

Coming of Age in Senegal: Young Adults' Narratives of Delayed Family Formation

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Abstract

Large-scale evidence suggests that, despite persistently high fertility, transition to adulthood markers have been delayed in sub-Saharan Africa. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate cohort change in family formation trajectories among women and men in Senegal, as well as young adults' narratives around delayed family formation. We use repeated cross-sectional data with retrospective information on family lives from the Demographic and Health Surveys, sequence analysis, cluster analysis, and regression methods to examine cohort change in family formation trajectories from ages 12 to 35 for men and women born between 1950 and 1990. We augment the quantitative analyses with life history narratives of Senegalese young adults born between 1980 and 1990, collected in three waves of qualitative autobiographical interviews between 2021 and 2024. The quantitative analyses show that delayed marriage and parenthood with wider birth-spacings increased sharply across cohorts among highly educated urban young adults. In contrast, among less educated young adults in rural areas, cohort change is less pronounced, and family formation continues to vary widely. The qualitative analyses identify four themes behind the observed delays among urban, educated young adults, namely i) lack of economic preconditions for family formation, tied to labor-market insecurities and informality; ii) perceptions of adverse generational change, whereby young adults witness higher hardship today vis-à-vis their parents' generation, iii) ambivalent dynamics of normative expectations and social control in extended family networks, and iv) uncertainty around desirable adulthood goals and the paths that could reliably lead to realizing such goals.

1. Introduction and research questions

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the world's highest fertility region and will contribute most to global population growth in the 21st century. Nonetheless, also in SSA, fertility has started to decline, with a general trend towards delayed family formation (Clark & Agnant, 2025; McLean et al., 2024; Pesando et al., 2021). Possible explanations of delayed family formation include educational expansion, urbanization, difficulties in reaching the economic pre-conditions for marriage, female empowerment, improved access to contraception, and a shift towards post-material values of self-realization. Scholars have further highlighted the rising uncertainty about whether the markers of adulthood observed in the parent generation are still viable and desirable as impediments to family formation among post-Millennial generations in both high-income and low-income contexts (Mains, 2011; Silva, 2013, 2023).

To date, we know little about the relative importance of different driving forces and how they jointly interact to shape young adults' family formation in SSA, which likely varies locally (Fasang et al., 2024). At the individual level, religious values, higher education, and changing fertility preferences might play a role. Relevant meso-level processes include the local availability of formal and informal work, suitable partners, and social control in extended family networks and religious communities. At the macro level, structural shifts in the economy and labor market, such as declining agricultural exports, educational expansion, rapid population growth, urbanization without industrialization, rising costs of living, and political instability, set conditions for young adults' family formation. This is particularly the case in Senegal, where about 90 percent of the labor market is informal. The majority of highly educated young adults struggle to make a living in a "hustling culture" of multiple ad-hoc opportunities of pan-handling-type entrepreneurship, which is highly insecure, barely covers their basic needs and does not put them in a position to take financial responsibility for others – a key marker of adulthood (Cooper & Dubbeld, 2024; Mains, 2011; Simone, 2004).

Demographers have long studied global family change, examining aggregate patterns of family change across broader world regions (Castro Torres et al., 2022; Clark & Agnant, 2025; Furstenberg, 2019; Pesando et al., 2021). Recently, studies point to some delays but also persistent heterogeneity among family formation and adulthood processes in low-income countries, commonly associated with the Global South (Clark & Agnant, 2025; Pesando et al., 2021). This broad mapping of global trends typically aggregates world regions into continents that comprise very heterogeneous local circumstances and historical legacies. Highly aggregated approaches reach their limits in informing the mechanisms that drive variation in

family lives and overlook young adults' perceptions and accounts of how their lives are unfolding. In contrast, a vast anthropological literature highlights how multiple contextual features uniquely combine in specific locations within SAA, often a particular town, village, or neighborhood, to shape how young adults navigate limited opportunities and struggle to uphold hopeful future imaginations in highly uncertain and resource-poor environments (Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Mains, 2011; Nunzio, 2019; Thieme, 2018; Trinitapoli & Yeatman, 2011; Vigh, 2009). Sociological life course studies on transition to adulthood typically have taken a middle ground, examining the specific structural driving forces of cohort change in family lives comparing single countries, sometimes combined with qualitative insights but have largely ignored low-income countries, and especially SSA (Bernardi et al., 2007; Billari et al., 2019; Jalovaara & Fasang, 2020).

Senegal is a particularly interesting case to explore young adults' narratives around delayed family formation. First, as a former colonial center of France, it has been comparatively affluent and institutionally stable since it gained independence in 1960. Senegal is widely seen as a forerunner in democratic, educational and economic development in the region and an attractive destination for migrants from poorer neighboring countries in West Africa. Second, the dominant Muslim religion (95% of the population) is organized via several Muslim brotherhoods, importantly the Mouride and Tijjani brotherhoods, who are distinctly moderate and peace-oriented and have been an important bastion against the influx of radical Islamist movements pouring in from North Africa and the MENA region. While the Muslim Brotherhoods also propagate high fertility values in Senegal, they are far more liberal than, for instance, in Egypt, leaving room for individual choice and other driving forces to impact fertility and family formation (Newman, 2021).

We ask the following questions: 1) How has the timing and sequencing of family formation in young adulthood changed across cohorts born 1940 to 1980 in Senegal? 2) Which narratives do young adults born after 1980 use to account for their family formation and changes compared to their parents? 3) What are their preferences for family formation, and which challenges do they experience in realizing these preferences? We address these questions with a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analyses of cohort change in family formation with an original qualitative data collection that follows a group of young adults longitudinally.

Findings from the quantitative life course mapping support that the delay of family formation and decline of fertility is primarily driven by the growing group of urban, higher-

educated young adults, whereas cohort change is less pronounced among rural, lower-educated young adults, whose family lives remain far more heterogeneous. The qualitative analyses focus on narratives around delayed family formation of educated young adults in urban areas, for whom we found the greatest increase across cohorts. Due to rapid population growth, massive educational expansion and urbanization in Senegal, as in neighboring countries (Davis, 2004; Fall, 2024; Simone, 2004), young adults with secondary or higher education in urban areas are a particularly pertinent demographic group that faces great challenges in making a living with rising inflation in labor markets where about 90 percent of employment is informal. In 2023, Senegal had a population of approximately 18 million, of which 75 percent were under the age of 35 and 50 percent resided in urban areas, corresponding to around 9 million urban residents. In 1960, Senegal had a population of approximately 3.2 million, with a similar age structure, where 76 percent of the population was below the age of 35, but only 23 percent of the population lived in urban areas, which equated to 740,000 urban residents (Fall, 2024). The population has thus increased sixfold within sixty years, and the proportion living in urban areas has doubled in this time coupled with massive educational expansion. Frustrations of urban educated young adults about limited employment prospects, which undermine their possibilities for family formation, are considered a primary driver of recent partly violent youth protests in Senegal (Fall, 2024).

2. Study design

The analysis combines a quantitative, population-representative assessment of generational change in family lives for cohorts born between 1943 and 1988 with a qualitative analysis of young adults' narratives of delayed family formation and generational changes in family life in Senegal among young adults born since 1980. The study design follows a mixed methods logic that combines a quantitative and qualitative phase in the research process (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). First, the quantitative analyses combine four Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (<https://www.dhsprogram.com/>) with interview waves between 2005 and 2023 covering cohorts of women and men born between 1955 and 1988 who were retrospectively asked about key family transitions, including age at first sexual intercourse, age at first union, age at first marriage and age at first child. We employ sequence analysis, cluster analysis, and regression methods to identify typologies of typical family lives for men and women, and document how their prevalence has shifted across cohorts, specifically in urban and rural areas, as well as by education. In a second step, we use an original qualitative

data collection of three waves of autobiographical narrative interviews with Senegalese young adults born after 1980 that we collected with a research team between 2021 and 2024 to study young adult life courses and coping strategies with failed occupational aspirations (see below).

The quantitative analysis identified family life course experiences that became more common for young adults, especially educated young adults in urban areas, that are characterized by delays of first sexual intercourse, first unions, and parenthood. Due to rapid educational expansion, a doubling of the population between 1997 and 2022, and massive urbanization, educated young adults in urban areas have become a greater proportion of their respective cohorts compared to their parents' generation (Davis, 2004; Fall, 2024; Simone, 2004). Our qualitative analysis mainly focuses on selected urban, educated respondents, who constitute a growing demographic in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and for whom our quantitative analysis documents the most pronounced shifts in family lives. After laying out this two-step analytical approach, we first present the quantitative mapping of generational change in family lives, followed by a qualitative content analysis focusing on selected respondents of the qualitative data collection that exemplify the quantitative family life course types that have risen most among younger cohorts. We present relevant methodological and data details in each of the following sections on the two steps of the analysis.

3. Generational change in family lives

3.1. Data and methods

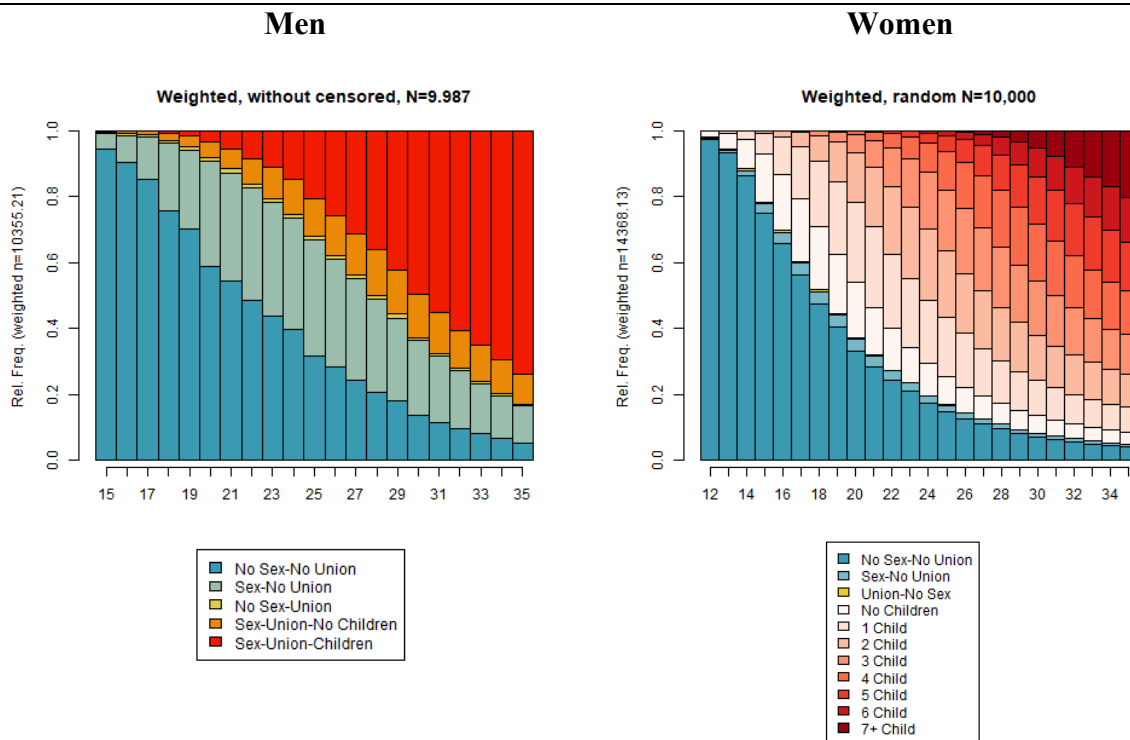
The DHS is targeted at fertility and health, with a core focus on women. Each DHS wave is representative of the national population of women aged 15–49. In addition, men co-residing in the households with the representative sample of women are included in the survey with a reduced set of questions. In terms of fertility information, women were asked to report complete fertility histories, whereas men only reported age at first child and total number of children. The DHS is therefore strictly only representative of women aged 15–49. However, in Senegal, multigenerational households are very common, and most men co-reside in households with women. We keep all respondents with complete information on age at first intercourse, first union, first marriage and age at first child who are at least age 35 at the time of the interview.

Due to different data availability for men and women, we specify different sequences states for men and women. For women, we distinguish 10 family formation states: 1. “No sex-

no Union”, 2. “Sex-No Union”, 3. “Sex-Union/Married”, 4. “Union-1 child”, 5. “Union-2 children”, 6. “Union-3 children”, 7. “Union-4 children”, 8. “Union-5 children”, 9. “Union-6 children”, 10. “Union-7 or more children”. Unions include formal and informal marriages but not cohabitation or motherhood out of socially recognized wedlock, because this is highly stigmatized, occurs very rarely and would not be reliably reported in the data. Sex refers to the time before and after first sexual intercourse. The DHS includes additional information on the number of other wives, wife rank and whether women live in the same household as their husbands. Because this information is not longitudinal and only collected at the time of the survey, we only use it in the description of the typologies but cannot include it in the family formation sequences. For men, we specify a reduced sequence state space of five states, since we only have information on the timing of birth of their first child and not of subsequent children: 1. “No Sex - No Union”, 2. “Sex - No Union”, 3. “No Sex - Union”, 4. “Sex – Union - No Children”, 5. “Sex – Union - Children”.

For men, we can reconstruct complete family formation trajectories between ages 15 and 35 for N=9,987 respondents born between 1955 and 1988. For women, the sequences cover ages 12 to 35 and the sample is considerably larger. From 30,685 women with full, uncensored sequence information born between 1943 and 1984, we randomly selected 10,000 cases to reduce computation time for the analysis. If we include right censored cases of younger cohorts, who have not reached age 35 yet, they can contribute to the earlier ages and case numbers are considerably larger. However, we lose many cases at later ages. All analyses use the DHS weights (Pesando et al., 2021). Figure A1 in the data appendix shows state distribution plots of the full sample for men and women for three data scenarios: including censored cases without weights, including censored cases with weights, excluding censored cases with weights, the final analysis samples. The distributions appear close to identical in all three data scenarios. Figure 1 shows state distribution plots for the entire final analysis samples of men and women (excluding censored cases, weighted with DHS weights and randomly selected 10,000 for women).

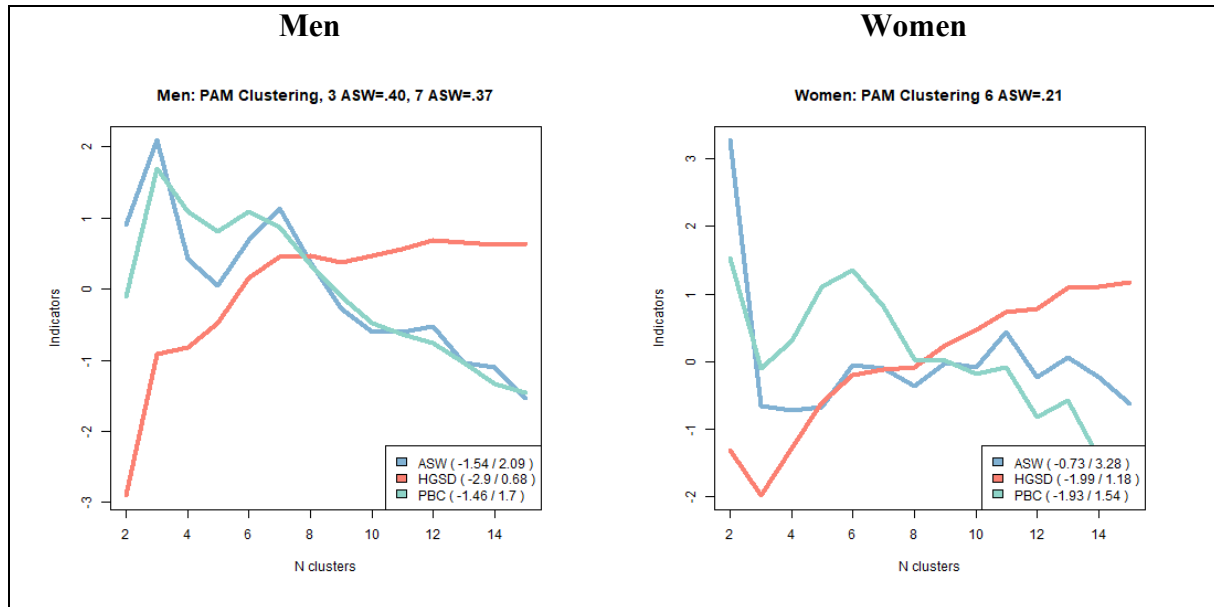
Figure 1: State distribution plots of full analysis samples for men and women



We conduct all analyses separately for men and women. First, we run sequence analysis using optimal matching with indel costs of 1 and constant substitution costs of 2. Optimal matching compares all sequences with each other in pairwise comparisons and determines sequence similarity based on how many transformations are necessary to transform one sequence into the other. The more transformations are necessary to equalize two sequences, the more dissimilar they are. Two types of transformation are possible: insertin/deletion of states and substitution of one state with another. Attaching insertion/deletion half the cost of substitutions, as we do, is standard fare in social sequence analysis, because this specification balances similarity in terms of the timing and order of the states in the sequences (Abbott & Tsay, 2000; Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Liao et al., 2022; Studer & Ritschard, 2016). The resulting distance matrices for men and women, respectively, each enter a cluster analysis to identify typologies of typical family lives. We use an initial ward clustering followed by partitioning around medoids (PAM) clustering, which has been shown to identify particularly discriminant and robust groupings (Piccarreta & Studer, 2019; Studer, 2013, 2021). Several cluster cut-off criteria guide the selection of the most appropriate groups (Studer, 2013). Figure 2 shows standardized values of the Average Silhouette Width (ASW), Point-Biserial Correlation (PBC), and Hubert’s Gamma Sommer’s D (HGSD) for different cluster groupings ranging from 2 to 15 groups. All of these indicators are higher for

more discriminant groupings, that is, cluster typologies, in which each type is internally similar and coherent and differs more sharply from the other types.

Figure 2: Cluster Quality Criteria following Partitioning Around Medoids (PAM) Clustering for Men and Women.



When several indicators suggest the same grouping with a local maximum, this generally suggests strong support for the respective grouping. In addition ASW values of around .25 or higher have been suggested as an absolute indication for a strong grouping in cluster analysis (Studer, 2013), which might be a too high threshold for clustering after sequence analysis, as sequences can vary much more depending on time points and states than simple random variables (Liao & Fasang, 2021). Figure 2 shows the strongest support 3 clusters (ASW=.40) or 7 clusters (ASW=.37) for men and 6 clusters (ASW=.21) for women. The lower absolute ASW values for women are related to the greater overall heterogeneity in the sequences and indicate an acceptable grouping in this case. The selection of the most appropriate number of groups should generally be guided by statistical criteria (as shown in Figure 2) and substantive considerations, that is, construct validity and the substantive information the respective groupings hold for the research question at hand (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Piccarreta & Studer, 2019). Compared to the 3-cluster grouping, the 7-cluster grouping provides important additional information on generational change in men’s family lives, by showing smaller sub-types that have become far more frequent among younger cohorts. We therefore retain the seven-cluster grouping for men and the six-cluster grouping for women. Appendix A2 shows the three-cluster grouping for men. Subsequently, we present the

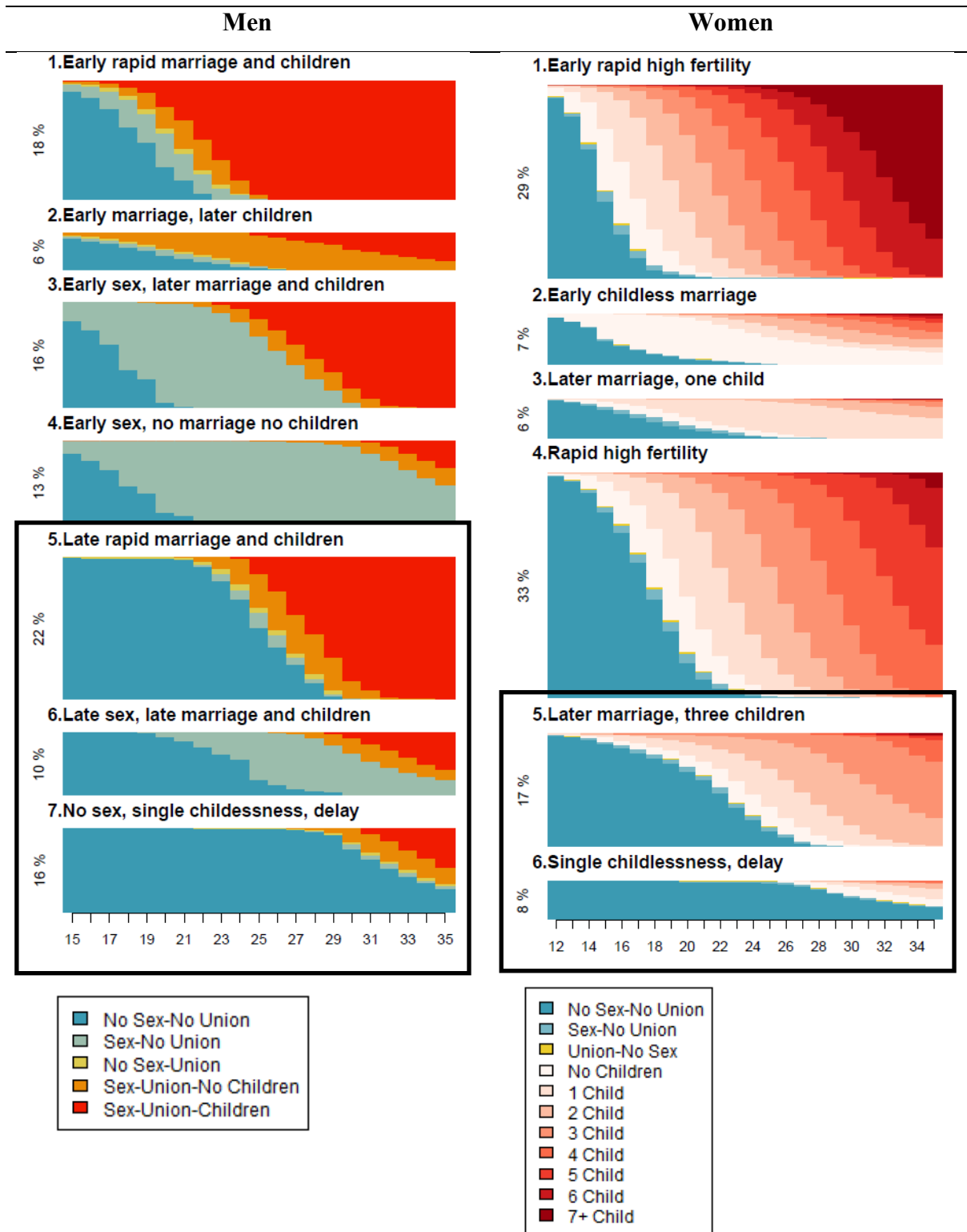
respective cluster grouping, followed by multinomial logistic regression models, where the clusters serve as dependent variables, focusing on urban/rural regions and the highest educational degree as core independent variables to account for cohort changes in family lives.

3.2. Result: Mapping generational change in family lives

Figure 3 presents state distribution plots of the seven-cluster typology for men's family lives (left), and the six-cluster Typology for women's family lives (right) [descriptive tables by cluster will added]. Figure 4 shows unconditional estimates of the probability of being in each cluster by birth cohort. The relative size of each cluster in Figure 3 reflects the size of the corresponding group in the population (percentages on the y-axis). The state distribution plots show the distribution of sequence states at each age (x-axis). The clusters at the top of Figure 3 have either remained stable or decreased across cohorts (see Figure 4), whereas the clusters at the bottom, surrounded by the black boxes, have increased across cohorts (black boxes in Figure 4 also mark groups that have become more prevalent for younger cohorts).

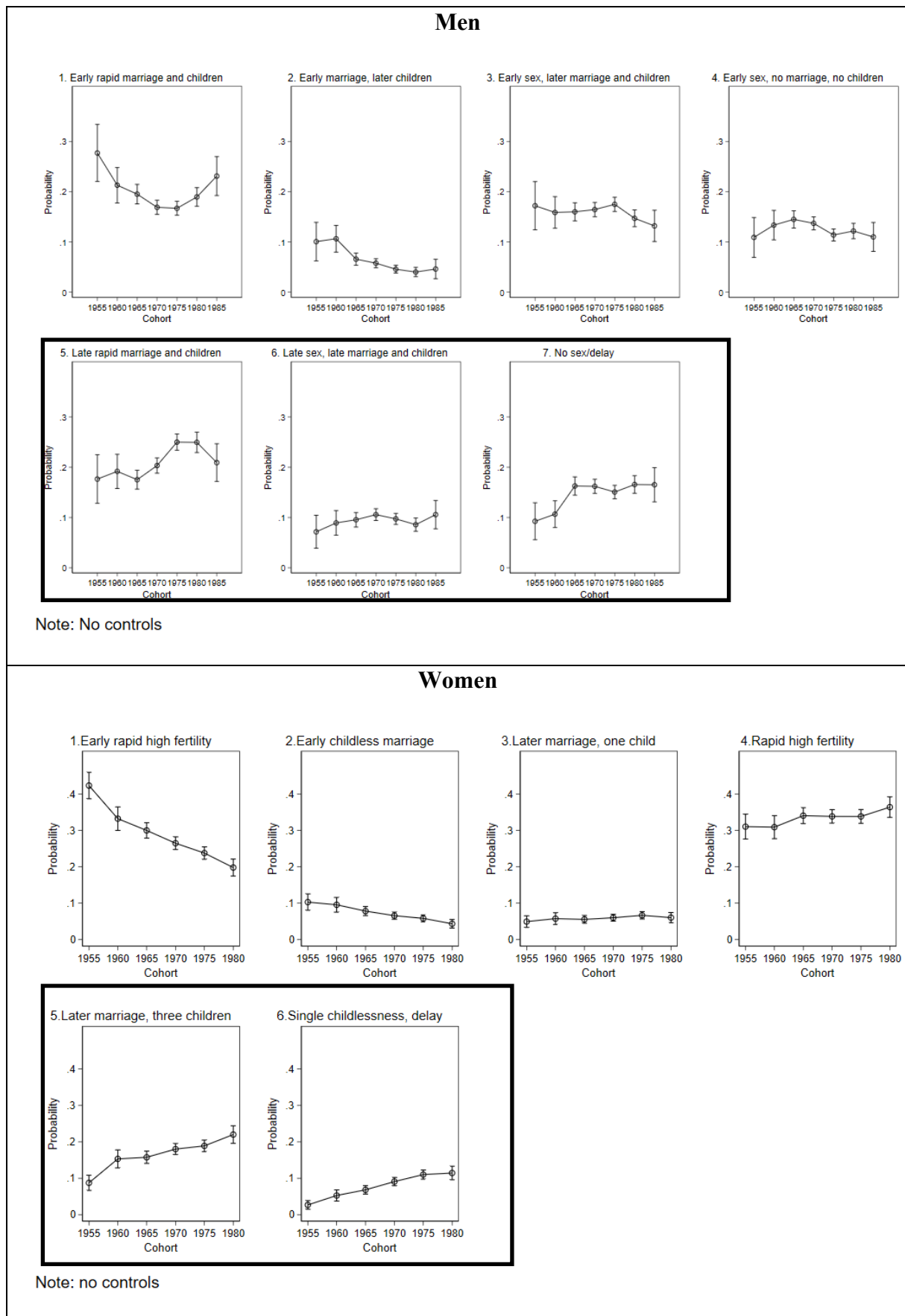
For instance, the top group for men shows a traditional family formation pattern of early, rapid family formation. 'Rapid' refers to the transitions to first sexual intercourse, first union, and first child, all occurring within a short time window of two or three years, mostly between the ages of 15 and 20. Notably, all family formation clusters that have increased across cohorts for men (clusters 5, 6, and 7 surrounded by the black box in Figure 3) show a substantial delay in first intercourse and subsequent family transitions, visible in the long periods of blue that indicate "No Sex-No Union" for these three groups. Together, the three delay clusters (5, 6, and 7) account for almost half of our sample. First intercourse is reported to occur from their mid-twenties onwards. For cluster 7 "No Sex, Childlessness, Delay" that comprises a sizeable 16 percent of our sample, first intercourse and rapid subsequent transitions only occur after age 30 and only for a small proportion within this group.

Figure 3: State Distribution Plots of Family Formation Typologies for Men and Women



Note: Black boxes indicate family formation types that increased for younger cohorts.

Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities to be in each Cluster by Cohort from Unconditional Multinomial Logistic Regression Models for Men (top) and Women (bottom)



Note that the cluster analysis groups sequences together that share the longest durations in the same states, even if their situation at brief periods of the end of the trajectory differs. The men in cluster 7 “No Sex, Childlessness, Delay” all share the experience of no sex, no union and no children from age 15 well into their thirties, which differs sharply from the clusters that decreased across cohorts (Clusters 1, 2, 3, and 4), who all report first sexual intercourse before age 20.

For women, we observe a similar pattern, where younger cohorts are overrepresented in family life courses, with later onset and lower fertility (Clusters 4, 5, and 6, surrounded by a black box). Cluster 1 displays “Early rapid fertility” with first sexual intercourse, first union, and at first birth in their teens with a regular birth-spacing of about two years between children and mostly 7 or more children by age 35. This group notably declined across cohorts. Similarly, clusters 2 and 3 for women exhibit an early onset of family formation, but relatively low later fertility and extended periods of childlessness (Cluster 2) or marriage with one child (Cluster 3). Descriptive evidence suggests that these are typical family lives of second or third wives in polygamous households, and their prevalence also declined across cohorts (Figure 4). In contrast and similar to men, all family life course clusters that have increased across cohorts display a delay of first sexual intercourse and first union, mostly until after age 20. Cluster 5 exhibits a later onset of family formation and larger intervals between birth spacing, with a majority having three children by age 35. Similar to men, cluster six for women is characterized by extended periods of being single and childless until age 35. Figures 5 and 6 show that the clusters of delayed marriage and later and lower fertility (Clusters 6 and 7 for men, Clusters 5 and 6 for women) have increased particularly strongly among younger cohorts, and urban and higher educated young adults are more likely to experience them. Later rapid marriage and children (Cluster 5 for men) with still high fertility (Cluster 4 for women) have also increased across cohorts, but mainly in rural areas and for less educated young adults, specifically for men and women without any education. These groups seem to replace similar patterns just with earlier onset by about 5 years in rural areas that are declining across cohorts (Clusters 1 for men and women).

Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities to be in Clusters that increased across Cohorts for Men by urban/rural and education from Multinomial Logistic Regression Models

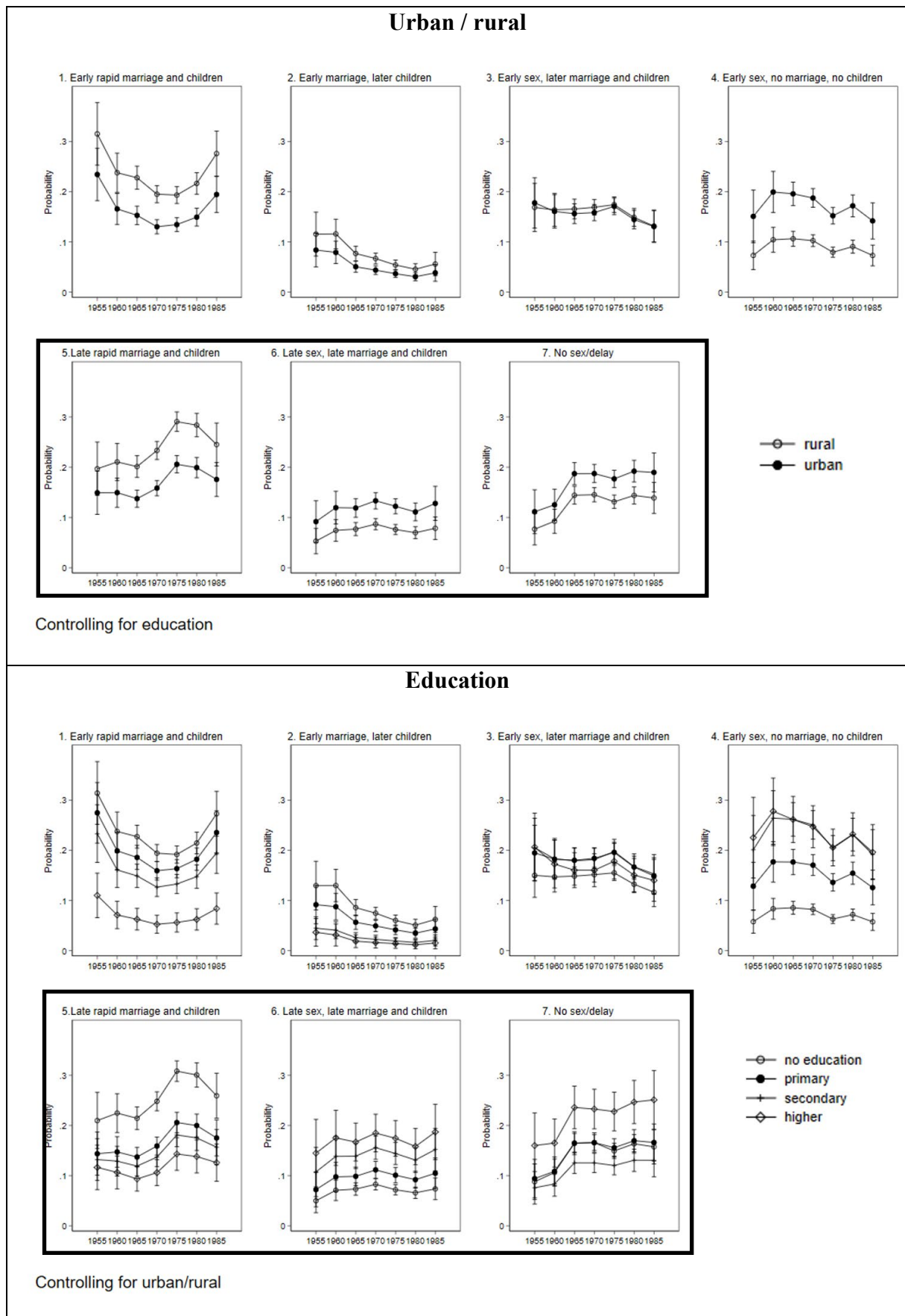
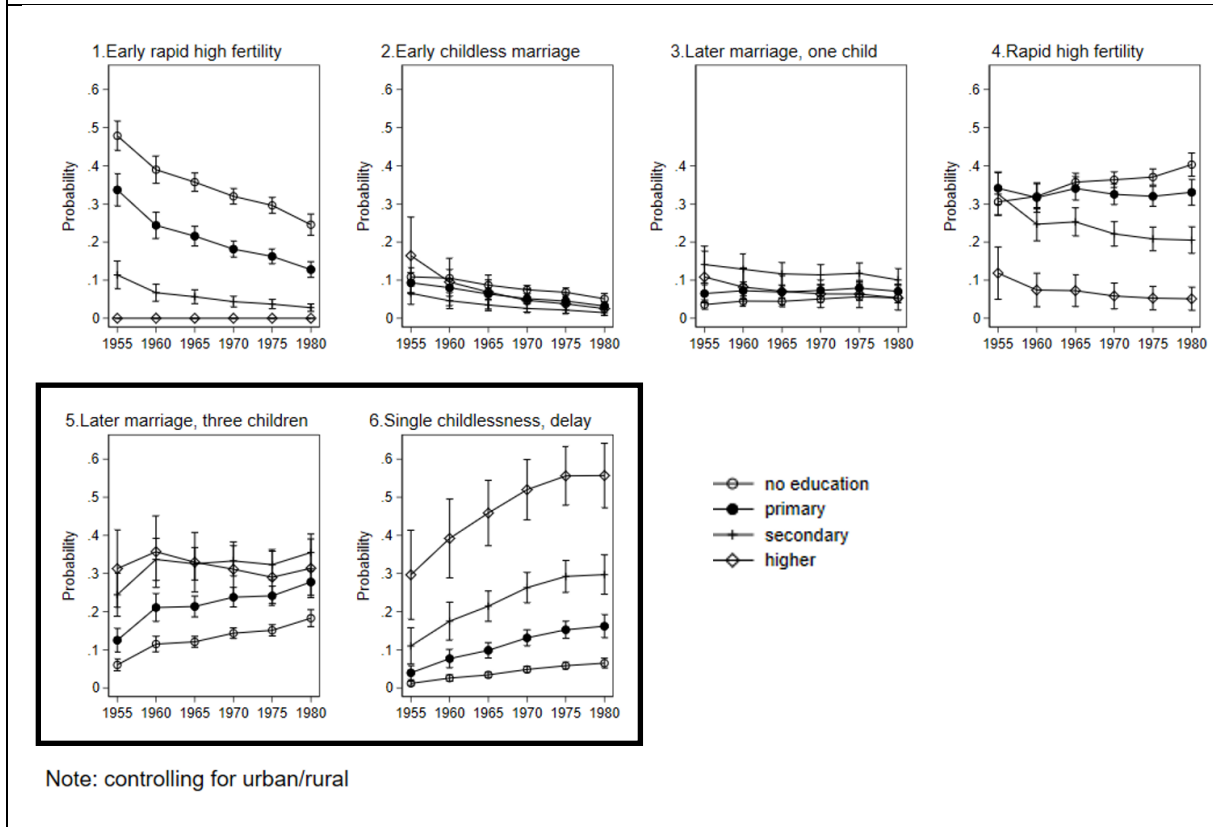
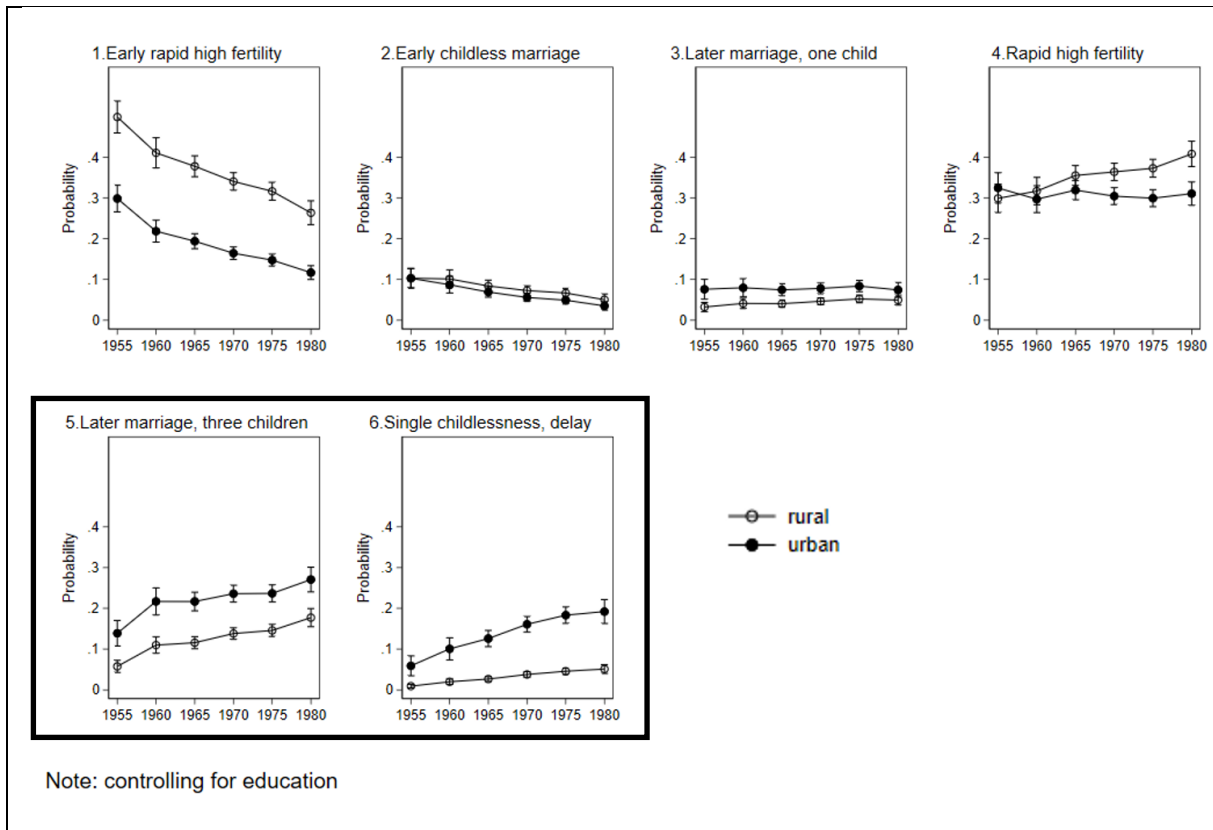


Figure 6: Predicted Probabilities to be in Clusters that increased across Cohorts for Women by urban/rural and education from Multinomial Logistic Regression Models



In the following, we select qualitative interviews from respondents born after 1980 whose family life course experiences correspond with clusters that have increased across cohorts for men and women, specifically those in urban areas with higher education (cluster 6 “Late sex, late marriage and children” and 7 “No sex, single childlessness, delay” for men; clusters 5 “Later marriage, gradual space, three children” and 6 “Single childlessness” for women). Due to rapid and massive educational expansion and urbanization in Senegal, as in neighboring countries (Davis, 2004; Fall, 2024; Simone, 2004), young adults with secondary or higher education in urban areas are a particularly pertinent demographic group that faces great challenges in making a living with rising inflation in labor markets where about 90 percent of employment is informal. Frustrations of urban educated young adults about limited employment prospects, which undermine their possibilities for family formation, are considered a main driver of recent partly violent youth protests in Senegal (Fall, 2024).

Taken together, the quantitative mapping of generational change in family formation supports a massive delay and decline of fertility related to urbanization and educational expansion for both men and women. Delayed and protracted family formation increased across cohorts, and more so in urban areas and for educated young adults. Notably, extended periods of single childlessness and no sex well into age 30 are most common for young men and women with higher education (Cluster 7 for men and Cluster 6 for women). For highly educated women, the probability of largely forgoing family formation until age 35 doubled from 30 percent for cohorts born in 1955 to almost 60 percent for women born after 1975 (Figure 6 bottom). Delays of sexual initiation and fertility decline are less extreme but still pronounced for urban youth with secondary education, as is visible, for instance, in the predicted probability of experiencing Cluster 6 “Late marriage, gradual fertility and three children” for women (Figure 6, bottom).

4. Narratives of delayed family formation among urban educated young adults

The quantitative mapping of generational change in family lives provided us with initial insights supporting macro-structural trends, particularly educational expansion and urbanization, as relevant drivers of delayed family formation. The quantitative analyses are unable to inform about the role of rising uncertainty about attainable life goals, potentially ambivalent effects in social networks, and young adults' aspirations and subjective perceptions about their family lives when compared to their parents' generation. To further

illuminate these mechanisms, we draw on an original data collection of in-depth autobiographical narrative interviews with young Senegalese adults.¹

4.1. Data and Methods

The “High Hopes and Broken Promises: Young Adult Life Courses in Senegal” study collected qualitative data in three waves to assess young adults’ life goals and coping strategies in response to failed occupational aspirations. Starting in 2019, we worked with a team of Senegalese sociologists preparing the fieldwork and interviews. In several focus groups with young Senegalese adults. Our field research was disrupted and delayed due to the pandemic in 2020. In 2021, we continued fieldwork in Dakar. Over the course of several months, we collected a first wave of interviews with participants recruited through snowball sampling with the aim of having variation by gender, rural/urban location, and by subjective social mobility. In late 2021 and early 2022 we collected a second round of interviews. 56 respondents participated in two waves of interviews. A third round of interviews was conducted starting at the end of 2023 and completed in summer 2024 with 23 of the original participants, 8 women and 15 men. The final wave of interviews was disrupted by massive youth protests and related curfews and internet outages that required more time and effort to schedule interviews. Urban, highly educated young adults are overrepresented in the sample, especially among those who participated in all three waves, as they proved easier to retain in the survey. However, several rural and lower-educated participants could be retained in all waves as well. The unstable political situation during data collection substantially delayed the data collection process, as interviewers often had to make several attempts and reschedule interviews multiple times to accommodate curfews and other unforeseen events, as power outages.

The interviews switch between French and Wolof, the local language in Senegal. The interviewers provided us with the audio tapes and the transcriptions in French, including the translations of the Wolof parts of the interviews into French. Wolof is not alphabetized in Senegal; thus, translating the respective passages into French was the straightforward way of

¹ The interviews were conducted as part of the project “High Hopes and Broken Promises: Young Adult Life Courses in Senegal,” which was funded by the German Research Foundation within the SCRIPTS Cluster of Excellence. See <https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/research/research-projects/General-Research-Projects/high-hopes-and-broken-promises/index.html> for more details. Respondents were recruited through a snow-ball sampling starting in the interviewers’ networks covering Dakar, rural regions, and smaller towns in the vicinity of Dakar yielding a relatively balanced sample in terms of gender, education and rural/urban location.

transcription for the Senegalese interviewers. The transcripts highlight which parts were in Wolof. We recurrently consulted with the interviewers on correct translations and interpretations, including the Wolof parts. The transcriptions were also translated into English and analysed using qualitative content analysis with MaxQDA. The reasons why participants could not be followed up in the second and third rounds were documented, as well as general impressions by the interviewers of how the interview went. Ethics approval was obtained from the responsible ethics board at Humboldt University. In October 2024, all participants were invited to a three-day youth assembly in Dakar, including local activists and policy makers, in which we presented and discussed core findings of the study with the study participants and discussed challenges of young adults in Senegal as well as the role of Western researchers in studying social change in Sub-Saharan Africa in panel discussions and working groups. The exchanges in these workshops proved insightful in contextualizing the interview material and were very positively received by the respondents.

The interviews cover many topics ranging from education, work experiences, aspirations and life goals, intergenerational relationships, family lives, work-family interplay, migration, the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Senegalese society, and the youth protests that occurred between 2021 and 2024. For this paper, we focus on the questions pertaining to family lives, work-family interrelations, and generational change. The interpretation of the qualitative interview data is augmented by multiple, partly longer field visits in Senegal by the research team, including visits to various educational institutions in Touba, the capital of the Mouride Muslim brotherhood, expert interviews with protest leaders, and extended visiting research stays of the Senegalese collaborators in Berlin.

The qualitative analysis started with a round of open reading and manual coding of all interviews to mark pertinent passages and phrases (Saldaña, 2021). We continued with a first round of in-vivo coding in MaxQDA, where we extracted pertinent quotations, phrases, and themes. The in-vivo codes were then grouped into more significant categories and themes in a second round of coding in MaxQDA. We are currently still in the process of coding and establishing inter-coder reliability. Our goal was to approach the interview data as openly as possible to identify the concerns of young adults that emerge from their own accounts of their lives, life goals, and perceived obstacles to realizing these goals. Respondents often had quite different interpretations of the questions than expected. For instance, questions on work-family interrelations were typically answered by referring to the key role of extended family in supporting educational trajectories and opening opportunities for income generation, as

well as ensuing responsibilities to share income with parents and siblings. The questions in the third round of interviews were designed to follow up on insights that emerged from the first two waves of interviews.

In the following, we present five cases in detail, two men and two women, that exemplify the delay clusters identified in Figure 2 (overview of respondents in Table 1). In addition, where appropriate, we refer to common sentiments that the large majority of the 56 respondents who completed at least two waves of interviews shared. Even though Senegalese women conducted the interviews, female respondents tended to answer more briefly and less assertively than male respondents, requiring more frequent follow-up questions and encouragement to express themselves.

Table 1: Overview of respondents

| Respondent | Cohort (age W3) | Family situation W3 | Highest education | Gender |
|------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Babacar | 1991 (32) | Single, childless | M.A. Economics | Male |
| Mamadou | 1988 (36) | Married, one child | M.A. Banking | Male |
| Thérèse | 1995 (29) | Married, childless | M.A. Banking | Female |
| Awa | 1996 (28) | Single, childless | M.A. Development | Female |

4.2 Young adults' narratives of delayed family formation

Consistent with anthropological research for West Africa (Bledsoe, 2002; Bledsoe et al., 1994; Newman, 2021), the young adults unanimously embrace culturally and religiously mandated high fertility preferences and reject individual control over fertility, which is expected to lie “in God’s hands.” This corresponds with an absence of a “numeracy of children scheme” (Bledsoe, 2002), where young adults object to the very notion of having individual fertility preferences “*I don't calculate. I don't limit myself also after all, I am a Muslim. So, I don't limit the followers of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)*” (Fatima², 22, tertiary education). Some women even expressed pressure not to have a preference: “*My values and principles do not allow me to pronounce on these two questions [number and timing of children], I prefer to leave everything in the hands of God*” (Nancy, 35, no education). Young adults also consistently express strong marriage norms, eventually aspiring to marriage, if circumstances permit. Theories of a shift towards post-materialist values of self-realization, openly rejecting

² Fictitious names are used to ensure anonymity.

the commitment of parenthood and marriage, thus have little explanatory power in the context of Senegal. Despite culturally and religiously mandated high fertility intentions and persistently strong marriage norms, urban educated young adults increasingly delay and forgo marriage and parenthood. **Four dominant themes** associated with delayed marriage, fertility and family formation emerge from the initial analysis of our interview material: 1) lack of (economic) pre-conditions for family formation, 2) adverse generational change and young adults having it harder today than their parents' generation, and 3) ambivalent dynamics of normative expectations and social control in extended family networks, 4) daily insecurity and uncertainties about viable life goals that make family formation difficult or impossible. We will use the cases of Babacar, Mamadou, Thérèse, and Awa to illustrate these four themes for delayed family formation among educated urban young adults. First, we briefly introduce each of the four respondents, followed by pertinent quotes. Not every theme is equally prominent among all respondents, and we only highlight those that are exemplified by each. Table 2 below provides an overview of the four core themes in narratives of delayed family formation that we have identified so far.

Babacar

Babacar is 32 years old in 2023 and has a Master's degree in economics from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. He is single and has no children at the last round of the interview and lives in an urban area in a medium-sized town outside of Dakar.

A) Lack of economic preconditions for marriage: In all three interview waves, Babacar expresses deep frustration about a series of unpaid internships and working informally in a multiservice kiosk to make ends meet in the years following his university studies at the age of 24. In the first wave in 2021, he was employed on a three-month fixed-term contract as a development officer in a microfinance company, where he first started on yet another unpaid internship. By the time of the third interview, he had obtained a permanent contract in the microfinance company. He responds with well-structured, lengthy answers, mentioning several times that people in Senegal who work hard have little, while others who don't work as hard possess much more. He links this and other problems to bad governance, nepotism and corruption. When asked about his family formation preferences in wave one, he explains:

“For me it starts with the choice to marry a woman. I tell myself that I must be able to assist my wife in everything before I marry her, to be able to satisfy all her needs. My children too. If I were to have children that I couldn't provide for or educate, it wouldn't be worth having. I ask God to give me the means to put the children I have in very good conditions to give them a better education. These are my principles.”

B) Adverse generational change: His own economic insecurity is described in stark contrast to what he observed in his parent generation as described in the wave 3 interview:

“...the times aren't the same - I can have more income than them [his parents], we can have more income than them, but their times were easier to live in. With the few means they had, they could achieve a lot; have a house, wives, manage a family of any number, and they didn't have extraordinary incomes. But now, life is so expensive that it's hard to get by. [...] I think their time was easier, they were more stable than us.”

C) Ambivalent dynamics of expectations and social control in social networks: By wave 3 he is still unmarried and childless and describes social pressures for marriage around him as follows:

“...we're in Senegal and people interfere in your private life like you wouldn't believe (laughs). And that's not just the family, even in the street you meet people who ask you what you're waiting for to get married, but it's up to you to know when the time comes, God will provide.”

Babacar further describes how his brother helped him to obtain his permanent position after lengthy periods of informal and unpaid work, along with a strong sense of obligation to provide for his extended family. At the third wave, he is financially supporting his extended family and parents. In addition to a lack of economic preconditions for marriage, despite being one of the few respondents in our sample who have permanent contracts, he describes necessary parental approval for marriage as a reason why he is not yet married in wave 3:

“Marriage is not a matter of personal choice. Before you marry someone, you both have to consent to it. If marriage was like having a goal, you have your money, you buy it. But marriage doesn't work like that. There are too many protocols here in Senegal. You may want to marry someone, but problems arise due to ethnicity, religion, or even caste. [...] It happens to us that you love someone, you have a marriage project, her mother refuses to give you her hand in marriage and that's not fair; because you're this, she's that, sometimes it's complicated.”

When talking about his future plans, he describes marriage as his “*flagship project*.”

The case of Babacar illustrates how the structural lack of employment opportunities leads to lengthy periods of unstable ad-hoc informal internships and odd jobs after completing an MA degree, in his case, for about six years before he finds a permanent formal job through family networks. Economic frustrations appear particularly stark in contrast to the parent generation, which is described as having had more options to establish typical adult roles and

having had it easier than contemporary young adults (Easterlin, 1976). Babacar's financial support of extended family members once he obtained a permanent contract compromises his economic capacity for getting married himself. Extended family networks and parents take a double-sided role in initiating family formation. On the one hand, parents and local social networks exert social pressure for marriage on a general, abstract level. On the other hand, extended families and parents are described as interfering with concrete marriage plans that do not meet exact expectations. Overall, Babacar's reports attest to social control in extended family networks, which another respondent described as "*dictatorial marriage*" enforced by parents. In contrast, individual preferences and personal agency are explicitly described as inconsequential for family formation compared to meso-level dynamics in extended family networks and local communities.

Mamadou

Mamadou holds a master's degree in banking, econometrics, and quantitative finance. At the last interview wave, he is 36 years old, he married at age 30 and had one child shortly after, and has a full-time job as a portfolio manager in a microfinance company and loans his car to a cab driver for extra income. He also returned to cattle farming occasionally after completing his education to make ends meet. He remains married with one child throughout all waves of the interview, alluding to economic constraints withholding him from having additional children and preventing him from getting married earlier even though he sees his peers still unmarried at older ages.

"What I think is that I got married late. If I make the comparison now I can say it's early but in my opinion it's too late. If it was of my own free will, I would have married at the age of 24. I got married the month after I signed my CDI. I couldn't commit on a fixed-term contract. I signed my contract in July and got married in August. I waited until the situation was stable before getting married."

A) Lack of economic preconditions for family formation: Even though Mamadou is one of the few respondents in our sample who consistently seems to have several sources of income generation, he perceives his work as far below the standards expected for his educational degree. Across all three interview waves, Mamadou frames his work as a portfolio manager at an agricultural microfinance agency as temporary before he can find something commensurate with his high qualifications: "*I am just waiting for something to start*". He describes pressure from his family to have a better job that conforms with his

training, but also the daily pressures of generating income that led him to accept his current sub-optimal work:

“... even if you want to be an entrepreneur, your family prefers that you have a job that is in line with your studies. When I left university, I didn't want to work for anyone. I wanted to be an entrepreneur. [...] And I am still in it, but with the pressure you're under, you often have to stop and look for a job. There are many young people who experience this.”

B) Adverse generational change: Similar to Babacar, Mamadou describes a rising cost of living, monetization, and increased aspirations among his generation compared to his parents' generation, which has widened the gap between life aspirations and possibilities for realizing them among younger cohorts. Monetization of the economy only occurred gradually after independence, mainly in urban areas. Studies document the adverse effects of monetization on the livelihoods of Africans in many post-colonial urban settings (Simone, 2004). The large discrepancy between higher aspirations and lower possibilities for realizing them compared to their parents becomes a recurrent theme in narratives around delayed family formation.

“When the old ones tell you about their journey you notice that they achieved a lot with a lot of patience. But now young people are in too much of a hurry. From birth they want everything. That often [...] frustrates you.”

“The aspirations were not the same. If they had a small place they could live there. For them it was to survive. If they provide the daily expenses and people eat their fill, that's it for them. They don't need anything anymore. [...] at the moment my peers and I, our dream is to have our own flat and to settle down with our family. To have a car, that is to say, that some things are easy for us. [...] Our aspirations are beyond our income.”

“In their time many things were easy and money was not privileged and now everything is expensive and conditioned by money. Even though money was not accessible but most of them were farmers and had enough to live on, life was not limited on money unless you needed some luxury. But life nowadays is all about money, if you don't have money even the woman we were talking about you might not have her (laughing) unless you are lucky enough to meet a nice family who will help you. One of my brothers say that someone can't feel sorry for you and then offer you his daughter in marriage (laughs). But that's the reality, no one is going to feel sorry for you and then give you his daughter in marriage, nowadays its money that conditions families and most family disputes are cause by money – one has money and the other doesn't. That's our relationship with money. It is our relationship with money that we should review.”

“Yes, I remember because today we have more income than they did, but if we look at their standard of living, it was easier. Because today, you can have an income that your parents didn't have, but you'll never have the assets they had. For example, here there were two apartments and they lived with their own children and nephews, yet my father managed the expenses well, on his own. Right now, I'm with my older brother in

this house, we share the expenses and yet it's hard for both of us despite each having our own income. That's why I said we have more income, but our parents lived cheaper than us and were more stable. Our parents, with the little they had, could do a lot of things like manage a big family without any problems. Unfortunately, we can't do that, because we think it's still not enough."

C) Ambivalent dynamics in social networks: For Mamadou, ambivalent dynamics of expectations and social control in family networks and religious communities are less centred around the choice of an appropriate spouse, which he has already completed. Instead, he expresses great ambivalence being torn between 1) his extended families' occupational aspirations for him, and 2) religious high fertility norms as opposed to the economic realities he is facing. Aspirational occupational identities, as described by Frye (2012) in rural Malawi, become a family endeavor in Mamadou's account of his family's expectations for his occupational and economic success. Aspirational identities arise when individuals hold on to seemingly unrealistic occupational aspirations because they identify with what they aspire to become in the future, given the lack of possibilities in the present (Frye, 2012). His parents and extended family form aspirations based on his educational accomplishments, which appear as a recurrent source of stress for him and have to be fulfilled before or in addition to providing for potential additional children of his own. Mamadou's educational credentials thus provide an anchor for upholding hopeful narratives about possibilities of future improvement for the entire family (Mains, 2011), placing great weight on his shoulders and preoccupying him before being able to expand his own nuclear family:

*"...Because the way you know what you want and what they want for you, your family has its own wish for you. They see that you have learned and those who have learned to that level, that is what they become. **They are what they want you to be.** Now if you see a path that is different from the path that they have chosen for you, they think: does this individual want something in his life? [...] They think: we have tired ourselves for his studies. We did this. He must be this. You may even see that it's not the best for you. But that's what they force you to do so that ... at that level I think it's a handicap for you. But it allows you to give your all to everything you do because they have an expectation of you. In this case it helps that they may not want what you want but also you join them in what they want. [...] You will do your best to go away from disappointment. That's why often it can limit you but also often it can boost you." [Bold emphasis added].*

On the question whether he wants more children, he expresses ambivalence torn between economic realities and religious and culturally mandated high fertility norms:

"We want it but with fear. As a Muslim we want it but (laughs) you get to a point where you even question your beliefs. You say to yourself that with what is happening I would not like my child to be a victim. But as a Muslim you don't dare say that you don't want many children. You know the situation you are in [lack of economic means] and it's difficult to overcome it with the burdens that will be added to it [with

another child]. If you don't have a firm belief, you can doubt. But we thank God, we want it anyway."

When asked about his ideal number of children, he continues:

"Whatever God gives me. I have no preference. I don't have a number, I don't have a preference (laughing)."

By the second and third wave of the interview with no improvements in his economic situation, Mamadou turns more explicit and pessimistic about having more children in view of economic constraints:

"We all try to limit the number o children we will have by saying that we will not have enough to support them, even our relationship with God we should review it. Now we think if I have a lot of children what will I feed them with? [...] In the old days you see a family who has one person who is successful, he helps everyone in the area he is in (for example by building a house for them or giving them work). [...] But nowadays everyone wants to show that I am the one who feeds the family, the help nowadays is that they give money, for example to buy a bag of rice. [...] everything happens (laughs) to show that it is my husband who is rich, he is the one who brings a lot of money and the other one stays in the corner."

D) Existential insecurity and uncertainty about viable paths to adulthood: In all three waves, Mamadou recurrently mentions the challenges of daily existential insecurity, as well as larger uncertainties about adulthood processes. He explicitly mentions two to three children (as we find in cluster 5 for women above) as a potentially still economically sustainable number of children, suggesting that it's the highly educated men who make these sortss of economic calculations and are willing to accept (presumably higher educated) women's desire for fewer children. The following quote illustrates this point and lends support to both female empowerment and educational expansion, impacting fertility delay through economic considerations rather than by shifting to post-materialist values.

"Often you [meaning himself] have an activity but it does not allow you to save money. What you earn is for your survival. What you earn every day is limited to your daily expenses."

"Those who have a higher education are generally those who limit the number of children the most, because they calculate with the job first, their salary level. They say to themselves, if I want a better education for my child, would my salary allow me to do so? That's what they calculate all the time. And that's why today they say to themselves, "Wouldn't I limit myself to two children or three at the most?" Today those who work on a day-to-day basis (meaning lower educated), most of the time they don't calculate these details. Although now it's the women who have started to do it on their own, saying they want to rest and so on. But the men who accept it are those with a high level of education, they make these kinds of calculations, wondering if I would be able to manage it, with the high cost of living at the moment and so on."

Thérèse

Thérèse is unmarried and childless at our first two rounds of interviews, married at age 28 before the last interview when she is 29 and still childless but expresses a wish to have 5 children. When we first interviewed her, she was an unpaid sales consultant intern with a small business selling veils online on the side. At the last interview, she found a full-time job as an accounting assistant with a company, continues online sales on the side to sustain herself and her parents economically, and also receives financial support from her husband. She describes the many difficulties of finding a job and gaining economic independence for young adults in Senegal. Her case exemplifies gendered ambivalences of expectations and social control in social networks, as well as uncertainties about viable paths to adulthood. While Thérèse and Awa (below) echo some of the concerns voiced by Babacar and Mamadou, they do not equally share all narratives and highlight particular challenges that young women face in the traditionally patriarchal society in Senegal.

A) Lack of economic preconditions for family formation: Thérèse highlights the gendered nature of necessary pre-conditions. Her concerns focus on life course norms of completing education before marriage and being able to support her parents, whereas Mamadou and Babacar focused more on the necessary financial means to “afford” marriage, including bride wealth. Similar to Mamadou, Thérèse describes her age of marriage at 28 as late and outlines her reasons for marrying late as follows:

“I can tell it's late. Personally, then, I told myself that until I finish my studies, I won't get married. I can't mix educational life with housework. So that's what I was saying. I can't mix the two or combine the two. That was my vision, my choice. But then I realized that there is this connection, especially when you meet someone who doesn't love you. But if I have a husband who helps me and who has studied, he's not going to spoil my studies, or he's going to support me in my studies. After I got married, I realized that this was my vision because I was young. I saw cases that would allow me to say I'm not going to get married at this age, because I'm going to continue my studies. I saw cases of girls who were married and not continuing their studies. It scared me. You think to yourself, my parents, everything they've done for me and everything. If I get married and a man forbids me to study, I'd better finish my studies first before getting married.”

B) Adverse generational change: In the first wave of interviews in 2021, Thérèse shifts back and forth between describing her generation's possibilities as easier in some ways,

for example, stating that her generation is more “modernized” and has the opportunity to live in apartments outside of multigenerational, polygynous households. She also expresses concerns about the heavy use of digital communication technology in her generation, which was not a problem for her parents. In later waves of the interview, with rising cost of living and increasing political instability, she more clearly expresses her generation’s relative disadvantage compared to their parents, with an increasingly pessimistic and bitter outlook for future generations:

“I can say that our parents' life is easier than ours because in our parents' time, life was not expensive. Even though they didn't have electricity, they had a hard time finding water. They drank water from wells. But they had agriculture as an activity, for example, or selling water bags, or fishing to survive. That was enough for them, because at that time, money had value. For them, it was enough to have 1000 francs (CFA) to solve half your problem. Now with 1000 francs (CFA), you can't even buy lunch for two people. That's why I say that our life is difficult. And it will become more difficult, because the world will become more expensive. Also to find a job, it will be very difficult. So, that's why I say our parents are luckier than us. In their time, they didn't have connection problems, or phone problems, smartphones. Now, you see, when you don't have WhatsApp, you are not even considered. Because all activities are done on social networks, even studies. Teachers send lectures on WhatsApp or email addresses. If you don't have a computer or you don't have a smartphone that will allow you to receive these documents, you won't learn. It's difficult, we have to keep up. And all this depends on the means. You have to have the means to have all this. Whereas our parents were studying, and they didn't need all this. That's why our life will be more difficult. And the generations to come will also find life even harder.”

Thérèse further highlights tensions of social change between the high fertility regime of her parents and the trend to declining fertility. Economic pressures lead to fewer births, which in turn threatens old age security, if there are fewer children to care for the elderly:

“Limiting the number of children has a positive impact, and also a negative impact. It has a negative impact because, for example, when you have two or three children, you, the parents, will work all your life. Especially when you've been slow to have children, we can say that when your children succeed, perhaps the parents will already be dead. So that's another problem. It also decreases population growth. In this case, because there will be fewer births. This is what happens in Senegal in most cases. Young people do not want to have many children anymore. They also worry about financial means. Life is hard. So everyone limits the number of children so as not to have problems with financial resources to make them survive. Also, this can be understood. On the other hand, it can also be said that having many children can help, because if for example two do not succeed, the other three will succeed and will help you. But imagine if you have two children and they don't succeed in their studies or don't want to help you. The kids today, they just dress up and be on social networks, or whatever. So, as a result, you, the parent, are going to work your whole life to survive, or when you are retired, it's going to be harder.”

C) Ambivalent dynamics in social networks: Similar to Mamadou, Thérèse describes family pressure and high expectations for her occupational success anchored in her educational accomplishments:

“ [...] what I have always liked, is to be an entrepreneur. But the problem with parents is that they think that when you have a degree, when you have studied, you have to find a job to satisfy them at all costs. Sometimes they put pressure on you: “why don't you do this, why don't you take the exams, you studied until you have this level, and you only get this small salary.” Sometimes it stresses me out, and also we become detached from our goals.”

She further describes conflicting norms about women's educational attainment and family formation that young women face:

“ Because boys, for example, are afraid of intellectual women. Because they think that marrying an intellectual woman or a woman who has studied a lot, they are afraid of that. There are others who share the opinion that the girl studies first, and then she gets married.”

Interviewer: *“There are different opinions”*. Thérèse: *“They are different, yes.”*

Thérèse highlights how pregnancies and marriage threaten educational completion for young women, as well as the repercussions educated working women face when they have children:

“For example, when you study and get married early, and suddenly you get pregnant. Maybe there are pathological pregnancies, a situation where the mother is sick all the time. So imagine that you have a pathological pregnancy, and you have to do the baccalaureate or you are at university, you have to do the exams, so it will become complicated. Either you will start again or you will have to catch up. This will delay your education on the one hand, especially when you are married to a man who does not have a certain maturity, or who does not accept studies, this will impact on the education of the woman. Because there are many women who suffer from this. In our master's class, there was a woman who was married. She hadn't even finished her master's degree and was pregnant. Her husband told her that it is risky to leave her home community every day to come to the university. So she left her studies.”

“Even in the professional world, when you have children every year, if you're not careful, you'll be fired, or they'll tell you that you don't even work, every year you take time off. This also pushes women to have fewer children.”

More generally, she feels torn between traditional religious expectations of women to manage the household and have children and current necessities to contribute economically to household income. When describing how she and her recent husband divide work and family, she justifies her continued efforts to work and generate income as follows:

“It's a bit difficult, but we're women and we're called upon to manage our home, because as far as religion is concerned, God has told us that women should stay at home and look after the children. But given the current context of the country, I think that even if the man works alone and the woman doesn't, we can see that economically, there will be a problem.”

D) Existential insecurity and uncertainty about viable paths to adulthood:

Thérèse recurrently mentions the lack of returns to education and uncertainty as a core impediment for family formation and as the main driver for irregular migration:

“We really have a lot of problems, even with internships. We left everything for studies. We don't say we have something comfortable and all that. But we need to have a minimum to reassure ourselves and our parents. Because now, we even say to ourselves why study, since you study after you don't succeed. Most of the unemployed are students, or they are people who study. So what is the use of studying now? This pushes a lot of students to go abroad. Most young people go abroad because everything is uncertain, there is no certainty.

Awa

Awa, daughter of a fisherman and a cleaner is the fifth of 9 siblings and the first who obtained a university degree. She has an M.A. degree in local government management and local development. She grew up in an urban area by the coast and was 28, single, and childless when we last interviewed her in 2024 with a wish for four to six children in the future. Similar to Thérèse, at our first interview, Awa is doing an internship with a small remuneration and online sales of cosmetic products on the side but has problems with customers who do not pay instalments. At the last interview wave, she has a full-time job at a treasury in a local government administration. She contributes to her parents' livelihoods by buying them food and giving them occasional “pocket money” at the end of the month. She also describes that “*diplomas and experience don't make things easier*” in Senegal and is very concerned about the exorbitantly rising costs of living and declining fishing industry. She belongs to the Christian minority in Senegal but is sympathetic towards the Muslim Brotherhoods as an important stabilizing force in society.

A) Lack of economic preconditions for family formation: Awa feels a strong responsibility for her family of origin and prioritizes helping her parents and siblings before she can start thinking about getting married and having children herself.

“I was born in a large family, if I can say so, where I am the fifth child. I come from a family of nine children. I am the fifth person. And in any family there are ups and downs. Sometimes it's a bit difficult because I have older children and younger sisters and brothers. My elders were enrolled in school and they all dropped out. So it's going

to be a bit difficult to overcome all that. I also went to school and I tell myself that I will take up this challenge. And almost my whole family works in the fishing industry, the boys used to go with dad and my mum also "teruwane la" she goes fishing and buys some fish to sell. So I said to myself that I would try to change this as I have little brothers and sisters, perhaps they will follow in my footsteps. That's why I decided to continue my studies so that my little brothers and sisters could take up the challenge of a new life. At first it wasn't difficult because we had the means, the fishing was going well, the fish were abundant. If you left you could earn a living, that's how you felt. But afterwards, we can say that artisanal fishing is sick, we can say that. So it's a bit difficult."

"Because as I was a simple student we didn't take more responsibility especially on the financial side but since I work there is some financial responsibility that I manage in the family that's it; they made me responsible."

Awa describes how especially friends and other people, but not her family, tease her for not being married yet. As reasons, she states that *"there is no reason"* followed by *"Well, I haven't found the right suitor yet (laughs)"* and that she is not waiting for finishing her education or getting a house or a job: *"No, I am not waiting for that, I'm waiting for the man (laughs)"*. Later, similar to Thérèse, she mentions that men shy away from women who are more educated and economically stable than them:

"Some men are against it, they'll say, "Well, this one's more senior, if you can put it that way. This may reveal another challenge."

For Awa, her primary economic responsibility is towards parents and siblings, and as an educated and economically stable woman, she is experiencing difficulties in finding a husband with similar qualifications.

B) Adverse generational change: Awa recurrently notes that there are no returns to education and sees their parents' lives as easier than for her generation, partly blaming educational expansion:

"Because they [parents] had their land, when you don't have a job you go back to work by the sweat of your brow. They grew crops, farmed, and there was also fishing. So I can say that there were not too many frustrations [for the parent generation] that we feel ourselves. They didn't have much of a chance because there was no expansion of schools. There weren't too many schools and there weren't many people who knew that you had to rely on school to succeed. But our generation is based on school to succeed, that's the problem. That's why I think this is the problem....."

"Sometimes it's a bit difficult at the moment, it's very difficult to have a job and to start a family. Life is becoming more and more difficult. Because in the past, at the age of 14 or 18, we used to get girls, we used to give in marriage. But perhaps I would say that there is an emancipation, so you are free to choose your husband. In the past,

there was no such thing. There were certain ethnic groups in the age of We give you..... I would say it's a bit difficult to start a family for the last [her] generation."

C) Ambivalent dynamics in social networks: Similar to Babacar, for Awa marriage is a respectable and desired goal, but in her view, marriage has become more complicated if parents' interference clashes with individual preferences for specific partners, which did not play a role in her parents' generation, where especially young women had not choice about whom to marry. Female empowerment and access to family planning become key drivers of delayed marriage in her account:

"Sometimes there are generation conflicts especially when it comes to marriage. Sometimes you go out and you see someone and you say "Daddy, this is the man I love" and they go back and try to find out about the man's parents, where they live, where they live, so they might even tell you that you can't marry him."

"In the traditional time, well I would say it was easier for them to get married and start a family. [...] In the traditional time, sometimes, for example, you are told that this person will be your husband and that will be true. But in our time, we can say that it doesn't exist anymore because we are the ones who will choose our husband and present him to our mother and sometimes you can present him to your mother and she won't agree and your father won't agree either. And sometimes it can cause a bit of a tug of war between families. And if it was in the traditional times, so there, maybe this tug-of-war will not be because dad and mum have already chosen a husband for you and there you will accept it because you are a woman and the woman had no right to speak, if I can say so, so you have to agree and everything and there will be no tug-of-war."

"Our fathers had one to four wives and they lived in the same family and there was no family planning and nowadays most married women say I'm not going to stay here and have children because it's going to slow down my career and so on. And now there is also what is called family planning and all that."

4.3. Summary of core narratives of delayed family formation

Table 2 summarizes core themes in the narratives of delayed family formation of Babacar, Mamadou, Therese and Awa.

Table 2: Four themes in narratives of delayed family formation

| | |
|---|---|
| A) Lack of preconditions for family formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectation to rise beyond daily expenses with some degree of predictability and stability (men) • Finishing education before marriage (women) • Waiting for a suitable husband (women) |
| B) Adverse generational change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rising gap between aspirations and economic possibilities: |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher cost of living and higher aspirations among young adults • Loss of opportunities in fishing and agriculture |
| C) Ambivalent dynamics in social networks | <p>Tensions between:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Families' occupational aspirations vs. own aspirations and structural opportunities 2) Religious marriage and high fertility norms vs. economic possibilities to provide for and educate children 3) Generalized pro-marriage norms vs. specific expectations about suitability of available partners (for men) 4) Expectations of married women to drop out of education and care for children vs economic necessity to complete studies and work to support parents and complement husbands' income (for women) |
| D) Daily insecurities and uncertainty about adulthood processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily existential insecurity undermines the possibility for long-term planning and committing to family formation (can also lead to unplanned high fertility among lower-educated “who do not calculate details.”) • Uncertainty about which paths lead to the realization of life aspirations, no returns to education |

4. Discussion

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the world's highest fertility region and will contribute most to global population growth in the 21st century. This study presents a mixed-methods case study of generational change in family formation. We show that the growing demographic groups of educated urban young adults are driving the trends towards delayed family formation and declining fertility, whereas cohort trends are less pronounced, fertility remains high, and family lives continue to be very heterogeneous in rural areas and among less educated young adults. The qualitative analysis focused on the subgroup of urban, educated young adults — the protagonists of the most pronounced cohort changes in family formation. We identified four dominant themes in the narrative accounts of urban educated young adults delayed family formation: i) lack of (economic) preconditions for family formation; ii) perceptions of adverse generational change, whereby young adults witness higher hardship today vis-à-vis their parents' generation, iii) ambivalent dynamics of normative expectations and social control in extended family networks, and iv) uncertainty around desirable adulthood goals and the paths that could reliably lead to realizing such goals.

Our analysis come with several limitations, including data limitations in the DHS, especially with regard to men’s family trajectories, and our inability to more directly link the quantitative and qualitative parts of the analyses. Nonetheless, the results from the quantitative and qualitative parts of the analysis amount to a coherent picture, whereby the quantitative mapping of generational change contextualizes the individual narrative and the qualitative findings offer insights into the subjective perceptions and accounts of the protagonists of the life course clusters. Our focus on urban educated young adults is warranted by this group being particularly interesting both in terms of its rapid absolute and relative increase as a share of the population, and its key role in recent youth protests in Senegal (Fall, 2024).

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Data Preparation of the DHS

Figure A1: Men's distribution of family states with and without weights and censored sequences

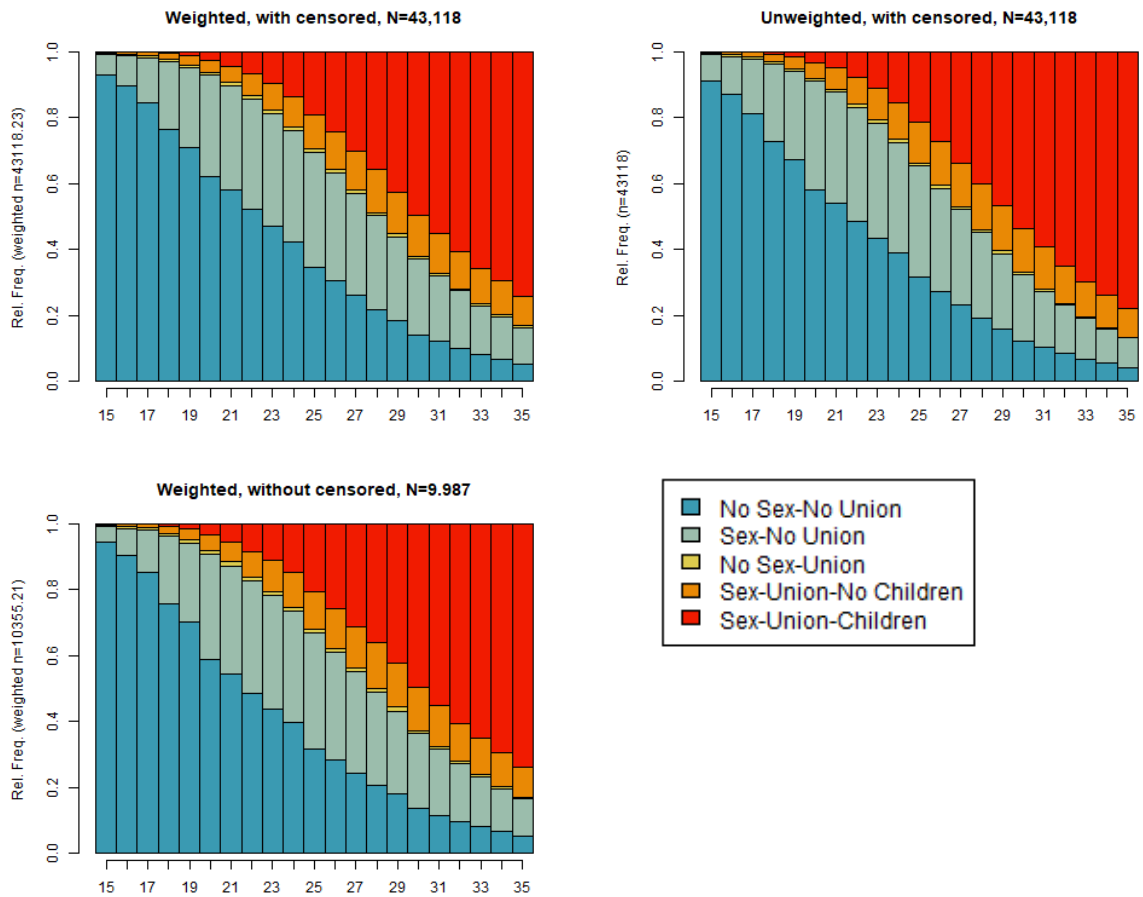
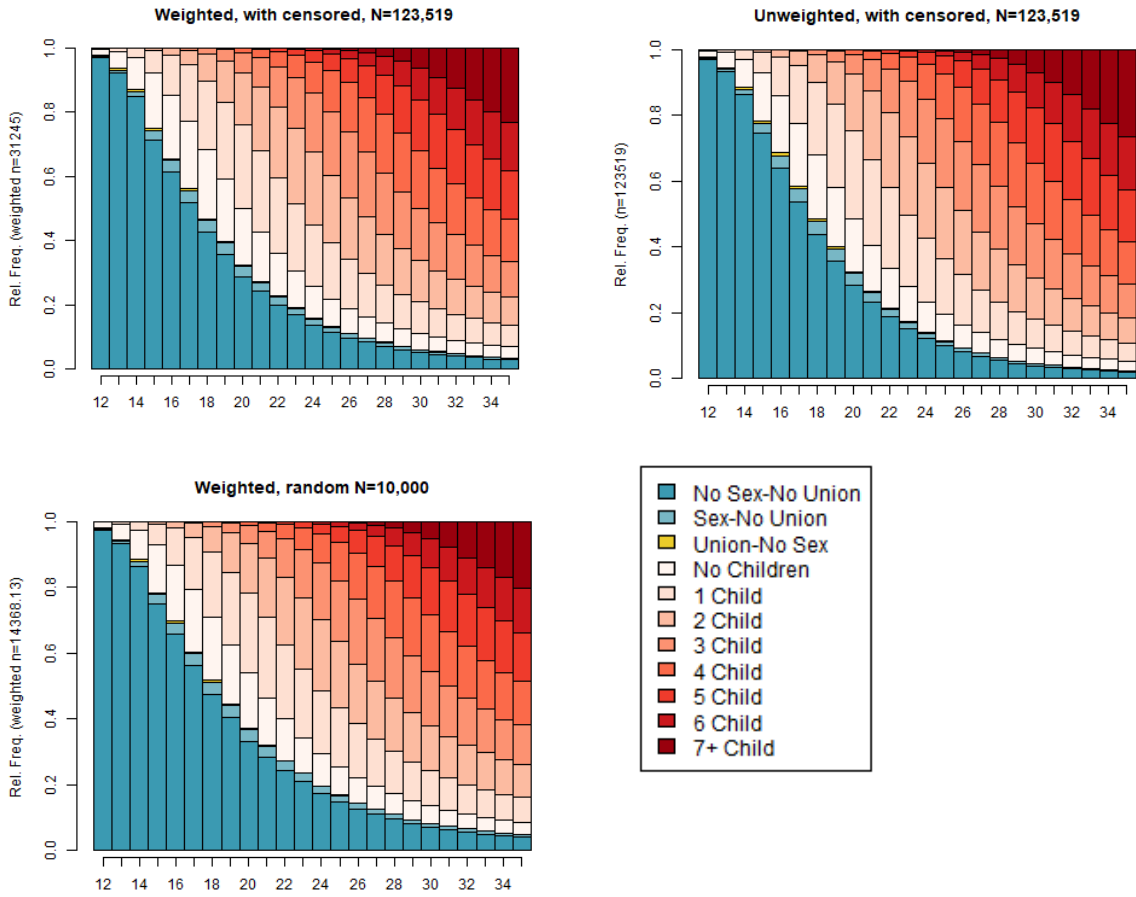


Figure A2: Women's distribution of family states with and without weights and censored sequences



Appendix 2: 3-cluster typology for men

Figure A2.1: Three-Cluster Typology for men

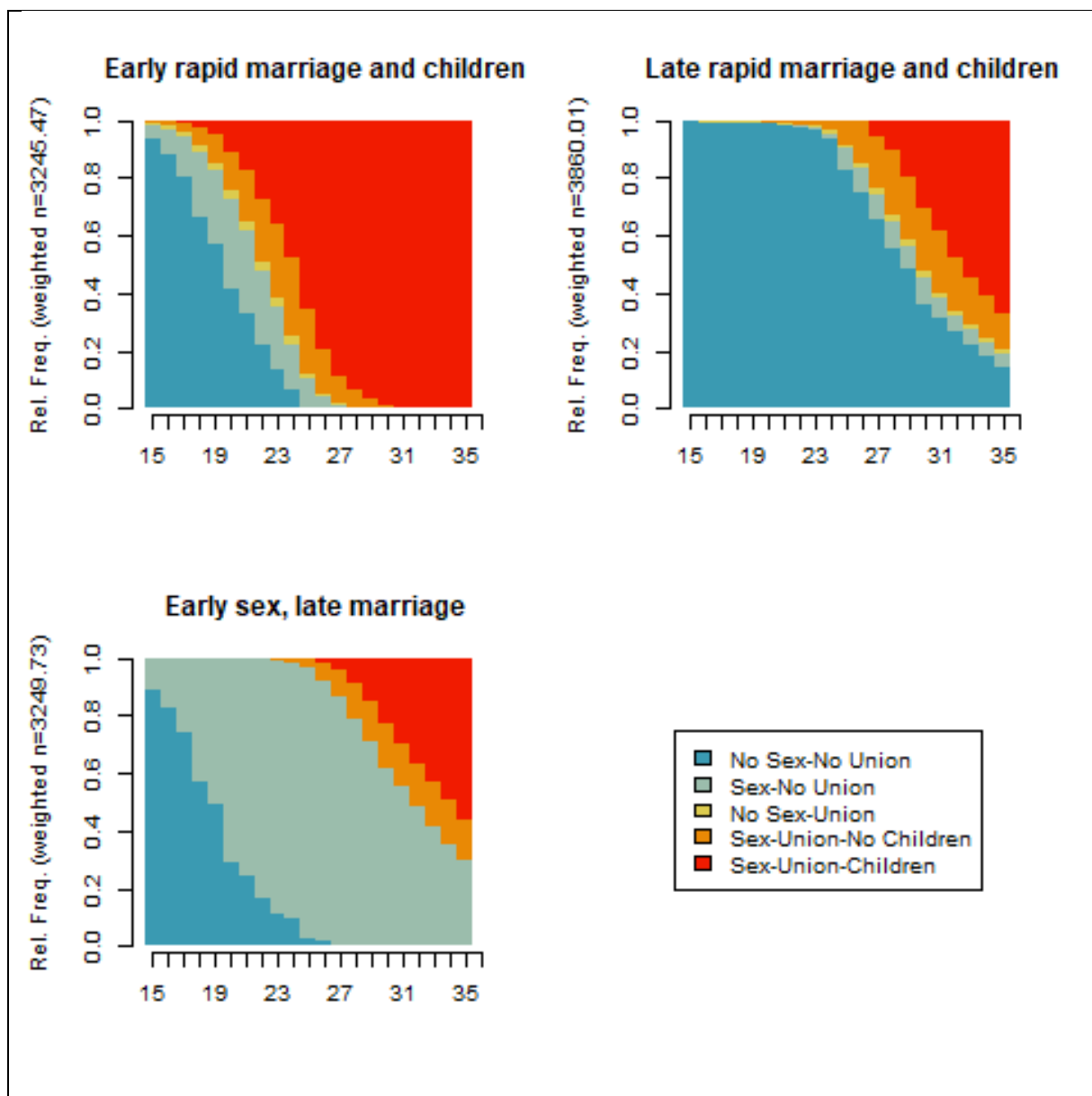


Figure A2.2.: Predicted Probabilities to be in each of the three clusters by cohort, urban/rural, and education from multinomial logistic regression models

