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Forced child unions: From legal reform to social disruption—Formative research in five communities in Chisec, Alta Verapaz

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**FORCED CHILD UNIONS: FROM LEGAL
REFORM TO SOCIAL DISRUPTION**
FORMATIVE RESEARCH IN FIVE COMMUNITIES IN
CHISEC, ALTA VERAPAZ

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Cecilia Garcés

MAY 2018

The Population Council confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science, and public health research in 50 countries, we work with our partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies that improve lives around the world. Established in 1952 and headquartered in New York, the Council is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization governed by an international board of trustees.

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Executive Summary

Evidence has shown that marriage and forced child unions (CEFM/U) are harmful to the rights and development of girls and adolescents. It has also shown that increasing the minimum marriage age is not enough to eradicate this phenomenon that underlies the practices of social institutions at the community level. We carried out this investigation at the time when a modification to Civil Code 8-2015 was approved, followed by modification 13-2017 to increase the minimum age of marriage in Guatemala, with the purpose of identifying the norms, practices, and attitudes prevailing in the school, family, religion, government, and economy with regard to CEFM/U.

Qualitative research was conducted in five communities of Chisec, Alta Verapaz, where the Abriendo Oportunidades® Program has been implemented by the Population Council. Through life stories, in-depth surveys, and focus groups in which representatives of families, churches, health services, schools, and community development councils participated, information was collected on the practices that occur around CEFM/U, what is known about its legal prohibition, and what are considered to be its causes and the consequences it has for the lives of girls and adolescents. In addition, changes in the practice of marriage and early unions were identified that showed three typical patterns in which they presently occur.

With the information gathered, a radio campaign was designed and carried out in the region. Messages were created and disseminated to parents, local authorities, schools, and churches to raise awareness of the legislation and the negative consequences for girls and adolescents, with the aim of preventing forced child unions by social institutions.

It was clear that there is information about the legal prohibition, as well as the negative consequences for the lives of girls and adolescents. The position of families and other members of the community on the issue varies; however, it is recognized that unions are still occurring with the support of families, religious leaders, and some government representatives. An interesting effect of the legal prohibition is documented in the modification of the treatment provided by midwives and other health providers to pregnant girls and adolescents, who now prefer to refer them to the

official health system because of the legal implications of caring for minors. Three patterns associated with the marriage process were identified: (1) In the past, parents arranged the daughters' marriages without their opinion; (2) In the present, parents arrange marriages or unions to resolve economic issues or to conceal a pregnancy; and (3) marriages or unions are decided by the girls. In the general discourse adolescents are held responsible for being the ones who maintain an interest in early unions in order to reach better spaces of emotional coexistence and economic well-being. The changes that have occurred from one generation to another, such as access to secondary school and technology, present new challenges around the processes of socialization of adolescents that must be addressed through the implementation of an effective, comprehensive education strategy in sexuality.

The report concludes that reform of the law on the minimum age for marriage has brought about some change to the practice of child marriage, but its scope is limited. This research recommends actions that cause social disruption by all social institutions to the practices and norms that affect girls and adolescents.

Background

Child marriage and forced union—CEFM/U—refers to any civil marriage or de facto union in which one or both parties are under 18 years of age (United Nations, n.d.). Around the world each year, 15 million girls are united/married before they are 18 years old. This equates to 28 girls every minute and one every two seconds.³¹ CEFM/U is recognized as a problem throughout the world due to its adverse effects on girls' access to their rights and well-being, as it marks the end of their childhood, forcing them to perform activities for which they are not physically or emotionally prepared.²

Marriage before the age of 18 is associated with an increase in fertility and population growth, because early marriage lengthens the time that girls and women remain in the fertile age and shortens the time between generations.⁶ This practice also undermines a girl's ability to access education that allows her to develop her autonomy and exposes her to the dangerous consequences of childbirth before physical maturity.¹⁷ Women who marry at younger ages tend to have a greater age difference with their husbands, as well as less power and autonomy in their relationships,^{13,15} and consequently have a higher risk of domestic violence.^{26,6,28,23}

The Population Council has studied the negative effects of CEFM/U and the living conditions associated with its practice in order to understand the social institutions that legitimize and maintain it.⁶ These studies tend to highlight the relevance of education, poverty, religion, and traditions as associated factors. The prevalence of CEFM/U tends to persist in remote, rural, and poor areas.⁶ The women most likely to marry as girls are those who live in rural areas, come from poor households, are in a context of humanitarian crisis, and have little or no education.^{16,33} CEFM/U is more likely to be lower among women who attended secondary school than among those who did not.²⁸ In situations of poverty, families depend on CEFM/U and migration as strategies for economic survival.²³

It is known that delaying marriage can improve girls' health and productivity opportunities and that these benefits extend to their children, their family, their community, and their country.¹ Due to the harmful effects of CEFM/U, its elimination has become a major priority in the global and multi-country agenda. Objective 5 of the Sustainable Development

Goals calls for the eradication of child marriage.² Clear and consistent laws that prohibit CEFM/U are recognized as an important first step toward eradication²⁸; however, questions persist about the effectiveness of this strategy. As in other countries where CEFM/U is practiced, Guatemala reformed its Civil Code in November 2015³ raising the legal age to marry (to 18 years). This reform still included exceptions to allow marriages at age 16 with the authorization of a judge. On August 17, 2017, another amendment was made to the Civil Code in which all exceptions to marrying before age 18 were eliminated.⁴ This change, from the institution of the State to influence the practices and norms surrounding the population, is relevant among public policies and is a first step toward eradication; however, Guatemala still faces difficulties with respect to the application of the law, as it is not enough if the circumstances that determine girls' exposure to forced child unions are not modified. Even with the appropriate law, the practice persists for a variety of complex and interdependent reasons. Men maintain the rule of power in most aspects of life by restricting the rights of women and girls, denying them the exercise of equality in their home and in their community. This inequality is reproduced through gender norms that place greater value on boys and men than on women.¹⁶

Practices, norms, and laws derive from social institutions that place certain groups of people at a disadvantage, forcing them into vulnerable situations, and creating barriers to their well-being.⁸ CEFM/Us are an example of this, since they are influenced by community norms, household poverty, and a lack of opportunities,¹ all of which occur within the framework of social institutions. Focusing on social institutions allows us to analyze the context surrounding CEFM/U, observing the social practices in which the phenomenon is involved and identifying those that add to girls' and adolescents' vulnerability.

Although a wide range of definitions of social institutions have been generated, in this study we understand them as a complex, integrated, and enduring set of norms, laws, and practices that seek to preserve the basic social needs and values of a human group (Harper, Jones, and Watson, 2012). There are five broad dimensions—meta institutions—in which social institutions operate: family, government and politics, economy, education, and religion.¹⁰

These dimensions affect the entire life trajectory of girls and women, and establish the broad parameters within which particular forms of norms, values, and practices coexist. In other words, the family is not homogeneous and static and its forms and dynamics vary according to the context.¹⁰ Although these recurrent social practices persist over time, they are also susceptible to change based on internal contradictions or in light of changes in the context, from other social institutions.¹⁰ It is essential to know what rewards and sanctions families, girls, and adolescents experience from social institutions when they repeat, sustain, or modify practices related to CEFM/U.³² This framework of analysis also addresses the existing link between norms, practices, and the perception of group identity by which various actors, including girls and adolescents themselves, replicate tacitly or explicitly their support for CEFM/U.

In Guatemala, existing data on the problem are very limited and come mainly from national statistics and information associated with adolescent pregnancies. The most recent official statistics on CEFM/U at the national level are from 2009, and the prevalence of child marriage is registered as 7.7% of 15–19-year-old girls.¹⁸

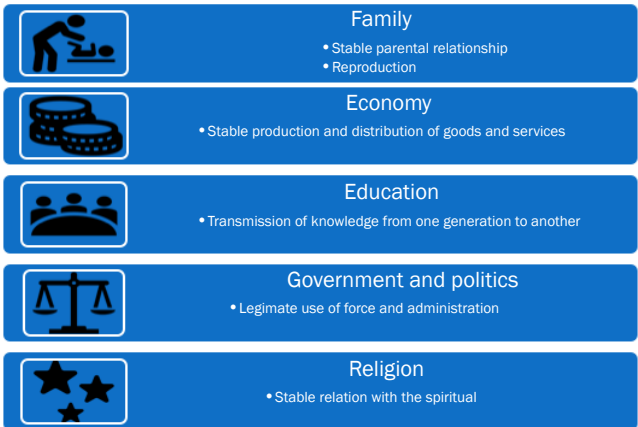
As in other parts of the world, in Guatemala CEFM/U has been practiced for generations. Some communities consider it a way to protect the honor of girls and families before the possibility of premarital sex.¹⁷ The desire to escape poverty and domestic violence, exacerbated by social pressure not to become an “old maid,” perpetuates CEFM/U as a practice accepted by the community.²³ A study in Chisec, Guatemala determined that although girls have increasing

participation in the decisionmaking process with regard to CEFM/U, their choices must be in tune with the preferences of their family and community, government policies and legal norms, education, and employment opportunities.³²

At the moment there are no evaluations of which intervention approaches work best to eliminate CEFM/U in Guatemala. The main studies focus on adolescent pregnancy, describe the methodology of the interventions to limit CEFM/U, analyze their link to sexual exploitation, and consider the agency of the girls. Local evidence is necessary in order to design successful strategies for the eradication of this phenomenon.

This research explores the practices, norms, and perceptions around CEFM/U of the representatives of various social institutions at the community level. The government is approached through community authorities, health providers, the influence of the municipality, the courts, and the National Registry of Persons—RENAP. The role of education is evidenced through the action or inaction of the school. The economy is analyzed by latent transactions in this practice. For families we obtain their expectations and norms around reproduction, which, in many cases, are dictated by religion, citing a moral and sacred character. We identify the social institutions involved in producing, sustaining, and replicating the vulnerabilities of girls and adolescents, seeking to understand how these are constructed and how they can be limited.¹⁰ The information revealed by this investigation will allow the design of informative actions directed toward actors from diverse social institutions with the purpose of provoking the modification of those practices, norms, and laws that validate CEFM/U.

FIGURE 1. The five broad dimensions in which social institutions operate: family, government and politics, economy, education and religion



Authors' elaboration based on the dimensions model proposed by Harper, Jones, and Watson (2012).

Methodology

This investigation was designed in 2016—within the framework of Decree 8-2015, which increased the age of marriage to adulthood—with the purpose of exploring the practices, norms, and perceptions of the CEFM/U phenomenon. There were representatives from social institutions in five communities of the municipality of Chisec, Alta Verapaz^a at the time the modification to the minimum age of marriage was made. Based on the conceptual framework of the ecological model used by the Population Council,^b the methodology and research instruments were designed. These were presented to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Population Council and received an exemption from a full review because they did not put the adults who participated in the research at risk.

With the support of key participants in each of the five communities, the field research team—comprised of 2 social research experts and 10 mentors trained in the social research process with an emphasis on human rights—

collected the information, including cards with the socioeconomic data of the people consulted for the investigation. During the months of September to December 2016, focus groups, life stories, and in-depth interviews were conducted with midwives, leaders, community founders, fathers and mothers, teachers, municipal authorities, and community authorities. The instruments were implemented in the mother tongue of the participants; in all cases informed consent was collected documenting free and voluntary participation, as well as authorization for the use of the information obtained.

The information collected was transcribed, translated into Spanish,^c and systematized in qualitative scoring matrices, according to the research instrument and the participant subject. The collected discourses were analyzed to identify the perceptions, norms, and practices around CEFM/U coming from the social institutions. The director of the National Registry of Persons (RENAP), upon learning of the inves-

TABLE 1. Techniques, participants, and information collected

Research technique	Participants	Quantity
Focus group	Mothers between 23 and 78 years.	5 focus groups
Focus group	Community leaders: founders, members of the Community Development Council, school teachers, religious leaders.	5 focus groups
Life stories	Women between 35 and 55 years old who were under the age of 11 to 15 years when they married.	5 life stories
Life stories	Men who were married to a female minor.	2 life stories
In-depth interview	Parents, mothers, midwives, community leaders, health service officials, RENAP representative.	22 in-depth interviews

^a The Population Council has been implementing the Abriendo Oportunidades® Program in Chisec, Alta Verapaz since 2013, creating groups of girls and adolescents at the community level in alliance with COCODES and families. To date, it has worked in 50 communities in the municipality; trained 35 community mentors; and cared for more than 2000 girls, adolescents, and young people. Q'eqchi' is the mother tongue of most of the research participants, so the data collection was done in this language.

^b The ecological model involves adults, parents, teachers, leaders, and other decisionmakers in the community to promote the cause of girls' empowerment as a strategy that impacts the development of the entire community.

^c The translation into Spanish was done by Lic. Arturo Chub, a Q'eqchi' anthropologist with certification in Spanish–Q'eqchi' translation. The systematization and translation of the information was validated together with the field research team to preserve the original meaning of the information collected.

tigation, asked the data collection team to compare the registration records of births before and after the approval of Decree 8-2015.

Due to ethical and security considerations, we decided not to include in the investigation underage youngsters who had been married or were in unions, so we do not have input from the experiences or perceptions of this population sector. All participants were of legal age.

Results

The results below are organized according to the social institution to which they refer. For each one, how each of the three models manifests is illustrated.

This investigation reveals that, in the communities investigated, despite the prohibition of marriage between/with minors, forced child unions continue to prevail in practice. It is clear that actors in all of the social institutions are aware of the changes in the law, and the harmful consequences that CEFM/Us have on the health and lives of girls and adolescents. The investigation describes practices and rules that families and religion use to reinforce discrimination against women. It demonstrates the great absence of the government and education as key actors to enforce the law and strengthen the agency of girls and adolescents. Through life stories it is possible to identify conditions that are usually present around CEFM/Us such as poverty, violence, and lack of social networks. It collects the perceptions of adults, from their roles in various social institutions, about the intergenerational increase in access to technology, education, and socialization that teenagers have today. Next, the findings related to the different social institutions studied are detailed.

The family: As a process of socialization, education transcends the school environment. In this sense, it is clear that the family and religion are both institutions that can modify the social norms related to CEFM/U. Among the responses is the beginning of a change in perceptions and discourses on this phenomenon. In this sense an adult woman who was married at just over 15 years of age commented: *“Today, I say that it is not good for girls to get married because it is a very big responsibility. I advise my daughters to take care of themselves and use family planning, because now there is information in the health center”* (life story, adult woman married as a minor). Members of the community say they know why the age of marriage has been delayed; for example, a mother who participated in a focus group commented: *“They have to marry after they get their DPI—identification document—at 18 years. This is so they can enjoy their youth and can continue studying in a school”* (focus group, 23-year-old mother). However, family and religious actions surrounding pregnant adolescents document continuity in the processes of exclusion and the conditions that

The life histories of adult women who endured CEFM/U allowed them to identify its effect on their life trajectory. They present a point of reference for the identification of modifications that have been gradually introduced in the context of CEFM/U. This approach is useful for illustrating inequities through the perspective of both gender and generations.

force the couple's union. Such is the example of a father who argues that if his daughter does not agree to marry, *“it is because she only wants to have fun with any man and wants to be with several men. If she only joins an informal union, it means that she is not sure and that she wants to have another husband, because she did not like the one who is asking for her”* (interview, father of a family).

Family poverty also promotes girls' interest in leaving home. Comments such as the following one abound, reflecting the condition of poverty as an acceptable explanation for joining unions at an early age: *“What we ate was chili with pure water and that is why I decided to join a union, because I saw the need in our family”* (focus group, 23-year-old woman). Through the constitution of a new family, the adolescent may opt for a better economic condition while discharging her own family from the cost of her maintenance. *“Around the same time I had a relationship that lasted a year and then I joined him in an informal union. His parents came to ask me and mine did not want to accept, but I wanted to get married. I thought that marriage was the best thing for my parents because we were so many siblings, there would be fewer expenses, and I wanted to have my own things”* (life story, adult woman married as a minor).

The investigation found that CEFM/Us respond to the norm which determines that it is the responsibility of fathers and mothers to ensure that their daughters marry, as a mechanism for maintaining the integrity of the family by acting as a safeguard for the adolescent's sexuality. The responses of the focus groups confirmed that pregnancy is a condition that demands union and marriage. *“If she is pregnant, we parents, we force them to live together or marry so that we are not ashamed of having a child without a father”* (focus group, Secretary of COCODE).

Although multiple consequences of CEFM/U were mentioned, those related to violence stand out. Most of the life stories of adult women who were married or living together as minors, account for the physical and emotional violence they suffered as girls and continuing into their marriages through adulthood. In these cases, violence against girls was inflicted by the father and in some cases by the mother, in school or on the way to it by teachers, their partner, men in the community, or students. The motivations for such infringement were diverse; at home they had to do with their work in the home or alcoholism. Once the new couple is formed, girls and adolescents confront violence in this new domestic space, being forced to assume the subordinate role assigned to them as women. Regarding girls and adolescents living in unions, a woman explained that: “They suffer a lot because they do not know their job. From there, physical violence begins and they do not know how to take care of their children” (focus group, 33-year-old woman).

The social pressure for the girl to fulfill her expected gender role is exercised through physical and emotional violence as a continuum from childhood that in some cases extends to adult life. As a community facilitator on this aspect explains: *“When they ask a girl of 13 to marry or to live in a union with a person older than her or with one of the same age, (...) the mother-in-law begins to order her to do things in the home, it’s worse if the girl cannot work well; this is where the problems start. The man begins to insult her because his mother asks him where he got this useless woman, and when the girl is pregnant and begins to have a headache, or gets more nervous the man insults her, kicks her, or hits her every time.”*

Some of the patterns identified with respect to the role of the family in relation to CEFM/U include specific roles that each member of the family plays. While the father of the family decides what the marriage will be like, the mother is in charge of talking to the girl and convincing her. The siblings pressure and advise the girl to obey their parents. The grandparents accompany the parents during the request. The girl obeys. In this framework it is understood that father and mother continue to exercise control over the life of their daughter and have the authority to exercise coercive sanctions against her.

In addition to the unions imposed by the parents, there were cases in which the adolescents chose to live in unions. This supposedly arises from a desire for a better life—economical and emotional—than the one that the young people

“If I broke a container, in punishment she (the mother) would cut my skin with one of the pieces. At three o’clock in the morning we had to get up to grind the corn and if I did not wake up, she would throw water on me to get me up. They told me that I had to learn to be able to take care of my husband. My father said that because we were women we had to get married because the man was going to support us and that all we were going to do was take care of him and our children.”

Life story, woman united as a minor

have with their family. Some participants argued that this is possible as a result of an increase in the area of socialization that adolescents have today—via phones, technology, social networks, and school. *“When we grew up there were no cell phones and we did not communicate and we did not know what a cell phone was. Now 12-year-old girls have a cell phone and with only that the boy can call and say that he needs to meet somewhere”* (focus group, 31-year-old woman). The community perceives that there is a progressive modification of family dynamics in which the authority of the father and mother gives in to a supposed autonomy assumed by the daughters. This perception is demonstrated in the following comment: *“The girl’s father and mother is the cell phone and what the parents do is warn you but only because they are left in shame, and if you are already pregnant you are obligated to marry”* (focus group, 50-year-old woman). According to the community, this situation threatens the integrity of adolescents because it is no longer possible to give them advice or determine what happens with their life. Thus, fathers and mothers comment that they feel that it is difficult for them to protect their daughter from a partner who has not been chosen by them. *“There are many problems because if they fall in love on the street, in school, or somewhere else when they live together or get married there are a lot of problems because there is no one to ask for her”* (focus group, 52-year-old woman).

Religion: The community mentions pastors, priests, elders of the church, ministers of the word, women’s groups, and religious administrators as important actors in religion. Although Mayan spirituality is practiced in the Chisec area, its actors did not figure prominently in the dialogues that were held.

The information collected shows that churches do not endorse marriages or unions between minors, but there is

“The parents are the ones who decide if a girl is going to live in a union or marry. (...) there are young people who are already planning to get married ... there is nothing they can do, but for me that is a lie and then they split up.”

Community facilitator 1, interview

also no alarm or complaint about it. Although unions often precede marriage, it is the religious ritual that legitimizes the union of the couple regardless of age.

The pastor and the priest play an important role in the ritual of the request and they always give advice on the Bible and the duties of the man and the woman. They also reinforce traditional gender roles such as the morally accepted family order. This religious authority accompanies families when they agree to relinquish the girl and their blessing indicates the moral acceptance of the union. Through the ritual of marriage the union of a couple is legitimized. In most cases it takes place many years after the union occurs. *“The wedding came later, it could take a long time and the marriage was formalized in the church”* (life story, 70-year-old man). As a social sanction, single mothers or those who were living as a couple and then separated were morally discredited. Religion develops a process of social exclusion toward them and their children if they oppose marriage or if they are single mothers through: (1) exclusion from participating in positions within the Church, (2) denial of baptism for their children, (3) condemnation to hell for living in sin, and (4) promotion of shame and humiliation before the community. A 39-year-old woman comments that: *“When a girl becomes pregnant, the COCODES and the midwife must be made aware. They say that they have to get married and when they want to entrust their children to the Church, when they are not married, they cannot baptize a child”* (focus group, 39-year-old woman).

The economy: Socioeconomic data collected among participants in the five communities reveal that they are mainly engaged in trade and agriculture. The monthly family income varies between Q.600.00 to Q.2000.00 (equivalent in US dollars to \$82 to \$274). This amount is insufficient for the maintenance of families of 6 to 10 members when the basic food basket is Q.3,697.11 Limited access to and little work on the land, unemployment, and fluctuations in crop prices are conditions that surround the girl’s environment and expose her to poverty, migration, and violence. In this context, it is reported that families resort to CEFM/U

as a means of distributing the economic burden (the cost of child support) and of acquiring a production mechanism (the work of the son-in-law).

At present three conditions of life are maintained: poverty, violence, and discrimination against women. Most of the women consulted affirm that they are not originally from the communities where they currently live. Their fathers and mothers lived on rented land or farms where they worked as farmhands such that access to land was conditioned on their loan of labor with insecure conditions and precarious access to services. They also mention the conditions of poverty as a limitation to accessing education, health services, and food. *“In the hacienda there was a stream where we washed clothes, the dishes, the cornmeal and we also bathed there because we did not have a faucet or a sink”* (life story, 58-year-old-woman).

In addition to the moral imperative of keeping girls’ honor, marriage and forced early union means the transfer of the girl in exchange for an economic payment of work or goods. The women consulted affirm that one of the reasons to accept being married was poverty in the home. Marrying or living together would help her family not to worry about feeding and dressing her. The investigation confirms that this norm is still valid today, according to the testimonies of the mixed focus groups where they indicate that families with scarce resources quickly agree to give their daughters away to resolve debts or because of their inability to support their children. One participant stated that: *“There are families who do not have enough financial resources and have many children and if someone comes to ask for a daughter, the parents immediately accept so that they no longer have so many children to support and the siblings are happy that someone leaves the family home”* (focus group, 36-year-old woman).

Education: Life stories reveal that one of the limitations to girls’ continuing with their studies lies in the harassment exercised by their peers and by teachers, both inside and outside the school. This was one of the reasons why parents removed them from school. Thus the testimony of a woman who was eventually forced to marry: *“When I was 12 years old I started to study, but because of the distance between my home and school, I stopped going. Also, when I left school, sometimes on the street I found boys were hugging me and I did not like that, for that reason I only went for a month. Maybe I could have continued, but my mom pulled me out”* (life story, 34-year-old woman).

“It starts at school, at the basic level the problem begins, when girls have just turned 12 they get very happy because their hormones are off and they already want to have a boyfriend and no matter how much you scold them, they do not understand.”

Testimony of mother during focus group

Throughout the study, there were no reports that the school carried out affirmative actions to prevent the dropout of girls and adolescents; or actions to prevent sexual harassment or to generate safe environments. Nor were any affirmative actions mentioned—by the school, the family, or the community—that directed attention to the elimination of harassment and the guarantee of the rights of girls. When addressing the link between education and CEFM/U, far from identifying the school as an ally, the community refers to it as a threat because it is a space of socialization without family supervision, which for many mothers is unfamiliar because they never attended school. Formal education is limited and does not involve strong actions to increase the attendance of adolescents after puberty. In its curricular content, as well as in its daily practices, it accepts traditional norms and legitimizes violence against girls and adolescents.

From the Central Government/Community Government:

The State recognizes that CEFM/Us are a problem that hinders girls’ futures. In addition, the State of Guatemala has ratified international treaties and agreements regarding the rights of children and youth. Although there are legal sanctions, it was not evident in the investigation that the government assumes forceful and sustained actions to eradicate CEFM/U. Since the modification to Civil Code 13-2017 has existed it has been circumvented and there is no follow-up by the authorities. Lack of resources or capabilities are blamed for this.

In the communities studied, the legitimate authority of the Community Development Committees (COCODE) is recognized. These committees are a product of Law Decree 11-2002 whose objective is to promote the participation of the members of a community in public management to carry out the process of democratic development planning.

When Decree 8-2015 came into effect, the municipality undertook actions to make the community aware of it. The COCODES were summoned to announce it and the sanctions that would apply to those who broke the rule by

“Now there is a law, but people and young people do not understand it and do not believe in the law. We can’t do anything if they live together, the law doesn’t know anything about what is happening. They are doing it secretly. Now the law prohibits marriage in childhood; for example, if I wanted to marry one of my 12-year-old daughters, a secretary wouldn’t receive me at the desk; the current law is very hard.”

Testimony during focus group

authorizing marriages in their community. Similarly, information meetings convened by the Health Center were held to inform the midwives so that they would refer pregnant minors for childbirth in the hospitals. The measure has been useful in informing and raising awareness about the damage done to girls and adolescents by early marriages and pregnancies. The population recognizes that marriage between/with minors will be punishable by jail or fine and that economic exchange in the negotiation of marriage (trafficking in persons) is considered a crime.

Nevertheless, the inability to enforce rights and apply the established sanctions leaves children in the region vulnerable; de facto unions continue to be recurrent practices that are simply not registered under a marriage agreement. The research documented strategies that were used to evade Decree 8-2015 such as notarial deeds of marriages between/with minors that registered dates prior to the date of issuance of the decree and the registration of newborns as children of their grandparents. With the new decree, RENAP is obligated to report as a crime any unions that involve minors. Of the 223 birth records registered in RENAP during the investigation period, six cases of pregnancies in girls (between 11 to 13 years old) were reported to the MP; the records of adolescents aged 14 to 17 years were not reported. Although the RENAP reports unions of minors to the MP, there is no follow-up for various reasons (there are no resources to pay for lawyers, the community is opposed, etc.). After the approval of Decree 8-2015, Chisec births registered by RENAP indicate that 59.19% of mothers were between 14 and 17 years old; data that contrast with the registered age of the parents where 44.84% are 25 years old. Although the marriages are no longer registered, unions between adolescent girls and older men continue.

Discussion of Results

This research is a case study whose results apply only to the participating communities in this particular time period. Because of the methodology used, the sample is small and its integration varied among the communities as a result of the response to the call. Given the sensitivity of the topic, life stories were conducted with adult women who were married/in unions before the age of 15.

The results show that there is a transition—to differing degrees—toward the elimination of CEFM/U in social institutions. In this regard, three types of CEFM/U can be classified: (1) As in the past, parents arrange the marriages and unions of their daughters without their having any say; (2) fathers and mothers arrange marriages or unions to save family morals and hide a pregnancy; and (3) marriages and unions are the outcome of decisions made by the young women. In the first case, when parents are responsible for the union, their right to intervene is recognized when they identify something in the relationship that is not right for their daughter. In cases where the girls themselves decide to marry, it is established as a norm that neither their father nor their mother can intervene in cases where they identify something harmful in the relationship.

Throughout the investigation, adolescents were clearly penalized when studying at the basic or diversified level; at that stage puberty and adolescence coincide with the myth that girls are suitable for marriage or union. The school, as an institution that reproduces social norms, also transmits the taboo and silence around sexuality education. Although the health centers have made efforts to provide information, what is provided is not objective and is permeated with religious values. Currently, with globalization, telecommunications, and fashion, there is an unrestricted exposure of youth to information that does not receive scientific support from adults and the school about sexual and reproductive rights.

The interviews and focus groups emphasize an increase in unions formed without the intervention of parents and families. Mothers and fathers argue that this is happening because of access to school and technology as spaces in which girls can maintain relationships with men without the supervision or consent of their family. Far from viewing the

education system as a protective factor, it constitutes, in the eyes of the adults of the family, a risk for the girls. The lack of actions by schools to protect girls from harassment and discrimination is an example of how the State—through its institutions—remains virtually absent with the exception of promoting legislation and refusing to register marriages that contradict the legal framework.

The literature on CEFM/U argues that the practice undermines the ability of girls and adolescents to access education that allows them to develop their autonomy and exposes them to the dangerous consequences of childbirth before physical maturity.¹ The results of this investigation also confirm that families and communities are aware of this fact.

The communities studied conform with the profile showing the prevalence of CEFM/U in rural, remote, and poverty-stricken areas⁶ and, as there is no change in this condition, CEFM/U continues to be a survival strategy for families as well as girls and adolescents.

The results highlight the fact that the generations of women married before age 15 did not have access to education.¹⁶ The testimony of the families in the focus groups indicates that access to school facilitates CEFM/U, and that adolescent girls now decide for themselves when and with whom to live. Although UNESCO stipulates that effective education, based on the development of skills and awareness of the risks associated with unprotected sex and the use of drugs, encourages the adoption of healthier behaviors, and develops attitudes and values that promote human rights and gender equality,³⁰ this is not the educational experience of adolescents and young people in the participating communities. The limited access to education, the reproduction of discriminatory gender norms, and the lack of action are important variables for understanding the role of the school in early marriages and forced unions in the researched communities. As Haberland has indicated, the proposal to provide comprehensive sexuality education, when implemented with a gender perspective, brings about a decrease in violence and high-risk behaviors.⁹

Decree 13-2017 issued by the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala, is a first step toward the eradication of CEFM/U, although doubts about its incidence remain prevalent in the communities studied; consistent with other research.²⁸ As a social institution, the family dictates the norms and practices linked to the forms of kinship and reproduction that sustain the social group.¹⁰ In the case of the communities studied, legal changes are not enough to provoke change in the gender norms that give greater value to boys and men than to women.¹⁶ The COCODES and COMUDES depend on the resources and the will of local and national public administrators to channel adequate responses to meet the needs of the inhabitants. Control of the national, regional, and departmental councils rests with executive government authorities who prioritize based on party or electoral interests, nullifying the spirit of decentralization. This infringes on the community leaders of the COCODES, turning them into mediators between a weak State disinterested in the population and a population that is unfamiliar with their rights and the responsibilities of the State.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this research can be used in the design of community actions that seek to provoke a social disruption to the norms, perceptions, and activities that, from different social institutions, have an impact on the eradication of CEFM/U. This was the case study for the design of the radio campaign led by the Population Council in the municipality of Chisec during the last quarter of 2017.

The Population Council's theory of change asserts that the foundation of productive lives is formed during adolescence, along with life skills, financial literacy, sexual and reproductive health, negotiation skills, and literacy. It is also the period during which poverty may be consolidated or overcome.²⁵ At a time when vulnerable girls and adolescents face social pressures to encourage or impose CEFM/U, it is essential that they have the skills to negotiate and manage inequalities of power within the family, and among peers and community authorities.⁶ Upon reaching puberty, girls who are married or in union need a social network of trusted friends; in order to develop and maintain their agency, they need assistance from others and close affiliations.⁸

Dissemination of information: It is crucial to disseminate information about the harmful effects of CEFM/Us among parents, authorities, and adolescents. Information can be disseminated through information strategies that are familiar to them and allow them to identify with the evidence. It is necessary to go beyond the information in the statistics to reach an awareness generated by knowledge and analysis of cases they are familiar with or in which they find similarities. Likewise, it is necessary to demonstrate the economic benefits that occur when adolescents consolidate their agency, increase their years of study, and flourish in safe environments.

It is necessary to analyze the social institution of the economy from two perspectives: material conditions that create vulnerability in girls conditioning them to marriage as a survival mechanism, and the sexual economy where girls and women have a hidden role in production and as an object of exchange.

It is necessary to sensitize the COCODES and COMUDES and spread the word about the complaint systems so that

they transfer the CEFM/U cases in their communities to the municipal judicial system. We must also strengthen justice institutions—municipal and departmental—with trained personnel and sufficient resources to meet the demand in an appropriate manner. We suggest the prioritization of (1) the creation of conditions for the safe transition from childhood to adulthood—10 to 19 years—recognizing that this period of life is crucial for strengthening and development in adult life; (2) recognition of social norms and sanctions that are discriminatory to girls; (3) broadening the space for girls' participation, guaranteeing that they have the opportunity to access these spaces and develop freely and safely in them (school, community participation, economic development); and (4) recognition that adolescents who are already mothers need support and investment, as much as those who are not yet married,¹⁰ citing Mensch et al. (1988).

Strengthening actions from the State: It is necessary to promote actions at the state and community level that ensure safe environments for Q'eqchi' girls in schools, and facilitate provision of objective and truthful information about sexual rights in health centers and among midwives.

Provision of comprehensive sexuality education: Schools have to adopt ways to prevent and punish the harassment of women by men and incorporate comprehensive sexuality education that includes power relations and gender dynamics.⁹

To overcome conditions of gender discrimination, one goal that education could adopt is the provision of tools to equip students with knowledge to become productive adults in society. It is important that the classroom instill in students the ability to contribute to the collective well-being as citizens and members of their communities, and strengthen their capacities to make decisions based on their identity, integrity, and personal well-being.¹⁰

It is necessary for the school to address adults' interpretation of school attendance as a cause of early unions among the students.

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Annexes

ANNEX 1 - LIFE STORIES OF ADULT WOMEN WHO WERE MARRIED OR IN UNIONS AS MINORS UNDER 15 YEARS OF AGE

With the aim of identifying possible transformations in CEFM/Us, life histories were undertaken with adult women who were married or in unions before reaching the age of 15. These stories allowed us to learn about the changes in women's perceptions of CEFM/U. Life histories have been included as a rich resource for analyzing CEFM/U as a social phenomenon.

ANNEX 2 - SOCIAL MOBILITY OF MARRIED WOMEN OR IN UNIONS AS MINORS

1. Las Promesas Community		Trends
Childhood	Adulthood	
Origin	Current residence	
My parents were originally from the Estancias La Constancia and Las Mercedes, in Telemán, municipality of Panzós.	Las Promesas Community, municipality of Chisec.	Internal Migration
Material household conditions		
In the hacienda there was a stream where we washed clothes, the dishes, the cornmeal and we also bathed there because we did not have a faucet or a sink.	My husband worked as a tractor driver on the same farm where we lived. They made lime there and helped us with the sale of the corn crop. With my husband we built a house on the same farm.	Husband works in haciendas, farms, agricultural work.
Composition of the family		
No Response NR	We had a total of 9 children, of whom 4 died. One of them died at age 15 because he had been bewitched. The other 3 died moments after the birth. Two of them were boys and one a girl.	
2. Monte Cristo Community		Trends
Childhood	Adulthood	
Origin	Current residence	
About the origin of my parents, I do not know exactly where they were from, they thought they were from Raxruhá. I do not remember very well, I vaguely remember that we were in El Palmar and then we went to Secacao. That's where we grew up. We moved because it was a hacienda.	Monte Cristo Community, municipality of Chisec.	Internal migration, with no access to land.
Material household conditions		
At that time, corn was worth 75 cents per quintal. Nobody bothered us and my dad enjoyed working the land. My dad was tired of going from place to place so we stayed in the Monte Cristo community.	When I had my second child, I realized that marriage was more difficult. I had to wash his clothes and when my children got sick we did not have money to cure them.	Precarious conditions with limited access to services.

Family composition		
We are four sisters and one brother, but I also have 5 siblings who died.	I had all the children that God wanted me to have. (...) I had children as much as my body allowed. I'm finished now, the youngest of my children is the one who is keeping me company now.	Large families with no family planning. Child mortality.
3. New Babylon Community		Trends
Childhood	Adulthood	
Origin	Current residence	
I was born in Purulhá, Baja Verapaz in the Muxonté Village. My parents are from the same.	Nueva Babilonia Community, municipality of Chisec.	Internal migration
Material household conditions		
My childhood was very sad because my parents lived in poverty, they had no home, they only rented and they did not have land, we only lived on the work that their neighbors gave them.	To raise my children I worked in the coffee shop and sold tamales.	Precarious living conditions with limited access to services.
4. Pozo Seco Community		Trends
Childhood	Adulthood	
Origin	Current residence	
I was born in a place called Chinamá, in the Municipality of Lanquín. I lived on a farm with my mother, I never knew my father.	Pozo Seco Community, municipality of Chisec	Internal migration
Material household conditions		
My mother worked at the farm in charge of feeding all the workers and I always stayed at home taking care of all the animals.	<p>I didn't know what to do (upon the death of her first husband) and I had no choice but to look for a job and I found one in a dining room.</p> <p>I learned how to make bread and I also took care of the housework. They treated me like their grandmother, although we did not have any kinship.</p>	Single-parent home. The women provided family support.
Composition of the family		
1 daughter	With my first husband I had three children. One drowned in the river.	Few children and infant mortality.
5. Barrio San Francisco		Trends
Childhood	Adulthood	
Origin	Current residence	
I was born in Setzí Village	Barrio San Francisco, Chisec municipality	Internal migration
Material household conditions		
NR	My husband and I lived for 20 years with my father and he only left us the land where we live.	
Composition of the family		
NR	I had 10 daughters and sons, 7 are alive and 3 died in childbirth.	

