

# **Economic Contexts of Intimacy and Marital Dissolution among Young Women in Malawi**

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## **Introduction**

The intimate bond between partners is a critical component of family life as it dictates how couples navigate through various circumstances to maintain their relationships, ranging from the construction of gender (Graham 1983) to the transferring of goods and services within the household and across communities (Rubin 1976; Luxton 1980). At the onset of profound socioeconomic changes which have shaped family lives across the globe, studies between emotions and economics provide an important and well-timed insight on how family lives are faring along with socioeconomic transformations. In other words, how do socioeconomic contexts shape couples' emotional bonds? How do couples reconcile their emotional needs with material ones under different socioeconomic contexts, and finally, how do these factors account for the demographic trends?

According to the 2020 African Economic Outlook report, GDP growth has gone up to 3.4 percent in the region, highlighting six African countries among the world's ten fastest growers (African Development Bank Group 2020). In more relatable terms, these numbers indicate more education, more human capital, and more opportunities for wealth across the continent. Most importantly, these numbers signify structural changes to women's social positions, from their economic participation (Ambler et al. 2021; Giron and Kazemikhasragh 2021) to the respective roles within the household as providers (Mojola 2014). However, our understanding on the link

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between economics, intimacy, and marital experiences is far from complete. For one thing, there are limited theoretical and empirical account on how economic changes have affected emotional bonds among partners. Few important studies have documented how economic contexts of marriage have changed over time (Sweeney 2002; Killewald 2016), yet we see far too little discourse on the role of emotions when social changes are discussed. On the other hand, literature on relationship quality captures rich emotional dimensions of marriage without contextualizing them. This is well reflected in the predominance of “love as transactional sex” framework when interpreting romantic relationships and materiality in Africa, which inevitably leads our attention to single-event outcomes such as intimate partner violence, infidelity, and HIV/AIDS transmissions (Stoebenau et al. 2016; Frye and Trinitapoli 2015).

Recently, however, considerations of emotions and emotionality have returned to the analyses of economic actions. A number of qualitative studies has clearly documented the changing nature of romantic relationships in relations to rapidly changing economic circumstances. These studies find that economic contexts influence the meaning and practice of love – from duty and endurance dependent on the traditional agriculture system to emotional work and romance based on modern commodities and cash-economy (Cole and Thomas 2009). Consequently, divorce rates across the continent has shown complex patterns, with some regions experiencing decrease while others experiencing increase in marital disruptions (Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015). Lack of overarching theory leaves this contradictory demographic trend unexplained; some argue that women’s economic independence would increase divorce rates as it provides necessary resources for the women to shun abusive, obligatory relationships (Oppenheimer 1997; Miller and Kannae 1999) while others show that women’s economic

independence begets other forms of intimacy within relationships (Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Mojola 2014).

Using a unique set of longitudinal data collected in southern Malawi, this study explores how economic contexts affect relationship quality among young couples, and ultimately, patterns of union dissolution. This paper seeks to address the gap between the existing empirical evidence and the recent ethnographic development which highlights the importance of emotional dimensions of relationships and the effect of economic contexts in which meanings of marriage are situated in. Empirically, this study provides much needed analyses on how economic contexts shape emotional dimensions of marriage in a transitioning society. Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on economics and emotions by looking at how Malawian women reconcile intimacy and economic transactions within marriage when the existing economic script between the two contradicts their desires to build lasting relationships based on trust and commitment.

Malawi is an ideal setting for studying this topic for two major reasons. First, both marital and non-marital relationships are unstable in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Malawi. Even without divorce, the region has the highest level of marital instability due to migration and widowhood in times of rapid economic and epidemiological process (Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015; Takyi 2001). Second, many relationships in Malawi are formed within transitional economy with competing expectations and realities. This paper has three major goals. First is descriptive – I lay out general trends in relationship quality among young women in this region. Second is analytic – I investigate how materiality has affected multiple dimensions of relationship quality over time. Lastly, I explore the implications of changing relationship quality on union dissolution.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Economic Context of Intimacy in sub-Saharan Africa*

Intimacy within marriage is an ambiguous term, potentially encompassing all objective and subjective measures of couple-level well-being. Measures of intimacy include but are not limited to conflict resolution, affection, sexual satisfaction, expressiveness, and autonomy (Waring and Reddon 1983). Numerous previous research has suggested that economic factors such as financial strain and financial instability influence key dimensions of relationship quality. However, juxtaposing intimacy and money has been long been considered a taboo as money is often thought to be “rationalizing, fungible, and corrupting” and are not compatible with emotional dimensions within intimate relationships (Zelizer, 2000). Consequently, to borrow Siegle’s words, “many couples fight about money, but there is little theory available in the professional literature to guide research or clinical activities” (2008).

The bias against money and intimacy is well reflected in the dominance of transactional-love framework to describe emerging romantic relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. Under this framework, romantic relationships based on any provision of money are often labeled as unhealth and unstable, and even as prostitution (Day 1988; de Zalduondo 1991). However, transactional love – whether in forms of labor or money – has long prevailed in the continent and made romance and exchange inseparable aspects of intimate relationships since pre-colonial era (Cole and Thomas 2009). Mills and Ssewakiryanga (2005) famously describe romantic relationships in sub-Saharan Africa as, “no romance without finance.” Gifting luxury items such as clothes and shoes is a common way to initiate intimate relationships in sub-Saharan Africa, and the continuation of relationships is contingent on men’s provision of other essential and non-essential goods women need. The amount and the frequency of these gifts are often thought to

reflect how much men love their women. Monetary gifts also signal men's level of commitment; any reduction in the amount often indicate that men have found new partners, dividing up his resources among multiple girlfriends.

While African women acknowledge that true love without transactions exists, young African women feel themselves caught between the intense desires to attain Western levels of material comfort and love while facing immense challenges for achieving both. Many of them believe economic security is the key aspect of transitioning into marriage (Pike et al. 2018). For many disadvantaged women, marriage is often a way out of poverty and an insecure string of unhealthy relationships (Bertrand-Dansereau and Clark 2016). Among highly educated women, modern identity infuses extra needs and social competition to keep up with idealized levels of consumption (Mojola 2014). In sum, the rise of romantic love as a privileged rationale for assessing the quality of a marriage is in tension with the notion that marriage is a form of social, and often financial, exchange between partners that has long prevailed in the region.

### *Modes of Exchange and Intimacy in a Transitioning Society*

Are romantic relationships becoming less – or more – intimate under these social changes? Decades of sustained focus on international development has surely shifted the local economic context where exchanges and intimacy are defined. Gift giving continues to play a central role in how African couples make sense of their relationships. However, its effect on couples' marital experiences are difficult to assess. For one thing, declining power of men in response to economic stagnation is often cited as a major reason why traditional family formation has failed to persist in the region. And the lack of social structure has, in part, increased demand for low-commitment relationships that are sustained by material and sexual

transactions (Pike, Mojola, and Kabiru 2018; Hunter 2009). Yet, resourceful men could also pose risks in places where divorce rates and infidelity are high as women often accuse one another for their partners' promiscuity (Van den Borne 2005).

Further situating relationship quality and marriage in the global economic context, women's increased economic participation has diversified the modes of exchange couples are engaged with, which redefines and challenges the nature of romantic relationships (Zelizer 2000). In case of the U.S., Sweeney (2002) documents that women's rising economic prospect shifted the paradigm away from the mutual labor-finance dependency to more independent, assortative partnerships based on both parties' economic prospects. One such relevant measure is women's share of household income. Empirical study affirms that an increase in women's income positively affects couple-level marital wellbeing and happiness (Rogers and DeBoer 2001), suggesting that couple's income has become a part of the exchange which defines intimacy.

In many parts of the African continent, girls have come to outweigh boys in terms of their academic performance (Lopus and Frye 2018) and economic participation (Hallward-Driemier and Hasan 2013). No clear existing literature have investigated the direct effect of African women's income, yet few studies highlight the increasing importance of women's financial resources in coping with day-to-day struggles as household heads (Schtz and Ogunmefun 2007). With shifting gender roles and expectations, provision for food and support are not only within the realm of men anymore; widowed women often take up the role as "sugar mommy" to support young aspiring men who lack economic resources (Mojola 2014). This indicates that women's financial resources could also initiate and sustain different forms of intimate relationships.

Moreover, “modern” objects such as television, mobile phone, and bicycle have tremendous impact on the couples’ day-to-day activities as well as their desire for romantic relationships (Stoebenau et al. 2013). For example, it is well established in the Western context that having a smartphone has a direct impact on the quality of interactions people have within their intimate relationships (Rotondi, Stanca, and Tomasuolo 2017). Other examples from SSA, although not directly related to relationship quality, attest that mobile phone ownership is known to reduce women’ ideal family size in southern Malawi via role modeling, preference change, and access to information (Billari, Rotondi, and Trinitapoli 2018). Television and radio also serve similar purposes, diffusing the ideas on what an ideal, Western romance look like (Barker and Axinn 2004). Modern household goods and infrastructure also have shifted the form of intimacy and gender dynamics in the continent. Traditional residences in Africa are made with readily available resources, requiring man’s labor to show his commitment to the relationship. However, modern housing infrastructure such as tin roof and bricks now necessitate substantial amount of savings. Consequently, building house has become a collective investment couples undertake together, with women contributing considerable amount of money to improve household infrastructure (Fletschner and Kenney 2014). As such, changes in the economic contexts and the modes of exchange provide a complex situation for African women to navigate their romantic relationships (Mojola 2015; Stoebenau et al. 2016, Hunter 2010).

### *Intimacy and Marital Dissolution*

Demographically, these phenomena raise an interesting intersection between societal changes and changes in human behaviors. At the macro-level, social context of relationships redefines how intimacy is practiced. At the micro-level, different social needs and expectations

clashes to shape couples' experiences and satisfaction within their relationships, and consequently, distinct demographic processes. Globalization has fundamentally defined companionate relationships to the ideal form of marriage (Wilcox and Nock 2006, Amato et al. 2003, Burgess 1948). Ample empirical studies focusing on sub-Saharan Africa reflect that the importance of "modern" variable in determining couples' relationship quality has grown. A study looking at the correlates of relationship quality among Ghanaian men found that less traditional decision-making and open communication were strong predictors of happy marriage (Miller and Kannae 1999). Another qualitative study among a sample of South African men and women found that "mutual love and respect" was valued by both men and women (Styen 1996). In another study in Ethiopia, Ezra (2003) described increased education of woman as a key 'modernization variable' that has promoted more marital happiness.

Based on these findings, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that emotional bonds would rise as an independent determinant of marital dissolution in contemporary society. However, whether changes in intimacy would interfere with divorce is unclear given that some divorces are followed by no changes in the levels of discord and marital happiness (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007). Population-level studies also show that marital quality across the globe has changed little (Amato et al. 2003) or has increased in the past three decades (Corra, Carter, and Carter 2009), yet the risk of divorce also drastically increased in many parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa (Gross and Simmons 2002; Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015).

One reason why relationship quality may have difficulty predicting marital dissolution is that people's ideology and actual outcomes are often affected by normative and cultural schemas (Wilcox and Nock 2006). Even if women deem marriage as unsatisfactory, she might still stay married if she believes in the institution of marriage and traditional gender roles (Rogers and



Amato 2000). In fact, women with more gender egalitarian ideologies tend to report lower marital satisfaction, contradicting the widely-held belief that companionate relationships would entail more equality and higher satisfaction (Qian and Sayer 2015). These findings are particularly to sub-Saharan African context as recent study in Madagascar shows how transactional sex could be seen as part of the same continuum of sexual-economic exchange which is shaped by social, political and economic structures of inequality and gendered hierarchies of power (Freedman et al. 2021).

### **Case: Marital and Non-marital Relationships in Malawi**

Although divorce in Malawi is not new and infidelity is high, this is also a “new” aspect of problems that women in Malawi often talk about (Bertrand-Dansereau and Clark 2016). A small land-locked country in southern Africa, Malawi historically had high marital instability which was first recorded during the British colonial period. Marriage in southern Malawi has, since the 1940s, been presented as an institution in crisis, perpetually compared against a mythical earlier time of greater stability (Kaler 2001). Matrilineal marriage in this region is sometimes viewed as a comparative advantage to women in initiating divorce, yet this argument is also without consensus. A number of qualitative studies note women’s concerns over the extent of men’s commitment to their marriages, and ascribe high marital instability in the region to the practice of impulsive marriage (Bertrand-Dansereau and Clark, 2016). It is not uncommon for the woman to be proposed by a stranger, who would eventually leave his wife, children, and fields and to start a new family altogether (Ansell et al., 2018; Poulin 2017). Combined with low life expectancy due to AIDS epidemics and the now-or-never approach to marriage, Malawi’s divorce rates are estimated to be 40%–65%, which is one of the highest in Africa (Reniers 2003; Ueyama and Futoshi 2009).

Despite making significant economic and structural reforms to sustain economic growth, Malawi remains one of the poorest countries in the world (Conroy 2006). The economy is heavily dependent on agriculture and is vulnerable to external shocks. The national poverty rate has remained at 50% since 2010, which is driven by rapid population growth, low productivity in the agriculture sector, and limited labor market opportunities in non-agricultural sectors. Heavy alcohol consumption and inability to secure jobs among young men leave a lot of marriage at stake. It is reported that about 42% of ever-married women have experienced some form of violence within their marriage (Chikhungu et al. 2019).

## **Data and Methods**

I use data from Tsogolo la Thanzi (TLT), a longitudinal, population-based study conducted in Balaka, Malawi. In 2009, TLT interviewed a population-representative sample of 1,505 women between the ages of 15 to 25 and followed them until 2011 for every three months, which resulted in eight waves of panel data within two-year period. In the summer of 2015 and 2019, follow-up surveys were administered (Yeatman et al. 2018). Since the main focus of the study was on family formation and sexual partnerships among young women, TLT collected detailed marital quality measures in three points in time: 2010, 2015, and 2019.

First, in order to assess the changing economic contexts and their impact on relationship quality, I leverage TLT data in a series of pooled, cross-sectional analyses. I restrict my sample to those between the ages of 21-25 who are married at each point in time to separate possible age effects from the period effects. This leads to a total of 1,407 respondents. Table 1 shows the detailed description of the analytic women used in the cross-sectional analyses and the changes in the key variables over time. All three samples – 2010, 2015, and 2019 – are statistically similar in terms of their ethnic composition; however, significant demographic differences are

noted. Women between the ages of 21-25 in 2019 have significantly higher levels of education compared to their age mates in 2010 and 2015 and have fewer number of living children. Economically, 2019 sample are significantly more likely to live in the household with improved roofs, more of them ever worked for either piece work or stable employment, and earn more compared to 2010 and 2015 samples. Moreover, 2019 sample adopts significantly more gender egalitarian attitudes. However, in terms of their marital experiences – the number of marriages and the duration of current relationship – differences are insignificant. In sum, these samples are different in key ways which reflect the larger societal changes that have happened in nine-year span, yet are similar in terms of their marital experiences. I use a series of ordered logistic regression for each relationship quality dimension measured in three points in time. The main focus of these sets of analyses is to see whether relationship quality is affected by different economic contexts captured by household goods index, income, and gift received as well as other key socioeconomic characteristics such.

<Table 1 about here.>

Next, to measure how changes in relationship quality affect marital dissolution in different economic contexts, I focus on 2010 and 2015 samples. Of 894 women in 2010 and 2015 samples, 738 were followed through 2015 and 2019, respectively. The average retention rate for these two periods is 81% and the restriction does not substantially alter the sociodemographic profile of the analytic sample from the original sample (see Table 2). I use discrete-time hazard models to predict the log odds of divorce during the five-year period based on the relationship quality measured in 2010 and 2015. Person-years of exposure are the unit of analysis for marital dissolution. I start the hazard of divorce from the first year a woman is married to the particular partner she reported relationship qualities with based on the marital

history. I first assess the impact of multiple dimensions of relationship quality on divorce separately for 2010 and 2015 samples and include a pooled model for the comparison.

<Table 2 about here.>

### Key Measures

Conceptually, marital quality is measured as a multi-dimensional construct such as levels of companionship, communication, affection, trust and conflict, along with the subjective aspects like marital satisfaction and happiness (Lewis and Spanier 1979; Glenn 1990). In order to capture the holistic dimensions intimacy and their changes over time, I focus on four key measures of relationship quality in this study: **general care, communication, trust, and commitment**. All relationship qualities are measured through four Likert scale questions: “my partner shows that he cares about me, (general care),” “my partner and I sit down together and discuss important matters together (communication).” my partner is probably having sex with someone else (trust),” and “if things were really bad with my partner, I would leave the relationship (commitment).” Respondents were given a choice of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree to answer each question. I reverse coded general care and communication measures so that higher score signifies positive ratings (scale 1-4). For example, higher score in general care signifies that women perceive higher levels of care while higher score in trust signifies that women are less like to think their partners are having an affair.

Conceptually, I distinguish between general care and communication from trust and commitment. The feeling of care and communication have long been affirmed as the major characteristic of “modern” relationships which measures the positive affections and emotional intimacy among couples. (Allendorf and Ghimire 2013). On the other hand, trust and

commitment captures perceived stability of relationships based on cultural norms and other holistic assessment of the current relationship. These measures are particularly relevant in places where infidelity is high and divorce and re-partnering are socially acceptable (Reniers 2003; Trinitapoli 2015). Although high-intimacy relationships tend to be high-commitment relationships, high-commitment relationships are not necessarily high-intimacy ones (). Thus, intimacy/affections and trust/commitment are fairly independent from each other, both conceptually and empirically (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.50$ ).

To fully capture the degree to which economic context affects women's marital quality, I use three separate measures. First, household wealth is measured as a continuous variable adding up nine household goods. These items are widely used in the surveys in developing countries to measure overall socioeconomic status of the household and include: bed with mattress, television, radio, telephone, refrigerator, bicycle, motorcycle, animal-drawn cart and car. This simple additive captures the overall socioeconomic status of the household in transitioning societies which is proven to have a strong association with various behaviors independent of more traditional forms of wealth such as land and size of the cattle owned (Garenne 2015). However, much caution is necessary when interpreting changes in household wealth index over time as it does not capture the essence of the goods accumulated. For example, the proportion of the households owning radio had dropped significantly from 2010 to 2019 among our sample, declining from 71% to 46%. On the other hand, the proportion of the households owning landline and television increased from 63% to 85% and 14% to 19%, respectively. This shows that households losing radios over time are not necessarily losing wealth as the index indicates. Rather, these households have accumulated other goods of higher values. Thus, household

wealth index is treated as a time-invariant measure to capture the relative socioeconomic standing of women's households at a given point in time.

Given the penetration of cash economy, the importance of off-farm wage labor known as *ganyu* has grown over time (Simtowe 2010). Moreover, women's formal employment rate has also gone up in the nine-year period; among the analytic sample, women's employment rate – both temporary and steady jobs – has increased from 39% in 2010 to 54% in 2019. The most common livelihood among these women are petty trade and farming, as well as running small businesses apart from housekeeping. Thus, I include a logged income measures to control for the financial circumstances of women independent of their material circumstances. All incomes are converted to US dollars based on the exchange rates at each point in time. Lastly, gift from the partner is a logged amount of financial support women received from their partners in the past month. Although women's income has clearly increased over the period of nine years, the amount of financial gift received from partners remained relatively stable over the same period of time.

### Controls

*Years of education* is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 15. In Malawi, tertiary education includes both degree-granting four-year colleges as well as any vocational and professional training respondents pursued after finishing secondary school. Since it is difficult to differentiate between the two, I uniformly assigned 15 to those who have proceeded above secondary education (1.21% of the analytic sample). *Gender Ideals and norms* are measured by two dichotomous variables. In the baseline TLT survey as well as in 2015 and 2019, women were asked whether they agree with the following statements: “There is something wrong with a

woman who is divorced and doesn't want to remarry,” and “There is something wrong with a married man who heats his own bath water.” The answers were coded as 1 if women agree with each of the above statement and 0 if they disagree. For 2010 sample, I used their answers obtained from the baseline survey.

I also control for a number of variables that are known to affect relationship quality – *number of children* at three points in time (2010, 2015, and 2019) and *duration of relationship*. Age at first marriage is an important predictor of the overall marital experience as well. However, marriage is almost universal among Malawian women as 90% of our sample have married by age 20. Inevitably, age at first marriage and duration of relationship are highly correlated among young women. Since this paper focuses on marital quality, I only include duration of relationship in the model to avoid multicollinearity problem. In general, marital quality is thought to be more volatile during the early years of marriage (Johnson et al. 1992; James 2015) while the effect of age at first marriage on relationship quality is less documented, especially among higher-order marriages.<sup>2</sup>

## **Results**

### Trends in Marital Quality, 2010-2019

Despite tremendous changes in economic circumstances during the nine-year period, relatively little changes are noted in women's reported marital quality (see Table 1). Among those who are between the ages of 21-25, general care and discussion scores slightly decreased over time. In 2010, respondents' average general care score was 3.81 out of 4-point scale. By

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<sup>2</sup> Reniers (2003) estimates that roughly 40-65% of Malawian women would experience at least one divorce in their lifetime. Our 2019 survey result shows that 31% of our sample has experienced marital dissolution and 25% are in higher-order marriages.

2019, general care score decreased to 3.74, with a slight increase in 2015. Similar pattern is observed for the communication score; the average communication score decreased from 3.78 to 3.68 between 2010 and 2019. Given the widespread concerns around men's infidelity, women generally show little trust of their partners across three points in time, as the trust score decreased from 3.10 to 2.98. Interestingly, commitment level shows a slight increase from 2.27 to 2.42. However, most of these changes are statistically insignificant.

In questioning whether women between the ages of 20-25 are in any way different from the wider range of population (aged between 18-34), Appendix A shows the same trends in relationship quality among women using women of all ages who are married at each point in time. The most notable difference compared to the analytic sample is that the population average for trust and commitment scores in 2019 are lower. Moreover, there is a statistically significant decrease in trust level between 2009 and 2019. This reflects the fact that full sample in 2019 consists of older women and trust level tends to decrease with respondents' age while care and discussion scores are independent of age. However, the overall trends in observed relationship qualities within population are similar, with more robust decrease in care and communication scores and slight increase in commitment.

How exactly has the distribution of relationship quality has changed over time? Even though the changes in relationship quality seem minimal at glance, Figure 1 shows that the proportion of extreme negatives and positives have significantly changed over the nine-year period for affectionate measures. For example, those who "strongly disagree" that their partners show care has increased from 0.08% to 4%. Accordingly, those who "strongly agree" that their partners show care has decreased from 85% to 82%. On the other hands, the distribution of extreme answers, both positive and negative, increase for trust and commitment measures. In



2010, 34% of the women answered they “strongly agree” that they would leave the relationship. The proportion of women answering the same in 2019 has increased to 39%. In parallel with this change, those women who answered they “strongly disagree” to leave the relationship also increased from 21% to 33% between the nine-year period. In sum, these cross-sectional glances suggest three things about relationship qualities in Malawi: 1) relatively little changes in women’s reported marital quality were observed over the nine-year period, 2) each dimension of marital quality follows different trend, with a slight decrease in care, communication, and trust scores while commitment score remains relatively constant over time, 3) changes/stability in these measures are partially due to the changes in the proportion of women experiencing extreme negatives/positives.

<Figure 1 about here>

#### *Affectionate and Intimate Relations and Their Determinants*

Given the tremendous changes in women’s economic circumstances yet relative stability in relationship quality, what are the factors influencing women’s relationship quality? Figure 2 shows the changes in economic determinants of women’s relationship quality between 2010 and 2019. Despite the fact that financial gift women received from their partners remained relatively stable over time, its significance has increased over the nine-year period. Starting with general care, we see that the amount of financial gift received is consistently significant determinant of women’s perceived levels of affection, such that higher gift is correlated with higher levels of care. Socioeconomic status measured via household goods are insignificant. Yet, women’s income is significantly negatively associated with their reported care in 2019. Other sets of determinants known to affect relationship quality are generally behaving in the expected

directions, yet are largely insignificant. Previous marital experience is negatively associated with general care. Education is not a significant determinant of relationship quality and its overall association is mixed while the number of children born is consistently negatively associated with care score.

<Figure 2 about here.>

The amount of gift received from the partner is also a sole determinant of communication between partners among 2015 and 2019 samples but not among 2010 samples. Here also, the importance of income has grown over time, yet is negatively correlated with the reported communication. On the other hands, the amount of gifts are not significantly correlated with trust and commitment measures in all three points in time. However, income is marginally significant in predicting trust; women with higher income reports lower trust. Social contexts are more significant predictor of commitment than economic variables. Neither the household wealth, the amount of gift received, and women's income are correlated with commitment level. Rather, women's commitment is largely dependent on their gender ideology and attitudes towards remarrying.

These findings suggest that the “economic transaction” predominantly predicts emotional intimacy of marriage and its importance has grown in recent years as young women expect romantic relationships to involve intimate bonds. However, gift giving alone does not predict the perceived stability of those relationships. And interestingly, increase in women's economic participation has a negative effect on both their emotional bonds and trust.

<Figure 2 about here.>

*Changing Relationship Quality and Union Dissolution*

It is no coincidence that the relationship dimension that is heavily affected by gift economy is also the dimension that has seen decrease over the nine-year period. Has the persistence of transactional love come to strain the relationship quality? In other words, are relationships high in affectionate dimension more likely to dissolve compared to those high in intimate dimension? Model 1 in Table 3 shows the hazard ratio of getting divorce among women who were between the ages of 20-25 in 2010 and followed through 2015 (N=377). The model indicates that only trust level is moderately significant predictor of divorce while other relationship dimensions are relatively non-effective. Also, household goods index and the amount of monetary gift received from the partner, both measured in 2010, are not predictive of divorce by 2015.

However, we see a difference in how these variables behave among those who were between the ages of 20-25 in 2015. For these women, neither of the relationship qualities are strongly associated with the risk of divorce by 2019. With decreasing marital quality over time, this finding is not particularly surprising. The importance of both household goods and the amount of gift received, on the other hand, significantly affect the risk of divorce; while higher household goods significantly lower the risk of divorce, higher amount of gift increases the risk of divorce by 31%. These results, along with the earlier findings, confirm that stable household wealth and economic transactions are increasingly important foundation of marital experiences among young women in Malawi. Emotional dimensions of marriage, however, exhibit much complex patterns and suggest two things: First, the fine line between affectionate-based relationships and intimacy-based ones are not as clear as the theory predicts. Second, intimacy and materiality are closely intertwined and their interdependence has increased over time as emotional dimensions of marriage loses independent effect over marital dissolution.

<Table 3 about here.>

One concern raised by this result is the fact that disadvantaged women are more likely to be drawn into short-term relationships supported by gifts rather than economically stable, intimate relationships. As evident from the previous set of analyses, it is clear that negative affections are concentrated among a small group of women. Although no evidence of stratification along socioeconomic status and education are observed so far, many previous literature affirm that the intensification of structural disadvantages and deprivations, coupled with rising aspirations in a liberalized economic structure, might have further destabilized marriages among the disadvantaged (Haller 1981).

To see whether the effect of relationship quality on marital dissolution differ by women's socioeconomic standing, I repeat the same analysis across three different wealth quintiles (analyses not shown, available upon request). Results attest that the hazard of divorce is significantly higher among the disadvantaged sample. However, quite contrary to what the literature predicts, care and the amount of gift received are only significant predictor of marital dissolution among women in the highest wealth quintile. Among those who are less privileged, household goods predominantly determine the risk of divorce, not the amount of gift received nor relationship quality. This finding closely mirrors the ethnographic findings that love-based relationships and the discourse over romance are signs of privileges among contemporary African couples. Although the overall effect of romantic emotions – as expressed in non-materialistic form – has decreased over time, its effects are still concentrated among those who could care.

## Conclusion

This paper investigates how larger societal changes affect intimacy within romantic relationships, how different modes of economic exchanges shape intimacy, and ultimately, union dissolution patterns in a transitioning society. Using Malawi as a case study, this study shows that unlike what the literature has previously predicted, affectionate dimensions of intimacy measured via general care and discussion scores have decreased among the women between the ages of 20-25 in the nine-year period. On the other hands, other dimensions of intimacy – commitment and trust – remained constant, if not increased in some instances. The gift economy – the prevalent form of transactions among couples in Malawi – largely determine affections even though other major economic changes have taken place. On the other hand, women’s income, not the amount of gift received, predict trust. I find no evidence that the amount of gift received from the partner deteriorate care and communication scores measured in the later waves, yet women’s income is negatively associated with both general care and trust.

However, economic measures such as household wealth and gift received have come to outweigh intimate dimensions in determining marital dissolution in recent years, suggesting that relationships based on transactions are becoming more vulnerable in light of economic changes. This observation has an important implication for understanding shifting relationship dynamics among young Malawian women, and potentially, identifying emerging patterns of stratified family experiences under economic transformation. Further analyses show that this is indeed the case; the effect of relationship qualities is higher among women with more privileged backgrounds.

Apart from providing a much-needed empirical evidence of relationship qualities and marital dissolution in transitioning society, this paper looks at the intersection between emotions,

materiality, and marital experiences. Too often, literature on relationship quality are detached from the economic foundation of marriage. This had led us to study how economics affect relationship quality and marital formation/dissolution separately under the assumption that deteriorating economic circumstances would strain relationship quality, and ultimately, marriages themselves. However, this study shows how materiality changes both economic and emotional foundations of marriage, which distinctly shape young women's' marital expectations and their consequences. Emotional dimensions of marriage are more versatile such that women act and react in accordance to the changing economic scenes. Marital quality and materiality may operate independently, yet the evidence shows that these two are increasingly interwoven together under recent economic circumstances.

Few limitations are worth nothing, however. First, the sample is restricted to women between the ages of 20-25 to minimize age effect. This led to relatively small sample size and further study needs to attest whether patterns observed among this age group is also generalizable for other age groups. The vast majority of marriage – and consequently, the first divorce – happens around age 20, yet early marriages are still prevalent as well as the “delayed” marriage among educated, affluent women. As the previous literature repeatedly confirmed that age at first marriage is a significant predictor for divorce, it is worth exploring whether the effect of emotions and materiality hold constant across different age groups. Second, because marital quality is measured at a fixed point in time, its time-varying effect may not be accurately captured in the marital dissolution analysis. Although intimate dimensions are relatively more stable, affectionate dimensions of marriage are versatile and time-sensitive and their effects on marital dissolution may be underestimated as the timing of divorce varies across sample.

Despite these limitations, the results presented here clearly suggest that transactional love alone is an insufficient explanation to fully understand materiality and romantic relationships in transitioning societies. Love is a contested concept in contemporary Africa due to its implications for transactional sex and HIV-related risks. This paper is an attempt to provide a new framework to think about love and money from a demographic point of view as they operate to form and dissolve families in high-divorce, high-poverty context.

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Table 1: Summary Statistics for the Cross-Sectional Analysis Using Three Samples

	2010 Sample	2015 Sample	2019 Sample
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>			
Tribe			
Yao	0.29	0.29	0.30
Chewa	0.10	0.09	0.07
Lomwe	0.14	0.15	0.16
Ngoni	0.42	0.43	0.41
Other	0.05	0.04	0.06
Year of birth***	1987.02 (1.43)	1992.10 (1.43)	1995.70 (1.46)
Educational attainment***	6.88 (2.89)	8.02 (2.81)	8.12 (2.95)
Parity***	1.88 (0.89)	1.62 (0.84)	1.60 (0.86)
<b>Marital Characteristics</b>			
Relationship duration (in years)	5.32 (2.92)	5.21 (2.81)	5.26 (3.22)
Previously married	0.18	0.14	0.14
<b>Economic Characteristics</b>			
Household Goods Index (0-9)**	2.29 (1.35)	2.40 (1.61)	2.00 (1.61)
Improved roof***	0.30	0.40	0.51
Ever worked***	0.39	0.43	0.54
Income (in USD)*	11.60 (23.00)	15.64 (35.03)	17.96 (51.18)
Gift received (in USD)	8.81 (14.78)	12.12 (24.90)	10.69 (19.20)
<b>Attitudes on Gender and Marriage</b>			
Women who don't want to remarry is weird*	0.61	0.58	0.68
Men heating own bath water is wrong*	0.73	0.60	0.66
<b>Relationship Quality</b>			
General care (1-4)	3.81 (0.51)	3.88 (0.44)	3.74 (0.65)
Communication (1-4)*	3.78 (0.59)	3.84 (0.51)	3.68 (0.74)
Trust (1-4)	3.10 (0.99)	3.00 (1.00)	2.98 (1.14)
Commit (1-4)	2.27 (1.13)	2.30 (1.14)	2.42 (1.30)
<b>N</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>568</b>

Note: Significance of difference between 2010 and 2019 samples is marked next to the variable names. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed  $t$ -tests).

Table 2: Summary Statistics for the Longitudinal Analysis Using Two Samples

	<b>2010 Sample</b>	<b>2015 Sample</b>
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>		
Tribe		
Yao	0.30	0.29
Chewa	0.09	0.08
Lomwe	0.14	0.14
Ngoni	0.42	0.47
Other	0.05	0.02
Year of birth	1987.03 (1.44)	1992.06 (1.43)
Educational attainment	6.83 (2.84)	7.90 (2.73)
Parity	1.88 (0.89)	1.67 (0.84)
<b>Marital Characteristics</b>		
Relationship duration (in years)	5.35 (2.94)	5.25 (2.84)
Previously married	0.20	0.15
<b>Economic Characteristics</b>		
Household Goods Index (0-9)	2.20 (1.32)	2.25 (1.53)
Improved roof	0.27	0.35
Ever worked	0.40	0.42
Income (in USD)	11.70 (23.62)	13.53 (35.27)
Gift received (in USD)	8.11 (13.13)	10.18 (12.51)
<b>Attitudes on Gender and Marriage</b>		
Women who don't want to remarry is weird	0.62	0.58
Men heating own bath water is wrong	0.72	0.61
<b>Relationship Quality</b>		
General Care	3.81 (0.52)	3.90 (0.41)
Discuss	3.79 (0.58)	3.86 (0.48)
Trust	3.14 (0.98)	3.04 (0.99)
Commit	2.26 (1.15)	2.31 (1.14)
<b>N</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>361</b>

Note: Significance of difference between the full and analytic samples in both 2010 and 2015 is marked next to the variable means. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed  $t$ -tests).

Table 3: Cox-Proportional Hazards Regression Predicting Marital Dissolution

	Divorce 2010-2015		Divorce 2015-2019	
<b>Relationship quality</b>				
Care	0.947 (0.221)		0.800 (0.291)	
Discuss	0.859 (0.187)		0.897 (0.297)	
Trust	0.708 (0.094)	**	1.075 (0.151)	
Commitment	0.995 (0.116)		1.054 (0.134)	
<b>Economic variables</b>				
Household goods	0.912 (0.102)		0.766 (0.077)	**
Income	0.951 (0.033)		1.023 (0.029)	
Gift	1.051 (0.057)		1.309 (0.169)	*
<b>Marital experiences</b>				
Previously married	5.898 (1.193)	***	7.018 (1.658)	***
Partners' background				
Partner's better	1.383 (0.512)		1.931 (0.691)	
Equal	1.434 (0.564)		1.825 (0.642)	
<b>Demographic variables</b>				
Tribe				
Chewa	4.124 (1.650)		0.495 (0.250)	
Lomwe	1.039 (0.483)		1.208 (0.481)	
Ngoni	1.282 (0.424)		0.792 (0.234)	
Sena	2.402 (1.466)		0.541 (0.566)	
Education	1.113 (0.063)	**	1.232 (0.074)	***
<b>Gender perceptions</b>				
Health bath water	1.155 (0.348)		1.058 (0.317)	
Divorced women remarry	0.798 (0.226)		1.177 (0.347)	
<b>N</b>	<b>372</b>		<b>366</b>	

Figure 1a: Compositional Changes in Responses to Four Relationship Quality Measures over Time, 2010-2019

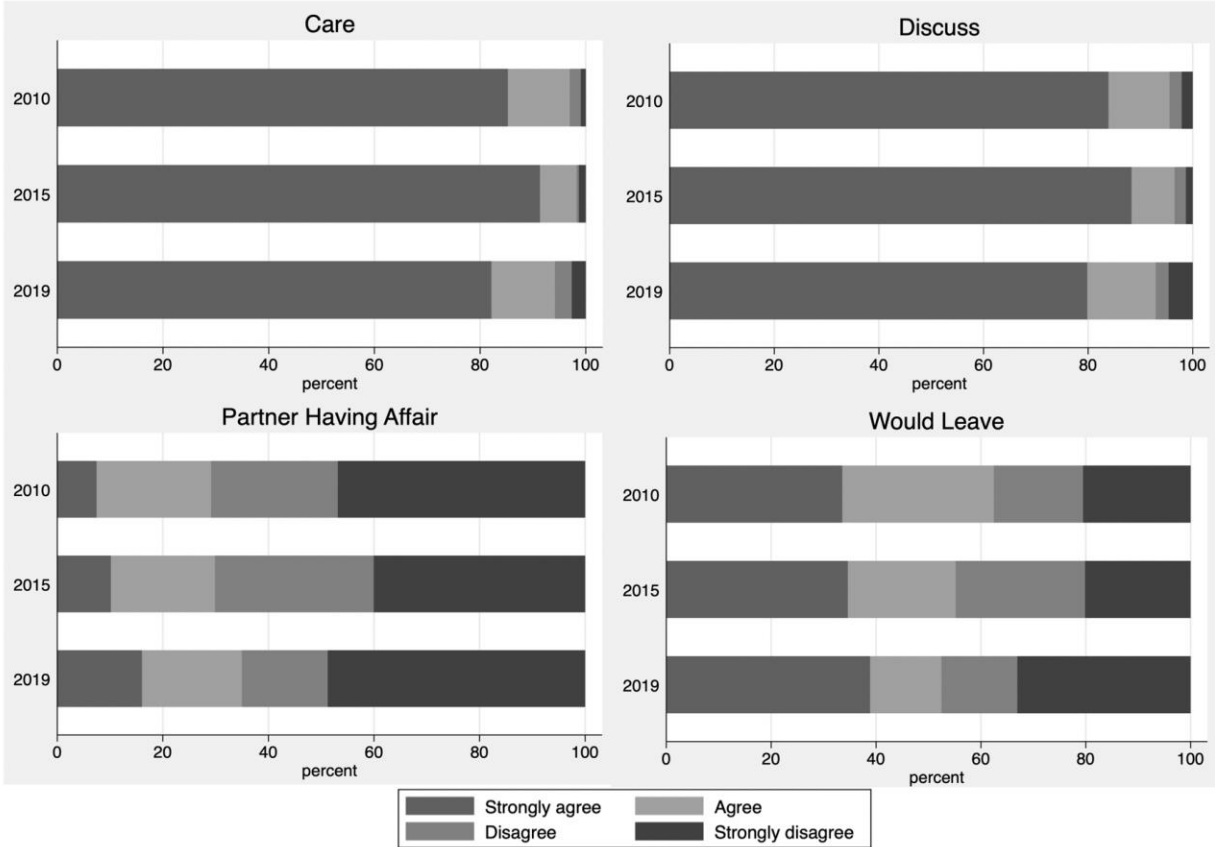


Figure 1b: Compositional Changes in Responses to Four Relationship Quality Measures over Time, 2010-2019

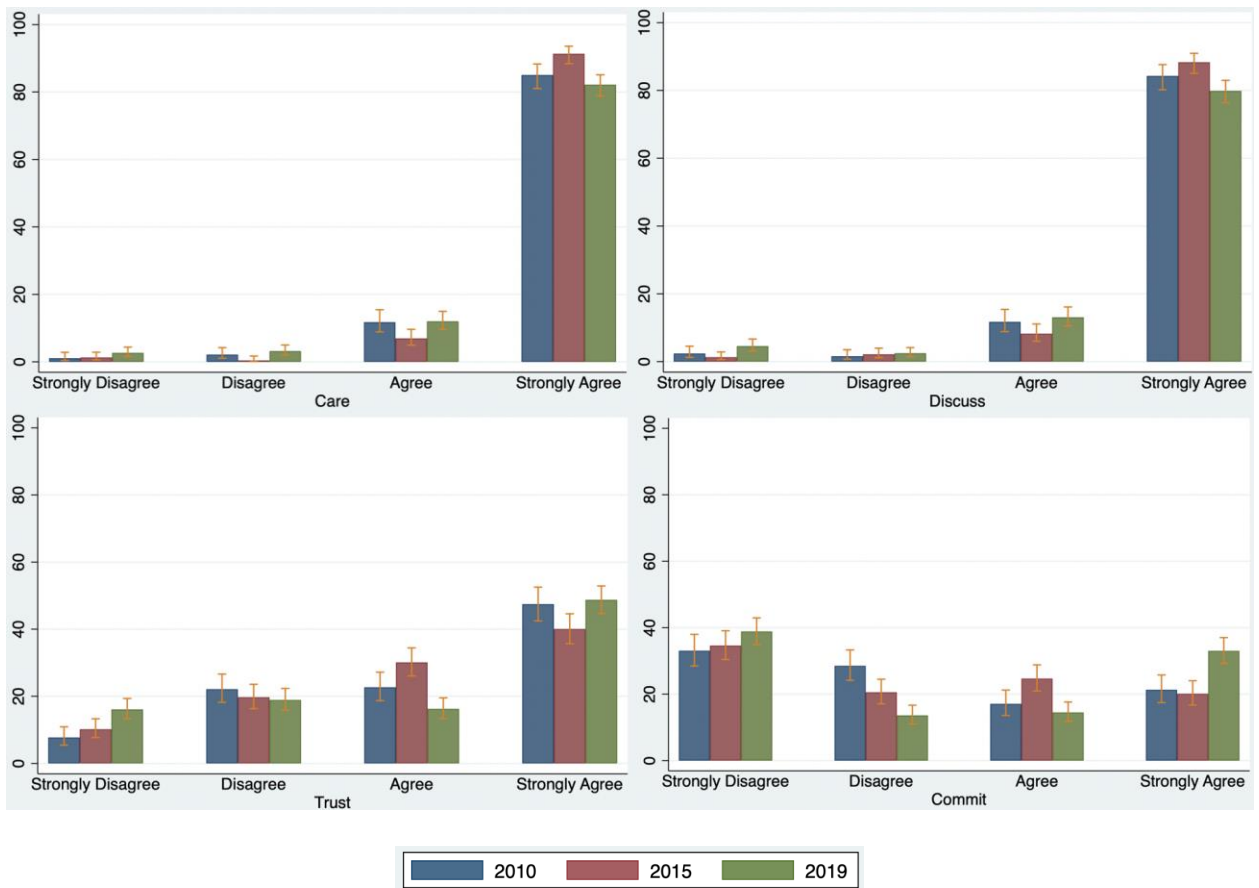
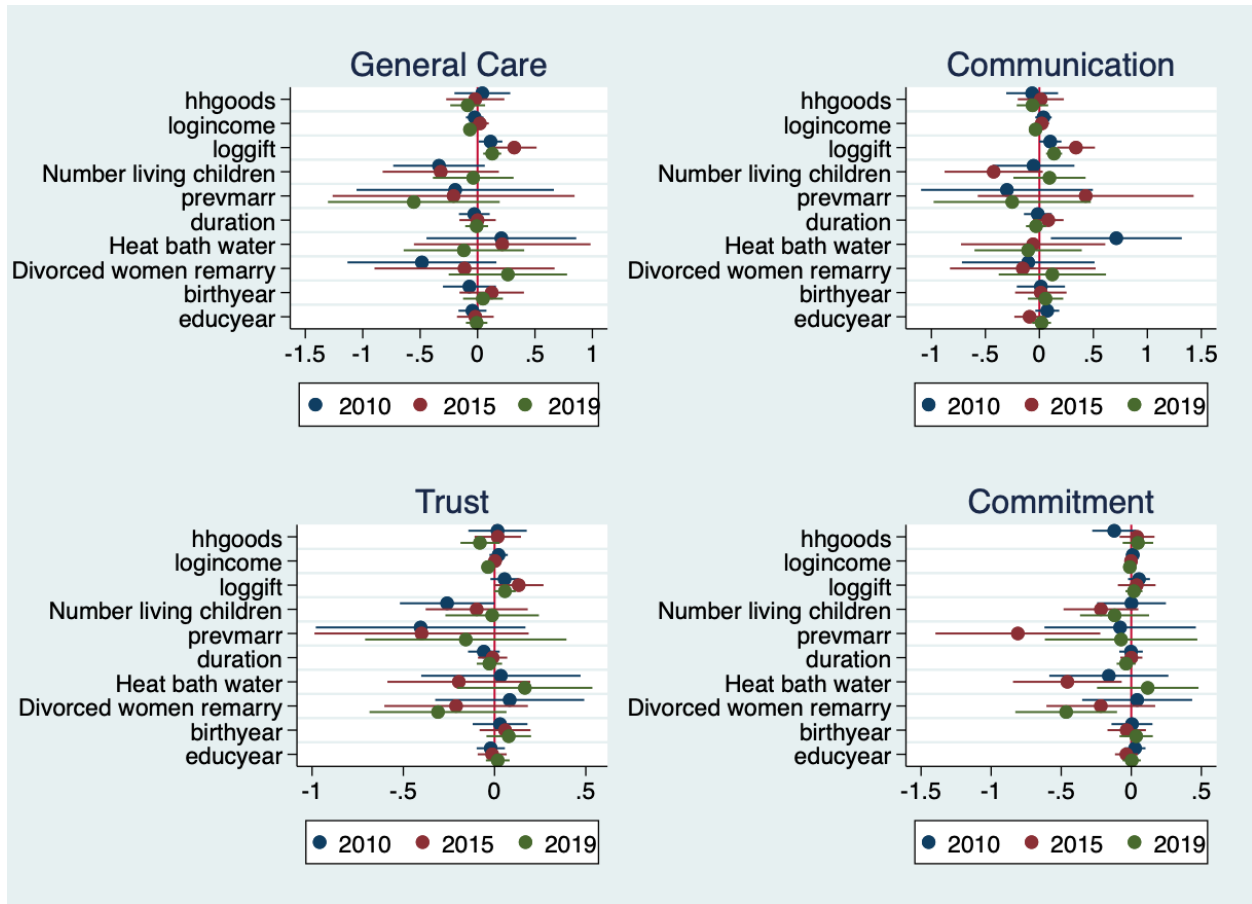




Figure 2: Three Modes of Exchange and Intimacy among Malawian Women, 2010-2019



Appendix A: Changes in Relationship Quality Between 2009 and 2019 for Age-Restricted Sample and Full Sample

	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>Diff</b>
<b>Analytic Sample</b>				
Care	3.81	3.88	3.74	
Discuss	3.78	3.84	3.68	*
Trust	3.10	3.00	2.98	
Commitment	2.27	2.30	2.42	
<b>N</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>568</b>	
<b>Full Sample</b>				
Care	3.83	3.84	3.70	***
Discuss	3.77	3.84	3.67	**
Trust	3.12	2.87	2.86	***
Commitment	2.32	2.28	2.37	
<b>N</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>1,048</b>	<b>1,961</b>	

Appendix B: Ordered Regression Models Predicting Four Dimensions Relationship Quality from the Pooled Samples

	General Care	Communication	Trust	Commitment
Household Goods Index (0-9)	-0.03 (-0.55)	-0.04 (-0.72)	-0.03 (-0.77)	0.01 (0.27)
Income	-0.0364* (-1.98)	-0.01 (-0.34)	-0.01 (-0.89)	0.00 (-0.37)
Gift	0.131*** (4.42)	0.139*** (4.90)	0.0631** (2.78)	0.03 (1.41)
Parity	-0.230* (-1.98)	-0.08 (-0.78)	-0.11 (-1.47)	-0.09 (-1.21)
Previously Married	-0.34 (-1.35)	-0.10 (-0.41)	-0.325* (-1.98)	-0.31 (-1.91)
Duration of Relationship	0.00 (-0.03)	0.00 (0.11)	-0.03 (-1.39)	-0.02 (-0.99)
Year of Birth	0.03 (0.53)	0.04 (0.67)	0.05 (1.38)	0.02 (0.45)
Educational Attainment (0-13)	-0.02 (-0.56)	0.02 -0.55	0.00 (-0.16)	0.00 -0.13
Heat bath water	0.11 -0.59	0.17 -1.02	0.02 -0.17	-0.17 (-1.49)
Divorced women remarry	-0.08 (-0.43)	-0.05 (-0.32)	-0.20 (-1.74)	-0.237* (-2.16)
Year				
2010	base	base	base	base
2015	0.26 -0.68	-0.06 (-0.17)	-0.585* (-2.46)	-0.15 (-0.64)
2019	-0.58 (-1.02)	-0.76 (-1.42)	-0.67 (-1.84)	0.01 -0.04
N	1385	1386	1386	1386

Note: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001