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The Changing Marital Union Practices: A New Look on Fertility Behaviour; Experience from Banyankole Families in Sheema Municipality

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The article analyses marital union practices among the Banyankole as part of a study on sociocultural practices and fertility behaviour. The aim was to examine the prevailing reproductive-related cultural practices of the Banyankole and determine their influence on fertility behaviour denoted by choice, spacing and number of children. The qualitative study adapted community-based participatory methods in a grounded theory approach. The study was exploratory in nature based on non-numerical data. Data was collected over 4 months on women and men aged 18 and above living in Sheema Municipality that identify themselves as belonging to the Banyankole ethnic group of Uganda. The study identified major marital union practices existing in the area to include Marriage, Consensual unions, Marital mobility and multi-partnerships. The findings illustrate evolutions in the cultural context of marital union practices and describe their influence on fertility behaviour. The article calls attention to multi-union practices as an important demographic indicator for development practitioners and policymakers in the context of the rapidly advancing sociocultural environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Fertility is one of the major development indicators especially for developing countries. Reducing fertility is a global agenda and a prerequisite for any country to achieve its development objectives. Casterline and Agyei-Mensah (2017) observe that high fertility has been registered in Sub-Saharan Africa more than in any other region in the world largely due to conservative culture. The individual freedoms to control fertility have been constrained by cultural pressures premised on historical constructs that ruminate high fertility and large families as being economically and socially rewarding (Ahinkorah et al., 2020)

Uganda's fertility is among the world's highest at an average of 5.4 children per woman. It is ranked seventh highest in the world (Ariho et al., 2018). Fertility varies by residence and region. Women in rural areas have an average of 5.9 children, compared to 4.0 children among women in urban centres. The Banyankole is the second largest single ethnic group in the country forming 9.6% of the total population. Fertility among the Banyankole is reported at 4.9 children per woman (UBOS, 2016). High numbers of births, short birth intervals, and the early age of childbearing have been reported to contribute to Uganda's rapid population growth (Amongin et al., 2020). The National Population Policy (2020) focuses on fertility decline in order to change the population age structure to reap a democratic dividend.

The sociocultural context of marital union plays an important role in determining reproductive behaviours and attitudes (Taghizadeh et al., 2015). The choice of having children, the number and spacing of children are some of the key life decisions and should be socio-culturally contextualised (Balbo et al., 2013). Ordinarily, Marital union is regarded as one of the key background factors that interact with the proximate factors to influence fertility (Bongaart, 2017). However, the world is currently witnessing unprecedented transitions in marital unions, away from traditional marriage. (Mensch et al., 2005; Mensch et al., 2006; Choe & Retherford, 2009; Moultrie et al., 2012; Ghimire & Axinn, 2013; Zare et al., 2019). Until recently, a family mostly consisted of married parents and their shared children. Although this phenomenon remains preferred, reality shows are emerging and more prevalent in marital unions. As a result, couples are increasingly having children with more than one partner and this has impacted childbearing experiences in terms of choices, number and spacing.

The study analysed the prevailing marital union practices in the context of the cultural norms of the Banyankole to determine their influence on fertility behaviour. Until the start of the study, no study had been done on the reproductive behaviours of men and women beyond the marriage union. Sheema Municipality was chosen as the research team was familiar with the language and the culture of its people, and this familiarity with the dialect made it

possible to access real-time data. The study area was also selected for its geographically central location. An Urban Centre in a rural setting, within the middle of greater Ankole districts of Western Uganda, thus the inhabitants could be culturally representative of the Banyankole as an ethnic group and the results can be generalised to Ankole as a whole.

The identified common marital unions include Marriage (Polygamy, monogamy, remarriage), marital mobility, multi-partnership, and consensual unions. The article situates fertility behaviours within changing marital unions, discusses the implications and suggests areas for further research.

METHODOLOGY

Between October 2022 and January 2023, a qualitative study was conducted on male and female respondents aged 18 years and above living in Sheema Municipality that identified themselves as belonging to the Banyankole ethnic group of Uganda. The qualitative study adapted community-based participatory methods in a grounded theory approach. The study was exploratory in nature based on non-numerical data. Data was collected through a World Café (WC) Session augmented by In-depth Individual Interviews, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (Odimegwu, 2000; Folch-lyon et al., 1981; Gibbs, 1997).

Sample Selection and Procedures.

The non-probability sampling method was employed. Sheema Municipality was stratified into 4 divisions and 44 initial participants were chosen through quota sampling. Sampling continued with new rounds of new participants and previous participants based on the saturation principle (Gibbs, 1997; Fusch & Ness, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), to a total of 250 participants. The intention was to engage as many respondents as possible to gather all the relevant information. The characteristics for

consideration in respondents' recruitment included age, gender, education, marital status and religion). Only adults (18 years and above) were recruited in the study as participants.

Data Collection

World Café (WC) Participatory Assessment Session

In a world café (WC) method, groups engage in constructive dialogue around critical questions in a hospitable environment, encouraging everybody's contribution (Tan & Brown, 2005). The WC session was hosted in a hotel conference room with 52 participants on ten 5-seater tables with writing material and markers. Discussion questions were provided to guide the discussion. The World Cafe session was moderated by the researcher assisted by two Research Assistants. The session lasted 90 minutes. Audio recorders were placed on each table, recording the discussions while the researcher took note of the body language, mood, expressions, and other physical interruptions.

The researcher listened for patterns and insights into the questions. Participants were mobilised by random movement around communities and institutions in the four divisions of Sheema Municipality, with an invitation flier distributed among adults while community leaders were purposively invited to the café.

In a world Café session, participants were engaged in a cool conversation on questions regarding the number of children preferred in a typical Ankole family and a number of reasons were noted. Participants shared their life experiences as they grew up in the Ankole culture regarding nuclear and expanded families and the reproductive-related traditional rituals and ceremonies they have been subjected to or witnessed in their community. The conversation generated information on factors influencing marital union structures and provided insights into opportunities and contests regarding

marital unions and fertility behaviour in local communities.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Community leaders representing cultural heads, community opinion leaders, elders, religious leaders, young people and women were purposively recruited in the study as key informants. A total of twenty key informants were interviewed using a prepared interview guide.

Individual Interviews

By random selection, 44 participants were interviewed alternately selected from the first household in the 22 parishes in Sheema Municipality. Ten participants were re-recruited as Individual Interview participants for clarity and corroboration of information from the World Cafe. Similar questions were administered following the prepared guide in a twenty-minute interview each.

Focus Group Discussions

Fourteen Focus Group Discussions were conducted with groups of people of similar demographic traits of 6 participants each (Women: 4, Men: 4, Young people: 4, Elderly: 1, Mixed: 1). The inconsistent information prompted the researcher to conduct an additional focus group discussion to see if the same statements could be repeated in a mixed FGD.

Data Analysis

Recorded texts were downloaded, listened to, and translated into English. Interpretation follows an inductive analysis of common themes, ideas, topics and patterns arising out of recorded texts and transcripts (Braun et al., 2022) from the data collected using the computer software ATLAS.ti. Validity was tested through corroboration (Kay, 1997). Themes from one group of respondents would be compared with themes from other groups by asking the same questions.

The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) applied the principle of theoretical sensitivity (Beech, 2000) by classifying demographic information relating to cognitive notions to define the variables and situating fertility choices, number and spacing of children within the varying marital Union practices in the sociocultural context. The study assessed the factors within the existing marital unions and other sociocultural practices that influence fertility behaviour.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The article explores the prevailing marital union practices and their influence on fertility behaviour in the cultural context of the Banyankole. The article presents the participants' experiences and views on marital unions, fertility motivations, attitudes and instigations for childbearing decisions.

Marital Unions

The study identified dominant marital unions among the Banyankole living in Sheema Municipality to include; Marriage (Polygamy, monogamy, remarriage), Consensual union, marital mobility and multi-partnership unions.

The study confined the definition of marriage within the limits of a union established through solemnisation by a legal, religious, or customary rite in conformity with local traditions. Marital Union is described as Persons of the opposite sex engaging in a conjugal relationship. To this effect, most participants through individual interviews identified themselves as married, but on further interrogation, a significant number of marital unions are not by marriage, even before classifying them as monogamous or polygamous in nature. With this finding, the research further took an interest in the existing marital relationships leading to a more prominent socially recognised stable union that other studies have called consensual union (Goldman & Pebley, 1981). Glaser (1999) notes that the legality of the marital union is important for the protection of children. The participants'

perspectives legitimised this account. The study describes marital mobility, multi-partnership unions and consensual unions as alternatives to formal relationships where there is no long-term commitment as in marriage;

“Like me, I was not ready for any formal commitment, but I feared she might not wait. I had to make her pregnant so who would take her after that? But now, I am thinking, I think maybe something better for my future, but I still do not know. But now, 7 years, she has three children; when I marry my next choice, she will of course have more children, you never know” (FGD, Butsibo, January 2023).

The findings note the emergence of new trends of marital union away from a traditional marriage that suggests a close association with fertility behaviour. Jacobs and Furstenberg (1986) call it ‘Conjugal Careers’. From the discussions, the practice of marital mobility comes out as the greatest contributor to high fertility, followed by a multi-partner union, remarriage, and polygamy, respectively. The average fertility rate in Sheema stands at 4.9, apparently below Uganda’s average of 5.4 (UBOS, 2016b). Among the participant group, this study notes the average number of children born to a man through marital mobility is 7, while the average for a multi-partner union is 5 and 4.3 for a polygamous partnership. This is an important finding as previous studies have not focussed much on male fertility.

Discussions indicate that these practices had gained community acceptance unlike in the past when such practice, especially for women was considered prostitution. However, most unions overlap and are difficult to differentiate to the extent that even those in church marriage go ahead to engage in other consensual unions, cohabitation and multi-partnership unions or practice marital mobility from one marriage to another and back. Only a few individuals could confidently place themselves in a specific marital union.

An insignificant number of couples were notably in cohabitation relationships. This phenomenon may be due to the participants mainly being rural inhabitants. Elsewhere, cohabitation has been reported to be rampant among urban dwellers (Hayward & Brandon, 2010). Although the study area is in an urban centre, the setting is typically rural and the majority of participants were natives. None of the participating couples was reported to be in a civil marriage.

Furthermore, there has been the temptation to believe all marital unions are entered into by choice. One of the emerging issues has been vulnerability, including “marital entrapment” and coercion”. Also, there are disenfranchising conditions of “abandonment” and power influence. These conditions were reported to result in compromise where an individual finds him or herself involved in a planned marital union in pursuit of protection or provision of basic needs leading to unprotected sexual activity and, thus, unwanted children. Usually, after giving birth, most women reported increased financial burden that they are ready to remain in the union, thus repeating childbearing despite wanting to delay the following birth.

There were however, contentions among female and male participants concerning vulnerability, coercion, and marital entrapment. Below are relevant quotes;

“... Today’s women no longer depend on men, haaa... can you depend on men? I can also work and get money. I am even paying school fees for my two children. The man was not cooperative, I left and now I am looking after my children. First, I hired land and grew beans, when I harvested them, I sold them and bought a goat, when they multiplied to six, I sold them and bought a young bull, now I even own a piece of land’... I cannot stay in an abusive relationship because of children (Individual Interview, Woman 46, Itendero, January 2023).

“See, first time, it was an accident, When I asked my wife to bring the child home, she refused and threatened to divorce. I kept going back to check on the child, before I knew it, she was pregnant again; now we have 5 children” (Individual interview, Male 52, Kanyeganyegye, November 2022).

Family Life History

It was observed that people who grew up in polygamous or multi-partnership families prefer single marriage for themselves. This had more to do with competition for resources in large families. Also, those who grew up in religious families preferred church marriages. Consequently, the individuals who are currently in unions of many children because they lack experience with the cost of large families.

“We enjoyed playing together, but we also fought a lot” (Individual interview, young female, Ryakizibwa, January 2023)

Evidence from this study also suggests that parents with children with more than one partner become parents at younger ages, largely with unintended first births outside of marriage.

The Age Factor

Asked at what age they entered the marital union, none of the females in the age ranges below 40 years admitted to having married before 18 years. This suggested the declining practice of child marriage becoming a thing of the past among the above 40s in this region. This statistic needs further investigation through a survey as it does not speak to the national statistics. This may only be relevant to the specific sample. All participants except two (elderly women in the World Café session) believed that the ideal age at marriage for a woman should be around 20 years. It was noted from the discussions that delayed marriage attracts stigma. No parent would want to see their son getting married to an

overaged girl (*‘with a wrinkled face’* as one participant described it)

The support for late marriage was mainly urged against physical and mental readiness. They noted 20 years as an average school-going age and reasoned that individuals should first attain sufficient education and be mature enough to manage a family. If the marriage occurs before that age, the woman faces the heavy burden of children before adjusting to a new environment. A woman who gets married when she is old enough is wise enough to understand the new life and her responsibilities in a new environment. The quote below explains;

“I was too young to fit within the behaviours of members of the new family, especially the in-laws. It takes a mature woman to understand the expectations of the husband and other family members. I even produced many children in my early age of innocence, before I understood these issues” (Individual Interview, female, Kashozi ward, October 2022)

Cultural Perspective

Those who supported childbearing in multi-partner unions urged their point from a moral perspective claiming that these unions protect society from illicit sex. Individuals’ attitudes are formed through cultural principles. Although almost all women resented the idea of sharing partners, their men counterparts are convinced that it is better to be in a more stable and known marital relationship than pretending to be with a single woman while they continue to silently engage in other marital practices.

Among male participants, a particular phrase came out prominently *“Omukazi omwe ni nyoko, omushaija aba owaboona’* translated as “the concept of one woman only refers to your mother; otherwise, a man should have many women’. In male-only interviews, no single participant ever confessed royalty to one woman.

On the other hand, a childless man is not considered complete by society and is usually ridiculed. The arrival of a child in a marital relationship increases love and family stability. Those in favour of delayed childbirth, preferring the first baby at least after one to three years, reasoned that an early start of childbearing might end up in having too many children. The quotes below elaborate on these sentiments

“Let me give an example with the picture of my own life. I was married at a young age I was not yet in a position to understand my surrounding. I already had many children, and looking after them was already a burden. Early marriage and too many children take away the pleasures and happiness with your husband.”

“A Munyankole woman gains more respect as a woman through her procreation ability; thus the earlier the woman proves that capacity in a family, the better, thereby settling without fear that the man will leave her’ (KII, elderly male, Nyarweshama, Nov. 2022).

The Culture of Sex Preference

Contrary to the common assumption that sons are preferred to girls and that individuals and couples would keep trying and having more children in pursuit of sons, data from the study tells a different story. Generally, participants contend that all children are the same and would like to have both sexes. Asked if they could try again for another child in case one has had no son, instead, the general revelation is that in any case, one would try again to get different sex, no matter which one. This was across male and female participants, almost all mentioning 50:50 as their preferred boys-to-girls ratio.

“In the past, the Banyankole men preferred sons because of inheritance. Now we know that all children inherit property from their parents. If you are five children, they divide into five and this is equal to both boys and girls. One, all

children are entitled to inheritance under the current laws; secondary, all children, boys or girls will demand the same school fees to go to school, so --- all our children” (KI – Cultural leader, Male Kihunda, December 2022)

“By the way, I would rather have more girls than boys these days, girls have proved to be more beneficial than boys nowadays... at least a girl will remember her parents” (FGD – Women, Karera Dec. 2022).

The ideal family size preferred ranged from two to six children with a large number preferring four (two boys and two girls). The minimum ideal family size was three. The ideal preferred family size reported in the central division was significantly lower than that reported by the respondents from the more rural divisions of the municipality. Also, the general attitude was that the determination of ideal family size was not within the limits of human beings. This belief exists even among the educated. One Imam who had a master’s degree in Islamic studies stressed that *“it is not within the control of human beings to increase or decrease the number of children”*. Responding to how he has enforced this view among his followers, he continued to advance his strong view that thinking about limiting children is an action punishable by God.

“Creator is God. To whom He desires gives more and to whom He desires gives less. Anyone who attempted and attempts to stop the process of childbearing, he is committing sin and crime from the Islamic viewpoint. He is criminal and punishable’ (As quoted by KII, Religious leader, Rwanyamukinya, January 2023)

Value of Children

The data disclosed psychological and emotional sentiments attached to children, especially among the participants. There was a general impression from the majority of participants expressing that *‘children are better than wealth, almost saying*

having children is the only purpose for living.’ No single participant indicated approval or intention to live childlessly. The main reasons advanced were in respect of social security for parents in old age. Contrary to the general sentiment that sons are normally preferred in Ankole, the impression was different among this particular group of participants. Preference for daughters came out prominently arguing that daughters or girls help parents, especially mothers with housekeeping chores, especially at an early age; perhaps the reason for continuous childbirth even in old age to ensure there are young children around to help with household work like sweeping, fetching water, washing, babysitting, and cooking. Some participants, using various descriptions, referred to many children as ‘ornaments’ in the home, while others confessed to having been encouraged to become hard-working in order to feed and look after their many children.

“Children are like flowers in a home. They are a necessary evil, they make noise they cry, and they keep the home as lively as you may not expect in a childless home. There is this scent of pleasure that makes the home beautiful...” (WC-Kabwohe December 2022).

“Children are not only a source of pleasure. They are also the essential element of solidarity of marital relations. They facilitate communication between couples”. These were the views coming out of the World Café session and corroborated with the FGDs.

*“My husband believed in her mother so much... I was so under pressure that I think the stress was even preventing me from conceiving, yet me, I had even wanted to delay like for two years so that I complete my course. One time I even stepped on a chick and it died *laughs*”* (KI, female 56, Kashozi, Dec. 2022)

The way she looked at me and she was passing... if it was on my own, a maximum of

three children would be enough, but he puts me under pressure that he wants to expand the clan as he is the only child to his parents” (Participant in Women only FGD discussion, Nyakashambya, October 2022).

The Effect of Religion

Another variable considered for this study was the effect of religion on marital unions and the consequent fertility outcomes. Among the study participants, 21% were Muslims, 56% were Protestants, and 19% were Catholics. The 4% subscribed to other religious sects apart from the three major denominations. All Muslims were in polygamous unions, while the majority of those who practised marital mobility were Catholics. This was attributed to the catholic teaching that strongly discourages multiple unions. There is a lot of stigma in the catholic faith that people from multi-partner unions are subjected to in the catholic faith. For example, in a conventional catholic church, an individual in a polygamous or multi-partner union cannot be appointed into church leadership positions, while a child born out of wedlock used not allowed to be baptised. This in a way, constrained the catholic faithfuls from engaging in multi-partner unions. Thus, at worst, one union at a time. Other religions have remained indifferent in their teaching. In fact, it came out from the world café discussions that in the west Ankole Diocese, multiple partnerships and non-church marital unions have been tolerated to the extent that Christians in church unions, which is monogamous in nature are allowed to even receive holy communion. This has not helped to reduce multi-partner-induced fertility when other factors are controlled. A diocese is a religious administrative unit equal to a geographical district. The study area is located in the West Ankole Diocese of the Anglican Church of Uganda.

Probing how religious teachings have influenced marital decisions and childbearing, below are some relevant quotes;

“...may be that now things have changed, eeeeh, would you dare to have a child before marriage? Or with another girl besides your wife? Where would you put that child? Ok, now things have changed, but at that time, the priest would not agree to baptise that child they say, ‘omwaana nowenshonga’ (borne in sin) you would suffer, I had to change religion to be a protestant’ (Male, participant, Individual Interview, Nyakashambya, Nov. 2022)

‘It is written in 1st Timothy, chapter two verse fifteen that a women will be saved through childbearing’, and in First Corinthians chapter four that a woman does not have authority over her body” number of children is God’s case’ (KI, Female Pastor, Rwanyamukinya, Dec. 2022).

The majority have not taken care to plan. (*abu ruhanga arampe nibo abo*) literally meaning “I will take whatever God gives me.

One Imam said:

“A Muslim couple should produce many children to increase and strengthen the faith.”

“Child spacing is unislamic”. In their view the Muslim leaders (Key Informants) although marriage facilitates legal sexual enjoyment for spouses, the main purpose is procreation and family formation. The widespread belief is that procreation is a natural, moral and religious obligation of the human race. In all sessions, participants emphasised that procreation preserves the continuity of the family and society and that a family without children is incomplete, unhappy, and unlucky. A family is only defined in terms of children; otherwise, man and woman remain distinct figures in a home, not to be called a family. Following are the impressions of some of the participants;

“For me, what matters is that she can give me children... can you call yourself a man simply because you have a woman in the house, waaa,

don’t be deceived. Before I had children, I could even go to eat at my mother’s home. But now I have to eat with my children, now the family is complete without children. A family without children is not a family. Families finish without children and, ultimately, society. Children are a blessing of God. I cannot keep with a woman who does not produce; that is a curse.”

‘The holy Quran teaches us not to divorce a woman if she does not produce. We agreed that I marry her sister, - now she also has children’ (From FGD, Rushozi, December 2022)

Gender Marital Unions and Fertility

The patriarchal tendencies still rampant among the Banyankole families limit the woman’s reproductive role within the confines of the sexual pleasures of a man. A section of men talked to in male-only focus group discussions intimated that when women partake of modern contraception, their sexual libido goes down as a side effect. When the woman does not satisfy his man sexually, the man moves on to another sexual partner. These new partners are usually younger and inevitably get pregnant. The discussions of the study acknowledge the notion that the majority of marital unions result in childbearing, thus increasing the general fertility situation of the population.

“I paid dowry; if she cannot have children, what would she be doing in my house? But now I hear that they dry up their eggs not to produce because the government has given them authority but in a home, a man should be respected (Key informant, 69-year-old man, Kyabandara, January 2023)

Notably, children are an indicator of the social and economic status of a man. Modern families with fewer children are labelled either lazy or greedy. Families with many children were associated with the capacity to produce enough food and so food security. On the other hand, one of the women’s sole responsibilities is to ensure their families have food,

girls especially help their mothers with house chores. Families with few children are referred to as *Embwijana* (without help). Women and childbearing were also found to be used to enhance egos.

‘For us working men, you have to make sure always that your wife is either pregnant or breastfeeding so that she is busy, otherwise you find when other men have taken her. These women are stubborn’ (Male participant, World Café, Kabwohe, January 2023)

These statements however raised tensions and conflicting sentiments among married men and women in the world café.

“Even when you are poor, children will grow, an elephant cannot fail to lift its trunk, the rich are just setting bad examples, see the whole of Obama, with only two children; they are just greedy, for us in Ankole if you produce few children, we know you are just lazy, you can’t work to feed your children.... applause (Female participant, World Café).

This assertion attracted loud cheers and clapping

The Role of Education

A critical analysis of participants’ attitudes and perceptions makes a note of the increased preference to opt out of marital commitment among educated women and also increased mobility in unions among educated men. A significant number of educated (Secondary level) young adult participants (ages 18-24) were not looking forward to getting into any form of the marital relationship soon. Probed why the main reason seemed to be around the cost of raising children. The delayed union would lead to delayed onset of childbearing and thus fewer children. Among the later age group (25-30), only one male aged 30, uneducated had no child. Among the educated with a minimum of secondary education, the latest age of childbirth both male and female was 69 (50 years in marriage)

and the earliest was 16. Among the educated females those who got into marital unions and had children before age 24, the majority had children while in school. This information puts in balance the common belief that is keeping girls in school delays childbirth and controls fertility. It casts doubt that schooling alone delays marital relationships, especially under the current government policy on reintegration, where girls are accepted back into school after birth (Dambo, 2019). Of those who gave birth while in school, through probing, only a few got into formal marriage unions thereafter. The Ankole traditionalists shun such girls calling them names (*kishiki makazi*)- literally meaning not a girl, not a wife but both and none! Thus depriving them of future decent unions where they can control their fertility choices. Such girls end up hopping from one marital union to another, having more and more children as dictated by the circumstances.

Superstition & Customs

Data from the field contains narrations of traditional practices and their perceived influence on marital intentions fertility behaviour. One elderly key informant described a scary tradition that when an individual dies and he or she has never married or given birth (*called enfanabujune*) the siblings are literally forced to sleep with the body known as (*okugyerempango*). Apparently, this is to appease the spirits that at least the person had a sexual partner before death (or rather before burial). Not only that, but such a person is considered a curse to the family and clan that is believed to live on for generations. This creates a lot of fear and peer pressure for marriage and childbearing as soon as possible to avoid subjection to such rituals.

“Every woman is expected to have children. I grew up seeing my uncle’s wife, she was well educated, a teacher in a very good school at the time and very beautiful by the way; called (name withheld). She had no child. The whole clan demonised her. Whenever she visited some dust would be picked from under where she sat

for a ritual, I came to know that it was to cleanse the house of the spirit of childlessness. My uncle was tolerant, maybe because he was also educated, a teacher as well, but he could not stand the pressure. After eight years, my uncle impregnated another girl and she had to leave. See it is serious, yeah, you. After that for me, I had to first test before I committed myself to the such bad omen. Actually, one of my uncles' daughters have been married for 12 years now, with no child. The spirit of childlessness is very bad” (Elderly male, World Café session, Central Division, November 2022

CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that marital unions are both causes and effects of fertility behaviour. There are many factors influencing the marital unions that an individual engages in that would later determine fertility behaviour. Culturally symbolic values have been attached to marriage and family with childbearing not necessarily the primary purpose but a primary output of marital unions.

Marriage instability and mortality in the community are the major causes of variations in marital unions resulting in high fertility. It emerges that modern unions outside marriage as well as remarriages have had significant contributions to the numbers, choices and spacing of children. Those who remarry after the death of their spouses continue to have more and more children. An important note was taken, however, among the study participants that whereas it is common for one who loses a spouse continue to remarry, most men who lost a spouse in multi-partnership never replaced them. This signifies a possibility that multi-partnerships are not a pleasant union in this community.

The apparent patriarchal tendencies have obviously resulted in less interaction between couples regarding a suitable and more desirable number of children, thus concluding that fertility behaviour among this group is more socially than biologically

controlled. The study leads to the conclusion that if marriage was preserved, with women and men having equal bargaining capacity, fertility among the Banyankole would be different.

The study further concludes that keeping girls in school is not an adequate measure to delay marital unions and the onset of childbearing, yet it is also observed that the longer the exposure to marital unions, the more children an individual is likely to produce. The study, however observes that girls remain exposed even in school, contrary to the common belief that keeping girls in school will prolong the onset of childbirth.

Reduced stigma and recognition of children out of wedlock have also impacted increased fertility. Earlier on, a child born out of wedlock would be called an illegitimate child, and a woman called a concubine. Cultural evolution and enlightened urban communities have legitimised and accepted these scenarios, escalating multi-partner childbearing, thus increasing fertility.

All in all, therefore, coupled with scientific interventions, once the cultural practices responsible for fertility are addressed, it is possible to bring fertility lower down to at least three children per woman in the near future.

Recommendations

The results and conclusions of this study emphasise three recommendations;

First, policymakers and community leaders especially religious teachers should refocus on stabilised marriages to reduce fertility. Sociocultural beliefs and practices are holding back the successful implementation of programmes to reduce fertility. It is recommended that through education curriculum, the government should instil Sexuality behaviour that will counteract the sociocultural doctrines. Second, the school reintegration programme needs further examination to rule out any negative consequences. Now that

girls do not fear dropping out of school, the policy may promote early exposure to marital unions and, subsequently, unwanted fertility outcomes. Most importantly, the study recommends a household survey to determine the number of children born in different types of unions for further analysis of how marital unions can be used in population planning and programming.

Limitations

The number of children were mentioned with a lot of hesitation as it is believed that counting children brings a bad omen to the family. Secondly, most unions overlap and are difficult to differentiate to the extent that even those in church marriage go ahead to engage in other consensual unions, cohabitation and multi-partnership unions and practice marital mobility from one marriage to another and back. Only a few individuals could confidently place themselves in a specific marital union.

The study also recognises there could be other prevailing sociocultural transitions at micro and macro levels including political and economic factors which may influence marital patterns as well as the existence of other processes that lead to fertility outcomes that have not been studied. The findings and recommendations of the study therefore are as good as the content derived from the study area, the study variables as well as the methodology. Therefore, the study of the main effect of marriage patterns on reproductive behaviours including the number of children requires careful consideration of all sociocultural, economic, and political underlying factors that may inform reproductive behaviours and attitudes.

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Conflict Of Interest

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