

Colombia's Historic Child Marriage Ban



Credit: Fundación Plan/Instagram

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay, Jan 8 2025 (IPS) - Colombia has just marked a historic milestone in the global campaign against child marriage, with the Senate passing one of Latin America and the Caribbean's [most comprehensive bans](#) on child marriage and early unions. In a country where [one in five](#) girls under 18 and one in 10 under 14 are married or live in marriage-like conditions, the new law raises the minimum age to 18 with no exceptions, eliminating a 137-year-old Civil Code provision that allowed children over 14 to marry with parental consent. This achievement aligns with goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has a target of eliminating harmful practices like child marriage by 2030. The new law now [awaits the signature](#) of President Gustavo Petro to come into effect.

The breakthrough

Child marriage disproportionately affects Colombia's most vulnerable communities, with rates of [between 40 and 65 per cent](#) among rural, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations. In some communities, girls as young as 10 are married off. These early unions expose girls to unequal power relations, deny them education, limit their bodily and economic autonomy and lead to higher rates of gender-based violence and health issues linked to early pregnancy.

The passage of the #SonNiñasNoEsposas ('They are girls, not wives') bill reflected the power of persistent civil society advocacy. After several failed attempts since 2007, the bill, authored by two congresswomen, passed with [unanimous support](#). This success was driven by a coalition of Colombian civil society organisations as part of the [Girls Not Brides](#) global network, including the [Foundation for Gender and Family Development](#), [Fundación Plan](#) and [Profamilia](#), working alongside international partners such as [Equality Now](#) and [Plan International](#), with Girls Not Brides directly supporting legislative advocacy and media campaigns.

Beyond raising the marriage age, the new law establishes the National Comprehensive Programme for Life Projects for Children and Adolescents. This preventive initiative targets the structural causes of early unions – poverty and lack of education – particularly in remote rural areas. The programme includes the participation of Indigenous communities through their own governance structures, recognising the importance of cultural sensitivity in implementation.

The global landscape

Colombia is by no means alone in having a child marriage problem. Around the world, [some 12 million girls](#) are married each year, two million before the age of 15. While child marriage can affect boys as well, girls are six times more likely to be married as children than boys.

According to the [Child Marriage Monitoring Mechanism](#), a collaborative initiative to generate evidence to support efforts to end child marriage, one in five young women worldwide are married before their 18th birthday, with rates highest in sub-Saharan Africa.

To tackle this problem, [The Elders](#), a group of senior public figures, launched the global Girls Not Brides partnership in 2011. With over 1,400 member organisations in more than 100 countries, Girls Not Brides works to prevent under-age marriage, recognising it as both a human rights violation and an obstacle to development. It identifies four main drivers of child marriage: poverty, limited educational and economic opportunities, gender inequality and insecurity in conflict or disaster situations. It tackles the problem with awareness-raising campaigns, national and international policy advocacy and community engagement to challenge social norms that perpetuate child marriage.

Since then, efforts have multiplied. In 2016, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched the [Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#). Now in its [third phase](#), set to run until 2030, the programme operates in 12 high-prevalence countries in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Working directly with governments, it has reached millions of adolescent girls, focusing on education, healthcare and economic opportunities.

Regional-level initiatives include the [South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children](#), which works in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and the African Union's [Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa](#), launched in 2014 in 10 high-prevalence countries and later expanded to 30.

Many more initiatives work at national and local levels. They combine multiple responses, including working with religious and community leaders to change social norms, supporting girls' education and economic empowerment, engaging with men and boys on gender equality, advocating for stronger laws and their enforcement, providing support services to girls at risk of child marriage, using media and technology to raise awareness and change attitudes and building networks of young advocates and change-makers.

Progress and challenges

These efforts have contributed to a global decline in child marriage rates. According to UNICEF, the proportion of young women married as children has [decreased](#) from 25 per cent to 21 per cent over the past decade, meaning that 25 million child marriages have been prevented. However, the global number of child brides is still estimated at 650 million, including girls under 18 who have already married and adult women who married as children.

The [average annual rate](#) of reduction has been 0.7 per cent over the past 25 years and 1.9 per cent over the past decade, showing the impact of recent initiatives. But at this rate, the SDG target of eliminating the practice by 2030 won't be achieved.

Setbacks have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, conflict and economic instability. Wherever insecurity rises, so does child marriage, as parents see early marriage of

daughters as a financial and security solution. During Syria's conflict, for example, the rate of child marriages [shot up](#) among refugees in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon.

Looking ahead

Colombia's new law marks significant progress, but it's just the beginning, as evidenced by the fact that many of the early marriages that take place in Colombia would have been illegal under the old law.

The real work of implementation begins now. Colombia's efforts over the next few years will be crucial in demonstrating how legislative change can translate into real protection for vulnerable girls. For Latin America and the Caribbean, it should open up opportunities for strengthened cross-border cooperation and similar legislative reforms.

Colombia's comprehensive approach could serve as a model for change in a region where many countries still have legal exceptions that allow child marriage under some circumstances, while others have strong laws that aren't adequately implemented.

While the declining trend in global child marriage rates offers hope, the current pace of change remains far too slow. Colombia's example shows that significant progress is possible through sustained, multi-stakeholder commitment and comprehensive approaches that change laws but also address underlying social dynamics. The international community must build on this momentum. This means scaling up successful initiatives, increasing funding for civil society organisations and maintaining political pressure.

Inés M. Pousadela is CIVICUS Senior Research Specialist, co-director and writer for [CIVICUS Lens](#) and co-author of the [State of Civil Society Report](#).

For interviews or more information, please contact research@civicus.org.

