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The evolution of family and its impact on the increase of marriage age: Analysis of needs for psychosocial services

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Abstract

The 21st-century family is undergoing significant changes that have evolved over the years. This evolution has both positive and negative implications, particularly concerning its structure, developmental stages, role changes, growth, and psychosocial needs. This study aims to analyze the impact of family evolution on the increase in marriage age in Albania, focusing on the structure and model of family life over the past decades. It also examines the need for psychosocial services in the context of social transition.

To understand changes in family and marriage dynamics in Albania, the study used a wide array of methods, including interviews with individuals over 45 years old. The findings reveal a rapid transformation in family structure and an increase in the average age of marriage, accompanied by new social and economic challenges for young people.

Considering these changes, the study underscores the necessity for psychosocial services, highlighting the crucial interaction between family evolution and society's responses to emerging needs. The results show a growing demand for these services, underscoring the importance of recognizing the roles of social workers and psychologists in providing treatment and support to families and couples within this evolving social context.

Keywords: Psychosocial Needs; Family; Social Transition; Marriage

1. Introduction

The evolution of the family is an ongoing process that includes changes in society and culture. Since the 1800s, with the emergence of the "Welfare State" and the rise of industrialization, changes in economic, political, and ideological realms have brought about significant transformations in how families are organized and function. These changes have been reflected in family activities and relationships, marking an important period in the evolution of family life in modern history. From a chronological perspective, from the Middle Ages to the present day, advances in social policy and changes in industry, economy, politics, and ideologies, as highlighted by Realini (2012), have had a major impact on the structure and life of the family.

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Being born into a family is a universal experience, but choosing to form a family in any situation can reflect responsibility. This distinction underscores a key difference between inheriting a family and intentionally setting up one. While those born into a family may meet unforeseen challenges, opting to set up a family requires a higher degree of responsibility and determination. This is because the commitments and duties of a new family are intentional and well-considered. This viewpoint emphasizes the crucial role and influence of individual decisions and actions in the establishment and maintenance of a family.

In the Albanian context, the family is an entity that has changed over time, influenced by global forces and internal dynamics in the realms of politics, economics, and culture (Ngjela et al., 2022). Xhakolli et al. (2014) emphasize that the primary driver of these changes in family structure is the Western world, which has later had a broadening effect on other parts of the globe, gradually influencing all countries. This gradual process reflects a pronounced evolution in how families are organized and function, making this topic one that mirrors the changes and challenges of family life in the current global context.

In Albania, the increase in marriage age is a noticeable trend, although consistent and detailed data are scarce or difficult to find. This situation is clear despite challenges in accessing and obtaining detailed and published data. Statistics on the rise in marriage age show a significant increase, particularly among males, with exponential growth observed in recent years, notably since 2014, according to data from statistical institutions (Topalli, 2015). These trends are also mirrored in neighboring countries, as Bonu (2015) notes about Italy, where the average marriage age increased from 32 years in 2002 to 34 years by 2012. Analyses and studies on this increase in marriage age highlight various factors influencing this phenomenon, including education, career development, economic situation, migration, religious influence, and other factors affecting the timing of marriage.

The increase in marriage age has led scholars worldwide to focus on this phenomenon. Various studies, such as Kelan's (2016), have found a strong link between marriage age and economic situation. In another study, Amoako et al. (2020) highlight that the economy is one of the major issues influencing young people's feelings about marriage age. This trend is consistent with the findings of Gurrentz (2018), who in his research found that full-time workers with average annual earnings and home ownership are more likely to marry.

In the context of social and economic changes, as highlighted by Realini (2012), families today feel less protected by the state and more vulnerable to market forces. This dynamic is not only a result of global changes but also of local cultural, economic, and social factors. These changes have brought about significant impacts on the structure and functioning of families, leading to a lower number of marriages in the 20th century compared to earlier periods.

According to INSTAT (2018), emigration has been a key element in demographic changes in Albania from 2001 to 2011. This process has contributed to a considerable decrease in the population and a change in the demographic structure, particularly an aging population. Initially, the emigration trend was more gendered, with a high majority of young males emigrating after the 1990s, while in recent years there has been an increase in the number of females leaving. This marks a shift in the dynamics of emigration and its impact on Albania's population structure.

Realini's analysis (2012) suggests that "Today's family is increasingly less protected by the state and more at risk from the market," reflecting an important reality in the transformation of family structure in the modern era. This statement shows a declining trend in the influence and protection offered by state institutions to families, leaving them more vulnerable to pressures and risks posed by market and economic factors. This situation can be linked to processes of economic liberalization and increased market influence, which have brought new challenges to the stability and protection of family life.

The level of stress has increased widely and has affected other aspects of psychological and emotional health, causing disruptions in family functioning. The demand for psychosocial services is rising, making it an increasingly important need in our society. The role of psychologists and social workers becomes vital in addressing and managing these challenges, becoming key actors in supporting the well-being and stability of families. According to Dragoti (2009), social work includes aid provided to individuals, groups, and communities to enhance or restructure their capacity to function within society. The Ministry of Health, in its context, evaluates the psychological and mental functioning of individuals and takes measures to improve or restore their psychological health in relation to the environment in which they live. This link between social work and the health environment marks an important direction in caring for the well-being and integrity of individuals and families in our society.

A summary of various analyses and studies offers a broad description of intertwined changes in Albania's social, economic, and demographic dimensions (Sokoli, 2022). These aspects are closely interconnected and represent a

multidimensional reality in the Albanian social context. The increase in marriage age, as one of the phenomena experiencing growth, is among the key links to economic situation and the flow of emigration, deeply affecting family structure and society (Ngjela et al., 2022). The economic situation, in turn, is a key factor influencing the timing of marriage and the dynamics of marriages in Albania, reflecting a close relationship between individuals' well-being and the decisions they make about family life.

Demographic changes, in terms of population aging and its movement over time, also mark an important part of the country's social and economic landscape. These intersections and various connections highlight the importance of holistic analysis to understand complex interactions and their impact on society. Thus, themes such as marriage age, economic situation, emigration, and demographic changes are interconnected in different ways and have a significant impact on the structure and functioning of Albanian society, presenting a challenge that must be carefully and responsibly addressed in research and social policies in the country.

Objective

The aim of this paper is to discover and measure the factors influencing the increase in the marriage age in Albania, exploring individuals' opinions and feelings of changes in family structure and functioning, as well as the need for psychosocial services in this context. Other minor aims include:

- Finding the factors influencing the increase in the marriage age and measure the impact of each.
- Reflect on the most significant factors related to the country's economic, social, and cultural variables, and their interaction with the marriage process.
- Show changes in family structure and functionality, find general issues in this context, and their connection with psychosocial services.

Hypothesis

The increase in the age of marriage has an impact on the decline in the population, while individualism, postmodernism, and changes in family function and needs have a significant impact on cultural aspects and the recognition and expectation of psychosocial services for families and the community.

2. Methodology

The method used for conducting this research was methodological triangulation. This approach combined data collected from two sources: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. This combination provided a broader and deeper perspective on the topic under study, allowing the researchers to benefit from the advantages and strengths of each method.

2.1. Data Collection Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions divided into different sections, covering demographic data, feelings about marriage, and factors influencing the increase in marriage age. This structure enabled the measurement of various variables and helped the analysis of relationships among them to gather comprehensive information about the factors influencing marriage age.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by a specific set of themes and questions developed based on a literature review, providing a solid foundation for the conversation. The interview guide was designed to cover three main areas: demographic data, feelings about family during the past political system, and perceptions about changes and the role of psychosocial services.

2.2. Population and Sample

The population for this study included all individuals over the age of 18 who were unmarried. For the sample selection, a voluntary sampling method was used to facilitate access and address potential limitations during data collection and analysis. A total of 20 individuals were selected for interviews using purposive sampling, which allowed the researchers to choose participants who could best answer the research questions. The criteria for selecting individuals included being over 45 years old, married, and having lived in Albania during the beginning of the transition period.

2.3. Procedure Followed

Questionnaires were administered both physically and by phone. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted initially to find and correct any necessary changes. Following this, the main data collection was carried out, with a total of 180 questionnaires completed. Participants willingly agreed to fill out the questionnaires due to their interest in the research topic. Voluntary consent of participants was ensured, and confidentiality was supported throughout the research process.

Interviews were conducted in various environments such as workplaces, bars, and homes, ensuring suitable conditions for participants. Voluntary consent was obtained from each participant before conducting the interviews, adhering to ethical standards. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to compile comprehensive and correct research results. Participants were thanked for their contribution to the research process.

Students from the "Social Work" program at Logos University College, class of 2024, made a significant contribution to this research. Under the direction of student Armando Doda, collaborating students including Meribane Islami, Roel Islami, and Melina Meçaj rigorously help with interviews and questionnaires in predetermined field settings. They used the research space provided in the "Research Methods" course led by Dr. Prof. Xhulia Musta.

2.4. Limitations of the Research and Data Validity

The research results cannot provide a complete representation of the entire population due to several limitations that influenced the research process.

2.4.1. Sample Selection

The use of voluntary sampling introduced potential bias, as participants who volunteered may systematically differ from those who did not take part. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population.

2.4.2. Lack of Resources

Limited resources, both in terms of finances and personnel, constrained the scope and depth of the research. This may have affected the ability to collect more data or conduct more extensive analyses.

2.4.3. Time and Funding Constraints

Time and funding were limited, which affected the extent to which the research questions could be explored. This constraint may have restricted the number of participants or the breadth of data collection methods.

2.4.4. Other Similar Aspects

Other factors, such as access to specific groups or individuals, the quality of data collected, and unforeseen circumstances during data collection, also contributed to limitations in the research.

These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results of the research. While efforts were made to mitigate these constraints, they inevitably affected the validity and generalizability of the findings to the wider population.

2.5. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could aim to address these limitations by employing more rigorous sampling methods, securing other resources, and ensuring broader participation to enhance the robustness of the study. These improvements would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the increase in marriage age and the need for psychosocial services in Albanian society.

3. Results

The interviewee expressed a perspective that significant changes have occurred in families, particularly emphasizing the negative aspects of these transformations. They highlighted that in the past, family traditions and values were more stable, and people were more connected within a social unity. There was a sense that youth played an important role in preparing for the future and advancing society. However, nowadays, the interviewee sees a shift away from this unity and a strong movement of youth towards new values and behaviors. This new behavior has led to a decline in consistency and understanding of family traditions, leaving room for increased individualism and a lack of responsibility

towards shared values. As a result, the interviewee believes that families are no longer able to perceive and follow a clear path, with everyone instead pursuing their personal desires.

During the interviews conducted, some interviewees found key factors driving societal changes, highlighting elements such as loneliness, stress, and emigration, while viewing factors such as improved economic conditions and enhanced freedom more positively. Some expressed their views as follows:

"Economically, the situation seems better today, but stress has increased significantly."

"There has been a big change. For me, emigration and inequality have had a big impact. Successful people undervalue others."

"The most positive thing is the freedom and the opportunity for free communication."

These interview results reflect significant changes in Albanian society and individuals' feelings about the factors influencing these transformations. The assessments expressed by the interviewees show a feeling of fundamental changes in society, reflecting a deep awareness of the challenges and opportunities of contemporary times. In conclusion, this analysis of participant opinions contributes to a better understanding of social dynamics and finds areas where further efforts are needed for improvement.

Interviewees have expressed a low level of awareness of the term "psychosocial services," but some have knowledge about the role of psychologists, while their knowledge of social workers is very limited. They have expressed appreciation for social structures and have a certain understanding of the importance of the psychologist's role. Their responses reflect this lack of knowledge:

Some have heard little about "psychosocial services" and believe that this service is important to help individuals in times of pressure when they cannot solve problems themselves.

Another group does not know this term at all, telling they have only heard the name but lack sufficient knowledge about it.

These responses highlight the need for greater awareness and information about the role and importance of psychosocial services, emphasizing the benefits and aid they can provide for the well-being and treatment of individuals in society.

Interviewees show a positive appreciation for the role and aid provided by psychosocial services, recognizing its importance. However, some express doubts about our society's readiness to use this service. In this context, two interviewees expressed the following:

One emphasized that the service is necessary but believes that in rural areas, the need for it is not as clear.

Another expressed skepticism, saying that the service does not work well in our society, mentioning that it is not part of the culture, and that physical distance may be a barrier to its use.

The interview results highlight a general awareness of the importance of psychosocial services in our society. However, the changes and challenges in the acceptance and use of these services emphasize the need for further dialogue and cooperation at the societal and political levels to ensure better access and effectiveness in providing social and emotional aid to the community.

One of the participants in the interview shared their experience with psychosocial services while living abroad as an emigrant. They expressed that these services' function and fulfill an important role. They emphasized the importance of social aid and considered it essential for the immigrant community. In a context where people face significant challenges and changes in their lives, they emphasized that setting up a minimum standard for these services is necessary, providing support and aid to those living away from their country of origin. This perspective underscores the importance of social services in supporting immigrant communities and addressing their fundamental needs for well-being and adaptation in their new environment.

3.1. Analyses of the questionnaires

From data analyses these are some of the most relevant outcomes:

3.1.1. Do you see the rise in the marriage age as a problem? The answer “No”

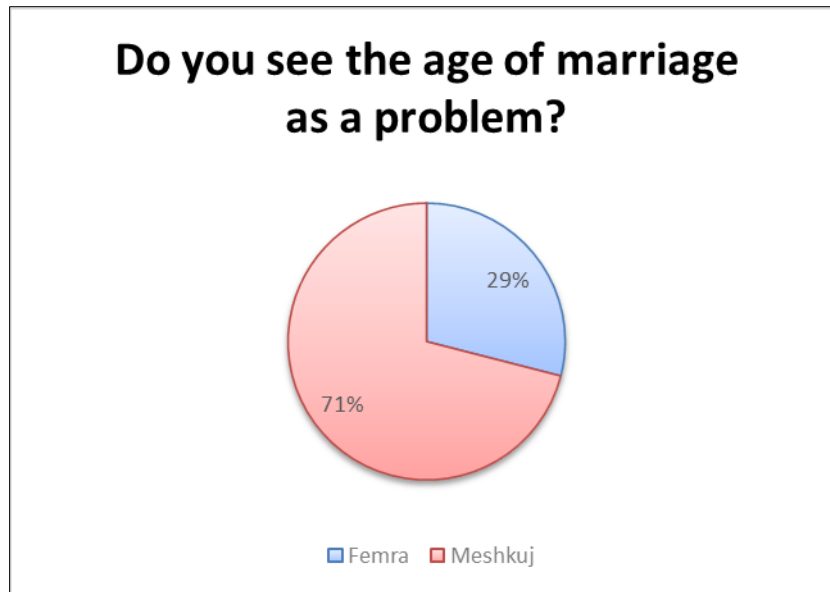


Figure 1 Man (in blue) and women (in red) about the rise of the age of marriage.

The results concerning the increase in the marriage age are intriguing and reveal a clear divergence in feelings between women and men. Most women, 71%, express that the increase in the marriage age is not a problem for them, while only 29% consider it a problem. In contrast, men show contrasting feelings, with 59% considering the increase in the marriage age a problem, while 41% do not see it as a problem. This gender-based difference in feelings highlights an interesting aspect of society, where men and women hold different perspectives on this issue.

These results suggest the potential for a deeper analysis to understand the motivations and reasons behind these divergent feelings. Additionally, this situation opens the door to further research that may help uncover the reasons for women's indifference towards the marriage age and address issues related to this phenomenon in our society.

3.1.2. My current situation does not favor me to seriously consider marriage

The survey results reveal an interesting picture about feelings and concerns of individuals about the economy and marriage in Albanian society. The graph depicting these results highlights a clear difference in feelings between women and men on this issue. According to the survey, women express greater concern about the economy, with 57% of them seeing the economy as a hindrance to seriously considering marriage, compared to 47% of men who share this view. This difference in feelings underscores a noticeable gender divide in mindset about involvement in marriage, leaving room for reflection and in-depth analysis on the socio-economic development of women in contemporary Albania.

This intriguing result raises important questions about women's economic independence, gender equality, and the impact of economic factors on personal choices and decisions such as marriage. In this context, research opportunities are broad, including the analysis of different paths of socio-economic development for women, policies that can promote gender equality and economic independence, as well as the impact of these factors on the structure and functioning of families and society in general.

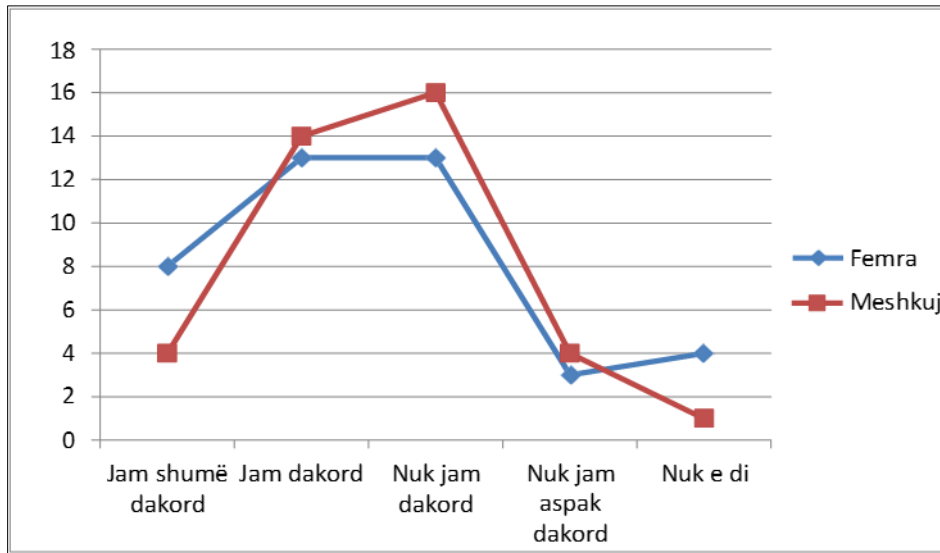


Figure 2 Elements favoring taking the initiative for marriage (In Blue women’s response, in red, men responses). The answers are presented from top-down, in a Likert Scale, from the highest (very much agree), to the lowest (not agree at all).

3.1.3. In your opinion, is emigration a phenomenon that delays the age of marriage?

The results of the analysis indicate that emigration is perceived as a key factor significantly influencing the age of marriage. A majority, 76% of participants in the survey, express that emigration is a driving force that delays marriage. This reflects a deep interaction between social processes and the economic realities of emigration, which have a profound impact not only on the demographic structure of a country but also on its economic, social, and cultural dynamics and dependencies.

The departure of many individuals from their country causes significant changes in the community and society, including alterations in social relationships, expectations of family life, and attitudes towards marriage. Analyzing the impact of emigration on the age of marriage is thus crucial for understanding demographic and social changes occurring within a broader societal context.

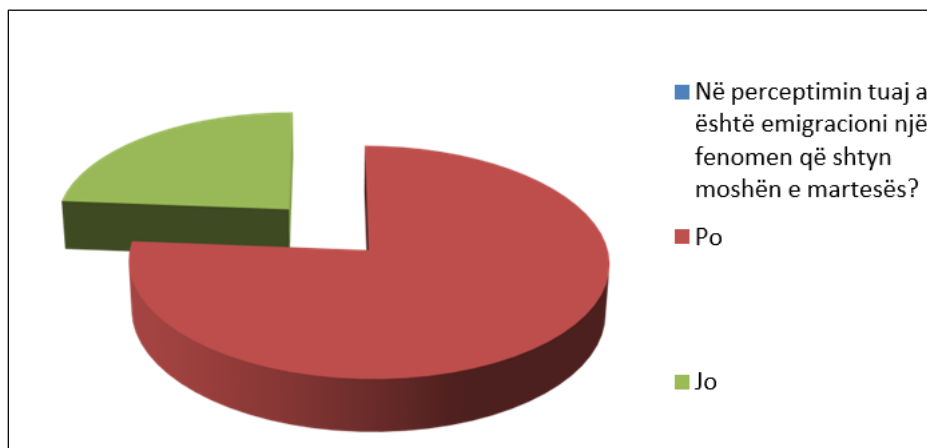


Figure 3 The emigration as a key factor in postponing the age of the marriage. “Yes” responses (in red).

Emigration is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a process that has profound repercussions on the structure and functioning of society. It increases the complexity of challenges and the diverse needs that must be addressed in policies and strategies to cope with these transformations in our society.

3.1.4. What would be the ideal age to get married according to you?

The survey results present an insightful perspective on the thoughts and preferences of participants about the ideal age for marriage and the influence of education in this regard. About 74% of participants express the opinion that the ideal age for marriage is between 26 and 30 years old, finding this age group as the most suitable period to enter marital relationships. Conversely, a small percentage, 12.5%, favors a younger age range of 18-25 years, while a similar percentage, 11%, prefers the ages between 31 and 40 years. Only 2.5% of participants express that ages over 40 are ideal for marriage, showing a general preference for a specific average age as most suitable for marriage.

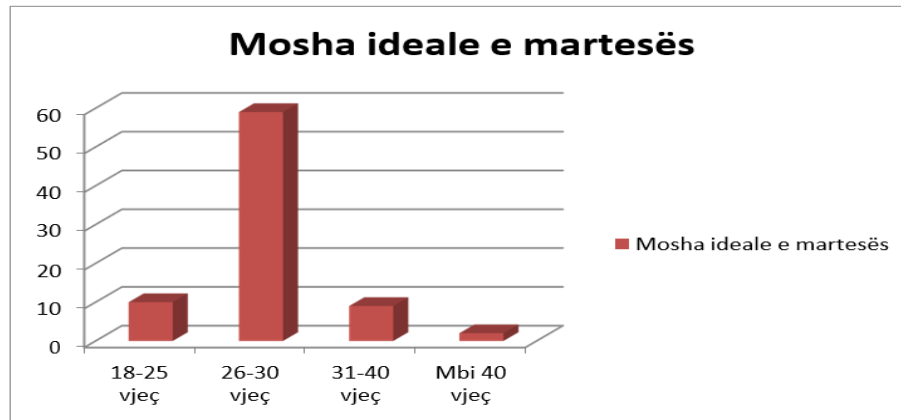


Figure 4 The ideal age for the marriage

About the influence of education on the age of marriage, the data shows that 74% of participants agree that education delays the age of marriage. This result suggests that higher levels of education are often associated with longer expectations and plans to marry, reflecting a deliberate and structured influence of education in deciding individuals' marriage age. This finding could spur further studies on the link between education and personal decisions about marriage, enhancing our understanding of the complex factors influencing this social and personal challenge.

4. Discussion

The increase in the marriage age is a phenomenon that can be interpreted differently by individuals and social groups in general. Some may see it as a problem, while others may interpret it as a natural change in modern society. Here are some perspectives on this issue:

4.1. Positive Perspective

In industrialized societies, the increase in the marriage age can be seen as a sign of individual freedom and personal development. People are choosing to wait longer to marry, viewing marriage as a more responsible and significant decision.

Higher levels of education and workforce participation are often associated with delaying marriage. Individuals are focusing more on their careers and economic stability before committing to marriage.

Delaying marriage allows individuals to mature emotionally and financially, potentially leading to more stable and fulfilling marriages.

4.2. Negative Perspective

In cultures where early marriage is a significant social norm, the increase in the marriage age may be viewed as a challenge to family stability and population growth. Delayed marriage can contribute to demographic issues such as declining birth rates and an increase in the average age of parents, which may affect fertility rates.

4.3. Cultural and Social Influence Perspective

The increase in the marriage age can be seen as reflecting changes in social norms and values, showing broader social and cultural developments. Changes in family structure and roles, including the emergence of extended youth, may

reflect deeper societal shifts towards greater individual adaptability and autonomy. The feeling of whether the increase in the marriage age a problem is or not varies significantly across different cultural and social contexts.

Positive Views: Individuals in industrialized societies may view the trend positively, seeing it as a natural consequence of societal progress and individual empowerment.

Negative Views: In societies where, early marriage is traditionally valued, there may be concerns about the impact on family structures and cultural continuity.

Cultural and Social Influence: The evolving roles and expectations within families and communities may influence how the delay in marriage is perceived and understood.

Therefore, whether the increase in the marriage age is considered a problem or a positive development is subjective and context dependent. It reflects broader cultural, social, and economic dynamics within a society.

Elements favoring taking the initiative for marriage could be:

- **Emotional and financial stability:** Emotional and financial insecurity can affect the decision to marry. A stable state in these aspects may favor taking this initiative.
- **Personal and professional preparation:** Good personal and professional preparation can improve marriage prospects.

Moreover, other secondary elements that could favor the initiative for the commitment of the marriage are:

- Emotional readiness and stability.
- Financial stability and security.
- Personal and professional fulfillment.
- Support and encouragement from family and friends.
- Cultural or societal expectations.
- A desire for companionship and partnership.

The research aims to understand individuals' feelings and opinions about the evolution of family dynamics and the impact of psychosocial services on their lives. Participants have highlighted significant changes in family composition and functions, expressing concerns about negative shifts, particularly related to emigration, inequality, and increased stress levels. Conversely, the economy and freedom are seen as factors that positively influence family stability and development, signaling a shift in feelings towards a more proactive approach in addressing challenges and changes in family life.

An important aspect of this study is the identification of gaps and deficiencies in knowledge among participants about psychosocial services. Overall, there is a complexity of gaps in understanding and experience with these services, showing a clear need for improvement in communication and awareness about their importance and role in enhancing the lives of individuals and families.

The conclusions drawn from the interviews underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach in addressing family changes and societal challenges. The necessity for close collaboration between social structures and psychosocial services becomes clear in navigating the complex affects our society faces. These findings are crucial steps towards advancing and strengthening policies and practices that support the well-being and stability of families and individuals in an increasingly diverse and challenging environment.

During the interviews, efforts were made to deepen the understanding of young Albanians' feelings about factors influencing the increasing age of marriage, and to analyze the interactions between demographic variables and socio-economic conditions. The research results reveal several fundamental discoveries:

Firstly, there is a new cultural trend among the youth influenced by Western values and perspectives. Education before marriage and family creation significantly affects the decision to marry. Economic insecurity and the continuous phenomenon of emigration are noted as influencing factors in marriage decisions. One of the aspects noted is the lack of economic security and its connection to marriage decisions, as well as the impact of emigration as a continuous phenomenon that concerns individuals.

Another important finding is the empowerment, equality, and independence of women in the context of marriage. Although a considerable percentage (44%) see the increase in the marriage age as a problem, the right to choose marriage is considered a fundamental individual right. Therefore, further investigation into the socio-economic factors influencing this feeling is crucial.

On the other hand, about 49% of participants express that they would find it easier to decide to marry if the state offered soft loans for housing. This connection between economic security and marriage decision-making underscores a key aspect of the research. Baby bonuses also have a positive impact, although on a smaller scale compared to other factors. To achieve these goals, it is important to develop supportive policies for young people and new couples. This includes not only examining the increase in the marriage age as a phenomenon but also making broader efforts to keep population vitality and aid in the country's economic growth by addressing the challenges and opportunities related to marriage and family life in general.

5. Conclusion

- Further research is needed to delve deeper into the issues found in this study, including the challenges and opportunities related to the increasing age of marriage and the impact of socio-economic factors.
- It is important to develop social policies that refocus attention on the family and take measures to strengthen supportive institutions for families, including economic support and social services.
- A key aspect is the promotion of psychosocial services and improving access to them for all, considering this service as a significant need to improve the social and emotional well-being of individuals.
- Crucial for future policies and research is deepening the understanding of the cultural trends among young people and their impact on the conception of marriage, including the analysis of Western-influenced values and approaches, as well as the connection of these trends with socio-economic factors.
- Priority should be given to creating policies that promote pre-marital education and empower the economic position of young people, considering the direct link between economic insecurity and marriage decisions.

The study provides a rich perspective on the feelings and influences related to the increasing age of marriage in the Albanian context. The results show a significant concern about the social and economic challenges that influence marriage decisions, such as economic insecurity, the effects of emigration, and cultural trends among young people. Special focus should be on policies that help secure soft housing loans for young people, based on the positive feelings of participants in the research about this economic incentive and its facilitation of marriage decisions. Recommendations for further research and supportive policies emphasize the need for in-depth analysis of these factors and the development of policies that promote education and economic empowerment for young people, as well as improving access to psychosocial services. This summary underscores the importance of an integrated approach to addressing challenges and deciding concrete measures that will help improve conditions for marriage and overall social well-being.

Compliance with ethical standard

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be shown.

Statement of Ethical Approval

The present study received Ethical Approval by the Ethics Committee of Wisdom University College.

Author Contribution

JM and Eb conceived the study. DB and EK designed the study. LL and AI collected data and worked on tables and figures. DB also contributed with the Ethical Approval, EK conducted the analyses with JM. EB contributed to the database. AI

wrote the first draft with the help of LL. All authors significantly took part in interpreting results, revising the manuscript, and approved its final version.

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