Socioeconomic Determinants of Age at Marriage in Malawi

Abstract

Although age at first marriage has important demographic and health consequences for any population, no systematic analysis of changes in the timing of marriage has been conducted in Malawi. The purpose of this study is to indentify factors affecting age at marriage among women in Malawi.

This study used data obtained from 2000 and 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health surveys. Univariate, bivariate and logistic regressions were employed to examine the relationship between age at marriage and selected background variables.

Nearly 70% of the respondents were married before the age of 18 years and the mean age at first marriage is 17.4 years. Age at marriage varies by age, region, rural-urban residence, religion, ethnicity and wealth. The findings from logistics regressions indicate that age, region, education, religion and ethnicity are the most important determinants of age at marriage in Malawi. The policy implications of the results are discussed.

Extended Abstract

Purpose: Age at first marriage has important demographic and health consequences for a population, yet no systematic analysis of changes in the timing of marriage has been conducted in Malawi. The purpose of this study is to indentify factors affecting age at marriage among women in Malawi.

Methods: This study used data obtained from 2000 and 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health surveys. Univariate, bivariate and logistic regressions were employed to examine the relationship between age at marriage and selected social and demographic variables.

Results: Nearly 70% of the respondents were married before the age of 18 years and the mean age at first marriage is 17.4 years. The timing of marriage varies by age, region, rural-urban residence, religion, ethnicity and wealth. Although the findings from multiple regression analysis indicate that age, region, education, religion and ethnicity are found to the most important determinants of age at marriage, only age and education are significantly related to age at first marriage.

Conclusion and recommendations. These results suggest that governments should accord a significant priority to female education and, in particular, a higher priority compared to male schooling. The *Chidyamakanda* (those who eat children) bill designed to reduce the minimum age at marriage from 18 years to 16 years and to legitimize those who children who are "forced" into early marriages should be vigorously challenged.

Keywords: age at marriage, socio-economic, determinants, Malawi

Introduction

Marriage is an important institution for the individual and the society at large. For the individual, it is a significant and memorable event in one's life cycle of as well as the most important foundation in the family formation process. In addition, marriage marks the beginning to an end of the transition to adulthood as the individual separates from the parental home, even if generations continue to be socially and economically interdependent through the extended family. For the society as a whole, it unites several individuals from different families and represents the creation of a production and consumption unit as well as one for the exchange of goods and services ().

In most societies marriage defines the onset of the socially acceptable time for childbearing and is not only the most predominant context for childbearing but also one of the most important determinants of fertility.

Change in marriage pattern i.e. delayed marriage are believed to bring in the issues of dating, premarital sex, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, STDs and HIV/AIDS (Jones, 2007).

Age at marriage is of particular interest because it marks the transition to adulthood in many societies; the point at which certain options in education, employment, and participation in society are foreclosed; and the beginning of regular exposure to the risks of pregnancy and childbearing.

Women who marry early will have, on average; a longer period of exposure to the risk of pregnancy, often leading to higher fertility. Historically, societies with later age at first marriage have experienced decreased fertility rates while in traditional populations in Asia and Africa where age at first marriage is younger, high levels of fertility has been observed (Bongaarts, 1983; Coale, 1971; Week, 2007).

Variation in age of entry into marriage helps explain differences in fertility across populations and also helps explain trends in fertility within individual populations over time (United Nations, 1990; Ezeh and Dodoo, 2001). Therefore, age at first marriage has a direct bearing on fertility behaviour (Davis and Blake, 1965; Coale, 1971; Lesthaeghe *et al*., 1989).

Early marriage is associated with early childbearing as, in most cases particularly in the developing countries, the main purpose of marriage is to have children. Early childbearing is fraught with substantial health risks for both the mother and the child.

Young mothers are more likely to experience pregnancy related complications and less able to deal with them, which often lead to maternal death (Zabin and Kiragu, 1998).

Children born to young mothers are usually subject to elevated risks of morbidity and mortality (Casterline and Trussell, 1980; Zabin and Kiragu, 1998; Ikamari, 1996).

Delayed age at marriage directly affects completed fertility by reducing the number of years available for childbearing. Later marriage permits women to complete their education, build labor force skills, and develop career interests that compete with childbearing within marriage. These career interests may, in turn, motivate women to limit family size and / or widen the spacing of their children (Amin, 1995; Jensen and Thornton, 2003).

Given the centrality of marriage in an individual's life history and its role in fertility and mortality transitions, surprisingly few analytic studies have been undertaken on marriage patterns and its determinants in Malawi.

Studies elsewhere have, however, identified a number of factors that seem to influence the timing of marriage (Véronique, 2002; Singh and Samara, 1996; Jejeebhoy, 1995; Oppenheimer, 1988; Bloom and Trussell, 1984; Rindfuss and St. John, 1983).

Increases in age at marriage are associated with major social-structural changes such as increases in educational attainment, urbanization, and the emergence of new roles for single women

(United Nations, 1987, 1988; Lesthaeghe *et al*., 1989, Singh and Samara, 1996; Kaufman and Meekers, 1998).

Jejeebhoy (1995) analyzed 51 studies based on a number of data sources, mostly the World Fertility Surveys and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and found that education is the single factor most strongly related to the postponement of marriage, but the relationship may be subject to threshold effects.

In many countries, the tendency for education to increase the age marriage becomes universal only after a few years of primary education. However, because the results of the few studies available are contradictory, little can be said about trends in the relationship between education and age at marriage over time (Jejeebhoy, 1995).

The nature of the relationship between timing of marriage on the one hand and socio-economic factors on the other hand has not been exhaustively investigated in Malawi. Therefore this study primarily examines the effect of social and economic factors on the woman's age at first marriage. In particular, the study aims at establishing the effects of some of the factors that have been indicated in studies elsewhere to be closely associated with the woman's age at first marriage. These include region and place of residence, childhood place of residence, age at first sexual intercourse, premarital childbearing, religion and ethnicity.

Sources of Data

The study is based on the analysis of data obtained from the 2000 and 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health surveys (Malawi Government, 2002, 2006). The DHS (now DHS+) program has conducted over 170 nationally representative surveys in about 70 countries throughout Africa, Asia, the Near East, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The DHS program is funded by USAID and implemented by Macro International, Inc. DHS typically have large sample sizes of between 5000 and 30,000 households. These surveys provide data for a wide range of monitoring and impact evaluation indicators in the areas of population, health, and nutrition.

The MDHSs involved the use of three basic questionnaires. First, a questionnaire on households that recorded information on all household members. Second, a questionnaire on individual women that recorded detailed information on eligible women who were identified from the household questionnaires. The 2000 MDHS collected data for 13220 women aged 15-49 whereas the 2004 DHS collected data for 11698 women of in the same age range. Total sample for this analysis comprises of 10,600 and 9605 ever married women aged 15-49 years old in 2000 and 2004 data sets respectively. The questionnaires on individuals collected information on the respondent's background characteristics, reproductive history, knowledge and practice of family planning, breast-feeding practices, marriage, fertility preferences etc., as well as on her husband's background characteristics. Third, a questionnaire for individual men aged 15-54 was administered and a total of 3092 and 3261 men were interviewed in 2000 and 2004 respectively. The male questionnaire was similar to that of the individual women questionnaire but excluded the birth history and maternal and child health sections. The analyses in this paper will use data from the individual women questionnaire only.

One of the objectives of the surveys (though by no means the only one) has been to obtain data from which levels and trends of fertility can be obtained. In all the three surveys information on the birth histories of women aged between 15 and 49 years at the survey date was collected. In particular, each woman was asked for the history of her births, including birth dates, the sex of each child, the survival status of each birth, and so on. This information was used to estimate such measures of fertility as Age Specific Fertility Rate (ASFR) and TFR for periods close to the survey dates.

Variables

The variables of interest for this study were obtained from the individual questionnaire. The dependent variables for this analysis, age at first marriage, were obtained from a question in the section on marriage in the individual woman's questionnaire: "How old were you when you

started living with him?". The "him" refers to husband for those women who are married or any man the once lived with.

Age at first marriage, the dependent variable, is a continuous variable. However for the purposes of this study, age at first marriage was dichotomized at 18. This enabled us to look at the percentage of marriage that happened before and after the age of 18.

Because our main interest is on the interrelationship between age at first marriage and social and economic factors the following eight (8) independent variables were used in the analyses: current age; education; region; type of residence (rural-urban), religion; ethnicity; wealth index and occupation. All the independent variables were obtained from the section on participant's background characteristics.

Current age of the respondent.

Current place of residence in urban or rural areas was used.

Region of residence identified the geographic region in which the participant was interviewed. This was coded as North, Center or South for the analysis.

A variable measuring sex of the head of the household was available in the individual woman's data file from a question asked in the household questionnaire.

Participants were asked whether they were currently working, aside from their housework.

Educational level was determined by asking a participant if they had ever attended school and the highest level of school attended.

To determine religious affiliation, participants were asked what religion they belonged to. The response options included Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, traditional religion, and other.

To measure household wealth, an index was created from amenities (the availability of piped water, flush toilet, electricity, cement floor) and possessions (refrigerator, bicycle, motorcycle, car). Wealth index was constructed using household asset data including electricity, radio, TV, bicycle, motorbike and car. Each item was given a score and it was summed across items for each household. Individual wealth was ranked as poor; middle and rich based on the total score.

Methods

Three approaches were used in the analysis. Descriptive univariate analyses were performed to inspect the frequency distributions of the various factors. Bivariate analysis was employed to examine the relationships of the independent variables and age at first marriage. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted for categorical variables and t-tests for continuous variables. Logistic regression was used to examine the impact of social and economic factors on age at first marriage. The use of the logistic regression is based on the fact that the dependent variable is dichotomous (0=age at first marriage below 18, 1=age at first marriage above 18). The logistic regression model takes this form:

$$\text{Logit}(p_i) = \ln [p_i / (1-p_i)] = b_i \, x_i$$

With p_i being the probability that a woman marries before 18 years, b_i standing for the regression coefficient, x_i's being the independent covariates and the ratio $[p_i/(1-p_i)]$ being the odds that a woman marries before 18 years.

Study Limitation

Although our interest is in exploring the relationship between age at first marriage and socio-economic factors, our study has some limitations. First, the reporting of age at first marriage might be inaccurate. This might arise from recall bias and might be more severe in rural areas where literacy levels are low and marriage certificate may not be readily available. However, the study also collected information on duration of marriage in an effort to minimize the effect of error reporting on age at first marriage. Second, our study includes only ever-married women. This may bias downward age at first marriage because women in the older group who had not married were not included. Third, the study includes only women so there might be still much

unknown about trends and determinants of marriage among men. Lastly there is also the problem of measuring some of the independent variables such as education, ethnicity and religion.

For instance, religion may not permit us to identify people belonging to charismatic and non charismatic churches or allow us to assess the direct effects of religious theology, attitudes, practices, and norms on women's age at marriage. This is important because the religious groups under consideration here may differ in their religious teachings regarding gender roles, female status and education, spouse selection and childbearing practices. Furthermore, whereas education, particularly school enrollment, occurs during childhood, religious affiliation is usually established by the family at the time of birth and for the most part is unchanged throughout the life course. However, there is a chance that a respondent could change her religious affiliation after getting married or at any point during her adult life, particularly at a time when there is an upsurge of charismatic ministries. Thus, a full understanding of religious influence on marital factors including age at first marriage requires a consideration of the religious heritage in which an individual was raised rather than the respondent's current religious background. Despite these limitations, we hope this study will shed some light on the factors influencing age at first marriage in Malawi.

Results

Table 1 gives the summary statistics of the samples and the variation of means age at first marriage across independent variables.

In terms of social and demographic characteristics the mean age of respondents is 30.3 years. The majority of the respondents lived in rural areas (80% in 2000 and 88% in 2004). The majority of the respondents were in the Southern Region, followed by Central Region and then Northern Region. This finding is consistent with the distribution of the population at the national level where the southern region is home to almost half of the population. Over 80% of the respondents were Christians, with Muslims accounting nearly 15%

The mean age at first marriage is17.4 years for all the women in both surveys.

The mean age at first marriage is lower among the younger women than older women. The mean age at first marriage is 16 years for women aged 15-19 increasing to 17.8 years for women aged 35-39 years and 18.1 years for women aged 45-49. In 2004 mean age at first marriage is 16.1 years for women aged 15-19 increasing to 17.7 years for women aged 35-39 years and 18.1 years for women aged 45-49.

In 2000 the mean age at first marriage is lowest in Northern Region, followed by Southern Region and highest in the Central Region. In 2004 the mean age at first marriage is lowest in the Southern Region, followed by Northern Region and highest in the Central Region. Overall, women in Central Region on average go married later than women in Northern and Southern Regions.

Women in urban areas on average got married slightly later than women in rural areas. In 2000 the mean age at first marriage is 17.8 years in urban areas as compared to 17.3 years in rural areas. Similar estimates for 2004 are 18.1 and 17.3 years respectively.

Women with no or primary education were among the youngest to get married compared to people who had secondary and higher education. In 2000 the mean age at first marriage ranged from a low value of 17.1 years among those with primary education, 17.3 among women with no education, 19.7 years among women with secondary education and 22.4 years among women with higher education. In 2004 the mean age at first marriage ranged from a low value of 17.1 years among with no education, 17.2 among women with primary education, 19.5 years among women with secondary education and 22.7 years among women with higher education. The differences in age at first marriage comparing no-education with those who had more than higher education were: 5.1 years in 2000 and 5.6 years in 2004.

The mean age at first marriage varies by religious affiliation. The mean age at first marriage was lowest among those respondents practicing other religion (17.1), then other Christian (17.2),

Muslims (17.3), seventh day (17.4), No Religion, Anglican, Catholic (17.5) and highest among CCAP (17.8).

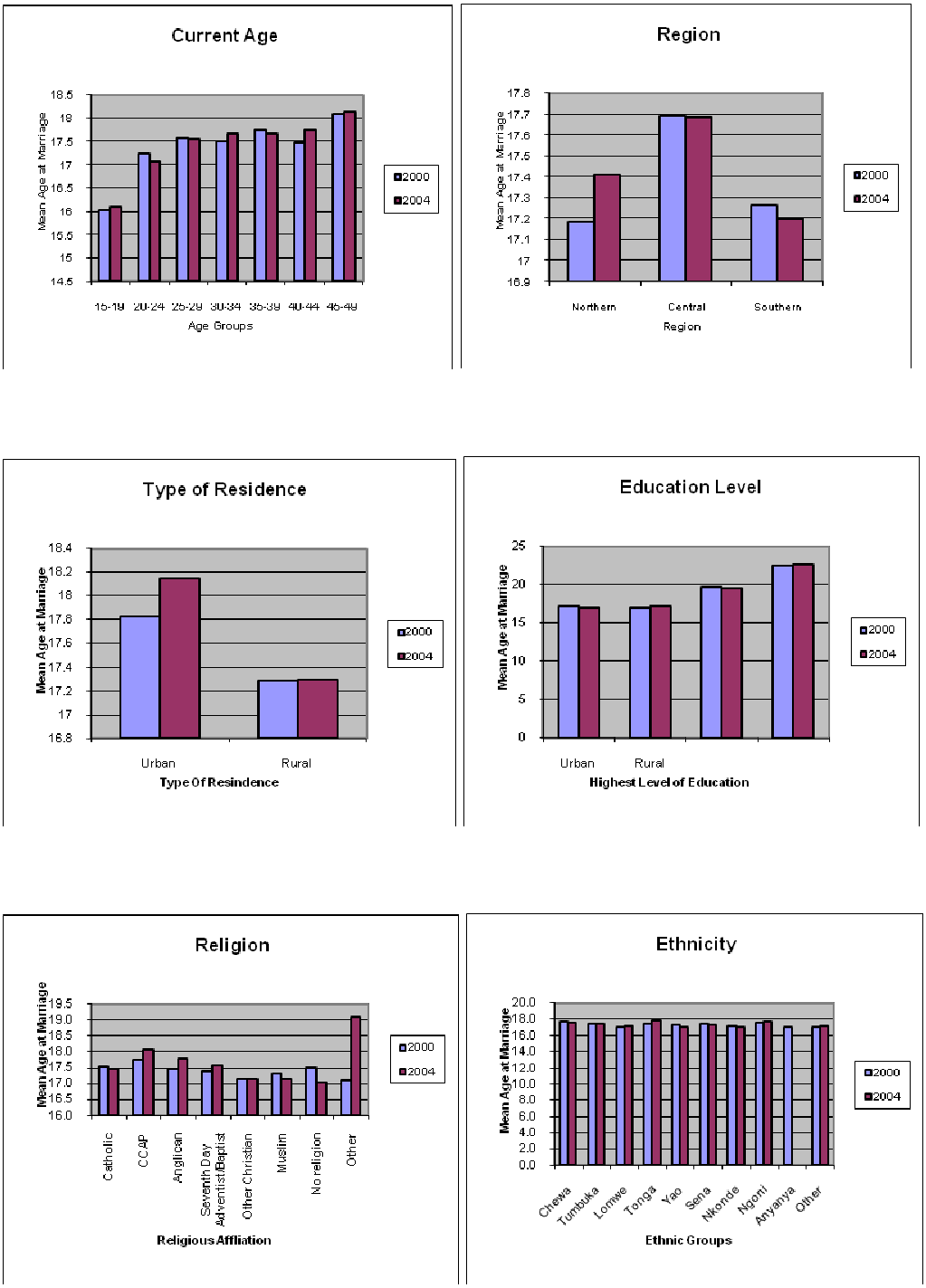
Poor people tend to get married earlier than people in middle and rich class. Comparing people in the poor category with those in rich category, the difference in age at first marriage were: 2 years in 2000 and 2004.

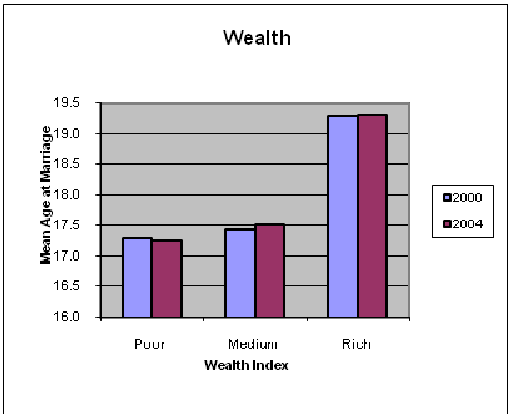
Table 1: Mean Age at Marriage by Selected background variables for Malawi 2000 and 2004

	Mean	SE	N	%	Mean	SE	N	%
15-19	16.0	1.5	1039	9.8	16.1	1.6	871	9.1
20-24	17.2	2.3	2513	23.7	17.1	2.3	2446	25.5
25-29	17.6	3.0	2237	21.1	17.5	2.9	2035	21.2
30-34	17.5	3.4	1516	14.3	17.7	3.5	1465	15.3
35-39	17.8	4.0	1372	12.9	17.7	4.1	1106	11.5
40-44	17.5	4.0	1027	9.7	17.7	4.0	925	9.6
45-49	18.1	4.3	896	8.5	18.1	4.5	757	7.9
Northern	17.2	3.0	1743	16.4	17.4	2.8	1227	12.8
Central	17.7	3.2	3581	33.8	17.7	3.2	3412	35.5
Southern	17.3	3.4	5276	49.8	17.2	3.4	4966	51.7
Urban	17.8	3.2	2082	19.6	18.1	3.4	1182	12.3
Rural	17.3	3.2	8518	80.4	17.3	3.2	8423	87.7
No education	17.3	3.7	3198	30.2	17.1	3.7	2639	27.5
Primary	17.1	2.8	6469	61.0	17.2	2.9	5976	62.2
Secondary	19.7	3.2	917	8.7	19.5	3.1	950	9.9
Higher	22.4	3.2	16	0.2	22.7	4.0	40	0.4
Catholic	17.5	3.1	2273	21.4	17.5	3.0	2035	21.2
CCAP	17.8	3.0	1796	16.9	18.1	3.4	1517	15.8
Anglican	17.5	3.1	255	2.4	17.8	3.3	197	2.1
Seventh Day Adventist/Baptist	17.4	3.1	674	6.4	17.6	3.2	608	6.3
Other Christian	17.2	3.3	3846	36.3	17.1	3.1	3540	36.9
Muslim	17.3	3.6	1581	14.9	17.1	3.5	1587	16.5
No religion	17.5	3.6	93	0.9	17.1	3.7	76	0.8
Other	17.1	4.1	78	0.7	19.1	6.1	41	0.4
Chewa	17.8	3.2	2777	26.2	17.6	3.2	2990	31.1
Tumbuka	17.4	3.0	990	9.3	17.4	2.7	904	9.4
Lomwe	17.0	3.2	2155	20.3	17.2	3.3	1872	19.5
Tonga	17.5	3.1	215	2.0	17.8	3.3	192	2.0
Yao	17.3	3.7	1580	14.9	17.1	3.5	1548	16.1
Sena	17.5	3.2	376	3.5	17.4	3.4	330	3.4
Nkonde	17.2	2.9	355	3.3	17.1	2.4	83	0.9
Ngoni	17.6	3.1	1131	10.7	17.8	3.2	923	9.6
Anyanya	17.0	3.3	614	5.8	0.0	0.0	0	0.0
Other	17.0	3.0	399	3.8	17.2	3.3	761	7.9
Poor	17.3	3.2	6405	60.4	17.3	3.2	5541	57.7
Medium	17.4	3.3	3983	37.6	17.5	3.2	3924	40.9
Rich	19.3	3.6	212	2.0	19.3	3.9	140	1.5

Total	17.4	3.2	10600	100.0	17.4	3.3	9605	100.0

Figure 1: Socio-economic variables associated with age at first marriage in Malawi





Bivariate analyses

The relationship between age at first marriage and the independent variables was further explored by examining the proportion of marriage that took place on or before age 18. Table 2 shows the percentage of women who were first married before 18 years of age by selected background variables.

The table showed that there was significant proportion of women who got married before the age 18 and all independent variables were significantly associated with early marriage.

Overall the percentage of women who get married before the age 18 remained unchanged between 2000 and 2004 (the percentage was 70.5 in 2000 and 70.8 in 2004).

Younger women, women who lived in rural area; women who lived in the Northern and Southern Regions; women who had lower education level and poor women were more likely to get marriage before the age 18. This pattern remained consistent in both surveys.

Table 2: Proportion of women who married before age 18

15-19	95.5	97.5
20-24	73.1	70.0
25-29	65.6	66.3
30-34	66.2	67.7
35-39	66.8	67.7
40-44	67.9	69.5
45-49	62.9	64.4
Northern	72.7	75.6
Central	67.0	66.9
Southern	72.3	71.8
Urban	60.2	64.2
Rural	71.9	72.4
No education	73.3	71.6
Primary	74.6	75.3
Secondary	38.6	37.4
Higher	17.5	6.3
Catholic	70.8	68.6
CCAP	61.9	65.9
Anglican	66.0	67.1
Seventh Day Adventist/Baptist	65.6	68.7
Other Christian	74.0	75.0
Muslim	72.5	70.6
No religion	77.6	63.4
Other	61.0	79.5
Chewa	67.4	65.7
Tumbuka	72.9	72.4
Lomwe	73.0	74.6
Tonga	67.2	73.5
Yao	72.7	71.0
Sena	71.5	68.4
Nkonde	74.7	75.2
Ngoni	67.7	68.6
Anyanja		75.7
Other	71.7	75.4
Poor	72.4	72.6
Medium	68.5	69.4
Rich	47.9	43.4
	70.4	70.8

Multivariate analysis

Overall, five independent variables (namely age, region, rural-urban residence, religion and ethnicity) are found to be significantly associated with the age at first marriage in Malawi. Among the independent variables included in the model wealth is not significantly associated with the age at first marriage. This means that our analysis indicate that age, region, education, religion and ethnicity were the strongest predictors for age at first marriage in Malawi. The results of the multivariate analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 22: Logistic regression coefficients predicting the relative odds that a woman marries before exact age 18

	2000 Odds Ratio	S.E.	2004 Odds Ratio	S.E.
15-19	0.039*	0.21	0.059	0.19
20-24	0.643*	0.09	0.440	0.09
25-29	0.807*	0.09	0.701	0.09
30-34	0.800*	0.09	0.768	0.10
35-39	0.816*	0.09	0.782	0.10
40-44	0.768*	0.10	0.772	0.11
45-49 ®				
Northern	0.826	0.11	0.910	0.11
Central	1.079	0.07	1.244	0.07
Southern ®				
No education	0.027*	1.04	0.077	0.42
Primary	0.027*	1.04	0.094	0.42
Secondary	0.146	1.04	0.503	0.43
Higher ®				
Catholic	1.373	0.30	0.748	0.34
CCAP	1.288	0.30	0.947	0.34
Anglican	1.305	0.33	0.797	0.38
Seventh Day Adventist/Baptist	1.386	0.31	0.927	0.35
Other Christian	1.098	0.30	0.705	0.34
Muslim	1.447	0.31	0.827	0.35
No religion	1.682	0.37	0.532	0.44
Other ®				
Chewa	1.255	0.16	1.092	0.11
Tumbuka	0.926	0.15	0.756	0.14
Lomwe	0.875	0.16	0.941	0.10
Tonga	0.907	0.21	1.177	0.20
Yao	0.954	0.18	1.019	0.13
Sena	1.297	0.19	1.258	0.16
Nkonde	1.044	0.18	0.886	0.29
Ngoni	1.061	0.16	1.026	0.12
Anyanja	0.840	0.18		
Other ®				

Constant	14.641*	1.09	7.704	0.55

* = p<0.5

-2 Log likelihood =11588.035

Cox & Snell R Square= 0.108

Nagelkerke R Square=0.154

Age at first marriage is higher among older women than younger women. Age at marriage is higher among women aged 20-44 relative to younger women and the reference category. The odds indicate that women aged 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39 and 40-44 are 96%, 36%, 19%, 20%, 18% and 23% less likely to marry after the age 18 than the reference category. The odds ratio decrease with increasing age probably suggesting a slight increase in age at marriage.

Women who lived in the Central Region are more likely to get married later than those who live in the Southern and Northern Regions. On the one hand residents in Central Region are 8% more likely to marry after age of 18 than women residing in Southern Region, and the difference is not statistically significant. On the other hand residents in Northern Region are 17% less likely to marry after age of 18 than women residing in Southern Region, and the difference is not statistically significant.

Education has the expected relation with age at first marriage. Women with no education are 97% less likely to marry after age 20 relative to the reference category; women with primary and secondary education are 97% and 85% less likely to 17 times and 3 times as likely marry after age 20 relative to the reference category.

There are differences in age at first marriage by religious denominations. Catholics are 37% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. CCAP are 29% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. Anglicans are 31% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. Seven Day Adventist are 39% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. Other Christians are 10% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. Muslims are 45% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. No religion are 66% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category.

Among the mainstream religious groupings Muslims are more likely to marry at an earlier age than other religious groups in Malawi.

There are variations in age at first marriage by ethnic group in Malawi. The Chewa are 25% more likely to marry after age 18 than the reference category. The Tumbuka are 8 times less likely to marry after age 18. The Lomwe are 12% times more likely to marry before age 18. The Tonga are 10 times more likely to marry before age 18. The Yao are 5 times more likely to to marry before age 18. The Sena, Nkonde and Ngoni are 1.3, 1.0 and 1.1 times less likely to marry before age 18. The Anyanja are 16 times more likely to marry before age 18.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper focuses on examining the economic and demographic factors affecting age at first marriage among Malawian ever-married women aged 15-49 years old.

Although the findings from multiple regression analysis indicate that age, region, education, religion and ethnicity are found to the most important determinants of age at marriage, only age and education are significantly related to age at first marriage.

Our study also revealed that there was significant proportion of women who got married during adolescence and before the legal age (18 years old) especially among young women and less educated women.

Early marriage is believed to cause negative consequences such as having more children, increase child and maternal mortality especially

The effect of late marriage on reproduction through shortening the reproductive life span has been widely recognized. However, reproduction is not the only function of marriage. Marriage heralds the beginning of a new family unit with all the complicated roles and statues which the members of this unit are expected to play.

Sociologically speaking, early marriage is a part of the wider practice of female seclusion through their subordination to men and deprivation of equal access to social and material resources. This evil practice destroys their ability to think, question, and act independently. Child marriage also minimizes parental responsibilities toward girl's education, developmental activities, socialization, and so forth.

From a demographic point of view Malawi still needs to control its fertility rate as such effort to increase age at first marriage may be needed.

Government policies can help women to have more access to education, improve socioeconomic and thus help young women to make their own decision regarding when to get married. This also suggests that study on the consequences of early marriage should be conducted.

This study has implications for policies and programs that seek to promote the status of woman in Malawi. First policies that aim at increasing the women's age at first marriage should be promoted. In this regard the unpopular *Chidyamakanda* (those who eat children) bill designed to reduce the minimum age at marriage from 18 years to 16 years and to legitimize those who children who are "forced" into early marriages should be vigorously challenged. Second it is crucial to continue improving girls and young women access to education in the country, as this

is important avenue for increasing the women's age at first marriage and for empowering women so as to enhance their active participation in market economy. Similarly, it is advisable to target young women, particularly those with no or little education, with information on reproductive health and to provide them with basic life skills to enable them to avoid early sexual activity and ultimately early marriage. These should include primary school girls. This should be done throughout the country with more emphasis placed on the least developed parts of the country. These programs should emphasis the health as well as the economic advantages of delayed marriage and childbearing.

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