

# A Demographic Study of Women's Early Marriage in Algeria

**Khadra Rachedi**

*University of Oran 2 Mohammed Ben Ahmed, Department of Demography, Algeria  
rachedi.khadra@univ-oran2.dz*

**Abstract.** This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of early marriage among women in Algeria, including child marriage, by analysing data from the sixth cluster survey conducted in 2019. The findings reveal that early marriage remains relatively limited in scope, affecting approximately 3.9% of women. Through automatic classification, the study distinguishes two distinct social groups within the sample. The first group, comprising more than half of the women, is marked by social vulnerability and is predominantly located in rural areas. On average, women in this category marry at around 16.22 years of age. They tend to have lower levels of education and live in modest socioeconomic conditions, residing in both urban and rural settings. Early childbearing is closely linked to early marriage, with the average age at first childbirth estimated at 18.8 years. A significant proportion—about one in five—have experienced pregnancy loss due to miscarriage. Moreover, the risk of child mortality among young mothers is alarmingly high, surpassing national averages. The study also highlights a sharp rise in early marriages during the 1990s conflict in Algeria. This increase appears to be a protective response by families, aiming to shield their daughters from violence or sexual threats during a time of instability.

**Keywords:** early marriage, child marriage, Two-Step cluster method, women's characteristics, Algeria

## ***1. Introduction***

International norms and laws reject early marriage, including child marriage, because of its negative implications on the minors or young individuals involved. One of the main development goals has become to eliminate this phenomenon and calls to end early marriage have been put forward by international regulations. Nevertheless, it persists with varying intensity from one region to another, according to different social contexts and assorted living

conditions. Early marriage, also referred to as child marriage, is defined as a union involving individuals under the age of 18, the internationally recognized threshold marking the end of childhood. From the perspective of children's rights, any marriage before age 18 is viewed as a violation, constituting a form of violence that jeopardizes a child's life, future, and overall well-being, depriving them from experiencing their childhood in a healthy and appropriate manner.

However, it remains an intractable phenomenon in many societies. Statistically, the West and Central Africa regions record the highest rate of child marriage in the world, reaching 37% for those married before 18 years old and 12% for those married under 15 years old, with Niger recording the highest rate of girls married before 18 at 76% (UNICEF 2022). In the Arab countries, a significant increase in the rate of girls married before 18 was observed in Somalia (45%), Mauritania (37%), Sudan (34%), Yemen and the Comoros (32%), while the lowest rates were recorded in Tunisia and Algeria (no more )than 3%)(UNESCWA 2019).

In Algeria, marriage is regarded as the fundamental foundation for the establishment of a family, as sexual relations and childbirth outside the bounds of marriage are socially and culturally unacceptable.

Algerian law sets the legal age of marriage at 19 for both men and women. However, it neither explicitly prohibits nor criminalizes marriage before this age. The legislation has been shaped by prevailing social contexts, particularly in terms of cultural values and societal perceptions. Although the legal framework reflects a commitment to international treaties and conventions concerning the rights of women and children, it also seeks to preserve the country's cultural identity and religious foundations. While early marriage used to be more widespread in Algeria, in recent times it has declined considerably. Nevertheless, it is still present and common in certain areas among certain social groups. Its occurrence can surge unexpectedly in response to shifting circumstances, especially during periods of insecurity or social unrest.

Sweileh (2024) examined 964 scientific documents that dealt with early marriage published between 1983 and 2022, concluding that these studies provide an insufficient glimpse into the situation, given the scale and importance of the phenomenon. There is a convergence between scientific efforts from both social and health sciences; however, the research on regions where this phenomenon is widespread remains insufficient. In addition, there are very few studies in Algeria that have dealt with this issue and only in a tangential manner within the broader scope of marriage in general, so this

study will be a scientific contribution to the body of research on this topic within the Algerian context.

Therefore, the relevance of this study lies in dealing with an important social group, namely young women, and in the fact that early marriage directly challenges the efforts made to empower women, and to protect them from all forms of violence and deprivation. The early marriage carries psychological, social and health effects on the girls involved, as well as demographic effects, most notably increasing fertility and fostering population growth. In this regard, the present research aims to examine the magnitude and characteristics of early marriage in Algeria, as well as its relationship with various social and health indicators. In the following sections, we address the reasons and factors encouraging marriage in general and early marriage in Algeria. Then, we discuss the results of the sixth Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 2019), and finally, we analyse these results in light of previous information and studies, offering some suggestions to completely eliminate this practice.

## ***2. The early marriage***

### **2.1. Reasons and factors encouraging early marriage**

Early marriage is stimulated by a range of factors that vary in severity and importance from one region to another, the most important of which are poverty, conflict, gender inequality, social and cultural norms, religious beliefs, economic issues and poor education (Sharma, Shukla et al. 2020; Roy and Chouhan 2021; Saleh, Othman et al. 2022; Kidman, Breton et al. 2024; Rizkianti and Puspita Sari 2024). Poverty is one of the factors encouraging early marriage (Billah, Khan et al. 2023; Mathabatha and Tsawe 2023), as poor families may resort to marrying their underage daughters to get rid of their financial burden and may benefit from these marriages if the son-in-law is financially capable. This is very common in poorer countries such as sub-Saharan countries and South Asia, or Pakistan and Afghanistan, where poor families marry their underage daughters in exchange for a dowry (ONUfemmes 2020). Illiteracy and poor education play a major role in the spread of early marriage, as many studies prove an inverse relationship between early marriage and the education level of girls (Belachew, Negash et al. 2022; Mathabatha and Tsawe 2023; Kidman, Breton et al. 2024).

From a religious perspective, since Islam encourages marriage upon reaching puberty, early marriage is often promoted in Muslim societies as a means of protecting young people from moral deviation and allowing them to fulfil their needs—particularly sexual ones—within a lawful and legitimate framework. Given the heightened emotions and increased libido characteristic

of adolescence, many view early marriage as a positive solution that helps meet these needs while preventing moral decline. Alsharif and Sahlani (2023) in Iraq and Haneefa and Shaffi (2024) in Malappuram (a Muslim-majority city in India) find that the rise of early marriage is primarily due to the religious factor. We shall note that religion does not set a minimum age for marriage and there is no legal text in this regard, but it requires eligibility, maturity and the consent of the girl, as she is not married forcibly, against her will. Marriage is forbidden if it harms one of the parties. In a study on a group of Syrian refugee women in Jordan who married early, Al Akash and Chalmiers (2021) find that early marriage is deemed good for young women as a solution to their refuge and displacement-related issues.

Finally, illegitimate pregnancy can be a reason for early marriage, which was found in a study of marriages registered at the level of a group of Indonesian courts in the Bumijawa region (Amralla 2020). A young girl who has been raped or has had an extramarital intercourse may be married to avoid scandal.

Regarding the effects of early marriage, many studies conducted in countries with a high rate of early marriage indicate that the latter causes serious psychological, health and social effects on the girl and society (De Groot, Kuunyem et al. 2018; Yoosefi Lebni, Solhi et al. 2023). Socially, early marriage deprives girls of their childhood, health, education, and future aspirations. One of the first consequences they face is being forced to abandon their studies, which in turn hinders their personal development, limits the growth of their personality, and restricts their awareness of their own rights and issues. It also undermines their independence in making decisions about their lives and futures, while cutting them off from economic opportunities and self-sufficiency (Yoosefi Lebni, Solhi et al. 2023). This is a waste of human resources and an impediment to development. The greatest problem faced by these girls is adaptation due to their lack of maturity and experience in dealing with the husband and his family. Newly married women often live with the husband's family, which leads to permanent disputes that may end by divorce, as a study in rural Algeria indicates that the earlier the marriage, the higher the risk of divorce (Alsharif and Sahlani 2023; Widyastari, Isarabhakdi et al. 2020).

Girls who marry early are forced to assume family responsibilities that exceed their psychological, physical and mental capacities, making them more vulnerable to psychological disorders that affect them, their family relationships, and their children. Sezgin and Punamäki (2020) show that women who gave birth between 13-19 years old had more anxiety and somatisation symptoms than women who gave birth at an older age.

Due to their incomplete physical and psychological growth, these girls, and especially the very young among them are exposed to serious health risks during pregnancy and childbirth. Young mothers' offspring are more prone to experiencing health complications including underweight, malnutrition and stunted growth (Wodon, Malé et al. 2020). Additionally, it has also been observed that three quarters of premature births occurred within early marriages (Wodon, Malé et al. 2020; Molitoris, Kantorová et al. 2023). Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of death for adolescent mothers (OMS 2017; UNFPA 2017). Early marriage is strongly associated with the early onset of several diseases including hypertension, diabetes, heart disease and thyroid disorder (Vikram, Visaria et al. 2023), and globally, 76% of first births of mothers below the age of 18 occur within marriage, with large regional differences.

Women married early are more vulnerable to various forms of violence, especially from the partner (Verma and Nair 2022; Huber-Krum, Miedema et al. 2024; Verma and Choudhury 2024). Violence can also extend to children as Yassin and Montasser's (2020) study indicates that the younger the age of the couple, the greater the child abuse.

## **2.2. Early marriage in Algeria**

In Arab societies such as Algeria, a girl's marriage is largely shaped by cultural norms and the societal perception of women and their status. Once a girl reaches puberty, she often becomes a source of concern for her parents, who fear that any romantic involvement could result in the loss of her virginity—an event considered deeply shameful and stigmatizing for the entire family. As a result, many parents view early marriage as the best solution, believing it safeguards their daughters' chastity, offers protection, and ensures social stability. Within this context, the marital home is often seen as the most appropriate place for a girl, where she comes under the protection of a man who is expected to provide for her needs. In other words, early marriage is seen as a way for families to relieve themselves of responsibility—particularly in a society where remaining unmarried can be perceived as a source of shame. This is expressed in Algerian idioms such as: 'Get up at the crack of dawn to fulfil your need', and 'Listen to the omen', or 'Your daughter must be married before fasting' (in reference to puberty), 'give her to a man to avoid gossip' and to avoid their spinsterhood. The Algerian society views women who are over the social age of marriage as inferior, with no social value, which is reflected in the popular proverb, 'A girl is either for her man or her grave', meaning that marriage is the only thing that guarantees her value. Societal reactions to the

single women are often violent, regarding her as inferior, and denying her a decent social position until she marries and becomes a mother.

The early marriage of girls can be seen as a form of control in a patriarchal society, where limiting a girl's access to education, employment, and personal development serves to preserve traditional gender hierarchies. Empowering women through knowledge and economic independence is often perceived as a threat to male dominance. Until recently, it was common in many families that male children intervened to prevent their sisters from studying, under the pretext that education is not important, encouraging them to get married at the first opportunity, to get rid of them. But these ideas have greatly declined, and parents have increasingly grown proud of their daughters' success and education, which is reflected in the high rates of female enrolment in various educational levels, which in turn has contributed greatly to the decline of early marriage rates.

In addition, there is a widespread belief that the earlier a girl marries, the longer and more fertile she will be, increasing her chances of having children. This view assumes that a woman's age at marriage directly influences her fertility and reproductive capacity. Another belief is that the more families get their children married early, especially girls, the happier they will be to see their grandchildren, expanding their lineage and strengthening their kinship and intermarriage relations with other families. In some cases, early marriage reflects the girl's own choice, particularly when she faces social problems within her family. She may see marriage as a way to escape a difficult household context and to seek stability, or as the only viable option available to her—especially if she has dropped out of school.

Despite this, early marriage in Algeria has become increasingly rare due to social change and its influence on mindsets and attitudes toward marriage, particularly early marriage. A survey of the Information and Documentation Centre on the Rights of Children and Women (CIDDEF 2020) finds that 80% of Algerian women and 62% of men who participated in the survey rejected the legalization of child marriage, which is not prohibited by law.

For comparison, the legal age of marriage in Algeria is set at 19 for both men and women, while in Arab countries it varies from one country to another, with 18 years in Jordan, Oman, UAE, Iraq, Mauritania and Syria, while it 15 years in Yemen and 16 in Bahrain. In other countries, laws distinguish between women and men, setting the age at 17 and 20 in Tunisia, 16 and 18 in Qatar, 15 and 17 in Kuwait, and 15 and 17 in Sudan.

While, as mentioned above, the legislation has allowed for the marriage of individuals below the legally specified age, most of these legal frameworks did not set a clear minimum age for marriage. Instead, they left room for minors to be married under certain conditions, without imposing strict age limits. Exceptions include the laws in Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, where legislators have established a minimum marriage age of 15 years, in Kuwait, where legislators prohibited the official registration of marriages involving individuals below the age of 15 for girls and 17 for boys, or the Palestinian legislative requirement that the groom be at least 16 years old and the bride 15 years old to be legally eligible for marriage (Kingdom of Morocco 2020: 11).

Because early marriage is rooted in Algerian society, as it is in many other societies, Algerian law did not abolish it but rather established a legal frame under which minors are protected. The legislature has set the legal age of marriage at 19 for both genders. However, if one or both parties are under the age of 19, a marriage contract may still be concluded with judicial approval. According to the Algerian Family Code, such an approval is granted based on considerations of interest, necessity, and the ability of the parties to marry, provided that the minor gives their consent (Ordinance No. 05-02 of February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Article 7-Article 13). However, the Algerian legislature does not specify the nature of this interest, necessity, and the capacity, or the manner of proving it, except for a certificate proving the minor's physiological capacity to marry, and the authorisation must be obtained from the judge at the request of the minor's parent (or guardian).

Article 13 of the Family Code (Ordinance No. 05-02 of February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005) also criminalises forced child marriage. It states that a guardian, whether father or otherwise, may not force a minor under his guardianship to marry, nor let her marry without her consent. The marriage of minors is performed by their guardians, namely the father, or one of the first-degree male relatives, or the judge, who is the guardian of those who do not have a guardian. In order to prevent early or forced marriages for minors, imams are prohibited from conducting any religious ceremonies of marriage unless it is proven by a civil contract. It should be noted that marriage in Algeria must have two contracts: religious and civil. Although the marriage is socially recognised, if it is not legally documented, rights and duties are lost. According to Article 22 (Ordinance No. 05-02 of February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005), the marriage shall be documented in an extract from the civil registry, and in case it is not registered, it shall be confirmed by a judicial ruling that must be registered in the civil registry at the request of the Public Prosecutor.

With reference to marriage statistics according to various censuses and population surveys, the average age at first marriage for women has risen considerably from 18.3 years old in the 1966 census, which means that marriages were very early in this period, to 27.1 years old in the MICS2018-2019 survey. By focusing on the rate of married women in the 15-19 age group, we can understand how important early marriage is in Algeria; this rate has declined since 1977 from 23.6% to 3.3% in 2019, with some variation over time. This means that while early marriage is not currently a major issue in Algeria, it nevertheless still exists. The social goal is to eliminate this type of marriage altogether and to protect children and minors from its consequences, despite the drop in shares.

### ***3. Methods and data***

This research employs a descriptive approach, specifically a demographic perspective, to analyze the phenomenon of early marriage. It aims to examine its scale, characteristics, and effects using data from the 2019 cluster survey. This is the sixth Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted globally and the fifth in Algeria. It aims to obtain reliable, detailed, and internationally comparable data on various areas related to population well-being, reproductive health of women of childbearing age, and child health and growth (over 200 indicators). Consequently, it serves as a valuable source for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. This survey was conducted by the Ministry of Health, Population, and Hospital Reform, with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The survey was carried out between December 22, 2018, and April 22, 2019, covering an original sample of 31,325 households with a response rate of 95.5%. Five questionnaires were used, including one specifically for women aged 15-49. The data obtained from this questionnaire allowed for the conduct of this study, which includes a sample of 30,283 women aged between 20 and 49, 3.9% of whom were married before 18 (4.6% in rural areas and 3.5% in urban areas). This age was taken as a limit because, both legally and internationally, any marriage occurring before it is recognized as being an early one. To facilitate the use of findings in comparison with other regions, we first reviewed the available database to ensure the presence of auxiliary variables relevant to this study. We then identified the dependent variable as marriage before the age of 18 and used the weighted sample to enhance the representativeness and significance of the data. In the end, a sample of 1,282 women who married before 18 was adopted, 70 women of which married before the age of 15. Women's ages during the

survey were between 15 and 49, which we found methodologically sufficient to carry out this study.

To identify the social characteristics at the time of the survey for women who were married before the age of 18, we applied the Two-Step Cluster method, categorizing these women based on seven key variables: place of residence (urban-rural), territorial programming area (northwest, northeast, north-central, western highlands, eastern highlands, south), wealth index (poorest, poor, middle class, rich, richest), number of children, educational level (no education, primary, middle, secondary, university), current age, marital status (currently married, previously married), and kinship with husband (yes, no). Other data were used to reveal the relationship between early marriage and some demographic, social and health indicators, mainly the age at first childbirth, the average number of children, child mortality, and pregnancy loss. We first compared characteristics of women who married before and after the age 18, to determine whether there were indeed differences in the characteristics of the two groups of women. Relying on the raw database (rather than the results published in the final survey report), and after reviewing and processing certain variables to ensure the inclusion of all those required, the final revised sample consisted of 19,578 women aged between 20 and 49, of whom 5.8% were married before the age of 18.

#### ***4. Results of the sixth MICS 2019 in Algeria***

##### **4.1. Comparison of women's characteristics at the time of the survey, by age at marriage in Algeria**

Before addressing the characteristics of women who married early, we present a comparison of the current characteristics (i.e., at the time of the survey) of women who married early and those who married at the age of 18 or older, aged between 20 and 49 at the time of the survey. Unfortunately, the survey does not provide any information about their characteristics at the time of marriage, but the current characteristics can give a close idea. Table 1 shows that women who married early, unlike others, currently have lower educational and living standards. Except for the first age group (20-24 years), where the rate of early marriages is higher, we observe an increase in early marriage among older generations, i.e., those aged between 40-49 during the survey. It is also higher among non-working women.

Geographically, although the rate of early marriage is notable in urban areas, it remains higher in rural areas compared to those who married at an older age. The differences are particularly noticeable across certain regional programming

areas. With the exception of the northeastern and western highlands, where early marriage rates are relatively low, women who married early are more commonly found in other regions—especially in the northwest and the greater south. Statistically, the chi-square test shows significant differences between each variable and age at marriage (sig = 0.000).

*Table 1. Comparison of women's characteristics by age at marriage in Algeria in 2019 (%)*

Variables		<18 yrs	18 yrs +	Variables		<18 yrs	18 yrs +
Level of education	No education	31.8	13.7	Wealth index quintile	Poorest	27.0	20.8
	Primary	26.8	15.5		Second	23.2	20.9
	Middle	28.9	30.2		Middle	21.1	20.2
	Secondary/ high school	11.3	24.2		Fourth	16.9	19.5
	University	1.2	16.6		Richest	11.7	18.6
Total		100	100	Total		100	100
Age of women	20-24	16.6	6.1	Territorial programming space	North-central	23.2	33.0
	25-29	13.2	16.4		Northeast	4.6	14.1
	30-34	11.5	20.7		Northeast	18.6	17.0
	35-39	11.5	20.8		Central highlands	14.1	7.0
	40-44	21.2	18.8		Eastern highlands	16.5	14.3
	45-49	26.0	17.2		Western highlands	5.9	5.9
Total		100	100	Total		100	100
Economic activity	Occupied	4.5	12.3	Place of residence	Urban	56.6	62.0
	Unoccupied	95.5	87.7		Rural	43.4	38.0
Total		100	100	Total		100	100

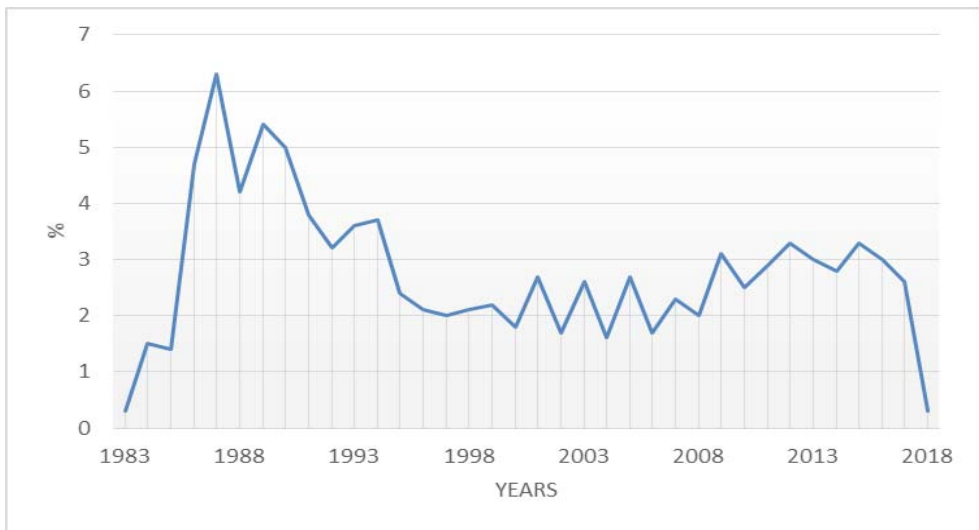
*Source* : Own calculations based on MICS6-2019 survey data

Looking at the geographical distribution of early marriages in general, the map in Annex 1 shows a lower rate in the central north, while the southern regions and central highlands record the highest rates (7.7% and 6.8%, respectively).

#### 4.2. Characteristics of early married women at the time of the survey

The study finds that early marriages took place between 1983 and 2019, most of which were recorded between 1985 and 2000, a critical political period Algeria went through, which will be discussed later.

*Figure 1. Distribution of early marriages in Algeria (as percentages of all marriages)*



*Source:* Own calculations based on MICS6-2019 survey database

Based on a statistical classification, women who married early were categorized into two different groups, as shown in Table 2. As mentioned earlier, we refer to their characteristics at the time of the survey due to the lack of data related to characteristics at the time of marriage.

Before comparing the two groups, we first examine the general characteristics of these women based on the classification variables, and then proceed to analyse additional characteristics. It is generally observed that early-married women have almost all the characteristics described in the studies we discussed earlier. They have mostly limited education, about half of them belong to poor families, a third of them married a relative, and they have a high average number of children compared to the general average (2.8 children per woman). However, more than half of them reside in urban areas.

*Table 2. Classification of women who married before age 18 by different variables*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Cluster1</b>	<b>Cluster2</b>	<b>Total</b>	
Age of 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	16.1	16.3	<b>16.2</b>	
Level of education	No education	46.1	11.3	<b>30.0</b>
	Primary	26.9	24.6	<b>25.8</b>
	Middle	22.7	41.5	<b>31.5</b>
	Secondary/ high school	4.4	19.9	<b>11.2</b>
	University	0	2.7	<b>1.2</b>
Place of residence	Urban	19.4	97.8	<b>55.7</b>
	Rural	80.6	2.2	<b>44.3</b>
Wealth index quintile	Poor	76.9	21.4	<b>51.1</b>
	Rich	7.7	50.9	<b>27.7</b>
Family relationship to husband	40.8	22.8	<b>32.4</b>	
Polygamy	3.1	1.5	<b>2.4</b>	
Average number of children	3.7	3.61	<b>3.7</b>	
Proportion	53.7	46.3	<b>100</b>	

*Source:* Own calculations, Cluster Two-step Outcomes. SPSS.V25

These and other findings are summarised in the following sections.

#### **4.2.1. Geographical distribution of early marriages**

After the educational level, the geographical region is one of the most important determinants of early marriage in Algeria. According to the area of residence, rural areas have a higher percentage (4.6%) than urban areas (3.5%), while the South (Sahara) and the Central highlands regions have the highest values (6.8% and 7.7% respectively). This difference is because these regions are characterized by women's low educational level and the prevalence of customs and traditions that entrench and encourage early marriage as we will see when discussing these results.

Table 3. Geographical distribution of early marriages in Algeria according to the MICS6-2019 survey

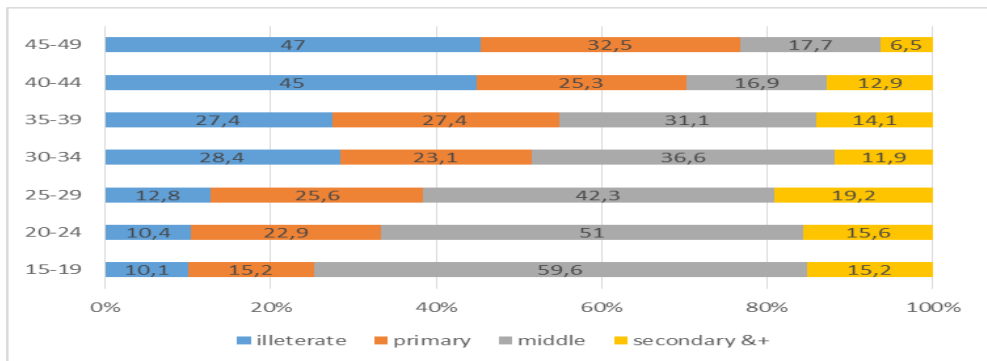
Place of residence		Territorial programming space							
Urban	Rural	North-central	Northeast	Northwest	Central highlands	Eastern highlands	Western highlands	South	Total
3.5	4.6	2.8	1.2	4.4	7.7	4.7	4.5	6.8	3.9

Source: MICS6-2019: 343-344

#### 4.4.2. Education

Regarding educational level, it was found that one third of women who married early had never attended school, and about one quarter of them had attended school and had a primary level education, which means that low educational levels play a role in the rise and survival of early marriage. 36.6% of those women finished primary school, 31.5% had a middle level while only 24.1% of them finished this stage, 11.2% had a secondary level, and 51.1% of which finished this stage. If we go back to the age of marriage according to these stages, we find that the earlier a girl quits school, the earlier she gets married. Referring to their age at the survey period, 47% of women between 45 and 49 years old were illiterate, compared to 10.4% of those between 20 and 24. In this category, more than half of women had a middle school level of education.

Figure 2. Early married women's educational level by age at the time of the survey (%)



Source: Own calculations based on MICS6-2019 survey database

### 4.2.3. Marriage

The sample of women who were married before the age of 18 at the time of the survey is distributed by marital status as follows: 93.1% were married, 2.6% widowed, 4.0% divorced, and 0.3% separated. Notably, among those whose marriages had ended, the majority experienced separation due to divorce, which suggests the possibility that early marriage works to increase divorce (Widyastari, Isarabhakdi et al. 2020). Only 1.8% of them had been married more than once and 2.4% were living in a polygamous marriage.

The age range of marriage for these women is estimated to have been between 10 and 17 years old, with an average of 16.22 years old, and about half of them married at 17. By place of residence, there is a slight difference between urban areas (16.24 years old) and rural areas (16.20 years old). In terms of geographical regions, the age is lower in highlands (between 16.00 and 16.10 years old) and in the southern desert regions (16.06 years old).

*Table 4. Spatial distribution of the average age at marriage for women who married early*

Place of residence		Territorial programming space							Total
Urban	Rural	North-central	Northeast	Northwest	Central highlands	Eastern highlands	Western highlands	South	
16.24	16.20	16.33	16.40	16.37	16.10	16.09	16.00	16.06	16.22

*Source:* Own calculations based on MICS6-2019 survey database

In terms of education, the average age of marriage for illiterate women is 15.92 years old, compared to 16.57 years old for those with secondary or higher education, which shows the importance of education in eradicating this phenomenon.

*Table 5. Average age at marriage for women who married early, according to their educational level during the survey*

Level of education	Illiterate	Primary	Middle	Secondary and above
Average age of marriage	15.92	16.20	16.40	16.57

*Source:* Own calculations based on MICS6-2019 survey database

About one-third of early marriages are kinship marriages, especially in rural areas, 59.8% of these marriages being patrilineal. This is common in most societies where kinship marriages are prevalent, such as North Africa, West Asia and South India (Tadmouri, Nair et al. 2009; Bittles 2011).

Although most marriages are registered in the civil registry, there are cases (13.4%) registered through the courts, which is expected given that the bride was below the legal age of marriage (less than 19 years old).

As for the age difference between the spouses, we found that about 42% of women are 5 to 9 years younger than their husbands. More than half of the women were over 10 years younger than their husbands—a significant age gap that suggests the men were more mature, at least in terms of age. This disparity also underscores the unequal burdens placed on young wives, compared to husbands.

#### **4.2.4. Fertility, pregnancy and childbirth conditions**

93.1 % of women who married early gave birth, with 55.9% of them having their first child before their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and 23.5% before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The survey finds that 2.3% of teenage girls started their fertility before 15, and the average age of first childbirth was 18.82 years old.

The birth rate for teenage girls (15-19 years old) is estimated at 12% (9% in urban areas and 18% in rural areas). The highest rate is recorded among women with no education (63.8%) (MICS2019: 134). The average final fertility, i.e. the average number of children among women who married early, had children, and ended their reproductive life (50 years old) was 5.67 children per woman, which is a very high average that confirms that the earlier the marriage, the higher the likelihood of having more children.

23.6 % of women who married early and had children experienced at least one pregnancy loss: 73.8% had at least one miscarriage, 33.1% had at least one abortion, and 17.8% had at least one stillbirth. These high rates emphasise the consequences of early marriage on pregnancy and childbirth.

In this regard, data on infant and child mortality probabilities highlight the significant impact of the mother's age at the time of the child's death. It is evident that mortality rates are higher among mothers under the age of 20. This trend is particularly pronounced in post-neonatal and infant mortality rates, where younger maternal age is associated with significantly elevated risks. A clear variation in these mortality probabilities can be observed based on the mother's age. For instance, while the survey recorded post-neonatal and infant mortality rates of 4‰ and 17‰, respectively, among the overall female

population, these figures rose sharply to 22‰ and 35‰ among mothers under 20. This increase is largely attributed to the limited experience and insufficient readiness of adolescent mothers to care for their newborns.

*Table 6. Child/infant mortality by mother's age*

Age of mother	Infant and child mortality rate	Child mortality rate	Infant mortality rate	Post-neonatal mortality rate	Neonatal mortality rate
Below age 20	39	4	35	22	13
20-34	17	2	15	4	11
34-39	24	3	21	5	16
Total	19	2	17	4	12

*Source:* MICS6.2019: 120.

#### **4.2.5. Classification**

We note that the first group (women who married early) is more present in rural areas (8 out of 10 rural women married early); the largest proportion of them have no education or poor education (primary school), more than two thirds of them are in the first and second (poor) quintiles of wealth index, and about 5 out of 10 are relatives to their husbands. The proportion of polygamy is high, while the average number of children is estimated to be 3.79 and the average age of marriage is 16.12 years old. Thus, this group, estimated at 53.7% of the total sample, appears more vulnerable than the second group (women who married after the age of 18), which is predominantly located in urban areas and characterised by acceptable levels of education and living standards, while the polygamy is almost 50% less than in the first group.

In general, women who married early are found in the central north, northwest, as well as the south and northeast. The reason, particularly for the central and northwest regions, is that these areas experienced significant security instability during the Black Decade. As for the south, these are regions known for their adherence to customs and traditions that encourage early marriage. According to the classification, it can be observed that the first group, which appears more vulnerable, except for its low rates in the northeast and western highlands, is significantly present in other regions, especially rural areas characterized by low educational and living standards, in addition to the violent security situation that affected these regions, except for the south.

Meanwhile, there is no significant difference with the second group, which is somewhat more present in the central north, northwest, eastern highlands, and the south.

*Table 7. Distribution of early married women by geographical area*

Clusters	Place of residence		Territorial programming space						
	Urban	Rural	North central	Northeast	Northwest	Central	Eastern highlands	Western highlands	South
1	19.4	80.6	23.4	5.1	19.9	15.0	16.0	5.7	15.0
2	97.8	2.2	21.2	4.0	19.7	12.3	17.0	5.4	20.4
Total	55.7	44.3	22.4	4.6	19.8	13.7	16.5	5.5	17.5

*Source:* Own calculations based on MICS6-2019 survey data

## **5. Discussion**

Although the statistics used in this study show that early marriage experienced a decline at the national level, it documents its continued existence in certain regions. The Algerian legislature sets the age of marriage at 19 years old for both genders, but it does not prohibit or criminalise marriage before this age in line with the country's customs and traditions. However, it imposes a set of controls that protect the minor bride and preserve her rights. This phenomenon is widespread in the highlands and Saharan South, which are conservative regions that are still subject to customs and traditions of early marriage within the belief that the best place for a girl is her marital home, and which preserves her and her family's honour. These regions are often characterised by high illiteracy and poor schooling for girls, two factors that encourage such kind of marriage. In these areas, families also maintain marriages within the family line to preserve traditional social structure. These marriages are often predetermined, and children have no right of refusal. According to the MICS 2019 data, about one third of women who married early and within the family support such marriages because they believe these strengthen family ties, promote solidarity and mutual support with the husband, reinforce customs and traditions, help preserve inheritance within the family, and reflect parental authority in decision-making.

Most early marriages involve girls who are illiterate or did not complete their education, especially in the early stages. They decline whenever the educational level increases, which proves that education is the key to eliminating this

phenomenon. A Chinese study indicates that one additional year of schooling reduces the possibility of marriage before 18 by 1.7% (Liang and Yu 2022) and another study in South Asia finds that any progress or improvements in education (as well as wealth) contribute to the decline of early marriage by 44% in India and 96% in Nepal (Scott, Nguyen et al. 2021). When a girl drops out of school at an early age, marriage often becomes her only perceived path, as she is rarely guided toward alternative opportunities. In such cases, she tends to focus on marriage, accepting it—and sometimes even preparing for it—as an inevitable outcome of her circumstances. Despite their young age at the time of marriage, it is notable that the average ideal age for marriage, from the perspective of women who married early, is around 22 years. Moreover, 75% of them believe the ideal age is at least 25. This indicates a clear sense of dissatisfaction with their own early marriage experiences.

The significant age gap between spouses suggests that, when a young girl is married, little attention is given to the implications of this disparity. It is often considered sufficient that she marries a mature man who is expected to take on marital responsibilities. However, from a psychological and social perspective, smaller age differences generally promote greater harmony between partners. Moreover, the larger the age gap, the higher the likelihood that these women will become widows, given the higher male mortality rates compared to female mortality, as demonstrated by demographic studies. This also explains the high number of female householders who are widowed despite their young age (less than 50 years old).

Because they were married early, it is natural for these girls to start their reproductive lives early with more childbearing because of their long period of fertility. We find that women who married early have a higher number of children than others, and these children are more likely to die at different ages due to the pregnancy complications and lack of experience, especially with the increased burden they bear in taking care of their families. It is found that 55.3% of married women aged between 15 and 19 years live in their husbands' households. In this situation, the teenage daughter-in-law is often the one who takes on the onerous responsibility of housekeeping, in addition to raising her children.

Finally, when we look back at the history of these early marriages, we find that the highest number recorded annually was between 1987 and 1999. We can divide this phase into two periods, the first one between 1987 and 1992, a period that some refer to as the Islamic Awakening (which originally started at the beginning of the 1980s). After adopting multi-partyism in Algeria following October 1988 events, the Islamic trend played a role in the spread of

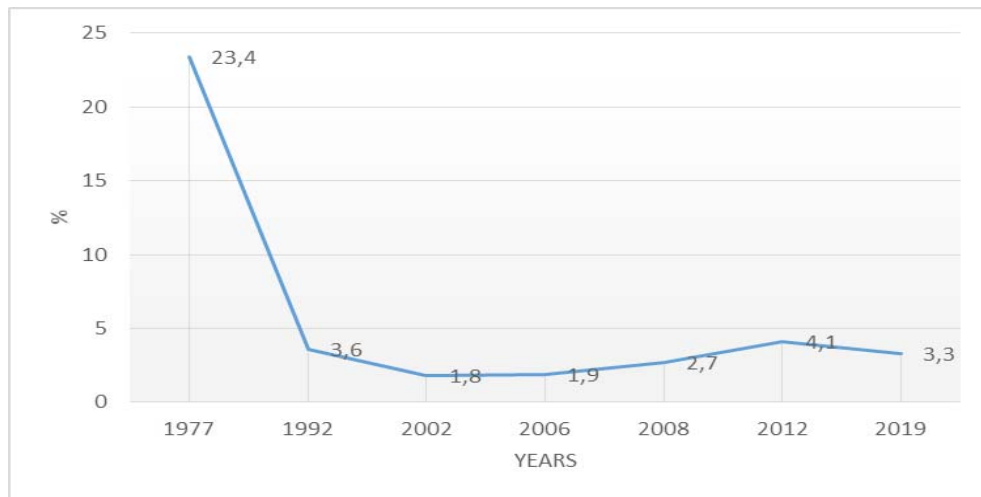
many related phenomena, including early marriage. The second phase, which was after the cancellation of local elections in 1992 and the beginning of the so-called Black Decade<sup>1</sup> featured by bloody dispute that led families to worry about their daughters. Although this period witnessed a decline in marriage in general, it also saw a significant increase in early marriages. Unfortunately, there are no in-depth or comprehensive studies on this topic—only a few newspaper articles featuring interviews with girls from villages and cities affected by the security situation. In these areas, many parents chose to marry off their daughters at an early age, particularly after widespread reports of kidnappings and sexual assaults by jihadist groups. Early marriage was seen as the best means of protecting girls from the threat of sexual violence. This pattern is consistent with findings from various studies that have examined the impact of conflict on child marriage, particularly among girls, as seen in contexts like Syria, where such marriages increased significantly as a result of the war (Yagi 2018).

Furthermore, we notice a significant increase in the number of early marriages since 2008, as the MICS4.2012/13 survey shows. The rate of married women aged 15-19 years old rose to 4.1% from 2.8% in the 2002 survey, only to decline in 2019 to 3.3%. We did not find any studies that address this issue. However, this phenomenon may be explained by the actual prevalence of early marriage that nevertheless remains unregistered, as some families marry off their daughters before reaching the legal age of 19, but do not seek out official recognition of the marriage. Once these young women reach or surpass that age—particularly after having children—the marriages are subsequently registered in court, provided certain conditions are met, most notably the presence of witnesses who can attest to the marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> After the cancellation of the parliamentary elections in which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a landslide victory with 188 seats in the first round of the December 1991 elections, and before that in the municipal elections in 1990, and amid fears of this party opposing the ruling elite, the army canceled the elections on January 11, 1992, and requested the resignation of President Chadli Bendjedid, forming a High Council of State. Islamists rejected these decisions and declared a rebellion, leading to a wave of arrests among their ranks and pushing many of them to take up arms against the authorities, resulting in the emergence of armed groups. Thus began the Black Decade, which lasted until February 2002, causing, according to unofficial sources, the death of between 150,000 and 200,000 people, tens of thousands of kidnappings, and significant security breaches.

Figure 3. Evolution of the rate of married women aged 15-19 between 1977 and 2019 in Algeria



Source: Own calculations based on surveys and demographic censuses

Given the classification obtained, it can be said that women who married early are divided into two groups, the most specific characteristic of which is the place of residence. The first group are mostly located in rural areas with demographic and social characteristics which greatly reflect their vulnerability, especially since they constitute more than half of the sample. These areas still preserve customs and traditions related to women, including early marriage, considering the poverty, deprivation they experience, and the poor education they benefit from.

Interestingly, among all the women included in the study, the rate of early marriage is higher in urban areas, with 55.7% of early-married women residing in urban settings compared to 44.3% in rural areas. Although the survey does not provide a direct explanation for this pattern, the timing of many of these marriages—coinciding with periods of political transition and the Black Decade—offers a possible clue. During that time, many families fled conflict zones, particularly rural and mountainous areas, and migrated to cities and their outskirts, often settling in impoverished and marginalized slums. The survey shows that approximately 74% of these women left their place of birth or original residence. This observation aligns with the timing of their marriages, suggesting that the prevailing security situation during that period played a significant role in the rise of early marriages in urban areas.

According to the Territorial programming space, we have noted the high proportion of early married women (between 4.4% and 7.7%) and the low age of marriage in the North-West and Upper Highlands, especially in the Central and Southern regions. The latter are characterized by low educational level of women; the control of customs and traditions related to marriage and their deep-rooted pressure on families. The practice of early marriage is prevalent among both females and males, largely due to cultural considerations that emphasize early marriage, especially for girls upon reaching puberty. Within this context, any relationship outside the framework of marriage is socially condemned and regarded as a violation of the family's honour. Due to a lack of awareness and the misinterpretation of religious teachings, the traditional view of a woman's role—limited to marriage and childbirth—continues to prevail. This perception reinforces the practice of marrying off girls at an early age, often driven by economic hardship, poverty, and low living standards. Additionally, the mitigation of family ties and the desire to preserve family property within the family further contribute to the persistence of early marriage, as shown by the high kinship marriage in these regions.

## ***6. Conclusion***

Early marriage violates human rights, especially those of girls, as it is more prevalent among them than boys. Unlike in many parts of the world, especially Arab countries, it is not a real issue in Algeria, but it is nonetheless present in certain areas, especially in the interior regions and conservative south, and among families with poor education and living standards. Marriage is strongly linked to customs, traditions and religion; these are factors that have made it deeply rooted in Algerian society. Therefore, the legislature does not prohibit or criminalise it but defines a legal framework by which minors are protected, stipulating that early marriage can only take place out of necessity or in the minor's interest and requires the consent of the minor entering it.

Early marriage affects the social status of girls, preventing them from going further in studies and limiting their participation in social and economic life, which is reflected in their level of well-being and social and economic empowerment. It also affects many vital indicators associated to development in its various fields, most notably high infant and child mortality and pregnancy loss among young mothers, which poses a challenge to face the consequences at the demographic and health level. Marriage in general is a choice that is subject to the individual's will and psychological and social aspirations, with the aim of forming a stable family through which the stability of society is ensured. Any marriage that is not based on consent and violates one's rights, as is the

case of early marriage, and especially child marriage, curtails the girl's freedom, and hinders efforts to empower her and protect her from any form of exploitation.

Therefore, in view of the results, we recommend the following:

-Treating any phenomenon requires tracking its levels and trends, and this can be only conducted by providing sufficient related data, which is an issue frequently raised at the national level. Field studies, especially demographic studies, can provide such data with the support of social studies that investigate the factors that work to reinforce this phenomenon.

- Greater emphasis should be placed on educating girls and encouraging them to pursue their studies, given the critical role of education in reducing the prevalence of early marriage. Girls who are enrolled in school and progress through its various levels are significantly less likely to marry at an early age. As a result, they are more likely to enjoy a safer environment, fully experience their childhood, and have better opportunities for personal development and self-fulfilment.

-Focusing on raising awareness among individuals and families about the dangers of early marriage, especially in regions where customs and traditions of early marriage are deeply rooted, particularly in rural areas as well as in the interior and southern regions.

-The laws of minors marriage should be reviewed addressing the legal gaps, making them clearer in order to provide further protection to this group.

-Any treatment of this issue must occur at the level of the family, society, legal institutions and social actors, including leaders and associations, and sensitise about this critical issue and its implications on female minors and society, in addition to searching for the factors that lead to it. In this regard, Algeria's will to curb this phenomenon is evident, and it succeeded in doing so through its involvement in many conventions and regulations that fight it in order to protect children and women, most notably by raising the age of marriage to 19 years old.

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Annex

*Annex 1. Geographical distribution of early marriages in Algeria*

