



## Experiences of cohabitation, marriage and parenting in Peruvian adolescents and youth

Vanessa Rojas and Francis Bravo

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## About YMAPS



This research report was authored and produced by Young Lives as part of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood.

YMAPS is a collaboration between Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 18 years, and Child Frontiers, a consulting company that works in partnership to promote the care, well-being and protection of children.

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## Key study findings

- Early patterns of cohabitation differ according to age and gender.
- Families play a decisive role in the initiation of cohabitation.
- Sexuality during adolescence is a socially taboo subject.
- Cohabitation at an early age limits girls' educational opportunities.
- Young men and women approach cohabitation with limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive health.
- Teenage girls and young women face a lack of opportunities in their communities.
- Relationships between young people are marked by unequal power relations.
- Women who begin cohabitation at a very young age are the most vulnerable to violence.
- Young people's families play a fundamental role in the partnership.
- Social gender norms define and reinforce the dynamics within the partnership.

## The authors

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# Executive summary

Although there is extensive evidence about early marriage around the world, there is still little known about this practice in Peru. In Peru, it is more common for teenagers and young people to live together than to marry formally. Living together before the age of 18 and during the first years of the transition to adulthood seems to be a reality that mainly affects women. The Young Lives longitudinal study indicates that, by the age of 19, 30 per cent of women surveyed were already living together, while only 7 per cent of men were doing so.<sup>1</sup> Based on the 2017 Demographic and Family Health Survey (ENDES), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Plan International show that 19 per cent of Peruvian women between the ages of 20 and 24 began living together in a relationship or marriage when they were teenagers (Plan International and UNFPA 2019: 14). The greater the degree of poverty, the greater the percentage of adolescents cohabiting – with teenage girls aged 15-17 living together representing 46 per cent in the lowest poverty quintile and only 1 per cent in the highest quintile (Plan International and UNFPA 2019: 21).

There are multiple challenges facing young people in their transitions to early cohabitation, motherhood and fatherhood. Various studies, both quantitative and qualitative, point out that young people who experience these transitions usually end up dropping out of education – especially pregnant women – and then find it difficult to re-enter school because of the new responsibilities they assume, which means that, in the future, they will have fewer opportunities (Cueto, 2004; Olthoff, 2006; Lavado and Gallegos, 2005; Alcázar, 2008; Cueto and others, 2010; Lindman, 2010; Del Mastro, 2015; Save The Children, 2016; Balarin and others, 2017; Sánchez, 2018; Plan International and UNFPA, 2019).

The following report is a product of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study, which also took place in Ethiopia, India, and Zambia, and was funded by IDRC. We collected the experiences of young people who, between the ages of 14 and 21, had started living together – or getting married – and/or had become mothers or fathers. We explore the motivations that led them to start a life as a couple as well as the implications of this process on their sexual and reproductive health and on the elimination of intergenerational cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

The report is based on the analysis of the qualitative data of a sub-sample of the longitudinal study Young Lives in Peru. Information was collected in three locations during 2018: Lima, urban district; Piura, peri-urban district; and Junín, rural/jungle district. Since Young Lives is a longitudinal study, the collection of qualitative information was based on data previously collected in the surveys of the families of the participating young people during five rounds of data collection – in 2002, 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2016 – so that, at the time of the fieldwork, information was already available on the context in which the young people had grown up, the important changes they had faced at the family level, as well as their educational history and wealth index.<sup>2</sup> This report's findings complement information from the international Young Lives study on this issue that involves thousands of young people around the world.

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1 Estimated by the Peru Young Lives team using data available in 2019

2 The wealth index measures the quality of housing, access to services and ownership (consumption) of durable goods.

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## Key findings

- **Early cohabitation patterns vary according to age and gender.**
    - For women in the study, cohabitation was related to the desire to escape oppressive or violent situations in their family environment, to improve their socio-economic situation, and to seek protection.
    - Men started cohabiting at a later age than women. Those who reported having started living with a partner between the ages of 18 and 21 said they did so because they felt pressured by their families or their partners' families. They also stated that they had agreed to cohabitation in order to fulfil their responsibilities and exercise their male role associated with protection of their families.
  - **Families play a decisive role in the establishment of cohabitation:** At the community level, families encourage (and sometimes demand) cohabitation when it has been made public that the young couple has already begun an active sex life or it is known that the young woman is pregnant. The family plays a protective role in the face of the social "disgrace" and possible abandonment of the woman by the man.
  - **Sexuality during adolescence is a socially taboo subject:** Sexual activity during adolescence is not accepted in the social sphere, and is only permitted in the context of cohabitation or marriage.
  - **Living together at an early age limits girls' educational opportunities:** Some girls do not manage to complete basic education and others do not continue with higher studies because they must conform to traditional gender roles associated with care of the household and children.
  - **Young men and women move towards living together with limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive health:** The use of modern contraceptive methods usually begins after young women have had their first child. Young people demand better knowledge about these issues, as they perceive that they are only superficially addressed at school.
  - **Teenage girls and young women face a lack of opportunities in their communities:** While there is now better access for women to basic education, continued education outside of secondary school seems a long way off for most women, who need not only money but also support networks. Mainly in poorer environments, the beginning of cohabitation is seen as one opportunity – if not the only one – to improve their own well-being.
  - **Relationships between young people are marked by unequal power relations:** Young men and women feel that they were not prepared to start a life together and that it did not turn out as they expected. Expectations regarding gender roles in the home place women in a subordinate position to their partners. Men exercise control over their actions and bodies, including through violence.
  - **Women who begin living together at a young age are the most vulnerable to violence:** Women who started living together between the ages of 14 and 15 are more likely to be victims of physical and psychological violence from their partners. Their partners believe the women need to be disciplined in order to learn and fulfil their role as "wives".
  - **Young people's families play a fundamental role in the partnership:** They are present when there are problems between the couple and can act as mediators, and they are also a source of childcare support. Women who reported having access to higher education did so thanks to family support for childcare.
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- **Social gender norms define and reinforce the dynamics within the partnership:**  
Although changes in family dynamics are recognised, such as the fact that women are now able to work more than in previous generations, the domestic burden continues to fall mainly on women. The men interviewed feel that they must exercise control over their partners in order to demonstrate their strength and masculine identity. Within the relationship, women still find limits in the exercise of their autonomy and consider this to be normal. Thus, men and women are still expected to fulfil traditional gender roles.

## ***Recommendations***

- Implement comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) with a gender perspective at all levels of basic education. Also, ensure access to this education for adolescents from the poorest households, as well as those who have dropped out of school.
  - Train teaching and administrative staff in the new gender equality approach introduced as part of the National Curriculum in 2017.
  - Increase and improve the dissemination of differentiated health services as well as information on sexual and reproductive health to adolescents.
  - Increase the focus on adolescents and young mothers in education and health services.
  - Create care networks for children of different ages, accessible to adolescents and young people, that are safe and of good quality.
  - At the local and community levels, promote the perspectives of gender equality and new masculinities. This involves providing locally relevant and culturally sensitive examples that show the individual and social benefits linked to these changes.
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# Introduction

Although there is extensive evidence on early marriage around the world, it has not yet received a lot of attention in Peru. In Peru, young couples choose cohabitation more often than marriage. According to the latest National Population and Housing Census (ENDES 2017), 6.9 per cent of adolescents aged 15-19 were living together, while only 0.3 per cent were married. Among young people aged 20-24, the figure was even higher: 27.7 per cent were living together and only 3.5 per cent were married (INEI 2018a). Results from the Young Lives<sup>3</sup> longitudinal study show a similar trend among young people. At age 19 (Round 4 of data collection, in 2013), 17 per cent of young people were married or living together, while at age 22 (Round 5, 2016) this had increased to 29 per cent. Furthermore, at the age of 22, while 42 per cent of women were already living together or had married, only 17 per cent of men had, suggesting that this phenomenon mainly affects women.

Young Lives evidence also indicates that in Peru the beginning of cohabitation seems to be related to early pregnancy. Favara, Sánchez and Lavado (2016) found that, at age 19, about 1 in 5 women were mothers, and 80 per cent of them were married or living together with their partner. By the age of 22, 44 per cent of young women were mothers and 42 per cent were married or living together. According to ENDES 2017 (INEI 2018b), teenage pregnancy in the country affects 13.4 per cent<sup>4</sup> of women aged 15-19, a figure that has hardly changed over the past 20 years (MCLCP 2016). ENDES 2017 also highlights that the proportion of pregnant women increases rapidly with age: 22 per cent of women were mothers or pregnant at 18 and 26 per cent at 19, which means that a significant number of women are becoming mothers as they are moving towards adulthood.

Evidence indicates that young people – especially pregnant women – who experience these transitions usually end up dropping out of school. Their new responsibilities make it difficult for them to resume their studies and thus limit their future opportunities (Cueto 2004; Olthoff 2006; Lavado and Gallegos 2005; Alcázar 2008; Cueto et al. 2010; Lindman 2010; Del Mastro 2015; Save The Children 2016; Balarin et al. 2017; Sánchez 2018; Plan International and UNFPA 2019).

But the challenges go beyond the daily lives of young Peruvians, as they do not necessarily enjoy legal protection in these unions, especially when it comes to cohabitation. In Peru, adolescents can marry if they are at least 16 years old, expressly declare their willingness to marry and have the consent of their parents (according to Articles 241 and 244 of the Civil Code). However, few choose to marry. In accordance with Article 29560, common-law unions are recognised after two years of continuous cohabitation, which means that there are no explicit regulations to protect adolescents who are living together. According to the law, it is assumed that cohabitation could begin, like marriage, at the age of 16, but the common-law relationship is not legally recognised until two years later, when the young people are already 18. Questions then arise about women who started cohabiting at the age of 14, what protection is offered to the teenage population living together, and what happens if unions last less than two years.

According to the Criminal Code of Peru, any sexual relationship with a minor under 14 years of age is considered rape. Article 173 of this Code states that if the victim is between 10 and less

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3 Young Lives is a longitudinal study following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Peru, Ethiopia, India and Vietnam) over 15 years. It researches the causes and consequences of poverty among children and young people, and analyses how policies affect the well-being of children and young people. See [www.ninosdelmilenio.org](http://www.ninosdelmilenio.org)

4 ENDES 2016 reported a teenage pregnancy rate of 12.7 per cent, therefore the rate has increased (INEI 2017).

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than 14 years of age, the penalties range from 30 to 35 years of imprisonment. Although cases like these were not common in our sample of young people, in some of the focus groups people reported knowing about cases of sexual relations – and even cohabitation – between adults and children under 14.

On the other hand, cohabitation is linked to motherhood or fatherhood. Once the adolescent becomes a parent, by law he or she acquires full capacity to assume parental responsibilities. This could mean, however, taking away protections that the state gives to teenagers in general, such as health insurance, education, employment, protection from violence, and others (Plan International and UNFPA 2019: 47).

Therefore, understanding the challenges that affect the lives of thousands of young people in Peru means listening to their narratives, but also considering how social practices and institutions related to early marriage or cohabitation are being reinforced. Without a doubt, the absence of institutions may be affecting the continuation of some issues; however, we also looked at the role played by local cultural practices and the opportunities to which young people have access – or not.

Analysing what the beginning of cohabitation – and in many cases motherhood or fatherhood – before the age of 18 or in the first years of adult life, means for young people, especially in contexts of poverty, shows how difficult and challenging it has been for them to transition to their new life in a context like Peru, where gender inequalities are manifested at all levels of everyday life. Finally, this study also aims to help us look at ourselves as a country committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030; in particular, to SDG 3 (health and well-being), one of whose objectives is to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning information and education. We aim to contribute to the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes, and also to SDG 5 (gender equality), which seeks to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls worldwide, as well as to eliminate all forms of violence against them in the public and private spheres.

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# Part 1: Early marriage and/or cohabitation in Peru and the world

## 1.1. The global context

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2012), ‘child marriage’ occurs when one or both partners are under the age of 18.<sup>5</sup> This marriage can be formal – registered as a religious or civil marriage – or informal – not registered (Davis, Postles and Rosa 2013). While there are adolescent boys who marry and/or enter into cohabitation at an early age, women are affected more than men (UNICEF 2005; UNFPA 2012).<sup>6</sup> The term ‘early marriage’ draws attention to the problems it may create in the lives of adolescent women, for example, how it affects their right to continue their education (Plan International and UNFPA 2019).

Child marriage is sometimes also presented as early and/or forced marriage. The term ‘forced’ refers to the fact that this type of marriage and/or union does not necessarily imply a free choice on the part of the adolescent girl (Plan International and UNFPA 2019). Under this definition, their age does not allow girls who cohabit or get married to give free, prior and informed consent, or to decide when they want to marry or enter into cohabitation.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, and because of its implications, child marriage is considered a violation of human rights (UNFPA 2012; Glinski, Sexton and Meyers 2015) and, furthermore, it is considered a practice that is harmful under the SDGs (UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF 2018).

Many reports conclude that child marriage tends to most affect a specific segment of adolescent girls: the least educated, those in situations of vulnerability and poverty, and those living in rural areas (Davis, Postles and Rosa 2013; UNICEF 2014; Glinski, Sexton and Meyers 2015). They point out that more than 41,000 girls and adolescents are affected by this practice every day, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Wodon et al. 2017).

Latin America and the Caribbean is no stranger to this problem. Over the past 10 years it has consistently been the only region in the world where child marriage and/or early cohabitation have not decreased (UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF 2018). As in other parts of the world, the most affected are often indigenous girls and teenagers who are less educated and come from the poorest households (UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF 2018). Moreover, unlike in the rest of the world, in Latin America and the Caribbean child marriage is usually informal in nature; that is, in practice it is a union characterised mainly by cohabitation, without necessarily being the result of a civil or religious ceremony (Girls Not Brides 2017).<sup>8</sup>

The factors that contribute to the prevalence of child marriage vary depending on the context. However, there are a number of common factors that contribute to the perpetuation of this practice, including poverty, gender inequalities, lack of protection of the rights of children and adolescents, lack of educational and employment opportunities; school dropout, and teenage

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5 The age limit of 18 for defining child marriage can be found in various international treaties and conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Wodon et al. 2017).

6 A recent UNICEF report showed that 115 million teenage boys and young men have been married while under the age of 18, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia and the Pacific; see [www.unicef.org/press-releases/115-million-boys-and-men-around-world-married-children-unicef](http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/115-million-boys-and-men-around-world-married-children-unicef)

7 Sometimes they end up getting married or starting a partnership because they have no other options. Others may be pressured or forced to do so by their families (Davis, Postles and Rosa 2013).

8 Over 60 per cent of partnerships at an early age in the region are informal (UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF 2018).

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pregnancy (Davis, Postles and Rosa 2013; UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF 2018). At the same time, certain cultural and social norms reinforce these factors and make it difficult to eradicate child marriage despite the existence of laws that prohibit it (Davis, Postles and Rosa 2013).

Pankhurst, Tiemelissan, and Chuta (2016), using quantitative and qualitative data from the Young Lives cohort in Ethiopia (at age 19), found that child marriage is the result of a combination of factors that interact at the community level (living in rural areas), at the household level (low parental education), and at the individual level (higher educational attainment decreases the likelihood of marriage). There is also a relationship between early marriage and low educational expectations.

Other studies – in Nepal (Sah et al. 2014), Tanzania (UNFPA et al. 2014) and India (Chuta 2017) – confirm the link between child marriage, low education and growing up in rural areas. In Bangladesh, it was found that, in addition to the education levels of the girl, her father and her husband, the family's monthly income and religion are important factors in determining the likelihood of child marriage (Obaida and Rahman 2012). In Vietnam, Young Lives (Nguyen Thu 2016) found that ethnic minority girls who were not enrolled in school at age 15 or whose mothers had little decision-making power within the family were at greater risk of early marriage.

In Latin America, some studies – such as Barrios-Klee (2017) in Guatemala – point out that unplanned pregnancies, lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), unfavourable socio-economic conditions, as well as certain cultural practices, are factors that influence the probability of child marriages and early partnerships. Likewise, in Mexico Rivero and Palma (2017) found that a lack of opportunities to access work or continue studying, the desire to escape from violent home environments and the desire to experience sexuality and achieve status in the community are contributing factors.

Furthermore, a study by Plan International in the Dominican Republic (Plan International 2017) reported that young women who married at an early age lived in authoritarian families, had mothers who had married at an early age, did not find opportunities to participate in their communities and did not have projects for their future. The study also noted the desire for autonomy for adolescent girls, especially in contexts of high control over their sexuality and relationships with boys. This last factor was also pointed out by Taylor et al. (2015) for Brazil. Finally, it is important to note that the studies mentioned for Latin America found that unplanned pregnancy is one of the main factors associated with child marriage and early cohabitation.

Ultimately, the negative consequences of child marriage and/or early partnerships include dropping out of school; early pregnancy; the likelihood of emotional violence, abuse and isolation from family and friends; and limited agency for decision-making (UNICEF 2005; UNFPA 2012; Davis, Postles and Rosa 2013; UNICEF 2014; Glinski, Sexton and Meyers 2015).

There are also studies that identify factors that may protect against early marriage. Bhan et al. (2019) analysed longitudinal quantitative data from a sample of girls from Young Lives in India, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Peru, surveyed from ages 8 to 19. They found that a quality parent-child relationship – in which parents feel proud of their daughters and the girls, in turn, feel that they are loved and treated fairly – is a protective factor against marriage before age 16.

## **1.2. The Peruvian context**

Cohabitation and non-formal partnerships are more common in Latin America than formal marriage, and the same is true in Peru. However, in the Peruvian context there are not many qualitative studies on early marriage and/or cohabitation. Nevertheless, the studies that are available can be very useful in providing background understanding of these phenomena.

Existing studies indicate that in low socio-economic situations, cohabitation – rather than marriage – generally begins because of pregnancy (Del Mastro 2015; Gutiérrez 2006; Rojas, Guerrero and Vargas 2017; Plan International and UNFPA 2019). In these situations, a single mother faces stigmatisation and is therefore motivated to start living with her partner, usually by moving into the man's family home (Gutiérrez 2006). However, cohabitation can also be motivated by the possibility of accessing basic services, goods and material resources that can be provided by the couple (Save The Children 2016). Recent reports on early partnerships in Peru indicate that, in addition to improving the socio-economic status of the girl or adolescent, the beginning of marriage and/or cohabitation also presents an opportunity to escape from violent and restrictive family environments. In addition, many girls or adolescents who decide to enter into a partnership do so motivated by the ideal of romantic love, which is associated with the possibility of being understood, taken into account and listened to by their partners (Plan International and UNFPA 2019; Greene 2019).

However, studies such as Oliart (2005) – on gender and sexuality in rural communities of Cusco – show how other factors play an important role in the beginning of cohabitation. Oliart points out that, although families and the community in general previously played a determining role in the formation of relationships, their importance has diminished over time, and young people now have a greater agency in their unions or relationships. In the past, community sponsored sexual encounters at parties and the formalisation of the relationship were monitored by the community and the woman's family. The situation is different now, as young people relate to the person that they choose, and not necessarily with the purpose of living together or marrying later, but to experience their sexuality. The fact that the importance of the community in these unions is diminishing reveals the need for the sexual autonomy of teenagers; however, since these practices are not accepted in the community, women become pregnant as a result of casual relationships, where the man does not recognise his paternity.

Several studies point to the abandonment of their studies and the difficulty of resuming them as a consequence of marriage and/or cohabitation for young people and adolescents (Del Mastro 2015; Save The Children 2016; Plan International and UNFPA 2019). In Peru, there is a strong link between pregnancy and marriage or cohabitation (Favara, Sánchez and Lavado 2016), and other studies confirm these consequences for women's educational paths (Balarin et al. 2017; Olthoff 2006; Cueto 2004; Lavado and Gallegos 2005; Alcázar 2008; Cueto et al. 2010; Sánchez 2018). These studies highlight the domestic and care obligations that adolescents and young people must assume, both for their partners and for their children, which makes it very difficult for them to continue their educational careers, as well as the burden of responsibility that teenage girls must assume in the domestic sphere once they experience these transitions.

Teenage girls and young women may also face a range of physical and psychological abuse, lose contact with and be isolated from family and friends, and be limited in their agency to make decisions, as they become dependent on the decisions of both their partners and his family (Greene 2019; Rojas, Guerrero and Vargas 2017; Plan International and UNFPA 2019).

Teenage girls and young women who are cohabiting face not only the reproaches and claims of their own family, but also those of their partner's family, who hold them responsible for the pregnancy. If they arrive in a home with a patriarchal structure, it is likely that they will occupy a subordinate position (Gutiérrez 2006). In such a context, many of these young women will primarily devote themselves to domestic and care work, while their partners go out to work. Thus, they end up reproducing traditional gender roles: women dedicated to being caregivers and taking care of the home, versus men as providers (Del Mastro 2015; Greene 2019; Plan International and UNFPA 2019).

In this sense, gender identities and roles play an important role in defining the dynamics of the couple. For example, in the Lower Amazon relationships she analysed, Fuller (2004) found that

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the man exercises strict control over his partner: 'the wife must obey and please the husband in sexuality, strictly comply with his tasks, restrict her movements, silence her opinions and leave the decisions to the husband' (Fuller 2004: 128). If a woman does not comply with these conditions, she may become a victim of violence, which is the most common mechanism used by men to control their partners. On the other hand, Fuller (1993; 2004) also found that female identity is, by definition, very much associated with motherhood, and points out that this constitutes the most effective way for women to access adult status and social prestige. For Fuller, this is the area where young women exercise the most power and can negotiate their interests with their partners and children. Unfortunately, for many women from humble origins and of limited socio-economic status, motherhood is perhaps the only feasible option they may see, which perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty and gender discrimination (Fuller 1993).

Countries with a deep-rooted macho culture, such as Peru, bolster a male identity that is associated mainly with force (Fuller 2018). This characteristic differentiates men and women and is a sign of authority and dominance. According to Fuller, a strong man is considered to be capable of assuming the role of protector of his family and partner, who assumes a subordinate position after the beginning of cohabitation or marriage. Segato (2016) similarly outlines that masculinity is a status that men must acquire throughout their lives, under the evaluation of other men – their peers. To do this, they must prove that they possess certain skills, such as stamina, aggressiveness, and the ability to master and collect 'feminine tribute', in order to exhibit the suite of powers (war-related, political, sexual, intellectual, economic and moral) that will enable them to be recognised as male subjects (Segato 2016: 113). That said, men seem to respond to a demand for a masculinity that does not recognise emotionality as part of their identity, but rather exonerates them from it. Developing their identity as men can be extremely difficult for them, and many may feel pressured to exercise strength and protection. In relation to masculinity, another strand of studies shows that, for men themselves, the paternal role involves not only providing, but also caring, spending time and establishing an emotional bond with children (Marcos 2010). This constitutes a change from a version of masculinity which, as Olavarria (2001) points out, is considered hegemonic, and establishes that men only assume the role of providers through work, while women take on the tasks of care and upbringing.

Finally, recent studies emphasise addressing gender equality and the construction of new masculinities in Peru in order to reduce the level of violence against women, especially in the family or domestic environment, which unfortunately often ends in femicide or attempted femicide. Hernández, Raguz and Morales (2019) analyse ENDES 2011-2015 and highlight factors that increase the probability of a woman becoming a victim of violence with risk of femicide. These include isolation in cohabitation, a large age difference with an older partner, having been a victim of sexual violence, and justifying violence against women.

Addressing the experiences of cohabitation, marriage and parenthood also means understanding the gender roles and norms that shape these experiences, which unfortunately end up encouraging the reproduction of inequalities between men and women.

## Part 2: Research design and context

### ***2.1. Methodology and research questions***

This qualitative research project is part of YMAPS, an international comparative research programme carried out in Peru, Ethiopia, Zambia and India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana). Data collection in Peru was undertaken in 2018, with a subgroup of adolescents and young women and men from the Young Lives longitudinal study sample.

The research aimed to understand: (a) the experiences of young people who married, lived together and/or had become parents between the ages of 14 and 21; and (b) the predictors and motivations of early marriage/cohabitation and parenthood, as well as their implications for sexual and reproductive health, and for the elimination of intergenerational cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

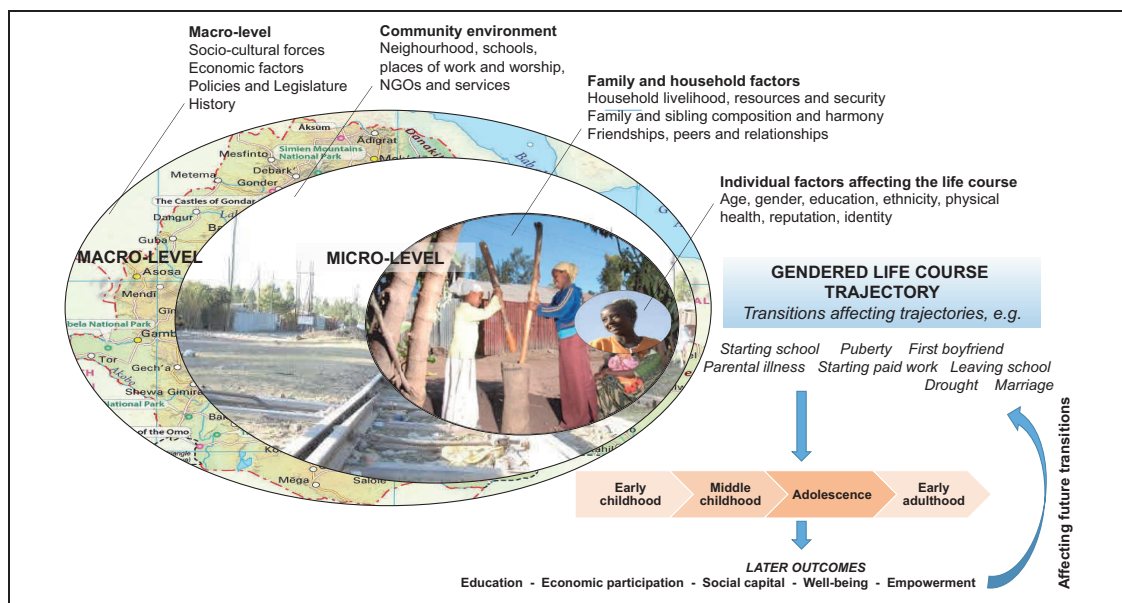
The overall study (Crivello et al. 2017), sought to answer two questions:

- Who marries, lives together or has children before the age of 18, and why? What consequences does this have on their well-being, their identity and their relationships?
- How do adolescents and young people who marry, live together or have children before the age of 18 experience their new roles and relationships – including experiences of parenting and separation/divorce? What kinds of support, programmes and services do they access?

To this end, voices of young people were collected on the consequences of marriage, cohabitation and early parenthood on educational paths, economic activity, interpersonal relationships, health, and sexual and reproductive well-being. YMAPS also sought to understand how the agency of these adolescents and young people is understood, limited and supported in different urban and rural contexts. Finally, it addressed the role of social change and the extent to which the values, expectations, motivations and practices of marriage, cohabitation and parenthood have changed over time and across generations, with a particular emphasis on the how and the why of these changes.

This research used socio-ecological and life-course perspectives to explore the changing roles and responsibilities of adolescents and young people, as well as the dynamic contexts in which they operate (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Elder 1994). It also relied on feminist perspectives that emphasise the role of power, relationships and societal influences in the experiences and trajectories of adolescents and young people (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The socio-ecological perspective of marriage and early parenthood seeks to reveal how different systems interact and influence the trajectories of adolescents and young people over time, taking into account the most immediate relationships with family, friends and teachers at home, at school and in the community (micro level), to the influences of culture, laws, politics and history (macro level). On the other hand, the life-course perspective focuses on how experiences in childhood affect the trajectories of adolescents and young people over time (Dornan and Woodhead 2015).

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**Figure 1:** *Conceptual and theoretical framework*<sup>9</sup>

Note: This framework was developed by Young Lives for many facets of their research on gender and adolescence. See Young Lives 2015.

The methodology considered the interrelationship between individual and structural factors that shape the critical moments of adolescence and youth, such as school dropout, the start of paid work, maternity/paternity, marriage and cohabitation. We also considered an intergenerational gender approach to examine the relationships, cultural logics, norms and practices that influence these transitions, and emphasised the meanings that participants gave to marriage, cohabitation, maternity and paternity in their lives.

**Interviews** were undertaken with the young people in the Young Lives sample to explore the perceptions of adolescents and young people in relation to: decision-making, the role of the family in those decisions, gender roles and the social norms and values associated with them, and their view of their own experience of marriage, cohabitation and motherhood/paternity. We also looked into the plans for the future of adolescents and young people.

In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the partners of the adolescents and young people in the case studies, with local authorities, and with service providers.

We undertook **focus groups** with three different generational groups: young mothers, adult mothers and students – men and women – in the last years of basic education in each of the selected locations. This was done in order to triangulate different information about social norms regarding cohabitation, marriage, motherhood and fatherhood at an early age.

In addition, in each of the locations we conducted focus groups with authorities and leaders to identify changes in relation with the provision of services to adolescents and young people, as well as events that may have had an effect on certain local practices. Finally, we explored the role of social norms regarding marriage/cohabitation and parenthood.

As these were young people who have been participating in Young Lives since 2002, we reviewed information from the surveys of them and their families in 2002, 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2016 prior to the qualitative fieldwork. This allowed us to reconstruct the main changes that these young people had experienced with respect to the socio-economic situations of their families and

9 This framework has been developed by Young Lives at various stages of its research on gender and youth. See Young Lives (2015).

their own lives. Based on this, profiles were prepared for each of the young people who constitute case studies.

## 2.2. Survey areas and participants

### 2.2.1. Survey areas

We used the Young Lives Older Cohort (born in 1994-1995) in Peru as our sample, and from this selected all those who in the last round of data collection – in 2016, when the Older Cohort were aged around 22 and the Younger Cohort around 15 – had reported being married, living together and/or being parents.

The qualitative research required working with a group of young people and adolescents living in the same locality or in neighbouring communities, in order to understand how social and/or cultural factors intervene in their experiences. Therefore, we used concentration of young people in different districts as our next criterion. In reviewing the survey data we found that young people in the study were located in three main districts:<sup>10</sup>

**Lima, urban district:** This is an urban settlement located in the southern part of Lima, the capital of Peru. The residents of the neighbourhoods in this district are migrants from all over the country and the children of migrants, born in Lima. The neighbourhood where data were collected has two areas: a central area, where the oldest houses are located, and a hilly area with little access to basic services. Most of the young people interviewed lived in or near the central area. The basic services available are electricity, running water and sewage, as well as telephone and internet. The neighbourhood also has a pre-school, primary school and a health facility.

**Piura, peri-urban district:** A district located 30 minutes by car from the district capital of Piura. The fieldwork was carried out in a population centre located 15 minutes from the nearest district capital. The community is mainly engaged in agriculture – growing bananas and rice – and the basic services available are running water, electricity and telephone. The village centre has a pre-school, primary and secondary school, as well as health facilities. The community has also undergone some changes since the formation, in 2003, of a banana cooperative producing and exporting bananas. Today, the cooperative offers the majority of employment opportunities in the community, which has increased the incomes of some families. The cooperative has also supported improvements in the infrastructure of some schools and health facilities.

**Junín, rural/jungle district:** A district located one hour by car from the provincial capital of Satipo, which has a greater number of young people concentrated in rural areas who experience parenthood and cohabitation. The fieldwork was mainly carried out in a native community 10 minutes from the nearest district capital. The community has a bilingual (Spanish and *Nomatsiguenga*) pre-school and primary school; however, there is no secondary school, and young people must move to the nearest town or district capital to attend secondary school. There is no health facility, and people often turn to other larger population centres or the district capital's hospital for health services. The community has electricity, telephone, mobile phones, and access to water, but no pipes; although not all homes have access to water service. The Cuna Más government programme is present, though few families use it.<sup>11</sup>

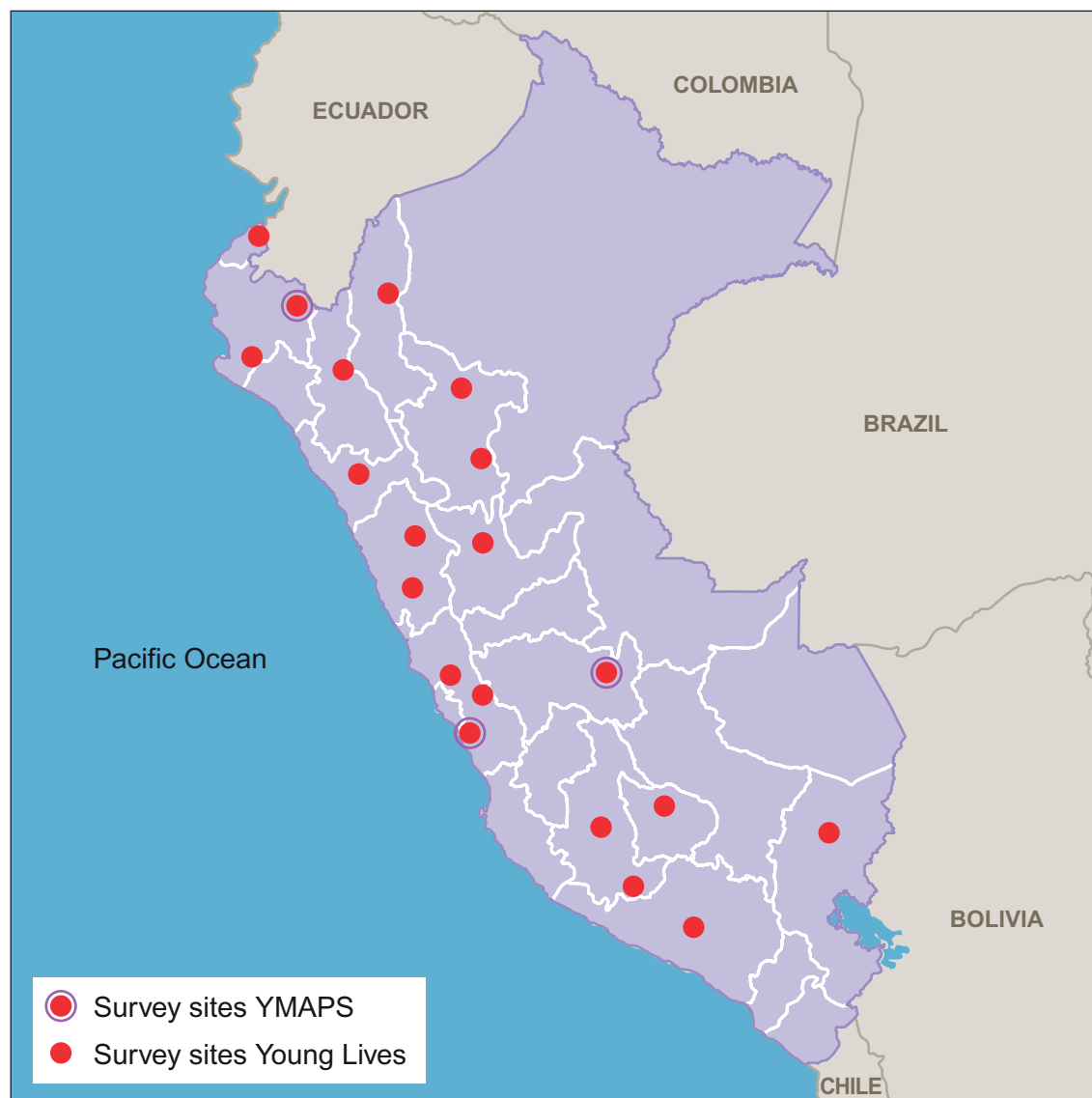
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10 For confidentiality reasons, locations are identified by the type of district – urban, peri-urban and rural – and region, while pseudonyms are used for all respondents.

11 In 2012 the Peruvian government turned the Wawa Wasi programme into Cuna Más, with a much-strengthened emphasis on early education. See: [www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL%20Impact%20Case%20Study%20ECD.pdf](http://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL%20Impact%20Case%20Study%20ECD.pdf)

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**Figure 2:** *Conceptual and theoretical framework*<sup>12</sup>

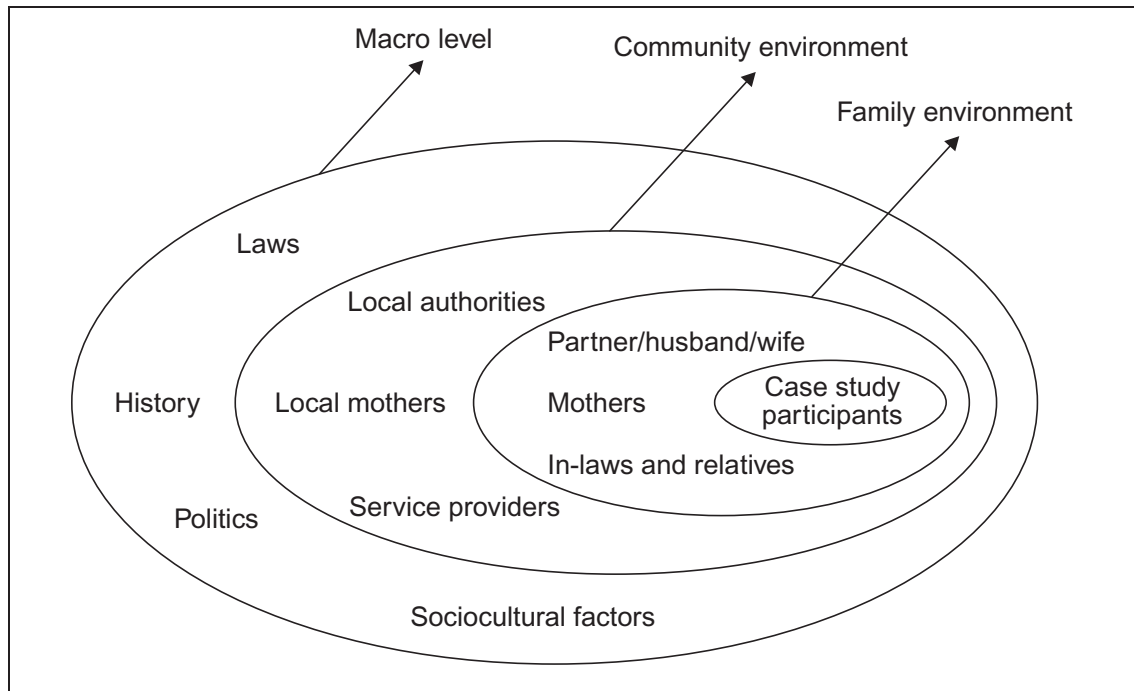
Note: This framework was developed by Young Lives for many facets of their research on gender and adolescence. See Young Lives 2015.

### 2.2.2. Participants

In total, 139 respondents took part in the study: 51 in the Piura peri-urban district – 30 interviews and 21 participants in focus groups; 47 in the rural/jungle district of Junín – 28 interviews and 19 participants in focus groups; and 41 in the urban district of Lima – 19 interviews and 22 participants in focus groups.

We selected 14 case studies in the peri-urban district of Piura, 12 in the rural/jungle district of Junín, and eight in the urban district of Lima. In each of these cases, information was collected from couples and family members, in order to fill in gaps in their personal histories. This was supplemented with information from local authorities, service providers, and the focus groups.

12 This framework has been developed by Young Lives at various stages of its research on gender and youth. See Young Lives (2015).

**Figure 3:** Sources of information by survey district

One limitation of the study relates to male participation in the focus groups. According to the local authorities, getting young males to participate was difficult because of their work hours, but also because of their reluctance to talk about their relationships and other very personal topics. Thus, most of the data analysed is from female voices. However, we try to incorporate information obtained from young men, in order to contribute to the reflection on male identities, a topic that is still rarely discussed in Peru.

### **2.3. Ethical considerations**

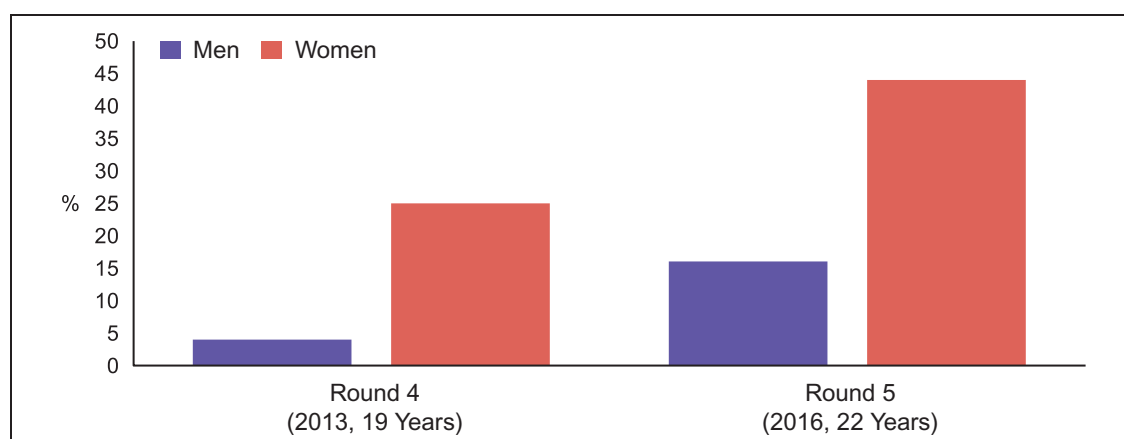
The study was approved by the Institute for Integrative Nutrition's (IIN) Ethics Committee. Interview and focus group guidelines, as well as informed consent forms, were reviewed and approved prior to data collection. Before each interview, participants were informed about the study's objectives, the confidentiality of the information and the voluntary nature of their participation. In the case of participating minors, we asked the caregiver or guardian to sign the informed consent form. All participants voluntarily agreed to be interviewed.

## Part 3: Results

### 3.1. What does Young Lives tell us?

According to data from the Round 4 (2013) Young Lives survey in Peru, women who reported being mothers or pregnant at age 19, accounted for 25 per cent of the entire study sample, while only 4 per cent of men reported being fathers at the same age. By the age of 22 (Round 5, 2016), the percentage of women who reported being mothers or pregnant increased to 44 per cent, while the percentage of men who reported being fathers increased to 16 per cent.

**Figure 4:** Maternity and paternity in Rounds 4 (19 years old) and 5 (22 years old)<sup>13</sup>



This data show that:

- In the Young Lives sample there is a higher proportion of mothers than fathers.
- Maternity and paternity cases increased significantly between the ages of 19 and 22.
- For half the women in our study, the beginning of their adult life is connected with the beginning of motherhood.

The results on cohabitation/marriage at the age of 19 also show that a higher percentage of women who reported to be cohabiting were in the middle and lower wealth terciles. The data also indicate that motherhood is linked to cohabitation. Favara, Sánchez and Lavado (2016) found that, at the age of 19, 80 per cent of the young women in the Young Lives sample who had a child reported being married or living together.<sup>14</sup> Teenage pregnancy and cohabitation/marriage were more common among young women who had grown up in the poorest families, and girls who had experienced the absence of one of their parents for a long time were at high risk of becoming pregnant at an early age. Girls whose self-efficacy and aspirations for higher education diminished over time were also at risk of becoming pregnant during adolescence.

On the other hand, Briones and Porter (2019) analysed how motherhood and cohabitation/marriage in adolescence affected the lives of young women in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, and found that those who began motherhood and cohabitation/marriage in adolescence were less likely to have completed basic education. For example, in Peru and

<sup>13</sup> The Round 4 results are based on a sample of 567 young people, while those from Round 5 are based on 575 young people. The results of both rounds are taken from young people from the Young Lives Older Cohort.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the analysis carried out by the authors does not seek to establish a causal relationship between motherhood and cohabitation/marriage.

Vietnam, only 60 per cent of girls who experienced motherhood and cohabitation/marriage during adolescence had been able to complete high school. Guerrero, Rojas and Vargas (2016, quoted in Cueto et al. 2018) found similar cases in a qualitative analysis of the educational, employment and family formation trajectories of a subgroup of 26 young people – 12 women and 14 men – from the Older Cohort of Young Lives. Young mothers had to leave their studies to care for their children.

Another interesting result from the analyses of the longitudinal study data is that young women who were mothers and cohabited or married in adolescence were also less likely to believe in equality between men and women (Briones and Porter 2019). For the specific case of Peru, Briones and Porter found that 19 per cent of women who experienced motherhood and cohabitation/marriage in adolescence agreed that girls should be more concerned with being good wives, rather than aspiring to a professional career.<sup>15</sup> In addition, they found that these young women showed less agency, as did their Indian and Vietnamese peers.

Therefore, this study's quantitative data show that for this, mainly poor, population, the beginning of maternity/paternity or cohabitation before the age of 18 or in their transition to adult life limits their educational opportunities and, as a consequence, their future opportunities in general. However, this situation becomes more complex, mainly for women who live in contexts where there are unequal gender norms, as Winter (2018) highlighted and as we see below in the qualitative results.

### 3.2. Characteristics of the qualitative subsample of the study

Of the 34 case studies collected in 2018, the vast majority (25) were living together, two were married, and two were single parents who had never lived together (Table 1). This corresponds with the previously mentioned preference of living together over marriage.

**Table 1:** *Marital status by district*

Marital status	Total	Rural		Peri-urban		Urban	
Married	2	2		0		0	
		0 (M)	2 (F)	0 (M)	0 (F)	0 (M)	0 (F)
Cohabiting	25	10		10		5	
		3 (M)	7 (F)	1 (M)	9 (F)	0 (M)	5 (F)
Single parents	2	0		0		2	
		0 (M)	0 (F)	0 (M)	0 (F)	1 (M)	1 (F)
Separated	5	2		2		1	
		1 (M)	1 (F)	0 (M)	2 (F)	0 (M)	1 (F)

We found that participants who started cohabiting before they came of age were mainly women. Of the 28 women interviewed, most (19) began cohabiting between the ages of 13 and 17, while the other nine began living together as young adults, when they were between 18 and 22 years old. Of the six boys who participated in the study, five started living together with their partners as adults, while the other young man, although he was a father before he was 18, did not.

We also found similarities with previous Young Lives findings. Thus, most of the women who started living together or had children before the age of 18 had incomplete basic education, which points to a link between dropping out of school and these transitions (see Table A1). Women who began living together or became mothers when they came of age had greater

<sup>15</sup> Only 13 per cent of those who did not experience motherhood or cohabitation/marriage agreed with these views.

diversity in their educational paths: some managed to access and even complete higher education (see Table A2). Those women who managed to complete their higher education did so, in all cases, thanks to the childcare support they received from their families. Another group of women failed to complete higher education because they lacked family support when they became pregnant and had to assume the role of caregivers in the home.

On the other hand, women who reported dropping out of school around the age of 15 did so mainly because they wanted greater independence, were pregnant, wanted access to socio-economic security or were in love.

Two participants from the rural district belonging to the Younger Cohort, who were 16 and 17 years old at the time of the survey, were already living with their partners, and one of them was a mother. However, both were continuing their secondary education because they had the support of their families. One, Estrella, said her mother-in-law and her partner supported her decision to continue studying at the school, with the mother-in-law conditioning her support for the baby on Estrella getting good grades. If she did not, according to the mother-in-law, it would not be worthwhile for Estrella to continue studying. The other young woman, Daniela, decided to start living with her current partner because of the financial support he offered her, in addition to promising to take care of her. Daniela's partner works outside the rural community where they live and returns every three weeks. Daniela's parents agreed to the cohabitation as long as Daniela finished high school. She still lives with her parents when her partner is away and, when her partner comes to the community, she stays with him.

We found that, of the six young men interviewed, four had completed basic education, while one had not, and one had managed to access higher education but had not completed it (see Table A3). What is interesting about this is that the educational decisions of young men are not related to cohabitation or the start of parenthood, as is the case with women. The level of education achieved seems to be mainly related to their economic means. This was mentioned by two of them, Guillermo and Arturo, who had dropped out of education. They did not have enough money to continue, so they had to prioritise working.

The sample had five cases of women who had started cohabiting around the age of 14-15: two from the peri-urban district, two from the urban district and one from the rural district. In all of these cases, the adolescents lived in very low-income households and/or violent family environments, where they felt unprotected or abandoned.

Rural adolescent girls who dropped out of basic education began to live with their partners shortly thereafter. For these adolescents, the transition from primary to secondary education meant facing the change from a bilingual primary school to a Spanish-language secondary school located in an urban location, outside their community setting. They commented that they did not like to walk long distances and then face discrimination in their new schools because they were from native communities. Thus, the educational inequities faced by the girls in the rural district affected their educational decisions and also, later on, their decision regarding the start of cohabitation.

Finally, as highlighted in the results of the Young Lives survey, cohabitation is closely linked to motherhood, which is why only three women in the qualitative sample – one from each district – had not become mothers by the time the data were collected in 2018. One, Jimena, started cohabiting because she was pregnant, but suffered a miscarriage. However, she continued living with her partner on the recommendation of her relatives. Luz pointed out that she was not a mother because she considered herself still too young (she was under 18); however, she said that she did not use any birth control because she had been told at a private clinic that she had cysts and that it would not be easy for her to become pregnant. Daniela, who was still in high school, said her mother and aunt had advised her to take contraception to avoid getting pregnant so she can finish her high school education.

In the urban district, two young people reported having become mothers and fathers, respectively, without having experienced cohabitation. Elvira had not because the father of her child abandoned her when he found out she was pregnant. In Ephraim's case, his mother opposed cohabitation because he was a minor. However, Ephraim does see his son and his partner fairly frequently; for now, it is Ephraim's mother who provides financially for the care of the baby.

This overview of the sample suggests that beginning cohabitation influences – in most cases – the educational decisions mainly of the women, and that their families or their partners also play a fundamental role when it comes to beginning life as a couple. In all three locations, as we will see below, families assume a decisive role in the decision-making of young people at the beginning of their lives as a couple, but also throughout their lives together.

### ***3.3. Cohabitation and/or marriage among Peruvian adolescents and young people***

#### ***3.3.1. Social practices and the role of the family in initiating cohabitation***

In all three locations, the beginning of cohabitation is related to the existence of secret amorous and/or sexual relationships. Mainly for women, the beginning of sexual life is closely linked to the beginning of life as a couple. Active sexuality in adolescence is not socially accepted in the environments in which these adolescents and young people grow up, and when the sexual relationship becomes public, society demands that the couple start living together. Although the start of a relationship depends on individual decisions such as those mentioned previously, these are not detached from the social environment in which young people live. The forms and rituals around this vary in each locality, and with the customs of the family.

In the peri-urban context, we found a local practice, 'stealing', that was quite socially structured and was followed by young people who began living together. The man takes the young woman from her community for one or two nights, and when this happens, social norms require the couple to live together with the expectation that they will marry later. Unlike in previous times, in most cases young couples make a prior agreement to 'escape'; that is, the woman now takes an active part in the initial decision. However, they seem to be excluded from the rest of the household negotiations, which are mainly between the woman's parents and her partner.

According to the testimonies we collected, the decision to live together is made when the couple want to continue their relationship without any restrictions on the time they have to see each other. Once the 'stealing' occurs, it is publicly understood that the couple has begun their sexual relationship. Faced with this situation, what follows is a process of 'reparation': the young man and his family must go and talk to the young woman's father in order to decide where the couple will live and articulate the commitment to marriage, although this rarely happens, as young couples mainly remain cohabiting. On the other hand, despite the fact that, in most cases, the couple organise their own 'stealing', they usually make this decision out of fear that the woman's family will find out that she is in a romantic relationship. Thus, some young people 'stole' their partners when they found out that she was pregnant, while others did so because a close relative had seen them, and they preferred to avoid arguments or physical aggression. Thus, it is fear of the family's reaction that encourages some couples to start living together. For a young woman, returning home when the relationship has become public and there has been no 'reparation' means that her parents are likely to beat her for having had a secret sexual relationship.

In the rural community, cohabitation does not follow structured processes such as 'stealing'. What usually happens is that the man, having had sexual relations with the woman, proposes to start living with her and then informs the parents. The union is then formalised before the local authority

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of the native community (the *apu*). The young man is brought before the authority by the parents of the young woman, and the *apu* makes sure that they have consented to the union. The couple signs a document that establishes a series of commitments that they must fulfil as members of the community. The local authority informs them what obligations they will assume and what punishments they might receive if they break the community rules. In most cases, there does not seem to have been a romantic relationship prior to living together – as we see in the peri-urban community – but only occasional sexual encounters. In addition, in some exceptional occasions, especially when the woman is very young – around 14 years of age – she is totally excluded from the negotiation of the start of cohabitation. It is the young man who, after having seen the teenager and spoken to her on occasion, goes to her parents and negotiates the beginning of the cohabitation with the promise of "improving her economic well-being". In the rural community, the women themselves reported having agreed to start living with their partners at this early age, as they saw this as an opportunity to improve their economic situation and being provided for.

In the urban district, the beginning of cohabitation seems to be more closely related to pregnancy than in the other districts. Thus, it is the pregnancy that motivates cohabitation. Once a pregnancy is confirmed, both young people talk to their respective families, and agree on the conditions for cohabitation. In most cases, the parents had no knowledge that the young people were in a romantic relationship, and both boys and girls felt pressure from their families to start living together, as it was felt that the child's welfare should be the main consideration: "The best thing for the child is to have the parents together". In less-poor families, the woman's parents ask that they live together in their home, which does not happen in the poorest families. In this context, the social pressure for cohabitation goes hand-in-hand with the idea that a single mother is a "suffering woman", a woman who must work hard in order to cover the costs of raising a child. Living together is seen as a way of ensuring the presence and responsibility (mainly economic) of the father towards his child. Community members indicated that it is more common for pregnancies to occur when young women are between 17 and 19 years old, that is, among young women who have already completed basic education. However, there were also a few cases of very poor families where poverty and violence in the home causes the adolescent to drop out of school and start cohabiting earlier, around the age of 15.

Despite the diversity of practices by which cohabitation is initiated in each location, a common characteristic is the importance of the role played by families. Families do not consider sexual activity in adolescence acceptable and end up intervening. The parents of the young woman get involved in the process and make sure that the young man fulfils his responsibility of providing financial support for the new family. Families define the agreements and, in the end, give their blessing to the couple. If a woman wants to start cohabiting before the age of 18, families must come to an agreement or commitment of future marriage in order to avoid a complaint of rape.<sup>16</sup> However, parents of young women argue that, as long as their daughters are minors, they could file a complaint and even, because of the authority they have over their daughters, have them claim that the relationship was not consensual. So, the agreement between the families is the proof that there was no harassment.

As noted earlier, however, only if the young man has had sex with his partner when she was under 14 years of age would it be rape under the Criminal Code. Article 173 of this code defines rape as sexual relations with a minor between 10 and less than 14 years of age.

The role of the young woman in this process is minimal. In most cases, she only gives her consent to live with her partner, but does not participate in negotiating the terms of it, such as where she will live. This was the case for Clara, from the rural district, who said that her parents

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16 Since 2012, the minimum age for consensual sex in Peru has been 14 years old.

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decided that she should live with her partner, since she had become pregnant. Neither she nor the young man wanted to live together, but the family insisted. A few years later, Clara separated from her partner, as he abused her, drank excessively and had not shouldered the financial responsibility for his family.

We've forced them together. She refused, but since she gave birth on that date ... "If she gives birth on that date, the child is mine," he said, "and if he is not born on that day, he is someone else's." But that date was when he was born. He didn't deny it. Then we called his dad, his whole family. He denied it, but then he accepted it. "That's my son," he said. We have brought them together. (Clara's mother, rural district)

Although it is often customary for the woman to go to the community where the man lives, some families ask for the opposite and thus remain more proactive in the relationship. In the rural district, some young women noted that living close to a woman's family could protect against violence from their partners. One of the women in the group discussion with young mothers from the rural district said that when she started living with her current partner, her parents supported her to move close to them. Although her husband wanted to take her elsewhere, she did not accept, as she would have felt unprotected.

My husband wanted to take me far away, but I didn't want that ... He lives far away [doesn't specify where] and who knows. Sometimes you don't know the man well, or you've only just met him. He can tell you he loves you, but he doesn't really love you. You never know. (Focus group of young mothers, rural district)

The mistrust expressed in the quote was justified. Despite the fact that this woman remained living close to her family, she said she had experienced episodes of physical violence from her husband.

### 3.3.2. Cohabitation or marriage?

Although marriage is the societal expectation of the young people's families, we found that, in the three locations, there seem to be no sanctions for not getting married. Families are aware that a marriage ceremony represents a significant economic expense, so they prefer to use the money to help the young people start life as a couple. Both young men and women stated that marriage is not necessarily part of their aspirations. They prefer not getting married for two main reasons: a) they do not think that their family or relationship dynamics would change if they got married; and b) they think that if the relationship does not work out, being married may be harmful for their well-being.

For women, cohabitation represents a source of power in negotiations with their partners. When they live together, they point out that they can leave home if they decide to do so, a situation that would be more complicated if they were married. Women perceive themselves as "tied to the man" by marriage; they consider that separation would not be easy, as they point out that sometimes husbands "do not want to sign the divorce" and therefore they must remain married "forever". On the other hand, some think that, although there is not much difference between being married and living together, marriage gives a message to the community: the man is committed to monogamy and, in addition, the wife and her children are the main beneficiaries of the couple's assets. However, since cohabitation is public, they believe that, in practice, cohabitants are recognised as wives and that, therefore, there is no major difference.

Young men point out that, for them, getting married implies a greater loss of freedom than living together. They claim that, for example, a "married man" has to attend events in the company of his partner, which is not the case if they are only living together. For them, a male partner can go out alone and even enjoy greater freedom if he wants to have occasional relations with other partners, but that, if they were married, society would be more inclined to sanction them morally.

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For young men, separation from a married partner with children is economically disadvantageous, as the law will require them to provide child support. They recognise that while they have this responsibility for their children, the legal and social pressure on a married man is greater. That said, men feel that if they do not marry, they are freer to leave the relationship without assuming any responsibility for it.

Overall, it seems that cohabitation is preferred because it is perceived as a practice that allows more flexibility for men and more protection for women. It should be noted that, although Peruvian law recognises that couples who live together for more than two consecutive years can declare their 'common-law union' in order to obtain benefits similar to those of marriage with respect to assets and inheritance, this is not something that the couples interviewed have done. Young people in general are unaware that they must declare their union in order to obtain the corresponding legal protection. Women in particular indicated that they rely on their partners' families to demand that responsibilities be met in the event of a separation.

### ***3.4. Why do teenage girls and young women decide to begin cohabiting?***

#### ***3.4.1. Living together to be free***

Teenage girls who began living with a partner before the age of 18 said one of the reasons they did so was to seek greater independence and protection. During their adolescence, they lived in violent and repressive environments, in which they felt they had little or no decision-making capacity. Thus, in most cases, we find that it is the women themselves who seek to leave these environments; unfortunately, in other cases it is the family that leaves the girls unprotected and they see no other way out than to begin cohabitation.

Maintaining a love affair before the age of 18 seems to be forbidden for women. Families see in this relationship the risk of pregnancy and therefore prefer to exercise control over their daughters. However, once the romantic relationship becomes public, the opposite happens and they demand that the couple start living together. The patriarchal culture that these families are part of encourages control over women's bodies and their sexuality. Therefore, they seek control first by isolating their daughter and then, in the face of the failure of the isolation, they encourage her to form a family with the man with whom she publicly acknowledges that she has had sexual relations. In this context, the exercise of women's sexual life is framed and accepted only in the context of a marriage or cohabitation relationship. The family promotes cohabitation to ensure that the man fulfils the role of provider for the future children.

The following cases – one peri-urban and one urban – are examples of how the beginning of romantic relationships, and later of living together, are associated with a search for greater freedom or to escape from violent situations within one's own home.

Luz was born and raised in a peri-urban town. At the age of 14, she met her current partner, with whom she is cohabiting. At that age, her father didn't let her go out much and didn't want her to interact with boys. Nevertheless, Luz began a romantic relationship with her partner that they kept secret because her father was very jealous and sometimes violent. She mentioned that one of the reasons she started cohabiting was fear of her father's violent reaction and the oppressive situation in her home:

I was just late. One day, we just went out for chicken ... I was late. I knew my dad could be mean, sometimes he would hit me when I was late. I was afraid, I didn't want to go home anymore because he was going to hit me, he was going to scold me. "What will he say to me?" I thought, and I just didn't go home. This is how they found out that I was in love, and

they told me I couldn't go out any more ... and that's when I went with him. He stole me and then he talked to my dad.

Yanet, a 25-year-old from the urban district, said she started living with her partner at age 14. She remembered her father being very violent and constantly beating her mother, especially after drinking. Because of this, Yanet did not feel safe in her own home and did not like living there.

*Was there anything you didn't like about living at home?*

My dad's beatings, he hit my mom. I hated that. Because of my dad, my [youngest] brother now uses drugs ...

She said that while she didn't want to be at home, she hadn't thought about cohabitation. She was just starting to date when her father threw her out of the house. Yanet realised that she could do nothing at the age of 14, so she had no choice but to start living with her partner:

I didn't plan on living together at such a young age, but I was forced ... I was forced to by my dad. He's the one who threw me out and I had to deal with it. And I had no choice, because where would I go?

While the young women in the survey said that they were living in oppressive relationships at home, it is important to note that, over time, these have changed and are now perceived as less oppressive relationships than before. Adult women in the focus groups in all three locations stated that they perceived a change in parent-child relationships and thought that fathers were no longer as demanding as they were when they were young. But young women said that while they agreed that they had more opportunities to go out than their mothers did, they still perceived their fathers to have been very restrictive and even violent towards them.

This change in dynamic is perceived because women now go to school and socialise with other young people, but, beyond that, they are not given permission to go out and interact with other adolescents in their community. In this context, mobile phone use – in both the urban and peri-urban district – has given them new tools to circumvent restrictions, as they can use text messages to arrange meeting their partners and maintain secret relationships. Therefore, although some intergenerational changes are perceived in the upbringing of women, there are also continuities in relation to the control exercised over them, and they play an important role in the decision-making of young people about cohabitation.

### 3.4.2. Living together to improve their socio-economic situation

We also found a relationship between adolescents from the poorest households – mainly in the rural district – beginning cohabitation, and the promise of improving their living conditions. In the rural district, some young women started cohabitation shortly after dropping out of basic education. In this context, when they stay at home doing housework, they start having sex with their future partners. Some young people began living together when they felt alone at home and others did so to improve the socio-economic conditions in which they lived. This can be seen in the cases of Leonor and Daniela, both young people from the rural district.

Leonor said she stopped going to high school because her family, specifically her grandparents, who were raising her, did not have the financial resources for her to continue. They did not have the means to cover her daily commute to school and so Leonor stayed home to do the housework. While they went to work on the farm, she was left alone, cooking and cleaning. It seems that being alone was an important criterion when the possibility of cohabitation arose when she was between 13 and 14 years old: "So my grandparents went out to work. And who was going to stay in the house with me? I was all alone ... So I thought, instead of being left alone, I'd better go. I'm going with my husband". Then, her partner, who was 20 years old at the time, asked the grandparents for permission to live with Leonor, and they agreed.

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Daniela, 16 years old, recently started living with her partner. She met him at a community restaurant. At first, she showed no interest in him, but the young man found out where she lived and started looking for her. After a time when they were seeing each other and talking, they became lovers and soon after began living together. Daniela said that she agreed to live with him because he offered her financial support: he bought her things and also promised to support her to continue her studies:

He helped me, he helped me with various things ... he bought my clothes, my shoes ... my plates, my pots and pans ... He already had his own plate. ... He told me: "You're not going to have any problems, I'm going to support you with various things ... I'm going to support you with your studies".

Faced with the limited opportunities that these poor teenagers see for themselves, they accept cohabitation not least because they are looking for better economic conditions. Unfortunately, in many cases, once they start living together, the promises fade away and the dynamics of the relationship that emerges are not very different from what these young women experienced in their family homes.

### **3.5. "It wasn't what I had expected": life for women in cohabitation**

When cohabitation does not result from pregnancy, it can arise as a result of a search for independence and freedom – especially for girls from repressive homes – to escape from family problems or to improve the socio-economic conditions in which they live. Moreover, the women also mentioned "love" as part of their reasons for living together. Before living together, they imagined they would experience a happy couple's life, but once it began, they felt a certain disappointment. Life together did not turn out the way they had imagined; on the contrary, they were once again in the midst of unequal power relations.

#### **3.5.1. Control and isolation at the beginning of life as a couple**

Yolanda, a young woman from the peri-urban district, started cohabitation at the age of 16. She quit her studies in basic education not because she wanted to, but because her father forced her to. He always told her that it wasn't worth investing in her education because she would end up married anyway. Shortly after leaving school, Yolanda met her current partner and they decided to start living together. In the beginning, she was excited because she thought, "I'm finally going to make my own life," but this didn't happen. Yolanda feels that her partner is very jealous and controls her too much, a situation that generates frequent arguments. Now she believes that this is how the dynamics between couples are:

Sometimes I want to go out alone or with my daughter, [but] he won't let me ... When I say, "I'm going out", he says, "No".

*But does he give you a reason?*

No, he just says, "You're not going out, we're both going out."

*And you're okay with that?*

No, not at all ... He once told me that my shorts were too short, that I wasn't supposed to wear them because I was with him. That's why I almost never wear them.

*If you weren't living with him, would you dress like that?*

Yes.

*And what would happen if you wanted to go out with your sister?*

He wouldn't let me either. He doesn't let me.

Yolanda and many other women in the study believe that their partners have controlling attitudes, to the point that they even want to limit their contacts with their family and friends. When young women start life as a couple, it is often far from their family, which creates a certain isolation and rupture in these relationships. With the relocation, her most important ties are with the other young women in her husband's family: sisters-in-law or cousins. "We can talk and complain about life," they say, but they know that are talking with a member of their partner's family and so do not feel they can trust them completely. Sometimes – mainly in the peri-urban and rural districts – men do not allow their wives to work, believing that in such environments they can meet other men and therefore end the relationship.

### 3.5.2. Violence as part of the dynamics of life as a couple

The exercise of control and jealousy between partners has exposed some of the women to situations of physical violence. We found in the interviews that all the rural women had been physically assaulted by their partners at some point during the relationship. In the urban and peri-urban districts, this had only happened to a few young women. Women who separated from their partners reported that they did so because of the constant mistreatment they received. However, separating was not an easy decision; those who did so had the support of their families. For example, Lorena, who lives in the peri-urban district, left her partner because her parents supported her when she told them that he was beating her. The main reason for the separation, according to Lorena, was her husband's violence against her. He was possessive and complained that she did not fulfil her roles as a partner, did not know how to cook and did not keep the house clean and tidy.

[He] is a possessive, aggressive person, all that ... For example, when I was preparing something for him, he told me to do it again, just like that, he wanted me to do it again. He didn't care about what I was doing, and if I didn't do it, he'd start yelling at me ... I was learning to be a housewife and I thought he should understand, because when he met me, I was a student, my studies were everything. That's how the problems started.

However, Lorena says that the people around her demanded that she continue the relationship, and this made the decision to separate difficult.

A neighbour told me, "You have to deal with that and put up with it because he's your husband". At the time, I was listening to her, but then I realised I had to put an end to it ... He was so aggressive hitting me, usually with his hands, but then he threw a box of games at me ... It didn't hit me, but it hit him [his son]. It hit him and cut him here [points to the head].

Social control over women tends to reinforce unequal power relations between men and women and contributes to the development of unhealthy relationships. In the rural district – a native community in the Amazon – cases of physical or sexual violence between couples are not reported to the police authorities. They are resolved by the *apu* or chief of the community, who listens to the complaint and gives the perpetrator a second chance, making him promise not to attack his partner again. However, as assaults keep happening, the women feel discouraged by the impunity and will not report the abuse a second time. This feeling of helplessness on the part of the women is justified, considering that it is clear that community rules do not protect them from violence, but rather prioritise keeping the couple together "for the sake of the family" or "for the sake of the children". Tolerance of violence reinforces inequality in relationships and justifies the superiority of men over women. On the other hand, in the testimonies of some young rural women, we also find that women are afraid to denounce their partner because they feel that cannot do without the man as a provider. It is important to remember that women often drop out of education, thus limiting their access to the labour market.

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Age seems to play an important role in the perpetuation of violence against adolescent girls during cohabitation. Thus, we find that the greater the age difference between the man and the woman, the more likely she is to face physical violence. Women who started living together at a younger age also reported physical violence more often. The hierarchical and violent relationship is justified by the age difference because, as the woman is very young, it is considered that she is not yet ready to assume her role in the home and it is necessary to "teach her". In the rural district, adult women say that the younger the woman, the more likely it is that her partner will hit her, because "she doesn't know how to do anything" and "she must learn". We found the same dynamic in some couples in the urban district, as in the case of Lourdes, who was 14 years old when she started living with her partner, who was 19. In an interview, her partner noted that they argued and that sometimes he hit her:

I hit her because sometimes she didn't cook, right? Sometimes I was really jealous ... Sometimes she wouldn't let me go out and play ... Sometimes my kids would look at me when we were arguing. Well, I used to hit her ... I mean, I didn't hit her like you see on the news sometimes, all beaten up, bleeding, bruised, no. Not like that. I mean, I pushed her. Sometimes she'd kick me, right, and then I'd kick back. That's what the fights were like. (partner of Lourdes, woman from the urban district)

### 3.5.3. The need to fulfil traditional gender roles

When cohabitation begins, social norms demand that traditional gender roles be reproduced in everyday dynamics. Women are responsible for household life. They must prepare the food, take care of the children, wash the clothes and keep the house clean. These norms are acquired in the family and community environment, as shown by the case of Ingrid, a woman from the urban district who started cohabiting at the age of 19 because she had become pregnant. She said that her mother told her that in order to be a good wife, she had to "take care of the husband, and keep the house and the children clean". Men are the economic providers, and so the young women agree to take on the household chores. But the task of caring for children, cooking and keeping the home clean and tidy sometimes overwhelms the young mothers, as Ingrid pointed out:

*And you think you're a good partner?*

More or less ... because sometimes I fall asleep with my baby ... sometimes I'm tired, and don't do some things. And he also kind of doesn't like it, right? ... He tells me, "Don't you ever clean up?" ... but, yes, I'm trying to do better.

However, in cases like Leonor's – a 24-year-old woman from a rural community – the lack of support networks for childcare prevents her from supporting her partner, who is currently the only provider in the household. Leonor started living with her partner when she was 13 and he was 20. She is mainly a caregiver for her children and takes care of all the household chores. Occasionally, she works in cocoa harvesting when her aunt asks for her support. Her partner works in construction and is hardly ever home. According to Leonor, he "doesn't help with the chores because he works outside the home". In addition, she expressed her agreement with the distribution of tasks in the home, although she would also sometimes like to be able to work outside to contribute financially. However, she acknowledges that it is difficult because she would have no one to leave her children with: "Who will look after my children in the house? I don't have anyone here."

We found that men generally make most of the decisions in the household. Although men recognise their partners' ability to save and manage money – which is why, in many cases, they give them everything they earn – young women do not feel free to make use of the financial resources because they believe they need their partners' approval, even if their partners have

never questioned any of their spending. Some decisions may be negotiated between the couple, such as house repairs, finding a school for the children, or shopping, but the man always has the last word. In general, women tend to make decisions related to the needs of their children. The cases of Yanet, a young woman from the urban district, and Kiara, from the rural district are examples of this:

*Who makes most of the decisions in your house? For example, when you receive something, to pay electricity, buy clothes for someone ... who decides?*

He decides ... because he handles the money ....

*And, for example, who decides what to cook?*

No, that's me.

*You decide what to cook?*

Yes.

*OK. What about clothes for you? For your kids? Does he buy them?*

We go shopping together ... We go shopping and I take a look. I am the one who chooses.

*But in the end, he makes the decision what you are buying?*

If we are buying something or not? Yes, that's him. (Yanet, woman from the urban district).

*When money comes into the house, at the end of the month, when he gets paid, who decides what that money is spent on or how it will be spent?*

I do.

*You? OK. I mean, he comes, he gives you the money and you decide what you're going to spend it on?*

Yes, he tells me it's to buy, well ... He tells me it's for buying things for the baby.

*How do you decide what to buy?*

I don't know.

*By yourself, like, "OK, I'm going to buy a TV"?*

No, the two of us.

*What do you decide, what do you have the responsibility for? Give me an example.*

Cooking ... (Kiara, woman from the rural district).

It is important to emphasise that, in the case of the few young women who reported working, there may be a little more autonomy and agency to buy some extra things they need. However, the unequal power distribution in the relationship remains unchanged. Even if they both earn the same or the woman earns more, it seems that the money earned by the man is worth more than that earned by the woman. Money earned by men is used for "important" things – such as household repairs or bank loans – while money earned by women is used for the needs of the children, such as clothing or food.

Only young women who had accessed higher education before living together received help from their parents in raising their children and were therefore able to work. In these cases, however, work was a source of conflict for the couple, as the men were very jealous of the women's co-workers. Young women pointed out how sometimes work can lead to conflict with their partners, even to physical violence against the women. This was the case with Monica, from the peri-urban district. She worked in a supermarket in the district capital, and her husband always drove her to and from the bus stop out of jealousy, thinking she might meet someone on the journey. One

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day, the husband came home drunk and was met by Monica's mother, who was taking care of the couple's child while Monica was working. He yelled that her daughter had gone off with someone else and tried to take the child, but the grandmother stopped him. Moments later, Monica arrived at her mother's house with bruises. What had happened was that the husband, who had already been drinking, went to pick up Monica at the bus stop and did not find her. He then made up the story of the infidelity, which is why he assaulted her.

In most cases, women indicated that they became mothers shortly after starting cohabitation. In this new role they had to dedicate themselves full-time to parenting and home care which, in many cases, was so demanding that they became frustrated. When they wanted to resume their education or enter the labour market, they encountered barriers within the family, such as their husband's jealousy or lack of parental support, but also in their environment, due to a lack of childcare services. This undoubtedly limits their aspirations, often making it difficult for them to express what they expected for themselves in the future. In 10 years' time, they see themselves doing the same things and prefer to focus their aspirations on their children's education. Clara, from the rural district, articulated this:

*You don't get out much anymore?*

No.

*Why don't you get out much anymore?*

Because I have to take care of my children.

*Would you like to work with something other than cocoa?*

Yes ... Helping my mom.

*OK. And, for example, how would you like to live in the next few years? What would you like to see happen?*

Same as now, just like now.

*OK. And how would you like your children to live in the future?*

I'd like them to be professionals.

*That they continue to study after school, that they study more?*

Yes.

Many of the young women reported not using any modern contraception until after their first child was born. That is one of the reasons why motherhood goes hand-in-hand with cohabitation. They seem to have little autonomy over this and pointed out that men are in charge of taking care of themselves in the first sexual encounters. Because they are men, so the women believe, they have more experience in this field. Once the first child is born, the burden of contraception falls on the woman; she must take care of herself if she wants to avoid a second pregnancy. Thus, the man exercises his dominance in deciding on sexual activities, but does not intervene in reproductive health or birth control. Young women and men in all three locations mentioned that they had little or no information about contraceptive methods, and that this had not been a topic of discussion or instruction either at school or at home. Teenage sexuality and forms of sexual activity are not discussed. They want to know more about it, but, unable to find suitable channels, turn to other sources, such as the internet and pornography, to "learn". This shows that Peruvian teenagers and young adults are starting relationships without the information they need to exercise their sexuality freely and responsibly. Social norms related to the appropriate age of sexual intercourse keep these adolescents uninformed, so there is a strong association between the beginning of sexuality, motherhood and cohabitation.

### 3.6. "I felt pressured": men's perceptions of cohabitation

So far, this report has emphasised women's voices. However, excluding men's voices is tantamount to keeping them out of an issue that also affects their lives. Thus, although we have few cases of young males in cohabiting relationships who agreed to be part of the study, those that did talked about the challenges they face in fulfilling the male role in their transition to partnership and fatherhood.

In their testimonies we find that some men started living with their partners because of family and social pressure. If they have sex with a teenager or young woman and this becomes public knowledge, they feel it is their responsibility to repair the "damage" and "take responsibility for the family". That means that the young man talks to his partner's father and commits to fulfilling his role as provider for her and their future children. A young man from the peri-urban district commented that he was forced into cohabitation by his in-laws because he and his partner had returned late from a party. "If she came home at that time [2 am], her dad was going to beat us. So I stole her." He added that, despite having assumed his role, he had not felt ready to start life as a couple at that time, but since the relationship had become public, it was the right thing to do as a man.

*Have you ever felt pressured to live with her?*

Yes, by her dad ... Her parents were ashamed of what the people would say. He had been here with her, he had taken her to my house, he had left her again. It is better this way ...

*Sure, they'll say, "He took her out until 2 am in the morning."*

Yeah. Besides, they discriminate here.

*What, how so?*

People look down on you.

*So, honestly, did you want to live with her?*

Yes, but later on, I wanted to get to know her better.

*Had you ever discussed it?*

Yes, [they had talked about living together later] because I wanted to study ... but then her father threw a fit, so [we just started living together] (Arturo, man from the peri-urban district).

Once cohabitation has begun, it is clear to the young men that, in order to fulfil their role as providers, they must work outside the home, while the women take care of the domestic tasks. In this dynamic, men believe that they should not intervene in the domestic sphere because this is a way of maintaining dominance over the woman. For these men, to insert themselves in the feminine – domestic – sphere is to distance themselves from the ideal of a strong and masculine person, to disobey the requirements of masculinity<sup>17</sup> and, therefore, to put their masculinity at risk in the eyes of others, as we see in this quote from Arturo, a young man from the peri-urban district:

*What does a good husband do?*

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17 For Segato (2018: 40), masculinity 'requires men to prove themselves men all the time, because masculinity, unlike femininity, is a status, a hierarchy of prestige, it is acquired as a title and must be renewed and proven as such'. In other words, masculinity demands that men never suspect that their masculinity has been degraded. This concept of masculinity, acquired during childhood, demands indifference to the pain of others, use and control of force, a low level of empathy, the capacity for cruelty, and the ability to defy danger.

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Helping out around the house, but not too much because that sets an example for later ... You will teach her that others are doing things for her, then she will not want to get up early to make breakfast, all of a sudden she wants you to get up, right? [laughs]

*Ah, you say she will develop bad habits.*

Yes [laughs].

Despite recognising that they are the dominant partners in the relationship, some of the men indicated that starting cohabiting was not easy for them either. The responsibility of becoming a provider was sometimes overwhelming, because, as César, a man from the peri-urban district said, if they don't work, the family doesn't eat. They may also feel that they began cohabiting with false expectations about what it entailed, and thought it would be easier.

*And you, before living together, for example ... how did you imagine living together, living as a couple, would be?*

I never thought it would be so stressful.

*Stressful?*

Yes, stressful. You have to work to be able to eat; when I was single, I would come home, and they would give me the food.

*I mean, you didn't think it was that bad.*

Yes, already all the work is too exhausting. (César, man from the peri-urban district)

*If we go back in time a bit, is there anything you would change about the decisions you have made and the things that have happened in your life?*

Yes. If my parents had given me better guidance, I might not have gotten this family, right? I would have been someone else ... or I don't know what would have happened.

*How would you have wanted to be guided, for example?*

To teach me what could happen later on in my daily life, what could happen in a relationship, or to teach me not start a relationship in the first place, right? Stay in school and finish my studies...

*You feel like they didn't teach you that?*

No, they didn't teach me that. (Julio, man from the peri-urban district)

Accounts such as the following, from César, show that men expect their partners not only to do the housework, but also to keep them informed about what they are doing. Maintaining control is vital to their sense of masculinity. Men like César have learned that their role involves exercising control over their home, but also over their partner's body and decisions, a situation that exposes women to violence.

*Who makes the decisions how the money is spent, for example?*

Well, I make the decisions.

*And your wife, for example, what kind of decisions does she make?*

Decisions about the baby. Above all else, she looks after the baby and the house, for example ... What we are having to eat, she looks after everything ... She takes care of her pots, her things. I take care of my cars ... Before she makes any decisions, she has to talk to me.

*You have told her to talk to you before making a decision?*

Yes, she talks to me.

*Why do you think that's okay? I mean, do you think she has to talk to you?*

She has to talk to me because ... what she wants to do, what she wants to take, where she wants to be, so I don't have to worry. (César, man from the peri-urban district)

However, there were also some stories that highlighted the tension that men feel as they try to fulfil their role as providers and begin to question the role they play, that society and their families requires them to play. For example, the story of Julio (a young man from the peri-urban district) shows an intention to break with the traditional figure of an authoritarian father that he probably experienced as a child, while Guillermo (a young man from the rural district) outlined how his work activities conflict with his role as a father and husband, which creates a tension in his identity.

Like I say, I don't spend much time here [at home] ... I don't know if I'm a good husband, I don't have much time.

*So, let's talk about what a good husband would be...*

He should have time, he should be with his family, he should give them everything, he should make them laugh, he should make them happy, he should make them feel good ...

*You mean, give them everything they need materially. Is that it?*

Sure, materially and emotionally, right? Be with them, and make sure they don't lack anything ... (Guillermo, man from the rural district).

*And, for example, in your house, who is mainly in charge of taking care of your daughter?*

My wife, because she has more time for her. When I'm here, I take care of my daughter ... To make up for the time I'm away from her, at work.

*So how do you take care of her? What do you do?*

I bathe her, I dress her, I give her milk, I prepare her food ... I play with her. We watch TV ...

*And do you find it easy to combine the responsibilities you have at work with the responsibilities at home?*

I don't think so. What I would like is ... to make some changes and even have a regular day off to spend more time with my daughter, with my family ...

*What should a father of your age do, for example?*

Above all, be clear about your responsibilities. Your responsibilities ... to have good communication. And to try to spend a little more time with your children. So they see you more as a friendly figure, not as an authoritarian figure (Julio, man from the peri-urban district).

The attributes associated with masculinity – such as strength, toughness and performance at work – are valued in all three survey districts. Men feel that they must prove themselves as providers in their social environments. In addition, they perceive that exercising their masculinity implies controlling their partners, a requirement that can end up justifying violence. However, in some statements we also see calls for a new masculinity, less linked to physical power and more linked to the family environment.

### **3.7. Lack of opportunities and limits of the social environment**

In the testimonies of young women from the peri-urban and rural districts we found that becoming a mother between the ages of 18 and 22 was quite common, although women generally did not want to do so. All the women reported that they would have liked to continue their studies – either to complete basic education or pursue higher education – while few saw themselves as becoming young mothers. Similarly, women in the urban district believed that it is too early to become a mother at that age. Yet, they see that this happens quite often around them and eventually

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assume that this is the reality that they live in. So, it seems that the women sense that, sooner or later, their life trajectories point towards the traditional role of "wife-partner-mother-caretaker". They may have aspirations to achieve higher levels of education, but access to such opportunities is often difficult due to their socio-economic status and lack of support networks.

The women in the survey noted that those who have close family members who are willing to help them could aspire to continue studying and/or enter the labour market. But they also felt that, if they did so, they risk "neglecting" what they see as their main responsibility: the home, which involves the care of children and partners. Social gender norms seem to demand that they fulfil their caregiving role above all else. Thus, a woman who studies or works must also accept that she cannot neglect the domestic burden for which she is responsible because she is a woman. This demand is made not only by the woman's partner, but also by community members, as Monica, a young woman from the peri-urban district, and some young mothers who participated in a focus group in the rural district, pointed out:

Um... [he] does sweep, clean and, well, it doesn't take long to sweep ... So he does help me sometimes. Yes, he helps me sometimes! He also says that he is tired when he comes home, he doesn't do more, he just sweeps ... Sometimes, when I come home at night [after work], sometimes, when I leave early, well, 7:45, I leave at 4:45. Sometimes I actually leave at that time, so ... I start cooking, I start preparing things. First, I cook, then I clean up, then at night everything is clean ... That's how I do it sometimes, sometimes I am also very tired when I come home.

*And do you agree with the way the tasks are distributed like this, or would you like to change something?*

Yes, well, it used to be worse, he didn't use to help me at all ....Now he helps me, so ... My mom also tells him: "You have to help, because she's tired too", and I tell her: "He only washes when he's upset with me, he starts washing his work clothes". (Monica, woman from the peri-urban district)

*Woman 4: Women have more burdens to carry: cooking, cleaning, washing, having their husband's clothes folded.*

*Woman 2: When he comes home, you have to serve dinner to your husband. There is no time left to do your nails [laughs] (Focus group of young mothers, rural district).*

Social gender norms are not static over time. Discussions with authorities and adults in the community indicated that some attitudes towards traditional gender roles have been slowly changing. The adult mothers in the three districts stated that "women today have more rights than before". In the peri-urban district, for example, it was noted that when they were younger, their activities were confined to the domestic environment; however, they see that some women and mothers now work or run a small business in their own homes, and this can provide them with some economic independence. However, they also pointed out that women end up overloaded with chores and responsibilities, as men still do not take a more active part. We found similar opinions in the urban district and, with much less change, in the rural district, where it is noted that men have more traditional ideas, so they expect their partners to devote themselves entirely to the care of the home and children, and not to work outside the home.

Resuming their educational career is usually very difficult for women; therefore, for some, starting life as a couple is convenient, as they think that this will help them acquire economic security and independence from their families. Some of the women who dropped out of education prefer to work exclusively as housewives because they know that not having completed their basic education limits their opportunities to enter the labour market or will only allow access to precarious jobs.

But lack of opportunity is not just an issue for those women who dropped out of school. Women who had completed basic education were also immersed in inequitable power relations and did not seem to have the tools to challenge those norms. On the contrary, they accepted them as part of their status as women. Many wanted to go back to school and, unable to do so, felt frustrated and limited in their role at home. This can be seen in the case of Yolanda, a young woman from the peri-urban district:

*And you, where will you be? What will you be doing at 30?*

Same thing, housewife [laughs].

*What would have to happen for you to go back to school?*

Get a separation from my partner ... Get a separation because he wouldn't let me study if I wanted to.

*He won't let you study?*

No ... I did tell him once and he said no.

*And can you imagine why?*

Because he's jealous, of course.

For these women, having opportunities means acquiring an education that empowers them and allows them to develop their autonomy. None of the women seemed to have experienced this during their years of primary and/or secondary education. Being a woman and coming from a family with limited resources limits their future educational opportunities, so they end up perceiving that cohabitation is the only window of opportunity they have.

However, childcare is a challenge, and while many young mothers said they would like to have childcare, they also pointed out their distrust of the few services that exist in some communities, mainly in rural areas. Reasons for not using the services included lack of trust and mismatches between programme schedules and the needs of families in the community. Childcare generally runs from 8 am to 4 pm, and families usually go to work on their farms between 7 am and 5 pm. Young mothers were also suspicious of care providers from outside the community. Complaints about the low quality of the services and the occurrence of child abuse in Cuna Más were common in the communities. This discourages the women from considering these services.

*And have you ever been to a programme like Cuna Más?*

Oh, no. My mother lives a few blocks from Cuna Más, and she used to say that they mistreat your children there. My mom lives over there and there are quite a few nurseries. She hears the children crying, being abused and she says, "No nursery, none." (Elvira, woman from the urban district).

*And when the girls work, who do they leave their children with?*

All: With their grandmothers.

Woman 2: Mostly yes, all grandmothers look after the babies, the sisters-in-law or someone you can afford to pay, but someone you know, someone close.

*And there's no place here where they can just pay a small allowance and leave the kid?*

Woman 4: Like Wawa Wasi?<sup>18</sup>

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18 Programa Nacional Wawa Wasi is a Peruvian government programme for impoverished children aged six to 48 months. Up to eight children spend five days a week at a Wawa Wasi centre where they are assisted by a carer carefully selected from the local community. See [www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP51-Cueto-WawaWasi.pdf](http://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP51-Cueto-WawaWasi.pdf)

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Woman 2: Right now, everything is private. I think there should be [a Cuna Más], because there are many girls who want to work.

Woman 4: A public nursery, run by the state.

Woman 3: There is no one to take care of their children. (Focus group of adult mothers, urban district).

As mentioned above, most of the women indicated that they had very little knowledge of modern contraceptive methods prior to cohabitation. Sex and sex education are still taboo in all three communities. This situation, we believe, exposes young women at the beginning of cohabitation to becoming pregnant soon after starting their sexual life and to having more than one child in a short time. All the women said they started using birth control only after their first pregnancy or miscarriage. They received family planning information only about the methods available at the health facilities. Unfortunately, some young mothers remembered how comments from staff at the health facility about being pregnant at their age made them feel bad; therefore, they decided not to use these services anymore and to use more traditional methods of birth control instead, such as rhythm or the use of local herbs.

It should also be mentioned that teenagers who become pregnant have limited educational opportunities in the community, since going to school is not easy for them. Although we found more cases of pregnant teenagers attending school in the rural district because of the support they receive from their families, these girls normally stay away from the school system. In all three settings, there is a strong stigma attached to an unmarried teenage girl who becomes pregnant, leading to abuse by her classmates. Some students in the urban and peri-urban districts pointed this out:

They bully her, telling her ... calling her names.

*What do they call her?*

Student 2: They say, "How did your boyfriend catch you?" [laughs].

Student 4: "In what positions have they done you?" [laughs]. They make fun. (Focus group of students, peri-urban district)

If you get pregnant, you go to the social worker and say, "Look, I'm pregnant, I want to continue studying," and the first thing they tell you is, "Look, you can fill out this document [to request the withdrawal], you can withdraw from the school. (Focus group of students, urban district)

Peruvian Law 29600 guarantees the right to remain in education for students who are pregnant or have children. However, schools do not seem to have enacted any procedures or policies to address this problem. As a consequence, teenage girls feel that they no longer belong there. Teenage mothers require the support of their relatives to care for their children; otherwise, they would not have anyone to leave them with. Schools do not offer childcare services themselves or have agreements with local childcare services to encourage these young women to stay in school.

In this sense, at the community level, women not only have few tools that allow them to question their own gender roles in order to maintain healthy couple relationships, they also lack important information for their sexual and reproductive health. There is also a lack of reliable services aimed at enabling young women who have become mothers or started life as a couple to continue their education and thus have greater opportunities in the future.

## Part 4: Conclusions and recommendations

Although the study was carried out in three different regions of the country, we found several similarities in young people's experiences of cohabitation, motherhood and fatherhood. Daily practices related to gender and sexuality particularly negatively affect Peru's teenage girls and young women. Like this study, reports on early and forced partnerships in Peru (Greene 2019; Plan International and UNFPA 2019) show that the family and community environment of these women display asymmetrical power relations, in which gendered social norms place women at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male peers, and this ends up affecting their decisions. This imbalance does not mean that men have an easy time going through this stage of their lives; they undoubtedly experience tensions in the exercise of a masculinity that is primarily associated with physical strength (Segato 2016; Fuller 2018), and which denies or neglects their emotions. Thus, we found that several of the young people began a new phase of their lives with the feeling of moving forward blindly, not knowing what the future held and with few or no tools to face it.

The question why a teenage girl or young woman starts cohabitation and becomes a mother before she has come of age led us to analyse the situations of poverty, oppression and violence that they face in their family homes, but also forced us to look beyond the family environment to understand how gender norms set the tone in the lives of these adolescents and are rooted in social and institutional settings. It is true that the motivations for marriage may stem from each person's individual experience, but it is also true that girls in these settings do not perceive that they have many other opportunities. For Fuller (1993; 2004), limits posed by socio-economic conditions and the scarcity of options for women end up making motherhood the only possible opportunity, and this perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty and gender discrimination. Today, Peruvian women are accessing basic education because families see school as an opportunity for progress. However, their immediate circles and communities expect them to be centrally involved in domestic and household tasks. It is considered necessary that women learn what will later become their main task (Greene 2019). Thus, social and family environments converge in determining to what degree teenage girls and young women perceive their ability to make decisions about their own lives to be limited. They have greater access to education than their mothers, but they also know that their voice remains dependent on that of their parents, partners and community, which demands that they exercise the role of caregiver above all. Thus, attention to gender norms is critical because of their far-reaching impact on women's daily life opportunities (Harper et al. 2018).

In this context, it is vital to discuss some of the structural forces that mark relations between men and women and emphasise the importance of violence against women. The grassroots movement *Ni Una Menos* has raised awareness on this issue in Peru. As part of the call for a march in August 2016, thousands of stories from women who have been physically and sexually abused since childhood have come to light.<sup>19</sup> The power of these statements underscored not only how violence is part of the life journey of Peruvian women, but also the prevalence of impunity for aggressors and the persistent gender norms that endorse the use of force and male

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19 In 2017, the judiciary in Peru released two aggressors against women despite video evidence where they appeared to be violently beating their partners. The sense of impunity led to the creation of a Facebook page to protest against this action. This call, which started as citizen protest, led thousands of women to share their testimonies of violence on the Facebook page (many for the first time). The "Ni una menos" (not one less) movement was born from this shared memory of violence against women. See 'Ni Una Menos Perú: el poder de la memoria compartida': <http://idehpucp.pucp.edu.pe/opinion/ni-una-menos-peru-el-poder-de-la-memoria-compartida>.

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dominance over women. Therefore, understanding the issue of cohabitation and early marriage in Peru requires an analysis of the power inequalities that are based on social norms.

Social norms establish the framework in which children and adolescents grow up, where parents, partners and the community determine what counts for appropriate behaviour for this age group and gender. Teenage girls and women in these contexts know that once they finish school, their career paths will not be easy, in relation to access to further education and better job opportunities. Therefore, they only see themselves in relation to the home and childcare. In general, the norms regarding what it means to be male or female are difficult to change, as people have been socialised into them since birth (Boudet et al. 2012). The challenge is to understand what these attitudes are in relation to gender, cohabitation and parenthood at an early age. Ignoring what is behind the voices of these young men and women who started cohabiting when they were very young limits us to making changes in the institutional sphere of laws and regulations, and does not consider that these norms are often ignored or modified in the community environment, where the important thing is to maintain what is socially accepted.

## 4.1. Conclusions

We return here to our initial research questions.

### 4.1.1. Which teenagers and young people marry, live together or have children, and why? What consequences does this have on their well-being, their identity and their relationships?

- **One of the reasons for starting cohabitation is that young women see it as an opportunity to escape from oppressive relationships in their homes.** Several of the women interviewed who began cohabiting during adolescence – or as soon as they came of age – indicated that there was a close relationship between this decision and the desire to leave their homes, since they were victims of oppressive and violent relationships, mainly on the part of their relatives. They see living with a partner as an opportunity, and believe that when they leave their homes, they will be free to make decisions about their friendships and also to exercise their sexuality. Social gender norms do not allow young women to explore their sexuality and keep them confined to the home.
- **Young women also see cohabitation as an opportunity to improve their socio-economic status.** Poverty is another relevant factor for initiating cohabitation. When young women become aware of the situation of scarcity in which they are growing up, they prefer to stop being a burden to their families and see in the partnership the opportunity both to free their parents from that burden and to improve their own living conditions. Previous studies in Peru (Save The Children 2016; Plan International and UNFPA 2019) point to similar findings and indicate that, in contexts of great poverty, the beginning of cohabitation is predicated on the possibility of accessing resources for subsistence.
- **Cohabitation expresses the desire to seek protection and attention.** Many interviewees said they were attracted to the idea of living together because of the promise of finding protection, emotional security and care. In some cases – mainly of rural teenagers – staying home alone and not being able to go to school was a determining factor for them to see no other possibility but to live with a partner.
- **Despite high expectations, cohabitation does not protect women from oppressive and violent relationships.** In their new home, the partner exercises control over the woman and her decisions, including the use of violence against her, as previous studies also indicate (Greene 2019; Plan International and UNFPA 2019). Violence is used to control women's behaviour and results from the machismo that prevails in social relations in Peru. Men are

seen as natural predators of women; for this reason, women must be controlled, monitored and isolated (Stromquist 2006). The practices that give rise to cohabitation exist within the context of a patriarchal structure that subordinates women (Gutiérrez 2006).

Women who started cohabiting at a very young age and who were living in poverty are the most vulnerable to physical abuse. Due to their age, they are considered unprepared to take care of the home, and the exercise of violence is seen as a way of teaching them to fulfil their role properly.

- **Social gender norms in the community validate the practices of women's subordination and even the exercise of violence.** We saw, for example, that in rural areas, reporting of physical or sexual violence within the family is discouraged. The local authorities consider these incidents to be part of the "adjustment" that couples go through when they start living together, and they give the aggressor a "second chance" if he promises not to repeat the assault. Since it is all too common that the aggressor does not fulfil this promise, women end up accepting that violence is part of the couple dynamic and see very little agency in a social environment that reminds them that they must endure this type of abusive relationship because they, as women, are responsible for the welfare of their children and their family.

On the other hand, society's gender role expectations require men to use force in the public and the private sphere. If a man doesn't comply with these expectations, he puts his reputation on the line in front of the whole community. For some of the men, this role can be exhausting. When they cannot find other ways to assert themselves in their role, they have violent relationships within their home.

- **The expectation at the social/community level that women conform to traditional gender roles reinforces inequalities in the domestic sphere.** The man plays the role of provider, while the woman mainly takes care of the home and children. With few exceptions, women stay at home and men go out to work during the day. The woman is perceived as the support that the man needs. This relationship justifies her putting herself at his service and therefore not making any of the important decisions in the household. The reproduction of these roles puts women in an inferior position in relation to their partners and limits their capacity for autonomy. While there are nuances in the outcomes – some young women reported making decisions together with their partners – the evidence is that it is generally men who make decisions related to large amounts of money, while women's decisions are more linked to domestic life – what to cook, what clothes and toys to buy for the children, and so on. Unlike their partners, women feel an obligation to discuss spending decisions with their partners, because they are the ones who provide money for the household. This does not mean that women do not have the capacity for agency; they do, but it is limited due to the imbalance in power relations.

4.1.2. How do adolescents and young people who marry, live together or have children at an early age experience their new roles and relationships – including experiences of parenting and separation/divorce? What kinds of support, programmes and services do they access?

- **Young men and women make the transition to cohabitation with limited knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and insufficient access to modern contraceptive methods.** The search for "freedom", together with a lack of information on sexual and reproductive health, means that for many young women the beginning of motherhood and cohabitation are closely linked. This is evidence of the dilemma faced by teenagers in terms
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of their sexuality. Teenage girls and boys explore this field without sexual and reproductive health information because sexual experience during adolescence is not socially accepted. This leads some families who discover the sexual activity of their female children to encourage the initiation of an early cohabiting relationship.

- **Once cohabiting, women face a series of difficulties in resuming their educational careers, including a lack of support networks.** While noting that they would like to return to school at some point in their lives, women who live with a partner recognise that to do so is very difficult. Entering schools requires socio-economic conditions that they lack and support networks that are beyond their reach. For a teenage mother or a young pregnant woman, returning to school is not easy, precisely because they have to deal with the role they are expected to play as mothers. The responsibility that falls on these women is so overwhelming that they often prefer not to try to return to school unless they have significant family support.
- **Many women face frustration once they start cohabitation.** The initial desire for freedom contrasts with what they end up experiencing in their new family dynamics, which generates feelings of frustration that affect their expectations for the future. Far from imagining a future with better opportunities for themselves, women put aside their own needs and focus only on expectations for their children. They feel that they can no longer do anything about their own lives, but they can help their children to choose a different path.
- **Early cohabitation limits women's opportunities.** Cohabitation at an early age deprives women of educational opportunities that could provide them with more and better tools to change their future, and submerges them in traditional and unfair gender roles that allow control over their activities and their bodies. When reflecting on their lives, women do not think that their future might have been different had they not started cohabitation at an early age. They point out that perhaps they would have reached a higher level of education, but that, in the end, their role as mothers/wives/partners would have taken precedence in their lives no matter what.

## 4.2. Policy recommendations

- **Comprehensive sex education with a gender perspective must be implemented at all levels of basic education.** Schools are not providing adequate guidance on sexual and reproductive health. Comprehensive sex education would promote the importance of equitable gender relations and responsible use of contraceptive methods – rather than abstinence, as many teachers recommend. We have shown that there is little knowledge among young people about sexual and reproductive health. Usually, they start having sex without information about birth control methods. The few who manage to access information on these methods do so via the internet, without the necessary guidance and advice from an adult or an expert. For this reason, they do not necessarily make appropriate use of that information.
- **It is important to train teachers and administrative staff in the new gender equality approach.** Although the focus on gender equality in the school curriculum has been approved by the government, it is necessary to train educational personnel to develop a critical stance towards the gender norms that these same people hold. It is likely that many teachers in Peru do not feel prepared to implement this approach, since many have been trained in a social structure that justifies inequalities between men and women as natural.

In Peru, the gender gap in access to education has narrowed; however, in light of the findings outlined above, adolescent girls still lack a voice powerful enough to shape their life choices and domestic situations. Their initial aspirations and expectations – some of which they

acquired in school – fade as they realise how difficult it is to overcome unequal power relations within their homes.

From the beginning of school, girls should be encouraged to question gender roles and stereotypes and to learn about sexual and reproductive health within a rights-based approach. If girls in school receive an education that helps them understand gender inequalities and empowers them, they are likely to recognise that starting a partnership at a young age is not the only way to change their lives. Children, young people and families must be included in this learning, as girls alone cannot change the entrenched power relationships that limit their life choices and their ability to exercise their rights. The high levels of early cohabitation will only begin to decline with the participation of everybody involved in the social setting.

- **There is an urgent need to improve the quantity, quality and dissemination of differentiated health services, above all, specific services to provide information on sexual and reproductive health to adolescents.** Participants in all of the survey districts told us that they do not access health services because they believe they need to be accompanied by their parents, although the Technical Regulations on Family Planning (2017) indicate that this is not necessary.
  - **Treatment of young mothers in education and health services must be improved.** Young women seeking information at local health facilities after becoming mothers experienced harsh treatment by service personnel who judged them for being young mothers. Despite the enactment of Law 29600, which promotes school reintegration following pregnancy and guarantees the right to remain in education for pregnant students and young mothers, it seems as though schools have not enacted any procedures or policies to ensure compliance with this law. On the contrary, young mothers feel that they are judged and discriminated against at school and therefore prefer, in many cases, not to continue their studies. In this context, there is also a need for continual training of personnel delivering government services to teenagers, in order to avoid further stigmatisation of young pregnant women. It must also be explained to these staff that sexual exploration in adolescence is a normal part of life.
  - **There is a need for a variety of care networks for children of different ages.** It is important that entrepreneurship and job training programmes for young women have support systems that allow them to leave their children in the care of others. One of the principal reasons that prevent young mothers from accessing work opportunities is the lack of care networks. Programmes such as Cuna Más would be helpful, but they need to have a greater presence in urban areas, as neither the programme itself nor its objectives are widely known. In rural areas, it is necessary to take into account the intercultural component of this programme, as differences in childrearing and care practices could generate rejection, for example, in indigenous communities.
  - **It is important to continue to promote knowledge about gender equality and new masculinities at the local and community level.** Programmes that focus on counselling and guidance on parenting practices need to strengthen the participation of young men. Although some young men and women have achieved higher education (technical or university) they have not received sufficient resources to challenge traditional gender norms in the household. In some parts of the country, institutions such as the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations have promoted strategies for the prevention of violence such as *Hombres por la Igualdad* (Men for Equality); however, more talks and workshops on this subject should be organised to enable men and women to question traditional gender roles.
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# Annexes

**Table A1.** Women who started cohabitation and/or became mothers before the age of 18

	Pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Age of starting cohabitation	Education level			
				Basic (not finished)	Basic (finished)	Higher (not finished)	Higher (finished)
<b>Rural</b>	Leonor	24	13	x			
	Fabiana	22	16	x			
	Maregarita	23	16	x			
	Daniela	16	16	x			
	Laura*	23	17 and 20		x		
	Carmen	23	15				x
	Clara	24	17	x			
	Estrella	17	17	x			
	<b>Peri-urban</b>	Angélica	16	15	x		
Maira		24	15	x			
Lorena		24	16			x	
Luz		17	16		x		
Jenny		24	17		x		
Doris		23	17		x		
Yolanda		23	17	x			
<b>Urban</b>	Yanet	24	14	x			
	Lourdes	24	15	x			
	Elvira**	24		x			
	Valeria	24	17		x		

Notes: \* Has more than one experience of cohabitation. \*\* Has not started cohabitation but is a mother.

**Table A2.** Women who started cohabitation and/or became mothers between the ages of 18 and 22

	Pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Age of starting cohabitation	Education level			
				Basic (not finished)	Basic (finished)	Higher (not finished)	Higher (finished)
<b>Rural</b>	Kiara	23	18	x			
	Eliana*	23	18 and 22	x			
	Yamila	23	19		x		
<b>Peri-urban</b>	Mónica	23	18				x
	Lucía	23	21	x			
<b>Urban</b>	Jazmín	23	21				x
	Ingrid	24	19			x	
	Vera	23	20			x	
	Jimena	24	22				x

Note: \* Has more than one experience of cohabitation.

**Table A3.** Men who started cohabitation and/or became fathers between the ages of 18 and 22

	Pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Age of starting cohabitation	Education level			
				Basic (not finished)	Basic (finished)	Higher (not finished)	Higher (finished)
<b>Rural</b>	Guillermo	23	18			x	
<b>Peri-urban</b>	Arturo	23	19	x			
	Raúl	23	19		x		
	César	24	20		x		
	Julio	24	20		x		
	<b>Urban</b>	Efraín *	17			x	

Note: \* Has not started cohabitation but is a father.



The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) is a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage, cohabitation, and parenthood, involving Young Lives, Child Frontiers, Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE) Peru, and the Policy Studies Institute (Ethiopia).

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**YOUNG  
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