



Sub-Saharan Africa is home to thousands of ethnic groups with distinct languages and customs. The present report cannot do justice to this cultural diversity, which greatly complicates attempts to generalize about African culture or beliefs. Nevertheless, African societies share some traditional social and cultural practices affecting family structures, childbearing and rearing, and sexual behavior. Moreover, across the region – and especially in urban areas – social and economic changes have had considerable impact on Africa’s traditional culture of high fertility. In many cases these changes were first stimulated by colonial rule and have accelerated with the region’s increasing integration into the world economy. The rapid growth of cities, economic pressures and gains in child survival are also weakening the traditional preference for large families.

In many parts of Africa, however, large families are still the norm. Traditional family structures, the pronatalist views of men, and lack of educational and economic opportunities for women continue to reinforce the desire for large families. Economic pressures have heightened demands on women’s time, and their increasing reliance on children to perform housework may also be working indirectly to keep fertility high.

Family and Community Institutions

Although traditional African customs and beliefs sustaining high fertility are eroding, they nonetheless remain strong, especially in rural areas. These traditions evolved when children were highly valued for their contribution to farm production and many did not survive to adulthood. Large families were considered essential to ensure that enough children survived to continue the family line and fulfill important religious, social and cultural obligations.

In many African countries, the extended family remains a strong

institution and helps to spread the responsibility of childrearing. Biological parents rarely absorb the full costs of raising their own child – thus reinforcing the tendency towards larger families. In West Africa, it is common for close relatives and friends to serve as foster parents or share child-care tasks; in Liberia, for example, children spend an average of one-third of their childhood living away from their mothers.

Relatively weak ties between African husbands and wives are also thought to contribute to high fertility. In many countries, spouses commonly live apart and keep separate incomes and budgets; mothers assume most of the costs of raising children. In countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Namibia, women head over 30 percent of households. Under these conditions, a wife may want many children as a way to maintain the bond with her husband. Moreover, the husband and other relatives – who receive much of the benefit but share little of the costs of having children – are more likely to prefer large families.

Marriage Patterns

Patterns of marriage and other relationships in which sexual activity occurs are important not only for their impact on fertility but also for their effect on the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs. Marriage in Africa takes on different meanings depending on the society. In many African cultures, it is common for men and women to move in and out of relationships. Recent surveys show that up to a third of women in their 40s have remarried following divorce or widowhood.

Since virtually all African women marry and most marry young, they are sexually active and exposed to the risk of pregnancy for a large portion of their lives. In most African countries, half of all women marry by age 18; women in rural areas tend to marry even earlier. Although age at marriage is beginning to rise in some African

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countries, for example Liberia and Senegal, there does not appear to be an appreciable decline in early child-bearing, possibly because more single women are becoming mothers.

Polygyny – the practice of a man taking more than one wife – continues as a common arrangement, with the proportion of women in polygynous relationships reaching 50 percent in some West African countries. In addition, many men who have only one wife have less formal relationships with other women, thus raising the risk of STD transmission.

The impact of polygyny on fertility, however, is unclear. Women in polygynous relationships have the same and sometimes fewer children

than do women in monogamous marriages, perhaps because polygyny facilitates the traditional practice of sexual abstinence after childbirth and may also reduce the frequency of intercourse for a woman. On the other hand, there is some evidence that polygyny may indirectly raise the fertility of women in monogamous unions; a woman in such a union may accommodate her husband's preference for more children for fear he will divorce her or take a second wife.

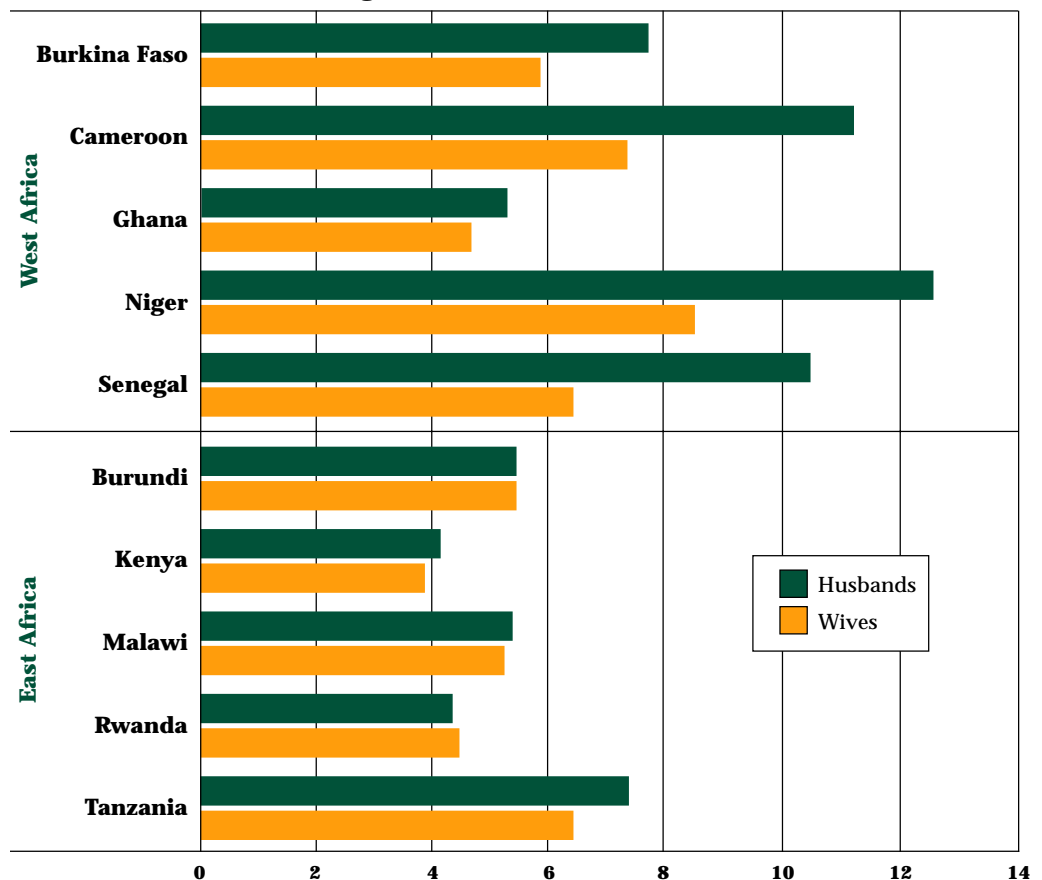
Breastfeeding and Postpartum Abstinence

In the absence of widespread use of modern contraception, prolonged

FIGURE 8

Desired Number of Children Selected Countries in West and East Africa

Average Desired Number of Children



SOURCE: Alex Chika Ezeh, Michka Seroussi, and Hendrik Ruggers. *Men's Fertility, Contraceptive Use, and Reproductive Preferences*. Demographic and Health Surveys Comparative Studies, no. 18. Calverton, MD: Macro International, Inc., 1996.

breastfeeding, which can provide contraceptive protection by suppressing ovulation, and sexual abstinence following childbirth have been important natural checks on fertility. These traditional customs help to delay the next pregnancy, benefiting the health of both mother and child. On average, African mothers breastfeed their babies for 21 months; however, the degree to which women breastfeed exclusively – which affects the contraceptive and health benefits of the practice – varies considerably across the region. Similarly, postpartum abstinence averages one to two years in West Africa, while in most of eastern and southern Africa three months is the norm. For the region overall, the duration of both breastfeeding and postpartum abstinence appears to have stabilized since the 1970s, after falling since the early 20th century.

Male Views on Reproduction

Male attitudes towards childbearing and contraception vary significantly across Africa. In East Africa, men and women share similar family size preferences and attitudes towards family planning, a situation that is typical in most of the developing world. In West Africa, however, views of men and women are markedly different. Men in four of five West African countries want between two and four more children than their wives. In Cameroon, Mali and Senegal, fewer than half of men and fewer men than women approve of family planning. By contrast, in East Africa, with the exception of Tanzania, over 90 percent of men and women favor family planning.

Spousal communication on reproductive matters is rare. Most women have never discussed family size preferences with their husbands. Again, this problem is more acute in West than in East Africa.

Men in many African societies have a greater say than women in

childbearing decisions. Thus, large differences in family size preferences such as those seen in West Africa may help to explain low levels of contraceptive use. There is, nevertheless, encouraging evidence that these attitudes are not immutable. In Ghana, between 1988 and 1993, the expansion of family planning services and rising contraceptive use were accompanied by a large drop in the number of children men say they want and by increased male support for family planning.

Access to Education

In Africa, as elsewhere, a woman's education is one of the most important determinants of family size. Countries such as Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, which have invested heavily in education, have been the first to experience falling fertility. An African woman with some secondary education has more than two fewer children on average than a woman with no schooling. Girls who stay in school are more likely to marry later, have greater options in the job market and to have a greater say in household and reproductive decisions.

As more girls move through secondary school, age at marriage is likely to increase and fertility to decrease. So far, however, few African women have gone beyond primary education. Indeed, in many countries, more than half of women have never attended school. Illiteracy rates in Africa are decreasing, but remain among the highest in the world; one third of all men and half of all women cannot read or write. The male-female literacy gap is widening, and 62 percent of all illiterates are women, up from 60 percent in 1980.

Furthermore, girls have a harder time than boys gaining access to education; about 10 million more boys than girls attend school. The solid progress in girls' education since independence is at a standstill. During the

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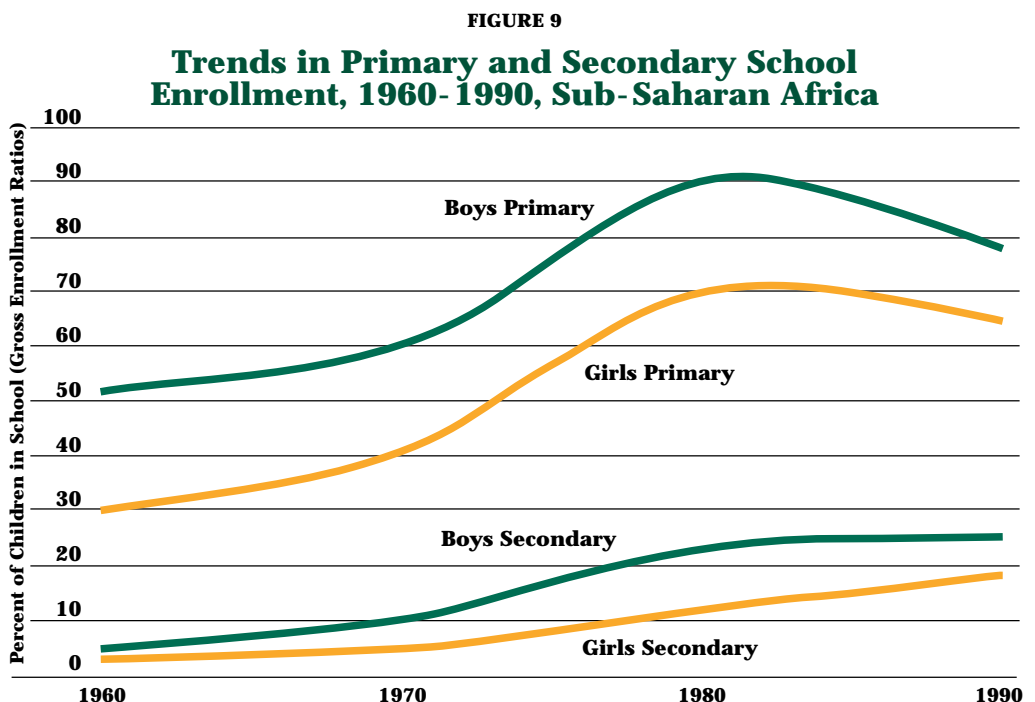
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1980s, school enrollment rates for girls fell in several African countries, and by more than 10 percent in Madagascar, Nigeria and Tanzania. By 1994, girls' primary school enrollment had crept back up to 67 percent – roughly the same as in 1980, but still far below the developing country average of 93 percent. Girls' secondary enrollment has risen slowly to about 20 percent, only half the average for the developing world.

Erosion in girls' education has occurred within a wider educational crisis in Africa. Government spending on education fell from \$41 per capita in 1980 to \$32 in 1994, while increasing by greater than 50 percent for the developing world as a whole. A combination of falling incomes and rising school costs has put education out of the reach of many poor families. The cost of education is also higher for girls than for boys, because of the higher cost of uniforms for girls and because concern for the physical safety and chastity of girls requires extra money for transportation.

Girls in Africa encounter many of the same barriers to education as in other developing regions.

- Parents are often more reluctant to invest in educating a daughter than a son when most women have limited income-earning opportunities, and in those cultures where a daughter's economic contribution to her family ends at marriage.
- The quality of instruction is generally poor and schools frequently teach skills irrelevant to real-world employment needs.
- Teacher attitudes, gender stereotypes in textbooks and sexual harassment contribute to a poor climate for girls' educational achievement.
- In many countries, school policy and social pressures force most pregnant schoolgirls to either drop out or resort to unsafe abortion. In Botswana, typical of many African countries, teenage pregnancy is the cause of 60 to 90 percent of schoolgirl dropouts.



SOURCE: UNESCO. *World Education Report, 1995*. Paris: UNESCO, 1995.

Women's Economic Opportunities

Lack of access to education, credit and formal sector job opportunities inhibit African women's chances for economic advancement. Meanwhile, formal legal systems have tended to reinforce customary discrimination against women in economic as well as family matters.

Women have a dominant role in growing food crops, yet they are disadvantaged in access to the knowledge and resources needed to improve farming techniques. Despite their importance to the rural economy, women receive just one-tenth of the credit available to small farmers. Female traders and small business owners fare no better. Furthermore, just five percent of women have jobs in the modern wage sector.

The lack of economic opportunities reduces girls' aspirations and discourages them from pursuing an education. Without education and work options, many marry young and have large families. Moreover, in the absence of national pension systems and other forms of social support, women who lack job opportunities and schooling must depend on their children for support in old age, a further incentive to have many children.

Changes in the structure of African economies are also working to keep fertility high. The shrinking of job opportunities in the modern wage economy, which has accompanied recent economic austerity programs, has disproportionately affected women, further closing off their options for employment.

Moreover, economic pressures have forced many men to migrate in search of work and to spend more time producing export crops such as cocoa or coffee – traditionally a male responsibility. As a result, customary arrangements for men to help women with food production are breaking down, increasing the time women must spend

on farming. Many women already travel long distances and spend many hours collecting fuelwood and water for cooking and cleaning; deforestation and water scarcity are adding to this burden. With demands on their time increasing, more mothers feel a necessity to keep their daughters at home to help with household tasks, and the need for extra help around the house may also serve to maintain a desire for more children.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women in Africa is widespread as economic and social change weaken traditional protections for women and girls. Surveys in Kenya and South Africa show that between 17 and 42 percent of women are battered by a domestic partner. Partly from fear of violence, many African women exercise little control over contraception, including condom use, and thus are more vulnerable to pregnancy and HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Refugee women, in particular, are exposed to violence; a recent study found that one-quarter of women in Burundian refugee camps in Tanzania were exposed to sexual violence during their stay in these camps.

Harmful Traditional Practices

The widespread traditional practice of female genital mutilation contributes to women's health problems in Africa. The procedure, which removes the external female genitalia in varying degrees, can cause infection and bleeding – sometimes leading to shock and even death. Long-term effects include scarring, which can cause life threatening complications in childbirth, chronic infection and infertility. Women subjected to the practice often experience psychological trauma, painful intercourse and menstruation, and diminished sexual pleasure.

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Female genital mutilation affects half the adult female population of sub-Saharan Africa – 110 million women. Each year roughly 2 million girls – mainly ages 4 to 12 – undergo the ritual. No religion requires the practice; it is done mainly to preserve virginity, as a rite of initiation to adulthood and to control women's sexuality. Many men will only marry women who have undergone genital mutilation.

Social and Economic Change

In some countries in Africa, increased use of contraception and the trend towards smaller families have gone hand in hand with improvements in child health. The three countries where fertility has fallen first – Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe – have also made the greatest gains in lowering child mortality. When their children are less likely to die, parents apparently feel more secure that they can achieve their ideal number of *surviving* children. Still, in many other countries, fertility has not yet begun to fall, despite a decline in child death rates. Many couples – especially in rural areas – may not yet have adapted their childbearing behavior to the lower risk of losing a child. Moreover, the impact of rising child deaths from AIDS on desired family size is still unclear.

Other forces are weakening traditional supports for high fertility. Increased seasonal migration and rapid urbanization have strengthened ties

between the city and countryside and are eroding rural customs and cultural beliefs. Although Africa still lags behind other regions, since 1970 individual ownership of radio and television has increased 4 and 20-fold respectively, exposing people to new ideas that influence their decision to have smaller families.

Moreover, many parents can no longer afford large families. Where land has become scarce, children have lost much of their economic value. Increasing numbers of parents see education as a strategy to improve the chances that their children will eventually find good jobs and contribute to the family's income. Meanwhile, the decision by a number of governments to raise school fees has further fueled demand for small families. The average family in Kenya must now pay 10 to 15 percent of annual household income just to send one child to school.

In addition, as the extended family assumes less direct responsibility for raising children, parents are shouldering a greater share of the costs of childrearing. The struggle to make ends meet also appears to be fostering closer financial partnerships between spouses, who increasingly must pool their resources to educate their sons and daughters.