

Socio-demographic factors in the marital status of older Ghanaians

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Abstract

In this paper, marriage patterns among older Ghanaians are examined. A main aim is to assess the marital behaviour of these persons and the extent to which the behaviour is influenced by intervening variables such as urban or rural place of residence and gender. The data used were obtained from the Ghana population censuses of 1960 and 1970, specifically the Supplementary Enquiry (SE) and the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES), respectively, the 1984 census and a survey conducted in 1991. An analysis of the data sets has revealed significant differences: marital status is shown to vary according to gender and place of residence – be it urban or rural.

Introduction

Most people enter a marital union at some stage of their lives. At the age of 60 years or older, an individual may be single, married, widowed or divorced. Since marriage entails an institutionalized social relationship between a man and a woman, with rights and obligations, the marital behaviour of older persons is of interest to society.

Along with an increase in the size of the older populations of developing countries has been a concomitant increase in interest in the marital status of older individuals (William, Lin & Cheung, 1993). It is projected that over 70 percent of the world's population aged 60 years and over will live in the developing regions of the world (United Nations, 1995). Relatively little attention has been paid to the marital status of older people in these regions.

In Ghana, the elderly constitute only a small proportion of the total population – about 5.8% according to the 1984 population census. However, both the number of older Ghanaians and their percentage of the total population are increasing. It is important therefore to study this segment of the Ghanaian population and to examine the marital status pattern and trends.

Data and method

The main sources of the data analysed in this paper are the population censuses conducted in Ghana in 1960, 1970 and 1984. The results of these censuses were published in the census reports. The 1960 population census figures include those from a supplementary Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) which asked questions not included in the main questionnaire, among which were questions on marital status. Similarly, the 1970 population census also includes figures from a

supplementary survey, known as the Supplementary Enquiry (SE), which SE gathered information on the marital status of the respondents not obtained in the main 1970 population census. In both the PES and the SE, questions were asked on whether the respondent was single, married, divorced, separated or widowed. Unfortunately, no questions on marital status were included in the questionnaire for the 1984 census, which again has placed a limitation on data. However, data on marital status were obtained from another source: a survey of older residents of Anum, a town in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Adu, 1991). These data are also examined in this paper.

It is pointed out that even though the 1960 census data are old, they have never been analysed in terms of the marital status of older persons. Moreover, there has been no population census since 1984. Even if a later population census had been conducted, it would still be necessary to use the 1960 data to examine trends.

Demographic background

Ghana conducted its first population census in 1960 which showed the country to have a population of 6.7 million. The second census, conducted in 1970, recorded a population of 8.7 million – showing an increase of 2.4% a year in the population over the 1960 census. The third census, conducted in 1984, showed a population of 12.2 million and an annual growth rate of 2.6% during the period 1970 to 1984. Thus, by 1984, Ghana's population had almost doubled over the population recorded in 1960. (See Table 1.)

Apart from the increase in the size of Ghana's population, other demographic changes have also taken place. One such change are urban-rural differences. During the period 1960-1984, the proportion of the population in the urban areas (populations of 5 000 and above) increased from 23% in 1960 to 28.9% in 1970, and by 1984 had increased by 32%. Thus, between 1960 and 1970, Ghana's population in the urban areas had increased by 25.1%. Roughly, between 1960 and 1970 one out of four citizens of Ghana had moved to an urban area.

Table 1 also shows the extent to which the rural areas have been depopulated. This depopulation has not been without consequence to older persons, who as a result of migrant children are deprived of care. The table shows a persistent fall in the rural population size. For instance, the population in the rural areas in 1960 constituted 76.9% of the total population, which declined to 68% by 1984. As may also be seen in the table, Ghana experienced a negative population growth rate

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of 7.5% between 1960 and 1970 in the rural areas. A further decline of 4.4% in the rural population was noted for the period 1970-84. Since the majority of Ghana's population, including older persons, dwells in the rural areas, demographic changes in terms of migratory movement from the rural areas tend to affect the marital life of the elderly. Offspring who are expected to see to the economic and social comfort of their elderly parents in their old age are not available. If one understands that in Ghana the care of parents in old age is an enshrined responsibility (Nukunya, 1991), then the gravity of the situation may be realised.

Table 1

Selected demographic indicators of the population of Ghana (1960, 1970, 1984)

Indicator	Population census		
	1960	1970	1984
Population size (n) (1000s)	6 727	8 559	12 296
Rate of population growth per annum (%)		2.4	2.6
Urban-rural distribution (%)			
Urban (total)	23.1	28.9	32.0
- Male	11.9	14.4	15.6
- Female	11.2	14.5	16.4
Rural (total)	76.9	71.1	68.0
- Male	38.7	35.2	33.7
- Female	38.2	35.9	34.3
Rate of change of urban-rural population (%)			
Urban (total % increase)		25.1	10.7
- Male		21.0	8.3
- Female		29.5	13.1
Rural (total % decrease)		-7.5	-4.4
- Male		-9.0	-4.3
- Female		-6.0	-4.5
Population in age groups (years) (%)			
0 - 14	44.5	46.9	45.0
15 - 59	50.6	47.8	49.2
60 +	4.9	5.3	5.8
% increase in age groups (years)			
0 - 14		5.4	-4.1
15 - 59		-5.5	2.9
60 +		8.2	8.3
Dependency ratio	0.904	1.023	0.962
Elderly/children ratio	0.072	0.078	0.089

Sources: Population Census 1960, 1970, 1984. Demographic analyses, 1994.

A slow decrease (10.7%) in the rate of urbanization was observed between 1970 and 1984, compared with the period between 1960 and 1970. A possible factor for this decrease is emigration. The period 1970-84 was the time during which legislation on aliens resident in Ghana, known as the Aliens Compliance Order, was implemented. The order compelled unregistered non-Ghanaians to leave the country. Immigrant males were the hardest hit by the bill and the effects are reflected in Table 1.

Another feature of the Ghanaian population is its youthfulness. The population tilts heavily towards a youthful popula-

tion with a small proportion in the older age group. For example, Table 1 shows that in 1984, almost half of Ghana's population fell within the 15-59-year age group. As in developing countries generally, the size of the age group 0-14 years shows the youthfulness of the Ghanaian population: it shows an increase of 5.4 points over that of 1960 but a decline of 4.1% in 1984. On average, Ghana has a youthful population (0-14 years) – about 45% in 1984.

The table also reveals changes that have occurred over the years in the ratio of older persons to children (defined as a population aged 65 years and over divided by the population under 15 years). In 1960 the number of older persons per hundred children was as low as 7.2. Thus one may refer to a relative increase in the older population relative to the proportion of children in the total population.

Of the broad age groups shown in Table 1, the population aged 60 years and above is the most interesting. For almost two and a half decades, this population has shown a persistent increase. The broad age groups 0-14 years and 15-59 years, even though showing a heavy concentration of the population, have fluctuated over the years. On the other hand the population aged 60 and above was only 4.9% in 1960 but increased to 8.2% in 1970. By 1984, the population aged 60 years and over increased by 5.8% – an increase of 8.3% over that of 1970. With the persistent increase both in the number and percentage of older Ghanaians, their marital status and family structures are of obvious interest. For one reason, families provide physical and emotional support to members in times of need and distress.

Patterns of marital status

Marital status patterns and rates are important events for demographers. Shryock and Siegel (1976) identify two types of marriage. The first type of marriage occurs when a person moves from the status of being "single" to that of being "married." The second type of marriage is remarriage, when persons move from "divorced" or "widowed" status to "married" status. Shryock and Siegel define divorce as a final legal dissolution of a marriage which is the separation of husband and wife, and define widowhood as the dissolution of a marriage upon the death of one of the spouses.

Table 2 and Figure 1 show the marital status distribution of Ghanaian persons age 60 years and over by gender in 1960 and 1971. The data show a higher incidence of marriage among males than females, and lower rates of divorce and widowhood among males than females. As is usual in the populations of developing countries, more males than females have never married.

Urban-rural differential

Patterns in the marital status of older Ghanaians differ by place of urban or rural residence (in 1960 and 1971 – see Figure 2). In both rural and urban places of residence older males are more likely to be married than older females. As the data show (see Table 2), while over three-quarters of the males in both urban and rural areas were married, only a quarter of the females were married (1960 Population Census figures). Among the males, slight differences exist between those in urban centres as against those in rural areas. A higher percentage of rural males (78.3) than urban males (73.6) were married. Similarly, a slightly higher percentage of females in the rural areas (27.7) than in the urban areas (23) were married. However, the 1971 figures show a marital pattern for older males that is comparatively lower than the 1960 figures. On the other hand the percentage of married older women in 1971 more than doubled over the period 1960-71, for both

urban/rural women combined, and urban and rural women separately. The trend may reflect a new attitude towards marital behaviour whereby increasing numbers of older women remarry.

Table 2

Trend and pattern in the marital status of persons aged 60+ years in Ghana, by gender, age and urban/rural place of residence (1960, 1971, 1991)

Place of residence	1960 population census		1971 population census		1991 sample survey	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Marital status by urban/rural place of residence and by gender^a

Urban/Rural	Never married	Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed	N
Never married	2.2	0.3	38.0	14.3	2.2	-
Married	77.6	26.6	54.3	66.3	58.7	18.9
Separated	-	-	0.8	1.5	-	-
Divorced	10.6	14.1	5.0	8.2	19.6	31.1
Widowed	9.6	58.9	5.0	9.7	19.6	50.0
N	173 380	157 480	232 809	225 065	46	74

Urban

Never married	2.8	0.4	43.4	20.1
Married	73.6	23.0	50.6	60.5
Separated	-	-	1.0	2.2
Divorced	11.7	10.6	4.1	9.1
Widowed	11.9	66.0	0.9	8.1
N	25 610	34 440	43 313	51 393

Rural

Never married	2.0	0.3	36.8	12.6
Married	78.3	27.7	55.2	68.0
Separated	-	-	0.8	1.3
Divorced	10.4	15.1	5.2	7.9
Widowed	9.3	56.9	2.0	10.2
N	147 770	123 040	189 496	173 672

	Male (60-64) %	Female (60-64) %	Male (65+) %	Female (65+) %
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Marital status by urban/rural place of residence, gender and age group^b

Urban/Rural	Never married	Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Never married	2.6	0.2	2.4	0.4	
Married	81.4	38.2	73.0	19.7	
Divorced	10.3	15.4	11.5	14.3	
Widowed	5.7	46.2	13.1	65.6	

Urban

Never married	2.8	0.2	2.7	0.5
Married	81.3	38.2	69.4	17.7
Divorced	10.6	14.4	12.3	14.3
Widowed	6.0	47.2	15.6	67.5

Rural

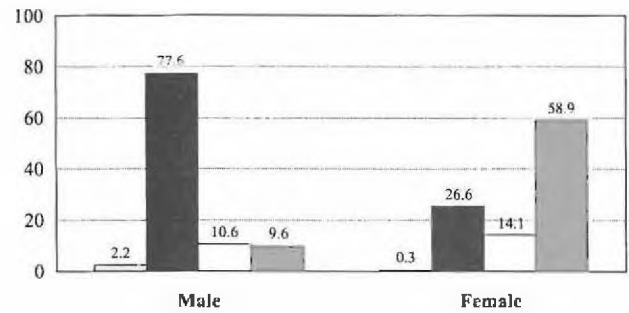
Never married	2.4	0.3	1.8	0.3
Married	81.6	38.3	76.6	21.7
Divorced	10.0	16.4	10.7	14.4
Widowed	6.0	45.0	10.9	63.6

Sources: a Population Census, 1960; Supplementary Enquiry, 1971; Adu, 1991.
b Population Census, 1960.

Figure 1

Marital status of Ghanaians (60+ years), by gender, 1960 and 1971

1960



1971

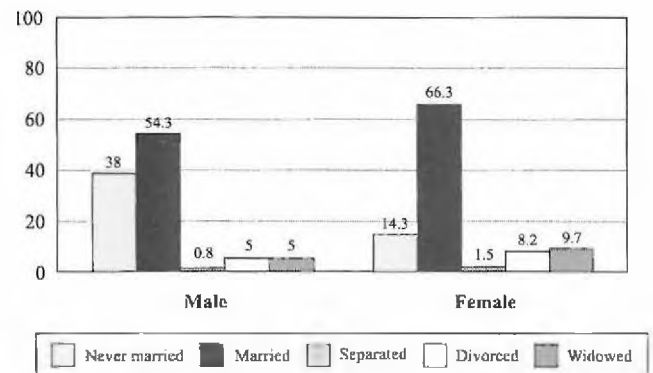
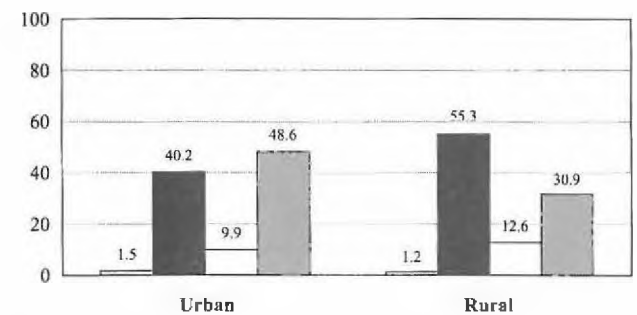


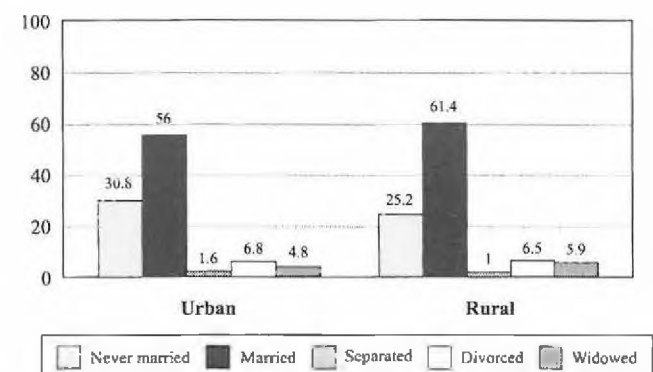
Figure 2

Marital status of Ghanaians (60+ years), by urban-rural location, 1960 and 1971

1960



1971



Divorce rates for older males and females were comparatively low. Table 2 shows rates for both urban and rural areas. What is significant are the wide differences seen in the proportion of older males in both rural and urban areas who are widowed, as against females who are widowed. While the 1960 population figures show that two-thirds (66%) of all females aged 60 years and above in urban areas were widowed, only an eighth (11.9%) of males were widowed. A similar pattern is noted for males and females in the rural areas in the same year (1960).

The marital status of older Ghanaians as recorded in the Supplementary Enquiry of 1971 (Table 2) follows the pattern of 1960 in some respects. One such pattern is that of widowhood (see Figure 1). A lower rate of widowhood was found among older males in urban areas (5%) than among their female counterparts (9.7%). The table also shows differences in rates of widowhood between males and females. As had been the pattern, more females (8.1%) than males (0.9%) in urban areas were widowed. As in the case of urban dwellers, the percentage of rural females who were widowed was 10.2%, compared to 2% of males.

The overall divorce rate for the older population (Table 2) was higher for females (8.2%) than for males (5%). In the urban areas, females (9.1%) were twice as likely to be divorced than males (4.1%). The pattern of divorce in the rural areas is similar, with more divorced females (7.9%) than males (5.2%).

Contrary to the 1960 PES data however, the 1971 SE data show that the rate of marriage among older females was higher than for males. While two-thirds (66.3%) of older females were married, only 54.3% of older males were married. Similar differential patterns are observed for urban and rural populations.

Adu (1991) carried out a survey on social life among older people in the Anum Traditional Area. The results of his survey (Table 2) show that widowhood was higher among older females than older males. According to Adu's finding, half of the female respondents had lost their husbands, compared to 20% of the male respondents who had lost their wives. Marriage among older males was higher. More than half (59%) of the males were married, compared to 19% of the females. The survey again shows the divorce rate to be higher for females (31%) than for males (18%).

Adu's research supports other findings, that the incidence of remarriage is higher in males than females. By contrast, women tend to maintain their widowhood. A number of reasons were given by widows for this pattern, e.g. widows abstain from remarriage to prove their faithfulness and commitment to the memory of their deceased husband, his family and society in general, and widows do not want to experience the loss of a second husband (Adu, 1991).

Discussion

Marriage in Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, involves the transfer of some form of bridewealth from the lineage of the husband to the lineage of the wife. Payment of this bridewealth comes with certain rights and benefits which husbands enjoy. Two such rights and benefits are sexual rights and the economic services of the wife (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950).

In general terms, in Africa, society views marriage as a mark of maturity and conformity with traditional norms and behaviours. Single persons are seen as irresponsible and are therefore frowned upon by society. At an individual level, marriage is very beneficial to couples. For women, marital union is a proximate determinant of procreation. In this regard, various studies have shown that most women enter a

union with the cardinal aim of having children. Thus, having children ranks highest in marital union, as far as women are concerned. On the other hand men enter a marital union primarily for the economic services of the wife. In traditional settings, these services include domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and sweeping; in general terms, the wife serves her husband. Outside the home, the wife will assist in farming by tilling the land, harvesting crops, collecting firewood and performing other economic activities. In all of these, she is an unpaid worker. These services tend to overwork the women and invariably lead to stress. Thus, many widowed or divorced women lose interest in remarriage in later life. With an increase in the number of economically-independent women, more women have become emancipated.

It is clear that remarriage is common in Ghana and is prevalent among older men. The 1960 demographic data have shown that four out of five men in the age group 60-64 years were cohabitating with a spouse, compared to two out of five women. The 1971 demographic data as well as the 1991 survey data (Adu, 1991) have shown a similar pattern of men being far more likely to be living with a wife, than of women to be living with a husband.

Remarriage in the older population of Ghana varies slightly by place of residence. The practice is higher among urban dwellers than among their rural counterparts. This is not surprising, since rural dwellers enjoy support through the extended family system which is still prevalent in the rural areas.

Since it is easier for older Ghanaians in rural areas to have constant interaction with kin and to have assistance in time of need, it is surprising that more older persons live without a spouse, compared with those who live in an urban area.

William, Lin and Cheung (1993) explain the need for marriage among older urban dwellers in terms of certain factors: the marginalization of the elderly, loneliness, isolation and loss of self-esteem, and fragmentation of the extended family, which traditionally provided care for the elderly. These factors are largely a result of modernization and industrialization.

Since older men benefit more from marriage than do older women, because of "services" provided by wives, men tend to suffer more in the event of divorce or when they are widowed. Older men therefore are more likely to suffer from emotional and physical distress than older women. It is not surprising thus to find that in the event of divorce, most older females are not interested in remarriage.

The high rate of remarriage among the elderly tends to affect the divorce rate pattern in Ghana (see also Apt, 1989). Thus, fewer divorces are recorded. There is also the presence of strong traditional norms and values, such as social pressures which compel couples, but especially women, not to seek divorce in the face of misunderstandings. Most older women, moreover, are not economically independent and this makes them subservient to their husbands.

Life expectancy in Ghana is comparatively low, and is lower for men (55 years) than for women (59 years) (US Bureau of the Census, 1998). The result is a high rate of widowhood among women. The 1960 demographic data show that the proportion of widowed persons rises with age for both men and women but is higher for men. For instance, at ages 60-64 years, the percentage men who were widowed was only 5.7%, compared to 46.2% of older women. As expected, the percentage of the older population at age 65 and older who were widowed increased by 13% for males, as against 66% for females. The pattern is similar for the 1971 demographic data as well for the 1991 survey data.

Conclusion

The marital status of older Ghanaians therefore follows a differential pattern. The pattern differs by place of residence, gender and age. High mortality rates among older men account for the gender differential seen in the proportion of the older population which is widowed. Remarriage is more prevalent among older men than older women.

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