

Changing patterns of marriage and unions across the world

World Marriage Data 2015 — a new, comprehensive dataset on marital and union status by age and sex from 1970 to 2014 for 231 countries or areas — provides up-to-date information to assess time trends in marriage patterns, and the extent to which women and men postpone marriage, intentionally remain single, cohabit or live together.¹

1. Men and women are marrying later today than in the past; also, the sex gap in age at first marriage narrowed in most regions, but widened in Asia, and remained stable worldwide

In the period 1970 to 1999, the average age at first marriage worldwide was 24.3 years for men and 21.1 years for women (figure 1). From 2000 to 2014, the

average age at first marriage increased by more than two years for both men and women, reaching 26.5 years for men and 23.4 years for women in 2014.³ The largest increases took place among women in Africa, Europe and Northern America, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Despite the postponement of marriage to older ages in recent decades, the average worldwide difference between men and women (“the sex gap”) in the age at first marriage has remained at about three years. The gender gap narrowed over time in Africa, Europe, Northern America and Latin America and the Caribbean, while widening in Asia. In countries where women marry young on average, the difference between men and women in the age at first marriage tends to be larger (figure 2).

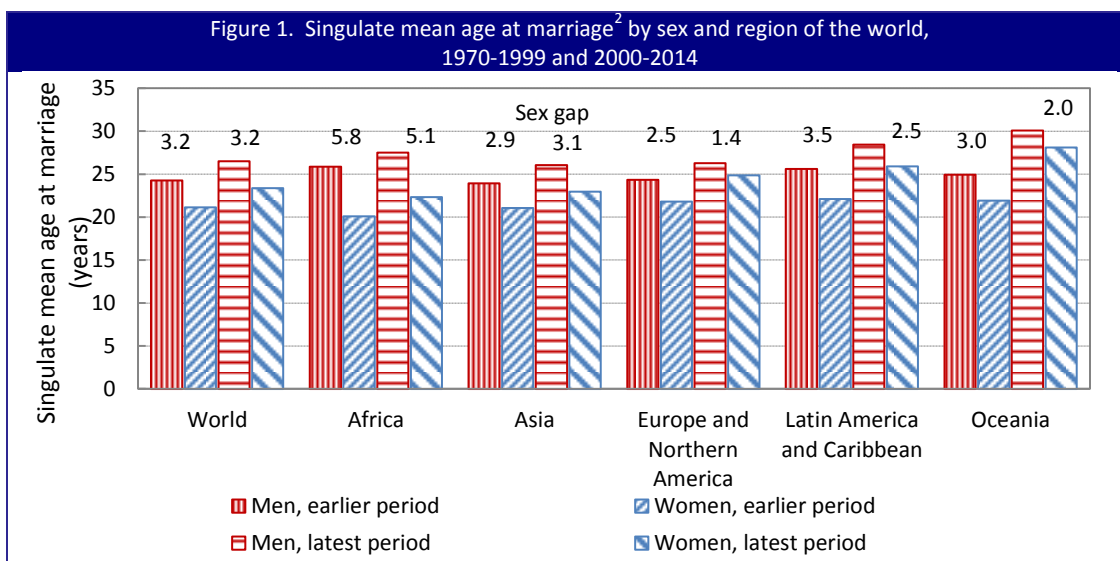
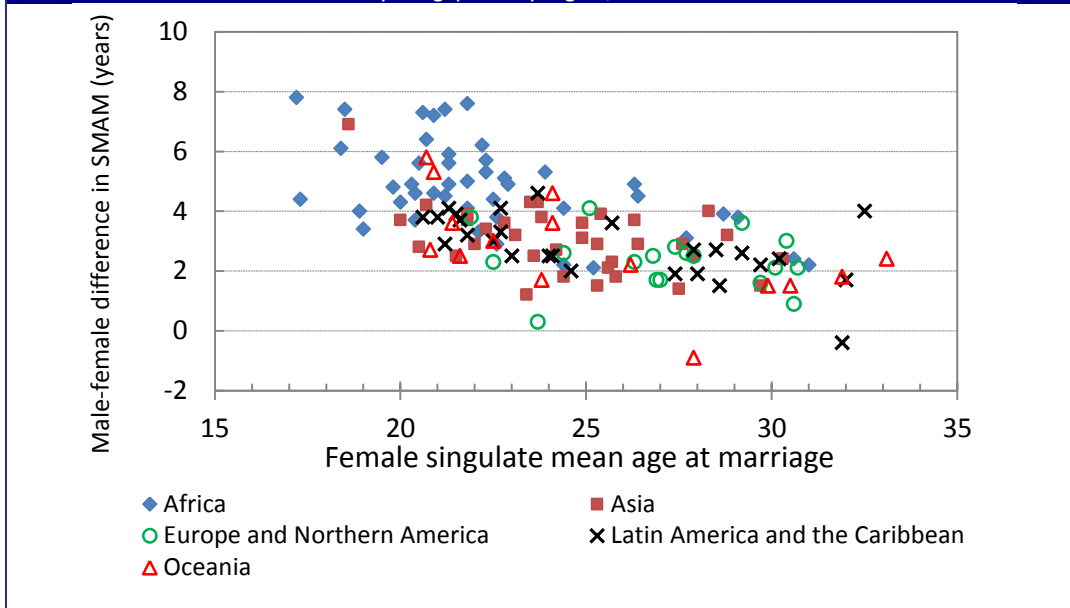


Figure 2. Female mean age at marriage among countries by sex gap and by region, 2000-2014



2. Cohabitation of unmarried couples, or consensual unions is increasingly common

The growing prevalence of cohabitation, or consensual unions, has been a key change in union patterns during recent decades. The increase in the percentage of females in unions that are consensual, from 1970-1999 to 2000-2014, is shown by the points above the diagonal of figure 3. Consensual unions not only characterize young people's unions, they have increasingly become more common among both never-married and ever-married persons across many age groups.

Consensual unions are less common in Asia and more prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean (figure 4). A distinct life-course pattern of consensual unions is evident in Latin America and the Caribbean, where large proportions of women at all ages are in consensual unions. It is not known, from the available data, what proportion of women have spent their entire life in consensual unions or was previously married and was in consensual unions at the time the data was collected.

Figure 3. Percentage of women in consensual unions by age group in selected countries, 1970-1999 and 2000-2014

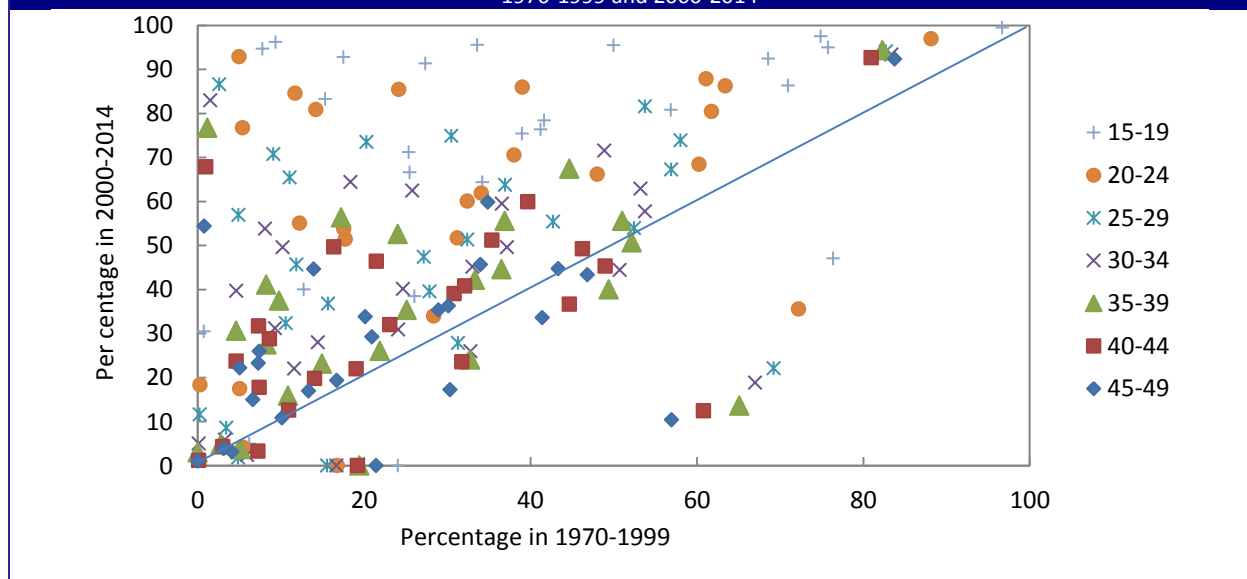
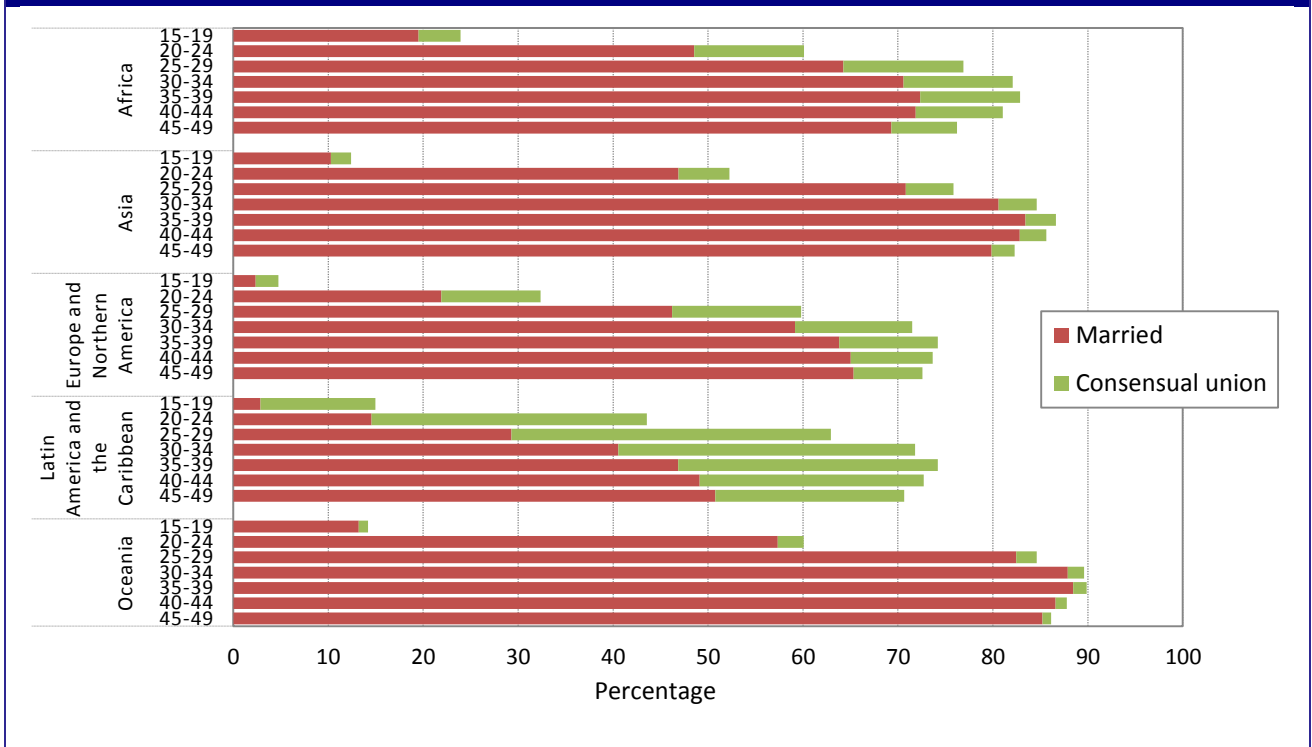


Figure 4. Percentage of women who are married or in consensual union by age group and region of the world, 2000-2014

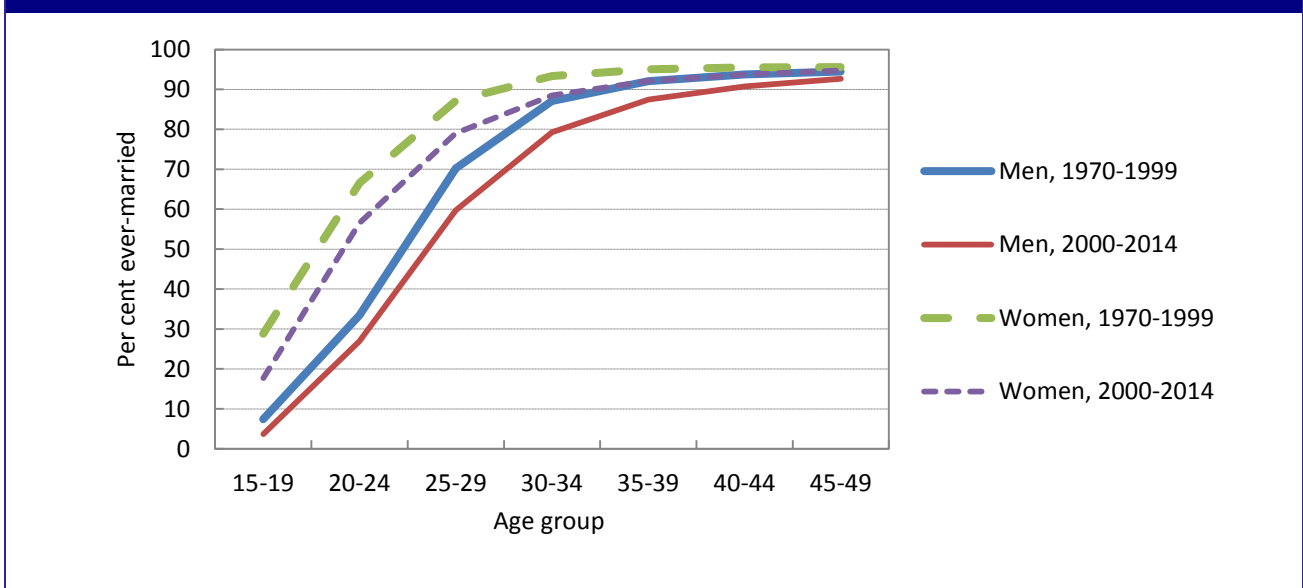


3. Although a large majority of men and women eventually marry, the global prevalence of marriage has fallen in recent decades

Global estimates of the percentage of ever-married persons (population-weighted)³ show that despite declines over time in the age-specific proportions of

men and women who have ever married, at least 9 out of 10 men and women over the age of 40 had been married in both time periods (figure 5). A larger proportion of women than men have ever married in both periods, reflecting the general pattern of women marrying men who are older than they are. The difference between men and women in the proportion ever married is larger at younger ages (below 30 years).

Figure 5. Percentage ever-married by age group and sex, 1970-1999 and 2000-2014

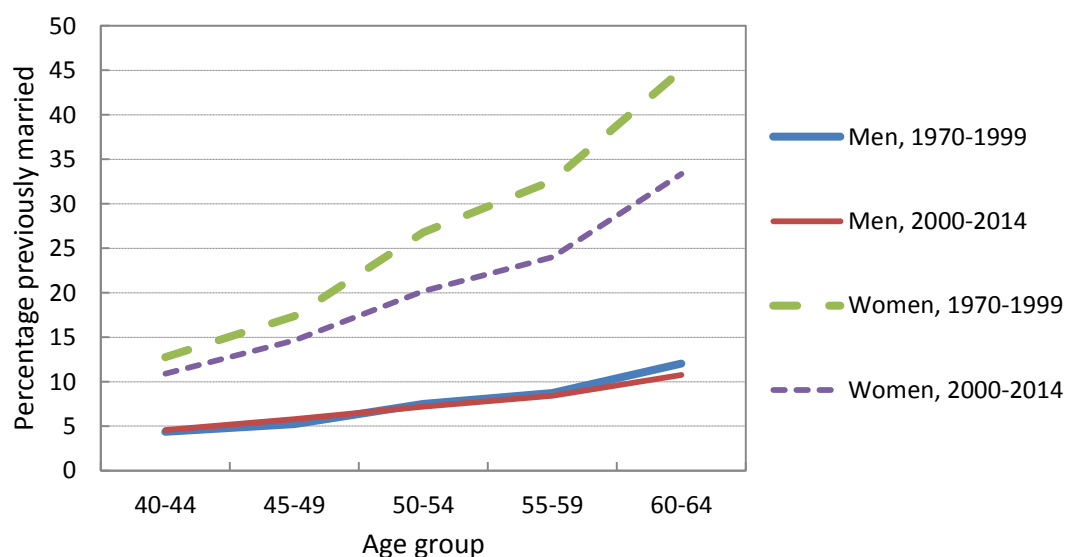


4. Globally, a larger proportion of women than men are formerly married (separated, divorced or widowed)

Living as a separated, divorced or widowed person continues to be more common among women than men. Among the population aged 40 to 64 years, the sex gap in the proportion of previously-married persons grows wider with age (figure 6), a reflection of the lower

average marriage ages of women than men, the higher female life expectancy, and the higher remarriage rates among men than women (see details in Population Division, 2015a). Also, whereas the proportion of formerly married women declined between 1970-1999 and 2000-2014, the proportion of previously married men did not change significantly.

Figure 6. Percentage formerly married (separated, divorced or widowed) by age group and sex, 1970-1999 and 2000-2014



NOTES

¹ Special tabulations based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015a). *World Marriage Data 2015* (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2015). New York: United Nations, available online at: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/theme/marriage-unions/WMD2015.shtml>.

² The singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) is calculated from the data on proportions single by age and sex, obtained from censuses or sample surveys. Details of the calculation of SMAM are provided in United Nations (1983). *Manual X: Indirect techniques for demographic estimation*. New York: United Nations, available online at: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/manuals/estimate/manual10/annexes.pdf>

³ Estimates for regions of the world are weighted using the respective male and female populations obtained from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015b). *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*. New York: United Nations, available online at: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/DVD/>.