

On MARRYING, MIXING and EVERYTHING ELSE

The changing face of family life in South Africa

In the face of increasing modernisation and globalisation, how are South African families shaping up? YAW AMOATENG analyses results from the HSRC's 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey, to which 5 734 people responded.

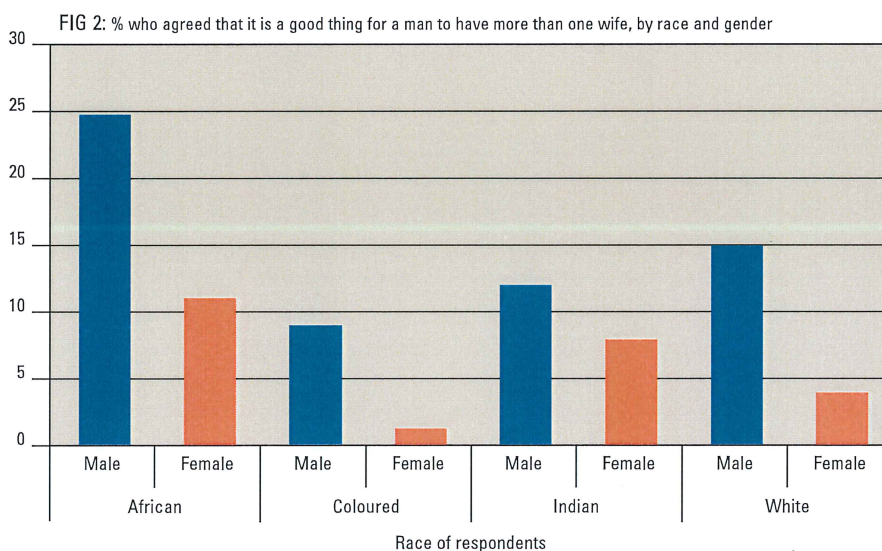
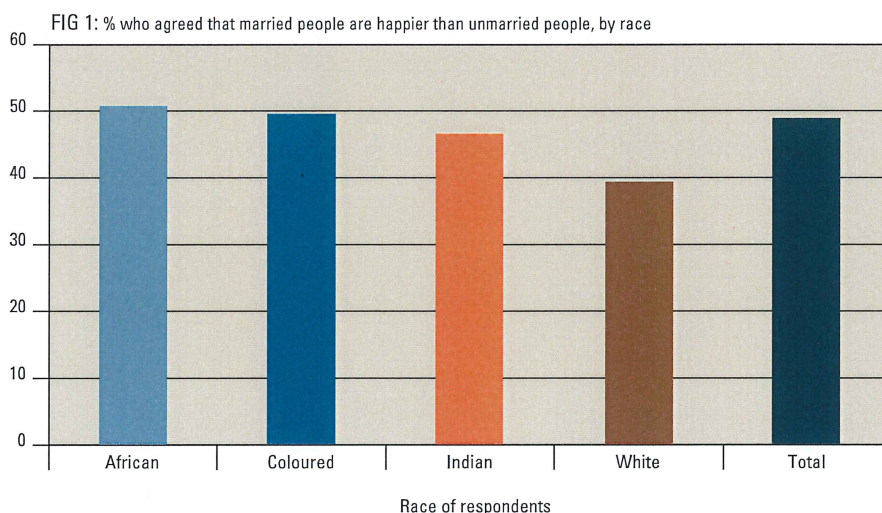
THE EVIDENCE PRODUCED so far from the 2005 survey points to growing generational, racial and gender gaps in South Africans' attitudes towards several important aspects of family life. A noteworthy trend is the difference in attitudes towards the institution of marriage between the younger and older generations.

Considering these attitudes and South Africa's relatively low marriage rates in comparison with other sub-Saharan African countries, it would appear that marriages will continue to decline with corresponding increases in cohabitation.

This is despite the fact that South Africans strongly believe in the importance of marriage and express near universal support for marital monogamy, both of which are perceived to be associated with better living standards and emotional security. On average, almost one in two (49%) of South Africans agree that married people are generally happier than unmarried people. Africans are more likely to view marriage positively, with 50% of Africans agreeing with the statement compared to 49.4%, 45.8% and 39.3% of coloureds, Indians and whites respectively (see FIG 1).

Attitudes towards marriage are changing, as is understood from the fact that older people are more likely than younger people (between 16–18 years old) to have positive attitudes towards marriage. For example, 57% of people 50 years and older agree with the statement that 'married people are generally happier than unmarried people' compared to 47.3% of young adults.

The survey found widespread support for marital monogamy, with an average of 87% of all race groups supporting marriage to one partner for life (84% of men versus 90% of women), yet there are significant racial and



other differences in the support for polygamy.

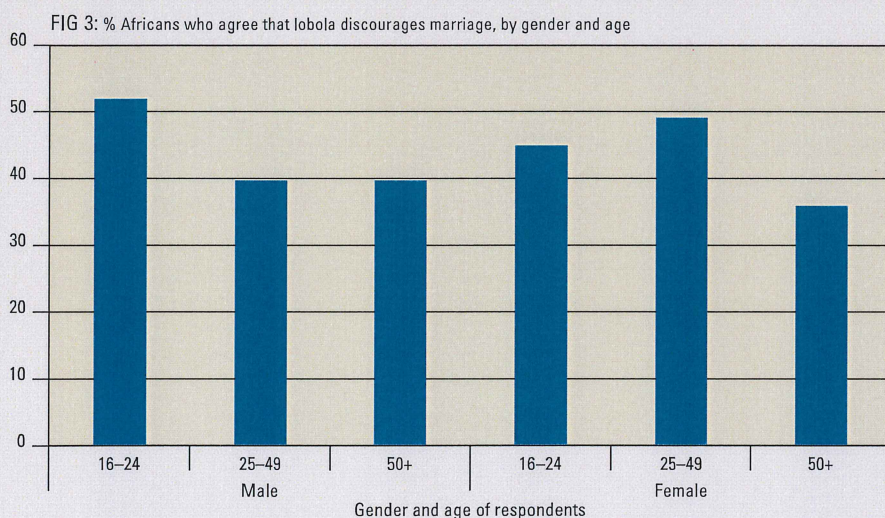
Africans are somewhat more likely to endorse this practice, with 18% agreeing with the statement that 'it is a good thing for a man to have more than one wife if he wants to'. This compares to 4.4% for coloureds and 11% for both Indians and whites.

As expected, within race groups, men are more likely than women to accept the idea of having more than one spouse. African and white men are more than twice as likely as African women (25% versus 11%) and white women (15% versus 3.7%) to endorse polygamy. And

while 9% and 12% of coloured and Indian men support polygamy, only 1% and 8% of coloured and Indian women support this type of arrangement (see FIG 2).

Conversely, women are more likely than men to support monogamy, with coloured and white women voicing the most support for it (93%). In contrast to this trend, Indian men and women equally support monogamy.

For Africans, among whom lobola is an important marriage custom, economic and cultural reasons appear to underlie less positive attitudes towards marriage among young people. For instance, among Africans, more than one in four (44%) agree that lobola is the main reason why people do not get married. As far as age is concerned, almost half (48%) of young Africans agree with the suggestion that lobola discourages marriage compared to four out of ten (38%) older Africans. Older African females are the least likely to agree that lobola discourages marriage, while younger African males are the most likely to agree with this assertion (see FIG 3).



As might be anticipated, married people across the races are more likely than singles to endorse marriage as an institution and to be against cohabitation and polygamy. Whereas 27% of unmarried participants accept the idea of cohabitation between couples who do not intend to get married, only 19% of married people favour this type of living arrangement.

Within race groups, unmarried whites are the most likely to favour cohabitation (47%), compared to 25%, 29% and 23% for unmarried Africans, coloureds and Indians respectively (see FIG 4). And, on polygamy, 17% of unmarried people agree with the statement

that 'it is a good thing for a man to have more than one wife' compared to 14% of married people.

On attitudes towards mixed marriages, it was found that 38% of coloureds agreed with the statement that 'people should marry someone of the same race' compared to 43% Africans, 49% Indians and 61% whites, the latter voicing the most support for racial homogeneity.

Overall, South Africans show liberal attitudes towards the changing status of women in the family. For example, only 37% of respondents, and mainly people over 50, support the idea that a woman should focus on her role as wife and mother, while six in ten (60%) agree that 'South African women should feel free to remain unmarried and get interesting jobs'.

Whites, Indians, and to a lesser degree coloureds, are less supportive of traditional roles for women than Africans, who are the most inclined to support traditional roles for women. For example, 43% of Africans agree with the statement that 'the only satisfying role for a woman is as a wife and mother' compared to 24%, 25% and 15% of coloureds, Indians, and whites.

What the survey shows is that the institution of the South African family is far from becoming an endangered species. Nevertheless, it is increasingly being transformed by a combination of both ideological and material forces engulfing the broader society – especially a shift towards the tolerance of alternative views and choices.

There are a few other trends worth noting. Homogamy, in terms of social class, is likely to increase, with people being more likely to partner with someone of a like standing to themselves, while it is likely to decrease in terms of sex and race.

Cohabitation, rather than replacing marriage, is becoming an accepted life stage, as many marriages are preceded by this type of living arrangement. And to the extent that females continue to be educated and pursue careers, decision-making in families will be a joint effort by couples and will even involve children, while household tasks will be equally shared among family members.

As for having children, the survey showed that they will continue to characterise families. However, families are becoming smaller as the emphasis in parenting shifts from the quantity of children to the quality of their lives. ●

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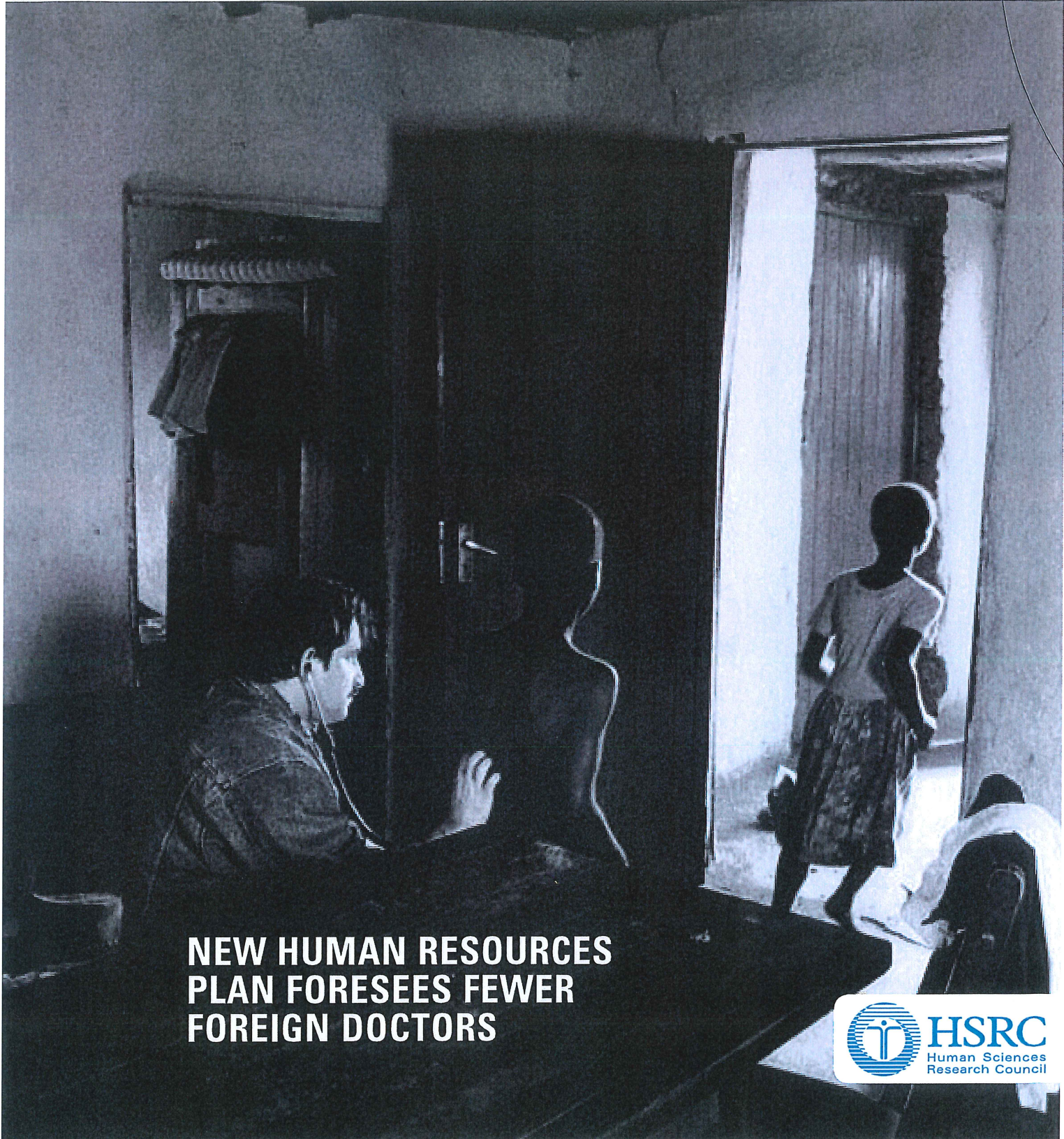
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