



Report on Early Unions in Mexico

Executive Summary | 2017

BY ESTELA RIVERO AND JOSÉ LUIS PALMA



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Early union] tends to deprive girls of their liberty, their childhood and their further education, while under-age childbearing poses major health risks.

Child marriages and other early unions occur for many reasons: girls and boys under 18 lack other life choices, they are forced into the arrangements, or they think it is their best option under prevailing circumstances and social norms. Such early, child and forced unions are a violation of human and children’s rights, linked to school dropout, early fertility, poverty and gender-based violence.

To learn more about the level and nature of early unions in Mexico, the Ford Foundation commissioned INSAD in 2015 to describe the situation nationwide, analyze its relation to childbearing, identify “hot spots” for interventions likely to reduce such unions and teenage pregnancy, and hold a seminar to disseminate the findings. To fulfill the first three obligations, INSAD conducted a mixed-methods study using a literature review, analysis of census data, and in-depth interviews with 17 girls who had ever been in a union in Mexico, Nayarit and Tabasco; and with 15 key community informants and experts in those states plus Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas. This report details our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of existing literature found strong documentation of harms from early unions, reasons for global efforts to end the practice as a human rights abuse: it tends to deprive girls of their liberty, their childhood and their further education, while under-age childbearing poses major health risks. But little is known about early unions in Latin America generally and in Mexico specifically.

According to the United Nations Population Fund analysis of Mexico’s 2009 National Demographic Survey, Mexico’s child marriage rate is the region’s fifth highest: an estimated 22.9 percent of women age 20-24 were married or entered an informal union before age 18. That one-in-four rate may not be “critical” by the UN definition, but it has not changed in nearly 30 years. In Chiapas and Guerrero states the child marriage rate is the “critical” 30 percent, and that is also the rate for the rural population alone in 14 states (Pérez Amador and Hernández 2015). Further, the child marriage rate for women who completed only some primary school ranges from 33 percent up to 77.6 percent in one state, Nayarit (OnuMujeres Mexico 2015b).

The “Mexican Model of Nuptiality” literature spotlights the coexistence of formal marriages with non-formal unions, more of which are now beginning at an early age, mostly among less educated and rural girls. Unions

below age 18 are condemned by several international covenants to which Mexico is a party, but Mexico's federal and state laws either do not comply with those recommendations or allow many exceptions. For instance, the current federal legal age for marriage in the Civil Code is 14 for girls and 16 for boys. But the General Law for the Protection of the Rights of Boys, Girls and Adolescents, modified in 2014, is age 18 for both men and women.

Existing studies link early unions in various Latin American countries with the same factors found worldwide: differentiated gender roles in society, the presence of arranged marriages, high child mortality rates, and the family's desire to secure their own and the girls' financial future, to protect them from sexual assault and to control their sexual activity. The environment of sexual control often causes girls to want a union so they can demonstrate their agency and leave the parental home. Where women have more education, some agency in family decision-making and access to jobs, the surveys find they tend to delay marriage. Urban life also tends to foster modern values that encourage women's education and later unions.

Most existing research on early unions in Mexico focuses on the effect of education and paid employment on the transition to adulthood and childbearing. Lindstrom and Brambila (2001) found that each year of education raises the probability of paid employment, which delays pairing up and childbearing. Pérez Baleón (2014) found that schooling changed girls' aspirations to favor work, while Mier y Terán (2011) correlated greater education with delayed unions and childbearing. In areas of extreme poverty, young men and women both leave school early, but while men soon begin work, 60 percent of girls never work for pay, most quickly entering unions and giving birth instead.

On the theory that Mexico's economic slowdown in the mid-1990s may have changed the situation, Giorguli Saucedo (2011) found that both rural and urban children of more educated and higher-status parents were less likely to have left home or entered a union at any age than those from poorer families. Another study (Oliveira 1995) found this was especially true for girls with good parental communication. The results of other studies were mixed but most found rural women tend to enter a union earlier than urban ones in general, with measures of independence in decision-making the most important factor for both men and women (Pérez Baleón 2014, Taylor et al. 2015, Murphy-Graham and Leal, 2015 and Echarri Cánovas and Pérez Amador 2007).

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Girls age 12-17 in unions are also more likely to be out of school than girls not in a union--83 percent for married girls and a startling 92 percent for those in non-formal unions, versus only 15 percent for girls not in a union.

Despite claims that early unions are not important in Mexico, their great regional variability and persistence over three decades suggest a need to raise public awareness about the situation. Raising the federal legal age to 18 and eliminating all exceptions would be a start, but the non-formal unions that are more common than marriages would not be affected, and those are still high-risk for young girls.

More research is needed about the nature of and differences between marriage and non-formal unions; the determinants of which one is chosen, especially for the most vulnerable girls; and the consequences of entering a union before age 18. No research has yet analyzed what makes women more likely to follow one pattern over another.

NATIONAL-LEVEL FINDINGS

We used data from Mexico's 2015 Intercensal Survey to analyze early unions at the national, state and local-region levels, assuming a standard age distribution nationwide. We analyzed the percentage of women age 12 to 17, 12 to 14, and 15 to 17 who have ever been in a union; the percentage of women in these age groups who have ever been married, and the percentage who have ever been in a non-formal union. Our study shows that nationwide, one in every 20 girls age 12-17 has ever been in a union (319,000 to 329,000 girls), and 81 percent of current unions are non-formal. Among girls age 12-14, 22,000-25,000 (0.7 percent) have been in a union, while among girls 14-17 the percentage is 9.42. At age 17 it is 15.3 percent.

Most girls age 12-17 who are in a union are at least six years younger than their partner, whether married or unmarried, and 65 to 69 percent are 11 or more years younger. Less than a fifth of these girls are in a union with someone five or fewer years older. Even when such girls think or argue that they are participating in the decision to have an early union, their partner is likely to have more power and resources than they do.

Girls age 12-17 in unions are also more likely to be out of school than girls not in a union--83 percent for married girls and a startling 92 percent for those in non-formal unions, versus only 15 percent for girls not in a union. Fully 86 percent of married girls age 15-17 are out of school, a slightly better rate than for those in non-formal unions.

The data also show a strong correlation between teenage pregnancy and early unions: one in every two women age 12-17 in a union had had at least one live birth, compared to one in 100 girls not in unions. As half of those in unions had not given birth, it seems many girls enter unions not because they are pregnant but for other reasons, explored below.

Living arrangements for girls in unions are diverse. About 42 percent of married girls and 49 percent of those in non-formal unions live with their in-laws, the most common situation. Married girls age 12-14 tend more to stay with their parents (66 percent), while those in non-formal unions are commonly with in-laws (57 percent). At age 15-17, only about 30 percent live as or with heads of household. The link between early unions and lower economic status may preclude an independent household, along with social norms that identify males as the main provider.

Overall the nationwide findings confirm that girls in a non-formal union and married girls under age 18 are two different groups with different living conditions and different vulnerabilities. Some family mechanisms may protect married girls under 15 and keep them at home, compared to those who enter a non-formal union, most of whom live with in-laws. This means that girls age 12-14 in a non-formal union are the most vulnerable of all.

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Percentage distribution of girls age 12 to 17 in an early union, by characteristics of the union (2015)

Age group	Non-formalized union or marriage	Age difference with partner	Percentage of cases
12-14	Marriage	5 years or less	0.30
12-14	Marriage	6 to 10 years	0.22
12-14	Marriage	11 years or more	1.34
12-14	Non formalized	5 years or less	0.97
12-14	Non formalized	6 to 10 years	0.96
12-14	Non formalized	11 years or more	4.18
15-17	Marriage	5 years or less	3.76
15-17	Marriage	6 to 10 years	2.28
15-17	Marriage	11 years or more	10.38
15-17	Non formalized	5 years or less	15.61
15-17	Non formalized	6 to 10 years	10.99
15-17	Non formalized	11 years or more	49.01

Despite age and their marriage status, all girls in early unions are much more likely to be out of school and to have had a child than girls not in unions.

The most common group (49 percent) in the population studied is girls age 15-17 in non-formal unions who live with a partner at least 11 years older than they are. About half these girls have delivered at least one child and live with in-laws, and 92 percent are out of school. At the other extreme are married girls age 12-14, who are 1.86 of the study group. Despite age and their marriage status, all girls in early unions are much more likely to be out of school and to have had a child than girls not in unions.

We took a closer look at the Del Nayar municipality in Nayarit state, which has the country's highest proportion of girls 12-17 who had been in a union (13.5 percent). Our in-depth interviews there show that courtship and dating are unknown in this predominantly indigenous community; girls tend to move in with their new partner and his family within a few weeks of meeting. They may be escaping from problems at home, or wish to practice their sexuality, but early unions are perceived as normal. Social expectations about the transition to adulthood for both boys and girls involve having a formal partner, becoming sexually active and having a child, not always in that order, over a period of a year or so. Boys' transitions include quitting school, becoming economically active and having their own place, while girls' transitions involve becoming someone's woman and being a mother.

The distinctions among living with a family, sharing some spaces or having a separate household are not always clear, so survey findings may not be reliable or consistent. Power relationships may differ in each situation. Our qualitative findings show that when a girl is living with her partner's family, the mother-in-law usually has the last word and is considered the owner of everything.

After initial anger, most parents of girls forming unions in the qualitative study became supportive if the male was willing to be a breadwinner. Often they supplied housing, babysitting and economic help to the young couple, and usually supported the girl if the relationship deteriorated for any reason.

STATE-LEVEL FINDINGS

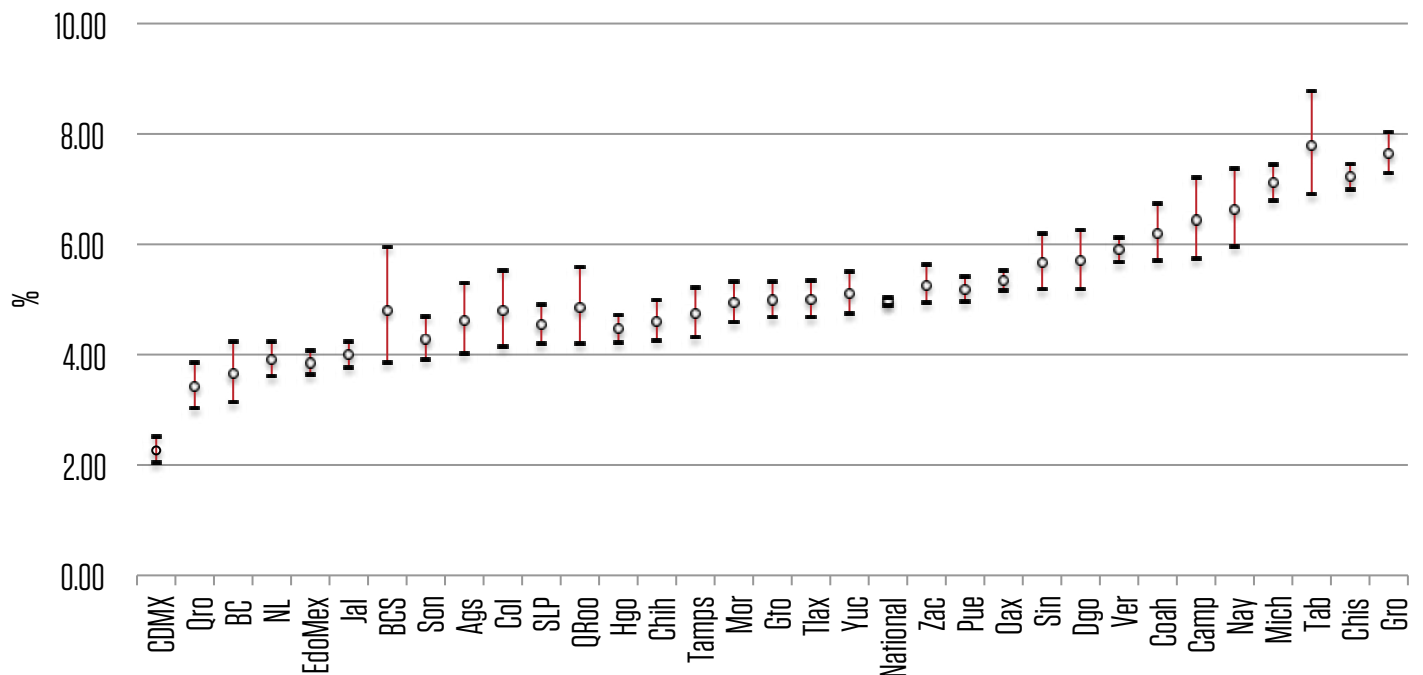
If one in four Mexican women nationwide enters a union before age 18, the numbers vary greatly across states--an important consideration for policy-makers selecting sites for interventions. Rates for child marriage

in Chiapas and Guerrero are above 30 percent, UNFPA’s “critical” level. Rates are higher in rural than in urban communities, and in 14 states the rural child marriage rate is more than 30 percent.

These estimates refer to 2009, prior to the law changes banning child marriage, and do not reflect any effects that these changes may have had. Legal restrictions are only one factor in the probability of girls entering unions, however; others include the availability of schools nearby, family encouragement for continuing education, gender-based violence within the household, and family flexibility to allow sexual relationships.

Non-formal unions predominate over marriages among girls age 12-17 in all Mexican states: more than half of all current unions and up to 92 percent in Quintana Roo. Legislation to set 18 or older as the legal marriage age could have an impact in all states, but additional actions are likely needed, as 80 percent of girls age 12-17 now in unions have not married. Our in-depth interviews showed that some of these girls never consider a formal marriage, even though they may call their partners “husband” or the partner says they should marry.

Percentage of girls age 12 to 17 who have ever been in a union, by state (2015)



THE STORY OF ARCELIA AND BRENDA: EARLY UNIONS CAN BE VERY DIFFERENT

Authors like Quilodrán (2001) and Pérez Amador (2008) claim that two decades ago, informal unions in Mexico were more unstable than formal marriages. Several other specialists also held that among less-educated groups today, non-formal unions seldom transition to a formal marriage (Pérez Amador, 2008; Solís, 2004; Quilodrán, 2001; and Quilodrán & Sosa, 2004).

However, little is known about the differences in the gender and power dynamics within the same kind of unions, or about the opportunities that the girls will have later in life.

Our in-depth interviews with women who started cohabiting before age 18 show important differences in their experiences, even if they come from similar backgrounds. The stories of Arcelia and Brenda are a good example.

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ARCELIA'S STORY

Both women live in an extremely poor area of Mexico City and grew up within feet of one another as next-door neighbors. They became family when Brenda ran away with Arcelia's brother. This happened two weeks before Arcelia started living with her own boyfriend, Andrés.

Arcelia met Andrés when they were both in secondary school, and soon became his girlfriend. She has fond memories of this period, which lasted two years. She says they had a good relationship: they got along well and cared for each other.

Arcelia got pregnant when she was age 15 and they were both close to finishing secondary school (grade 9). She told him she expected to carry on with the pregnancy, and he said he would back her up. And he did, within his limited resources.

Arcelia's parents at first were extremely angry and disappointed when they learned about the pregnancy. However, Arcelia claims, they calmed down and became more supportive after Andrés and his parents talked to them to formalize the liaison. Then Arcelia moved in with Andrés and his parents.

This was ten years ago. The couple never married and currently have four children, ages four to ten years. When asked about her life, about whether she would like to get married someday and about what she misses from her youth, Arcelia paints a relatively positive panorama. Indeed, in her attitude and the way she expresses herself, she may be the happiest of all the women we interviewed in this study.

Arcelia says Andrés is a good man, very responsible, caring and committed to his family. Like Arcelia, he discontinued his education just after finishing secondary school and started working with his father as a carpet installer. He still holds this job, and their business has grown a lot: they now also install floors, have bigger clients and several employees.

Arcelia says she misses going out as much as they did when they were dating, but says that from time to time they sit together to watch a movie; they go shopping together on weekends, and sometimes Andrés offers to buy her things for herself. He loves playing with his kids. However, not everything is idyllic. Sometimes Andrés drinks more than he ought, and he may lose his temper then, or when he gets home and the food is not ready, or when the kids bother him or do not do as he says.

BRENDA'S STORY

Brenda's story is very different. Her relationship with Arcelia's older brother Beto started when they were children. For a time they kept their love platonic, only writing each other love letters and going out for walks. However, when she turned 13, they became sexually involved as boyfriend and girlfriend.

According to Brenda, they were very much in love, and their relationship was so serious that Beto was her chambelán (main dance partner) at her important 15th birthday party, her Quinceaños. Shortly afterward she became pregnant.

She had already left school during the 7th grade because money was very short in her house and she was forced to work full time. Beto, on the other hand, was still in school. When she gave Beto the news of her pregnancy, his first reaction was to question their future together because he did not have any plans to go to work.

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Things got worse for Brenda from then on. Her mother went to talk to Beto's parents, who then forbade him to have further contact with Brenda. If she called or went looking for him, everyone in his family would deny his presence. Brenda's mother then claimed Beto would never be responsible for the baby and she forced Brenda to have an abortion. Brenda now felt abandoned by all the people she loved.

Then Beto re-entered the picture. He started to avoid his parents' supervision and began chasing Brenda in the street, claiming to have changed and challenging her to elope with him. At the beginning she resisted, but one day he followed her to work and they ended up spending the night in a motel. It was the first time that Brenda had ever spent a night outside her house. She felt that after doing this, she "no longer belonged to her mother, but to Beto," and she did not return to her mother's house.

When the couple returned to Beto's home the morning after, he asked his parents for their support, claiming that he loved Brenda, that he "stole her from her house" and that she could no longer go back. His parents once more rejected her and denied him their support, so they went to live with an aunt instead. Brenda's mother was also furious when she learned what had happened, and she broke off all contact for a year. They only returned to speaking terms after the birth of Brenda's first child, a boy.

Now Brenda has two children, a boy and a girl, and she lives with her in-laws. She says her life has been miserable and she is full of resentment -- about the abandonment she felt during her first pregnancy, toward her mother for her long silence, and toward Beto for his apparent indifference to her.

She says it saddens her that Beto is not more present in the family's life. He does not help her take care of the kids or with the housework, and he rarely has time to play with the children. He works as a carpenter and often travels to work in other states. He once departed for more than a year, leaving Brenda with her in-laws and two small children without his support. She also resents the fact that when he is around, he drinks a lot and spends weekends away at rock concerts or with his friends while she has to stay home to take care of their kids.

DIFFERENT ENDINGS

These two contrasting cases together illustrate some of the variations among non-formal unions in Mexico. Both Arcelia and Brenda started their unions when they were age 15, but under very different conditions, with different resources and with different outcomes.

Arcelia was pregnant and her union was very much motivated by that. Brenda was not, but her union also feels determined by her lack of options. After spending a night away from her mother's home, she felt she could not return there. Meanwhile, Beto showed indecision and lack of commitment. Brenda felt isolated throughout the process of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood.

Another difference is that despite her pregnancy, Arcelia had the support of her partner, her parents (through negotiation) and her partner's family. Brenda's isolation continued into the relationship: her mother withdraw her support, Beto's parents openly rejected her at first, and Beto himself does not appear interested in the family.

These differences between the two cases seem to be key in their current situations and in the tools each woman now has -- or does not have -- to negotiate power and options within their relationships.

Both Arcelia and Brenda started their unions when they were age 15, but under very different conditions, with different resources and with different outcomes.

Unions before age 15 may be particularly damaging to girls, as they imply leaving school at the secondary (junior high) level or less, while pregnancy poses a higher risk at such a young age.

In the impoverished indigenous communities of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero, where nearly all rural unions are non-formal, most unions involve some kind of courtship and agreement between the girl and the boy, according to community workers. The boy may ask the girl's parents formally for the girl's hand; they may be seen talking or kissing and then be required to unite; they may run away together; or the girl may become pregnant and the families then require the union.

Non-formal unions can look very different from each other, even if the couples have similar backgrounds, depending upon the degree of their mutual support and commitment.

Unions before age 15 may be particularly damaging to girls, as they imply leaving school at the secondary (junior high) level or less, while pregnancy poses a higher risk at such a young age. All states show cases of girls age 12-14 who have been in a union, with broad state variations, from four per 1,000 in Mexico City up to 15 per 1,000 in Guerrero.

Being in a union is almost synonymous with being out of school in Chiapas and Oaxaca: only one in 20 girls age 12-17 in a union there still attends classes. In the wealthiest states the school attendance rate among girls in unions is still low: 16-21 percent. And everywhere, 40 to 55 percent of girls 12-17 in unions have had at least one child. These facts are key to understanding the kind of sexual and reproductive health services they should be offered.

Most girls in unions age 12-17 continue living with their parents or move in with in-laws, although most aspire to have their own place. Girls staying at their parents' home, while in the minority of girls in unions (12 percent to 32 percent in the various states), are usually better off: they have more helpers, more economic support and less community criticism than those living with in-laws (who are 25 percent to 53 percent of the total). The other girls are heads of household or partners with the head. Mexican states vary widely in which kind of arrangement predominates.

They also vary in whether girls are in a non-formalized union or married, and in age differences with their partners. Coahuila, for example, is the only state in which the most common type of union is non-formal and the partners are either the same age or within five years of each other. In 10 states, girls commonly partner informally with a man at least 11 years older; the rest run the gamut of situations between those extremes.

LOCAL-REGIONAL FINDINGS

Local conditions affect young women's futures. Understanding how may help policymakers design more targeted policies. To avoid the small-sample issue, we grouped municipalities with similar characteristics in "meso-regions" for analysis. This shows that 13 of Mexico's 32 states have regions where 8 percent to 13.5 percent of girls age 12-17 have been in unions, a higher rate than the state-level maximum. Several regions have high percentages for girls 12-14 in a union as well, reaching up to 2.63%.

As with state-level findings, the characteristics of the unions also vary widely at this level, emphasizing once again the need to take area variations into account in policy-making.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that early unions are not rare in Mexico as has long been assumed, but in fact very common, and that their nature and level vary in important ways -- nationwide, among states and within states. These considerations are important for policy-makers to take into account as they choose sites for interventions.

Nationwide, about one in every 20 Mexican girls age 12-17 had ever been in a union in 2015, or 5 percent; but disaggregating the numbers finds some places with rates of 13.5 percent. These levels are striking in that they include girls as young as 12. Similarly, four in every five unions nationwide are non-formal, but the rate ranges from 90 percent in Quintana Roo to less than 65 percent in Guerrero. And in some scattered regions, marriages are more frequent than informal unions.

Most of the girls who have ever had a child are also in a union, but half the girls in a union have not had a child. This shows that not all early unions are due to a pregnancy, and that girls in a union may need different reproductive and sexual health services than their peers, as well as specific services for their children.

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**One-size-fits-all policies
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Two of our other findings are also critical for policy-makers: three of every four girls in a union have a partner at least six years older than they are, and half of girls in a union live with their in-laws. Although these behaviors vary across states and regions, like our other findings, these results indicate some of the causes of early unions. Besides unplanned pregnancy, reasons include lack of opportunity to work or continue in school, the desire to escape from a violent or hostile home environment, the desire to experience sexuality, and the desire to transition to adulthood and thus gain community status by starting a family. Men's and women's expectations about partners' age are also important: men seem to prefer much younger women.

Girls in unions who live at their in-laws' homes are more at risk of discrimination, gossip and intrigues than those who live with their own parents, who often provide emotional, social and economic support for the young couple. We recognize that ending early unions is a priority, but we also think it important to note that family support can help young women in a union deal better with the challenges of their situation.

Within this multitude of determinants, social norms remain paramount: expectations of young men and women, what it means to be an adult and the options available for a place to live. One-size-fits-all policies are not adequate for all the young girls exposed to the risks of early unions.



Urban community in Estado de México



Rural community in Estado de México



Urban community in Estado de México



Rural community in Estado de México



Rural community in Estado de México



Urban community in Estado de México



Rural community in Estado de México



Urban community in Tabasco



Urban community in Tabasco



Urban community in Tabasco



Rural community in Estado de México



Rural community in Nayarit

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Estela Rivero and
Martha Sánchez

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ABOUT INSAD

Investigación en Salud y Demografía (INSAD) is a private research organization that does population, gender and health research to inform civil society organizations and public policy. With this as its goal, INSAD specializes in evaluation, original data collection and informative research with its own and secondary analyses, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

INSAD has extensive experience in sexual and reproductive health topics, including sexual and reproductive health among teenagers, maternal health, gender-based violence, access to contraceptive technology and sexual and reproductive rights, among others. INSAD has worked with government agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and development agencies worldwide. In addition to a grant from the Ford Foundation for this report, we have received support for other work from the MacArthur, W. K. Kellogg, and Summit Foundations, and regularly collaborate with the Population Council, UNFPA, El Colegio de México and the Guttmacher Institute, among others.

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INSAD
Malaga 88
Insurgentes Mixcoac
Mexico City
03920
Mexico

