

## 3 POPULATION AND HOUSEHOLDS

**SUMMARY.** *The population of Afghanistan is characterised by a very young age structure. The proportion of 47.5 percent of the population under age 15 is one of the highest in the world. This young age structure, driven by very high fertility, is the main component of the high dependency ratio of one dependent per person in the most productive ages 15 to 64. The large number of young people pose formidable challenges to various sectors of society. In five years time there will be more than 5.5 million children of primary school age, while presently the education system offers primary education to only 2.9 million children of this age. Similarly, in these next five years close to 4 million youth will reach working age in a labour market that is already characterised by high levels of unemployment and underemployment. The typical pyramid shape of Afghanistan's population ensures that population growth will remain high for several decades.*

### Quality of age reporting

In countries like Afghanistan, many people are unaware about their exact age or date of birth. This leads to high incidences of age misreporting, for instance by age heaping and age shifting. Consequently, reported ages in surveys and censuses should be treated with caution. Different procedures to assess the quality of the ALCS data indicate that age reporting is highly inaccurate.<sup>a</sup>

Another common characteristic of many developing countries is the omission of very young children from enumeration activities. The relatively small 0-4 age group in Figure 3.1 points in this direction. A breakdown by single years of age suggests a significant undercount of infants and one-year old children.

<sup>a</sup> The Myers' blended index is 21.8, the Whipple's index is 231 and the UN age-sex accuracy index is 56.4

*The sex ratio by age shows a very atypical pattern. Instead of a situation where at older age women tend to become more numerous compared to men, the opposite is observed in Afghanistan. Beyond age 70 men outnumber women by 170 to 100. Likely explanations for this can be found in underreporting of women and high maternal mortality. Both causes reflect the vulnerable position of women in society.*

*The vulnerable position of women and gender inequality is also witnessed in specific marriage patterns. A sizable number of 388 thousand married women live in polygamous marriages, which places them in a disadvantaged position. Polygamy also increases the age gap between spouses, which is again disadvantageous for women. However, a positive trend towards a smaller age gap can be observed. For married women aged 40 and older, the age of the husband is on average more than 7 years higher, but for women aged 15 to 29, the difference is reduced to 4.6 years. Also the proportion of couples with a spousal age gap of 10 years or more has declined from 36 percent among women 50 years and over, to 8 percent among women under 20.*

*A major issue of concern is the large share of child marriages in the country. The ALCS 2013-14 indicates that 34 percent of female youth aged 20-24 were already married at age 18, the age that distinguishes child marriage. Some 12 percent of these women were even already married at age 16, which is legally the minimum age at marriage. At the positive side, these high figures for marriage at a young age imply an improvement compared to older women who married in an earlier period. Thus, more than 50 percent of women 30 and older were married at age 18 and more than 23 percent of them were even married at age 16.*

*The average household size in Afghanistan is 7.4 persons, of whom on average 3.5 persons – 48 percent – are children under fifteen. On average, only one in five households has an elderly member of 65 years of age or older. Close to half the Afghan people live in households with nine or more household members. Households with just one or two persons make up 3.5 percent of all households, but the share of the population that lives in these small households is less than 1 percent. The households are almost exclusively headed by men. Female-headed households are only one percent of the total number.*

### 3.1 Introduction

The last count of the population of Afghanistan was done in the 1979 Population and Housing Census. CSO's estimation of the settled population is based on a constant annual population growth rate of 2.03 percent since 1979, which results in an estimate of 26.5 million settled persons for 2014. The nomadic Kuchi population is established at 1.5 million persons, which adds up to a total population of 28 million in 2014 in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> UN estimates for Afghanistan for 2015 are more than 32 million people (UNDESA 2015).

There can be no doubt that high fertility and mortality, and large-scale international migration – including consecutive massive waves of refugees and, more recently, returnees – made a significant impact on the overall size and structure of the population. In addition, geographic differentiation in fertility and mortality, as well as internal migration and movements of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have had major effects on the internal distribution of the population.

One of the aims of the ALCS is to examine the structure and distribution of the population and households of Afghanistan, and their underlying dynamics. Section 3.2 focuses on population structure and distribution, whereas section 3.3 addresses household characteristics and marriage patterns. A separate chapter (chapter 4) is devoted to migration and displacement.

## 3.2 Population structure

### 3.2.1 Age distribution

The most striking feature of the Afghan population is its very young age structure (see *Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1*).<sup>16</sup> Some 47.5 percent of the population (13 million people) is under 15 years of age, whereas elderly of 65 and older represent only 2.6 percent of the total population. Among the Kuchi, children under-15 even make up more than half (53.8 percent) of the population, due to the very high fertility in this minority.<sup>17</sup> The national proportion under 15 would figure the third highest in the world in the 2015 UN population estimates (UNDESA 2015).<sup>18</sup> Overall, the share of the 0-14 year old population has decreased very little compared to NRVA 2007-08 (48.6 percent). However, if the better coverage of household members in the present survey is taken into account, the decrease might well have been around four percentage points.

The young age composition, driven by a high fertility of 6.3 children per woman (CSO 2010), contributes to a very high dependency ratio in the country: for every 100 persons in the main working age 15-64, there are also 100 persons in the less productive ages of under-fifteen and 65 and over, who are dependent for income and subsistence. This figure implies a significant burden for the prime working-age population and the economy at large, as large economic and social investments in terms of education and health care are concentrated in the youngest age categories. Thus, the number of children aged 7 to 12 for whom primary-school facilities should be provided – schools built, teachers educated and books provided – has doubled from 2.6 million in 2007-08 to 5.2 million in 2013-14. As shown in section 9.2.1 of this report, the present capacity of the education system is able to accommodate only two-thirds of the primary school age children. Similarly, over 4 million young people reached the working age of 14 between NRVA 2007-08 and ALCS 2013-14, many of whom are in need of rewarding employment. In another five years time again close to 4 million youth will reach working age in a labour market that is already characterised by high levels of unemployment and underemployment (see section 5.3.2). The typical pyramid shape of Afghanistan's population and the ever-increasing number of women that will reach the reproductive ages ensure that this type of social and economic challenges will remain for several decades, even if the high level of fertility will come down in the near future.

There is a significant difference in the dependency burden between the main residential populations, due to fertility differentials and rural-to-urban migration: the dependency ratio of 84 percent in urban areas is relatively low, compared to the rural dependency ratio of 105 dependents for every 100 persons in the most productive ages. Very high fertility in the Kuchi contributes to dependency ratio of even 126 in this sub-population.

<sup>16</sup> The population distribution by age and sex for provinces is provided in annex V.

<sup>17</sup> NRVA 2007-08 estimated the Total Fertility Rate in the Kuchi population of 7.3 (CSO 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Only for Chad and Uganda the estimates of the percentage of population under 15 were higher. The estimate for Mali was also 47.5 percent.

Figure 3.1: Population, by sex, and by age (in percentages)

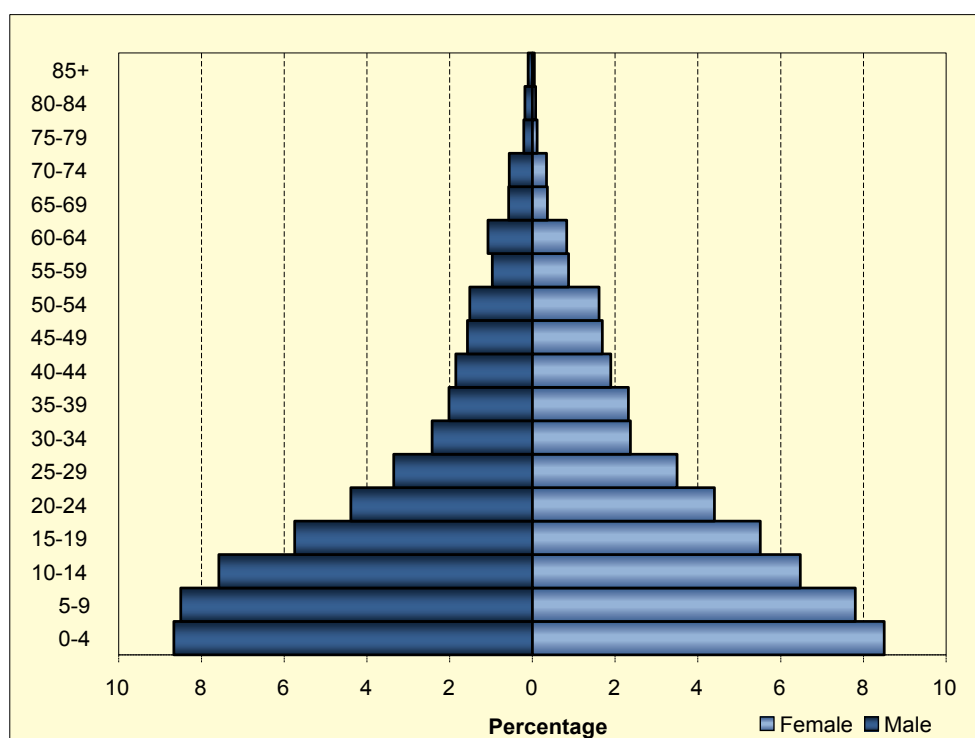


Table 3.1: Population, by residence, sex, and by age

a. In thousands

Age	National			Urban			Rural			Kuchi		
	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes
Total	14,370	13,651	28,020	3,425	3,317	6,742	10,163	9,657	19,821	781	676	1,458
0-14	6,934	6,384	13,318	1,489	1,379	2,868	5,019	4,647	9,666	426	358	784
15-24	2,840	2,776	5,616	799	796	1,595	1,912	1,875	3,788	128	105	234
25-39	2,184	2,294	4,477	525	562	1,086	1,548	1,609	3,157	111	123	234
40-64	1,956	1,933	3,889	486	495	981	1,373	1,357	2,730	97	81	178
65+	456	264	720	126	85	212	311	169	480	19	10	29

b. In percentages

Age	National			Urban			Rural			Kuchi		
	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
0-14	48.3	46.8	47.5	43.5	41.6	42.5	49.4	48.1	48.8	54.5	52.9	53.8
15-24	19.8	20.3	20.0	23.3	24.0	23.7	18.8	19.4	19.1	16.4	15.5	16.0
25-39	15.2	16.8	16.0	15.3	16.9	16.1	15.2	16.7	15.9	14.2	18.2	16.1
40-64	13.6	14.2	13.9	14.2	14.9	14.5	13.5	14.1	13.8	12.4	12.0	12.2
65+	3.2	1.9	2.6	3.7	2.6	3.1	3.1	1.7	2.4	2.4	1.4	2.0

### 3.2.2 Sex ratio

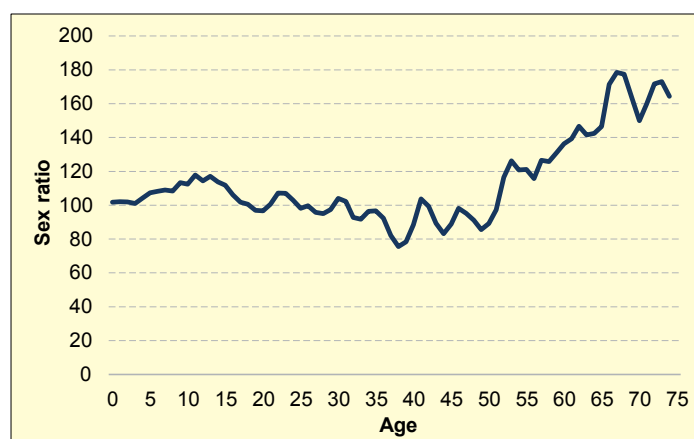
The sex ratio is an indicator of the balance between men and women in a population, and is calculated as the number of men per 100 women. The overall sex ratio in the ALCS 2013-14 is 105.3, which comes close to the values found in the NRVA 2011-12 (106 males per 100 females) and the NRVA 2007-08 (105 males per 100 females). The sex ratio is determined by the sex ratio at birth, sex-specific migration patterns and sex-specific mortality. Another factor could be sex-specific under-reporting of household members. Experience shows that in Afghanistan this is the case and that women tend to be under-reported. In the ALCS 2013-14, a special module was added in which the most senior female in the household was given all the names of the person already listed by the male household head and asked whether anyone was missed-out on the list. The information of this module confirmed that female household members were disproportionately more often omitted from the household listing than male members: more than 80 percent of additionally reported persons were women or girls.

In various countries in Asia the sex ratio at birth is disturbed by prenatal sex screening and sex-selective abortions. Most often, because of a preference for boys, sex ratios at birth are much higher than the natural ratio of around 105 boys per 100 girls. This is often referred to as the problem of the missing girls. China is the country with the highest sex ratio at birth with 118 male births per 100 female births.<sup>19</sup> In the past both the 2010 Afghanistan Mortality Survey (AMS) (AMS 2010, p. 38) and the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (CSO and UNICEF 2012, p.196) reported unusually high sex ratios at birth. The AMS found a sex ratio at birth of 116 boys per 100 girls for the period 2006-2010. Given the state of the Afghan health services, prenatal sex screening and thus sex-selective abortion is not performed and the abnormally high ratio implied a serious underreporting of female births. In the ALCS 2013-14, no question was asked about the sex of the last birth. As a proxy the child sex ratio is used, that is the ratio of boys compared to girls below the age of five.<sup>20</sup>

Worldwide, the 'natural' age-specific sex ratio at birth is around 105 boys per 100 girls, as somewhat more boys than girls are born. With slightly higher mortality among boys at the very young ages, the age-specific sex ratios drop to around 100 at adulthood. In most societies, women have a higher life expectancy than men. Therefore, in the majority of countries, the higher mortality of men over women causes the sex ratio to drop well below 100 usually after age 50.

The sex ratios observed in the 2013-14 ALCS show a completely different pattern (*Figure 3.2*).<sup>21</sup> The sex ratio in the age-group 0-4 years, is quite low: 102 boys per 100 girls. In the broad age interval 5-19 years of age, sex ratios are well above 100, with the highest value between 10 and 15 years of age: in this age-group 117 boys per 100 girls were reported. Between 20 and 55 years of age sex ratios are slightly below 100, which may be due to the higher number of males not living in the household due to migration or military service. Normally one would expect lower sex ratios after age 55, but the ALCS pattern is very different. Sex ratios climb rapidly after age 55, to a level around 170 males per 100 females after age 70. It is interesting that both the NRVA 2011-12 and the NRVA 2007-08 observed the same age pattern.

Figure 3.2: Smoothed age-specific sex ratios, by age



<sup>19</sup> <http://www.unicef.cn/en/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=196&id=777>

<sup>20</sup> The child sex ratio is different from the sex ratio at birth, in the sense that it is based on the enumerated number of children living in the household and not on the self-reported number of children the woman has given birth to. The child sex ratio is not only a function of the sex ratio at birth, it also influenced by differential mortality between girls and boys in the first years of life and to a lesser extent by sex-selective migration of young children out of the household.

<sup>21</sup> Figure 3.2 shows the smoothed age-specific sex ratios by single years. As the original pattern was quite erratic due to age misreporting, a running means smoothing of groups of three observations was applied.

The underrepresentation of female teenagers and older women is probably caused by the combination of two factors. The most important is the cultural code of purdah which dictates the physical boundaries between both sexes. To protect the honor of the woman and the reputation of the family, many women live secluded. The secluded position of women may easily lead to them being omitted in the household roster by the head of household. It is interesting that at teenage and older age the sex ratios are particularly high, but not in the age-group 20-49 years. Perhaps this is due to the fact that (female) interviewers specifically probed for women of these age groups to be interviewed for the reproductive health module. Another reason why the sex ratio at older ages is so high may be the very high levels of maternal mortality, especially in the past. The global report on maternal mortality by the interagency group estimated 460 maternal deaths per 100,000 births for Afghanistan in 2010 (WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and World Bank 2012). Although no exact nationwide figures are available, there is no doubt that maternal mortality was much higher in earlier days. Bartlett et al. (2005) estimated that in the period 1999-2002 the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) was between 1,600 and 2,200. Assuming for the sake of argument that in the period 1970-2000 the MMR was 2,000 and the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)<sup>22</sup> was around 7, then the lifetime risk of maternal mortality can be estimated at 14,000 per 100,000 women. This would imply that in that period almost one in seven women would have died during pregnancy and childbirth. Obviously, this would still be reflected in the number of women who survive beyond age 50 and it would seriously distort the current sex ratios at older ages.

### 3.2.3 Distribution by place of residence

As is shown in Table 3.1, the population of Afghanistan is overwhelmingly rural: the 19.8 million rural residents represent 70.7 percent of the total population. Only 24.1 percent (6.7 million) live in urban areas, whereas 5.2 percent (1.5 million) of the population is classified as Kuchi. The CSO population projection rates imply that since the NRVA 2007-08, the total population has increased with 3.0 million people, of which close to 1.8 million in urban areas and 1.3 million in rural areas. Due to the assumed counterbalancing effect of natural growth and settlement of the Kuchi, the size of the nomadic population remains stable at just below 1.5 million people, which implies a steady decrease in terms of its share in the overall population (down from 5.8 in 2007-08).

The urban, rural and Kuchi residence groups differ considerably in the age distribution of their populations, especially in terms of the share of children under 15. The lowest share is observed in urban areas (less than 43 percent), while rural (49 percent) and Kuchi (54 percent) have considerable higher percentages of children. Fertility differentials are likely to be the most important explanation for these differences. At provincial level, the differences in the age structure of the population are even more pronounced. Whereas Kabul – as expected, being the most urbanised province – records a low share of under-15 population (41.8 percent), eight provinces have shares of more than 52 percent (data not shown).<sup>23</sup> The provinces with the highest shares of young people – an indication of high fertility levels – are typically located in the south-eastern Pashtun belt of the country.

## 3.3 Household composition

### 3.3.1 Household structure

The total number of households<sup>24</sup> in Afghanistan is estimated at around 3.8 million. This implies an average household size of 7.4 persons, about the same as found in the previous NRVAs from 2005 to 2011-12. Despite having fewer children under 15, urban households are as large as rural households (see Table 3.2). On average, households had 3.5 children under 15 years of age, with urban households having half a child less. Kuchi households have, on average even 4.2 children out of the 7.7 members in total. One in four urban households, on average, accommodates an elderly person aged 65 and over, with the corresponding rural figure being around one in six households.

<sup>22</sup> The Population Reference Bureau estimates that the TFR for Afghanistan was around 7.5 in 1970 (<http://www.prb.org/DataFinder>)

<sup>23</sup> These provinces are Urozgan, Zabul, Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunhara, Nooristan, Helmand and Khost.

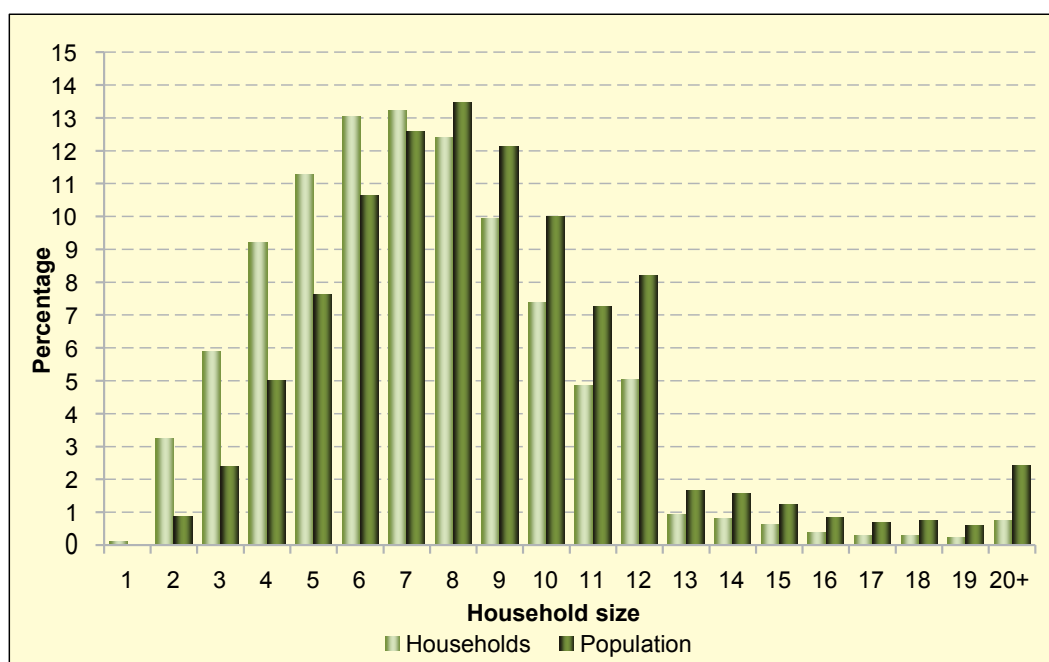
<sup>24</sup> A household is defined as group of people, either related or unrelated, who live together as a single unit in the sense that they have common housekeeping arrangements, that is, they share or are supported by a common budget. They live together, pool their money, and eat at least one meal together each day.

**Table 3.2: Households, by residence, and by selected household structure indicators**

Selected household structure indicators	Thousands				Percentages			
	National	Urban	Rural	Kuchi	National	Urban	Rural	Kuchi
<b>Household size</b>								
Total	3,805.8	917.5	2,700.0	188.2	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1-2 persons	127.6	24.4	100.9	2.3	3.4	2.7	3.7	1.2
3-5 persons	1,004.2	243.1	714.5	46.6	26.4	26.5	26.5	24.8
6-8 persons	1,472.9	378.6	1,024.4	69.9	38.7	41.3	37.9	37.2
9-10 persons	659.0	152.3	470.1	36.6	17.3	16.6	17.4	19.5
11-14 persons	444.0	93.5	322.2	28.3	11.7	10.2	11.9	15.0
15 persons or more	98.1	25.7	67.9	4.5	2.6	2.8	2.5	2.4
<b>Averages</b>								
Household size	7.4	7.3	7.3	7.7				
No. of children 0-14	3.5	3.1	3.6	4.2				
No. of elderly 65 and over	0.19	0.23	0.18	0.15				
<b>Share of</b>								
Children 0-14					47.5	42.5	48.8	53.8
Elderly 65 and over					2.6	3.1	2.4	2.0

Almost two-thirds of all households (65.1 percent) have 3 to 8 members, whereas close to one third (31.6 percent or 1.2 million households) accommodates 9 or more people, and only 3.4 percent had less than three persons. The population distribution is to a much larger degree concentrated in large households than the household distribution: almost half (47.3 percent) of all Afghans live in households with 9 or more people and less than 1 percent do so in households with one or two people. One-person households are virtually non-existent. *Figure 3.3* shows the distribution of households and population by household size.

**Figure 3.3: Households and population, by household size (in percentages)**



The position of household members in terms of their relation to the head of the household is dominated by being a child of the head. As the last bar at the right side of Figure 3.4 indicates, more than half (60 percent for males and 50 percent for females) of the population in Afghanistan has the position of the child – son or daughter – of the head of the household. The most frequent other household positions are household head itself for men (26 percent), spouse of the head for women (27 percent), grandchild of the head for both sexes (6 percent) and daughter-in-law for women (6 percent). Any other position determined by the relation to the head of household is taken by relatively very few people.

The position that persons take within households is strongly age-related and sex dependent. Figure 3.4 also illustrates the transitions that male (Figure 3.4a) and female (Figure 3.4b) household members go through in terms of their relation to the head of the household. Up to age group 15-19, the large majority of people are the son or daughter of the household head (shaded green in Figure 3.4), and a substantial other share consists of grandchildren of the head (lighter green). During the ages 15 to 19, the first persons advance from the position of child to that of household head (for males) or to that of wife or daughter in law of a household head (for females). This transition process is reinforced in the next ten years and for men typically involves the establishment of new independent households by the young generation or – within the household – the transfer of the position of head, because the original head hands over his responsibilities to his son or because he passes away. For women it usually signifies the move to a another household and the transition to the position of wife, either by being married to a household head or to a son of the household head (the dark green bars mostly figuring in the age range 15-19 to 30-34). Very few women aged 25 and over remain in their parental home.

Figure 3.4a: Male population, by relation to the head of households, and by age group (in percentages)

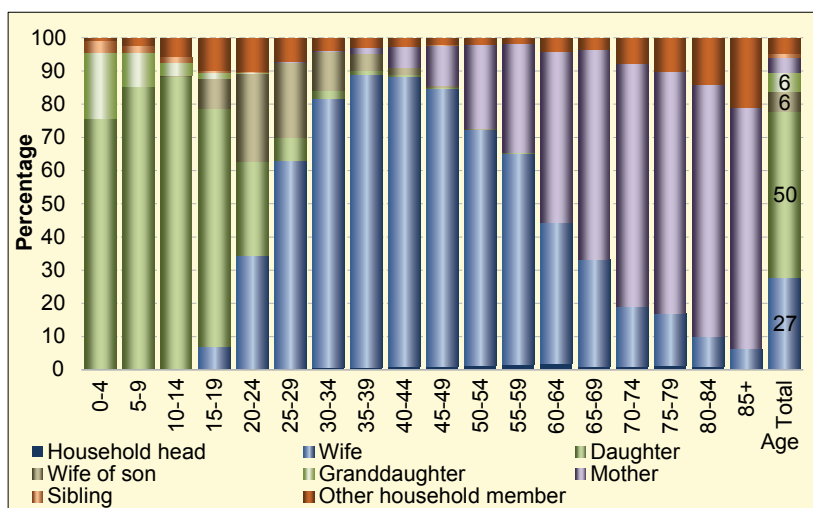
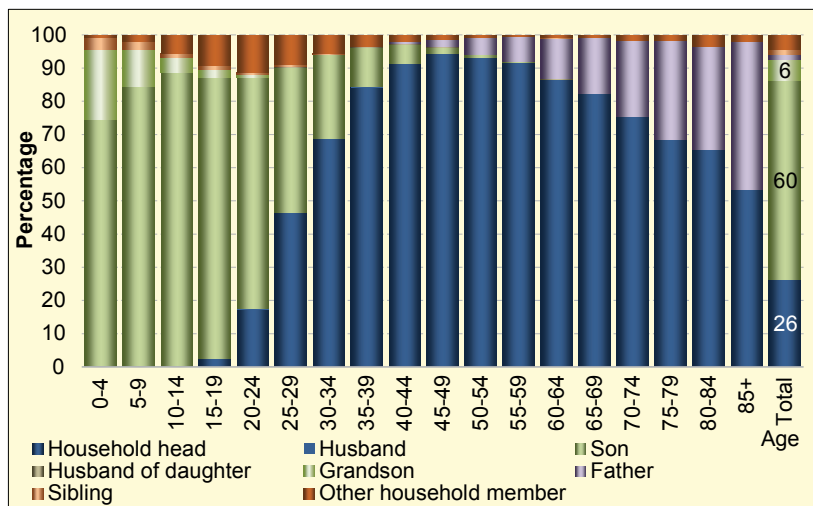


Figure 3.4b: Female population, by relation to the head of households, and by age group (in percentages)





Males aged 30 and older predominantly take the position of head in the household (the dark blue bars). Between age 30 and 70 even more than 80 percent of men are household head. With older age, however, an increasing share abandons the position of head and is considered as the father of a younger-generation head (the purple-shaded bars). At very old age (85 and older) only 53 percent of men remain being considered the head of household and 45 percent are considered as the father of the household head.

For women, the process is very different. Of women who reached age 20-24 only 28 percent have remained in the parental home as daughter of the household head, while about equal shares have moved out to other households and became the wife of a household head (light blue bars) or of his son (dark green). Women’s transition to the position of the mother of the household head starts at an earlier age and is more complete than the male transition to the position of father. This is because women not only make this transition when their husbands stop being the household head, but also when they outlive their husbands due to large age differences between spouses (see section 3.4.3). At age 60-64 already more than half of women have the role of mother to the household head, and almost three-quarters of women aged 70 and over are in this position.

### 3.3.2 Head of household

In the Afghanistan context, the absence of a male head of household can signify a highly vulnerable position of the household members in terms of income security and social and physical protection. A very small proportion – 1 percent – of households are female-headed (see Table 3.3). In absolute numbers, this corresponds to 38.4 thousand households, representing 115 thousand persons. In a similar way, households headed by young persons (under 18) or old people (65 and over) without younger adult male household members can find themselves exposed to economic and social threats. The occurrence of any one of these three categories of household heads is in 3.8 percent of the households. This represents 593 thousand people (2.1 percent of the total population) living in such potentially vulnerable households.

**Table 3.3: Households and population, by characteristics of the head of household (in percentages)**

Characteristics of head of household	Percentage of	
	households	population
Headed by female	1.0	0.4
Headed by child (under 18)	0.3	0.2
Headed by elderly (65+) without male adults (19-64)	2.4	1.5

## 3.4 Marriage patterns

### 3.4.1 Marital status distribution

Marital status is a key principle in the social relations in Afghan society. Marriage as a universal phenomenon is indicated by the fact that less than one percent of the population aged 35 and over remained unmarried. In the total population, however, 63.3 percent is unmarried due to the large representation of the age cohorts under-15 – of whom virtually no one is married – and 15-24 – of whom 72.0 percent is still unmarried (Table 3.4).



**Table 3.4: Population, by marital status, and by sex, age (in percentages)**

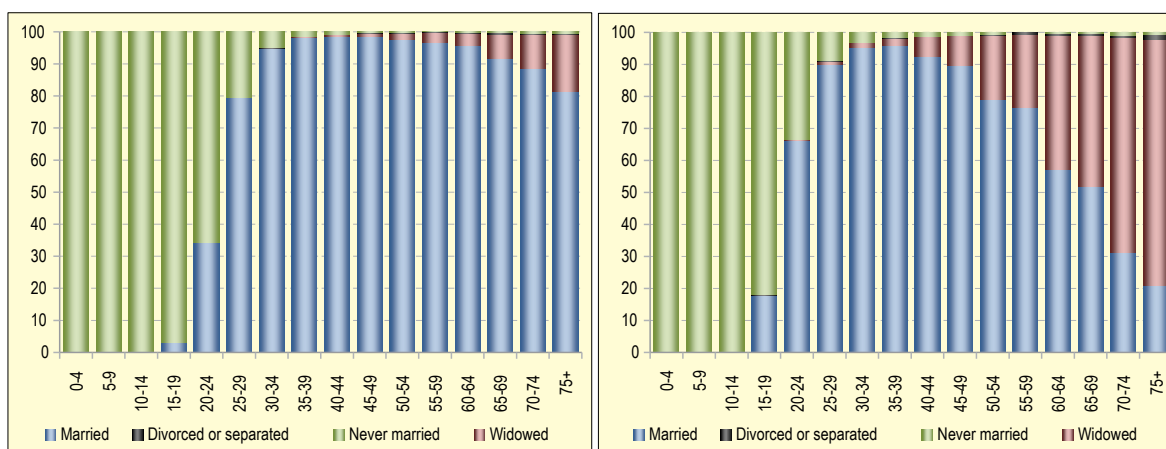
Sex, age	Married	Widowed	Divorced or separated	Never married	Total
<b>Both sexes</b>					
Total	34.4	2.2	0.1	63.3	100.0
0-14	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0
15-24	27.8	0.2	0.0	72.0	100.0
25-39	91.1	0.9	0.1	7.9	100.0
40-64	90.1	9.1	0.2	0.6	100.0
65+	68.8	30.1	0.5	0.5	100.0
<b>Male</b>					
Total	32.9	0.7	0.0	66.4	100.0
0-14	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0
15-24	16.7	0.1	0.0	83.3	100.0
25-39	89.0	0.2	0.0	10.8	100.0
40-64	97.7	1.8	0.1	0.5	100.0
65+	87.5	11.7	0.4	0.4	100.0
<b>Female</b>					
Total	36.0	3.8	0.1	60.0	100.0
0-14	0.0	0.0	0.0	99.9	100.0
15-24	39.2	0.3	0.1	60.5	100.0
25-39	93.1	1.5	0.2	5.1	100.0
40-64	82.4	16.5	0.3	0.8	100.0
65+	36.5	62.0	0.8	0.7	100.0

While divorce and separation are practically invisible in the marital status distribution, the incidence of widowhood increases with age, especially for women. Around 2 and 12 percent of men aged, respectively, 40-64 and over-65 are widowers. The corresponding figures for women are 16 and no less than 62 percent. In absolute numbers, Afghanistan has around 94 thousand widowers, but no less than 524 thousand widows. The main cause of this large gender difference in widowhood is the high re-marriage rate of men compared to that of women and the large age difference between many spouses. The marital gender differentiation is clearly visible in *Figure 3.5*: women tend to marry earlier than men and remain widowed earlier and in significantly larger shares. Irrespective of the cause, widowed women can be classified as being in a vulnerable position in Afghan society.

**Figure 3.5: Male and female population, by marital status, and by age (in percentages)**

a. Male

b. Female



### 3.4.2 Age at first marriage

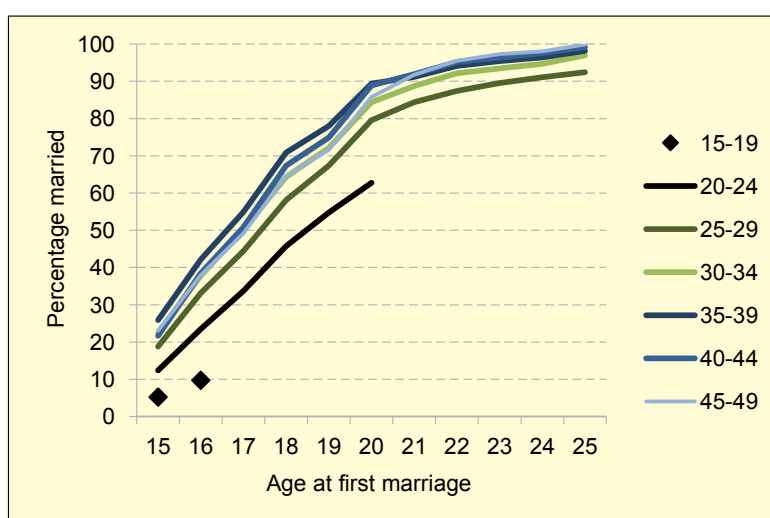
The ALCS 2013-14 observes significant social change in terms of marriage patterns. This relates to both the age at first marriage for women and the age difference between husbands and wives.

The minimum age at marriage is formally regulated by law. Afghan Civil Law, Article 40, stipulates this minimum age at 18 for boys and 16 for girls. Under special circumstances a marriage for girls at age 15 is allowed. To date, this law has not been fully enforced and marriages at younger age are still prevalent. UNICEF defines child marriage as any a formal marriage or informal union before age 18 for boys and girls and propagates that child marriages are harmful for the development of children. Evidence shows that girls who marry early often abandon formal education and become pregnant at young ages. Maternal deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are an important component of mortality for girls aged 15–19 worldwide, accounting for 70 thousand deaths each year (UNICEF 2012). The infant mortality rate of children born to child mothers is 60 per cent higher than that of an infant born to a mother older than 19. Even if the child survives, he or she is more likely to suffer from low birth weight, under-nutrition and late physical and cognitive development. Child brides are at risk of violence, abuse and exploitation and child marriage often results in separation from family and friends and lack of freedom to participate in community activities, which can all have major consequences on girls' mental and physical well-being.

Analysis of ALCS 2013-14 data indicates that the age at first marriage for women is declining. Half of the women of the older age group 40-44 year old were married at exact age 16.6. For each successively younger age group this median age at first marriage increases steadily to age 17.0 for 30-34 year olds, 18.1 for 25-29 year olds and 19.0 for 20-24 year olds.

Figure 3.6 shows that women's cohorts of age 30 and above had an almost similar pattern for age at first marriage. More than 23 percent of these women were already married at age 16, the minimum age for marriage. For the younger age group 25-29 this percentage decreased to 19 percent and among the youngest women for whom complete data were available (aged 20-24) this share was only 12 percent. Similarly, more than 50 percent of women 30 and older were married at 18, which is the distinguishing age for child marriage. Among women aged 25-29 this was 44 percent and among those aged 20-24 only 34 percent. Despite this declining trend, the situation that still almost half of the women marry before age 18 reflects their vulnerable position in Afghanistan.

Figure 3.6: Females aged 15 to 49, by current age group, and by age at first marriage (in percentages)



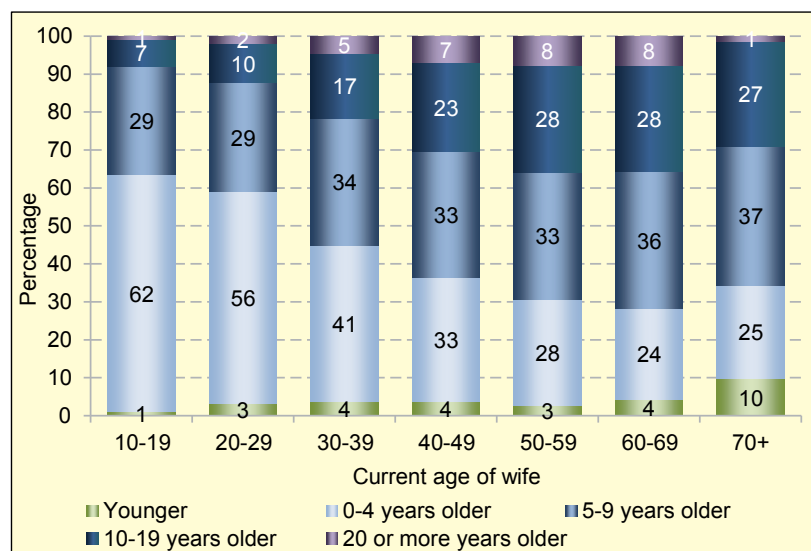
### 3.4.3 The marriage age gap

Social change is also observed in terms of the age difference between spouses. A large spousal age difference often indicates a significant power imbalance in marriage and with regard to decision making in reproductive health, spending money and various household matters (see also section 11.5 of this report). Overall, the age gap between Afghan

husbands and wives is 6.1 years, but over time, this gap has become reduced. Whereas on average for women of more than 40 years old, the age of the husband is more than 7 years higher, this age difference consistently declines with the successive younger age cohorts: around 6.4 years for women aged 30-39 and 4.6 years for those aged 15-29. *Figure 3.7* shows that the share of couples with relatively small spousal age differences (less than four years) has dramatically increased for each younger ten-year age group of women (from 24 percent among women aged 60 and over to 62 percent of those under 20). At the same time, the shares of couples with large (10-19 years) and very large (20 years or more) age differences has similarly decreased from 36 percent in the age group 50-69 to 8 percent in the youngest category.

Deviating from this general pattern is the finding that in the oldest age group (70 and over), a relatively large share of women – 10 percent – has younger husbands. This phenomenon can be explained by the high rate of male remarriage after widowhood and also the incidence of levirate marriage, a practice especially prevalent in the Pashtun population, whereby a widow is required to marry a – possibly younger – relative of her late husband.

**Figure 3.7: Ever-married females, by current age, and by relative age of husband (in percentages)**



### 3.4.4 Polygamy

Another marriage custom that creates inequality between spouses is the existence of polygamy. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which was ratified by the Government of Afghanistan in 1983, calls on measures to abolish the practice of polygamy, as this implies discrimination against women and violates their dignity (CCPR, Human Rights Committee 2000) (see also section 11.2.4 in the chapter on gender analysis). Polygamy also aggravates the imbalance in marriage, as it tends to increase the age gap between husbands and wives. The age difference between polygamous spouses is almost double that of monogamous spouses: 11.8 against 6.1 years.

The ALCS 2013-14 data suggest that 7.9 percent of married women live in a polygamous marriage. This represents 388 thousand women, the large majority of whom live with one co-wife. The highest proportions of polygamous women are found in the age range between 30 and 70 years old (*Figure 3.8*), typically around 10 percent. It is unclear to what extent the low proportions among women under 30 are the result of a decline in the practice of polygamy or of the short duration of being at risk of entering a polygamous marriage.

Figure 3.8: Percentage of married women in a polygamous marriage, by age

