Gender Systems and Fertility in Christian and Muslim Villages of Kenya: Twenty Years of Change.[1]

An-Magritt Jensen
Professor
Dept. of Sociology and Political Science,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)
anmagritt.jensen@svt.ntnu.no

DRAFT

Abstract

This paper describes two contexts of rural and poor villages in Kenya. The villages are located in Christian villages in Western Province, and Muslim villages in Coast Province. The two contexts differ in terms of religion, ethnicity and cultural legacies. Twenty years ago the two provinces were situated at the extreme ranges of fertility levels in Kenya, Western at the top and Coast at the bottom. Presently both provinces are found at the upper end of the fertility range. The paper is focussed on ways in which gender systems in the two contexts have resulted in similar fertility outcomes over these twenty years, despite widely different processes. Villages in Western and Coast are explored through case studies in 1988/90 and repeated in 2011, at the start of the Kenyan fertility decline and after the stall.

Introduction

During the early 1980s Kenya was a leading country adding to the global population growth. Family planning programs flourished seemingly with little impact (Sindiga, 1985). As the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 1989 indicated a fertility decline from TFR 8.1 (in 1977/78) to 6.7 this was a much welcomed result. For the following years the fertility continued to decline until it reached a TFR at 4.7 in 1998. However, in contrast to expectations the fertility decline stabilized at that level (4.6 in 2008/2009).

Only one in three Kenyans lives in urban areas. This paper explores case studies in two rural areas carried out in 1988/90 (Jensen and Juma, 1989; Jensen and Khasakhala, 1993) [2] and repeated in 2011. [3] Emphasis is given to cultural, religious and social characteristics and ways

[1] Financed by The Research Council of Norway and the Hewlett Foundation. Grant no. 199408/S50. Project leader: An-Magritt Jensen.
[2] The first, *Women, Childbearing and Nutrition. A case study from Bungoma, Kenya*, was accomplished with the Kenyan researcher, late Dr. Magdallen Juma, Kenyatta University. The second, *Too Many children? Fertility and Family Planning in a Muslim Society of Kenya*, was accomplished with Dr. Anne A. Khasakhala at Population Studies and Research Institute, University of Nairobi.
[3] Project team: Anne A Khaskhala, Salome Wawire, George Odwe and An-Magritt Jensen.

in which these impacts gender relations, marriages and childbearing. The first round can inform us about the situation at the time of the initial fertility decline, while the second round can enlighten our understanding of the situation after a decade when fertility stabilized at a lower, but still quite high fertility level.

Fertility changes in Western and Coastal Kenya

At the time of the first round Western (1988) and Coast (1990) provinces had contrasting fertility levels, the highest in the country in Western (TFR 8.1) and the lowest in Coast (TFR 5.4). [4] The fertility decline during the 1990s affected the two areas very differently. A relative sharp decline took place in Western to TFR 5.6, while only marginal changes took place in Coast to TFR 4.8.

Figure 1 here

Through the decades Western has retained the position as the highest fertility province[5] while the position of Coast shifted from the lowest to the third highest position, only surpassed by Western and Nyanza. Fertility is still higher in Western than in Coast, while by its relative stability in Coast fertility has climbed in the national ranking...

Kenya belongs to a group of countries Sub-Saharan countries where the fertility decline stabilized. Bongaarts (2008) found that: *'Two-thirds of sub-Saharan countries experienced no significant decline between the two most recent surveys'* (p. 109). Contributing factors were weak economic development, rising mortality and lower priority to family planning programs. Consequently, the elements for a demographic transition were not fulfilled. The issue was followed up by Bongaarts and Casterline (2012): *'The reason is Africa's high ideal family size, which is clearly an obstacle to rapid fertility decline. In fact, it is one of the main reasons why the current pace of fertility decline is so slow.'* (p. 166). Schoumaker (2009) asked if the stall could be explained by inadequate data quality in the African DHS's. The study confirmed the birth histories are complicated to collect particularly in poor, high fertility countries and found no conclusive evidence for stalls. However, in Kenya no severe problems were traced.

Analysing of the fertility stall in Kenya from 1998 to 2003 Westoff and Cross (2006) found an increase in unwanted births but no causal explanation to the stall. Their most puzzling finding was that *'the increase in the desire to stop childbearing stalled or reversed'* (p. 38). A positive association between increasing child mortality and the 'wanted fertility rate' was

[4] Apart from Nairobi
[5] Apart from North Eastern, which was not included in the 1989 KDHS.

identified. Women who had experience of child loss wanted more children. Furthermore a strong educational gradient was traced. The increase in wanted fertility was located among the least educated. The rise in wanted fertility cut across religious groups, but most dramatic for the Muslim minority. Westoff and Cross suggest that general social or economic changes may have motivated the fertility stall in Kenya. Data for the Kenyan Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) confirm a clear relationship between fertility and socio-demographic factors.

Figure 2 here

The highest fertility is found among the poorest women (lowest wealth quintile), with low education and those located in rural areas. As we have seen before two out of three Kenyans live in such areas.

Figure 3 here

Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of women and men in the households with Secondary education or more. In 1989 education was very low in Coast and considerably higher in Western. From the end of the 1990s the two provinces have followed divergent paths. Today the two districts are at the same level, and both below the national average. In Coast a considerable educational improvement has taken place, unlike in Western where the development since 1998 has been less positive. We have a hint that social changes did not favour fertility decline in Western. But we do not understand the mechanisms. Given the global development Kenya stands out as a challenging case to explore fertility dynamics.

Here changes impacting fertility is examined through the lenses of the gender system in contexts of cultural and religious differences in rural villages in located in Western and Coastal Provinces. Bungoma, in Western (hereafter named western villages) is characterised as patrilineal and Christian, while Kwale, in Coast (hereafter named coast villages) has a mixture of matri- and patrilineal legacy and Muslim religion. Can the gender system in the two areas help us to understand why fertility declined and then stopped at a fairly high level in Western, and why few changes have place in Coast?

Theoretical framework and previous research

Mason (1985) emphasised the importance of gender equality –in prestige, power and access to and control over social and material resources for fertility. Education is seen as a major indicator of improving women's status. Educated women will have a larger say in household decisions, they will often engage themselves in income earning activities outside the home, they have acquired new ideas on their own life and they want their children to be educated,

and hence invest more in each child. However, in some countries, Kenya among them, it is found that education impacts fertility primarily if schooling is above a certain level (Jejeebhoy, 1995). Thus, education should be understood in a broader perspective.

At the heart of this study is the concept of gender system *'a set of beliefs and norms, common practices, and associated sanctions through which the meaning of being male and female, and the rights and obligations of males and females of different ages and social statuses are defined.'* (Mason, 2001: 161). This concept helps us to understand two aspects, the division of labour and the stratification of the genders.

Men are often absent in fertility studies while it is a widespread belief that men want more children than women do (Caldwell, 1982). In a study among the Yoruba in Nigeria Bankole (1995: 325) found: *'... that there is no evidence that the desire of the male or the female spouse predominates in influencing the couple's fertility behaviour.'* Bankole saw this to be contrary to expectations. The finding, however, is resonated by Dodoo (1998) who found that many Kenyan men, in contrast to conventional wisdom, wanted to reduce their number of children. From this he requested the need for including men in fertility studies. Twenty years later Frost and Dodoo (2009) claim that men are still missing in family planning programs in Africa (as they also are in Asia and Latin-America). The present cases studies include both women and men.

Gender systems are strongly embedded in cultural and religious affiliations. The two areas in this study differ in their cultural (patri- versus matriliny) and religious (Christian versus Muslim) heritage. Patrilineal societies predominate in East Africa Lesthaeghe (1989) claim. He also found that that Islam represents a strong male dominance and *'not least, Islam also weakened traits of matrilineal form of kinship organization.'* (p. 33). Furthermore, Lesthaeghe et al. (1992) found that sub-Saharan regions dominated by Islam were strongly disadvantaged in terms of female education and low contraceptive use compared to areas dominated by Christianity. However, marriage types and the role of (western) education signify differences between the two religions. Few studies have examined the impacts on fertility from religious differences within African countries. A comparison of the impact of Islam on two ethnic groups in Nigeria found that women had less economic control among the Islamic Hausa than the Yoruba, who were less Islamic (Kritz and Makinwa, 1995). However, Johnson-Hanks (2006) finds no differences in comparing fertility among Muslim and non-Muslims in West-African countries, with one exception important to the present study: Muslim women have more control. Bankole and Olaleye (1993) observe that educated women, those in

monogamous marriages and Christians retain closer ties with their husbands compared to women in polygynous marriages and Muslim women. Analysing the case of Kenya Ezeh (1997) identifies differences in the levels of 'polygyny regimes'. Women in high polygyny regimes have and want more children and *'gender differences in reproductive desires increase with polygyny regimes'* (p. 359). But he also finds that the boundaries between monogamy and polygyny are not always clear cut and comments that culture may intervene in the relationship between polygyny and fertility. In a review on how gender relations have impacted fertility development in Sub-Saharan Africa Dodoo and Frost (2008) note that polygyny tends to increase men's extramarital affairs while reducing those of women while Izugbara and Ezeh (2010) in a study among Hausa women in Islamic northern Nigeria examine how cultural studies have pointed to Islam, its value of children and politics as main drivers of high fertility in the area. In their own study they find that marriage patterns, with polygyny and high divorce rates, and the inheritance system have major impacts in pushing fertility up.

Research has tended to describe women in areas dominated by Christianity in a better position than women in Muslim areas primarily due to the different role of education. While female education is expected to empower women Dodoo and Frost (2008) claim that education must be placed in a broader context. This is the aim of this paper.

Both areas examined have high levels of polygyny. Education is highly valued in the western villages while rejected until few years ago in the coast villages. Nevertheless, twenty years ago fertility was much higher in Western than in Coast. I shall explore the two contexts with attention to gender system and into which very different interactions between polygyny and fertility unfold.

Data

The empirical background of the paper is two rounds of case studies. The very first study took place in 1988 with no intentions of a follow-up. However, the strong a positive relationship between high fertility and high child mortality in this area seemed to be contradicted in Coast, where fertility was relatively low despite even higher child mortality. On this background a similar study was carried out in Coast 1990. Fertility and child mortality in rural villages were the only selection criteria for the choice of the villages in Coast. Religion and culture were not considered. Data collection for the 2011-round followed the principles of the first round. The basic principle was interviews with women through 'focussed biographies' (Oppong and

Church, 1981 and Oppong and Abu 1985; 1987). Prefixed questions included standard demographic information such as age, marital status, background information, birth-histories, child deaths and contraceptive use. The open-ended questions centred on perceptions of gender relations, marriage and the value of children. The sample included 132 women (65 + 67). Also 10 men from each area were interviewed but less rigorously. Finally, community information was collected through key informants (such as chiefs, nurses and teachers).

Our objective for the 2011-round was to trace original informants, in order to interview them and their descendants (daughter, son, daughter-in-law, adult grandchildren). These were named 'core-informants' and were supplemented with informants in the neighborhoods, recruited primarily through 'snowballing'. Data collection was carried out in two villages in each area. In Western these are named 'Subsistence' and 'Cash crop' the former relied more on subsistence than the latter (where sugar cane is important). In Coast the villages are named 'Traditional' and 'Semi urban'. The Traditional relied on small scale food crops and fruit cultivation (such as mangos, cashew nuts) while the Semi-urban was located close to a main road and local market (which had developed during the period).

The 2011-data comprised some modifications from the first round. More attention is given to men while the number of interviewed women is reduced (see Table 1). Furthermore, in the scope of key-informants was broadened (to 24). Finally, the data were supplemented with 16 Focus Group interviews. Women and men and divided in age groups of young (up to 36 years) and old (36 years and over). FG-discussions were centered on perceptions on poverty, childbearing and marriages. The three kinds of sample cover an age range of 18 to 78 years. More than 80 per cent in the in-depth individuals were from 18 to 49 years, about 10 per cent were older than 50, and to the rest was not known.[6] The rationale for including such a broad age range was to capture social changes. Biographical information from these individuals was collected at the start of the interview. The demographic information of both in-depth and FG groups were coded into SPSS-files. The total in-depth sample from both rounds included 219 women while the FG-sample included 170 individuals. The in-depth interviews with women and men, and key-informant interviews are also coded and analysed in ATLAS.ti. Interview-data were supplemented with field observations written down for both study rounds.

The different interview types capture variations in 'meaning-making' (Watkins and Swidler, 2009). The in-depth interviews represent a bottom-up perspective, which provides insights into how people understand their personal situations. Key-informants provide top-down

[6] From the context the majority is likely to be older than 50.

insights into the community level from their backgrounds as teachers, health workers, and community and religious leaders. Finally, the focus-group interviews offer collective perceptions among people in the village. Furthermore, differences in the kind of information provided by women and men are noted. For example, women tend to stick to issues in their personal surroundings, while more men also discuss issues outside the family, such as agricultural politics and educational standards.

Data collection and processing involved many challenges. Since most respondents only mastered their indigenous languages we had to use local assistants to interviewing. All interviews were transcribed in English. Despite developing interview guides and holding training courses data problems are detected in the analytical phase. This could be questions not asked, answers transcribed in a summary rather than an exact form or confusion in translation of local terms (one example is brideprice, bride wealth and dowry). The case studies involve a relative large sample, where guides are adapted to each type of interview. This paper is based upon a full read of interviews and field notes from both rounds.

A background description of the villages

The case studies took place in areas of widespread poverty. The western villages are located close to the border of Uganda. The area has long agricultural traditions of subsistence and cash crop cultivations (coffee, maize and sugar cane). The dominant ethnic groups is Luyia (Abaluyia) which consists of several sub-ethnic groups, the largest being the Bukusu the group of the study.

The coast villages are located south of Mombasa close to the border of Tanzania. The area has long traditions in trade and palm tree cultivation. The dominant ethnic group is Mijikenda, to which Digo, the group of the study belongs.

The western villages

Previous studies have described Bukusu women as highly dependent on their husbands (Wagner, 1949). Their marriages are patrilocal, with the wife moving from her family to the homestead of the husband. Inheritance is patrilineal. Land and cattle are inherited by sons only. Women have no rights to property but are important in the farm work. The sexual rights and duties are, according to Wagner ‘illbalanced’ with the husband holding sexual rights over the wife. Wagner described marriages as universal and stable with widespread polygyny. More recent research has confirmed a gender system in which the sexual division of labour is

sharp and where men hold a privileged social status over women (Berg-Schlosser, 1984; Lumbasi, 1986).

The observations from the first round of case study (1988) accorded with these descriptions. At the same time the study found that Western education was highly valued. Most women had attended schooling, although typically only a few years. The division of labour rendered a heavy load on women, and the status hierarchy was clearly a subordination of women to men. Women were under a strong pressure to have more children and polygyny reinforced this. Nevertheless, both women and men emphasised the importance of educating their children and referred to a need of having fewer children due to increased costs (Jensen and Juma, 1989).

Studies over the next decades indicate that these features remain central, such as described by Lee-Smith (1997) who claims that: *'A Luhya woman mainly has access to housing as a wife…'* (p. 27) and women can '*can only survive if they have a husband*' (p. 83). Florence (2013) analyse Bukusu folktales. She notes that men in general are describes as better than women but also that: *'In both public and private domains, women dismiss each other to align themselves with male interests'* (p. 377). Despite the many years intervening between the descriptions of Wagner (1949) and Florence (2013), both refer to a culture where patriarchy prevails. Women are subordinated to men, but they also contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy. Nevertheless fertility in Western Province did fall during these years, but it also stalled.

The coast villages

The Digo culture in Coast Province used to be matrilineal, with descent, inheritance and authority passing through the female line (Spear, 1978). With the growing influence of Islam during the twentieth century, a shift towards patrilineal descent took place. The mixture of matriliny and patriliny resulted in complex adaptations described as 'ambilineal' by Gerlach (1963). These cultural legacies give daughters rights to inherit a share of the parents' property, although less than sons. Marriages among Digos have long traditions of instability (Gomm, 1972). Different marriage types exist side by side and father's right to children depend on the type of marriage and the size of the brideprice. Although the division of labour follow gendered patterns: 'men are able to do most "female" household tasks', which is seen as a result of the high 'turnover of wives' Gomm (p. 102). Gillette (1978) describes the gendered division of labour as flexible. She found that although market economy was an essential part of the Digo economy cultural norms comprised resistance to change: 'Perhaps most important

is the rejection of Western education in favor of Islamic training in "madrasa" or Koran schools.' (p. 236, see also Foeken et al., 1989).

Digo-women are described as self-conscious (Gerlach, 1963). Women may demand divorce and move to the parental homestead if not content with their marital situation (Gomm, 1972). Gillette (1978) noted that a divorced daughter 'is provided land by her father when returning to the parental home, [and] daughters who have no full brothers inherit land from their father' (p. 257). Dressing up and jewellery are markers of socio-economic position. Women highly value having money on their own (Stephenson et al., 1986) and have a reputation of independence (van Oosten, 1989). Studies on fertility patterns have not been traced. However, Larsen (1989) identified a sub-fertility belt stretching over central Africa in which Muslims consistently had higher levels of sterility than Christians. A major reason is the spread of venereal diseases and 'due to cultural practices among Muslims.' (p. 174). Wide fertility differences among ethnic groups are traced. The Mijikenda (to which the coast villages belong) has much lower fertility than the Kikuyus.

The first round of case studies in 1990 found that almost no women in our sample had attended (western) school and despite being allowed in the Islamic religion, few women lived with a co-wife. Due to divorces many women lived in long spells of time outside marriage, with their parents or as single. Extra marital sexuality was common and as consequence reproductive health problems thrived and were a main reason why fertility was relative low. Many women had problems in conceiving and giving birth. They wanted fewer children than women in the western villages but they had fewer children than they wanted. (Jensen and Khaskhala, 1993).

Little research from this context is detected over the last years. However, studies on relevant societies with matriliny are traced. Vieira-Martinez (2013) has identified a belt stretching across Africa, from Angola to Tanzania, and makes a plea for more research on gender relations in such societies. Kaarhus (2013) has analyzed villages with matrilineal traditions in Malawi with relative independence to women and easy access to divorce.

What happened over the following decades in the two study areas?

Twenty years later

The western villages: educated and dependent

In 2011 polygyny prevailed while women resent having co-wives. As one of our core-informants from the first round (P13)[7], now in her mid-sixties, commented on her marriage: 'it was the wish of my husband. […] There is nothing good with co-wives.' Her husband brought the second wife after her third birth; two boys and a girl, year by year. When we met core-informant in 1988 she had six children and told that she did not want more. But her husband refused family planning and she gave birth to three more children. All in all she had nine children, one of which died. We also interviewed the co-wife (P12) who had given birth to 10 children, two of which died. For a period of 20 years the two women had given birth every second year, only once with a child each the same year. Both women had experienced miscarriages. All children were born at home, with the exception for the first wife who had two children 'born at the roadside' on the way to hospital after days in labour. The two wives had never assisted each other and lived in in the same compound with mutual resentment to each other. Both accused the other for attracting too many resources from the husband. The core-informant is harsh when talking about the husband: 'He does not inform me about anything. He only gives orders for something to be done.' One daughter (P71) of the first wife is also interviewed. She confirms that the father had no role in caring for the children and tells that: 'We normally depend on our mother.' Her mother had no way to control her marriage and fertility. So why did she marry, and what has changed over time? The mother answers: 'It was written in the Bible that a woman and a man will leave their parents and unite as one.' Yet, now, she states: 'most children marry due to sexual desires; some just marry because they do not want to listen to the instructions of their parents.' The mother suggests an increase in young people's freedom to decide matters of marriage.

The mother's observation is resonated among young women, among them her own daughter P71). She is, a single mother in her mid-twenties. Her pregnancy did not lead to marriage because 'I did not want to get married there.' But she is hopeful: '… that God will bless me and I will get a spouse.' However, before this: 'I want to have a job first to enable me get my own money.' To this she adds: 'You cannot depend on husbands these days'. The daughter's vision for a husband is: 'we have to sit down and plan together.' While the mother gave birth to nine children, the daughter wants two children but finds this unrealistic, since a husband:

[7] P13 indicates the number of the respondent in Atlas.ti.

‘may want me to give him a child. […] You cannot just stay without giving him a child.’ Most men, she states, ‘prefer many children just because luck can easily show itself up through one or two of his children. […]. For women, we normally see the burden.’ According to her the husband has the final say in fertility matters. The stories indicate both durability and changes. Unlike her mother the daughter will marry for love. She wants a team-working marriage but the husband has the final word. Nevertheless, her vision is to ensure herself economically. Men cannot be trusted.

The stories of the three women are confirmed by others. The mother (P13) is aware that ‘It is legal for a girl to be given land by her parents,’ however ‘it is believed in Bukusu traditions that girls have no right to own land.’ This is confirmed by a key male informant (P30): ‘Men in our community – we don’t give women land.’ Polygyny is widespread and outside the control of women. A young woman (P6) is the youngest of three wives. When asked whether she is going to be the last, she replied: ‘I cannot tell if he wants to add another wife since you cannot tell these Bukusu men. […] Because most Bukusu men love to marry many wives.’ In general women dispose of very limited economic resources, as expressed by a young woman (P55): ‘Having wealth? For the women?’ It was an impossible thought.

The gender division of labour seem to have survived over the decades. According to women men want to have many children, but their care is left to women. As expressed in a Focus Group discussion:

> You find a man insisting he wants children in the home … he does not even know the size of his child’s shoe, but he wants children … You will be forced to hide when going for family planning, and after a short while, when he doesn’t see you give birth, he says:”You mean, there is no giving birth in this house?” … So women have a lot of problems. … When it comes to family planning … you will be beaten … He insists, ‘I want children’, so you just give birth… He does not want to understand … If you cannot give birth, then what have you come to do in the home? (FG, young women, Subsistence village).

Patriarchy does not seem to be weakening. Despite this, many young women in our sample state that they want an income of their own in order to depend less on a husband. In the western villages women were educated but still dependent on a husband.

The coast villages: a power to leave

Returning to the coast villages in 2011 the research team met problems both in locating the villages and respondents from the first round. Field notes from the first study were scanty due to the sudden and unexpected break of diplomatic relations between Kenya and Norway during fieldwork in October 1990. Furthermore, instable marriages with shifting residence and sometimes names increased our problems.

During our search for villages and respondents from the first round we could observe features and conducts not noted twenty years ago and never seen in the western villages, such as a young woman bicycling in the village. Another crucial change was traced in attitudes to education.

Figure 4. Changes in educational levels. Women in the western and coast villages 2011.

While twenty years ago (western) education was resisted because it was equated with 'modern life' (from field notes) it was now embraced as expressed by an old woman (P43) 'modern life is based upon a pen.'

It was by recognizing the Islamic school, where the conflict unfolded during the first study we could start our winding up. The first person to be identified was a man who could remember the interview. He became a core-informant in 2011. This man (P110) was interviewed as was a wife (P119) and a daughter (P117). Their stories illustrate continuing cultural features as well as changes in the social life.

The man, about fifty years old, had married three wives, all of them after having seduced the women and subsequently been forced by the woman's relatives to marry them. However, he lived with one of them only, his second wife (P119) and the mother of the daughter (P117). The three wives belong to the same ethnic group since 'I only married Digo.' His first wife divorced him and later died while his third wife, still young, lived in a separate compound some distance away. The man had 10 surviving children, two of which with other women than the wives. An additional three children had died. His second wife, with whom he shares his daily life, first married a man whom she left because he 'used to search for other women'. She has three children, one of which with the first husband. This child lived with the father. Having given birth to two more children she had to remove her uterus and no more children were born. Both the husband and this wife tell that he assists her in child care and household chores. The daughter, in her early twenties, is married and is interviewed with her daughter (about two years) on her lap. She was pregnant when marrying and tells that she married

‘because I loved him.’ The daughter is trained as an ‘electrical wirer’. She did not complete her secondary schooling but attended a polytechnic college which is still to be completed. Her education had been financed partly by her mother and partly by her brideprice, paid to her by the groom upon marriage. In addition she has saved earnings from employment in electrical companies. For these she has bought a television and installed a generator in their house, since it had no electricity. She is now out of job but has installed electric lightening in the Islamic School, where the previously mentioned conflict over western education unfolded. Her husband, a trained teacher, earn only a little money. She bought the television from her savings. Her husband ‘only provided the bus fare because I gave him the money to go and buy it for me.’ The husband helps with child care and they own household assets together. One example is a bicycle which is shared ‘with my husband, he usually uses it to go to school for work, we contributed the money.’ The interviewer asks if she also ride the bicycle, to which she answers: ‘Yes. When I have a job to do, I would take the bicycle.’ The daughter expects to have four children and thinks that ‘He also needs four or five’ because ‘He knows what we want in our life.’

Polygyny among Digo in the coast villages takes a different form from the Bukusu in the western villages. In coast villages marriage patterns are instable and complicated as illustrated by a woman in her late twenties (P42). She is married for the first time but is the third wife of her husband. The husband has one child with the first wife, which was left with the husband upon divorce. His second wife was barren. Thus the third wife (P42) is now the only wife in the household. She has two young children with the husband. He works ‘in the streets’ and she suspects infidelity and fear he takes another wife: ‘…he won’t come back until six in the morning…. If comes home and [I] ever ask him, he gets angry. … After around two months you’ll hear that your husband has married another woman.’ Another example is a woman in her early forties (P43). She was the second wife of her first husband. The first wife barren and because of this the husband was looking for a fertile woman, she tells. However, this husband died after falling from a tree and she was left with seven children. Her next husband is an old man ‘… ready to marry me and take care of my children. I had no option than to accept because I found that I was not able to take care of the family…’ This husband helps with food to the family but: ‘… there is no money. Like today, all the kids have been sent home for fees. … because without money, there is no education, without money, there is no food, if sickness comes into the house and you don’t have money, it will be a house of sickness.’ One of her sons is permanently sick. Although, instable marriages and sexuality outside marriage

is described as common in the area (Gomm, 1972) this woman perceives an increase: 'In the olden days there wasn't a lot of promiscuity. But nowadays the marriages are not successful because people are married today and they divorce the next day. At the olden days, the parents would first negotiate. … there are no blessings in modern marriages because there are no lasting men.' While polygyny was widespread more wives would often leave if the man took another wife. It is common to find that both women and men have experiences from more marriages. Even if respondents may find an increase, marital instability has long traditions and was also found in the first round of study. In this study we see a society in which the boundaries between monogamy and polygyny are not clear cut as Ezeh (1997) noted. It is a polygyny where men can marry another wife but women are able to leave.

Similar fertility, different processes

Twenty years ago Western had very high and Coast had a relative low fertility. Today fertility is more similar (5.6 in Western and 4.8 in Coast). However while in Western fertility has declined and stalled, in Coast only minor changes have taken place. Can the gender system in two contexts of rural poverty in Kenya help us to understand the processes behind the two developments?

Both the western and the coast villages belong to a cultural ideal in which having many children is perceived as important to both women and men, and an crucial, maybe the only, means available to gain security (for women) and prestige (for men). For example, when asked to list their most important assets men, in both contexts, mention children. As a man in a western village, in his late forties, father of seven children, answered: 'I own a house, land, trees and children … [laughter]…. Are they not assets?' (P15). Similarly, a man in a coast village states: 'The most valuable assets that I have are my children.' (P104). He is in his early forties and the father of seven children, two of which died. To this he added 'I regard children as assets because when they grow up and get jobs they will assist me.' This is a view held across the two study areas.

But beyond the general perceptions on the value of children differences are traced in in the ways children are related to men. In the western villages fertility is controlled by men, children belong to men and sons are preferred over daughters as illustrated by the quotes from Focus Group discussions below:

> 'In Bukusu … a woman … must at least give birth to a son, otherwise you are useless as a person in the family.' (FG, young women, Subsistence village).

> ‘Having a son is like a backbone of the home.’ (FG, old women, Cash crop village).
>
> ‘Children belong to the man [transcriber’s comment: ‘All speak at the same time’] … because he is the one who planted the seed. ... Women are just the vessels to carry the baby.’ (FG, young men, Cash crop village).
>
> ‘The women are the neck and the men are the head. (FG, old women, Cash crop village).

Such quotes may exemplify what Florence argues (2013). Bukusu women are both victims and contributors to their own subordination. According to many women men want more children, they are men’s possessions. The subordinate position of women in fertility matters are described by both women and men.

In the coast villages gender systems are described in a different vein. Here adultery, marriage instability and barrenness are main issues. Men’s desire for women is described as outside the control of women, as reflected in the discussion among old women in the Traditional village:

> Respondent: he will go out no matter what you do for him.
> Interviewer: so what should we do?
> R: we must satisfy them in whatever they want.
> R: that is absolutely impossible! [transcriber comment: general commotion]
> I: let’s talk one by one.
> R: he will keep on seeing newer ladies whatever he goes out.
> R: but if you carry him on your back at home, whenever he goes out there, he will remember you and hold back…
> R: no way (laughter)

But as seen in previous descriptions of Digo culture extra marital affairs have long traditions both among women and men, such as:

> ‘If your wife hears that the husband is having an outside affair, she will also do the same. … most marriages break up because of cheating. … once a woman distrust you […] the marriage will break no matter what. […] So, mostly men are the ones causing marriages to break.’ (FG, young men, Traditional village).

What these men tell is that men’s behaviour is responsible for divorces.

Polygyny is equated with wealth among young men: ‘It means poverty if you have one wife.’ (FG, young men, Semi-urban). Polygyny is not without restrictions but ambivalence also surface:

> Man 1: ‘All of us are Digo and Muslims as well. Most of us are learned [in religion] and we know what the Holy Quran says about the number of wives that a man is allowed to have. But, it’s to those who have the chance [the wealthy ones]. …. If you think you can’t be fair, don’t try it.’
>
> Man 2: ‘If you have one wife, you are amongst the ‘wifeless’ crew. This is what I mean; once you have lost your in-laws or your wife is sick, it means you will have no one to sooth you and make you happy, because it said they [women] are men’s paradise.’ (FG, old men, Semi-urban)

While, in the western villages, much emphasis was given to having a son this is not expressed in a similar strong way in the coast villages: ‘All kids are equal regardless of their sex. … sex doesn’t matter, a kid is a kid’ (FG, young men, Semi-urban). This statement, that ‘a kid is a kid’ is often given in in-depth-interviews when asked about preferred gender composition.

These quotes illustrate that gender relations in the two study areas surface as quite different. However, changes are also clear. Gender bitterness in the western villages is expressed with an intensity not seen twenty years ago. In the coast villages the relationships are expressed in milder ways as also found in the first study.

Other changes with implications for gender relations in the two areas involve women’s access to education and economic resources. As seen in Figure 4 women in the western villages have higher education in both age groups than women in the coast villages. But we can also see a notable change in the coast villages with a strong decline of women with no education, and an increase in primary and secondary education. The resentment to (western) education which was strong twenty years ago is gone while access to economic resources had taken an amazing path. Young women now negotiate and receive a part of the brideprice for themselves. As expressed in a focus group discussion: ‘There is (bride)wealth and dowry. Wealth is what is needed by the lady’s parents but dowry is what is demanded by the lady.’ (FG, old men, Semi-urban village). Brides demand money, jewelry or kinds of furniture. Money can be placed in a bank account ‘to grow’ or be invested in jewellery Women make plans for future like putting up a kiosk, travelling abroad to get a job, taking education (like

the daughter above (P119)) or to educate their children. The brideprice is a route to economic independence.

A third striking difference in gender relations is men's contributions to household chores. While in the western villages no trace was found on participation among men, neither in 1988 nor in 2011, in the coast villages women stated in both rounds that husbands would wash clothes, cook and take care of babies/children. This tradition prevails. The father above (P110) tells that he assists his (second) wife with different tasks, such as making buns for sales, which is confirmed by the wife. Also the daughter (P119) tells that her husband assist her. It is women who have the primary work in household chores, but husbands also participate (see also Gomm, 1972 and Gillette, 1978).

Gender bitterness, as we have seen, surface most clearly, but not only, in the focus group interviews. These collective perceptions on gender relations may mirror actual problems, but they may also be exaggerated 'hearsay' (Watkins and Swindler, 2009). However, discussions in focus groups take a very different track in the two contexts. Less antagonism is expressed in the Muslim than the Christian area.

What happened to fertility?

Why did fertility decline and then stall in Western, while so few changes took place in Coast? In both study areas poverty strike hard. The western villages have long traditions for valuing education and also twenty years ago both women and men claimed that the cost of educating the children was a main reason for having fewer. Reviewing literature on the demand and supply of children Jensen (1995a) asked if it seemed reasonable to believe that Kenyan women would reduce their number of children below five children and concluded: 'probably not.' (p. 272). The reason was lack of socio-economic improvements.

In both areas a common answer when asked for the desired number of children is 'God decides'. Through probing most will offer a number between four to six children. We also find that most young women have experiences from use of modern contraceptives. However, usage is discontinued and additional children are born. In the western villages poverty is associated with risky behaviour such as excessive drinking and local prostitution, both of which are likely to push fertility up. What we see is a persistent patriarchal rule. However, resistance is also evident. The widespread, often covert and often discontinued, use of modern contraception could also indicate a change, as could the very existence of struggles expressed

as gender bitterness. One main theme among young women was the wish for having an own income. We also find that women's groups, in which women come together to support each other, are common (the high attendance at women's groups was also reported by Lee-Smith, 1997). The old way of life is challenged.

In the coast villages we find continuity in marital patterns and gender relations over time. However, while twenty years ago sexual behaviour caused reproductive health problems and sub-fecundity among many women such problems are now minor. Interviewed health personnel confirm that women seek treatment for sexually transmitted diseases. Hence, it is reasonable to suggest that women are enabled to fulfil their desires for more children than twenty years ago. Fertility desires were also lower in the coast than the western villages during the first round of studies while today, unlike earlier times, in the coast villages educational aspirations and costs of children have increased.

I have focussed on ways in which gender systems in two areas of Kenya have resulted in similar fertility outcomes despite widely different processes. It should be mentioned that fertility is also shaped by social forces not discussed in this paper. The most important is the continued risk of child mortality which remains a strong barrier to reduce children to a lower level in both areas.

Conclusion

Can the gender system help us to understand why fertility declined and then stopped at a fairly high level in Western, and why few changes have taken place in Coast? Two contexts with different religious and cultural backgrounds are examined. In one case the population is predominantly Christian and the cultural traditions are rooted in strong patrilineal legacies. The other case is Muslim with an 'ambilineal' background. The two components are associated to distinct gender systems with implications cutting across conventional wisdom. A gender system, as Mason (2001) has described it includes two major factors; unequal distribution of power and a strong division of labour.

The two areas diverged both in economic structure and their appreciation of western education. A previous comparison found that marriage patterns impacted fertility in different directions, pushing fertility up in the western villages while suppressing fertility in the coast villages (Jensen, 1995b). Over time the initial differences have expanded.

Other studies comparing fertility in Christian and Muslim do not reach similar conclusions. Muslim women are described as disadvantaged in terms of female education and expected to

have higher fertility. But they are also found to suffer from infertility (Larsen, 1989) and as having more control over fertility than Non-Muslim (Johnson-Hanks, 2006).

Ezeh (1997) found strong statistical correlation between the predominantly Christian Luhya ethnic group (to which Bukusu belong) and high fertility desires while no strong association was found for the predominantly Muslim Mijikenda (to which Digo belong). With a Muslim society in Northern Nigeria as their case Izugbara and Ezeh (2010) point to inheritance and polygyny as important drivers of high fertility. Dodoo and Frost (2008) see female education as a force counteracting high fertility but make a plea for inclusion of a broader gender context, and marriage contracts in particular.

What we have seen in this study is ways in which religion and cultural heritages may impact gender relations and fertility in unexpected ways. We find that the combination of Christianity and strong patrilineal heritage, as found in the western villages, implies a reinforcement of gender antagonism combined with relative high levels of female education. In such a context childbearing is a strategy to acquire security in the home. Women are exposed to the pressure of giving birth and feel the threat of having a co-wife if too few children are being born. Joblessness among men is widespread, and although it was believed that education would take people out of poverty, for many this does not come true. Problematic drinking among African men is also observed by other researchers. Silberschmidt (2011) describes this in the following way: *'Alcohol consumption has become a major activity and also a major problem'* (p. 104). As asked by Johnson-Hanks (2008) what can be deemed rationality, given extremely uncertain life circumstances in many African areas? Nevertheless we also find that young women want a larger say as Goode also predicted fifty years ago (Cherlin, 2012).

By contrast, the combination of Islam mixed with a matrilineal heritage has produced a gender system with more options for women. Similar findings are found in other areas with matrilineal heritage (Kaarhus, 2013) and researchers' interests is spurred (Vieira-Martinez, C., 2013). As noted by Ezeh (1997) the relationship between polygyny and fertility may vary by the cultural contexts. We have seen an example of this. Women experience polygyny but have the option to leave. Instable marriages and frequent divorce were main reasons why fertility was relatively low twenty years ago. Over time marital behavior continues but women have gained more education, economic resources and medical cure for sub-fecundity. In the Christian, Western area it is difficult not to agree that life circumstances undermine educational rationality of reducing fertility. Westoff and Cross (2006) found that the rise in wanted fertility was most dramatic among Muslim women. We do not know if the villages

included in this study are representative for Western and Coast Provinces but it gives a picture of crucial variations within the national setting. The present study suggests that in the Muslim, Coastal areas life circumstances have given women more options to the number of children they want. Maybe a pertinent perspective to understand the fertility stall in Kenya would be look for reasons why people in poor, rural areas should reduce their only hope for the future, namely children.

References:

Bankole, A. and Olaleye, D. O. (1993): Do marital partners have different reproductive preferences in sub-Saharan Africa? Paper at *Women and Demographic Change in sub Saharan Africa*. Liege: IUSSP.

Bankole, A. (1995): Desired Fertility and Fertility Behaviour among the Yoruba of Nigeria: A Study of Couple Preferences and Subsequent Fertility. *Population Studies: A Journal of Demography*, 49(2): 317-328, DOI: 10.1080/0032472031000148536

Berg-Schlosser, D. (1984): *Tradition and Change in Kenya. A comparative analysis of seven major ethnic groups.* Paderborn: International Gegenwart, Ferdinand Schrønich.

Bongaarts, J. (2008): Fertility Transitions in Developing Countries: Progress or Stagnation? *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 39: 105-110.

Bongaarts, J. and Casterline, J. (2012): Fertility Transition: Is sub-Saharan Africa Different? *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 38 (Supplement): 153-168.

Caldwell, J. (1982): *Theory of Fertility Decline*, London: Academic Press.

Cherlin, A. J. (2012): Goode's world revolution and family patterns: A reconsideration at fifty years. *Population and Development Review, 38*, 577-607.

Dodoo, F. N.-A. (1998): Men Matter: Additive and interactive gendered preferences and reproductive behaviour in Kenya. *Demography*, Vol. 35(2): 229-424.

Dodoo, F.N.-A. and A.E. Frost. (2008): Gender in African population research: The fertility/reproductive health example. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34: 431-452.

Florence, N. (2013): Bukusu (Kenya) Folktales: How Women Perpetuate Patriarchy. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15(3): 370:390. DOI:10.1080/14616742.2012.744175

Foeken, D., P. Leegwater, R. Niemeijer, W. Veerman and J. Hoorweg (1989): *Seasonality in the Coastal Lowlands of Kenya.* Part 3: Socio-economic Profile, Report No. 32, Nairobi and Leiden: Food and Nutrition Planning Unit, Ministry of Planning and National Development and African Studies Centre.

Frost and Dodoo (2009): Men are missing from African Family Planning , *Context*, 8(1): 44-49.

Gerlach, L. P. (1963): Traders on Bicycle: a study of entrepreneurship and cultural change among the Digo and Duruma of Kenya. *Sociologicus. A Journal of Emphirical Sociology, Social Psychology and Ethnic Research*, Vol. 13(1): 32-49.

Gillette, C. (1978): *A Test of the Concept of Backwardness: A case study of Digo Society of Kenya.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Cornell University, University Microfilms International

Gomm, R. (1972): 'Harlots and Bachelors: Marital Instability among the Coastal Digo of Kenya'. *Man*, Vol. 7(1): 95-113.

Izugbara, C. O. and A. C. Ezeh (2010): Women and High Fertility in Islamic Northern *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 41(3): 193-204.

Jejeebhoy, S. (1995): *Women's Education, Autonomy and Reproductive Behaviour: experience from developing countries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jensen, A-M. and M. N. Juma (1989): *Women, Childbearing and Nutrition. A case study from Bungoma, Kenya*, Oslo: NIBR-report no 16.

Jensen, A-M. and A. A.Khasakhala (1993): *Too Many Children? Fertility and Family Planning in a Muslim Society of Kenya,* Oslo: NIBR-report, no 15.

Jensen, A.-M. (1995a): Prospect of a Decline in Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of the Recent Debate. *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 38: 263-273.

Jensen, A.-M. (1995b): 'The Status of Women and the Social Context of Reproduction.' *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 7(1): 61-79.

Johnson-Hanks, J. (2006): On the politics and practices of Muslim fertility: Comparative evidence from West Africa. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *2*, 12-30.

Johnson-Hanks, J. (2008): Demographic transitions and modernity. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *37*, 301-315.

Kaarhus, R. (2013): Women's land rights and land tenure reforms in Malawi: What difference does matriliny make? *Forum for Development Studies*, 37: 171-192.

Kritz, M.M. and P. Makinwa (1995): Women's control over resources and demand for children: the Hausa and Yoruba cases. In P. Makinwa and A.-M. Jensen, (Eds.) *Women's Position and Demographic Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Liége: IUSSP: pp. 73-97.

Larsen, U. (1989): A comparative study of the levels and differentials of sterility in Cameroon, Kenya and Sudan. In Lesthaeghe, R. J. (ed.) *Reproduction and Social Organization in Sub-Saharan Africa,* Berkeley: University of California Press: pp. 167-211.

Lesthaeghe, R., Verleye, O. and Jolly, C. (1992): *Female Education and Factors Affecting Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa*. IPD-Working Paper No. 2. Interuniversity Programme in Demography, Brussels: Vrije Universiteit.

Lee-Smith, D. (1997): *"My House is my Husband" A Kenyan Study of Women's Access to Land and Housing.* Thesis no. 8, Department of Architecture and Development Studies, Lund: Lund University – Sweden.

Lumbasi, G.W. (1986): *Christ's Role in Christian Marriage. With reference to marriage custums among the Babukusu of Western Kenya*. Nairobi: Faculty of Theology.

Mason, K. O. (1985): *The Status of Women. A review of its relationship to fertility and mortality*. New York: The Rockefeller Foundation.

Mason, K. O. (2001): 'Gender Systems in the Fertility Transition. *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 27, (Supplement: Global Fertility Transition): 160-176.

Oppong, C. and K. Church (1981): *A Field Guide to Research and Seven Roles of Women: Focussed biographies*. Working paper no. 106, Geneva, ILO.

Oppong, C. and K. Abu (1985): A Handbook for Data Collection and Analysis of Seven Roles and Statuses of Women. ILO, Geneva.

Oppong, C. and K. Abu (1987*): Seven Roles of Women: Impact of Education, Migration and Employment on Ghanaian Mothers*. Women, Work and Development, No. 13, Geneva: ILO.

Schoumaker, B. (2009): *Stalls in Fertility Transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa: Real or Spurious?*

http://www.uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/demo/documents/DT_SPED_30_corrige.pdf, Accessed 12.08.2013.

Sindiga, I. (1985): The Persistence of High Fertility in Kenya. *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 20(1): 71-84.

Silberschmidt, M. (2011): What Would Make Men Interested in Gender Equality? Reflections from East Africa. In A. Cornwall, J. Edström and A. Greig (eds.) *Men and Development: Politicising Masculinities.* London: Zed Books, pp. 98-110.

Spear, T.T. (1978): *The Kaya complex: A history of the Mijikenda peoples of the Kenya Coast to 1900.* Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

Stephenson, L. S. (ed.) (1986): Schistosomiasis and Malnutrition, Cornell International Nutrition, Monograph Series No. 16, New York: Cornell University.

van Oosten, C. (1984): *Farming, Food Security and Off-farm Activities: A study of farming systems in Kwale District. Kenya*. Department of Geography, Utrecht: University of Utrecht.

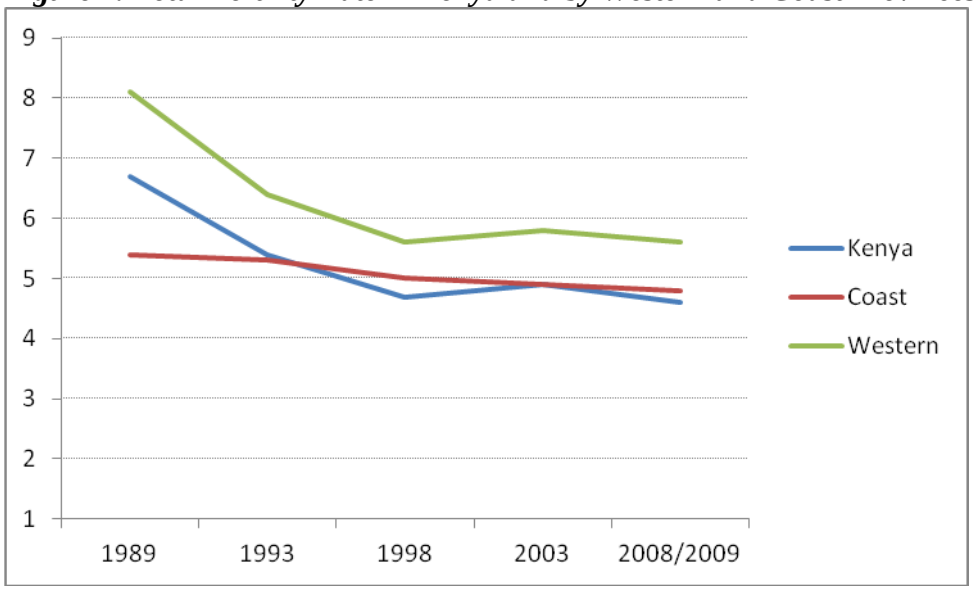
Vieira-Martinez, C. (2013): *Creative endeavours*. http://cevmartinez.wordpress.com/. Accessed 23.02.2014.

Wagner, G. (1949): *The Bantu of North Kavirondo*, Vol. 1, London: Oxford University Press.

Watkins, S.C. and A. Swidler (2009): Hearsay ethnography: Conversational journals as a method for studying culture in action. *Poetics, 37*, 162-184.

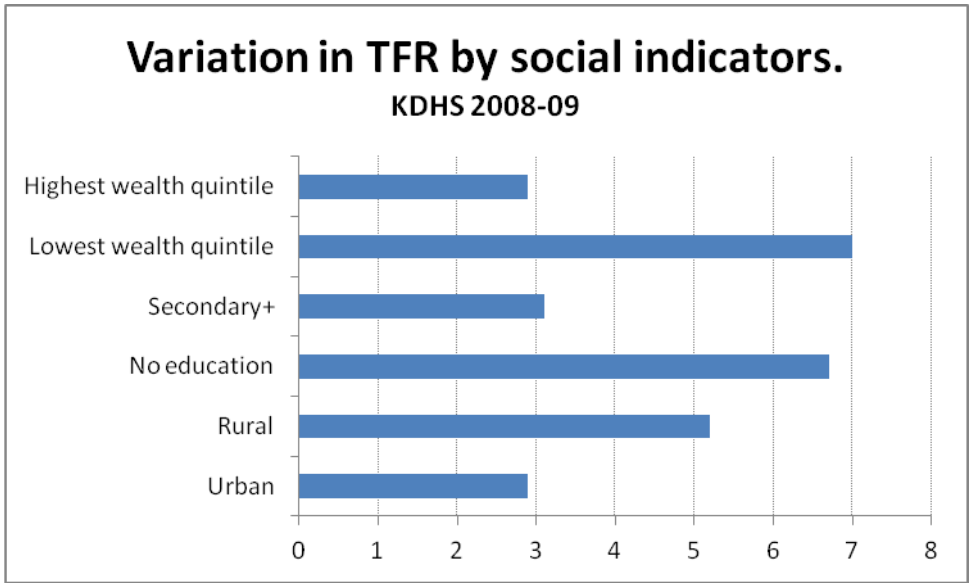
Westoff, C. F. and A.R. Cross (2006): *The stall in the fertility transition in Kenya.* DHS Analytical Studies no. 9, Calverton, Maryland: ORC Macro.

Figure 1: Total Fertility Rate in Kenya and by Western and Coast Provinces 1989 and 2009.



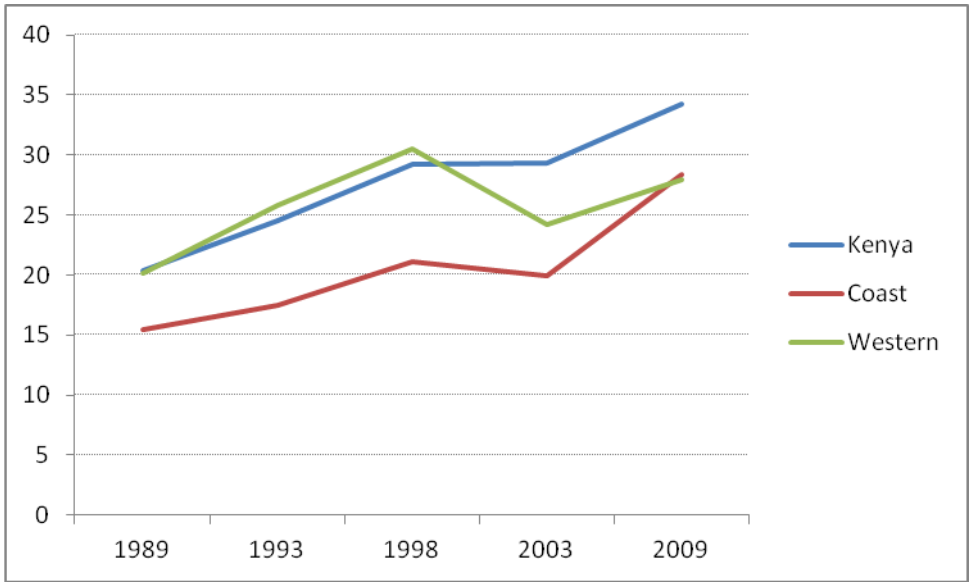
Source: ***Kenya. KDHS 2008-09***

Figure 2 Variation in TFR by social indicators. KDHS 2008-09



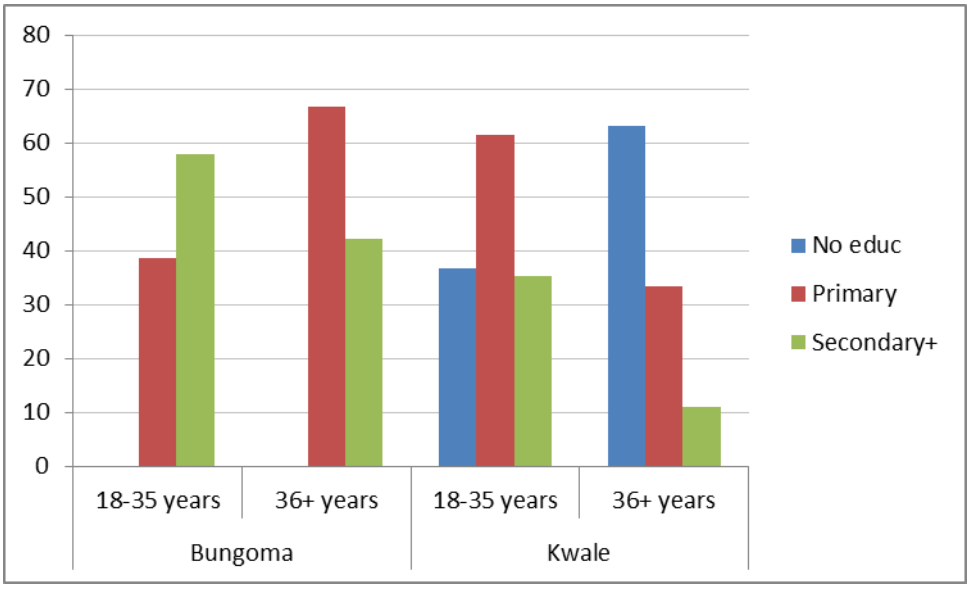
Source: STAT compiler. Measure DHS/USAID, Complete list.

Figure 3 Education at Secondary level or more. Women and Men. 1989-2009



Source: STAT compiler. Measure DHS/USAID, Complete list.

Figure 4. Changes in educational levels. Women in western and coast villages 2011.



Source: Focus Group - Fertility and poverty project,

Table 1: Summary of In-depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussion conducted In Bungoma and Kwale*

	Bungoma				**Kwale**				**Total**
	Traditional		**Cash Crop**		**Semi-urban**		**Traditional**		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
In-depth Interviews									
18-34 years	6	17	3	14	3	12	2	13	70
35+ years	0	6	3	7	3	6	5	8	38
Total	**6**	**23**	**6**	**21**	**6**	**18**	**7**	**21**	**108**
Focus Group Discussions									
18-34 years	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
35+ years	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Total	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**16**

- To preserve anonymity key informants are not distributed by villages.