

Charting New Courses to Adulthood in the Global South

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Abstract: Growing up in an increasingly global world offers the youth of today unprecedented opportunities, while also presenting both novel and abiding challenges. This paper examines trends in how young men and women in the Global South navigate five key transitions to adulthood using Demographic and Health Survey data from 47 countries between 2000 and 2023. Despite some similarities, we find little evidence of convergence across or within regions. There have been impressive gains in the years of schooling attained and a steady increase in the age union formation. Yet, labor force participation, particularly among women, has declined in most regions and gains to the average age of first childbirth among women have been modest. Our analyses show that marriage continues to be incompatible with paid employment for many women. Further, with the exception of education, there are few signs of diminishing gender inequality with respect to other transitions. These trends raise concerns about the ability of youths to fulfill the promises of the demographic dividend. Maximizing the economic and demographic potential of these better educated cohorts of youth will require increasing the availability of skilled jobs and helping women reconcile the competing demands of paid work and family obligations.

Introduction

The turn of the second millennium marked the era of youth in the Global South where approximately 20% of the population was between the ages of 15 and 24. By 2050, this proportion is expected to fall to 14% and by the end of this century will constitute only 12% of the population in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Yet, despite the steady decline in the proportion of youths, the years between 15 and 24 remain an important period when critical life transitions frequently occur. These transitions to adulthood (TTA) include: finishing school, becoming sexually active, entering into intimate unions, having children, and finding employment. When, whether, and in which order young adults make these key transitions has both immediate and long-term implications for their economic wellbeing, social standing, and physical and mental health. It is also of considerable importance to their future families' stability, structure, and size and to societies' economic and social wellbeing with youths being portrayed as engines of economic prosperity and technological change or instigators of political unrest and economic instability.

The goal of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview and synthesis of TTA throughout the Global South over the past two decades, emphasizing key findings from the extant literature as well as important knowledge gaps in current research. When possible, we supplement these studies with data from the Demographic and Health Surveys representing 47 countries to update major trends and highlight emerging patterns. Unlike most of the recent demographic studies, we focus on trends in all five TTA (school completion, paid employment, sexual debut, union formation and childbirth). Several recent studies have provided novel insights into trends in three reproductive and demographic TTAs, namely sexual debut, entry into marriage, and parenthood in the Global South (Batyra and Kohler 2022; Bongaarts et al. 2017; Pesando et al. 2021), sub-Saharan Africa (Batyra et al. 2021; Melesse et al. 2020, 2021), and Latin America (Esteve et al.

2022; Esteve and Florez-Paredes 2018). Other studies have explored the dynamic relationship between two transitions. For example, studies have assessed the relationship between completing schooling and becoming sexually active (Biddlecom et al. 2008; Clark and Mathur 2012), getting married (Frye and Lopus 2018), having a child (Grant 2015), or finding a job (Basnet et al. 2020; Chen 2018; Pastore 2008). These studies are often limited to one region or one country. Further, most prior studies, especially those focused on reproductive and demographic transitions, focus exclusively on women. For exceptions, see the recent work on trends in men's age of first sex and marriage in sub-Saharan Africa (Batyra et al. 2021; Melesse et al. 2020; Nguyen and Eaton 2022). Very few prior studies have examined men's transition into parenthood (Melesse et al. 2020; Nsoby et al. 2019).

By providing a more complete picture of all five major TTA for both women and men across much of the Global South, we address five main questions: 1) What are the trends in TTA and are they converging across or within regions?; 2) Are TTA becoming disordered or de-standardized?; 3) Are women's transitions to adulthood bifurcated between paid work and family formation?; and 4) Do men and women follow different trajectories to adulthood?. We conclude with a discussion of what these changes in TTA might mean for future demographic, economic, and social outcomes and whether countries in the Global South will likely receive a demographic dividend.

Data and Methods

Data presented in this study come from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in 47 countries in the Global South. To be included in our sample, countries had to have at least two DHS conducted between 2000 and 2023. This paper presents trends in the TTA that are most often examined by demographers, namely median age of first sex, first union, and first childbirth. To estimate the median age of school completion, we add six years to the median number of years of education completed among respondents aged 25 to 29. While the majority of educational systems in the Global South start around age six, we note that this likely underestimates the age of school completion particularly in countries where delayed school entry and grade repetition is common. Finally, because the DHS does not systematically report age of first paid employment, we estimate the percentage of men and women aged 25 to 29 who are currently working. When data are available, we provide estimates for all five TTA for both men and women. Appendix A summarizes which indicators are available for men and women by country.

We generate regional trends by fitting a linear regression line to country-level estimates for each region and for men and women separately. In addition, to evaluate the compatibility of two key transitions, work and marriage, we estimate trends in the percentage of married and unmarried women and men in each country who are currently employed and fit regional regression lines. In our last set of analyses, we calculate gender differences in all five transitions by subtracting women's values from men's and fitting a regional trend line to these values.

Trends in Transitions to Adulthood by Region and Gender

Are Trends in TTA Converging Across or Within Regions?

Figures 1 to 5 depict country-level trends (blue lines) and regional averages (black lines) in median age of school completion, first sex, first union, and first childbirth as well as the

percentage of young women and men currently working. These figures show that although trends are headed in the same direction throughout much of the Global South, changes in TTA over this 20-year period are modest compared to the remarkable variability both across and within regions. In short, there is little evidence of convergence on any of the five TTA either across or within region. These findings echo those of Pesando et al. (2021) with respect to age of first sex, marriage, and childbirth for women across regions. Our findings further show that even the most dramatic changes, those with respect to education, are smaller than variation within regions. This absence of convergence on reproductive and family formation processes may be surprising given evidence of convergence between LMICs and HICs with respect to some measures of development, gender norms, market structures, and formal schooling (Behrman and Sengupta 2005). They point to differences in the historical, institutional, and legal contexts across these countries as well as to the importance of distinctive cultural values and norms in shaping TTA (Fussell et al. 2010). Hence, although how men and women enter adulthood is changing nearly everywhere, how it is unfolding is largely determined by where youths live.

(insert Figures 1 to 5)

Are TTA Becoming more Disordered or De-Standardized?

Theoretically, one might expect that the median ages at which transitions occur would rise in tandem in response to ongoing economic development, urbanization, and globalization. In particular, educational expansion, leading to more years of schooling, might trigger a cascade effect, pushing back when they become sexually active and form families and ultimately increasing employment rates. Figure 6, which presents the regional trends of four transitions: the median ages school completion, first sex, first union and first child, shows this is not necessarily the case. Rather there are substantial differences in the pace, and even direction, of some trends in TTA. Consequently, although the order of the median age of TTA is generally the same for men and women in all regions, the intervals between transitions and the pace of change differ markedly. Figure 6 shows that increases ages of school completion and first union formation typically outpaced those of either first sex or first child. These differences have implications for the heterogeneity in the order in which some youths make TTA. As the interval between two transitions gets smaller, it is likely that the order of events is reversed for a larger proportion of youths.

(insert Figure 6)

There seem to be three broad trends. First, as the median age difference in school completion and first sex diminishes, more girls and boys are likely to become sexually active while they are still in school. This is likely especially the case in LAC where the median ages of school completion and sexual debut have almost converged. Second, with the notable exception of Asia (where unmarried women are assumed to not be sexually active in some countries), the median age of sexual debut is earlier than the age of marriage and this gap is increasing, suggesting that a higher proportion of youths, both female and male, are becoming sexually active before marriage. Third, in all countries and for both women and men union formation and parenthood are closely linked with these transitions occurring in rapid succession of each other and this difference is often shrinking. In fact, only in SA is the gap between union formation and first childbirth more than one year. This suggests a growing proportion of women and in these regions are conceiving or having their first child before marriage.

Are Women's Transitions to Adulthood Bifurcated Between Paid Work and Family Formation?

To further investigate the relationship between family formation and paid employment for men and women, Figure 7 shows the proportion of currently employed women and men by marital status in each region. It shows striking differences for women and men. For women, being married is associated with substantially lower rates of employment. Only about half of married women in LAC and SEA and less than 40% of married women in SA are working for pay. Men exhibit an opposite pattern where being married is associated with considerably higher rates of employment. Across all regions, 90% or more of married men are currently working for pay. This figure highlights the extent to which marriage and motherhood continue to be incompatible with paid work for women throughout the Global South.

(insert Figure 7)

Do Men and Women Follow Different Trajectories to Adulthood?

Prior studies have argued that gender inequality is declining globally, particularly with respect to education, mortality, economic activity, and political participation (Dorius and Firebaugh 2010). Yet, data with respect to family formation processes and employment are more mixed. Figure 8 shows trends in gender differences (male values minus female values) for the five TTA. Overall, men make transitions to adulthood at substantially later ages than women and they continue to be far more likely to be employed. Only with respect to education is there a consistent reduction in gender inequality, although this decline is very slight in SEA and ESA. Further, there is no evidence of convergence in men's and women's paid employment. Hence, despite some reduction in gender inequalities with respect to education, there is strong evidence that men and women continue to follow different pathways into adulthood.

(insert Figure 8)

Discussion and Future of Adulthood in the Global South

The era of youth is coming to an end—at least outside of SSA. What lies ahead for future generations of youths is unclear. Yet, when, whether, and how these next cohorts of youths make TTA will largely determine the economic, social, and demographic outcomes for their families as well as for their countries and regions. This paper suggests four broad conclusions. First, despite considerable social, economic, and environmental changes over the past 20 years, countries have largely retained their distinctive trajectories for entering adulthood and heterogeneity across countries within regions is often much larger than average regional changes over time. Second, although the order in which youths make transitions has not changed on average, differences in the pace of change indicate that a growing proportion of youths may follow a “de-standardized” pathway to adulthood. Third, despite sustained increases in female education and changing gender norms, women continue to face more limited and bifurcated pathways into adulthood than men. For women entry into marriage and motherhood decrease their likelihood of engagement in paid work and this penalty has not diminished over time. Fourth, there are persistent gender inequalities with respect to all TTA and with the exception of education, evidence that these inequalities are diminishing over time is mixed. These findings should concern policy makers and the development community more broadly, particularly those

who hoped providing more universal access to education would reduce these inequalities in other transitions.

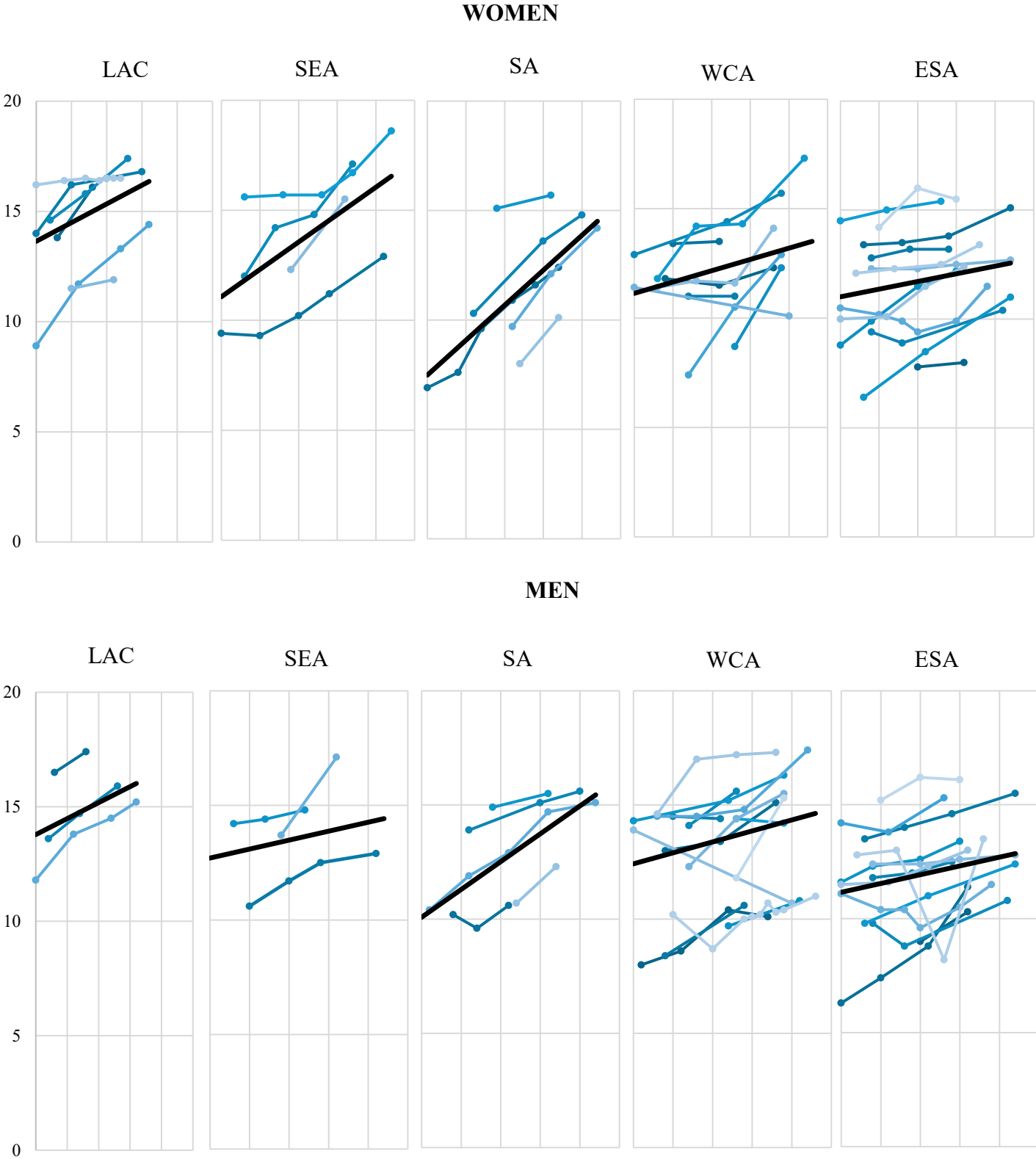
Men and women who are coming of age over the next few decades face an uncertain future. Twenty years ago, when the comprehensive study “Growing up Global” was published, youths in SSA were navigating the transition to adulthood in the midst of an ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. Today the Global South is emerging from the global pandemic of COVID-19. This experience interrupted their education, thwarted their ability to work, and hindered the formation of new partnerships. Climate change too poses an unprecedented challenge, particularly for youths living in regions where excess heat and flooding threaten to undermine their economic and physical security. Urbanization, globalization, and educational expansion will also likely continue, and these changes will occur in the context of unimaginable technological change. While youth of all generations have faced obstacles on their paths to adulthood, these next few cohorts of youths will be called upon to chart new courses and their success in navigation will have far-reaching economic, social and demographic implications. To maximize the economic and demographic potential of better educated future cohorts of youth, academics and policy makers need to focus more attention on the availability of skilled jobs and on helping families reconcile the competing demands of childcare and paid employment.

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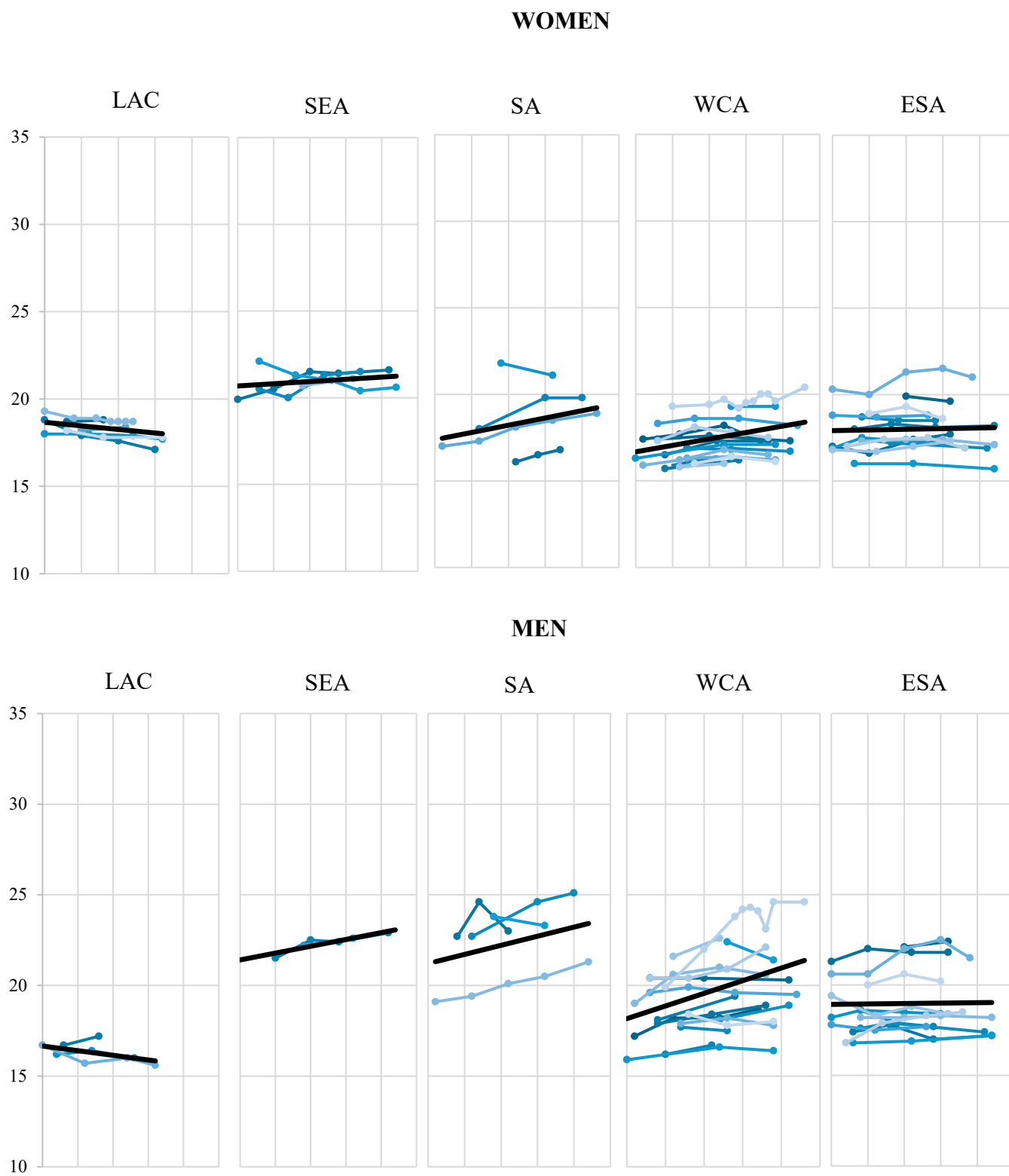
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Figure 1. *Country and Regional Trends in Median Age of School Completion Among Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023.*



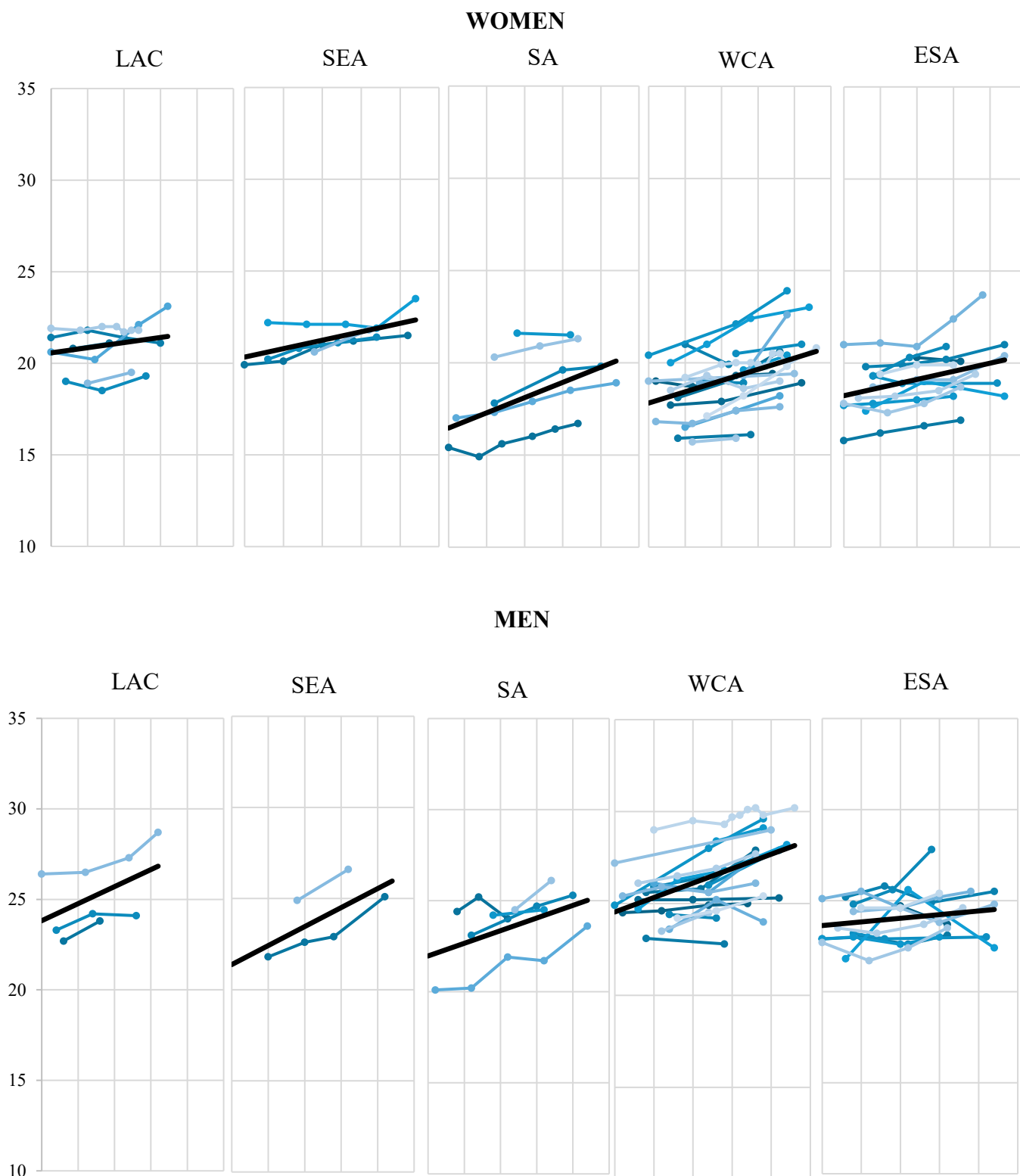
LAC: Latin America & Caribbean;
SEA: Southeast Asia;
SA: South Asia;
WCA: Western & Central Africa;
ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa

Figure 2. *Country and Regional Trends in Median Age of First Sex Among Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023.*



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SEA: Southeast Asia;
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WCA: Western & Central Africa;
ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa

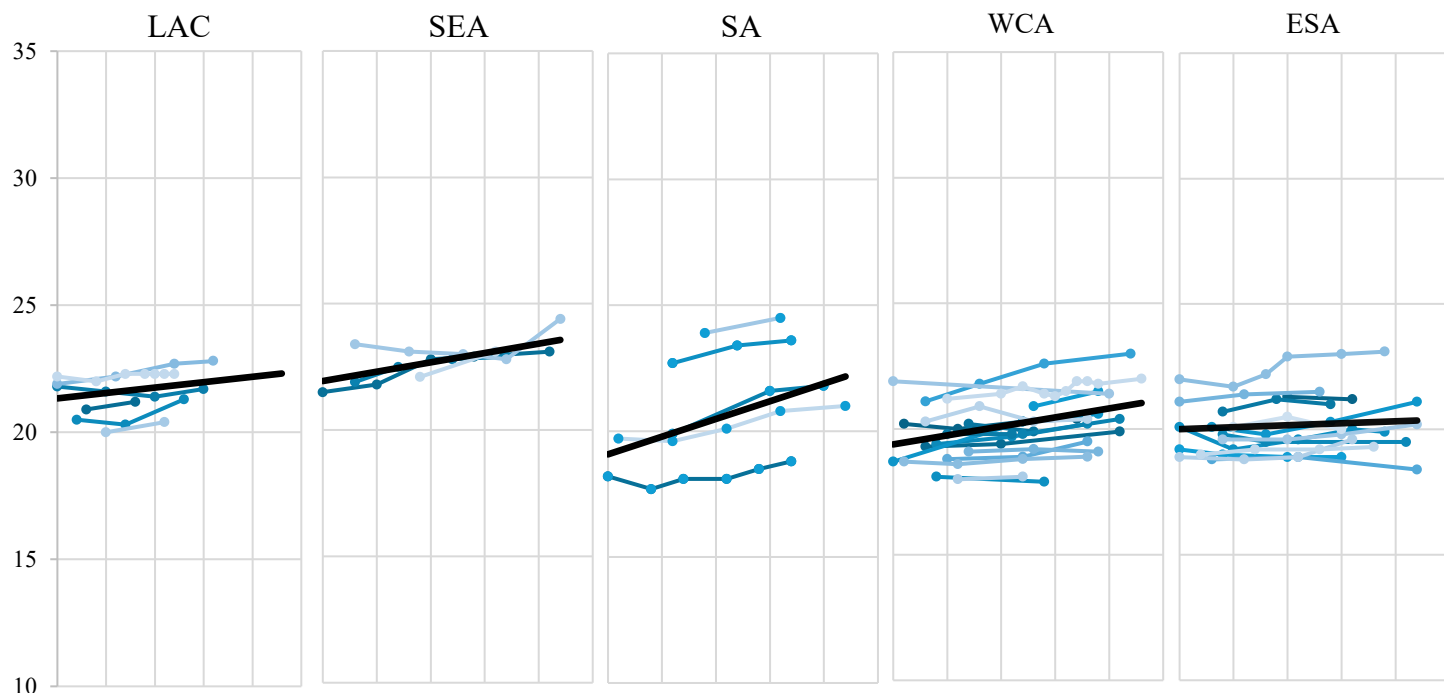
Figure 3. *Country and Regional Trends in Median Age of First Union Among Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023.*



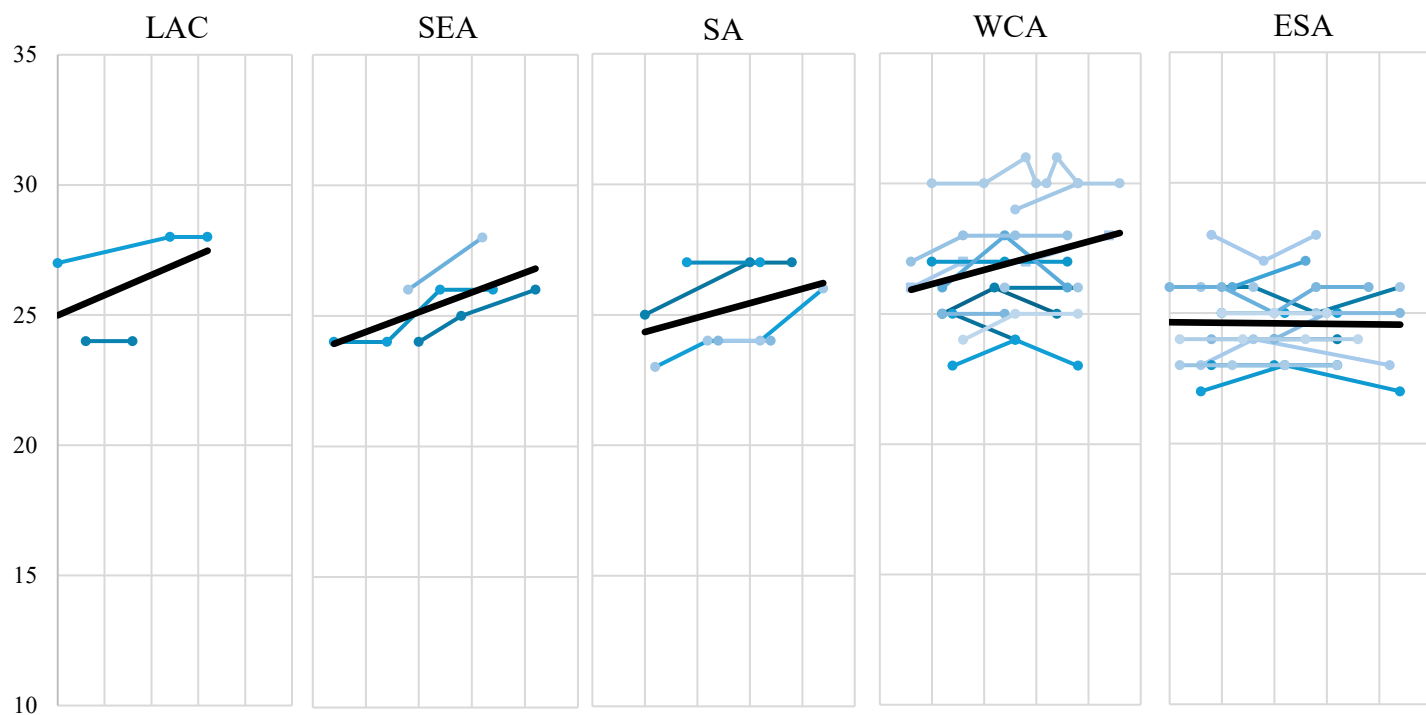
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Figure 4. *Country and Regional Trends in Median Age of First Child Among Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023.*

WOMEN

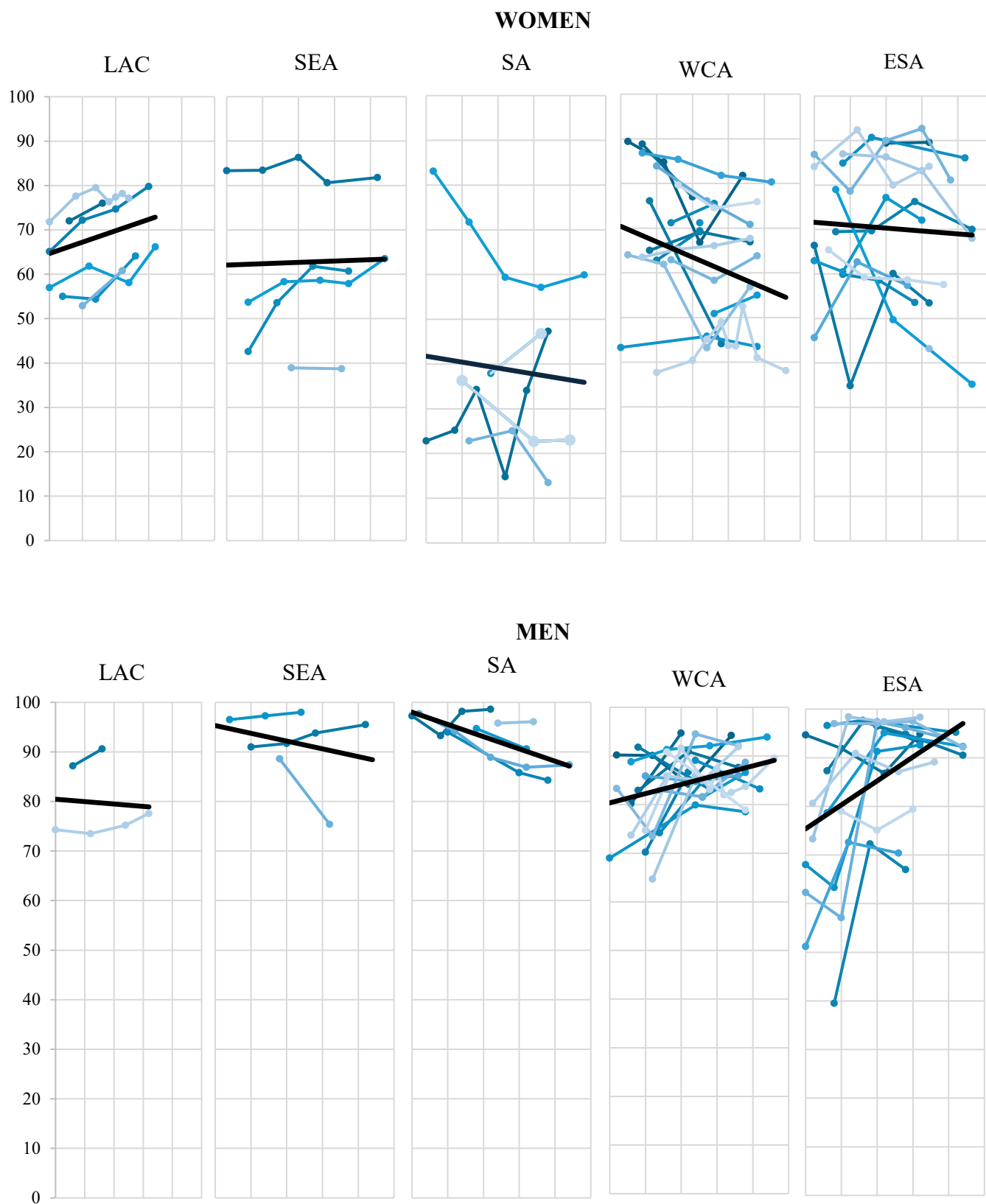


MEN



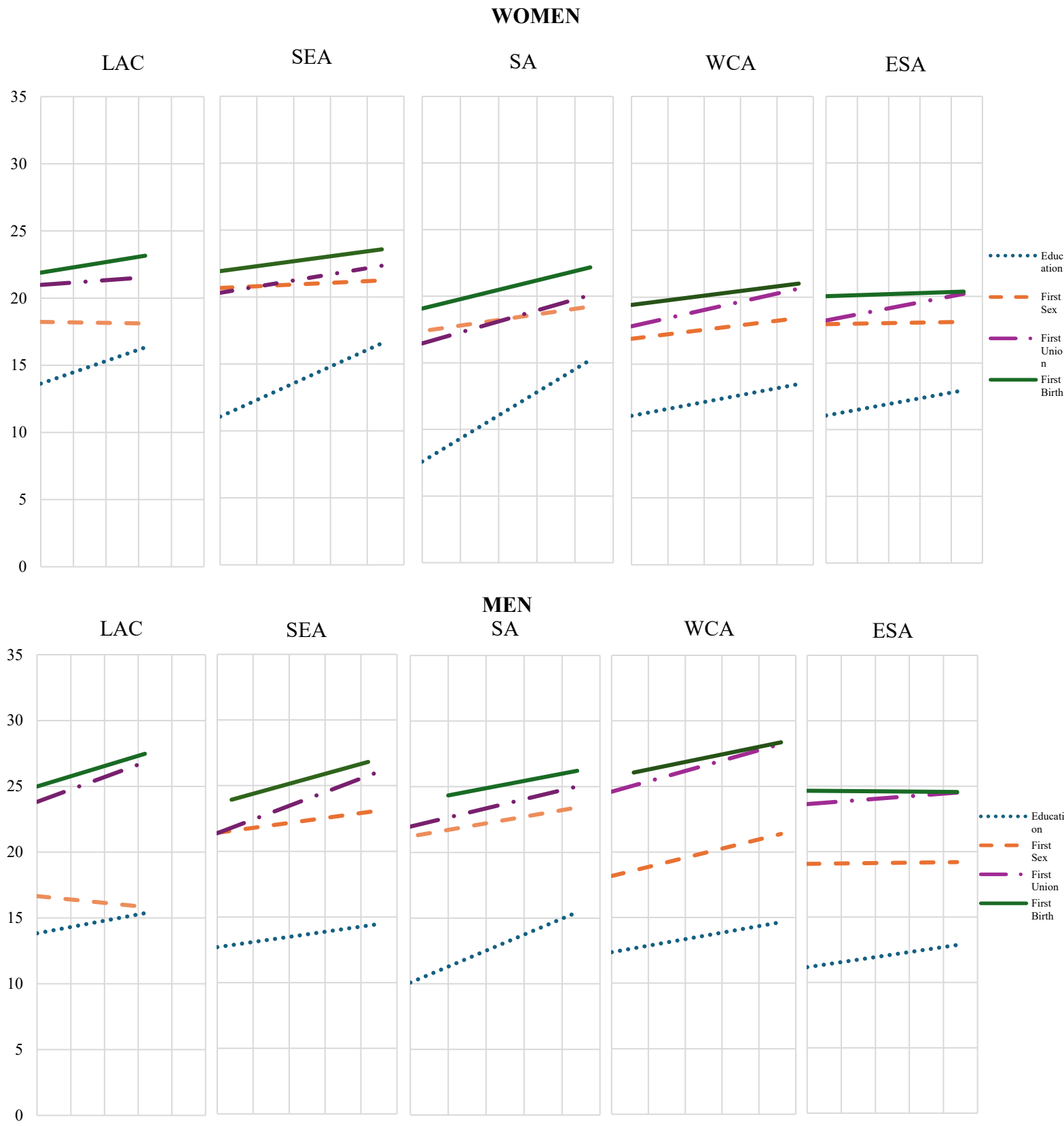
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Figure 5. *Country and Regional Trends in the Percentage of Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Currently Employed Between 2000 and 2023.*



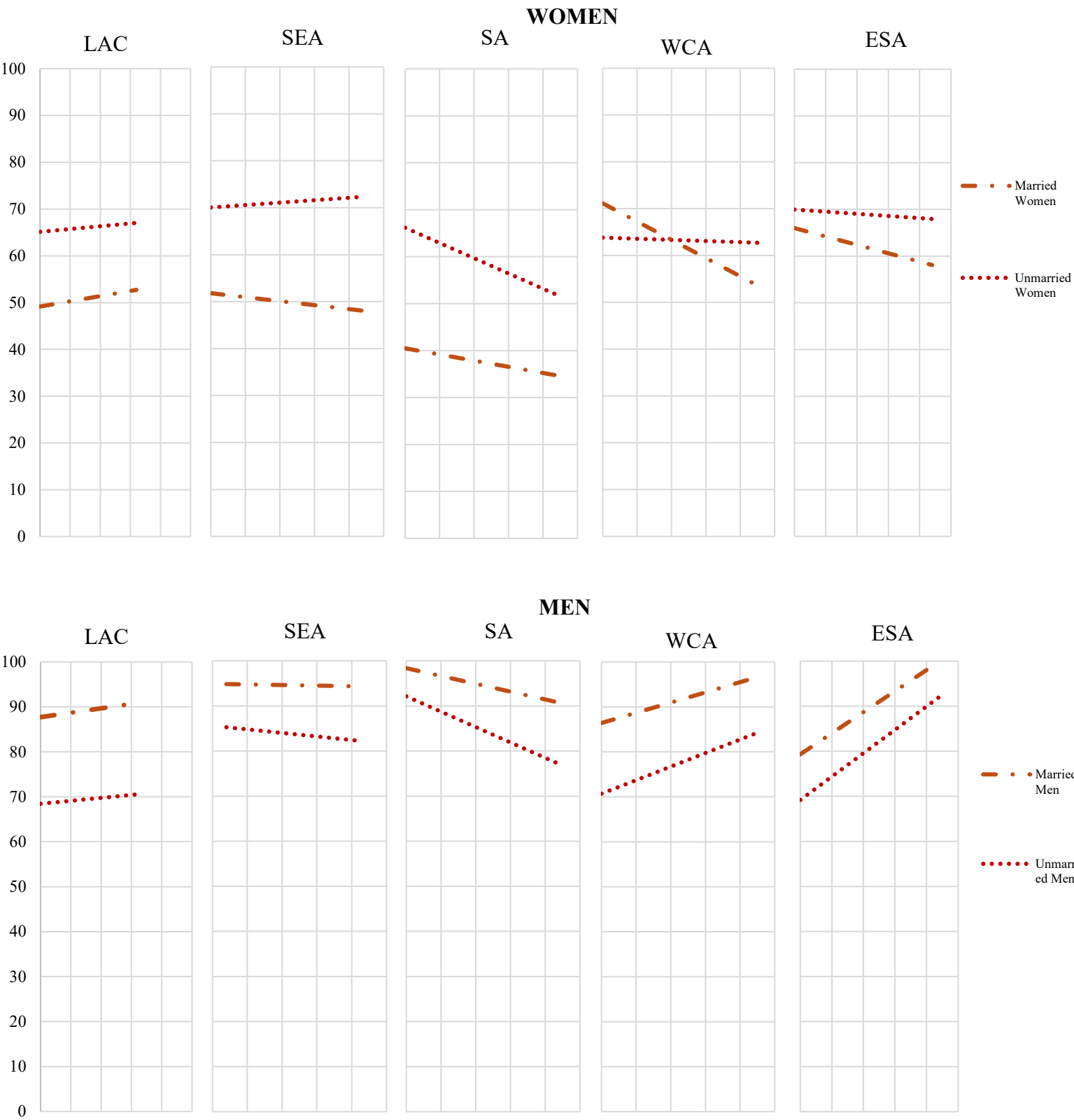
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Figure 6. Regional Trends in Median Age of School Completion, Sexual Debut, First Union Formation, and First Birth Among Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023



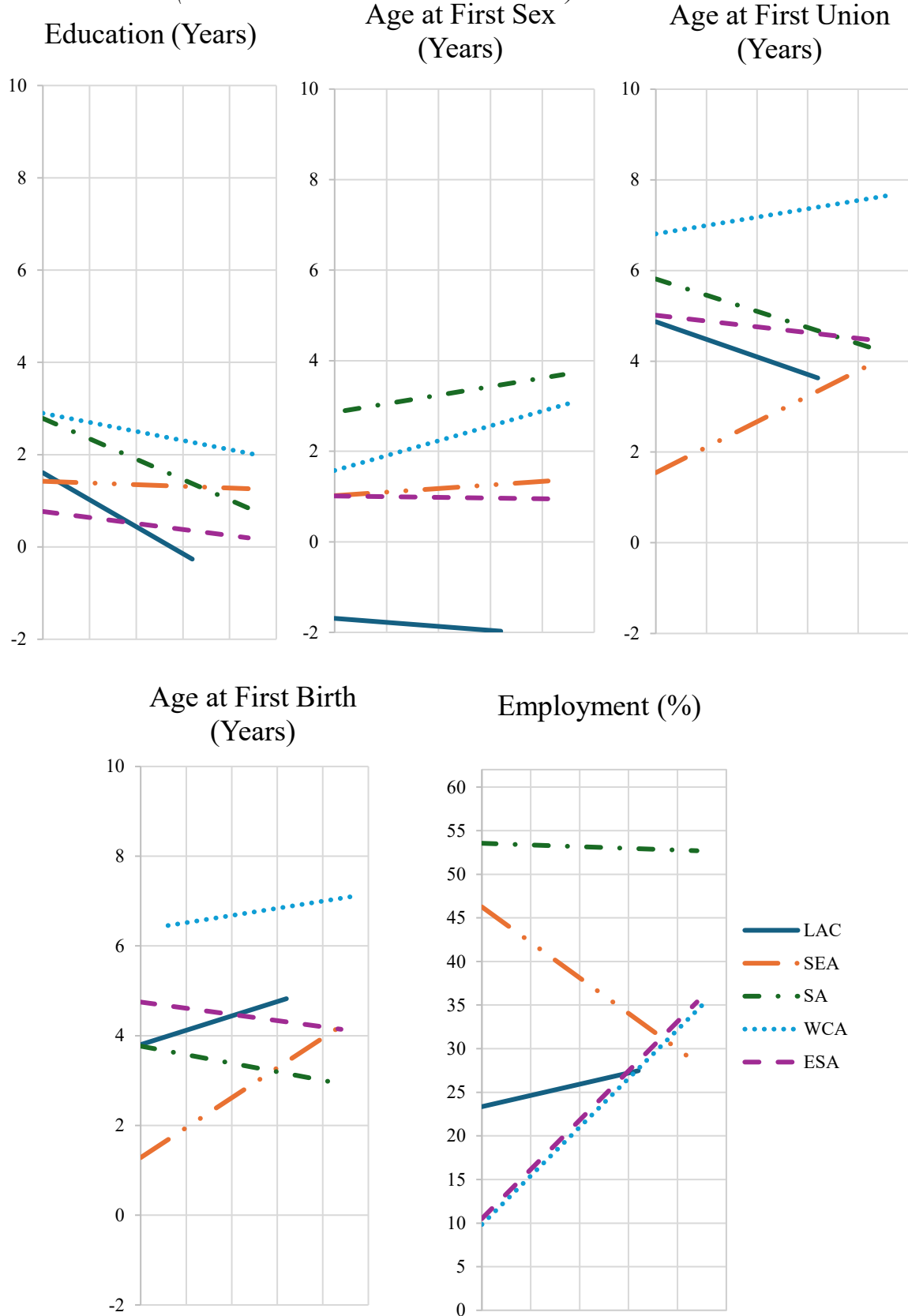
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Figure 7. Regional Trends in Percentage of Currently Employed Married and Unmarried Women and Men Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023.



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Figure 8. Gender Differences in Transitions to Adulthood for Men and Women Aged 25 to 29 Between 2000 and 2023 (Men's Values Minus Women's Values).



LAC: Latin America & Caribbean;
SEA: Southeast Asia;
SA: South Asia;
WCA: Western & Central Africa;
ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa