Research Article

Gender Differentials in the Perception of Family Structure Changes in Benue State, North-Central Nigeria

Benedict Ejeh[1, *] , Aduke Olufunmilayo Bello[2], Adenike Saliu Morilat[2], Angela Uwanuakwa[2]

[1]Department of Geography, Faculty of Social and Management Sciences, Federal University Gashua, Nigeria

[2]Department of Geography, School of Art and Social Sciences, Federal University of Education, Zaria, Nigeria

Abstract

Family structures have experience various changes globally in recent times. These changes are being influenced by one factor or the other. The study reports the level of experience of family structure changes among male and female in some selected Local Government Area of Benue State, North-Central Nigeria. Data was obtained through questionnaire. Purposive sampling method was used to select six Local Government Areas, while 386 households were chosen as sample size. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages, chart. graphs were used for the analysis. Family system theory was used to explain the changes in family structure with the assumption that a shift in one part such as nuclear family to a new modern family arrangement of cohabitation, divorce, separation, delayed marriage affects the functioning of entire parts of the family. Result from the findings indicates that 78.% of the respondents have experience changes in the family while 22% have not. The gender differentials in the level of experience of family structure change shows that the level of experience of cohabitation and divorce is slightly higher among women with about 1.1% and 2.5% respectively than men. Also, the level of experience of marital separation and single parenthood is slightly higher among men than women with about 0.1% and 3.2% respectively. Finally, change in household size and delayed marriage is more experience among women than men with about 10.9% and 7.1% respectively. This suggests that the traditional values are experiencing a changes and the cultural chastity are no longer promoted and encouraged in recent times. The chi-square test results show that for all the six indicators (cohabitation, divorce, separation, single parenthood, household size, and delayed marriage), there is no significant difference between males and females in terms of their experience of family structure changes. The p-values for all tests are greater than 0.05, which suggests that gender does not significantly influence family structure change. It is therefore recommended that there is need for policymakers to develop gender-neutral policies and support services. For instance, support systems such as counseling, divorce mediation, housing assistance, and child support programs should be made available equally to all genders without assumptions based on gender roles, there is need by government to strengthen marriage institution to promote stable family pattern, Public awareness campaigns and educational programs should emphasize that family structure changes affect both men and women, Family support programs that address challenges such as single parenthood, delayed marriage, and cohabitation should not prioritize gender but instead focus on the universal needs of individuals undergoing these changes.

Keywords

Family Structure, Changes, Gender Differentials and Experience

1. Introduction

Family structures have undergone various transformations globally. Despite these notable changes, the family remains a vital component of contemporary society with significant and cross-institutional influences, Alabi [3]. The family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household interacting with each other in their respective social role of husband and wife, mother and father, brother and sister creating a common culture. Changes in family structure are the significant shift in the composition and dynamics of traditional families to another type. Family structure can be categorized into single and extended family. These family types cum structures have witnessed and still undergoing an unprecedented changes in recent times characterized by a shrinking household size, an increase in female-headed households, increase in number of single parent households, late marriage, increasing rate of cohabitation, increase in the rate of marriage breakdown and instability among couple which is primarily driven by factors like urbanization, modernization, economic changes, and increased education levels for women, violent crisis, desertion by one parent, by choice as a result of personal experience, death, divorce or separation, demographic, Socio-economic and cultural, Prioux, Bianchi and Kuperberg [7, 16, 31].

Benue State of the North-Central Nigeria is not exempted from these changes despite its cultural inheritances ranging from early marriage, strong attachment to the Alekwu spirit of the ancestors by the Idomas, the practice of Yamshe or exchange system of marriage by the Tiv, the practice of levirate marriage which all served as a guide against divorce, separation that could lead to single parenthood, premarital sex that can lead to cohabitation before year 2000 Aboje, Prioux and Torkula [2, 31, 36] These cultural norms and values have experienced changes since the beginning of the 21st Century as contained in the reports of National Bureau of statistics (NBS) and Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) [21-28]. Given the fact that transformation of family structure is a global phenomenon, several studies have been conducted on this phenomenon based on individual perceptions. Ragini, Shabnam and Sudha looked at changing family composition, structure and practices in Bangladesh using questionnaire and descriptive statistics. A total of 150 sample size was used and random sampling for the study. The findings revealed that 81.25% families were nuclear, role power and status was given according to age of person in the family (86.25%). The study concentrated on family types and role power as one of the indicators of family structure but did not address the gender differential of these types [33]. Harawa used data from Malawi Demographic Health Survey of 2000 and 2010 to assess the levels, trends and determinants of family structure. The study reveals a 2.5% increase in the rate of single families between 2000 and 2010. Furthermore, the results show that age of household head is statistically associated with changing family structure in Malawi in the years 2000 and 2010 for both the nuclear and extended family categories. The study relied on secondary data (Malawi Demographic Health Survey) of the entire country [13]. This work used both secondary and primary data which provide more robustness than using only a single data source among men and women in Nigeria and Benue State in particular.

Haregu, Beguy and Ezeh assessed changing family structure and fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa using the DHS reports of three selected sub-Saharan African countries of Kenya (Eastern Africa), Nigeria (Western Africa) and Namibia (Southern Africa) using descriptive statistics. The finding revealed that African household size is reducing, female-headed households are increasing and extended families are decreasing, women's age at first marriage is increasing which results to a declined in fertility. The study is very insightful, yet the gender differential of the changes was not captured [14]. Despite the aforementioned studies by various authors much about the perception of the changes in the family structure among men and women remains fairly unknown in Nigeria in general in Benue State in particular. The specific objectives are to: i. assess the level of experience of transformation of family structure in Benue State; ii identify the types of transformation of family structure in Benue State; iii. examine the gender differentials in the type of changes in the family structure in the study area.
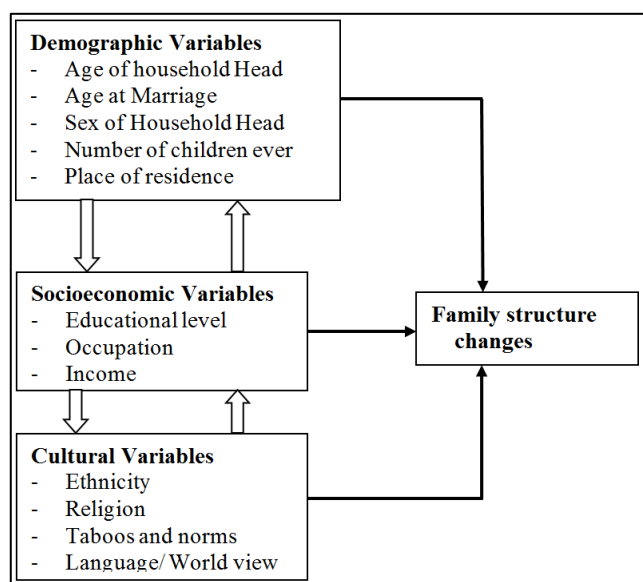
2. Theoretical Framework

Family system theory is rooted in general systems theory, which is based on the assumption that the system as a whole is more and different from the arithmetic sum of its individual parts taken in isolation Bratcher, Fingerman and Bermann [9, 12]. Family systems theory is concerned with family dynamics including functioning, structures, roles, boundaries and actions occurring within the group Fingerman and Bermann, Rothbaum et al [12, 34]. It explains why family members behave in a certain manner in a given situation Fingerman and Bermann [12]. According to family systems theory, a human family is a multigenerational, natural living system where the family's network of relationship serves an important purpose in the family life, Becvar, and Becvar [6]. Thus, it takes into account communication, interaction, separation, connectedness, loyalty, independence and adaptation to the stress in the context of the whole family as opposed to the individual alone Fingerman and Bermann [12]. It focuses on the family as an emotional unit composed of interrelated members and structure Bowen, Kerr and Bowen [8, 16]. As such, the shift in one part of the current functioning of the entire family system affects the functioning of other parts of the family Becvar, and Becvar, O'Gorman and Rothbaum [6, 30, 35]. Two main assumptions underlined in this theoretical framework are: a)

the family is a very strong emotional system. It functions as an organic whole which shapes the life and behaviour of its members;) family relationships are characterized by circular, reciprocal and repetitive motions rather than linear ones Charter, Kerr and Bowen, Titelman [11, 16, 35].

Figure 1. Show the influence of the demographic, socio-economic and cultural factors on family structure changes. These variables inter-relate with each other to bring about family structure change. These were adopted as independent variables as factors arise from respondent's background and its influence on the adoption to changes occurring to the family.

In this conceptual framework, the demographic factors (age of household head, age at marriage, sex of household head), socioeconomic factors (education, occupation, religion, place of residence, and income) and cultural factors (ethnicity); are assumed to be associated with family structure changes in Nigeria.
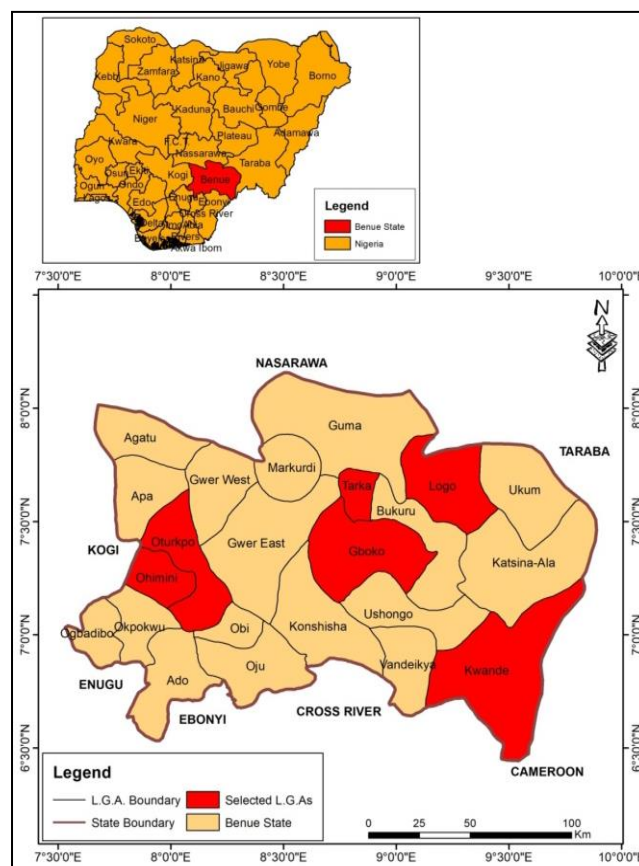

Source: Adapted from Harawa, [14].

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the influence of the socio – economic and demographic variables on family structure changes.

The arrow pointing up and down from each variables show the inter-relationship between each other while the lines from demographic, socio-economic and cultural variables which are independent variables show their influence family structure changes which is the dependent variable as the outcome effect of the inter-relationship.

3. The Study Area

Benue State lies within the lower river Benue trough in the middle belt region of Nigeria. It lies between Latitude 6°30' to 8°0' 0°N of the equator and longitude 7°30' to 10°0' E of the Greenwich meridian (see Figure 2). Benue State shares boundaries with other States like Nassarawa to the north, Taraba to the east, Cross-River to the south, Enugu to the south-west and Kogi to the west. The state also shares a common boundary with the Republic of Cameroun on the south-east with a landmass of 32,518 square kilometer Ujoh and Alhassan [4]. The State has a total population of 6, 427, 991 as projected in 2019 making it the 7th most populous State in Nigeria having about 51% and 49% population of males and females.

Source: Adapted from Administrative Map of Nigeria (2019)

Figure 2. Map of Benue State.

Benue State comprises of several ethnic groups which are Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etulo, Abakpa, Jukun, Akweya and Nyofon, Igbos, Yorubas, Hausa among others. The Tiv are the dominant ethnic group, occupying fourteen Local Government Areas, while the Idoma and Igede occupy the remaining nine Local Government Areas. Agriculture forms the backbone of the Benue State economy, engaging more than 70 percent of the working population. Benue state is acclaimed the nation's "food basket" because of its rich and diverse agricultural produce which include yam, rice, beans, cassava, potatoes, maize, Soya beans, sorghum, millet and coco-yam. Agriculture being the main occupation of the people could lead to early marriage and hence the increase in the incidence

of divorce, Benue State Ministry of Information and Orientation [18].

4. Materials and Method

The study was carried out in selected Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The State comprises twenty-three (23) Local Government Areas which are grouped into three (3) senatorial zones. A sample size of 386 was arrived at using the Yamane (1967) sample size formula with a population of 4, 253, 641 in 2006 which is being projected to 6, 427,991 in 2019. After grouping the Local Government Areas (LGAs) according to the three (3) senatorial zones, two LGAs were purposively selected from each senatorial zone making a total of six (6) LGAs. From the selected two LGAs, one with highest and lowest population was purposively selected. This is to enhance equal representation from each senatorial zone. Secondly, the socio-economic characteristic was also used to select the LGAs. For instance, Gboko and Otukpo are the administrative headquarters of the two dominant ethnic groups in the study areas. These have attracted rapid infrastructural development making them more urbanized than other LGAs. The household at ward level in each of the selected LGAs served as a unit of observation. After arranging the wards in each of the selected LGAs alphabetically, systematic sampling was used to select the second ward in that orders. What informed this method was the uneven distribution of the number of wards in each of the selected LGAs. The questionnaire was distributed equally across the wards in each of the selected LGA. This is due to the unavailability of ward population in the selected wards as at the time of the research.
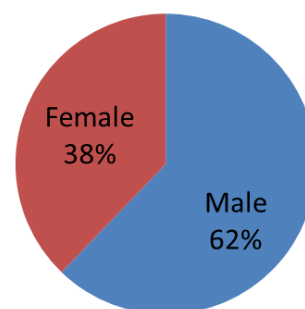
Convenience sampling method was used to select a household in each of the selected wards for questionnaire administration. The reasons for convenience sampling method was due to time efficiency to allow the researcher to gather the data quickly; to reduce logistical expenses since the respondents are readily available, respondents restriction by either spouse or family members as a result of culture and tradition where people especially women restricted from giving information of the family without permission, the willingness of respondents to participate in the exercise reduces the chances of non-response. The head of each house-

hold was chosen as the respondent and where he/she is not available; the eldest adult person was selected to represent the household. This was done until the required sample size was obtained. One copy of questionnaire was administered per household to allow full participation of other households especially in urban areas where there are multiple tenants. Data was analyzed descriptively using SPSS version 22. Frequency and percentages were used to present results in tables and charts while chi-square was used to test the significant difference between family structure transformation among male and female.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of Respondents

The sex distribution of respondents is presented in Figure 3. Results showed that about 62% of the respondents were males while 38% were females.

Source: Field survey, 2019.

Figure 3. *Sex of the Respondents.*

This is in tandem with the fact that, the households in Benue State like other traditional African societies are male-headed dominated. This is in agreement with Aboajah, Onjewu and Okeme [1] in Benue which reported 71% and 29% households dominated by male-heads respectively.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic characteristics of household heads.*

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
35-39	4	1.7	5	3.4	9	2.3
40-44	14	5.8	8	5.5	22	5.7
45-49	24	10.0	17	11.6	41	10.6
50-54	65	27.1	36	24.7	101	26.2

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	Freq.	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**
55-59	39	16.3	26	17.8	65	16.8
60-64	48	20.0	23	15.8	71	18.4
65 and above	46	19.2	31	21.2	77	19.9
Total	240	100.	146	100	386	100
Occupation	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
None	0	0	1	0.7	1	0.3
Civil service	68	28.3	20	13.7	88	22.8
Farming	121	50.4	91	62.3	212	54.9
Pettytrading/business	41	38.0	21	14.4	62	16.1
Artisan	7	2.9	3	2.1	10	2.6
Student	3	1.3	5	3.4	8	2.1
Housewife	0	0	5	3.4	5	1.3
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	240	100	146	100	386	100
Education	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Primary	86	35.8	58	39.7	144	37.3
Secondary	63	26.3	35	24.0	98	25.4
Quranic	2	0.8	0	.0	2	0.5
Post-secondary	55	22.9	19	13.0	74	19.2
None	34	14.2	34	23.3	68	17.6
Total	240	100	146	100	386	100
Income	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
No fixed income	71	29.6	60	41.1	131	33.9
₦5000- ₦10,000	18	7.2	24	16.4	43	10.9
₦10,000- ₦15,000	22	9.2	15	10.3	37	9.6
₦15,000- ₦20,000	30	12.5	15	10.3	45	11.7
₦20,000- ₦25,000	13	5.4	9	6.2	22	5.7
₦25,000- ₦30,000	3	1.3	3	2.1	6	1.6
₦30,000- ₦35,000	10	4.2	3	2.1	13	3.4
₦35,000- ₦40,000	18	7.5	8	5.5	26	6.7
₦40,000 and above	55	22.9	9	6.4\2	64	16.6
Total	240	100	146	100	386	100

Source: Field survey, 2019.

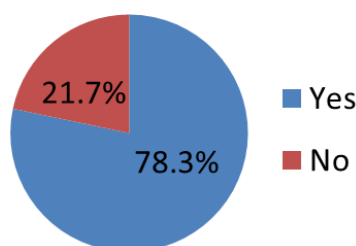The age distribution of respondents in Table 2 indicates the dominance of 50 years and above which accounts for 81%.

Only few were between the age brackets of 35-39. The finding established that most respondents in the selected Lo-cal Government were adults. Among them, about 38% were aged. This is in tandem with that of Attah., Mbah and Okeke [5] where it was reported that, majority of the household heads in Benue State were within the age bracket 50 years and

above. Result of occupation of the respondents reveals that 55% were farmers who depend on farming mainly as means of livelihood while others were civil servants, petty traders, are artisan, students and housewives. This is in agreement with [11] where 55% of the respondents were farmers. With respect to education the result shows that, majority (82%) had formal education while about 18% had no formal education. The income distribution of respondents reveals that 34% have no fixed income. This could be as a result of the nature of socio-activities engage in. About 32% earned monthly income between ₦5,000-₦20,000. Only about 28.2% of the respondents earned monthly income above the National Minimum Wage of ₦30,000 (Thirty Thousand Naira) as obtainable in Nigeria as at the time of this study. This suggests that most of the sampled population were low–income earners. Secondly, it could be attributed to the high number of respondents with primary education as highest qualification (37.8%) which can influence their opportunities to be gainfully employed in high income jobs.

5.2. Level of Experience of Family Structure Changes in the Study Area

Figure 4 shows the respondent's level of experience of family structure changes. The result reveals that about 78.% of the respondents have experience of changes in the family while 22% have not.
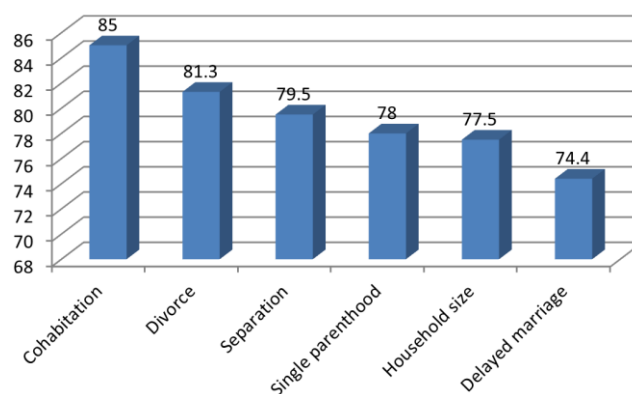
Source: Field survey, 2024.

Figure 4. *Level of experience of family structure changes in the family.*

This indicates that the level of experience of changes in the family is almost universal among household heads in the study area. The finding is in tandem with, UN, NBS, Bianchi and NDHS [7, 19-22, 24-28, 38] who documented a change in the family structure over time and space.

5.3. Types of Changes in the Family Structure

Figure 5 shows the types of changes that have occurred in the family structure as identified by the respondent. Prominent among them is the increase in the level of cohabitation of about 85%, divorce 81% in that orders. In support of the finding William [39] documented a gradual change in the rate of cohabitation. In other studies, Ogunsola, Posel and Rud-

wick [30, 32] reported that, the socio-cultural norm of marriage in Africa which Benue state is part use to progress from introduction and engagement and procreation in the past, but presently the sequence has changed; partners meet, fall in love, have sex, cohabit and marry or instead of marrying, they have children in cohabiting relationships.

Source: Field survey, 2019.

Figure 5. *Types of changes in the family structure.*

From the results, it can be deduced that the respondents have some degree of agreement with the fact that there is a transformation occurring to the family based on the selected indicators in Benue State.

Except of In-depth interview with district head confirmed:

That we are experiencing changes more in the family today that what we have experienced in the past 30 years (21/10/2019).

This is supported by Excerp from FGD in Otukpo where participants clearly stated that:

What we are seen in the family today whereby people are refusing to marry, boys and girls staying together without marriage is very scarce in the past 40 years (22/10/2019)

The finding is in tandem with similar studies by Prioux, UN, Kuperberg, Samad, Haregu et al [7, 14, 16, 31, 35, 38] posited that there is an observed transformation in the family especially its structure such as cohabitation, divorce, separation, single parent households, household size and delayed marriage. The study contradicts the view of Mezieobi and Ibekwe [17] who reported that despite the observed transformations in the family in other parts of the world, such transformations is non-existent in Nigerian families. The reason for the disagreement could be attributed to the sampling size and techniques. These transformations according to the respondents are very noticeable presently compared to the past accounting for 78%.

5.4. Gender Differentials in the Level of Experience of Family Structure Changes

Table 2 present gender differentials in the level of experi-

ence of family structure change and the level of experience of cohabitation and divorce is slightly higher among women with about 1.1% and 2.5% respectively than men. Also, the level of experience of marital separation and single parenthood is slightly higher among men than women with about 0.1% and 3.2% respectively. Finally, change in household size and delayed marriage is more experience among women than men with about 10.9% and 7.1% respectively.

The implication of the finding is that children may experience or feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger, and insecurity due to the disruption of their familiar family unit and potential loss of a parent figure. Also, changes in family structure can sometimes lead to increased behavioural problems like aggression, withdrawal, or acting out, especially if children are struggling to cope with the transition.

Table 2. Gender differentials in the level of experience of family structure changes.

Types	Male		Female		χ^2	Df	p-value	Decision
	Freq. (Yes)	%	Freq. (Yes)	%				
Cohabitation	203	84.5	125	85.6	.616[a]	2	0.735	Not Significant
Divorce	193	80.4	121	82.9	.882[a]	3	0.830	Not significant
Separation	191	79.5	116	79.4	1.309[a]	2	0.520	Not significant
Single parenthood	190	79.2	111	76.0	.546[a]	2	0.761	Not significant
Household size	176	73.3	123	84.2	1.574[a]	2	0.455	Not significant
Delayed marriage	172	71.7	115	78.8	.389[a]	2	0.823	Not significant

Source: Field survey, 2019

Children from disrupted families may experience difficulties in school due to stress, lack of focus, or inconsistent support from parents. Navigating new family dynamics and potential changes in social networks can lead to challenges in forming and maintaining friendships. Divorce often results in decreased household income, which can lead to financial stress and limit opportunities for children. The hypothesis was tested using chi-square (χ^2) to determine the significant difference in family structure change experience among genders. The chi-square test results show that for all six indicators (cohabitation, divorce, separation, single parenthood, household size, and delayed marriage), there is no significant difference between males and females in terms of their experience of family structure changes. The p-values for all tests are greater than 0.05, which suggests that gender does not significantly influence these family structure changes. Therefore, the hypothesis "There is no significant difference in family structure change experience and perception among genders is retained.

6. Conclusion

Family structure changes is a significant and emerging social phenomenon, influenced by various factors such as cultural shifts, economic pressures, technological advancements, and evolving gender roles. These changes have led to more diverse family forms, including single-parent families, divorce, separation, delayed marriage and cohab-

iting partners. While these changes can challenge traditional norms and expectations, they also reflect the adaptability and resilience of families in the face of societal changes. However, the changes in family structure can also present challenges such as, the rise of non-traditional family forms can sometimes lead to concerns about child welfare, economic stability, and the role of extended family members in caregiving. Additionally, issues such as work-life balance, mental health, and generational changes in caregiving responsibilities also need attention. It is therefore recommended that there is need for policymakers to develop gender-neutral policies and support services. For instance, support systems such as counseling, divorce mediation, housing assistance, and child support programs should be made available equally to all genders without assumptions based on gender roles, there is need by government to strengthen marriage institution to promote stable family pattern, Public awareness campaigns and educational programs should emphasize that family structure changes affect both men and women, Family support programs that address challenges such as single parenthood, delayed marriage, and cohabitation should not prioritize gender but instead focus on the universal needs of individuals undergoing these changes. There is need for further future studies the socio-economic determinants of family structure changes for more insight in States, zones, and countries.

Abbreviation

FOS   Federal Office of Statistics
NBS   National Bureau of Statistics
NPC   National Population Commission
NDHS   Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey
UN   United Nations

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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