

Marriage

Marriage and Fertility

Marriage is the predominant context for childbearing in all developing countries. Customs do vary governing whether men and women live together — and have children — outside of marriage or in consensual unions rather than in legal marriages. The initial timing of entry into unions and the prevalence and continuity of marriage also vary from country to country. But in spite of these variations, most births still occur to women in union, and this is also true for women ages 15 to 19.

Age at marriage is of particular interest because it marks the transition to adulthood in many societies; the point at which certain options in education, employment, and participation in society are foreclosed; and the beginning of regular exposure to the risks of pregnancy

and childbearing. Variation in age of entry into marriage helps explain differences in fertility across populations and also helps explain trends in fertility within individual populations over time (Adlakha et al. 1991; Moreno 1991 for Latin America).

The mechanisms linking age at marriage to fertility are well known, albeit complex, and involve other determinants of fertility, such as education (Henry and Piotrow 1979; Smith 1984; United Nations 1987:90):

- Delayed age at marriage directly affects completed fertility by reducing the number of years available for childbearing.
- In addition, populations with later mean ages at first marriage also tend to be more urbanized, to have higher levels

of educational attainment, and, more often, to use family planning within marriage. Fertility may be lower not only because of delayed marriage, which reduces the proportion of the adolescent cohort that is married, but also because marital fertility is lower in these populations.

- Finally, later marriage permits women to complete their educations, build labor force skills, and develop career interests that compete with childbearing within marriage. These career interests may, in turn, motivate women to limit family size and/or widen the spacing of their children.

Age at first marriage is the first of the two proximate determinants of teenage fertility considered in this report.

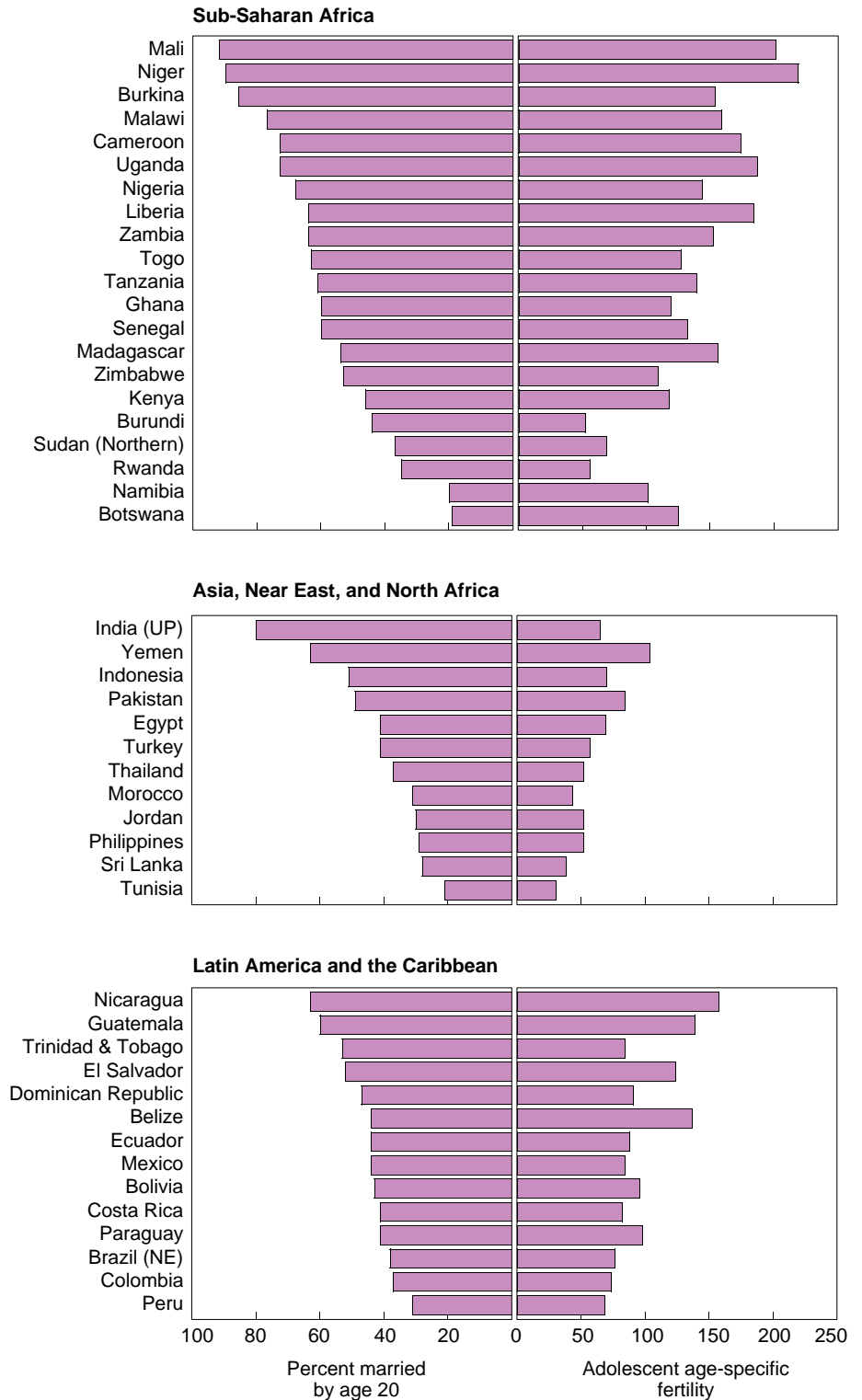
What the Data Show

Marriage is especially important in explaining differentials in adolescent fertility among countries because contraceptive use is less common among adolescents than among older population subgroups. The relationship between the pace of marriage to age 20 and adolescent age-specific fertility is illustrated in figure 17.¹³

Data from DHS and CDC surveys conducted in the late 1980's and early 1990's show that, even though there is a general trend towards later marriage (defined, in order to facilitate cross-national comparisons, to include both formal marriage and simply living in union with a man) throughout the developing world, teenage marriages continue to prevail in many countries, and in Africa in particular. In two-thirds of the Sub-Saharan African countries represented here, at least 1 out of every 4 women ages 15-19 is married, and nearly 60 percent of women in these countries marry by age 20.

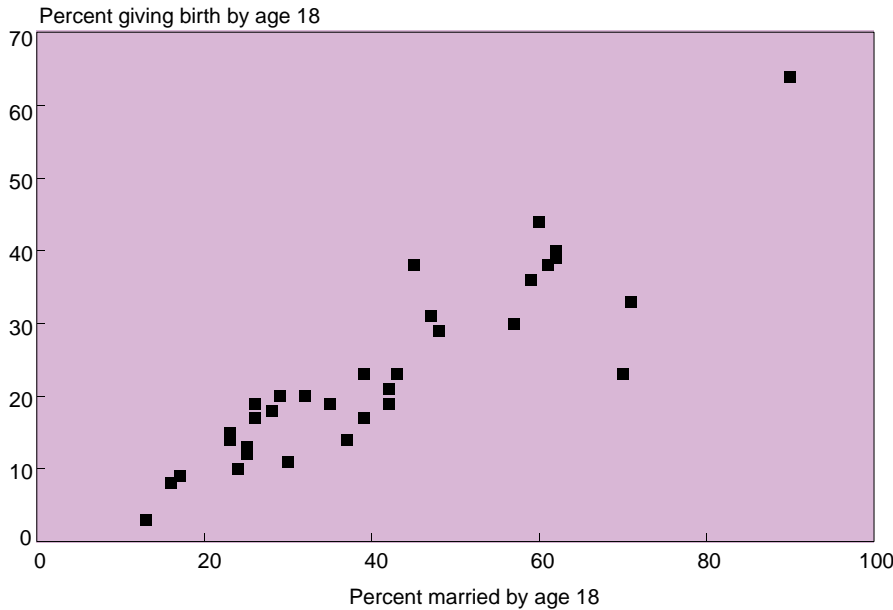
The data underscore a strong relationship between adolescent marriage and childbearing in each of the three regions. From Asia, the Near East, and North Africa, the four populations with the highest proportions married or in union by age 20 — India (Uttar Pradesh), Yemen, Indonesia, and Pakistan — have 3 of the 4 highest adolescent age-specific fertility rates. In Sub-Saharan Africa the six populations with the highest proportions married have four of the highest adolescent

Figure 17.
Percent of Women Ages 20-24 Married by Age 20 and Adolescent Fertility



¹³ Data for this section are from appendix tables 5, 13, and 14.

Figure 18.
Percent of Adolescents Married and Giving Birth by Age 18
 (33 countries)



ASFR's. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the four countries with the highest proportions married also include 3 of the highest 4 ASFR's among those shown.

The principal exceptions to the rule are Botswana and Namibia, in Sub-Saharan Africa. Proportions of women reported as married by age 20 are low in both countries and

unexpected given the corresponding levels of fertility in these countries. In Botswana, 59 percent of never-married women have given birth; in Namibia, 44 percent (Westoff et al., 1994:11). This departure from the general pattern found in other countries is attributed to a lengthy bridewealth process, the decline of polygyny, gender equality in rights to property (Botswana), the displacement of population associated with the struggle for independence (Namibia), and high levels of labor migration in both countries (Westoff, *ibid.*).

Data from the World Fertility Survey show that early adolescent fertility — together with its health risks and its negative connotations in terms of personal development for women— is strongly associated with early adolescent marriage.

Figure 18 shows that those countries with high proportions of young women married by age 18 also have high proportions of first births by age 18.

Trends in Adolescent Marriage and Childbearing

Regardless of current levels, proportions of teenage women marrying are declining in most countries, including Sub-Saharan Africa.

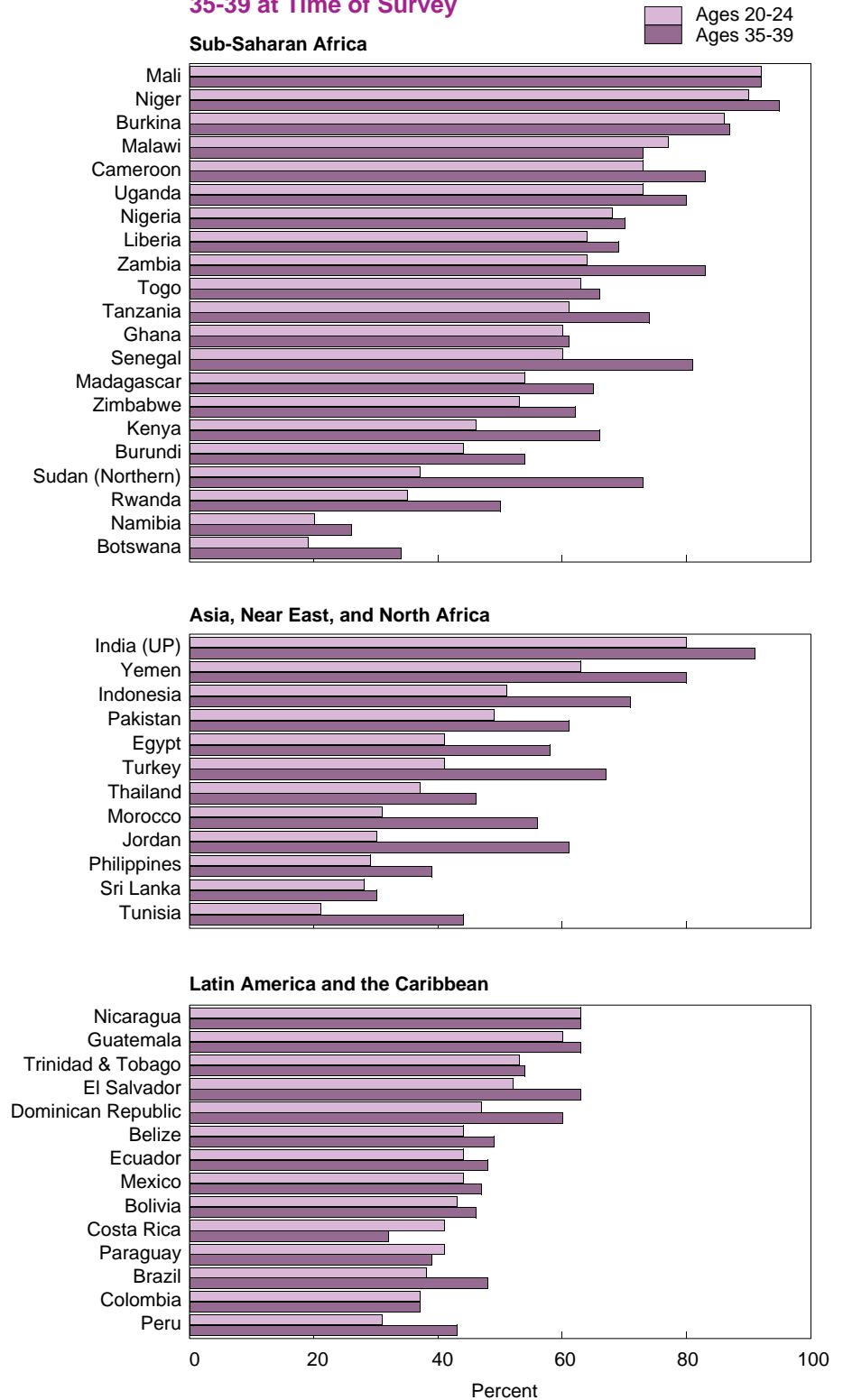
Figure 19 shows the percentage of women from two age groups (20-24 and 35-39) who reported being married by age 20. A comparison of these percentages provides evidence of the trend in teenage marriages over approximately a 15-year period.

With few exceptions, smaller proportions of the younger cohorts of women report being married when they were adolescents than do older women from the same populations. The differences are somewhat smaller for Latin America and the Caribbean, but the same general trend is evident for all three regions.

Given the strong relationship between adolescent fertility and age at marriage in the populations covered here and the clear trend toward somewhat later ages at marriage, it would appear that evolving patterns of timing of first marriage are directly responsible for some of the reduction in teenage childbearing in these same countries.

Unfortunately, comparable data are not available to tell us whether or not the decline in proportions married by age 20 has been matched by a shift from early to late adolescent entry into unions and childbearing.

Figure 19. Percent of Women Who Married Before Age 20 for Women Ages 20-24 and 35-39 at Time of Survey



Using Data From Multiple Sources for Programs Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation: An Analytical Issue

The combination of the path-breaking WFS series dating to the early 1970's with DHS surveys has provided some useful new insights into the reproductive behavior of young women representing approximately 77 percent of the developing world (excluding China). However, from an analytical standpoint, the value of comparative studies like this one is limited where data from different sources refer to different populations and where questions asked differ. This report would be stronger, and future attempts to monitor adolescent marriage, pregnancy, and childbearing would be more productive, if efforts already evident in some DHS country reports to distinguish early from late adolescent behavior—and the correlates of that behavior—could be continued and strengthened.

