# Typologies and Trajectories: A Descriptive Study of Men's Reproductive Life Course (AS75)

*An Analysis Brief from The DHS Program*

## Why study men's reproductive life course?

Women's life courses are well studied, and it is well accepted that key events like early marriage and birth have social and health consequences later in women's lives. Much less attention has been given to men's reproductive life courses, and we know little about men's experience with family formation and its impact on other social and health outcomes.

## Which countries were included in the study?

This analysis included data from 8 countries in 3 regions: Benin, Mali, and Nigeria in West Africa; Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda in East Africa; and India and Nepal in South Asia.

## What methods were used to conduct this analysis?

This descriptive analysis focuses on 3 family formation events important to men's reproductive life course: timing of first sex, first marriage, and birth of first child. We use data visualization to explore the timing and trajectories of these life events, with a particular focus on "typical timing" versus "off-time" compared to the norms for that country. Finally we examine the implications of the timing of these events on several economic, social, and fertility-related behaviors.

## What are the key results?

• We identified three major family formation timing typologies which largely split along regional lines (see box).


Father and son in Ethiopia. ©Brant Stewart, RTI/ PMI USAID

**Family Formation Typologies**

**Type 1**

- Extended gap between first sex and marriage, followed by a shorter gap to first birth.

-Premarital sex and childbearing are relatively common.

*Benin, Mali, Nigeria, Uganda*

**Type 2**

- Moderate gap between first sex and marriage, and a longer gap to first birth.

-Premarital sex is fairly common, but premarital childbearing is relatively rare.
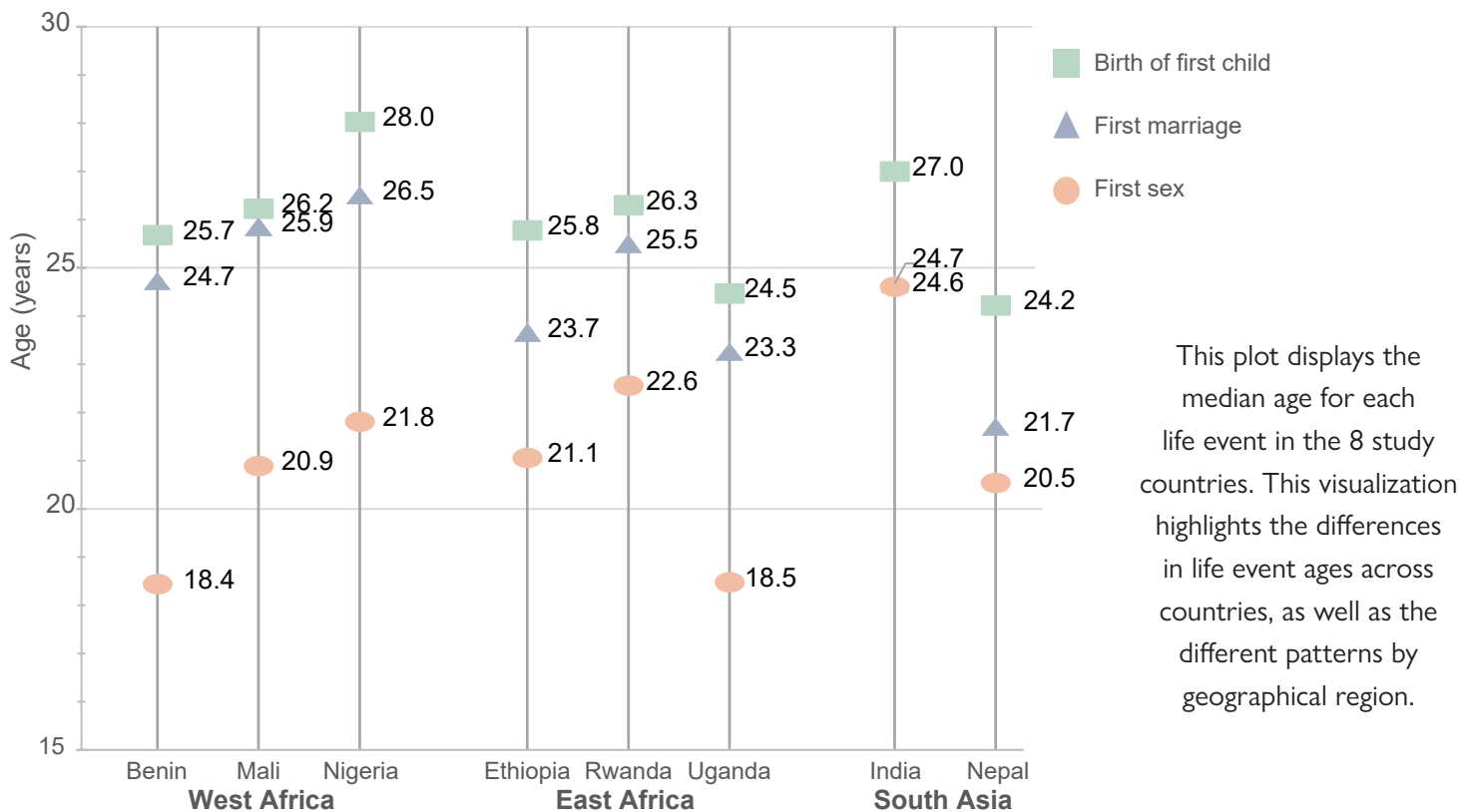
*Ethiopia, Rwanda*

**Type 3**

- Short gap between first sex and marriage, and a moderate gap to first birth.

-Premarital sex is less common and premarital childbearing is very rare.
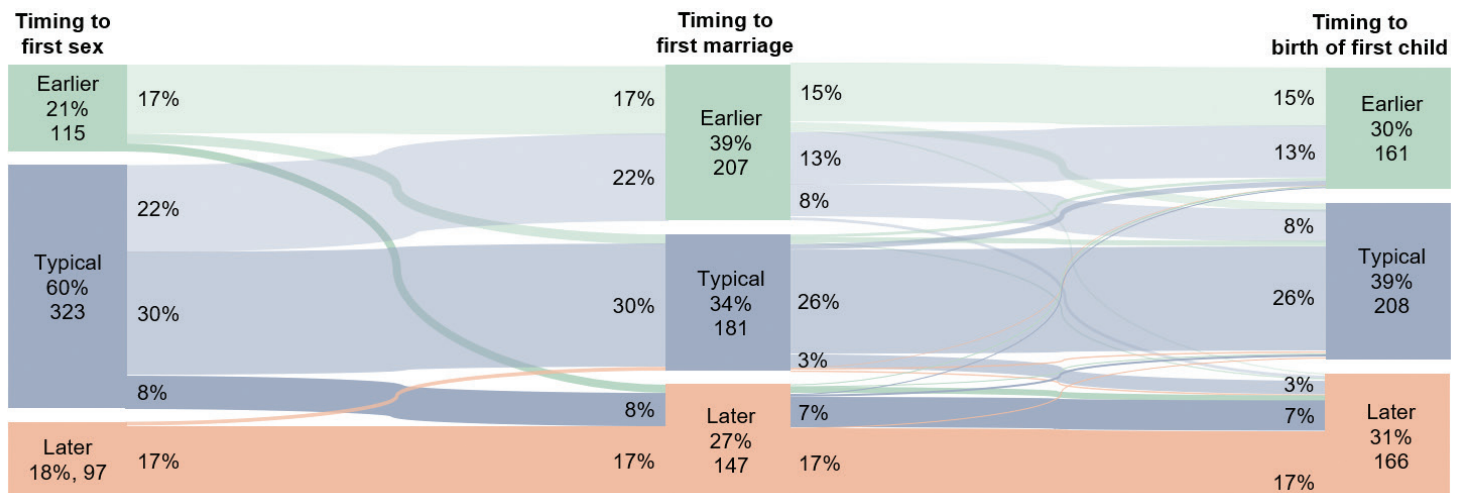
*India, Nepal*

# Results, continued

**Figure 1: Median ages at first sex, first marriage, and birth of first child among men age 30-34**



This plot displays the median age for each life event in the 8 study countries. This visualization highlights the differences in life event ages across countries, as well as the different patterns by geographical region.

- Median ages for each life event vary by country but the patterns, as described by the 3 typologies, are recognizable (see Figure 1). For example, in West Africa, which, with Uganda, are all Type 1 countries, there is a large gap between first sex and marriage, indicating the frequency of premarital sex. Conversely, in South Asia there is a much smaller gap between first sex and first marriage, suggesting the relative infrequency of premarital sex.

- Men tend to adhere closely to the typical timing for first sex, while there is more variation in timing of first marriage and birth of first child. When first marriage and birth of first child occur "off-time", that is, far from the median ages these events are experienced at, there is roughly an even split between those who are 'earlier-than-typical' and those who are 'later-than-typical' (typology 3).

- Sankey diagrams are used to illustrate life trajectories, that is, the various pathways men take from one life event to the next. Results are presented by country, but several patterns emerge across countries:

  - There is evidence of some path dependence: When men start earlier than typical, the next event is more likely to be earlier than typical. In Nepal, for example, men who initiate sex earlier than typical generally continue on to marry and have their first birth earlier than the typical age (Figure 2).

  - There is less switching from later to earlier or typical on the next event than other progressions. That is, men who initiate sex later than typical are less likely to move on to the other life events at the typical or earlier timings, whereas men who initiate sex early or at the typical age move fairly equally to the next timing categories.

    **Additional guidance on reading and interpreting Sankey diagrams is provided on page 4.

**Figure 2: Family formation trajectories among men age 30-34, Nepal**



| Timing to first sex | Timing to first marriage | Timing to birth of first child |

- There is evidence that men with earlier trajectories are advantaged on some economic behaviors/outcomes (home & land ownership) and those with later trajectories are advantaged on others (wealth and education).

- Men with later trajectories typically display more attitudes and behaviors supportive of women's empowerment. Later trajectory men report more joint decision-making with their spouse (rather than sole decision-making), and lower support of wife-beating. The attitude that contraception is a woman's concern is associated with earlier and typical trajectories.

- Patterns of contraceptive use by trajectory vary by country. Earlier trajectories are associated with having more children, but fertility desires are country and typology-specific.

## What comes next?

This descriptive analysis for 8 countries is a first step in exploring Life Course Theory for men. The typology scheme presented here suggests that this may be an effective way of classifying countries in terms of family formation processes, but analysis of more countries is necessary to assess the validity of the scheme more globally. Further research could explore the underlying reasons for patterns of family formation behavior.

Additional analysis is needed to understand causal relationships, but this analysis suggests that earlier trajectories are associated with poorer outcomes for men. While most efforts at delaying childbearing are focused on women, this study highlights the importance of men in the planning of these critical events.
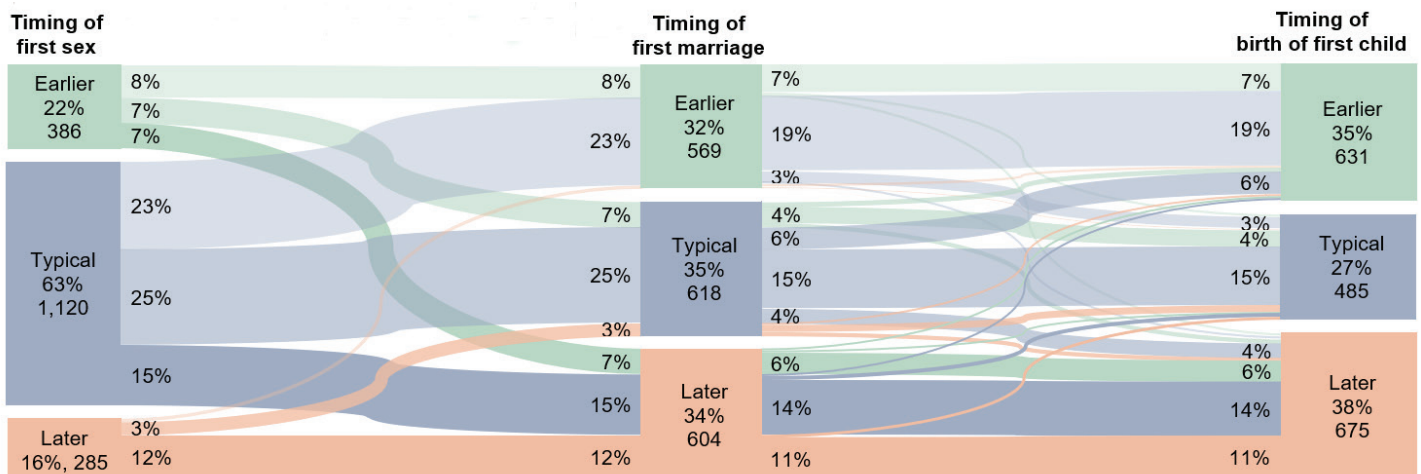
# How to read and interpret a Sankey diagram

A Sankey visualization is a type of flow diagram in which the width of the arrows is proportional to quantity.

In this example from Nigeria, the 1st indicator is timing of first sex. The blue bar is the widest, indicating that the majority of men age 30-34 in Nigeria have typical timing for initiation of first sex (63%).

The 2nd set of bars, which visualize men's data for timing at first marriage, is more evenly spread. Each of the bars (green, blue, and orange) are about the same size, indicating that about 1/3 of men age 30-34 are in each category.

The 3rd event is the timing of the birth of the first child. These are also fairly evenly distributed among 30-34 year old men in Nigeria. But men don't necessarily stay in the same timing category across the stages.

**Figure 3: Family formation trajectories among men age 30-34, Nigeria**



The flow arrows connecting the major categories help to tell the story of how men move from one family formation even to another: their reproductive life trajectories. Each arrow retains the color of the first category it came from; that is, the green arrows for the men who initiated sex early stay green, even if they ultimately get married or have their first child later than the typical age.

For example, let's follow the 22% of men who initiated sex earlier than the typical age. Reading from left to right we see:

- 8% also got married earlier than the typical age; and then 7% also had their first child earlier than the typical age.

- 7% got married at the typical age, and then the group splits: some have their first child early (a very thin line going up), a few have their first child later than average (a very thin line going down) and the majority of this group (4%) proceed to have their first child at the typical age.

- 7% got married later than the typical age, and almost all of them (6%) then had their first child later than the typical age.

By identifying the widest bars across the visualization, we can see the most common life trajectories for these 3 events:

- Men who initiate sex at a typical age, and then proceed to marry and have their first birth early (19%)

- Men who initiate sex at a typical age, and then proceed to marry and have their first child at a typical age (15%)

- Men who initiate sex at a typical age, but then have their first marriage and birth later (14%)

- Men who initiate sex later than the typical age, and also marry and have their first child later than the typical ages (11%)