

21

DHS COMPARATIVE STUDIES

**The Status of
Women: Indicators
for Twenty-Five
Countries**



**DEMOGRAPHIC
AND HEALTH
SURVEYS**

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**Demographic and Health Surveys
Comparative Studies No. 21**

**The Status of Women:
Indicators for Twenty-Five
Countries**

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December 1996

Recommended citation:

Kishor, Sunita and Katherine Neitzel. 1996. *The Status of Women: Indicators for Twenty-Five Countries*. DHS Comparative Studies No. 21. Calverton, Maryland: Macro International Inc.

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	viii
Executive Summary	ix
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Defining women's status	2
2 Gender, Poverty, and Wealth	5
2.1 Sex ratio within each API category	8
2.2 Sex ratio within each API category by age	9
3 Gender and Household Headship	13
3.1 Prevalence of female-headed households	14
3.2 Female-headed households in comparison with male-headed households	19
3.3 Characteristics of female household heads	24
4 Education and Other Indicators of Women's Awareness and Exposure	28
4.1 Extent of female disadvantage in education ...	28
4.2 Educated women by residence and age	34
4.3 Additional indicators of women's exposure and awareness	36
5 Women's Work and Workload	42
5.1 Extent of women's labor force participation ..	42
5.2 Characteristics of women's labor force participation	46
5.3 Indirect indicators of women's workload	55
6 Marriage and Sexual Activity	60
6.1 Age at first marriage and distribution of women according to marital status	61
6.2 Demographic and socioeconomic profiles of women according to marital status	65
6.3 Profiles of women who have been married more than once	72
6.4 Profiles of women in polygynous unions	74
6.5 Relationship between first marriage, sex, and childbirth	75
7 Ascribed Status of Currently Married Women	79
7.1 A comparison of the education of wives and husbands	79
7.2 A comparison of the employment of wives and husbands	82
7.3 Doubly-empowered wives	87

8	A Summary Measure of Women's Status	90	5.2	Employment of women by selected background characteristics	45
8.1	Indicators of women's status	90	5.3	Women not working for cash by residence	47
8.2	Evaluating women's status	94	5.4	Employment by type of payment and API level	48
8.3	Country rankings on the threshold measure of women's status	99	5.5	Women's employment by location and type of work	49
8.4	Rankings of women's status compared with other gender-related indicators	101	5.6	Occupational distribution of employed women	51
	References	103	5.7	Major occupations for working women by type of payment	52
Appendix A					
	Selected Demographic Characteristics	106	5.8	Women's education and employment for cash	54
Appendix B					
	Summary of DHS-I, DHS-II, and DHS-III Surveys, 1985-1995	110	5.9	Childcare arrangements of working mothers	56
Tables					
1.1	Survey characteristics	2	5.10	Indicators of women's workload	57
1.2	Economic, social, and demographic characteristics of countries	3	5.11	Household-level indicators of women's workload	58
2.1	API distribution of household population	7	6.1	Women's marital status	62
2.2	Sex ratio by API level	8	6.2	Cohabitation and separation status of women	63
2.3	Sex ratio by age and API level	11	6.3	Marital status of women by age	64
3.1	Characteristics of female-headed households	15	6.4	Women's education and employment by marital status	68
3.2	Resident population of female-headed households	18	6.5	Women's marital status according to API level	69
3.3	Sex ratios by sex of head of household	19	6.6	Living arrangements and household headship by women's marital status	71
3.4	Dependency ratio and household type	21	6.7	Women who have been married more than once by selected characteristics	73
3.5	Sex of household head and API level	23	6.8	Women in polygynous unions by selected characteristics	75
3.6	Age and education of women by household headship status	25	6.9	Comparison of the timing of first intercourse and marriage for women	76
3.7	Household headship status of women by selected demographic characteristics	27	6.10	First birth before age 20 by current age and marital status	77
4.1	Population characteristics by educational status	29	7.1	Education of currently married women and their husbands	80
4.2	Completion of educational level by sex	31	7.2	Women's employment by husband's education	83
4.3	Literacy among women by educational status	32	7.3	Women's employment by husband's occupation	84
4.4	Sex ratio by education and age	33	7.4	Women not working for cash by husbands' education and occupation	85
4.5	Educational status by residence and age	35	7.5	Work status of women whose husbands work in agriculture	88
4.6	Media exposure by residence	37	8.1	Selected indicators of women's status	96
4.7	Migration experience of women	38	8.2	Summary measure scores on women's status	100
4.8	Reproductive choice	40	8.3	GDI, TMWS, and GEM rankings	102
5.1	Employment status by residence	44			

Figures

2.1	Underrepresentation and overrepresentation of females in each API category	10
3.1	Percent of households headed by females and percent of population living in female-headed households	14
3.2	Percent of female population and male population living in female-headed households	17
3.3	Percent of female-headed households and male-headed households with HIGH and MEDIUM-HIGH API values	24
4.1	Scatter plot of the sex ratio of population with no education by percent of population with no education, for population age 15 and over	30
5.1	Percent currently employed among women age 15-49	43
6.1	Median age at first marriage for women age 25-49 years	61
6.2a	Age distribution of women by marital status, Kenya 1993	66
6.2b	Age distribution of women by marital status, Philippines 1993	66
7.1	Scatter plot of percent of wives with lower education than their husbands by percent of husbands who have secondary or higher education	81
7.2	Percent of women not working among wives or men in agriculture by ownership of land which husband works	87
7.3	Percent of women who have at least the same number of years of education as their husbands and who work for cash	89

Preface

One of the most significant contributions of the DHS program is the creation of an internationally comparable body of data on the demographic and health characteristics of populations in developing countries. The *DHS Comparative Studies* series and the *DHS Analytical Reports* series examine these data across countries in a comparative framework, focusing on specific topics.

The objectives of DHS comparative research are: to describe similarities and differences between countries and regions, to highlight subgroups with specific needs, to provide information for policy formulation at the international level, and to examine individual country results in an international context. While *Comparative Studies* are primarily descriptive, *Analytical Reports* utilizes a more analytical approach.

The comparative analysis of DHS data is carried out primarily by staff at the DHS headquarters in Calverton, Maryland. The topics covered are selected by staff in conjunction with the DHS Scientific Advisory Committee and USAID.

The *Comparative Studies* are based on a variable number of data sets reflecting the number of countries for which data were available at the time the report was prepared. Each report provides detailed tables and graphs for countries in four regions: sub-Saharan Africa, the Near East and North Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Survey-related issues such as questionnaire comparability, survey procedures, data quality, and methodological approaches are addressed in each report, as necessary. Where appropriate, data from previous DHS surveys are used to evaluate trends over time.

Comparative Studies published under the current phase of the DHS program (DHS-III) are, in some cases, updates and expansions of reports published earlier in the series. Other reports, however, will cover new topics that reflect the expanded substantive scope of the DHS program.

It is anticipated that the availability of comparable information for a large number of developing countries will have long-term usefulness for analysts and policymakers in the fields of international population and health.

Martin Vaessen
Project Director

Acknowledgments

This research was carried out primarily with funds provided to the Demographic and Health Surveys project by the Office of Women in Development (WID) of the United States Agency for International Development. We thank Ann K. Blanc and Pav Govindasamy for their comments on earlier drafts of the report and Keith Purvis for his help. We gratefully acknowledge Trina Yannicos, Kaye Mitchell, Betty Thomas, Jonathan Dammons and Helen Espitallier for their assistance in the production of this report.

Executive Summary

This study utilizes the household and individual level information available in the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) program to compare women's status across 25 countries throughout the developing world. Wherever possible, comparisons are made between men and women to ascertain whether any gender bias exists. This report examines the relative poverty status, household headship, and education of men and women, and compares the education and employment of husbands and wives. Additional chapters explore women's employment, workload, and marriage patterns.

The first issue examined is whether more women than men live in poverty. A living standards index, called the Amenities and Possessions Index (API), is defined based on the household amenities and possession data collected in the DHS. A person is assigned to one of four categories (HIGH, MEDIUM-HIGH, MEDIUM, LOW) according to whether the household in which the person resides has access to different combinations of the following amenities and consumer goods: toilet facilities, drinking and nondrinking water, electricity, radio, television, refrigerator and car. Households in almost all countries are found to be concentrated in the MEDIUM category of the API.

Sex ratios are used to examine the sex differentials across the poverty-wealth spectrum as represented by the API. Different patterns emerge by region. In the majority of sub-Saharan African countries, the adult population of "poorer" households is more likely to be female than male compared to the population of "richer" households, although the opposite is true among the child population (age 0-14). In the two North African countries, Egypt and Morocco, no clear pattern is discernible overall, although there are more males than females age 50 and over living in "richer" households than "poorer" households. Among the Asian countries, if there is a pattern at all, it reveals more males than females overall and within each age group in "poorer" rather than "richer" households. Finally, in the Latin American and Caribbean countries, distinct patterns favoring women are found.

Another aspect of women's status examined is female household headship. The characteristics of female-headed households, the incidence, how they compare to male-headed households, and the characteristics of female household heads are all discussed. Assuming that household heads

are economically responsible for the household and that women face greater barriers in accessing resources compared to men, female-headed households could be inherently disadvantaged. Further, the sex of the household head is likely to influence resource allocation within and between households.

In almost every country, at least one in 10 households is headed by a woman. Female household headship is generally more common in sub-Saharan Africa and least common in Asia. Although household headship does not appear to vary by residence, the prevalence of female-headed households increases with age and decreases with education of the household head. Female household heads are also more likely to be older, less educated, widowed, with higher parity and currently employed than women who are not household heads.

In all countries examined, households consisting of one adult and one or more children are most likely to be headed by females. While, in general, a higher proportion of male- than female-headed households are found in the "richer" categories of the API, among most of the Latin American and Caribbean countries there is either no difference in the API status of male- and female-headed households, or as in the Dominican Republic, female-headed households are more likely than male-headed households to have higher API status. Although, there is little difference by sex in the proportion of children living in male- and female-headed households, women 15 years and older are more likely than men of comparable age to be living in female-headed households. A comparison of sex ratios between male- and female-headed households shows that female-headed households have higher proportions of females than male-headed households.

Education implies literacy, knowledge, and exposure to new ideas and can provide access to improved employment opportunities. While women's access to education is increasing, an analysis of the sex ratios of the population with no education reveals that in all countries surveyed, except Brazil and the Dominican Republic, women are far more likely than men to have no education. Among the population with primary or secondary and higher education, men dominate in all countries except Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Namibia. In the Philippines, the sex ratio of the educated population is close to 100.

Trends in gender differences in access to education are examined by comparing the sex ratios of each age cohort (15-24, 25-49, and 50 years or more) within each educational category (no education, primary education, secondary and higher education). Few countries exhibit a consistent decline in the relative share of females among the population with no education. In addition, the only countries that reveal equality in access to education or improvements consistently across cohorts are Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Madagascar, Namibia, Paraguay, and the Philippines.

Women's exposure to media and their knowledge about fertility and reproductive control are also examined. Not surprisingly, urban women are much more likely to watch television, listen to the radio, and read a newspaper than their rural counterparts. By contrast, more than half of rural women in most countries surveyed have exposure to only one media source or none at all. In all sub-Saharan African countries and a few countries in Latin America and Asia, one-third or less of women have ever used a modern contraceptive. Also in most of sub-Saharan Africa, only one out of two women discusses the desired number of children with her husband. Rates are higher in Asia, North Africa and Latin America (except in Egypt and Pakistan) where more than 60 percent of women discuss the number of children they want with their husbands.

Employment, by giving women access to non-kin settings and access to and control over financial resources, can be a means to higher status. Whether women actually achieve higher status through employment, however, depends on the type and location of the work, whether cash is earned, and cultural norms that determine the acceptance of women's work outside the home. The rate of women's employment is highest in sub-Saharan Africa where in eight of the 12 countries, at least one in every two women is employed. In Rwanda almost all women are employed. Employment of women is least common in Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco and Pakistan. While most women work for cash, the proportion not working for cash is highest among rural women and women living in households with the lowest API level. Agricultural occupations are the highest or second highest employers of women in most countries surveyed.

In several countries surveyed, women's employment participation follows a U-shaped pattern across education levels, decreasing from none to primary but increasing from

secondary to higher education. Nonetheless, in most countries, it is women with more than secondary education who are most likely to be employed. Also, employed women are most likely to be widowed or divorced and to be household heads.

Traditionally, women are responsible for household tasks which include caring for children and the elderly and ensuring the availability of household water. Women's employment outside the home is likely to increase women's total workloads. Indeed, more than a quarter of all women who work and have a child less than five years old are found to be solely responsible for caring for their child even as they work, in all countries surveyed. The dependency ratio, defined as the number of children less than five plus adults over age 60 per woman age 15-49, is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where each woman has at least one dependent. Further, in nine out of the 12 sub-Saharan African countries surveyed, more than 80 percent of women live in households without household water on the residential premises. However, in the majority of countries, households without water are not far from the water source—more than half of the women without water on the premises say it takes less than 15 minutes to collect water. The fetching of water is likely to require the maximum time in the sub-Saharan African countries.

Cultural norms governing marriage patterns can impact women's status. For women, the marital status of "currently married" is likely to be respected in most cultures, while the status of divorced and widowed women is less certain. Further, age at first marriage can affect a woman's opportunities for education and employment, and influence the number of children she has. Also, a woman's ability to initiate and obtain a divorce may affect her level of influence within the marriage.

The median age at first marriage ranges from 14 in Bangladesh to 25 in Namibia, with the majority of countries showing a median age at marriage between 18 and 21. The majority of women in the reproductive ages are currently married or living with a man in all countries surveyed except Namibia. In Namibia, over 50 percent of women in these ages are never-married. However, never-married status does not necessarily imply lack of sexual activity for women in Namibia, where first intercourse occurs on average about six years before first marriage. The timing of first marriage and first intercourse overlap (difference is less than one year) in only about half of all the countries surveyed.

Never-married women are most likely to have some education and be in the HIGH and MEDIUM-HIGH API levels, possibly because they are still living in their parents' households. Widows are disproportionately found in the LOW API categories and are more likely than married or never-married women to be working for cash. Women most likely to have both some education and to be employed for cash are those that are divorced or separated.

The facility with which divorced, separated, or widowed women can remarry might reflect the social stigma associated with these statuses. Compared to women in other regions, women in sub-Saharan Africa are generally more likely to have been married more than once. Remarried women are most likely to be currently divorced or separated, working for cash, and have no education.

Another aspect of marriage relevant to the status of women is the practice of polygyny. The prevalence of polygyny varies, from being nonexistent in most countries outside Africa and less than 5 percent in Madagascar, Morocco, and Pakistan to over 50 percent in Burkina Faso. Women in polygynous unions are likely to be rural, uneducated, and employed without cash.

The age at first birth, premarital births, and trends in both are also examined. In every country surveyed, at least one in four women currently between the ages of 20 and 49 years had a birth before they were 20 years old. No consistent reduction in the percentage of births before age 20 is found; nor is there a decrease in the proportion of births outside of marriage to women less than 20.

Married women, especially in patriarchal settings, may derive their status from that of their husbands. The husband's education and type of employment may determine the prestige that women have in society. Intrapousal differences in earnings and education may also lead to inequitable bargaining power within the household.

The analysis shows that in most countries wives have lower education than their husbands. The proportion of wives with less education appears to be related to the proportion of the population that is educated (represented here by the percent of husbands with secondary or higher educa-

tion). Among countries with a low share of husbands with secondary or higher education, an increase in this share is associated with an increase in the proportion of wives with less education than their husbands; however, in countries where at least half the men have secondary or higher education, increases in overall education are associated with lower educational differences between couples.

Women's employment does not vary with husband's education consistently across all countries. An examination of the percent employed by occupation of the husband shows that in most countries, women are more likely to be employed if their husband works in a modern occupation. Wives of husbands with no education and working in agriculture are most likely to be working without cash earnings. Wives are more likely to be working outside of agriculture if their husbands are not working their own land, compared with husbands who do work their own land.

The proportion of women who have equal or greater education than their husbands and work for cash provides some measure of intrahousehold equality that could translate into greater authority within the household. Women in North Africa, Asia, and the Near East are least likely to achieve this intrahousehold empowerment, while rates are highest in sub-Saharan Africa.

In an attempt to summarize the report's findings, a threshold measure of women's status is devised based on 29 indicators discussed throughout the report. Countries are scored based on their achievement of specified levels on each indicator, then ranked according to their overall scores. *Distinct regional patterns emerge, with the Latin American countries scoring the best overall. The Philippines scored the highest in Asia, and Namibia is the most advanced in all of sub-Saharan Africa.*

A comparison of country rankings on this threshold measure with their rankings on the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Equality Measure (GEM) (measures defined by the United Nations) reveals remarkable consistency. The conclusion follows that there is great interdependence between the multiple aspects of women's status covered by these alternative indicators.

