



Population Facts

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World Marriage Patterns

1. Although the minimum legal age at marriage without parental consent is 18 years or higher in most countries, there are still many women marrying at younger ages.

• **In 2010, in 158 countries the minimum legal age at marriage for women without parental consent or approval by a pertinent authority was 18 years or higher.¹**

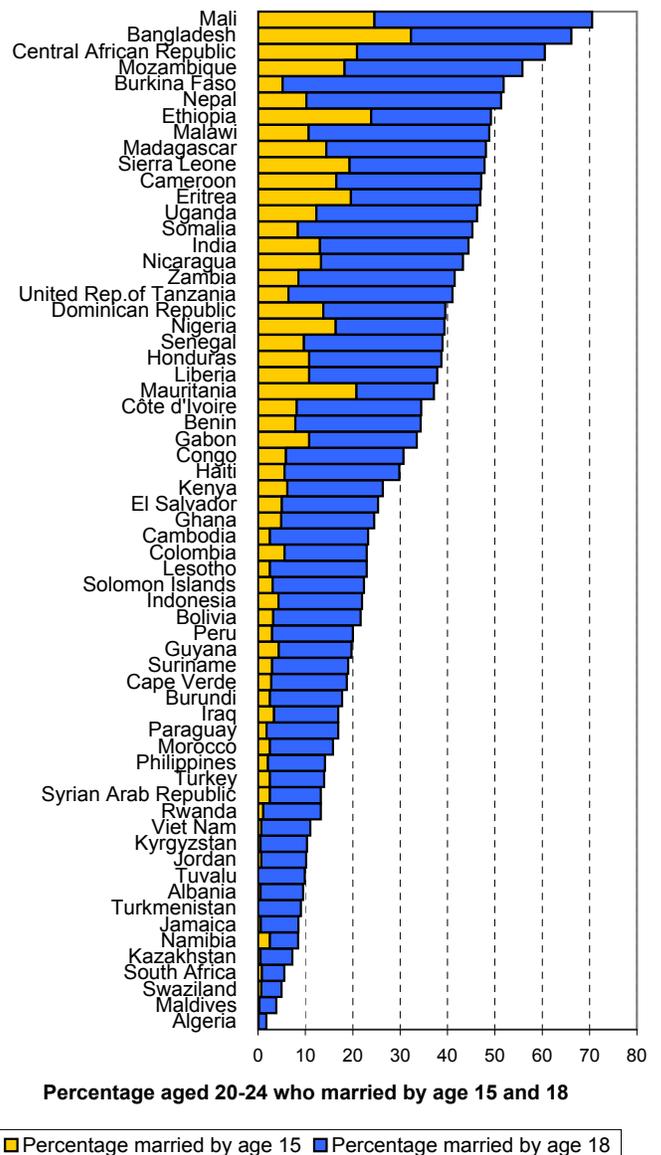
In a further 29 countries the minimum legal age at marriage for women was below 18. In addition, in 146 countries, girls younger than 18 could marry with parental consent or approval by a pertinent authority and in 52 of them girls under 15 could marry with parental consent.

• **For males, the legal age at marriage without parental consent or approval by a pertinent authority was 18 years or higher in 180 countries.** In a further eight countries, the legal age at marriage for males without parental consent was under age 18 and in 105 countries boys under 18 could marry provided they had the consent of their parents or of a pertinent authority. Only 23 countries allowed the marriage of boys under 15 with parental consent.

• **In many countries, marriage before the age of 18 is still common among women.** Among the 63 developing countries with recent data where the minimum legal age at marriage without parental consent was 18 years or higher, there were 39 where at least 20 per cent of women aged 20-24 had married by age 18 and 20 countries where at least 10 per cent of those women had married before age 15.² In Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali, Mozambique and Nepal over half of the women aged 20-24 in the most recent survey had married before age 18. Those findings suggest that early marriage with parental consent is still a generalized practice or that the implementation of existing laws on minimum age at marriage is weak.

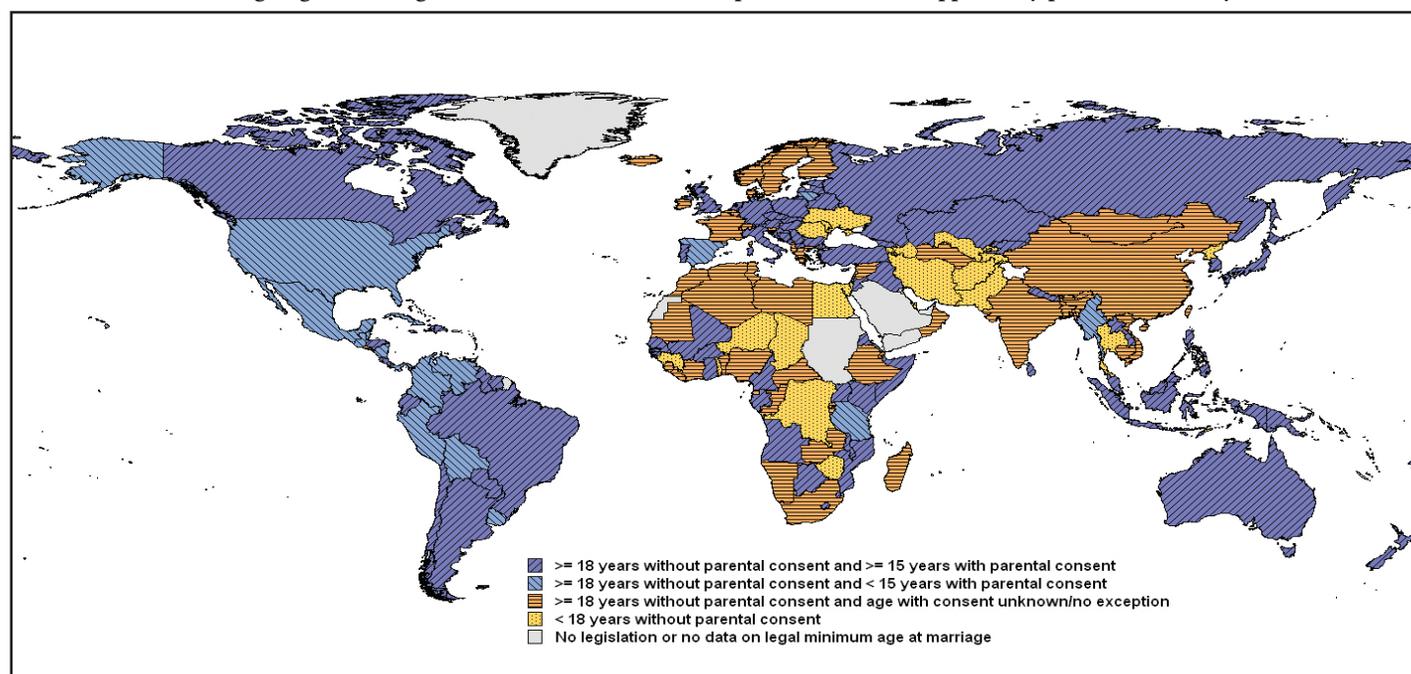
• **Nevertheless, the prevalence of adolescent marriage among women has significantly decreased since the 1970s.** Among the 107 countries that have data for the 1970s and

Percentage of women aged 20-24 in 2000-2010 who had married by age 18 in countries where the minimum legal age at marriage without parental consent is 18 years or over



Sources: MEASURE DHS, ICF Macro (2011). DHS Reports, accessed from <http://www.measuredhs.com/publications> on 20 December 2011; UNICEF (2011). Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys - Available reports/datasets by country, accessed from http://www.childinfo.org/mics_available.html on 20 December 2011; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). *World Fertility Policies 2011* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.XIII.5).

Minimum legal age at marriage for women, with and without parental consent or approval by pertinent authority, 2010



The boundaries on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

for the 2000s, in 66 at least 10 per cent of females aged 15-19 in the 1970s had been married whereas in the most recent period similar proportions of ever-married women aged 15-19 are recorded in only 45 countries.³

- **Adolescent marriage is rare among males.** Only in four countries had more than 10 per cent of males aged 15-19 been married in the 1970s and by the 2000s, only two countries had similar proportions of ever married males aged 15-19.

2. The age at marriage has been rising in every region of the world for both women and men.

- **Between 1970-1979 and 2000-2008, the mean length of single life has increased in the majority of countries.**

For women, the singulate mean age at marriage⁴ increased in 100 of the 114 countries with the required data. The direction of change in the singulate mean age at marriage of men was similar to that of women in most countries, but men almost universally marry at older ages than women. In all countries, the singulate mean age at marriage for men is higher than that for women, and the lower the singulate mean age at marriage for women, the larger the age gap between women and men in the timing of marriage.

- **The postponement of marriage is more marked in developed countries.** The singulate mean age at marriage for

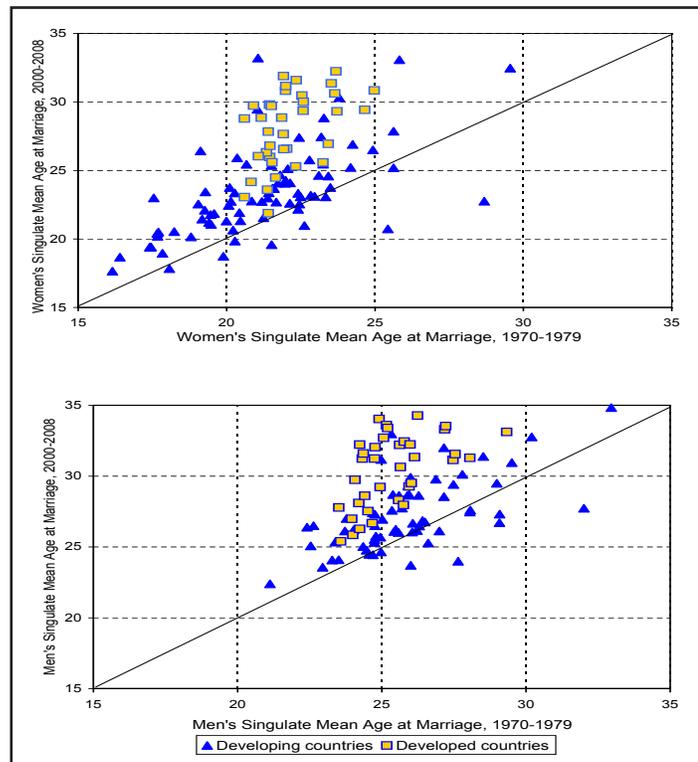
both females and males increased more in developed countries than in the different regions of the developing world, although there are important differences among the latter.⁵

3. The large majority of adults marry.

- **Even if marriage is increasingly being postponed, the majority of women and men eventually marry or live in a consensual union.** Among the 159 countries with data relative to the 2000s, in all but 16 at least 80 per cent of women aged 45-49 had ever married, and in all but 18 of the 150 countries with data for the 2000s, at least 80 per cent of men aged 45-49 had ever married.³ Furthermore, among the 162 countries with data for the 2000s, in 125 at least half of the women aged 25-29 had already married and in 78 of the 152 countries with data, at least half of all men aged 25-29 had also been married.

- **Nevertheless, the proportion of never-married persons has been increasing in some countries.** Between the 1970s and the 2000s, the number of countries where at least 10 per cent of women had never married by age 50 increased from 33 to 41, and from 31 to 49 with respect to men who had not yet married by age 50. However, the proportion of never-married women and men is overestimated in countries where the data available reflect only formal marriage and disregard consensual unions.

Singulate mean age at marriage in 1970-1979 versus that in 2000-2008, by sex



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). *World Marriage Data 2008* (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2008).

4. More women and men are divorced or separated.

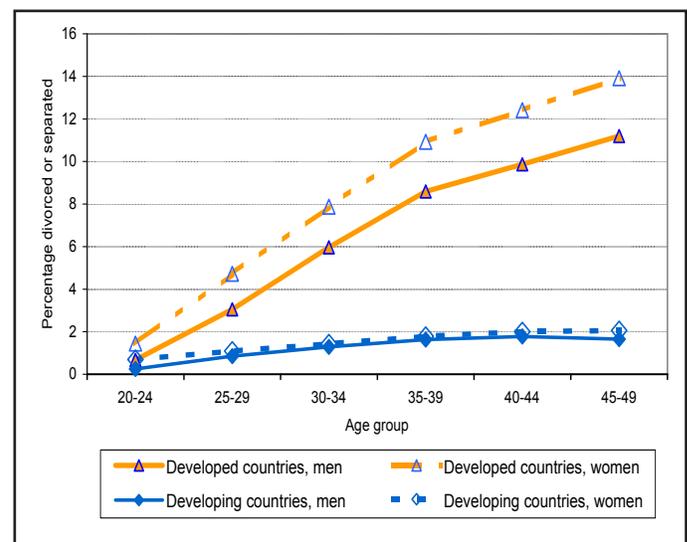
- **The proportion divorced or separated is higher in developed countries than in developing countries.** According to data referring to the 2000s, the proportion of women aged 35-39 who are divorced or separated was 11 per cent in developed countries and 2 per cent in developing countries. Among men aged 35-39, the equivalent proportions were 9 per cent in developed countries and 2 per cent in developing countries. In developed countries, the proportion divorced or separated is higher among women than among men in every age group above age 24. In addition, at the world level, the proportion of adults aged 35-39 who are divorced or separated has doubled, passing from 2 per cent in the 1970s to 4 per cent in the 2000s.

- **In developed countries remarriage after divorce is common.** According to data for 15 OECD countries, in 2006-2008 between 20 per cent and 28 per cent of all registered marriages were re-marriages.⁶ Furthermore, between 1970 and 2008, the share of first marriages among the total number of marriages decreased significantly in those countries. In addition, the proportion of women and men form-

ing several unions over their lifetime has been increasing, particularly in developed countries where divorce has been common for a long time.⁷

- **In OECD countries, the mean duration of marriage among people who divorce has remained stable between 1980 and 2008.** In 2006-2008, the average duration of marriage at divorce in the OECD countries ranged from 10 to 17 years.⁶

Percentage divorced or separated by age group and sex, 2000-2008



Sources: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). *World Marriage Data 2008* (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2008); United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*, CD-ROM Edition.

5. Consensual unions are increasingly common and the practice of polygamy is still widespread.

- **Consensual unions are common in many countries.** Consensual unions are particularly prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean where over a quarter of the women aged 20-34 live in a consensual union. Consensual unions are less prevalent in Africa, where about 10 per cent of women aged 20-34 live in such a union, and they are relatively rare in Asia where the percentage of women aged 20-34 in a consensual union is barely above 2 per cent. In Europe and Northern America, consensual unions used to be rare but their prevalence has been increasing as more people live together for long periods before marrying. However, the data for developed countries do not always reflect accurately the prevalence of unions that have not been formalized by marriage.

- **The percentage of women in consensual unions peaks at ages 25-29 in a majority of the countries with data.**³

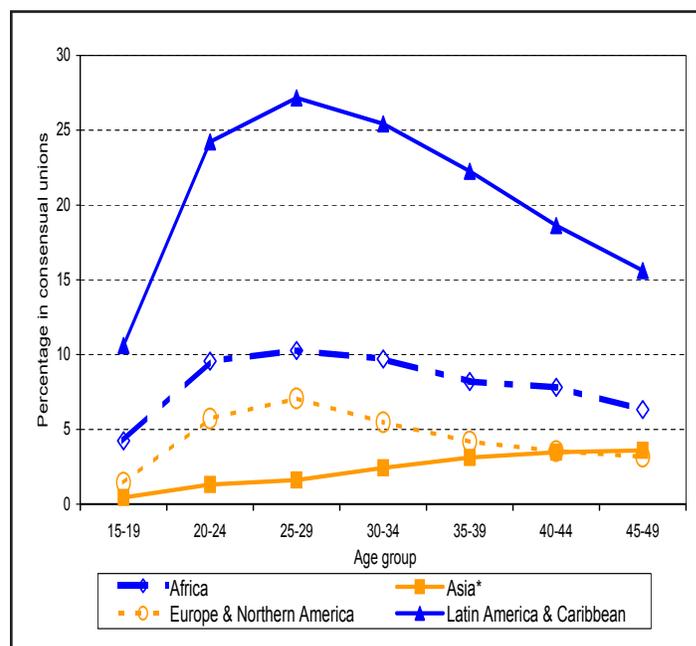
There are, however, major differences in the prevalence of consensual unions among countries. According to available data referring to the 2000s, the proportion of women aged 25-29 who were in consensual unions ranged from nearly zero to 65 per cent in 31 countries of Africa; from 10 per cent to 49 per cent in 23 countries of Latin American and the Caribbean; from zero to at most 14 per cent in 10 countries of Asia, and from nearly zero to 30 per cent in 16 developed countries.

- **The proportions of women in consensual unions have been rising in developing countries.** Among the 22 developing countries with trend data relative to some year between 1985 and 1994 and to another in the 2000s, the proportion of women aged 20-34 who were in consensual unions increased in all but four countries.

- **In Europe, cohabitation frequently precedes marriage or is the preferred type of union following the end of a previous marriage.** In 2006, the mean duration of premarital cohabitation ranged from 1 to 6 years in 8 of the 15 European countries with data. Among the four located in Northern Europe, the mean duration of premarital cohabitation ranged from 3 to 6 years. Among persons living together in 2004, the proportion who had been previously married ranged from 12 per cent to 51 per cent in the 15 European countries with data.⁸

- **In 2009, polygamy was still prevalent in numerous countries.** At the national level, polygamy was legal or generally accepted in 33 countries, 25 in Africa and 7 in Asia. In addition, polygamy was accepted by part of the population or legal for some group of people in 41 countries, 18 of which were in Africa and 21 in Asia.⁹ According to the Demographic and Health Surveys carried out between 2000 and 2010, in 26 out of the 35 countries with data on polygamy, between 10 per cent and 53 per cent of women aged 15-49 had co-wives.²

Percentage of women in consensual unions by age group and region, 2000-2008



Sources: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). *World Marriage Data 2008* (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2008); United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*, CD-ROM Edition.

Note: * Data cover less than 50 per cent of the female population in the region.

Notes

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). *World Fertility Policies 2011* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.XIII.5).

² MEASURE DHS, ICF Macro (2011). DHS Reports, accessed from <http://www.measuredhs.com/publications> on 20 December 2011.

³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). *World Marriage Data 2008* (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2008).

⁴ The singular mean age at marriage (SMAM) measures the average length of single life in years among those who marry before age 50. Persons who are formally married and those living in consensual unions are both considered married. See *World Marriage Data 2008* (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2008) for technical details.

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). *World Fertility Report 2009* (United Nations publication).

⁶ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010). OECD Family Database. Social Policy Division, Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (<http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database>).

⁷ Prioux, F. (2006) Cohabitation, marriage and separation: Contrasts in Europe. *Population and Societies*, No. 422.

⁸ Kasearu, K. and D. Kutsar (2011). Patterns behind unmarried cohabitation trends in Europe. *European Societies*, 13:2, 307-32.

⁹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010). Gender, Institutions and Development Database 2009 (GID-DB). OECD Development Centre (<http://www.stats.oecd.org>).