



Gender

Discrimination in the family

Kouassi Yeboua and Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 05 February 2025 using IFs 7.96

Table of contents

Discrimination in the family	3
Briefly	3
Child marriage	3
Household: unpaid care and domestic work	5
Divorce and inheritance	7
Endnotes	9
Donors and Sponsors	9
Reuse our work	9
Cite this research	9

Discrimination in the family

- Briefly
- Child marriage
- Household: unpaid care and domestic work
- Divorce and inheritance

Briefly

In addition to education and health, Africa exhibits a high level of discrimination in the family sphere (e.g. child marriage, household responsibilities, inheritance and divorce) due to the persistence of deep-rooted, unequal power relations between women and men within the household.

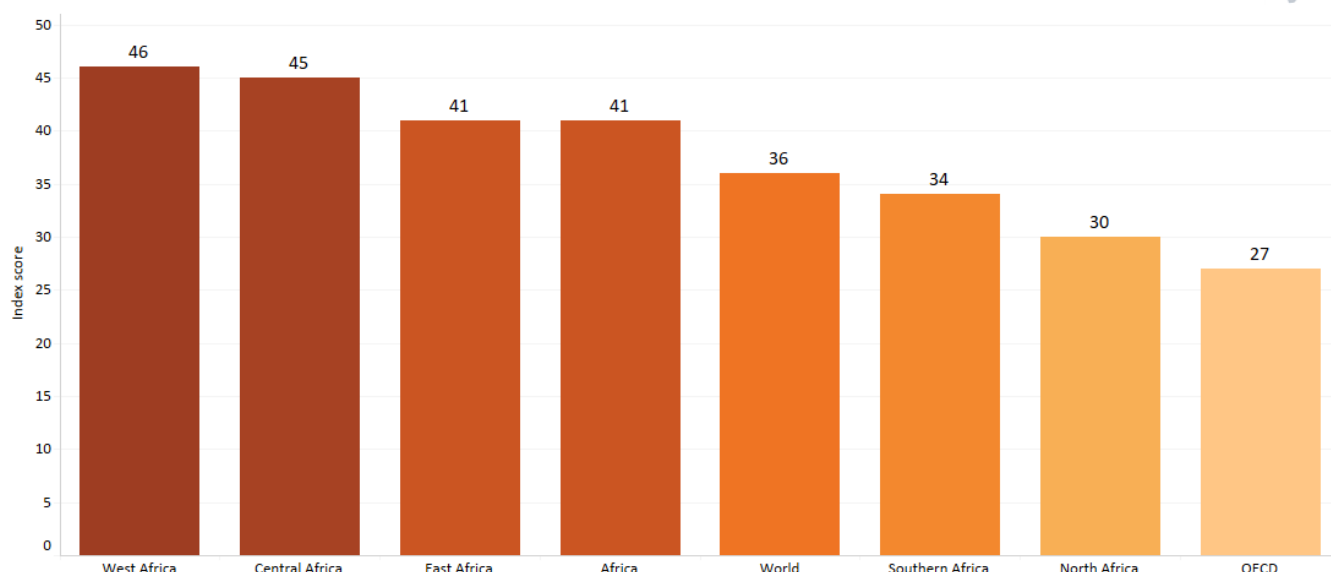
Child marriage

Child marriage, which is considered a form of gender-based violence, is defined as marriage taking place before the age of 18. Worldwide, child marriages have been declining steadily, including in Africa. For instance, from 2009 to 2018, the prevalence of child marriage declined by seven percentage points in Africa.[1] However, child marriage is still a widespread practice in many African countries. According to UNICEF, Africa is home to 130 million child brides, both girls under the age of 18 who have already married and adult women who were married as children.[2] It is estimated that 23% of African girls marry before the age of 18.[3]

Almost all African countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Maputo Protocol, which set marriage at 18 years and emphasises the need to end child marriage. However, most of these countries permit marriage before the age of 18. For instance, 37 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have legislated 18 years as the minimum age for marriage; however, 12 out of these countries allow marriage before the required age of 18 if the parents agree to such union.[4]

Africa's score on the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) for child marriages stood at 41 in 2021, which is significantly worse than the world average of 36 (a score of 0 indicates no discrimination and 100 indicates absolute discrimination). The extent of child marriages varies widely across Africa's subregions. The highest prevalence of child marriages is in West Africa (Chart 12), with a score of 46, followed closely by Central Africa (45). North Africa has the lowest level of child marriages among Africa's regions. Globally, nine out of ten countries with the highest levels of child marriage are in Africa, namely Niger, the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, South Sudan, Guinea and Nigeria. Countries with low levels of child marriage in Africa include Algeria, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa and Tunisia.[5]

Chart 12: Scores for child marriage, 2021



Source: Social Institutions and Gender Index, OECD

The deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs and the low value placed on girls are underlying factors of child marriages throughout the continent. In many African communities, girls are expected to become wives and mothers. For them, marriage brings more respect in the community than education. In some communities, families whose daughters are not married as children are often stigmatised, partly due to the importance placed on virginity, as many believe that the earlier a girl is married, the more likely she is to be a virgin.[6]

Poverty is also one of the key drivers of the practice of child marriage in Africa. Low-income families with several children see child marriage as a way to reduce their economic burden. One less daughter means one less person to feed, clothe and educate. One study reveals that 50% of women in Côte d'Ivoire's poorest households were married as children, compared to 14% in the wealthiest households.[7] In cultures where the bride's family is expected to pay a dowry, early marriage equates to a lower bride price. In cultures where the groom's family pays the dowry in exchange for the bride, younger girls get a higher price. Thus, families that cannot afford to raise their daughters perceive child marriage as the next best alternative and a source of income.[8]

The practice of child marriage results in multiple negative consequences for girls. It denies them their childhood and the chance to go to school, exposes them to serious health risks, subjects them to psychological and emotional trauma, isolates them from their societies and violates their human rights. Girls who marry as children often marry older men, intensifying power imbalances in the relationship. Subordinate to their husbands and families, domestic violence by an intimate partner is more prevalent and severe among girls who marry as children than women who provide informed consent to marry.[9]

Child marriage subjects many girls to rape and abuse for the rest of their lives. Also, with limited education and decision-making power, girls cannot influence decisions over safe sex and family planning, which puts them at high risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and becoming pregnant and giving birth before their bodies are biologically ready. It increases the chance of stillbirth, infant mortality, maternal mortality and disabling complications for the mother, such as obstetric fistula.[10]

There is a strong relationship between child marriage and fertility. Women who marry as children are more likely to have

more children over their lifetimes than those who marry later in life. It is not surprising that Niger, which has the highest rate of child marriage globally (62%), has the highest fertility rate globally (an average of seven births per woman).

Also, child marriage reduces girls' chances to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to secure good jobs and provide for themselves and their families. They also lose the opportunity to be empowered and stand up for their interests. As a result, millions of girls and women in Africa continue to live in extreme poverty.

Some African countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Rwanda and South Africa have made huge strides in reducing child marriage, while others are making legal reforms supporting the alignment of domestic legal frameworks with international conventions to reduce child marriage. For example, in 2019, Côte d'Ivoire passed a law putting the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 years for women and men in line with Article 6 (c) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.[11]

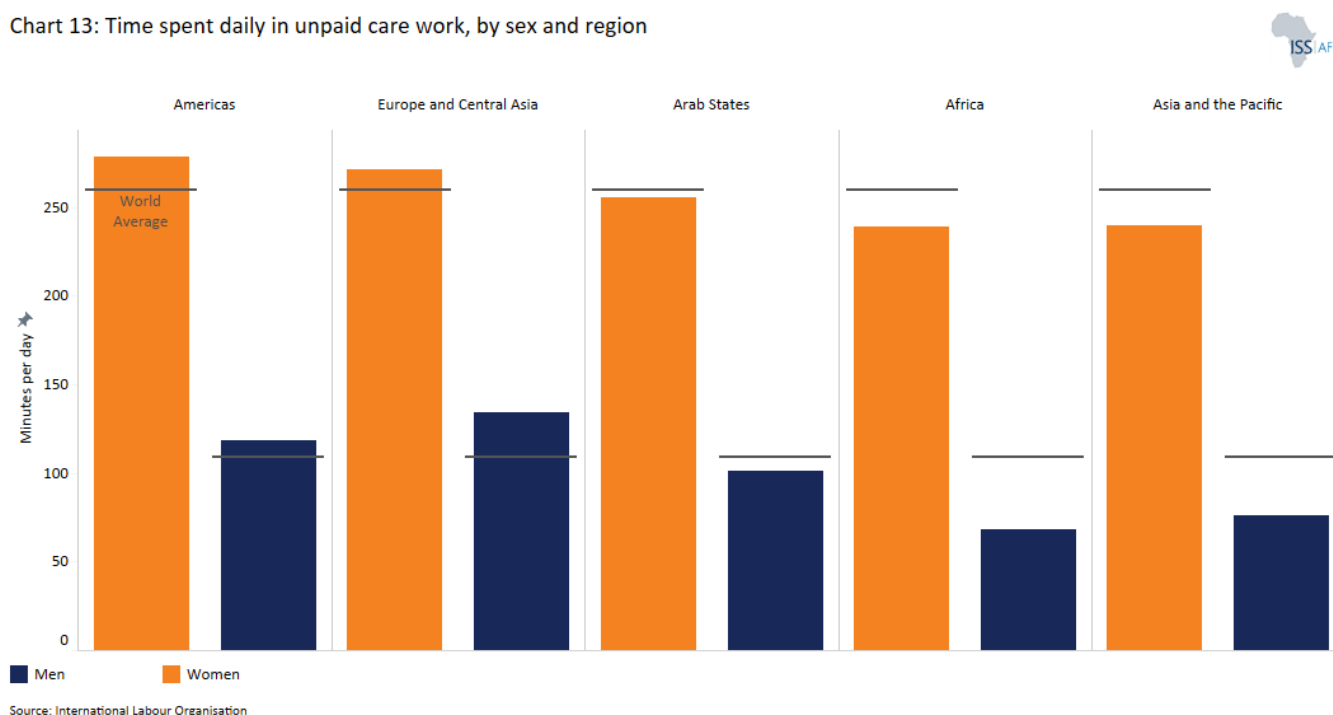
On the Current Path, IFs forecast that the share of females aged between 15 and 19 in marriage or union will range from 44.6% in Central African Republic and 38.7% in Niger to about 1% in Namibia, Algeria, Rwanda and Tunisia by 2043. The average for Africa is projected to decline from 19% in 2019 to 14.8% by 2043.

Household: unpaid care and domestic work

In many African communities, women are restricted as household headship and cannot make decisions within the household. Customary and traditional laws or some religious beliefs prevent women from having equal rights with only men seen as heads of households. According to a report by OECD, the national legal frameworks of 21 African countries prevent women from being head of a family and do not grant equal parental authority to married women over their children.[12] Also, in many African communities, cultural norms assign men as the primary breadwinners, while women are expected to fulfil the primary caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, women bear most of the burden regarding unpaid care and domestic work.

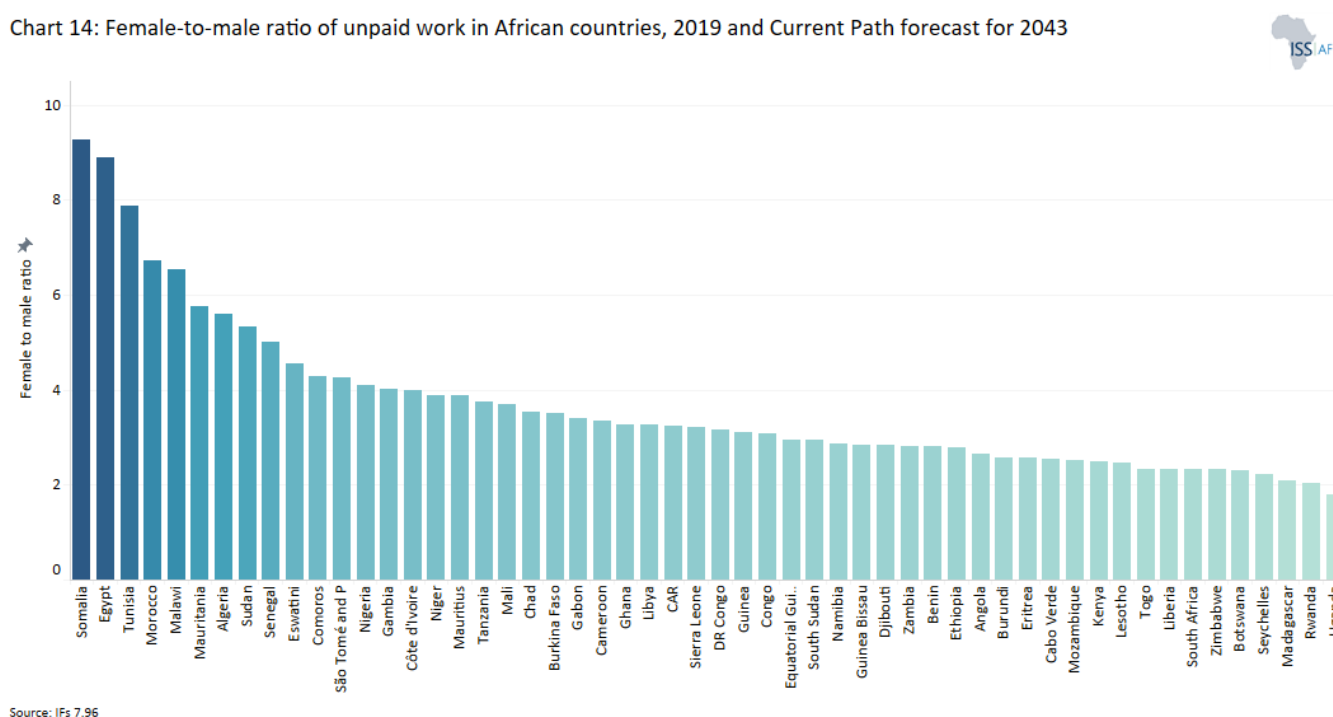
Globally, women are responsible for about 75% of all unpaid care and domestic work,[13] ranging from cooking, cleaning, washing, and caring for children, elders or sick family members, to attending children's school activities. According to a report by ILO,[14] globally, on average, women dedicate 3.2 times more time than men to unpaid care work: 4 hours and 25 minutes per day, compared to 1 hour and 23 minutes for men. Over a year, this represents 201 working days (on an eight-hour basis) for women compared with 63 working days for men.[15] The report also indicates that women spend more time in unpaid care work than men in every region, ranging from 1.7 times more in the Americas to 4.7 times in the Arab States (Chart 13).

Chart 13: Time spent daily in unpaid care work, by sex and region



In Africa, on average, women spend 4.1 times more time than men on unpaid care and domestic work; however, this proportion varies significantly across countries, ranging from about two times more in Uganda to nine times more in Somalia (Chart 14).

Chart 14: Female-to-male ratio of unpaid work in African countries, 2019 and Current Path forecast for 2043



This high gender inequality in unpaid labour limits women's time on remunerative activities to increase their income and economic empowerment. Also, women's unpaid work burden affects girls' educational outcomes as they generally assist more in unpaid domestic work than boys. Due to the lack of access to piped water and electricity at home in many African rural areas, women and girls walk several hours to collect water and firewood (used in traditional cookstoves). In Somalia

and Mauritania, for instance, a single trip to fetch water can, on average, take more than an hour.[16] These expectations that girls and women undertake a larger share of unpaid housework than boys and men in many African communities is a significant barrier facing girls and young women both for staying in school and for having the time and energy for school work and training for technical and vocational skills.

Women's unpaid work subsidises the cost of care that sustains families, supports economies and often fills in for the lack of social services.[17] Yet, it is not included in countries' GDP calculations. Based on ILO estimates, the value of unpaid care and domestic work represents as much as 9% of global GDP. Of that, women's unpaid work accounts for about 6.6% of GDP, and men's at 2.4%.[18]

The Current Path forecast is that the share of African men in unpaid domestic work will slightly increase (probably due to the projected increase in women's labour force participation rate), so by 2043, the average share of a given 24-hour day spent doing unpaid work by men will be about 7%, compared to 5% in 2019. The gap between men and women will then be about ten percentage points compared to 12.5 percentage points in 2019. Clearly, African men have a long way to go in equally sharing domestic work.

Divorce and inheritance

Women in Africa often face significant disadvantages in divorce and inheritance due to cultural norms, traditional practices, and legal frameworks that prioritise male interests and perpetuate gender inequalities. Examples include the following:

Divorce

In many African societies, divorce may result in women losing their rights to marital property, including land, houses and other assets. Customary or traditional laws, prevalent in some regions, may not adequately protect women's rights to property acquired during the marriage. As a result, women may be left economically vulnerable and unable to support themselves after divorce.

Inheritance

In many African societies, traditional inheritance practices often exclude women from inheriting property, especially land. Customary laws and patrilineal inheritance systems typically prioritise male heirs, leaving women with limited or no access to family assets. This lack of inheritance rights can perpetuate gender gaps in asset ownership, especially where inheritance is an important mode of asset acquisition. When only girls are in a family, the father's assets or possessions are usually passed on to his brothers upon death.[19] Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Eswatini, Gambia, Madagascar, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Mauritania and Niger are some African countries where sons and daughters do not have equal rights to inherit assets.[20]

Custody of children

In custody battles, women may face challenges in securing custody of their children. Cultural norms and stereotypes may assume that women are primarily responsible for childcare, but this can work against them if they seek custody. In some cases, custody decisions are made based on religious or customary laws favouring fathers over mothers.

Legal disparities

Legal frameworks in some African countries may not fully protect women's rights to divorce and inheritance. Laws might

be influenced by traditional or religious practices that discriminate against women, leading to unequal treatment under the law.

Lack of awareness and enforcement

Even when laws exist to protect women's rights to divorce and inheritance, lack of awareness about these rights can be a significant barrier. Additionally, enforcement of these laws may be weak or inconsistent, allowing harmful practices and discriminatory customs to persist.

Stigma and social pressure

Women who seek divorce or challenge customary inheritance practices may face social stigma and ostracism from their communities. This can discourage them from pursuing legal remedies or asserting their rights.

Endnotes

1. OECD, [Gender, Institutions and Development Database \(GID-DB\)](#), 2019.
2. UNICEF, [130 million African girls and women today married as children](#), 16 June 2022.
3. OECD, [Gender, Institutions and Development Database \(GID-DB\)](#), 2019.
4. B Maswikwa et al, [Minimum marriage age laws and the prevalence of child marriage and adolescent birth: Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa](#), *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 41:2, 2015, 58–68.
5. UNICEF, [130 million African girls and women today married as children](#), 16 June 2022.
6. S Olk, [The current state of child marriage in Africa](#), The Borgen Project, 2 February 2019.
7. Girls Not Brides, [Côte d'Ivoire](#)
8. *Berkeley Economic Review*, [The economics of child marriage](#), 8 October 2018.
9. Africa Health Organisation, [Child marriages](#).
10. Africa Health Organisation, [Child marriages](#).
11. Girls Not Brides, [Côte d'Ivoire](#).
12. The countries are Algeria, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Republic of the Congo, Seychelles, South Sudan, Togo and Tanzania.
13. A Chebbi, [Unpaid work and domestic labour: The reality for African women](#), ONE Campaign, 9 March 2020.
14. L Addati et al, [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#), International Labour Organization (ILO), June 2018.
15. L Addati et al, [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#), International Labour Organization (ILO), June 2018.
16. UNICEF, [Collecting water is often a colossal waste of time for women and girls](#), 29 August 2016.
17. UN Women, [Redistribute unpaid work](#).
18. RC Hernando, [Unpaid care and domestic work: Counting the costs](#), APEC Policy Support Unit Policy Brief No. 43, March 2022.
19. P Yao, [The right to inherit in customary law: An obstacle to women's emancipation in Ivory Coast](#), Ritimo/Aitec/Citego, March 2014.
20. The World Bank, [Gender Portal](#).

Donors and sponsors



HUMANITY
UNITED



Sweden
Sverige



Hanns
Seidel
Foundation



AUDA-NEPAD
AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts [can be embedded](#) in any site.

Cite this research

Kouassi Yeboua and Jakkie Cilliers (2025) Gender. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/16-gender/> [Online Resource] Updated 05 February 2025.

About the authors

Dr Kouassi Yeboua previously worked as a Senior Researcher at AFI, where he led significant ISS studies on the long-term development prospects of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Horn of Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, and Mozambique. His research focuses on development economics, macroeconomics, gender, and economic modeling. He holds a PhD in Economics.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.