

Child Marriage in Albania (Overview)



I have a younger sister. I would never ask her to marry young. Maybe when she turns 20. She must enjoy life. When you marry, you don't enjoy life.

—Child spouse, age 16 at time of interview

Child marriages

Early or child marriage is the union, whether official or not, of two persons, at least one of whom is under 18 years of age.¹ By virtue of being children, child spouses are considered to be incapable of giving full consent, meaning that child marriages should be considered a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. Rates of child marriage are low in Albania, but the practice is found among Roma, and in some isolated rural communities.

Child marriage is a gendered phenomenon that affects girls and boys in different ways. Overall, the number of boys in child marriages around the world is significantly lower than that of girls. Girl child spouses are also vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual abuse within relationships that are unequal, and if they become pregnant, often experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as their bodies are not ready for childbearing. Upon marrying, both boys and girls often have to leave education to enter the workforce and/or take up domestic responsibilities at home.

Various international treaties, conventions, and programmes for action address child marriage. These include: the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (which followed the UN Fourth World Conference on Women). These international instruments cover the abolishment of harmful customs and traditions, violence against the girl child, marriage consent, marriageable age, registration of marriage, and the freedom to choose a spouse.

This fact sheet provides information about the issue of child marriages in Albania and offers recommendations aimed at addressing the issue. It includes a review of national legislation and the country's ratification of the various international standards relevant to the issue, analysis of current practices and attitudes towards child marriages, and statistical information about the prevalence of the practice. The methodology for this study involved a review of the existing legal framework and literature related to child marriages in Albania, and interviews with child spouses and experts working in the fields of children's and women's rights.

Child marriage is an appalling violation of human rights and robs girls of their education, health, and long-term prospects. A girl who is married as a child is one whose potential will not be fulfilled. Since many parents and communities also want the very best for their daughters, we must work together and end child marriage.

—Dr. Babatunde
Osotimehin, Executive
Director, UNFPA



Recommendations

- The provision in the Family Code giving local courts the right to approve marriages of those under the age of 18 should specify an age limit, and the Penal Code should be revised to include a set of measures aimed at common law marriages (or cohabitation) involving children. The legislation vacuum on how to regulate births within child marriages needs to be addressed in the Civil Code, Family Code, Civil Service Law, and other relevant legislation.
- Awareness of the consequences of child marriages needs to be raised among policy-makers, civil society, and other opinion leaders in order for the practice to be addressed more strategically. Policy-making needs to be supported by accurate sex- and age-disaggregated statistical data on marriages, divorces, births, and child and maternal health. Awareness of the consequences of early marriages needs to be raised as well among parents, children, and young people living within communities where child marriage is widely practiced.
- The root causes of child marriage among Roma need to be tackled. Child marriage is not an isolated event. It is related to other social problems that Roma families face, such as economic difficulties, lack of adequate housing, and lack of access to education and health services.
- Given the low level of awareness on family planning and reproductive health issues among Roma and other vulnerable communities, there is a need for coordinated action among national and local actors to create mechanisms for implementation of the strategies in place. This includes the latest National Contraceptive Security Strategy, which aims at ensuring that men and women can choose and access modern contraception methods and family planning services of the highest quality.

Legal and national context

Albania is a member state of the United Nations and the Council of Europe. It is a party, either by ratification or accession, to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (and

the Optional Protocol); and the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Overview of national legislation

The most recent Law on Children, the 2010 Framework Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child, conforms to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Albania ratified in 1992), and defines the child as ‘any person born alive who is under 18 years of age’.² The Framework Law also defines all the rights and protection a child is entitled to, and names the mechanisms and institutions that are responsible for guaranteeing the realisation of these rights. These are the National Council and the National Agency for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, which were set up in 2010. The Law also envisages the establishment of child protection units at regional and local level, to serve as primary units for cases of child rights violations.

“*Legislation in Albania is very good on paper, but fails in implementation. This is not because of policy-makers, but those who implement it. It is an issue of the level of awareness on child rights.*” (Government official)

According to the Constitution, children, young people, pregnant women, and young mothers have the right to special protection from the State. The same article states that any child has the right to protection from violence and exploitation that ‘may damage health [. . .] or put its life and normal development at risk’.³

Who can contract a marriage?

Under the Family Code, the legal minimum age for marriage in Albania is 18. However, the same article of the Family Code states that a local court may approve marriage at an earlier age ‘for matters of importance’ (for instance when a girl under 18 years of age is pregnant, or the future husband is an emigrant who would like to contract a marriage with a person under 18 years of age). In such case, no minimum age is defined. All marriages must be

based on the free consent of both future spouses, and must be registered at an official register office.⁴

The Civil Code of the Republic of Albania states that a person attains full juridical capacity when he or she reaches 18 years of age. The code specifies, however, that if a girl marries before the age of 18, she automatically attains juridical capacity.⁵ Juridical capacity gives a person certain legal rights and obligations; for instance, to enter into legally binding contracts, receive medical treatment without parental consent, and to register the birth of children.

“Current legislation has gaps with regard to two main issues: children affected by blood feud and child marriages. These two are not part of the legislation.” (NGO activist)

The Criminal Code does not criminalise child marriage. There is one reference made to ‘Forcing [. . .] to commence or continue cohabitation [. . .] which is punishable by a fine or up to three months of imprisonment’.⁶ In 2010, no such cases were prosecuted.⁷ Sexual intercourse with a minor below the age of 14 is a criminal offence, with a punishment of seven to 15 years in prison, while forced sexual intercourse with a minor aged 14-18 years is punished by five to 15 years of imprisonment.

Family planning and reproductive rights

As stipulated by law, the equal right to efficient and high-quality healthcare without discrimination is a key principle of the healthcare system.⁸

According to the Law on Public Health, essential public health services include sexual and reproductive health services and maternal and child health services. The same law provides for healthcare for mothers and infants during pregnancy, delivery, and after birth, regardless of their ability to cover the costs.⁹

Reproductive health rights are regulated by a specific law, which covers the provision of counselling services on reproductive health issues, ensures prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and infections, and ensures safe abortion.¹⁰

In Albania, contraception was legalised in 1992, very soon after the collapse of communism; prior to this, it had been extremely difficult to obtain. Contraceptives are provided free of charge at state-run clinics. Ensuring access to contraception remains a priority for the Ministry of Health.¹¹ Just recently, a new family planning strategy was launched with the assistance of UNFPA for the period 2012-2016.¹²

According to the Demographic and Health Survey for 2008-2009, 86.4 per cent of currently married women aged 15-19 years had used some method of contraception at some time, while 32.6 per cent had used a modern method of contraception. Slightly over one half of currently married women (54.7 per cent) in the 15-19 age group were using some family planning method, while only 12.9 per cent were using modern methods, with the male condom being the most used method (9.4 per cent).¹³ However, the majority of married young women (41.8 per cent) are using traditional family planning methods, particularly withdrawal (40.8 per cent).

According to reproductive health and family planning experts, low levels of modern contraception use negatively correlate to the incidence of STIs/STDs and high abortion rates, while having negative implications for mother and child health indicators overall, especially amongst the most vulnerable populations, such as Roma.

Approximately 2 per cent of all women aged 15-19 have given birth to at least one child, while 23.6 per cent of married women aged 15-19 have given birth to at least one child.¹⁴

As of 2009, about 3 per cent of females in the age group 15-19 years had begun childbearing. This percentage is more than three times higher in rural areas than in urban areas (3.8 per cent vs. 1.2 per cent). It is also close to four times higher among girls who have completed only primary education compared to those who have completed secondary education (4.4 per cent vs. 1.2 per cent).¹⁵ In 2008, 3.2 per cent of all abortions were performed on women under 20 years of age (270 out of a total of 8,335).¹⁶

Child marriages in Albania

Child marriage in Albania is a complex issue. Poverty, the lack of value placed on girls’ education, geographical isolation, social exclusion, trafficking,

and emigration are all factors driving child marriage in Albania today, in addition to attitudes towards women's sexuality and role in society. At the same time, child marriage within certain communities is itself helping to perpetuate these trends as well. This is locking young people affected by child marriage into a cycle of poverty, exploitation, and marginalisation.

“We don't know if child marriage is a real problem in Albania. Policy-making is based on evidence; therefore as long as we do not have evidence, we cannot address the issue.” (Government official)

While child marriage is not well-researched, it has been peripherally addressed as a by-product of other issues, such as ethnicity-based social exclusion, discrimination, poverty, and child labour and exploitation. A review of the few available studies reveals that child marriage in Albania is most commonly practiced among the Roma ethnic group. That said, child marriages also occur in some Albanian communities living in extremely isolated, poor, rural areas. Marriages involving children are not registered and, hence are not legally recognised. This means that accurate statistical data about these subpopulations is not available.

Child marriage among the Albanian majority

Child marriage has been practised in the last two decades among some communities living in extremely remote, rural, mountainous areas, where a patriarchal mentality meets poverty. Here the practice exclusively involves girls under 18 years of age. Boys enter marriage later in life, generally between their mid-20s and early 30s. Nowadays, child marriages are less common, although they still exist.

In these communities, marriages are arranged by families, and girls have no say in the choice of spouse. Male dominance plays a significant role. The father makes the decision, while the girl's mother has little say in the matter and just has to hope that her daughter will be lucky.

“The girl waits for the chance to go out. She can hardly wait for the proposal so that she can say ‘Yes.’” (NGO activist)

Girls living in these remote village areas are unaware of the available choices, given that most have never travelled outside of their village. According to a report on the rights of the child published by the Albanian Children's Alliance, many girls in these mountain communities drop out of school at age 12-13, in order to take on domestic work at home and prepare for marriage.¹⁷ As girls are kept in isolation from school and social life, marriage appears to them to be the best alternative to their current life. Child marriages in remote rural areas follow a distinctive pattern. Daughters are engaged at 13-15 years of age. The wedding takes place a few years later, after which the girls move to the in-laws' house. Since the grooms are generally emigrants living in other countries, they often leave their new wives with their family and return to their country of emigration. The husband usually visits Albania about twice a year.

“Besides the fear that ‘no one will [want] my daughter as she grows older’, the family is driven by the expectation that ‘as soon as she gets married, we will have one mouth less to feed.’” (NGO activist)

Dropping out of school, usually before completion of compulsory education (for the majority group), and before the completion of basic primary school (for Roma) is a predictor of child marriage. It may happen before or after the marriage itself, and is a decision made by parents, rooted in the belief that 'school is not the future'. Parents do not see a future for their daughters beyond being a wife, homemaker, and mother. School dropout is reported for both genders in the last years of compulsory education, but for different reasons. Boys tend to drop out in order to enter the labour market, while girls drop out in order to prepare for marriage.

“These families used to be poor, uninformed, seduced by the ‘rich, in-love grooms’ who could pay for their daughter. They were thinking ‘He must love her so much, if he pays.’” (NGO activist)

Some reports from NGO field activists interviewed for this study indicate that in recent decades, these marriages have been feeding the trafficking phenomenon. The option of having a wealthy son-in-law is so appealing that the prospective bride's family is willing to give consent to the marriage even if they know very little about the future son-in-law, who may in fact turn out to be a trafficker.

“*I have a younger sister. I would never ask her to marry young. Maybe when she turns 20. She must enjoy life. When you marry, you don't enjoy life.*” (Roma child spouse, age 16 at time of interview)

Child marriages among Roma in Albania

There are no accurate official figures on the Roma population in Albania. In 1995, Minority Rights Group International estimated the number of Roma in Albania to be between 90,000 and 100,000.¹⁸ Life for Roma in Albania is marked by unemployment, low income, poverty, and low levels of education.¹⁹ Studies reveal that Roma girls tend to marry at a much younger age and become mothers earlier than members of other ethnic groups. A study in 2002-2003 showed that the average age of marriage for Roma girls was 15.5 years, while the average age of Roma mothers at the birth of their first child was 16.9 years. In 2011, 31 per cent of 13-17-year-old Roma girls were married or in union.²⁰

Table 1. Mean marriage age during the transition period (post-1990)²¹

	Roma	Total population
Males	18.2	28.3
Females	15.5	23.3

Table 2. Mean age at birth of first child²²

	Roma		Total population	
	Pre-1990	Post-1990	Pre-1990	Post-1990
Males	21.4	19.2	24.6	20.4
Females	18.9	16.9	20.1	18.2

I have seen Roma children marry as early as 13. Nothing is envisaged in the law if this happens. (NGO activist)

The available studies found that the main factors driving child marriages are cultural values, poverty, parents' fear of child kidnapping and prostitution, and limited education on marriage and family planning.²³ The outcomes of child marriage and childbearing, reported by the available studies, include low levels of education and high divorce rates. For women, divorce leads to increased poverty and social exclusion for themselves, their families, and their children. This may result in their resorting to sex work as a strategy for survival and a coping mechanism for poverty.²⁴ The use of birth control methods is low among Roma (10 per cent) and abortion rates are high.²⁵

“*Once the girl has her menarche, she is perceived as a woman, now ready to get married.*” (Child rights advocate)

While poverty is a major predictor of child marriage among Roma, their values, beliefs, and attitudes towards what is considered honourable, moral, and pure are important as well. Physical growth is considered an indicator of the readiness to enter marriage, rather than the child's actual age. Parents worry that once a child has reached puberty, he or she will begin dating and enter into a sexual relationship. Parents will arrange a marriage to ensure that the girl does not lose her virginity out of wedlock, and to avoid the shame that would be brought onto the family's honour if this were to happen. In many cases, parents force their daughter to marry the boy she is dating.

Child marriage among Roma affects boys as well as girls. Two types of child marriages are common in Roma communities. The most frequent are arranged marriages, as soon as the child is considered ready to marry (about 12-14 in females and 14-16 in males). The second type is marriage by elopement, where the couple decides to marry without their parents' approval. Roma marriages are rarely registered

The Family Code states that in case of children born to girls under 18, 'the minor mother may recognise the maternity of the child in the civil registry office'.²⁶ However, children born into Roma child marriages

are usually not registered, or are registered as the offspring of the wife's parents or grandparents.²⁷ While this makes it possible for children born into child marriages to obtain identity documents, and to access public services, especially health and education, it serves to conceal the fact that the child has been born into an illegal, child marriage.

“There are no good things about getting married [when] you are a child. We made a mistake by getting married this way. One feels regret afterwards. We were young, did not think much of it.”
(Roma child spouse, age 14)

Child marriage is not common in all Roma communities in Albania. It is mostly found among more marginalised communities, who speak only Romani and are organised in big, extended families. Discrimination against them follows two axes: the attitude of the majority Albanian population, and the legal and policy environment, which does not consider the specific needs of this group.

Roma child spouses usually continue the cycle of poverty into which they were born and as their marriages are illegal, it is difficult for them to continue their education, and to secure adequate housing or employment. Child marriages often do not last, and a couple may separate and soon after remarry.

Responses to child marriage

Sexuality education introduced in school curriculum. NGOs working with socially excluded communities report that introducing sexuality education into the compulsory school curriculum is useful for raising awareness. NGO activists have attended and facilitated classroom teaching to support teachers in raising awareness on sexuality education and family planning issues. However, this type of intervention is effective only for children who attend school. Roma children in particular cannot be targeted through school only, as they tend to drop out before completing compulsory education. Therefore, other types of intervention are needed to reach out to children who have dropped out of school and inform them about sexual and reproductive health issues.

Community-based interventions. Community-based interventions have brought some positive results in Albania through engaging health mediators and community leaders who gave their support. However, they are challenged by the complex economic and social issues facing the people with whom they work, as well as the community's attitudes and reluctance to engage, and the lack of a systematic approach.

Targeting children in marriage. Another type of intervention involves working directly with street children, some of whom are the offspring of child marriages themselves, and at the same time, working with their parents and providing them with information on parenting practices, child development, and family planning.

Key points (general)

Although legally, marriage can only be contracted by two persons over the age of 18, children enter into marriages before that age. The law does not foresee what actions should be taken in these cases, beyond potential prosecution for sexual intercourse with a minor below the age of 14, or forced sexual intercourse with a minor aged 14-18.

Child marriage has not been addressed directly as an advocacy issue by NGOs, government agencies, and/or Roma NGOs. They have focused mostly on child labour and exploitation, protection from violence, and school dropout rates, under the assumption that these are the main risks to children.

There is a lack of accurate statistical data on child marriages.

Key points (Roma-specific)

Socio-economic problems facing Roma are complex and interrelated. They include: lack of schooling, lack of employment, poor housing, unregistered children and adults, and lack of access to health services.

Acceptance of child marriage is embedded in the values of young people and adults. The belief that child marriage is necessary to preserve honour cannot be changed by imposing other values, e.g. that women's health and schooling are more important.

Awareness of family planning methods and reproductive health remain low among Roma in child marriages.

Quotes (general)

Apart from the age limit for marriage, the Albanian legislation does not stipulate any measure to prevent child marriages. Clear legal measures [need] to be taken, authorities [need to be] appointed for implementation, [and they] need to coordinate their actions. (NGO activist)

Quotes (Roma-specific)

Exclusion from the other parts of society and a fixation with the old model are the reasons for child marriages. Discontinuation of education is another. If the children would attend school regularly they would have more chances for a normal life cycle. (Roma NGO representative)

One way to identify cases is through reaching out to [school] dropouts and asking for the reason why they dropped out. However, it is difficult, because you never know for sure how many Roma children there are, since they may not be registered. (Child rights advocate)

It's a completely another thing, to target child marriages [among] Roma people. Very specific measures are needed. A whole plan is needed. You need to think about schooling, finding jobs, vocational training. It's another story from the child marriages in the majority community. (Government official)

Our people marry early. One cannot trust girls, because they can date someone or fall in love. It is better if they get married. (Female Roma child spouse, age 17)

It's the way they [Roma people] are raised [through] the generations. This is how their grandparents were raised. (NGO activist)

Roma community members have started to use family planning methods. Men are more resistant to using them. They don't want their wives to use family planning methods either. Therefore women are using them secretly, unbeknownst to their husbands. They are afraid of oral contraceptives, but they prefer injections which are administered once in several months. (NGO activist)

Data overview

Total population (2010 est.):	3,195,000 ²⁸
Life expectancy at birth (2010 est.):	77 ²⁹
Average life expectancy at birth for the period 2005-2008:	72.1 (males); 78.6 (females) ³⁰
Population under age 15 as of 2009:	23.4% (747,436 in total) ³¹
Population aged 15-19 years:	9.4% (301,266 in total) ³²
Population below national income poverty line:	12.4% ³³
Unemployment rate (2009):	13.8% ³⁴
Youth literacy ratio (female rate as a percentage of male rate, ages 15-25) (2010):	100% ³⁵
Health expenditure per capita per year (2010)	US \$241 ³⁶
Main ethnic groups:	Albanians, Greeks, Macedonians, Montenegrin, Vlachs, Roma, Balkan Egyptians ³⁷
Main religions:	Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Bektashi ³⁸
Main languages:	Albanian ³⁹

Child marriage statistics

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this section are taken from the 2008-2009 Demographic and Health Survey.⁴⁰

Average age at first marriage in 2008 was 23.1 for women and 28.1 for men.⁴¹

Table 1. Marriages by bride's age (2008)⁴² and groom's age (2008)⁴³

Total number of marriages in 2008	Bride's age (years)		Groom's age (years)	
	Under 15	Up to 19	Under 15	Up to 19
21,290	0 (0%)	5,945 (27.2%)	0 (0%)	237 (1.1%)

Table 2. Percentage of women/men married before the age of 18, by age group (2008-2009)

Age	% of women married before the age of 18	% of men married before the age of 18
15-19	n/a	n/a
20-24	9.6	0.0
25-29	14.0	1.6
30-34	12.1	0.5
35-39	7.5	1.2
40-44	8.2	0.6
45-49	7.0	0.9
Total	9.4	0.8

Table 3. Percentage of women/men aged 15-19 currently in union, by age group (2008-2009)

Age	% of women 15-19 married/in union	% of men 15-19 married/in union
15-19	7.4	1.0

The available data indicates that the number of child marriages was lower among persons born prior to the mid-1970s, compared to those whose adolescence coincided with the country's transition (early 1990s) from a communist regime to a market economy (persons aged 25-34 at the time of the 2008-2009 Demographic and Household Survey). According to the same sources the number of child marriages among persons born in the last two decades shows a declining trend.

Significantly more women than men were married before the age of 18, or were aged 15-19 years and currently in union. While almost one in ten women aged 20-49 included in the DHS contracted marriage before the age of 18, fewer than 1 per cent of men did the same. It appears from the DHS that women and men in urban areas tend to marry later compared to their peers in rural areas while both women and men in urban Tirana exhibit a tendency to postpone marriage, compared to the rest of the population.⁴⁴ The prevalence of child marriages was greater among men and women who had only completed primary education or less, and those belonging to the lowest, second, and middle wealth quintiles.

Age-specific fertility rate per 1,000 women for the age group 15-19 years is 17.⁴⁵

Table 4. Live births by mother's age (2008)⁴⁶

Total number of live births in 2008	Mother's age
	15-19
36,251	1,805 (5%)

Notes and references

- 1 A child is 'every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), available at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> (accessed 29 May 2012).
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- 3 The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, (1998), Article 54, available at: http://www.mpcs.gov.al/dpshb/images/stories/files/Kushtetuta_E_Republikes_se_Shqiperise.pdf (accessed 18 June 2012).
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- 12 Ministria e Shëndetësisë, available at: <http://www.moh.gov.al/index.php?module=2&citim=449> (accessed 31 July 2012).
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- 14 *Ibid.*, p.58.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.62.
- 16 World Health Organization (2012), Regional Office for Europe. European Health for All Database (updated July 2012), available at: <http://data.euro.who.int/hfad/> (accessed 6 September 2012).
- 17 Albanian Children Alliance (2012), 'Brief Report on Major Issues of Concern for the Situation of Children's Rights in Albania', Albanian Children Alliance, Tirana, p.9.
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- 19 De Soto H., S. Beddies, and I. Gedeshi (2005) 'Roma and Egyptians in Albania: From social exclusion to social inclusion', The World Bank, Washington D.C., cited in Centre for Economic and Social Studies (2011) 'Mapping Roma Children in Albania', Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Tirana, p.6.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 21 De Soto H., S. Beddies, and I. Gedeshi (2005) *op. cit.*, p.28.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.28.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.28.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.33.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 26 The Family Code of the Republic of Albania (2004), Article #176, available at: http://www.minfin.gov.al/minfin/pub/3_3_2_kodi_familjes_1942_1.pdf (accessed 18 August 2012).
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- 32 *Ibid.*
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- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 UNICEF (2010), *op. cit.*
- 36 World Bank (2012) 'Albania', available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.PCAP> (accessed 9 July 2012).
- 37 Centre for Economic and Social Studies (2011), *op. cit.*, p.5.
- 38 INSTAT, Institute of Public Health (2010), *op. cit.*, p.1.
- 39 The Constitution of the Republic of Albania (1998), Article 14, available at: http://www.mpcs.gov.al/dpshb/images/stories/files/Kushtetuta_E_Republikes_se_Shqiperise.pdf (accessed 18 June 2012).
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- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 INSTAT, Institute of Public Health (2010), *op. cit.* p.90.
- 45 INSTAT, Institute of Public Health (2010), *op. cit.*, p.53. Age-specific fertility rate is expressed as the number of births to women in a given age group per 1,000 women in that age group.
- 46 INSTAT. Live births by age group of mother for the years 1990-2008, available at: www.instat.gov.al (accessed 18 June 2012).

Key messages

When a girl delays marriage, everyone benefits. A girl who marries later is more likely to stay in school, work, and reinvest her income into her family. Crucially, a girl who marries later is more empowered to choose whether, when, and how many children to have. When investments in girls are made, everyone benefits: their families, communities, and most importantly, the girls themselves.

There is a huge cost to inaction on child marriage. It is time for policy-makers, parliamentarians, communities, families, and young people to address this issue head on. Let's deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. Let girls be girls.

Child marriage violates girls' rights, denies them of their childhood, disrupts their education, jeopardises their health, and limits their opportunities. No cultural, religious, or economic rationale for child marriage can possibly justify the damage these marriages do to young girls and their potential. A girl should have the right to choose whom she marries and when. Parents want the best for their children, and need to support their girls' choices and decisions to marry.

UNFPA is working with governments and partners at all levels of society to deliver comprehensive programmes addressing the needs of vulnerable and married girls, and providing access to livelihoods, social support, and health programmes, including sexual and reproductive health. The ultimate aim is to end child marriage in this generation and to shift cultural attitudes to protect girls' rights.

What must be done to break the silence on child marriage?

Bring greater attention to the situations faced by married girls and girls at risk of child marriage, and advocate strongly for their rights. Child marriage is not good for girls or development. The world cannot afford to see the rights, health, and potential of thousands of girls being squandered each day.

Promote investments that build up adolescent girls' capabilities and skills, especially education. Girls' education, particularly post-primary and secondary, is the single most important factor associated with age at marriage. Girls especially need social support and access to programmes that provide life skills, literacy, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health information and services, such as family planning and life-saving maternal health services.

Invest in adolescent girls!

Investments should provide platforms for vulnerable girls to develop life skills and critical health knowledge, obtain access to social services including sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gain vocational and employable skills for work, and have access to friends and mentors.

Married girls need special targeted strategies that provide access to education, life skills, health including SRH and HIV prevention, and opportunities to participate fully in society. Maternal health programmes need to be reoriented with dedicated outreach for the youngest, first-time mothers, to enable them to use antenatal, essential and emergency obstetric care, and post-delivery services.

Acknowledgements and contacts

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