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Single-parenthood and cohabitation are becoming ‘trendy’ family structures in many African societies. Guided by the structural functionalism approach, types of family structures and the influence of globalisation on the African family structure were discussed. Secondary data from Demographic Health Surveys conducted in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda, as well as World Family Map and various studies from sub-Saharan African countries were also used to examine the prevalence of the married-couple, cohabiting-couple, and single-parent family structures, and the findings presented descriptively. Results show that single-parenthood is most common in South Africa and married-couple family structure is popular in Nigeria and Ghana whereas marriage, single-parenthood, and cohabitation recorded a comparable level of popularity in Uganda. In the study, it was discovered that cohabitation and single-parenthood have lost some stigma in many African societies and are becoming common and socially acceptable, especially among educated citizens and in Christian dominated countries on the continent. Society, governmental and non-governmental agencies, education and religious institutions, as well as clinical and social services, should be attuned to the currently diverse new ‘normal’ family systems.

Keywords: Single-parents, cohabitation, married couple, globalisation, African family

Introduction
The family is a socially recognised group united by blood relations, marriage, co-residence, or adoption. It perpetuates society, both biologically through procreation, and socially through socialisation. In the old African traditional setting, the ‘normal’ family structure was large, multigenerational, and polygamous. It consisted of a breadwinner husband (who worked outside the home), his homemaker wife/wives (who did household chores, child rearing, assisted in the farm, and cared for elders), their children, the spouses’ parents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and cousins. The maternal role was that of childcare and home keeping while the paternal role was that of economic responsibilities and discipline of children.

Due to the processes of globalisation, there are increasing changes in family formation and structure across Africa (Ntoimo, Odimegwu, Dansou and Ola, 2016; Udegbe and Bamgbose, 2001). Polygamy and the extended family system have become less normative while nuclear family has become more popular (Olutayo and Akanle, 2007). Couples are marrying at older ages, nurturing fewer numbers of children, and parental roles have turned out to be less rigid. Apart from marriage, single-parenting (having children without being married) and cohabitation (living with one’s partner without being married) are popular choices for forming a family (Kamgno and Mengue, 2014; Otite and Ogionwo, 2006; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019). These shifts in family structure have made families smaller, more complex, diverse, unstable, and less ‘normal.’

Statement of the problem
This research is important because of the need to understand diverse family forms since families and households are the foundational hubs of societal development. There are signs of breakdown in African traditional moral norms regarding family
formation and family structure. Many are worried about the breakdown of the ‘normal’ family structure that fits their own established social, cultural, and religious norms. Also, there is a decline in the proportion of people who view having premarital sex, living with one’s partner, and having children without being married, with or without a partner in moral or religious terms. Furthermore, the concept of family has changed from the large multiple-parents extended families to the small two-parent nuclear families; and nowadays to even smaller single-parent families. Researchers (e.g., Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Mashau, 2011) have argued that explaining the spread of single-parent and cohabiting-parent families has been both an intellectual challenge and a source of persistent frustration for social scientists. The increasing diversity of family structure in African countries compels need for the contributions of globalisation processes to the public permissiveness and growing popularity of single-parent and cohabiting-parent families in Africa to be examined in this paper, including the prevalence of these structures as measured by Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).

**Theoretical framework**

Structural functionalism theory assumes that the society is a system of interdependent parts that is in equilibrium and that the society has evolved, over time, from a simple to a complex type (Otite and Ogionwo, 2006). Social institutions and practices have evolved due to the processes of industrialisation, modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation. Institutions like the family that fulfilled needs and maintained the social system in traditional society are superseded by modern ones. The theory posits that families are an important social institution and they perform sexual, procreation, economic, and socialisation functions that facilitate the prosperity, stability, and development of society (Otite and Ogionwo, 2006). Structural Functionalism is generally seen as being supportive of the nuclear family (status quo) as the most natural and efficient way for the family to be organised.

**Family structures**

Family structure refers to whom a child lives with, including parents and other family members, and the relationships between them (Ryberg, Lippman, Wilcox and DeRose, 2015). The family structure is important for procreation, socialisation of children, emotional support, and economic cooperation in society. A household is defined as all the people who live together in a dwelling unit, either as married-couple family households, cohabiting-couple family households, single-parent family households, or non-family single persons living alone households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

**Married-couple family**

Traditionally, marriages are what create families, and families are the most vital units in social organisations, the social control upon which society is built (Otite and Ogionwo, 2006). Marriage is a social institution or legal contract between spouses in which interpersonal, intimate and sexual relationships are formalised through a wedding ceremony. It provides a stable context for bearing children, rearing them, and integrating fathers into their lives (Heuveline, Timberlake and Furstenberg, 2003). Through marriage, the newly formed family establishes a relationship between the families of the husband and wife, creates status, roles, and sexual division of labors that are sanctioned by society, and teaches young children manners, civility, and behaviours that follow social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes (Okyere-Manu, 2015).

A married-couple family with two married parents (husband and wife), and their unmarried biological or adopted children are referred to as a nuclear family. The central concept of this family type is that the parents live together and raise their children together in the family home and the children are the focus of parental financial and emotional investment. Social researchers, policymakers, and most people regard a two-parent married family as the golden standard of family structure and the ‘normal’ family environment to raise children (Brown, 2010).

Two-parent married families tend to have better economic status, problem-solving skills, and communication ability, more efficient division of labor, greater ability to support one another, and more affective responsiveness and involvement within the family (Brown, 2010; Ekpenyong and Lawrence, 2016). So children from this family often have many advantages over children from
other families. But many nuclear families are under stress, have weak social support and are isolated from their extended families. The nuclear family is perceived itself to be self-reliant but many are not, and the couples have unrealistically high expectations for spouses to fulfill their needs (Coontz, 2005).

**Cohabiting-couple family**

Cohabitation is conceptualised as a short-term, non-legal, private, co-residential union of unmarried men and women in a sexual relationship which brings some but not all of the costs and benefits of marriage (Popoola and Ayandele, 2019). It allows the cohabiting partners to have an interpersonal, intimate, and sexual relationship similar to marriage but without the same formal recognition or sanction of governments, law, religions, or cultures.

In the African tradition, marriage is not just an important life event; it also represents responsibility, respectability, and morality. But the dramatic increase in the prevalence of cohabitation and single-parenthood is making the marriage institution to become more of an option for adults, rather than a necessity for their survival and their children’s. It is becoming less relevant in many countries (Ntoimo et al., 2016). Researches, practical experiences, and media reports show that cohabitation has emerged as a common precursor or alternative to marriage in many sub-Saharan African countries (Mokomane, 2006; Ntoimo et al., 2016; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019; Ryberg et al., 2015).

Cohabitation seems to offer cohabiting partners more flexibility in their relationships, opportunities to test their compatibility, and the freedom to leave an unsatisfying relationship than marriage which requires more commitment and is more difficult to dissolve (Ariyo, 2013). Therefore, many people think cohabitation will give them all the perks of marriage like interpersonal, intimate, and sexual relationships, and none of the downsides of marriage (Popoola and Ayandele, 2019). Unfortunately, cohabitation may distract cohabiters from their purpose in life and expose them to varieties of emotional, relational and social problems as it also seems to be counterproductive to long-lasting marriage (Duyilemi, Tunde-Awe and Adekola-Lois, 2018; Mashau, 2011; Ojewola and Akinduyo, 2017; Svodziwa and Kurete, 2017).

**Single-parent family**

A single-parent family is a family with children that are headed by a single parent. A single parent is a person who lives with and cares for a child or children younger than 18 years without the assistance of the other biological parent, and who is widowed, divorced, never married, or does not have a live-in partner. Single parenting means that one of the two individuals (i.e., mother or father) involved in the conception of the child is solely responsible for the upbringing of the child (Azuka-Obieke, 2013). There is a general bias in single parenthood around the world, with more women than men being single parents (Boyden & UNESCO, 1993).

Single parenthood is a social phenomenon that may arise due to relationship breakdown, abandonment, divorce, separation, death of the other parent, premarital childbirth, teenage pregnancy, unintended pregnancy, poverty, stereotypic beliefs about single women of high occupational and economic status, and choice (Dlamini, 2006; Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). It could also be caused as a result of women raising children singlehandedly as their husbands are working elsewhere (military/business/labor migration) (Smit, 2001). Single parenthood was previously unknown among Africans because of the high rate of remarriage after bereavement or divorce to maintain ‘balance’ in the society (Ayodele, 2014) and where they existed; they were ignored as exceptional cases (Tijani et al., 2015). However, the number of single-parent families has recently increased drastically in many African countries (Adelani and Ogunbanwo, 2008; Clark and Hamplová, 2013; Dlamini, 2006; Moyo and Kawewe, 2009; Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Tijani et al., 2015; Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006).

Walsh (2012: 13) noted that ‘increasingly, older single women nowadays, decide to be parent a child on their own when they lack suitable partners for childrearing. Children generally fare well in financially secure single-parent homes where there is strong parental functioning, especially when supported by extended kin networks’. Also, parents and children can become very resilient and close, but life in a single-parent family can be stressful for both the child and the parent, as the single parent is likely to suffer deprivations, stigmatisation, lack social support, be unable to supervise their adolescent children and
may be overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for the children, maintaining a job and keeping up with the bills and household chores, while their children's school performance, social behavior, and peer relations could also be adversely affected (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

**Globalisation and the African family systems**

Globalisation can be defined as ‘a buzzword that is being used under all conceivable circumstances... where the four corners of the world have come together... where technologies spread from more advanced to less advanced regions, where information travels virtually instantaneously,... where different cultures borrow elements from each other and fuse them, where legal systems clash and influence one another, where traditional family and gender patterns are broken up as a result of foreign influences’ (Therborn, 2006: 9). Globalisation in Africa has its antecedents in slavery, the introduction of Islam and Christianity, colonialism, modernisation, urbanisation, western education, decolonialism, neocolonialism, gender equality/equity, mass media, and individualism among others. Its economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions collectively make globalisation a complex process with numerous implications.

During the colonial era, the imperialists imposed their language, modes of dressing, institutions, and culture on African societies. They enfeebled African traditional authority and communal living patterns (Mashau, 2011) and introduced ‘strange’ lifestyles among Africans (Okyere-Manu, 2015). Colonialism also led to the dislocation of peoples and the introduction of law and religion which disrupted traditions that shape sexual behavior, marriage, procreation, and gender relations (Calvès, 2016; Rijpma, 1996).

The culture and religion in most African societies often stigmatise single (and cohabiting) parents as morally debased and promiscuous (Essien and Bassey, 2012; Ndagurwa, Odimegwu, Singini and Baruwa, 2015), even though cohabitation is also a way to escape the stigma associated with prolonged singlehood for women (Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). However, globalisation processes have led to changing views and decrease in the social stigma attached to premarital sexuality, out-of-wedlock birth, and single-and cohabiting-parenthood in many segments of society, the fears of raising children alone are becoming a thing of the past as many are taking a walk from a bad marriage or relationship. Those who initiate premarital sex are more likely to cohabit with an intimate partner (LeGrand and Younoussi, 2009) and premarital pregnancy and birth may pressurise girls to cohabit with their partners or raise her child alone. In Southwest Nigeria, the fading away of the traditional social stigma attached to single motherhood has encouraged an increasing number of single-mothers to have sex at will with any man of her choice, have her own house, and have children (Adelani and Ogunbanwo, 2008).

Urbanisation facilitated the process of spousal selection in many urban centers to be transformed from the traditional pattern built around family-centered orientations and community-based goals to a more individualistic pattern based on love and self-selection (Olutayo and Akanle, 2007; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). Also, unlike the older generation, many young people do not regard marriage as the first step to adulthood but want to complete their education or apprenticeship, be established in their career, buy a car, get an apartment, and cohabit before tying the knot (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan, 2005). This may be due to the more prominent influence of globalisation in urban than rural areas in many African countries (Kamgno and Mengue, 2014; LeGrand and Younoussi, 2009).

The increase in the educational attainment of women meant more females leave schools at an older age and many females are employed in wage work. Studies show that women who had attained any level of education were more likely than their uneducated counterparts to cohabit (Kamgno and Mengue, 2014; LeGrand and Younoussi, 2009; Ntoimo et al., 2016). Although girls are traditionally groomed for heterosexual marriage from an early age, the processes of globalisation has led to the emergence of an increasing number of educated women who, by choice or constraint, remain unmarried till later age in certain socio-cultural groups in Nigeria (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000). The Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey conducted in 2008 shows that 70.6 percent of Nigerian women aged 15-19 are unmarried, but by
age 30-34, 94.2 percent are married (National Population Commission and ICF Macro, 2009).

The harsh economic conditions in African states deepened by the globalisation policies of the World Bank/IMF group are having a devastating impact on family formation, stability, and well-being. Many young people are experiencing the ‘marriage gap’ due to unemployment, job losses, business failure, financial insecurity, high bride price, and wedding cost (Cherlin, 2010; Ojewola and Akinduyo, 2017). Those with bleak earning prospects are less likely to get married and more likely to cohabit (Kamgno and Mengue, 2014; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019). Similarly, some economically secure women may even see no need to sacrifice their freedom for a ‘bondage’ called marriage (Tijani et al., 2015) likewise, the financial pressures and responsibilities that come along with marriage may make some men avoid marriage.

The increased media exposure to and acceptance of foreign cultures has liberalised sexual activities (e.g. premarital sex) (Duyilemi et al., 2018), and placed more emphasis on individualism (Olutayo and Akanle, 2007). Similarly, the depiction of marriages in the media is contentious as it is the unhappy rather than the happy relationships that are typically brought to our attention; and the oft-cited statistics that ‘half of all marriages end in divorce’ was never really correct (Science20.com, 2014; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). Correspondingly, television families in American television sitcom have moved from a father, a mother, and children structure as seen in ‘The Cosby Show’ and a less flattering ‘The Simpsons’ nuclear family to a mixture of nuclear, step-and same-sex ‘Modern Family’; single parent ‘Hannah Montana’ or ‘One Day at a Time’; and cohabiting surrogate ‘Two and a Half Men’ family. Also, many of the widely followed celebrities on social media are single-parents or in cohabiting relationships. All these could influence young people’s changing attitudes toward marriage itself. Although South Africa has legislated same-sex marriage and adoption rights for gays and lesbians (Rothmann, 2011), most Africans have resisted same-sex marriage and gay culture despite globalisation.

The aim of this study is therefore to examine the prevalence of married, cohabiting, and single-parenting households in four sub-Saharan Africa countries, namely Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda, and highlight changes in the proportions between this decade (the 2010s) and the last decade (2000s). This study will add to the body of literature in family research in sub-Saharan Africa.

Methods
Data from recent Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in the selected countries; Ghana (2014), Nigeria (2018), South Africa (2016), and Uganda (2016), were used in the present study and compared with DHS from the previous decade (the 2000s) and the World Family Map (Ryberg et al., 2015). The surveys are nationally representative and comparable data was collected from persons aged between 15 and 49 years on background characteristics (gender, age, education) and family structures (marital status). A sample consisting of 13,784 (Ghana), 55,243 (Nigeria), 12,132 (South Africa), and 23,842 (Uganda) respondents was selected. These are all weighted values. Descriptive statistics were used to represent the results.

Results
Respondents’ profile
The results in table 1 reveal that most of the respondents are female (68%-78%) and aged between 15-24 years (35%-44%). Except in Nigeria with 64% of its respondents in marital relationship, non-marital options overshadows marriage in the other countries; South Africa has the largest proportion of never-married individuals (60%), Ghana also has married persons (41%) in the minority and Uganda has the most cohabiting individuals (28%). Most respondents from Ghana and South Africa possess high school education (58%-77%) while Nigeria has the largest percentage of the respondents with no education (32%). Also, Nigeria has more Muslims (53%) while Uganda and Ghana are dominated by Christians (almost 80%).
Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Ghana</th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N= 13,784</td>
<td>N= 55,243</td>
<td>N= 12,132</td>
<td>N= 23,842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9,396</td>
<td>41,821</td>
<td>8,514</td>
<td>18,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4,388</td>
<td>13,422</td>
<td>3,618</td>
<td>5,336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>4,681</td>
<td>19,170</td>
<td>4,077</td>
<td>10,323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>4,117</td>
<td>16,824</td>
<td>3,733</td>
<td>7,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>4,466</td>
<td>17,693</td>
<td>3,907</td>
<td>6,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>4,945</td>
<td>15,501</td>
<td>7,065</td>
<td>6,863</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5,448</td>
<td>34,591</td>
<td>2,607</td>
<td>7,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>1,719</td>
<td>1,284</td>
<td>1,430</td>
<td>6,588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/separated</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>1,226</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2,226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>1,086</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-parenthood</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>7,277</td>
<td>4,766</td>
<td>6,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education¹</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education</td>
<td>2,154</td>
<td>17,158</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>1,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>2,215</td>
<td>7,629</td>
<td>1,159</td>
<td>13,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>7,749</td>
<td>22,280</td>
<td>8,974</td>
<td>6,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>1,145</td>
<td>6,621</td>
<td>1,353</td>
<td>2,082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>10,363</td>
<td>24,648</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>2,103</td>
<td>28,723</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3,222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Various DHS (2014-2018) data sets from the selected countries assessed at https://dhsprogram.com/

Note: ¹Education refers to the highest level of education attended, whether or not that level was completed. ²Religion is missing from the South African dataset.

**Prevalence of married-, cohabiting- and single-parenting household**

The prevalence of marriage among adults in their prime childbearing and child-rearing years (18 to 49) was highest in Nigeria (64%) and Ghana (41%) while South Africa (22%) and Uganda (31%) recorded the least prevalence. The prevalence of cohabiting couples is highest in Uganda (28%) and lowest in Nigeria (3%). Two out of every five women in South Africa are single parents and a third of women in Ghana and Uganda are also practicing single parenthood. The rates in these countries are presented in figure 1.
**Single and Cohabiting Parent Family Systems**

*Figure 1: Comparison of married, cohabiting & single-parent households*

![Comparison of married, cohabiting & single-parent households](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitation</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parenthood</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** various DHS (2014-2018) data sets from the selected countries assessed at https://dhsprogram.com/

**Cohabitation trends across Africa**

The results of recent trends in cohabitation show the rising prevalence of cohabitation in the selected countries. The level of cohabitation in Uganda doubled from 14% in 2006 to 28% in 2016 while a marginal increase occurred among cohabiters in Nigeria and South Africa. This is presented in figure 2.

*Figure 2: Trends in cohabitation prevalence in the selected countries*

![Trends in cohabitation prevalence in the selected countries](image)

**Source:** various DHS (2003-2018) datasets from the selected countries assessed at https://dhsprogram.com/
Single-parenthood trends across Africa
All the countries recorded an increase in single parenthoods across the decade; the proportion of single parents in Uganda and Nigeria almost doubled within ten years while four out of ten parents (previously three out of ten parents) in South Africa are parenting alone. The results are in figure 3.

Figure 3: Trends in single parenthood prevalence in the selected countries

Source: various DHS (2003-2018) data sets from the selected countries assessed at https://dhsprogram.com/

Discussion
The purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence and trends of single-parents, cohabiting-partners, and married-couple households in Africa, using the DHS dataset. The historical analysis reveal that large polygamous and multigenerational or extended family structure was considered as the ‘normal’ family among Africans (Caldwell, 1999) before the advent of the Europeans. However, non-traditional types of family structures such as cohabiting couple families, single-parents, same-sex couple families among others have emerged in present time African society (Clark and Hamplová, 2013; Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019).

The finding that most marriageable adults in Africa are not ‘married’ could be due to the report that young people nowadays do not regard marriage as the first step to adulthood (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Ntoimo et al., 2016) but rather desire individualistic lifestyle based on love and self-selection which might not be family-oriented (Olutayo and Akanle, 2007; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). It could also be as a result of poverty (Kamgno and Mengue, 2014; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019), high bride price and wedding cost (Cherlin, 2010; Ojewola and Akinduyo, 2017), and the desire of some economically secured women to be independent of the ‘bondage’ of marriage (Tijani et al., 2015) and the inability to find a right partner.

Although most African states have been able to culturally resisted same-sex marriage, findings from the study reveal that while the marital relationship is the most popular family structure across Africa (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006), the rate of cohabitation and single parenthood is increasing. The proportion of individuals in their prime childbearing and child-rearing years (18 to
The observed prevalence of cohabitation could also be caused by globalisation, poverty, women empowerment, and high bride prices, based on women’s level of education (Mokomane, 2006; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019). The findings are also confirmed by studies and reports which identified the marriage institution as an option for adulthood; and a precursor or alternative to marriage in many sub-Saharan African countries (Ntôimô et al., 2016; Popoola and Ayandele, 2019; Ryberg et al., 2015). Moreover, the increasing popularity of cohabitation could be due to its flexibility, opportunity for involved persons to test their compatibility, and the freedom to leave an unsatisfying relationship with less commitments than a marriage (Ariyo, 2013). These reasons explain why countries such as Uganda, South Africa, and Ghana recorded a higher prevalence of cohabitation.

The trend in the rate of single-parent households identified by the study is a confirmation of its social acceptance (Duyilemi et al., 2018; Mashau, 2011). This is affirmed by a DHS analysis of the characteristics of single mothers from selected African countries (Dlamini, 2006) and the World Family Map (Ryberg et al., 2015) which revealed that the prevalence of single parenthood increased in almost all sub-Saharan African countries between 2006 and 2015. In Nigeria, due to the over 1 million divorced or separated women and 1.7 million widows in 2006 (National Population Commission and ICF Macro, 2009), Adelani and Ogunbanwo (2008) identified single parenthood as one of the fast-growing family patterns in the country. This proliferation of single parenthood, with its negative implications for the wellbeing of women and children, indicates that many African children are born and reared in single-mother households (Clark and Hamplová, 2013; Ntôimô et al., 2016; Ryberg et al., 2015). In the black townships around Johannesburg, South Africa, half of all children born in 1990 were born out of wedlock. Similarly, about a third of children born in Kampala, Uganda are to single mothers (Barbarin and Richter, 2001). Research has identified non-marital childbearing, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, divorce/separation, poverty, absent fathers, labor migration of men to work in the cities and mines, and reduction in levirate marriage (where a man’s widow remarries one of his brothers) as major drivers of single parenthood in most African countries (Ayodele, 2014; Clark and

49) who are married is highest in Muslim populated Nigeria. A similar result was obtained in Egypt, Niger, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Tanzania which has a large Muslim population; and marriage is the means to parenthood for more than two-thirds of the population (Mokomane, 2006; Ryberg et al., 2015). The significant Muslim population in Nigeria for whom out-of-wedlock pregnancies are taboo and where pregnant adolescents are often forced to get married could be responsible for the high prevalence of marriage (Barker and Rich, 1992). It should be noted, however, that four out of ten married persons in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Muslim dominated Burkina Faso, cohabited before their marriages (Calvès, 2016). Likewise, more than half of the respondents in a study on pre-marital cohabitation factors in Lagos, many persons in Nigeria cohabited before marriage (Ariyo, 2013). In Christian dominated countries such as Uganda, South Africa, and Ghana, it was found in the study that single parenthood and cohabitation are rampant. A regional analysis of cohabitation in sixteen African countries by Ndagurwa et al. (2015) reported that countries such as the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Gabon where cohabitation is highly prevalent are largely Christian dominated countries. From the findings, Nigeria, which has the largest proportion of respondents with ‘no education’ also, has the least prevalence of cohabitation. Studies (Kamnog and Mengue, 2014; LeGrand and Younoussi, 2009; Ntôimô et al., 2016) found that uneducated women are more likely to marry compared to their educated counterparts while Adejumo et al. (2017) and Svdziwa and Kurete (2017) found a relationship between university education and cohabitation.

Findings show that all four studied countries are experiencing a rising trend in cohabitation. This is confirmed by the South African Department of Social Development (2012) which reported that the population of cohabitating couples in the country increased from 1.2 million in 1996 to 2.4 million in 2001. Similarly, data from DHS in many African countries also reveal an increase in cohabitation (Ntôimô et al., 2016); in Cameroon, cohabitation rate increased from 15 percent in 1991 to 31.5 percent in 1998 and 38.9 percent in 2004 (Kamnog and Mengue, 2014) while the proportion of cohabiting unions among all unions in Botswana moved from 28 percent in 1988 to 46 percent in 2001 (Mokomane, 2006). The observed prevalence
Hamplová, 2013; Moyo and Kawewe, 2009; Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006). Christianity which led to the decline of polygamy in Africa, (Mokomane, 2006) could be inadvertently promoting single parenthood due to its negative moral judgment on polygamy while the Islamic religion, which sees non-marital childbearing as a taboo and polygamy as acceptable, is a limiting factor for single parenthood (Moyo and Kawewe, 2009).

**Recommendations**

The public needs to understand the increasing diversity in family structure and ensure that stakeholders implement programs that would provide employment opportunities to young people (to be substantially employed so as to be financially ready enough to become married, thereby reducing cohabitation), provide youths with appropriate and culturally sensitive information on reproductive health (to prevent unintended pregnancies), improve their relationship skills and promote stable marriages (to curb divorce and single parenthood), and strengthen social and moral values through education and public enlightenment. The society, policymakers, clinicians, and family scholars should be aware that ‘normality has been constructed by dominant groups, reified by religion or science, and used to pathologise those who do not fit prescribed standards’ (Foucault, 1980 cited in Walsh, 2012: 4). Therefore, since the structural functionalism theory (Otite and Ogionwo, 2006) posits that families are important for the prosperity, stability, and development of society, no family structure should be privileged while others are stigmatised and marginalised.

**Strength and limitations**

Data used in the study was obtained from nationally representative surveys that reflect every locality in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda. The study was however limited by probable bias in reporting of marital status. It is also possible that the extent of single parenthood and cohabitation is underestimated in the DHS, as respondents may have been unwilling to disclose their status to the interviewer and might have classified themselves as either married or single.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the influx of modern ideals, poverty, unemployment, education, high bride prices, women empowerment, and sexual revolution instigated by globalisation has caused a radical structural and cultural transformation of the African family system leading to more permissive attitude to and greater prevalence of premarital childbirth, single-parenthood, and cohabitation. It should be noted that married-couple families remain the prominent family structure in Africa even as the ‘new normal’ families are diverse and look different.

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