

**Under Elders' Eyes?:
Intergenerational Control and Family Formation in Urban West Africa**

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The major transformations observed over the last decades in the process of family formation in African cities seem have been accompanied by equally important changes in intergenerational relationships. Despite the importance of the topic, however, statistics on the topic are rare. Using unique survey data recently collected among young adults in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, the present study explores the contemporary generational control exerted by elders over the family formation process of young city-dwellers and how it varies across sub-groups of youth. Preliminary results suggest that although parents are not involved in the selection of their children's mate, parental approval remains a pre-requisite to marriage and elders still play a key role in bridewealth payment for their son's wedding. Female elders also remain central in the transmission of maternity knowledge to the next generation and the persistent authority of "mothers in law" over young mothers is noteworthy.

Context and Objectives

In Ouagadougou, like in many other African cities, the family formation process among youth has undergone major changes over the last decades (Antoine and Marcoux, 2014). Under the combine effect of prolonged schooling and deteriorating employment conditions among young generations of city-dwellers in Burkina Faso, age at first union has risen consistently since the 1980s (Calvès et al., 2007). The process of union formation is also changing and new forms of unions are emerging in African cities, with a growing number of young adults living together as husband and wife in “intermediary conjugal union” without any prior marital ceremony (Calvès *et al.*, 2007; Attané, 2007). Like first marriage, transition to parenthood is postponed and although changes in the age at first birth are still timid at the national level, the postponement is marked in cities (Calvès *et al.*, 2007). The context in which first pregnancies and births occur has also changed and a growing number of young urban women are becoming pregnant or having their first child outside formal marriage (Guiella and Woog, 2006).

These transformations in the family formation process seem to have been accompanied by equally important changes in intergenerational relationships. Thus, although African marriage is traditionally a union between two lineages rather than two individuals, studies have documented the decreasing control of elders and kin over younger people’s marriages, and the increasing individualization of marriage whereby young men and women play a more active role in the marital process, notably in the selection of their future spouse (Attané, 2007; Hertrich, 2007; Smith, 2009). With schooling and increased exposure to Western media and to a globalized culture that places a great emphasize on gender relationships, the ideas or “romantic love” is very popular among contemporary

urban youth in sub-Saharan Africa (Touré, 2006; Werner, 2006). Today most young people in Burkinabè cities say they want to marry for love with a mate of their choice (Rossier, 2007). Evidence of increasing individualization of marriage in sub-saharan Africa can also be found in the growing number of young grooms who bear the costs of the wedding alone, as well as in the declining involvement of elders in the preparation and supervision of wedding ceremonies observed in several countries (Lardoux, 2005; Hertrich, 2007).

Like marriage, youth's transition to parenthood is traditionally « family matter » in Burkina Faso. Soon after marriage, generally within less than a year, the new wife must become pregnant (Badini, 1994). She will then learn from older women her role of future mother, as maternal knowledge is traditionally « a collective and popular knowledge transmitted by female circle » (Ouedraogo, 1994). Through their teaching, older women enhance their prestige and justify their rank in the familial hierarchy. As noted by Suzanne Lallemand (1991 : 28) concerning older women : « *their prestige within the family, their place in the family compound do not depend on the fertility they lost, nor on their declining work productivity but on their moral authority in the domains of mother and child care* ». In this intergenerational transmission of knowledge, mothers-in-laws played a key role (Ouedraogo, 1994). As in other African countries, however, with the increase of female education and the multiplication of governmental initiatives to improve maternal health, the sources of information on reproductive health and maternity available to young pregnant women have become more diversified over the years in Burkina Faso (Moran et al. 2006). Nonetheless, scattered evidence suggest that, even in urban areas, the moral authority of older women on the reproductive life of their daughters and daughters-in-laws, has not totally disappeared. Results from a qualitative study on the experience of first

maternity across generations in Ouagadougou conducted in 2006 show that older women, and especially mothers in law, are still a precious source of information and help for young generation of females at the time of the birth of their first child (Lewis et Calvès, 2011). In fact, the study shows that women from the young generation who are often still single at the time of pregnancy and are eager to gain acceptance by their « in-laws » and are, paradoxically, more submissive to their future mothers-in-law compared to women from the previous generation.

Despite the importance of the topic in societies where gerontocratic power has historically structured social relations, the new intergenerational relationships that are emerging in African cities have attracted little attention among demographers, and statistics on the topic are rare (Antoine, 2007). In such a context, the objective of the present study is to explore the contemporary generational control exerted by elders over the family formation process of young city-dwellers and how it varies across sub-groups of youth, using data from a recent retrospective survey on transition to parenthood conducted among young adults in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso.

Data and Methods

To do so, this paper uses primary data from a unique representative survey entitled “Becoming a Parent in Ouagadougou” (BPO Survey), conducted by the University of Montreal and the University of Ouagadougou among 2,036 young adults in the Burkinabe capital city between November 2009 and February 2010. Since the primary purpose of the survey was to study transition to parenthood we needed to account for gender differentials in age at first marriage and first birth, and the survey therefore targeted young men aged 25

to 34 and young women aged 20 to 29. The sample is a two-stage stratified random sample, representative of the city of Ouagadougou¹, comprising 927 young men and 1,109 young women.

The richness of the data collected provides a unique opportunity to explore quantitatively the involvement of elders in the family formation process of young adults at various stages of the process: union formation, marriage and birth of a child. In fact, besides information on social origin (such as ethnic group, religion, and parents' occupation) and the detailed retrospective residential, occupational, unions, and childbearing histories, information was collected on the intergenerational control over youth's life. More specifically, in the section devoted to relationships, unions and marriages, for each relationship, respondents were asked whether their parents were involved in the choice of their partners and respondents who got married were asked whether their family had approved their marriage, and whether they would have gotten married without their family approval. The section on childbearing history includes information on the support network surrounding each pregnancy and birth, allowing to evaluate the role played by elders: sources of information and advices received by the young mothers at the time of pregnancy and after birth, and sources of help for daily living after the child birth. Additionally, the residential history include information on persons living on a daily basis in each residence and permits to evaluate the proportion of young couples who share their first residence with their parents and in-laws.

¹ The first stage consisted of randomly selecting ten census enumeration areas (EAs) in each of the five administrative strata ("arrondissements") of the city. The EAs were selected from the 2006 census database using probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling technique. In a second stage, based on the census database, 46 households were randomly selected in each of the selected EAs. In each selected household one eligible young man aged 25-34 or young woman aged 20-29 was interviewed.

To evaluate elderly control over youth's union formation process, we focus on a subsample of respondents: those who ever lived with a partner, either in a consensual union (cohabitation without any marital ceremonies) or in a marriage (a union formalized by a traditional, civil or religious). In addition, since most respondents (98%) experienced only one union, we focused our analysis on the first union. Thus, a total of 703 young women and 362 young men are included in this section of the analysis. To evaluate the control of elders over youth's transition to parenthood, we focus on a subsample of 656 young female respondents who already had a first birth and explore the level of implication of elders at the time of the birth and pregnancy of their first child.

The analysis is divided in two sections. In a first section we provide descriptive statistics on elders' control over youth's union, marriage and transition to parenthood. We then mobilize logistics regression models to analyze factors affecting the level of intergenerational control over union and family formation process. In these models, four dependent variables will be considered: whether or not elderly were involved in partner's choice (Model I), whether parents paid for the bridewealth (Model II), whether female elders were a main source of advices and daily help of young mother at time of first birth (Models III and IV). Because of retrospective nature of the data, intergenerational control of union formation and first birth of young adults can be related to the characteristics of young men and women and of their partner at the time of these events (onset of union, marriage, and first birth) and examine how this intergenerational control varies across subgroups of youth. Based on background characteristics as well as occupational and residential histories, several individual fixed and time-varying characteristics measured at the time of the event can be included in the models as covariates: religion (Muslim,

Christian or other) ethnic affiliation (Mossi or non-Mossi), geographic origin (Ouagadougou, other cities, rural areas, abroad), social origin (as measured by father's occupation), age, educational attainment, occupation, and residential poverty index. Because survey respondents also asked socioeconomic information on their partner, three characteristics of the spouse/cohabiting partner at the time of the event can also be taken into account in the models: his/her age, educational attainment. Finally, a variable reflecting the type of union (formal marriage or cohabiting informal union) formed is included in models I and II and the marital status of young women at time of birth (single, in informal union, formally married) is taken into account when evaluating the advices and support received by female elders (Models III and IV).

Preliminary findings

First union formation: « supervised » individualization

Table 1 presents selected indicators of elders' involvement in the process of first union formation of urban young women and men: implication of elders mate selection, and, for youth who got formally married, whether the marriage received parental approval and financial support. BPO survey data confirm the individualization of the union formation in Ouagadougou (Tableau 1). In fact, only a minority of young women (20%) and young men (18%) have found their future spouse or cohabitating partner through parents (father, mothers, aunts or uncles). The large majority of young adult have met their partner by themselves or through friends.

[Table 1 about here]

Although youth in Ouagadougou generally form their first union with a partner of their choice, parental approval clearly remains a prerequisite for marriage (99 % of marriages were approved by parents). In fact, parental endorsement remains essential in the eyes of most young men and women who want to get married in Ouagadougou and only a minority of them (9%) declared that they would have got married against their parents' will. Elder's implication in the marital process of young generation is also financial. In fact, for the majority of marriages concluded by young men (64%), the parents of the future groom paid for the bridewealth (Table 1). Of course, this contribution to the payment of bridewealth goes beyond economics and has a strong symbolic value, suggesting that marriage is still perceived as a ceremony uniting two families, despite the active role played by youth in selecting their future spouse.

Transition to Motherhood: the Persistent Role of Female Elders

During the survey, young mothers were also questioned about the advices, information and support they received during their pregnancy and after they gave birth (Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

BPO data provide support for the idea that the role played by female elders in the transmission of maternity knowledge to the next generation has not disappeared in urban areas of Burkina Faso. On the opposite, while midwives and doctors are important sources of advices and information for most young pregnant women (57%) today in Ouagadougou, so are mothers (26%), aunts (9%) and « mother-in-law » (28%). In fact, the majority of

future mothers (59%) cited at least an elder woman in the family (mother, aunts, or mother in law) as a main source of advice during pregnancy. The role of female elders in the transmission of knowledge on maternity asserts itself after first birth with 66% of young mothers declaring receiving advices and information either from their mother, aunts or “mother-in-law” after delivery. The authority of “mothers in law” over the wife or female partner of their son is still noteworthy: a third of young women cited their mothers in law as main sources of advice. Besides advices and information, the majority of young mother also received daily assistance from their mother, aunt or mother-in-law after delivery (70%).

Table 1. Elders' involvement in youth's first union formation process: involvement in mate selection and marriage

	Women	Men	All
Person who introduced his (her) mate to respondent			
Father/Mother	15.2	15.4	15.3
Aunt/Uncle	05.8	03.5	05.0
Sister/Cousin	03.5	07.0	04.8
Friend	11.1	19.0	13.7
Nobody	64.4	55.0	61.3
N	703	362	1065
Marriage approval ⁽¹⁾			
Parents approved marriage	99.1	99.1	99.1
Respondents declared that they would have married even without parental approval	09.6	09.4	09.5
N	447	234	681
Financial implication in marriage			
Person who paid for the bridewealth ⁽²⁾			
Future groom		33.7	
Parents of future groom		64.1	
Other		02.1	
N		234	

Source: 2010 BPO survey

(1) Among married respondents

(2) Among married male respondents

Table 2. Source of information, advices and support during first pregnancy and birth, among young women who ever had a life birth (multiple answers allowed)

Main sources of advices during pregnancy cited	
Respondent's mother	26.2
Respondent's aunt	09.2
Mother of the child's father (« mother in law »)	28.1
Friend/neighbor	14.3
Mid-wife/Doctor	57.3
<i>Has cited mother, aunt or « mother in law »</i>	59.4
Main sources of advices after child birth cited	
Respondent's mother	26.6
Respondent's aunt	10.0
Mother of the child's father (« mother in law »)	32.7
Friend/neighbor	17.2
Mid-wife/Doctor	37.5
<i>Has cited mother, aunt or « mother in law »</i>	65.7
Main sources on daily help after delivery cited	
Respondent's mother	21.0
Respondent's aunt	15.8
Mother of the child's father (« mother in law »)	36.7
Friend/neighbor	14.6
Child's father	22.3
Others	09.8
<i>Has cited mother, aunt or « mother in law »</i>	70.4

N= 656

Source: 2010 BPO survey

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