

Causes of Early Marriages among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Communities in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje Municipality



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1. Executive Summary

This research aims to understand the causes of early marriages among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Neighborhoods 28 and 29 in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje.

The questionnaires were administered to 300 community members, targeted by a volunteer team who - in accordance with The Ideas Partnership policy for research - included members of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. 20 in-depth interviews, four Focus Groups and a Case Study elaborate on some of the research questions and issues raised.

Key findings:

- The majority of respondents (62% of men and 54% of women) said that their parents had not influenced their decision to marry.
- 12% of respondents cited unplanned pregnancy as a cause of early marriage, but this figure was twice as high for men than for women.
- Marriages of the majority (87%) of respondents were not registered in the municipality
- 32% of respondents did not know that there is a law prohibiting marriage under 18 years of age
- Respondents cited social pressure as a reason to marry younger - and that if you were assumed to be ill or doing something wrong, then no one would marry you

Issues affecting the emergence of early marriages identified in the Focus Groups are:

- gender inequality
- school dropout
- poverty
- lack of information
- cultural traditions
- parents see marriage as a way to comfort their children
- short life expectancy for these communities
- social welfare policies that provide financial incentives for families with children under the age of 5
- Improper communication between parents and their adolescent children

The report concludes with recommendations for institutions, civil society and communities where early marriage is widespread.

2. Introduction

Child marriage by law is traditionally regarded as the union of two minor persons, under the age of eighteen, without the proper authorization of the responsible institutions. They are human rights violations.

This phenomenon affects both sexes, but according to statistics, in most cases, girls are victims of this phenomenon. According to research by The Ideas Partnership on Early Marriages published in 2017¹, the causes of these marriages among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje Municipality are closely linked to lack of education and school dropout. To further explore this phenomenon and to understand other causes that affect the appearance of early marriages, we conducted this research during 2018 and 2019.

This research was conducted in the framework of the project “Free to choose; Free to learn”, supported by Danish Refugee Council. The project aims to address one of the key social cohesion challenges the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities of Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje - the manifestation of gender inequality in early marriages that excludes girls from education and keeps them out of their support networks. Increasing the number of years spent in school has benefits in the areas of employment, economic stability and health. Our research shows that marriage marks the end of education, so the phenomena of early marriages and education are highly related.

The Ideas Partnership aims to address the issue of early marriage through:

- Raising awareness of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian mothers about the rights of their daughters
- Awareness of girls about their rights
- Supporting girls with practical resources to stay in school
- Creating a framework for prospective social workers coming from target communities who prioritize and address the issue of early marriages
- Research on factors affecting early marriages
- Empowering women and girls from targeted communities to express their aspirations for continuing education / against early marriage, and to share these aspirations with potential supporters

¹http://theideaspartnership.org/wp/?page_id=701

3. Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to collect data in order to provide quantitative and qualitative information on the causes of early marriages among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje Municipality, in neighborhoods 28 and 29, respectively.

Through this research, the organization "The Ideas Partnership" with the support of the Danish Refugee Council and within the framework of the project "Free to Choose; Free to Learn" has attempted to identify the causes of this phenomenon and other socio-economic factors that may be related to it. The findings included in this report are important material and can enable the competent local and central level institutions to develop appropriate strategies to help prevent this phenomenon.

4. Methodology

The research was conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods. This study covers neighborhoods 28 and 29 of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje Municipality.

In the quantitative part of the research, a total of 300 respondents, respectively 152 females and 148 males, were selected by random sampling. The demographic data of the respondents include: age, gender, educational level and ethnicity. The research was conducted through a questionnaire that included questions that helped to understand some of the causes of early marriages among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje Municipality..

All questionnaires were coded and processed with SPSS 19 software. All responses were analyzed using comparisons with variables such as: gender, age, level of education, social status, and occupation. The margin of error is +/- 3%.

In the qualitative part of this research were carried out in total:

- 20 in-depth interviews with respondents coming from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities,
- 4 Focus Groups
- a Case Study

The identity of the respondents in this study remains protected in accordance with the code of ethics, namely the law on protection of personal data² and the data collected in the field will be used only for scientific purposes.

5. The purpose of the survey / data collection is to evaluate:

- level of education of the respondents
- monthly income and number of persons in employment within the family
- marital status and, where appropriate, the age at which they were married
- the influence of parents on the marriage decision
- the reason for the decision to marry and the way the marriage is concluded
- respondents' perception of the appropriate age for marriage
- respondents' knowledge of the legal age for marriage

6. Main survey findings and demographic data

In the quantitative part of the research the number of respondents of both participating sexes was approximately equal, a total of 300 respondents were interviewed, of whom 152 were female and 148 were male.

Level of education

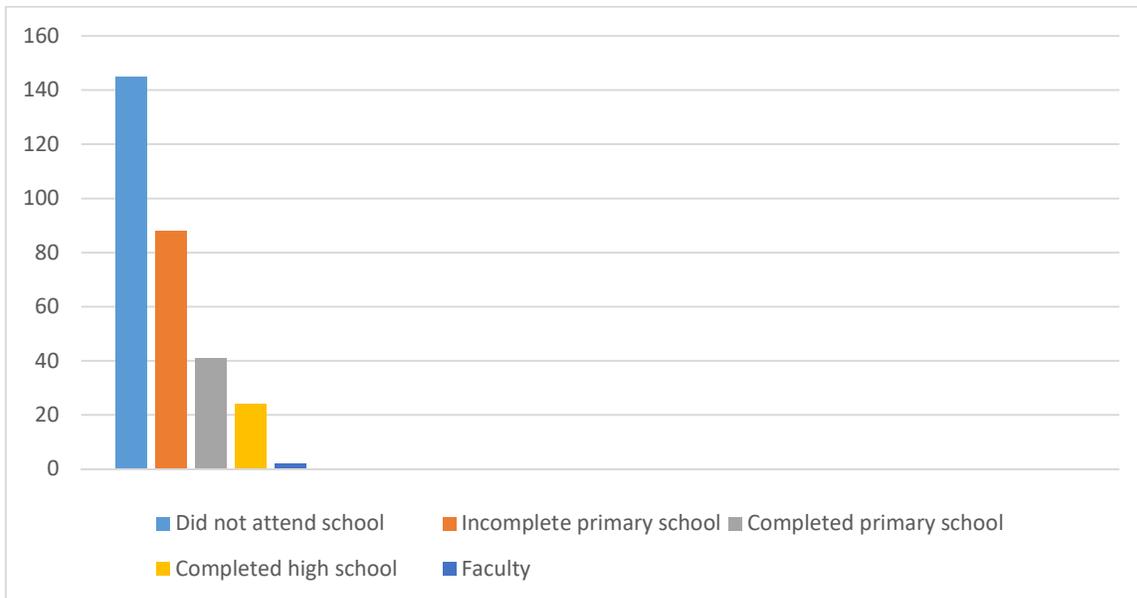


Figure 1: Level of education

² <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=18616>

The graph above shows the educational level of the interviewed respondents. The respondents who have never been part of the education system are 48.3%. A considerable proportion of them have not completed primary education, with only 29.3% of the respondents in this group. 13.7% of the respondents have completed the primary level of education. 8% of respondents have completed secondary education, while only 0.7 of respondents have completed university education.

Balkan Sunflowers Kosovo's "Schools Out" survey, conducted in 2012, gives a similar picture of the level of education in terms of the percentage of population in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje who have never gone to school. Thus, of the 1038 persons interviewed in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje coming from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, 52.5% were uneducated, 2.8% completed primary education, 0.4% attended high school and only 0.3% attended university³.

If we compare this data from 2012, with 2018 when our survey was conducted, we will see that besides the percentage of respondents who have never gone to school which is approximate, the state of completion of primary education, high school and higher education seem to be improving. However, the high percentage of uneducated people remains as a cause for concern.

Monthly household income

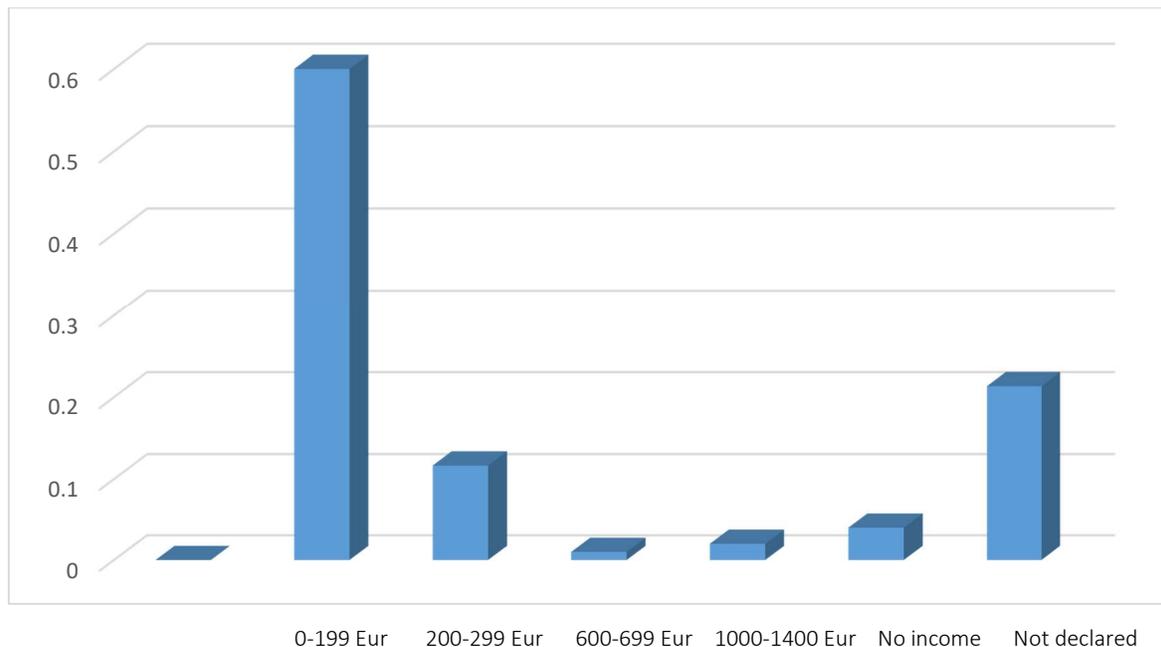


Figure 2. Monthly household income

³ http://the-strategy.org/Schools%20Out_English.pdf

Tab 1.: Respondents' monthly household income:

Number of families	Monthly income
180	0 to 199 Eur
35	200 to 299 Eur
3	600 to 699 Eur
6	1000 to 1400 Eur
12	No income
64	Not declared

Regarding the respondents' monthly income, in the table and figure above, we can see that 60% of households have monthly incomes of up to 199 Euros, 10.5% of households live on 200 to 299 Euros per month. 1% of the surveyed households have monthly incomes of 600 to 699 Euros, 2% have declared 1000 to 1400 Euros, while 4% of the respondents stated no financial sources. The remainder of the respondents did not want to declare their monthly income.

How many members of your family work?

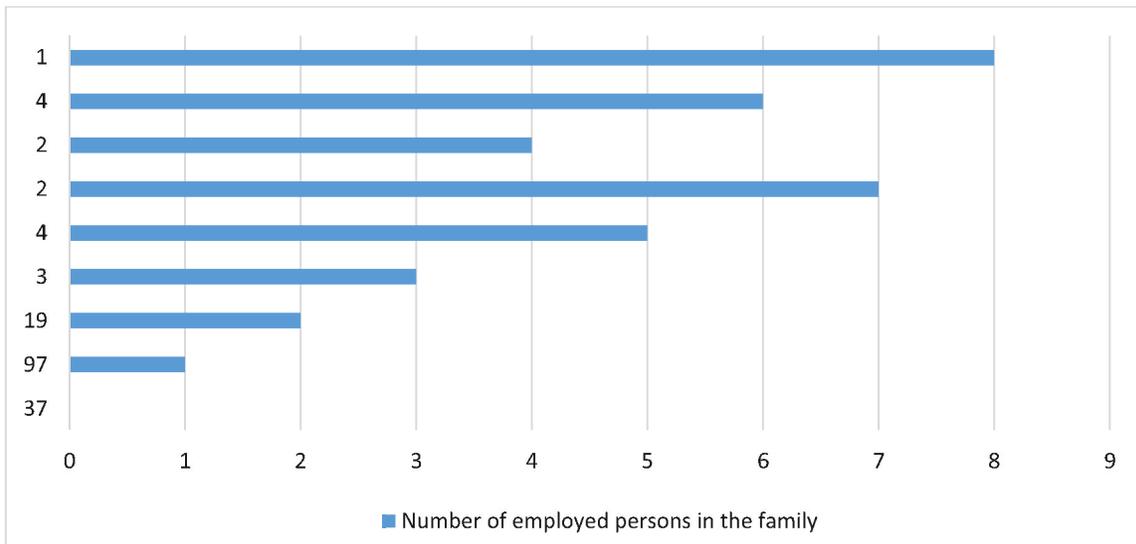


Figure 3: How many members of your family work?

When asked how many members of their family were employed, a significant proportion of respondents stated that no member of their family had a secure job. Namely, 56% of them stated that they have no one in employment. Out of 300 respondents, 97 of them stated that only the head of household works, mainly as a collector of recyclable materials and 19 respondents stated that only 2 persons in the family work. Whereas, for most members employed in the family we have a low percentage as shown in Figure 3.

Are you married? If so, at what age were you married?

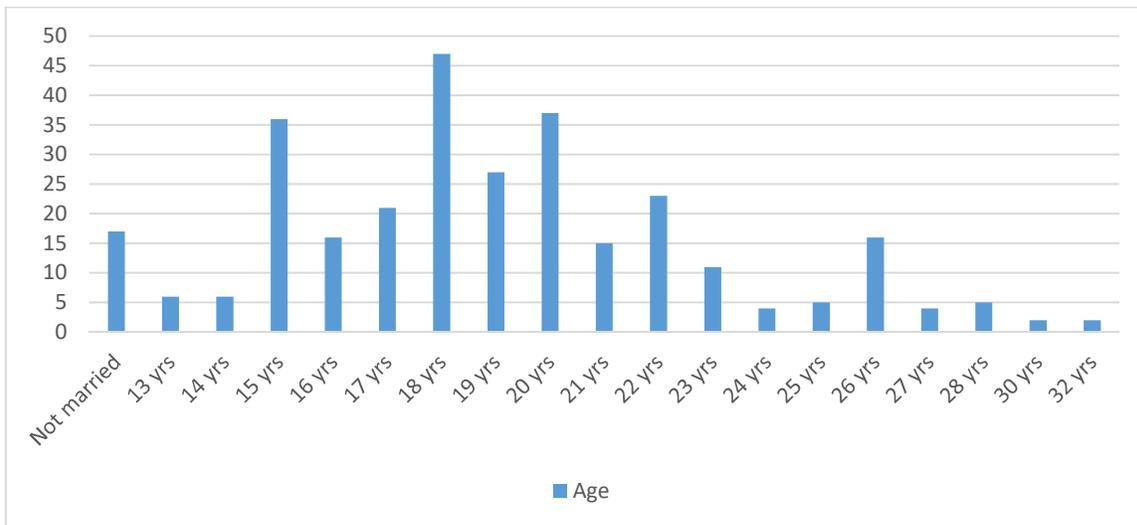


Figure 4. Are you married? If so, at what age were you married?

From Figure 4, we can see that the most prevalent age when marriages are concluded is eighteen, or 15.67% of respondents. 7% of respondents were married at the age of seventeen and 5.33% at the age of sixteen. At the age of fifteen, 12% of respondents were married. The same percentage of 2% is found in marriages between the ages of thirteen and fourteen. 17 respondents or 5.67% were not married.

Tab 2.: Marriage age by gender, up to 18 years

Age	Gender	
	Female	Male
13 yrs	4	2
14 yrs	3	3
15 yrs	19	17
16 yrs	10	6
17 yrs	12	9
18 yrs	30	17

The Family Law, Article 16, states that "(1) A person who has not attained the age of eighteen may not enter into a marriage", this Article also states that under certain conditions marriage under eighteen years may be permitted "(2) For justified reasons and at his request, the competent court may permit the marriage to a minor older than sixteen years, if it finds that the person has attained the necessary physical and psychological maturity to exercise his or her marital rights and to fulfill marital obligations⁵.

Research on Early Marriages in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje, conducted by The Ideas Partnership in 2017⁶ shows similar data on marriage age where out of 502 respondents, at the age of thirteen 1.39% of the respondents were married, at the age of fourteen 6.57% of the respondents, at the ages of fifteen and sixteen 28.28%, at the age of seventeen 17.3%, while 44.42% of the respondents were married between the ages of 18 and 24 years.

Comparing this data from both studies shows that there is a slight difference between marriages under the age of 18. Slight improvement appears in marriages at ages 13, 14, and 14 and 15, while a significant difference and improvement that occurred within two years appears in marriages at ages 16 and 17.

Have your parents influenced your marriage decision?

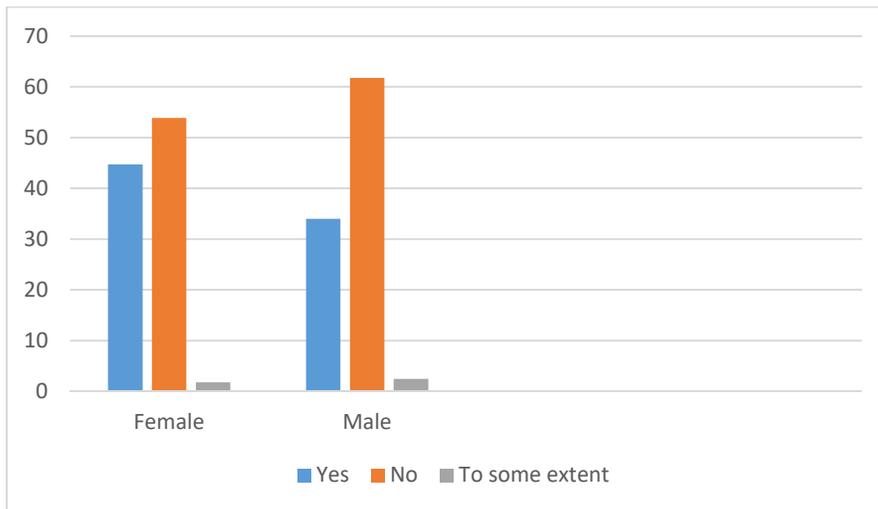


Figure 5: Have your parents influenced your marriage decision?

Regarding the influence of parents on marriage decision, 44.7% of women stated that parents influenced marriage decision, while 53.9% of women answered no. On the other hand, 34% of men surveyed stated that parents influence the decision to marry, while 61.8% stated no. Here it can be

⁴ <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2410>

⁵ <https://www.avokatia.eu/sh/docs/ligjet/LIGJI%20MBI%20FAMILJEN%20I%20KOSOVES.pdf>

⁶ http://theideaspartnership.org/wp/?page_id=701

observed that parents more often influence decision making for girls than for boys. Of the total number of respondents of both sexes, 57% of them stated that their parents did not influence their marriage decision. 39% of respondents stated that their parents influenced this decision. The remaining 2.7% stated that to some extent parents influenced their decision to marry.

Tab 3.: Why did you decide to get married?

Reason	Number of respondents	
	Male	Female
Unplanned pregnancies	24	11
Community mentality	58	81
I considered it the right time for marriage	37	44
The desire to create families	12	8
Discontinuation of schooling	2	9
Difficult economic conditions	8	5

In one of the main survey questions, the majority of respondents stated that the decision on early marriage is influenced by the mentality of the community in which they live. Of the total number of respondents, 46.3% stated that marriage is a cultural norm and expectations from the area where they live and this opinion is predominant in women. A significant number stated that it was their personal choice to marry, respectively, 27% of respondents stated that they decided to marry on their own volition. Another reason that respondents have highlighted is the phenomenon of unplanned pregnancies that then affects the decision to marry, especially in men. Of the total number of respondents, 11.7% of the respondents stated this. Other reasons that 5% of respondents gave are: poor economic conditions of the family and that respondents felt they were a burden for their family.

How is your marriage crowned?

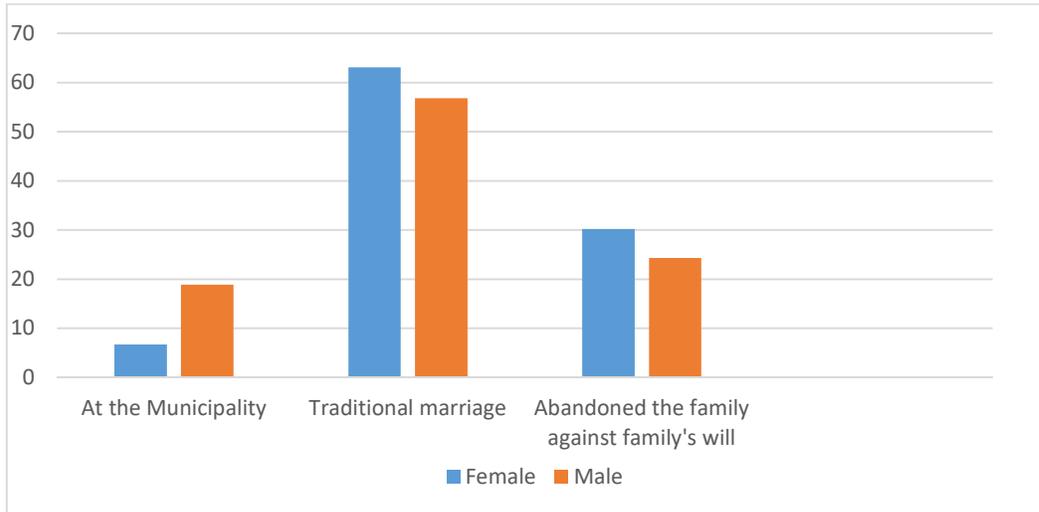


Figure 6: How is your marriage crowned?

According to the findings, the majority of marriages are carried out outside legal procedures and only a small percentage of them are officiated in municipal institutions. For this phenomenon, 59.3% claimed that they were married in the traditional way. Another significant proportion stated that they had married without the knowledge of their families, with the girls usually abandoning their families. In this survey, only 12.7% stated that they had a legal marriage in municipal institutions.

In your opinion, what is the appropriate age for marriage?

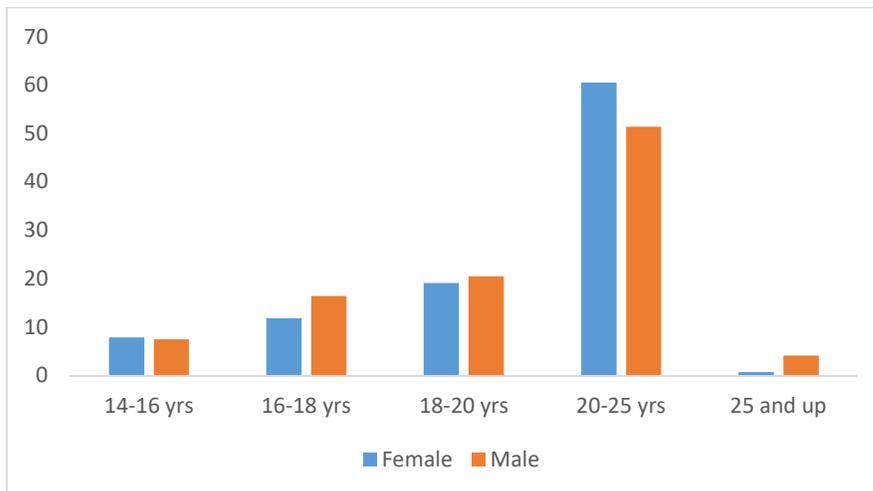


Figure 7: In your opinion, what is the appropriate age for marriage?

52.7% of the interviewed consider that the age range of 20-25 years is appropriate for marriage. Whereas, 19.8% of respondents consider 18-20 years as the ideal age for marriage. 14.1% of

respondents consider the age of 16-18 years as the best age for marriage. Only 7.7% of respondents see it as suitable for 14-16 year olds. Given these impressions, it turns out that respondents are aware of the ideal ages for marriage, but unfortunately, in reality, marriages occur earlier as the data in Table 2 also shows.

Are you aware that the law prohibits marriage under 18 without the permission of the court?

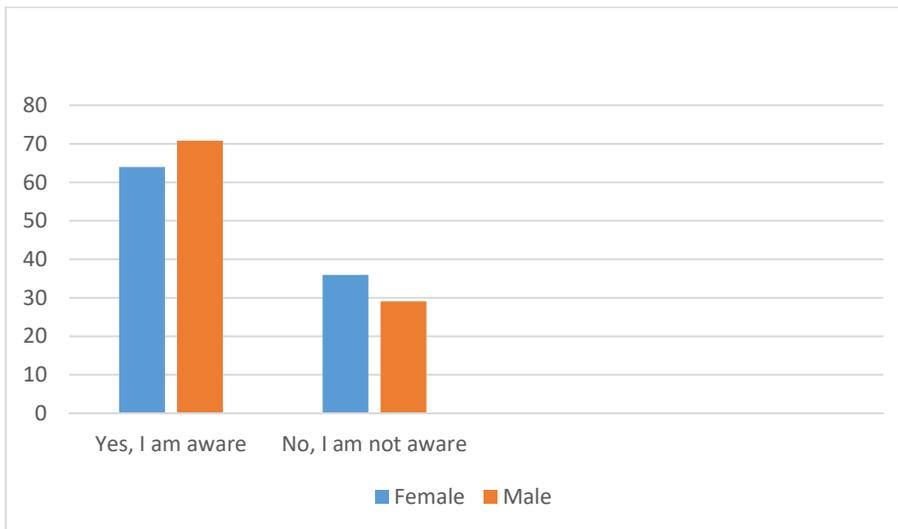


Figure 8: Are you aware that the law prohibits marriage under 18 without the permission of the court?

Of the 300 respondents who participated in this survey, 67% of them stated that they were aware that the law prohibits marriage before the age of 18, while 32% of them stated that they had no information that such a law exists. As can be seen from Figure 8, women are more aware of the legal age for marriage.

7. Goals of In-depth Interviews, Focus Groups and Case Study

- Assessing respondents' knowledge of the ideal age for marriage, the age allowed by law and how this perception varies based on the gender of respondents;
- Comparing the relationship of early marriages in the past and in the present as well as how perceptions change based on gender;
- Assessment of respondents' perception of marriage decision making;
- Assessing the impact of the social environment and community on early marriage outcomes, with emphasis on the impact on girls and how this impacts on boys;
- Assess the impact of early marriage prevention initiatives and awareness campaigns on target communities;
- Assessment of respondents' perception of both positive and negative aspects of early marriage;
- Assessing respondents' knowledge of the link between education and early marriage;
- Assess the impressions of married women (most of whom are married before the age of 18) regarding early marriages;
- The perspective of professionals in different fields on the causes of early marriage, the main drivers and the relation of this phenomenon to the social status of families;
- Making professional recommendations on initiatives to be taken and the role of institutions, society and the family in preventing early marriages;
- In-depth study of a specific case of early marriage to understand how the key respondent's life, perspectives and impressions on early marriage, education, and social environment have changed;
- Assessing the perspective of the key respondent's close relatives (her husband, daughter, mother, friend and teacher) and their impressions of the key respondent's early marriages and lives.

Findings of in-depth interviews with 20 respondents (10 females and 10 males aged 19 to 42), from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities from Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje Municipality, respectively neighborhoods 28 and 29. Respondents were selected by random sampling.

8. Key findings of in-depth interviews

Concerning the question of what age is appropriate for marriage and why, how and how much the phenomenon of early marriage has changed from the past; male respondents state that the most suitable age for marriage is 20 to 25 years. Whereas, female respondents think that the ideal age for marriage is 19 to 22 years. Most respondents think that there are differences from the past regarding early marriages because younger generations enjoy more independence in choosing their partners, while in the past marriages are associated at ages younger than 13 and parents have always decided when and with whom the marriage should be concluded.

The pressure of the social circle has an undeniable impact on early marriages. This was evident when respondents were asked what is the perception of the district / community regarding the appropriate age for marriage and what are the community attitudes about this phenomenon for both girls and men. Male respondents claim to have different attitudes, younger generations prefer ages 20 to 24 years. Many families prefer the age of 20 to 24 if there are "given words".

"Given word" means that families prefer to reach out to other families for their children / young people to marry after they reach adulthood, but this often does not mean over 18, as many marriages, according to respondents, also related to agreements, are made even under the age of 18. The "given word" may also come from a proposal by two young people under the age of 18 who like each other and plan to marry later.

90% of male and female respondents think that the community has the expectation that young people first need to complete their education in order to be more responsible and have easier marital life. 10% of the respondents also mentioned the negative pressure of society / community, where young people marry early because of the perception of the social circle. Quote from a respondent:

"Often society labels you if you don't get married at a young age, they think you're sick or you've done something wrong and nobody wants to marry you."

Female respondents are better informed about the legal age for marriage under the Law.

All female respondents stated that 18 years is the age allowed by law, while 20% of male respondents think that marriage can be concluded at 16 years of age. 30% of men interviewed stated that the age for marriage under the Law is 20 years, and 50% stated that the Law allows marriages from the age of 18 years.

Prejudice among the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities plays a very important role in stigmatizing women who choose not to marry, or who marry later than the age of 20 to 25, an age that is seen as the preferred age for marriage on the basis of the research. Although it happens in very few cases, male and female respondents claim that the social circle labels such cases that no one marries these women for several reasons, such as: she is too picky and will remain unmarried, is sick /she can't give birth because of old age, remains a burden of family, want to grow old at home, and other prejudices that respondents found difficult to express but implied to be honest. One respondent explains that there are cases when women do not get married because they have to take care of elderly people or other family members and it is very bad when these cases are also subject to prejudice. Also, younger generations of women are more independent and don't care what the social circle is talking about. Most female respondents support women who are decisive and decide for themselves when to marry. This also relates to the education of young generations of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities and the greater interest of women to be educated, economically independent and to change their families' traditions related to early marriage.

In neighborhoods 28 and 29 in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje, non-governmental organizations that implement projects to empower Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities often organize awareness campaigns on early marriages. These initiatives are seen as very positive by all interviewees who claim that there should be even more such campaigns, because despite the efforts of NGOs to raise awareness of the aforementioned communities, there is still a need for more detailed informing. Families living farther away in the neighborhood often lack access to such lectures and campaigns, and thus remain uninformed. Female respondents think that heads of households should be reminded more often that early marriages are not good for young people, because young people then face health, economic, and educational problems, and thus cannot even teach and educate their children.

The family tradition in the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities regarding decision-making about the right age for marriage has been continued to this day. All respondents claim that in past times decisions were made by grandparents, the oldest male head of household in the family. Over time, the decisions have been made by the head of the household, and nowadays there is a marked improvement because most often the decision on the appropriate age for marriage of their children is taken by both parents together.

When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of early marriages, the interviewees listed the factors as detailed in the table below.

The positive and negative sides of early marriage

Positive	Negative
Childbirth (parenting)	Additional responsibility
Rehabilitation (marriage in a good family)	Discontinuation of education
The impression that the girl is no longer a burden on the family	Early pregnancy
Getting a bride means more help for the husband's family (physical work, maintenance, care for the elderly and children)	Increasing the number of divorces
	Physical and psychological health problems
	Poverty / economic hardship
	Abortion

Education is very closely linked to early marriage. This is also evidenced by earlier research conducted by TIP in 2017⁷. This research addressed one of the main challenges of social cohesion that the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities of Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje face - the manifestation of gender inequality in early marriage that drives girls out of education and away from their support networks. Increasing the number of years spent in school has benefits for employment and thus economic stability and health. Our research shows that marriage marks the end of education, so the phenomenon of early marriage and education are related.

Regarding the question of how early marriages affect education, all respondents think similarly, pointing out that early marriages lead to school drop out. Children of uneducated parents also suffer the consequences because these parents are not good role models for their children and parents also find it difficult to help their children during school. This is observed at an early age, because uneducated parents have nothing to transmit to their children except love and care, as much as they know and are able to. In addition, respondents claim that marriage brings new responsibilities and obligations, causing the education of mothers and fathers to be stopped and it's more important for parents to provide for their children than to educate themselves.

⁷ http://theideaspartnership.org/wp/?page_id=701

9. Focus Groups

9.1 Focus Group Summary with Girls

Total: 7 girls aged 13 to 17, all belonging to Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities and residing in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje.

3 of the girls have completed only two years of education, 3 have completed elementary school and one is attending secondary school.

Most of the girls' parents are unemployed, however they are sometimes engaged in day jobs, doing a little farming or physical labor in the market.

The purpose of this Focus Group was to gain insight on the opinions and perceptions of young girls regarding the causes of early marriages. All participants agree that the ideal age for marriage is over 20, considering this age as more mature to make decisions. Marriage decisions in their families are mostly made by parents but the girls' opinions are also taken into consideration. The current situation differs from past generations where participants tell the stories of their mothers and grandmothers who were not only married at a young age but the head of the household chose their spouse and they married without even seeing their future husband. Girls emphatically explain that even today women are not treated the same as men, in context of early marriages. They think that girls and boys should be treated the same, because if a girl does not marry "on time", then there are prejudices, while for men it is less common for them to be prejudiced.

All girls are aware that by law the marriage age is over 18, and claim that parents often advise them to continue their education and not to get married early, but there are many cases when girls drop out of school and get married early, without parental permission. Thus they do not have the support of their family, while another life and other responsibilities awaits them at their husband's home, and so they remain uneducated and are not prepared to become mothers, nor do they know how to manage household chores.

None of the girls see any positive sides of early marriages; they claim that early marriage is a blockage of life and the opportunity for independence and education. They see education as very important for their lives, even though today's employment is difficult even after completing education, but the emancipation of females is very important for their lives as their social status also varies on this.

Quote from the respondent:

"..... even if you don't get a job after completing education, it is enough to be educated because you have more choices in life, you make decisions more easily, you are a good example for other girls and you will educate your children better"!

Initiatives for preventing early marriages, Focus Group participants see as very purposeful, but need to be more frequent in order to make the society more conscious. Focus Group participants see early marriages prevention initiatives as very necessary, but claim that there should be more of them so that society can become more aware.

During the conversation, the girls generally felt comfortable discussing about their rights, and the impact of education on their lives. Although quite young in age, they feel sorry for their parents, most of whom haven't completed secondary education and are largely unemployed. Given their economic situation and the discrimination they face in families, schools or other institutions, they still have a vision for their future, and see salvation in education and then in employment.

According to the girls, the main causes of early marriages are:

- discrimination against girls at home, school and society;
- dropout;
- poverty;
- lack of information and;
- society / community mentality.

9.2 Focus Group Summary with boys

Altogether: 5 boys aged 15 to 19 all belong to Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities and are residents of Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje. Most of the boys' parents are not working, or survive on income from collecting recyclable materials.

The participating boys in this Focus Group have completed 5 to 8 years of education, and three of them occasionally engage in day jobs. None of them are married. They have been pleased to participate in a discussion on early marriages and claim that such conversations should take place more often.

During the conversation, the boys did not feel comfortable discussing certain issues, particularly the consequences of early marriages for boys and when discussing issues of society's definition for non-married girls. However, the boys were excited to talk about their rights on decision-making and to talk about family traditions related to early marriages.

Regarding the question of what age is appropriate for marriage, all boys have claimed that the appropriate age to be over 18, because when you are more mature you understand things better, you have the opportunity to be employed and support your family. They also think that decisions can be made more by themselves after the age of 18 than by their parents. Boys are convinced that the society / community in which they live in expects girls to marry earlier than boys, and this applies to marriages before and after adulthood. However, the perception of boys is slightly different

because boys in the community enjoy more rights. They are well aware that girls who marry early cannot afford to go to school because they have to take care of their home and children, while boys do not have many obligations except to make a living, and for an uneducated person this is quite difficult.

Similarly to the Focus Group with girls, boys claim that decisions about the appropriate age for marriage are made by parents in cooperation with their children but that boys have more freedom to decide. When asked how do they feel about having freedom to choose the age to get married, compared to their sisters or girl friends, boys feel sorry for such differences, they explain how this situation is changing nowadays but this process is going very slowly.

The family traditions of the community where the participants of this discussion live are undergoing positive changes. They explain how girls who attend school and are employed are admired in the community and in society. As with girls, boys have similar responses to the link between early marriage and education. They agree that early marriages bring many responsibilities that young people think they are ready for, but in reality they aren't and this situation often leads to divorce, a process that brings many problems because society then prejudices them and makes them feel bad.

Early marriage prevention initiatives are very welcomed by boys, and they think it is more important for boys to understand that early marriages have no positive side.

Quote from the discussion participant:

"...Boys often think that if they get married early, they'll have a better life, they'll create a family. But this is quite different in reality, because young boys are usually not prepared to take responsibility and maintain a family, then get frustrated, divorced, /take a bad path in life [implying drug abuse, alcohol, involvement in crime, etc..]"

According to boys, the main causes of early marriages are:

- lack of education and employment of both youths and parents,
- bad economic situation,
- youth's lack of awareness and
- family traditions to a certain degree.

9.3 Focus Group Summary with women

Altogether: 10 women aged 33 to 61, all belonging to Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities and residing in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje.

Most of the women who participated in the discussion were married under the age of 18 and it was interesting to get their impressions on the causes of early marriages. 8 of them have completed only four to six years of schooling, while 2 of them have never gone to school.

Regarding the question on the appropriate age for marriage, all women agree that the best age is after 18, while some women specifically prefer marriages from age 24 to 27 as they themselves were married young and have suffered the consequences of early marriages. Women are happy that they have families and children, but if they could change that reality, they would never get married so young. They talk freely about the problems they had as young brides.

Quote from respondent:

"....still not being well aware of my body, they married me and soon I became a mother! My husband's family expected for me to do all the housework; cook, clean, raise children....but I was a child myself and I had a lot of problems with my husband that he was only two years older than me if I could turn back the time, I wouldn't be married so young! "

Even with a few years of schooling, women are aware that the law does not allow underage marriages and advise their children not to repeat their mistakes. However, they point out that children are often deceived by love and get married without parental permission. Regarding the community's perception of what is the appropriate age for marriage and how girls who do not get married early are perceived by society, there are various responses in the discussion. Women say that (s)the community is very prejudiced if girls turn 25 and they don't get married. But when the community sees good examples of girls and women being educated and employed they congratulate them. Therefore, women advise youth not to fall prey to the prejudices of society but look towards their future, get educated, get employed and then think about marriage. When asked how women would act if their children would get married before the age of 18, they claim that they try hard to prevent it, but the children may not listen to them, and place the blame on their parents' lack of education.

Quote from respondent:

"A person who has not completed education themselves does not even know how to educate their child!"

In terms of the impact of early marriages on the economic situation, women recount different examples from the community and their relatives. There have been cases where the family marries boys earlier in order to bring the bride home to help with the house work and to have offspring, but that also brings economic problems because then there are more mouths to feed. In the past,

marriage decisions were made by the elders; respectively the oldest male of the family. Considering that in the past, large families lived together, the decisions to marry grandchildren were taken by the grandfathers, uncles, etc. Whereas, now decisions are usually made by parents together with children, but there are often cases when children are not asked at all. We received an interesting response from a respondent who never went to school and was only 13 when she got married. She sees early marriages as positive, and claims that girls do not need school, implying that girls in school do not learn anything, and that they need to create family and have children as soon as possible. She recounts how her husband was 17 when they got married, and he wandered the streets before marrying her, but after getting married, he became a responsible man, going out every day to find a job to earn an income for the family. However, she says that she would not marry her daughters as early as she was married, but anyway around the age of 20.

Participants in this discussion are convinced that the main causes of early marriage are:

- lack of education,
- economic situation,
- the immaturity of youth and;
- parents' desire to “settle down” their children who, in the absence of education and awareness, do not think much about the health and life consequences of early marriages.

9.4 Focus Group Summary with professionals from different fields

In total: 9 professionals from different fields such as Sociology, Psychology, Health, Management, Economics, Law, Gender Studies, Teaching and Social Work.

“The girl is for foreign door”

When asked about the main causes of early marriages among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, the participants of this Focus Group who have extensive experience with various research studies on the situation of the communities in question think that one of the main reasons relates to the longevity of members of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities.

A research conducted by Balkan Sunflowers in 2015 ⁸, shows that the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities as a group in this case, have an average life expectancy of about 12 and a half years shorter or less than the majority community. The results of the survey, which also covered Plemetin village residents, show that early marriages occur because the family wants to see their grandchildren, as not many of them live to be more than 57 years old, linking here the cause of early marriages with family tradition.

⁸ http://balkansunflowers.org/images/stories/pdf/kosana%20annual%20report_2015_web.pdf

Sociologists argue that the main problem is the economic situation but they also link life expectancy with the lifestyle, because the communities in question live mainly under difficult economic conditions, and the jobs they do for a living are heavy physical labor, so this also determines their longevity.

An interesting fact is also mentioned by gender studies professionals who claim that the causes of early marriages has a lot to do with morality. For both majority and minority communities, in our society morality is the leading cause of early marriages. Regardless, parents of all communities, especially parents who do not have a higher education, fear that their children will go astray, and this pressure pushes them to orient their children, especially girls, towards marriage. This is almost the same as if they wanted to preserve the honor of the family, but for minority communities this is more noticeable, which is also evident in the majority communities that live mainly in rural areas. So the causes of early marriages stem not only from the economic situation or lack of education, but also from moral issues when parents find it more reasonable to "get the job done" and "settle down" their children.

Psychologists and professionals in the field of gender studies claim that discrimination also plays an important role because boys are obviously favored for reasons we encounter also in the majority community. Research shows that parents tend to educate the boy rather than the girl, because the boy brings income, while the girl is "for the foreigner's door" (meaning that she will live most of her life at her husband's house). Researchers in the Focus Group also point to a taboo topic that is hard to talk about with members of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, and that is the issue of "marriage bargain" between families. Most of the Focus Group participants claim to have heard about this phenomenon which is hardly mentioned in any other research. However, this kind of "marriage bargain" is also encountered by the majority community and presents a major problem as long as it is not discussed because it is embarrassing. The issue of marriage bargain is also practiced in different parts of the world but it has not been adequately addressed or researched in Kosovar society. The lawyer present at the discussion argued that in some way this is a child sale and can be considered abuse, trafficking and persons selling their children, especially underage children, can and should be punished by law.

The phenomenon then starts a chain reaction in bride kidnapping, say participants, most of whom have carried out years of research into the livelihoods and problems the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities face. In cases where the boy's family is unable to pay for the bride, the boy often kidnaps the bride and brings her home, so the family "escapes" the payment, but the problems persist because the families may then fall into animosity.

The Social Worker points out that even the social circle has a profound effect on the emergence of early marriages. Seeing their surroundings as girls marry early and especially in the last 20 years as girls marry in the diaspora, and then help their families financially, has made its own and pushed

other families to be influenced and acted in the same way by marrying children at the earliest age in order to provide a source of income.

Focus Group data on how this phenomenon relates to the social status of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, shows that many families marry young boys and girls in order to gain social assistance. The aim is to establish families and give birth to children as soon as possible and then meet the criteria for social assistance. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Law on Social Assistance Scheme in Kosovo says that you can receive social assistance from the state if it meets the following non-financial criteria: ... if a family member is fit to work but there is a child in your family who is less than 5 years old⁹. Therefore, relevant local and central level institutions should also reflect here in order to change the eligibility criteria for social assistance.

The psychologist claims that another reason for the presence of early marriages is the lack of healthy parent-child relationships, and this is true for the entire community regardless of nationality?. Children that lack good communication and discussion with their parents during puberty or adolescence are more likely to be influenced by society, examples in the community in which they live, and they are less likely to talk to parents. This is also due to the culture in our families and in all communities, when topics that are still taboo are not discussed, then the consequences come without stopping. Therefore, early marriages that occur in all communities are closely linked to the lack of genuine communication between children and parents. Moreover, uneducated parents often do not know how to reach their children, so many important topics remain unaddressed. Socio-economic aspect is normally the most important, but still parents' support for their children and communication is lacking in all communities where early marriages occur.

A Focus Group member who has experience in education and project management for minorities integration projects claims that early marriages cannot be treated as a characteristic phenomenon for the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. In the rural parts of Kosovo, unfortunately, the girl is seen as an object that will give birth to children, cook and clean. We still come across families who say that "the girl is for a foreigner's door" so, from the beginning the daughters are treated as means of reproduction, labor force, and that she does not belong to her family but to the husband who will take her.

Many families of all communities still believe in the myths that the older woman may not have children, or may have children with health problems.

⁹ <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2826>

Respondent's quote:

“Our society still sees a 25-year-old girl as a time-out girl to whom the biological train has passed to give birth to a baby! That is why early marriages are also present.”

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that early marriages are more easily distinguished among minority communities, while being held as taboo by the majority community.

The lawyer argues that even the double standard of institutions for dealing with early marriages plays a very important role. Having a state where the law does not function properly, then neither judges nor prosecutors do their job properly. The cases of early marriages are not reported, but even if the procedures are announced, they last so long that they are simply forgotten, in the mean time young people that married early, reach adulthood.

Concerning the legal measures to be taken in case of early marriages, the data from the discussion indicate that the timely intervention of the Center for Social Work and the implementation of the legal framework are the two main actions to be taken. Society in general needs to be aware of the consequences of this phenomenon. Effective functioning of the law could reduce the number of early marriages, as they constitute violations of the law. Involving members of all communities in initiatives to prevent early marriages would also be a good step. There are other alternative measures to notify school dropouts and early marriages, such as; mobilizing the community to report such phenomena in exchange for remuneration, penalizing the police and other relevant institutions in the case of no intervention after reporting cases or initiatives with community members who are educated.

Early marriages among girls have a major impact on endangering health. Unwanted pregnancies, various complications during pregnancy, abortions, sexually transmitted diseases, infections and other health problems come from a lack of knowledge about family planning. This problem also stems from the lack of the subject on sex education in schools and this leaves young people uninformed. Professionals in the field of Gender Studies claim that youths prefer to receive this information from society and the Internet rather than from parents, as there are many taboo topics in Kosovo that are difficult to talk about within the family. Therefore, information for youths about sex education is often limited and inaccurate, as the information is incomplete and not well understood by them. The best solution would be for schools to have sex education as a subject, where students could be first informed about their body, physiology, sex, contraceptives and other preventive methods, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and many other factors that would prepare

them for the future. In addition, a health professional claims that statistics show that girls who give birth early are more likely to have complicated pregnancies and births, preterm births, and postpartum depression. This comes as a result of their unpreparedness for parenting, moreover even their partners do not know how to support them because men are young and unprepared to become fathers. This chain reaction also leads to the psychological problems for both husband and wife who are young and often end up in divorce.

All participants of this Focus Group agree that organizing early marriage awareness activities in cities and especially in deep rural areas and advocating for institutions to implement relevant laws preventing early marriages are vital to reduce the number of this phenomenon. Schools, learning centers, youth centers, non-governmental organizations, as well as local and central institutions can do more effective work in preventing early marriages and informing young people more about the consequences of this phenomenon.

The causes of early marriages under this Focus Group are; the economic aspect, the preservation of honor, the short life span, and the “marriage bargain” done between families on the occasion of a marriage.

9.5 Focus Group Key Findings

Focus Group discussions show that the main causes of early marriages are: the difficult economic situation, the lack of education for young people and parents, school dropouts, family traditions, preservation of honor, youth immaturity, and parents' desire to “settle down” their children, unemployment, lack of information and awareness of young people and the community about the consequences of early marriages, prejudices of society and community, discrimination against girls.

10. Case Study

In order to further explore the phenomenon of early marriages, a Case Study was conducted, where researchers selected a woman who had married early. In this case study, the woman was interviewed as the key respondent, her husband, daughter and mother, as well as her teacher in whom the key respondent attended adult literacy and parenting lessons at the learning and community center of NGO The Ideas Partnership in Fushë Kosovë. Due to the work ethics we called the key respondent “Lule”.

Lule is a 21 year old woman and has three children. She lives in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje in an old house with the rest of her husband's family and in very difficult economic conditions. Lule never went to school. Neither her sisters nor her brothers were educated. Her parents also never went to school. Lule was only 14 when she got married.

“My parents gave me I made no decision. I knew the man and I loved him”, she says with a smile as she remembers her wedding day. Her husband was 16 at the time. According to the tradition, the husband's family sent the “mediator” to Lule's family, and with the consent of her parents and the husband, the marriage decision was made.

“What did I know then? I didn't know anything ... except that all the young girls were getting married, because then they'll say that your time is gone and you will stay at home with your father forever, you cannot have children and nothing”

- Lule confesses, explaining that she was too young and unprepared for marital life, much less to become a mother. She says that at first she found it very difficult to adapt to her husband's home. She tells how she had to work hard at home maintenance and even with the help of her mother-in-law, she has been very young to handle household chores, pregnancy, childbirth, and adding here also the difficult economic situation, her life took a different direction.

Lule thinks the ideal age for marriage is over 20, because then you are more mature and better prepared for marriage. She adds that the present time is different to the past because parents now think differently about their daughters. Often during conversations with her friends, they discuss how important it is for girls to be educated and employed in order to be independent and not depend on their husbands. She is aware that the age allowed for marriage is 18, but if asked, that age according to the law would be 20 years. Asked if there are prejudices about girls who do not marry early, and does this change for boys, she claims that people's words never stop, society always prejudices, especially women. While she has no

knowledge of boys, she says she does not care what kind of attitudes society has for boys who do not marry early, but is certain that girls find it more difficult, and often suffer the consequences of these prejudices.

Lule is worried about youth because, according to her, there cannot be a golden middle point between the past and the present. ***“In the past nobody asked the children, the parents decided for them for marriage, and now the kids don't ask noone, even when advising them not to get married early, they often don't listen the advice they go for what they want!”*** – she says..

Lule doesn't like either of these extremes. She says she would not want her children to get married early because then the problems come without stopping. She views early marriage prevention initiatives as very positive and purposeful. Since Lule has not attended school, she regularly attends adult literacy and parenting activities at the NGO The Ideas Partnership Learning and Community Center in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje. She loves being with other women where they learn and have a good time together. She has not only learned writing and reading, but also basic math and loves to discuss in class the messages that accompany the various poems. Lectures on parenting are most liked because they bring new insights into equal rights, how to educate children and many other topics that Lule has missed all these years. She sees the birth of her children as the only positive side of her marriage. Lule is optimistic that in the future the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities will become more aware of early marriages and instruct girls and women to be educated and advanced as much as possible.

Conversation with Lule's husband

For research ethics we called Lule's husband "Bekim"

Bekim was only 16 when he fell in love with Lule, then 14 years old. It was not long before they were married through the mediation of both families. Bekim is not educated and works with recycling materials. Now he is 23 years old, has three children and faces difficulties keeping up with his family, the recycling business brings in little money and requires a lot of effort. He thinks that the right age for marriage is 20 years old.

"...if I knew that it was so hard to take care of the house, I would get married later, not that young!" Bekim explains that in the past marriages were concluded earlier, taking as an example his parents who married at the age of 12. While today, he says there are better opportunities to get education and employment before getting married, but still claims that in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje a large number of girls are getting married at very young ages like 15 and 16 years old. He has no time to listen to society and other people thinking about early marriages, but his experience has taught him and says that he will not allow his children to marry before the age of 20 or 21. Asked what he thinks of Lule and her life, he says with a smile; ***".....she and I also thought we were better off marrying because we were in love, but then we saw how difficult it was and how many problems occur!"***

On the positive side of early marriages, he says, the bride (Lule) helps my mother with housework while not wanting to declare the negative side of early marriages, except for the aforementioned difficulties.

Conversation with Lule's mother

Lule's mother is 41 years old and lives in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje.

She recounts how at the age of 16 she fled her home and married without her parents' permission. She shyly indicates that she had fallen in love and, fearing that her parents may dislike her boyfriend, had left home..She claims that the past times have been much different to today, children have not talked to parents about love, and not mentioned topics about marriage and intimate relationships. Lule's mother says her life after marriage has changed a lot but she did not regret getting married early because she gave birth to healthy children and raised a family. According to her, the ideal age for marriage is 18 years. She has 2 other children besides Lule, who were married at 19 and 20 years old. Concerning the life of her daughter Lule, she says that Lule was married in a good home and married with the help of a mediator. Apart from the difficult economic conditions, Lule's mother does not see any negative side to her daughter being married early. ***“Lule got the man she wanted..... it’s better with a marriage allowed by parents, than go to the husbands house without family permission!”***

With regard to girls who decide not to marry early, Lule's mother has not much to comment. She says everyone has their own lives, some girls want to stay longer with their family, they want to get educated and she doesn't care much about these things.

Conversation with Lule's friend

Lule's best friend is 18 years old and lives in Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje. She completed 7 years of schooling and then dropped out of school because she had to stay home to help her mother. Although she has dropped out of school, Lule's friend is not planning to marry anytime soon, but is keen to get a job somewhere and become independent.

Regarding early marriages, she says the phenomenon is widespread, but nobody cares to stop it. Lule's friend claims that early marriages have been present in the past but there are still many cases, and she thinks they are becoming more frequent now because young people are no longer asking and respecting their parents. ***".....in the past it has been a shame and fear for girls to talk to parents about marriage, and now it is the opposite, no one asks parents except when we hear that one 15-16 year old went to her husband"!***

Asked if she had any friends who dropped out of school to get married, Lule's friend says no, because she herself dropped out of school on seventh grade and has no knowledge of it. But in regard to her early married friends, she says that for some of them, life has changed for the better, and for some it's worse. She gives examples of her friends and neighbors who lived in miserable conditions at home, while at their husband's home they found a better life. She also mentions other instances where girls who get married early, often have a difficult life at the husband's house. They are no longer free to go out and socialize, and often economic conditions are even more difficult than in their own homes.

Regarding Lule's life she thinks that Lule, despite having been married early, it has been her choice, but that it would be better if they were both educated. As a positive side of Lule's life, her friend thinks it is good that Lule has children and has become a mother. On the negative side, she says I can't comment on my best friend.

Conversation with Lule's teacher

Lule's teacher by profession is a psychologist. She works at the NGO The Ideas Partnership as a teacher of adult literacy classes and also holds parenting classes. She works with 45 women from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities who regularly come to the center to attend activities.

Regarding early marriages she says this topic is no longer taboo in our society. The women she works with, often share stories of their lives and share experiences with the teacher showing how early marriage has impacted their lives. Based on her experience with women, she says the main driving factor of early marriages is the economic and socio-cultural situation. Lack of parent-child education and communication are also compelling reasons that lead to this increasing phenomenon.

As for distinguishing the presence of this phenomenon from the past and present, Lule's teacher refers to the stories of the women she works with. She says the phenomenon has ups and downs but is always present. The main difference, according to her, is that in the past, girls' opinions were not taken into consideration if they really wanted to get married at that age. Whereas nowadays, with the development of awareness-raising platforms for equal rights, women's and children's rights, it can generally be said that the situation has changed.

During her experience she has had numerous occasions when girls have dropped out of school. The teacher states that usually after leaving school the next consequence is early marriage. The initiative that The NGO The Ideas Partnership has taken to prevent such phenomena has been our insistence that those young girls or women continue their education in various alternative ways. ***"We have tried to support these cases with school materials, literacy activities, parenting, financial support such as scholarships, and have insisted on reinforcing their talents by offering attractive programs through which girls and young women have realized the importance of education. "***

Asked what the school's connection to early marriages is and what the school can do to stop early marriages, she says it is essential that schools have sex education curricula. The lack of information for young people leads them to seek this information elsewhere or to experiment with their own lives. Therefore, home and school education are two major factors that can prevent this phenomenon.

Regarding the life of her student, Lule, the teacher claims that all of her students are equal to her and her job is to give these women and girls a second chance to educate themselves. ***“Not only for Lule, but for all the women I work with, I feel sorry for the course of their lives, especially after marriage at a young age. They are now mothers themselves, and now they see the importance of schooling because most of them have never been to school, or have attended only a few classes. Their education was interrupted at the the age when they had to learn, be informed and have the confidence to be prepared for life!”***

On the negative side of early marriages, Lule's teacher points out: lack of socializing, health problems, especially psychological problems, stress, depression, and a lack of adaptability to a new situation and environment. Increased responsibilities as a wife and mother, lack of support from parents and family, psychological and often physical violence in the spouse's home are almost inevitable factors.

It is therefore very important that we as a society, with the help of relevant institutions, become better organized and take more initiatives that would prevent this phenomenon..

10.1 The main findings of this Case Study

Early marriages are closely linked to family tradition, lack of education and communication with parents are the main drivers. The youth's immaturity affects early marriage, while unprepared marriage and the difficult economic situation make the lives of both spouses extremely difficult.

11. Conclusions

- The vast majority of interviewees have not completed the compulsory education required by law.
- Most of the interviewed households have sole sources of social assistance and none of them are employed by employment contracts.
- Marriages to the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are often conducted in a traditional way without legal procedures.
- During the interviews there were cases where respondents stated that they had entered into a traditional marriage at the age of 13.
- Pressure by parents to make a decision on marriage is evident for both sexes, but a small number of respondents stated that it was their personal decision to marry.
- Constant exposure to a particular lifestyle that simulates early marriage and family formation at a young age has created a set of values that young members of the community take for granted and unknowingly adopt as norms.
- Based on the findings in the field, the cause of early marriages appears to be the community mentality, where it is worth noting that the majority of respondents consider that the age of sixteen to eighteen is the appropriate period for marriage.
- A significant proportion of respondents are aware that there is a legal prohibition on marriages under eighteen years without the permission of the court.
- The Ideas Partnership, through its activities, has reached out to the majority of the community, which is also understood by the responses of the respondents where most of them stated that they were part of the programs of this organization.

12. Recommendations

- Organizing awareness campaigns on the consequences of early marriage.
- Take measures to prevent marriages that are not covered by the legal frameworks and legal acts that regulate this civil status of persons under 18 years of age.
- Creating vocational training programs for community members, in particular girls and women.
- Government programs which include various incentive methods for young people who pursue education and do not enter into traditional marriage at an early age.

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