

## **Social Support and Young Women's Economic Well-Being after Divorce in Malawi**

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### Abstract:

Given the rise of complex families, significant research has been carried out on the consequences of divorce in the western world. Far less is known, however, about the consequences of divorce in contemporary Africa. Prior analyses have estimated that up to half of first marriages in Malawi end within the first five years suggesting the critical importance of understanding how the experience of divorce affects women's well-being. We will use a mixed methods approach to examine how the availability of social support prior to a divorce influences young women's economic well-being after the union has dissolved. The analysis will use data from the Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Study (MSAS), a longitudinal survey that followed a cohort of 14-16 year olds over the period 2007 to 2013. The quantitative data will be supplemented with 50 in-depth marriage history interviews collected from ever married women in 2013.

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With the growing complexity of families, there is an abundance of literature on the consequences of divorce in the western world. Discourse on divorce is often framed in a divorce-stress-adjustment perspective: there are stresses that accompany divorce as well as protective factors that can cushion the impact of this often turbulent life moment. Examples of stresses include loss of child custody, lack of emotional support, and continuing conflict with the ex-spouse while protective factors include supportive social networks, mature coping skills, and more extensive economic resources (Amato 2000).

Research has been carried out on factors that might increase the likelihood of divorce in Africa, including formality of the marriage, childlessness, early marriage, and women's socioeconomic autonomy (Grant and Soler-Hampejsek 2014, Tilson and Larson 2000, Takyi and Gyimah 2007). There has been little research, however, on the consequences of marriage dissolution despite the fact that 30 to 50 percent of marriages in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to end in divorce (Lesthaeghe 1989; Locoh and Thiriart 1995; Tilson and Larson 2000; Reniers 2003). One notable exception is Oya and Sender's study of divorced and separated women in rural Mozambique; they found that divorced women had better access to jobs and were better at investing in their daughters' education relative to married women (Oya and Sender 2009). However, the paper does not use longitudinal data and therefore does not allow for a comparison of economic well-being before and after union dissolution.

Divorce rates in Malawi are amongst the highest in Africa with life table probabilities of divorce ranging from 40 to 65 percent (Reniers 2003; Kaler 2004; Grant and Soler-Hampejsek 2014). There is significant regional variation in divorce rates, with southern Malawi experiencing higher rates than the rest of the country. This pattern is often attributed to the fact that most ethnic groups in southern Malawi are matrilineal with rights to children and inheritance determined by the mother's kin group (Grant and

Yeatman 2014; Reniers 2003; Chimbiri 2006; Mitchell 1962). With such a high percentage of women experiencing divorce, and often at a young age, it is important to understand how this experience is affecting their wellbeing and their transition to adulthood.

In this paper, we will use a mixed methods approach to examine the potential protective factors that cushion the economic impact of divorce on women. The quantitative analysis will provide descriptive information about women's economic well-being in the survey rounds before and after marriage dissolution. We will then explore whether sources of social support, including parental survival and proximity, parents' marital status, and marriage formality, are associated with better post-divorce outcomes for women. In addition to these quantitative analyses, we will use qualitative data to develop a deeper characterisation of women's well-being and the importance of social support at different points in the divorce process.

## **Data and Methods**

Using longitudinal data from the Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Survey (MSAS), this paper will explore the consequences of divorce for women in two districts in southern Malawi. The initial 2007 sample consisted of 1,764 students (875 girls and 889 boys) who were randomly selected from the enrolment rosters at 59 randomly selected primary schools in Machinga and Balaka districts. The probability of a particular school being included was proportional to its enrolment in 2006. An additional sample of 885 out of school adolescents (462 girls and 423 boys) were identified through key informants located at the school and within the school catchment villages. Survey weights were constructed to correct for the differences in the probability of being included in the sample by school, gender, and enrollment status at Round 1. Follow-up interviews were conducted between 2007 and 2013.<sup>1</sup> By the final survey round, 83 percent of the original sample was reinterviewed.

Our analysis will compare indicators of economic well-being measured in the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to a reduction in funding, data were not collected in 2012.

survey rounds before and after a respondent divorced. These variables include: household asset ownership, household living standards (e.g. housing materials, toilet, fuel source), household size and structure, and remarriage. Potential measures of social support include parental survival and proximity, parents' marital status, and the formality of the marriage, in particular whether the union was formalized by the mediation of the *ankhoswe*, representatives from the families of the husband and wife who negotiate the terms of the marriage. We also consider other characteristics that might influence well-being after a divorce, including the respondent's ethnicity, educational attainment, premarital wealth, and age at first marriage. We plan to use regressions to test our hypotheses about whether the availability of social support improves the well-being of women following divorce.

#### *Qualitative Data*

The main survey was supplemented by 50 in-depth marriage histories collected from ever married female respondents who were approached after the 2013 survey round was completed and were invited to take part in a one-time study about their marriage. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. All interviewers followed a common interview guide, covering topics that included: the marriage process, married life, experiences with divorce and remarriage, and community norms about marriage. Other than these questions, interviewers were not given more specific interview guidelines but were encouraged to use a conversational tone and to allow the respondents to speak at length about their experiences and opinions.

Interviews were simultaneously transcribed and translated into English by the interviewers within 24 hours of the time of the interview, allowing the author to seek clarifications and advise revisions to the interview protocol as issues developed. The majority of changes focused on rephrasing questions that respondents had difficulty understanding and improving the probing techniques used by the interviewers. The transcripts were read closely by the author and coded, first with reference to the general themes covered by the interview guide described above. During the second coding, responses within each topic were classified into sub-categories.

## **Preliminary Findings**

By 2013, a high percentage of the cohort's women had ever been married (84.5 percent). Of these, 36.8 percent had ever divorced and half of ever divorced women had remarried by the 2013 survey round. Though the survey data includes men, the paper will focus on women since relatively few men (less than 34 percent) in the cohort were married as of the last set of data collection in 2013. Furthermore, while much divorce literature studies the consequences of divorce on children, in this paper, we shall only focus on the women as their children at this stage remain young. However, this is a potential area for further research within this survey.

Table 1 presents the distribution of our preliminary indicators of economic well-being measured in the survey rounds before and after a divorce. We find that household asset ownership declined slightly following the divorce, but that household living standards improved. Women's post-divorce households contained, on average, almost one additional person relative to their pre-divorce households. There was also a noticeable shift towards a higher percentage of divorced women living in households where their mother, father or other adult was the head of household. However, 36 percent of all divorced women had remarried within one year of their divorce, reflected in the relatively high percentage of recently divorced women who reported a spouse as their head of household.

Table 2 presents the distribution of our preliminary measures of social support. Eighty-one percent of women had living mothers and 72 percent had living fathers at the time of the survey round immediately prior to their divorce. Only 35 percent of women had parents who were still married to each other. Finally, almost 80 percent of women had married with the mediation of the *ankhoswe*. Future analyses will test whether these measures of social support protect women's economic well-being immediately after a divorce. We will also explore alternate measures of well-being and social support in the data.

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Table 1. Distribution of economic well-being variables in the survey rounds before and after divorce, women, Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Survey 2007-2013

	Pre-divorce	Post-divorce
Asset ownership index (standardized), mean	-0.43	-0.47
Living standards index, mean	2.0	2.2
Number of household members, mean*	2.6	3.5
Head of household, %		
Self	40.2	26.0
Spouse	32.1	30.5
Mother	8.7	13.6
Father	9.8	15.3
Other adult	9.2	14.7
Remarried, %	n/a	36.1

\*Note: Household rosters were only collected in Rounds 1, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 2. Distribution of preliminary social support variables, women, Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Study, 2007-2013

	Distribution
Mother alive, %	81.1
Father alive, %	72.2
Mother and father still married, %	34.6
<i>Ankhoswe</i> mediated marriage, %	79.5