

Final Report/ Journalistic Article

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Married at 15, youtube star at 16: The complexities of child marriage in Brazil

Rarely does the topic of child marriage invoke associations with Latin America. And even more rarely does a teen youtube channel come to mind with child brides. Brazilian Hisa Irineu's channel "Casadaaos15" in Portuguese - "married at 15" - is about as much of a counterpoint as one can find compared to the dominant images of a sad looking girl with a baby sitting on her hip.

One year after she begins to document her life as a young wife, Hisa now has 152 videos and over 58,000 subscribers to her channel. While none may be as vivacious as the original Hisa, I found at least a dozen other girls who had made similar videos: "married at 16", "married at 13." The comments are a window into society's reactions of love and resonance ("I too married at 14, 15, 16...", "do a tour of your house!") – to a few critical comments that a girl should be studying rather than being responsible for a household. Viewers follow Hisa's cooking and cleaning routines, just as they see her dancing funk with her cousin and showing her latest makeup tricks.

Hisa appears as anything but a victim of a violation of human rights. International law defines child marriage as a union involving a girl or boy below the age of 18. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 7 sets forth rights to equality and non-discrimination, while art. 16 specifies the right to marriage involving "men and women *of full age*" and that "marriage shall be entered into only with the *free and full consent* of the intending spouses" (italics

added). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (art. 16) states "the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect." A child, by international law, therefore cannot consent to marriage. Brazil's Statute of the Child and Adolescent has limited mention of sexual and reproductive health rights and no mention of marriage. National legal frameworks are often contradictory, and enforcement is weak. Informal unions often leave particular gaps in protection and there are legal loopholes between the Brazilian Civil Code and Penal Codes.

Among Latin American countries, Brazil is ranked the fourth country globally in absolute numbers of women married by the age of 18. Brazil has the third highest prevalence of marriage (36% married by age 18), followed by the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. According to census data, about 88,000 girls and boys ages 10-14 years entered consensual, civil or religious unions.¹

In Brazil as in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, both formal and informal unions (i.e., co-habitation) take place, though the latter are most common and hold similar implications as formal marriages. Both girls and boys enter unions, though girls most often marry men who are at least several years older. Substantial evidence shows that child marriage increases risks such as in maternal and child health and in intimate partner violence.

Only in the past few years has there been an increase in attention to the topic in Latin America, a region overshadowed by the phenomena in Sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asia. While working with Promundo, an NGO that focuses on gender equality and masculinities, I worked on the first study of this topic in Brazil from 2013-2015. The study partners were Plan

who married before age 18 and 15. *The state of the world's children 2014 in numbers: Every child counts*. Brazil numbers are from IBGE, Censo Demográfico 2010.

¹ Ranking of prevalence data in the region and global estimates based on household surveys reported in UNICEF, 2014 using reports of women aged 20-24

International Brazil and the Federal University of Pará, which I reconnected with this summer.

Research supported by the Tinker Foundation allowed me to go in depth with two phenomena that were especially salient from that original child marriage research. The first is girls' expressions of agency, or choice (albeit constrained), in deciding to marry. While Hisa's channel may represent one girl's experience in which she flaunts her young married life, it reflects a broader theme of agency in the LAC region: girls often have a say in whether they marry, in contrast to prevailing assumptions of victimization in child marriage. The reasons girls marry are complex, and their own will to marry is one; other reasons include marrying due to poverty, being pushed out of their households of origin in which they experience violence or abuse, losing their virginity or getting pregnant and being pressured by a family member or partner to marry.

The second salient theme I focused on is the relationship between education and marriage: evidence worldwide shows that girls drop out of school and marry or they marry and drop out of school. Trends in Latin America are no different; the younger girls marry, the less likely they are to finish secondary school. Yet the impact on education is far more nuanced than dropping out of school; namely, their duties as wives and mothers take precedent over studying and makes them miss school. School also appears unappealing in the contexts in which many girls live and talking about gender in schools has been banned from the national curricular plan.

In my fieldwork through the Tinker grant, I conducted interviews and focus groups in the cities of Belém and Recife. While the previous research focused on girls who are already married, this visit offered me the chance to speak with girls who were not yet married, to understand their aspirations. It also enabled me to interview service

providers, academics, young activists, and others who work with girls.

The research led me to question more fully: what does it mean to be a young adolescent in the periphery? I came to understand the significance of urban peripheries, spaces in which law enforcement, services, and opportunities are peripheral. And how these cities in the north and northeastern regions of Brazil are peripheral to attention and resources that have a greater reach in the southern part of the country. In Belém, the site in which I focused, was a port community that lay between the city and Amazon river settlements. In a focus group I conducted with a partner at the Federal University of Pará, ten girls showed up in the rain to speak to us. After we wrapped up the discussion, girls stayed on to talk longer. "We should have this every night," one girl said, stressing to me the desire girls have to talk about relationships and their lives – and the lack of opportunities they have to do so. She was 16 and had come with her two-month old son. There was similar interest among girls in a school in the same city.

What does it mean to have and exercise agency amidst limited choices? What options for resistance are there? These questions made me turn to broader forms of agency: in what ways are girls advocating for their rights? I also spoke to young activists and participated in related events. Brazil is experiencing a political and economic crisis in which social services and human rights are especially jeopardized. As many peripheral communities include disproportionately adolescents of African and Indigenous descent, a perspective that takes into account race and colonialism are essential. One of the most visible young feminist movements over the past year has undeniably been that of black feminists: multiple interviews and a public hearing on violence against black women emphasized the intersections of vulnerability of women and girls with race and living in the periphery.

I began to explore in peripheries that are characterized by violence, what adolescents, youth and other activists are doing to reimagining agency and empowerment in ways that resist child marriage. Popular education, or critical pedagogy – well known globally through pioneering work of Brazilian Paulo Freire – offers avenues of questioning and understanding forms of oppression. Many of the people I spoke to remarked that popular education is having a moment of revival, especially considering Brazil's current state. Beyond teaching criticality, popular education is a way of promoting collective learning and knowledge production that is being taken up by popular movement groups and activists, for example young feminists who – when they are not in the streets – are sharing texts and exchanging via social media as well, filling in gaps of what they are not receiving in school.

Teaching gender equality and relationships in schools and through NGO initiatives is another way of inspiring critical discussion around gender – sometimes again using principles from popular education. Some of these initiatives recognize the critical importance of challenging gender norms and working with men and boys to promote equitable relationships and marriages – when and if partners which to marry.

This initial research was the beginning of partnerships, collaboration, and many possibilities of understanding the complexities surrounding child marriage in Brazil and the region. I hope for it to spark many more discussions, research, and action about meaningful provision of adolescent and child rights and well-being during their pivotal transition to adulthood.