



Marriage and relationships: Findings from the rural women and land survey

Introduction and background

In 2009-10 the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E) conducted a survey of 3 000 adult women living in three rural, ex-homeland, areas of South Africa. The research was conducted with support from the Canadian International Development Research Centre and United Nations Development Programme. The main aim of the survey was to see whether and, if so, how women's access to land had changed over time. Marital status can be an important determinant of women's access to land. The survey therefore included questions about relationships. This factsheet presents some of the findings.

The three areas in which the survey was conducted were Keiskammahoek in the Eastern Cape, Msinga in KwaZulu-Natal, and Ramatlabama in North West province. The three areas have different dominant languages – Xhosa, Zulu and Tswana respectively – and different cultures and customs. They also have different histories under colonial times and apartheid that have affected how people live.

C A S E conducted focus groups with women and men in each of the three areas before designing the questionnaire. It conducted these groups to ensure that the research team had a good understanding of the words and concepts used by people to describe their lives. One of the issues explored in the focus groups was marriage and other relationships – both the most common forms of relationships in the area and the terms used to name them.

Focus groups provide a different type of evidence than surveys. Surveys usually attempt to collect “facts” from a large number of people. These “facts”, when added together, give a statistical picture about the issue being investigated. If the sample is well designed, the statistics should be representative of the situation in the community surveyed.

In contrast, focus groups aim to collect views, opinions and perceptions. Because there are usually many different views in a single community, the views of the focus group participants are not necessarily shared by all – or even most – community members. Views, opinions and perceptions are also different from “facts”. They are, nevertheless, important for understanding the nuances in how local people understand the issues being investigated.

Findings from the pre-survey focus groups

In **Keiskammahoek**, two types of customary marriages were identified in the focus groups. The first was *ukuthwalwa*, meaning to be carried away. The second was a traditional marriage agreed upon by the man, woman and their parents.

There were discrepancies in how participants explained *ukuthwalwa*. One participant said it was a form of arranged marriage in that a father would see a woman with qualities he would like in a daughter-in-law, and would inform his son of his wishes. In contrast, a second participant said this was a marriage where the woman “was just kidnapped, kicking and crying”. A third participant said that abduction often involved two people who knew each other. It would take place when a man had “damaged” a woman by impregnating her. The man then had the option of either paying damages to her family or starting with *lobola* negotiations. The woman would be considered to be *thwelwe* because it was thought that the man impregnated her on purpose in order to make her his wife.

The term *ukwenda* was said to be used for when the man and woman had consented to get married, either through arrangements made by their parents or through meeting with each other. A woman married in this way is referred to as *endile*.

In addition to customary marriages, the other form of marriage reported to be common in Keiskammahoek was civil marriage. Some participants referred to this as the “white wedding”. Other terms used for civil marriages included “the marriage of democracy” and a marriage in which “your thing is yours and mine is mine”.

There was some dispute about whether a civil marriage or “white wedding” included some elements of a traditional marriage. One male participant provided a description of a “white wedding” that included *lobolo* negotiations alongside a church ceremony and having the marriage registered. Another participant felt that a white wedding was more about a ring and going to the magistrate than it was about customary processes.

Cohabitation was seen as a mark of the changing times. The older women in the Cata focus group blamed the arrival of “white men with pills”. They said that it took away a girl’s incentive to keep her virginity.

In **Msinga**, participants said that a woman could either enter into a “full” or “incomplete” customary marriage or into a civil marriage. They said that a full customary marriage was one where *lobolo* was paid for the bride, all the required steps had been completed and the marriage was registered. An incomplete marriage was one where *lobolo* had not yet been paid in full and only some of the required steps had been completed by the man.

Full marriages, for which the term *gidile* is used, were said to be rare because of the cost involved, especially with regards to gifts given to the women’s family. Another reason offered for the decline in “full” customary marriages was that a son was not permitted to marry a woman in “full” unless his mother was properly married. He thus had to ensure that the mother’s marriage was complete, including by paying outstanding *lobolo* before he could continue with his own. A woman whose marriage is incomplete is said to be *ganile*. The terms *ganile* and *gidile* are used for widowed women as well as for those whose husbands are still alive.

An induna reported that instead of *umgido* people are now practicing *umemulo*. *Umemulo* refers to a ceremony where a young girl’s parents slaughter a cow for her to thank her for being “good”, meaning taking good care of herself as a woman and not giving birth before marriage. The induna attributed the decline in marriage to the democratic era, which he said had “spoiled a lot of things”.

Cohabitation was said to be uncommon, or even unknown, in Msinga. Participants in one of the report-back meetings said that cohabitation was discouraged through charging men who had not paid *lobolo* for the woman with whom they were living R160 per year.

In **Ramatlabama**, participants identified civil marriage as the most common type of marriage. They said that these marriages often included both customary and civil elements in that a man would pay *magadi* to the women’s family following which there would be a “white wedding” where the couple would have a ceremony in a church.

Customary marriages were said to be more common among older people or in cases where a family did not have enough money for a “white wedding”. One participant observed that the prevalence of customary marriages in the past was because there were a lot of arranged marriages and in some instances the woman would be taken against her will to the man’s place.

The third type of relationship – reported to be increasingly prevalent in Ramatlabama – was cohabitation, or “vat en sit”. Participants said that the man and woman would leave their parental homes and establish their own home without payment of *magadi* or receiving any blessings from the parents. In these relationships, women kept their maiden name and children would also take the mother’s surname. Participants reported that this had implications with regards to inheritance if the man were to pass away.

Findings from the survey

Marriage patterns

In analysing the survey responses, we classified all women who reported that they were *ganile*, *gidile*, *endile* and *thwelwe* as married because the focus groups had suggested that these relationships are recognised as forms of marriage. Overall, 37% of the 3 000 women surveyed were married. A further 34% had never been married, and 24% were widowed. There were much smaller numbers in each of the other categories. If cohabiting women are grouped with married women, 39% of the women surveyed were in a stable relationship.

Women in Msinga were most likely to be married (46% of the Msinga total, with a further 27% widowed and thus previously married), while those in Ramatlabama were least likely (26% married plus 15% widowed). Conversely, women

in Ramatlabama were most likely to have never been married or be co-habiting, while those in Msinga were least likely to be in either of these two categories.

Focusing only on younger women, 59% of women under 30 years of age in Msinga had never been married, compared to 85% of women of this age in Keiskammahoek and 92% in Ramatlabama.

Of the married women in Msinga, 80% were *ganile* rather than *gidile*. This confirms that completion of the full customary procedures is relatively uncommon. Of the married women in Keiskammahoek, 95% were *endile*, leaving only 5% who said that they were *thwelwe*. This small percentage is surprising as the Keiskammahoek survey conducted in the early 1950s found that here were more *ukuthwala* marriages than full customary marriages in the two villages surveyed in the two decades preceding the survey.¹ Participants in the report-back meetings of the more recent research suggested that the proportion of marriages which were incomplete, and where the women could thus be considered *thwelwe*, was probably much higher than reported in the survey.

Of the widowed women in Msinga, 52% reported themselves to be *ganile* and 48% *gidile*. The fact that the proportion reported to be *gidile* was much higher than for those currently married suggests that it is becoming less common for the full customary process to be completed.

In Msinga there were no divorced women, and there were relatively few in the other sites. The absence of divorced women in Msinga was explained in one of the report-back meetings by the traditional court in the Mthembu area having ruled that if a woman had spent 10 years in a marriage and the husband wanted to leave her, he would have to pay the woman's family a cow for each year they had stayed together plus a further cow for each child. A further reason could be that women who have not completed all the steps of a "gidile" marriage may describe themselves as unmarried (as opposed to divorced or separated) if the relationship ends.

There were also very few women in any of the sites who reported that they were separated or had been deserted by their partner. However, 110 women who reported that they were married, did not list a husband or partner when asked to list all the homestead members who had been home at least once in the previous two years. Most of these women could be considered effectively separated.

Children and family composition

Changes in marriage and relationship patterns affect family composition. In particular, the changes affect the type of families in which children are raised, and the roles played by women and men in caring and providing for children. The survey questionnaire thus included questions on children and their fathers.

Nine in every ten women interviewed (90%) reported having given birth to at least one child. The percentage who had given birth was higher in Keiskammahoek and Msinga (both 92%) than in Ramatlabama (87%).

Across the three sites, more than one out of every four of the women who had given birth to at least one child had never been married. Women in Msinga (84%) and Keiskammahoek (75%) were more likely than those in Ramatlabama (50%) to report that the child's father was their husband or partner at the time of the child's birth.

Close on six in every ten children (57%) under 20 years of age were living with their mothers at the time of the survey. A larger proportion of children of this age in Msinga (70%) than in Ramatlabama (55%) and Keiskammahoek (46%) were reportedly living with their mothers.

Only a third (33%) of the biological fathers of children under 20 years of age were reported to be resident members of the homestead. The biological fathers of more than three in every ten (37%) of the children under 20 were reported to be deceased. Twenty-nine percent of the children in Ramatlabama had fathers who were reported to be alive but not a member of the homestead, more than in the other two areas. A larger proportion of the fathers in Msinga (17%) than Keiskammahoek (11%) and Ramatlabama (5%) was reported as absent members of the homestead. These numbers include fathers who were married to the mother as well as those who were not.

The survey thus showed clearly that many mothers bear the responsibility for children in the absence of the children's fathers. For example, 50% of all never married women, 20% of married women, and 24% of widowed women had at least one child under the age of 20 living with them and the children's fathers were not resident members of the homestead.

Wilson Monica, Kaplan Selma, Maki Theresa & Walton Edith M. 1952. Social Structure. Keiskammahoek Rural Survey Volume III. Shuter and Shooter: Pietermaritzburg.

Overall, half of the women who were married, widowed or in a stable relationship reported that they were in monogamous marriages recognised by civil law. Just over two out of every five were in monogamous customary marriages. Less than 5 percent were in polygamous marriages.

Over two thirds of the married women in Msinga reported that they were in a monogamous customary marriage while less than a tenth reported this in Ramatlabama. Msinga also had a higher rate of polygamous marriages than the other two sites.

In 1998, the South African parliament passed the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act. This Act was intended to place those married under customary law on a more equal footing with those with civil marriages. The 1998 Act provided the opportunity for customary marriages to be registered, but did not make registration compulsory. About ten years after the passing of the Act, of the 873 surveyed women who were in customary marriages, four out of every five reported that their marriage was not registered. Non-registered customary marriages were most common in Msinga, and least common in Keiskammahoek.

Census statistics suggest that greater numbers of women and men, and especially women, are remaining unmarried throughout their lives today than previously. To investigate this, in the survey women were asked if their mother and grandmother had ever married.

Of the women who knew their mother's and maternal grandmother's marital status, over four fifths of the women in each site reported that their grandmothers had been married at some point and more than three quarters reported that their mothers were married at some point. The rate of marriage thus decreased from the grandmothers to the respondents themselves, as only two thirds of the women reported that they themselves had been married.

Post-survey focus groups

In post-survey focus groups participants were asked to speculate about the reasons for the large difference in marriage rates between Msinga and Ramatabama.

Keiskammahoek participants were reluctant to speculate about two areas of which they did not have personal experience. However, one of the participants suggested that a decline in the rate of marriage could be an indication that women were becoming more independent. Another participant speculated that women were being put off marriage by the examples they had seen of the problems facing women within marriage.

Msinga participants reported that for women marriages were a means of inheriting land and for a man marriage was a means of making sure that your children had your name and would carry on the name of your family. Participants said that in the Zulu culture from the time a man was born all the males around him were married, and it would therefore be taboo not to get married.

One participant said that the fact that men in Msinga had livestock which they could use for *lobolo* made it easier for them to propose marriage. Other participants speculated that women had very few alternative options to marriage if they were uneducated.

However, responses from some participants suggested that even in Msinga marriage was no longer seen to have the same value as previously. As one participant reported: "The marriage of today is no longer the genuine marriage about family... It is more about getting something if a man dies."

Ramatlabama participants attributed the decline in marriage to the high rate of unemployment. As one woman explained: "You could find someone you want to marry but he does not work. When you tell your family they will say, 'He's going to ask for mealie meal from us now. We are starving as it is and you want to bring an extra mouth to feed.'"

According to other participants, the opportunity that was now available to women to choose a partner as well as the easier access women had to land rendered marriage a non-necessity. As a result cohabitation had become more prevalent within the village. However, the men also suggested that the level of poverty sometimes put women at a disadvantage because in wanting to be taken care of they would accept a relationship in which the man had no intention of marrying them.