

# IF CARE IS FAIR, THE FUTURE IS OURS



Perceptions and demands of adolescent girls in Latin America and the Caribbean in relation to care, as part of the XVI Regional Conference on Women



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This document, prepared for the XVI Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (XVI RCW), gathers the opinions and experiences of **56,060 adolescents and young people from 29 countries** who responded to an online survey on the U-Report platform, together with the ideas developed in the discussion held with **104 adolescent girls** during regional workshops (and whose names are acknowledged in this publication). This report is a call to redistribute, recognize and remunerate care from their perspective.

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# THE ROAD TO THE CONFERENCE: A PROCESS DESIGNED BY AND FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The meaningful participation of adolescent girls was at the heart of this process. They exercised their right to freely express their views in matters that affect their lives, in particular those related to the social organization of care. The commitment to this right, which is enshrined in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, was affirmed at the XV Regional Conference on Women in 2022, which recognized the irreplaceable role adolescent girls play as agents of change in care systems.

The regional consultation process took place between May and August 2025. To revalidate and further develop the work initiated in 2022, the scope of the consultation was increased, and it included a more diverse group of adolescents. The process also involved creating meaningful spaces for dialogue, to enable adolescent girls to reflect on, develop and validate a series of demands that are representative of the region's diversity.

## MILESTONE 1

Large-scale digital poll

**56,060 adolescents and young people from 29 countries**

Adolescents and young people (aged 10–24) shared their views on care through U-Report, the digital platform used by UNICEF to gather young people's opinions on issues that matter to them.

## MILESTONE 2

National and subregional dialogues  
**104 adolescent girls from 18 countries**

UNICEF, UNFPA, ANDHES, and Girl Up facilitated 19 national and 7 subregional dialogues with 104 adolescent girls (aged 12–19) from 18 countries. The adolescent girls identified national issues, developed proposals, and presented their agendas to gender and children's government representatives from 8 countries.

## MILESTONE 3

Consolidation of demands  
**10 adolescent girls from 9 countries**

A delegation of 10 adolescent girls (aged 15–19) met in three virtual sessions to review and consolidate the results from the national dialogues and U-Report poll. They defined five regional demands to be presented at the XVI RCW.

## MILESTONE 4

Presentation at the XVI RCW

A delegation of 10 girls presents the regional demands to be heard and considered by decision-makers at the conference.

*Adolescents and young people from the following countries participated in this process:*

*Antigua, Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Saint Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela.*

## CONTEXT AND ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON CARE WORK

The experiences shared by adolescents and young people from different countries in the region show that unpaid domestic and care work intersects significantly with gender and age inequalities. From a very young age, many adolescent girls and young women take on tasks that not only require time and physical effort but also involve sacrificing their own wishes and opportunities for play, education and rest. These burdens are intensified by multiple forms of discrimination, which result in greater socioeconomic vulnerability and further exacerbate the responsibilities they face.

Adolescent girls described their daily routines in detail during the workshops: from cleaning their homes, looking after siblings and cooking to supporting older people, caring for family members with disabilities, and even caring for their own children. Some reported spending between four and eight hours a day on these tasks, in addition to attending school or working. Their testimonies tell us: care tasks fall disproportionately on girls and women, which perpetuates gender inequalities.

***"My sister and I always have to clean up. We take on mum's role when she's not around."***

These testimonies are supported by data from the U-Report survey: 20 per cent of adolescent girls and young women report spending more than three hours a day on care tasks. This proportion is considerably lower among young men, at 14 per cent.



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**At the same time, the perception of equity regarding the distribution of these tasks changes with age:** while the majority of adolescents believe that domestic work is shared equally between women and men (80 per cent), their perception changes significantly as they age. **One in two respondents aged between 20 and 24 (50 per cent) believe that girls and women assume a larger share of this work.** This could be due to increased inequality in the division of tasks or to a greater critical awareness among young people of their environment and the actual burdens borne by adolescent girls and young women.

***"We women have less time to rest, study or do what we enjoy. We don't have the same opportunities from the start."***

The U-Report survey results show that, among the adolescents and young people who participated, **more than twice as many girls (23 per cent) than boys (10 per cent) think that care work falls mainly on girls and women.**

The patterns that perpetuate these inequalities became clear during the workshops.

**Within families,** it is often mothers who teach their daughters from a young age to take on care tasks, reproducing stereotypes passed down from generation to generation.

**Within schools,** cleaning or assistance tasks systematically fall on girls, and the curriculum is not adjusted to meet girls' needs.

**Within communities,** women face barriers to their full involvement in decision making spaces. As one adolescent girl recounted, "In my community, even the female mayor — who is the person with the most power — has trouble breaking down barriers and is also overloaded with care tasks, like all the other women."

**Within the workplace,** they are held back by the lack of policies that address the balance between work and care tasks.

Care work is perceived as being strongly linked to love, or a natural result of attachment. Adolescent girls find this idea problematic: "Caring for others doesn't mean we love them more, and it doesn't mean we love them any less if we don't care for others," one participant said. Linking care work to love makes it even more invisible and promotes a system that neither recognizes nor remunerates it, perpetuating overwork, inequality and exclusion.

On the other hand, there is a growing awareness of the 'triple shift' experienced by a large proportion of women who study, work and care. For many adolescent girls, this combination results in stress, frustration and resignation, but also in fighting for change: **eight out of ten adolescents surveyed believe that people who care for children and older people and who are responsible for domestic work should be recognized for this work.**

**"We take care of everyone, yet who takes care of us?"**

As well as identifying the inequalities that exist, adolescent girls proposed actions to address them. **Ninety per cent of those who participated in the U-Report survey believe services and policies such as free childcare or greater educational flexibility for caregivers should be urgently implemented.** Workshop participants highlighted a need to increase funding for gender policies in some countries, as well as for the increased presence of the State, **particularly in areas far from large cities** where the adolescent girls and young women with the most caregiving responsibilities live.

According to the results of the U-Report survey, **recognizing and valuing caregivers is the most urgently needed action, followed by that of equally distributing care work between men and women.**

In addition, workshop participants questioned the structural origin of these inequalities, attributing them to colonialism, adultcentrism, the reduced scope of public policies and a regression in rights. They called for an opportunity to be involved in the design of policies through genuine spaces that enable them to participate in an effective and binding manner. This demand is also evident in the survey: **87 per cent of respondents believe that adolescent girls and young women should be able to express their opinions and make decisions about care tasks at home and in the community.**

In this regard, the adolescent girls also highlighted the importance of civil society organizations, which often provide spaces and services that should be guaranteed by the State. They noted that it is often these organizations that are present when the State fails to act, supporting communities, creating networks and promoting access to rights in areas where the State does not reach.



## THE VOICES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS ON CARE WORK

**As adolescent girls and young women from different parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, we believe that life would not be possible without caregiving.** Care tasks such as cooking, cleaning, caring for children, the elderly or people with disability and tidying the house are what make daily life possible. Without them, no one would be able to study, work or progress. However, we are also aware that these essential tasks almost always fall on us and the women around us.

Often, these tasks are taken for granted, as if they were 'natural' for women. But they are not: they **are work**. Work that is not paid, not recognized and often **takes away the time we would have had to play, study, rest or just enjoy our childhood and adolescence.**

We talk about the double shift, when women work outside the home and, on their return home, have to do care and domestic work. However, there is also the triple shift, in which women get involved in social organizations, their neighbourhoods or their communities as well. We know women like this, including some of us too, who study, care and support our communities. **All of this is tiring and stressful, and almost nobody sees it.**

We have been hearing things like "you have to help around the house", "girls are more responsible", or "boys don't know how to do this stuff" from a very young age. These phrases are repeated so often that we begin to feel like domestic and care work is our duty. Often, while our brothers are playing, we are cooking or taking care of our younger siblings. And that is not okay. **We have the right to play, to rest, and not to be put in harm's way doing tasks that are not appropriate for our age.**



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We also believe that care work is often confused with being loving. It is assumed that, if we care, we do it "out of love", but this sacrificial love leaves us exhausted, frustrated and with no time for ourselves.

**We no longer accept the idea that loving others means giving up our dreams. We also want to have dreams and fight for them.**

In addition, many women work in highly feminized sectors, working as cleaners, nannies, teachers or caregivers. **These jobs are essential to society, yet poorly paid and undervalued.** We know that many young and adolescent girls from rural areas travel to cities to do domestic and care work. This prevents them from continuing their studies and exposes them to unfair treatment and unsafe situations. Meanwhile, **more prestigious or better paid jobs continue to be mostly held by men.** This is also unfair.

**We urgently need to talk about it.** Care tasks should not just be a woman's responsibility. We need more empathy and a fairer division of tasks within the home. We need our schools to teach us that these tasks are everyone's responsibility. And we need the State to play its part. **We want a life in which we can play, rest and choose what we do with our time; in which doing care tasks does not mean giving up being ourselves.**

Governments, international organizations, employers, teachers, mothers and fathers: **we are asking you to listen to our voices, take our demands seriously, and take action. Because doing care tasks should not mean giving up our rights or our dreams.**



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## OUR DEMANDS FOR TRANSFORMING CARE AND OUR FUTURE

- 1** The creation of a comprehensive, rights-based, public care system, which involves key ministries and guarantees accessible, holistic and quality services for all those who provide care.
- 2** The implementation of employment policies, including paid leave, that recognize all forms of parenting and caregiving and promote the joint responsibility of States, employers, communities and families.
- 3** The provision of welfare and opportunities for adolescent mothers, including comprehensive support networks that guarantee the continuity of education for adolescent girls and access to comprehensive health care.
- 4** The provision of education on equality through training programs that promote shared responsibility and challenge gender stereotypes from childhood, across all regions, including the effective and mainstreamed implementation of comprehensive sexual education.
- 5** The genuine and effective political participation of adolescent girls in all decision-making spaces, especially those related to care work and community participation.





## 1- TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC CARE SYSTEM WHICH IS TRULY ACCESSIBLE, REFLECTS GENDER EQUITY AND IS PRESENT IN ALL AREAS

We, adolescent girls and young women of Latin America and the Caribbean, recognize the urgent need to create, revive and consolidate **comprehensive care systems** that are public, apply a rights-based approach and are sustainable over time. These systems should effectively coordinate different ministries and relevant sectors, especially those focused on gender equality, health, education, children and social development.

We consider it essential that these systems prioritize the construction of solid infrastructure and the **creation of a network of accessible, comprehensive and quality care services, with a broad and equitable territorial reach**. We believe it is fundamental to decentralize care policies and services: they must reach rural areas, indigenous territories and historically excluded regions.

This includes guaranteeing access to sexual and reproductive health services, pre- and post-natal care, and community spaces for training, dialogue and rights promotion. We need this system to be safe and provide adolescent girls and young women in our region with access to justice.

As adolescent girls, we see an urgent need to create and expand national networks of public, accessible and quality care spaces and centres that respond to the diverse needs of the population. These networks should include: care spaces and maternity facilities in schools; specific care centres for children (day-care centres); assistance and care spaces for people with disabilities; and care spaces for older people.

Finally, we believe it is essential to allocate budgets, **establish mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and ongoing systematization to measure the impact of the policies implemented**, and replicate good practices, such as 'communities of care'. We also stress the importance of transparently communicating these measures through official data and channels.



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## 2- PROMOTING A FAIR ORGANIZATION OF CARE: WORK LEAVE THAT RECOGNIZES ALL FORMS OF PARENTING

We call for employment policies that recognize caregiving as a collective responsibility and not the exclusive burden of those who give birth or those who have historically been designated as caregivers. We consider it strategic to create a law that gives monetary recognition to care work, formalizing and dignifying this work that is essential to society.

We call for the creation and extension of **work leave for pregnant and non-pregnant people** as part of public policies that promote equity at work and joint responsibility for care tasks. These leave options must include significant paid time off and take into account a diversity of family structures, gender identities and social realities to guarantee that all people can enjoy equal conditions when exercising their work and care rights.

In addition, they must be accompanied by **measures that prevent employment discrimination, protect employment stability and promote joint responsibility between the State, employers, communities and families**. The goal is to ensure that care tasks do not hinder personal and professional development or generate discrimination in the workplace but instead strengthen the labour rights of all people.



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### 3- ENABLING A LIFE OF DIGNITY AND FREEDOM: WELFARE AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADOLESCENT MOTHERS

We call for **concrete actions to guarantee welfare and opportunities for adolescent mothers**. Care work should not prevent adolescent girls from continuing their studies or developing their own life plans; we want this to be recognized as a fundamental right.

We call for public policies that acknowledge adolescent girls' paths and choices, instead of stigmatizing us. These policies should enable us to study and not to make us choose between being mothers and having a future.

We call for the **substantial expansion of the scholarship system for adolescent mothers**, as well as the creation of **comprehensive support networks** that guarantee access to and retention in school. We need educational spaces that are truly accessible and free from violence, we need our time and lived experience to be respected, and we need care work to be shared, instead of just being our responsibility.

As adolescent mothers or as friends who support them in their experience, we know that motherhood in adolescence can involve many obstacles, stigma and exclusion. Often, those of us who experience this face loneliness, a lack of support, the interruption of schooling and the loss of opportunities that should be part of our rights. For this reason, we recognize the importance of having support networks that guarantee adolescent mothers access to comprehensive health care. In addition, the provision of holistic professional support (psychological, legal, etc.) specifically addressing the prepartum and postpartum stages is crucial for personal well-being and maternal and infant health.

Finally, it is essential to **create accessible care spaces for children**. This should be complemented by the availability of **breastfeeding spaces and support networks** that facilitate adolescent mothers' access to leisure and work opportunities, to promote their autonomy and holistic development.



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## 4- EDUCATING ON EQUALITY. LIVING WITHOUT STEREOTYPES

We recognize that gender inequalities and the domestic and care work assigned to us from a very young age limit our access to fundamental rights such as education, free time, emotional well-being and the possibility of developing our own life plans. In light of this, we call for **the effective implementation and mainstreaming of comprehensive sexual education with a gender and rights perspective** at all educational levels and in all geographical areas, including rural areas and indigenous communities.

This education should promote joint responsibility for care work, question social norms that perpetuate inequalities and oppose all forms of control over or regulation of girls' bodies and roles. In addition, we propose that States promote **mass public awareness campaigns and trainings on the shared social responsibility of care** aimed at society as a whole and which include a gender, diversity and rights perspective. These campaigns should promote new masculinities, make visible the social value of care, challenge stereotypes and encourage the active participation of men and non-pregnant people.



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## 5- NETWORKS THAT SUPPORT AND PARTICIPATION THAT TRANSFORMS

We call for the promotion and guarantee of real, meaningful political participation by girls, adolescent girls and women in all decision-making spaces. This includes promoting their social inclusion and the creation of a public policy system that takes into account their proposals and is accountable for their implementation.

To achieve this, it is crucial to build and strengthen comprehensive support networks that address the specific needs of girls, adolescent girls and women, including **creating care spaces for children, establishing a support network for adolescent mothers and providing support for those facing mental health problems.**

Participation is only possible if girls, adolescent girls and women are guaranteed access to **spaces free from harassment and violence.** This is essential for them to be able to develop fully, exercise their right to participation without fear and to strengthen their autonomy in all areas.



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