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Family Demography in sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review of Family Research

Extended Abstract

The traditional family in African societies is an institution that contains a husband with his wives and children, as well as blood or marriage relatives (Okon, 2013). In the African context, family is based on lineage, kinship and reciprocity (Wusu & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006). It is the basis of social organizations in Africa which gives primary care to the young and the aged as well as the agent for social control (Takyi 2001). The institution is resilient in sub-Saharan Africa but responding to general socio-economic and political changes (Wusu & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006). Furthermore, HIV has played a pivotal role in the recent changes in family in sub-Saharan Africa because of adult mortality of people in their prime age (Dintwat, 2010).

One could argue that sub-Saharan Africa is going through the second demographic transition which is characterised by increase in divorce, increase in contraceptive effectiveness, change in abortion legislation decrease in marriage and increase in cohabitation. Furthermore, this “second demographic transition” brings a plethora of living arrangements other than marriage, the disconnection between marriage and reproduction, and migration (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

There is a growing body of literature on family transition in Africa; studies have been conducted on a variety of forms of family changes such as family formation, family size, family structure, family dissolution, living arrangements and the effects of family changes. This review argues that family in Africa is in resilience and it is reacting to global changes. This paper seeks to review the documented studies on family changes in Africa in order to highlight the research gaps.

A systematic approach to all literature was used to identify studies on family change in Africa. This review included academic peer reviewed journals from Pub Med, J Stor, Google Scholar and Science Direct. The key words used for search were “family research”, “family dynamics”, and “family transitions”, “family changes”. The following specific words that represent family changes in Africa were also used in the search; “orphanhood”, “single motherhood”, “divorce”, “family formation”, “same gendered families”, “child headed households”, and “nuclear and extend families”. The reviewed studies were only limited to African studies. To develop a comprehensive review, journal articles published

from 1976 to date were included. Sixty-nine journal articles fitting the inclusion criteria that analyzed the determinants of family changes and the consequences of family changes in Africa were reviewed.

Table 1: Summary of the studies

	Frequency	Percentage
Sample size		
Quantitative research >100	2	4%
Quantitative research <100	48	96%
Over 1000	38	76%
Research approach		
Quantitative	50	72%
Qualitative	14	20%
Mixed method	5	7%
Design		
Cross sectional	58	91%
Longitudinal	6	9%
Outcome variables		
Demographic	35	51%
Family types and relationships	19	27%
Sexual behaviour	4	6%
Health outcomes	4	6%
Sex roles	4	6%
Attitudes	3	4%
Theory		
Utilized theory	19	28%
Fertility theories	6	18%
Quantitative studies data sources		
Primary data	10	20%
Secondary	40	80%
Demographic and Health Survey	17	34%
Qualitative studies data sources		
Primary	9	64%
Secondary (desktop review of literature)	6	36%
Quantitative statistical methods		
Descriptive	6	12%
Bivariate	4	8%
Multivariate	40	80%

This review provided an overview of the literature on determinants and consequences of family changes in Africa. Family in Africa has transformed in many ways for example people are having smaller families (Shapiro & Gebreselassie 2008) delayed marriages (Ikamari 2005), increase in cohabitation (Moore & Govender 2013) and decline in polygamy (Mere 1976, Hayase & Liaw 1997). The review confirmed that there is family transition in Africa due to a plethora of reasons. Family in Africa is a resilient institution and the changes it is facing are attributed to social and economic conditions such as rising education levels, female labour force participation, economic challenges, urbanisation and migration. Increase in level of education attained by women and their participation in the labour force has not only changed their roles in families but marriage patterns. Furthermore, labour migration has changed a lot of families, resulting in single parent families that are becoming more common. HIV/AIDS related mortality and morbidity has altered the structure of many families as it is leading to increased marital dissolution and orphanhood. New laws on homosexuality have led to an emergence to families that were not previously considered as families in South Africa. Family changes have an impact on children's education, child survival as well as sexual behaviour of the youth. Given that family transition is ongoing in Africa and some of the changes have a negative impact, there is need for countries to develop explicit family policies that help improve the wellbeing of the emerging types of families. Future research on family in Africa could be improved by theoretical guidance and being methodologically robust with studies using longitudinal data to examine family change overtime, multilevel analysis and mixed method research approach to get richer information.

After reviewing the studies one of the identified gaps in literature is on research on the same gendered families in Africa. Scientific literature on same-gendered families and parenting remains limited in South Africa and Africa at large because homosexuality is illegal in most African countries and is still stigmatized even in South Africa where it is legal. All the reviewed studies on this new type of family were qualitative, quantitative research on such families are needed to test associations with different independent and dependent variables. Furthermore, homosexuality has been studied in the context of HIV /AIDS and has not been given much attention as a family form. Furthermore, the other identified gap in the reviewed studies is on step families in Africa. Some people remarry after marital dissolution caused by either widowhood or divorce hence blended families are created. Studies in America and Netherlands have shown that children who were staying in original, two-parent households have better well-being than children in stepfather households (Amato 1987, Hanson et al 1996, Spruijt & Goede 1997). Hence, it will be worthwhile to conduct research on the dynamics in step families in Africa. Levels and determinants of cohabitation have been documented in Africa but evidence is sparse on how cohabitation influences the child wellbeing. Furthermore, African studies that examined family change and child

health mostly looked at the association between single motherhood or female headed households and child mortality. Schemeer (2011) found that child health outcomes are better for children whose parents marry than those who cohabit in America. Given that levels of cohabitation are increasing in Africa, this could be a research gap that needs to be filled. Another identified research gap is on father only households in Africa. There are emerging father only households in some parts of Africa for example Zimbabwe, where the women migrate and leave their children with their fathers or widowers who stay with their children. There is need to conduct research on such families in Africa. Furthermore, more research is needed on how individuals and the societies are responding to family changes in Africa.

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