

Ending child marriage and early unions in Dominican Republic

This brief highlights key learnings and puts forward evidence-based recommendations for the Government of Dominican Republic to take action for preventing and addressing child marriage and forced unions.

CURRENT STATE

Progress towards ending child marriage and early unions in Dominican Republic

Since 2021, the Government of Dominican Republic has demonstrated its commitment to **SDG 5.3— to end child marriage and forced unions**. The government has also taken steps to protect children through the passing of Law 1-21 to prohibit child marriage and forced unions under the age of 18, together with Decree 1-21, creating the Cabinet of Women, Adolescents and Girls. In addition, the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MISPAS) and the National Health Service (SNS), with support and financing from the Children and Adolescents National Council (CONANI) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) within the framework of the joint cooperation agreement, have designed a series of actions to improve access and quality of basic health services, including services for sexual and reproductive health.

Despite progress, 31% of women and girls and 8% of men and boys in Dominican Republic have been married or in a union before the age of 18, and 12% of girls enter into marriage even younger—before their 15th birthday.¹ In more remote regions, these numbers are much higher, such as in El Valle where 46.7% of women aged 20–24 report having entered a union before the age



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Caption here

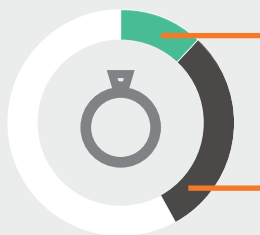
of 18; with 41% in Cibao Noroeste, and 38% in Cibao Sur and Yuma.² These statistics rank Dominican Republic as the Latin American and Caribbean country with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage and early unions.

While the 2021 laws mark a significant step forward; legislation only partially addresses the situation of child marriage in Dominican Republic, as informal unions are very common and most marriages not officially recorded in civil registration systems.

Dominican Republic also ranks amongst the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy with 7 out of 10 adolescents married or in an early sexual relationship having reported at least one pregnancy. These early pregnancies together with patriarchal social and cultural norms are often linked to girls dropping out of school and marrying early—if not already married— further limiting future opportunities.³

8%
OF BOYS ARE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18

7/10
OF EARLY UNIONS RESULT IN PREGNANCY



12%
OF GIRLS ARE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 15

31%
OF GIRLS ARE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18



Whether formal or informal, child marriage is violence against children, and unions not only violate the rights of children, but they place girls and adolescents in vulnerable positions with no legal protection.

Child marriage is deeply embedded in the social norms of Dominican communities, and such unions have come to be recognised as normal—never a crime or a violation of the fundamental rights of the child. Children of often married with the approval of their parents, either transactionally, because of a pregnancy or simply because they consent. In many cases, the normalisation of child marriage is perpetuated by parents who, lacking awareness of positive parenting strategies or the ability to provide adequate care and protection, view early unions as a viable option for their daughters.

Child marriages and early unions in Dominican Republic are driven by varied and complex factors that require multisectoral solutions, delivered through strong child protection systems. World Vision's research and programmatic implementation have demonstrated the following evidence on trends for effectively addressing child marriage and early unions. This evidence is outlined according to the framework of the seven evidence-based INSPIRE strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence-based recommendations to take action against child marriage and forced unions

World Vision believes the Government of Dominican Republic can make significant progress in ensuring all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential without the threat of child marriage. Therefore, World Vision and its partners urge the government to renew its commitment to ending child marriage by adopting evidence-based, INSPIRE-aligned pledges at the Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children and beyond. These commitments also should be clearly and measurably reflected in the forthcoming National Action Plan for Children.

World Vision is confident that, in partnership with civil society organisations, the Government of Dominican Republic can effectively combat child marriage and protect the rights of children, in the present and for their futures.



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Caption here.

We call on the Government of Dominican Republic to commit to...

PREVENT – TO PROTECT

1 In collaboration with CSOs, scale up empowerment and norms-shifting initiatives, including:

- A. **Approve the positive parenting law** and enforce the implementation of Law 1-21 on child marriage and early union in a gender-transformative and rights-based approach.
- B. **Scale up catch-up empowerment and education programmes** for pregnant girls, and education and life skills programmes nationwide for girls and boys to prevent early pregnancy; and promote responsible, healthy behaviours among adolescents, including sexual and reproductive health.
- C. **Scale up the current interventions piloted by World Vision and partners** to shift social norms and cultural patterns and perceptions of child marriage including resourcing a coordinated Social Behaviour-Change Campaign and Positive Parenting.

How is this related to Government plans?

- » While Law 1-21 outlaws child marriage and early unions, together with Decree 1-21, creating the Cabinet of Women, Adolescents and Girls, the Positive Parenting Act, drafted in 2019 seeks to replace corporal punishment (a form of VAC) by promoting positive non-violent discipline. The law mandates the implementation of educational programs for parents and caregivers to learn about positive parenting techniques and child development, provides for support services, including counseling and guidance, to help parents and caregivers adopt positive parenting practices and reinforces the legal protection of children's rights and establishes mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement. The goal of the Positive Parenting Act is to foster a nurturing environment that supports the well-being and healthy development of children, aligning with international standards for child protection and rights. Efforts to expand positive parenting programmes will support the Government of Dominican Republic in achieving these objectives.







EVIDENCE

These recommendations are supported by the evidence as follows:

- » Laws play a central role in our collective work to address child marriage, but can have negative consequences for girls if not embedded in gender-transformative, rights-based approaches that go beyond setting a legal minimum age of marriage.⁴
- » A 2020 survey of Girls Not Brides member organisations identified pregnant adolescents' rights to education as one of the most important issues affecting adolescent girls' access to education.⁵
- » Qualitative and quantitative results from the evaluation of a Comprehensive Sexual Education (ESI) training programme for girls, boys and adolescents in the Dominican Republic (as part of the Take Control and Pause Project of World Vision, the Government of Dominican Republic and CONANI demonstrated that following the ESI programme interventions, young people are better able to visualise a more promising future and establish long-term goals that are essential to prevent risky behaviours and promote responsible and healthy behaviours. The programme covered topics of comprehensive sexual education, cause and consequence of pregnancy in adolescence, healthy behaviours and prevention of early unions alongside an experiential life-skills project. The project technical evaluation showed a reduction in the belief of young people that marrying early is a solution to escape poverty. The 3,000 adolescent participants, particularly girls, demonstrated a greater awareness of the importance of planning and personal development before making critical life-impacting decisions such as early marriage.⁶
- » Community beliefs and expectations (real or perceived) about age of marriage and about girls' involvement in marital choice can affect norms around child marriage.⁷ Interventions should aim to engage communities with activities addressing marital age and choice, to help shift community level norms.⁸ Understanding the nuances of how girls' marital choice is viewed by men and women is important, and interventions should aim to build a common understanding in this regard.⁹
- » Work with fathers, mothers and guardians (PMT) in the Take Control and Pause project has demonstrated that programmes targeted at parents can have a positive impact and increase the understanding and adoption of positive parenting practices. Phase 2 of Take Control and Pause resulted with increased positive parenting and promotion of a protective environment for children and adolescents¹⁰ in four regions. As a result of these positive parenting support initiatives, the programme technical evaluation demonstrated that 2,400 PMT trained on positive parenting skills demonstrated a notable commitment and greater receptivity towards family support programmes and promotion of the rights of children and adolescents.¹¹

- » University of San Diego (UCSD) and UNICEF joint research shows that the more a parent exhibits investment in the child, through ongoing, respectful and open communication, giving voice to the child, the higher the quality of the parent-child relationship at an earlier stage and the more protective the family environment will be against early and child marriage.¹²
- » The combination of interventions including parental monitoring, community dialogue to change gender norms and social protection resulted in a reduction in the prevalence of child marriage.¹³

-  **Implementation and enforcement of laws**
-  **Education and life skills**
-  **Parent and caregiver support**
-  **Norms and values**

We call on the Government of Dominican Republic to commit to ...

FUND – TO FUNCTION

2 Strengthen child protection systems:

- Fund the coordination of formal and informal parts** to strengthen child protection systems.
- Establish a reporting and referral mechanism** to allow the Childhood National Council to work with cases that arise at community level.



How is this related to Government plans?



EVIDENCE

These recommendations are supported by the evidence as follows:

- » The Take Control, Pause project has made significant strides in the Municipalities of Baní, San Cristóbal, Dajabón and Higüey by fostering collaboration between formal and informal actors to prevent early unions and adolescent pregnancy. This coordinated approach exemplifies how a multi-sectoral response can strengthen the child protection system at the local level.¹⁴
- » From the outset, formal actors, such as municipal authorities and social services, were actively involved in the project design and implementation. They worked closely with informal community leaders and grassroots organisations to identify high-risk neighbourhoods and communities in need of targeted interventions. Together, they took collective responsibility for engaging key stakeholders, including parents, caregivers and young people, in the programme. These local actors not only facilitated the selection of participants for the training sessions but also assumed a leadership role in monitoring the programme's progress, ensuring that the initiative was grounded in community realities and needs.¹⁵
- » The success of Take Control and Pause demonstrates the significance of collaboration, and would not have been possible without the coordination, commitment and support of Regional and Municipal offices of CONANI as well as the Government of Dominican Republic, local government institutions and community organisations.

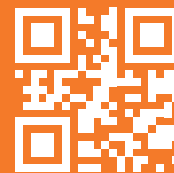
-  **Response and support services**
-  **Safe environments**

World Vision would like to thank our donors, international and local partners and the Government of Dominican Republic for their ongoing commitment and investments to end all forms of violence against children, including their critical support in addressing child marriage and forced unions.



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**Learn more about
World Vision's work to end
violence against children**



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WORLD VISION RESOURCES

National Reports:

Take control-Put it on Pause, Phase 2 Final Narrative Report. Training Workshops Aimed at Boys, Girls and Adolescents (NNA) and Fathers, Mothers and Tutors (PMT).

Take Control and Pause, Phase 2 Technical Report, December 2023.

Global Reports:

Young and Married, World Vision. October 2023

No happily ever after, What children really think about child marriage in humanitarian crises, World Vision, 2020

Case Studies: Strengthening livelihood and preventing child marriage, World Vision, 2020

Fighting for a future: an index of girls' opportunities in countries and regions with high rates of child marriage, World Vision, 2022

Breaking the chain: Empowering girls and communities to end child marriages during COVID-19 and beyond, World Vision, 2020

Child Marriage Round Table, World Vision, UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, UNFPA, Save the Children, Global Affairs Canada, December 2023.

Faith Norms, are they the neglected angle? Reflection from research and work of World Vision, International, 2022

ENDNOTES

- 1 Girls not Brides
- 2 Dominican Republic 2019, MICS Survey Findings
- 3 World Bank, 2023.
- 4 The impact of the law on child marriage and girls' rights. Thematic Brief, Girls Not Brides, 2024
- 5 Girls Not Brides, Girls' Education and Child Marriage, 2022.
- 6 Take Control and Pause, Phase 2 Technical Report, December 2023.
- 7 Four Areas of Influence Driving Child Marriage, What data tells us and how it informs the programming, UNICEF, Center on Gender Equity and Health, 2020
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Take control-Put it on Pause. Phase 2. Final Narrative Report. Training Workshops Aimed at Boys, Girls and Adolescents (NNA) and Fathers, Mothers and Tutors (PMT).
- 11 Take Control and Pause, Phase 2 Technical Report, December 2024.
- 12 Strengthening the Evidence Base to End Child Marriage, UCSD and UNICEF.
- 13 Hertzog, Toska, Yates, Culver et. al.
- 14 Take Control and Pause, Phase 2 Technical Report, December 2023.
- 15 *ibid.*