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Descriptive Finding

**Children under 5 in polygynous households in
sub-Saharan Africa, 2000 to 2020**

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Children under 5 in polygynous households in sub-Saharan Africa, 2000 to 2020

Emily Treleaven¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Cross-sectional analyses have identified polygyny as a prevalent family form across sub-Saharan Africa, though it has been declining over time in most countries. Yet how the prevalence of young children in polygynous households has changed over time concurrent to changes in other demographic indicators is not well understood. Trends in polygynous living arrangements and selection into these households may have consequences for related disparities in health and mortality over time.

OBJECTIVE

We describe the proportion of young children residing in polygynous households over a 20-year period of significant social and demographic change.

METHODS

We analyze nationally representative household survey data from 83 Demographic and Health Surveys from 27 sub-Saharan African countries collected between 2000 and 2020. Among children under 5 years of age, we estimate the proportion residing in a polygynous household over time and compare it to the proportion of women of reproductive age in polygynous unions over time. We then disaggregate this change by maternal marital status and wife rank.

RESULTS

Despite substantial variation between countries in the sample, the proportion of young children in polygynous households declined almost universally in sub-Saharan Africa from 2000 to 2020. The proportion of children in polygynous households declined more rapidly than the proportion of women of reproductive age in polygynous unions in almost all countries. Children in West Africa are increasingly living in monogamous households,

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while children in Central and Southern Africa are more likely to have a mother who is divorced, widowed, or never married.

CONTRIBUTION

This paper provides new estimates of the characteristics and trends over time of young children residing in polygynous households across sub-Saharan Africa.

1. Introduction

Polygyny – the practice of a man having multiple wives – is a prevalent and persistent family form, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In recent decades, there has been a steady and universal decline in the proportion of polygynous marriages in many sub-Saharan African countries (Chae and Agadjanian 2022). Despite this decline, in more than half of these countries, more than 20% of women of reproductive age reported being in a polygynous union in recent years (Ahinkorah 2021; Chae and Agadjanian 2022).

While prior studies have examined conditions of polygynous households (Agadjanian and Ezeh 2000; Bove and Valeggia 2009; Dissa 2016; Ezeh 1997; Lawson et al. 2015; Madhavan 2002) and identified characteristics related to women’s selection into polygynous marriage (Behrman 2019; Chae and Agadjanian 2022; Fenn et al. 2015; Timæus and Reynar 1998), the patterns and implications of changes in polygyny for young children remain unclear. Changes in the prevalence of polygynous unions have occurred against a backdrop of changes in fertility and marriage indicators across sub-Saharan Africa, along with rapid economic development, urbanization, and increased access to education. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, fertility has declined – though not linearly – while age at marriage, rates of divorce, and child survival have increased (Bongaarts, Mensch, and Blanc 2017; Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015; Golding et al. 2017; Schoumaker 2019). Depending on which stage a country is in its demographic transition, children’s family and cohort sizes change at different rates given the effects of lower mortality, lower fertility, and population momentum over time (Lam and Marteleto 2008). Coupled with significant shifts in children’s living arrangements in the region (Castro Torres et al. 2022; Clark, Koski, and Smith-Greenaway 2017; Pesando and Global Family Change team 2018; Zimmer and Treleaven 2020), it is possible that young children’s experiences of living in polygynous households could change at different rates and/or in different directions than women’s union types. Identifying the prevalence of young children in polygynous households is salient because a number of studies have identified a relationship between polygyny and child health outcomes, including mortality (Adedini and Odimegwu 2017; Amare et al. 2021; Gyimah 2009; Lawson and Gibson 2018; Omariba and Boyle 2007; Smith-Greenaway and Trinitapoli 2014; Wagner and Rieger 2015).

In this study, we describe the characteristics and estimate the proportion of children under 5 residing in polygynous households in sub-Saharan Africa. We show how these indicators have changed over the past two decades, including relative to the proportion of women of reproductive age in polygynous unions. To do so, we analyze data from 83 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in 27 countries in sub-Saharan Africa between 2000 and 2020.

2. Data and sample

The DHS is a nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional household survey designed to measure population and health outcomes. The 27 countries in our sample fit several criteria: at least two survey waves had been conducted there since 2000; at least one survey was conducted there after 2010; the surveys included questions to measure polygyny; the surveys linked children to their biological mothers (Table 1). The countries are distributed across four subregions specified by the United Nations Statistics Division: Western Africa (ten countries, 34 surveys), Eastern Africa (ten countries, 32 surveys), Central Africa (five countries, 11 surveys), and Southern Africa (two countries, six surveys). In total, we use 83 DHS waves.

We combine two DHS modules to construct two analytic samples: the person recode, which includes all household members, and the women's survey, which includes all women of reproductive age (15–49) in sample households. The person recode captures all children under 5 years of age residing in a sample household, regardless of whether they live with their biological mother. The majority of children in our analyses have a co-resident mother who completed the women's survey. In this module, women self-report their current marital status. If they are currently married (or living with a man as married), they are also asked whether their husband has other wives and, if so, how many. Women in polygynous unions report their wife rank. We restrict our analyses to de jure household members – that is, those who are usual residents of the household.

The primary analytic sample comprises all children under 5 years of age reported in the household roster, regardless of whether they co-resided with their mother. We also assess women of reproductive age, 15 to 49 years, who completed the women's survey. Across the 83 DHS waves, this includes 796,953 children under 5 and 1,081,436 women of reproductive age. The survey waves include 39,571 unique primary sampling units (PSUs) over space and time. We exclude 7,242 children whose mother has an indeterminate marital status in a household in which no other person is polygynous. We also exclude 40,089 children whose mother is reported as co-resident but did not complete the women's survey, resulting in an unknown marital status, in a household in which no other person is polygynous.

Table 1: Demographic and Health Surveys included in analysis

Country	# of surveys	Years	N children under 5	N women of reproductive age
Benin (BJ)	4	2001, 2006, 2011, 2017	46,687	56,540
Burundi (BU)	3	2010, 2016	19,954	26,658
Cameroon (CM)	3	2004, 2011, 2018	27,037	40,759
Chad (TD)	2	2004, 2014	22,647	23,804
Republic of the Congo (CG)	2	2005, 2011	12,803	17,870
Democratic Republic of the Congo (CD)	2	2007, 2013	25,128	28,822
Ethiopia (ET)	4	2000, 2005, 2011, 2016	39,773	61,635
Gabon (GA)	2	2000, 2012	9,814	14,605
Gambia (GM)	2	2013, 2019	16,414	22,098
Ghana (GH)	3	2003, 2008, 2014	12,747	20,003
Guinea (GN)	3	2005, 2012, 2018	20,184	27,970
Kenya (KE)	2	2003, 2014	25,902	39,274
Lesotho (LS)	3	2004, 2009, 2014	10,921	21,340
Liberia (LB)	3	2007, 2013, 2019	18,812	24,396
Malawi (MW)	4	2000, 2004, 2010, 2015	56,845	72,500
Mali (ML)	3	2006, 2012, 2018	32,360	35,526
Mozambique (MZ)	2	2003, 2011	19,107	26,163
Namibia (NM)	3	2000, 2006, 2013	13,738	26,574
Niger (NI)	2	2006, 2012	21,026	20,383
Nigeria (NG)	4	2003, 2008, 2013, 2018	91,027	121,773
Rwanda (RW)	5	2000, 2005, 2010, 2014, 2019	39,280	63,544
Senegal (SN)	5	2005, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019	74,472	99,976
Sierra Leone (SL)	3	2008, 2013, 2019	27,733	39,606
Tanzania (TZ)	3	2004, 2010, 2015	25,164	33,734
Uganda (UG)	4	2000, 2006, 2011, 2016	36,271	42,952
Zambia (ZM)	4	2001, 2007, 2013, 2018	34,477	44,898
Zimbabwe (ZW)	3	2005, 2010, 2015	16,630	28,033

Notes: We exclude some survey waves in two of the sampled countries. We exclude Kenya 2008 because this survey does not include data to link children with their biological mothers. We exclude Mali 2000 and 2004 because we are unable to link a large proportion (> 50%) of live births, women of reproductive age, and households.

2.1 Measures

Children's living arrangements. We consider a child to be living in a polygynous household if any woman of reproductive age living in that household reports being in a polygynous union, regardless of that woman's relationship to the child.

Marital status/type. We define a woman as in a polygynous union if she reports that she is currently married or living with a man as though married and that her husband/partner has at least one other wife. Non-polygynous marital statuses include monogamous, widowed, separated or divorced, and never married. Among women in polygynous unions, we consider a woman to be the first wife if she self-reports a wife

rank of one, the second wife if she self-reports a wife rank of two, and the third or higher order wife if she reports a wife rank greater than two.

2.2 Analytic strategy

We calculate the proportion of children under 5 living with polygynous mothers for each of the 83 DHS waves. Estimates are calculated using survey weights to account for the DHS's stratified two-stage sampling design. To compare trends over time between countries, we estimate the annual percentage change in the proportion of children under 5 living in polygynous households, as well as the annual percentage change in the proportion of polygynous unions among women of reproductive age, comparing each country's earliest eligible survey to its most recent one. We use an annualized measure to account for the variation in the time span between countries' earliest and most recent surveys. Finally, we calculate the annualized percentage change in children's living arrangements by region across the 20-year study period. Specifically, we assess the change in the proportion of nine possible arrangements: biological mother is married monogamously; mother is first wife in a polygynous marriage; mother is second wife in a polygynous marriage; mother is a third- or higher-order wife in a polygynous marriage; a woman in the household other than the mother is polygynous; mother has never married; mother is divorced/separated or widowed; child does not live with mother and someone else in the household is polygynous; child does not live with mother and nobody in the household is polygynous. We weight regional estimates of annualized change in living arrangements by the population size of each surveyed country from the region.

We use Stata 17.1 for all data preparation, management, and analysis, and RStudio (ggplot2 package) for the creation of figures.

3. Results

Table 1 lists the countries and survey years included in our analyses, as well as the number of children under 5 and women of reproductive age from countries included in the analytic sample. Sociodemographic characteristics for the analytic sample of children under 5 are displayed in Table 2, stratified by household polygyny status. Children in polygynous households tend to have older and less educated mothers and older fathers relative to children in non-polygynous households. Polygynous households with young children are more likely to be in rural areas and tend to be poorer than non-polygynous households.

Table 2: Characteristics of children under 5 years of age by maternal polygyny status, 2000–2020 (N = 796,953)

	Children in non-polygynous households	Children in polygynous households
	N = 596,652	N = 200,301
	N (%)	N (%)
Median child age (IQR) ^a	29 (14-44)	29 (14-43)
Child's year of birth		
1995–1999	37,360 (6.1)	7,669 (4.0)
2000–2004	107,415 (18.1)	37,217 (19.2)
2005–2009	143,028 (23.9)	46,170 (23.1)
2010–2014	213,428 (35.6)	69,376 (34.1)
2015–2020	97,421 (16.3)	39,869 (19.6)
Child is female (vs. male)	296,600 (49.7)	99,239 (49.6)
Mother's marital status		
Currently married, monogamous	467,676 (78.7)	19,513 (9.3)
Currently married, polygynous (first wife)	--	65,407 (33.1)
Currently married, polygynous (second wife)	--	73,175 (36.7)
Currently married, polygynous (third+ wife)	--	13,540 (6.6)
Currently married, polygynous (unknown wife rank)	--	3,737 (2.0)
Widowed or divorced/separated	40,242 (6.8)	2,630 (1.3)
Never married	28,759 (4.7)	2,485 (1.2)
Child's mother did not participate in women's survey	--	7,115 (3.5)
Child does not live with biological mother	59,975 (9.8)	12,489 (6.1)
Missing	--	210 (0.1)
Mother's age (time of survey)		
< 20	32,896 (5.4)	8,221 (4.0)
20–24	126,099 (21.2)	30,902 (15.3)
25–29	150,724 (25.5)	46,211 (23.2)
30–34	109,395 (18.4)	41,260 (20.9)
35–39	73,495 (12.3)	32,200 (16.1)
40–44	33,460 (5.6)	16,200 (8.0)
45+	10,608 (1.8)	5,703 (2.8)
Missing ^b	59,975 (9.8)	19,604 (9.6)
Mother's educational attainment		
No formal schooling	203,478 (33.8)	115,472 (57.3)
Incomplete primary	142,461 (23.8)	33,735 (16.9)
Complete primary	61,510 (10.4)	11,888 (6.2)
Incomplete secondary	87,910 (14.8)	15,450 (7.7)
Complete secondary or higher	41,293 (7.4)	4,142 (2.2)
Missing ^b	60,000 (9.8)	19,614 (9.8)
Mother's relationship to household head		
Wife	380,185 (64.6)	121,165 (61.2)
Self	61,396 (10.1)	19,834 (10.1)
Daughter/daughter-in-law	65,984 (10.8)	22,089 (10.7)
Other	27,515 (4.4)	17,154 (8.1)
Missing ^b	61,572 (10.1)	20,059 (9.9)

Table 2: (Continued)

	Children in non-polygynous households	Children in polygynous households
	N = 596,652	N = 200,301
	N (%)	N (%)
Husband/partner's age		
< 25	25,145 (4.3)	3,417 (1.7)
25–29	79,675 (13.6)	11,978 (6.0)
30–34	104,660 (17.8)	24,026 (12.1)
35–39	96,521 (16.3)	31,627 (16.1)
40–44	68,868 (11.5)	32,200 (16.3)
45–49	42,271 (7.0)	26,151 (13.0)
50–54	20,840 (3.4)	18,463 (9.0)
55–59	8,965 (1.5)	10,361 (5.2)
60+	8,806 (1.4)	14,983 (7.3)
Don't know/no husband data	140,901 (23.2)	27,095 (13.3)
Median household size (IQR)	6 (4-8)	9 (7-14)
Household is located in a rural area (vs. urban)	419,321 (70.0)	155,635 (77.8)
Household wealth quintile		
Poorest	144,501 (22.3)	55,523 (25.7)
Poor	125,492 (21.1)	48,414 (23.8)
Middle	117,726 (20.0)	42,461 (21.6)
Rich	108,904 (19.1)	33,287 (17.9)
Richest	100,029 (17.5)	20,616 (11.1)
Religion		
Christian	319,719 (54.8)	52,321 (26.7)
Muslim	163,139 (26.4)	108,835 (53.5)
Traditional/animist/other	10,448 (1.7)	5,854 (2.9)
None	8,465 (1.4)	4,014 (2.1)
Missing ^c	94,881 (15.6)	29,277 (14.6)
Survey year		
2000–2004	87,576 (14.9)	22,446 (11.7)
2005–2009	108,315 (18.2)	42,566 (21.8)
2010–2014	240,820 (40.1)	76,253 (37.7)
2015–2020	159,941 (26.8)	59,036 (28.8)
Child's relationship to head of household		
Child	448,143 (75.8)	148,829 (75.2)
Grandchild	103,341 (16.9)	28,670 (14.0)
Other	45,133 (7.3)	22,695 (10.7)
Missing	35 (0.0)	17 (0.00)

Note: We report the unweighted number of observations and the weighted proportion using DHS-derived survey weights.

^a IQR = interquartile range.

^b The vast majority of these cases are missing because the child's biological mother was in the household roster but did not complete the women's survey or the child does not live with his or her mother. In both types of cases, there are no measures of sociodemographic characteristics in the woman's DHS individual recode. In non-polygynous households, this includes 59,975 children (9.8%); it includes 19,604 children (9.6%) in polygynous households.

^c Religion was not recorded in certain survey waves; hence it is missing for all children in the following survey waves: Rwanda 2000, Tanzania 2004, and Uganda 2000 (N = 30,706).

The proportions of children under 5 living in polygynous households (Panel A) and women of reproductive age in polygynous unions (Panel B) by country over time are displayed in Figure 1, stratified by region. The proportion of children and women in polygynous households and unions, respectively, has decreased in almost all sampled countries over the past two decades. At the most recent survey, the proportion among children under 5 ranges from more than 46% in the Gambia to just 2% in Lesotho. Overall, polygyny remains more common in West Africa than in other regions. Compared to the proportion of women of reproductive age in polygynous unions, a considerably higher proportion of young children live in polygynous households in several West, Central, and Southern African countries. For example, in Senegal and the Gambia, up to 25% more children under 5 are in polygynous households compared to women of reproductive age, according to the most recent surveys. However, there is much less divergence between children and women in countries where polygyny is less prevalent overall.

Figure 1: Proportion of children under 5 residing in a polygynous household (Panel A) and women of reproductive age in polygynous unions (Panel B) by country over time, 2000–2020

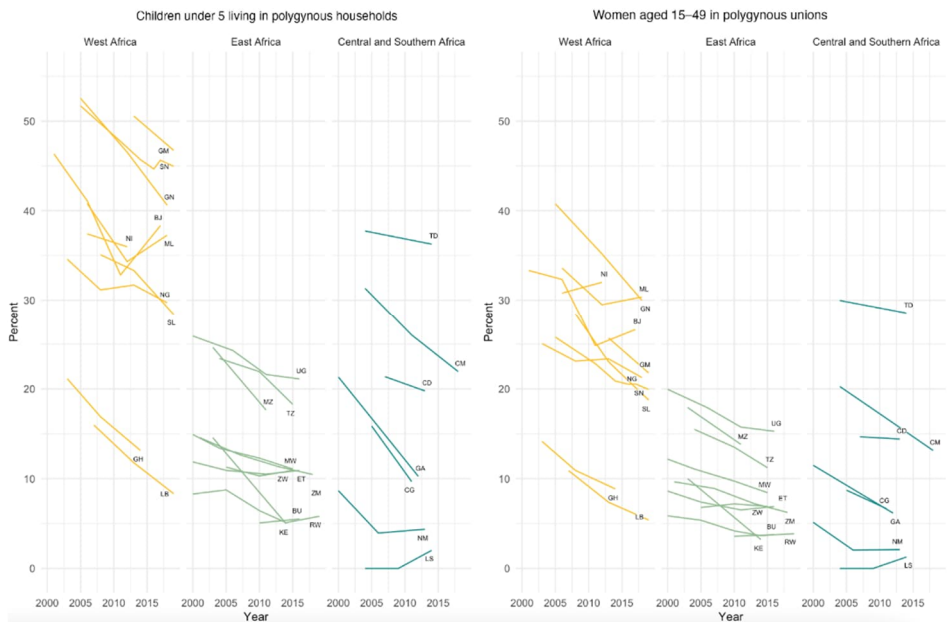


Figure 2 plots the annualized absolute percentage change in children living in polygynous households against the annualized absolute percentage change in women of reproductive age in polygynous unions between the first and last eligible DHS for each country. In all but four countries, both indicators decreased. Lesotho and Burundi experienced modest increases in the proportion of both children in polygynous households and women in polygynous unions since 2000; notably, Lesotho reported no polygynous unions or households at its first two DHS waves. In Niger and Zimbabwe, the proportion of children in polygynous households decreased while the proportion of women in polygynous unions increased. In just three countries, the decline in polygynous unions was greater than the decline in the proportion of children in polygynous households, particularly in Senegal. In all other countries (N = 20), we observe a greater decline in the proportion of children in polygynous households relative to the decline in women in polygynous unions, with the greatest relative declines in the Republic of the Congo, Gabon, and Mozambique.

Figure 2: Percent annualized change in the proportion of children under 5 living in a polygynous household relative to the percent annualized change of women of reproductive age in a polygynous union from first to most recent DHS (2000–2020)

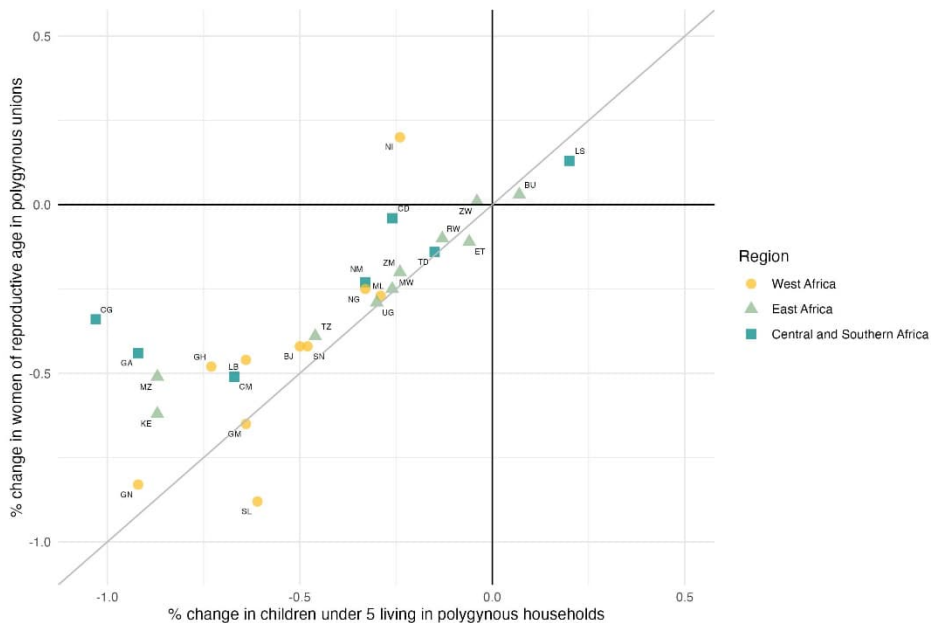
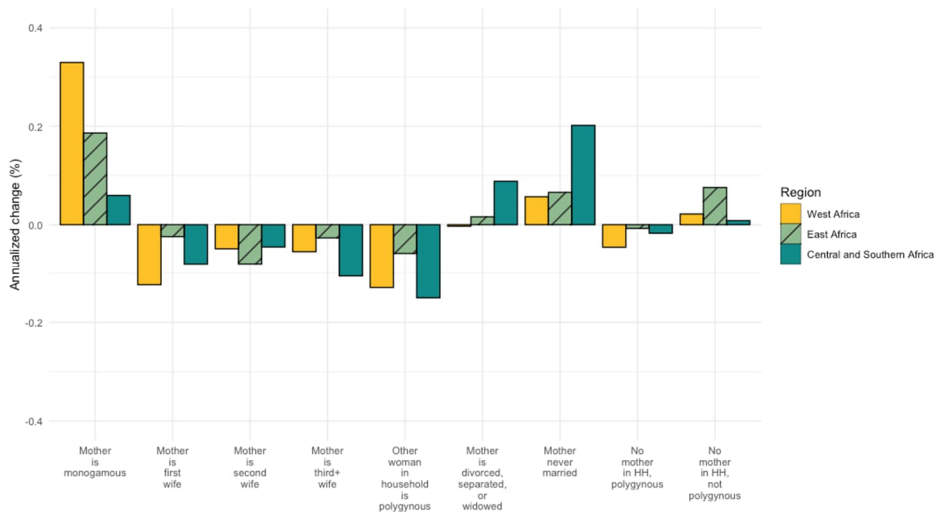


Figure 3 shows the annualized absolute change in the proportion of children across nine maternal marital statuses and living arrangements by region. The proportion of children living with polygynous mothers of all wife ranks declined in all regions. Simultaneously, the proportion of children whose mother is in a monogamous marriage increased in all regions, with the greatest increase in West Africa. The proportion of children under 5 living with never-married, widowed, or separated mothers also increased in all regions, particularly in Central and Southern Africa. This suggests that the decline in young children living in polygynous households is reflective of a shift toward monogamous unions in West Africa and a shift toward single motherhood in Central and Southern Africa. Both trends are observed in East Africa. The proportions of foster, adopted, and unrelated children living in polygynous households declined in all regions, while the proportions in non-polygynous households increased in all regions.

Figure 3: Percent annualized change in the proportion of children under 5 by maternal and household marital and polygyny status from first to most recent DHS, by region (2000–2020)



Notes: Wife rank was not measured in four surveys (Kenya 2003, Malawi 2000, Namibia 2000, and Uganda 2000). We exclude data from these survey waves in the estimates of annualized change if the child's mother is a polygynous first, second, or third or higher order wife. For these measures, data from these countries are included for all other waves. The estimates for all other categories use the full denominator of these survey waves. We also exclude 3,737 children from other survey waves whose mother reported that she was in a polygynous union but did not report her wife rank.

4. Discussion

Using data from 83 DHS waves in 27 sub-Saharan African countries between 2000 and 2020, we found that while the prevalence of polygyny has generally decreased over time in nearly all these countries, it remains a common living arrangement for a substantial proportion of young children. This trend aligns with recent research that examines the decline of polygynous unions in sub-Saharan Africa across birth cohorts from the 1940s to the 2000s (Chae and Agadjanian 2022). Notably, the decline in polygynous living arrangements was faster for children than was the decline in polygynous unions among women of reproductive age in most countries. Given the potential implications for the socioeconomic status, health, and well-being of these children, which may differ in polygynous households relative to non-polygynous households (Adedini and Odimegwu 2017; Amare et al. 2021; Omariba and Boyle 2007; Smith-Greenaway and Trinitapoli 2014; Wagner and Rieger 2015), understanding the reach of polygyny in the region is a key policy consideration, particularly in countries and regions where it remains prevalent.

The decline in polygynous living arrangements among young children reflects broader changes in children's living arrangements. We found that the proportion of children with single mothers, never-married women in particular, increased in all regions. Age at marriage has risen nearly universally in sub-Saharan Africa (Hertrich 2017), and while patterns in premarital childbearing vary greatly across countries and regions, it is more common among more recent birth cohorts in many of the Central and Southern African countries in this study (Clark, Koski, and Smith-Greenaway 2017). Divorce is also becoming more common in the region (Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015). The decline in the proportion of young children residing in households where another woman is in a polygynous union could reflect shifts away from laterally extended households or related changes in household organization, including those resulting from increased urbanization (Castro Torres et al. 2022). The finding that fostered and adopted children have become less likely to live in polygynous households over time reflects the broader decline in polygyny in sub-Saharan Africa. While there is significant variation in fostering across the region, it has remained relatively stable within countries over time (Cotton 2021). Because the prevalence of specific living arrangements varies widely across countries in the region given factors such as the AIDS epidemic and labor migration (Beauchemin, Caarls, and Mazzucato 2018; Hosegood et al. 2007; Zimmer and Treleaven 2020), further investigation of country-level trends and determinants is merited.

The faster decline in polygynous living arrangements among young children relative to changes in women's union status may reflect both changes in the number of wives per family as well as shifting fertility patterns within polygynous families over time. Our use of an annualized change to compare the prevalence among women and children accounts for differences in cohort size, suggesting that other factors drive this difference. Identifying the factors driving this divergence will shed light on the interrelationships among marriage practices, fertility trends, and household composition in specific settings

within sub-Saharan Africa. The greater decline in the likelihood of having a mother who is the third or higher order wife relative to having a mother who is a second wife among children in Central and Southern Africa suggests a shift toward fewer co-wives in polygynous households in this region. While a recent study found no difference in the total fertility rate (TFR) among married women by union type in ten West African countries (Millogo, Maté Labité, and Greenbaum 2019), this cross-sectional analysis may not reflect differences in TFR by wife rank. If, for instance, there is considerable heterogeneity in the fertility of wives within the same polygynous family, this could explain our finding that the proportion of children in polygynous households is, in general, declining at a faster rate than the proportion of women of reproductive age in polygynous unions. If the relative disadvantage in survival – that children in polygynous households are more likely to die before age 5 than children whose mothers are monogamous (Adedini and Odimegwu 2017; Smith-Greenaway and Trinitapoli 2014) – has intensified over time, this could also contribute to a greater decline in polygynous living arrangements among children. Children in polygynous households in our sample have a higher likelihood of exposure to sociodemographic characteristics typically associated with poorer health outcomes and higher mortality, including lower maternal education and household wealth. However, both observable and unobservable characteristics associated with polygyny may contribute to the relationships between polygyny and adverse health outcomes in early childhood (Amare et al. 2021; Gage 1997; Omariba and Boyle 2007).

Social organization and legal context may also influence the prevalence and effects of polygyny for children, including on their health and/or well-being. The social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics associated with polygyny vary both across and within regions, reflected in the between- and within-region heterogeneity of our estimates. Contexts where polygyny is common tend to be distinct from those where it is rare with regard to economic status, gender norms, and how polygyny is culturally practiced, including household organization (Agadjanian and Ezeh 2000; Smith-Greenaway and Trinitapoli 2014; Zeitzen 2008). For example, polygynous wives are more likely to co-reside in rural households than in urban areas (Coast et al. 2011; Ezeh 1997). For children in these households, co-residence may translate to an increase in their father's presence, as well interactions and/or relationships with co-wives (Dasré, Samuel, and Hertrich 2019; Madhavan 2002). Polygyny is legal in just over half of the countries in our sample, including countries in each region of sub-Saharan Africa (Mitchell 2019). While assessing the relationships between legality and children's living arrangements is beyond the scope of this descriptive analysis, we note that a greater proportion of young children tend to reside in polygynous households in countries where polygyny is legal compared to those where it is not. Legality may affect household organization and allocation of resources to specific children within polygynous households depending on the union status of the mother. Further investigation of these and other dimensions of contextual

variation, such as religion, will inform future studies of the relationships between polygyny and child outcomes.

Our study is subject to several limitations. The estimates presented here pertain to a child's household at the time of survey. However, the polygyny status of a child's household can change over time – for instance, if the child's living arrangements change (e.g., the child is fostered out or moves into a multigenerational household) or if the child's parents enter a polygynous union after his or her birth (e.g., a co-wife joins the household). For children whose mother was divorced, separated, or widowed at the time of survey, it is unknown whether the prior union was monogamous or polygynous. We exclude children whose mother has unknown marital status in a household in which no other woman reports a polygynous union, which could bias our estimates if missingness is associated with polygyny.

5. Conclusions

Our analyses underscore that children's living arrangements and early life family organization have been dynamic over the past two decades in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite shifts toward monogamous and nonmarried households over time, polygynous family structures remain highly prevalent for young children in some areas, particularly West Africa. By examining shifts in marriage through the lens of children's household context, we offer a fresh perspective on how declines in polygyny – usually analyzed at the woman level – are reshaping the living arrangements, household context, and family composition of young children across the region.

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