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My Family and Home Life : GHANA

This three lesson Topic looks at changing patterns of family life in the West African country of **Ghana**.

Lesson 1 : Exploring families

Lesson 2 : Daily lives of boys and girls

Lesson 3 : Children and work

Ghana



Human beings have inhabited the land which is now present day Ghana from about 1500 BC. The territory includes what was once the Empire of Ashanti, one of the most influential states in sub-Saharan Africa before colonial rule. Later, modern day Ghana was the first place in sub-Saharan Africa where Europeans came to trade, first in gold, later in slaves. In 1854 Britain proclaimed the territory as a crown colony, the Gold Coast. It remained so until 1957, when Ghana became the first black African nation in the region to achieve independence. The country is now a democracy, and often seen as a model for economic and political reform in Africa.



- **President** John Atta Mills (elected 2008)
- **Population:** 23.8 million (UN, 2009)
- **Capital:** Accra
- **Area:** 238,533 sq km (92,098 sq miles)

- **Major languages:** English, African languages including Akan, Ewe
- **Major religions:** Christianity, indigenous beliefs, Islam
- **Life expectancy:** 56 years (men), 57 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** Cedi
Main exports: Gold, cocoa, timber, tuna, bauxite, aluminium, manganese ore, diamonds
- **GNI per capita:** US \$670 (World Bank, 2008)

Family Structures

Children in this topic describe family structures ranging from the highly traditional (eg Saviour, Lesson 1 Track 5 or Michael, Lesson 1 Track 3) to modern nuclear families (Eugenia, Lesson 1 Track 4). Historically, in Ghana as throughout West Africa, extended families lived together, and shared the responsibility (emotional and financial) of raising children. Romantic ties between a man and his wife were often not seen as important; the strength of the family line as a whole was what mattered. Normally extended families would share a “compound” within a village - a group of huts sometimes separated with a fence or a wall from the nearby group of dwellings. Saviour (Lesson 1 Track 5) still lives in such a compound, along with 200 members of his extended family. And even today, a family may still share a house with other families as a result of travel for work, or displacement, as children in Lesson 1 Track 1 explain.

Traditionally it was considered desirable for parents to have as many children as possible, especially boys, and to ensure that they had enough children, men might take several wives. In modern day Ghana, in the mainly Christian south of the country, under civil law polygamy is technically illegal, but still the practice is widespread in traditional rule. Michael (Lesson 1 track 3) describes his life, in a “polygamous” family. In the north of the country where some states are under the rule of Sharia law, polygamy is legal, and constitutes almost a third of marriages.

But current social, economic and political conditions mean that family structures in Ghana are changing. It is now normal for girls to attend school, and have careers; many want to wait, before getting married and starting families. Educated women tend to marry later. (Eugenia, Lesson 1 track 4, speaks about how her own life differs from that of her grandmother in this regard). The proportion of women reporting a divorce or separation is also on the rise, and single-parent households are becoming more common. Men often travel to urban areas, or even to neighbouring countries, to find employment; increasingly their wives are accompanying them. Additionally, the rise of HIV/AIDS poses a challenge to the working-age population, and impacts hugely on child-care arrangements, as do all serious illnesses (Faustina, Lesson 2 Track 2) speaks of how her home life has changed since her mother became sick)

Even in rural areas, the “nuclear” family structure, where a man lives with just his wife and children, is becoming more common, and emotional bonding between a man and his wife is often considered to be important. Marriage is still highly regarded in Ghana; unmarried women are considered to have a lower status than married ones. Family planning is becoming more widely used (research shows that most Ghanaians now consider that four is the ideal number of children, as compared to over eight in the past). A new law passed in 1985 rules that the majority of marital property (even in the absence of a will) should go to the nuclear, rather than the extended, family.