**ABSTRACT**

Fertility decline in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been exceptional as compared to other regions globally. The speed of fertility decline has been slower in most African countries with an average total fertility rate (TFR) of 4.7 children per woman in 2015-2020 (United Nations, 2019). This figure is more than double the average rate of other world regions (Asia, Caribbean, Europe and Latin America) whose fertility levels have declined to 2.2 children per woman or less. The high fertility rates in SSA are contributing to an increase in population growth with projections expecting the number to double by 2050. This "*African exception*" is raising concern for researchers and policy makers.

This study uses secondary data from the most recent Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of Ethiopia (2000, 2005, 2011, 2016), Kenya (2003, 2008-09, 2014), Malawi (2000, 2004, 2010, 2015-16) and Mali (2001, 2006, 2012-12, 2018) to conduct analysis of fertility rates among ages 15-24. There are approximately 880 million young women aged 15-24 years globally (UNAIDS, 2014). Sub-Saharan Africa comprises of an adolescent population of more than 250 million (20% globally) aged 10-19 and expected to increase to 24% by 2030 (United Nations, 2019). Whereas adolescent youth are projected to decline in Asia from "715 million in 2015 to 711 in 2030 and 619 million in 2060", Africa is experiencing a rapid growth with projections of 42% increase by 2030 (UN population, 2015). Adolescents and young women aged 15-24 in SSA face myriad challenges such as child marriage, adolescent childbearing, low use of modern contraceptives, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortion practices and low levels of education attainment. The Bongaarts framework of proximate determinants of fertility is used to interpret the data.

This study revealed that there is a relationship between education attainment of women ages 15-24 and the proximate determinants of fertility (age at first birth, index of contraception use and breastfeeding). A higher percentage of women of childbearing age with higher education levels were using modern contraceptives as compared to those women with no formal education. In contrast, the median duration of postpartum is higher among women with no formal education in contrast to women with higher education. More women in all education categories are using some sort of modern contraceptive as compared with traditional or folk methods of contraception. However, fewer women with secondary or higher education are breastfeeding which has repercussions on the wellbeing of mother and child.

This study confirms that the education attainment of women ages 15-24 slows down fertility rates in the selected four countries as the women delay age at first marriage and utilise modern contraceptives.