

### **Original Article**

# Associated factors with child marriage in Salvadoran woman during 2021

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#### Abstract

Introduction. Child marriage is a marriage that occurs before the age of 18. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 21. 2 % of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before turning 18. **Objective**. To establish the sociodemographic and cultural factors associated with early marriage in women aged 15 to 22, El Salvador, 2021. **Methodology**. This is an analytical cross-sectional study based on the 2021 National Health Survey of El Salvador database. The population was 14 261 women aged 15 to 49, taking as a sample women aged 15 to 22 years who have lived in a union or have been married before the age of 18 years. **Results**. According to the multivariate analysis, factors associated with child marriage include: basic education or no schooling (ORP=6. 46, Cl 3. 83-10. 90, p=0. 000), lack of access to a computer or tablet (ORP=1. 38, Cl 1. 001. 91, p=0. 04), low asset access index (ORP=1. 73, Cl 1. 24-2. 42, p=0. 001), and not making one's own decisions (ORP=5. 52, Cl 2. 99-10. 20, p=0. 000). **Conclusion**. Child marriage in El Salvador is related to low educational attainment, lack of autonomy in decision-making, and limited access to information.

#### Kevwords

Marriage, Child, Risk Factors, Marital Status.

#### Resumen

Introducción. El matrimonio infantil es aquel que se realiza antes de los 18 años. En América Latina y el Caribe, el porcentaje de mujeres entre 20 y 24 años que estaban casadas antes de cumplir los 18 años corresponde al 21,2 %. **Objetivo**. Establecer los factores sociodemográficos y culturales asociados al matrimonio temprano en las mujeres de 15 a 22 años, El Salvador, 2021. **Metodología**. Es un estudio transversal analítico, a partir de la base de datos de la Encuesta Nacional de Salud de El Salvador 2021 siendo la población 14 261 mujeres de 15 a 49 años tomando como muestra a las mujeres de 15 a 22 años que han vivido en unión libre o han estado casadas antes de los 18 años. **Resultados**. Según el análisis multivariado el nivel de escolaridad básica o sin escolarización (ORP=6,46, IC 3,83-10,90, valor de p = 0,000), no tener acceso a computadora o una tableta (ORP=1,38, IC 1,00-1,91, valor de p = 0,04), índice de acceso a bienes bajo (ORP=1,73, IC 1,24-2,42, valor de p = 0,001), no tomar sus propias decisiones (ORP=5,52, IC 2,99-10,20, valor de p = 0,000) son factores de riesgo asociados al matrimonio infantil. **Conclusión**. El matrimonio infantil en El Salvador está relacionado con el bajo nivel educativo, la falta de autonomía en la toma de decisiones y el limitado acceso a información.

#### Palabras clave

Matrimonio, Niños, Factores de Riesgo, Estado Civil.

# Introduction

Child marriage is a union in which at least one person in the couple is under 18 years of age, including marriages with legal ties, as well as common-law unions of a couple, that is, cohabitation without legal recognition and forced marriages. It is considered a violation of human rights, especially the rights of girls and adolescents. This type of marriage or union is more frequent in women than in men, with one in five young women marrying before the age of 18 compared to one in 30 men.<sup>i,ii</sup>

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the percentage of women between the ages of 20 and 24 who were married or in a stable union before the age of 18 is 21.2 %.



## **OPEN ACCESS**

Factores asociados al matrimonio infantil en mujeres salvadoreñas durante el 2021

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The countries reporting data for this indicator to UNICEF have percentages above 30 %: Suriname (36 %), Nicaragua (35 %), Honduras (34 %), Belize (34 %), Dominican Republic (32 %) and Guyana (32 %).

A report in 2019 published that women who were in early unions were influenced by different factors such as poverty, living in rural areas, pregnancy, and, in some cases, domestic violence, since many girls see it as a way out of the situation previously mentioned.<sup>III</sup> Another important factor is gender inequality in families and society.<sup>IV</sup>

In El Salvador, the final report published in 2015 regarded the matter of marriages reported that 79 % of the girls and adolescents mainly joined for love and wanting to be together. However, when analyzing with other questions, it is estimated that in 50 % of the cases, the girls and adolescents were pressured to join, or in others, it was evidenced that in 25 % of the unions, it was the man who had the final decision on the marriage or union, thus reflecting the low decision-making power of the girls, among other factors.v,vi As a result of this problem, in 2017, in El Salvador, a legislative reform of the Family Code was carried out, now stipulates that the minimum age for marriage is 18 years.vii

Despite the improvements in the quality of life over the years, there continues to be early unions or teenage mothers. However, unlike in other countries, many thoughts have been changing, such as cultural practices of fathers giving their daughters in marriage in exchange for material goods.<sup>viii</sup>

Therefore, it is necessary to establish the sociodemographic and cultural factors associated with early marriage in women ages 15 to 22 in El Salvador, 2021.

# Methodology

This study is based on a secondary analysis of data obtained from the National Health Survey (ENS) conducted in El Salvador in 2021, using a cross-sectional analytical design. The study population included 14 This study is based on a secondary analysis of data obtained from the National Health Survey (ENS, for its acronym in Spanish) conducted in El Salvador in 2021, using a cross-sectional analytical design. The study population included 14 261 women ages 15 to 49 years who participated in the survey.

The sample was selected from women between 15 and 22 years of age at the time of the survey who had been married or in a common law union before the age of 18. Forty-one variables from the main database were requested from the Research Unit of the National Institute of Health corresponding to the household and women section, allowing to obtain variables that responded to the marital status of women, access to goods which was determined from an index constructed with five variables that were found in the survey such as whether they own a television, washing machine, radio, computer and internet, with these variables were cataloged by quintiles, being quintile one and two a low access to goods, quintile three a medium access to goods, finally, quintiles four and five, high access to goods.

A range of additional variables were analysed, including education, categorised as none, elementary, middle, and high school; the presence of discrimination experienced by the woman, categorised as yes or no; the response of the women to one of two forms of discrimination, namely gender discrimination and/or discrimination for other reasons; the occurrence of domestic violence; and the capacity to make independent decisions, categorised as no if the woman indicated that the decision was made by the partner regarding sexual relations or the utilisation of family planning methods, or if she was unable to make her own decisions. A secondary database specifically designed for this analysis was constructed with these variables.

The statistical analysis of the data was descriptive for the sociodemographic variables and an inferential analysis to establish the association of sociodemographic and cultural factors with child marriage, constructed from two variables, married or living in union "if" and if the age at the time they married or began living in union was less than 18 years old. An association between risk factors in women who had united early was established through the Odds Ratio of Prevalence (ORP), and statistical significance was established with the Chi-square test, considering a p-value of< 0.05 as significant. A logistic regression model was also performed for those variables that were statistically significant in the bivariate analysis. The data was processed using Microsoft Excel 2019 and Epi Info version 7.2.5.0.

The protocol was approved by the National Institute of Health Ethics Committee, official letter No. CEINS/2023/026. The database provided remains anonymous and is for the exclusive use of the research team.

## **Results**

Of the 3016 women aged 15 to 22, the prevalence of early marriage, i.e., those who were

married or living in union before the age of 18, was 24 %, while 76 % were not married or living in union at the time of the survey.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the women who had married or were living in an early union (Table 1) were as follows: 72.61 % had basic schooling, 57.44 % belonged to the rural area, and 27 % were from the eastern region of the country. Regarding the poverty indicator, 40.17 % were found to have a low index of access to goods. On the other hand, 48 % of these women reported using some means of communication to obtain information.

Of the cultural characteristics (Table 2), 41 % of the women who are in early

marriage are of evangelical religion, and only 10.81 % suffer violence. Regarding autonomy, 51.83 % identified that they make their own decisions, but regarding the use of contraceptive methods, only 41.8 % make their own decision, and 7.72 % reported having suffered violence.

Figure 1 shows that women who were in early marriages initiated sexual relations with persons with a median age of 20 years, that is, older than themselves; however, persons up to 57 years of age were recorded.

Of the risk factors according to the bivariate analysis (Table 3), statistical significance was found between child marriage and factors such as: not having schooling (ORP

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of women aged 15 to 22, El Salvador 2021

Variable	Early marriage (n= 712)	%	95 %CI	No early mar- riage (n=2304)	%	95 % CI
Level of education						
None	15	2.11	1.28-3.45	19	0.82	0.53-1.28
Basic	517	72.61	69.22-75.76	734	31.86	29.99-33.79
Highschool	168	23.6	20.62-26.85	1126	48.87	46.83-50.91
Universitary	12	1.69	0.97-2.92	425	18.45	16.92-20.08
Area						
Urban	303	42.56	38.97-46.22	1277	55.43	53.39-57.44
Rural	409	57.44	53.78-61.03	1027	44.57	42.56-46.61
Region						
Central	88	12.36	10.14-14.98	264	11.46	10.22-12.82
Metropolitan	90	12.64	10.40-15.28	435	18.88	17.33-20.53
Western	144	20.22	17.44-23.33	443	19.23	17.67-20.89
Eastern	199	27.95	24.78-31.36	618	26.82	25.05-28.67
Paracentral	191	26.83	23.70-30.20	544	23.61	21.92-25.39
Access to goods i	ndex					
Low	286	40.17	36.63-43.81	465	20.18	18.59-21.87
Average	260	36.51	34.91-38.18	892	38.71	36.34-40.87
High	166	23.31	21.63-25.42	947	41.1	39.65-43.46
Access to informa	ation					
Use of news- paper. radio or television	569	79.92	76.82-82.69	1909	82.86	81.26-84.34
Using a com- puter or tablet	304	42.7	39.11-46.36	1617	70.18	68.28-72.02
Using cell phones to get information	346	48.6	44.94-52.26	1438	62.41	60.42-64.37
Use the media to get information	576	80.9	77.85-83.62	1903	82.6	80.99-84.09

**Table 2.** Cultural characteristics of women aged 15 to 22, El Salvador 2021

Variable	Early marriage N=712	%	IC95%	No early mar- riage N=2304	%	IC95%
Religion						
Catholic	255	35.81	32.38-39.40	1068	46.35	44.33-48.39
Protestant	293	41.15	37.59-44.80	938	40.71	38.72-42.73
Other religion	10	1.4	0.76-2.57	48	2.08	1.57-2.75
No religion	154	21.63	18.76-24.80	250	10.85	9.65-12.19
Suffering violence	77	10.81	8.74-13.31	160	6.94	5.98-8.06
Women's autonomy						
She can say "no" to her partner when she does not want to have sexual intercourse	445	62.5	58.89-65.98	427	81	0
Makes own decisions	369	51.83	48.16-55.48	428	81	0
Currently using contraceptive methods	428	60.11	56.47-63.65	134	5.82	4.93-6.85
Use of contraceptive methods is own decision	179	41.8	38.24-45.45	78	58	0
Discrimination	55	7.72	5.98-9.92	247	10.72	9.52-12.05

2.58 IC95 % 1.30-5.12 p = 0.009) or having only basic education (ORP 5.67 IC95 % 4.70-6.83 p = 0.000) living in rural areas (ORP 1.67 IC95 % 1.41-1.98 p = 0.000), lack of access to information (ORP 3.15 IC95 % 2.65-3.75 p = 0.000), poverty, represented as a low rate of access to assets (ORP 2.65 IC95 % 2.21-3.18 p = 0.000), not belonging to any religion (ORP 2.26 IC95 % 1.81-2.82 p = 0.000), normalizing various violent attitudes (ORP 1.62 IC95 % 1.22-2.16 p = 0.001), and lack of autonomy in decision making (ORP 4.01 IC95 % 3.08-5.22 p = 0.000).

The resulting factors with statistical significance were analyzed by multivariate analysis, resulting in the following: basic schooling level or no schooling (ORP 6.46 IC95 % 3.83-10.90 p = 0.000), not having access to a computer or a tablet (ORP 1.38 IC95 % 1.00-1.91 p = 0.045), Index of access to goods low (ORP 1.73 IC95 % 1.24-2.42 p = 0.001), and not making their own decisions (ORP 5.52 IC95 % 2.99-10.20 p = 0.000) (Table 4).

#### Discussion

According to what was found in this analysis, in El Salvador, there are risk factors that continue to cause early unions among women; in Colombia and Mexico, they reported similar vulnerability factors such as fleeing from poverty, dominant male norms, lack of education, lack of knowledge of rights, among others. In Ecuador, the causes of this problem are different from those presented in this study; they are

related to adolescent pregnancy and the desire to control sexuality, but similarly, family finances and experiences of violence are also characteristics.<sup>xiii</sup>

Child marriage worldwide has multiple causes that are associated with each other; in each country, they have specific characteristics that create the conditions for the continuity of the problem that limits the potential development of minors and violates their human rights.

According to this study's findings, basic education or having no schooling at all is a factor that exposes women to deciding to marry early at.xiv A study conducted in Mexico reported that girls with primary education were four times more likely to marry early at.xv The problem is similar in the region, where low levels of schooling among girls and adolescents are caused by stereotypes and domestic roles or by giving way to early marriage.ii

The fact that women suffer violence and do not make their own decisions regarding family planning issues analyzed as a lack of autonomy is a factor that was found to be associated with early marriage; according to the regional director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for Latin America and the Caribbean, at the global level, only half of women can make their own decisions related to medical care, the desire or not to have sexual relations or the use of contraceptive methods.<sup>xvi,xvii</sup>

Circles of violence, abuse, and family exploitation make early marriage or union an escape option.<sup>ii</sup>

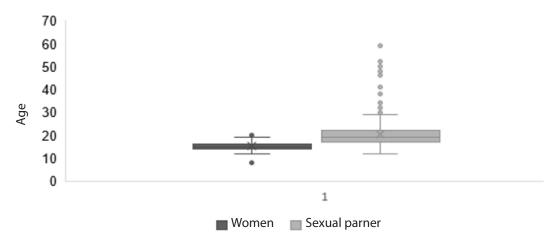


Figure 1. Age of onset of sexual intercourse in early married women compared to age of sexual partner.

**Table 3.** Factors associated with early marriage, El Salvador 2021

Variable	ORP	IC95%	Valor p
Level of scholling			
None	2.58	1.30-5.12	0.009
Basic	5.67	4.70-6.83	0.000
Area			
Rural	1.67	1.41-1.98	0.000
Access to information			
No access to computer or tablet	3.15	2.65-3.75	0.000
Does not use cell phone for information	1.75	1.48-2.08	0.000
Low rate of access to goods			
Low rate of access to goods	2.65	2.21-3.18	0.000
Religion			
No religion	2.26	1.81-2.82	0.000
Violence			
Attitude towars violence	1.62	1.22-2.16	0.001
Women's autonomy			
Cannot refuse to have sex	2.56	1.96-3.34	0.000
Does not make her own decisions	4.01	3.08-5.22	0.0000
The choice of methods is not her own decision	1.93	1.30-2.87	0.001

In a bulletin on inequality and poverty among women, girls, and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean, it was estimated that a higher prevalence is found in households whose income belongs to the lowest quintile; qualitative studies carried out in the region report that it is common for girls and adolescents to marry or enter into a common law union as a strategy to escape poverty in their homes of origin or to seek protection their homes of origin or to seek protection unlike in other societies, where early marriage may be perceived as a family economic advan-

tage due to the duty system, since a young wife is considered to be of greater value, this is not the case. It is therefore argued that this acquires a transactional character.<sup>xx</sup>

In recent years, there have been improvements in terms of access to information, such as the use of cell phones, computers, or electronic tablets; however, in this analysis, it was found that many women still have limited access to a computer or an electronic tablet, thus being associated as a risk factor for early marriage.<sup>xviii</sup> The media allows access to information that can be used as a tool for empow-

**Table 4.** Multivariate analysis of sociodemographic and cultural factors associated with early marriage, El Salvador 2021

Variable	ORP	IC95%	Valor p
Level of schooling			
Basic or no schooling	6,46	3,83-10,90	0,000
Area			
Rural	0,93	0,69-1,26	0,000
Access to information			
No access to computer or tablet	1,38	1,00-1,91	0,045
Does not use cell phone for information	0,90	0,67-1,22	0,528
Index of access to goods			
Low	1,73	1,24-2,42	0,001
Religion			
No religion	0,73	0,50-1,26	0,108
Violence			
Normal attitude towars violence	0,81	0,50-1,29	0,001
Women's autonomy			
Cannot refuse to have sex	0,42	0,22-0,96	0,085
Cannot make own decisions	5,52	2,99-10,20	0,000
Decision on methods not own decision	4,79	3,19-7,20	0,000

erment and critical thinking, and technology allows to be aware of their legal rights. XXI,XXIII

# Conclusion

In El Salvador, early marriage is associated with several risk factors, such as insufficient or no schooling, lack of access to technological devices such as computers or tablets, and unfavorable socioeconomic conditions. The lack of autonomy in decision-making on the part of women regarding sexual health, reproductive health, and maternity is evidence of the persistence of gender norms and stereotypes in which our population is immersed.

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