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Trends in household headship and living alone in South Africa, 1995-2011

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Abstract

In South Africa, households were formed at about twice the rate that the population grew between census 1996 and census 2011 and the number of single-person households ballooned by 150%. In this paper, I describe trends in household formation and living alone between 1995 and 2011, made possible by prior work to address data quality concerns in the household survey data I use. I use household heads as a proxy for household formers since I have one head per household in my data. In South Africa's patriarchal context, household headship is probably a more reliable proxy for these purposes than it may be in other contexts. I show a surge in household formation in the late 90s was driven by prime-aged and older women and Black African men and likely connected to new freedoms afforded to these groups after the transition to democracy. Household formation then steadied in the 2000s, hiding variation in who formed what types of households. Astonishing growth in the rate at which South Africans live alone was led by Black African men, a group historically associated with circular labour migration. Women instead are heading up complex households including children. More households only consist of adults of a single sex, mainly because more households are single person. These changes seem tied up with long-term marital decline. By 2011, most female heads were never-married; most people living alone were never-married; and the growing majority population group of never-married adults persistently increased their propensity to form households over this period.

Keywords: households; household formation; living alone

1 Introduction

Average household size in South Africa dropped by about a full person from 4.55 people in census 1996 to 3.57 in census 2011.¹ This represents important change in the size, but also the structure of people’s co-residency with implications for who is sharing income with whom; who is caring for whom; and how men, women, and children all relate to each other. An important question is to what extent change in average household size is driven by change in population size (the numerator) or the number of households (the denominator). In this paper, I investigate change in the denominator at the national-level by describing trends in household formation. It turns out that between the 1996 and 2011 census, the population grew by 28%, but the total household count changed by 58% suggesting important changes might have occurred regarding how people form households. From the expansive literature on households in South Africa, we know that household size has dropped (Wittenberg et al. 2017), composition has evolved (Wittenberg & Collinson 2007, Posel & Hall 2021), and that women are heading a larger share of households than ever before (Posel & Rogan 2012). However, we know less about how household *formation* has evolved and coheres with key political, social, and economic changes over the same time period.

South Africa’s transition from an apartheid state to democracy around 1994 can be expected to have had profound effects on people’s household formation behaviour (Lemon 1991, Smith 2003). With regime change came freedom for Black² and female South Africans to move around the country and own property (Smith 2003, Nolde 1991, Venter 1995). Barriers to Black and female labour market participation were formally removed and the new democratic government committed to a large social expenditure bill (Rospabé 2002, Bentley 2004, van der Berg et al. 2010). However, economic realities have remained challenging for most South Africans despite advances on paper. About half the population remained in poverty in 2011 (Statistics South Africa 2017) and income inequality ranks amongst the worst in the world (Alvaredo et al. 2018). The three main pathways to household formation in the economic literature are getting a job, getting married, and getting older (Ermisch 1981, Ermisch & Di Salvo 1996, Goldscheider & DaVanzo 1989). If this is so, then South Africa represents an interesting case. Getting older proxies for strengthening preferences for privacy and autonomy (Fafchamps & Quisumbing 2007), but South Africa currently has a youth bulge (Statistics South Africa 2016) and most young adult South Africans live at home (Thornton 2023). It is not easy to get a job in South Africa where unemployment rates started out high at the end of apartheid and have risen over time.³ South Africans are also less and less likely to get married (Garenne 2016), so much so that childcare has essentially been de-coupled from marriage (Hosegood et al. 2009). It is also well-established that households recompose upon the onset of pension receipt but do not necessarily shrink like in the developed world (Edmonds et al. 2005, Ranchhod 2017, Ambler 2016). In these circumstances, it is not clear why South Africans would be foregoing the better economies of scale of larger household sizes and spreading themselves more thinly across more households.

Adding to this puzzle is that one of the most striking changes over this period has been the astonishing growth of single-person households. In the 1980 census, 7% of rural and 6% of urban households were

¹Own calculations using the census 10% samples.

²I use the term ‘Black’ to apply to groups of the population classified as ‘African’, ‘Coloured’ (people of mixed-race heritage from the Cape and also associated with a distinct cultural identity); and ‘Indian/Asian’. These are apartheid-era classifications which Statistics South Africa still uses to collect demographic data owing to the continued importance of understanding, quantifying and monitoring the legacy of apartheid in the post-apartheid era. The fourth population group category is ‘white’.

³Male and female strict unemployment rates increased from 17 and 25%, respectively, in 1994 to 26.8 and 31.5% in 2019 (Casale et al. 2021)

single-person (Simkins (1986) in Ziehl (2002))⁴; by the 1996 census, this had leapt to 16%, and was up to 27% by the 2011 census (own calculations). In other words, the share of households that were single-person approximately quadrupled in the 31 years between 1980 and 2011, growing robustly by about ten percentage points in two very different periods of South African history as roughly delineated by the 1996 census. This rapid growth coheres with global trends, whereby the share of households that are single-person has risen to unprecedented levels around the world, representing a major demographic trend of the modern age (Snell 2017). Many factors are at play in the developed world such as falling fertility (Salcedo et al. 2012), growing population shares of the elderly, less marriage and more divorce (Bradbury et al. 2014, Peichl et al. 2012, Raymo 2015), ideational change (Lesthaeghe 2020) and advanced industrial economies (Goode 1963, Burch & Matthews 1987, McDonald 1992). However, in South Africa single-person households are also notable because of a long history of oscillating labour migration in the southern African region (Wilson 2001). During much of the 20th century, mostly male migrant labourers were housed in single-sex worker hostels at their location of work for extended periods and remitted to rural homesteads (Xulu 2014). They therefore often practically counted as living alone even though they were part of a household ‘stretched over space’ (Spiegel et al. 1996). Although apartheid was formally dismantled in the 1990s, many of the economic structures architected during that time have proven extremely difficult to uproot and modern economic migrancy remains a feature of the South African economy (Posel 2020). The share of single-person households in South Africa in 2011 (27%) is therefore comparable to developed countries like the United States (27%) and Portugal (19%) and far above that of comparable middle-income economies, like Brazil (12% in 2010) or Colombia (11% in 2015) (Ortiz-Ospina 2019).

In this paper, I use a stacked series of cross-sectional household survey data covering the period 1995-2011 to plot trends in household headship with a special focus on living alone. There is one head per household in my data, making household headship a lens on the person most likely to have formed a household at some point in time. I am interested in who has changed their pace of household formation, who is forming what types of households, and how this connects to change in the labour market, marriage market and social expenditure after apartheid ended. Household headship is not a perfect measurement tool and is a contested concept (Presser 1998, Budlender 2003), but later on I discuss qualitative and quantitative research that exists for South Africa supporting the idea that headship is an informative proxy in this case (Rogan 2016, Posel 2001). Relatedly, my survey data dictates how households are defined and in my data, households are defined strictly in terms of physical co-residency. Although this precludes important analysis of labour migrants in stretched households, it is the definition sealed into most welfare analyses of the country (e.g. any that uses per capita household income) and also prevents any double-counting. This is particularly useful for me, since I can trace who headed the 9 million households in 1995 and how these people looked different to those who headed the 14.5 million in 2011.

Aside from these conceptual measurement issues, there is also an important set of statistical measurement issues. The series of surveys I use are the only nationally-representative household survey data available for the first 13 years of the post-apartheid period meaning they occupy a critical space in South Africa’s data infrastructure. However, problems with how the survey weights are calibrated compromise the extent to which the data is fit for purpose for studying national household change (Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*b*). These issues are described in more detail later on, but essentially researchers can

⁴The 1980 census excluded the independent homelands of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, and Venda.

extract more than one trend for the same variable and it is not clear which is the ‘correct’ one. A co-author and I therefore recalibrated the survey weights to address these problems and targeted improving the accuracy of variables germane to the study of households, like total household counts and counts of small households (Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*b*). This is a significant technical point because the new weights make non-negligible revisions to counts and rates and can alter the direction of trends. In one example, the new weights increase the survey-weighted count of the number of single-person households by as much as 25% to bring it in line with the census count in the same year. A main contribution of this work then, is to apply these more reliable survey weights to the survey data and describe what I find regarding household formation. This paper is the first presentation of trends in household headship and composition that have the benefit of these new weights. Our period of study ends in 2011 because this was the period we were able to reweight. Although survey data is now publicly available until 2021, estimates of statistics like headship rates and average household size are not as accurate without our new weight, and estimates of living alone are especially susceptible to continued undersampling (Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*b*).

Measurement - both conceptual and practical - is a central theme in the literature on households in South Africa. Early debates about households in South Africa were hindered by the inability to make comparisons across data sources (Ziehl 2001). Historically, Black African households in South Africa have followed a consanguineal and extended family pattern (Siqwana-Ndulo 1998, Russell 2003, Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba 2016) rather than the conjugal system associated with the West and the nuclear family. The drop in household size triggered debates at the turn of the century about whether South African households were becoming more nuclear (Russell 2003, Ziehl 2002, Seekings 2008, Amoateng 1997). In contributing to this debate, many researchers drew on small highly-localised studies, some of which differed in their definition of a household (Seekings 2008). Even today, when we have more than 20-years worth of national household surveys with an invariant definition of a household, problems remain as I have just described in the paragraph above. More recent research has agreed that South African households are not becoming more nuclear, but rather that there is growth at the poles of household compositional complexity: more people are living alone and more people are living with extended family (Wittenberg & Collinson 2007, Posel & Hall 2021). Better measurement establishes a strong foundation for me to contribute to this literature, particularly with regards to the measurement of living alone.

More research is required on single-person households as they become more prevalent, but also because there are currently ambiguous implications for the economic welfare and physical and mental well-being of so many more people living alone. This is partly also because of reasons of measurement since we still struggle to compare individual welfare across different household sizes (Lanjouw & Ravallion 1995). Smaller households typically look better-off in per capita terms, but this ignores the complexity of spending the household budget (Lanjouw & Ravallion 1995, Posel & Rogan 2016). Living alone can be associated with more self-determination and freedom from potentially restrictive traditional social customs of the past (Jamieson et al. 2009); but also more isolation and loneliness (Smith & Victor 2019), including in South Africa (Posel 2021). Most of the research on single-person households in South Africa relies on just the three census data points of 1996, 2001 and 2011 (Amoateng et al. 2007, Jhamba & Mmatli 2015, Mutanda & Odimegwu 2019, Roux & Geyer 2017), owing to known problems of undersampling in the household survey data (Kerr & Wittenberg 2015, Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*b*).⁵ Tracing

⁵Some exceptions using other survey data are Wittenberg & Collinson (2007), Posel (2021), and Posel & Hunter (2022).

this important trend over time is the first step to understanding what is behind its growth.

I also approach the question of household change from the angle of household formation. Indeed, most studies describing household change in South Africa, focus on compositional change (Steyn 1995, Amoateng 1997, Amoateng et al. 2007, Posel & Hall 2021, Seekings 2008, Russell 2004), with few directly aiming to investigate the process by which such change is happening. An exception is a series of studies using data from the Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) in Agincourt, which is a rural area in Mpumalanga province where a long-running panel study has been conducted since 1992. Wittenberg et al. (2017) and Wittenberg & Collinson (2020) treat the data as a panel of households and apply a novel decomposition technique to show that the drop in average household size in the area is mainly driven by the formation of new households (as opposed to the shrinking of existing ones). Wittenberg et al. (2017) reach the same conclusion for the country as a whole using data starting in 2008. These studies link the provision of free household services, particularly housing, to household formation. Interestingly, the surge in living alone that has emerged in the national survey data has not been detected in the regional data (Wittenberg & Collinson 2007), and this is a point that warrants more investigation. A gap in this literature is what happened to household formation at the national level in the first decade of democracy, which I address with this paper.

I show that there was a surge in household formation in the 90s that plateaued in the 2000s, hiding variation in who formed what types of households. The important groups behind the 90s surge were prime-aged and older women of all races and Black African men. This surge is likely connected to new freedoms afforded to these groups after apartheid, particularly access to the labour market for women. That these women were prime-aged and older is significant because this coincides with the ages when women were most likely to have a job, making household formation possible if they did not have a spouse by middle age. Indeed, labour market status seems to have interacted in important ways with the persistent decline in marital rates. Not only were there more and more never-married people, but this group increased the *rate* at which they formed households even in the 2000s when the overall pace of household headship was flat. Never-married women form complex households often including children or lived alone. It is Black African men who are the vanguard of the meteoric rise in the rate of living alone, the group historically associated with circular labour migration. The profile of the man who lives alone is one who is very likely never-married and employed. Over time, the age profile of the man living alone progressively gets older, meaning one possibility is that men move out at young ages as they have done historically, but then as more and more men remain bachelors at older ages, they continue to live alone. Many more men living alone is driving a trend where households increasingly include adults of a single gender with important implications for gender relations in South Africa where gender-based violence is amongst the worst in the world (Abrahams et al. 2009). Essentially, ‘getting a job’ was probably the most primary driver behind the surge in household formation in the 90s; but interestingly, ‘not getting married’ might be engendering real change in household formation behaviour that will continue to play out over time.

There are thus several contributions of this paper. The most important contribution is a description of household formation using more reliable estimates than previously possible thanks to the survey weights I use. I provide the first description of nationally representative trends in household formation for the first 15 years of democracy that are simultaneously benchmarked on both person and household auxiliary

I turn to the issue of measurement in these survey data shortly.

information, as well as, on numbers of small households.⁶ This speaks to my second contribution which is a description of the trend in living alone which is both more detailed and more reliable than previously possible by leveraging 15 reliable data points instead of only the three census data points to describe country-level change. A third contribution is my lens of household formation as a less-studied angle to understand why household size has shrunk. In the next section, I describe my data. As part of this section, I provide more detail about the survey weights I use and also motivate using household heads as a proxy for household formers. Section 3 provides trends in household headship and living alone. In Section 4, I explore the correlation between these trends and marital and labour market status. I connect household formation to household composition in Section 5.

2 Data

Out of the set of household survey data sets collected by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), the most appropriate to use for counting people and households is the October Household Survey (OHS) and the General Household Survey (GHS). The OHS is the only large nationally representative annual household survey undertaken by StatsSA in the period 1995-1999.⁷ Additionally, the OHS collects data about relationships within the household, defined in reference to the household head (e.g. spouse of the head, child of the head). After 1999, the OHS was conceptually split into the Labour Force Surveys and General Household Surveys, with the former focusing on economic outcomes and the latter on socio-demographic outcomes. The GHS - which only launched in 2002 - is therefore the survey that inherited questions about household relationships from the OHS, making it the logical choice for the latter half of the period.

Both the OHS and the GHS are cross-sectional and survey approximately 30 000 dwelling units based on about 3 000 Primary Sampling Units drawn from the Master Sample of enumerator areas used during the most recent census at the time. Exceptions are that the 1996 and 1998 October Household Surveys only surveyed about 16 000 and 20 000 dwelling units, respectively, due to budget constraints. A stratified, two-stage cluster sampling design is employed in each case, stratified at the provincial level.⁸ Data is self-reported to the enumerator (or by proxy in the case of an absent respondent) and covers the spectrum from demographic and household information to basic labour market data. Between these two surveys then, I have large samples of nationally representative cross-sectional data on individuals, households, and their structures for every year in the period 1994-present, with the exception of 2000 and 2001. I combine 15 releases of the OHS (1995-9) and GHS (2002-11) surveys (StatsSA 2010-2013, 2011-2018) into the OHS-GHS series by merging person and household information; stacking the cross-sections by year; and, cleaning and harmonising a subset of variables useful for my purposes.

⁶Machemedze et al. (2007) provided benchmarked trends in small households for the 90s and here I provide them for both the 90s and the 2000s.

⁷OHS data exist for 1993 and 1994 but I exclude these years. I exclude 1993 because the 1993 survey had a different sampling frame to the later surveys in that it excluded the 'independent' homelands of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and, Ciskei. OHS 1994 also differed to later surveys in that it oversampled whites and undersampled Black Africans. These differences proved pertinent when trying to recalibrate the survey weights and so I omit this year for quality concerns.

⁸The 2004 Master Sample used for GHS 2005-7 was stratified at the district council level, although StatsSA caution that the data is not representative at this level and more recently released versions of the GHS for 2002-2007 do not include a district council variable (DataFirst 2015).

2.1 Extracting more accurate estimates with a new weight

The OHS and GHS data are the only nationally-representative household survey data available for the first 13 years of the post-apartheid period meaning their importance to the post-apartheid research agenda cannot be overstated. However, the quality of these data is compromised by how the survey weights are calibrated, undermining the degree to which the data can be used to study not only household change, but most research questions (Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*b*). Sampling practise implies that the data should be released with a single integrated weight; but in contravention of sampling practise the data are released with two separate weights, a person weight and a household weight, calibrated in mutually exclusive processes. This creates statistical problems because researchers can extract two estimates per statistic, e.g. two total household counts for the same year. This also creates conceptual problems since incoherence between the person and household levels means it is especially unclear which weight to apply to variables that combine person and household information, like average household size, per capita household income, or household headship rates. For example, it is unclear which of the two trends in average household size is the ‘correct’ one to use, and the two trends eventually start to drift off in different directions from about 2009. Household headship rates by race and gender sometimes change direction or vary by more than five percentage points depending on which weight you use.⁹ The publicly released survey weights introduce a considerable amount of noise both statistically and conceptually into the study of household change with these data.

A co-author and myself therefore calibrated a new set of survey weights for these data that conform with sampling practise in prior work (Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*b*). These weights have the benefit of consistency between the person and household level - we extract just one estimate per statistic. We also benchmarked our weights on the numbers of one-, two-, and three-person households given documented undersampling of small households (Kerr & Wittenberg 2015) and consistently accounted for worker hostels, amongst other improvements. These adjustments increased the household count by up to 5% in some years and especially improved the accuracy of counts of single-person households. In 2011, for example, our new weights increase the (household-) weighted GHS count of single-person households by 25% to bring it in line with the census estimate in the same year. Without our weight, the trend in the share of single-person households fluctuates wildly, clearly influenced by changes in Master sample, and it is hard to tell in which direction the trend is moving. In another example, the direction of trends in household headship rates by race can change direction without our weight. I combine these weights (Thornton & Wittenberg 2022*a*) with the stacked OHS-GHS series. My period of study ends in 2011 because this was the period we were able to reweight.

2.2 Operationalising household heads

My main outcome variable in this study is household headship, and its subset of single-person household headship. In the OHS and the GHS, households are asked to self-identify one household head. This is convenient for me because the number of heads in the country then tallies with the number of households. This provides me with a useful lens to understand country-level change by asking who headed the 9

⁹The headship rate for white women in 2011 was 24% household-weighted, but 19.3% person weighted. In the same year, the headship rate for Black African men was 45.6% person-weighted and 50.1% household-weighted. In both cases, 95% confidence intervals do not overlap.

million households in 1995, and how were they different or similar to those who headed in the 14.5 million households in 2011? I use household headship as a proxy for the person most likely to have made the decision to form that household at some point in time.

Immediately, I need to deal with the fact that household headship is a contested concept and it is not necessarily obvious that heads can be thought of as ‘household formers’. The head of the household is first and foremost a device of survey enumeration. In the data, after the administrative particulars of the household (e.g. PSU number), the very first question asked of the household is to identify the head. Every other household member is then defined in relation to this person. The concept of household head has been challenged by South African and international feminist scholars for being patriarchal; for being an artefact of survey methodology that is abstract from how household members truly understand themselves; and for being amorphous and diversely understood by respondents (Budlender 2003, Presser 1998).

Whilst many of the criticisms raised by these scholars ring true, qualitative and quantitative evidence exists for South Africa that the concept of headship is well-understood. South Africans can easily identify household heads without asking for clarification of what the concept means (Rogan 2016); and headship is closely associated with being the oldest household member, the breadwinner, and the final authority on household decisions (Posel 2001). This final quality about decision-making is most pertinent for my purposes of identifying people who at some juncture made the decision to form a new household and was the case for both male and female household heads. Overall, the idea of a single household authority is a familiar one in South Africa (Rogan 2016), where ideas about hierarchy emerge from patriarchal norms ubiquitous in most cultural groupings (Shefer 2010, Albertyn 2009, Timol et al. 2019), high levels of religiosity (Chipkin & Leatt 2011), and these two aspects serving to reinforce messages about male household headship, in particular (Maisiri 2016). The connection remains imperfect, though, because headship may not be static;¹⁰ people may inherit headship upon the death of the head;¹¹ and, people can make the choice to form a household jointly. Ultimately, my choice to focus on heads is guided by my aim to understand the proliferation of households in our census and survey data and focusing on heads allows me to analyse this change directly: the more households we observe, the more heads we observe.

Household heads in this study are also heads of households defined in a strict sense. In the data, respondents are considered household members if they on average slept four nights a week in that household in the four weeks prior to enumeration. This definition is strict given well-established ideas about stretched households and labour migrancy in South Africa (Spiegel et al. 1996). Data constraints mean a limitation of this work is the inability to properly identify labour migrants and gain insight into to what degree changing patterns of migrancy might have contributed to household proliferation over the period. This is particularly an issue for my focus on single-person households, which might be more likely than other household types to be migrant destination households. However, the benefit of the strict definition is that we are able to avoid any double-counting of either people or households; directly tether my results to change observed in census data; as well as describe household change using the definition usually used

¹⁰Although Klasen & Woolard (2009) find evidence that headship is relatively stable. The African and Indian respondents from KwaZulu-Natal province in the 1993 South African Living Standards Survey were re-interviewed in 1998 for the KwaZulu-Natal Income Dynamics Study. From this two-wave panel they find 96% of household heads or spouses who were alive and resident in 1993 were still head or spouse in 1998. The few ‘demotions’ from the position of head had an average age of 67.

¹¹In South Africa, though, many widows and divorcees are not allowed to remain in their husband’s home (Claassens & Ngubane 2008).

to compute national welfare statistics. Essentially, there is more than one way to define a household in South Africa because households are complex social concepts, and there is more than one way to study household formation because it is a complex social process. There is something to be learned from applying all the different lenses researchers have at their disposal and each of these lenses contribute different insights to move towards to a more complete understanding of the issues at hand. This paper then describes what can be learned from applying one of these lenses, in accordance with my goal to understand the household proliferation recorded in the census data and how that might contribute to systematic household change.

3 Trends in household headship and living alone

Table 1 reports that between 1995 and 2011, the number of household heads increased from 9.1 million to 14.39, a change of 5.29 million or 58%. The number of people living alone more than doubled from 1.58 million in 1995 to 3.98 million in 2011. Note that single-person households are a sub-set of household heads and are always included in the estimates for household heads. The 2.4 million new single-person households make up about 45% of the overall 5.38 million new households, highlighting the importance of this constituency for household growth. Both the overall headship rate and the rate at which people live in single-person households increased by 5 percentage points over the period. For the former, this represents a 14% increase, whereas in the latter case this represents an 83% increase.

Men head up more households than women, but female headship rates increased by more. Women increased the rate at which they form households by 8 percentage points, compared to just 3 percentage points for men, and as a result contributed as many new households as men to the count by 2011. Men are also more likely than women to head single-person households and this time increased their rate of single-living by more than women over the period. This discrepancy already highlights some important gender differentials in household formation over the period. Men are more able to live alone than women in general owing to their better access to labour market income (Mosomi 2019) and weaker social expectations to care for children (Makusha et al. 2019).

Table 1: Counts and shares of household heads and single-person households, 1995 and 2011

millions (share)	Household heads			Single-person households		
	1995	2011	Change	1995	2011	Change
Men	5.75 (0.46)	8.45 (0.49)	2.70 (0.03)	1.03 (0.08)	2.57 (0.15)	1.54 (0.07)
Women	3.27 (0.24)	5.95 (0.32)	2.68 (0.08)	0.55 (0.04)	1.41 (0.08)	0.86 (0.04)
Total	9.02 (0.35)	14.40 (0.4)	5.38 (0.05)	1.58 (0.06)	3.98 (0.11)	2.40 (0.05)

Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Household headship share = share of household heads amongst the respective population aged 15 years and older. Single-person household share = share of people living in one-person households amongst the respective population aged 15 years and older. The share of single-person households is a subset of the rate of households heads.

Figure 1 describes the trend in household headship and single-person household headship by sex and

racial categories which are reflective of apartheid-era population categorisations that continue to correlate with socio-economic status today.¹² The overall trend for men is mostly flat, only marginally increasing over the time period, and masks considerable variation by race. In correspondence with their high socio-economic status, white men are the group most likely to head households. Immediately after apartheid, white men restricted their household formation whilst Black African men formed more households. More conservative household formation behaviour by white men could be reflective of the end of apartheid signalling the end of advantageous economic and legal monopolies for this group. Notably, white male headship bounces back in the decade of the 2000s possibly reflecting the realisation that whites would be able to maintain many of their socio-economic advantages post-apartheid.

There is steady decline in the rates at which Indian, Asian and Coloured men form households. However, Black African men were the only group of men to accelerate their rate of household formation in the 90s and this continued, albeit at a slower pace, over the course of the 2000s. Black African men are the group driving the meteoric rise in living alone in Panel B by almost doubling their rate of living alone from 9.4% in 1995 to 17.5% in 2011. It makes sense that Black African men are the vanguard of the swell in single-living given this group's historical association with labour migration. For Black African men, faster household formation in the 90s was possibly underpinned by optimism about legislative changes after the first democratic election in 1994 that extended human rights previously restricted under apartheid. Most relevant to household formation would have been removing barriers to labour market participation (Rospabé 2002) and freedom of movement around the country (Lemon 1991).

In Figure 2, I present age-specific headship rates for heads in Panel A and living alone in Panel B. I smooth the age-profile for single-person households with a local linear regression because the smaller sample of people living alone makes the profile too unstable to be readable. The quite different age-profiles of single-living by gender conform with those from the rest of the world (Esteve et al. 2020, Raymo 2015). In Panel A, there is a subtle but noteworthy leftward shift of the male age-specific headship profile suggesting that over time, younger men have been forming households more quickly. In Panel B, more living alone by men appears to have bubbled up the age distribution over time. First middle-aged men aged 30-50 started living alone more often between the OHS and the beginning of the GHS; and then at the end of the GHS, it was men aged 50 and older who ramped up the rate at which they lived alone. One possibility here is that men move out at young ages as they have done historically, but then as they fail to marry they continue to be bachelors leading to concomitant bulges in the age profile. My data is not longitudinal meaning I cannot verify whether these are indeed the same men over time, but this would be an interesting topic to investigate with panel data that does exist for South Africa. Alternatively, these age changes could be related to the evolving profile of the modern economic migrant. I explore the role of marriage in more detail in the next section.

Turning to women in Figure 1, much higher headship rates by Black African women are partly a reflection of some portion being *de facto* household heads as I discuss later. Women exhibit remarkably similar trends regardless of race. All groups of women notably increased their rate of household headship in the 90s immediately after apartheid and then their household formation fell roughly back in step with population growth in the decade of the 2000s. The age-specific headship rates in Panel A of Figure 2 suggests this was mainly prime-aged and older women (aged 30+ years). A number of important

¹²Black Africans are by far the majority population group representing 80% of the population, or 41 million people, in 2011. This means the trend for Black Africans largely determines the overall trend. The other race categories make up the following percentages in 2011: Coloured (9%), Asian/Indian (2.5%) and White (9%).

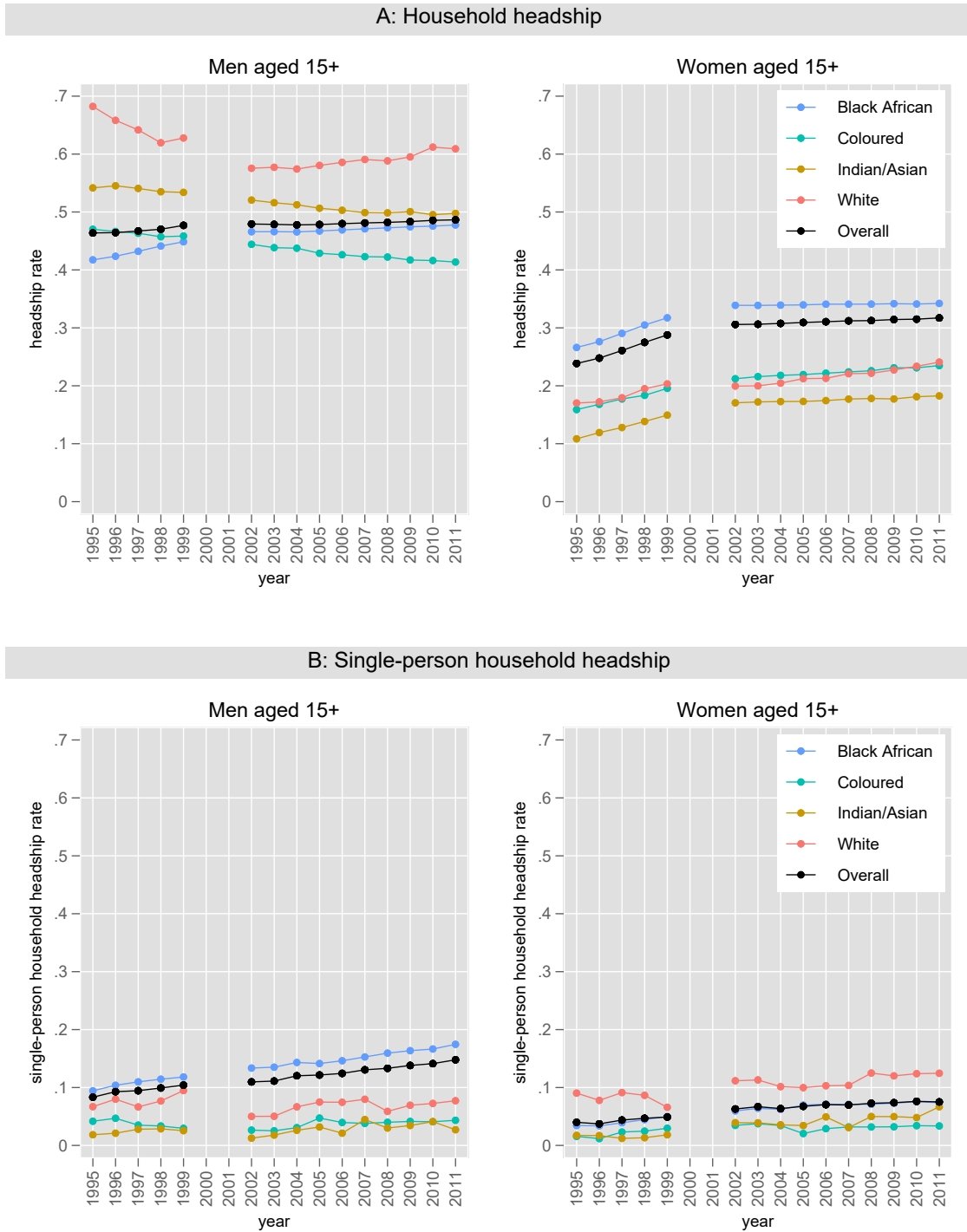
legislative changes expanded women’s freedom in South Africa in the 1990s,¹³ giving good reason to think women might have indeed embarked on an expansion in household formation during this time. This was particularly the case for Black African women who were barred from owning property under apartheid law (Venter 1995, Bentley 2004). Potentially, female headship boomed immediately after apartheid as women in general, but Black women especially, were freed to adjust more fully to marriage, property ownership, and labour market conditions in their household formation choices. This pattern could reflect a once-off adjustment to a new ‘steady state’ of household formation constituted by the plateau in the 2000s. Alternatively, the pattern could be the result of optimism in the 90s surrounding better reproductive freedom and future opportunities in the labour market for more financial independence. But as the decade of the 2000s wore on and the labour market remained highly exclusive on the dimensions of race and gender, women slowed the momentum of their household formation. I explore the connection with labour market and marital status in more detail later on.

One concern is that the structural break in female headship in Figure 1 coincides with change from the OHS to the GHS. To assess whether the change is real or an artefact of change of survey instrument, I plot headship rates for six birth cohorts of Black Africans in Figure 3. I focus on Black Africans because their trends are distinct and they represent the majority population group. Vertical lines in the corresponding colour indicate when the cohort is surveyed in the GHS for the first time. If the change is real, there should be a strong change across generations of women, regardless of survey. Figure 3 supports the idea that the change is real; successive generations of Black African women did ramp up the rate at which they were forming households until about the 1965-1970 generation (the gold line). This generation and those coming after it exhibit very similar household formation behaviour suggesting patterns had settled by this point. The expansion of female headship thus happened for generations of women who would have been about 24-29 and older when the first democratic election happened in 1994 (i.e. born 1965-70, the gold line, and earlier). Women who were aged 19 and younger in 1994 adhered to more similar headship rates by age (i.e. born 1975-80, the purple line, and later). By contrast, it is generations of Black African men who would have been aged 24-29 and *younger* in 1994 (i.e. born 1960-75, the gold line, and later) who are slightly more likely to form households than their older counterparts, as evidenced by the leftward shift by these younger cohorts between ages 15 and 30.

In sum, household headship rates surged in the 90s for women (prime-aged and older) and Black African men, and then settled down in the decade of the 2000s. A plausible interpretation is that the boom for both of these groups was related to legislative changes expanding human rights for Black and female South Africans which had been restricted under apartheid. However, as these changes on paper failed to convert to real economic change in the 2000s, women checked the pace at which they formed new households. Black African men on the other hand have continued their expansion in their rate of solo-living.

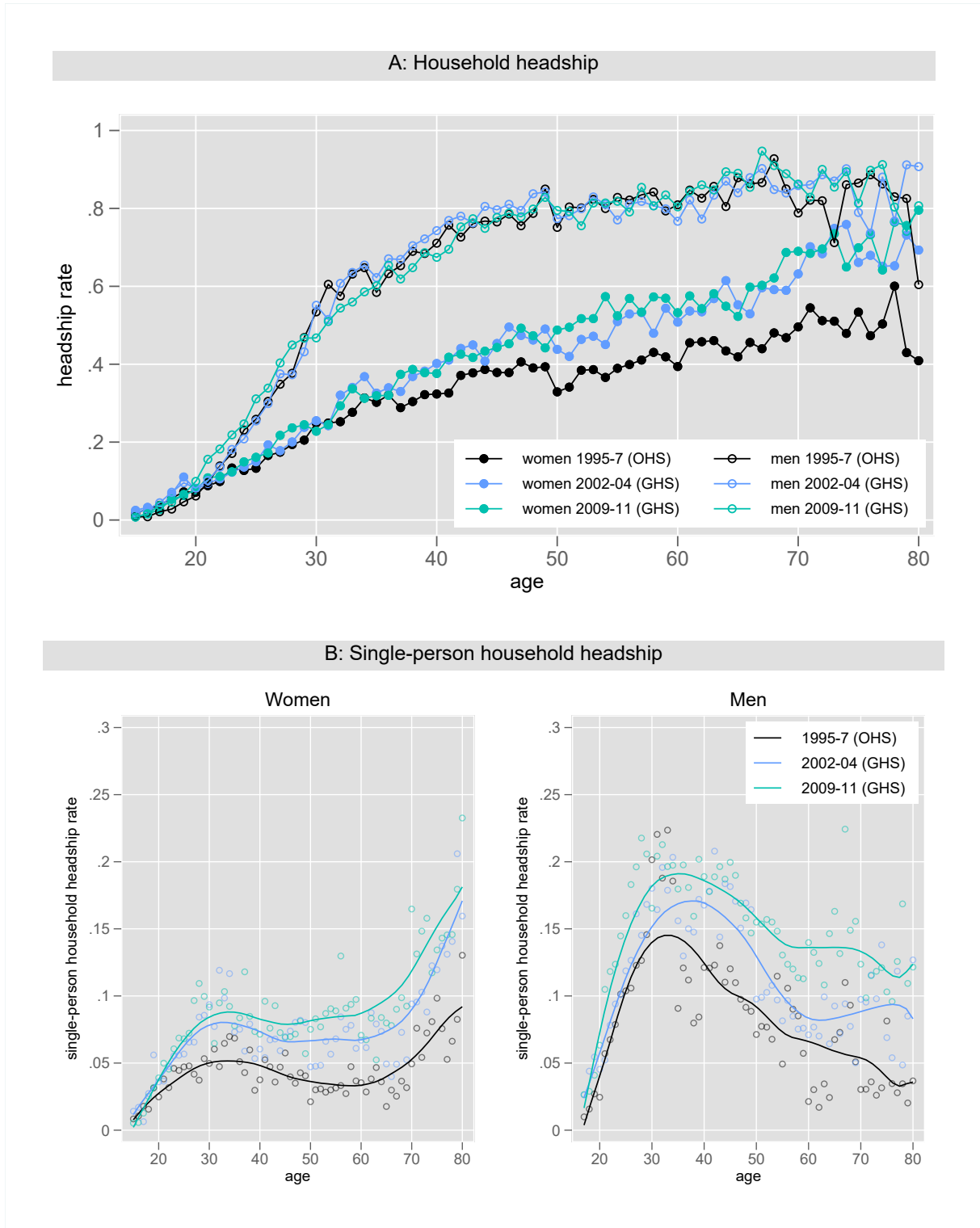
¹³These include the outlawing of marital rape (Karimakwenda 2020); legislation preventing domestic violence (Vetten 2013); and, the legalisation of abortion (Althaus 2000).

Figure 1: Rates of household headship and single-person household headship by gender and race in South Africa, 1995-2011



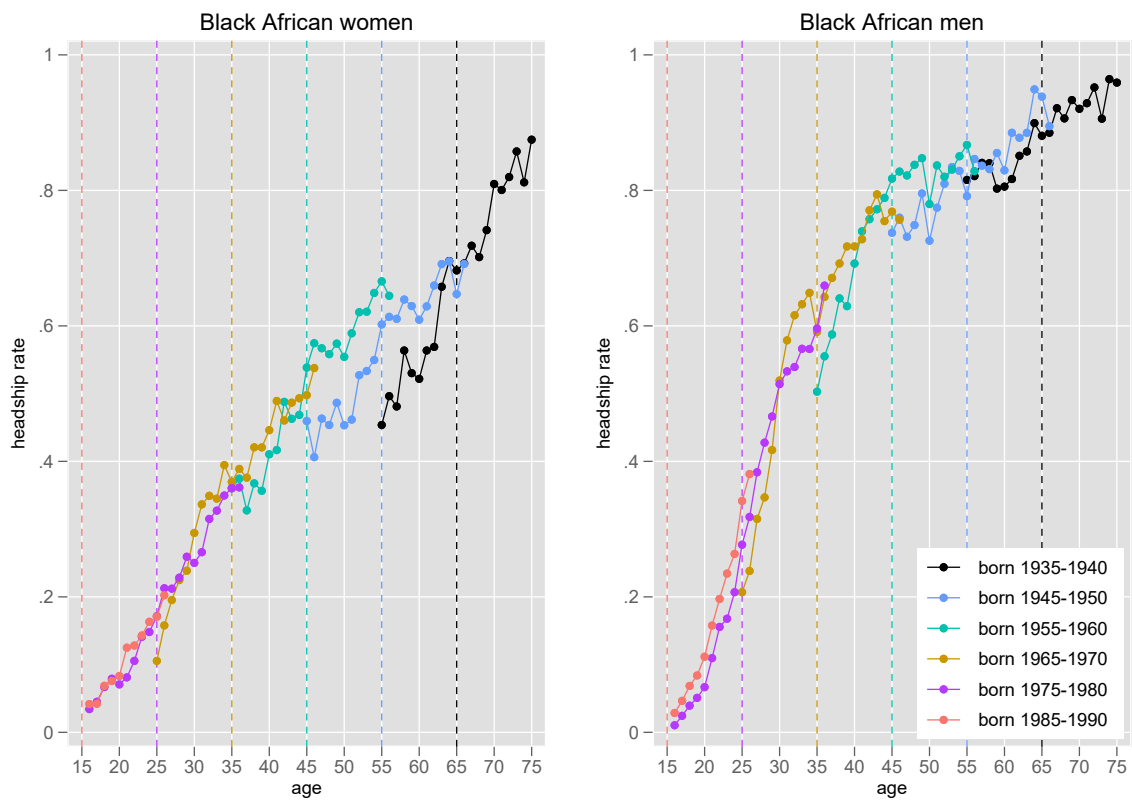
Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b).

Figure 2: Age-specific headship rates by gender, 1995-2011



Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b).

Figure 3: Age-specific headship rates for Black Africans by gender and birth cohort



Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b).

4 The link to labour market and marital status

Getting older, getting married, and getting a job are the three most important drivers of household formation that emerge out of the literature on housing tenure and household formation (Ermisch & Di Salvo 1996, Goldscheider & DaVanzo 1989). Getting older is associated with strengthening preferences for privacy and autonomy (Fafchamps & Quisumbing 2007) and I already described age-profiles of headship in the previous section. Now I turn to getting a job and getting married. Getting a job most directly relates to the financial feasibility of forming a new household (Ermisch 1999) and getting married relates to this pathway insofar as it provides someone with access to their spouses earnings, as well as increasing preferences for privacy for the couple. Marriage is also a focal point for young adults to detach from the parental household in the nuclear family pattern. As such, sketching how household headship evolves in relation to these other trends is of foremost interest.

4.1 Getting a job or getting a grant

Panel A of Figure 4 shows that the 90s was characterised by more women getting access to jobs (Casale & Posel 2002). The jump in female employment in the 90s then tracks well with the jump in the female household headship rate as jobs no doubt made household formation possible. It is probably not a coincidence that lifetime female employment probability starts to peak around age 30 in South Africa (Thornton 2021),¹⁴ which aligns with the upward shift in the female age-specific headship rate in the previous section. Women under 30 face much higher unemployment vs. employment rates¹⁵ and are considerably more reliant on marriage as a pathway out of the parental home than either young men or older women (Thornton 2023). Table 2 describes the distribution of labour market status for household heads over time between 1996 and 2011.¹⁶ There was little change in the labour market status of male heads, whereas there was a notable jump in the share of female household heads who were employed. Women living alone are notably more likely to be employed than women heading households in general.

Another factor to consider over the post-apartheid period is the expansion of government social expenditure. The provision of a schedule of social grants has been credited as amongst the most effective anti-poverty tools of the post-apartheid government (Leibbrandt et al. 2010). Gender, however, remains a key dimension and higher reliance on social grant income by female- versus male-headed households is one reason why female-headed households stand the higher risk of falling into poverty (Posel & Rogan 2012). The two most important of these grants are the Old Age Pension which has the highest Rand value and the Child Support Grant (CSG) for its wide reach. South Africa has historically had a non-contributory State-provided Old Age Pension which was initially reserved for whites in the early 20th century before being extended to a limited degree to Black populations (van der Berg et al. 2010). Only in the 1990s was the pension made equally available in terms of both access and amount to the whole population (van der Berg et al. 2010).¹⁷ In 1998, the government implemented the CSG (DSD 2012). At

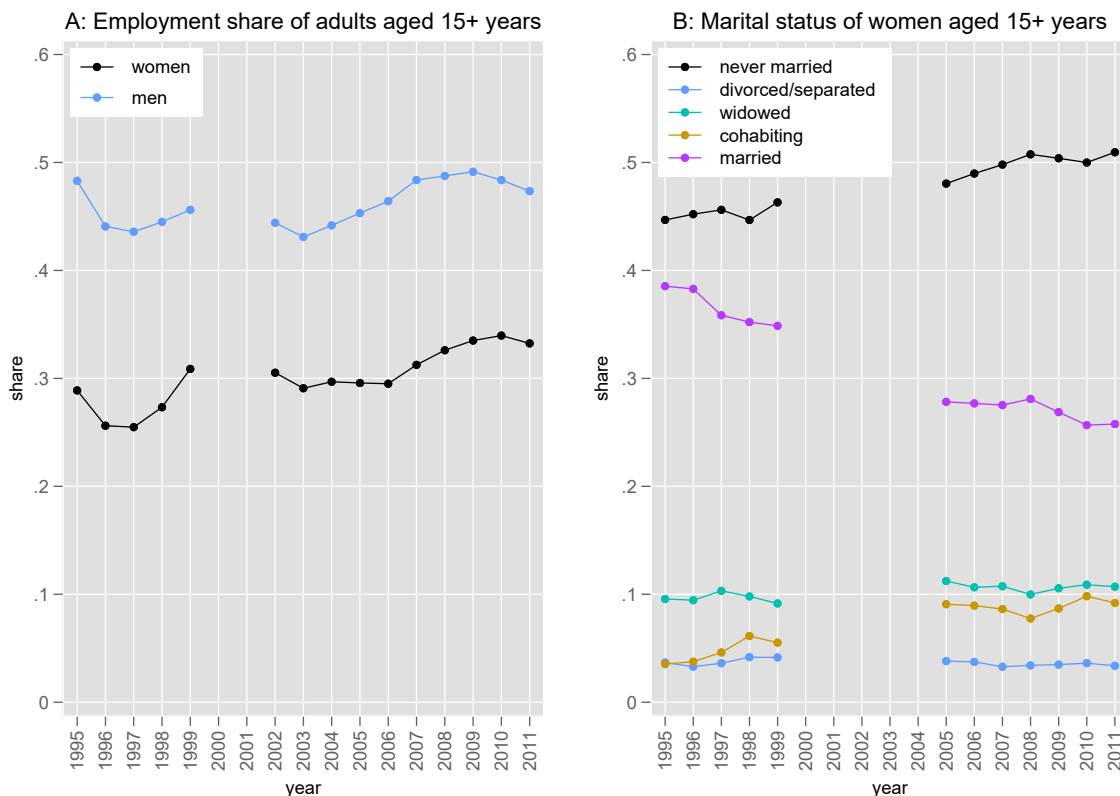
¹⁴See Appendix Figure 7.

¹⁵See also Appendix Figure 7.

¹⁶The labour market statistics use 1996 as the base year because employment numbers look too high in 1995 across the board. This is visible in Panel A of Figure 4.

¹⁷Women historically qualified for pension-receipt upon turning 60 years of age whilst for most of the period men only became eligible at age 65. However, this changed between 2008 and 2010 when age-eligibility for men was brought down to 60 as well (van der Berg et al. 2010).

Figure 4: Trends in employment probability and marital status, 1995-2011



Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Years 2002-4 are omitted for marital status because cohabitation was not separately distinguished in the questionnaire in these years.

first, only children under the age of 7 years were eligible and care-givers collect the grant on their behalf. Numerous policy changes have taken place since then to improve access to the grant including increasing the age of eligibility to 18 so that by 2012, about 10.7 million children were recipients (DSD 2012).

Table 2 reports receipt of grant income for household heads over time. Between 1996 and 2011, the rate at which both male and female heads accessed these grants increased as government’s social expenditure increased. In all cases, though, female heads are about twice as likely as male heads to be drawing on grant income. In 2011, 21% of female heads were pension recipients and 43% were co-resident with a CSG-recipient; whereas the same figures for men were 10 and 22%, respectively. The same story plays out for living alone. About 12% of women living alone were pension recipients in 2011 compared to 6% of men.

4.2 (Not) getting married

In South Africa, marriage rates have been declining since the 1950s (Garenne 2016). Panel B of Figure 4 describes how marital rates have fallen and mainly resulted in more never-married people as divorce

remains rare and cohabitation levels, though not insignificant, do not fully account for the drop in marriage. The share of women aged 15 years and older who are married declines from 38.5% to 25.7% between 1995 and 2011. By 2011, never-married women represented about half of the adult female population. Marital rates also diverge notably by race, with white women being much more likely to marry than Black African women. In 2010, there was a 40 percentage point difference between the share of Black African (41%) and white (81%) women aged 20 and over who were ever-married (Posel & Rudwick 2013). The faster decline of marital rates amongst Black African populations has been linked to apartheid policies that separated families and would-be spouses by requiring men to spend long periods away from rural homelands (Smit 2001, Hunter 2010). In many cases, working men were housed close to their work-site in single-sex worker hostels which didn't permit women and children to visit (Xulu 2014). As high male unemployment in the post-apartheid period has continued to destabilise the feasibility of marriage (Posel & Casale 2013), childbearing has largely been de-coupled from marriage (Hosegood et al. 2009). An astonishing 58% of children under 18 years did not live with a co-resident father in 2008 (Posel & Hall 2021).

Table 2 reports the breakdown of marital status for household heads and people living alone at the beginning and end of my period of study. There are four marital statuses consistently identifiable in the data: never married, divorced/separated, widowed, and married. 'Married' in this instance includes cohabiting couples and all forms of traditional and civil marriage.¹⁸ I separate married heads into '*de facto*' and co-resident married household heads. *De facto* heads are married heads living without a co-resident spouse, meaning they could be a migrant worker or spouse of a migrant worker in a stretched household. Table 2 reveals one of the most striking changes over this period has been the rise of the never-married household head, across gender and household head type. Male heads are in general much more likely to be married with a co-resident spouse than female heads, since men traditionally fill the head position in married couples (Smit 2001, Maisiri 2016). But, both male and female heads saw the share of heads who were never-married increase by about 15 percentage points. Never-married and widowed status were tied for the most common marital status for female heads in 1995 at about 29% each; but by 2011 never-married female heads were overwhelmingly more likely coming in at 44%. There have also been large increases in the shares of single-person households who are never-married. In general, people who are living alone are more likely to be never-married than the pooled group of household heads. There was an 18.3 percentage point increase in the share of men living alone who were never-married, resulting in over 70% of men living alone being never married in 2011.

The main other category that saw extensive change was married *de facto* which is an important category because of its link to labour migrants. In 1995, as many as 36% of men living alone were married. This can be compared to the 23% of married *de facto* female heads in the same year. These shares reduced for both groups, but especially so for men. Even in 2011, though, 17% of men living alone were married *de facto* meaning they were probably migrants part of stretched households. A key question is the extent to which marriage is modulating ties between stretched households and to what extent these ties might remain even in the absence of marriage. This is unfortunately not a question my data can answer because it lacks detailed-enough questions about remittance income.

¹⁸The response 'living together' which should identify cohabiting spouses is absent from the 2002-2004 GHS questionnaires.

Table 2: Distribution of labour market, marital, and grant recipient status of households heads

	Household heads (%)			Single-person household heads (%)		
	1995	2011	Change	1995	2011	Change
Men						
never married	15.05	30.22	15.17	52.85	71.14	18.29
divorced/separated	2.47	2.62	0.15	7.15	5.50	-1.65
widowed	2.54	4.79	2.25	3.72	6.79	3.07
married <i>de facto</i>	8.55	7.50	-1.05	36.27	16.56	-19.71
married co-resident	71.39	54.87	-16.52			
	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00	
Women						
never married	28.87	44.03	15.16	58.59	63.97	5.38
divorced/separated	10.18	8.36	-1.82	9.08	8.03	-1.05
widowed	28.91	30.00	1.09	18.82	20.03	1.21
married <i>de facto</i>	23.39	11.89	-11.50	13.51	7.92	-5.59
married co-resident	8.65	5.73	-2.92			
	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00	
	1996	2011	Change	1996	2011	Change
Men						
Employed	65.51	66.89	1.38	70.36	68.45	-1.91
Unemployed (br.)	13.74	12.89	-0.85	15.61	16.04	0.43
NEA	20.75	20.21	-0.54	14.02	15.51	1.49
	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00	
Pension recipient	4.46	9.79	5.33	1.95	5.81	3.86
CSG recipient in HH	1.04	22	20.96	0.00	0.00	0.00
Other grant recipient in HH	4.61	7.18	2.57	2.71	3.05	0.34
Women						
Employed	32.65	43.94	11.29	53.79	61.63	7.84
Unemployed (br.)	19.67	16.17	-3.5	11.32	10.35	-0.97
NEA	47.68	39.89	-7.79	34.89	28.02	-6.87
	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00	
Pension recipient	8.99	20.65	11.66	5.43	11.7	6.27
CSG recipient in HH	2.52	42.85	40.33	0.00	0.00	0.00
Other grant recipient in HH	5.36	11.27	5.91	2.37	2.39	0.02

Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Single-person households are a subset of households heads.

4.3 Household formation behaviour

The emergence of the never-married head is an important aspect of household change. On the one hand, this could be the outcome of there simply being more never-married people in the population in general as rates of marriage decline. Alternatively, this could be the outcome of an acceleration in the rate at which never-married people form households. The latter case suggests a more complicated scenario where underlying household behaviour is changing. To investigate this, I report household formation conditional on being never-married. Figure 5 plots age-specific headship rates of never-married people to account for the changing age-profile of this group as well.¹⁹ Several points stand out from this figure. Never-married women have comparable, if not higher, rates of household headship compared to men. There is a pronounced upward shift in women’s household headship at almost all ages between the OHS and beginning of the GHS. Thereafter, never-married women aged 50 years and over continued to increase the rate at which they formed households. The more important plot for men is that of single-person households in Panel B. Here we can see that the never-married age profile is both much higher in level and flatter in shape than the general age profile in Figure 2. Never-married men are more likely than the unconditional case to live alone and to do so at older ages.

Another important question is to what extent this has interacted with the changes described above in the labour market. Although married people might want to form their own household for reasons of privacy; marriage is also enabling for household formation because it provides access to a spouse’s earnings. This means there is an important interaction between marital and labour market status when thinking about household formation, especially in a context where marriage is less and less common. I report conditional chances of headship and single-person headship for combination categories of ‘employed-not employed’ and ‘married-not married’. ‘Not employed’ includes unemployed and not economically active (NEA) people; ‘Not married’ includes never-married, divorced/separated, and widowed people. I then report the probability that employed-not married people for example, will be household heads for the population aged 15 years and older.

Table 3 shows that all the action, so to speak, has been in an increase in the chance that not-married people will be heads, regardless of employment status and gender. Being married is the main factor correlated with men becoming heads, but not being married plus being employed is the main factor for women. This showcases the enduring power of gender norms (even if a male spouse is not a breadwinner, he is still the head of the household) and relates back to the earlier discussion about the importance of the feminisation of the labour market for female headship. Not married-employed people of either sex are most likely to be living alone by a long margin, suggesting an important interaction between marital and labour market status. These results present an initial indication that structural change in household formation may be happening as people adjust to conditions in the labour market, marriage market, and care economy.

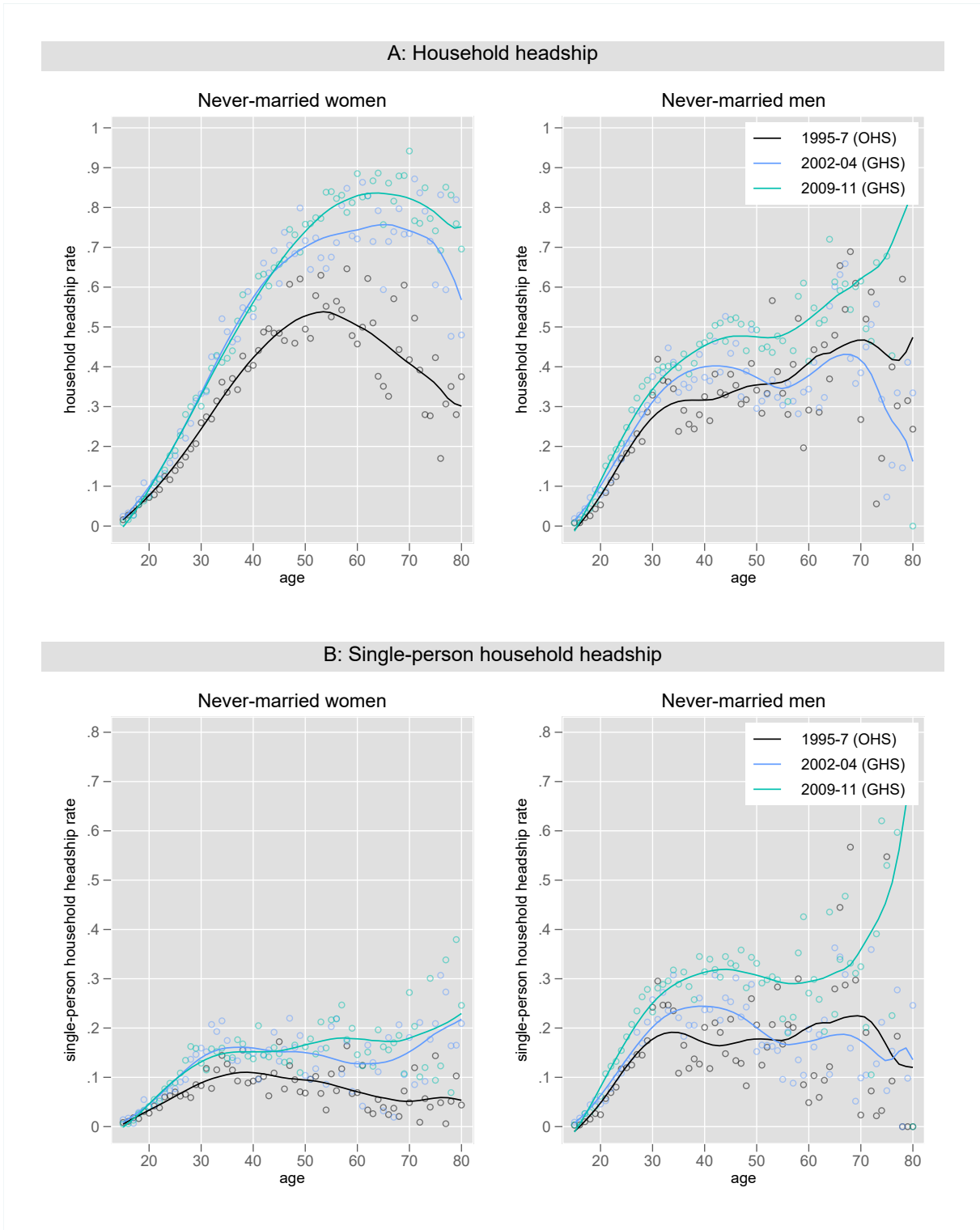
¹⁹Indeed, by 2011, this very large group must be quite heterogeneous. For now, I bluntly treat them as one group, but try to at least account for age in this section.

Table 3: Probability of heading a household or living alone conditional on labour market and marital status by gender, 1995-7 and 2009-11

	Men			Women		
	1995-7	2009-11	Change	1995-7	2009-11	Change
Household Heads						
Not Employed-Not Married	0.09	0.16	0.07	0.22	0.31	0.09
Employed-Not Married	0.42	0.50	0.08	0.51	0.61	0.10
Not Employed-Married	0.80	0.78	-0.02	0.21	0.16	-0.05
Employed-Married	0.86	0.85	-0.02	0.17	0.17	0.00
Single-person households						
Not Employed-Not Married	0.04	0.09	0.05	0.03	0.06	0.02
Employed-Not Married	0.27	0.36	0.09	0.16	0.22	0.07
Not Employed-Married	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00
Employed-Married	0.09	0.08	0.00	0.02	0.03	0.01

Notes: own calculations using the OHS-GHS series weighted using the survey weight from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Not Employed = unemployed or NEA. Not Married = widowed, divorced/separated, or never married. Married = married or cohabiting.

Figure 5: Age-specific headship rates by gender conditional on being never-married, 1995-2011



Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b).

5 What types of households are people forming?

Having described change in household formation over my period of study, I turn to describing change in the types of households people are forming. Key points emerging from the previous sections that I want to connect to household composition are that household formation patterns are highly gendered, there has been a mushrooming of single-person households, and that never-married heads are an important group. I classify households into six mutually exclusive household composition categories. This classification hinges on age as a defining feature for labelling household members as children (as opposed to relationship to the household head). This means adult children in a household with their parents are labelled as a household of adults. Whilst a different classification might label this a nuclear household, I think adult children who are of working age are analytically different to children primarily in need to nurturing from adult caregivers. My conclusions are ultimately robust to classifying by relationship instead of age and my goals for now mean a simple measure of household complexity is sufficient. Table 4 divides all households into one of six categories roughly increasing in complexity which I report by gender of the household head for all heads and never-married heads separately: single adult; single adult with children aged less than 15 years; couples (i.e. household heads living with spouses); couples with children; multi-adult; and multi-adult with children.

Table 4: Household compositional change by gender of household head, 1995-2011

	Female-headed			Male-headed		
	1995	2011	Change	1995	2011	Change
<u>A: All Heads</u>						
Single adult	16.75	23.75	7.00	17.96	30.41	12.44
Single adult + children	17.17	12.22	-4.95	0.64	0.97	0.33
Couple	2.82	2.22	-0.60	12.61	14.03	1.41
Couple + children	2.19	0.91	-1.28	19.29	13.56	-5.73
Multi-adult	15.47	18.85	3.38	14.32	16.66	2.33
Multi-adult + children	45.60	42.05	-3.55	35.17	24.38	-10.79
	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00	
<u>B: Never-married heads</u>						
Single adult	33.99	34.51	0.52	63.08	71.56	8.48
Single adult + children	23.46	15.84	-7.63	1.61	2.03	0.42
Couple	0.49	0.27	-0.22	1.43	0.28	-1.15
Couple + children	0.36	0.09	-0.27	1.26	0.10	-1.16
Multi-adult	14.63	16.76	2.14	23.86	19.18	-4.68
Multi-adult + children	27.08	32.54	5.46	8.77	6.86	-1.91
	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00	

Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Children = aged less than 15 years

The main takeaway from Part A of Table 4 is that there has been growth at the poles of complexity for both male and female-headed households, but that levels diverge sharply by gender. By 2011, the most common form of male-headed household was a single-person household; whereas this was a multi-adult

household with children for female heads by a long margin. All household types with children declined as fertility rates have dropped (Moultrie & Timæus 2003), and multi-adult households with children declined especially quickly for men as single-person households rose in prevalence. Single-person households have risen to quite comfortably be the second most-common household type for female heads and multi-adult households are the only other category to gain ground over time, although only marginally so. Roughly equal shares of men and women head multi-adult households (which can include children of the head over age 15), but closer inspection of the members making up these households (see Appendix Table 5) reveals that it is extended family members who have become more prevalent. This is mainly other relatives for male-headed households and other relatives and grandchildren (both over and under 15 years) for female-headed households. Women remain likely to head up households alone with children while this is practically never the case for men. Classically nuclear household types combined - couples and couples with children - have declined. In earlier debates about whether South African households were becoming more nuclear, single-person households were often treated as nuclear types (Ziehl 2002). However, in a context where oscillating labour migration remains relevant, one should be cautious about treating the explosion of living alone as evidence of more adherence to nuclear family patterns.

Given the growth in never-married heads, it is particularly interesting to investigate the types of households never-married people are forming reported in Part B of Table 4. In some ways, Part B represents a more extreme version of what was presented for households in general in Part A. By 2011, over 70% of never-married male household heads were living alone in a consolidation of the pattern for heads in general. For never-married women heads, composition clusters at the poles: around a third of never-married female-headed households are either single-person or multi-adult with children. Despite falling fertility, the share of households that are multi-adult with children has slightly increased, also suggesting a consolidation of patterns where women live with children. This speaks to how women are adjusting coping mechanisms to meet new challenges of reduced access to male earnings but children’s continued need for care. Appendix Table 6 shows that these households included more children of the head (both above and below age 15) as well as more grandchildren and other relatives.

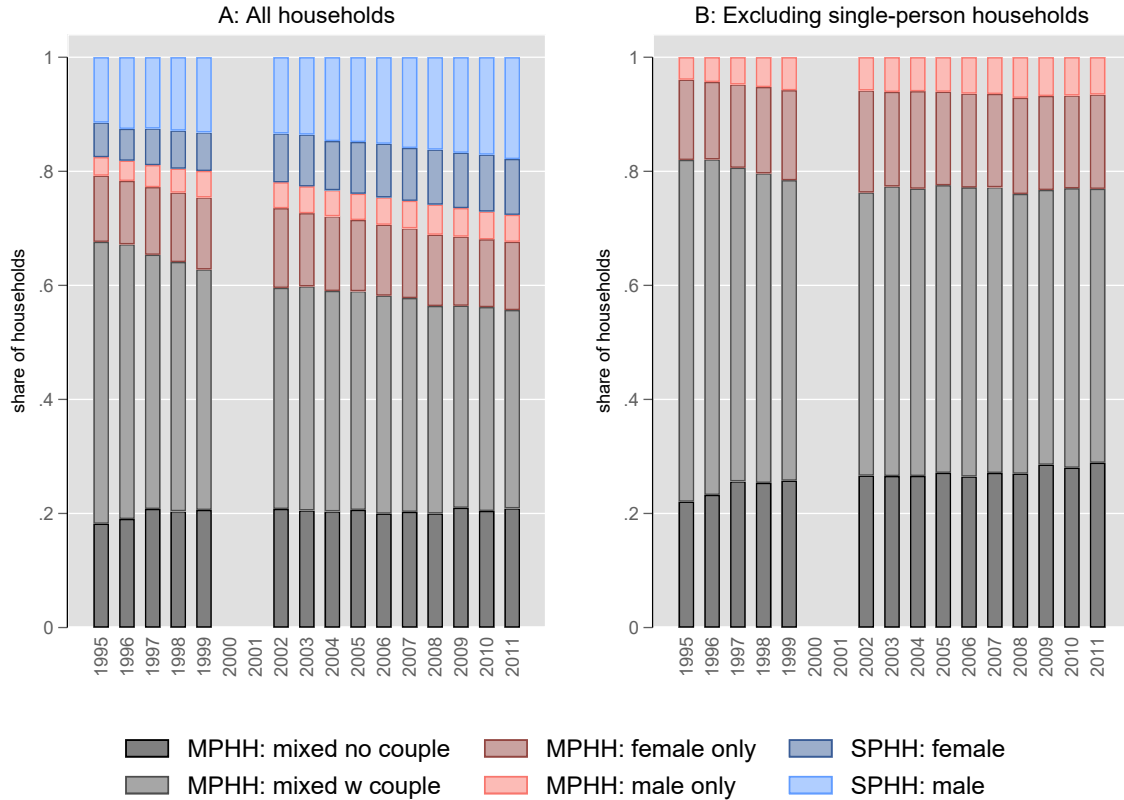
5.1 Living alone as a driver of household gender polarisation

A recently noted characteristic of household change is that more and more households include adults of only a single sex (Posel & Hall 2021, Posel et al. 2023). In 1995, Posel & Hall (2021) find that 26% of households were home to adults of one gender only and by 2018, this had risen to 46%. This trend matters because access to the labour market and childcare burdens are highly gendered. This pattern is also critical to modulating gender relations in a country with some of the highest levels of gender-based violence in the world (Abrahams et al. 2009, Zembe & Adjiwanou 2019).

My analysis of the reweighted OHS-GHS series finds similar levels of household gender polarisation to Posel & Hall (2021); however, my special focus on single-person households, which are necessarily single-sex, adds another dimension to this topic. Reliably disentangling the degree to which this trend is driven by single-person households is made possible by the careful reweighting work in Thornton & Wittenberg (2022*b*). Figure 6 differentiates between mixed-gender households (in monochrome) and single-sex households (in colour, darker colours for women, lighter colours for men); and also distinguishes between multi-person (MPHH) and single-person (SPHH) households. In all cases, gender composition

is based on adults in the house. The share of mixed-gender monotone households is steeply declining in Panel A when all households are included, but falls and then stabilises in Panel B when single-person households are excluded.

Figure 6: Gender composition of multi- and single-person households in South Africa, 1995-2011



Notes: own calculations using the OHS-GHS series weighted using Best CEW. MPHH = multi-person household; SPHH = single-person household; mixed = male and female adults co-residing; couple = head and a spouse co-residing.

Once single-person households are excluded, the trend is that gender polarisation did increase in the OHS period, but then stabilised in the GHS period with about 77% of multi-person households being mixed. The share of mixed-gender households in Panel B was 76.3% in 2002 and 76.9% in 2011, with 95% confidence intervals overlapping on these point estimates. In other words, the household gender polarisation that we continue to see in this period in Panel A is largely driven by the widening share of single-person households captured by the blue portions of the bars, mainly men. This matters for essentially the same reasons we would care about household gender polarisation in general, but changes the discussion slightly because living with other people of the same sex is different to living without anyone at all. There are a slew of economic and social welfare considerations that are unique to living alone that make the growth of single-person households an important demographic phenomenon in its own right (Jamieson et al. 2009, Smith & Victor 2019).

6 Conclusion

The increase in the number of households in South Africa was about double the increase in the population between census 1996 and 2011. I show that most of this household growth happened in the politically unique period of the 1990s, thereafter household formation fell in step with population growth. Prime-aged and older women and Black African men were the main groups behind this surge and they were likely adjusting their household formation behaviour to new freedoms afforded to them after the end of apartheid related to movement, property ownership and access to (labour market or social grant) income, but also reproductive rights and equality in marriage for women. The step-up in female household headship in particular coincides with the step-up in women's access to jobs. In this sense, the 'getting a job' pathway to household formation played a key role in the 90s.

Getting married is another pathway to household formation in the economic literature, but interestingly in South Africa this could be about not getting married in the first place. New access to the labour market appears to have interacted critically with the long-term decline in marital rates that had already been happening for years before democracy. Although the overall rate of household formation was flat in the 2000s, two groups continued to increase their rate of household headship: never-married people, and within that, Black African men living alone. Black African men are the vanguard of the astonishing rise in single-person households in South Africa. This group increased the rate at which they lived alone by 8 percentage points, or 85%, between 1995 and 2011. Historically, Black African men are associated with circular labour migration, but it is also easier for men to live alone owing to stronger access to the labour market and much weaker expectations to care for children. Men living alone are very likely never married and employed and although this was mainly younger men at first, this profile has progressively aged up over time. Potentially, these men move out to live alone at young ages as they have done historically, but then as more and more of them fail to form a union, they continue to live alone at older ages. This would require panel data to verify.

The result of the decline in marriage is that by 2011, over half the male and female adult population were never married meaning this group constitutes an important majority. This period therefore saw the emergence of the never-married household head as not only were there more never-married people, but they increased the *rate* at which they formed households. For men, this mainly translated into single-person households. But for women, this seemed as much about forming complex households often with children as living alone and interacted critically with employment status. Younger women face very high unemployment rates in South Africa and are more reliant than men on marriage as a pathway out of the parental home (Thornton 2023). Female employment probability peaks from about middle-age onwards and it was those women who hit middle age without forming a union but nevertheless had a job who ramped up their rate of household formation in the 90s. In other words, women most able to form households without a spouse's earnings.

In the developed world, a growing population share of the elderly and higher divorce rates have played an important role in household proliferation and single-person household proliferation particularly (Bradbury et al. 2014, Peichl et al. 2012). However, this appears not to be the case in South Africa where divorce remains rare and 60% the population is under 30 years old.²⁰ Key pathways instead appear to be new access to jobs in the 90s and how not getting married at all has potentially started to engender

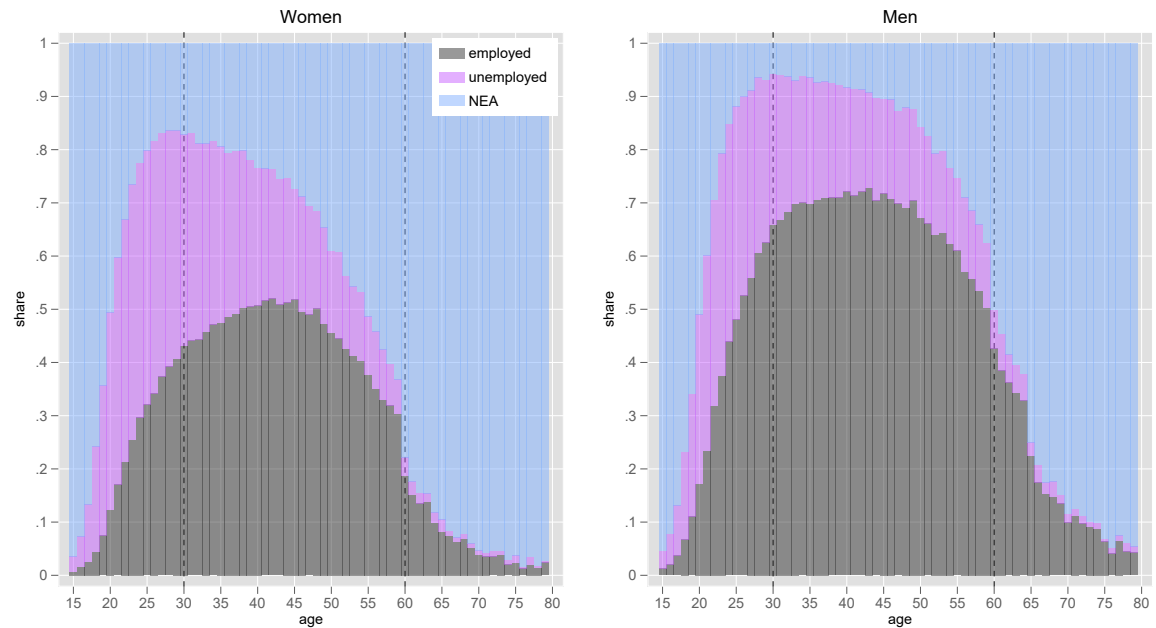
²⁰Own calculations for 2011.

systematic change in how people form households. Change in marital rates have profound effects on household formation because marriage is so closely bound up with women's economic welfare, in a way that is not quite the same for men. Historic female disadvantage in the labour market and specialisation in household production meant women were dependent on men's earnings, often accessed through marriage (Lundberg 2001). However, as male unemployment shot up towards the end of apartheid (Nattrass & Seekings 2010), marital rates continued to decline as his marriageability suffered further (Posel & Casale 2013). This unbundling of traditional household gender specialisation has had implications for how men and women form households that we are seeing in this paper. Post-apartheid household formation reflects gendered access to labour market and social grant income and childcare burdens across the life-cycle. South Africans have adapted existing livelihood structures (e.g. labour migration) and support systems (e.g. extended kin networks) to cope with the fallout of marital decline and high open unemployment.

I connect my findings on household formation to the types of households people are forming. Who one lives with is probably one of the most important determinants of one's livelihood strategies and a broad sweep of other social outcomes. I confirm findings by other authors that there has been growth at the poles of household composition complexity and that this is highly gendered: men are mainly living alone, and women are mainly forming extended households that include children. Three main effects to consider are, firstly, that for the many more men living alone there are currently ambiguous implications for their economic welfare and physical and mental well-being. Secondly, for women there is a consolidation of the bulk of childcare as women's work and the need to draw on extended family members, also often women, to assist with childcare and strategise about livelihoods. Without a reduction in the unemployment rate, more progressive gender attitudes towards child care and fatherhood, and, State family policy that might alleviate this burden (e.g. day care), these patterns will probably only serve to entrench female disadvantage in South African society. Thirdly, more living alone is driving a pattern where men and women increasingly live apart from one another. Aside from how this modulates access to labour market income, this also has potentially negative implications for gender relations in a country with some of the highest levels of gender-based violence in the world.

A Additional plots on labour market and marital status change

Figure 7: Employment probability over the life-cycle, 1995-2011 pooled



Notes: own calculations using a stacked series of the OHS and GHS weighted using the survey weights from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Vertical lines represent the start of prime-age (age 30) and pension eligibility (age 60). Note that until 2008, men only qualified for the pension at age 65.

B Additional tables on types of household members in multi-person households

Table 5: Types of household members living in households by gender of the household head, 1995 and 2011: multi-person households

% of multi-person households with at least one ...	Male-headed			Female-Headed		
	1995	2011	Diff	1995	2011	Diff
Male-female axis						
Adult of the sex opposite to the head	93.81	88.40	-5.41	61.55	62.07	0.52
Spouse	88.18	79.18	-9.01	11.75	8.32	-3.43
Parent-child axis						
Adult child of the head (aged 15+)	45.88	40.08	-5.80	57.03	57.54	0.51
Child of the head (aged ≤ 15)	54.40	39.28	-15.12	50.40	36.50	-13.91
Parent of the head	5.63	1.85	-3.78	3.50	1.56	-1.94
Extended family						
Adult grandchild of the head (aged 15+)	4.23	5.76	1.53	12.53	17.43	4.90
Grandchild of the head (aged ≤ 15)	16.90	17.88	0.99	32.29	38.17	5.87
Grandparent of the head	1.15	0.13	-1.02	1.30	0.28	-1.02
Brother/Sister of the head	8.18	10.90	2.72	12.51	13.47	0.95
Other relative of the head	10.48	18.39	7.91	15.90	24.69	8.79
Other household member	3.69	2.91	-0.78	2.50	3.19	0.70
Total households (millions)	4.71	5.87	1.16	2.72	4.53	1.81

Notes: own calculations using the OHS-GHS series weighted using the weight from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Sample consists of all households of a size greater than one person.

Table 6: Types of household members living in households headed by never-married men and women, 1995 and 2011: multi-person households

% of multi-person households with at least one ...	Never-married male-headed			Never-married female-headed		
	1995	2011	Diff	1995	2011	Diff
Male-female axis						
Adult of the sex opposite to the head	42.92	38.14	-4.79	43.55	48.35	4.79
Spouse	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Parent-child axis						
Adult child of the head (aged 15+)	6.97	9.31	2.34	33.73	42.61	8.88
Child of the head (aged ≤ 15)	9.57	6.77	-2.80	59.77	49.73	-10.04
Parent of the head	17.18	2.58	-14.60	6.71	1.59	-5.12
Extended family						
Adult grandchild of the head (aged 15+)	1.22	2.46	1.24	3.14	6.66	3.52
Grandchild of the head (aged ≤ 15)	2.29	3.76	1.47	13.72	22.45	8.73
Grandparent of the head	1.46	0.29	-1.17	1.38	0.32	-1.06
Brother/Sister of the head	54.10	55.84	1.74	29.12	27.84	-1.29
Other relative of the head	25.78	40.81	15.03	17.55	28.94	11.38
Other household member	18.58	10.53	-8.04	3.49	3.57	0.08
Total households (millions)	0.27	0.71	0.44	0.61	1.70	1.09

Notes: own calculations using the OHS-GHS series weighted using the weight from Thornton & Wittenberg (2022b). Sample consists of all households of a size greater than one person headed by never-married people.

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