

# Colombia's Senate to vote on landmark bill to end child marriage

By Sandra Ramirez, Legal and Advocacy Advisor for Latin America and the Caribbean at Equality Now

BOGOTA, COLOMBIA, October 8, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Colombian lawmakers are poised to cast their final vote on historic legislation seeking to end child marriage. Known as “Son Niñas,

No Esposas” (They are Girls, Not Wives), Bill PL 155/2023C aims to raise the minimum marriage age to 18 without exceptions. Although Colombia’s current legal age of marriage is 18, girls 14 years and older are permitted to marry with parental consent, a legal loophole that leaves girls vulnerable to early marriage.



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*Sandra Ramirez, Equality Now*

It is also common for girls under 18 to enter into informal unions, often cohabiting with older men. Law 54 of 1990 establishes that after two people cohabit for two continuous years, they are presumed to form a permanent

and singular community of life (de facto marital union), and this includes minors who entered into a union before adulthood.

Colombia ranks [20th globally for girls marrying or in an informal union before turning 15](#), and research consistently shows these harmful practices are associated with higher rates of early pregnancy, maternal mortality, school dropout, and increased vulnerability to intimate partner violence.

Analysis by Equality Now of Colombia’s legal standards has identified a lack of adequate safeguards to prevent parents from forcing or coercing children into marriage. The policy brief, [Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Colombia](#), calls for essential legislative reforms and welcomes proposed new legal amendments.

In addition to a total ban on child marriage, the Bill intends to introduce policies addressing the root causes of child, early, and forced marriage and unions. Provisions include an education program to disseminate information about the causes and consequences, establishing a National Program of Comprehensive Care for Life Projects for children and adolescents, and yearly reports from the Ministry of Equality and Equity to Congress evaluating the law’s implementation and achievements.

## CHILD MARRIAGE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTS GIRLS

Child marriage in Colombia disproportionately impacts girls, many of whom are frequently partnered with men twice or three times older. According to UNICEF Colombia, 73% of girls aged 10 to 14 in unions [reported being with men over 20 years old](#), while 42.4% of girls aged 15 to 19 are in unions with men aged 25 or older.

These figures highlight a severe age disparity and power imbalance that exposes girls to greater risks of exploitation, violence, and limited life opportunities. Younger girls and adolescents in early marriages and unions are more likely to drop out of school due to pregnancy and for domestic and unpaid care work. This, in turn, reduces their ability to attain financial independence and keeps many trapped in a cycle of poverty, oppression, and abuse.

Limited access to education and employment opportunities restricts girls' choices, while traditional norms and patriarchal values reinforce discriminatory gender roles that primarily view girls as future wives and mothers.

Girls from rural, Indigenous, and poor households experience even higher rates of child marriage and informal unions due to a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. Poverty is a key driver, as impoverished families may see marriage as a way to alleviate economic pressures or provide for their daughters, while in conflict-affected regions, early marriage is sometimes viewed as a strategy to protect girls from violence or instability.

## COLOMBIA MUST REFORM ITS LAW ON CHILD MARRIAGE

Only 11 out of the 32 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have prohibited marriage under 18 without exceptions. However, in recent years, nations like Honduras, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic have implemented reforms to establish a minimum marriage age of 18, prohibiting all exemptions.

Colombia has ratified international and regional human rights treaties such as the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, known as the Belém do Pará Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These, amongst others, require the minimum age of marriage to be set to 18 without exceptions. By failing to do so, Colombia is violating its international legal obligations.

If the Bill passes into law, Colombia will become the latest country in the region to take decisive action against child marriage. This legislative milestone would mark a significant step forward in the fight against gender inequality, but robust implementation across different sectors, underpinned by sustained political will and investment, is crucial to achieving meaningful change.

Equality Now recommends that the State establishes comprehensive and systematic administrative records and data collection mechanisms to facilitate effective monitoring, enforcement, and response to cases of child and forced marriage and unions. Improved data collection will support targeted interventions, resource allocation, and the development of informed policies to provide better protection and support.

The final vote on Bill PL 155/2023C, the date of which has yet to be announced, is a historic opportunity for Colombia to affirm its commitment to protecting the rights of its children and fulfilling its obligations under international human rights law. Lawmakers must seize this opportunity to do the right thing by approving the Bill and demonstrating regional leadership to end child marriage and unions.

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