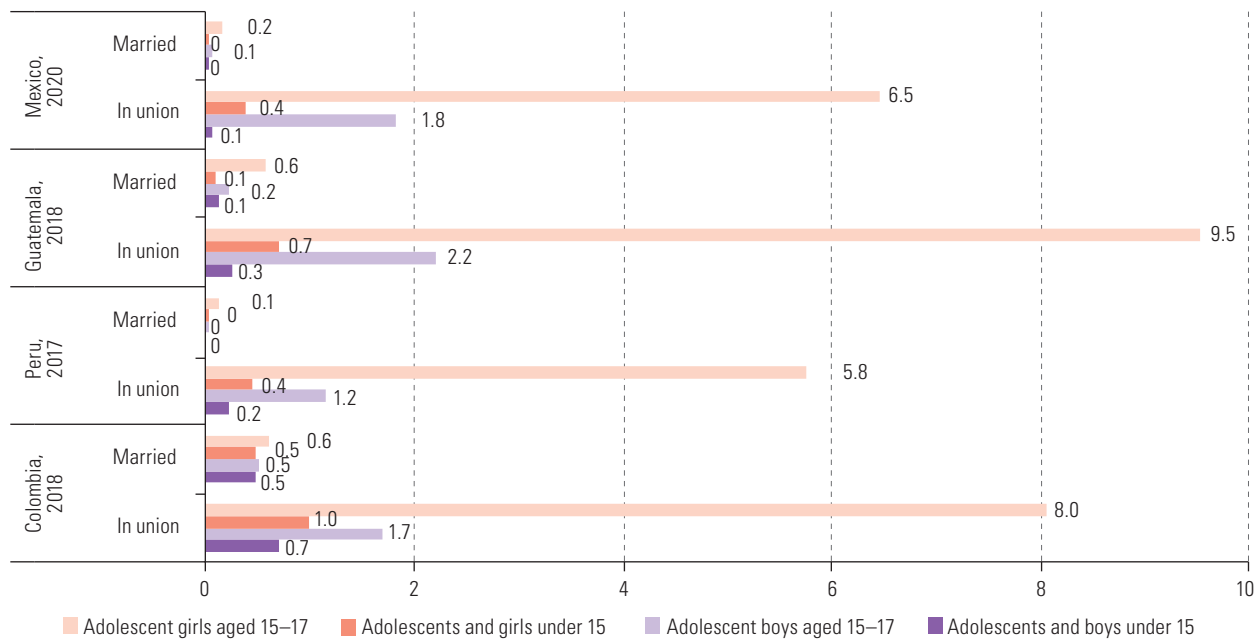
Nevertheless, there are certain limitations to how well this indicator can account for the magnitude and effects of this harmful practice. First, because data is retrospective, prevalence estimates do not indicate the percentage of girls and adolescents under 18 who are married or in union at the time of reporting, but rather those who entered into this situation a few years earlier. These estimates do, however, enable comparison. Furthermore, the measuring instruments are not used in all countries (such as Chile or Venezuela), nor used on a regular basis (data for Brazil are from 2006; data for Nicaragua from 2013). In addition, survey samples are not sufficiently representative for disaggregation of the population by socioeconomic status, ethnicity or subregions within countries.

This leads to underreporting of information, given that in Latin America and the Caribbean informal unions are more common than marriages and are often underreported in surveys, especially if the unions no longer exist at the time of the survey.

Other sources of information, such as censuses and household surveys, have been used to characterize child, early and forced marriages and unions. Censuses offer the benefit of identifying girls and adolescents who are currently in a marriage or union. The universal scope of a census means that variables can be cross-referenced to delve deeper into how this harmful practice affects schooling, maternity, living conditions and activity, to name a few. However, such large-scale national statistical operations also have limitations in that they exclude girls and adolescents under 18 but who are still at risk of early marriage or union. Underreporting may also occur because censuses are not always able to detect unions, family relationships and possible family subunits within households. Household surveys do not usually report on populations under 15 years of age and therefore exclude the particularly worrying realities for girls aged 10–14. Samples for those aged 15–18 are generally small and the greater margin of error in processing data on girls in marriages or unions is too high to for methodologically robust inferences to be made.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Breaking the statistical silence to achieve gender equality by 2030: implementing the information systems pillar of the Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030* (LC/CRM.15/4), Santiago; United Nations, “Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019) on harmful practices” (CEDAW/C/GC/31/Rev.1–CRC/C/GC/18/Rev.1), 8 May 2014 and ECLAC/United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects. 2023 update*, New York, 2023.

▪ **Figure 1**  
Latin America (4 countries): percentage of persons aged between 10 and 17 in a conjugal union or married, by sex, age group and type of union



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of census microdata for Colombia (2018), Peru (2017), Guatemala (2018) and Mexico (2020).

Notes: Data where marital status is unknown are not included. For Colombia, under 15 refers to ages 10–14; for Peru, Guatemala and Mexico, under 15 refers to ages 12–14.

Child, early and forced marriages and unions take many forms. However, given that they are based on power imbalances between men and women which affect the opportunities and decision-making power of girls and adolescents, all such unions are considered a harmful practice that violates the rights of children and adolescents (United Nations, 2014). They are complex phenomena connected to gender inequalities, violence, poverty, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and inadequate or insufficient legislation and policy, which put girls and adolescents at risk. These practices are both the cause and consequence of women having limited physical, economic and decision-making independence. They disproportionately affect girls and adolescents living in rural areas and impoverished households and who have less access to education (Working group of the Joint Inter-agency Programme to End Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021).

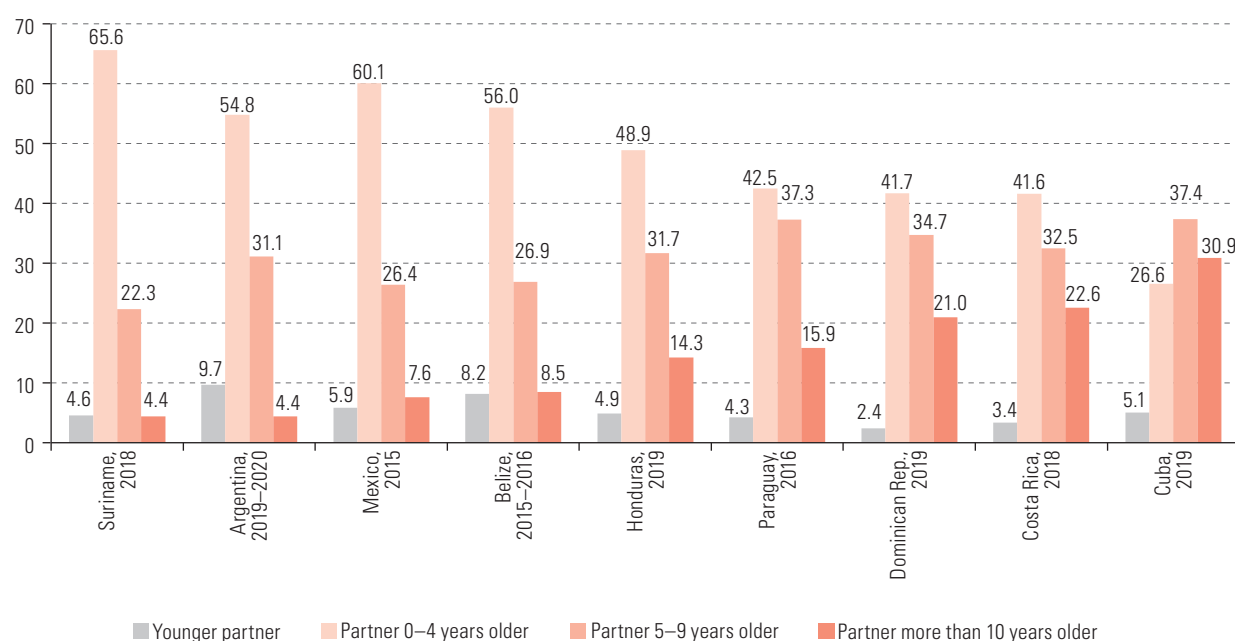
There is a lack of quantitative information on the prevalence of different ways in which girls and adolescents enter into a formal or informal union. However, in qualitative studies produced by different United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF; multilateral agencies such as the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI); civil society organizations like Plan International, Save the Children and Equality Now; academic organizations such as the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) and in advocacy work by women's, youth and feminist organizations such as Girls not Brides and Jóvenas Latidas, girls and adolescents describe various reasons for and ways in which they have been united or married. In some cases, families decide upon the union, and in others, the girls or adolescents see in marriages or unions an opportunity to escape poverty or violence in their own family (Greene, 2019).

An age difference between spouses is a notable variable in the analysis of power imbalances between girls in unions and their partners. Figures reveal that age-related realities vary widely among countries with available data: in some countries, over 50% of girls and adolescents who are currently married or in unions have partners who are younger or up to four years older than them (this is the case in Suriname, Argentina, Mexico and Belize), meaning that unions occur mainly between adolescents. However, in other countries, such as Cuba, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, the situation is reversed: the majority of formally or informally married girls are with men five or more years older than them.

▪ **Figure 2**

Latin America and the Caribbean (9 countries): age differences between adolescent girls aged 15–19 currently married or in union and their partners, latest year available

(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of the official reports of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

Note: Percentages were calculated on the basis of data that exclude persons where the age of the spouse or partner is not known.

## Socioeconomic inequalities and child marriages and early unions

Child, early and forced marriages and unions are more prevalent in low-income households

Several Latin American countries produce and publish annual, official figures on income poverty based on household surveys (CEPALSTAT includes data up to 2021 for Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay). This has made it possible to establish the femininity index of poor households. In 2021, for example, for every 100 men aged 20–59 in income-poor households, there were 116 women in the same situation. However, because the sample is massively reduced in size when poverty is cross referenced with data on girls in formal or informal unions in household surveys (see box 1), and because such surveys cannot identify the age at which these unions first occur, this bulletin does not analyse the prevalence of child, early and forced

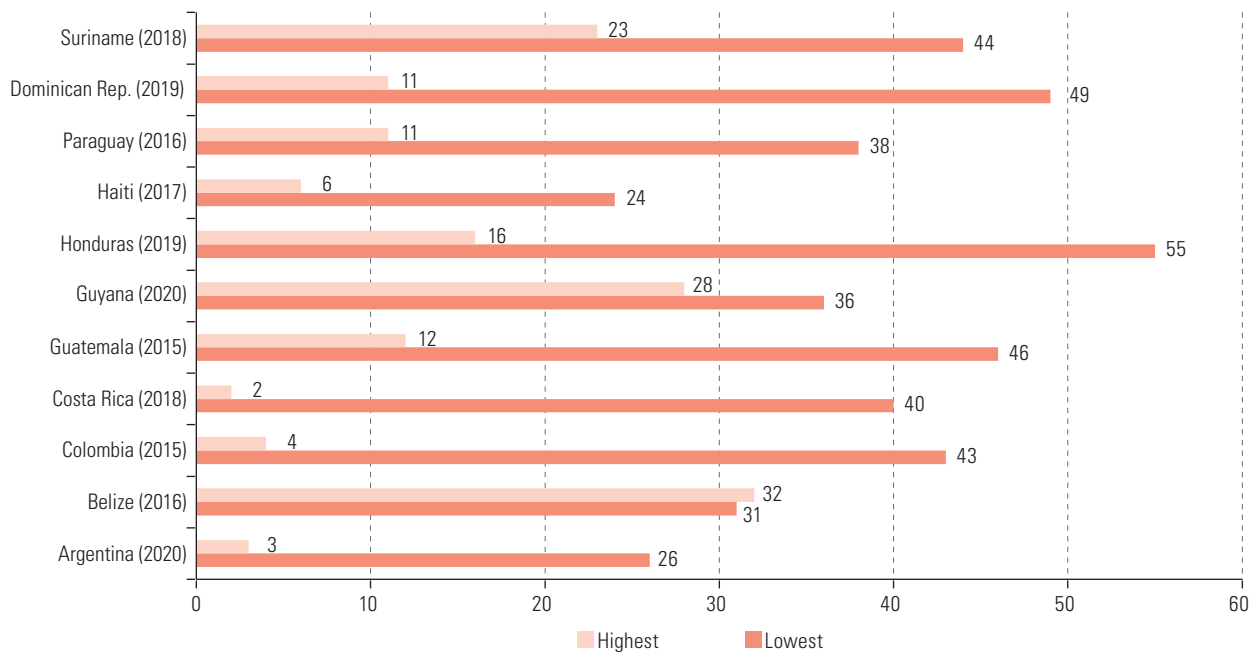
marriages and unions in poor households. Likewise, UNDP (2023) has identified that indicators on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are not available in most of the household surveys used to calculate multidimensional poverty in a sample of 10 countries.

In this context, available sources show that there is a higher prevalence of child, early and forced marriages and unions in households in the lowest income quintile, as shown in figure 3.

▪ **Figure 3**

Latin America and the Caribbean (11 countries): women aged 20–24 who were first married or in union before age 18, by income quintile (highest or lowest)

(Percentages)



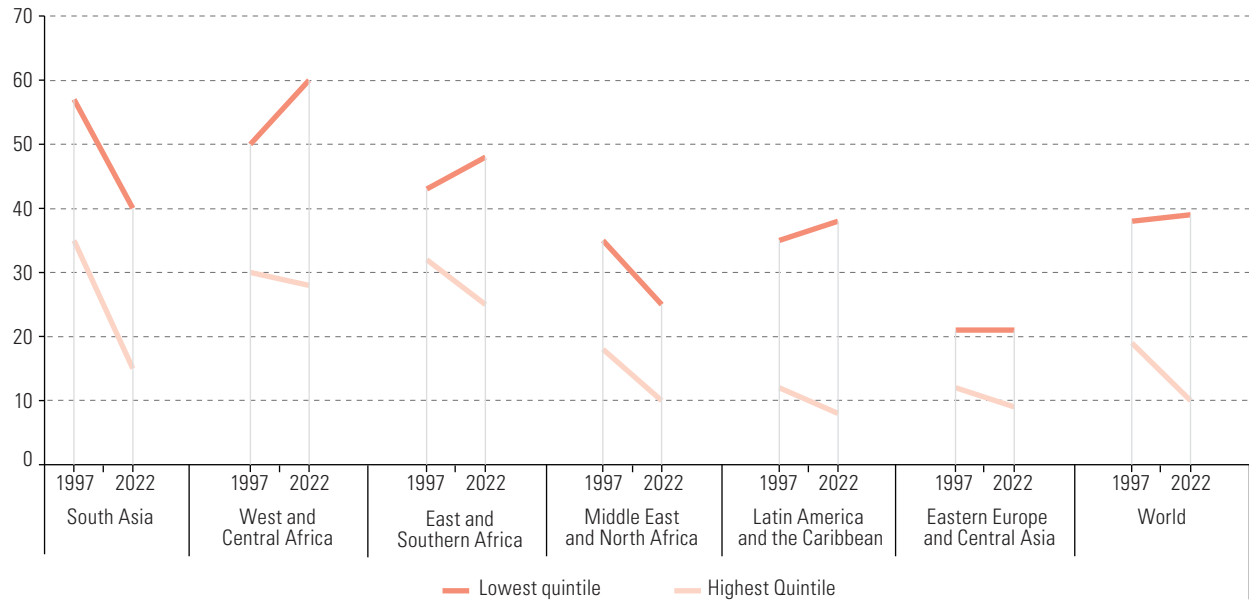
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

According to qualitative studies conducted in the region, girls and adolescents often enter into marriages or unions as a way to escape poverty in their own households or to seek protection from situations of vulnerability, either on their own initiative or that of their families (Greene, 2019, UNFPA/Plan International Paraguay, 2021). This reflects a failure to protect the human rights of girls.

A recent study by UNICEF (2023) reports that, globally, the decline in child, early and forced marriages and unions has been among girls and adolescents belonging to the richest quintiles. In Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in different regions of Africa, the prevalence of child and early marriages and unions increased in households in the first quintile and decreased significantly in households with the highest incomes, as shown in figure 4.

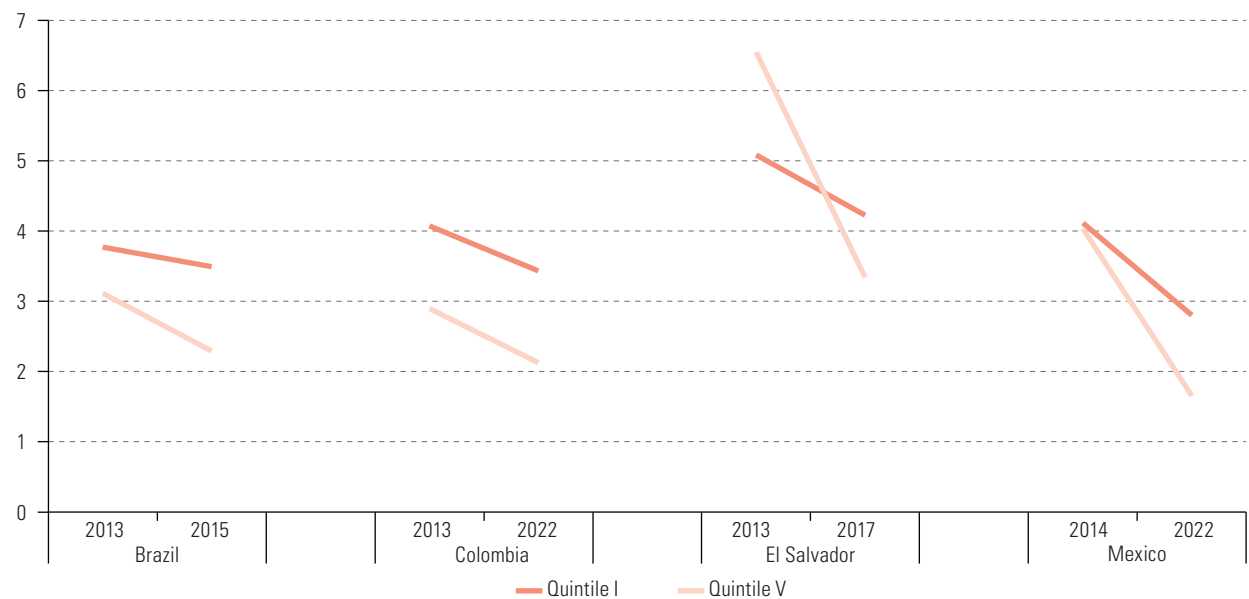
Analysis of household surveys in countries that have this information reveals a similar situation (see figure 5): in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico there is a higher prevalence of early marriages and unions among households in the lowest quintile, and while this harmful practice is on the decline throughout the population, this decrease is concentrated in the highest income quintile.

▪ **Figure 4**  
World and selected regions: women aged 20–24 who were first married or in union before the age of 18, by region and income quintile, 1997–2022  
(Percentage change)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/United Nations Children's Fund (ECLAC/UNICEF), *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects. 2023 update*, New York, 2023.

▪ **Figure 5**  
Latin America (4 countries): women under 18 married or in union, by income quintile  
(Percentage change)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of household surveys.

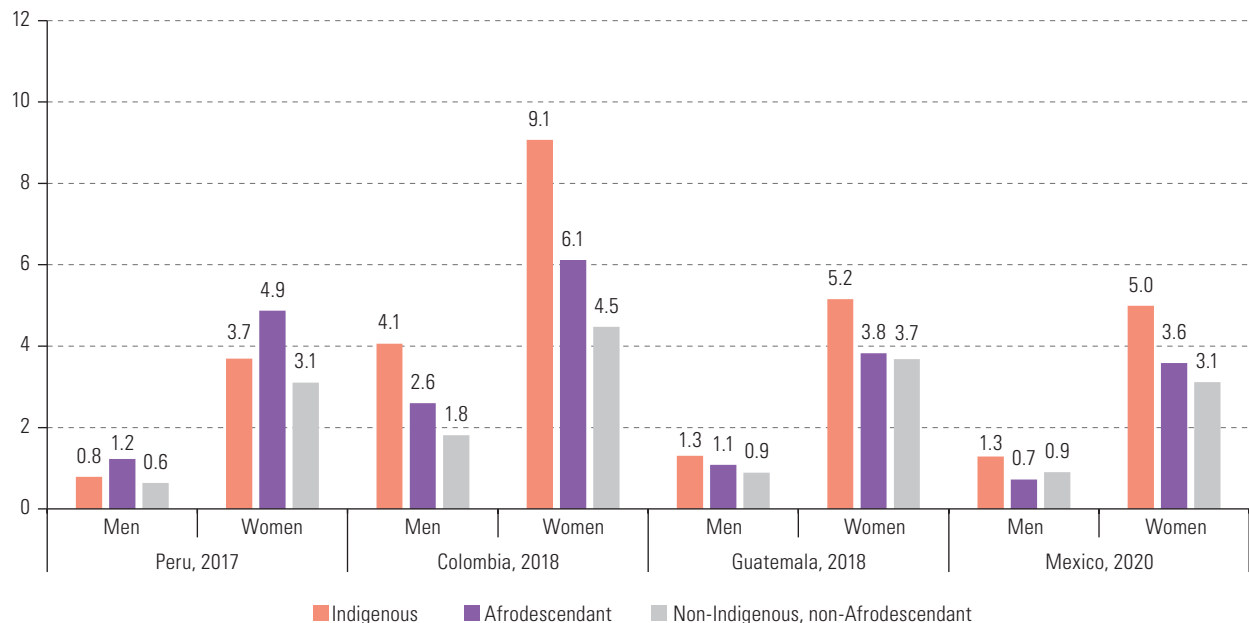
Similarly, a worldwide study by UNICEF shows that in the Dominican Republic, women in higher-income groups marry or enter into unions four years later than their lower-income counterparts: the median age at which women in the highest quintile marry is 21.6, while for women in the first quintile, this age is 17.2 (UNICEF, 2014).



In some countries, ethnicity is a factor in the prevalence of child marriages and unions, but situations vary greatly

Evidence shows that child, early and forced marriages and unions are more prevalent among Indigenous and Afrodescendant populations (UNICEF, 2019). Data from the 2020 census round from four countries (Peru, 2017, Guatemala, 2018, Colombia, 2018 and Mexico, 2020) confirm a higher proportion of girls and adolescents who are married or in unions among the population that self-identifies as Indigenous (see figure 6). This is also holds true among men (except in Mexico), although a much smaller percentage—less than 2% in all four countries—has been married or in union.

▪ **Figure 6**  
Latin America (4 countries): ever-partnered persons under 18, by ethnic and racial self-identification and sex  
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of census microdata for Colombia (2018), Peru (2017), Guatemala (2018) and Mexico (2020).

Note: The status “ever-partnered” refers to the entire population under 18 that reporting being married, in an informal union, separated, divorced or widowed. In Colombia, this covers ages 10–17, while in Peru, Guatemala and Mexico, it covers ages 12–17.

Early marriages and unions occur at a higher rate among the Afrodescendant population than among the non-Afrodescendant population. Although the proportion of men and women under 18 of this population group who report being or having ever been married or in union is lower than among the Indigenous population (except in Peru), it is relatively higher than the population that identifies neither as Indigenous nor Afrodescendant. However, it is important to note that these trends are determined by how ethnic or racial variables and marital status are measured.

Persistent structural inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean means that levels of poverty and indigence are much higher among Indigenous Peoples and Afrodescendant populations, as statistics systematically show (ECLAC, 2016). As a result, the incidence of the ethnicity/race variable must be qualified precisely by the intersections between ethnicity, race, poverty, gender and age must be carefully nuanced, which themselves reflect structural and systemic processes of discrimination, exclusion and inequality. Intersectional analysis is therefore a challenge in statistical production.

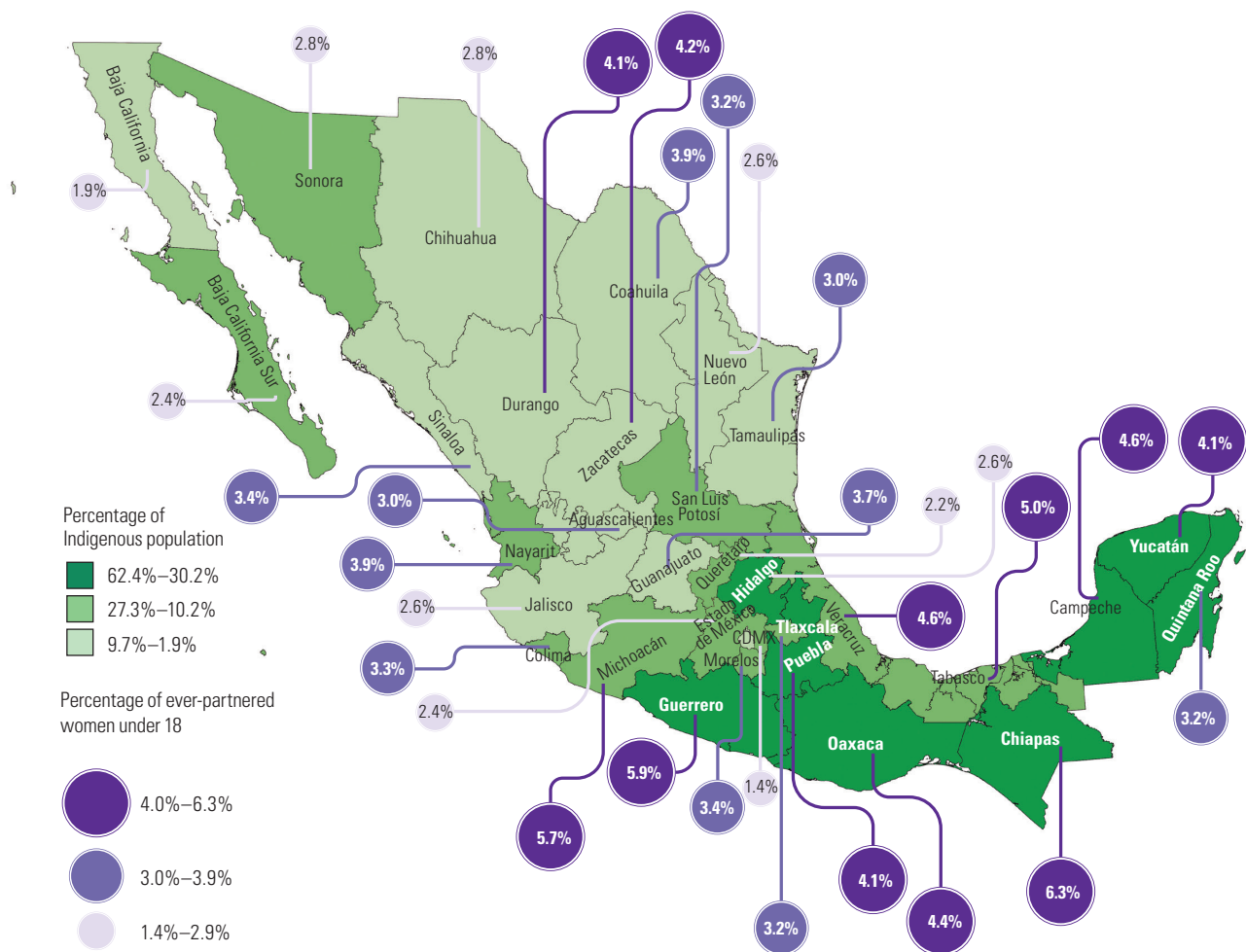


Thus, to facilitate an understanding of the complexity of the dimensions associated with early and forced child marriages and unions, below is a series of maps generated on the basis of census data from the 2020 census round. These maps indicate significant differences in the prevalence of child and early marriages and unions at territorial level and the percentage of the population that is Indigenous.<sup>5</sup> This means that the specificities of each Indigenous population must be considered, along with the various intersections of inequality, in the characterization of married or partnered girls and adolescents to avoid generalizations about a single variable, such as ethnicity or race. A larger Indigenous population does not necessarily imply a higher prevalence of child, early and forced marriages and unions at the subnational level within countries with the highest numbers of child marriages and unions.

In the case of Mexico (map 1), certain states with a smaller percentage of Indigenous Peoples in the population, such as Durango or Zacatecas, have a high percentage of girls and adolescents in marriages or unions, whereas states with high percentages of Indigenous Peoples, such as Quintana Roo or Hidalgo, record a lower relative proportion of girls or adolescents in marriages or unions.

#### Map 1

Mexico: percentage distribution of ever-partnered women under 18, by percentage of Indigenous population and by state, 2020



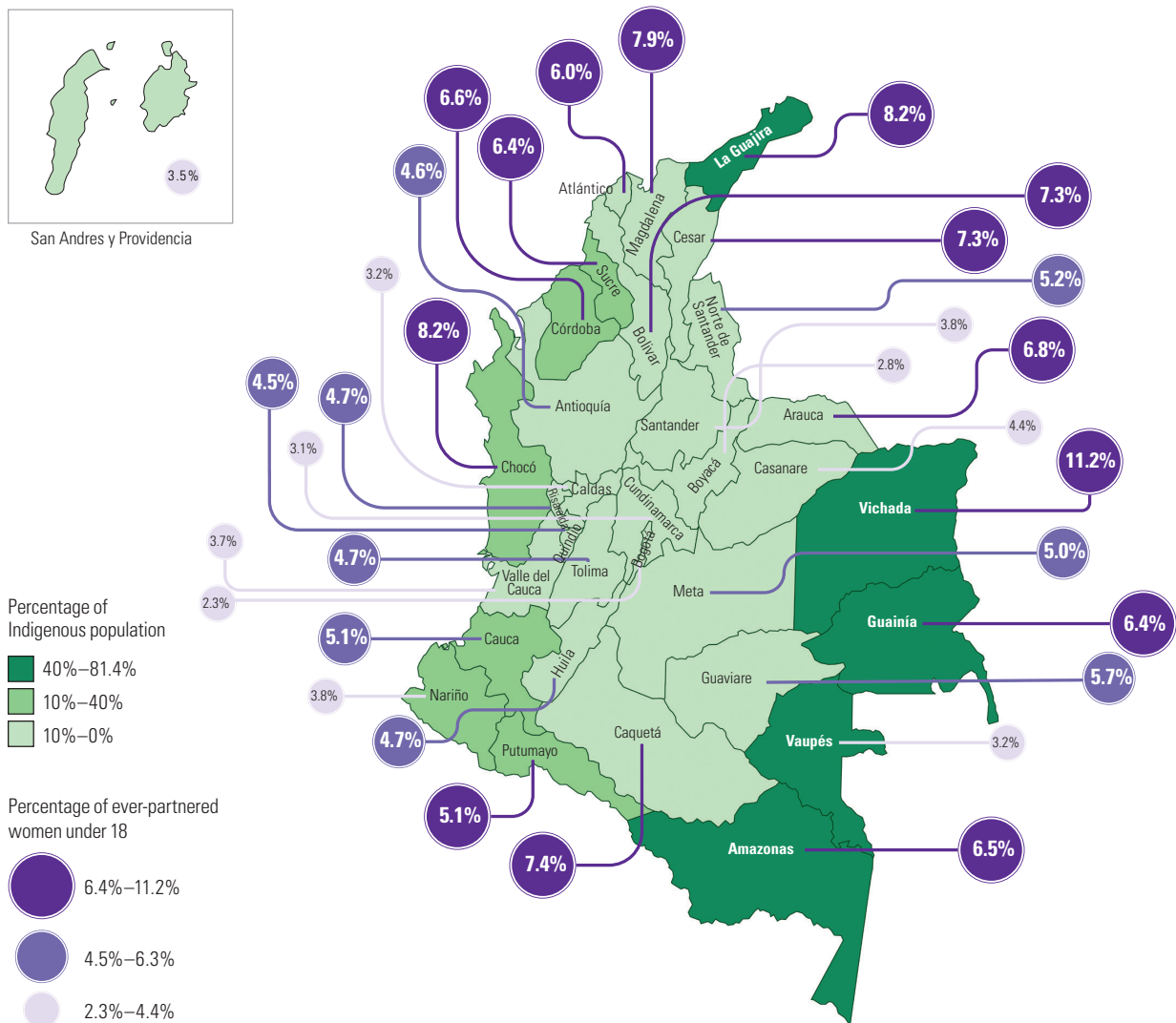
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of 2020 census microdata.

<sup>5</sup> The Afrodescendent population was not included in this exercise owing to a lack of data. The percentage of the population that self-identifies as Afrodescendant in Colombia is 6.8%; in Peru, 3.7%; in Mexico, 2%; and in Guatemala, 0.2%.

In Colombia (map 2), one third of departments report relatively high percentages of early child marriages and unions, (above 6%), a phenomenon that also occurs in departments where less than 5% of the population self identifies as Indigenous (Magdalena, Caquetá, César, Bolívar, Arauca, Atlántico, Guaviare, Norte de Santander, Meta, Risaralda, Huila, Tolima, Antioquia, Quindío and Casanare). Conversely, in the department of Vaupés, where Indigenous Peoples make up more than 80% of the population, a low percentage (3.2%) of girls under 18 reported having ever been in union in the 2018 census.

Map 2

Colombia: percentage distribution of ever-partnered women under, by percentage of Indigenous population and by department, 2018

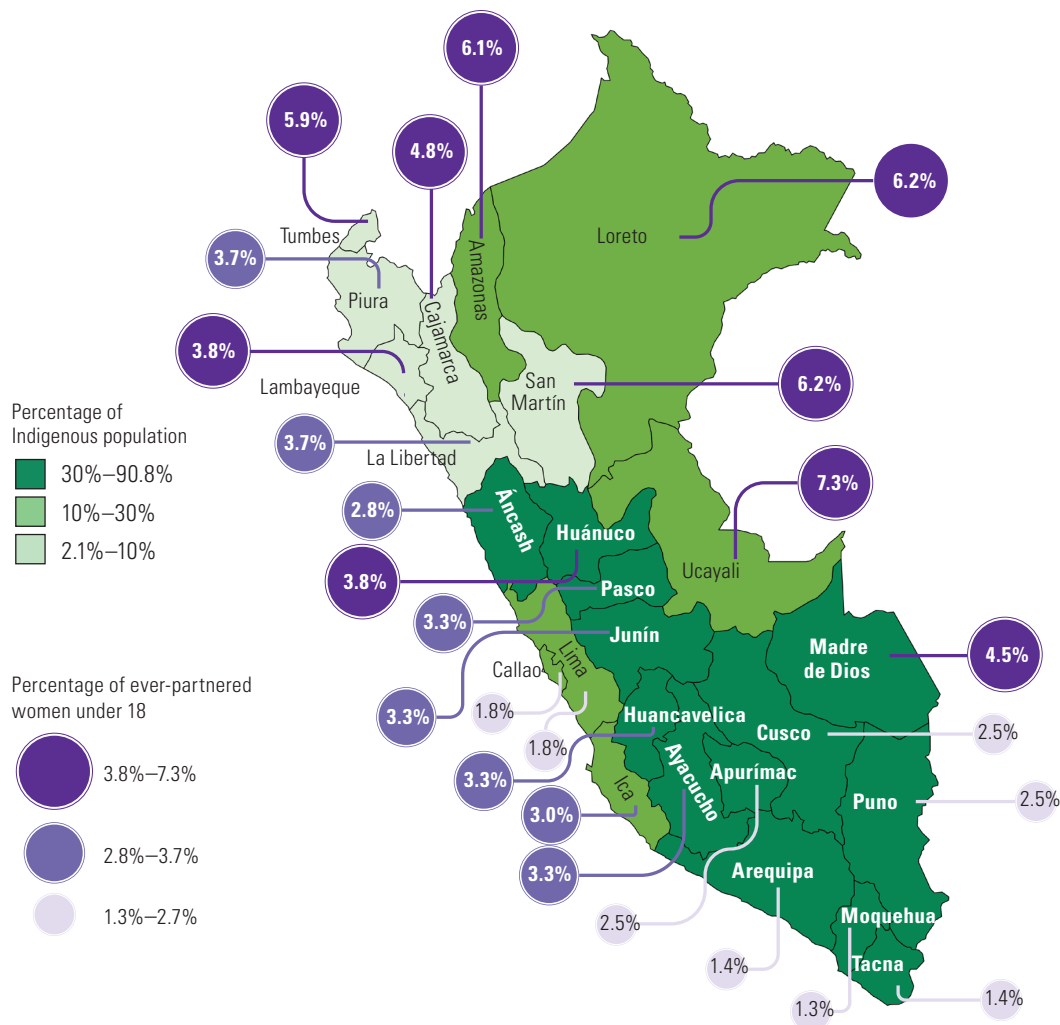


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of 2018 census microdata.

In Peru (map 3), meanwhile, the proportion of early marriages and unions varies among the territories with a higher relative share of Indigenous Peoples. The coastal departments of Arequipa, Tacna and Moquegua, where Indigenous Peoples account for a large percentage of the population, have the lowest percentages of child marriages and unions in the country. In contrast, the departments of the Peruvian Amazonia (Ucayali, Amazonas and Loreto) have the highest prevalence of early marriages and unions, at over 6%.

▪ **Map 3**

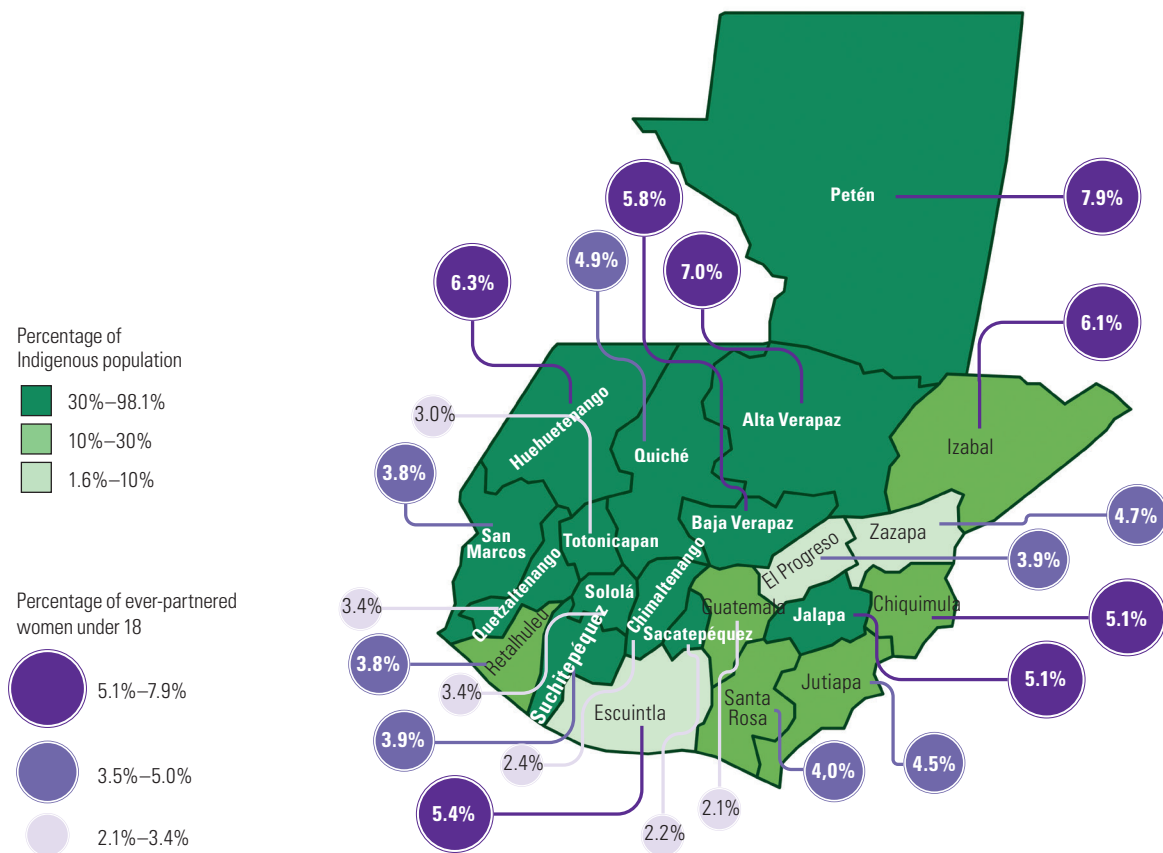
Peru: percentage distribution of ever-partnered women under 18, by percentage of Indigenous population and by region, 2017



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of 2017 census microdata.

In Guatemala (map 4), Indigenous Peoples make up a large percentage of the population—in 13 of the country’s 22 departments, 30% or more of the population self identifies as Indigenous— and the percentage of girls and adolescents under 18 who have ever been in union, based on the 2018 census, are relatively high as well. However, departments with the lowest percentages of Indigenous Peoples in the population (Escuintla and Zapata) record high rates of child marriages and unions. Conversely, the departments of Sololá and Totonicapán, with an Indigenous population of over 95%, report an average rate of early marriages and unions.

Map 4  
Guatemala: percentage distribution of ever-partnered women under 18, by percentage of Indigenous population and by department, 2018



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of 2018 census microdata.

### Interruption of transition to paid work

Child marriage and early unions and adolescent pregnancy are an obstacle to inclusive educational trajectories of girls and adolescents and their transition to paid work

As stated in Abramo and others (2021), child and early marriages and unions, as well as adolescent pregnancies (see box 2) hamper the transition of adolescents and girls from the educational system to paid work. This transition, a fundamental milestone in the life cycle, is key to the process of developing a person’s autonomy, particularly the financial autonomy and social mobility that can improve the life goals and living conditions that their households allowed. A gender rights and equality approach involves increasing the access of

adolescents and young people –particularly those who are subject to various forms of discrimination and exclusion– to their right to quality education and decent work, with the aim of giving them the tools and ensuring the conditions and opportunities needed to foster a greater degree of inclusion and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and inequality (Abramo and others, 2021, p. 8).

### Box 2

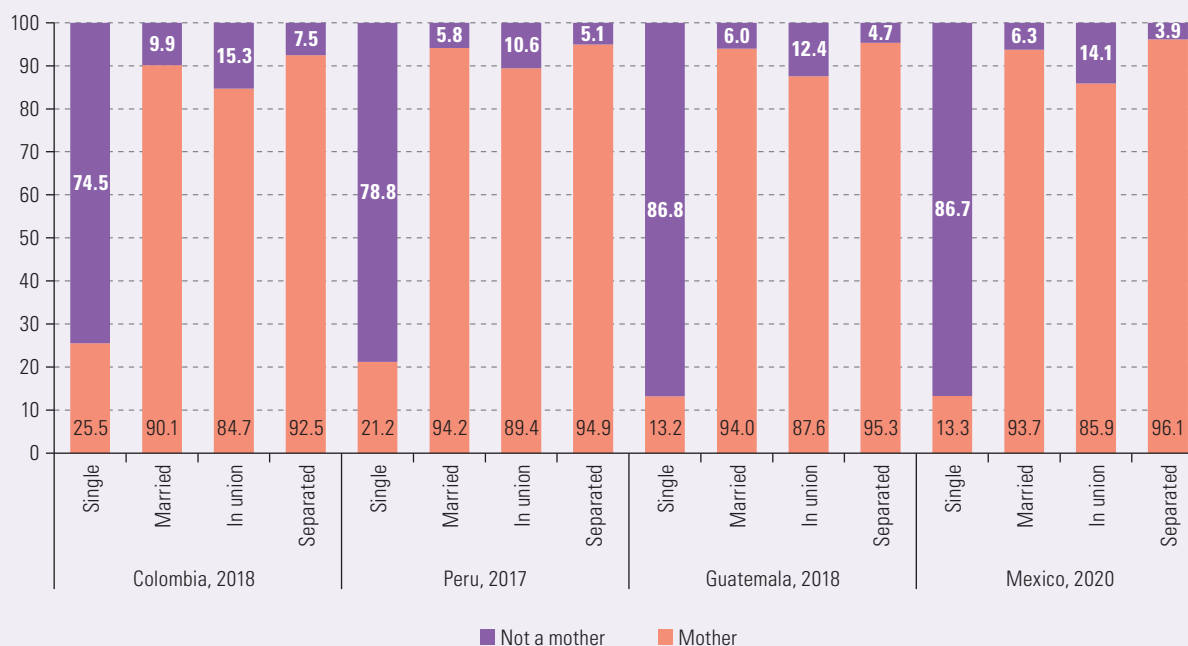
Child and early marriages and unions are associated with adolescent pregnancy, which also affects the development of the full independence of girls and adolescents and puts their health and rights at risk

Child and early marriages and unions are strongly associated with adolescent pregnancy, either because they may hasten pregnancies or vice versa. The connection between the two is noteworthy, as the combined or separate effects of these situations are similar in that they violate the rights of girls and adolescents and perpetuate gender inequalities.

As seen in the figure below, in four countries, most girls or adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17 who were mothers reported being married or in union before the age of 18 in the last census round. The effects of adolescent pregnancy on the development of girls and adolescents should be added to those of early marriages and unions.

#### Latin America (4 countries): percentage of girls and adolescents aged between 10 and 17, by maternity and marital status

(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of the regional database on maternity (MATERNILAC).

Note: The figure does not include girls and adolescents whose marital status is unknown or not recorded.

When no response was provided on the number of children, the value was treated as zero.

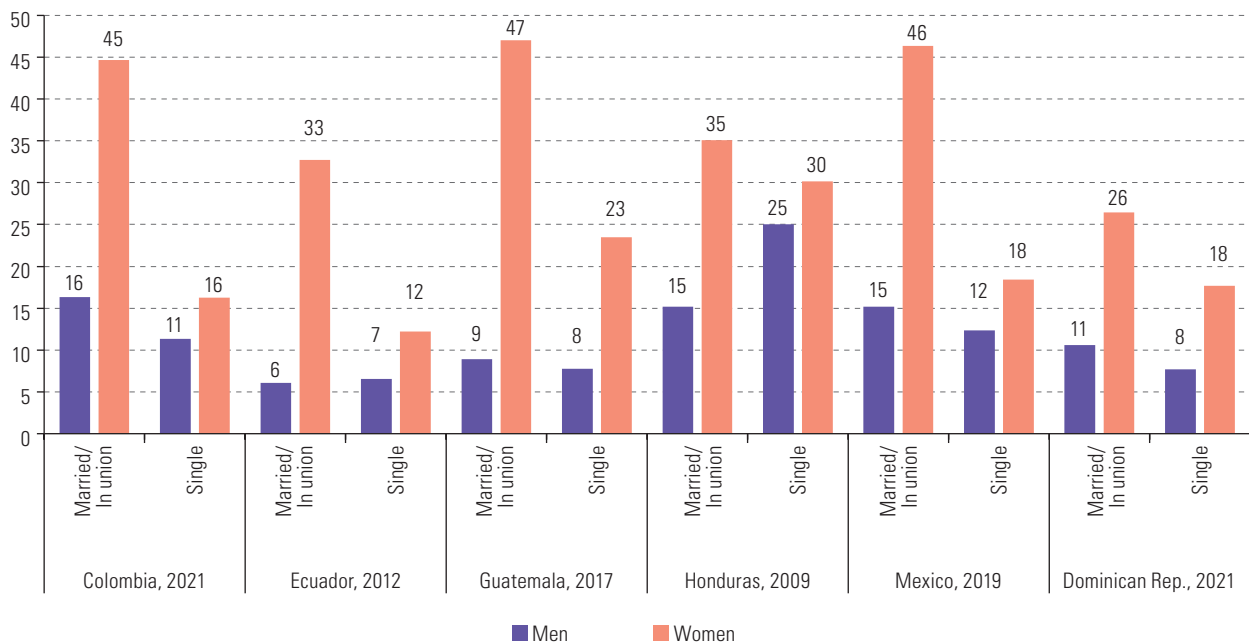
The age groups for girls and adolescents under 18 differ depending on the census question on marital status. In Colombia, the group includes girls aged 10–17, while in Peru, Guatemala and Mexico, it covers girls aged 12–17.

Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of the regional database on maternity (MATERNILAC), CEPALSTAT.

Child and early marriages and unions, and adolescent pregnancy hinder these transitions and deepen gender inequalities and a gender-based division of labour that assigns family and care responsibilities mainly to women, adolescents and girls, thus limiting their access to a personal income. This is particularly serious in the case of Indigenous and Afrodescendent girls, where gender inequality is accentuated by ethnic and racial inequality. Such inequalities severely limit their independence at all levels and perpetuate power imbalances based on gender and age.

Figure 7 shows the differences between men and women in the time spent each week performing unpaid work, which includes unpaid work for personal consumption, domestic and care work for the household and other households, and community and volunteer work. Notably, girls and adolescents who are married or in unions perform more unpaid work –the equivalent of a full workday in certain countries. In Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala, young women under 18 who are married or partnered perform over 40 hours of unpaid work per week, whereas their unmarried peers in the same countries spend one half to one third of that time on unpaid work. Marital status has no noticeable bearing on the amount of time that men spend on unpaid work.

▪ **Figure 7**  
 Latin America (6 countries): time spent performing unpaid work by persons under 18, by sex and marital status, around 2020  
 (Hours per week)

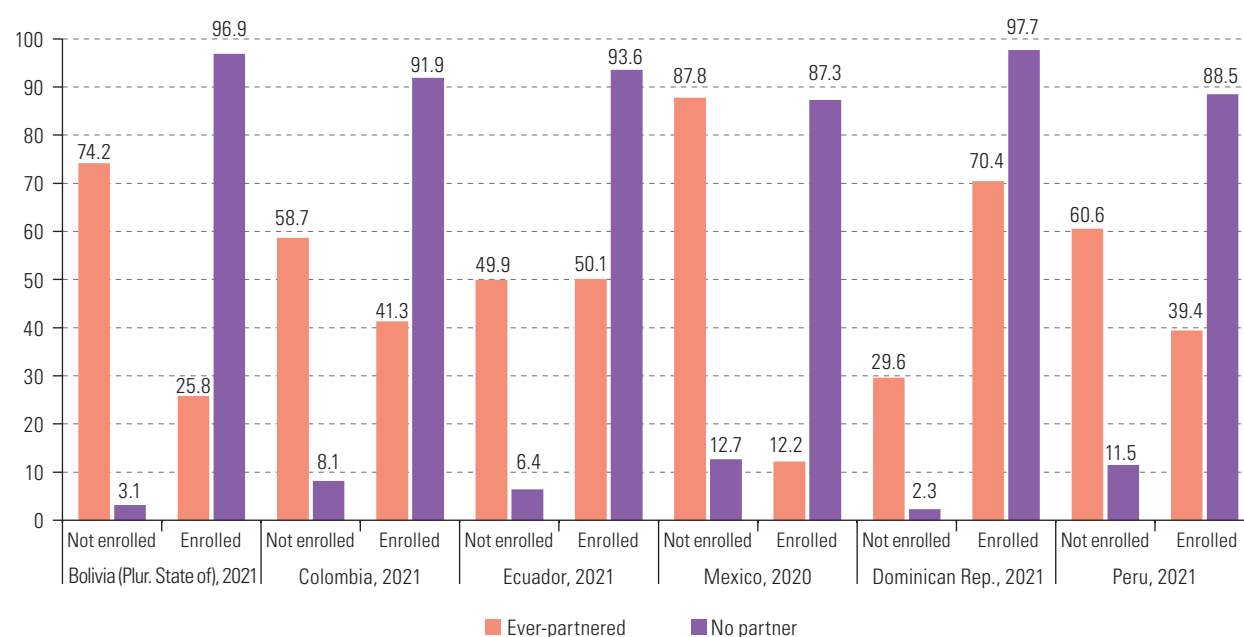


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, Repository of information on time use in Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/es/infografias/repositorio-informacion-uso-tiempo-america-latina-caribe>.

Note: The heterogeneity of data sources does not allow for comparison between countries. This figure is intended to illustrate the trends within each country. Unpaid work refers to employment without any remuneration and is measured by quantifying the time spent by an individual on work for the personal consumption of goods, unpaid domestic work, unpaid care work (whether for the person’s own household or to support other households), community work and voluntary work. In the Dominican Republic, the sample used to calculate time spent on unpaid work by men who are married or in unions is too small to ensure statistical significance; therefore, the data should not be used for other types of analysis.

The marital status of girls and adolescents is also linked to dropout or expulsion from school, as shown by recent household surveys in six countries (see figure 8). In these countries, most girls under 18 who have ever been in union do not attend school. The percentage is particularly high in Mexico (87.8%) and the Plurinational State of Bolivia (74.2%), and close to 50% in Ecuador. The only country where the opposite is observed is the Dominican Republic, where 70% of girls and adolescents who have ever been in union attend school, and 30% do not. In these same six countries, more than 80% of unmarried girls and adolescents attend school. This figure rises to over 90% in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

▪ **Figure 8**  
Latin America (6 countries): girls and adolescents under 18, by marital status and enrolment at a formal educational establishment, around 2020  
(Percentages)

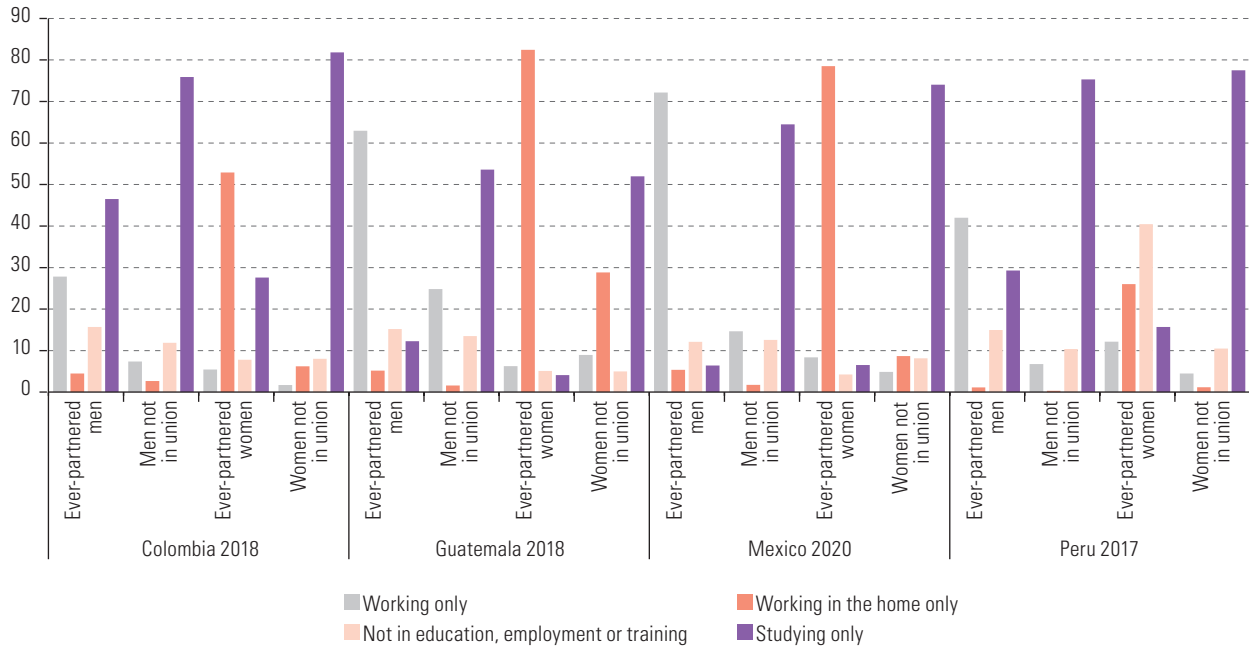


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

The effects of early unions on employment activity of children and adolescents can also be seen in how the activity status of the population aged 15–17 varies by marital status, reflecting a deepening of the sexual division of labour. Data from the recent census round of four countries (see figure 9) indicate that most women and men who have never been married or in union are pursuing an education, while most women who have already been in a formal or informal union (between 50% and 80%) dedicate their time exclusively to household chores, while men in the same situation spend most of their time in paid work. This means that they enter the labour market at an early age, and often in unstable conditions. This activity encroaches on educational pursuits and could therefore be considered child labour (ILO, 2023).



▪ **Figure 9**  
 Latin America (4 countries): activity status of the population aged 15–17,  
 by sex and marital status, around 2020  
 (Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of census microdata for Peru (2017), Colombia (2018), Guatemala (2018) and Mexico (2020).

## Recommendations for public action

### Public policies with a gender perspective and an intersectional approach to end child, early and forced marriages and unions in the region

In Latin America and the Caribbean, gender inequality is a structural barrier that hinders the efforts of women and girls to overcome poverty. Unpaid work and the overburden of care that falls to women and girls limit their ability to earn a their own income and devote time to self-care, leisure and other activities that are central to their autonomy (ECLAC, 2022c). It also contributes to a higher prevalence of insecure and informal jobs.

The Regional Gender Agenda, comprising agreements adopted at the sessions of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, has highlighted the need for substantive change in development models to draw attention to gender inequality and include it among a series of inequalities that affect Latin America and the Caribbean. Multiple and interrelated international health, care, energy, food and financial crises, the increasing challenges posed by climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification and the high level of public debt in many countries of the region, (ECLAC, 2023a) have shown that the current development model is unsustainable and fails to address the structural gaps that affect the vast majority of the population. This development crisis threatens the progress made in recent years in gender equality, ensuring the rights of women, adolescent girls and girls in all their diversity, the exercise of their autonomy, and the sustainable development of the countries of the region. To address this, the fifteenth Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Buenos Aires in November 2022,

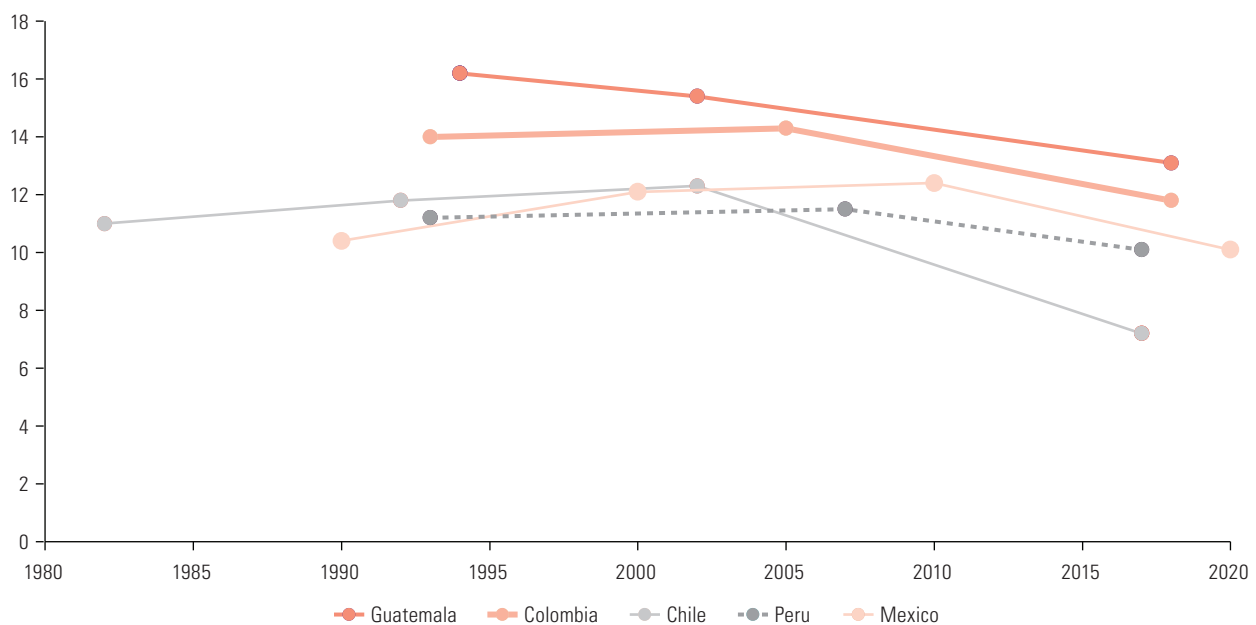
proposed building the care society as an alternative and proactive model –a form of organization that makes the sustainability of life the priority objective which, in turn, allows the structural challenges of gender inequality to be overcome. The aim is to recognize the irreplaceable value of care in achieving this objective and to make its provision a societal matter based on social co-responsibility (ECLAC, 2022b).

Tackling the structural challenge of socioeconomic inequality and the persistence of poverty in a context of exclusionary growth that affects women and girls requires robust and intersectional public policies that factor in the complexity of variables and elements that combine to reproduce the discrimination, inequality and violence that affect girls and adolescents. Analysis of early, child and forced marriages and unions confirms this complexity, as well as the severity of their effects at an early age. As has been documented, poverty is not only a cause of early marriages and unions; it also creates conditions in which married girls and adolescents face greater barriers to overcome it.

Thus, to reduce child marriages and unions, work must be done to promote policies that address multidimensional poverty among women and ensure their economic autonomy, as well as comprehensive policies for the full development of girls and adolescents, with a view to removing the specific barriers they face and directly preventing this harmful practice, through appropriate legislation, advocacy, education, health, social protection and strategies for cultural transformation.

In recent years, several countries of the region have developed public policies aimed at reducing adolescent pregnancy. These have proven to be effective, as seen in figure 10, which shows a decrease in all countries from 2017 onwards based on census data. The figure illustrates an upward trend until the early 2000s (with the exception of Guatemala), followed by a decline after 2005, except in Mexico, where the drop is observed from 2010 onwards.

■ **Figure 10**  
Latin America (5 countries): women aged 15–19 who are mothers, by five-year period  
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of the regional database on maternity (MATERNILAC).

Key to efforts is the prevention of adolescent pregnancy, with comprehensive sexuality education and the creation of specialized and differentiated health services —called adolescent-friendly services, centres or spaces— in most of the countries. Although the adolescent-friendly health services model predates the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and already existed in several countries of the region by 2013, its explicit inclusion in priority measure 12 of the Consensus favoured its expansion and enhancement (Rodríguez Vignoli and San Juan Bernuy, 2020).

Likewise, a systematic review of the literature on specific public policies and programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean that may have had an impact on rates of adolescent pregnancy or related determining factors shows that conditional cash transfer programmes have significant effects on decisions about maternity and marriage. Most studies on such programmes conclude that economic transfers conditional on health and educational requirements have a positive effect on the prevention of adolescent pregnancy (Rodríguez Ribas, 2021). The research reviewed within the framework of this systematization confirms that formal education, a human right that should be ensured by States, contributes significantly to reducing adolescent pregnancy and child unions and marriages.

These good practices demonstrate the success of decisive measures that frame adolescents as rights holders rather than as sources of problems (López, 2021). They also reflect the need for these policies to have a gender-transformative, intersectoral and interinstitutional approach that is based on the needs of girls and adolescents in all their diversity. In order to address inequalities, even when affirmative measures are required, it is essential not to perpetuate a piecemeal and limited approach (López, 2021) that stigmatizes girls and adolescents who are married or in unions and further excludes them from development opportunities. To do so, universal and progressive policies are needed that ensure the full exercise of the rights of girls and adolescents.

Policies aimed at preventing and addressing early unions are recent and limited to certain countries in the region, such as Belize, Colombia and the Dominican Republic (Working group of the Joint Inter-Agency Programme to End Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022). Thus, although it is possible to learn from good practices in policies to prevent adolescent pregnancy, the complexity of early unions (such as contributing factors and accelerators) requires special attention and, in particular, robust intersectoral action. This is all the more relevant given the scarcity of policies, programmes and measures specifically for girls and adolescents who have been or are married or in formal unions.

Public policy in support of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, aimed at eliminating all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, must not only tackle the structural challenges that perpetuate gender inequalities, including patriarchal cultural patterns, socioeconomic inequalities and the unfair sexual division of labour; it must also include comprehensive proposals with a rights-based approach aimed at the full development of all adolescents (see box 3). The effects of early marriages and unions on the full development of girls and adolescents must be addressed through specific measures in public programmes that distinctly include them and take into account the diversity of their situations.

- **Box 3**

- **Bold measures are needed for progress in eliminating child, early and forced marriage and unions (SDG target 5.3.1)**

Progress can be made in implementing the 2030 Agenda and Regional Gender Agenda by addressing the structural challenges of gender inequality, and the policies that focus on both its structural causes and the protection of the rights of girls already married or in unions:

- (i) **Strengthen public policies and services aimed at ensuring the full development of girls and adolescents, starting in childhood, to address the structural causes and consequences of child and early marriages and unions:**

- Implement gender-sensitive and intersectional policies to eliminate poverty that accommodate the specific needs of girls and adolescents and cultural and regional specificities.
- Ensure universal access for girls and adolescents in all their diversity to free education, with a focus on gender equality and free of discrimination. Special attention must therefore be paid to intersectional analysis to identify who is being left behind or excluded in the exercise of this right.
- Promote the right to self-care by young girls and adolescents as a way of developing their physical autonomy, with comprehensive sexuality education programmes, gender-sensitive curricula and guaranteed access to comprehensive health information and services.
- Actively involve girls and adolescents in the development of strategies for cultural change to eliminate gender-based violence in romantic relationships and in the public sphere, as well as the transformation of traditional gender roles, to promote an egalitarian and caring society. These strategies should incorporate men, adolescent boys and boys in the interest of developing non-violent and co-responsible forms of masculinity.

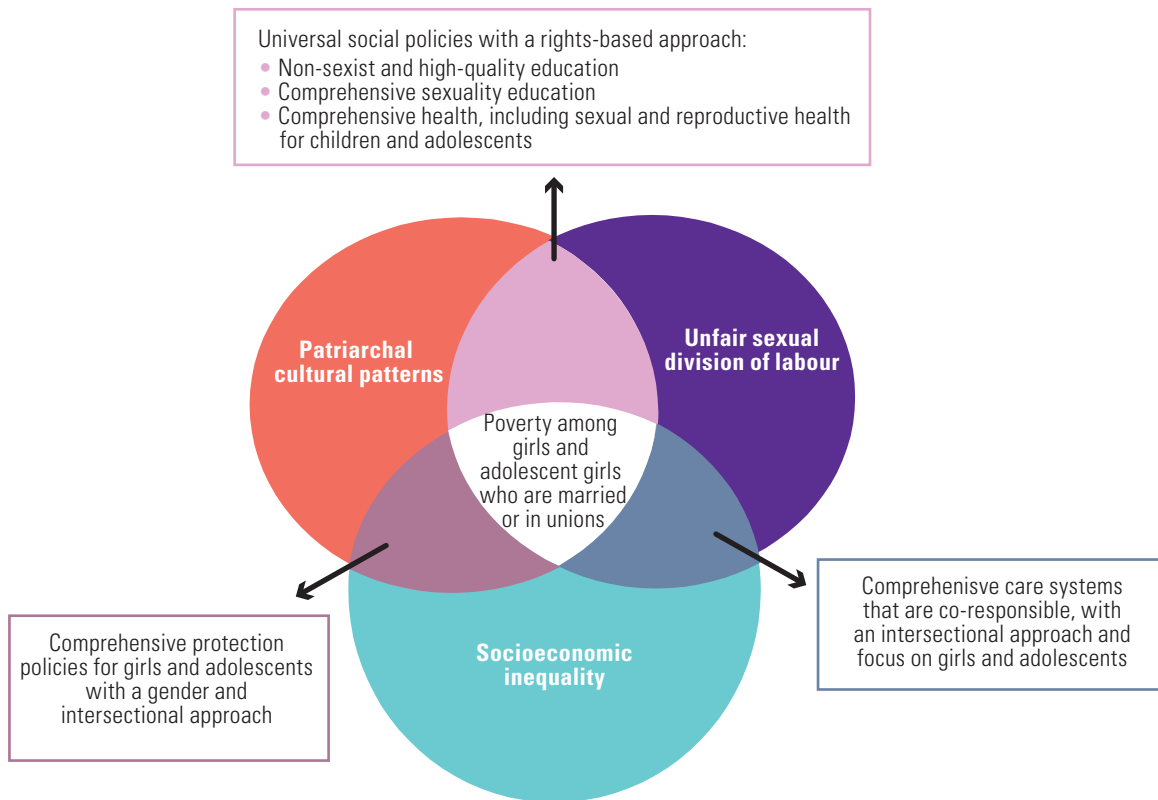
- (ii) **Design and implement policies and programmes that address the consequences of marriage and unions on girls and adolescents who are already in such partnerships:**

- Work with the national statistical offices and other national statistical entities tasked with collecting data on health, education and legal and social services to break the statistical and public silence regarding gaps in the data that include girls aged 10–14, in order to assess their situations and implement rapid response strategies for girls already married or in unions and identify risk factors from an early age.
- Bring regulatory frameworks into line with international standards on the age of marriage and gender equality and continue the efforts already made by 13 countries and territories of the region to legally prohibit child marriages.
- Pursue public policies aimed specifically at girls and adolescents who are or at risk of entering into early marriages and forced unions, who should receive support and protection —access to childcare and continued education, violence prevention measures and training for quality employment— to overcome the barriers to their full development.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), “Child, early and forced marriages and unions deepen gender inequalities”, Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, 28 June 2022 [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en/documents/child-early-and-forced-marriages-and-unions-deepen-gender-inequalities>.

Given that ongoing poverty among girls and adolescents who are married or in unions is both a cause and consequence of their marital status, policies must be enhanced which address the links between structural challenges to gender inequality, to bring about substantive change in reducing the prevalence of this harmful practice (see diagram 1).

- Diagram 1**  
 Public policies to overcome structural obstacles of gender inequality and the cycle of poverty caused by child, early and forced marriages and unions



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

It is important to strengthen universal public policies aimed at upholding the right to a good education, including comprehensive sexuality education<sup>6</sup> that is free from gender stereotypes and provides effective development opportunities for girls and adolescents in all their diversity. Also, policies and programmes are needed to ensure that adolescents and girls can independently exercise their sexual and reproductive rights and control over their own bodies, with adequate and accessible training and services, among them those to prevent and respond to sexual violence against girls and adolescents, since many adolescent pregnancies and forced child pregnancies are the result of sexual violence. These measures will help to break cultural patterns that assign traditional gender roles and responsibilities. One such example are adolescent-friendly spaces, which are so termed not only because of their infrastructure and accessibility, but because of the ties of proximity, respect and support that are formed with their users.

Likewise, the fact that the burden of care falls almost entirely to women, and the difficulties this creates in earning their own income and accessing the labour market and decent work must also be analysed from the point of view of girls and adolescents in their diversity. Girls and adolescents are classified as “care

<sup>6</sup> A recent study by the United Nations Population Fund and the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (UNFPA/FLACSO, 2022) shows that, although all countries in the region have legal or regulatory frameworks that underpin comprehensive sexuality education, which have been an enabling factor in its development, there is a disconnect in their effective implementation. In addition, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had a critical impact on the implementation of existing initiatives, which were designed for in-person application and brought to a halt by lockdown measures enforced in the countries of the region. As a result, a holistic approach to comprehensive sexuality education exists more in theory than in practice in these countries.

recipients”, and their role as caregivers from an early age is largely invisible. This is not exclusive to girls and adolescent mothers who are married or in unions; it is widespread, especially in low-income groups that cannot afford to pay for care services. This is why the critical work of building comprehensive care systems needs to be addressed with a gender and intergenerational approach, in order to adopt appropriate measures to prevent girls and adolescents from dropping out of school and to expand their hopes for a future of greater opportunities than they have in their households of origin.

Similarly, successful regional poverty reduction policies must be bolder in terms of incorporating a gender equality and intersectional approach, in which both the opportunities and risks of each stage in the life cycle are taken into account, and affirmative action is taken to prevent the stigmatization and marginalization of girls and adolescents who are mothers or are in union.

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