

# Sub-Saharan Africa



***Progress of the World's Women* is UN Women's flagship report that tracks progress on gender equality around the world. This factsheet provides a brief overview of the key issues and relevant facts from the 2019-2020 report, *Families in a Changing World*, for the region of Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup>**

## 1. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

Sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by great diversity in family forms. Overall, while marriage remains largely universal in the region as a whole, both women and men are starting to delay marriage, with a small percentage opting not to marry. Child and early marriage remains a serious problem and adolescent birth rates are very high, particularly among lower-income groups. The fertility rate has markedly declined but remains the highest in the world. Discriminatory laws reinforce gender inequalities in marriage and the family, and lack of land and inheritance rights contribute to women's economic insecurity in the context of marriage and relationship dissolution. Despite progress, less than half of married or in-union women have their family planning needs met with modern contraception. Women, including grandmothers and older female siblings, take on the vast majority of unpaid care and domestic work, with long-term care responsibilities for a growing older population continuing to fall on their shoulders.

## 2. FAMILIES ARE DIVERSE AND CHANGING

The report demonstrates the significant diversity in family structures and relationship—across regions, within countries and over time. This diversity is well illustrated in the Sub-Saharan Africa region:

### Household diversity:

- Couples with children make up 35 per cent of households; extended families, which include other relatives and may include children, comprise 32 per cent of households.<sup>2</sup>
- Lone-parent families make up 10 per cent of households;<sup>3</sup> the majority (8.8 per cent) are lone-mother families.<sup>4</sup> The region has the lowest rate of children under 15 years old living with two parents (45.4 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

### Marriage:

- The age of first marriage for women increased from 21.0 to 22.1 years old between around 1990 and around 2010 and from 26.6 to 27.2 for the same period for men.<sup>6</sup>
- Bridewealth, in which the groom transfers assets to the bride's family to compensate them for the loss of her agricultural and reproductive labour, is widespread across the region, among Christian and Muslim communities in both urban and rural areas.
- While child and early marriage has decreased in the last 25 years, 12 per cent of girls are married today before the age of 15 and 37 per cent before the age of 18.<sup>7</sup> Regional variations exist, however; a cohort analysis comparing child marriage rates of women aged 20-24 and 45-49 in 62 countries shows that early union formation increased, rather than declined, in 6 of the 34 countries in the sample: Angola, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.<sup>8</sup>
- It is estimated that one quarter of women in Sub-Saharan Africa are in polygynous marriages.<sup>9</sup> The proportion of currently married or in-union women aged 15-49 in polygynous partnerships exceeds one third in at least five Sub-Saharan African countries, including Niger (36.1 per cent), Chad (37.9 per cent), Gambia (38.7 per cent), Burkina Faso (42.2 per cent) and Equatorial Guinea (47.8 per cent).<sup>10</sup>

### Non-marriage, divorce and separation:

- In the region, the proportion of never-married women aged 45-49 increased from 3.5 per cent to 6.1 per cent from circa 1990 to circa 2010.<sup>11</sup> Rates significantly exceed the regional average in some countries including Botswana (32.3 per cent), Namibia (31.1 per cent) and South Africa (26.4 per cent).<sup>12</sup>
- Globally, women are more likely to be divorced or separated than men, as men are more likely to remarry, often to younger women. Around 2010, 6.9 per cent of women aged 45-49 (and 3.2 per cent of men) in the region were divorced or separated compared to the global average of 4.7 per cent of women (and 3.1 per cent of men) for the same period.<sup>13</sup>

### Fertility:

- The total fertility rate is projected to decline from 6.8 live births in 1970-1975 to 4.7 in 2015-2020; this regional average is almost double the global rate of 2.4.<sup>14</sup>
- Adolescent birth rates are higher in Sub-Saharan Africa than in other regions, with 27.8 per cent of women aged 20-24 giving birth before age 18, a figure that rises to 41.3 per cent among women in the poorest quintile.<sup>15</sup>
- Widowhood remains high in the region and has only moderately decreased over the past four decades; more than one in every ten women aged 45-49 (11.6 per cent) were affected around 2010.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. LAWS ARE NEEDED THAT PROMOTE EQUALITY, RECOGNIZE FAMILY DIVERSITY AND PROHIBIT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Family laws, which govern marriage (including minimum age of marriage), divorce, child custody and guardianship, adoption and inheritance, often include gender discriminatory provisions, creating an unequal playing field for women and girls in many parts of the world, including Sub-Saharan Africa.

- The legal age of marriage for girls in all countries in the region for which data are available is 18 except in Mali, where it is 16; however, many countries allow for exceptions with parental consent or judicial authorization. In Equatorial Guinea, girls can marry as early as 12 (and boys at 14) with parental consent.<sup>17</sup> Evidence suggests that countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with laws that consistently set the age of marriage at 18 have lower rates of child marriage.<sup>18</sup>
- Out of a total of 47 countries in the region, in 5 countries, women are required by law to obey their husbands; in 11 countries, a married woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as a married man; and in 4 countries, a married woman cannot confer citizenship on her children in the same way as a married man.<sup>19</sup>
- In many countries, women cannot initiate a legal divorce in the same way as men, and divorce can be particularly complex in countries with plural legal systems.<sup>20</sup> According to Zimbabwe's Matrimonial Causes Act, courts must equitably divide marital property in the dissolution of a registered customary marriage. However, many Zimbabwean women have unregistered customary marriages and are unable to access this right.<sup>21</sup>
- Due to the efforts of women's organization Mifumi, bridewealth payments were found to be unconstitutional and "dehumanizing of women" by the Constitutional Court of Uganda in 2015.<sup>22</sup>
- The Kenyan Marriage Act (2014) brings polygynous relationships and the women in them within the protection of wide-ranging human rights provisions, including equal property rights, equal rights to divorce and equal rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis children.<sup>23</sup>

#### Same-sex partnership rights:

- As of May 2019, 42 countries and territories around the world, including South Africa, have extended the right to marry or form a civil partnership to same-sex couples.<sup>24</sup> Angola and Botswana have recently decriminalized sex between same-sex partners.
- However, worldwide 68 countries have laws that explicitly criminalize consensual sexual relations between partners of the same sex. In 11 of the 68 countries, such relations are punishable by death, and 3 of these 11 countries are in this region.<sup>25</sup>

#### There has been progress on laws on violence against women, but lack of implementation remains a problem:

- In the early 1990s, only a handful of countries in the world had laws against domestic violence. By 2018, 26 out of 47 countries in the region had such legislation.<sup>26</sup>
- Nevertheless, 21.5 per cent of ever-partnered women aged 15-49 in the region have been subjected to physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.<sup>27</sup>

- Legislation in Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Eritrea exempts perpetrators from facing charges for rape if the perpetrator marries the victim.<sup>28</sup>
- Female genital mutilation (FGM) continues at alarming levels despite a decline in recent decades. Around 2017, one in three girls aged 15 to 19 had been subjected to FGM in the 30 countries in the world where the practice is concentrated, most of which are in this region, compared to nearly one in two around 2000.<sup>29</sup>
- ‘One-stop centres’ to provide health, police and social services for violence survivors in one location increase women’s access to justice and support services. The Isange One-Stop Centre (IOSC) in Kigali, Rwanda provides free 24-hour service, seven days a week, with provisions for emergency contraception, HIV prophylaxis, prevention of sexually transmitted infections and other medication. Every survivor who arrives at the IOSC is seen by a social worker who provides information and access to medical, psycho-social and police services. There is also a safe house available with three beds and basic provisions.<sup>30</sup>

## 4. HIGH QUALITY PUBLIC SERVICES ARE CRITICAL FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND GENDER EQUALITY

Public services play a critical role in supporting families and advancing gender equality. Access to reproductive health care, in particular, is an essential foundation for women’s and girls’ ability to exercise voice and agency in decisions about family life.

### Women’s access to sexual and reproductive health and rights:

- The rates of married or in-union women aged 15-49 who had their family planning needs met with modern contraception in the region increased from 4.4 per cent in the 1970s to 48.2 per cent in 2015; despite significant progress, this rate is among the lowest in the world.<sup>31</sup>
- Analysis of data in 52 countries, including 31 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, revealed that one of the most common reasons women do not use contraceptives is concern about side effects and health risks.<sup>32</sup> A review of qualitative studies in Mali, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Republic of Tanzania found that women feared that using birth control could lead to infertility.<sup>33</sup>
- A small but still substantial share of women (10-15 per cent) in Benin, Burkina Faso and Congo cite economic cost as the main barrier to access contraception.<sup>34</sup>
- In Rwanda, the demand for family planning met by modern contraception in 1970 was 0.2 per cent. By 2030, it is projected to reach 78.2 per cent, well above the average for Sub-Saharan Africa (62.0 per cent).<sup>35</sup> Over the past four decades, Rwanda’s total fertility rate more than halved from 8.3 to 3.8 live births per woman,<sup>36</sup> while the maternal mortality ratio declined from 1,300 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 290 in 2015.<sup>37</sup> This remarkable progress is the result of government action that has prioritized health system strengthening.

### Support is needed for teenage mothers to continue education:

- Special accommodations in schools for teenage mothers, such as time off for breastfeeding, are available in Cabo Verde and Senegal; while in Gabon, childcare centres have been established near schools. However, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone and United Republic of Tanzania expel pregnant girls, and many other countries lack policies for re-entry into school after girls have given birth.<sup>38</sup>

## 5. WOMEN'S ACCESS TO AN ADEQUATE, INDEPENDENT INCOME UNDERPINS THEIR RIGHTS WITHIN FAMILIES

For women, having their own resources, such as owning assets or receiving income from a paid job or through social protection, puts them on a more equal footing with men in their intimate relationships, strengthens their bargaining position within families and enables them to exit partnerships if they so choose. For older women, having their own income or assets is critical in securing an adequate standard of living.

### Women's labour force participation rate is influenced by their partnership status:

- Women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) in the region for individuals aged 25-54 has increased slightly over the last 20 years (1998-2018) from 73 per cent to 76 per cent, while men's LFPR declined from 90 per cent to 89 per cent.<sup>39</sup>
- There are large gaps in women's and men's LFPRs depending on their marital status. Widowed women aged 25-54 have the highest LFPR (79.9 per cent) compared to those who are divorced/separated women (75.6 per cent), married/in a union (73.8 per cent) and single/never married (64.3 per cent). The highest LFPR among men aged 25-54 in the region is among those who are married/in a union (93.1 per cent), while single/never married men had the lowest rate (71.5 per cent).<sup>40</sup>

### Women's income and ownership of assets lead to positive family outcomes:

- Women's control of resources and economic security are linked to positive outcomes for children and the family. Studies in Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana and Niger find a positive association between women's earned income or asset ownership and spending on food and children's education.<sup>41</sup>
- Research in South Africa and Uganda found that secure property access and/or ownership provided women with economic independence, which served as a protective factor against intimate partner violence (IPV).<sup>42</sup>
- Close to 70 per cent of all of all contributing family workers on family farms and enterprises in Sub-Saharan Africa are women which means that they receive no direct pay or remuneration for their work.<sup>43</sup>

### Women face disproportionate economic impacts from marriage, relationship dissolution and widowhood:

- Despite their contributions to family farms, women in the United Republic of Tanzania often see their usufruct rights stripped at the time of divorce, widowhood or when husbands sell off family land.<sup>44</sup>

- In Senegal, the Family Code specifies that wives must inherit a share that is equal to that of their children. Inheritance practices under both Islamic and customary laws, however, allocate only one eighth of the total bequest to widows, and this has to be shared among co-wives in the case of polygynous marriages.<sup>45</sup>
- In South Africa, both the Child Support Grant and Old Age Grant have reduced chronic poverty and the depth of poverty for women and lone-mother households.<sup>46</sup>

## 6. POLICIES AND REGULATIONS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT MIGRANT FAMILIES AND PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Migration is a major force affecting families and women's enjoyment of rights within them. While it can open up new opportunities for women, it often requires families to navigate a complex web of policies and regulations that affect the conditions under which families can live together or apart.

- The migration journey can be particularly risky for women and children travelling without an adult male relative. Europe-bound women and children from Sub-Saharan Africa have suffered sexual violence perpetrated by guards while stuck in Libyan detention centres.<sup>47</sup>
- Economic migrants in so-called skilled professions, such as migrant nurses, have far greater access to family reunification than those in less-skilled professions, such as migrant caregivers and domestic workers. Nursing has become a major sector of migrant women's employment globally, including in South Africa.<sup>48</sup>
- Access to health care is essential at all stages of the migration journey for women and their dependents. Ghana and South Africa have shown that covering non-emergency health services for both regular and irregular migrants is possible.<sup>49</sup>

## 7. FAMILY FRIENDLY POLICIES ARE AFFORDABLE

Analysis commissioned for the report shows that most countries can afford a package of family friendly policies.<sup>50</sup> This package would guarantee that every member of society has access to basic income security and essential health care over the life cycle and would ensure that pre-school children and older adults can access quality care services.

- The analysis finds that to close income, health and care gaps, 9 out of 44 countries with data in Sub-Saharan Africa could implement the required policies for less than 8 per cent of GDP; 15 countries could achieve it by devoting between 8 and 15 per cent of GDP.
- For the remaining 20 low-income countries, many of them conflict or post-conflict countries, more than 15 per cent of GDP would be needed, which would require significant international donor support.

<sup>1</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa includes Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Togo, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup> Regional values calculated by UN Women using published country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a. This analysis covers 86 countries and territories comprising 78.5 percent of the world's population, based on latest available data from 2007 onwards. See Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates from UN DESA 2017m, UN DESA 2018a and UN DESA and UN Women 2019. This analysis covers 88 countries and territories comprising 61.3 percent of the world's population, based on latest available data from 2007 onwards.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF 2019b.

<sup>8</sup> ICF International 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Lawson and Gibson 2018.

<sup>10</sup> ICF International 2007-2017. Household surveys, however, are likely to under-report the prevalence of polygyny due to using the household as the unit of analysis. Polygynous family members are assigned to distinct survey units when wives reside close to their husbands but in separate dwellings, or when spouses migrate internally for economic reasons. For further discussion of this, see Coast et al. 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. See Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> UN DESA 2017k.

<sup>13</sup> Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. In Sub-Saharan Africa the data are for 17 countries covering 44.4 per cent of the population, based on less than two thirds of their respective regional population and therefore should be treated with caution. See, Figure 2.7 in Chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m. Total Fertility Rates and population of women of reproductive ages (15-49) for the periods 2015-2020 and 2025-2030 are based on medium (standard) variant projections. See Figure 2.8 in Chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> UN Women calculations from ICF 2007-2017.

<sup>16</sup> UN DESA 2017k.

<sup>17</sup> World Bank 2018e.

<sup>18</sup> Maswikwa et al. 2015.

<sup>19</sup> World Bank 2018a. See Annex 5 (II).

<sup>20</sup> Raday 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Bond 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Supreme Court of Uganda 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Oyugi 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Ramón Mendos 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank 2018e. See Annex 5 (I).

<sup>27</sup> UNSD 2018, See Figure 6.2 in Chapter 6.

<sup>28</sup> World Bank 2018e. See Annex 5 (I).

<sup>29</sup> UN General Assembly 2018a.

<sup>30</sup> Jewkes, McLean Hilker et al. 2015.

<sup>31</sup> UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2018b and UN DESA 2018c, See Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3.

<sup>32</sup> Sedgh et al. 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Williamson et al. 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Sedgh et al. 2016.

<sup>35</sup> UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2018b and 2018c. See Box 3.4 in Chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> UN DESA 2017m.

<sup>37</sup> WHO et al. 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch 2018c.

<sup>39</sup> Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m. See Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4.

<sup>40</sup> UN Women calculations based on data from ILO 2018b; LIS various years and ABS 2016b. See Figure 4.3 in Chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> Fafchamps et al. 2009; Hoddinott and Haddad 1995; Wouterse 2016; Doss 2006; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003; Allendorf 2007.

<sup>42</sup> ICRW et al. 2007.

<sup>43</sup> UN Women calculations using data from ILO 2019a. Data are for 56.9 per cent of the region's population, latest available year ranging from 2007-2018.

<sup>44</sup> Mbilinyi and Shechambo 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Lambert et al. 2017.

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<sup>46</sup> Posel and Rogan 2012.

<sup>47</sup> OHCHR 2016.

<sup>48</sup> UN Women 2015a.

<sup>49</sup> OECD and ILO 2018, Table 2.1.

<sup>50</sup> Bierbaum and Cichon forthcoming.