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Determinants of early marriages among child heads of household: evidence from the Cristo na Aldeia Association in Mutua, Mozambique.

Determinants of early marriages among child-headed households: evidence from the Cristo na Aldeia Association in Mutua, Mozambique

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Summary

This article analyzes the factors influencing the occurrence of early marriages among orphaned children who are heads of households assisted by the Cristo na Aldeia Association, located in the village of Mutua, Dondo district, Sofala province, Mozambique. The research adopted a mixed methodological approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, using direct observation, interviews, and questionnaires. The sample consisted of 21 participants, intentionally selected, including 15 orphaned children who are heads of households, 2 community leaders, and 4 association employees. The results indicate that poverty, low levels of education, the absence of parents, sociocultural beliefs, and insufficient information about the legal, social, and health consequences of early marriage are fundamental factors for the persistence of the phenomenon. It is concluded that early marriage compromises the integral development of children, making intersectoral interventions involving the State, organizations, civil society, and community leaders necessary.

Keywords: child; early marriage; head of household; social vulnerability.

Abstract

This article analyzes the factors influencing the occurrence of early marriages among orphaned children who are heads of households assisted by the Cristo na Aldeia Association, located in the village of Mutua, Dondo district, Sofala province, Mozambique. The research adopted a mixed methodological approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, using direct observation, interviews, and questionnaires. The sample consisted of 21 participants, intentionally selected, including 15 orphaned children who are heads of households, 2 community leaders, and 4 association employees. The results indicate that poverty, low levels of education, absence of parents, sociocultural beliefs, and insufficient information about the legal, social, and health consequences of early marriage are fundamental factors for the persistence of the phenomenon. It is concluded that early marriage compromises the integral development of children, making intersectoral interventions involving the State, organizations, civil society, and community leaders necessary.

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1. Introduction

Early marriage is a complex and persistent social phenomenon, recognized internationally recognized as a violation of human rights, particularly the rights of the child and of the girl. This practice results from the interaction of economic, sociocultural, educational and institutional issues, manifesting themselves more frequently in contexts marked by poverty, Gender inequality and weak social protection. Its consequences are profound and lasting, negatively affecting educational progress, physical and reproductive health, psychological well-being and



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the opportunities for personal and social development of the children involved.

In Mozambique, despite the legislative progress made in the last decade, including the
Despite the approval of the Law for the Prevention and Combat of Premature Unions, premature marriage remains
a structural challenge. Recent data indicate that a significant proportion of girls continue
entering into unions before the age of 18, especially in rural areas, where access to education and services is limited.
Access to health and information about rights is limited. Although a slight reduction is observed in relation to
Compared to previous periods, prevalence levels remain high, revealing the persistence of
This phenomenon and the difficulties in the effective implementation of public policies for child protection.
This reality is exacerbated by deeply ingrained sociocultural norms, which tend to
to legitimize early marriage as a strategy for economic survival and social security.

The situation becomes particularly critical when it comes to orphaned and vulnerable children who
They prematurely assume the role of head of the family. These children face multiple vulnerabilities.
resulting from the loss of parents, the absence of family and institutional support networks, and
the need to assume economic and social responsibilities for the survival of the household.
family. In this context, early marriage often arises as a response to these
vulnerabilities, leading to early school leaving, low levels of education and
limitation of opportunities for social and economic inclusion. This reality compromises not only the
individual development of these children, but also the socioeconomic progress of their families.
and the community at large.

In the specific case of child heads of household assisted by the Cristo na Aldeia Association,
In the Mutua community, it is observed that early marriage entails severe consequences for
their psychological and emotional well-being, since these children are deprived of their childhood and
forced to assume roles typical of adult life. Added to this are concerns related to...
public health, particularly the high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases and the
difficulties in adhering to programs to prevent vertical transmission, which exposes these
children face increased risks to their health and the health of other community members. Many
They, lacking affection, attention, and educational support, depend heavily on the support of
associations and reception centers to ensure their comprehensive education and the protection of their
fundamental rights.

The study is justified by the need to understand the factors that influence marriage.
Premature births among orphaned children who are heads of households, supporting prevention and intervention strategies.
social context within the Cristo na Aldeia Association and potentially serving as a reference for situations
Similar. Conducted in a rural area with low incomes and limited access to services.
Based on fundamental principles and a strong influence from traditional sociocultural practices, the study has academic relevance.
and social when addressing issues that affect human and community development,



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considering children who prematurely assume the role of head of their households.

Thus, the overall objective of this study is to analyze the factors that influence the occurrence of Early marriage among child heads of households assisted by the Cristo na Aldeia Association, in The community of Mutua, in Mozambique. Specifically, the aim is to identify the factors socioeconomic, cultural, and family factors associated with the practice, describe its main social, educational and health consequences and analyze the perception of children and leaders Community-based discussions about the phenomenon. These objectives allow for a comprehensive view of the problem and help... to understand the phenomenon and to strengthen actions to defend and promote children's rights.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being. under eighteen years of age, unless otherwise provided by law (UN, 1989). In Mozambique, the The Convention was ratified by Resolution No. 19/90 of the Council of Ministers, constituting a This is an important legal framework for the protection of children's rights. From a legal standpoint, this The definition establishes limits to decision-making capacity, including consent to marriage.

However, in several African cultures, especially in rural areas, the idea of childhood It goes beyond chronological age. It is defined by initiation rites (of passage) and social expectations. maturity and responsibility, which makes legal age less relevant (GIL, 2013). In this In this scenario, children are not merely passive beings, but also autonomous social participants. although they are in situations of great structural vulnerability (HONWANA; DE BOECK, 2005).

In the case of early marriage, young people under 18 lack the necessary maturity. to give free and informed consent. Therefore, such unions can be seen as forms of forced marriage (HUDA, 2007). Despite the law in Mozambique stipulating 18 years as the age of marriage. Despite the minimum age required to get married, this practice continues to occur, revealing a contradiction between the laws. officials and local cultural traditions.

Recent research shows that the legal definitions of childhood and adolescence in Mozambique continues to be strained by these practices and is challenged by social realities. Data from 2022 highlight the high incidence of early marriages, especially in rural areas, where 15.1% of girls aged 13 to 17 are in unions before the legal age, compared to 6.2% in urban areas. This information highlights the continuation of geographical inequalities and social issues in the exercise of children's rights, despite progress in laws and policies (UNICEF, 2022).

According to data from the Demographic and Health Survey (2011) cited by PINTO and BOLACHA (2022) points out that in Mozambique, 48% of girls aged between



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Those aged 20 to 24 get married before the age of 18, and 14% get married before the age of 15. The data shows even though most of these marriages are formed through de facto unions that are formalized through cultural practices and beliefs related to lobolo.

Premature Marriage

Early marriage is defined as any conjugal union, formal or informal, that involve at least one individual under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2022). This practice is widely recognized as a violation of children's human rights, since It compromises their full development and restricts all their fundamental rights. specifically in education, health and social protection.

In Mozambique, recent national studies indicate that the country continues to be one of the countries with the highest rates of child marriage worldwide. It is estimated that around 48.4% of women aged 20 to 24 who entered into marriage or a union before the age of 18 years, with approximately 12.9% doing so before the age of 15 (UNICEF, 2025). This data They demonstrate the persistence of the phenomenon, despite legislative and programmatic efforts. implemented over the last decade.

The continued existence of early marriage still presents marked asymmetries. regional rates, being particularly high in the northern and central regions of the country. In the province of Nampula, For example, more than 56% of girls marry before they reach the age of 18, while about 18% enter into unions before the age of 15, which reinforces the territorial and structural dimension of the problem. (LUSA, 2025). These disparities reflect differences in access to education, health services and information about children's rights, as well as the influence of sociocultural norms. specific.

Qualitative research conducted in different Mozambican contexts reveals although community perceptions surrounding early marriage vary significantly. In some cases, children and adolescents demonstrate a belief that early marriage is not This constitutes an obstacle to their well-being or life project, which contributes to the normalization of This practice makes prevention difficult (COLONNA, 2022). This evidence underscores the importance of interventions that address not only economic factors, but also social norms and cultural factors that underpin the phenomenon.

Despite the approval of the Law for the Prevention and Combat of Premature Unions in 2019, which While criminalizing unions involving minors is problematic, early marriage remains deeply rooted in the system. cultural, economic, and social factors. This reality highlights limitations in the implementation of legislation and in promoting changes in attitudes at the community level, reinforcing the need for



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integrated strategies that combine legal, educational, and social actions for the effective protection of children.

Head of Household

Child parents who are heads of households constitute a highly vulnerable group, marked by early assumption of economic, social, and emotional responsibilities, usually resulting from Loss of one or both parents. The literature indicates that orphanhood and the absence of Adult caregivers weaken the child's protective mechanisms, increasing their exposure to risks. such as school dropout, labor exploitation and early marriage (UNICEF, 2019; UNFPA, 2023).

Studies in African contexts show that child heads of household face high levels of psychological stress and economic insecurity, often forcing them to take decisions that exceed their emotional and cognitive maturity (RICHARDSON et al., 2018; (RICHTER; DESMOND; HALL, 2021). The need to ensure the subsistence of the household. Family life leads many to resort to early marriage as a way to obtain economic support and protection. social or integration into new family networks.

In Mozambique, despite the scarcity of specific data on child heads of household, the Literature indicates that social vulnerability is associated with extreme poverty, food insecurity, and The fragility of safety nets contributes significantly to early marriage, especially in rural areas (UNICEF, 2022; WORLD VISION MOZAMBIQUE, 2023). Girl chiefs of Families are particularly vulnerable because deeply ingrained gender norms assign... Marriage plays a central role in securing sustenance and social recognition.

Additionally, data from humanitarian agencies reveal a gap in oversight. The institutional framework and the disarticulation of local support networks relegate these children to a kind of... invisibility before the State (SAVE THE CHILDREN, 2020). In these scenarios of omission, the Early marriage ends up being assimilated by the social fabric as a legitimate response to poverty. and to orphanhood, overriding the prevailing legal dictates.

In the case of child heads of household assisted by the Cristo na Aldeia Association, the The combination of orphanhood, economic hardship, and weak support networks increases the risk of Early unions. The absence of sustainable alternatives for social protection and opportunities. Educational practices reinforce the perception of marriage as a survival and reorganization strategy. of support networks. Therefore, analyzing the condition of being the head of the household is fundamental for to understand the determinants of early marriage and for a contextualized approach to realities experienced by these children.

Social Vulnerability



The fragility of the social welfare system is a structural determinant of marriage. premature, reflecting limitations in access to resources, services, and opportunities essential to well-being. The well-being and development of children and adolescents. Among its contributing factors, extreme poverty stands out. food insecurity, educational restrictions, and weaknesses in social protection systems, which significantly increase the risks faced by children and young people (WORLD BANK, 2022; BLANC; MORENO, 2021).

International investigations reiterate that conditions of economic and social deprivation are strongly associated with the prevalence of child marriage. In contexts of persistent poverty, Families may resort to early marriage as a survival strategy, reducing... dependent on or mitigation of immediate economic pressures, despite their negative impacts on long-term effects on girls (GAGE, 2013; KOHLER; MACKIE, 2018). Empirical evidence They also indicate that food insecurity and lack of educational opportunities are increasing. significantly reduces the likelihood of early unions, especially in rural areas and among socially marginalized groups (UNFPA; UNICEF, 2023).

In Mozambique, the persistence of high levels of early marriage, even after the The implementation of child protection policies is associated with gender inequalities and poverty. Chronic sociocultural norms that normalize early unions. Recent UNICEF reports. They indicate that girls continue to marry at much higher rates than boys, reflecting Structural inequality in access to education, health, and social participation (UNICEF, 2025). This Gender disparity shows how social norms and practices influence the unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities, perpetuating premature marriage.

Studies in Mozambique and other African countries indicate that social vulnerability It interacts with cultural and institutional factors. The combination of poverty, low educational attainment of girls and community perceptions that value early motherhood and marriage as a means of Economic stability reinforces the perpetuation of child marriage (MUTANGA, 2019; KOHLI et al., 2020). Thus, social vulnerability is configured not only as a risk factor, but also as a reflection of broader inequalities in the distribution of opportunities.

Therefore, understanding social vulnerability as a determinant of marriage is crucial. Premature behavior implies that strategies to combat the practice must go beyond legal measures. encompassing integrated interventions that address poverty, promote education, and transform discriminatory sociocultural norms.

3. Methodology

This research was characterized as descriptive and exploratory, as it sought to understand... and to analyze the determinants of early marriage among child heads of household, describing its characteristics, causes and implications in the context of the Cristo na Aldeia Association, in Mutua. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, suitable for The complexity of the phenomenon, as it allows for the articulation of measurable data with an understanding of... perceptions, meanings and experiences of the subjects involved.

The qualitative approach allowed for the interpretation of opinions, beliefs, and related social practices. early marriage, enabling an understanding of the sociocultural and family factors that influence the phenomenon (VIEIRA, 2009; LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986). The quantitative approach was used to organize and analyze data relating to the socioeconomic and family conditions of participants, using descriptive statistics, namely percentages, with the support of tables and graphs, as proposed by Gil (1991).

Regarding the technical procedures, the research was bibliographic and involved consulting books. scientific articles, legislation and institutional documents on children, early marriage and social vulnerability, supporting the theoretical foundation (ANDRADE, 2002). The documentary This consisted of analyzing reports and records from the Cristo na Aldeia Association and documents from the area. social, aiming to identify factors associated with early marriages (SEVERINO, 2007). By In turn, the field research was conducted at the site of the phenomenon, allowing direct contact with participants and collection of empirical data (KUMAR et al., 2007).

Data collection instruments included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and... Direct observation. Questionnaires, administered to child heads of households, allowed for the collection of data. Quantifiable socioeconomic, family, and educational factors associated with marriage. premature (VIEIRA, 2009). The semi-structured interviews, conducted with employees of The Cristo na Aldeia Association and community leaders made it possible to explore perceptions and practices. cultural and community dynamics related to the phenomenon (LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986). A Direct observation complemented these techniques, recording the children's routines and conditions. social vulnerability in the studied context.

The study population consisted of residents of Mutua Sede, including orphaned children. and vulnerable individuals, community leaders, employees, and collaborators of the Cristo na Aldeia Association. A The sample consisted of 21 participants, selected intentionally, including 15 orphaned children. heads of households, 2 community leaders and 4 association employees, considering their relationship

directly related to the phenomenon being investigated.

For data processing, content analysis was chosen, which allowed for systematization and the interpretation of the collected evidence (Bardin, 2011). Regarding the quantitative data collected through the questionnaires, these were organized using descriptive statistics.

4. Results and Discussion

The study results were analyzed in light of the specific objectives and discussed with Based on classic and recent literature on early marriage. Sociodemographic data. They revealed that most child heads of household are between 15 and 18 years old, corroborating... FRANCISCO (2014), who identifies late adolescence as a critical period for early unions. This finding also aligns with recent UNICEF data (2025), which indicate a higher incidence. early marriage in this age group, especially in rural contexts.

Regarding the level of education, it was observed that a large proportion of the children have... only primary education or presents interrupted school trajectories. ARTHUR (2010) and VICENTE (2013) already pointed to the low level of schooling as a determining factor for the Early marriage. More recent studies by UNFPA and UNICEF (2024) reinforce that the School exclusion significantly increases the risk of early marriages, especially among girls. orphans.

The socioeconomic conditions proved to be particularly unfavorable, with Monthly incomes predominantly below 500 meticaís. This finding confirms the analyses. by ARTHUR (2010), who associates extreme poverty with the instrumentalization of marriage as survival strategy. Converging, UNICEF (2025) and World Vision Mozambique (2025) emphasize that economic vulnerability continues to be one of the main drivers of Early marriage in Mozambique. And provinces like Zambézia, Nampula and Cabo Delgado are those with the highest incidence of early marriage cases.

The absence of parents and the consequent early leadership of the family unit are factors. central to early marriage, as orphaned children assume adult roles prematurely. increasing their exposure to exploitation, school dropout and early marriages (FRANCISCO, 2014; HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2024).

All the children surveyed demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the consequences of premature marriage, corroborating VICENTE (2013), who identifies weak civic education as an obstacle to child protection, and UNICEF (2025), which advocates systematic awareness programs. community. The results confirm that early marriages among child heads of households These results stem from a combination of persistent structural factors and contemporary challenges that have not yet been addressed.

4.1 Age distribution of child heads of household

Table 1 – Age distribution of child heads of household

Age range (years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
8 – 12	1	6.7
12 – 15	6	40.0
15 – 18	8	53.3
Total	15	100

Table 1 shows that 53.3% of child heads of household are between 15 and 18 years old, the phase of Late adolescence is marked by physical, emotional, and social transformations and increased pressure to assuming adult roles. This result highlights the vulnerability of these children to marriage. premature, often socially legitimized as an alternative to continuing studies and to Family dependency, especially in contexts of poverty and orphanhood.

The predominance of child heads of household in the 15-18 age group confirms that late adolescence constitutes a period of high vulnerability to early marriage.

According to NAIK (2024), early marriage results from the interaction between the Economic vulnerability, structural inequality, and social pressures affect, in a significant way... particularly adolescents in the transition phase to adulthood.

UNICEF (2025) reinforces that, in contexts of poverty and orphanhood, the transition of Adolescence and the transition to adulthood occur prematurely and in a forced manner, increasing the likelihood of... marital unions before the age of 18.

4.2 Marital status and occurrence of early marriages

Table 2 – Marital status of child heads of household

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Bachelor)	12	80.0
Living in a marital relationship.	2	13.3
Married	1	6.7
Total	15	100

Although most still identify as single, marital unions are observed. before the age of 18, confirming the presence of the phenomenon of early marriage in the community. studied. The identification of marital unions involving children under 18 years of age highlights the The occurrence of early marriage in the community analyzed. In scenarios marked by fragility.

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Due to family structures and limited social protection, informal marital relationships are common.

They are established before legal formalization, being culturally interpreted as marriage, even in the absence of official registration (SAVE THE CHILDREN, 2018; UNICEF MOZAMBIQUE, 2023).

Additionally, UNICEF (2025) notes that early cohabitation is widely accepted in various rural communities in Mozambique, reinforcing the social normalization of these unions.

4.3 Level of education

Table 3 – Education level of child heads of household

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Incomplete basic education	3	20.0
Completed primary education (7th grade)	7	46.7
Secondary education in progress	4	26.7
Secondary education completed	1	6.7
Total	15	100

The data show low levels of education and interrupted school trajectories, confirming the direct relationship between educational exclusion and early marriage. ARTHUR (2010) and VICENTE (2013) argue that remaining in school functions as a factor of social protection. Recent studies by UNFPA and UNICEF (2024) demonstrate that children outside the education system They are more likely to enter into early relationships, especially when they accumulate Family responsibilities.

4.4 Socioeconomic conditions and family income

Table 4 – Sources of income for families headed by children

Source of income	Percentage (%)
Sale of charcoal and firewood	40.0
Street vending of water	33.3
Sale of food products	26.7

The reliance on informal activities, such as the sale of charcoal, firewood, and water, reveals a context of economic subsistence. ARTHUR (2010) associates informality with social instability. and to the inability to plan a family. According to WORLD VISION MOZAMBIQUE (2025), this type of precarious economy favors the perception of early marriage as a strategy redistribution of economic responsibilities within the household.



Table 5 – Monthly family income

Monthly income (Meticais)	Percentage (%)
Less than 500	86.7
500 – 1,500	6.6
More than 1,500	6.7

Low monthly income demonstrates the economic vulnerability of families, leading many children viewing marriage as a survival strategy and a way to reduce responsibilities economic.

The predominance of incomes below 500 meticaïs characterizes a situation of extreme poverty. ARTHUR (2010) states that structural poverty constitutes one of the main Determinants of early marriage. Recent reports from UNICEF (2025) and UNFPA (2024). They confirm that economic vulnerability continues to be a central factor in the persistence of This phenomenon is especially prevalent among orphaned children and heads of households.

4.5 Perception of the consequences of early marriage

Table 6 – Knowledge about the consequences of early marriage

Response	Percentage (%)
Are you aware of the consequences?	0.0
Doesn't know	100.0

This result highlights the almost total absence of information and civic education about the social, legal, and health impacts associated with early marriage, reinforcing the need for Educational interventions. Total lack of awareness about the consequences of early marriage. This highlights the fragility of civic education and the dissemination of information about rights. child. VICENTE (2013) argues that the absence of human rights education limits the capacity for informed decision-making. UNICEF (2025) reinforces that lack of information It contributes to the reproduction of harmful practices that are socially normalized.

5. Final Considerations

The results of this study allow us to conclude that early marriages between Child heads of households at the Cristo na Aldeia Association in Mutua are influenced by a A coordinated set of socioeconomic, educational, and sociocultural factors. The analysis revealed that extreme poverty, expressed by monthly incomes of less than 500 meticaïs, constitutes one of the key determinants, leading children to view marriage as an alternative to



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survival and reduction of economic liabilities.

The low level of education also proved to be a central factor, since most of the children who are heads of households have only primary education or are in a situation of School dropout. This condition limits access to information and reduces mobility prospects. social and increases vulnerability to the reproduction of traditional practices, such as marriage premature.

The absence of parents or adult caregivers proved to be a determining factor in integration. These children experience premature adulthood. Upon assuming the role of head of the household, the children They end up playing social roles for which they are neither psychologically nor socially prepared. prepared, which favors entry into early, often informal, marital unions and lacking legal protection.

The study also revealed a widespread lack of awareness about the social consequences. Legal and health issues associated with early marriage. All the children surveyed stated not knowing the impacts of this practice, which reinforces the need for systematic programs of Civic education and community awareness.

The data confirm that socioeconomic factors, low levels of education, and The absence of parents and traditional cultural practices are central elements in the persistence of Early marriages. These results corroborate the literature that associates structural poverty and Social vulnerability to the violation of children's rights.

It can therefore be concluded that combating early marriages in contexts such as this one... Mutua requires an integrated approach that combines strengthening public policies for the protection of child, socioeconomic support for vulnerable families, promotion of school retention and Active involvement of community leaders in transforming harmful social norms. These results confirm the evidence presented by recent literature and underscore the urgency. sustainable and contextualized interventions for the eradication of child marriage in Mozambique.

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