

Change in African Family Size: Causes, Trends and Implications for the African Woman

Extended Abstract

That Africa is witnessing a population explosion is as true as ever. Yet another truism of African demography shows a significant change in the size of most families, especially those living in the urban areas, which now has higher population than the rural. Nevertheless, this demographic trend was equally very true of the rural populations in many African societies. Importantly, this change in the African family size has been noticed among communities where the ‘parity-ten’ custom was hitherto the norm rather than the exception. Taking three of such communities as areas of study, this paper focuses on the causes of the demographic change which African families are increasingly witnessing, the trends and dynamics of this development as well as the varied implications such a development has especially for the African woman and the African family system. In other words, the aim of this paper is to examine, understand and explain the causes, trends and implications of this new shift in African family size.

This study was carried out among families in three Igbo communities, which included Mbaise, Obowo and Ikeduru (in southeastern Nigeria). These communities were purposely and specifically chosen for the present study due to their previous high population density, a situation that was linked to their practice of the ‘parity-ten’ custom. For the purposes of the study, 30 in-person interviews were held with key informants, including male family heads of household, women and community leaders to ascertain their perception and knowledge of this change in family size. An addition, 15 in-person interviews were also held with the youth to determine the feasibility of continuity in this demographic trend. Furthermore, six (6) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with groups to determine collective opinions, perceptions, agreements and/or disagreements on the concerns of the study, as well as to comparatively assess the views of different age and sex groups on the development. In order to acquire some needed quantitative data on the trend and to validate some of the data got from

the qualitative sources, 286 Questionnaires were also administered in the study areas. The use of this repertoire of methods is to ensure that the three basic purposes of this research – exploration, description and explanation – are achieved.

The study locates and argues that Western education, which the African woman now acquires at an increasing rate, is the main cause of the new shift in African family size. Through western education, women have learnt about the dangers and disadvantages of early marriages, they are now more knowledgeable about health issues, for example the selection/determination of the baby's sex – which was, in most cases, the reason for a large number of children by a woman in time past. Women's western education has also increased the males' responsibilities in the family thereby making them aware of the demerits of large family sizes. In consequence, the African man, in tandem with the desires of the African woman, now claims 'to know better', and in agreement with the woman, prefers a smaller family size. Modernization, to a very large extent, has equally contributed to the shift in the African family size, now people tend to borrow family trends and development from elsewhere (especially modern/developed societies). In such societies, couples prefer to have either smaller numbers of children (between 1 and 3) or none at all, ostensibly for pleasure purposes. Thus, many African men and women now adopt such novel family practices and adapt them into the African setting.

Changes in socio-economic foundations have also been noted as significant contributor to this change. Large families existed in the past mainly because they needed hands in the farming economy. This is not so today, and this change has contributed to the reduction being witnessed in the African family size. The global economic crunch since the 1980s, which also led to austerity measures in many African countries, also necessitated a rethink by African couples about the desirability of a large family size. In this wise, people preferred lesser number of children to whom they would devote proper attention and giving them the very best affordable. Again, in modern times, families with larger number of children are perceived by

the public as primitive, ignorant and unreasonable, while those with lesser are seen as trendy and civilized. Such public opinion has got a significant role to play in the current change being witnessed. Finally, women's new career-disposition in Africa has been seen as a pervasive force in the change in African family size. These women are now working class mothers unlike hitherto was the case when they sat at home to concentrate on household chores, subsistence farming, and ultimately, child birth and rearing. Now that they are involved in white collar jobs, they hardly have time for larger numbers of children with the attendant stress of bringing them up.

The paper further points to the diverse but complex mix socio-cultural implications of these trends. These include the emergence of better empowered and career-minded African women, an unprecedented increase in the use of contraceptives, the giving of lesser attention to children due to working parents, the breaking down of the authentic African ways of life and family values, among other. It also identifies some coping mechanisms that couples and families are adopting in containing the new development. Another significant finding of the paper and on which it concludes, and which is yet another source of conflict of interests in the 'transiting' African family – the premium and demand for the boy-child. This has been an unquenched desired of a majority of Africans (males and females) since primordial times, and despite the new wave of demographic changes which the African family is currently undergoing, the demand for the boy-child remains vital and of utmost importance.