

Marriage Trends in Africa: A Fact Sheet

Background and Importance

This Fact Sheet examines rates of marriage, divorce and cohabitation among select countries on the continent of Africa. Regions of Africa differ greatly in culture and the data presented aims to examine these differences over time. Data in this Fact Sheet are taken from the Demographic Yearbook from the Statistics Division of the United Nations. Data were not available for all countries for all years, as the civil registry of each country differs.



Africa is the second most populous continent in the world,¹ with 57 countries² and over 3,000 languages.³ The country is divided into two geographic regions – Northern Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Northern Africa includes: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, South Sudan, Sudan, Tunisia, and Western Sahara.⁴ Sub-Saharan Africa includes all African countries not in Northern Africa. (*Sudan may be included in both Sub-Saharan and North Africa.*⁵ *For the purposes of this Fact Sheet, Sudan is included in Northern Africa.*) There are hundreds of different ethnic groups across Africa. Some of the largest groups are Arabs in North Africa; Yoruba in West Africa; the Kongo in Central Africa; the Hutu in East Africa; the Omoro, Amhara, and Somali people in the Horn of Africa; and the Shona and Zulu of Southern Africa.⁶

About 40% of Africans live in urban areas, with the Sub-Saharan African population at 37%. Urban/rural rates in Africa are similar to Asia but well below European and North American rates, where about 80% of people live in cities.⁷ The majority of Africans practice Christianity or Islam, with a majority Islamic population residing in Northern Africa.^{8,9} Christianity is more prevalent in the southern part of the country, although there is more of a mix of religions in Sub-Saharan Africa than North Africa, with Christianity, Islam and traditional African religions being practiced.¹⁰ Countries discussed in this Fact Sheet include the following: Northern Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia); and Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, and South Africa).

Headlines/Trends

Marriage rates in Africa differ by region. In Northern Africa, trends in marriage over time are roughly similar to those in the United States, exhibiting a steady decrease over the past few decades. Among the island nations off of the southern coast of Africa, the crude marriage rates are substantially higher than the nearby continental African countries. Unfortunately, recent crude marriage data were not available for many Sub-Saharan countries and trends are difficult to identify. Issues such as conflict, westernization, polygyny, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic have influenced marriage and divorce rates in many countries.

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Another issue impacting Africa is the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In 2009, the top 20 countries in the world with the highest adult HIV/AIDS prevalence rate were all located in Sub-Saharan Africa (Swaziland has the highest rate at 25.9%). Liberia (1.5%) has the highest prevalence among Northern African countries; however, its rate is less than half of the average Sub-Saharan rate (5%). While there has been limited research on marriage and HIV/AIDS in Africa, recent reports indicate the majority of HIV/

AIDS-infected individuals in Zimbabwe and Uganda are married or in stable relationships.^{20,21} Research at the beginning of the HIV epidemic in Africa suggested that the younger population may delay marriage or remain unmarried due to concerns over HIV, but there is little research on the overall impact on marriage and age at first marriage.^{22,23,24} The death of children due to HIV/AIDS may be associated with marital instability.²⁵



Definitions

Crude marriage and divorce rates describe the number of marriages or divorces per 1,000 individuals in the population. The crude rate provides a sense of how common marriage and divorce is over time. The crude rate is limited in that it includes children and married individuals—populations not “at risk” of marriage. In addition, the rates only represent a single point in time. Crude marriage and divorce rates provide rough descriptions of trends in marriage and divorce over time, and allow comparisons between the United States and other countries.

Consensual unions are men and women living together as a married couple without a formally registered marriage according to the laws and/or religion of the country. In the available data, it is possible that some persons reporting themselves as married may, in fact, be in a consensual union and vice-versa.

Polygyny is the practice of having more than one wife at the same time. This is not to be confused with the term polygamy, which may apply to multiple husbands or wives.

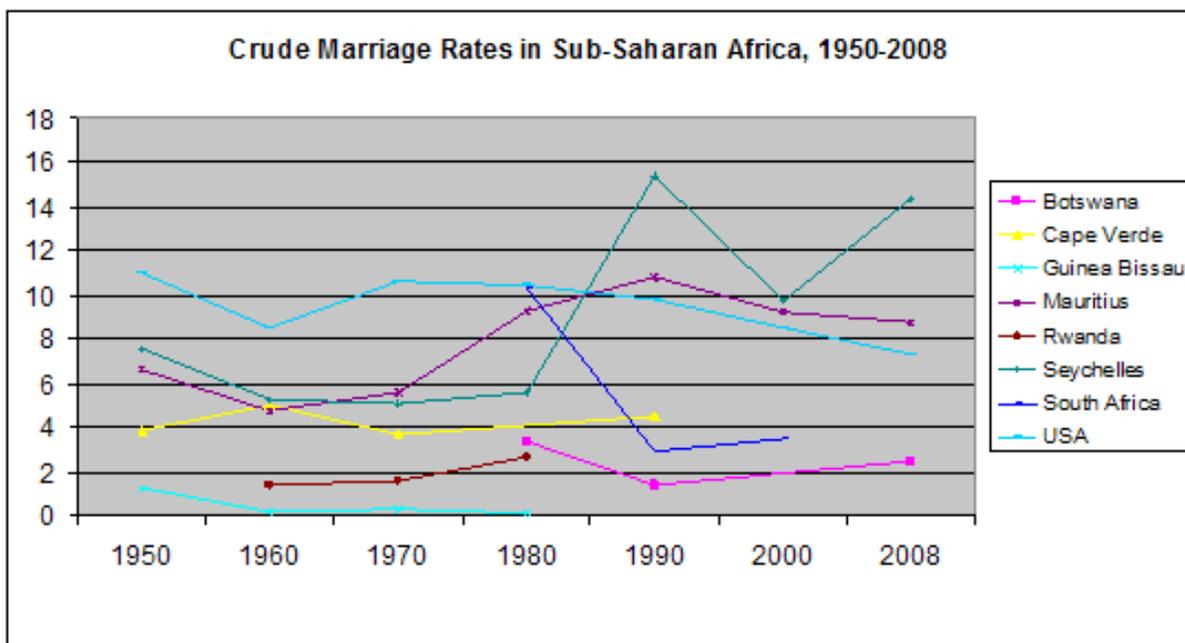
Data

Marriage

Although marriage rates began to decline in many African countries in the 1970s, marriage remains the norm across the continent. In some capitals and large cities, the trend is toward a longer single life and a later age of first marriage.²⁶ In Southern Africa the traditional practice of lobolo (or lobola) may be impacting marriage, as well. A lobolo, similar to a dowry in other societies, requires the man pay his fiancé’s family in exchange for her hand in marriage. However, due to massive unemployment, fewer men can afford the lobolo.²⁷ Many societies across the continent practice a combination of traditional African religions and Christianity or Islam.^{28,29,30} Along with tribal religions, the mixing of traditional tribal laws with

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English law can be common, as well.³¹ As a result of increasing westernization, education, and economic advances over the last century, the practice of polygyny has declined in some regions, but has not completely disappeared. Polygyny is most common in the western and Sahel (the area south of the Sahara Desert and north of the tropical Sudanian Savannah) regions; 30 to 60% of women there ages 35-44 are in polygynous relationships. Polygyny exists in other regions of Africa, but is not as common.³² In some of the Northern African countries, Islamic law dictates that fathers may contract their children to marriage and that polygamy is permissible.^{33,34} In Sudan, marriage is allowed for Muslim children at age 10.³⁵



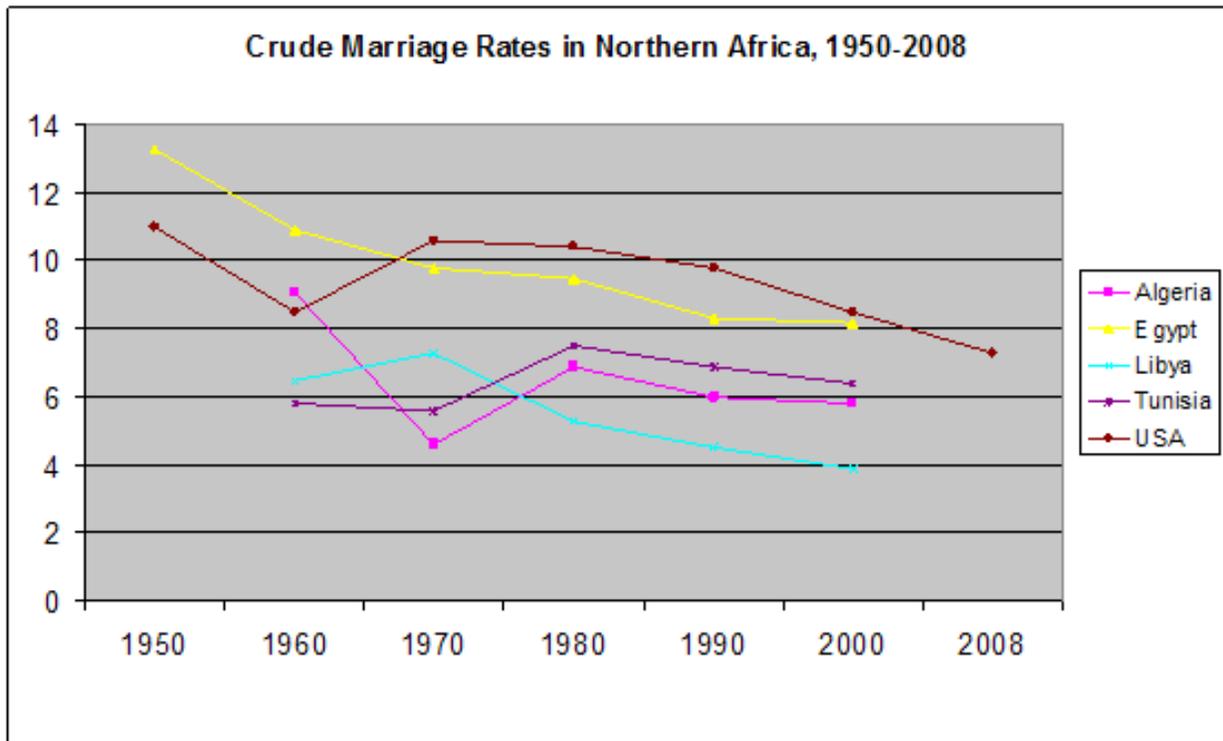
Note: In the event that data was not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data was used.

Chart 1 shows the crude marriage rate for Sub-Saharan countries with available data from 1950 to 2008. Among these countries, the island nations of Mauritius and Seychelles have had substantially higher crude marriage rates in recent times when compared with other African nations. Recent data from South Africa and Botswana show decreases in the crude marriage rate since 1980. This aligns with research showing an increasing age of marriage and a larger share of never-married individuals in southern African countries.³⁶

Chart 1 Crude Marriage Rates in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1950-2008 ³⁷

Chart 2 shows the crude marriage rate for Northern African countries with available data from 1950 to 2008. In most of these countries, there has been a decline in crude marriage rates since the 1950s and 1960s. Tunisia's rate increased in the 1980s, but the rate has slowly declined since then. Overall, rates in Northern Africa are likely impacted by the trend of increasing age at first marriage in the region.³⁸ While women's employment has grown in Tunisia, Egypt experienced declines in its crude marriage rate and increases in age at first marriage without gains in female participation in the workforce.³⁹

Chart 2 Crude Marriage Rates in Northern Africa, 1950-2008 ⁴⁰

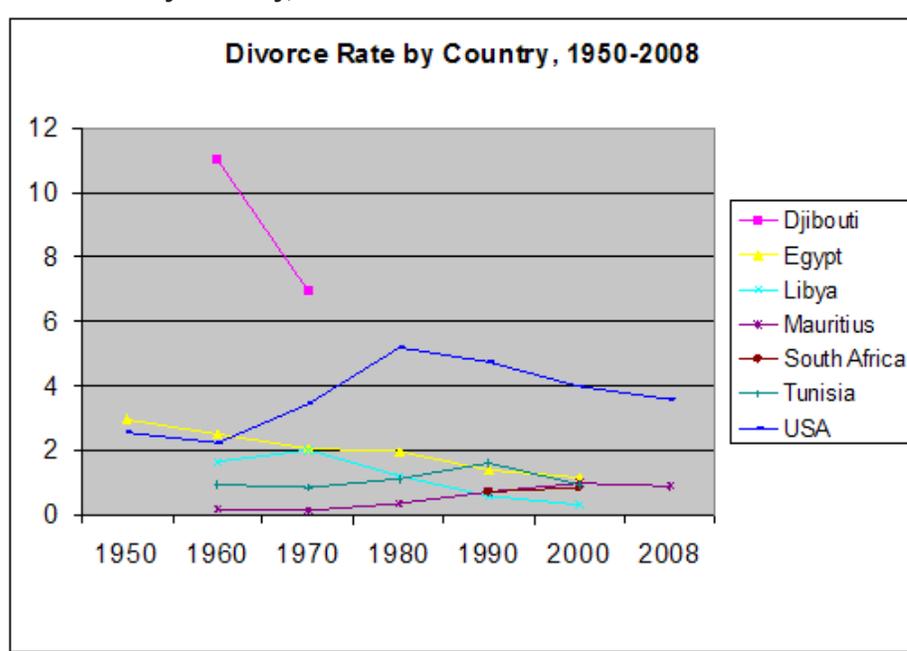


Note: In the event that data was not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data was used.

Divorce

Divorce is not well-documented in Sub-Saharan Africa. Research shows that divorce is more common in western Africa than in the East.⁴¹ Historical analyses of the region point to the strength of familial bonds through lineage, as opposed to marital bonds, as the reason behind more accepting attitudes towards divorce.⁴² Divorce is also more common in cities than in rural areas, with some notable exceptions.⁴³ In rural Mozambique, for example, there is a high proportion of divorced or separated female wage workers. There is an association between labor market participation and female divorce or widowhood.⁴⁴ In Northern Africa, all of the countries have at least some elements of Islamic law. In Egypt, matters of family law are left up to religious regulations. While Muslim women have the right to an Islamic traditional divorce wherein they do not retain the right to money, property, gifts, or alimony,⁴⁵ those in the Coptic church are much more restricted in their rights to divorce.⁴⁶ In many countries with both secular and Islamic laws and countries with only Islamic law, non-Muslims are often not required to obey Islamic law.⁴⁷ With the strong influence of traditional religious beliefs across African societies and their governments, we see much lower crude divorce rates compared with the United States. As with many other areas of life in Africa, marital dissolution has been influenced by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Union dissolution—among married couples, polygynous arrangements, and those in consensual unions—occurs at a higher rate among couples with HIV/AIDS.^{48, 49} Specifically, divorce or separation occurs at higher rates in couples in which the woman is HIV-positive and the man is not. Couples in which the man is HIV-positive have higher rates of widowhood, regardless of whether the woman is infected.⁵⁰ Chart 3 shows crude divorce rates for countries with available data since 1950. For purposes of comparison, the United States has had a higher divorce rate than the listed countries for most of this period, except for Djibouti.

Chart 3 Divorce Rate by Country, 1950 – 2008⁵¹



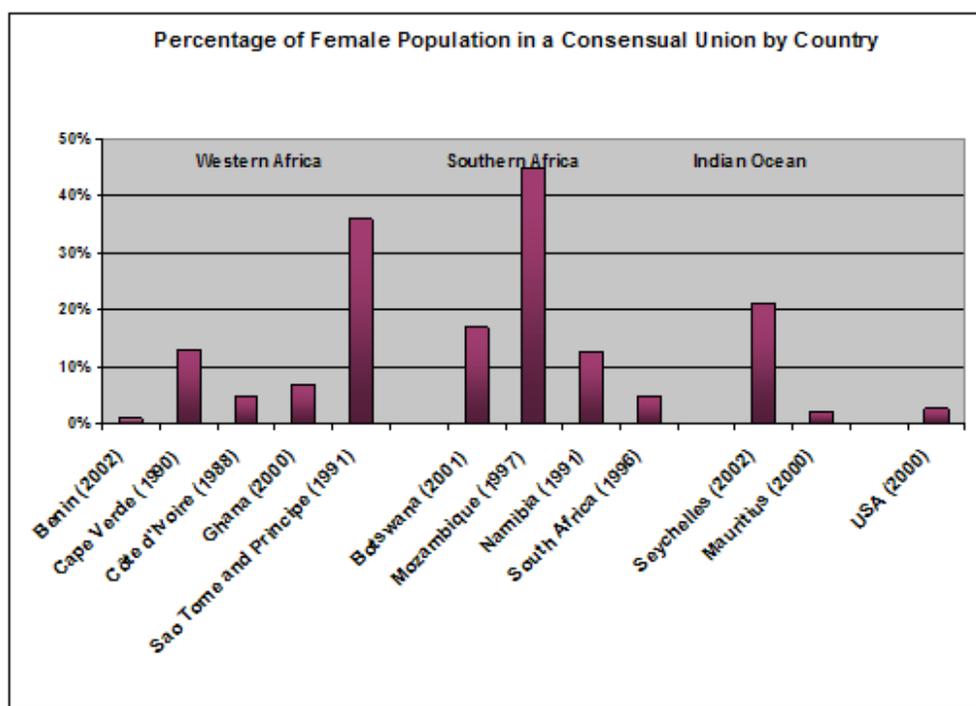
Note: In the event that data was not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data was used.

Consensual Unions

Research on consensual unions in Africa is limited, and underreporting of consensual unions may be common in some polygynous arrangements. As in other regions of the world, consensual unions are becoming more popular, particularly in urban areas and among well-educated couples.^{52,53,54} Consensual unions can be preferred over marriages because of low costs^{55,56} and stronger child custody rights for women.⁵⁷

Chart 4 shows the percentage of females in consensual unions by country. The countries in the chart are grouped by geographic location, not by UN definition.ⁱ The age of the sampled population from each country varies. The countries in the chart below report data on females at age 10 and older, 12 and older, or 15 and older. In most of these countries, the majority of females in a consensual union are between the ages of 20 and 35. In Cote d'Ivoire, the majority age trends younger than this range, and in Seychelles, the majority age trends older. When grouping countries by region, there does not seem to be a pattern of one region with a higher prevalence of consensual union formation. Almost all of the countries have higher female consensual union percentages than the United States, with Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe (an island nation) having the highest percentages. Data for North African countries were not available. Available data from the most recent year is provided.

Chart 4 Percentage of Female Population in a Consensual Union by Country⁵⁸



Note: In the event that data was not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data was used.

ⁱ Due to space considerations, Sao Tome and Principe is grouped among Western African countries, as it is approximately 200 miles from the nearest West African country. Mozambique is grouped among Southern African countries, as it borders South Africa.

Conclusion

Marriage rates in Africa differ by region. In Northern Africa, trends in marriage over time are roughly similar to the United States, exhibiting a steady decrease over the past few decades. Among the island nations off of the southern coast of Africa, the crude marriage rates are substantially higher than the nearby continental African countries. Unfortunately, recent crude marriage data were not available for many Sub-Saharan countries and trends are difficult to identify. Divorce data are also limited. But, from the data available, divorce rates are substantially lower in Africa than the United States, regardless of region. Data on consensual unions can be misleading because of how polygynous unions are surveyed. From the data available, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe each have high percentages of women in consensual unions, when compared with other countries in their regions. Similar to other areas of the world undergoing westernization, consensual unions are on the rise in Africa among well-educated, urban couples. Perhaps more than any other factor, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has impacted marriage rates in Sub-Saharan Africa greatly. Marital dissolution—whether through separation or death—is occurring at higher rates among HIV-positive couples.

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