

Policy Brief

Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Gender Justice Perspective

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Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions remains one of the most persistent violations of the rights of girls worldwide. In Latin America and the Caribbean, however, the phenomenon presents a distinct profile: while formal child marriages have declined following legal reforms, early unions remain widespread and continue to affect approximately one in four young women.

These informal unions are often overlooked in public policy and legal frameworks, despite exposing girls and adolescents to many of the same, and often greater, risks associated with formal child marriage. Their informal nature frequently leaves girls with fewer legal protections while reinforcing structural inequalities, gender-based violence, and barriers to education, economic autonomy, and access to justice.

This policy brief examines CEFMU as one of the most persistent yet overlooked gender justice challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean. It argues that legal reforms alone are insufficient and calls for comprehensive, rights-based responses that address the structural drivers sustaining the practice.

Drawing on regional evidence and current research, the policy brief synthesizes the main structural drivers of CEFMU in Latin America and the Caribbean and translates this evidence into policy-oriented recommendations. It seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on gender equality, girls' rights, and inclusive development by making complex evidence accessible to policymakers and practitioners.

It identifies five key findings:

- Early unions remain the predominant form of child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean, making them largely invisible within existing legal and policy responses.
- The persistence of CEFMU is driven by the interaction of structural inequalities, restrictive gender norms, poverty, limited educational opportunities, adolescent pregnancy, and weak institutional protection.
- Relationships frequently involve significant power asymmetries, including age, economic and social inequalities, that undermine girls' autonomy and capacity to exercise their rights.

- Social acceptance, weak enforcement of legal protections, and the normalization of informal unions contribute to the continued reproduction of the practice across generations.
- Ending CEFMU requires integrated responses that combine legal protection with prevention strategies, education, social protection, community engagement, and gender-transformative approaches.

This policy brief contributes to current debates by:

- Advancing a gender justice perspective that situates CEFMU within broader structures of inequality, discrimination, and unequal power relations.
- Bringing visibility to informal unions, a defining yet frequently overlooked characteristic of child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Synthesizing regional evidence and current research into an accessible analysis for policymakers, practitioners, and development actors.
- Translating evidence into practical policy recommendations that address both immediate protection needs and the underlying structural drivers of CEFMU.

The policy brief is intended to inform governments, international organizations, civil society organizations, researchers, and practitioners working on gender equality, child protection, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and violence prevention. By positioning CEFMU as both a development challenge and a gender

justice issue, it supports more integrated policy responses capable of preventing the practice while strengthening the rights, agency, and protection of girls and adolescents throughout the region.

The policy brief recommends coordinated, multisectoral action to:

- Closing legal and policy gaps affecting informal unions.
- Expanding girls' access to education, social protection, and economic opportunities.
- Strengthening prevention through comprehensive sexuality education and community-based gender-transformative interventions.
- Improving access to protection and justice mechanisms for girls in CEFMU.
- Challenging the social norms that normalize CEFMU and perpetuate gender inequality across generations.