

Why is Nigeria exceptional? A comparative perspective on Nigeria's fertility trends

Background

Nigeria stands out as exceptional in many respects, and its demographic trends are no exception. Currently the 7th largest country today (a population of around 200 million), it will double in size to become the 3rd largest country globally by 2050 (around 400 million), because of rapid population growth driven by persistently high fertility (United Nations, 2019). In this paper, we bring an international perspective to explore why Nigeria's demographic trends have taken such a different path to other countries of sub-Saharan Africa which are further along the demographic transition. We compare Nigeria to other countries of sub-Saharan Africa to identify in which ways Nigeria stands out as different, and which drivers are responsible for its exceptionality.

It has been shown that fertility levels are influenced by proximate determinants such as contraceptive use, abortion, marital status/sexual activity, and postpartum amenorrhea, and also more distal drivers such as education (particularly of girls) and social norms around childbearing. We examine the impact of these drivers on changes in fertility, comparing Nigeria to other countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

Data

In our analysis, we use estimates and projections of population and fertility from the 2019 revision of World Population Prospects (United Nations 2019), and contraceptive demand and use from the 2021 revision of Estimates and Projections of Family Planning Indicators (United Nations 2021). In order to examine differentials in fertility by women's education status, we draw on the Demographic and Health Surveys, selecting countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have 3 or more observations with at least one earlier than 2000, and at least one after 2000 (24 countries). We use data on primary school enrolment from UNESCO (2020).

Preliminary results

Despite starting at lower fertility in 1980, today Nigeria stands out as having higher fertility compared to Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda, and also to other countries of Western Africa including Sierra Leone (figure 1).

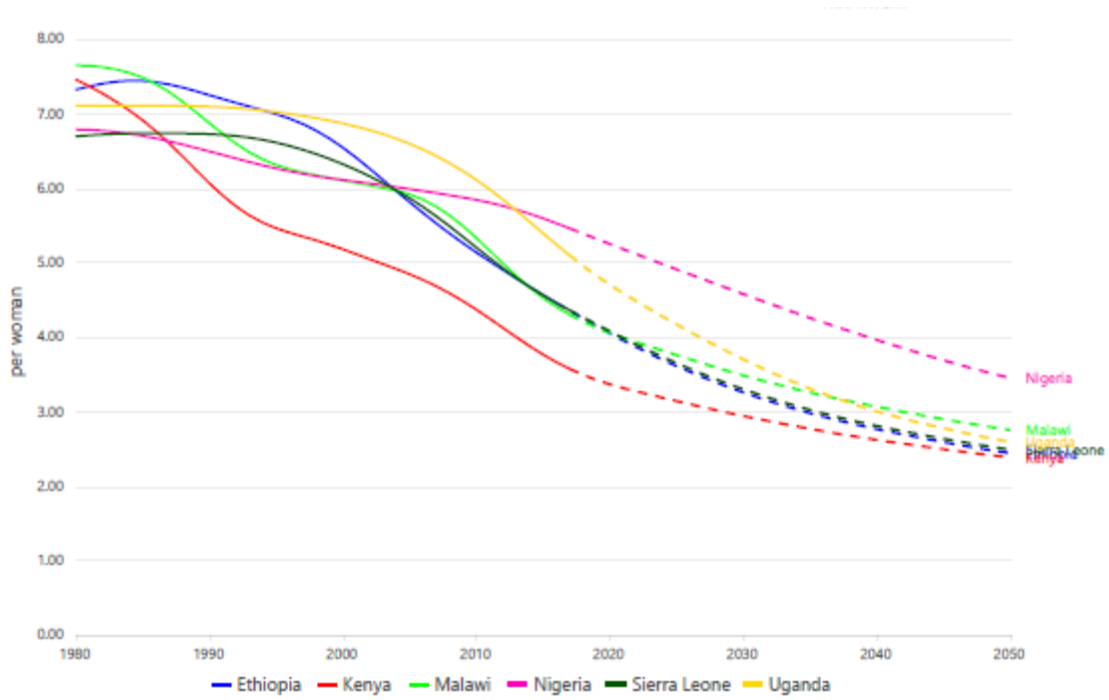


Figure 1. Total fertility rate, 1980-2050.

Source. United Nations (2019). World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision

Use of contraception among married or in-union women remains low in Nigeria, and has been overtaken by the majority of other countries in sub-Saharan Africa (figure 2).

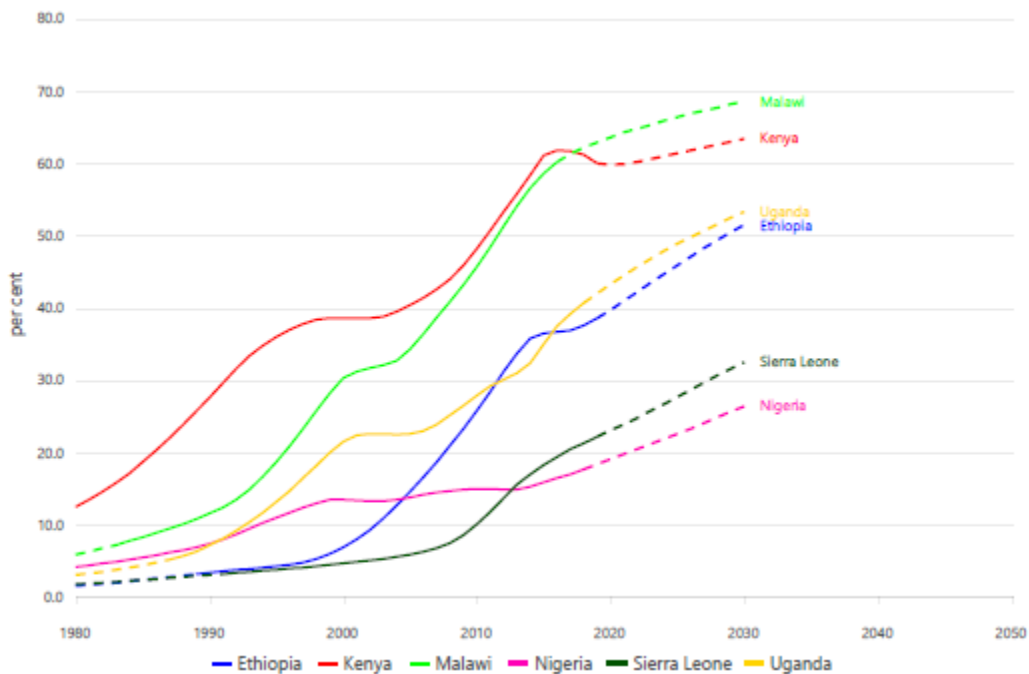


Figure 2. Estimates and projections of contraceptive use (any method) among married or in-union women, 1980-2030.

Source: United Nations (2021)

However, adolescent childbearing does not stand out as being high in Nigeria (figure 3).

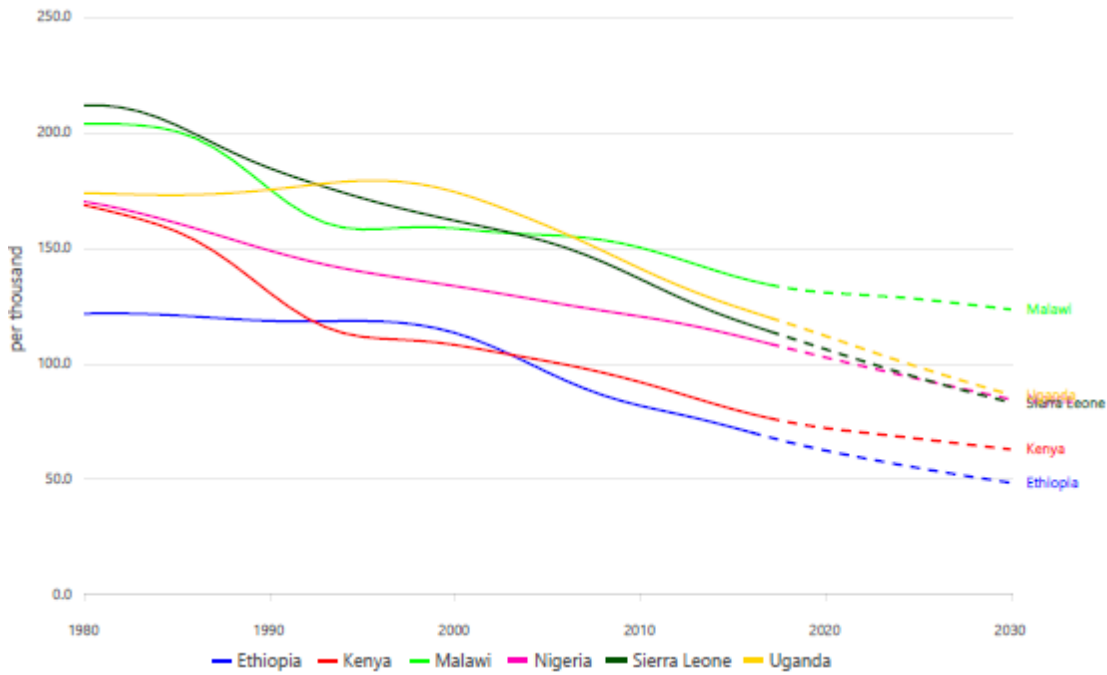


Figure 3. Estimates and projections of adolescent birth rate (fertility rates among girls and young women age 15-19), 1980-2050.

Source. United Nations (2019).

Primary school enrolment has increased sharply in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. While this is not an indication of the quality of learning, it nevertheless demonstrates significant changes (figure 4).

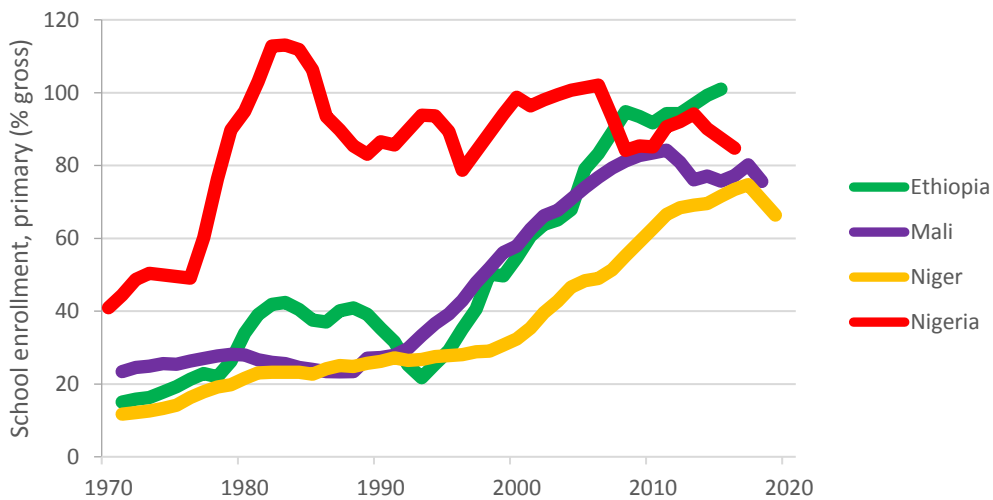


Figure 4. Trends in the ratio of total enrolment, regardless of age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown

Source: UNESCO (2020)

Women with secondary or higher education are known to have lower fertility than women with no education or primary education. The differential between these two groups is presented in figure 5. While Nigeria has amongst the highest levels of fertility, the differential between those with more or less education does not stand out as being significantly greater than or less than other high fertility countries in Western Africa (including Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger). There have been more significant declines in total fertility, combined with a shrinking education gap in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, and more recently in Senegal, Tanzania, Togo and Zambia. By narrowing the gap in fertility between women with higher and lower education, this is associated with a lower fertility overall.

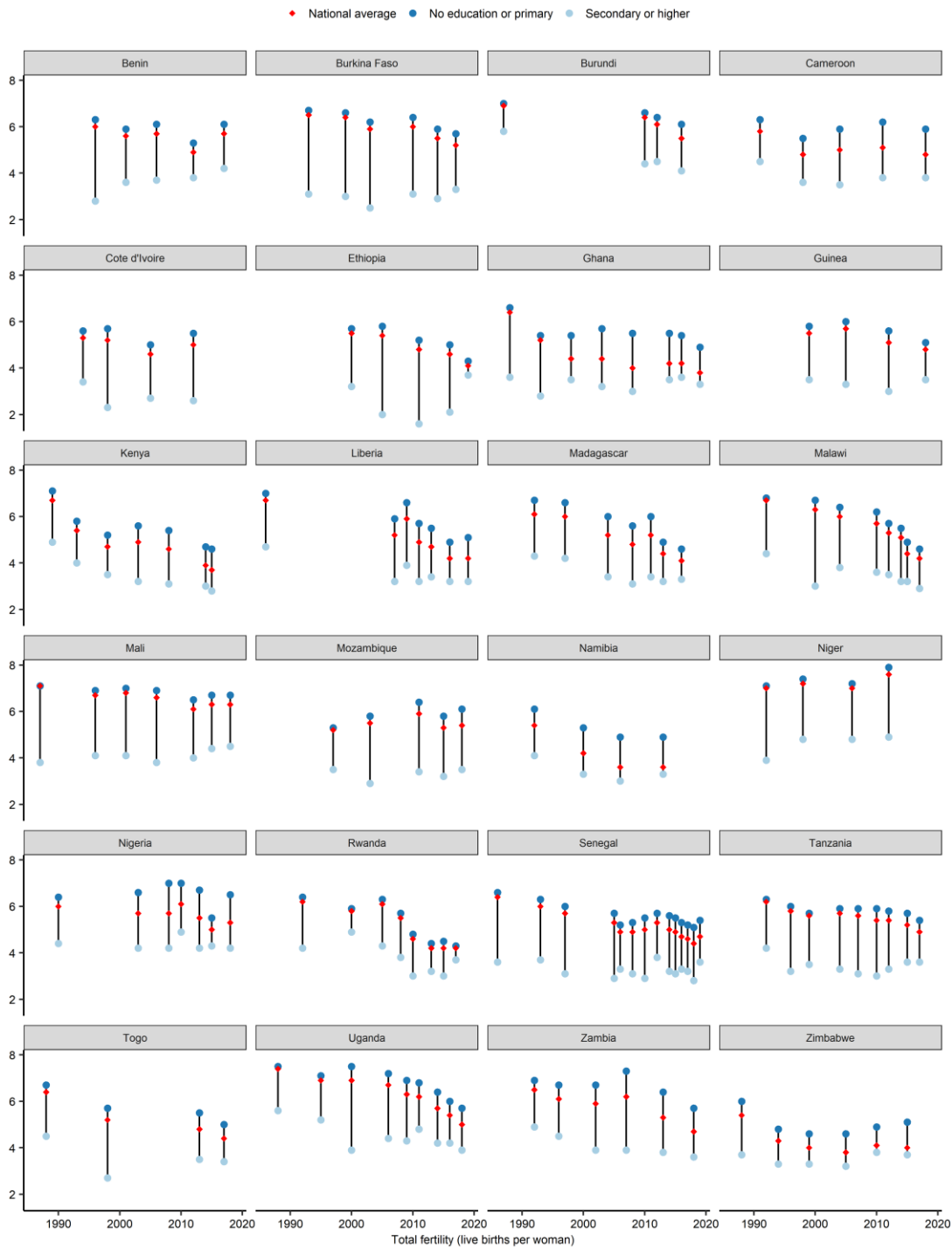


Figure 5. Differential in total fertility rate, between women with no education or primary, versus secondary or higher.

Source. Most recent Demographic and Health Survey since 2015.

Future analysis and discussion

We focus on Nigeria since it is such a significant country and will have a large bearing on global population trends. Our analysis will expand the perspective to other countries of sub-Saharan Africa. We will also explore in greater depth the extent to which narrowing of differentials in fertility (between more/less educated women, and wealth quintiles) contributed to fertility decline, and how this has changed over time. Our preliminary findings have shown that education may not have operated on fertility in the same way in Nigeria as in other countries, since primary school enrolment is relatively high but fertility also remains high. Contraceptive use has also had a different trajectory since it is increasingly much more slowly than other countries. We will therefore explore issues around quality of education and desired fertility. We will also comment on the political economy and policies affecting fertility and discuss the prospects of accelerated fertility decline in Nigeria.

References:

UNESCO (2020). Institute for Statistics (<http://uis.unesco.org/>)

United Nations (2019). World Population Prospects: 2019 revision.

United Nations (2021). Model-based estimates and projections of family planning indicators: 2021 revision.