

The man in his house: changing family and partnership behaviour in southern Ghana
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Family and living arrangements in Ghana have changed dramatically since the late 1980s, bringing in its wake important effects on reproductive behaviour. This study offers new insights into the association between gender relations and demographic behaviour; especially by assessing variations in marital stability, exploring new connections between the need to marry and fatherhood values and male dominance values, and women's economic life all with consequences for childbearing, birth-spacing and contraceptive use, economic desirability of children. Evidence was obtained from in-depth interviews triangulated with survey data obtained in Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim rural coastal communities of Ghana.

Marital status

Table 1 below shows the percentage distribution of sampled men living in Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim according to current union status. More than 95 percent of the men are officially married, signifying a preference for not wanting to just be in-union. On the average, men get married at a younger age (23 years) in Abuesi than in Brenu Akyinim (25 years) and it is generally observed that age at first marriage is higher for men than for women in the two communities.

In addition, even though more than three-quarters of the men are in monogamous unions, re-marriage is on the rise, and there is a higher incidence of polygynous marriages in Abuesi than in Brenu Akyinim. This is attributed to a higher proportion of Muslims in the former community than in the latter. In Islam, having multiple wives is allowed; some Christians practice this, but by Biblical injunction they are not allowed to occupy certain positions in the church administration; though bigamy is not prohibited by law in Ghana. The fundamental importance of marriage to males is also considered along the lines of how socio-economic activities (education, work, and religion) have influence on the age at first marriage. In Abuesi, it is observed that the likelihood of marrying at a later age is higher among men who have had some formal schooling (23.4 years), traders (26 years), and Catholics (25 years).

Childbearing and marital status

Childbearing achievement and desires of the men were viewed against the backdrop of the marital status. In a situation comparable to their wives, the formally married men in the two communities bear more children than those in relatively less formal unions. The difference is more pronounced in Abuesi, where married males on the average have more than five times as many children as those in less formal unions. The difference is less dramatic in Brenu Akyinim where married men only have approximately twice as many children as those in-union. However comparing across the board for males in-union, it appears that in Brenu Akyinim men are becoming less encumbered by the need to be in formal union before having children, as they reported having more children in this setting than the same category in Abuesi. While the sample size of males in-union is relatively small, this data signifies another part of the emerging complex changes in reproductive behaviour taking place in contemporary rural societies in Ghana.

Birth timing

In Abuesi, the males were prepared to wait approximately three years before having the next child with their first wives, compared to a two-year waiting period for additional children with the second wives. In some instances, birth intervals are even shorter if some second wives have given birth to male offspring when the first wives have not been able to achieve this feat. Average birth intervals stated by the men in Brenu Akyinim followed a similar pattern to that observed among men in Abuesi; however there is a marginal difference where multiple wives are

concerned, as most men would prefer to wait 3.2 years before having the next child with their first wives compared to a slightly shorter 3.0 years for those with second wives.

Table 2
Percentage distribution of men living in Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim according to birth interval preferences

Child birth interval	Abuesi		Brenu Akyinim	
	Wife1	Wife2	Wife1	Wife2
<2 years	42.1	66.7	33.3	75
3-4 years	39.5	33.3	38.1	25
5 years	18.4	-	28.6	-
Total nos.	38	6	21	4
Birth interval	2.9 years	2.1 years	3.2 years	3 years

Source: Diffusion of Fertility Survey, Round 1

One difference was observed, however in Brenu Akyinim: while the men expressed that they would rather wait for three years before impregnating their first wives, these men felt that their second wives would prefer a relatively shorter waiting period of two years. With their first wives, the men indicated (on average) a longer interval of three and half years. Reasons for the second wives' preference for a relatively shorter interval are not hard to understand. Second wives are more often than not younger than first wives, and in many cases they are taken on as second wives by relatively rich men, and/or men who want more from romantic relationships than what they were experiencing with their first wives. These women's willingness to have children at shorter intervals helps in further cementing unions with their husbands. Some even do so for inheritance purposes from a rich husband, which in a way causes conflicts between the matrilineal and patrilineal rules as the woman (or man) can use it for personal benefits.

Kinship and child-rearing: Generally in these communities, the matrilineal rule that confer ownership of children to women and inheritance to maternal uncles is widely accepted and used. However a man separated from his wife might subconsciously invoke the rule to avoid spending so much on child welfare since children automatically belong to the wife's family (children are expected to inherit from maternal uncles too); a woman can also use a biological connection (in lieu of patrilineal rule) to make children inherit their father's property in event of his death (which in a way makes the widow a potential beneficiary).

This puts the pressure of childcare on women. However in event of marital separation, children who are initially valued because they are offspring of current unions, can be just as easily de-valued and deprived of resources when the union is broken. Therefore at the remarriage of either parent to new partners, a new level of acceptance is established for an existing child. In this analysis, 'time' exposes children as symbolic values in high and low points of adult relationships. Matrilineal rules can also be suspended in the context of a rich man's death, because the widow can seek succour from the Intestate Succession Law 1985ⁱ that legally gives the woman and her children the right to inherit the dead man's estate.

Seasonal migration and birth intervals: The vocation of the inhabitants also influenced childbearing intervals. Fishing has been an artisan activity for a long time (though some now do it on subsistence and part-time basis); fishermen owned their own equipment and harvests were sold at market rates dictated by powerful market women, who in many cases were wives of the fishermen. In the farming community of Brenu Akyinim, a fishing group of temporary seasonal-settlers from nearby Moree appeared. These seasonal migrants from Moree established social

relations that impact on the marital and childbearing aspirations and behaviour of some women in Brenu Akyinim. If an un-married woman was discovered to be pregnant in the off-peak fishing season, and the date was traced back to the peak-time of the fishing season, more often than not the seasonal in-migrant fishermen were found responsible. The result was usually for the woman to move back to Moree and live with the fisherman, a good proportion of which end up in official marriage. Other women, in some cases, chose to remain in Brenu Akyinim as a household unit because the man was (or was suspected to be) married already to another woman in Moree. But this brings along with it long birth intervals between the first and second child. Abortion is not common due to the belief that childcare is not expensive and the extended family kinship system is still strong enough for mothers to get help in childcare.

Contraception and childbearing: Changes in family structure in recent times have seen erosion of the power of extended kin which has resulted in greater concurrence, and most likely better communication between spouses about the costs of children and how these costs have to be borne, and to reaching a decision on family size limitation. In addition, there is the 'open secret' that some women use modern contraceptives without their partner's knowledge or consent. But this has some form of indirect connivance from their partners in the sense that while these males are aware of the unpleasantness of having an unwanted birth, the responsibility for preventing it is put on the woman. The realisation of the increasing costs of raising children coupled with unpleasant appellations given to couples with large family sizes increased the acceptance of modern contraceptive methods. In order to prevent pregnancy, some women use contraceptive pills secretly (in Brenu Akyinim) and abortion (in Abuesi); some men in local discussion circles boast about how their partners know what to do to prevent unwanted pregnancy. In the course of time, the satisfaction of individual family size goals through the prevention of unintended pregnancies contributes to fertility decline.

Attitudes toward children and their treatment: Nowadays, couples with relatively small family sizes participate in the stereotyping of few nonconformists – families with 'too many' children, with no prescribed benchmark but defined by the apparent capacity to take adequate care of ones children. In Brenu Akyinim, couples that are seen to have 'too many' children now run the risk of being labelled 'pigs' or their children referred to as a 'football team'ⁱⁱ or 'Nigerian rats'. The prestige value the large numbers of children confer has to be weighed against the expenses involved in maintaining them. In the face of dwindling employment opportunities for school leavers and rising tuition fees, the economic value of children has been drastically reduced for some parents who would like to provide for their wards.

On the other hand, there is some evidence that the value of child labour has been increasing in fishing communities faced with little or no expansion of urban, industrial, technical, or white-collar employment opportunities. The government's adoption of the strict conditions (such as reducing or even eliminating subsidies to social sectors including education, health and agriculture) imposed by international financial bodies to boost national economic performance has led to rises in the cost of fishing and farming inputs. Coupled with rising unemployment, this all acts to make the inhabitants of the rural areas adopt labour-intensive livelihood strategies. Thus some couples may be bent on having large family sizes in order to use their children to make ends meet under exploitative economic conditions. They may also prefer not to send their children to school but rather engage them in main occupational activities of farming and fishing that require less investment in formal education.

1. The Intestate Succession Law provides protection for children in communities where they are not entitled to shares of their deceased parents' estates (<http://www.law.emory.edu/IFL/legal/Ghana.htm>)

2. Having small family size is a new norm attached to social dignity and respectability.