

Tackling the Taboo in Latin America and the Caribbean

Sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to address child, early and forced marriage and unions

Report and case studies



Foreword



Why a *Tackling the Taboo* report for Latin America and the Caribbean?

In 2019, the Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) and Sexuality Working Group published its flagship report, *Tackling the Taboo: sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions*, documenting programmes from many regions that addressed the link between control of adolescent girls' sexuality and child marriage through gender-transformative interventions.¹ The research surfaced few programmes in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, leading to an underrepresentation of the region in the report.

This report was originally conceived to fill this gap. However, the learnings from the process were so rich that, beyond filling the gap, this report provides unique insights on how control of adolescent girls' sexuality drives child marriage and early unions in the region, and how community-based organisations are addressing this issue in innovative and context-specific ways.

We hope this report draws greater attention and resources to locally led, gender-transformative programming that addresses the root causes of CEFMU and advances the sexual health and rights of girls in LAC and beyond, in all their diversity.

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This is a CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group project, whose members are American Jewish World Service (AJWS), CARE, CREA, EMpower, EngenderHealth, Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice (formerly Promundo-US), Fòs Feminista, Girls First Fund, *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*, Global Fund for Women, GreeneWorks, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), International Planned Parenthood Federation, MADRE, Nirantar Trust, Plan International and Population Council. This report was researched and authored by Tamil Kendall, PhD. Dr Kendall designed and implemented the research methodology, conducted the analysis, wrote the case studies, and drafted the overview report.

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Front cover image:

Anderla, Myriam, Yniflor, Génesis, Diana and Haida participate in the Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer programme. *Andrews Cardenas/Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer.*



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Executive summary

Almost one in four adolescent girls in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) enters a union or marriage before the age of 18, and most are between 15 and 18 years of age. No significant progress has been made on reducing the rate of child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) in the region over the past 25 years. Informal unions in adolescents – that is, cohabitation in a marriage-like relationship that is not legally registered – predominate, which makes the need for gender-transformative approaches that address the structural drivers of CEFMU more acute.

Patriarchal control of adolescent girls' sexuality and systematic discrimination against girls and women mean that CEFMU is too often one of few life options open to girls in the region of the world with one of the highest levels of economic inequality.²

In 2020, the CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group began a process in the region to identify gender-transformative programming led by community-based civil society organisations (CSOs) that addresses sexuality and CEFMU. Five examples of promising practice were selected, documented and analysed to understand what it takes to design and implement effective gender-transformative programming that addresses CEFMU and sexuality.

The case studies come from five CSOs in five countries: Movimento de Mulheres das Ilhas de Belém (Brazil), Núcleo de Apoyo a la Mujer (NAM, Dominican Republic), Na'leb'ak (Guatemala), Bayan Association (Honduras) and Yo quiero, yo puedo (Mexico).

All five case study programmes were either community-led or benefitted from a long-standing positive relationship between the communities and the CSO, and programme activities were implemented either by staff recruited from the community by the CSO or directly by community members.

Except for the Brazilian case study (where women's sexuality and premarital sexual experimentation were culturally acceptable) the programmes were implemented in socially conservative contexts with respect to sexuality. This was characterised by discussions of sexuality being taboo, an active cult of virginity – that is, where girls' and adolescents' sexual purity is valued and controlled – and premarital sexual activity for adolescent girls and young women being highly stigmatised. Although it is declining, 69% of Latin American adults self-identify as Catholic and 84% were raised as Catholics.³ This has influenced norms and attitudes to sexuality. This also reaffirms the absence of a link between child marriage and any one world religion.

In these conservative contexts a deep-rooted fear of, and desire to control, adolescent girls' and young women's sexuality leads to CEFMU being considered and encouraged by families, communities and religious authorities, and other community leaders in the case of known or suspected sexual activity and/or pregnancy.⁴

Gender-transformative approaches:

The ultimate aim of gender-transformative approaches is to achieve gender equality, empower girls, women and gender nonconforming young people, promote health and eliminate violence. They:

- encourage critical awareness of gender roles and norms
- promote equitable positions of girls and women in society
- challenge the distribution of resources and allocation of duties between men and women
- address the unequal power relationships between girls and women and others in the community, such as service providers or traditional leaders.⁵





Six elements of success for gender-transformative programming to address CEFMU and sexuality

The findings from the 2020 LAC case studies on what it takes to design and implement effective gender-transformative programming that addresses CEFMU and sexuality confirm and contextually nuance those of the 2019 [Tackling the Taboo](#) report, which includes case studies from India, Nigeria and Kenya. The 2022 report's core recommendations are:

- 1. Increase critical awareness of gender roles and norms.**
- 2. Use girl-centred, participatory approaches** to amplify adolescent girls' voices and perspectives, for programmes to respond to their needs and priorities.
- 3. Create public platforms for girls' leadership and voices in the community:** create opportunities for adolescent girls and young women to speak, position themselves and be recognised as spokespeople within their own communities, transforming discriminatory gender norms that devalue and silence them.
- 4. Offer developmentally and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education that is rights-based, holistic and adapted to context:** this includes scientifically accurate information and scenario-based opportunities for reflection and discussion to build skills.
- 5. Work with communities to address CEFMU and sexuality:** ensure programmes are community-led or developed in the context of long-term relationships between CSOs and the community and are implemented by community members.
- 6. Advocate for improved availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services and education:** increase adolescent girls' access to quality SRHR services and education through a combination of investment, gender-responsive policies, laws and community engagement.

The report's recommendations call on practitioners, policymakers and funders working to address CEFMU and advance gender equality to ensure investments, ways of working and the design of community-based programmes apply gender-transformative principles that address the links between CEFMU and sexuality. They should build the enabling environment (expansion of social protections, access to education and economic alternatives, comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health care) essential for girls and young women to exercise their full range of human rights.





Introduction

Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) affect large numbers of adolescent girls and young women in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Nearly a quarter of girls marry or enter in informal unions before 18 years of age, with the majority being aged 15–18.⁶

Globally, rates of CEFMU are highest in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where 34% and 28% of girls and young women are married or in unions before age 18, respectively. These regions, especially South Asia, have made significant progress to reduce CEFMU over the past 20 years.⁷ In contrast, **LAC, where prevalence is also high at 22%,⁸ has made no significant progress in reducing CEFMU over the past 25 years.⁹** Accelerating progress to prevent and respond to CEFMU in LAC is crucial to promote the human rights, health and wellbeing of girls and young women.

The informality of unions is an important contextual factor for understanding and responding to CEFMU in LAC. The majority of unions before the age of 18 are not formal marriages that are legally registered with secular and/or religious authorities.¹⁰ Cohabitation – when a couple lives “in union”, as if married – “raises the same human rights concerns as marriage”¹¹ and may even increase the risks to girls and young women in unions. Girls and young women in unions do not enjoy the social status and legal protections offered by legal marriage, including ownership of property, alimony, child support and inheritance. One country-level example of this is that only 8% of 12–17-year-old girls in informal unions in Mexico attended school compared with 17% of their legally married peers.¹²

As in the rest of the world, **CEFMU in LAC is deeply rooted in gender discrimination and violence.** This includes adolescent girls’ and young women’s lack of decision-making power over their own sexuality and reproduction leading to early motherhood and multiple pregnancies, gender-based violence, lower educational attainment, disproportionately higher levels of poverty and time spent on unpaid caring responsibilities, and lack of economic opportunities.¹³

Global progress towards ending CEFMU has been slowest in the lowest income countries where prevalence of child marriage is almost double that in the richest. The girls and young women who have been most economically and socially marginalised continue to be more likely to marry or enter union (cohabit) before reaching 18 years of age¹⁴ and global trends show that child marriage prevalence has actually increased among girls from the poorest households in LAC, West and Central Africa, and Southern Africa.

In LAC, **some girls and women are more disadvantaged** and more at risk of CEFMU due to their experience of multiple forms of discrimination, including the legacy of colonialism; rural, Indigenous and Afro-descendant adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately affected by CEFMU.¹⁵ Globally, concern is high that due to the **impact of the COVID-19** pandemic rates of CEFMU, especially among the most disadvantaged groups of adolescent girls and young women,^{16,17} will increase.

Lockdown measures (including school closures) reduced access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services, and households pushed into poverty and economic insecurity have increased rates of intimate partner and other forms of gender-based violence, including CEFMU, and put more girls at risk.

Addressing CEFMU means addressing the root causes of gender discrimination

Control and regulation of sexuality – particularly adolescent girls’ sexuality – is one of the most powerful drivers of CEFMU. Understanding and addressing how CEFMU relates to discriminatory gender and age norms, and practices regarding sexuality, is therefore essential for CEFMU prevention.¹⁸

Despite the need to address patriarchal control of sexuality to effectively prevent and respond to CEFMU, few CEFMU programmes and policies make sexuality a central concern.¹⁹



Building on the methodology and findings of the 2019 *Tackling the Taboo: sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriages and unions* study,²⁰ which included case studies from India, Nigeria and Kenya, the CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group began a similar process to identify promising gender-transformative practices in the LAC region. The findings from five LAC country case studies are summarised here in this second *Tackling the Taboo* report.

The *Tackling the Taboo in LAC* report summarises:

- lessons learned about key characteristics in the design and implementation of sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end CEFMU
- key learning from the region to inform global work to address CEFMU and advance the agency and autonomy of adolescent girls
- recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, governments and funders about how to accelerate prevention of and improved responses to CEFMU in LAC through a greater focus on gender and sexuality.





Methodology

In June 2020 the Sexuality Working Group conducted a scoping survey about gender-transformative responses to CEFMU that address sexuality in the LAC region. The survey was distributed online to civil society organisations (CSOs), United Nations agencies and partners working on CEFMU and related issues in LAC through the contacts of the Sexuality Working Group members. We used a “snowball sampling” methodology, requesting recipients to forward the survey to CSOs working to address CEFMU. In total, 105 organisations from 17 countries responded to the scoping survey.²¹

The Sexuality Working Group then selected organisations from which additional information was gathered about their CEFMU-related programming. Selection took into consideration representation of countries with high rates of CEFMU, regional and population balance, and the following three programme criteria:

1. The programme is implemented by a national or local CSO.
2. Links between CEFMU and sexuality are explicitly addressed in programming.
3. The organisation describes the programme as gender-transformative, based on the operational definition from *Tackling the Taboo*.²²

In-depth interviews were completed with ten key informants, two key informants provided written responses to interview questions, and additional information was gathered through a desk review and follow-up via email (n=12). Based on these interviews and supporting documentation, five case studies were developed, reviewed and approved by the participating CSOs.

The five promising practice case studies include **two types of programming**:

- **In-school gender-transformative sexuality education** for adolescent girls and boys complemented by workshops for parents and other adults delivered in the community (in the case of the Bayan Association’s Holistic Education for Youth (HEY!) programme in Honduras and Yo quiero, yo puedo in Mexico).
- **Safe-space interventions for adolescent girls and young women**²³ that include gender-transformative approaches to address CEFMU and sexuality, as well as seeking to increase financial literacy and economic empowerment (in the case of Movimento de Mulheres das Ilhas de Belém in Brazil, Na’lebak in Guatemala and Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer (NAM) in Dominican Republic).

This *Tackling the Taboo in LAC* report also draws on insights shared through interviews with staff of two programmes in Bolivia and Colombia. The Centro de Promoción de la Mujer Gregoria Apaza in Bolivia is a multi-year programme that trains young people as out-of-school sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) peer educators and community organisers. Hábitat Mujer Salud in Colombia trains outreach workers to promote access to SRHR services, with a focus on safe and legal abortion.

Case studies were not completed for the latter two programmes because the COVID-19 pandemic slowed CEFMU-specific programme implementation, however the organisation’s experience implementing gender-transformative interventions that address sexuality and promote human rights provide relevant insights.





Key findings: Using gender-transformative approaches to address sexuality and CEFMU in LAC

A broad range of CSOs are addressing CEFMU and sexuality in the region

- Almost all CSOs that responded to the scoping survey (98%) affirmed using a gender-transformative approach aligned with the operational definition from *Tackling the Taboo*.²⁴
- Two-thirds of the 98% of CSO respondents were working with adolescent girls aged 10–14 and 15–19 years of age (76% and 78%, respectively).
- One third of organisations reported including adolescent girls and young women in unions (35%) in their programming and half worked with girls and young women who were pregnant or mothers (49%).
- One third reported working with adolescent boys and young men (31%) to address the link between sexuality and CEFMU.
- Over half the organisations reported involving parents (58%) and teachers (56%) in their programming.
- Almost half also worked with community leaders (48%).
- 40% reported engaging with healthcare workers in their efforts to address sexuality and CEFMU.
- Only 11% reported working with national leaders, which is unsurprising given that 83% of CSOs reported working primarily at the community level, signalling an opportunity for more programme-informed advocacy for more gender-equitable services.
- CSO survey respondents worked in both rural (55%) and urban (49%) areas and reported working with a broad range of groups, including Indigenous peoples (41%), people of African descent (18%), young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex (LGBTI) people (24%), migrants (in transit and returned; 20%) and displaced persons and refugees (7%).

Attention to CEFMU and sexuality is growing in LAC as recognition of the link between CEFMU and gender equality grows

- Only 16% of the organisations that answered the scoping study reported having a programme focused primarily on CEFMU and sexuality. Instead, CEFMU and sexuality was integrated within, or one part of, a programme with the primary focus of promoting SRHR (35%), to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (20%), and promote human rights (19%) and child protection (7%).

CEFMU and sexuality is a recent inclusion in programming

- Only 14% of survey respondents reported having programmes addressing CEFMU and sexuality pre-2011; 50% began between 2011 and 2017, and 36% reported incorporating such programming since 2018.
- Open-ended text responses indicate that even those CSOs working on CEFMU and sexuality for some time had only recently (2–5 years before the survey) made it a programmatic focus as opposed to part of a broader programme such as adolescents' SRHR.





- The findings suggest that both integration of CEFMU within broader programming and standalone CEFMU programming are emergent rather than well established in LAC, but that both are garnering increasing attention.
- Until recently, CSO work to address CEFMU in LAC has taken place against a backdrop of limited public policy attention. In 2019, 23 countries in the region did not have a national plan to address CEFMU and only eight out of 23 (35%) countries cited CEFMU as an issue in policy frameworks to address adolescent pregnancy, education, girls' and women's human rights, violence against women and national development.²⁵ However, in 2020, Belize published a national cross-sectoral plan to address CEFMU²⁶ and at the beginning of 2021 the First Lady of the Dominican Republic declared the development of a national plan to address early unions and adolescent pregnancy a public policy priority.²⁷ Building momentum to address CEFMU by establishing concrete actions and regular reporting on progress against national and subnational public policy commitments is a priority for the region.
- This *Tackling the Taboo in LAC* report highlights key lessons learned about gender-transformative approaches to address fear and control of sexuality, which is one of the most powerful and yet under-resourced drivers of CEFMU.





Elements of success for gender-transformative approaches to address sexuality and CEFMU in LAC

Through analysis of the promising practice case studies, we identified six elements of success for designing and implementing gender-transformative approaches to CEFMU that address sexuality.

Six elements of success for gender-transformative programming to address CEFMU and sexuality

1. Increase critical awareness of gender roles and norms
2. Use girl-centred, participatory approaches
3. Create public platforms for girls' leadership and voices in the community
4. Offer developmentally and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education that is rights-based, holistic and adapted to context
5. Work with communities to address CEFMU and sexuality
6. Advocate for improved availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health and SRHR services and education

1. Increase critical awareness of gender roles and norms

All organisations interviewed to develop the case studies described how their programme worked to encourage critical awareness of the gender roles assigned to girls and women, and boys and men, and to promote adolescent girls' and young women's agency.

Creating safe spaces plays an important role. No matter what the primary focus for discussions and activities is, having the opportunity to meet and discuss freely and safely offers the potential for multiple gender-transformative outcomes. Having the opportunity to play and socialise has the potential to transform discriminatory gender norms that frame expectations that adolescent girls will spend their time looking after others and performing unpaid household chores, while their brothers and male peers are encouraged and supported to have fun and study.

"Adolescence is the best time to work on masculinities and femininities. They think they are adults but they are also in a developmental phase where they can change patterns."

Programme Coordinator

Involving adolescent girls and young women in activities, such as sport or agriculture, which in many LAC countries are socially constructed to be masculine domains, challenges traditional gender norms and expectations about what women and girls can and can't do and where they can go.

All the case study programmes include participatory exercises and/or educational materials that promote critical consideration and deconstruction of normatively assigned gender roles, gender inequality and human rights.

Programme implementers emphasised the importance of **adolescence as a critical developmental window of opportunity for gender-transformative interventions.**





2. Use girl-centred, participatory approaches

All case study programmes actively engaged participants in their design, including what to include and how to deliver the content of sexuality education activities and curricula. This means programmes are accessible and resonate with the language and cultural references where the programme is delivered, increasing their relevance and impact. Involving programme participants in the design of activities means the voice and perspectives of adolescent girls and young women are referenced, validated and amplified. Several programmes use train-the-trainer and peer mentoring models where older youths teach and mentor younger peers within the same community.

3. Create public platforms for girls' leadership and voices in the community

Examples of young people speaking out publicly on issues of gender, sexuality and CEFMU to authorities and other community members at cultural forums and other events demonstrate important shifts in gendered social norms.

The clearest example of the power of young peoples' leadership to transform gender and inter-generational power dynamics is the Na'leb'ak programme in Guatemala. Young women leaders of this youth-led organisation are now acknowledged as leaders within their communities, and they dialogue with and represent their interests and those of other children and youths to traditional community leaders and municipal authorities. This is revolutionary in a cultural context where young people, and especially young women, are not expected to exercise leadership, voice or decision-making power.

4. Offer developmentally- and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education that is rights-based, holistic and adapted to context

In all promising practice case study programmes, the sexuality curricula take a comprehensive, holistic, rights-based approach. This means going beyond the biology of reproduction to address multiple dimensions of sexual and affective relationships at the individual and social level. In all cases, the approach supported reflection and skills development, specifically critical thinking, communication and decision-making abilities. All case study programmes use locally adapted, context-specific scenarios to support critical reflection on gender roles and sexuality. Sexuality content was often tailored to younger and older age groups to ensure that it is developmentally appropriate and supports the evolving capacities of young people.

5. Work with communities to address CEFMU and sexuality

Community members are actively involved in programme design and implementation in all promising practice case studies. In two of the case studies – Na'leb'ak in Guatemala and Movimento de Mulheres das Ilhas de Belém in Brazil – the programmes are community led, and in the other three they have been implemented by CSOs from outside the community, but who have developed relationships of trust over time.

In addition to programme design, critical to programme success is the delivery of programme activities either by staff recruited within the community or nearby (in the case of the Bayan Association/HEY! programme in Honduras and Yo quiero, yo puedo in Mexico) or by volunteers and/or activists from well-established community networks (in the case of NAM in Dominican Republic).

In the words of one programme leader, what made their adolescent girls' safe spaces intervention successful was:

"...having a community base of organized women with whom we have raised awareness and trained. And these community leaders understand CEFMU perfectly, and they don't agree with it. Because we ourselves don't live in the community, but these women live in the community, and we have been working with them for years, for at least 7 years, to support the development of community networks, and we always bring projects to the community."

CSO Director





This positive relationship between community and CSO together with investment in long-term community-led programming to transform discriminatory gender norms and practices that drive gender-based violence are fundamental precursors to effective CEFMU and sexuality programming.

Programming that is by and for communities is important when tackling taboos such as sexuality. With the exception of Brazil, in all case study communities **it is taboo to talk about sexuality, and there is a widely and deeply held belief that talking and giving information about sexuality leads to experimentation, sexual risk-taking and earlier sexual debut.**²⁸ Before any CEFMU and sexuality interventions took place, including sexuality education for young people, in all case study programmes the CSOs worked with parents, guardians, families and communities to secure their buy-in.

It is necessary to identify and systematically engage with all those people who impact the lives of adolescent girls to transform the power dynamics that drive harmful practices with respect to adolescent girls' sexuality and lives. The global *Tackling the Taboo* literature review and case studies showed that to create an enabling environment for gender-transformative approaches, it is essential to discuss sexuality with parents and members of the wider community, including religious leaders where possible, to secure their buy-in and support, and to inform and develop strategies to mitigate or counter backlash.²⁹

"Families think that knowing about sexuality incites girls and adolescents to start exploring and having penetrative sexual relations. That is the barrier. What we try to explain is that it actually works the opposite way, and that it is important to have information to be able to make decisions about how each person wants to live their sexuality."

Programme Leader

The LAC case studies show that it is possible to introduce sexuality curricula even in socially conservative settings through a long-term process of dialogue and negotiation with parents, family members and communities to build trust and openness to change.

While celebrating the CSO strategies to address sexuality and CEFMU, it is important to acknowledge that **working with communities** to transform discriminatory gender norms and cultural constructions that govern sexuality and reproduction is slow and challenging work.

The case studies show it was possible to address highly contested SRHR issues, such as LGBTI rights and abortion, in some settings but not all. In some cases, at the time the study was done, the collaborative, community-based approach had not been able to put these issues into sexuality education and other programme activities. This said, their inclusion remains a desired longer term outcome. For example, one organisation delayed programme implementation because local staff were struggling to fully adopt and feel comfortable advocating for women's legal access to abortion.

The findings overall reinforce the importance of working with communities to address CEFMU and sexuality, increasing the effectiveness of interventions to sustainably address and transform harmful gendered norms. Investing in consultation and negotiation around the content of sexuality education and other interventions leads to progress and reduces the potential for backlash. The absence of any report of conflict following the introduction of sexuality education is noteworthy and makes a powerful case for investment in these long-term processes.

Given the high potential for backlash and the demonstrated value of working with communities to address the taboo of sexuality and CEFMU, we examined the strategies used by the case study CSOs to further unpack this element of success for gender-transformative programming.





CSO strategies to secure endorsement and support from parents, guardians and decision-makers in the community for the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education:

A. Educate adults about gender, sexuality, CEFMU and human rights

This often involves convening community-level forums, promoting the participation of adolescent girls and young women, to discuss gender inequality, gender-based violence and SRHR, and their relationship with CEFMU.

Many of the CSOs also lead awareness-raising and education activities for parents and guardians on gender, human rights and sexuality (in the cases of the Bayan Association in Honduras, NAM in Dominican Republic and Yo quiero, yo puedo in Mexico). None of the CSOs reported working directly with representatives of formal religious organisations, such as churches. However, the two organisations working with Indigenous communities, Na'leb'ak (working in Chisec, Guatemala) and Yo quiero, yo puedo (working in Guerrero, Mexico) collaborate closely with traditional community leaders, who guide and lead the community in both spiritual and secular affairs.

Engaging parents as allies for comprehensive sexuality education is a critical element of success, which means sharing information on gender, sexuality, CEFMU and human rights. Experience shows that often when mothers have the opportunity to critically reflect on patriarchal gender norms, sexuality and CEFMU they become allies and advocates for a different life path for their daughters.

The youth-led organisation Na'leb'ak in Guatemala identified parents as important allies to overcome resistance and opposition and as effective advocates to other parents of the importance of comprehensive sexuality education.

"They got married before 18, and they feel empathy. They don't want their daughters to go through that."

CSO Leader

"Sometimes there are parents who are opposed to the sexuality content, but when we are successful in getting the others to recognize that these are issues that are not talked about and that are important, they help us to convince the mothers and fathers who don't agree."

Programme Coordinator

B. Contrast norms around sexuality in the community with lived realities and actual experience

A second successful adult engagement strategy is to contrast idealised community norms around sexual behaviour with the realities and lived experience of adolescent girls and young women in the community. This involves drawing on local knowledge about adolescent pregnancy and sexual violence to make the case for comprehensive sexuality education as a protective factor maintaining the rights-based focus.

Sensitively and skilfully facilitated discussions with decision-makers, such as school administrators or educators, about cases of sexual violence and incest in the community are effective entry points to secure support for more work on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive rights.

"The families have a dilemma: they don't want contraception and they don't want their daughters to get pregnant. [...] In the end, they [young people] are going to make a decision, and we can't control them, and the parents know that. They won't know, the girls won't tell them. And we confront them with that reality."

Programme Leader

C. Ground the rights-based comprehensive sexuality education in the belief systems and spiritual values held and practised within the community

In all case study settings most people self-identify as Christian, and opposition to comprehensive sexuality education is frequently led by prominent church leaders and affiliated groups who frame sexual and reproductive rights as immoral. None of the CSOs work directly with churches or other religious groups, but for some the beliefs and spiritual values held and practised in the community are referenced in the sexuality education or training curricula.



NAM, for example, uses a Catholics for Free Choice sexuality education curriculum, which is based on interpretation of Catholic teachings and promotes a rights-based, sex-positive approach to sexuality for young people to take informed decisions and enjoy their sexuality freely and responsibly. Another example is Hábitat Mujer Salud in Colombia,³⁰ which invited a progressive clergyman to lead a values clarification exercise with project outreach workers struggling to reconcile the legal right to safe abortion for all women with their personal faith.

The curriculum developed and implemented by the Bayan Association in consultation with community members and local teachers gives factually correct scientific information about sexuality and reproduction whilst maintaining respect for the community's spiritual and moral values. The Bayan Association attributes parents' and communities' acceptance and support for the introduction and delivery of sexuality education to confidence in the organisation's spiritual and moral values, which are grounded in the Bahá'í faith.

6. Advocate for improved availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health and SRHR services and education

There is insufficient investment and attention by the state to make education and health services universally accessible, acceptable and of high quality in the communities where CSOs are implementing gender-transformative programming to address CEFMU and sexuality.

There are high levels of inequality in access to public services throughout the region, with rural, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities – and especially adolescent girls and women in those communities – experiencing poorer health and educational outcomes and increased risk of CEFMU.

One respondent commented that in Indigenous communities in Mexico and Central America the level of knowledge of adolescent girls about basic SRH issues like contraception and menstruation is lower than in Asia and Africa.

Access to education and health services, including SRH services, are limited in the case study communities due to geographic distance, lack of public investment and user fees. The need for structural change to extend social protection was clearly articulated by key informants.

Ninety percent of the organisations that responded to the scoping survey said that they work to change laws and policies to create an enabling environment for adolescent girls and young women to access public services such as SRHR services and education. All CSOs that completed key informant interviews advocate for better access and higher quality educational opportunities, and six of the seven work to increase access to SRHR services through referrals, accompanying adolescents and young women to larger centres with healthcare facilities, and advocacy at the municipal, subnational and national level for increased investment in service delivery.

At the national level, NAM and Yo quiero, yo puedo advocate for the legal minimum age of marriage to be 18 without exceptions, and/or to support better enforcement of existing age-of-marriage laws. None of the CSOs focused their advocacy exclusively on raising the legal minimum age of marriage to 18, demonstrating a clear understanding that laws can only be one part of the comprehensive response to CEFMU.

In LAC, where informal unions predominate, evidence suggests that setting a legal age of marriage is largely irrelevant for preventing CEFMU as unions occur whether they are legally registered or not, and laws to establish 18 as the legal age of marriage have not reduced births to adolescent girls nor increased their school attendance.^{31,32,33} Application of existing legislation to protect girls' and women's human rights is weak, and adolescent girls and young women face significant barriers in accessing justice.³⁴

“Knowing about sexuality is important to be able to make decisions, but for adolescents to act, we need to increase access to health and education. At the end of the day, it really depends on your context whether or not you can enjoy your sexuality.”

Programme Coordinator

“School has not been a source [of information]. One big challenge is that the State doesn't fulfil its commitment to sexuality education because of the conservative [political] agendas in our countries.”

Researcher

“We can keep working on the issues, but if the communities still don't have access to health services, to education, if they don't receive services, we can't guarantee that in the end there will be a different quality of life for these people. So, working with community, state and federal authorities is a good practice.”

Programme Coordinator





The CSO advocacy focus on improving service delivery, rather than establishing or raising the legal minimum age of marriage, is aligned with emerging global evidence about the limitations of age-of-marriage laws for preventing CEFMU.^{35,36} In the worst-case scenario, such laws can reduce rather than promote the agency of adolescent girls and young women and create barriers to legal protection, services and the full enjoyment of their human rights.

The focus for the case study CSOs is, rather, community-based and community-led transformation of gender and cultural norms, including those governing sexuality, to equip girls with the information, skills, self-confidence, and educational and economic opportunities they need to open up alternatives to CEFMU.





Conclusion

The elements of success for gender-transformative programming to address sexuality and CEFMU described in the 2019 *Tackling the Taboo* global report included centring girls as agents of change; context-specific sexuality curricula; engagement with families, communities and local stakeholders; and grounding programmes in local context.³⁷

The five LAC case studies confirm the importance of the elements of success above, and make an even stronger case for:

1. Building long-term relationships with communities and working with them to address sexuality
2. CSO advocacy for the expansion of public services, particularly health, education and economic opportunities without which alternative choices and life outcomes than those linked to CEFMU for adolescent girls and women are compromised.

LAC has strong feminist, women's, LGBTI and young peoples' movements that are committed to advancing a progressive, gender-transformative human rights agenda. A rights-based approach to addressing sexuality and CEFMU that promotes the autonomy of adolescents and responds to their evolving capacities is a strong foundation for building alliances *between* social movements within countries and at the regional level. This would advance the human rights agenda of multiple social justice movements and make a significant contribution to addressing CEFMU in the region.

In terms of learning that this regional study contributes to global evidence, the fact that the region is predominantly Christian confirms the practice of CEFMU is not linked to any one of the world's religions. The prevalence of informal unions in LAC, and the limited benefit of setting or increasing the age of marriage to prevent these unions, sharply focuses attention on the root causes and structural drivers of CEFMU: patriarchal norms that govern sexuality and social norms that discriminate against girls and young women and limit their life options. Responses that are based on criminalisation or prohibition of early marriage have not been shown to reduce CEFMU and may in fact introduce barriers for adolescent girls and young women to claim protection from the state and to access the services and support they need.³⁸

Sexual relationships that lead to pregnancy often precipitate early unions and child marriage. Regardless of the quality of a relationship, pregnancy and the birth of a child can increase pressures on adolescent girls and young women who are cohabitating to stay in that relationship. Education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and access to the full range of quality SRH services, which are universal human rights, are therefore critical for adolescent girls and young women to exercise choice and agency, including the right to bodily integrity, to marry or not, and to have children or not.





Recommendations

Recommendations from *Tackling the Taboo in LAC* build on those in the global report regarding increasing support and investment in gender-transformative approaches to gender and sexuality and CEFMU.³⁹

1. Explicitly incorporate discussions of sexuality and the patriarchal social norms that drive CEFMU in programming

- Address the myth that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) contributes to early sexual debut and sexual risk-taking through evidence-informed dialogue with local communities, policymakers and using mass and social media campaigns.
- Apply lessons learned about the importance of building trust and support from adults in the community for the adaptation and delivery of culturally grounded scenarios to support the uptake of both in- and out-of-school CSE.
- Include discussions and skills-building scenarios specifically addressing sexuality and CEFMU in all gender-norms-change interventions for gender equality and human rights.⁴⁰
- Strengthen the rights-based focus of sexuality curricula to include discussions of gender diversity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and abortion using the language, experience and cultural references of the setting and in dialogue with parents, families, communities and teachers.

2. Ensure CEFMU programming places girls at the centre, building their skills, perspective and agency to choose alternatives to CEFMU

The LAC case studies illustrate how adolescent girls' and young women's agency and leadership contribute to transforming discriminatory gender and social norms.

- Invest in free access to 12 years of quality education for all girls with barriers related to motherhood or marriage removed, including stigma-free CSE for all and specific outreach for girls who have left school.

3. Focus advocacy on multi-sectoral expansion of health, education, economic empowerment and social services for girls

The studies strengthen the case for increased investment in gender-equitable services and multi-sectoral coordination.

- Improve the quality and accessibility of services that respond to the needs of girls and women – inside and outside of school – through policy and budget advocacy holding government to account for national and international commitments to uphold the right of girls and women to remain in school, live free from violence and access SRH services. This includes the provision of accessible, affordable and quality services and the removal of barriers, including those related to motherhood and marriage, that inhibit girls' equitable access.
- In order not to address CEFMU as a standalone issue, policymakers need to develop and resource multi-sectoral policies that recognise and respond to the link between CEFMU, SRHR, education, economic empowerment and gender-based violence in national sectoral plans and national development plans through substantive public policy and inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 5.3.1.⁴¹
- Meaningfully include CSOs, especially those that are women-, youth- and adolescent-led, in the public policy process, from problem definition to planning and monitoring and evaluation.





- Government institutions need to work collaboratively across line ministries and from the local to the national level to ensure access for all young people – regardless of age, marital status, ethnicity or socio-economic background – to the full range of youth-friendly health and SRH services, including safe abortion. This will enable adolescent girls to safely navigate sex and avoid unintended pregnancy, have control over their own bodies, and choose if and when to marry or have children. Girls from rural, inaccessible, Indigenous or Afro-descendent communities are the priority for improving availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of services.

4. Build coalitions and collaboration across sectors and movements

- Connect, act collectively and in solidarity with women's rights, youth rights and SRHR movements to ensure inclusion of gender-transformative approaches to addressing sexuality and CEFMU in their policy advocacy agendas.
- Come together as a movement to advocate collectively for universal access to in-school CSE; high-quality, youth-friendly SRHR, including safe abortion; long-term, flexible funding for CSOs, especially those that are women- and youth-led, and their meaningful inclusion in policy and decision-making spaces as well as programme design.

5. Collect and use disaggregated data

- Identify and address differential progress on preventing CEFMU and advancing adolescent girls' and women's human rights to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal promise to "Leave No One Behind".⁴²
- Address critical data gaps for robust and relevant statistical information about the 10–14-year-old age group, people of Indigenous and African descent, and (dis)ability status.

6. Advocate to funders to accelerate progress on CEFMU in LAC through increased investment for CEFMU and sexuality within existing CEFMU portfolios and other programmes including SRHR, gender-based violence, youth, education, economic empowerment and social protection

- Take an approach that addresses the root causes and increase earmarked funding for gender-transformative approaches that explicitly address sexuality in CEFMU prevention and response. Work on sexuality has not been adequately resourced in the global response to CEFMU. In LAC, the incorporation of CEFMU as a thematic area by CSOs working on SRHR, gender-based violence and human rights makes a compelling case for the comprehensive, integrated approach.
- Increase long-term (4 years minimum) and flexible funding for CSOs. The long-term, non-linear and risky nature of social norm change means programme implementers need to be able to respond and adapt to change with agility, and to provide financial and other types of support. Salary support for emerging leaders amongst adolescent girls and young women, seed funds and core funding are needed to sustain networks of community advocates. Support second-tier organisations, such as human rights defenders, without which the work of many local CSOs would be problematic.
- Increase targeted funding for local feminist, women-, girl- and youth-led organisations prioritising those working for and led by people from Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities in recognition of their community-driven front-line work to transform discriminatory gender norms to enable adolescent girls to exercise agency and create the conditions to accelerate progress to end CEFMU.
- Include budget for CSO skills and time to monitor and evaluate changes in the lives of adolescent girls including CEFMU and the pathways to change in the implementation of gender-transformative approaches to CEFMU and sexuality.





7. Invest in documentation, learning and communication about gender-transformative approaches to address CEFMU and sexuality in LAC

This is to ensure that opportunities that enable more girls to take control of their bodies and their lives are not missed.

- Where resources allow, document process, outcomes and lessons learned that prioritise feedback from adolescent girls and programme participants focusing on their perceptions of change in relation to CEFMU, sexuality and agency.
 - At the community level:
 - » Simple techniques include: creating a monitoring and evaluation framework to document programme activities as part of programme planning; building simple evaluation tools into regular programme delivery (e.g. feedback from programme participants and leaders, recording their perceptions of perceived changes using a journal); completing a census in the intervention community at the household level (including number of adolescent girls and young women, educational level and civil status) or at the school level (including number of adolescent pregnancies annually, number of unions, and number of school-leavings because of pregnancies or unions).
 - At the regional and national levels:
 - » Advocate to regional and national offices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, the Organization of American States and offices of national statistics for the co-development with CSO partners of indicators relevant for measuring gender norms and knowledge of sexuality for their inclusion in national and regional monitoring frameworks.
 - » Promote the use of administrative data sources (including reports to donors) and the inclusion of relevant questions related to CEFMU and sexuality in population-based surveys.



Case studies



Case study

Bayan Association (Honduras)

School-based gender-transformative education to prevent child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) in rural Honduras.

Population: Adolescent girls and boys (grades 7, 9 and 11) attending rural schools, parents and community members.



Elements of success at a glance

- A robust curriculum that explicitly addresses CEFMU
- A participatory methodology for which students, parents, community members and teachers contributed to the design, implementation and evaluation of the educational materials
- Use of culturally grounded, context-specific scenarios to critically reflect on gender roles and sexuality
- Development of decision-making and communication skills
- A train-the-trainer model where older students teach younger students
- Tailored education on sexuality and CEFMU for parents
- A balanced approach to sexuality education that reflects the cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs of students, parents and community members
- Long-standing relationships with the communities

General organisational overview and key features of its work

The Bayan Association (Asociación de Desarrollo Socio-Económico Indígena Bayan) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 1986 to advance social and economic development in Honduras. Bayan is dedicated to improving health, education and environmental conservation. Bayan works in the rural areas of 12 out of 18 Honduran departments including regions with a large population of Garífuna people of African descent and Indigenous Miskito people. Currently, the main institutional focus is the Tutorial Learning System (Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial or SAT), which supports more than 8,000 students in rural communities to complete their high-school education.



Parents participating in a reflection meeting on CEFMU and early pregnancies prevention. Bayan Association

SAT, developed in Colombia by the FUNDAEC (Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias) in the 1970s, takes a comprehensive, participatory and transformative approach to education and development.ⁱ School is fully integrated with the community because most teachers live in the community and develop and deliver the curriculum with the Bayan coordinators and community members.

ⁱ Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science (FUNDAEC), <https://fundaec.org/en/>





The curriculum integrates community service and spiritual and economic development with mathematics, science and technology, and language and communication. Children and young people are seen as agents of social and economic transformation in their communities. Parents and community members are active participants, teaching their skills and knowledge (e.g. agriculture, carpentry and food preparation) as part of the curriculum. Parents are also invited to participate as learners in “parents’ schools”.

Alongside the SAT educational curricula, Bayan supports agricultural projects, community banks, business training and cultural activities. SAT is recognised by the Honduran government and teachers are paid by the Ministry of Education.

Context and decision to address CEFMU

Honduras has the fourth highest prevalence of child marriages and unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, with 34% of girls and adolescents entering into unions (usually informal) by the age of 18.ⁱⁱ Causes of early unions include the low status of girls, gender inequality, poverty and limited educational and economic opportunities.

A high cultural value is placed on girls’ virginity, and anxiety about female sexuality is associated with parents restricting girls’ movements and freedoms. Unequal and restrictive gender norms regarding sexuality, violence within the home, poverty, and limited life options other than becoming a mother and homemaker contribute to girls choosing early unions that they perceive as a way to gain autonomy.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, if a girl becomes pregnant outside marriage, her and her family’s reputations are damaged. Union or marriage is seen as a solution for the economic and social consequences of adolescent pregnancy.

In theory, Honduran law guarantees sexuality education, but the Ministry of Education has neither the necessary policy framework nor the resources needed to honour this commitment.^{iv} There is strong organised opposition to comprehensive sexuality education in schools nationally.

Bayan made the decision to address the issue of CEFMU when they became aware of data estimating the percentage of girls who enter into early unions. This data came from ongoing work by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, who collaborated in programme development and evaluation.

Featured programme: HEY! Empowering youth to address child marriage and promote gender equality

An initiative integrated into the SAT program, Holistic Education for Youth (HEY!) seeks to prevent CEFMU through school-based participatory education and “parents’ schools” that focus on critical thinking, gender equality, developmentally appropriate sexual and reproductive health knowledge and spiritual values.

The HEY! programme operates in 40 rural secondary schools. For the 2018 pilot, it was implemented in 21 schools reaching 1,200 students from 10 to 17 years. The programme also reached approximately 1,000 parents and 100 teachers living in rural and marginalised semi-urban settings.

Through a participatory process, aligned with the philosophy and methodology of SAT and design-based research, the Bayan Association and University of California came together to make HEY! a reality.^v Students, parents, community members and teachers participated directly in creating, pilot testing and implementing an educational model and materials. These were designed to prevent CEFMU and adolescent pregnancy by advancing gender equality, increasing knowledge of sexuality and reproduction, and fostering critical thinking and decision-making to enable young people to make informed choices.

The delivery of the curriculum embraces participatory and feminist principles. For example, the curriculum uses culturally grounded, context-specific scenarios and asks questions at the beginning, middle and end of each lesson to promote group discussions and invite students to analyse and reflect upon their individual and social realities and their roles in promoting social change.^{vi}

ii UNICEF, *Child Marriage Global Database*. Updated October 2021, data.unicef.org based on 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)

iii E. Murphy-Graham and G. Leal, ‘Child marriage, agency, and schooling in rural Honduras’, *Comparative Education Review*, 59, 1, 2015, 24–49

iv MiraQueTeMiro, *Educacion Sexual Integral: Honduras*, <https://miraquetemiro.org/countries/HND/42/>

v UC Berkeley, *Holistic Education for Youth: Empowering Youth to End Child Marriage and Promote Gender Equality*, <https://hey.berkeley.edu/>

vi D.P. Pacheco Montoya, *Developing a Curriculum for a Formal Education Setting to Prevent Child Marriage in Rural Areas of Honduras: A Design-Based Research Study* [Doctoral dissertation], 2019, University of California, Berkeley, https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/pacheco_berkeley_0028E_19441.pdf



The educational materials are delivered as part of the SAT curriculum through a train-the-trainer model, where the 16- and 17-year-old male and female students (11th grade) deliver the content to mixed-gender groups of 7th and 9th grade students. The idea is that teaching increases commitment and knowledge among the older students and that a smaller age and social distance between the “teachers” and the “students” encourages open discussion.

The programme developed two educational guides for students: *Viviendo Mi Juventud con Propósito* (Living my youth with purpose) and *Juventud con Igualdad* (Youth with equality). Parents involved in “parents’ schools” receive a specific curriculum called *Cómo Guiar a los Hijos Jovenes* (How to guide our youth). The curriculum for both students and parents critically address gender norms; consequences of CEFMU; the biological, psychosocial and cognitive changes that occur during adolescence; and sexual development. It also provides sexual and reproductive health information including about contraceptive methods.

“Sometimes you feel more trust with young people. Eleventh graders are still young and the age difference between 7th and 11th graders is not much. Students get along better and there is more trust, and sometimes that is not the case with teachers.”

Female student, Grade 7

The curriculum encourages young people to think about the purpose of life, their spiritual and ethical values, and the role of free will in decision-making. Sexuality is approached within the larger context of wellbeing and the ability to make informed choices. Lessons focus on gender equality, puberty and its social and biological components, romantic relationships, decision-making about sexuality, abstinence and contraception.

Results

The students, parents and teachers (including the older peer tutors) have enthusiastically embraced the curriculum. Teachers have observed changes in enacted gender norms. For example, boys who rejected cleaning as “women’s work” are now eagerly doing these tasks and girls are asserting their right to play sports. In classroom discussions, girls and boys criticise unequal gender norms including those related to sexuality. After being exposed to the curriculum on the potentially negative consequences of early unions, adolescent girls who had been planning to marry have reconsidered their options and decided to continue in school.

“The project developed its own materials that seek to balance local knowledge, elevating those spiritual values and academic knowledge. The students really like it when they see workbooks with stories that are similar to their own realities. They love to read them. And in terms of including issues that are considered taboo, like talking about the processes of puberty [and] contraceptive methods, it is a way of stimulating learning for the students. And the parents are also part of these conversations, because there are also specific materials for parents.”

Staff member

There was a 38% reduction in cases of CEFMU and a 13% reduction in cases of teenage pregnancy in the 21 schools that participated in HEY!’s initial implementation from 2017 to 2019. Additionally, the number of schools that reported any unions or adolescent pregnancies decreased.

Between 2017 and 2020, parents and other community members have supported implementation of the HEY! curriculum, including the sexual and reproductive health and rights components. Interest has been expressed by the local government to have Bayan deliver the HEY! curriculum in regular, urban secondary schools in the Department of Atlántida.

“I changed my decision to marry. I was thinking about getting married and after studying these workbooks I changed my mind [from getting married]. [...] The workbooks included some dramas, some case studies including one of a girl who decided to marry and she did not like it and [it showed] that it is not worth it.”

Female student, Grade 11



Challenges and opportunities

Based on the values and preferences of the Bayan Association, the sexuality curriculum omits content on same-sex relationships and frames decision-making about contraception and use of sexual and reproductive health services as occurring within marriage. Expanding the curriculum to explore a diversity of sexual orientations and including scenarios in which unmarried individuals seek sexual and reproductive health services would be an opportunity to increase the relevance of the curriculum for all adolescents.

In this community-based and community-driven education model, the decision to change content lies with the Bayan Association and their process of participatory curriculum development with community coordinators of SAT and community members, including parents and students. The interest from the mainstream education system in the HEY! curriculum represents a significant opportunity for scale-up.

Contact details and further information

HEY! programme website

<http://www.hey.berkeley.edu/>

"We haven't done an impact study, but generally the parents really like it and they are thankful. The issue is still taboo and they didn't know how to address it, and giving them the ability to learn so that they can have a more adequate and appropriate conversation, they are thankful. No one has said "why this?"—it is not only that they aren't against it, they are thankful."

Advisor



Case study



movimento de mulheres
das Ilhas de Belém



Movimento de Mulheres das Ilhas de Belém (Brazil)

Creating safe spaces for adolescent girls and young women in unions, focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights and economic empowerment in Cotijuba Island, Belém, Brazil.

Population: Afro-Indigenous adolescent girls and young women (14–25 years of age) in unions.

Elements of success at a glance

- Decisions about programme content and logistics are taken with adolescent girls and young women participants
- Facilitators are female community members
- Flexible, bottom-up approach to sexuality and sexual diversity that is culturally relevant and relatable
- Critical reflection on discrimination based on gender, class, racialisation and sexual orientation promotes solidarity
- Referral and support for adolescent girls and young women to access sexual and reproductive health and rights services on the mainland and advocacy at the municipal level for better health services
- Girls and young women have opportunities to participate in cultural and income-generation activities

General organisational overview and key features of its work

Movimento de Mulheres das Ilhas de Belém (Bélem Islands Women's Movement, MMIB) was founded in 1998 by women members of the Producers' Association of the Island of Cotijuba, located in the headwaters of the Amazon river, off the coast of the city of Belém do Pará in northern Brazil. The organisation began with the goal of promoting women's economic autonomy, independence, self-esteem and active citizenship.

MMIB offers educational and recreational projects for young people and the elderly. MMIB also supports local economic development by making and selling bio-jewelry (made with seeds found exclusively on the Island), handmade paper and local cuisine, supporting recycling and guiding tourists during the summer months. They also have a dance troupe. Adolescent girls and young women participate in all the cultural and economic activities of MMIB to build social networks and generate income for this group.

Context and decision to address CEFMU

In Brazil, 26% of girls enter unions before their 18th birthday.ⁱ Early pregnancy is linked with child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU)ⁱⁱ and the northern part of Brazil where MMIB operates has higher rates of adolescent pregnancy than other parts of the country.ⁱⁱⁱ The Afro-Indigenous population of the Island of Cotijuba lives an economically precarious existence. Poverty and a high cultural value placed on romantic love and passion are key drivers of early unions.

i The data available is very old, 2006 being the last national data aggregated by UNICEF: UNICEF, *Child Marriage Global Database*. Updated October 2021, data.unicef.org based on PNDS 2006 data

ii E.Z. Martínez and D. Leite da Roza, 'Ecological analysis of adolescent birth rates in Brazil: Association with Human Development Index', *Women and Birth*, 33, 2020, 191–198

iii E. Berquo, S. Garcia and L. Lima, 'Youth and reproduction: demographic, behavioral and reproductive profiles in the PNDS-2006', *Revista Saude Publica*, 46, 4, 2012, 685–93, page 689





Unlike many cultures, on Cotijuba, female sexuality is celebrated rather than condemned. Sexual relationships before marriage, changing sexual and romantic partners, and even transactional sex with tourists who visit the island are accepted by families and the community. Girls choose to form unions because they place a high value on marrying for love and, given their limited life options, unions are perceived as being the next step in gaining autonomy and the status associated with becoming an adult.

Pregnancy contributes to unions for girls from poor families as it means that the newborn's father takes economic responsibility for the child. CEFMU is common on the island, which is why MMIB activists started a safe spaces intervention for adolescent girls and young women in unions, and began to address the issue.

"Marriages occur because of pregnancy, or because the girl no longer wants to obey the family and sees marriage as a chance of having freedom and love. Even in the case of a niece who married her uncle, she has always said that she married because she was in love with him."

Featured programme: Breaking Barriers and Building Dialogues

The Breaking Barriers and Building Dialogues programme seeks to promote sexual and reproductive health, wellbeing and rights among adolescent girls and young women in unions through participatory discussion groups. In 2019, the programme supported three face-to-face meetings with two groups of 30 girls in January, February and April.

CEFMU activist and member of civil society organisation

The methodology used for the meetings is participatory and girl-centred, with adolescent girls and young women deciding everything from the topics to be discussed to the meals to share. The intention is to make the debate and dialogue fun, for example the girls and MMIB facilitator (herself a member of the local community) invented a game modelled on popular television debates to discuss sexual and reproductive rights and invented a belly-dance called "the day of the snake" to explore sexual pleasure, masturbation, the fertile cycle and menstruation.

MMIB adapts the United Nations Population Fund's scientific information on sexual and reproductive health and human rights to support highly informal, non-academic open discussions using the language and popular references of the communities where the girls live. This is even more important given the low levels of literacy of the participants.

The programme is gender-transformative in that it encourages girls to reflect on and articulate their rights and creates a safe space for them to express themselves and build social relationships. Creating a safe, caring space where the girls feel comfortable is an important component of the programme.

With respect to same-sex relationships, there are no self-identifying lesbian, gay or bisexual people in ongoing stable partnerships on the island. However, exploratory sexual relationships, especially between girls, are accepted by the community. MMIB decided to build on the opportunity offered by the broad acceptance of sexual relationships between girls to break with heteronormative expectations. The programme discusses the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations and frames sexuality between women as healthy and pleasurable. The programme addresses issues of gender identity and sexual orientation from a rights-based perspective that respects diversity, promotes solidarity and advocates for healthy and pleasurable sexuality for all.

Of the 60 girls aged 14–25 who participated in the programme in 2018 and 2019, many had already had a pregnancy, resulting in a birth or termination, and been in a stable relationship. As well as promoting knowledge, agency and sexual and reproductive health and rights, the programme supports and encourages girls and adolescents to continue in school and creates economic options by offering the participants the opportunity to participate in MMIB's economic and cultural development initiatives.

After the initial programme, the 60 girls were incorporated into MMIB's regular activities. MMIB promotes adolescent girls' and young women's economic independence by increasing their financial literacy and supporting them to generate an income through the work of a cooperative. The organisation encourages the adolescent girls and young women to use the income earned through the cooperative to join the national pension programme and provides practical information and support to do so.





MMIB is a community-based, women's empowerment organisation whose members live on the island. The long history, good reputation and range of MMIB activities that support local social and economic development has created trust with the community and provides opportunities for adolescent girls and young women to participate in cultural activities and economic empowerment beyond the programme. The fact that MMIB members live on the island fosters informal, as well as formal, discussions about sexuality, reproduction and CEFMU with teachers, parents and grandparents, and community leaders.

MMIB seeks to improve the availability and uptake of sexual and reproductive health services for girls, adolescents and young women. The nurse from the local health post is invited to give talks and interact with the girls as part of the programme, and condoms are always available at the participatory sessions.

MMIB also liaises with the public hospitals on the mainland in the city of Belém do Pará, an hour and twenty minutes away by boat, so that pregnant adolescent girls and young women can access antenatal and maternity care

Results

MMIB began the Breaking Barriers and Building Dialogues programme in 2018. In its first year, the programme engaged and supported 60 riverside-dwelling, Afro-Indigenous girls, adolescents and young women in unions from the Island of Cortijuba with information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, and their legal rights. It also accompanied them to access sexual and reproductive health services.

The vision for success is that girls are more aware and better able to articulate their rights, realise that pregnancy and marriage are not synonymous with a better life, continue their education and ultimately achieve economic independence. To date, evidence of girls' empowerment through the programme includes increased awareness of rights and greater participation in debates. Additionally, the number of girls who enrolled in the preparatory course for the high school entrance exam doubled.

Challenges and opportunities

While male partners are supportive of adolescent girls and young women participating in the programme, engaging them in community activities related to the programme is a challenge because of their work schedules. Due to lack of funding, the programme only ran once, in 2019, for a short period of time. In spite of this, MMIB activists continue to support adolescent girls and young women in unions in the community informally by reaching out to them on Facebook and accompanying them to the mainland for antenatal care.

At the time of writing, face-to-face activities were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The truly community-based nature of MMIB and the breadth of activities offered by the organisation provides an excellent foundation for responding to the sexual and reproductive health needs of girls in unions and works to transform the social and economic conditions that contribute to child and early marriages.

"I dream of graduating and being a great professional in my field. I dream of a less racist and sexist world. I dream about equal rights, and that over the next year, there will be more job opportunities on the Island for women, without class struggles and with more respect."

Participant, Breaking Barriers and Building Dialogues

Contact details and further information

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Case study

Na'leb'ak (Guatemala)

Youth-led adolescent girls' and young women's safe spaces intervention that incorporates diversified agriculture and has a strong focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Chisec, Guatemala.

Population: Girls and adolescent girls (aged 8–12 years) and adolescent girls and young women (13–25 years of age) facilitated by older peer mentors (aged 18–35 years) with additional engagement of parents, traditional community leaders and community members as allies.



Elements of success at a glance

- Organisation led by young women, all programmes youth-led and girl-centred
- Building relationships with the community
- Transforming gender roles and expectations through young women's leadership
- Culturally grounded, respectful approach to delivering sexuality education
- Gender stereotypes are transformed, and economic options for adolescent girls and young women increased through diversified agriculture
- Advocacy to improve health and education services

General organisational overview and key features of its work

Na'leb'ak was founded by rural and urban Indigenous young women who had participated in the Abriendo Oportunidades (Opening Opportunities, AO) programme as mentors or mentees. AO was originally designed and implemented by the Population Council to support Indigenous girls to reach their full potential and break free from the cycle of poverty. From 2013 to 2018, the Population Council implemented different components of the AO programme in Chisec, Guatemala, collaborating closely with an emerging group of mentors.



Young women with similar backgrounds to the participants are trained as mentors to deliver the programme, drawing upon their own personal experiences.

Roxana Mucú / Na'leb'ak

Chisec is a majority Mayan (95%) municipality located in the northern high plains. At the end of 2017, the Population Council supported 25 former AO mentors who wanted to continue to promote gender equality, support girls to develop life plans and prevent child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) to establish their own civil society organisation. Na'leb'ak is a youth-led organisation with a board of directors drawn exclusively from the young women members. Decisions are taken by consensus.

In Na'leb'ak's cultural context, young people – especially young women – are not recognised as leaders and usually have little say in family or community decision-making. Using the AO programme platform, the Na'leb'ak mentors increased their technical skills in project design and implementation and in 2017 they began to independently implement the girls' safe spaces intervention.





The young women of Na'leb'ak have positioned themselves as leaders through their advocacy for young people. For example, in 2019 they convened forums to learn about mayoral candidates' electoral platforms relevant to children, adolescents and young people. They invited community leaders, civil society and government organisations, adolescent girls and young women, and their families to participate.

By debating issues related to health, education and creating economic opportunities from a youth perspective and broadcasting the forums through community radio and on Facebook, the young women raised the profile of the organisation and positioned themselves as leaders. Na'leb'ak also exercises their leadership by entering into formal agreements with municipal and community governance structures. They negotiated a contract with the municipal government that empowers them to demand accountability for action to improve the situation of children, adolescents and young people.

Before beginning the AO programme in a community, they ask a community leader to convene an assembly to explain the programme, request space and sign a community contract that defines the timeframe and activities. Na'leb'ak then reports back on progress and upcoming activities at quarterly community meetings. This approach is culturally sensitive and respectful of local governance and power structures.

Na'leb'ak transforms traditional gender and intergenerational power relationships through their leadership in delivering the safe spaces intervention in communities and advocating for children, adolescents and youth with the municipal government.

Context and decision to address CEFMU

In Guatemala, 30% of girls are in unions by age 18.ⁱ Poverty, low levels of education and a lack of other life opportunities for adolescent girls and young women, and a persistent discriminatory attitude among national and municipal leaders that the practice is “cultural” (i.e. an Indigenous tradition) and therefore not a concern of the state all contribute to CEFMU.

In the case of pregnancy, there is significant pressure to preserve “family honour” through CEFMU, which is upheld by religious and traditional community leaders. In 2015, Guatemala reformed the civil code to increase the legal age of marriage to 18 years. Despite this legal change, 59% of the births registered in Chisec were to mothers aged 14–17 years; 45% of the fathers were at least 8–10 years older. Legal sexual relations and unions between adolescent girls and adult men – whether formally registered or not – remain common.ⁱⁱ

Na'leb'ak has prioritised addressing sexual and reproductive health within the AO curriculum because the issue remains taboo and because pregnancies among adolescent girls and young women lead to CEFMU in Chisec.ⁱⁱⁱ

Featured programme: Abriendo Oportunidades (AO) with diversified agriculture

Na'leb'ak implements the AO curriculum developed by the Population Council, which addresses self-esteem, gender, health, sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, financial education and community outreach. The curriculum is grounded in the pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire – taking a critical, participatory approach that also incorporates gender analysis and a strong human rights perspective.^{iv} Na'leb'ak has modified the curriculum based on the experience of the mentors and the needs of the communities, for example changing scenarios to better fit the cultural context and adding diversified agriculture modules grounded in local practices and Mayan cosmology.

The programme is implemented using a participatory cascade model in which young women (community mentors) aged 18–35 with similar backgrounds to the participants are trained to deliver the programme and mentored by peers who have been community mentors. In each community two groups are formed, girls from 8–12 years old and adolescent girls aged 13–25. Both groups meet with their mentors for at least two hours each week to discuss themes, play games and do arts and crafts. The curriculum culminates in the creation of a life plan.

i UNICEF, *Child Marriage Global Database*. Updated October 2021, data.unicef.org based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) 2015 data
ii P. Broll and C. Garcés, *Las uniones infantiles forzadas: de la reforma legal a la disrupción social—Investigación formativa en cinco comunidades en Chisec Alta Verapaz*, Guatemala City, Population Council, 2018, page 9, https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/departments_sbsr-pgy/459/
iii P. Broll and C. Garcés, *Las uniones infantiles forzadas: de la reforma legal a la disrupción social—Investigación formativa en cinco comunidades en Chisec Alta Verapaz*, Guatemala City, Population Council, 2018, page 5–6, https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/departments_sbsr-pgy/459/
iv Population Council, *Abriendo Oportunidades* (“Opening Opportunities”), <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/abriendo-oportunidades-opening-opportunities>





These sessions, held in a local venue provided by the community, create a safe space for adolescent girls and young women to learn, play and get to know each other, developing a healthy social network. Adolescent girls and young women participate in a process of empowerment. They learn about and articulate their rights, critically reflect on dominant gender roles, learn about different forms of violence and violence prevention, identify with their mentors, and begin to take decisions for themselves.

During these sessions, the community mentors draw upon their personal experiences and knowledge to discuss sexuality, using the local language (Maya Q'eqchi'). Among the issues discussed are romantic relationships free from violence, sexual and reproductive rights, female sexual and reproductive biology, menstruation, contraceptive methods, and sexually transmitted infections. Discussions of sexuality are grounded in local realities and are held with the full knowledge and negotiated agreement of the wider community.

Sexuality remains a taboo subject. Therefore, Na'leb'ak discusses the importance of increasing knowledge about sexuality and reproduction to support informed choices with parents and community leaders before introducing the topic to adolescent girls and young women. The young women leaders of Na'leb'ak have always been able to convince at least some community members of the value of sexuality education and successfully counter the erroneous belief that sexuality education hastens sexual debut or increases sexual risk taking.^v These community members (early adopters) have then become allies in securing acceptance from those who initially express opposition.

Beyond the safe spaces intervention with the adolescent girls and young women, the members of Na'leb'ak share messages about sexuality at the quarterly community meetings. Na'leb'ak also liaises with the local health clinic in the municipal capital to support efforts to strengthen youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services. There is strong interest from the programme lead at the health clinic, but the government provides limited resources for youth sexual and reproductive health infrastructure and service delivery.

“They start to learn about their sexuality. In our context, parents talk about it very little, or don't talk about it at all. So, when we discuss sexuality, that is one of the sessions where the girls are most interested, ask the most questions, are the most attentive, because it is an issue that isn't talked about anywhere.”

Civil society organisation board member and mentor

Incorporating diversified agriculture into the AO programme is a survival and sustainability strategy for both Na'leb'ak as an organisation and for the girls and their families.^{vi} It is also gender-transformative in that Na'leb'ak considers that adolescent girls and young women need to become economically empowered to make choices about their lives.

Diversified agriculture complements the financial literacy education provided through AO by giving the girls access to a source of income that can help them to stay in school. The aspiration is that income generation will eventually support adolescent girls and young women to implement their life plans. Adolescent girls' and young women's participation in agriculture also transforms community gender norms by highlighting their abilities, contributions and successes in what is traditionally considered a masculine domain.

Results

Since 2013, first the Population Council and now Na'leb'ak has reached about half of the communities in the municipality of Chisec (70 of 158) with the AO programme. Between September 2019 and January 2020, Na'leb'ak delivered the programme to 511 adolescent girls and young women. The positive results initially documented by the Population Council have continued with Na'leb'ak: an increase in the number of girls who complete primary and secondary education, start businesses, choose not to enter into a child or early marriage, and increase their knowledge about sexual and reproductive health.^{vii}

v P. Montgomery and W. Knerr, *Review of the Evidence on Sexuality Education. Report to inform the update of the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, Oxford, Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention, University of Oxford, 18, 2016, pages 22–24, 43, <https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/review-evidence-sexuality-education-report-inform-update-unesco-international>

vi Na'leb'ak's Casa Productiva (Agricultural Initiative), *Casa Productiva - Mujeres Indigenas - Guatemala*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgQOCjct3ec>

vii *Girls Not Brides and Population Council, Theory of Change Case Studies: Empower Girls, Abriendo Oportunidades, Girls Not Brides*, 2016, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.es/aprendizaje-recursos/centro-de-recursos/child-marriage-abriendo-oportunidades/>



The founding and operation of Na'leb'ak, led by young Mayan women who graduated from the AO programme, demonstrates the value of promoting gender equality, capacity development and leadership among adolescent girls and young women. Na'leb'ak has sustained and evolved the AO programme. Young women's leadership is contributing to the transformation of intergenerational and gender power dynamics in a cultural context where traditionally adolescent girls and young women have little or no voice.

Young women leaders from Na'leb'ak have become visible advocates for the issues of children, adolescents and young people in municipal politics and act as a bridge between the governance structures of Indigenous communities and the municipal government. In several communities, adolescent girls and young women are now invited to community meetings with the hope that over time they can participate more meaningfully in the governance and decision-making of those meetings.

With respect to diversified agriculture, Na'leb'ak has supported the creation of 365 diversified agricultural plots in Chisec and developed their own cooperative egg business and demonstration farm. Agricultural income has sustained the organisation's activities, though most of Na'leb'ak's members continue to give their time as volunteers. Income from agriculture also supports girls to continue their education.

The visible successes of adolescent girls and young women, for example winning prizes at the annual municipal agricultural fair, is changing gendered perceptions about women's right to land. In several cases programme participants have inherited a part of their families' land that normally would have gone only to male heirs.

Challenges and opportunities

The young women who participate in the leadership of Na'leb'ak and the community mentors have personal and family responsibilities and economic needs. Increased financial resources are required to sustain and expand the organisation. Na'leb'ak has been asked by communities to offer life skills and gender norms change programmes, which would address sexuality and reproduction, for adolescent boys and young men as well as mothers and other community members. At this time, the organisation is not able to respond to these requests because of their limited financial resources.

In general, the provision of health and education services by the government to the communities of Chisec is inadequate. This lack of investment is a barrier to adolescent girls and young women in Chisec fulfilling their sexual and reproductive rights. Na'leb'ak is advocating for improved provision of sexual and reproductive health services for young people. Greater investment by municipal and national governments is needed to improve services.

"At the meetings we learned to grow food, we learned about our human rights, and how to be protected against violence. I also learned how to do crochet. I see that our organisation is growing. We Indigenous women are capable."

Former mentee, now mentor and civil society organisation member

Contact details and further information

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Case study

Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer (Dominican Republic)

Safe spaces intervention designed to prevent child early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) that includes comprehensive sexuality education for adolescent girls in Santiago, Dominican Republic.

Population: Girls, adolescent girls and young women (9–17 years of age) from a marginalised, urban neighbourhood with outreach to and engagement of parents and guardians.



Elements of success at a glance

- Girl-centred safe spaces in which to build critical thinking skills and self-esteem
- Feminist intersectional analysis and participatory deconstruction of gender roles
- Sexuality curriculum that is rights-based and grounded in progressive Catholic values
- Long-standing community relationships, whole-community engagement and inter-institutional networking and advocacy

General organisational overview and key features of its work

Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer (Nucleus of Support for Women, NAM) is a feminist non-governmental organisation founded in 1987 to advocate for the creation of a law against gender-based violence in the Dominican Republic. NAM worked with a broad coalition of actors, and in 1997 the criminal code was modified to specify that violence against women and girls is a crime. As they provided legal support for women who experience violence, the founders of NAM recognised that these women needed comprehensive psychological support and expanded their mandate and programmes beyond legal services. Today, the organisation's objective is to prevent gender-based violence and support for women who experience violence through intersectoral coordination, education, research, human rights advocacy and comprehensive services.



Anderla, Myriam, Yniflor, Génesis, Diana and Haida participate in the Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer programme.

Andrews Cardenas/Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer.

NAM embraces an explicitly feminist analysis and practice with the goal of dismantling the patriarchy and advancing women's equality, autonomy and freedom. NAM is committed to transforming the structural conditions that underly unequal power relations between women and men, in solidarity with the broader women's movement and prioritising the groups that have been most marginalised and excluded.

NAM is organised into different departments. The Emotional Support Department offers psychological evaluation and individual and group therapy to women, adolescents, and girls and boys who have experienced gender-based violence. The Legal Support Department provides comprehensive legal advice and support for women who have experienced violence. The Education Department provides training on gender and gender-based violence to professionals, community groups and governmental and non-governmental organisations.





NAM also supports and strengthens community networks and engages in inter-institutional coordination and advocacy. Along with Profamilia, Acción Callejera and the Women's Ministry, NAM leads a multi-stakeholder network that monitors the implementation of public policies on violence against women and minors in Santiago called Movimiento por una Vida sin Violencia (MOVIDA).

Context and decision to address CEFMU

In the Dominican Republic, 32% of girls enter into unions by the age of 18.ⁱ The majority are informal unions rather than legal marriages. Poverty, family violence, cultural norms that accept and promote romantic relationships between younger women and older men, girls' and adolescents' limited life options other than marriage and motherhood, and the perception that entering a union will provide more autonomy than living at home, all contribute to CEFMU in the country.ⁱⁱ

The lack of comprehensive sexuality education and gender norms regarding sexuality – including the cult of virginity and constructions of romantic love – undermine the ability of adolescent girls and young women to make informed choices about sexuality and reproduction. Many Christian organisations in the Dominican Republic publicly and actively oppose comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive rights. Girls and adolescents who are known to have had sexual relations, or who become pregnant, are frequently thrown out of their homes by their families and pressured into unions.

NAM began to address CEFMU through their work on sexual and reproductive health and rights and sexual exploitation of minors in the community and the school system. Their expertise in gender-based violence led them to be invited by Plan International to co-coordinate the project Girls not wives (Niñas no esposas).

NAM understands CEFMU as a form of gender-based violence. Their vision is that transforming gender norms and stereotypes, increasing knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and access to services, and developing girls' self-esteem can prevent CEFMU. Preventing CEFMU is perceived by NAM as a powerful intervention to break ongoing and intergenerational cycles of violence against women and girls.

Featured programme: Growing Up Happy

In 2018 and 2019, NAM began implementing the programme Growing Up Happy (Crecer Contentas) in Buenos Aires, a poor, urban neighbourhood where NAM has a long history of activism. Over a period of seven years, NAM supported the creation and capacity building of a network of neighbourhood women who are committed to preventing CEFMU and provide ongoing in-community oversight and support for the adolescent girls in the Growing Up Happy programme.

The 30 girls and adolescent girls aged 9–17 years who participated in Growing Up Happy were identified by this network of women activists, prioritising those who might have increased vulnerability to CEFMU. For example, selection identified adolescent girls who were doing poorly with their academic schoolwork, who were from low-income families, or were children of Haitian migrants (a group that faces significant discrimination).

NAM brings together several curricula in Growing Up Happy. They use the Growing Up Happy programme model developed by Plan International, which develops life skills, financial literacy and sexual and reproductive health knowledge. NAM also incorporates sports, inspired by the methodology of the Sports for Life (Deportes para la vida) programme, which uses sports and games to develop leadership skills and support healthy decision-making among young people with a strong focus on sexual and reproductive health.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Growing Up Happy programme, delivered by a woman in her early twenties, creates opportunities for the adolescent girls to learn life skills, deconstruct patriarchal gender constructions and social norms, and have fun. Activities include playing different sports, flying kites (traditionally a male activity in the Dominican Republic), theatre, visual arts and crafts. All the activities and discussions are participatory and grounded in girls' and adolescents' experiences. For sensitive topics, such as sexuality, the groups are divided into younger and older participants to ensure content is developmentally appropriate.

ⁱ UNICEF, *Child Marriage Global Database*. Updated October 2021, data.unicef.org based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) 2019

ⁱⁱ Plan International, *Niñas esposadas. Caracterización del matrimonio forzado de niñas y adolescentes en las provincias de Azua, Barahona, Pedernales, Elías Piña y San Juan*, Planteamientos, 2017(2), <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/ninas-esposadas-caracterizacion-del-matrimonio-forzado-de-ninas-y-adolescentes-dominican-republic/>

ⁱⁱⁱ D. Lodin, *Deportes para la vida: An evaluation of an HIV/AIDS prevention and life skills intervention in the Dominican Republic*. Master's thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2014, <https://etd.library.emory.edu/concern/etds/2v23vv00w?locale=es>



Creating spaces for girls to get to know each other, develop social networks, express themselves and play is at the heart of the Growing Up Happy gender-transformative methodology. In the Buenos Aires neighbourhood, as in many low-income communities in the Dominican Republic, adolescent girls shoulder a heavy burden of domestic responsibilities, including housework and caring for younger siblings. In contrast, boys and male adolescents are often enrolled in formal sports and extra-curricular courses and, at a minimum, are free to be out of the house and in the street playing games.

Creating opportunities for girls to play contests unequal gender norms and sexual stereotypes, including the ideas that girls are physically weak, that their place is in the home doing domestic labour, and that their role in life is to serve others, whether that be a husband or their family.

NAM informs the parents and guardians about Growing Up Happy before the programme starts. Many of the adolescent girls' mothers experienced CEFMU themselves and are supportive of their daughters' participation in the programme. The programme includes formal workshops for parents and guardians on human rights, gender-based violence, assertiveness and managing emotions. Parents and guardians are also invited to participate in cultural activities. For example, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls, the adolescent girls performed a play, screened a movie and facilitated a dialogue on gender-based violence for family members and the whole community.

The comprehensive sexuality education delivered by NAM in Growing Up Happy uses the Catholics for Choice curriculum, *Sexuality and adolescence: Skills for taking free and informed decisions*.^{iv} Catholics for Choice disagrees with the Vatican's dictates on sex, marriage, family life and motherhood and promotes a rights-based, sex-positive approach to sexuality.^v The curriculum uses scenarios and real-life stories to spark discussions.

The first module focuses on preventing adolescent pregnancy, including an exploration and deconstruction of the social constructions that engender guilt, fear and doubt about sexuality. The second module focuses on contraceptive methods. The third module explores sexual violence. The objective of the curriculum is to increase the capacity of women and young people to make decisions about their lives and bodies and to enjoy their sexuality freely and responsibly, without fear, guilt, violence or coercion.

At the national and community levels, opposition to comprehensive sexuality education – including provision of information about contraception – persists in part because of the myth that information about sexuality results in early sexual debut.^{vi} Parents and guardians want to avoid adolescent pregnancy, sexual abuse and incest, and recognise that all three occur in the community.

In community discussions with parents and guardians and at meetings with school and government administrators, NAM has leveraged consensus about the desirability of preventing adolescent pregnancy, sexual abuse and incest to gain agreement for NAM to deliver rights-based education that provides information about contraception and gender-based violence in school and community settings. In general, NAM orients these discussions towards girls and adolescents postponing their sexual debut within a framework of gender equality and bodily integrity.

NAM's other activities in the Buenos Aires neighbourhood and nationally reinforce the objectives of the Growing Up Happy programme. As well as offering psychological and legal services for women who have experienced violence, NAM builds the capacity of school psychologists and teachers on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights. They also provide school-based education on these issues for children and adolescents. NAM's leadership of MOVIDA facilitates referrals, for example to sexual and reproductive health services.

"The idea that a woman should be kept by a man is still really entrenched. In the most vulnerable neighbourhoods, they bring the girls up with that idea: you grow up and you learn to do domestic work so that a man will take care of you. We want to transform this myth. So that the girls have another perspective on life, a life for themselves, a life plan, a life project. [So] that they have aspirations and understand that they can do it."

Director, NAM

iv Catholics for the Right to Decide Mexico, *Educational manual: sexuality and adolescence: Skills for free and informed decision making*, 2019, <https://letraese.jornada.com.mx/2019/07/31/manual-educativo-sexualidad-y-adolescencia-habilidades-para-la-toma-de-decisiones-libres-e-informadas-1412.html>

v Catholics for Choice, *Abortion Access for All*, <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/>

vi P. Montgomery and W. Kner, *Review of the Evidence on Sexuality Education. Report to inform the update of the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, Oxford, Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention, University of Oxford, 18, 2016, pages 22–24, 43, <https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/review-evidence-sexuality-education-report-inform-update-unesco-international>



Results

During the first year of implementation (2018–2019), Growing Up Happy reached and retained 30 girls who wanted to continue in the programme. In the community, NAM trained 40 teachers and psychologists and 30 parents and guardians on human rights, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. NAM has observed an increase in the adolescent girls' sense of autonomy and self-determination, ability to articulate their rights and to recognise when they are being violated.

Even though the programme participants knew each other prior to Growing Up Happy – because they live in the same neighbourhood and attend the same schools – they didn't express a strong group identity. By participating in Growing Up Happy, the girls and adolescents developed a social network and increased their sense of empathy and solidarity. This was demonstrated when NAM provided emergency care packages to the participants' families because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were concerned to make sure that everyone received the support and followed up with the programme coordinator to ensure they had.

Challenges and opportunities

Organised opposition to sexual and reproductive rights in the Dominican Republic represents an important barrier to progress towards providing comprehensive sexuality education, fulfilling sexual and reproductive health and rights, and preventing CEFMU. The defeat of politicians opposed to sexual and reproductive rights in the 2020 national election, growing recognition of CEFMU as a social problem in recent years, and proposed legislation that would establish the legal age of marriage as 18, without exceptions, all represent opportunities for progress to realise the rights of adolescent girls and young women.

Contact details and further information

Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer website

<https://sites.google.com/site/nucleodeapoyoalamujer/>

“From a very early age, girls and boys are empowered differently about sexuality. Boys are permitted knowledge about their own bodies, domination and told what things they can and can't do with their bodies. Girls are taught romanticism, soap operas and Cinderella dolls. They are taught more taboos, and they aren't allowed to explore their bodies—if they do it is seen as wrong, as dirty. They are forbidden to know their own bodies. And this is tightly entwined with child marriage, with early unions and sexuality. These girls grow up to face a reality that isn't what they were taught at home when they were little. And they start to explore on their own, without information, without specific guidance. They especially lack information about their own bodies, and they meet an adult who takes advantage of that lack of knowledge. And the consequence of that lack of knowledge can be a child marriage, an early union, rape or even incest.”

*Project Coordinator,
Growing Up Happy, NAM*



Case study



Yo quiero, yo puedo (Mexico)

School and community-based gender-transformative sexuality education to reinforce communities' commitments to end the sale of girls and child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) in Guerrero, Mexico.

Population: Adolescents who attend school, as well as parents, guardians, women, men and traditional community leaders.

Elements of success at a glance

- A multi-year collaboration with traditional leaders and all community members to transform gender norms prior to addressing CEFMU
- Bi-cultural, bilingual (Spanish, Mixtec) and mixed-gender programme teams
- A rights-based approach to gender and sexuality education
- Participatory, gender-segregated workshops that create safe spaces for adolescent girls and women
- Using mass media to raise awareness of CEFMU
- Advocating for improved health, education and other public services

General organisational overview and key features of its work

Yo quiero, yo puedo (formally the Mexican Research Institute on Family and Population) is a national non-governmental organisation based in Mexico City. Founded in 1985, Yo quiero, yo puedo has developed, implemented and evaluated over 40 social and economic development programmes and is the creator of the Framework for Enabling Empowerment (FrEE).ⁱ

The FrEE theory of change is that developing social, cognitive and emotional life skills (self-knowledge, assertive communication, empathy, expression and management of emotions, critical thinking and decision-making) alongside reducing psychosocial barriers (shame, fear, guilt, prejudices and resentment) and knowledge leads to attitudinal and behaviour change. These changes increase individuals' control over their lives and health, strengthen agency and result in sustained positive change for families and communities.

The Yo quiero, yo puedo methodology has been implemented with diverse populations, age groups and geographies in multiple content areas (e.g. nutrition, financial education, mental health promotion and sexuality education).

Context and decision to address CEFMU

In Mexico, 21% of girls are married or in unions by the age of 18.ⁱⁱ The majority of these unions are informal (80%). Most Mexican adolescent girls (12–17 years of age) are in unions with male partners who are six years older; 65% of male partners are 11 years older. In Guerrero State, 30% of girls are married before age 18 and the proportion of girls aged 12–14 in unions is among the highest in the country.ⁱⁱⁱ

i S. Pick and J. Sirkin, *Breaking the poverty cycle: The human basis for sustainable development*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195383164.001.0001/acprof-9780195383164>

ii UNICEF, *Child Marriage Global Database*. Updated October 2021, data.unicef.org based on ENADID 2018 national survey data

iii E. Rivero, J.L. Palma, *Informe sobre uniones tempranas en México: Resumen Ejecutivo*, Mexico City, INSAD, 2017, http://insad.com.mx/site/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Informe-sobre-Uniones-Tempranas-en-Mexico_2017.pdf



Metlatónoc, a majority Indigenous Mixtec community in the mountain region of Guerrero, is one of the most socially and economically marginalised municipalities in Mexico. Gender norms that devalue girls and women and lack of economic and educational opportunities for the whole population – but particularly for girls and women – are important drivers of CEFMU. Farming opium poppies and the sale of girls into marriage, a deeply rooted cultural tradition, are the main sources of income for families.

Communities in the mountain region consider 15–17 years as the ideal time for girls to marry. Traditional community leaders participate in marriage ceremonies during which payment is made for the girl even though marriage before 18 years of age is against the law in Mexico. Government institutions fail to take the legal age of marriage into account because unions are not legally registered.

The cosmovision and cultural rights of the communities make the lack of an intercultural approach from the national justice system a significant challenge to administering justice. In addition, for all practical intents and purposes, the mainstream justice system is inaccessible for adolescent girls and young women.

From the perspective of girls and young women, getting married and having children is seen as their only life option and doing so confers certain rights and privileges. In many Mexican Indigenous and rural communities, including Metlatónoc, if an adolescent girl or young woman may have had sexual relations (for example, if she was out of her home overnight without familial supervision) or is known to have had sexual relations because she is visibly pregnant, there is strong family and social pressure to enter into a union.^{iv}

From 2015 to 2017, Yo quiero, yo puedo implemented a large-scale participatory community development programme to develop life skills for health, reduce family violence and transform harmful masculinities in Metlatónoc. The programme reached 60 communities and 6,000 people. Results included changed gender norms among the trainers implementing the programme, men becoming more willing to do domestic labour (and women accepting this change), and decreased family violence and animal maltreatment.^v This programme set the stage to address CEFMU.

In 2016, of their own accord, traditional community leaders in Yuvinani, Valle de Durazno and Colonia Juquila publicly signed an agreement prohibiting the sale of girls. They presented the agreement to Yo quiero, yo puedo and requested ongoing support and engagement to change gender norms, promote human rights and prevent the sale of girls and CEFMU.^{vi}

“We have walked hand in hand, in a really respectful way so that they [traditional community leaders and members] don’t feel judged or undermined because of their beliefs. Over the years we have built trust and an understanding of the communities and an ability to identify what is the best way to work with them. And also, that they have a space to express their opinions without fear of negative repercussions.”

*Programme Lead,
Yo quiero, yo puedo*

Featured programme: Help them avoid the altar

From 2018, Yo quiero, yo puedo focused their work in Yuvinani, Valle de Durazno and Colonia Juquila. Rather than focusing on the legal age of marriage, the programme addresses gender equality, reducing gender-based violence and promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The programme is implemented by a multidisciplinary team of bilingual, bi-cultural (Spanish and Mixtec) male and female programme staff who live in the communities for extended periods of time. Male staff members have been important for engaging traditional community leaders. Over time, increasing openness, respect and willingness to dialogue with female programme staff by traditional community leaders has been observed.

The community-based education approach is playful, experiential and delivered in age- and sex-segregated groups. Sessions include critical reflection on stereotypical gender roles and resource distribution, gender-based violence, Indigenous women’s human rights and sexual and reproductive health. The circle seating arrangement of these workshops operationalises the non-hierarchical, participatory approach. Over time, the circle becomes a safe space and contributes to transforming gender norms.

iv G. Rodríguez and B. de Keijzer, *La noche se hizo para los hombres*, Mexico City, Population Council, 2002; C.J. Echarri Canovas and J. Perez Amador, ‘En transito hacia la adultez: eventos en el curso de vida de los jóvenes en México’, *Estudios Demograficos y Urbanos*, 22, 1, 2007, 43–77, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/312/31222103.pdf>

v Mexican Research Institute on Family and Population (Yo quiero, yo puedo), *Programa de Desarrollo Integral Comunitario: Informe final y conclusiones*, Mexico City, Mexico, Prospera, 2017

vi Yo quiero Yo puedo, *Yo quiero, yo puedo cuidar mi salud – PROSPERA*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7F8Aub-vZU&feature=emb_title





"[In Metlatónoc] decisions are taken by the community committee. And the committee is made up of men. So, when a decision is to be taken, it is the men who participate. Sometimes the women are present, but they almost never express their opinions. Our workshops are a space where they [women] can talk, they can express themselves, they can socialize. Embarrassment about participating, fear of expressing what they feel is reduced. We create an environment of trust. And at the end they are more confident in themselves. It is really rewarding to see how with each session, from being hunched over or not looking around, how their posture changes, how they start to participate more, reflect more, ask more. The change process is really visible."

Staff, Yo quiero, yo puedo

The programme develops social, cognitive and emotional skills and agency that supports behaviour change for adolescent boys and girls and adult women and men. Messages about sexuality, gender and CEFMU are integrated into the content of community workshops for women and men and specific sessions for parents and guardians.

In addition to community workshops, as part of the Help them avoid the altar programme, Yo quiero, yo puedo began to deliver comprehensive rights-based, gender-transformative sexuality and violence prevention education in schools. The curriculum frames sexuality as a lifelong process that includes emotions, attitudes, thoughts and behaviours.

Four interrelated components of sexuality are described: reproduction, gender, eroticism and affective relationships. It addresses social and biological aspects of sexuality, such as gender stereotypes, biological development, sexual and reproductive rights, the prevention of unplanned pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections. Explicit information and considerations for choosing a contraceptive method are included.

Yo quiero, yo puedo's strong, trusting relationships with traditional community leaders is critical to them being invited and allowed to deliver this curriculum in schools. Yo quiero, yo puedo is also building relationships with the municipal and state education sector with an eye to scale up, engaging with other civil society organisations working in the area and advocating for improved delivery of health, education and other public services in the communities with municipal, state and federal governments.

In 2019, Yo quiero, yo puedo also launched a national communication campaign to raise awareness of CEFMU. This campaign included a professionally produced short film screened at a national film festival, billboards in Mexico City and appearances on national media to talk about CEFMU.^{vii} The issue was picked up by national media outlets and raised the profile of CEFMU in Mexico. Community members from Yuvinani, Valle de Durazno and Colonia Juquila spoke out against the sale of girls in the national media, causing backlash from neighbouring communities. Mutual support from Colonia Juquila helped community leaders and members to face the backlash and stay strong in their resolve to stop the sale of girls and prevent CEFMU.

"To achieve change you have to work with the whole community. It is a process that takes years, it isn't a process that takes a month. Rather, to achieve change, you have to work with leaders, with men, with women, with girls, transforming the community into change agents."

*Executive Director,
Yo quiero, yo puedo*

vii Yo quiero Yo puedo ONG, *Ayúdalas a no llegar al altar 60 segundos*, 2019, <https://youtu.be/t04arcrZkCE>





Results

Three communities in Metlatónoc decided to end the sale of girls and asked for ongoing support from Yo quiero, yo puedo to respond to CEFMU. The request for and acceptance of gender-transformative, comprehensive sexuality education curriculum in schools by community and educational authorities is another important indicator of progress. The Help them avoid the altar programme reached 200 adolescent girls in 2018–2019.

The sale of girls and CEFMU are central to the economic and cultural systems of Metlatónoc, but change is occurring. The story of Catalina and Alfonso from Juquila is a powerful example. Catalina is the only daughter in a family of eight siblings. Her mother was purchased by her father, who also bought four of his daughters-in-law according to the traditional community customs. After participating in the workshops facilitated by Yo quiero, yo puedo, Catalina's parents decided that their daughter would not be sold into marriage.

Catalina and Alfonso met at a community event, fell in love and when they asked Catalina's family for permission to marry, the union was accepted. In 2019, at 18 years of age, Catalina married Alfonso at the civil registry. Following their marriage, Catalina and Alfonso moved to a nearby city for Catalina to attend university. Catalina and Alfonso choosing to marry without her family selling her, the public celebration of the legal registration of the marriage and the couple's decision to prioritise Catalina's education all demonstrate how attitudes and practices are changing.^{viii}

"Here in Yuvinani, women are sold for more than 100 thousand pesos, but I don't like it because I have a girl, and I won't do that with my girl, she isn't an animal. I want my daughter to study and when she is finished studying, she can do what she wants."

One of the first women in Yuvinani to marry voluntarily

Challenges and opportunities

The sale of girls and CEFMU is a deeply rooted cultural practice that is economically important for families. In the Mixtec communities of the mountain region, social cohesion and respect for tradition is maintained through administration of privileges and social control (e.g. shunning, exclusion from festivals and religious rites). That three communities out of 60 in the region have decided to stop selling girls and prevent CEFMU is a testimony to the challenge, and also to the fact that change is possible.

Community leaders and members in Yuvinani, Valle de Durazno and Colonia Juquila have faced pressure and disapproval from neighbouring communities for turning away from the traditions of the region. That three communities made this decision together is mutually supportive. The ongoing commitment of Colonia Juquila is provoking reflection and dialogue about the sale of girls and CEFMU in the mountain region and nationally.

Yo quiero, yo puedo's delivery of school-based gender-transformative comprehensive sexuality education, and relationship building with municipal and state educational authorities, as well as their good relationships with community leaders in the other 57 communities, represents an opportunity for future scale-up.

Contact details and further information

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