

# **The Effects of Marriage Dissolution on Women's Autonomy: Evidence From Rural Malawi**

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Women's lower status is considered an outcome of the material, social and emotional control men have over them. This control may stem from a couple's dynamics and the social norms dictating the division of labour and behaviours associated with marriage in a given society. Studies have shown that some women use marital strategies as an opportunity to free themselves from controlling family members or partners either by marrying or by leaving a controlling spouse. In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, women's autonomy is a key determinant in the promotion for better reproductive health behaviours as well as women and their children's well-being. The aim of this study is to identify if union dissolutions generate a greater perception of autonomy for women using data from the Malawi Longitudinal Study on Family and Health panel study. We use sequential analysis to extract marital trajectories and regress them on the dependant variable, women's autonomy. Autonomy is represented by an index constructed from questions on five dimensions (mobility, acceptability of divorce, domestic violence, negotiation of safer sex, and acceptability of coerced sex). Preliminary analysis using cross-sectional data from the 2006 wave confirms the effect of divorce on women's autonomy; women who have experienced a union dissolution are more likely to perceive a more autonomous perception of themselves than women who are in a stable marriage. The next step is to exploit the richness of our longitudinal data by using measures of women's autonomy at different period and by comparing the change in the score for women who remain married to women who divorce from their spouse over an observation period of 10 years. Considering our preliminary results, we expect that the autonomy score of recently divorced women will be greater than women who remain in their respective union.

## **Background**

At the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the academic community pledged to address gender inequality and to promote women's rights. However, the United Nations still consider gender inequality as one of the greatest challenges our world is facing (UN, 2013). Furthermore, the will to understand the demographic transition in countries with high fertility and high child mortality generated a large number of empirical studies on reproductive health outcomes. To better understand women's behaviours, some have tried to identify the effects of their autonomy on a variety of life choices and have examined the consequences on their welfare. Women's lower status is considered to be an outcome of material, social and emotional control men have over women. However, this may stem from couples dynamics as well as social norms dictating the division of labour and acceptable behaviours within marriage (Mason, 1987).

The geographic distribution of empirical studies on women's status is largely biased towards Asia, particularly South Asia. A significant number of those studies look at demographic outcomes such as reproductive health, child mortality and women and children's well-being. More studies taking place in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on the outcomes of HIV/AIDS and women's status (Kathewera-Banda et al., 2005; Schatz, 2005b; Watkins, 2004). The literature shows that women develop strategies adapted to their struggle for greater welfare and rely on a strong social network support to decrease their likelihood of HIV infection within their union (Schatz, 2002, 2005a; Watkins, 2004; Smith and Watkins, 2005). Some may also develop strategies to acquire more freedom and to have greater control over their lives. Successive marriages have been studied in West Africa by Locoh and Thiriat (1995) and in sub-Saharan Africa by Reniers (2003); Reniers and Tfaïly (2008) as a mean to free oneself from controlling family members (for example from a father or a brother) and eventually, from a marital partner. For example, as a woman first marries, she frees herself from paternal control and similarly if and when there is union dissolution, she frees herself from the control of her spouse. Thus, she finds herself at a new level of independence. Social norms in different societies influence the fate of divorced women; remarriage often offers a higher likelihood of control over the selection of a new partner (Thiriat, 1999). However, these findings are not confirmed by Reniers (2003) who found that the value of divorced women on the marriage market decreases. This can potentially be associated with a woman's hesitation for divorcing a husband who has a risky sexual behaviour and in return, puts herself at risk of acquiring sexual infections. Due to the rise of individualism, women in sub-Saharan Africa have shown greater independence in their life trajectories and constraints imposed by traditional practices have become of less importance (Shanahan, 2000; Clark et al.,

2009). Whether marital trajectories have become strategies for women to acquire more autonomy and control over their destiny is unclear. This supports our need to better understand the relation between women's autonomy and marriage. We ask ourselves if a specific marital trajectory can predict greater autonomy? More precisely we wonder if a woman who has been divorced at least once is more likely to have more autonomy?

## **Data**

To answer our research questions, we use the Malawi Longitudinal Study on Family and Health (MLSFH) <sup>1</sup>. This study panel has collected data for a population-based sample of approximately 4000 respondents aged 15 years and older to look at the role of social networks in attitudes and behaviours on HIV/AIDS, family planning, and attitudes on gender roles. The project takes place in three rural districts of Malawi. A comparison of the characteristics of the 1998 MLSFH sample with those of the rural population surveyed in the 2000 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey indicates that, at the baseline, the MLSFH sample was representative of the national rural population. The MLSFH study has completed seven waves of data collected since 1998 and in this paper we use data from 2006 wave<sup>2</sup>. Our analysis sample consists of 1314 married women in 2006 for who we have a measure for autonomy.

## **Methods**

**Autonomy** Because of our concern to represent autonomy as accurately as our data allows us to, we define it as *a set of contexts in which norms from the social, household and community are predefined and dictate accepted behaviours*. The variable of autonomy is constructed as an index based on a number of questions commonly used in the literature to account for the perception of autonomy. The index is built by allocating a unit to each question associated with a greater sense of autonomy. These questions can be found in table 4 at the end of this document.

**Marital trajectories** To analyze the various marital patterns, we use a similar approach used by Van-Assche and Clark (2011). Since we have access to the full marital history for each woman in our sample, we are able to reconstruct their

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<sup>1</sup>Formally known as the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP). More details on sampling and fieldwork procedures, as well as the survey data, are available from the project's website: <http://malawi.pop.upenn.edu>

<sup>2</sup>In future analysis, we intend on using the first five waves of the study (1998 to 2008)

complete marital history to the best of respondents' recollection<sup>3</sup>. Thus, we know the marital history from the moment a woman enters her first marriage up to the most recent data collection. We recorded changes in marital status such as divorces<sup>4</sup>, remarriages, and widowhood. From this data, we identified the most common trajectories: stable marriages (never divorced), divorced only once and divorced twice or more. At the moment, we included the category of widows although they represent a different situation since the union break is highly likely caused by external factors. We plan on giving more attention to this group as we pursue our analysis. The distribution of women's characteristics by marital groups can be found in the table 1 and table 2 displays the distribution of the mean autonomy score by the different marital trajectories.

## **Preliminary analysis**

To look at the association between women's autonomy and marital trajectories, we use ordered logistic regressions and tested three different models. The first model includes the main marital trajectories as well as individuals' characteristics. The second model goes one step further by including the couple or marriage characteristics such as the respondent's husband's education and the type of residence. The third model is the most complete and robust; it includes the individual, the couple as well as sexual behaviours characteristics known to potentially have some effect on women's autonomy. Table 3 presents the results for the three models. The results presented are preliminary and future specifications will allow us to be more confident in the conclusions we can extract from our models. Because the third model is more robust and the directions of our results remain relatively the same through our analysis, we introduce the preliminary results from this model only.

As we expected, women who have experienced one divorce are 33% ( $p < 0.01$ ) more likely to have a greater autonomy score compared to women who have never divorced, the reference group. This likelihood increases to 40% for women with two or more divorces (ns). Women who were only ever widowed are about 8% (ns) less likely to score higher for autonomy compared to women in stable marriages. As women get older, the odds of having a higher autonomy very slightly decrease ( $p < 0.01$ ). The effects of the religious affiliation are interesting in the sense that Muslim faith is often perceived as restricting in terms of women's autonomy. In all models, Muslim women have a greater likelihood of having a higher autonomy score than Catholic women (25% (ns)). This could be explained by the fact that a greater number of

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<sup>3</sup>We are subjected to the memory recollection of respondents on timing of unions and their dissolutions.

<sup>4</sup>Separations were categorized as divorces.

Muslims are found in the southern region of Malawi where a matrilineal system is in place. The results for the region help us support our potential explanation for the effect of the religious affiliation on the autonomy score since women living in the southern region have a higher likelihood of having greater autonomy than women living in the central or northern regions.

Women with some education are more likely to score higher autonomy than women without any education, by 13% for women with primary education and 56% ( $p < 0.1$ ) for women with secondary education. Surprisingly, there is a negative relation between the husband's education and a women's autonomy score. The more a husband is educated, the lower are the odds for his wife to have a higher autonomy score. This result is unexpected and goes against the findings of several studies. Women who cohabit with their spouse are 16% or so more likely to have a greater autonomy score than women who don't. As for sexual behaviour, a higher number of lifetime sexual partners decreases by about 10% the likelihood of scoring higher on the autonomy scale ( $p < 0.05$ ).

It is important to note that we tested for polygamous unions and number of children ever born. However, they had no significant effects on the perception of autonomy in our models.

## **Future analysis**

The current analysis allows us to confirm that there is indeed a relation between marital trajectories of women and their perception of autonomy. However, by considering the autonomy at one specific moment over the course of their complete marital trajectory, it is difficult to confirm if a previous union dissolution really has a strong effect on the perceived autonomy of a woman at a given time, here 2006. We could address this issue by selecting a new sample of only ever-married women at the first survey wave (1998) and by following them at subsequent waves. Consequently, we would be able to know how many women experienced a divorce between two waves and observe the change in their autonomy score following the dissolution<sup>5</sup>. We believe our research can help us understand the interaction between woman's autonomy and marriage further. Perhaps the greatest contribution of our research is yet to come as we also gain more insight on the effects of the different transitions a women goes through to acquire greater autonomy.

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<sup>5</sup>Due to our data, we are only able to consider four attitudinal questions instead of eleven as in our previous analysis - see table 4

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics of analytical sample for women

N=1314	Never divorced n=852	1 divorce n=324	2+ divorces n=77	Widows n=61
Religion				
Catholic	57.6%	44.4%	40.3%	52.5%
Muslim	20.5%	30.3%	41.6%	27.9%
Other	21.8%	25.6%	18.2%	19.7%
Mean age	32.31	37.21	41.21	43.75
Region				
Center	33.8%	30.9%	36.4%	31.2%
South	29.7%	46.6%	50.7%	39.3%
North	36.5%	22.5%	13.0%	29.5%
Education				
No education	22.7%	36.4%	41.6%	32.8%
Primary	69.3%	59.3%	54.6%	65.6%
Secondary	8.1%	4.3%	3.9%	1.6%
Spouse education				
No education	12.4%	22.5%	32.5%	36.1%
Primary	67.6%	69.4%	63.6%	52.5%
Secondary	20.0%	8.0%	3.9%	11.5%
Mean number of children	3.8	3.9	3.9	4.5
Cohabiting	95.5%	81.2%	63.6%	62.3%
Mean number sexual partners	1.5	2.7	4.0	2.1
Reported extra-marital partner	4.34%	5.25%	6.49%	4.92%

Table 2: Mean autonomy score by marital trajectory

MARITAL TRAJECTORY	Mean score
No divorce	5.6690
1 divorce	5.9537
2+ divorces	5.9221
Only ever widowed	5.3934
Average	5.7412



Table 3: Odds ratios for ordered logistic regression models for women

N= 1314	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Marital trajectory (ref: No divorce)			
1 divorce	1.175	1.174	1.333***
2+ divorces	1.073	1.070	1.404
Only ever widowed	0.847	0.840	0.923
Religion (ref: Catholic)			
Muslim	1.337*	1.264	1.251
Other <sup>1</sup>	0.904	0.888	0.888
Age	0.980***	0.978***	0.977***
Region (ref: Center)			
South	1.489**	1.448**	1.514**
North	0.560***	0.596***	0.576***
Education (ref: No education)			
Primary	1.079	1.121	1.131
Secondary	1.316	1.527*	1.556*
Spouse education (ref: No education)			
Primary		0.762*	0.768*
Secondary		0.577**	0.580**
Cohabiting		1.129	1.163
Number of lifetime sexual partners			0.897**

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

<sup>1</sup> Other religious affiliations include CCAP, Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, AIC, and Church of Christ.

Table 4: Questions on women's autonomy

QUESTIONS	2006	Longitudinal
MOBILITY DIMENSION		
Is it acceptable for you to go to:	✓	
The local without informing your husband?	✓	
The local health centre without informing your husband?	✓	
ACCEPTABILITY OF DIVORCE DIMENSION		
Do you think it is proper for a wife to leave her husband if:	✓	
He does not support her and the children financially?	✓	✓
He is sexually unfaithful?	✓	✓
He does not allow her to use family planning?	✓	
He doesn't satisfy her sexually?	✓	
ACCEPTABILITY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DIMENSION		
Do you think it is proper for a wife to leave her husband if he beats her frequently?	✓	✓
ACCEPTABILITY OF COERCED SEX DIMENSION		
If a woman often refuses sex with her husband, is it acceptable for the husband to sleep with her by force?	✓	
A woman has the right to refuse sex with her husband when she:	✓	
Doesn't feel like it or is not in the mood.	✓	
Is tired from hard working.	✓	
Is no longer attracted to her husband.	✓	
A woman has the right to refuse unprotected sex if she thinks her husband may have hiv/aids.		✓