

Consensual union in West Africa: Does it matter if you are English or French speaking?

Authors

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Introduction

In many regions, including sub-Saharan Africa, consensual union (unmarried co-resident partnering) has become a common nuptiality feature, often as a strategy to overcome singlehood, rejection of bride wealth and formal marriage, prelude to marriage, or a strategy to avoid bride wealth (Jensen & Clausen, 2003; Martin, 2002; Meekers, 1992). In many countries in West Africa, consensual union co-exists with marriages that are formalised through customary, religious and civil procedures. (Arnaldo, 2004; LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). However, little research attention has been paid to consensual union in the sub-region. Therefore, this study examined consensual union in eleven West African countries.

Evidence from countries, such as Canada, shows that consensual union is more prevalent in the French speaking Quebec than in other parts of Canada (Laplante & Fostik, 2015). Could a similar pattern be prevalent in West Africa? This study investigated the levels, trend, individual-level and contextual factors associated with consensual union in the English and French-speaking countries in West Africa. A scholarly investigation into the levels, trend and factors associated with consensual union in West Africa is important to highlight the diverse transformations in marriage and family in the sub-region given that consensual union may be an indication of less commitment to the permanence of marriage (Bracher, Santow, Morgan, & Trussell, 1993). Also, although consensual unions in some cases resemble formal marriages in stability and effect on the well-being of the couples (Musick & Bumpass, 2012), the risk of separation is higher among cohabiting couples than the married (Jensen & Clausen, 2003) and parental separation is consequential for the well-being of children,

women and men (Amato, 2000; Thiombiano & Schoumaker, 2012; Waite, 1995). Compared to formal marriage, responsibilities are more loosely defined in consensual union and because there is no legal protection women are likely to be more disadvantaged in consensual union in case of break up, and children in such unions may face the problem of limited access to kinship networks and inheritance rights (Martin, 2002). The importance of individual characteristics in explaining demographic outcomes, such as union formation is well established in literature and there is a growing research interest in the association between one's neighbourhood and individual-level behaviour. Thus, this study seeks to explain the tendency for women in West Africa to form consensual instead of legal marital union from the perspective of her individual and immediate community characteristics.

Literature review

Marriage in sub-Saharan Africa has been commonly described as early and universal (Lesthaeghe, 1989; Locoh, 2002) and well known to have patterns varying across countries and even within countries (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann, & Meekers, 1989). Among these marriage patterns is consensual union. According to some theoretical arguments recurrence and variation of consensual union rates may be mainly accounted for by both culture and socio-economic factors (Locoh, 2002; Thiriat, 1999). Supporters of socio-economic approach consider the divergences in case of socio-economic status as reasons of consensual unions' recurrence and variation among societies, since dowry and marriage process differ. Culture defenders attribute consensual unions' recurrence and variation to divergence in case of customs and traditions among societies especially in Sub-Saharan African countries, despite many influences since colonization. Prior to colonization, African wedding and marriage process was purely based on customs and traditions. Since then, it has been influenced almost everywhere by Christian religious precepts and the modern law (Locoh, 2002). In Senegal for instance, customs and traditions surrounding wedding are most influenced by the

requirements of the Quran (progressive Islamization of the country) before facing the modern laws of colonizer and the law of Senegalese State (Antoine, 2007). This therefore makes African weddings nowadays, to be the culmination of a more or less lengthy process, including customary, religious and civil rights (Meekers, 1992).

The majority of empirical studies have highlighted the importance of these cultural and socioeconomic factors among many cultures and countries around the continent. Among them are the studies of, Kamgno & Mengue (2014) in Cameroun, LeGrand & Younoussi (2009) in Burkina Faso, Thiriat (1999) in Togo, Arnaldo (2004) in Mozambique. Many of the studies confirmed the importance of socio-cultural factors (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). In Burkina Faso, from detailed retrospective data, it has been shown that Catholics and animists are more likely to enter into consensual unions than Muslims and Protestants while, according to ethnic groups, the Bobo, Gourounsi and especially Lobi appear to be comparatively more open to consensual unions (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). Findings from Mozambique demonstrated that socio-economic controls could not account for all ethnic differences in case of marriage patterns (Arnaldo, 2004). Likewise, in this society, due to the importance of the dowry, a later marriage has been noticed among patrilineal (Tsonga and Sena/Ndau) than matrilineal (Lomwe/Chuwabo and Macua) ethnic groups. A greater importance is given to the bride-wealth payment in the marriage process among patrilineal groups. Similarly, the amount of bride wealth to be paid may lead people to remain in consensual unions. Indeed, in some Sub-Saharan countries a big importance is given to dowry and bride wealth and it often precedes any formal union (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994). For instance, young Beti in Cameroon could not go into formal union without dowry and therefore are constrained to informal union without dowry payment (Kamdem, 2006). The difficulties for wedding celebration increase over time because of its high costs and the greater importance given to the bride-wealth payment in the marriage

process involves young men rather than their families, as in the past (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). Therefore, costly wedding and marriage rituals or celebrations may be delayed or spaced out (Boye, Hill, Isaacs, & Gordis, 1991; Calvès, Kobiané, & Martel, 2007; Marcoux, Gueye, & Konaté, 1995). Along the same lines, others have argued that poor socio-economic environment raises the risk for consensual unions because of dowry and wedding especially when much importance is given to them (Arnaldo, 2004; Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; Locoh, 2002). A poor economic environment keeps large people in unemployment with more difficulties to prepare for formal union (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; Locoh, 2002). Also, previous studies have stressed the importance of childbirth in the risk of remaining in consensual union. A recent study carried out in two West African cities (Cotonou in Benin Republic and Lome in Togo) demonstrated that lack of live birth especially of a boy constitutes an important factor which keeps cohabiting couples in consensual unions (Adjamagbo, Antoine, Toudéka, Kpadonou, & Fageac, 2014). A child is considered as a means for descendant perpetuation (Rwenge, 2002) and old age insurance for the parents (Diop, 1981; Ela, 1995). Another risk factor shown by Adjamagbo and colleagues with respect to consensual union is non-cohabiting (not living together) of spouses. Spouses who are not living together are more likely to remain in consensual unions.

Another practice well known in the past in some Sub-Saharan African countries is eloping (known as *enlèvement* in French). It is still happening at present in Burkina-Faso especially in rural communities. This practice, as explained by LeGrand & Younoussi, (2009), happens when a young couple seeks to get married against the wishes of the woman's family: typically, the woman runs away to be hidden by the man's relatives where she remains until they are able to convince her parents to agree to compensation and acknowledge their union. In general, the woman's family is most amenable to accepting their union (and thereafter allow a wedding to occur) once the young couple starts having children.

Even if the young couple failed to get the agreement of the woman's family they may keep living together in consensual union.

Changes have also been noticed over time and across several places in consensual unions. There is a growing tendency among young generations to live in consensual unions although this is well known to vary between and within countries (Adjamagbo, Antoine, Toudéka, Kpadonou, & Fageac, 2014). Adjamagbo and colleagues (2014) have shown a pronounced consensual unions' tendency in Lomé (Togo) than Cotonou (Benin republic). In Cameroon, younger women were more likely to be in consensual union; the proportion of women aged 15-34 in consensual union increased from 15% to 38% between 1991 and 2004 (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014). According to the place of residence, consensual unions are becoming more and more frequent in urban areas where people are more influenced by socio-economic development and cultural modernism (Meekers, 1992; Thiriati, 1999). Kamgno & Mengue (2014), LeGrand & Younoussi (2009) and Thiriati (1999) highlighted these evidences in Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Togo respectively. These findings are consistent with the high risk of consensual unions among well educated people (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). Likewise, grooms socioeconomic status determines the type of union (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014).

In additional, leaving outside the home country is also found to be a greater risk for living in consensual unions among Senegalese (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). These authors argued that new cohabitating unions are more likely to be consensual in situations where the influence of different norms and attitudes are comparatively greater and the importance of traditional social controls weaker – when partners are relatively better educated or when cohabitation began when they were living abroad. In addition, there is a clear evidence of an increasing popularity of consensual unions over time, a finding that is significantly more pronounced in urban areas. Unions made up of partners from different ethnic groups are,

however, not significantly more apt to enter into a consensual union (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009).

Spouses' history of marital disruption plays important role on the type of union. Spouses who already experienced a divorce, separation or widowhood especially women are at high risk to be in consensual unions for their forthcoming unions while women's first unions are likely to be formalized (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). In sharp contrast, the same study stated that men's prior union experiences have no significant effect on the likelihood of a newly formed union being consensual. Sometimes, among some Burkinabè ethnic groups, premarital sexual relations take the form of consensual unions (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009); the Samo and Goin had matrimonial systems based on premarital liaisons between lovers first, before the arrangement of marriage by the two families (Thiriat, 1999). Over time, some consensual unions end by formalization. In Burkina Faso, about two-thirds of Dagara "consensual" unions were followed by a wedding in the next three years compared to one-fourth for all other ethnic groups combined (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). Extending these past studies, the current study examined the levels and trend of consensual union in West Africa, and individual and contextual factors associated with the phenomenon in the sub-region.

Methods

Data

This study utilized data obtained from the last three Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) in eleven West African countries except Sierra Leone where there are only two surveys. The countries and survey years were: Nigeria (2003, 2008 & 2013), Liberia (1986, 2007 & 2013), Ghana (2003, 2008 & 2014), Sierra Leone (2008 & 2013), Burkina Faso (1998-99, 2003 & 2010), Benin (2001, 2006 & 2011-12), Cote d'Ivoire (1998-99, 2005 & 2011-12), Guinea (1999, 2005 & 2012), Mali (2001, 2006 & 2012-13), Niger (1998, 2006 &

2012), and Senegal (1997, 2005 & 2010-11). Using a nationally representative sample of women aged 15-49 years; the Measure DHS collects data on marriage, health and several individual and household characteristics. The primary sampling unit (PSU) also regarded as cluster in the DHS surveys were defined on the basis of Enumeration Areas provided by the national census bodies in the various countries. The community variables for this study were measured at the level of the PSU or cluster which served as proxy for community.

The multilevel analysis was based only on the most recent survey in each country. After pooling the datasets for the English-speaking countries, there was a total of 74,240 women aged 15-49 years and 90,159 in the French-speaking bloc. However, the multivariate analysis was limited to a weighted sample of 67,325 women in union (married and living together) in seven French-speaking countries and 49,439 in four English-speaking countries.

Ethical Consideration

The analysis was based on secondary data. All identifies for the participants were removed. The Institutional Review Board of ICF Macro International approved the survey procedures and instruments.

Variables and Measures

The dependent variable was marital status categorised into married and consensual union (living together). The independent variables included several individual-level and contextual factors drawn based on their relevance and from past studies. The individual-level explanatory variables included current age, age gap between spouses, level of education, partner's level of education, education gap between spouses, place of residence, occupation, partner's occupation, number of union, type of union (monogamous or polygynous), premarital birth, age at first cohabitation, age at first sex, number of sons, number of daughters, and household wealth. After initial multicollinearity test, variables that were

highly correlated with others, such as number of living children, year of first marriage/cohabitation were dropped from the final estimation.

Community-level (contextual) variables were community wealth index, female education and prevalence of premarital birth. These variables were generated by aggregating individual-level variables. Community wealth index was defined as the average wealth level in a community as measured from household wealth index. The categories were poor, middle and rich. Community female education referred to the proportion of women in union in the community who are educated, grouped into low, middle and high. Community premarital birth was the proportion of women in union who had births before marriage. The proportion was categorised into low, moderate and high.

Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted separately for the two linguistic blocs: French-speaking and English-speaking. Data analysis was conducted at three levels: univariate, bivariate and multivariate. The univariate involved use of percentages to describe the study population, levels and trend of consensual union in the sub-region. Prevalence of consensual union was computed as a percentage of the total population of all women in union. Three successive surveys, except in Sierra Leone where there was only two surveys, were categorised into three ranks: rank 1- most recent (2010-2014), rank 2 - next to most recent (2003-2008), and rank 3 - second to most recent (1997-2003). Bivariate analysis involved cross-tabulation and use of Pearson chi-square test to examine association between the outcome and explanatory variables. At the multivariate level, random and fixed effects logistic regression models were used to examine individual and contextual variables associated with consensual union in West Africa. In order to partition the total variance into individual and community components, a two- level binary logistic regression model was estimated. The fixed effects modelled associations whereas random effects modelled variations. Multilevel modelling was

appropriate for the analysis given that the study was interested in the extent to which neighbourhood (community) features are related to consensual union. Measures of association, such as odds ratio do not reflect variations in the outcome variable across and within communities where the individual women live. Thus, measures of variation in multilevel modelling, such as intra-class correlation (or variance partition coefficient) and proportional change in variance, were employed to present contextual factors associated with consensual union (Merlo et al., 2006). Also, in a multi-stage sampling such as was used in DHS, respondents from same geographical area (community) are likely to be more similar than respondents from different areas. Multilevel modelling accounts for the hierarchical structure of the DHS data, individual women nested in EAs and clustering at different levels.

An empty model which contained no explanatory variable was estimated first which presents variance in consensual union among clusters (communities in each linguistic bloc) and tests the significance of the cluster level variance (Merlo et al., 2006). In addition to the empty model, three models were fitted. Model 2 includes only community variables, model 3 contained individual-level variables. These models were fitted to examine the independent association between community and individual-level variables on the likelihood of being in consensual union. The fourth (full) model included all explanatory variables: individual and community variables. Variables included in each model were selected through forward stepwise regression.

Each model estimated the variance of random intercepts for the cluster and the intra class correlation coefficients (ICC) or variance partition coefficients (VPC). The random intercepts reflect the degree of heterogeneity between clusters whereas ICC reflects the degree of homogeneity within a cluster (Griffiths, Madise, Whitworth, & Matthews, 2004; Kaggwa, Diop, & Storey, 2008). Low ICC denotes that the within-cluster variation accounts

for a larger part of the variance (Kaggwa et al., 2008). ICC in this study was computed using the same general formula as in linear models except that $\sigma_e^2 = \pi^2/3$,

Therefore

$$\text{ICC} = \frac{\sigma_u^2}{\sigma_u^2 + \pi^2/3}$$

Where σ_u^2 is the variance at the community level, and $\pi^2/3$ is the fixed variance at individual level (Rodriguez & Elo, 2003). Precision of the random effects was measured using standard errors (SE) of the covariates, and goodness-of-fit for the models was measured using Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). These are common measures for comparing maximum likelihood models. Model with the smaller value of the information criterion is viewed as better.

Results

Table 1 presents percent distribution of the study population in each linguistic bloc by selected explanatory variables. Most of the respondents had partners who were older than them by 4 or more years in both English-speaking and French-speaking countries. The majority of the respondents had no education, particularly in the French-speaking countries (72.42%), and most of their spouses were also uneducated. Most respondents in both blocs resided in rural areas, and in communities with richer households, high proportion of educated female and premarital birth. Many (33.46%) respondents in the English-speaking countries worked in the informal sales and service sectors, but in the French speaking bloc a large number (40.85%) were not working. The majority in both linguistic blocs were in their first and monogamous unions. Many respondents entered into their first cohabitation between age 16 and 19 years, and the majority slightly over 50% in each bloc had their sexual debut in their first union.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of the study population by selected background characteristics and by consensual union, most recent DHS

Characteristic	English-speaking		French-speaking	
	All women (n=49,439)	Consensual union(n=5,419)	All women (67,325)	Consensual union(n=5,971)
Country				
Ghana	10.76	25.4		
Liberia	10.89	52.1		
Nigeria	56.29	2.8		
Sierra Leone	22.05	4.3		
Burkina Faso			20.15	4.8
Benin			17.35	22.0
Cote d'Ivoire			9.37	37.3
Guinea			9.99	1.5
Mali			13.10	1.9
Niger			14.68	0.2
Senegal			15.37	1.1
Age				
15-19	6.84	9.19	7.87	8.52
20-24	14.97	23.25 24.59	17.76	21.11 23.94
25-29	21.17	16.86 13.06	21.68	18.49 13.37
30-34	18.08	8.27	18.46	8.89
35-39	16.67	4.77	15.09	5.68
40-44	11.80		11.03	
45-49	10.47		8.11	
Spousal difference				
Wife older	2.85	7.56	2.09	4.05
Husband older				

0-3 years				
4-9 years	16.22	27.84	11.69	19.10
10-19 years	39.37	41.71	37.56	42.65
20+ years	31.55	19.30	34.79	25.57
	10.02	3.58	13.87	8.63
Highest Education				
No education	51.04	31.27	76.90	63.61
Primary	18.58	28.75	14.21	21.16
Secondary/Higher	30.38	39.98	8.89	15.23
Partner's Education				
No education	41.38	18.52	72.42	54.24
Primary	15.38	18.44	13.22	20.30
Secondary	31.85	55.28	11.05	19.93
Higher	11.40	7.76	3.31	5.53
Spousal Education difference				
Wife more	12.95	15.51	11.74	14.74
Same	49.07	25.88	66.31	49.56
Husband more	37.98	58.61	21.95	35.71
Place of residence				
Urban	37.64	39.68	29.39	42.23
Rural	62.36	60.32	70.61	57.77
Occupation				
Not working	24.99	31.28	40.85	33.45
White collar	4.09	2.21	2.05	2.66
Sales/services	33.46	28.15	27.61	36.60

Agriculture	23.15	29.75	24.84	21.16
Manual/domestic	14.31	8.61	4.65	6.13
Partner's Occupation				
Not working	2.24	4.24	16.20	6.39
White collar	12.40	9.67	8.24	12.29
Sales/services	17.59	12.82	13.86	17.18
Agriculture	40.80	38.29	43.81	44.04
Manual/domestic	26.97	34.98	17.90	20.10
Number of unions				
Once	82.90	70.39	87.08	83.97
More than once	17.10	29.61	12.92	16.03
Type of marriage				
Monogamous	70.26	84.75	62.30	68.75
Polygynous	29.74	15.25	37.70	31.25
Premarital birth				
No	87.43	74.60	89.30	80.04
Yes	12.57	25.40	10.70	19.96
Age at first cohabitation				
<=15	34.00	23.58	33.65	22.45
16-19	36.02	42.75	40.77	39.53
20-48	29.98	33.67	25.58	38.02
Age at first sex				
At first union	53.28	18.28	51.23	25.37
<=15	18.01	36.93	18.35	23.50

16-19	21.73	38.81	22.69	38.71
20-48	6.98	5.98	7.73	12.42
Number of sons				
No son	23.73	29.27	23.28	30.09
1	28.94	32.83	28.82	31.04
2	23.04	20.92	22.10	20.97
>3	24.30	16.98	25.80	17.90
Number of daughters				
No daughter	24.64	29.78	24.31	29.22
1	29.55	32.55	29.29	32.26
2	22.62	20.29	22.18	20.61
>3	23.20	17.39	24.23	17.90
Household wealth index				
Poorest	22.08	21.54	19.85	19.05
Poorer	20.97	22.27	20.23	20.15
Middle	18.96	23.11	20.15	19.11
Richer	18.86	19.30	20.53	19.76
Richest	19.13	13.78	19.24	22.92
Community wealth index				
Poor	15.57	9.62	10.23	24.24
Middle	31.91	26.15	37.29	31.26
Rich	52.51	64.23	52.48	44.50
Community female education				

Low				
Moderate	25.21	12.80	13.74	24.97
High	29.34	27.49	37.29	30.49
	45.45	59.70	48.98	44.54
Community premarital birth				
Low	20.01	9.86	13.97	26.90
Moderate	33.30	27.68	35.85	30.03
High	46.69	62.46	50.19	43.07

Source: DHS

Cross-tabulation of type of union and selected characteristics are presented in Table 1, but only the percentages for consensual union is shown. The result showed that consensual union was more prevalent among women ages 25-29 years in the English and French-speaking countries. Unlike the English-speaking countries where consensual union was more prevalent among those who had attained secondary and higher education, more than half (63.61%) of respondents in consensual union in the French-speaking bloc had no education. Consensual union was more prevalent in rural than urban areas in the two blocs. In the English-speaking countries respondents who were not working were more likely than those who worked to be in consensual union, but in the French-speaking bloc most of those in consensual union were in sales and services occupation, and in both blocs their partners were more likely to be engaged in agriculture than other occupations. Most respondents in consensual union in both linguistic blocs were in their first union. In both English and French-speaking countries, communities with larger proportion of richer households, educated females and high prevalence of premarital birth had the larger percentage of respondents in consensual union. Chi square test of association showed all the individual and community-level variables were significantly associated with consensual union ($p < .001$) in both linguistic blocs.

Level and Trend of consensual union

Levels and trend of consensual union in West Africa, the two linguistic blocs and each country are presented in figures 1-3 below.

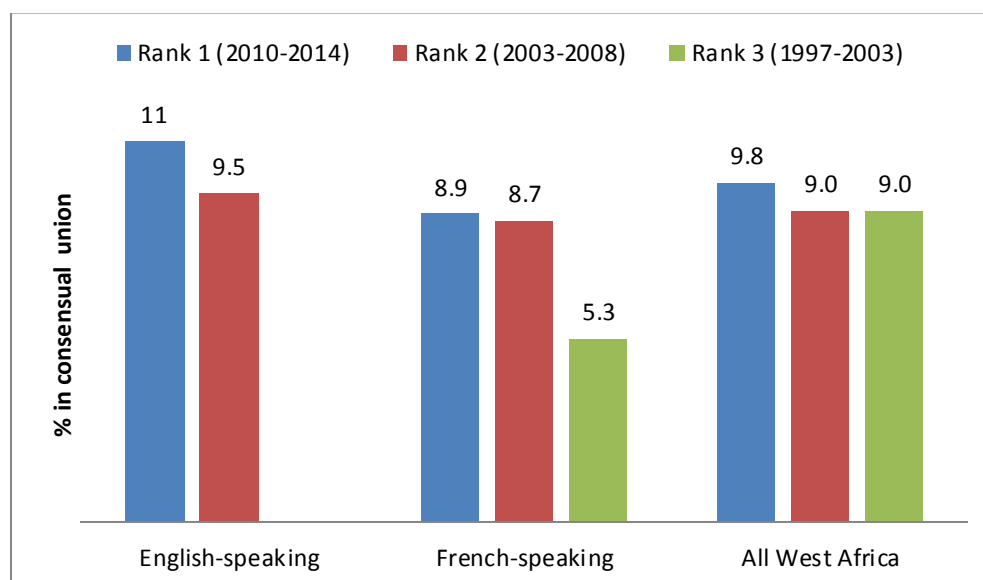


Figure 1: Levels and trend of consensual union in West Africa (DHS, 1997-2014)

Consensual union in the sub-region increased from 9.0% in rank 3 (1997-2003) to 9.8% in the first rank (2010-2014), about 8.9% increase. Change in the proportion of women in consensual union was higher in the two linguistic blocs than at the sub-regional level. In all the survey ranks the proportion of respondents in consensual union is larger in the English-speaking than in the French-speaking countries. Consensual union in the French-speaking bloc increased from 5.3% in the third rank to 8.7% in the second and 8.9% in first rank of DHS, representing 64% increase between rank 3 and 2 and 2.3% between rank 2 and 1, and 67.9% increase between rank 3 and 1. In the English-speaking bloc, Sierra Leone had only two surveys; so, the trend for the English-speaking bloc was computed for only two DHS periods: the most recent (rank 1) and rank 2. Consensual union in the English-speaking countries increased from 9.5% to 11%, about 15.8% increase between the two survey ranks.

There was sharp variation in the trend of consensual union across countries. Compared to the West Africa level, the highest prevalence of consensual union at the three DHS periods was in Liberia in the English-speaking bloc and Cote d'Ivoire in the French-speaking group. Consensual union was also predominant in Ghana and Benin.

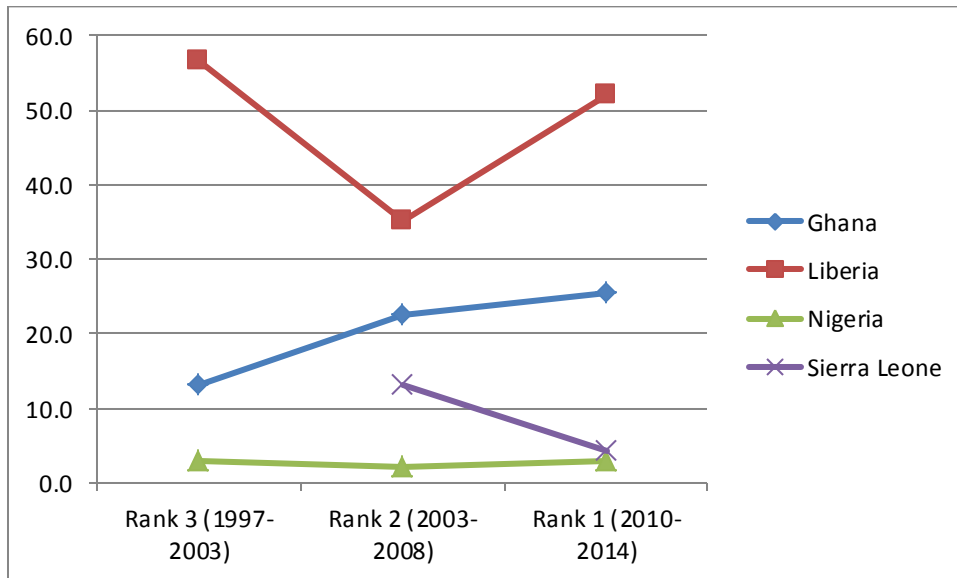


Figure 2: Trend of consensual union - English-speaking countries
 Note: Data points refer to each corresponding survey years

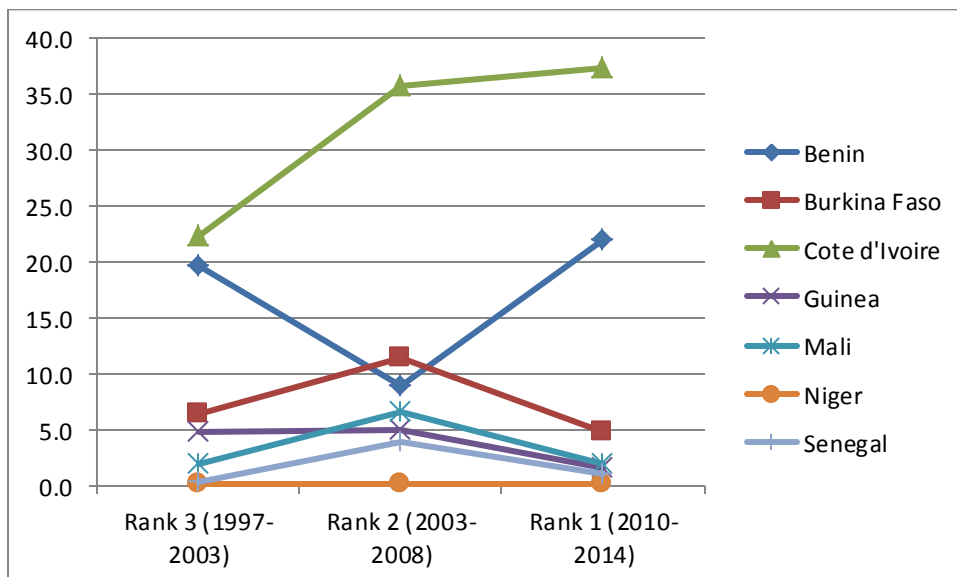


Figure 3: Trend of consensual union - French-speaking countries
 Note: Data points refer to each corresponding survey years

Multi-level Analysis

English-speaking countries

Results of the multilevel models of individual-level and community-level factors associated with consensual union in the English-speaking countries are presented in Table 2.

Individual-level Effects

Controlling for country-level effect, results of multilevel model fixed effect revealed that several individual-level variables had significant association with the odds of forming a consensual union in English-speaking West Africa. There was an inverse relationship in Model 2 and 3 between consensual union and age group of all categories, but the inverse relationship was larger for younger women. Age gap between women and their partners also displayed a negative association with consensual union. Relative to women who were older than their partners, those who were same age and had partners who were older by any age were less likely to be in consensual union. For instance, in models 2 and 3, the likelihood of being in a consensual union was 32% less for those whose partners were older by 4-9 years.

Table 2. Multilevel logistic regression models of individual and contextual variables associated with consensual union in English-speaking West Africa. DHS

Characteristic	Null model	Model 1 (OR/95% CI)	Model 2 (OR/95% CI)	Model 3 (OR/95% CI)
Age				
15-19 (RC)				
20-24			0.62(0.51-	0.62(0.50-
25-29			0.76)***	0.75)***
30-34			0.36(0.29-	0.35(0.28-
35-39			0.44)***	0.43)***
40-44			0.23(0.19-	0.23(0.18-
45-49			0.30)***	0.29)***
			0.17(0.13-	0.17(0.13-
			0.22)***	0.22)***
			0.13(0.10-	0.13(0.10-
			0.17)***	0.17)***
			0.08(0.06-	0.07(0.05-
			0.10)***	0.10)***
Spousal age gap				
Wife older (RC)				
0-3 years			0.76(0.63-0.91)**	0.75(0.63-0.90)**
4-9 years			0.68(0.57-	0.68(0.57-

10-19 years	0.81)***	0.81)***
20+	0.56(0.47- 0.68)***	0.56(0.46- 0.67)***
	0.47(0.37- 0.61)***	0.47(0.36- 0.60)***
Education		
No education (RC)		
Primary	1.37(1.22- 1.54)***	1.36(1.21- 1.53)***
Secondary/Higher	1.76(1.52- 2.03)***	1.72(1.48- 1.98)***
Partner's education		
No education (RC)		
Primary	1.20(1.02-1.40)*	1.16(0.99-1.36)†
Secondary	1.30(1.09-1.54)**	1.27(1.06-1.50)**
Higher	0.97(0.75-1.26)	0.97(0.75-1.26)
Spousal education gap		
Wife more (RC)		
Same	0.96(0.84-1.11)	0.97(0.84-1.12)
Husband more	1.11(0.94-1.30)	1.14(0.96-1.34)
Place of residence		
Urban (RC)		
Rural	0.94(0.82-1.07)	0.95(0.83-0.08)
Occupation		
Not working (RC)		
White-collar	0.55(0.42- 0.73)***	0.54(0.41- 0.71)***
Sales/services		
Agriculture	0.89(0.79-1.00)†	0.88(0.78-0.99)*
Manual/domestic	1.11(0.99-1.26)† 0.91(0.77-1.06)	1.10(0.97-1.24) 0.91(0.77-1.06)
Partner's occupation		
Not working (RC)		
White-collar	0.47(0.36- 0.62)***	0.48(0.36- 0.62)***
Sales/services		
Agriculture	0.66(0.51-0.86)**	0.67(0.51-0.88)**
Manual/domestic	0.69(0.53-0.89)** 0.73(0.57-0.94)*	0.70(0.54-0.91)** 0.74(0.57-0.95)*
Number of union		
Once (RC)		
More than once	2.42(2.19- 2.68)***	2.44(2.21- 2.70)***
Type of union		
Monogamy		
Polygyny	0.90(0.81-1.01)†	0.91(0.81-1.02)
Premarital birth		
No (RC)		
Yes	1.28(1.15- 1.41)***	1.31(1.17- 1.45)***

		1.43)***	1.46)***
Age at first cohabitation			
<=15 (RC)			
16-19		1.07(0.96-1.20)	1.06(0.9751.19)
20-46		1.18(1.03-1.35)*	1.15(1.01-1.32)*
Age at first sex			
At first union (RC)			
<=15		1.85(1.65-	1.81(1.61-
16-19		2.08)***	2.03)***
20-42		1.91(1.70-	1.87(1.67-
		2.14)***	2.10)***
		1.48(1.23-	1.43(1.19-
		1.79)***	1.73)***
Number of sons			
No son(RC)			
1 son		0.86(0.76-0.96)*	0.85(0.76-0.96)**
2 sons		0.81(0.71-0.92)**	0.80(0.70-0.91)**
3+ sons		0.72(0.62-	0.71(0.62-
		0.83)***	0.82)***
Number of daughters			
No daughter (RC)			
1 daughter		0.87(0.77-0.97)*	0.87(0.77-0.97)*
2 daughters		0.82(0.72-0.94)**	0.82(0.72-0.94)**
3+ daughters		0.79(0.68-0.92)**	0.79(0.68-0.91)**
Household wealth			
Poorest (RC)			
Poorer		1.20(1.06-1.36)**	1.22(1.07-1.38)**
Middle		1.41(1.22-	1.42(1.23-
Richer		1.63)***	1.64)***
Richest		1.35(1.14-	1.35(1.14-
		1.61)***	1.60)***
		1.06(0.86-1.30)	1.09(0.88-1.33)
Community wealth index			
Poor (RC)	0.23(0.16-		0.23(0.17-
Middle	0.31)***		0.32)***
Rich	0.08(0.05-		0.10(0.06-
	0.13)***		0.16)***
Community female education			
Low (RC)			
Middle	3.40(2.52-		2.77(2.08-
High	4.58)***		3.69)***
	3.78(2.60-		2.99(2.10-
	5.49)***		4.28)***
Community-level Premarital birth			

High (RC)				
Moderate		0.79(0.60-1.04)†		0.78(0.59-1.01)†
Low		0.60(0.44-0.83)**		0.64(0.47-0.87)**
<i>Random effects</i>				
Community-level variance (SE)	1.171(.093)**	1.418(.110)***	1.605(.143)***	1.111(.101)***
ICC (%)	26.2	30.1	32.8	25.2
Log likelihood	-16010.95	-11723.95	-9145.95	-9057.93
<i>Model fit statistics</i>				
AIC	32025.90	23469.89	18389.92	18225.87
BIC	32043.51	23566.77	18816.42	18704.59

*OR, odds ratio; CI confidence interval; SE standard error; ICC intra-class (community)correlation; PCV proportional change in variance; AIC Akaike information criterion; RC- Reference category; *p<0.05; **p,0.01; ***p<0.001 †p<0.10. Country effect was controlled in all the models.*

The estimation showed that women who had any level of education were more likely to be in consensual union than those who had no education in English-speaking West Africa. Primary education increased the odds of consensual union (OR 1.37 p<.001) and secondary/higher education increased the odds by 76% (OR 1.76 p<.001). In the full model, the direction of association remained and the effect size attenuated slightly. Partner's level of education showed a similar result to respondents' education. Women whose partners had primary and secondary education were more likely to be in consensual union than those whose partners were uneducated, but the significant association for primary education became marginal in the full model. In regard to occupation, white-collar occupation had a significant inverse association with the odds of consensual union (OR 0.55 p<.001) compared to those who were not working. The association between sales/service occupation and the likelihood of consensual union reached statistical significance in the full model (OR 0.88 p<.05). Unlike respondents' occupation, all categories of their partner's occupation were significantly associated with the likelihood of being in consensual union in inverse direction, but the odds were lowest for those who partners had white-collar occupation.

Women who had been in a marital union more than once were more likely than those who had been in union once to be in consensual union (OR 2.42 p<.001), even when

community variables were controlled in Model 3. Respondents who had premarital births were more likely than those who did not, to be in consensual union (OR 1.28 $p < .001$), the effect size increased slightly in the full model. Respondents whose first union took place between ages 20-46 years were more likely than those who married before age 16 years to be in consensual union (OR 1.18 $p < .05$). Another variable that was positively related to consensual union was age at first sex. Respondents whose sexual debut took place before first union were more likely to form consensual union than those whose first sexual intercourse was in their first union. Number of sons was inversely related to consensual union; those who had one or more sons were significantly less likely to be in consensual union than those who had no sons. Also, those who had one or more daughters were less likely than those who had no daughter to be in consensual union.

Relative to respondents in the poorest household wealth quintile, those in poorer, middle and richer household wealth quintiles were 20%, 41% and 35% more likely to be in consensual union, respectively.

Community-level effect

The results of fixed effect in model 1 and the full model 3 showed that women who lived in communities where level of household wealth index was middle and rich were less likely than those in communities with low level of household wealth to be in consensual union ($p < .001$). On the contrary, the likelihood of being in a consensual union was higher for respondents who resided in communities where a large proportion of women were educated. For instance, the odds of consensual union in communities with high proportion of educated women was 3.78 ($p < .001$), the effect attenuated but remained positive and strong when individual variables were adjusted in the full model. Respondents in communities where the proportion of women who had premarital birth was low were less likely than those in

communities with high proportion of premarital birth, to be in consensual union (OR 0.60 p<.01).

Random effect results (Table 3) showed there was significant variation in the odds of being in a consensual union across communities in the English-speaking countries ($\tau = 1.979$, $p < 0.001$). The variation across communities remained significant in the subsequent models that contained only community variables (Model 1), individual variables (Model 2) and the full model. The intra-class correlation (ICC) in the null model indicated that 26.2% of the individual variation in the odds of being consensual union were related to the community level and may be attributable to contextual factors. The ICC increased to 30.1% when only community variables were fitted in model 1, and to 32.8% in model 2 for only individual variables. In the full model the proportion of total variance that remains at the community level reduced to 31.5%. Goodness-of-fit measures, AIC and BIC, became lower with subsequent models, indicating that models 1 to 3 were better than the null model. The full model that contained both individual and contextual variables had the best fit with the lowest AIC and BIC.

Table 4. Multilevel logistic regression models of individual and contextual variables associated with consensual union in French-speaking West Africa.

Characteristic	Null model	Model 1 (OR/95% CI)	Model 2 (OR/95% CI)	Model 3 (OR/95% CI)
Age				
15-19 (RC)				
20-24			0.66(0.55-	0.67(0.55-
25-29			0.80)***	0.80)***
30-34			0.55(0.46-	0.55(0.46-
35-39			0.67)***	0.67)***
40-44			0.49(0.40-	0.49(0.40-
45-49			0.60)***	0.60)***
			0.45(0.36-	0.45(0.36-
			0.57)***	0.57)***
			0.37(0.29-	0.37(0.30-
			0.47)***	0.47)***
			0.32(0.25-	0.32(0.25-
			0.42)***	0.42)***

Spousal age gap

Wife older (RC)

0-3 years	0.89(0.72-1.09)	0.89(0.73-1.10)
4-9 years	0.86(0.70-1.04)	0.87(0.71-1.05)
10-19 years	0.71(0.58-0.87)**	0.72(0.59-0.88)**
20+	0.77(0.61-0.97)*	0.78(0.62-0.97)*

Education

No education (RC)

Primary	1.26(1.11-	1.26(1.11-
Secondary/Higher	1.44)***	1.44)***
	1.39(1.16-	1.39(1.16-
	1.67)***	1.67)***

Partner's education

No education (RC)

Primary	1.32(1.12-1.54)**	1.31(1.12-1.54)**
Secondary	1.32(1.08-1.61)**	1.32(1.08-1.61)**
Higher	1.20(0.90-1.62)	1.20(0.90-1.61)

Spousal education gap

Wife more (RC)

Same	1.11(0.95-1.30)	1.11(0.94-1.30)
Husband more	0.98(0.81-1.20)	0.98(0.81-1.20)

Place of residence

Urban (RC)

Rural	0.78(0.69-	0.76(0.67-
	0.88)***	0.86)***

Occupation

Not working (RC)

White-collar	0.67(0.52-0.86)**	0.66(0.51-0.85)**
Sales/services	0.85(0.77-0.93)**	0.84(0.76-
Agriculture	0.68(0.61-	0.92)***
Manual/domestic	0.77)***	0.69(0.62-
	0.84(0.71-1.00)	0.77)***
		0.84(0.71-0.99)*

Partner's occupation

Not working (RC)

White-collar	0.92(0.70-1.20)	0.92(0.70-1.20)
Sales/services	0.94(0.72-1.21)	0.93(0.71-1.20)
Agriculture	0.82(0.63-1.06)	0.83(0.64-1.07)
Manual/domestic	1.03(0.80-1.33)	1.02(0.79-1.32)

Number of union

Once (RC)

More than once	1.61(1.45-	1.61(1.45-
	1.79)***	1.79)***

Type of union

Monogamy(RC)

Polygyny	1.03(0.94-1.12)	1.04(0.95-1.13)
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Premarital birth

No (RC)			
Yes		1.19(1.07-1.32)**	1.20(1.08-1.33)**
Age at first cohabitation			
<=15 (RC)			
16-19		0.95(0.86-1.04)	0.94(0.85-1.04)
20-48		1.03(0.91-1.16)	1.02(0.91-1.16)
Age at first sex			
At first union (RC)			
<=15		1.32(1.19-	1.31(1.18-
16-19		1.48)***	1.46)***
20-48		1.60(1.45-	1.58(1.43-
		1.77)***	1.75)***
		1.98(1.71-	1.95(1.68-
		2.30)***	2.26)***
Number of sons			
No son (RC)			
1 son		0.88(0.79-0.99)*	0.88(0.79-0.99)*
2 sons		0.84(0.74-0.95)**	0.84(0.74-0.96)*
3+ sons		0.78(0.67-0.92)**	0.79(0.67-0.92)**
Number of daughters			
No daughter (RC)			
1 daughter		0.97(0.87-1.08)	0.97(0.87-1.08)
2 daughters		0.87(0.77-0.99)*	0.87(0.77-0.99)*
3+ daughters		0.91(0.78-1.07)	0.91(0.77-1.07)
Household wealth			
Poorest (RC)			
Poorer		0.99(0.88-1.11)	0.99(0.88-1.11)
Middle		0.83(0.73-0.94)**	0.82(0.73-0.93)**
Richer		0.74(0.64-	0.73(0.63-
Richest		0.85)***	0.84)***
		0.72(0.61-	0.72(0.60-
		0.86)***	0.85)***
Community wealth index			
Poor (RC)		0.56(0.40-0.78)**	0.71(0.49-1.02)
Middle		0.44(0.29-	0.60(0.38-0.94)*
Rich		0.66)***	
Community female education			
Low (RC)			
Middle		1.01(0.76-1.36)	0.76(0.55-1.06)
High		1.50(1.06-2.14)*	0.98(0.66-1.45)
Community-level Premarital birth			
High (RC)			
Moderate		0.56(0.44-	0.59(0.44-
Low		0.72)***	0.77)***

		0.52(0.39-0.69)***		0.58(0.42-0.79)**
<i>Random effects</i>				
Community-level variance (SE)	1.610(.108)***	0.809(.061)***	1.235(.093)***	0.983(.076)***
ICC (%)	32.9	19.7	27.3	23.0
Log likelihood	-17969.66	-13745.26	-11015.47	-10962.07
<i>Model fit statistics</i>				
AIC	35943.32	27518.52	22138.94	22044.14
BIC	35961.56	27646.21	22626.05	22585.37

*OR, odds ratio; CI confidence interval; SE standard error; ICC intra-class (community)correlation; PCV proportional change in variance; AIC Akaike information criterion; RC – Reference category; *p<0.05; **p,0.01; ***p<0.001 †p<0.10. Country effect was controlled in all the models.*

French-speaking countries

Multilevel models of individual-level and community-level factors associated with consensual union in the French-speaking countries are presented in Table 3.

Individual-level Effects

All categories of respondents' age were negatively associated with consensual union. Similar to the English-speaking countries, the likelihood decreased with older age. Compared to respondents who were older than their partners, those whose partners were older by 10 or more years were less likely to be in consensual union. Relative to respondents with no education, those who had primary, secondary and higher education were 26% and 39% more likely to be in consensual union, respectively. With regard to partner's education, attainment of primary and secondary education increased the likelihood of consensual union. Residence in rural instead of urban area decreased the odds of being in a consensual union (OR 0.78 p<.001). Contrary to the result in the English-speaking bloc, respondents in all occupational categories except those in manual and domestic service were less likely to be in consensual union than those who were not working. However, in the full model, all the categories including manual and domestic service were significantly associated with consensual union in inverse direction. Partner's occupation had no significant association with consensual union in this linguistic bloc.

Respondents who have previously lived in union had higher odds of being in consensual union than those in their first union (OR 1.61 $p < .001$). Premarital birth significantly increased the likelihood of consensual union by 19% ($p < .05$) compared to those who had no births before marriage. Age at first sex was a significant determinant of consensual union in French-speaking West Africa. Compared to those who first sex took place in their first union, respondents who had premarital sex were more likely to be in consensual union. The effect size attenuated slightly in the full model. Respondents who had one or more sons were significantly less likely to be in consensual union than those who had no son. With regard to number of daughters, respondents who had 2 daughters were less likely to be in consensual union than their counterparts with no daughter (OR 0.87 $p < .05$). Respondents in middle, richer and richest household wealth quintiles were significantly less likely than those in the poorest household wealth quintile to be in consensual union.

Community-level effect

Residence in communities where a higher proportion of women resided in middle and rich households decreased the odds of consensual union compared to poorer communities. However, the odds for middle households became insignificant in the full model. In regard to the proportion of educated women, relative to communities with low proportion of educated women, respondents who lived in communities where a high proportion of women were educated were significantly more likely to be in consensual union (OR 1.50 $p < .05$), but the direction reversed and became insignificant in the full model. Respondents in communities where premarital birth was low and moderate were less likely than those in communities where premarital birth was high to be in consensual union. Noteworthy is that all the significant variables retained their direction of association in the full model, and effect size only slightly attenuated and increased or remained unchanged.

The random effect results revealed significant variance in the odds of consensual union across communities ($\tau = 1.661$, $p < 0.001$) in the null model and other models. The intra-class correlation (ICC) in the null model indicated that 32.9% of the individual variation in the odds of being in consensual union were related to the community level and may be attributable to contextual factors. The ICC reduced when only community variables were fitted in model 1 (19.7%), but increased in model 2 with only individual variables (27.3%). In the full model the proportion of total variance that remains at the community level reduced to 23.0%. Goodness-of-fit measures, AIC and BIC were lower with subsequent models than in the null model, indicating that those models were better than the null model. The full model with both individual and community-level variables had the best fit with the lowest AIC and BIC.

Discussion of the Findings

This paper examined the levels, trend and factors associated with consensual union in West Africa. Particular attention was paid to international spoken language (French and English) by examining whether consensual union varied across the two language blocs. The results revealed variation in the levels of consensual union among women in union across countries and linguistic blocs. Drawing from the most recent DHS in each of the eleven countries, the prevalence of consensual union among women in union ranged from 0.2% in Niger Republic to 52% in Liberia. Results for the sub-region and the linguistic blocs showed a rising trend in consensual union. Consensual union was consistently higher in English-speaking countries than in the French-speaking bloc, although the difference was not large. This is contrary to the case in countries, such as Canada, where the French-speaking Quebec had higher prevalence of consensual union than other parts of the country (Laplante & Fostik, 2015).

Examining the individual and contextual factors associated with the variation across linguistic divide in the sub-region, the research revealed similarities and variations between the two groups. In both linguistic blocs, the relationship between consensual union and current age for respondents aged 20 and above was inverse. This finding suggests a higher likelihood of consensual union among younger women ages 15-19 years, supporting past studies in countries, such as Cameroon, Togo and Benin (Adjamagbo et al., 2014; Kamgno & Mengue, 2014). Respondents who had any level of education in both English and French-speaking countries were more likely to be in consensual union than the uneducated. Past studies in West Africa corroborate this finding on education (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, women are accorded prestige on the basis of marriage and motherhood (Aina, 1998), and because education delays early marriage, educated women may prefer to enter a consensual union in order to avoid prolonged or permanent singlehood. It is also likely that where bride wealth and dowry is high, educated women may enter into consensual union as a way to achieve their marriage desires and resist high bride wealth and dowry. This finding is contrary to the results in (Martin, 2002) for Latin America where education reduced the likelihood of being in consensual union. The study also shows that women whose partners attained primary and secondary education were more likely to be in consensual union, but attainment of tertiary education was statistically insignificant in both linguistic blocs. Of note is that the proportion of women in both blocs who attained higher education was low (1% in the French-speaking bloc and 5.5% in the English-speaking), thus higher and secondary was combined for the analysis. The results for partner's education suggest that educated women in both blocs who were more likely to be in consensual union may be more of those who had attained primary and secondary education. Although women's higher socioeconomic status is increasingly important in the marriage market, it is more likely for men to marry women who have same

or lower level of education than they have (Gage & Bledsoe, 1994; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000; Kalmijn, 1998). Also, McLanahan (2004) shows that highly educated women are more likely to stay married in formalised unions. Partners who worked in any occupation reduced the likelihood of consensual union in English and French-speaking countries. Given that men's socioeconomic status determines the type of union (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014), men who had means of livelihood will be more likely to enter into formalised bride wealth marriage than those who did not work.

Women in the rural areas were less likely to be in consensual union only in the French speaking countries. Influence of social change and cultural modernism is more prominent in urban than rural areas in many countries in West Africa, thus consensual union thrive in urban centres (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009; Meekers, 1992; Thiriat, 1999). Changes associated with urbanisation result in social disorganisation (Pfohl, 1994) of traditional values, such as that associated with marriage rites. Engagement in any occupation did not have a positive relationship with consensual union in both linguistic groups. However, in the French-speaking block the relationship was significant for all categories of occupation, but in the English speaking group, it was only significant for women who were in white-collar, sales and services occupations. Women's occupation may not have increased their likelihood of being in consensual union given that men's socioeconomic status in many countries in the sub-region determines the type of union more than women's. Although fewer women than men work in high-income employment in sub-Saharan Africa (Chant & Pedwell, 2008; UNDP, 2014), and women's income is increasingly becoming important in enhancing the status of the family (Kalmijn, 1998), in many countries in the sub-region masculinity is increasingly being defined in terms of financial strength (Erinosho, 2008); thus a woman's income is still viewed as support for the man's, and many men would still prefer to marry women who earn less than them. Meekers (1992) noted that increasing consensual union in Africa due to decline in lineage control is expected to be more prevalent among women with modern characteristics such as education and formal employment. The current analysis

confirms Meekers observation as regards education, but shows that occupational status of women had no positive association with consensual union in West Africa. Meekers observation may likely become evident as more women in the sub-region engage in the formal labour force.

In the two linguistic blocs, women who had married more than once were more likely to be in consensual union than those who were in their first union. Second and higher order marital unions majorly result from marital disruption due to divorce, separation or widowhood; and such women are more likely to compromise traditional norms of formalising marital unions in order to be partnered again. A previous study showed that previously married women are at a higher risk of entering into consensual union (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). Also premarital birth increased the likelihood of consensual union in both French and English speaking countries. The stigma associated with premarital pregnancy and birth pressurises girls and their parents to giving the girls out to undesired unions, such as consensual union (Buvinić, Valenzuela, Molina, & Gonzalez, 1992; Ringsted, 2004). Also, premarital conception is a way of attracting a spouse (Meekers, 1994), and many of such unions may remain consensual. Age at first sex was also a significant positive determinant of consensual union in both linguistic blocs. Respondents whose sexual debut took place before their first union were more likely to be in consensual union. This relationship may be because women who initiate sex before marriage are more likely to be cohabiting with an intimate partner. Among some Burkinabè ethnic groups, premarital sexual relations take the form of consensual unions (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009).

The presence of children, son or daughter, decreased the odds of consensual union in English and French-speaking West Africa. However, having male children had stronger inverse association than daughters in the French-speaking bloc, one or more sons decreased the likelihood of consensual union, but only two female children had significant association

with consensual union. This confirms past studies that the presence of children, particularly sons encourages men to concretise consensual relationships in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000), whereas lack of a live birth, particularly of sons increases the risk of remaining in consensual union (Adjamagbo et al., 2014). Children, particularly sons are viewed as necessary to perpetuate one's lineage and for old age security (Ela, 1995; Rwenge, 2002).

Household wealth was significantly associated with the odds of consensual union, but in divergent directions. In the French-speaking countries, women in the middle, richer and richest household wealth quintile were less likely to be in consensual union than their counterparts in the poorest quintile. In the English-speaking bloc, the direction of association was reversed; those in the poorer, middle and richer household wealth quintiles were significantly more likely than the poorest category to be in consensual union. Due to the importance attached to dowry and bride wealth in many countries in the sub-region (the value may be high in some cases) and the increasing significance of religious wedding, intending couples may remain in consensual union because they cannot afford the high cost of formal marriage (Arnaldo, 2004; Kamdem, 2006; Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; Locoh, 2002). Also, the influx of modern values of individualism is fast eroding the tradition of extended family assistance in bride wealth, thus, bride wealth payment is increasingly the sole responsibility of the young men who may be unemployed or underemployed (LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). The finding in the French-speaking bloc suggests the need for policy and programmatic interventions to lower cost of formal marriage to enable persons of low socioeconomic status to enter formal unions.

With regard to community-level factors, there was significant variation in the odds of being in a consensual union across communities in both the English and French-speaking countries. The ICC indicated that within-community variation accounts for a large part of the

variance in the odds of consensual union in the two linguistic blocs. However, the variation in consensual union attributable to community-level factors was higher in the English-speaking bloc than in the French-speaking countries. The research revealed a negative association between the odds of consensual union and residence in communities with a high proportion of women in the middle and rich wealth quintiles. This suggests that women who live in poor neighbourhoods are more exposed to forming consensual union than those in richer neighbourhoods. Previous studies in the sub-region indicated that a poor economic environment keeps many people in unemployment with more difficulties to prepare for formal union (Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; Locoh, 2002). High and moderate proportion of women who were educated in a community had positive relationship with consensual union particularly in the English-speaking bloc. Attainment of education may have exposed women to modern values that challenge traditional structures that delay or deny women opportunity of marrying on their own terms. Some studies show that the risk of high consensual is more prevalent among well educated people (Meekers, 1992, 1994; Kamgno & Mengue, 2014; LeGrand & Younoussi, 2009). The third community-level variable in this study was community prevalence of premarital birth. This factor was significant in both linguistic blocs. Women who resided in communities where premarital birth was moderate and high were more likely to be in consensual union than those in low premarital birth neighbourhoods.

The current study had limitations. Pooled data generate a large study population which may result in small differences being statistically significant. Also, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for inference on causality. Thus, the results in this research represent factors associated with consensual union at a particular period. In spite of these limitations, this study highlights factors associated with consensual union in West Africa and categories of women who are more likely to be in consensual unions.

Conclusion

This study revealed that a growing proportion of women in West Africa are in consensual union. Similarities and variations exist in individual and contextual factors

associated with consensual union across the French and English speaking countries in West Africa. Categories of women who were vulnerable to unmarried co-resident partnering in the sub-region irrespective of linguistic divide included the educated particularly those who attained primary and secondary-level education, those in their second or higher order union, who had premarital birth, whose sexual debut was not in their first union, who had no sons, and those who were resident in poor neighbourhoods, in communities with a large proportion of educated female and high premarital birth. Given the disadvantages that consensual union expose women and children to, the findings underscore the need to extend family benefits that are usually linked to formal marriage to consensual union in the sub-region, particularly in countries where it is not prevalent. Policies and programmatic interventions to protect women in consensual unions in case of break up is also necessary.

Other individual, family, community and national level factors which were beyond the scope of the current analysis may be related with consensual union in the sub-region. Therefore, we suggest that further studies be conducted on consensual union in West Africa, and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Studies that will make use of longitudinal data will be useful to reveal the predictors of consensual union over time. Further research on the relationship between household wealth and consensual union is suggested given the divergent relationships found in this study.

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