



Consensual Unions in Burkina Faso: Levels, Trends and Determinants

Zourkaleini Younoussi (*Université de Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso*), and **Thomas K. LeGrand** (*Université de Montréal, Canada, sabbatical ANU in 2006*)

To date, few studies have used survey data to examine types of conjugal unions in sub-Saharan Africa. Marriage remains at the heart of African social organization and changes in marital behaviors are likely to reflect significant changes in family organization, gender relations and fertility. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has greatly increased the policy importance of issues relating to sexual relations in the region. Consensual unions, to extent that they may be more transitory and lead to greater numbers of sexual partners, can facilitate spread of sexually transmitted diseases, compared to formal marriages. Are growing numbers of consensual unions in Africa a manifestation of profound changes in cohabitation and marriage? Or do they simply represent a transitional step in the marriage process, constituting little more than a minor change in strategy in the face of difficult economic times and the high costs of marriage? In sub-Saharan Africa, the study of consensual unions has been greatly hindered by the complexity of the marriage process and by greatly inadequate data. In this study, we use data from a recent national family life-type survey providing unusually detailed information on people's marital histories and related events to examine consensual unions in Burkina Faso. The empirical analysis focuses first on levels and covariates of consensual unions at the type of the survey in 2000, and then on time trends and the determinants of entry into consensual unions, using detailed data on the timing of first cohabitation and of various wedding ceremonies.