

Is polygamy weakening? Diversity and trends in Africa during the past 50 years

Véronique Hertrich, INED, Paris (France)

Polygamy is a strong bedrock of African families: its extinction was predicted in the 60s but, until now it is widespread. In Sub-Saharan Africa, at the end of the nineties, there are still one out of three women, 35-44 years old, who is married to a polygynist, and half of the women live, at least part of their life, with a polygynist. Polygamy is specially high in Western Africa, and low in Southern and North Africa, with intermediate levels in Central and Eastern Africa.

However trends in nuptiality, family organization and socio-economic conditions are challenging the maintenance of polygamy.

- Nuptiality. Polygamy is possible thanks to an imbalance between a high number of married women and a lower number of married men. This imbalance is socially organised through the difference between male and female entries in union (early for women, late for men, with an important age gap between spouses) and the rule for women to spend most of their adult life in union (rapid remarriage after divorce or widowhood). This organization of the nuptiality regime is changing: general increase in female age at first marriage, decline in age gap between spouses, slow increase in proportions of divorced and widowed women. These changes might favour decline in polygamy, at least from a mechanical point of view.
- Family organisation. Postponement of female first marriage and closer age gap between spouses are associated with changes in intergenerational relations (weakening of regular marriage procedure, decrease of family control over marriage) and in the social status of women (increase in female schooling, lengthening of the youth...). These changes in family organisation might favour decline in polygamy in the same vein as they contribute to other changes in nuptiality.
- Socio-economic conditions are often considered as determinants of the delayed first marriage and might influence also the probability to have an additional wife.

Demographic and health surveys provide some evidence of polygamy decline in urban areas and among the educated women, and at the national level in selected countries.

However a systematic analysis of the long-term trends in polygamy is not available yet.

The paper aims to describe polygamy trends over the past 5 decades in Africa. Trends and regional patterns will be discussed in reference with first marriage indicators and socio-economic indicators.

Data and indicators

A nuptiality database has been constructed by gathering the published statistical tables on population structure by marital status, sex and age, and possible others indicators on nuptiality, produced for the African censuses and national surveys, since 1950. It includes about 270 statistical operations.

Information on polygamy is not always available and the indicator of polygamy varies according the publication, whether it is evaluate among men or women, currently married or ever-married population, among an age-defined sample or not...

Description of long-term trends supposes, as a first step, the estimation of a selected indicator. This harmonization is made possible by the fact that correlation is high between different indicators of polygamy. When no specific data on polygamy is available, proxies will be deducted from the ratio between male and female married populations.

Maps and trends will be drawn in order to describe patterns and trends since 1950.

Analysis and expected findings

The description per se of polygamy trends and differentials is one of the aims of the paper. In addition, data will be analysed according the following question:

- Are polygamy trends consistent with changes in first marriage patterns?
- Is there any correlate between polygamy and socio-economic development?
- Are the recent trends of polygamy associated with the economic crisis?

The first topic will be questioned using the indicators on first marriage available in the nuptiality database. The correlation between polygamy, development and economic recession will be questioned using macro data indicators provided by the UN publications (level of schooling, GNP increase,).

First analyses on this topic have been done concerning West Africa, the African region where polygyny is the more frequent. They show contrasting trends between Western Coast countries and Sahelian ones. Polygyny is declining in Western Coast countries since the 90s, both in urban and rural areas, and this trend is correlated with the economic recession. In Sahelian countries, where the socio-economic level is lower but where the economic crisis was lighter, polygyny did not decrease until the late nineties. However, the most recent data suggest that the declining trend is beginning. The paper will extend the analysis on the whole African countries.