

# Young Women and Childbearing in Africa: The New Skepticism

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This paper examines the fertility of young women in sub-Saharan Africa using recent DHS surveys. We consider desired fertility, achieved fertility, and the intersection of the two, in particular unwanted fertility. A starting-point for this research is the following estimates of the incidence of unwanted first births (among births in the three years preceding the survey):

<u>Percent First Births Unwanted</u>	
Ethiopia (2000)	11%
Ghana (2003)	18%
Kenya (2003)	20%
Malawi (2000)	17%
Namibia (2000)	30%
Nigeria (2003)	8%
Uganda (2000-01)	10%
Zambia (2001-02)	24%

These are stunning figures for any contemporary non-Western society, and especially African societies with their deeply-rooted aversion to childlessness. And, indeed, most of the young women who declare their first birth unwanted also express a desire to have a child in the future, and their average ideal number of children that exceeds 3.0. Hence it would be an error to take the figures above as an expression of a lifetime goal to remain childless. It is, nevertheless, remarkable that such high percentages of young women are prepared to say that their first birth was “unwanted”. Equivalent levels are not observed in previous surveys in Africa; this is a radical departure from the past.

The above estimates are all the more provocative in the context of growing concern in policy circles about the course of fertility transition in sub-Saharan Africa, where fertility declines in both Kenya and Ghana appear to have stalled at TFRs in excess of 4.0 (Westoff & Cross 2006, Bongaarts 2006). In a widely-circulated piece in *The Lancet*, Cleland & Sinding (2005) document that national fertility levels remain high throughout most of the sub-continent, especially in the Sahelian countries where there is, as yet, little indication from data on fertility desires of an emergent demand to curtail fertility. Yet if one digs beneath the surface of basic aggregate-level indicators, and in particular examines in more depth young women and their fertility desires, the picture becomes more ambiguous.

So far as we know, the estimates shown above have gone essentially unnoticed. We regard them as indicative of a changing sensibility about childbearing among young African women (i.e. women under age 25). We make this assertion cautiously, because, as already noted, the DHS data present a mixed picture. Hence, in this paper we use the estimates of unwanted first births as a springboard for

a broader investigation of young women and childbearing in Africa, with particular attention to fertility desires -- both retrospective reports of the planning status of births and prospective reports of future fertility goals. For this analysis, we will focus on Africa DHS surveys conducted since 2000, supplemented by comparison with past surveys as appropriate.

The paper will have two major sections:

- I. Descriptive overview of fertility desires, realized fertility, and their inter-relations.
- II. Analysis of contending explanations for the sudden emergence of unwanted fertility among young African women.

### I. Descriptive Overview

The aim is to place the strikingly high percentages of first births unwanted against levels and trends in other basic reproductive indicators, namely:

- Age-specific fertility rates
- Age at first birth
- Ideal number of births
- Desire for a(nother) child

This will yield a broader assessment of young women's reproductive experience and goals. In so doing, this descriptive analysis will provide one basis for assessing the meaningfulness and significance of the high levels of unwanted first births.

### Explanatory Analysis

We will consider the following six explanations for the surprising phenomenon of unwanted first births:

1. Measurement artifact. Of particular concern is the meaningfulness of the distinction between "unwanted" and "mistimed" births. (Comparison across surveys suggests that much of the recent increase in declaring births unwanted might be attributed to a reduction in declaring births mistimed.)
2. Compositional changes: demographic and/or socioeconomic characteristics of the women. One possibility is that shifts in the age and marital status of women at the time of conception (or birth) accounts for the increased likelihood of first births being declared unwanted.
3. Economic distress. Might regret about recent births, despite desires to have multiple children in the future, reflect recent sharp economic downturns?

4. HIV/AIDS epidemic. It is noteworthy that the countries with the highest percentage of first births unwanted are in the AIDS belt (with the exception of Ghana). Might the negativity about recent births be a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic?
5. Religious revival. The recent surge in fundamentalist religion in sub-Saharan Africa has been documented by many researchers. In some countries this phenomenon has been especially prevalent among young adults. Might responses to survey questions on the wantedness of recent births reflect re-evaluations of childbearing (especially at young ages and/or outside of formally sanctioned unions) that, in turn, reflect changes in religious orientation?
6. Program failure. A final explanation is that the increase in unwanted births is the consequence of deterioration in family planning services, due either to an overall deterioration of health and family planning services, or due to a shift of resources away from family planning towards HIV/AIDS (a variant of explanation #4 above).

The explanatory analysis will take several forms – individual-level tabulations, individual-level regression analysis, country-level comparative analysis. The latter methodology is, we expect, the optimal approach for addressing several of the explanations listed above. However, as is often the case in comparative-historical research, we are unlikely to arrive at a neat and tidy rejection of some explanations and acceptance of others.

We do anticipate, however, that this analysis will cast new light on the current status of fertility decline in Africa. While most conventional macro indicators (e.g. the TFR) suggest a stagnant and sluggish transition, younger cohorts of women – those who have just entered the reproductive years – are expressing misgivings and doubts about childbearing that can be regarded as an historical, in many respects entirely unexpected, development in African society. By bringing this development into sharper focus, our aim is to stimulate further research that will explore in more depth and more thoroughly what appears to be a changing sensibility about childbearing among young African women.

## **Short Abstract**

DHS data from a number of sub-Saharan African countries show a recent sharp increase in unwanted fertility, in particular unwanted first births. If true, this is a remarkable development: among young African women, misgivings about childbearing are emerging that constitute an historic break from the past. This paper examines desired and realized fertility in the most recent DHS surveys, with limited comparison to previous surveys. We first describe patterns, focusing on fertility desires (planning status of recent births, ideal number, desire for a(nother) birth), then consider contending explanations for the surprising emergence of unwanted first births: methodological artifact; changes in age and marital status at conception; and macro social changes (economic distress, HIV/AIDS, religious revival, deteriorating family planning services). By looking beyond macro indicators and, in particular, focusing on young women, this research adds complexity and qualifies the accepted picture of slow and stagnating fertility decline in Africa.