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Akinyoade, A.

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The Man in his House: Marriage, Gender Relations and Childbearing in Ghana

Akinyoade, Akinyinka*

<Contents>

1. Introduction
2. Description of villages
3. Marriage and reproductive behaviour
4. Results
5. Marriage stability and fertility decisions
6. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Statistical evidence in Ghana suggests that age at first marriage is rising and the rate of childbearing is declining at a fast pace (GSS and Macro International 2004, 1999). Data obtained from the 1998 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey (GDHS) show that age at first marriage has gone up from 18.7 years among women aged 40-49 to 19.3 years for women aged 20-24, and simultaneously fertility 4 children per woman in the period 1988 to 1998. This paper tries to clarify this trend in a study of two coastal Ghanaian communities - Brenu Akyinim (Central region) and Abuesi (Western region).

Two sets of data are used for this study. In the first instance, empirical data is derived from the first round of the Diffusion of Fertility Behaviour Survey.¹⁾ In

* African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, The Netherlands.

¹ A multi-round survey a project titled 'Social Networks and Diffusion of Fertility Behaviour' which focused on six rural communities in the three coastal regions of southern Ghana. This is a joint project between Population Council (New York) and Department of Sociology (University of Cape Coast, Ghana), directed by the

the first round, information is obtained from 411 female respondents with the aid of a structured interview schedule that inquired into: socio-economic characteristics, childbearing experience, cost and benefit of childbearing, and extensive social network data among others. All these are aimed at understanding how social interaction influences the reproductive behaviour of respondents. These females are in the childbearing age range 15–49 years and more than three-quarters of them are married or in unions where childbearing is acceptable.

The second set of data is based on Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) conducted on four groups randomly selected from current cohorts of panel survey respondents homogenous by age and sex. Discussion groups comprised adult men, adult women, mixed male/female adult, and adolescents. Some participants not among the sample used during questionnaire administration were included. This will provide additional information on community-level attributes of reproductive behaviour. The FGDs focused on gender relations at the household level as fertility decision-making and fertility decision implementing individuals and partners, and other aspects of reproductive behaviour.

This paper wants to move the analysis of fertility rate decline beyond a mere statement of modernisation (Joseph and Garenne 2001, Dodoo 2001, Mensch et al. 1998, Meekers and Ahmad 1997, Isiugo-Abanihe 1994, Caldwell and Caldwell 1990). Changes in fertility rates are socially embedded and I would like to show the mechanism behind this claim. We will try to understand through the differences between the two villages the socio-economic power-play in gender relations that leads to particular fertility rate outcomes. In particular we will look at the role of marriage and stable unions. Our data will show that there are significant differences in reproductive behaviour between these two villages. It appears that economic activity bears the closest relationship to these differences.

2. Description of villages

Abuesi, in the Western Region, is a typical Ghanaian fishing village and it serves as departure point for emigration of fishermen to other coastal parts of West Africa. Most males engage in fishing on the Atlantic for a living and they are important sources of credit (fish or cash) for their wives. Three-quarters of the women living here are engaged in fishing trade as fresh fish mongers or smoked fish traders (table 1). Off-springs of such couples are significant sources of labour for fishing and fish processing (Akinyoade 2007, Aryeetey 2001). With increasing mechanisation and injection of capital in the fishing industry, women are now emerging as a new class of boat owners and credit (Overá 2000).

On the other hand, Brenu Akyinim - located in the Central Region which has one of the highest regional fertility rates - is a fishing village that combines with farming and salt-winning (Akinyoade 2007). Gender division of labour is evident in the farming of crops (by men) and sale of crops (by women). Production strategies are also labour-intensive and children constitute important sources of labour. Fishing is mostly done by minority group of seasonal in-migrants especially from Moree who also engages in subsistence pineapple production in off-peak fishing season. Although small-scale fishing communities in Africa have become the focus of an increasing amount of social and biophysical research in recent years (Aryeetey 2001), consideration of dynamics of fertility behaviour at the community and, in particular, household level in small-scale fisheries has received only limited attention. Approximately 10% of the women in these two communities are unemployed (table 1). It was also estimated from the survey that women have twice as many children (4)² than women in union (2) socially recognised for childbearing but less secure than formal marriage.

² However the current fertility level of four children per woman represents a significant departure from previous heights of ten children per woman that used to obtain in the two communities. Historically, women who had ten children were honoured with the presentation of a sheep; this practice - termed *badu guan* - used to be threshold women of childbearing age aspired to attain (Akinyoade 2007).

Table 1

Percentage distribution of respondents according to selected socio-economic and demographic background

Variable	Abuesi [F]	Brenu[F]
Occupation		
Not working	11,2	10,1
Farming		29,6
Fishing	0,9	1,7
Trading	75,9	46,4
Others	12,0	12,3
MNCEB		
In union	1,7	1,9
Married	4,1	4,4

Source: Diffusion of fertility behaviour survey, round 1, 1998

Note: F = Female; MNCEB = Mean number of children ever born

The total number of children a woman may have can be influenced by the spacing between one birth and subsequent one. This gap has implications for health of women and her off-springs, as well as the socio-economic activities of the women (Monekosso 2001). There is a notable difference in birth interval.³⁾ Statistical examination of birth intervals in these two communities reveal that while mean number of children ever born is higher for women in Brenu, female respondents of Abuesi give birth at relatively shorter intervals (2.7 years) compared to Brenu (3.7 years). As shown in table 2, women in Abuesi expressed shorter birth intervals - approximately three years compared to the four years stated by women living in Brenu Akyinim. This does not coincide with the national Population Policy recommendation of a two-year birth intervals; this policy is not in tandem with local practices. One female participant in the mixed FGD in Brenu Akyinim proudly commented that:

³ Women who expressed the desire to have additional children were asked how soon they intended to get pregnant, as an indicator of average waiting time, thus birth interval. While some women gave non-numeric responses like "as soon as possible" or "don't know", other women were more explicit with timelines.

'I have three children with five-year interval between them. My first born is fourteen years old, the second one is eight years and the last one is three years.'

More than 80% of women in Brenu Akyinim indicated a waiting time of more than three years compared to approximately 60% of women in Abuesi.

Table 2

Percentage distribution of women living in Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim according to birth interval preferences

Childbearing interval	Abuesi (%)	Brenu Akyinim (%)
< 2 years	36.2	18.8
3 – 4 years	50.0	53.1
5 years	13.8	28.1
Total nos. of women	(58)	(32)
Average birth interval	2.7 years	3.7 years

Source: Diffusion of Fertility Survey, Round 1

These differences can be understood against the background of the economic activities in the two villages. Typical in Brenu Akyinim is childbirth at an early age followed by a period without childbirth and then childbirth at smaller intervals. The reason is that the first child tends to be the result of an impulse; thereafter women wait for economic security before they reproduce again. In Abuesi, childbearing starts later and there is a shorter interval between the first and subsequent children. The first child in Brenu Akyinim is usually the result of fleeting liaison with visiting fishermen. There is a large seasonal in-migration of fishermen. Some women, upon impregnation by in-migrant fishermen follow the men back to Moree at the end of fishing season; a good proportion of such liaisons end up in marriage. Other women chose to remain in Brenu Akyinim as a separate household unit if it was discovered that the fisherman has another wife in his community of origin. Some of this latter category of women subsequently gets married to a local male. Closer inspection of the origins of her children would reveal that the father of the first child was not from the area; but

subsequent children came from a local husband. Reproductive behaviour also becomes intertwined with the management of a farm in off-peak fishing season.

In Abuesi, fishing is dominant and females have a much more independent existence as they are involved in fish trading and have an income of their own. Adult women more often than not find themselves combining child care with their vocations - fish processing, trading, or farming. This has further implications on breastfeeding; the busier a mother is, the more likely she is to wean her babies early, resulting in the loss of naturally induced protection against new pregnancies by the disruption of lactational amenorrhea. Though these women are more likely to get pregnant because of the loss of this naturally induced protection, their participation in vocation limits coital frequency with their partners, and is a major reason why they experience longer birth intervals. Such large gaps in birth spacing make the woman's family appear less compact, which could result in more generational stratification than the 'early-stopping' families (Schneider and Schneider 1992). The fishing community of Abuesi is stable and the fathers are known. In addition, when probed for their husbands' birth interval preferences, women in the two villages stated that their husbands prefer longer intervals. For example in Abuesi, married women stated that on the average, their husbands would like to wait longer by about half a year (that is, 3.2 years) when compared to women's stated interval.

Table 3

Mean age at first marriage according to selected background characteristics of women in Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim

Variable	Abuesi		Brenu Akyinim	
	Mean	Freq.	Mean	Freq.
Age at 1st marriage	19.4	181	19.7	153
Ever worked				
No	18.8	15	17.5	11
Yes	19.4	166	19.9	142
Type of work				
Fishing	21.5	2	21.7	3
Trading	19.2	142	19.7	73

Source: Diffusion of Fertility Survey, Round 1

Age at first marriage and stability of unions can also be explained in a socio-economic context. The economic activity in fishing is central to deciding to marry. The striking result in table 2 is that women who work have later age at marriage than those who did not work. The fishing activity for the women starts as early as age 6 where they help their mothers in the fish smoking and drying processes. The preservation process is done for fish harvests not sold as fresh and this takes several days. This is a continuous activity during the fishing season, and in the lean season, trips are made inland as far as Kumasi (approximately 400km away) to market the processed fish. The processing and commercial activities go on through the early stages of the woman's life. Their frequent trips and interactions with other people inland hinder their developing and maintaining (long-term) relationships that could encourage them to marry early. A woman and her family will start to think about marriage when it is felt that she is old enough to be an independent fishmonger.

Delayed entry into marriage is also in the literature a major explanatory factor in explaining the transition from high to lower fertility rates (Garenne 2008, Woldemicael 2008, Basu 2007, Lindstrom and Woubalem, Lesthaeghe and Moors 2000, Zakharov and Ivanova 1996, Zachariah and Kurp 1984). General evidence obtained on the relationship between age at marriage and reproduction from the GDHS indicate that in the past two decades that as age at first marriage is increasing, the proportion of women marrying by age 15 years is declining. Nevertheless, about half of currently married women got married in their teens and median age at first sex did however rise to age 17.5 years (GSS and Macro International 2004). The context of marital contracts and union is changing, with consequences for fertility decision making and implementation. Stability of union is changing as well, signifying possible shifts in how marriage is contracted and how gender relations sustain the union. Gender relations seem therefore crucial to understand demographic behaviour (Hirsch et al. 2009, Janssens 2007, Khan et al. 2007, Hobcraft 2006, Desai 1994, Naguib and Lloyd 1994, Dyson and Moore 1983). In this study, we observe that gender relations are much more complicated

than is assumed to be, especially in attempts to understand social basis of reproduction.

3. Marriage and reproductive behaviour

There is an idealised image of marriage in the past as being stable geared towards childbearing instead of sexual gratification. Procreation was then seen as fitting the demands of labour. Nowadays it is then seen as less stable geared towards sexual satisfaction. Marriage is no longer necessarily arranged by the family but can be the result of individual decisions (Gage-Brandon and Meekers 1992). In the light of the above, two main issues need to be addressed. The first focus is on the influence of the social issue of marriage on childbearing activities. This needs then to be extended to questions about livelihoods and childbearing.

4. Results

4.1 The ideology of stability of marriage and actual timing and frequency of marriage for women

In the study area, more than 90 percent of the women had experienced some form of married life. The majority of the women are currently married or in a stable socially sanctioned union with a man, and others had experienced marriage earlier but now terminated (through separation, divorce, or death). For the category of women who said they are 'in union', such a union does not involve a religious or civil ceremony; rather it 'involves cohabitation and an aspiration to cooperation or complementarity and to autonomy' (Magazine 2004). In this context, the word marriage is rarely used, but those with a partner refer to their partner as their wife or husband. This can also explain the difference between the

high degree of re-marriage in Abuesi as compared to Brenu Akyinim. The initial liaisons that produce off-spring will then not be regarded as marriage.

Table 4

Percentage distribution of women in Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim according to marital status

Marital status	Abuesi		Brenu Akyinim	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Never Married	18	7.8	11	6.2
In Union	9	3.9	12	6.7
Married	182	78.4	129	72.1
Disrupted	23	9.9	27	15.1
Total	232	100.0	179	100.0
Re-married	128	60.1	68	40.5

Source: Diffusion of Fertility Survey, Round 1

Note: Disrupted – separated, divorced, widowed

Among the women who had ever experienced or were currently in a marriage, 60 percent of married women in Abuesi and about 41 percent of married women in Brenu Akyinim stated that their married status at the time of interview was not the first one. This goes against the trend that expects stable long-term first marriages as is projected in the past.

There is a clear link between the type of marriage or union and fertility or child spacing. That can be clarified by looking at the decision to procreate within relationships. Firstly in our study sites, early pregnancy is common. For teenage girls, adolescent motherhood also means social stigma, but paternity acts as an intervening factor in the extent to which adolescent childbearing affects female respectability. Bledsoe and Cohen (1993) contend that paternity may or may not be linked with marriage in African society; however, it confers social legitimacy upon a birth. In Ghanaian society, acknowledgement of paternity implies social and financial commitment to a child on the part of a man and his kin and endows the child with rights and status within a society (Preston-Whyte 1974).

The financial burden of children should be and is mostly borne by men. Therefore childbirth is then often interpreted as a strategy to further financial

interests of women. Odd instances are cited where a woman gets pregnant by one man but ties the pregnancy to another, richer, man. Special risks are associated with impregnating a 'girlfriend'. More problems arise if the 'girlfriend' dies due to pregnancy complications (including from abortion, eclampsia, labour or delivery), and the consequences are heavy for the boyfriend or man-friend who caused the pregnancy. A 45-year-old fisherman in Abuesi noted that the boyfriend of the dead lady *'will be expected to perform the marriage rites before her burial is permitted; it is a big cost to pay'*. Another man in Brenu Akyinim exclaimed: *'if the girl dies in your room, it will be better to kill yourself before the family sees you'!*

Yet in this situation, far more emphasis is placed on sexual conduct as a means for young men and adult males to attain respectability compared with what is expected of women. Men have much more latitude in terms of acceptable sexual behaviour and are expected or even encouraged to engage in practices considered inappropriate for women. The importance of sexuality in defining masculinity is embodied in the concept of males being referred to as a '*champion*' or being '*brutal*'. This reflects a general pattern; according to Varga (2003), such terms denote 'a man who is socially successful and popular with women, although its colloquial usage has strong sexual connotations'. As said before, early pregnancy is common throughout Ghana. The percentage of adolescents who have begun childbearing also increased with age from 2 percent among women aged 15 years to 32 percent among those aged 19 years. In addition, adolescent childbearing is twice as high in rural areas than in urban areas (Forrest 1994, Arnold and Blanc 1990).

We estimated from the panel survey that average age of women having a first child is 19.3 years in Abuesi compared to 20.5 years in Brenu Akyinim. Typically, many women in these two communities have their first child six months into marriage, presenting us with evidence that pregnancy predated marriage by about three months. Adults in Abuesi FGD contended that *'childbearing after marriage is usually fast and quick; many start having children after six months of marriage*

which makes you wonder that the pregnancy was there before the marriage'. The underlying rationale for timing pregnancy before marriage (asides unplanned pregnancy) is to test if there is fertility problem for either of the couple. In some cases, such pregnancy is aborted. In isolated instances where prospective couples could not achieve pregnancy, more blame is heaped on the woman and such relationship is terminated. It is akin to Inhorn (2003) finding in Egypt that men's perception of their wives infertility usually drives them to taking a second wife.

Like childbirth, marriage has important economic aspects. One FGD participant in Abuesi painted a worst-case scenario where a man can really land himself in trouble, when he decides to go ahead and get married, knowing fully well the financial burdens associated with marriage, and unfortunately finds himself unemployed at some point after the wedding ceremony. This is a catalyst for marital discord and the opportunity for the employed wife to be the front-running decision-maker in the household; in some cases it makes the affected men feel insecure, as they believe that their masculinity is being challenged.

However marriage stability cannot be reduced to economics only. From a social perspective, marriage is deemed important because the status of responsibility or attainment of a new and higher level of maturity is conferred by society on a newly-married couple. Marriage, however, serves another purpose for the enforcement of local notions of masculinity. As put by a teenager in a FGD session, *'if you are a man in a community and you refuse to marry, people think you are an irresponsible man; but when you get married, people give you respect and see you as a responsible man'*. Being a man implies taking on financial responsibilities of other people (wife, children, and the extended family). There is a strong ideology supporting stable marriages. However it appeared that in both villages marriages are far less stable (see table 3).

5. Marriage stability and fertility decisions

In ideology, men are dominant in conjugal decisions (Doodoo 2001, Van Dijk 1997, Connell 1987, 1995, Ezeh 1993, Craig 1992). A striking event occurred in Abuesi during the male-only FGD. A 34-year-old fisherman made a statement that was concurred with by the panel of discussants, that *'because a man went to marry the woman, he should have the maximum decision-making power on all issues pertaining to the marriage'*. Related to this authority is the financial edge a man has over his wife in that *'he is the breadwinner, he provides the chop money and the wife depends on the husband'* meaning she cannot have the same decision-making power as the man in a household. Adolescent FGD participants also echoed the relatively higher authority of the *'man in his house'* which arises from facts that *'he went to marry the woman'*, *'men are breadwinners for the family'*, and *'women do not give good suggestions or contributions'*; all these account for why their *'voices are not heard most of the time'*, making men automatically have more decision-making power.

Although men may want to claim absolute authority, the reality may be different. A 36-year-old trader in Brenu Akyinim during the mixed-adult FGD alluded to that while saying *'women understand that the men have power because they married you ... so they have every right over you, men must bear in mind that without we women, they cannot survive'*. Such areas include being advisers to their husbands in that *'a woman can encourage her partner to look for job so that he can earn more to support the household if the man is jobless'*. Above, we referred already to the strategic economic considerations of women. A 30-year-old trader in Brenu Akyinim expressed that *'what I considered before having my first child was to have a man who wanted to be a father, and have enough material property for the children'*.

In local informal conversations, the exercise of power by women to encourage their husbands to use contraceptives, for family spacing can be the butt of a joke. A 37-year-old fisherman reported that in Abuesi *'some women put on about three*

shorts before they go to sleep in order to make it difficult for their husbands to have easy access to sex; they do this to avoid pregnancies especially if their men are not performing the roles expected of the head of household'. The fact that women space their children and put a limit to the number of children also shows female agency. In fact men profess the wish to have more children, but that does not happen. Men are afraid to be considered to have a dysfunctional erectile system or have weak sperm (locally referred to as 'blank bullets'). In addition, where a large birth interval existed between the last and the next-to-last child, the last child is culturally marked. Parents easily refer to such children as 'accidents'; this is common in cases of absentee heads of household who live outside Abuesi and Brenu Akyinim. Others claim accidents happen because, at a certain point, a man wants to see if he is still sexually potent. Though men discuss such 'accidents' with a show of remorse laced with disguised celebration, some women see such accidents as a source of shame (and ironically did not abort the pregnancy, or as they say, use natural feminine capabilities to inhibit the growth of the foetus). Abortion is not common due to reliance on the extended family kinship system for mothers to get help in childcare.

If society accepts promiscuous behaviour on the part of a man, then it is logical that there is promiscuity among women as well. The women in these villages are as varied and often as cunning and as authoritative in their sexual escapades as the men who are supposed to be nominal heads of households. The women in Abuesi are fishmongers who travel long distances and stay in places like Kumasi for days. Their men are fishermen and when at sea the women are out of the immediate view. The opportunities for sexual escapades are obvious. An important factor as well is that the women especially in Abuesi attain economic independence and are then not financially dependent upon men. The financial dependence upon men is mainly a phenomenon of early adulthood; such is the background against which we can understand the marriage instability as well as a fertility pattern where women show autonomy.

6. Conclusion

Marriage, the social institution in which childbearing is expected to take place, is also undergoing changes; this offers a probable reason for altering the childbearing calculus of individuals and couples. Family size preferences and timing of births are shaped by contradictory interests of individuals and couples in the communities. It is obvious that gender ideals are grounded in traits that reinforce double standards. Consequently, fertility levels have been undergoing changes influenced by factors that are not only non-mutually exclusive but also shaped by different and even contradictory interests.

Life in these villages continues to be traditional in many respects. Kinship is still most important and economic activities are also still related to self-provision. The major factor that seems to explain the rising first age at marriage and the declining fertility rate seems to be in the first place in the autonomy of women as a result of financial independence. In this situation it is very well possible that fertility rates will increase and that marriages become more stable. A major important factor may therefore be the economic prospects that influences whether a couple or a woman decides to have children or not. Fertility rates will vary depending upon the autonomous decisions taken by actors. We may understand more of fertility decisions by looking at particular socio-economic time frames especially the financial prospects of individuals and communities.

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Abstract

The Man in his House: Marriage, Gender Relations and Childbearing in Ghana

Akinyoade, Akinyinka

This paper attempts to clarify the trend in the inverse relationship in increasing age at first marriage and simultaneously declining fertility rates generally in Ghana, using examples of two coastal Ghanaian communities - Brenu Akyinim (Central region) and Abuesi (Western region). Two sets of data used for this study include empirical data derived from the first round of the Diffusion of Fertility Behaviour Survey; and the second set of data is obtained from Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) conducted on four groups randomly selected from current cohorts of panel survey respondents homogenous by age and sex. Data analysis shows that changes in fertility rates are socially embedded; the mechanisms through which these occur are identified. The paper further provides an understanding of how the socio-economic power play in gender relations leads to particular fertility rate outcomes between the two villages. Of essence here is the role of marriage and stable unions. Our data further shows that there are significant differences in reproductive behaviour between the two villages, and it appears that economic activity bears the closest relationship to the differences observed.

Key words: Ghana, Brenu Akyinim, Abuesi, marriage, gender relations, the rate of childbearing

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