

A Profile of Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean



A photograph of two young girls in school uniforms sitting at a desk outdoors. The girl in the foreground is looking down at a book on the desk, while the girl in the background is also looking down at a book. They are both wearing light blue short-sleeved shirts. The background shows a building with white horizontal slats and a red awning.

The photos in this publication are drawn from an award-winning communications campaign on child marriage launched by UNICEF Dominican Republic entitled, 'The Worst Soap Opera'. It used an innovative soap opera-style of storytelling to challenge social tolerance and shift perceptions on child marriage. 'The Worst Soap Opera' tells the story of two adolescent girls who find themselves forced into child marriage with older men to escape poverty and violence. The campaign won three awards at Cannes Lions 2018, the most important international festival of advertising and creativity.

Child marriage in the global development agenda

Child marriage is a violation of human rights. Every child has the right to be protected from this harmful practice, which has devastating consequences for individuals and for society. Child marriage is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, which aims to eliminate the practice by 2030. Although indicator 5.3.1 measures child marriage among girls, the practice occurs among boys as well. Regardless of gender, marriage before adulthood is a breach of children's rights.



SDG 5



**Achieve
gender equality
and empower all
women and girls**

TARGET 5.3

Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

INDICATOR 5.3.1

Proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18

Key facts



One in four young women in Latin America and the Caribbean were first married or in union before their 18th birthday.



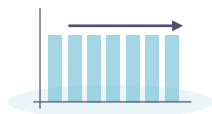
Child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean most often takes the form of an informal union, in which a girl lives with a partner, rather than a formal marriage.



Child brides are more likely to reside in rural areas, to live in poor households and to have less education.



The majority of women who married in childhood gave birth before their 18th birthday; 8 in 10 did so before they turned 20.



While other regions have made progress in reducing child marriage, the prevalence in Latin America and the Caribbean has remained stagnant for 25 years.



If the observed trend continues, by 2030 Latin America and the Caribbean will have among the world's highest levels of child marriage, trailing behind only sub-Saharan Africa.



Among boys, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have some of the highest levels of child marriage worldwide. Nine of the 10 countries with available data show levels above the global average.



Current state of child marriage

One in four young women in Latin America and the Caribbean were first married or in union before their **18th birthday**. The region's prevalence is above the global average, but lower than that of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

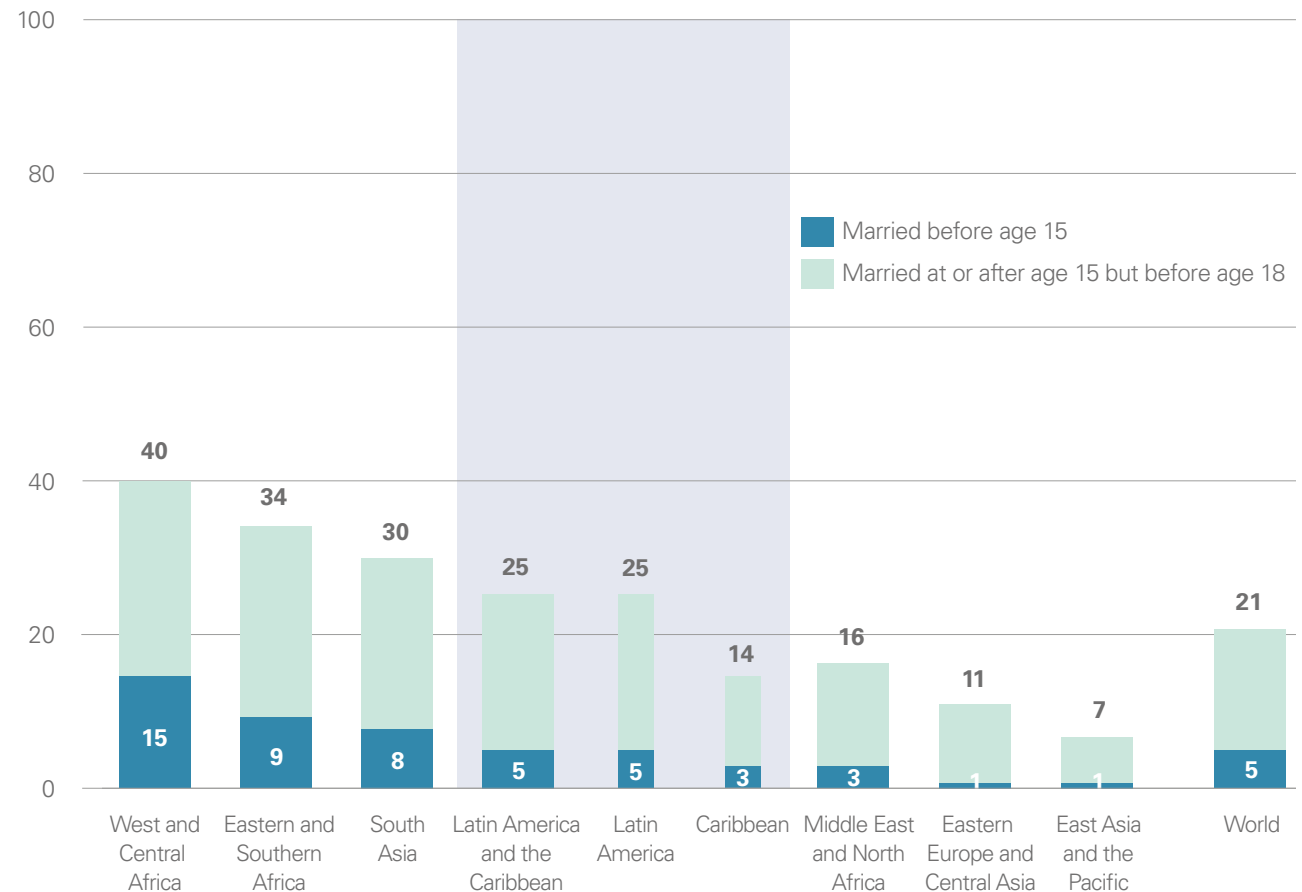
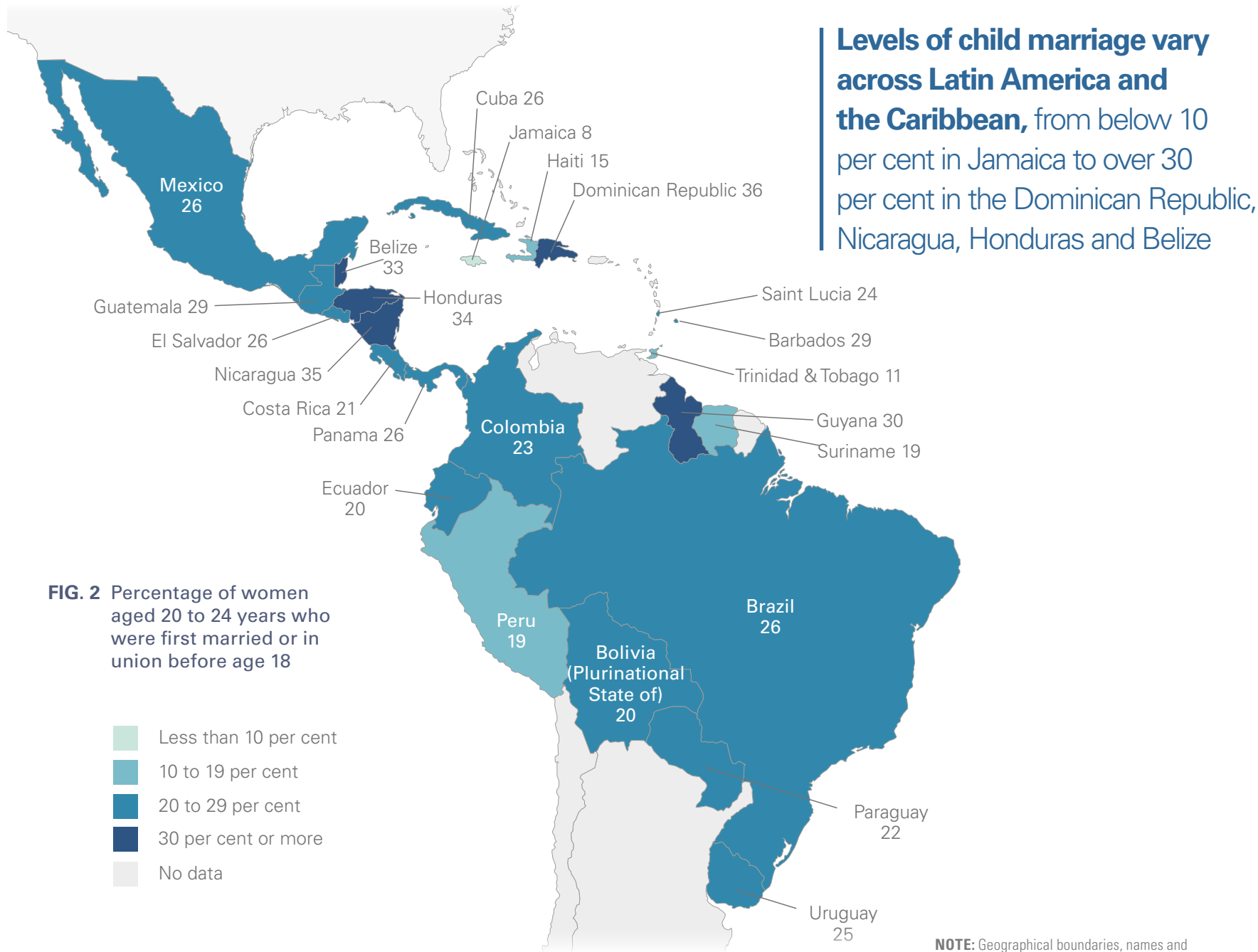


FIG. 1 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, by region



Child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean most often takes the form of an **informal union**, in which a girl lives with a partner, rather than a formal marriage

Figures 3a and 3b illustrate the types of unions reported by adolescent girls. Data shown are limited to girls aged 15 to 17 years who are or were in a union. Since these girls are under 18, they are all considered child brides.

Figure 3b presents a subset of countries in which 'visiting relationships', a social and sexual relationship without cohabitation, are common and were measured, hence the difference in response categories.

Both figures show that most child brides in Latin America and the Caribbean are not formally married, but rather in informal unions.

FIG. 3a Percentage distribution of girls aged 15 to 17 years who were ever married or in union, by current marital status

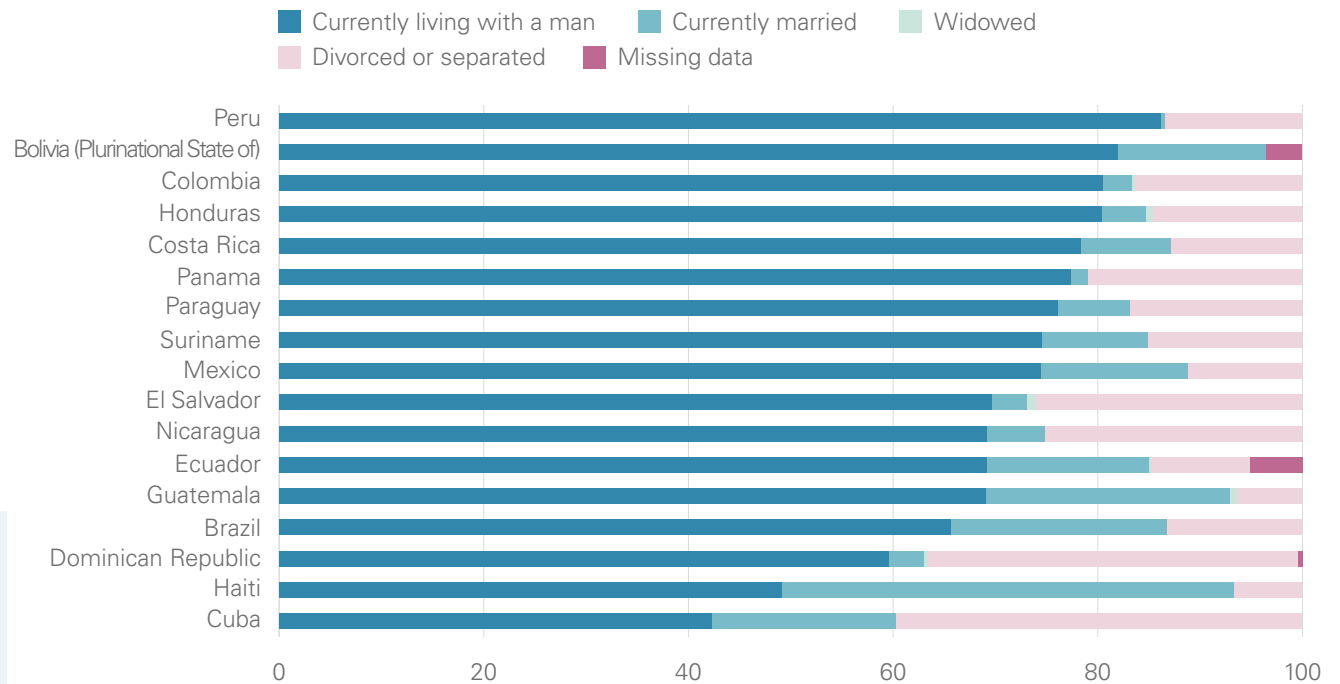
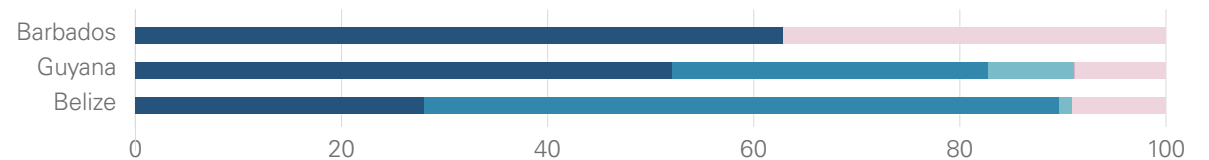


FIG. 3b Currently in a visiting relationship, Currently living with a man, Currently married, Widowed, Divorced, separated or no longer in a visiting relationship, Missing data



NOTE: Only categories with 25 or more unweighted cases are presented. Barbados is based on 25 to 49 unweighted cases. Visiting unions are measured in Barbados, Guyana and Belize as these are countries where the practice is common, but are not an available response category for countries shown in Figure 3a.



Girls most at risk of child marriage

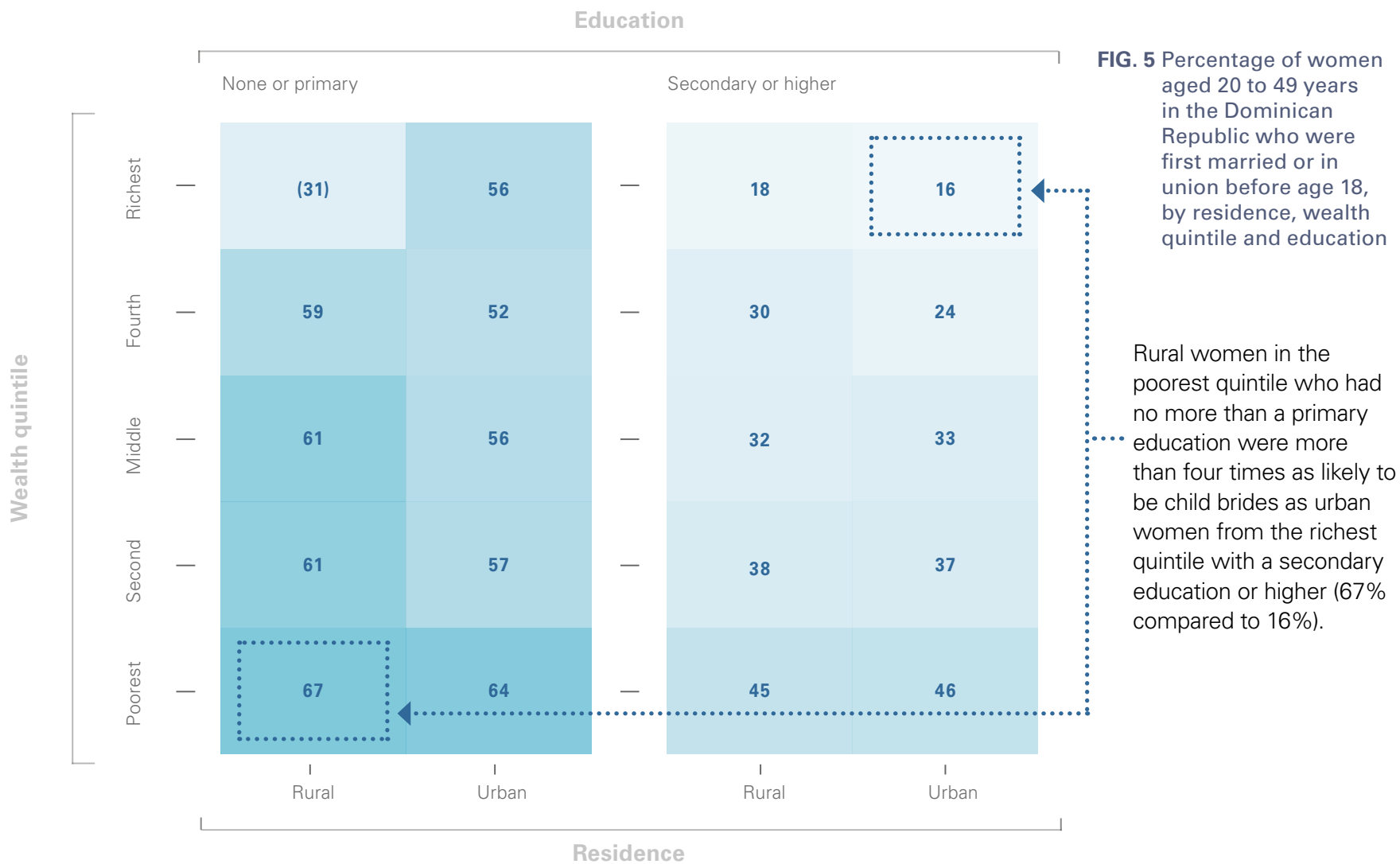
Child brides in the region are more likely to reside in **rural areas, to live in poor households, and to have less education**

FIG. 4 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by residence, wealth quintile and education



NOTE: Analysis is based on a subset of 23 countries with available data by residence covering 86 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20 to 24 years; 20 countries with available data by wealth quintile covering 52 per cent of the population; and 24 countries with data by education covering 86 per cent of the population.

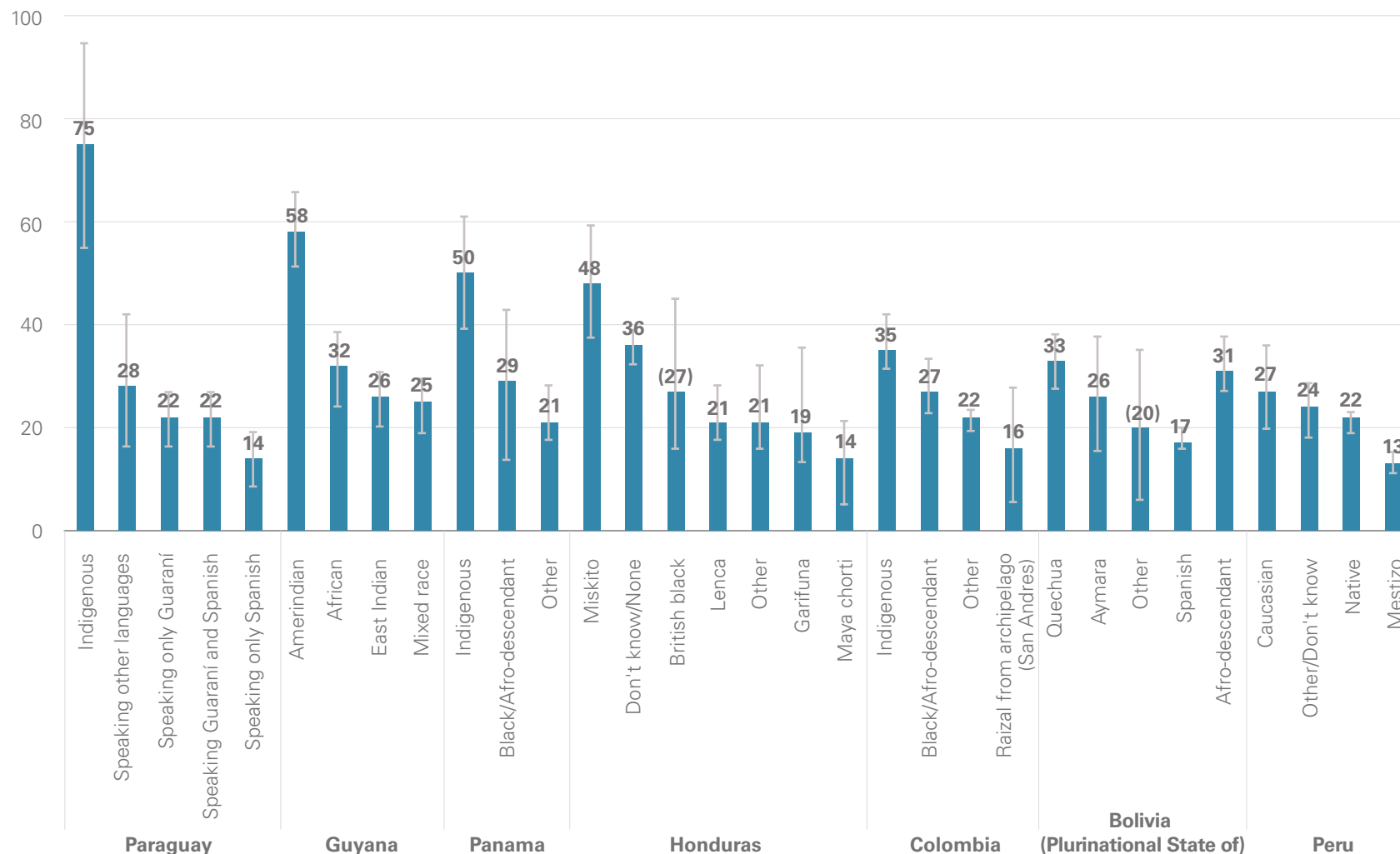
In the Dominican Republic, the country with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the region, the **largest disparities** are seen across **educational levels and wealth quintiles**



NOTE: The Dominican Republic is presented here as an illustrative example, as it is the country in the region with the highest prevalence of child marriage. Only categories with 25 or more unweighted cases are presented. The values in parentheses are based on 25 to 49 unweighted cases.

Ethnicity has a significant relationship with levels of child marriage in some countries

FIG. 6 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by ethnicity or language



NOTE: Countries shown here are those for which the prevalence of child marriage varies by ethnicity, and each has a prevalence in one ethnic group that is statistically significantly higher than the level in at least one other ethnic group. Only categories with 25 or more unweighted cases are presented. The values in parentheses are based on 25 to 49 unweighted cases. The category of Black/Afro-descendant in Colombia also includes the Mulatto and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups. In Peru, the category of Native includes Quechua, Aymara, native or indigenous Amazonian, and other indigenous group or origin; the category of Afro-descendant includes Black/Brown/Zambo/Mulatto/Afro-Peruvian people. The categories presented for Paraguay and Bolivia represent language or mother tongue since data on ethnicity were not collected.



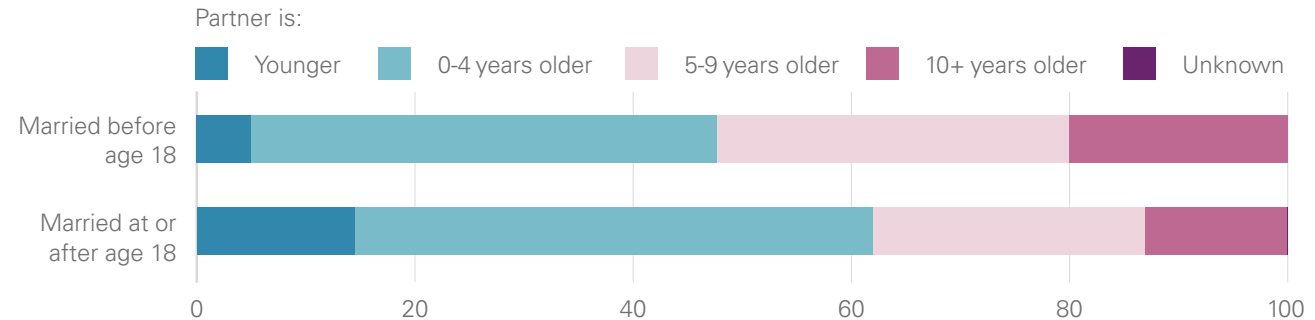


Lives of child brides

Spousal age gap:

One in five child brides is married to a man who is at least 10 years older

FIG. 7 Percentage distribution of spousal age gap between women and their partners, among currently married women aged 20 to 24 years, by age at marriage



Early childbearing: The majority of women who married in childhood gave birth before their 18th birthday, and more than 8 in 10 did so before they turned 20

FIG. 8 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before ages 18 and 20, by age at marriage

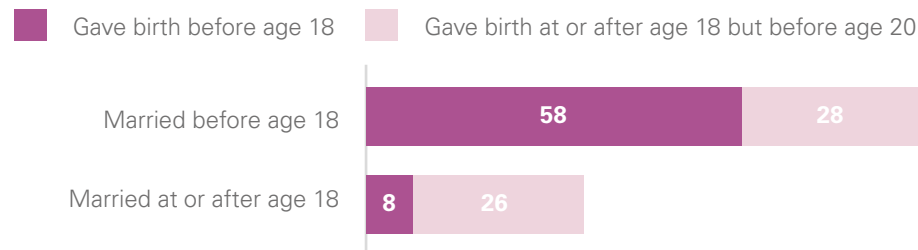
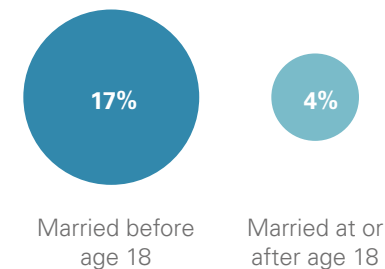


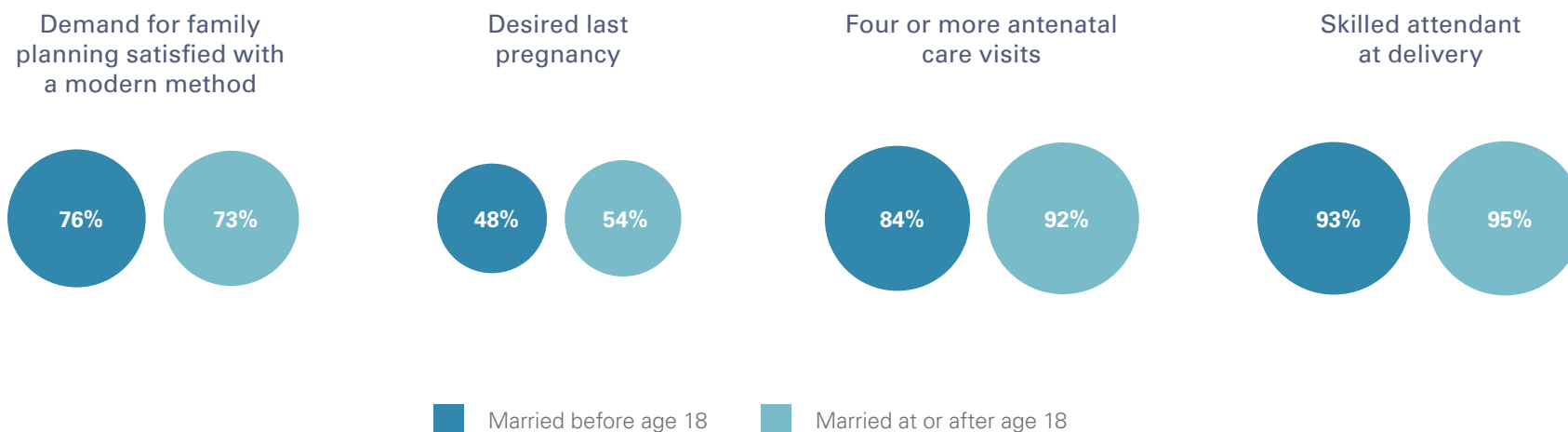
FIG. 9 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who have had three or more live births, by age at marriage



NOTE: Values in Figure 7 are based on 23 countries covering 78 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20 to 24 years. Values in Figure 8 and Figure 9 are based on 20 countries covering 84 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20 to 24 years.

Reproductive health: Across the region, about a quarter of young women do not have their contraceptive needs met with modern methods, but access to antenatal and delivery care is high regardless of age at marriage

FIG. 10 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years whose demand for family planning is satisfied by a modern method, whose last pregnancy was desired, who had four or more antenatal care visits during their last pregnancy, and who had a skilled attendant at the delivery of their last live birth, by age at marriage



NOTE: Values are based on 21 countries covering 83 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20 to 24 years for desired pregnancy, antenatal care and skilled attendant at delivery. Values are based on 18 countries covering 48 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20 to 24 years for demand for family planning.



Empowerment: In countries with data, women are likely to have a say in household decisions, whether they were child brides or not

Employment: In four of five countries with data, child brides were somewhat less likely to be employed than women who married in adulthood or who had not married

FIG. 11 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who participate in household decision-making, by age at marriage

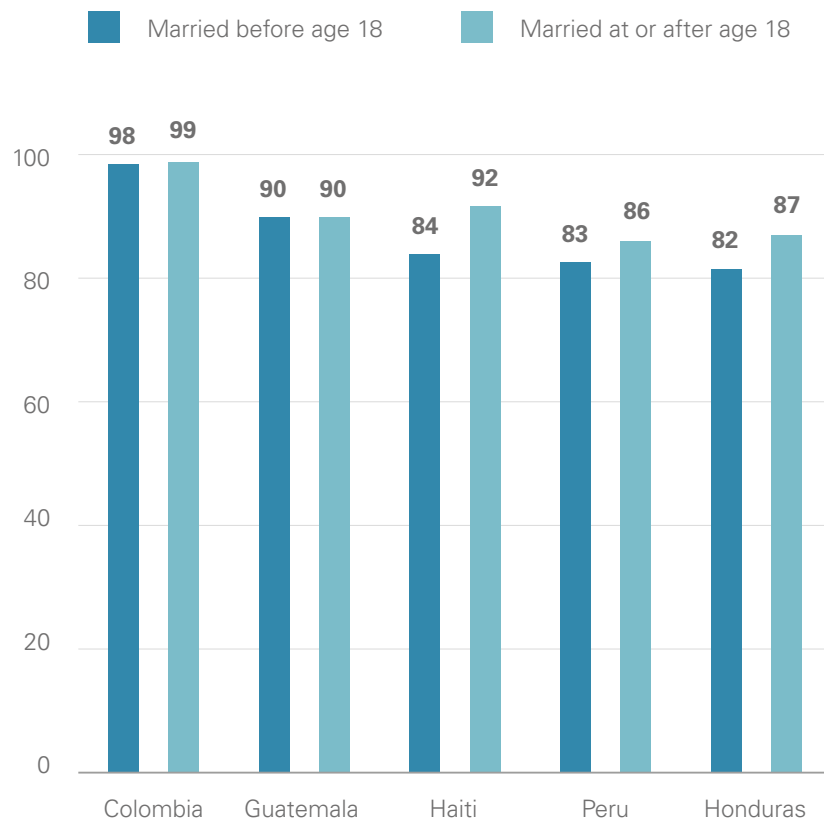
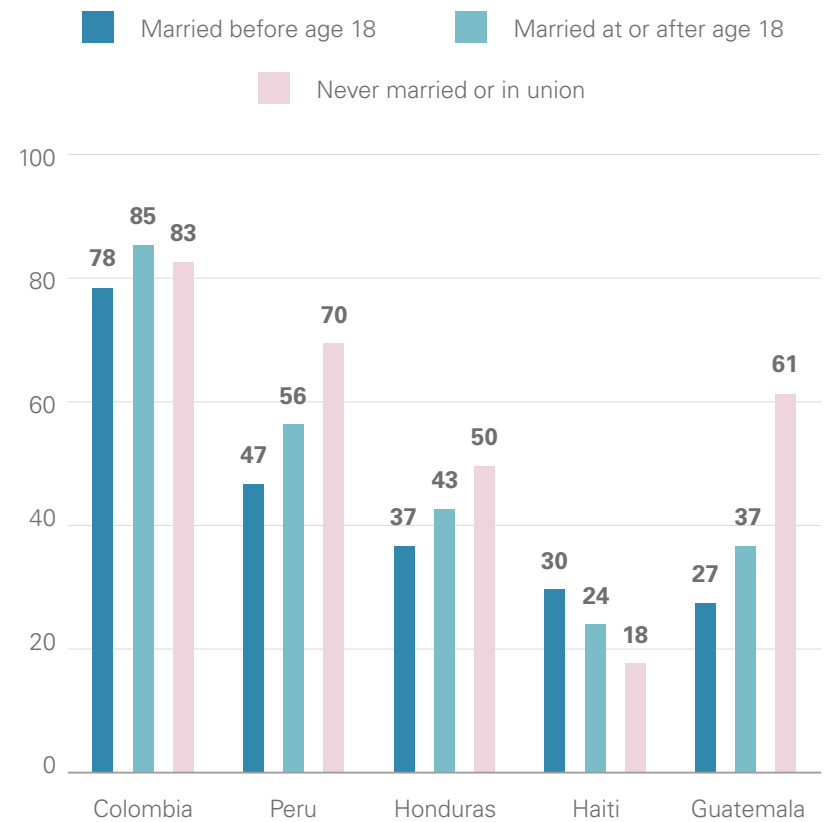


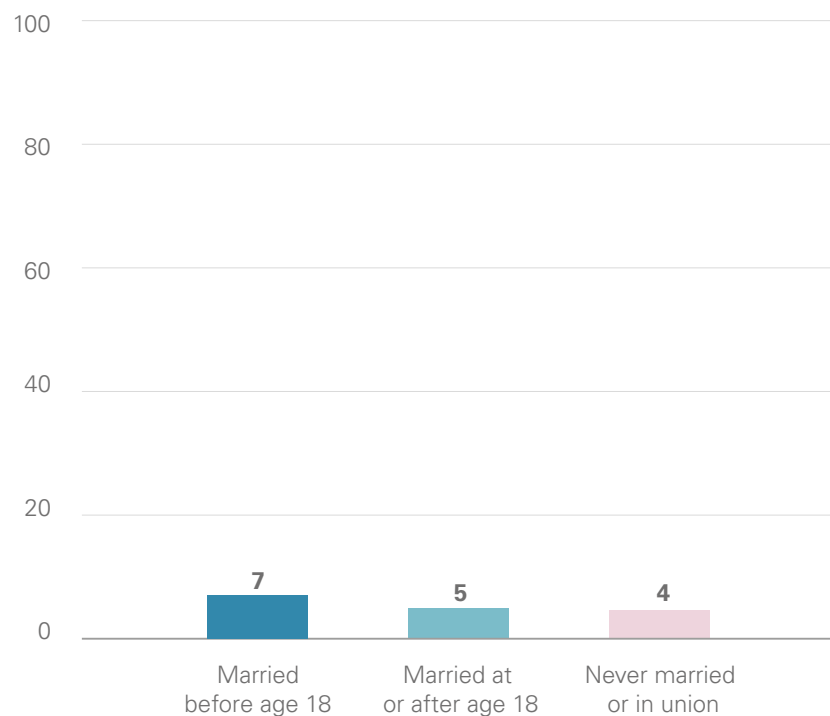
FIG. 12 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were employed and paid cash in the past month, by age at marriage



NOTE: Participation in household decision-making is measured by the woman's self-reported role as either the primary or joint decision maker in at least one of the following decisions: the woman's own health care, large household purchases, household purchases for daily needs, visits to family or relatives, food to be cooked each day and how to spend money earned by the husband.

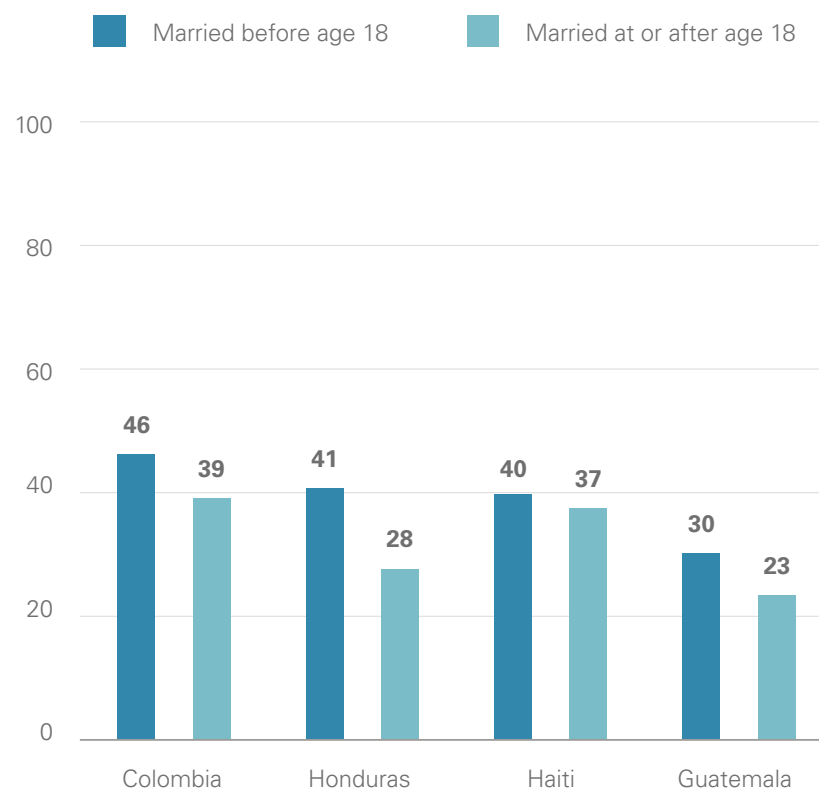
Intimate partner violence: Though most women say wife-beating is not justified, such violence is common. Across four countries with data, at least 3 in 10 women who married in childhood were subjected to violence by an intimate partner

FIG. 13 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who believe a husband is justified in beating his wife under certain circumstances, by age at marriage



NOTE: Values are based on 20 countries covering 49 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20 to 24 years.

FIG. 14 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who were ever subjected to any violence by current or former intimate partner, by age at marriage

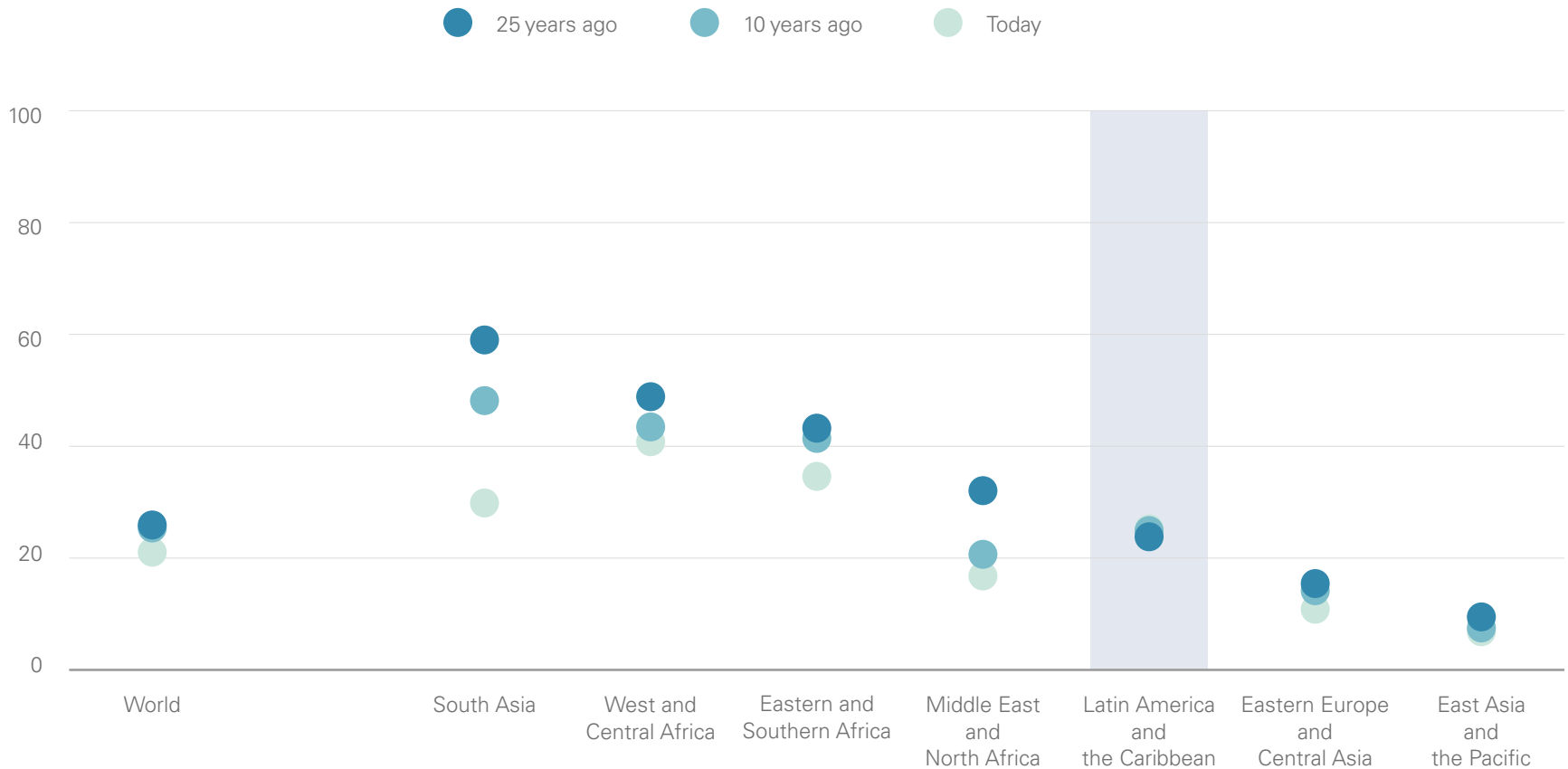




Generational trends in child marriage

While other regions have made progress against child marriage, **in Latin America and the Caribbean the prevalence has remained stagnant for 25 years**

FIG. 15 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by region



Child marriage has remained **steadily at the same level** across Latin America and the Caribbean, with exceptions in only a few countries

FIG. 16 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18

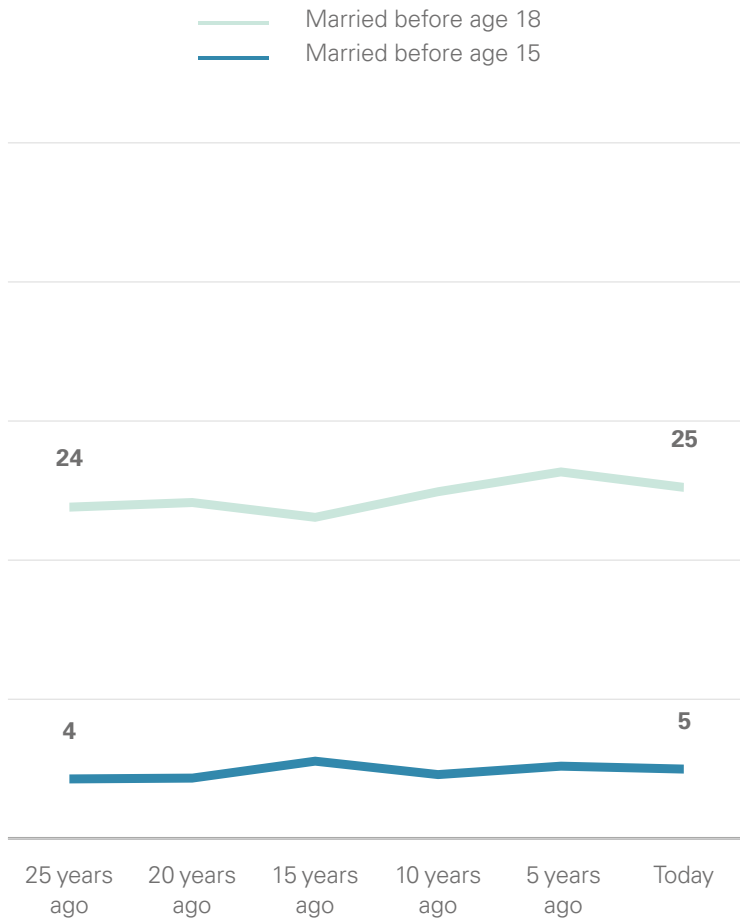
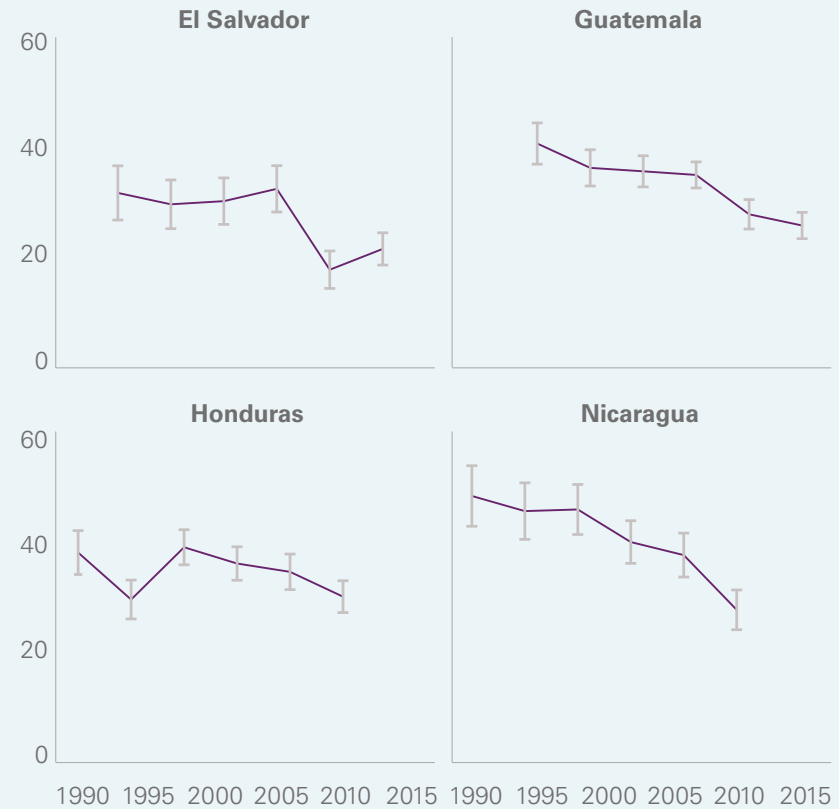


FIG. 17 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua

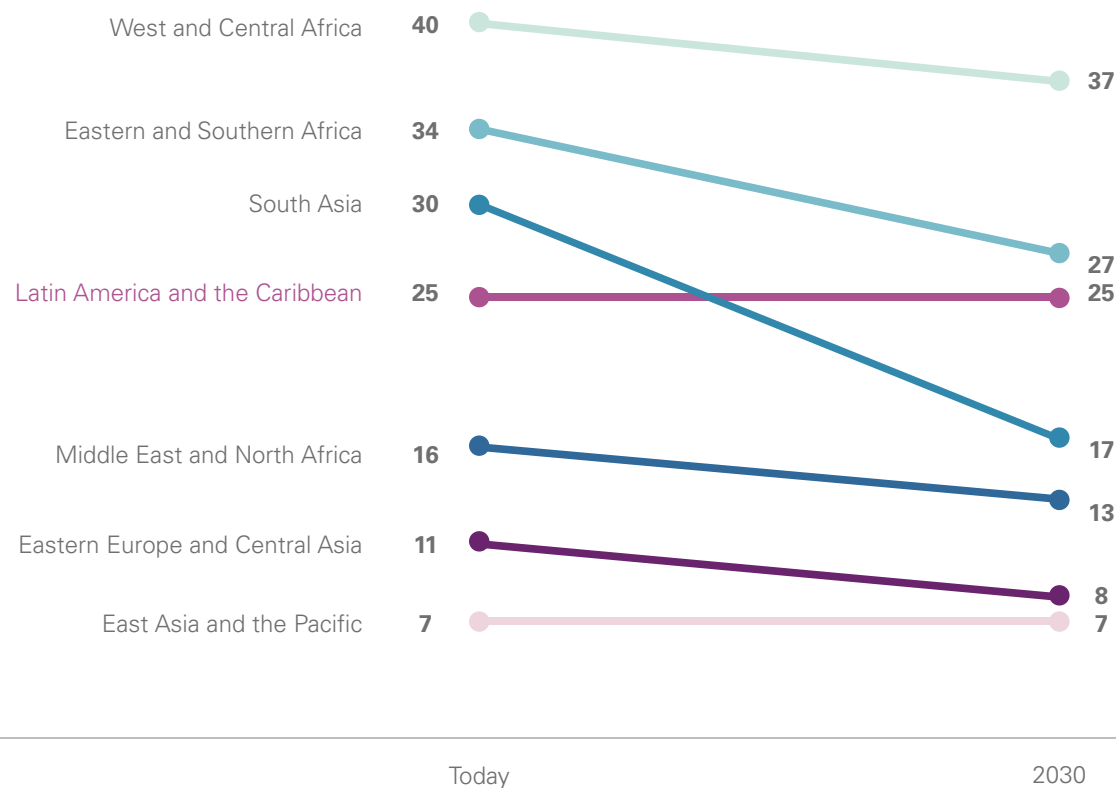
There is no evidence of progress in most countries in the region. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are the exceptions, all with lower levels of child marriage today than 25 years ago. Nonetheless, additional progress is needed.





Looking ahead to 2030

FIG. 18 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, projected, by region



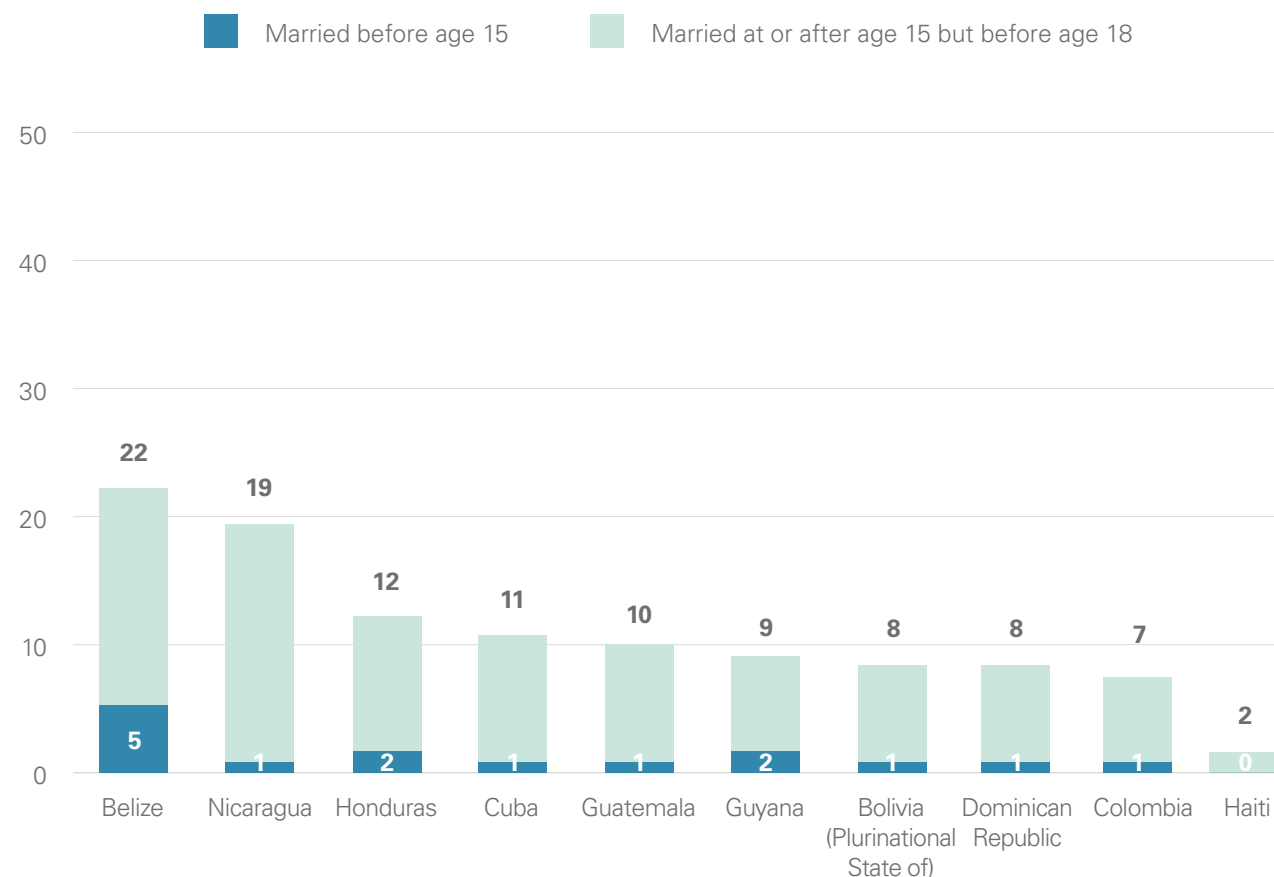
If the observed trend continues, by 2030 Latin America and the Caribbean will have among the **world's highest levels of child marriage**, trailing behind only sub-Saharan Africa



Child marriage among boys

Around **one in five young men** were married or in union before age 18 in Belize and Nicaragua

FIG. 19 Percentage of men aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18



Child marriage is a rights violation for both boys and girls. Though little research has been done on outcomes for child grooms, marriage places boys in an adult role for which they may not be prepared.

Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are among those with the highest levels of the practice. Nine of the 10 countries with data have levels above the global average (3%).

In most high-prevalence countries in the region, child grooms were more likely to be in the poorest households.

In all countries with trend data, the prevalence has been relatively steady over time.

Latin America and the Caribbean Joint Programme for a Region Free of Child Marriage and Early Unions (2018-2021)

Historically, child marriage and early unions have not been at the forefront of development agendas in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). But progress on gender equality is at risk in the region, putting girls in a greater position of vulnerability. LAC currently has the world's second-highest adolescent pregnancy rate; without action, it will earn the title of second-highest prevalence of child marriage in the world by 2030. Gender-based violence, reasons for school drop-out, and the risk of perpetuating cycles of inequalities for affected girls and their children lurk behind both indicators.

The future for girls is bleak without significant investments and concerted actions by all stakeholders to ensure no girl in LAC is left behind.

To end child marriage, UNICEF LAC targets these gender-based obstacles, in line with the UNICEF Gender Action Plan's Targeted Priority on child marriage and early unions.

Aligning efforts

Recognizing the need for systemic change, three United Nations regional offices – UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women – have joined forces to prevent and address child marriage and early unions, formulating the LAC Joint Programme for a Region Free of Child Marriage and Early Unions (2018-2021).

Now focused on five countries (Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico), the plan is to expand regionally. Both the work of UNICEF and that of the joint regional programme prioritize most-at-risk girls, such as those from indigenous, rural and low-income households.

The programme contributes to fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage; it centres on four evidence-based strategies, described below.

ALIGN NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS ON THE AGE OF MARRIAGE AND GENDER EQUALITY

Key activities: Work with women's ministries, parliamentarians and civil society to include measures and commitments in regional/global agendas (e.g., the Regional Conference on Women); Drive evidence-based advocacy to reform the legal age of marriage

Encouraging results to date: In Mexico, UN agencies and a range of partners are working to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18. In 2017, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras removed all legal exceptions to the minimum age of marriage (18 years).

SUPPORT GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT AND TRANSFORM GENDER NORMS

Key activities: Identify and address harmful beliefs and practices that promote child marriage and early unions; Create safe spaces for girls to develop skills and alternate life choices; Work with parents, community

leaders and service providers to reduce acceptance and perpetuation of child marriage and early unions

Encouraging results to date: In the Dominican Republic, girls' clubs and national youth leadership camps were organized to foster leadership skills, girls' empowerment and networks between participants.

PROMOTE POLICIES AND SERVICES THAT ADDRESS THE DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND EARLY UNIONS

Key activities: Ensure institutions within key sectors provide robust responses that prevent child marriage and early unions and protect affected girls from social exclusion

Encouraging results to date: In Belize, a child marriage and early union road map is being prepared that empowers teachers to provide sexual education; expands economic programmes for at-risk, pregnant and/or married adolescent girls; and revises the law to allow adolescent parents and young people in union to reintegrate into schools.

BREAK THE SILENCE NATIONALLY AND REGIONALLY

Key activities: Strengthen evidence on the causes and consequences of child marriage and early unions to inform decision-making and advocacy; Convene like-minded partners to generate movements to end child marriage and early unions; Organize evidence-based campaigns to influence decision-making and generate public debate towards rejecting the practice

Encouraging results to date: Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala are collecting trend data on gender norms to inform actions, while engaging in communications campaigns to raise awareness and promote public dialogue on the issue. In the Dominican Republic, a twitter campaign by UN agencies and partners advocated for legal reforms to the age of marriage; reaching over 7 million people, it coincided with parliamentary debates on child marriage and early unions.

Technical note

To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 18. All references to ‘marriage’ or ‘child brides’ include both formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living together with a partner as if married before age 18. For child marriage among boys, the same definitions apply, referring to men rather than women.

So-called ‘visiting relationships’ are a phenomenon observed in parts of the Caribbean, referring to a social and sexual relationship without cohabitation. In this analysis, visiting relationships are considered a form of informal unions, and the countries for which surveys collect data on this practice are Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago. In all other countries, data on visiting relationships are not available.

The percentage of currently married adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years should not be interpreted as indicative of the risk of being married in childhood. Any prevalence measure among girls under age 18 will be an underestimate of the full extent of the practice, as girls who are unmarried at the time of the data collection may still marry before their 18th birthday.

Aggregate regional estimates for Latin America and the Caribbean are based on 24 countries with comparable available data, covering 86 per cent of the female population in the region. Results of the Brazil National Demographic and Health Survey 2006 (Pesquisa Nacional de Demografia e Saúde da Criança e da Mulher, PNDS) are included since Brazil represents 32 per cent of the female population in the region. For all countries other than Brazil, data are from 2010 to 2017.

The sub-regional estimate for Latin America is based on a subset of 17 countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, covering 86 per cent of the female population in Latin America. The sub-regional estimate for the Caribbean is based on a subset of seven countries: Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, Guyana, Saint Lucia, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago, covering 95 per cent of the female population in the Caribbean.

Global estimates are based on a subset of 105 countries with comparable available data from 2010 to 2017, covering 77 per cent of the global female population. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for North America and Western Europe.

Confidence intervals are not shown in all figures in this publication. Caution is therefore warranted in interpreting the results since apparent differences among groups may not be significant. Key messages were developed taking confidence intervals into account; in cases where the title indicates that there is a difference among different groups or countries, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

Trends in the prevalence of child marriage presented in figures 15 through 17 relied on an age-cohort analysis based on data from the latest available surveys. Projected values in Figure 18 are based on a continuation of observed progress, applying the average annual rate of reduction observed in the past 10 years.

‘Childhood’ refers to the period from birth until the 18th birthday.
‘Adolescence’ refers to the period from ages 10 to 19 years.

A young girl with dark hair is shown in profile, looking out of a window. The window is covered with patterned curtains that have a mix of blue, white, and red designs. The lighting is soft, coming from the window, highlighting her face and the texture of the curtains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This data brief was prepared by the Data and Analytics Section of UNICEF (Claudia Cappa, Colleen Murray, Hyunju Park, Paul Schaettle and Munkhzul Zookhuu) with inputs from the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (Shelly N. Abdool).

DATA SOURCES

UNICEF global databases, 2019, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other nationally representative surveys, 2006 to 2017. For detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>.

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For information on the data in this brochure:

UNICEF

Data and Analytics Section
Division of Data, Research and Policy
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA
Telephone: +1 212 326 7000
Email: data@unicef.org
Website: data.unicef.org

For information on child marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean:

Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office

Building 102, Alberto Tejada St.
City of Knowledge
Panama, Republic of Panama
Telephone: +507 301 7400
Email: uniceflac@unicef.org
Website: www.unicef.org/lac