

# PREVALENCE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PREDICTORS OF COMMUTER UNIONS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

Changes have continued to take place in the marriage process given the proportion that is considered married as well as living arrangements after marriage in Nigeria. However, systematic documentation of these changes has been scanty. This study examined the prevalence and socioeconomic predictors of couples in commuter unions in Nigeria. Data was obtained from a nationally representative sample of 8,079 couples from the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey. Descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regression were used for the data analysis. The results show that 47% of couples in Nigeria are commuters. In 30%, males alone commute, and women commute alone in about 10%, whereas both commute in 7%. The likelihood of being in a union where only the man commutes decreases significantly when the woman is aged 25-29 and 35-39. The probability that the woman commutes alone significantly increases when the woman has attained secondary and higher education. The likelihood that both partners commute increases significantly when both the man and woman have attained secondary and higher education, work in clerical/services and sales occupations and are living together (not legally married). The results indicate a need for policy reform and initiatives to address the needs of commuting couples in Nigeria, expand job opportunities, diversify the location of industries, and invest more in transportation infrastructure to lessen the commuting burden of couples in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Commuting; Couples; Family; Marriage; Socioeconomic predictors

## **Introduction**

Marriage is the socially accepted means of family formation in Nigeria (Otite, 1990). In most of the country's 350 ethnic groups, marriage is an important marker of adult status (Otite, 1990; Smith, 2007), and everyone is expected to marry and remain married throughout life. Upon the conclusion of marriage rites, women co-reside with their husbands or in their husbands' families. Thus, it was common for women to resign from their jobs, and stop their education to live with their husbands because women derive their status basically from their dyadic roles of wife and mother.

A study among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria observed that "a girl's life is essentially a preparation for marriage ... a woman's glory is her children, and to have children, she must have a husband" (Uchendu, 1965, p. 53). However, changes have continued to take place in the marriage process, as well as the proportion of the married, and living arrangements after marriage. Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, marriage in many Nigerian societies ended with the completion of traditional marriage rites which included the exchange of bride wealth (including bride price) from the groom to the bride's family (Otite, 1990). The coming of Christianity and Islam elongated the process which now includes solemnization in Church, Court, or Mosque after the traditional rites. Marriage would not be said to be complete, and in some places, the bride would not move in to reside with the groom until solemnization.

However, anecdotal evidence indicates that co-residence is beginning to take place again immediately after the traditional rites are completed, and the proportion who cohabit before marriage is also increasing. The percentage of women who are in informal marital unions (living together with a partner without formalization through traditional, religious or civil celebration) decreased from 7.4% in 1990 to 2.3% in 2018 whereas the proportion of women never married at age 49 increased from 0% to 3% within the same period (FOS & IRD Macro, 1992; National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and ICF, 2019), indicating an increase in lifelong singlehood among women. The female median age at first marriage has increased from 17.1 in 1990 for women aged 20-49 years to 19.1 in 2018, but a more substantial transition is in the three southern regions of Nigeria where the female median age at first marriage increased from 18-19 years in 1990 to 23-24 years in 2018 (FOS & IRD Macro, 1992; National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and ICF, 2019).

The proportion of persons in a union whose partners live elsewhere was about 10% in 2018, but the absolute number has been increasing. Among all women whose husbands lived elsewhere, 5.5% was in 1990, 28% in 2008, and 30.1% in 2018 (FOS & IRD Macro, 1992; NPC & ICF International, 2014). These changes are often associated with increasing urbanization,

internal and international migration, changing gender roles, increasing educational and employment opportunities for women outside the home, economic slowdown and downturn that has made joint income a necessity in many Nigerian homes, and increasing cost and standard of living. Despite the changes, unlike in the more developed countries, scholarly literature in Nigeria on the changes in marriage and family and its implications is scanty. For instance, the proportion of couples in Nigeria who are in a commuter union is unknown as well as the predictors.

Commuter union refers to a couple (married or living together with a partner) who live in one home but one or both of them have a second residential apartment where she or he stays for at least part of the week when away from home due to work or study (Glötzer & Federlein, 2007; Levin, 2004). Evidence from previous studies shows that non-resident partnerships and similar living arrangements such as living apart together and long-distance single residence commuting partnerships are consequential for individual and family well-being as well as marital satisfaction and stability (Bergen, 2010; Chrishianie et al., 2018; DeKlyen et al., 2006; Kley & Feldhaus, 2018; Sandow, 2019). Therefore, this study examines the proportion of couples in a commuter union in Nigeria and the predictors. The findings will be useful for reforms in labour and family laws in Nigeria.

## **Methods**

### **Study design and data source**

A cross-sectional design was adopted for this study. The data were obtained from a weighted sample of 8,079 couples in the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). Using a nationally representative sample, the Measure DHS collects demographic and health data in over 90 countries from women aged 15 – 49 years, and men aged 15-49 or 15-59, depending on the country. The data include their union characteristics and living arrangements. This study made use of the couple recode which contains data on couples made up of women aged 15-49 and men aged 15-59 who reported themselves as couples and were interviewed during the survey.

### **Variables and measures**

The dependent variable is the commuter union. This was measured with two variables: a report of staying away for more than one month, and the number of trips in the past 12 months before the survey. The number of trips ranged from 0 to 90, with zero indicating no trip. The respondents (man or woman) who made 4 or more trips and stayed away for more than one month are considered commuters. Those who made no or 1-3 trips, and did not stay away for more than one month in the past 12 months before the survey were considered non-commuters. Both

variables were merged for both men and women to generate a single variable with four categories: non-commuters (coded 0), man alone commutes (coded 1), woman alone commutes (coded 2), and both commutes (coded 3).

The selection of potential explanatory socioeconomic variables was informed by the literature on commuter unions. They included the highest level of education, occupation, age, place of residence (urban and rural), number of living children, marital status (married or living together), type of marriage (monogamy or polygyny), and household wealth index.

### **Data Analysis**

All the analyses were conducted with Stata 17 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the study population, and multinomial logistic regression was used to examine the socioeconomic predictors of commuter union. Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate because the dependent variable has more than two categories. It aims to estimate the likelihood of a couple being in a union where either the man alone, woman alone, or both commute in comparison to a reference category (neither commute).

The model is specified as follows:

$$\text{Log} [\text{Pr}(Y=\text{category B})/\text{Pr}(Y=\text{category A})] = \alpha + \beta_1X_1+ \beta_2X_2+ \dots+ \beta_nX_n$$

$$\text{Log} [\text{Pr}(Y=\text{category C})/\text{Pr}(Y=\text{category A})] = \alpha + \beta_1X_1+ \beta_2X_2+ \dots+ \beta_nX_n$$

$$\text{Log} [\text{Pr}(Y=\text{category D})/\text{Pr}(Y=\text{category A})] = \alpha + \beta_1X_1+ \beta_2X_2+ \dots+ \beta_nX_n$$

Where Y= dependent variable (commuting status of a couple)

A= first category of dependent variable

B= second category of dependent variable

C= third category of dependent variable

D=fourth category of dependent variable

$\alpha$  = intercept of the equation (constant)

$\beta_n$  = slope of the equation (coefficient of each independent variable)

$X_n$  = independent variable

The results are presented using frequency, percentages, and relative risk ratios with a 95% confidence interval. A test of multicollinearity was conducted to determine highly correlated variables and variables that are highly correlated are the ones with multicollinearity coefficient of 0.70 and above. When there is a multicollinearity, one of the highly correlated variables is dropped from the model. The partner's age was highly correlated with the woman's age, thus,

the partner's age was dropped. All analyses were weighted, and the svy command in Stata was used to adjust for the design effect of the DHS data.

## Results

### Description of the study population by commuting status

The distribution of the couples by their commuting status is presented in Table 1. Close to half (47%) of couples in Nigeria commute, where either man or woman alone or both commute. More males commute than women, and in about 7.2%, both of them commute. A large proportion of the study population were females aged 20-39, and males aged 30-49. Slightly above 40% of the women had no education, and 30% of men. In contrast to men, 26.4% of the women were not working. More than half of the couples reside in rural areas, and commuting was evenly distributed between the two places. By household wealth index, almost an equal proportion of couples fall into the five quintiles, commuters are similarly distributed.

The south-south region has the largest proportion of commuters. With regard to marital status, and type of union, the majority of the couples are legally married, and in monogamous unions. Commuters are majorly in the living together unions. The median number of living children for women is 3 and 4 for men, and not different among the categories of commuters and non-commuters.

**Table 1. Percentage distribution of the study population by commuting status**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Non-commuter</b>	<b>Man alone</b>	<b>Woman Alone</b>	<b>Both</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>N=8,079</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Total</b>	53	30.2	9.7	7.2		
<b>Wife's age</b>						
15-19	52.6	36.2	6.2	5	6.3	507
20-24	49	34.3	10.2	6.4	15.7	1,265
25-29	53.9	28.9	9.8	7.4	23.8	1,919
30-34	52.9	29.8	9.8	7.5	21.4	1,728
35-39	55.5	28.1	9.3	7.2	17.7	1,428
40-44	52.7	28.9	10	8.5	9.4	761
45-49	53.8	27.4	11.4	7.3	5.8	471
<b>Partner's age</b>						
15-19	53.6	46.4	0	0	0.1	4
20-24	47.5	32.9	12.2	7.3	2.6	207
25-29	47.3	36.6	9.6	6.5	9	731
30-34	54	30.1	8.3	7.6	17	1,372
35-39	52.5	31.8	9.1	6.6	21	1,699

40-44	52.1	30.7	9.4	7.9	19.2	1,548
45-49	54.8	28.2	9.8	7.2	14.8	1,199
50-54	56.6	26.1	10.6	6.7	10	805
55-59	55.2	23.8	13.2	7.8	6.4	513
<b>Highest Educational Level (Wife)</b>						
No education	55.9	30.7	8.1	5.4	41.2	3,326
Primary	56.9	27.1	8.9	7.1	15.7	1,269
Secondary	50.5	29.7	11.8	8.1	33.2	2,684
Higher	43.4	34.5	10.3	11.8	9.9	799
<b>Highest Educational Level (Partner)</b>						
No education	55.8	30.1	9	5.1	30.1	2,428
Primary	56.1	28.4	9.5	6	17.3	1,397
Secondary	52.9	29.4	9.9	7.7	35.7	2,887
Higher	45.1	33.7	10.3	10.9	16.9	1,367
<b>Occupation (Wife)</b>						
Not working	55	31.2	8.6	5.2	26.4	2,130
Professional/technical/managerial	48.7	30.9	10.4	10	6.5	526
Clerical/services	48.2	28.6	11.7	11.6	7.1	576
Sales	52	30.8	9.7	7.5	41.1	3,320
Skilled and unskilled manual/other	49.9	28.3	13.2	8.6	4.5	361
Agriculture	57.5	27.5	8.9	6.1	14.4	1,165
<b>Occupation (Partner)</b>						
Not working/other	54.1	30.4	12.5	3	1.2	99
Professional/technical/managerial	49.3	31.7	10.6	8.4	13.4	1,084
clerical/services	46.2	32.6	9.8	11.4	9.9	803
Sales	54.4	30.3	9	6.3	14.8	1,199
Skilled and unskilled manual/other	50.4	32.7	10.2	6.7	17.4	1,405
Agriculture	56.3	28.1	9.3	6.4	43.2	3,488
<b>Type of Place of Residence</b>						
Urban	52.5	30	10.1	7.4	43	3,473
Rural	53.4	30.3	9.3	7	57	4,606
<b>Household Wealth Index</b>						
Poorest	57.2	29.5	8.5	4.8	18.9	1,526
Poorer	54.1	30.2	8.2	7.5	20	1,617

Middle	51	30.6	11.2	7.2	19.8	1,603
Richer	54.7	26.6	11.5	7.3	19.7	1,589
Richest	48.6	33.6	8.9	8.9	21.6	1,745
<b>Region</b>						
North central	60.4	24.9	9.8	4.8	13.5	1,094
North east	45.3	36.9	9.5	8.3	16.4	1,323
North west	53.8	31.1	8.9	6.1	31.1	2,513
South east	59.6	20.9	13	6.5	10.6	854
South south	35.8	37.6	12.4	14.1	9.5	766
South west	57.9	28	7.6	6.5	18.9	1,529
<b>Current Marital Status</b>						
Married	53.3	30	9.7	7	96.6	7,802
Living with partner	44.9	35.1	7.5	12.6	3.4	277
<b>Type of Union</b>						
Monogamy	53.1	30	9.8	7.1	74.9	6,051
Polygyny	52.7	30.5	9.3	7.5	25.1	2,028
<b>Number of Living Children</b>						
Median(Interquartile range) – woman	3(2-5)	3(2-5)	3(2-5)	3(2-5)	3(2-5)	
<b>Number of Living Children</b>						
Median(Interquartile range) – partner	4(2-7)	4(2-6)	4(2-6)	4(2-4)	4(2-6)	

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### Predictors of commuter union in Nigeria

Table 2 presents the results of multinomial logistic regression that predicts the likelihood that in a union only the man commutes, or only the woman commutes, or both commute compared to a base category (non-commuter), the predictors were based on socioeconomic status of the couples. The likelihood of commuting by the woman alone was significantly higher when the woman attained secondary (RRR 1.99 CI: 1.45-2.73) and higher education (RRR 2.20 CI 1.36-3.57) compared to no education. Both commute was also significantly higher when the woman has attained secondary (RRR 1.70 CI: 1.14-2.54) and higher (RRR 2.60 CI: 1.54-4.41) education relative to no education.

Couples are significantly more likely to be both commuters when the woman works in clerical/services (RRR 2.04 CI: 1.31-3.18) and sales (RRR 1.43 CI: 1.05-1.93) occupations. The relative risk of both being commuters is 85% significantly higher when the husband/partner has higher education (RRR 1.85 CI: 1.15-2.99) compared to no education, and when his occupation is clerical/services (RRR 4.02 CI: 1.03-15.61) compared to not working/other. In a union where

the couple is living together (not legally married), the likelihood that both commute is significantly higher (RRR 2.02 CI: 1.28-3.19). Compared to when the wife is young (15-19 years old), the likelihood that the man alone commutes significantly decreases when the woman is aged 25-29 (RRR 0.74 CI: 0.56-0.98) and 35-39 (RRR 0.69 CI: 0.50-0.96).

**Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression model predicting commuter union in Nigeria**

Variable	Man alone		Woman alone		Both	
	RRR	95% CI	RRR	95% CI	RRR	95% CI
<b>Highest education (wife)</b>						
No education (ref)						
Primary	0.88	0.72 - 1.08	1.19	0.88 - 1.62	1.28	0.86 - 1.91
Secondary	1.03	0.82 - 1.29	1.99***	1.45 - 2.73	1.70**	1.14 - 2.54
Higher	1.29	0.90 - 1.84	2.20**	1.36 - 3.57	2.60***	1.54 - 4.41
<b>Occupation(wife)</b>						
Not working(ref)						
Professional/technical/managerial	0.98	0.70 - 1.37	1.08	0.68 - 1.72	1.45	0.89 - 2.38
Clerical/services	1.04	0.79 - 1.36	1.28	0.87 - 1.89	2.04**	1.31 - 3.18
Sales	1.12	0.93 - 1.34	1.12	0.87 - 1.44	1.43*	1.05 - 1.93
Skilled and unskilled manual/other	0.98	0.70 - 1.37	1.48	0.97 - 2.25	1.63	0.93 - 2.86
Agriculture	0.97	0.77 - 1.21	0.90	0.67 - 1.22	1.03	0.70 - 1.52
<b>Highest Education (Partner)</b>						
No education (ref)						
Primary	0.96	0.77 - 1.20	0.84	0.62 - 1.13	1.02	0.67 - 1.54
Secondary	1.00	0.80 - 1.25	0.81	0.58 - 1.12	1.28	0.81 - 2.02
Higher	1.23	0.92 - 1.65	0.91	0.62 - 1.33	1.85*	1.15 - 2.99
<b>Occupation (partner)</b>						
Not working/other(ref)						
Professional/technical/managerial	1.05	0.51 - 2.15	0.86	0.34 - 2.19	2.27	0.58 - 8.84
Clerical/services	1.27	0.59 - 2.70	0.88	0.34 - 2.31	4.02*	1.03 - 15.61
Sales	1.01	0.48 - 2.09	0.75	0.29 - 1.94	2.29	0.58 - 9.03
Skilled and unskilled manual/other	1.23	0.59 - 2.55	0.86	0.33 - 2.19	2.55	0.68 - 9.54
Agriculture	0.90	0.44 - 1.81	0.79	0.31 - 2.01	2.50	0.65 - 9.67
<b>Type of Place of Residence</b>						
Urban(ref)						
Rural	1.11	0.91 - 1.36	1.08	0.86 - 1.37	1.30	0.97 - 1.74

<b>Household Wealth Index</b>						
Poorest(ref)						
Poorer	1.06	0.84 - 1.32	0.97	0.68 - 1.38	1.40	0.94 - 2.07
Middle	1.09	0.85 - 1.41	1.22	0.83 - 1.78	1.15	0.76 - 1.72
Richer	0.83	0.59 - 1.18	0.99	0.65 - 1.52	0.89	0.56 - 1.41
Richest	1.08	0.77 - 1.53	0.70	0.43 - 1.15	1.02	0.61 - 1.72
<b>Current Marital Status</b>						
Married(ref)						
Living with partner	1.44	1.00 - 2.07	0.80	0.47 - 1.38	2.02**	1.28 - 3.19
<b>Wife's age</b>						
15-19(ref)						
20-24	0.98	0.75 - 1.26	1.60	0.97 - 2.63	1.03	0.58 - 1.81
25-29	0.74*	0.56 - 0.98	1.37	0.81 - 2.30	0.98	0.55 - 1.74
30-34	0.76	0.57 - 1.03	1.44	0.85 - 2.44	0.90	0.49 - 1.66
35-39	0.69*	0.50 - 0.96	1.34	0.78 - 2.29	0.78	0.40 - 1.52
40-44	0.79	0.53 - 1.18	1.64	0.90 - 2.98	1.04	0.51 - 2.13
45-49	0.75	0.49 - 1.15	1.86	0.97 - 3.55	0.89	0.41 - 1.91
<b>Type of Union</b>						
Monogamy(ref)						
Polygyny	1.03	0.84 - 1.28	1.19	0.87 - 1.64	1.18	0.83 - 1.69
Number of living children (wife)	0.97	0.93 - 1.01	1.00	0.93 - 1.07	1.00	0.93 - 1.08
Number of living children (partner)	1.02	0.98 - 1.05	0.99	0.95 - 1.04	1.04	0.98 - 1.11

**Note:** \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05; base category - non commuters; RRR - relative risk ratio; CI - confidence interval

### Discussion of Findings

This study examined commuter unions in Nigeria. Evidence from the aggregating responses from men and women who reported as couples during the survey indicates that 47% of couples in Nigeria are commuter unions with some variation across the regions. This result is similar to the prevalence of commuter unions found among university lecturers in Nigeria (Nwobi & Iloeje, 2020). A far larger proportion of men commute than women. The gender gap and high prevalence of commuting among couples have been documented in Nigeria and Western countries (Giménez-Nadal et al., 2022; Nwobi & Iloeje, 2020; Reuschke & Houston, 2020).

Couples who reside in separate homes are not entirely new in Nigeria; it is a means of maintaining relationships with concubines and secret wives (Karanja, 1987; Uchendu, 1965). Whereas these are permanent living arrangements, the commuter union examined in this study is a circumstantial and temporary living arrangement usually driven by financial need, career

aspiration, and other needs as shown in studies in Nigeria and other countries (Akanle et al., 2014; Baldazzi & Romano, 2006; Glotzer & Federlein, 2007; Sandow, 2019).

Evidence from this study shows that when women have secondary and higher education, the likelihood that the woman alone and both commute significantly increases. Attainment of higher education for men also increases the likelihood that both partners commute. These results suggest that post-primary education may increase women's access to formal employment opportunities that may require commuting for her alone or both partners. The need for dual income to achieve a couple's standard of living may necessitate prioritizing family welfare to proximity to residence thus increasing the need to commute.

A 2020 study by Reuschke & Houston explored gender differences in commuting times and found that higher education levels in women led to an increased likelihood of longer commutes, but this may be moderated by gender norms, household responsibilities, and childcare demands (Bergen, 2010; Porter, 2011). A study by Sandow (2008) noted that higher-educated individuals, particularly men, often travel longer distances for better employment opportunities. In India, a study shows a higher likelihood of commuting among people who have attained post-primary education (Bhatt et al., 2020).

Types of jobs influence commuting patterns. Couples are more likely to be both commuters when the woman works in a clerical/services and sales job and the man is in a clerical/services occupation. These findings indicate how certain jobs necessitate commuting. Evidence from other studies indicates that a major reason couples commute is work-related (Baldazzi & Romano, 2006). This finding corroborates research by Motte et al. (2016) which showed that informal services and sales jobs often require workers to travel longer distances compared to agricultural or office-based jobs, due to the spatial distribution of employment in these sectors.

Family structure and dynamics influence commuter unions. Couples in unions that are not formalized are more likely to be both commuters. This could suggest that cohabiting couples might be more flexible in their living and working arrangements and may need a dual-commuter household as both partners need to contribute economically, especially in lower-income families. Empirical evidence suggests that family structure and responsibilities influence commuting for both men and women (Casado-Díaz et al., 2023). Couples with older women show a lower likelihood of commuting for the man alone and both. Fanning Madden (1981) observed that older couples typically have more established jobs and homes, leading to shorter commuting distances over time.

As the cost of living and standards in Nigeria continue to rise and opportunities for post-secondary education increase, the traditional concept of the male breadwinner is gradually fading away, with an increasing necessity for dual-income households. This situation increases the need for long-distance commuting to secure and retain a desired employment. As shown in previous studies, commuter union has implications on workers' needs, affects the organisation of family life, the intimacy of couples, the stability of unions, and the environment in which children grow (Bergen, 2010; Chrishianie et al., 2018; DeKlyen et al., 2006; Kley & Feldhaus, 2018; Sandow, 2019). Physical separation can strain relationships, affecting marital satisfaction and parenting roles, often leaving women with more care giving duties.

More men commute than women, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's career opportunities, potentially widening the gender gap in professional advancement. Commuting raises household expenses, influencing both family finances and regional labour markets. This may drive demand for better transportation infrastructure or remote work options. Commuting can lead to physical and mental health challenges for individuals and add stress to families, particularly impacting the non-commuting partner who manage more household responsibilities. These insights highlight the importance of policies and programmes to support commuting couples, reduce gender disparities, and offer resources to mitigate the impacts on families. The high prevalence of commuter union in Nigeria is also indicative of a need for more information about this category of couples and the effects of this living arrangement on the couples and their children.

This study has strengths and limitations. A major strength is the use of nationally representative data to estimate commuter unions in Nigeria. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study that examines the prevalence and predictors of commuter unions at the national level. The limitations include the use of cross-sectional data which do not permit inference of causality. Also, the distance and reasons for the commuting are not recorded in the dataset. However, this study provides useful insight into the prevalence of commuter unions in Nigeria and the significant drivers.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides insights into how education, occupation, family structure and dynamics and age, determine commuting behavior among couples in Nigeria. The findings suggest a high prevalence of commuting unions in Nigeria.

## Recommendations

- i. There is a need for policy reform and initiatives to address the needs of commuting couples in Nigeria.
- ii. It is important to expand job opportunities so people can have their desired jobs closer to where they live.
- iii. There is also the need to invest more in transportation infrastructure to lessen the commuting burden of couples in Nigeria.

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