Wife-Beating in Malawi:
Examining the Role of Global and Local Institutions in Cultural Change

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In what follows, I present my dissertation project on intimate partner violence in Malawi. A portion of the project—the quantitative analysis of global-level mechanisms—will be completed for the PAA meetings next spring. The second half of the project—the quantitative and qualitative analysis of local-level mechanisms—will not be completed by then, rather I will have some preliminary results to share based on my work in Malawi prior to the conference. The quantitative analysis of global-level mechanisms will be more than enough to motivate a panel presentation and the preliminary qualitative results will certainly add to my quantitative analysis.

Abstract:

Global cultural models are spreading worldwide, influencing the institutions of nation-states, businesses, and organizations. Local cultural models, however, play critical roles in how culture is enacted on the on-the-ground by individual people. This study approaches the question of the global-local nexus by looking specifically at the issue of intimate partner violence. I examine the influence of global and local cultural factors on Malawians' stated attitudes toward and reports of intimate partner violence between 2000 and 2010. I will utilize new quantitative data on foreign aid projects, nongovernmental organizations' programs, and media access and usage, all of which are geo-tagged at the district level. In addition, I will perform interviews with tribal chiefs' and local church leaders. Combining these data together, I will explain which mechanisms have had the greatest impact and why, and how these diverse mechanisms fit together and interrelate.

Introduction

The status of women has been a central focus of the international development field since the 1970s (Swiss 2012). "Women and Development" and "Gender and Development" policies have focused on expanding access to abortion and contraception, encouraging lower fertility and later age at first marriage, eliminating genital mutilation practices, and enhancing the position of women in politics, the workplace, and the home. In the past two decades, there has been an increasing number of international conferences and media coverage focused on eliminating the practice of domestic violence, in particular violence by men against their female partners (Pierotti 2013). Nations around the world have called for the elimination of such violence and some have introduced new laws to enforce this view. The broad diffusion of such policies and norms is evidence of an ever-emerging global culture in which violence against women is now taboo. What is less clear, however, is whether the increased emphasis on eliminating intimate partner violence among policymakers and global elites has influenced the attitudes and behaviors of individual people, particularly people in societies that the international community sees as in need of "development."

Following John Meyer and his colleagues in the "world society school" (Krücken and Drori 2009; Meyer et al. 1997), I begin from the premise that certain global cultural models are

diffusing around the world, leading to the emergence of a single, shared "world culture." The political legitimacy and economic resources linked with global models give these models strong backing. Unlike most empirical work in this vein, which tends to examine the influence of global models on the practices of nation-states, businesses, and other organizational bodies, I assess whether these global models strongly influence *individuals'* cultural attitudes and behaviors (Jorgenson and Givens 2013; Meyer 2010; Meyer and Jepperson 2002; Pierotti 2013; Roberts 2012). In particular, I focus on whether individuals' exposure to global models affects both their *attitudes toward* and *reports of* intimate partner violence. Or, to be more specific and more critical (Yount et al 2014), I examine whether exposure to global forces calling for the end of violence against women impacts what individuals decide to say to survey workers regarding their views about the justifiability of intimate partner violence and what they decide to report as instances of "wife-beating."

But global forces are only one side of the story. Following the work of Ann Swidler, Susan Watkins, and others (Dionne 2010; Frye 2012; Hannan 2012; Swidler and Watkins 2009), I also consider the role of local cultural models—and their interaction with global models—on individuals' ideas about wife-beating. Local actors often employ savvy techniques to combine global models with their pre-existing local models in order to gain access to additional resources (Hannan 2012). In some instances, local actors also rely on cultural models reinforced by local cultural authorities in order to resist the imposition of these new, global models (Dionne 2010). What is most apparent from this body of literature is that global models are certainly influential, but that the way in which these global models are received by local authorities and utilized by local actors largely shapes whether cultural changes on-the-ground. For my investigation at the level of individuals' perceptions of wife-beating, local cultural models are likely to play an especially significant role.

In this study, I examine the influence of both global and local cultural models on individuals' stated values about the justifiability of intimate partner violence and on individuals' reports of such violence within the country of Malawi. The first aim of this project is to examine changes in Malawians' *attitudes toward* and *reports of* intimate partner violence against women between 1998 and 2014. The second aim of this study is to identify potential mechanisms involved in these changes and compare their effects. I employ a mixed-methods approach and rely on archival research, in-depth interviews, and quantitative datasets.

I focus on Malawi for two reasons. First, intimate partner violence has historically been common in Malawi and in recent decades international development organizations have been attempting to eradicate this practice. Second, there is a rich body of both quantitative and qualitative data for Malawi, unlike that available for any other country. These data enable me to gauge the varying effects of different mechanisms that scholars theorize greatly influence people's attitudes and behaviors regarding violence against women. Though my study is limited empirically to Malawi, *some* of the mechanisms I observe likely are influential in other areas of the world where international development organizations similarly endeavor to change peoples' attitudes and practices. Other mechanisms I observe as important in Malawi, however, likely are not in other countries. Local culture matters.

Changing Gender Ideologies in Malawi

International development projects, education textbooks, and the media, among other sources, have brought global messages about the need to end violence against women to the doorsteps of Malawian people. The political power and economic resources linked with these global messages endow them with a substantial degree of legitimacy, and the Malawian government has begun to espouse and promote such models as well.

Pre-existing cultural models of gender and patriarchy, however, are already ingrained in the everyday lives of most Malawians, which may lead some to resist new, global messages stating that violence against women is wrong (Pierotti 2014; Trinitapoli and Weinreb 2012). Previous qualitative research highlights common cultural schemas and practices in Malawi regarding intimacy and family life, which lay important theoretical groundwork for my study of intimate partner violence (Frye 2012; Tavory and Swidler 2009; Watkins and Swidler 2009; 2013). In addition, local cultural authorities, especially tribal chiefs and local church leaders, are extremely powerful in Malawi (Swidler 2010; 2013). The position of these authorities on matters such as intimate partner violence is likely to have a substantial impact on Malawians' attitudes and practices. Local authorities views on the issue, however, appear to vary, with some espousing new global models and others vehemently rejecting them (Schatz 2003).

How have Malawians' attitudes toward and reports of intimate partner violence changed since the expansion of new global messages calling to end violence against women? What effect have different cultural influences – global and local – had on Malawians' attitudes toward and actual reports of intimate partner violence?

Changes Over Time

In order to examine temporal changes in Malawians' attitudes toward and reports of domestic violence, I will rely on three waves (2000, 2004, 2010) of Demographic and Health Surveys for Malawi, carried out by the United States Agency for International Development (*dhsprogram.com*). The surveys include geographic location for respondents (though randomized within fifteen kilometers to maintain privacy), inviting the possibility of comparing results by location. In the surveys, both men and women are asked about whether men in general are justified in physically beating their wives in a series of five different circumstances: (1) if she goes out without telling him; (2) if she neglects the children; (3) if she argues with him; (4) if she refuses to have sex with him; (5) if she burns the food. In addition, women are asked a series of questions about whether their intimate partners regularly beat them or have beaten them before. I plan to use adjusted Wald tests to measure temporal changes in survey responses.

Taking into consideration the global call to eradicate intimate partner violence and the worldwide diffusion of this message during the period in question, *I expect the rejection wife-beating as acceptable behavior has increased among both Malawian women and men*. However, given the long history and customary practice of wife-beating in Malawi, *I also anticipate that women's reports of experiencing intimate partner violence have risen substantially* during the time period measured. I do not suspect that actual incidences of intimate partner violence have increased, but rather that the introduction and spread of the very idea that such behavior can be categorized and labeled as "violence" has lead to an increase in people knowing to—and being willing to—report such incidences (Frias and Angel 2013).

Though a number of factors have been shown to be important in predicting individuals' attitudes and reports of intimate partner violence, including prior history of abuse and whether one witnessed such violence between their own parents, these variables likely do not predict temporal changes in such attitudes and reports. Instead, factors of cultural change are likely at work. I consider the influence of both global and local factors.

Global Mechanisms of Cultural Change

To investigate the influence of the international community, I consider foreign aid, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Malawian government, and local NGOs. I include Malawian government and local NGOs in these analyses because they are replicating the global models promoted by the international community regarding violence against women. In my analyses, I will utilize a number of quantitative data sources and link them with the individual-level data from the DHS using simple OLS regression. I also plan to use propensity score matching techniques to compare changes across geographic locations. To deal with endogeneity, I will use lagged version of independent variables. Additionally, I will also conduct field observations of actual development projects aimed at decreasing violence against women in order to better capture *how* projects affect the lives of individual people.

For foreign aid, I will use a new geographically-tagged dataset for foreign aid projects in Malawi between 1998 and 2012. The Malawi Ministry of Finance, in tandem with the AidData Center for Development Policy, created the dataset (Peratsakis et al. 2012). Over 2,500 projects are listed, several hundred of which are coded as relating to gender, women's empowerment, and related topics. Since each case includes the geographic location of the project in question, I can capture the influence of nearby aid projects on individuals (one group of scholars has already done this: Dionne et al. 2013). Based on previous literature critical of aid in development economics (e.g. Easterly 2006), *I anticipate that foreign aid in general will not have a significant effect*, but, drawing on recent research looking at type of foreign aid (Tierney et al. 2011), *I also suspect that foreign aid especially focused on gender issues will predict increases in attitudinal rejection and increases in reports of intimate partner violence*.

For quantitative data on international NGOs and on local NGOs, I follow the methods of other scholars and rely on multiple directories of NGOs, merging them together to create more accurate lists (Morfit 2011; Robinson 2013). At the international level, the main directories I will use are the Yearbook of International Organizations (*uia.org/yearbook*), the Development Directory (*devdir.org*), the NGO Aid Map (*ngoaidmap.org*), the Council for Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi (*congoma.mw*), and the Malawi Sustainable Development Network Programme (*sdnp.org.mw*). At the local level, I will be relying on current data collection efforts led by Dr. Sahai Burrowes with funding from AidData. Similar to foreign aid, *I expect that NGO projects focused on gender will have positive impact on change, but that NGO projects in general will not have a significant effect*.

Next, I examine the influence of the media, which is a common carrier of global cultural models. I look at not only individuals' media access, but also media content. For media access variables, I will use the DHS. For media content variables, I will depend on other scholars' efforts to digitize the archives of two popular Malawian newspapers, *The Malawi Times* and *The Daily Nation* (Angotti et al. 2014; Morfit 2011). I will also expand on their efforts by gathering archives for more recent years, coding a sample of articles for messages about gender and

intimate partner violence, and gathering and coding newspaper archives from the most popular regional newspapers in the northern, central, and southern regions of Malawi. Beyond newspapers, I will also collect and code transcripts from popular private and public radio and television stations in Malawi, which I will code accordingly. For Internet content, I will gather data on the frequency at which people located in Malawi search for terms related to intimate partner violence on Google (*google.com/trends/malawi*). *I expect that media content about intimate partner violence will increase in frequency during the time period measured* and that *media access will therefore have a proportionately higher level of influence on citizens' attitudes and reports of intimate partner violence over the time period measured.*

Local Mechanisms of Cultural Change

Despite my hypotheses that global factors will predict changes in individuals' attitudes toward and reports of intimate partner violence, I suspect that a large proportion of the variation in individuals' attitudes and reports of intimate partner violence will remain unexplained. Based on the observations of Ann Swidler (2010; 2013) and others looking at sources of grassroots' power in Malawi, I also consider the influence of local cultural authorities. Two types of institutions – tribes and churches – are likely of key importance. I focus primarily on the influence of tribal chiefs and local church leaders.

Previous work by historians and anthropologists, documents important cultural differences between tribes in Malawi, particularly whether land ownership is matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilineal, and recent surveys capture whether these trends continue today (e.g. Ibik 1970; Berge et al. 2014). Land ownership practices are in many cases indicative of the gendered aspect of power relations in tribes and I therefore will utilize new survey data as such a measure. These data are useful for testing the influence of local cultural models regarding gender and power on individuals' attitudes and reports of intimate partner violence within differing tribes.

These data do not capture whether tribal authorities have embraced or rejected new global scripts calling for the eradication of violence against women, however. Accordingly, I will conduct three qualitative interviews with tribal chiefs or community leaders in a sample of nine districts, resulting in twenty-seven interviews total. This will include three districts each in the northern, central, and southern regions, which scholars have classified as patrilineal, bilineal, matrilineal, respectively. In these interviews, I will ask respondents how tribal leaders have responded to development projects advocating against intimate partner violence. This will require respondents to retrospectively create a timeline of events or a tribal history calendar (Axinn et al. 1997) for the past two decades. This calendar will include events such as when the first development project regarding violence against women was instituted, what other large development projects regarding wife-beating and gender egalitarianism have taken place, and what leaders responses to these projects have been, including whether they have started "projects" or media campaigns of their own to either support or decry such efforts. Based on the information gleaned from these interviews, I will develop theories about how tribal chiefs responded to global messages advocating against intimate partner violence. This will allow me to create dummy variables for each of the three major regions in Malawi for tribal chiefs positions regarding the justifiability of wife-beating. These variables will not be static measures, rather they will include any temporal changes in tribal leaders' positions during the time period measured. I will use these new variables to test the predictive import of these tribal chiefs' positions. *I expect that when local tribal chiefs embrace global models, then individuals'*

membership in that tribe will be strongly associated with increasing rejection of intimate partner violence and also higher rates of reported instances of such violence. I expect the influence of tribal chiefs' positions to be particularly salient in rural areas.

An ever-growing body of research documents the tremendous influence of religious affiliation and local church leaders in Malawi, particularly in recent decades (Schatz 2003; Swidler 2010; 2013; Vondoepp 2002; 2010). The doctrines of different religious organizations regarding gender roles and family life, however, varies substantially and has measurable impacts on a wide range of behaviors. In order to classify the position of different religious denominations in Malawi, I will utilize the Malawi Journals Project (Watkins and Swidler 2009). In the journals project, several local Malawians in the northern, central, and southern regions of the country have been enlisted to write down everyday conversations they hear among Malawians about sexual relations and family life more broadly. The journalists make a special effort to attend churches and record what local church leaders say on such subjects. These data are coded by topic and are publically available (*investinknowledge.org/projects/research/malawian_journals_project*). I will supplement these data with field observations and I will attend different churches in various regions of Malawi and speak with local leaders where possible. Using the journals and my ethnographic data, I will create dummy variables for the position of different religious denominations on the issue of intimate partner violence, including temporal changes in their positions during the time period measured, and then examine their effect in my regression models. *My hypothesis is that the position of one's religious denomination will be strongly associated with one's attitudes and reports of wife-beating. I anticipate that the power of this variable will be especially strong in urban areas.*

Given the strong importance of tribal and religious affiliation in Malawi, I expect that these local cultural models will be the strongest predictors of cultural change in my models, stronger than all of my variables for global models or for any socio-demographic control variables. If this is in fact the case, then it would highlight the dominance of local cultural authorities as the most important mediums through which cultural change occurs. This would mean that any global-level analyses that document convergence might be missing a critical piece of the puzzle: local institutions. If this is not the case, however, and my variables reflective of global cultural models are the strongest predictors of cultural change, then it would imply that global models are so powerful, or so deeply disseminated, that they may bypass local cultural models altogether, easily eclipsing them.

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