



"SHE GOES WITH  
ME IN MY BOAT"

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT  
MARRIAGE  
IN BRAZIL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESULTS FROM  
MIXED-METHODS  
RESEARCH

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“SHE GOES WITH ME IN MY BOAT”<sup>1</sup>

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**THE ISSUE** | Marriage, informal or formal, involving a girl or boy below the age of 18 is internationally referred to as *child marriage*.<sup>2</sup> While both girls and boys experience child marriages, girls are disproportionately affected by them. They often involve adult men married to girls in early puberty; the terms “child” and “adolescent” are therefore both used. The nature of girls’ agency in some marriages and co-habitation relationships challenges existing assumptions around child marriage. This agency must fundamentally be understood within the context of power differentials and constraints on the choices available to girls. In Latin America, child marriage tends to differ from the more ritualized and formal nature of the practice in other high-prevalence settings.

**THE NUMBERS** | In the emerging body of evidence on child and adolescent marriage in Central and Latin America, Brazil stands out due to the sharp contrast between the country’s high ranking in terms of absolute numbers and the lack of research on the subject. According to one estimate, Brazil is ranked the fourth country in the world in absolute numbers of women married or co-habiting by age 15, with 877,000 women ages 20 to 24 years reporting having married by age 15 (11 percent). Also among women ages 20 to 24, thirty-six percent (nearly three million women) are estimated to have married by age 18.<sup>3</sup> In other countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region, prevalence rates are higher only in the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.<sup>4</sup> According to 2010 Census data, just over 88,000 girls and boys (ages 10 to 14 years) in Brazil are in unions categorized as consensual, civil, and/or religious.<sup>5</sup>

**BRAZILIAN LEGISLATION** | In Brazil, the legal age of marriage is 18 for both men and women; they can marry at the age of 16 with both parents’ consent. An exemption, however, allows minors to marry below the age of 16 in the case of a pregnancy.

**PARTNERSHIP** | From 2013 to 2015, Promundo conducted exploratory research in two states in Brazil with support from the Ford Foundation. Data were collected in partnership with teams from the Federal University of Pará (Universidade Federal do Pará) and Plan International Brazil in Maranhão.

**RESEARCH FOCUS** | The study – the first of its kind in Brazil – explores attitudes and practices around child and adolescent marriage in the two Brazilian states with the highest prevalence of the practice, according to the 2010

Census, namely Pará in the north and Maranhão in the northeast. The study examines local attitudes and practices, as well as risk and protective factors, around child and adolescent marriage in the capital cities in these two states. It looks at both formal and informal unions (i.e., co-habitation), as the latter are the most prevalent forms of child and adolescent marriage in Brazil yet hold similar implications as formal marriages.

**METHODOLOGY** | In the urban areas of Belém and São Luís, the researchers carried out 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews among the following groups: (1) girls (aged 12 to 18) in unions with older men (aged 24 and older); (2) men (aged 24 to 60) in unions with girls (below the age of 18); (3) family members of married girls; (4) local service providers/child and adolescent rights protection professionals. Six focus group discussions (three per site) were held with girls, men, and protection network representatives. An additional 50 key informant interviews were also conducted at state, federal, regional, and international levels. In order to explore broader community-level attitudes and practices related to child and adolescent marriage in the same urban setting, a quantitative household survey was conducted with 145 men (aged 24 to 60) and 150 girls (aged 12 to 18) – not necessarily married – in São Luís.

**ABSENCE FROM RESEARCH & POLICY AGENDAS** | In spite of the high absolute numbers and prevalence of child and adolescent marriage in Brazil, the problem has not been part of research and national policymaking agendas related to protecting girls' and women's rights and promoting gender equality. Brazil – like the rest of the Latin American region – has also been absent from many global discussions and actions around the practice, which largely focus on “hotspot” areas such as those in Sub-Saharan African and South Asia. While there is a relevant body of research and lively policy debates around fields *related* to child and adolescent marriage in Brazil – such as adolescent pregnancy, school dropout, sexual exploitation of children, child labor, and violence against women and children – no study to date has directly explored the practice and the causes and consequences for the lives of millions of girls and young women. In light of the absence of child and adolescent marriage from national policy debates, this study serves as a foundation for developing targeted interventions and further research, raising awareness, and sharing policy implications in Brazil. This work will also contribute to policy dialogue in other settings where the practice is informal and perceived as consensual, and thus less likely to be addressed by policy and research.

**KEY FINDINGS** | The results confirm the mostly informal and consensual nature of unions involving girls under the age of 18 in the settings studied. The analysis highlights the ways in which a child or adolescent marriage may create or exacerbate risk factors (i.e., related to health, education, security) while often being perceived by girls or family members as offering stability in settings of economic insecurity and limited opportunities. The average age at marriage (or co-habitation) *and* first birth of married girls interviewed is 15, *with married men being on average nine years older*.

The primary factors associated with child marriage are: (1) desire, often by a family member, to deal with an unwanted pregnancy in order to protect the girl's and family's reputation and to “ensure” the man's responsibility for the girl and potential baby; (2) desire to control girls' sexuality and limit perceived “risky” behaviors associated with girls being single, such as casual sex and going out; (3) girls' and/or family members' desire for financial security; (4) an expression of girls' agency and desire to leave their parents' home, albeit within a context of limited educational and employment opportunities and experiences of abuse or control over girls' mobility in their families of origin; (5) prospective husbands' desire to marry younger girls (perceived as more sexually and physically attractive and easier to control than adult women) and men's disproportionate decision-making power in marriages.

The key consequences of child and adolescent marriage identified include: (1) early pregnancy (sometimes also a cause of marriage) and related maternal, newborn, and child health problems; (2) educational setbacks; (3) limitations to girls'



mobility and social networks (namely, girls' expectations of independence are largely met with disappointment and further restricted mobility); (4) exposure to intimate partner violence, including a range of controlling and inequitable behaviors on the part of their older husbands. The study also found inadequate and often discriminatory provision of services and protection of the girls in marriages.

Overall, dating and healthy pre-marital relationships appear absent in girls' life trajectories, with marriage being perceived as the primary and most socially acceptable pathway to womanhood – in effect a “least worst” alternative when education is seen as unappealing or an unattainable means for improving one's life. Girls who leave or end marriages tend to face lower employment and education prospects compared to their unmarried peers, while often being the sole caregivers for their children. Men, when present in caregiving during and after a marriage, are largely expected to be economic providers. Adolescent boys who are girls' age-mates are unanimously disdained by the girls and their families as viable partners due to their assumed inability to provide for girls and “lack of responsibility.” Inequitable gender norms are reinforced by religion, media, and the communities girls live in.

**RECOMMENDATIONS** | The findings offer insights for improving our understanding of attitudes and practices related to child and adolescent marriage in Brazil and in other settings where the practice is informal, involves smaller age gaps between the spouses (i.e., mostly adult men with girls in childhood or early adolescence), and is more about family or community dynamics rather than a traditional and ritualized practice. The forthcoming report will discuss implications for future research, policy, and programming in Brazil, focusing on the ways that adequate legislation and policies – combined with initiatives aimed at changing social norms and providing viable alternatives to marriage such as schooling – can protect girls' right to freely and fully decide if, when, and whom they marry. As an important strategy, the report will also discuss the ways that child and adolescent marriage prevention initiatives can engage men and boys. These recommendations build on research showing that adolescent girls benefit from involved male caregivers or fathers. For example, research finds that girls with involved fathers experience less sexual violence or unwanted, early sexual activity; have better self-esteem and body image; and are more likely to select partners with more gender-equitable attitudes.

1. *The title comes from a quote from a married man in Belém, referring to the expectation of young married girls to follow their husbands' preferences and accompany the norms within marriage that they set. It also is symbolic of the importance of the river culture in Belém.*
2. *According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which Brazil signed and ratified in 1990. It is currently the most used and agreed upon term by practitioners and researchers internationally, and it is thus used throughout this research. The word “adolescent” is also added in this research given that many marriages in Brazil and in the Latin America region involve girls in their adolescent as well as childhood years. Furthermore, the Brazilian Statute on the Child and Adolescent, which followed shortly after the CRC, distinguishes between child (below 12 years) and adolescent (12 to 18 years) age groups. Concepts, legislation, and data are discussed further in the full report.*
3. *Percentages in the 20 to 24 years age group from Pesquisa Nacional de Demografia e Saúde da Criança e da Mulher (PNAD) 2006: page 161, Table 2: “Idade na primeira união,” available from: [http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/pnds/ing/relatorio\\_final\\_PNDS2006\\_04julho2008.pdf](http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/pnds/ing/relatorio_final_PNDS2006_04julho2008.pdf) (These percentages compare to levels from the same source in UNICEF, 2014. The State of the World's Children 2014 In Numbers: Every Child Counts). Source of absolute numbers used in the ranking: Statistics and Monitoring Section, Division of Policy and Strategy, UNICEF (2013), ranked in Vogelstein, 2013. Ranking calculations based on population of women 20 to 24 years old (2011); excludes China, Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, among other countries, due to lack of available data.*
4. UNICEF, 2014.
5. IBGE, Censo Demográfico 2010. Available from: <http://censo2010.ibge.gov.br/>

Full study results are available in English and Portuguese, and executive summaries are available in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. **Visit [www.promundoglobal.org](http://www.promundoglobal.org).**

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