



Are women emancipating? Evidence from marriage, divorce and remarriage in Rural Northern Burkina Faso[☆]

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of first-hand data, we document the evolution of marriage, divorce and remarriage practices in Northern Burkina Faso, and we highlight the emancipatory trajectories of women. We find a strong persistence of early marriages of the arranged and polygamous types. According to a widespread understanding, this finding suggests that women's position and status have not improved over the last generations. However, this is at odds with other key findings, more specifically the increased involvement of women in the selection of their spouse, the rapid increase in divorces initiated by women, their frequent subsequent remarriages, and their positive perception of polygamy. Moreover, second marriages do not appear to cause a deterioration in women's wellbeing, and we find no evidence that children of divorced women are discriminated against in their household. To reconcile these apparently contradictory findings, we propose an interpretation that rests on the idea that a category of women may act strategically. More precisely, a woman may accept an early marriage anticipating that she will be able to divorce, and later remarry, if the union is unsuccessful from her standpoint.

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1. Introduction

Emancipating women from the clutch of patriarchal social norms is now being reckoned as a major challenge of development. This is not only because freedom of choice is considered as a key component of wellbeing but also because economic growth depends on women's ability to seize upon new opportunities. The importance of this challenge is reflected in the rising number of works devoted by economists to the understanding of different factors of women's empowerment (a term that we will use interchangeably with emancipation in this paper). Typically, the way they measure women's status or power is focused on their role in household decisions, their contribution to the household budget, and/or their freedom of movement (see Quisumbing, 2003; Doss, 2003; Eswaran, 2014 & Anderson & Beaman, 2018). It is no coinci-

dence that large and systematic survey efforts, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), collect information on these proximate dimensions of women's autonomy. However and surprisingly, little attention has been paid to a woman's ability to take fundamental decisions regarding her marriage life, the choice of partner, the acceptance of polygamy, and divorce in particular (for a survey of the economic literature dealing with household formation in developing countries, see Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2007). This neglect is especially odd because the ability to influence household formation and dissolution is not only a key dimension of women's welfare but also an important determinant of their bargaining strength inside the family.

Economists have not only limited their attention to few indicators of women's status but, in analyzing the determinants of these indicators, they have typically adopted a comparative static approach. They thus avoid a genuine dynamic analysis of the process of empowerment itself, that is, an analysis of the way women develop strategies to achieve their emancipation and the various steps involved in the gradual transformation of their status. An historical perspective can contribute significantly to the understanding of such dynamic processes, as argued in detail in Guirkinger and Platteau (2020).

The present paper aims at raising questions that should help to bridge these two gaps in future research. We describe and discuss marriage and divorce patterns and their evolution in the context of

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a largely Muslim and strongly patriarchal society. We rely on three different sources of information. First and foremost, we collected first-hand data in rural northern Burkina Faso, including complete marital histories for male and female respondents. Second, we use some information from the Demographic and Health Surveys which nevertheless suffer from an important limitation in that they do not allow for an identification of women who divorced and remarried. Third, we derive valuable insights from anthropological accounts of marital practices in the area.

Turning to our main results, the strong persistence of early marriages of the arranged and polygamous types seems to suggest that women's position has not improved over the last generations. This is at odds with other key findings, more specifically the increased involvement of women in the selection of their spouse, the rapid increase in divorces initiated by women, their frequent subsequent remarriages, and even the positive perceptions of polygamy among them.

There are two different ways to reconcile these apparently contradictory findings. One of them is pessimistic and interprets the increasing incidence of early marriages as the result of a weaker ability of young brides to have a voice in the organization of their first marriage, or worse, as the outcome of a reactionary move by parents eager to limit the autonomy of their daughters (or daughter in law). Another, possibly more optimistic scenario, is based on the idea that, instead of being rather passive actors, women act strategically.¹ More precisely, a woman may accept an early marriage anticipating that she will be able to divorce, and later remarry, if the union is unsuccessful from her standpoint. If we are unable to sort out between these two explanations, it is important to stress that they may be complementary in the sense that the two scenarios would apply to different women. The positive scenario would apply to comparatively assertive women or to women whose parents have a comparatively more progressive view of the status of their daughters.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly describes the particular context of rural Northern Burkina Faso and the different samples used in the analysis. The following sections provide evidence regarding various indicators of women's status and power, and highlight the way they have evolved over time. This is done by distinguishing between successive events in the marital life of a woman: first marriage (Section 3), divorce (Section 4), and remarriage (Section 5). In Section 6, an interpretative framework is proposed that articulates together the various empirical findings highlighted in Sections 3 to 5.

2. Context and data

In rural Northern Burkina Faso, populations are mostly from the Mossi ethnic group. They are organized into large farming households possibly involving several married men (head's brother or sons) together with their nuclear families. Agriculture is rudimentary and households mostly rely on the labour of their members to produce foodgrain for their own subsistence. In addition, rural inhabitants may have side activities such as livestock rearing and various small business occupations. As described in the anthropological literature, among the Mossi, marriage is viewed not only as the formation of a couple for productive and reproductive purposes but also as an alliance between families (Laurent, 2013). Parents, or family elders, therefore play an important role in the marriage process. Unions may be planned long before the marriage actually takes place and include a set of symbolic compensations provided

by the groom's family to the bride's family. Polygyny has a long tradition among the Mossi for whom the number of wives is a signal of wealth and power (Dubourg, 1957). As a result, competition for women is strong. In this patrilineal and virilocal society, upon marriage, a woman physically moves to her husband's family where she will long be considered as a stranger. By contrast, her offspring is immediately and completely assimilated.

In addition to divorce by mutual consent, divorce initiated by one of the spouses is legally recognized in the Burkinabese Family Code (1990), but only in a limited number of circumstances: adultery, violence, repudiation or infertility (Thiombiano, 2014). In practice however, most marriages and divorces are informal affairs that are not reflected in official documents. Divorces are not legally sanctioned and take the form of de facto separations signalled by the departure of the woman from the household. The separation itself is often the ultimate outcome of a long process involving the failure of mediation attempts by families and customary authorities (Bertho, 2012).² An immediate implication of the above is that the legal changes brought by the new Family Code cannot influence marriage and divorce practices in our study area which consists of rural, rather remote communities.

Remarriages are frequent for both divorced women and widows. This is the consequence of a norm proscribing celibacy (especially for women) and of the strong demand for women resulting from polygamy. While remarriage after the death of the husband is often governed by the practice of levirate, remarriage after divorce entails fewer social obligations than first marriage (Laurent, 2013).³ As described by Lallemand (1977), the elders are less often in charge of finding the future husband so that the spouses themselves or other lineage members are more free to shape the future union as they like. In practice, women looking for remarriage often make visits to other married women (sisters or aunts on the mother's side) who then play the matchmakers between the woman and their own acquaintances. While the elders' final approval is still formally requested, they are generally not inclined to oppose a union initiated by mature women who are likely to ignore their decision in case of disagreement.

Adequate data on divorce are scarce mainly because information on individual marital histories is often missing from nationally representative samples. Systematic data collection efforts typically focus on current matrimonial status (this is the case of DHS surveys in Burkina Faso). They thus provide information on women who divorced and did not remarry but fail to detect the divorce of women who were remarried at the time of the survey. The widespread practice of remarriage therefore suggests that these data are not satisfactory to investigate divorce and remarriage processes. As a consequence, we will mainly rely on first-hand data that include individual marital histories.

Our data collection effort was part of a wider study project that aimed at measuring the impacts of a food-security intervention using a randomized control approach (see Gross, Guirkinger, & Platteau, 2020, for a detailed description of the program and the data). In the second round conducted in 2013, we included a mar-

¹ Other papers dealing with sub-Saharan Africa in particular, have also assumed that women behave strategically, yet, their set-up is polygamy and the nature of the argument is different from the one used here (see Rossi, 2019 & Barr et al., Barr, Dekker, Janssens, Kebede, & Kramer, 2019).

² Since the majority of Mossi are Muslims, one may wonder whether Islam, known to make divorce easy (it involves few procedural steps), especially for men, has left an imprint on divorce practices in our study area. The influence of religion, in this case, is actually relatively weak. There is plenty of evidence that Islamized societies in Africa do not strictly follow the Islamic codes of conduct, especially in marriage matters: they have only partly accommodated Islamic rules or recommendations into their local norms (Lapidus, 1988; Platteau, 2017). According to tribal customs, divorce needs to be regulated if only because the families involved in a conjugal union are typically eager to safeguard the alliance that underpins it. Evidently, the very idea of unilateral right of spouse repudiation in favour of men is rather at odds with this custom.

³ The levirate refers to the custom prescribing that a widow should marry a brother of her deceased husband.

riage and divorce module with the purpose of providing the material on which the present research effort is based. Our sample covers 567 farming households from 61 villages of rural Northern Burkina Faso.⁴ Caution is obviously needed before generalizing our results to other parts of the country since other regions and ethnic groups may be governed by different customs and subject to different patterns of transformation (for an attempt at detecting these differences, based on first-hand data, see Thiombiano, 2009).

Our information about women's marital trajectories is obtained from two sources: the husband's marital history as obtained from questions addressed to the sample men, and the reporting by the sample women themselves of all their unions, including former unions ended as a result of death or divorce. There are three reasons why we chose to base our main analysis on the information obtained from the first source. The first reason is logistical: we followed a procedure prescribing that an interview could only start when the household head was physically present in the household compound. When that condition was not met, revisiting the household was necessary. Maximum effort was put into obtain the presence of women, yet this did not always prove possible. As a result, there is more missing information on marriages reported by women than for marriages reported by men. Second, due to their higher levels of formal education, men were better able than women to precise the dates of marital events. Finally, only currently married women answered the marriage modules. This implies that divorced women who did not remarry (yet) are not featured in the female sample obtained from the women's interviews.⁵ This being reckoned, we always verify that the results obtained from the men's sample continue to hold when we use the women's sample.

To document trends in marriage characteristics and divorce, we rely on information that bear on the first unions of women. The main sample used consists of 1,432 such unions as reported by 870 male respondents. Out of these unions, 113 ended in divorce. While 399 men married only one woman, 259 men married two women (either through successive marriages or through a polygamous union) and 212 of them married three women or more. The sample of unions reported by 1341 currently married female respondents consists of 1519 unions, 102 of which ended in divorce and 76 were terminated by the death of the husband.⁶ Details about the break-down of these samples of unions by category (mono/polygamous, on-going or interrupted by death or divorce) are provided in Appendix 1.

For our analysis of children, we construct a specific sample for each category of children directly involved in a divorce - children left behind by a mother after a divorce, children born of a remarried woman, and children of a first union who live with a remarried mother.⁷ We use the sample of children born of ongoing first unions as a comparison group. A short description of each sample is provided in Table ???. These different samples combined form a unique dataset with rich information on marriages, divorces and remarriages.

⁴ These 567 households were male-headed and provided complete answers to the marriage modules. Excluded from the analysis are 18 households who became female-headed households following the husband's death (we have no information about the marital history of the deceased husband), and seven households whose head did not (fully) answer the marriage modules.

⁵ From male surveys, we learn that out of 116 divorces, 15 women had not (yet) remarried at the time of the survey. This is a proportion of only 13%, which is likely to be an overestimate of the proportion of women who will not remarry. First, and most importantly, these women may remarry in the future. Second, men may have a tendency to overreport such cases in order to better protect their honor and reputation.

⁶ Only two women married more than twice.

⁷ As there are only nine children in this situation, we do not conduct empirical analysis on this sample.

Special care was taken to ensure maximum reliability of recall and sensitive data. First, because data on marital histories are subject to recall errors and biases, we asked enumerators to systematically review the husband's marital history with his current wives and confront the information provided by men and women when they were obviously inconsistent. Enumerators were also required to use a calendar of major local events to reduce errors in reporting years of marriage and other time-related information. Second, due to the sensitive character of some of the questions raised, we relied on a small team of enumerators who had participated in several rounds of data collection and were therefore expected to have won the trust of the sampled households.

In the succeeding sections we examine the patterns and evolution of three aspects of marriage practices: first marriages, divorces and re-marriages.

3. Women's first marriages

3.1. Arranged marriages

Measuring the practice of arranged marriage is a thorny question because a precise definition is hard. In its most extreme form, an arranged marriage means that the choice of a spouse is authoritatively imposed on the child by the family. Traditionally, negotiations about marriage conceived as a union between two families could thus take place when the children concerned were still young. At the other extreme, parents suggest an appropriate spouse to a mature child who may either agree with, or oppose the parental choice. This is obviously a much milder form of arranged marriage.

Our questionnaire therefore includes several questions that allow for these different possibilities. A sampled man, when queried about his present or past unions, was thus asked whether he chose his spouse by himself, initiated the marriage, or entered a marriage arranged by the families in the sense that the parents selected the bride. These measures are reported in panel I of Table 1. We also have measures obtained from currently married women (see panel II). They were asked whether they met the groom before the marriage announcement, whether the groom was their friend before they married, and whether their parents selected the groom.

To investigate the evolution of the practice of arranged marriage, we distinguish between marriages contracted before and after 1993. We use this cutoff to have a similar number of unions in each of the two categories. When using alternative cut-off marriage years to define categories, the trends described below are not affected. This is also confirmed when we plot the evolution of arranged marriages through time using a kernel smoothing function.

As can be seen from Table 1, the practice of arranged marriage is highly prevalent and persisting. However, the strictness of the arrangement seems to have been recently relaxed. This is reflected, for example, in the increasing proportion of women who met their husband before marriage: 18% for (first) marriages contracted before 1993 and 28% for those contracted after. The continuous trend displayed in Fig. 2 confirms this increase.⁸ The proportion of men who chose their (first) spouse did not change much over time: from 36% before 1993 to 34% after that date (see also Fig. 1). The proportion of men who chose their spouse is thus higher than the proportion of women who met their husband before marriage. This suggests that even when a man participates in the choice of his wife, she is not necessarily consulted, implying that the union

⁸ The figures display the smoothed values obtained from a kernel-weighted local polynomial regression, with confidence bands.

Table 1
Arranged marriage, distinguishing between (first) marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993.

	All		By Marriage Date		
	N	MEAN	Pre-1993 (A)	Post-1993 (B)	Trend (B - A)
I. Men's perspective (first unions)					
=1 if groom chose his future wife	869	0.35	0.36	0.34	-0.02
=1 if marriage was initiated by the groom	802	0.26	0.29	0.24	-0.06*
=1 if parents chose the bride	869	0.69	0.69	0.70	0.01
# of observations	870	-	433	437	-
II. Women's perspective (current unions)					
(a) Women in first unions					
=1 if bride met the groom before marriage decision	1082	0.23	0.18	0.28	0.11***
=1 if bride was a friend of the groom before remarriage	1082	0.18	0.13	0.23	0.10***
=1 if parents selected the groom	1082	0.79	0.86	0.74	-0.12***
# of observations	1163	-	497	666	-
(b) Remarried women (after divorce)					
=1 if bride met the groom before remarriage decision	97	0.42	0.30	0.54	0.24**
=1 if bride was a friend of the groom before remarriage	97	0.34	0.23	0.44	0.21***
=1 if parents chose the groom	97	0.53	0.66	0.40	-0.26**
# of observations	102	-	47	55	-

Missing observations are mostly due to the respondent unwillingness or inability to answer the questions.
Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

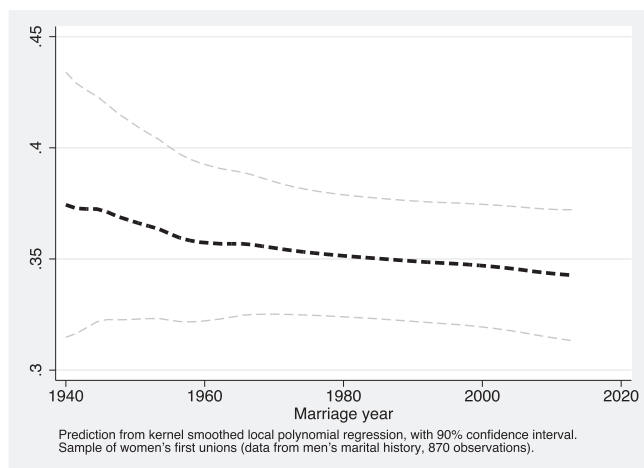


Fig. 1. Propensity to choose own wife (husband's perspective): time trend.

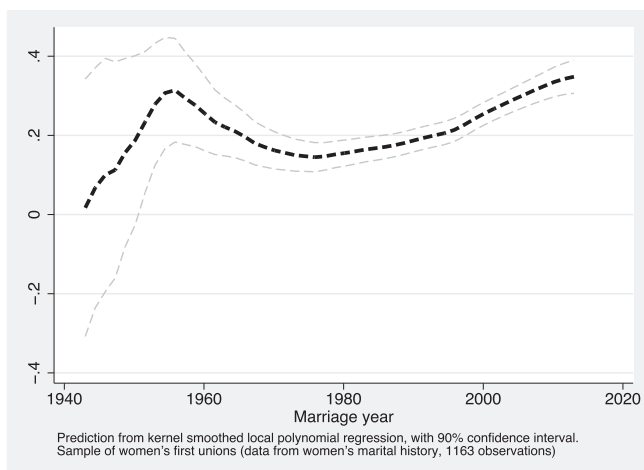


Fig. 2. Propensity to have met the groom before marriage (wife's perspective): time trend.

cannot be considered as a genuine love marriage. An alternative explanation is that men being more status conscious pretend to remain in control of their life choices. As a result, they eschew admitting a smaller role in spousal choice.

In polygamous marriages, the choice of the first wife is typically more constrained than the choice of the subsequent wives (Laurent, 2013). Our data show, indeed, that 32% of men participate in the selection of their first spouse whereas this proportion increases to 49% for the choice of higher-rank wives (not reported in the table). It is still noteworthy that almost half of the polygamous husbands did not influence the choice of their second or third wife. Finally there is apparently evidence of a decrease in the practice of polygamy. On the contrary, we observe that the probability for a woman's first husband to be polygamous (he already had at least another wife at the time of marriage) actually increased from 38 to 46% between the two cohorts (see Table 2). It can nevertheless be objected that our data obtained from men contained an inherent bias in the following sense. While at the beginning of the period covered, only the oldest men in the sample marry, and it is their first marriage, all men of the sample can potentially marry, in the most recent years: young man marrying for the first time and men taking a second or third wife. As a result, mechanically, there are more polygamous marriages in the latest period.⁹ To avoid that bias, we may focus on men who have been married for at least 15 years and examine whether the proportion of men taking a second wife within 15 years has evolved. We find that it has actually decreased (from 54% to 47%). Finally, a look at the 2010 DHS sample for Northern Burkina Faso reveals a perceptible increase in the probability for a woman to join a polygamous union when women married before and after 1993 are compared (from 24 to 34%).¹⁰ We thus have somewhat contradictory evidence regarding the trend of polygamy in our study area. To remain on the safe side, we can conclude that there is no sharp change in the practice of polygamy.

⁹ We are thankful to an anonymous referee of this journal for having raised this objection.

¹⁰ Our measure of polygamy in the DHS sample is based on the following definition: a woman's husband is considered polygamous at marriage if, at the time of the survey, the woman is found to be in a polygamous union and her rank among wives exceeds one. We thus assume that the husband of a woman of rank 1 was single at the time of her marriage. This implies that we are likely to underestimate the prevalence of polygamy at marriage. This happens when a woman of rank 1 at the time of the survey had a co-wife at the time of marriage who subsequently died or separated.

Table 2
Marriage characteristics, distinguishing between (first) marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993.

	All		By Marriage Date		
			Pre-1993 (A)	Post-1993 (B)	Trend (B - A)
	N	MEAN	MEAN	MEAN	DIFF
Marriage characteristics					
Women's age at marriage	1412	17.56	17.67	17.47	-0.20
=1 if age at marriage <18 years old	1412	0.11	0.09	0.13	0.04**
Spousal age gap	1419	12.88	11.91	13.70	1.79***
=1 if monogamous at marriage	1432	0.58	0.62	0.54	-0.08***
=1 if husband married additional wife	1418	0.44	0.68	0.24	-0.43***
Socio-economic background					
=1 if husband attended formal school	1418	0.20	0.17	0.22	0.05**
=1 if groom's family relatively poorer than bride's one	1424	0.11	0.11	0.10	-0.01
Area of land owned (in Ha) (1)	1418	4.00	3.97	4.02	0.05
Cattle size (# of head) (1)	1418	24.89	24.28	25.41	1.13
=1 if any women with IGA (1) (2)	1429	0.66	0.68	0.63	-0.05
# of observations	1432	-	661	771	-

(1) This variable reflects the current situation in the household.

(2) IGA stands for income generating activity.

Missing observations are mostly due to the respondent unwillingness or inability to answer the questions. The sample is restricted to first unions inventoried in the matrimonial history of husbands. All the information was thus gathered from the latter.

Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

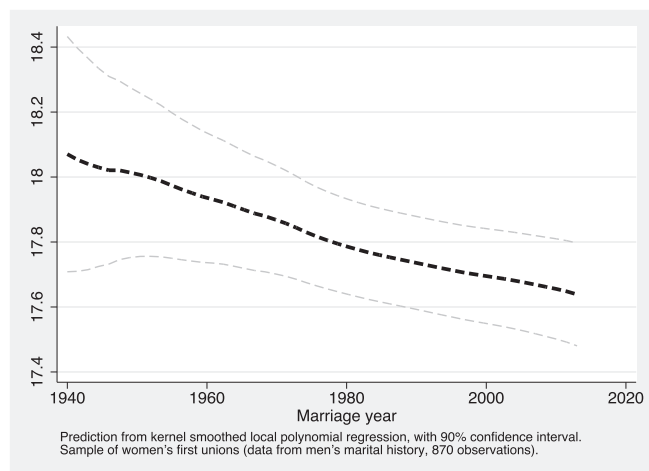


Fig. 3. Women's age at first marriage: time trend.

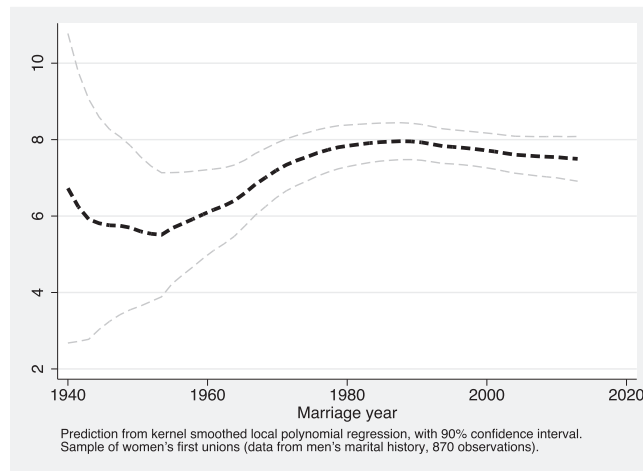


Fig. 4. Spousal age gap (women's first marriages): time trend.

3.2. Age at first marriage for women and spousal age gap

Table 2 reports the women's age at marriage, the prevalence of early marriages, and the spousal age gap.¹¹ Figs. 3 and 4 plot the trend in women's age at marriage and spousal age gap, by marriage year. Fig. 3 shows a decreasing and then flattening trend in the age at marriage and Table 2 indicates that the share of women married before age 18 increased from 73% among pre-1993 unions to 79% among post-1993 unions. The mean spousal age gap is as high as 12.8 years, and while the descriptive statistics indicate that it increased from 11.9 to 13.7 years between the two categories (pre- and post-1993), the continuous trend suggests that most changes occurred before 1980 (Fig. 4). This increase is related to the rise in the propensity to marry a polygamous husband.¹²

¹¹ Here, we encounter the same potential bias as was mentioned in the previous subsection. More precisely, part of the increase in the spousal age gap may be due to the fact that older unions concerned men who were rather young upon their marriage. For marriages that occurred before 1993, men who were rather old at the time of their marriage are likely to have died in which case they are not featured in our sample.

¹² The 2010 DHS sample for Northern Burkina Faso indicates a more stable average age at first marriage: 17.1 for women married before 1993 and 17.4 for those married after. Information on spousal age gap is not available.

4. Divorces

4.1. Prevalence and trends

In our sample, the divorce risk in the first 30 years of marriage is 11.2%. Fig. 5 plots divorce rates by marriage duration based on Kaplan–Meier survival estimates¹³. Divorce appears as the main cause of marital dissolution with divorce rates almost twice exceeding widowhood rates in the 10 or even 20 first years of marriage. Our result is remarkably close to that of Thiombiano and Schoumaker (2012), who report a divorce rate of 10% in the first 30 years of marriage for Burkina Faso.¹⁴

¹³ Survival analysis is used to deal with censored data in which survival times are unknown. In particular, the Kaplan–Meier estimate is a non parametric estimate of a survival function that gives the probability of not experiencing an event at a given time. In our case, the failure event is divorce and the time dimension corresponds to marriage duration in number of years [see for more details] (Dudley, Wickham, & Coombs, 2016).

¹⁴ Clark and Brauner-Otto (2015) use DHS data to extrapolate divorce rates for 33 countries of SSA and find that with a divorce rate of 11% (within 20 years of marriage), Burkina Faso is among the 5 countries with the lowest prevalence of divorce in the continent. On an average for the whole sample of countries, they estimate that 25% of first unions end up in divorce during the first 20 years of marriage, and that divorce far exceeds widowhood as a cause of marital breakdown.

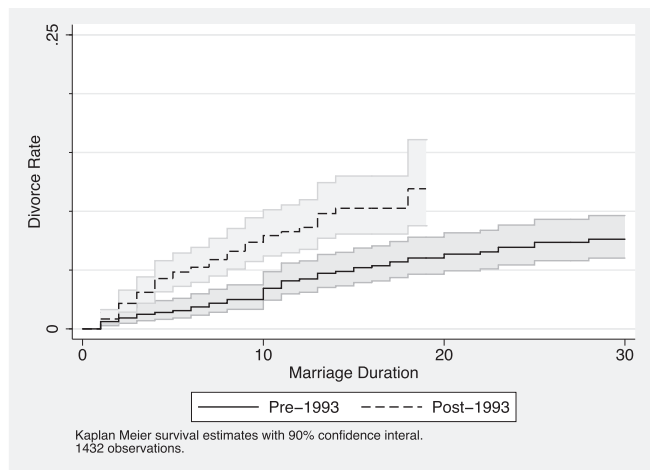


Fig. 5. Trend in divorce rates – Kaplan–Meier survival estimates for marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993.

What about the evolution of divorce over time? When comparing divorce rates across marriage year cohorts, we observe a significant upward trend for our study area. As illustrated by Fig. 5, which reports divorce rates, distinguishing between (first) marriages contracted pre- and post-1993, the probability of divorce in the first 5 years of marriage almost tripled across the two categories (from 1.9% for older unions to 5.34% for more recent unions), more than doubled in the first 10 years (from 4% to 8.6%), and also increased substantially after 20 years of marriage (from 6.9% for older unions to 12.2% for more recent unions). These conclusions are not driven by the choice of 1993 as a cutoff. If we use three cohorts instead (Fig. 6), it is clear that the rise in divorce over time is gradual. Four other findings support the existence of a growth in divorce. First, we observe that, at around 3%, the rate of divorce among parents of currently married women was significantly smaller than the rate currently observed among their daughters. Second, we checked that the observed trend in divorce is not driven by measurement errors (i.e. recall bias) that would equally affect the reporting of widowhood. We find no trend in widowhood. Third, the trend continues to hold if we restrict ourselves to men’s first unions. This avoids the overrepresentation of men who have divorced several times and are thus liable to have negative characteristics that women discover once married and

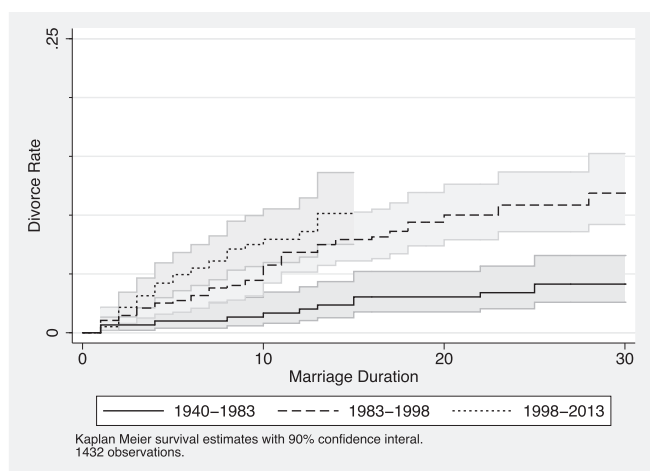


Fig. 6. Trend in divorce rates – Kaplan–Meier survival estimates for marriages contracted between 1940 and 1983, between 1983 and 1998 and between 1998 and 2013.

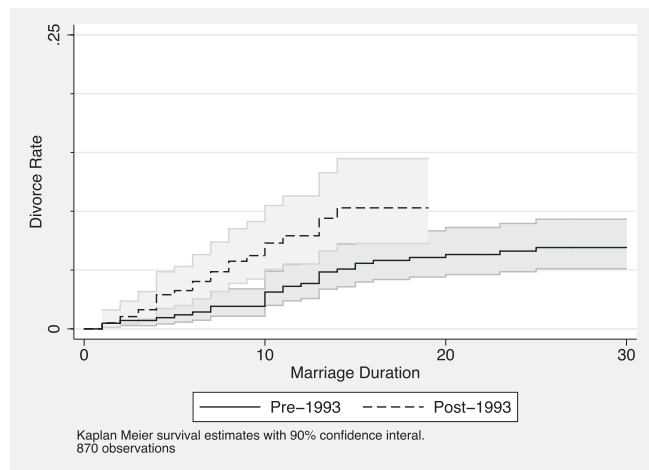


Fig. 7. Trend in divorce rates for men’s first marriages – Kaplan–Meier survival estimates for marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993.

prompt them to divorce quickly. Fig. 7 reports the trends for this subsample of unions. Finally, the trend is not related to the “overrepresentation” of polygamous unions in the later period (see above), we obtain the same dynamics if we distinguish between monogamous and polygamous unions in both periods. Therefore the trend cannot be attributed to a mixing of a genuine time trend and some sort of life cycle phenomenon.¹⁵

Besides a genuine increase in the overall divorce rate, there is a major change in the timing of divorce. While less than one-fifth of the divorces (19%) occurred within 5 years after marriage for pre-1993 unions, the corresponding proportion reaches almost two-thirds (65%) for post-1993 unions.

Our conclusion about the rising incidence of divorce in Burkina Faso is congruent with the aforementioned study of Thiombiano and Schoumaker (2012) in which the divorce rate within the first 10 years of marriage appears to have more than doubled between 1975 and 2000.¹⁶ Interestingly, divorce does not seem to be a recent phenomenon in Burkina Faso. Thus, Attané (2002) who has inquired about the marriage histories of a few Mossi families, argues that the practice of leaving a marital union for quick remarriage was not unknown as early as in the beginning of the twentieth century. Lallemand (1977) confirms that there is a long tradition of divorce among the Mossi. A sharp contrast emerges between the above account and the history of divorce in Western countries: in the latter, divorces were virtually non-existing, and mostly forbidden, for a long time, and they only started to spread as a result of major social changes and economic transformation (for an historical perspective, see Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2008).

4.2. Selection into divorce

Before exploring the process and consequences of divorces, we highlight the correlations between divorce and the characteristics of the spouses and their union. This is with a view to gaining a better understanding of selection into divorce. We report the results of the estimation of a Cox proportional hazard model of divorce risk

¹⁵ We are thankful to an anonymous referee of this journal for having raised the last two points.

¹⁶ Clark and Brauner-Otto (2015) conclude that divorce is stable or declining in many African countries, including Burkina Faso. This result contrasts sharply with the common assertion that divorce is broadly spreading across the continent. A plausible source of bias in this study based on DHS data is the failure to properly account for remarriages: being unable to observe remarried women, the authors are confronted with a measurement problem regarding women who are presently married yet went through a divorce some time in the past.

Table 3
Correlates of divorce, distinguishing between (first) marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993: Cox proportional hazard estimates.

	All				By Marriage Date	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Pre-1993	Post-1993
=1 if husband selected his wife	1.073 [0.745]	1.093 [0.684]	0.938 [0.768]	0.918 [0.696]	0.902 [0.726]	0.896 [0.731]
=1 if age at marriage <17 years old	1.398 [0.233]	-	1.071 [0.830]	1.148 [0.667]	1.510 [0.350]	1.038 [0.938]
Wife's age at marriage	-	1.006 [0.878]	-	-	-	-
Spousal age gap	1.020* [0.067]	1.020* [0.066]	1.013 [0.273]	1.015 [0.211]	0.997 [0.828]	1.039** [0.037]
=1 if husband attended formal school	1.676** [0.047]	1.665* [0.052]	1.526 [0.122]	1.495 [0.143]	1.454 [0.323]	1.359 [0.417]
=1 if groom's family poorer than bride's family	1.192 [0.543]	1.212 [0.505]	1.111 [0.711]	1.123 [0.685]	0.640 [0.328]	1.665 [0.146]
=1 if monogamous union at marriage (A)	-	-	0.748 [0.361]	0.772 [0.423]	0.851 [0.759]	0.917 [0.852]
=1 if husband married additional wife during marriage (B) (1)	-	-	0.091*** [0.000]	0.100*** [0.000]	0.112*** [0.000]	0.064*** [0.000]
=1 if imposed polygamy (A*B)	-	-	1.726 [0.247]	1.590 [0.336]	1.063 [0.926]	2.537 [0.261]
Area of land owned (in Ha) (2)	-	-	-	0.986 [0.711]	0.984 [0.707]	1.009 [0.886]
Cattle size (# of head) (2)	-	-	-	0.995 [0.340]	0.992 [0.287]	0.998 [0.732]
=1 if any woman with small business (2)	-	-	-	0.745 [0.189]	1.145 [0.684]	0.493** [0.021]
# of observations	1315	1315	1311	1299	623	842

(1) This variable is included as a time variant control.

(2) This variable reflects the current situation in the household.

All results are obtained through Cox proportional hazard estimates and correspond to hazard ratios. A hazard ratio above 1 indicates that the variable is positively associated with the probability of divorce and a hazard ratio below 1 that the variable is negatively associated with the probability of divorce. Results are very similar when including a binary variable for any child born from this union or village fixed effects in order to control for village-specific characteristics such as ethnicity, religion or the economic environment.

Standard errors reported into brackets are household-level cluster-robust standard errors. Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

for the whole sample (columns 1 to 4 of Table 3), and for pre-1993 and post-1993 unions separately (columns 5 and 6).¹⁷

The main lesson from this exercise is that most characteristics of the union are uncorrelated with the risk of divorce.¹⁸ In particular early marriage is not significantly correlated with divorce, in contrast to the findings of other studies in Africa (Locoh & Thiriat, 1995; Reniers, 2003; Takyi & Gyimah, 2007). Yet a wider age gap is associated with a higher risk of divorce, at least for the younger unions. On the other hand, there is no significant relationship between divorce risk and the type of marriage, whether we define it as arranged or not, or as monogamous versus polygamous. However, as in Reniers (2003), the addition of a new wife appears to contribute to lengthen the duration of marriage or, equivalently, to reduce the risk of divorce. This last result is less strong in the case of first wives: the effect of the interac-

¹⁷ Cox proportional hazard estimates allow to examine how a set of covariates influence the hazard of an event (divorce in our case) at a particular point in time - the hazard rate. The hazard function $h(t)$ (the hazard of divorce for an individual at time t) is a function of some unspecified baseline hazard function $h_0(t)$ (that corresponds to the value of the hazard at time t if all the x_i 's are equal to zero) and a linear function of the fixed covariates that are exponentiated:

$$h(t) = h_0(t) * \exp(b_1x_1 + \dots + b_mx_m) \tag{1}$$

The coefficients (b_i) measure the effects of the covariates and the quantities $\exp(b_i)$ correspond to the hazard ratios reported in the tables. A hazard ratio above 1 indicates that the covariate is positively associated with the probability of the event, a hazard ratio of 0 that it has no effect and a hazard ratio below 1 that the covariate is negatively associated with the probability of the event.

¹⁸ We suspect that the rather remote character of our communities makes for comparatively little variation compared to studies that rely on larger samples, including communities closer to cities that are the source of more heterogeneity. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the study of Gaspart and Platteau (2010), conducted in an area with similar characteristics in Senegal also concludes in the non-significance of personal characteristics such as women's education.

tion between "monogamous at marriage" and "additional wife" works against the effect of the addition of a new wife.¹⁹

Turning to socio-economic characteristics of the union, asset holdings (land or cattle) and the relative wealth levels of the groom and bride families are not correlated with divorce. On the other hand, women's economic independence, in the form of an income-generating activity (small business) is negatively correlated with divorce for the younger unions.²⁰

4.3. Initiation, timing and costs of divorce

In the following, we discuss our empirical evidence under the form of three statements that relate to different aspects of the divorce process and its consequences.

¹⁹ In the literature, several studies find a positive correlation between polygamy and divorce (Gage-Brandon, 1992; Antoine et al., 1998; Antoine et al., 2003; Reniers, 2003). The relationship is actually complex and arguments have also been put forward that point to positive effects of polygamy on marriage stability. In particular, the addition of a new wife into a household is not necessarily detrimental to the previous wives: it is sometimes perceived by the latter as the source of an improvement in their own situation as well as in their relative position within the household (Mason, 1988). It is thus not rare to hear women engaged in polygamous unions stressing the benefits that they derive from the support of their co-spouses in fulfilling their marital duties. Moreover, and this seems to be especially true for the Mossi and many other ethnic groups in West Africa, the wealth of a household is traditionally measured by the number of women present in it. In this context, monogamy signals low social status and polygamy is attractive not only for men but also for women (Dubourg, 1957).

²⁰ This negative correlation might be result of the fact that when husband disagree with their wife having an income generating activity, either she left, or she stopped. Hence, those women economically independent and remaining married are selected so that their activity is not a problem for their marriage. We thank an anonymous referee of this journal for pointing out that interpretation to us.

Table 4
Divorce characteristics, distinguishing between (first) marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993.

	All		By Marriage Cohort		
			Pre-1993 (A)	Post-1993 (B)	Trend (B - A)
	N	MEAN	MEAN	MEAN	DIFF
Decision					
=1 if woman took the decision	109	0.61	0.56	0.64	0.08
=1 if woman's family did not oppose	108	0.79	0.81	0.77	-0.05
Timing					
=1 if divorce within first 5 years of marriage	116	0.44	0.19	0.65	0.46***
=1 if divorce within first 10 years of marriage	116	0.66	0.42	0.86	0.44***
Children					
=1 if any child with divorced husband	107	0.74	0.83	0.67	-0.16**
=1 if first child born within 3 years of marriage	79	0.95	0.95	0.95	0.00
=1 if mother left with a child upon divorce	79	0.33	0.18	0.47	0.30***
# of observations	116	-	53	63	-

The sample is restricted to first unions that ended in divorce, as reported in the marital history of (former) husbands. Missing observations are mostly due to the respondent unwillingness or inability to answer the questions.
Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.3.1. Divorce is frequently a woman's decision that is not opposed by her family

Anthropological works dealing with West African populations suggest that it is typically women who initiate divorces, very often with the support of their own family (for a discussion, see [Locoh & Thiriat, 1995](#)). Similar patterns are found in our study area. According to ex-husbands, women initiated 61% of the divorces, and there seems to be some increase over time: 56% of the disrupted unions of the older unions were initiated by the wife, as against 64% of the younger unions ([Table 4](#)). These proportions are likely to be underestimates to the extent that men in a patriarchal society are sensitive to the question of their authority and therefore reluctant to admit that separation is imposed on them. This seems to be confirmed by a comparison between the answers provided by divorced men and women: the proportion of divorced women who say that they initiated the divorce is as high as 76% (over the whole period). From our sample of remarried women it is apparent that in most cases divorce consists of running away from the household with or without the consent of the husband. In other terms, most divorces take the form of an informal separation imposed on one spouse by the other.

When we inquire with women about the motives behind their divorce, we find that bad behavior of the spouse is not necessarily needed to justify a divorce. Inappropriate behavior of the husband, understood as adultery, violence, or alcoholism, stands for only 24% of the recorded divorces. By contrast, as many as 32% of divorces are alleged to be the result of a lack of love and 17% of frequent conjugal disputes.²¹ Similar patterns emerge when we consider the motives mentioned by men. Qualitative studies conducted in Burkina Faso ([Thiombiano, 2014](#)) and Senegal ([Dial, 2014](#)) have highlighted motivations for divorce that are similar to the above. Furthermore, divorces initiated by women seem to be relatively well accepted by their family: the family did not oppose a divorce decision, whoever initiated it, in 79% of the cases (77% if we rely on women's answers). The risk of full social exclusion appears rather limited and in most cases a return to the parental family is possible for separated or runaway women. The initiation of divorce by women is eased not only by weak opposition from own family but also by the absence

²¹ It is of course possible that the stated motives for divorce conceal deeper reasons that are complex and not easily avowable.

of brideprice reimbursement requirement by the spouse family.²²

In short, divorce appears as the first marriage-related decision that women can be effectively responsible for. It is true that divorce rates remain rather small, yet we must not forget that the possibility of divorce initiated by women may act as a threat that men take seriously, thereby influencing the bargaining process inside the household.

4.3.2. Separation from children is less frequent

In a patrilineal society, divorce often implies that women are separated from their children. The fear of that outcome is reflected in stories of Burkinabese women who condone their husband's infidelity in order to keep on living with their children ([Thiombiano, 2014](#)). In our sample, about three-fourths of divorces involve children and in two-thirds of these instances, mothers left some children behind after parting with their husband. Some changes appear to be under way, however. As reported in [Table 4](#), separation from children concerns a smaller number of women today than in the past: while for pre-1993 unions, 18% of mothers left with at least one child upon divorce, the proportion increases to as much as 47% when the post-1993 unions are considered. This trend is borne out when we use information reported by women: the proportion of mothers who left with at least one child increases for those who married later ([Fig. 8](#)). To the extent that women are keen on staying with children of a previous union, a serious constraint on their divorce decision is thus relaxed.²³

4.3.3. The cost of divorce for children born of the first marriages is not unambiguously high

The cost that the children have to bear is an important dimension to consider in any analysis of divorce. There is a large consensus in the literature that divorce negatively affects children (for a review, see [Amato, 2001](#)), although few studies have actually examined the relationship between divorce and children's welfare in the specific case of subsaharan Africa and most of them concern

²² Amounts of brideprices in our study area are not very high and this may help explain why the customary repayment obligation has vanished.

²³ Part of the aforementioned increase could be driven by the fact that some children are not yet weaned when their mother divorces. Ideally we would have wished to know how long children stayed with their mother after divorce and distinguish between boys and girls. Unfortunately this data is not available.

Table 5
Children's outcomes as per divorce status: descriptive statistics.

	First union mother (A)		Divorced mother (B)		Difference (B-A)
	N	MEAN	N	MEAN	DIFF
Comparing children whose divorced mother is absent to children of another first union within the same household					
=1 if child is a boy	2850	0.53	41	0.56	0.03
Height-for-age (HfA) z-score	2556	-1.13	40	-1.12	0.01
=1 if HfA < -2	2556	0.24	40	0.23	-0.02
=1 if ever been enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	1579	0.63	28	0.64	0.01
=1 if currently enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	1577	0.54	28	0.57	0.04
Comparing children born of a remarriage to children of a first union within the same household					
=1 if child is a boy	2850	0.53	196	0.53	-0.01
Height-for-age (HfA) z-score	2556	-1.13	177	-1.34	-0.20*
=1 if HfA < -2	2556	0.24	177	0.31	0.07**
=1 if child ever been enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	1579	0.63	104	0.60	-0.04
=1 if child currently enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	1577	0.54	104	0.56	0.02

Missing observations in HfA are due to the absence of the child at time of measurement.
Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

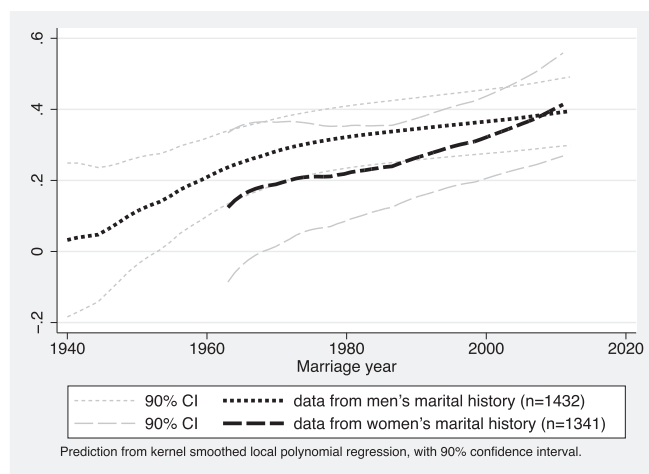


Fig. 8. Mothers' propensity to leave with a child upon divorce: time trend.

single motherhood rather than divorce.²⁴ The effects of divorce concern both the children who remained with their father's family and those who left with their mother. For the latter category, unfortunately, our sample size is too small to warrant an investigation.²⁵

For children who stayed with their father after divorce, we do not find any evidence of major detrimental effects of divorce,

²⁴ While a few papers focus on health-related outcomes, others look at schooling outcomes. Regarding health, divorce is potentially a risk factor for children's morbidity as measured by nutritional status (Ntoimo & Odimegwu, 2014), and for young children's mortality (Clark & Hamplová, 2013). Thiombiano, LeGrand, and Kobiané (2013) have precisely confirmed that hypothesis for children in Burkina Faso, and they submit that their predicament is caused by their separation from the mothers, as prescribed by the patrilineal custom. Regarding children's schooling, the limited evidence appears more ambiguous. While divorce seems to be associated with lower grade attainment in Malawi (Chae, 2016), opposite findings were obtained for Mozambique (Oya & Sender, 2009). Another plausible consequence of divorce for children in the African context is a higher exposure to child fostering. Grant and Yeatman (2014) show that in rural Malawi children whose parents have divorced are more susceptible of being fostered but only if their mother gets remarried (note that fostering does not necessarily have adverse consequences for children, see Akresh 2009). Even though few of these studies address the selection issue, their findings suggest that divorce may have negative consequences for the children's wellbeing in SSA.

²⁵ We find only nine individuals - six of whom are currently less than 19 years old - who left with their mother and are still currently living in the family of her new husband.

whether on long-term nutritional outcomes or school enrollment.²⁶ The top panel of Table 6 reports simple comparisons of means between children of divorced mother and children of mothers who are still in their first marriage. Mean height-for-age z-scores and stunting prevalence show almost no difference between children of divorced mothers and other children.²⁷ The same conclusion obtains when we make within-household comparisons, descriptively (top panel of Table 6) or in a regression framework (top panel of Table 7). Second, the probabilities for 6-19 years-old-children to have ever been enrolled in school, or to be currently enrolled, are similar for the above two categories of children.²⁸ Overall, we do not find any evidence of an effect of divorce on children who stayed with the father's family.

Although the absence of effects of divorce on children appears somewhat surprising, it can be plausibly explained by specific features surrounding marriage and child caring in rural Burkina Faso. Indeed, important stresses caused by divorce, separation from mother or father, and re-location may be attenuated in this context. This is because the involvement of several women in the tasks of child caring from early childhood ensures that the child is not abandoned to himself or herself after the departure of the mother. In particular, we learn from Lallemand (1976) that the Mossi make an important distinction between the so-called "educator-women" responsible for the upbringing and development of the child, on the one hand, and the "parent-women" whose role is mainly biological, on the other hand. While the former status is assigned to older women who are permanent and highly integrated members of the household, the latter, inferior status is earmarked for more recent spouses perceived to be more at risk of matrimonial instability (Lallemand, 1976; Laurent, 2013).

Our results should be interpreted with caution, though. They suffer from several limitations. Not only is our analysis restricted to a few dimensions of welfare but it also misses out two important categories of children: those who left with their mother and those

²⁶ Among the children left behind by their mother, 53 children are still currently living in one of the sample households but, for comparison purposes, we focus on the 41 of them who are less than 19 years old. As a consequence, all children included in the analysis have a mother whose first marriage occurred after 1993 or, equivalently, a mother from the younger cohort.

²⁷ As shown in Table 6, stunting prevalence is 23% among children whose mother left after divorce and 24% among other children. Means of height-for-age z-score are almost exactly the same for the two groups, -1.12 in the former and -1.13 in the latter.

²⁸ The proportion of 6-19 children who have ever been enrolled in school is 64% among children whose mother left after divorce and 63% among other children while proportions of children currently enrolled in school are respectively 57 and 54%. Within households, the comparison is sometimes to the advantage of children of divorced mothers, albeit never significantly (Table 6 and Table 7).

Table 6
Children's outcomes as per divorce status: descriptive statistics (sample restricted to households with both children of divorced parents and other children)

	First union mother (A)		Divorced mother (B)		Difference (B-A)
	N	MEAN	N	MEAN	DIFF
Comparing children whose divorced mother is absent to children of another first union within the same household					
=1 if child is a boy	128	0.51	41	0.56	0.05
Height-for-age (HfA) z-score	125	-1.19	40	-1.12	0.07
=1 if HfA <-2	125	0.30	40	0.23	-0.07
=1 if ever been enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	67	0.54	28	0.64	0.11
=1 if currently enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	67	0.49	28	0.57	0.08
Comparing children born of a remarriage to children of a first union within the same household					
=1 if child is a boy	266	0.55	196	0.53	-0.02
Height-for-age (HfA) z-score	244	-1.02	177	-1.34	-0.31**
=1 if HfA <-2	244	0.21	177	0.31	0.10**
=1 if child ever been enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	151	0.66	104	0.60	-0.06
=1 if child currently enrolled in school (6-19 years old)	151	0.56	104	0.56	0.00

Missing observations in HfA are almost exclusively due to the absence of the child at time of measurement.

Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 7
Children's outcomes as per divorce status: linear regressions.

	HfAz-score (1)	= 1 if HfAz-score <-2 (2)	= 1 if ever in school (3)	= 1 if currently in school (4)
Comparing children whose divorced mother is absent to children of another first union within the same household				
=1 if child of a divorced mother who left	-0.107 [0.421]	-0.008 [0.128]	-0.105 [0.198]	-0.239 [0.214]
Observations (1)	2596	2596	1607	1605
Comparing children born of a remarriage to children of a first union within the same household				
=1 if child born of a remarried mother (after divorce)	-0.024 [0.153]	0.009 [0.047]	-0.034 [0.070]	-0.018 [0.075]
Observations (2)	2733	2733	1683	1681

(1) A total of 32 households include both children without their mother (she left after divorce) and children of another woman's first union.

(2) A total of 73 households include both children born of a remarriage and children of another woman's first union.

All regressions include household fixed effects, age of the child, age of the child upon divorce and age of the mother as controls.

Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

who were left behind after divorce and are no longer living in the original household (most of those have been married or fostered in the meantime). In addition, even though we rely on within-household comparisons, we cannot rule out the possibility that confounding effects are at work owing to the presence of omitted variables.

5. Remarriages

Our main findings about remarriage can be summed up in the form of three statements.

5.1. Quick remarriage is the norm

Remarriage is a common practice and the risk of staying single after divorce is quite limited. According to DHS data from Burkina Faso, there are only 1.8% of widows and 1.3% of divorcees among 15-49 years-old-women (DHS, 2010). Based on the same data, extrapolations that account for remarried women reveal that the actual rates of widowhood and divorce are 6.2% and 11%, respectively (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015). Similar conclusions can be drawn from our survey: less than 1% of women are currently divorced and 8% of all the sample women have remarried following a divorce.²⁹

²⁹ While we did not interview women who were not married at the time of the survey, we know the marital status of all household members from the household roster and are thus able to evaluate the prevalence of divorce.

Another sign that remarriage is frequent and rather easy is the very short time span between divorce and remarriage: most remarried women have remarried within just a few years after divorce.³⁰ As reported in Table 8, 84% of them remarried within the two years following divorce, 75% within the very year after divorce, and as many as 45% report to have joined their new husband immediately after separating from the previous husband. Note that the locus of decision for divorce (whether the woman or the man initiated it) does not influence the timing of remarriage. The above figures, especially the last one, suggest that a large proportion of women can secure their new marital status even before divorcing, while others are experiencing relatively short transition periods. Note that we do not observe major differences between the two sets of unions along these dimensions.

Our evidence thus bears out an observation commonly made for SSA, and for West Africa in particular: like divorce, remarriage is frequent and it appears as the corollary of the necessity for African women to be engaged in some form of union (for a review, see Loco & Thiriart, 1995).

5.2. Second marriages appear rather attractive

Evidence on the effects of divorce on women's welfare in SSA, and in West Africa in particular, is very limited and ambiguous. Thus, Thiombiano and Schoumaker (2012) argue that divorces

³⁰ For information regarding the previous unions of divorced women, we rely on women's interviews. Indeed we do not feel comfortable with the information provided by their current husband on this precise point.

Table 8

Remarriage characteristics, distinguishing between (first) marriages contracted before 1993 and after 1993

	All		By Marriage Date		
			Pre-1993 (A)	Post-1993 (B)	Trend (B - A)
	N	MEAN	MEAN	MEAN	DIFF
Remarriage characteristics					
=1 if joined new husband immediately after divorce	83	0.45	0.47	0.43	-0.03
=1 if remarried within the year following divorce	83	0.75	0.81	0.71	-0.09
=1 if remarried in the two first years following divorce	83	0.84	0.81	0.87	0.06
=1 if monogamous at remarriage	102	0.31	0.41	0.25	-0.16
Socio-economic background					
=1 if husband attended formal school	102	0.15	0.08	0.19	0.11*
=1 if groom's family relatively poorer than bride's one	100	0.09	0.05	0.11	0.06
Area of land owned (in Ha)	102	0.26	0.28	0.26	-0.02
Cattle size (# of head)	102	19.62	24.23	16.76	-7.47
=1 if any women has an income-generating activity	102	0.75	0.82	0.71	-0.11
# of observations	102	-	39	63	-

The sample is restricted to women who remarried after their first union ended in divorce, as reported in the matrimonial history of currently married women. All the information was thus gathered from the latter.

Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

cause a deterioration in the women's standard of living in Burkina Faso, at least in the short run. This finding is in line with the evidence available for developed countries (for a review, see Amato, 2010).³¹

In our study area, several pieces of evidence point to a positive evolution of the women's status between first and second marriages (Table 1). First, remarried women are almost twice as likely as other women to marry a husband whom they have met before (44% compared to 24%). In most of these cases, the new husband is an old friend. Interestingly, this is especially true of women who got married after 1993: 55% of them met their husband before marrying him. In other words, women tend to play a more active role in partner selection on the occasion of their second marriage, and this trend is growing.

Second, the choice of divorced women is not limited to the pool of divorced men: they are not more likely to remarry a husband who himself went through a divorce. Furthermore, they are not barred from marrying men who have never been married before (one-third of remarriages), or from marrying polygamous husbands. Regarding the latter possibility, we observe that compared to other currently married women, divorced women are more likely to marry husbands who are now polygamous: 69% of them are found to be in this situation (Table 8) as against 42% of women in their first unions (Table 2). In addition, almost 70% of the women who divorced from a monogamous husband remarried into a polygamous household. Although it is tempting to interpret these facts as a sign of the absence of rejection of polygamy by divorced women upon remarriage, we cannot rule out the possibility that their behavior is constrained by a restricted supply of monogamous husbands in the remarriage pool, or that men already married are more likely to be willing to marry a divorcee. Hence caution is needed in interpreting our observations even though, as will be later argued, we have some interesting evidence in favour of the former story (absence of rejection of polygamy).³²

Third, divorced women are more likely to remarry a husband coming from a household in which women exercise independent economic activities. As shown in Table 9 where we compare

³¹ By contrast, a detailed study recently conducted in Senegal reaches the opposite conclusion: divorced women are relatively better off than other women in terms of current consumption (Lambert & van de Walle, 2018).

³² For remarried women we cannot compute the spousal age gap for their first union and compare it to the gap for their current union. If we compare (different) women in their first and second unions, the spousal age gap is two years larger for women in their second union (following divorce). This is consonant with our finding that remarried women have a greater tendency to enter into polygamous unions.

women in their first and second marriages in a multivariate regression framework, remarried women are more likely to be engaged in an independent economic activity. Whether this observation signals a welfare improvement for the remarried woman depends on the extent to which involvement in an independent economic activity is imposed by subsistence constraints or not. Whichever the case, such involvement tends to go hand in hand with enhanced autonomy for women upon remarriage.

Finally, evidence based on indicators of economic well-being is ambiguous. On the one hand, although almost 20% of remarried women divorced a husband who was poorer than themselves in terms of family background (not reported), this proportion falls down to 9% when we consider their remarriage (Table 8). Moreover, as is also apparent from Table 9, there is no difference in nutritional status (measured by the body-mass-index) between the two categories of women. On the other hand, however, the average nutritional level of children is lower in households with a divorced woman than in the other households (bottom panel of Table 5).

5.3. New children are not discriminated

What can we say about the situation of children born of a remarriage after divorce? Numerically, they form an important group because remarried women turn out to have more children after than before divorce. The wellbeing of these children is a legitimate cause for concern. Indeed they could be discriminated against if their mother has low bargaining power and status in her new marriage. To assess the relative wellbeing of these children, we compare them with children whose mothers are still in their first marriage, both across and within the sample households. Obviously, the within-household comparison is possible for polygamous unions only.³³

While between-households comparisons tend to indicate that children born to remarried women are worse-off in terms of long-term nutritional outcomes (bottom panel of Tables 5 and 6), this conclusion ceases to hold true when we compare children belonging to the same household in a regression framework that includes household fixed effects and the mother's age (bottom panel of Table 7). In other words, children from remarried mothers do not appear to be worse off than other children living in the same

³³ We restrict our attention to children aged less than 19 years and still currently living in the household: in our sample, we find 177 such children born of a divorced woman.

Table 9
Women's outcomes as per remarriage status: linear regressions.

	All		By Marriage Cohort	
	(1)	(2)	Pre-1993 (3)	Post-1993 (4)
Nutrition outcomes				
BMI level	0.020 [0.321]	0.165 [0.425]	0.373 [0.630]	-0.314 [0.386]
=1 if malnourished (BMI<18.5)	-0.020 [0.047]	-0.002 [0.063]	0.043 [0.086]	-0.041 [0.061]
Activity outcomes				
=1 if woman has any IGA (1)	0.076* [0.044]	-	0.122 [0.078]	0.063 [0.059]
Total individual cash income	0.986 [2.339]	2.508 [2.927]	1.498 [4.510]	0.088 [2.857]
Household FE	No	Yes	No	No
Village FE	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
# of observations	1115	1132	484	631

(1) IGA stands for income generating activity. Figures reported are coefficients obtained through separate regressions. Each cell corresponds to the coefficient of a binary variable that takes the value 1 if the woman is remarried and 0 otherwise when that variable is regressed on the outcome of interest. The sample includes all currently married women, except remarried widows. Except for regressions in column 2 with household fixed effects, all regressions include individual (woman's age) and household controls (household size, land-holding per capita, livestock size, motorcycle ownership, ownership of a house with strong walls, PPI index). Standard errors are reported into brackets. Level of significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

household. As far as schooling is concerned, we do not detect any difference between the enrollment rates of the two categories of children, and this is true whichever the specification considered.³⁴ All these findings tend to indicate that no systematic discrimination exists against children born of a divorced woman.

6. Discussion and conclusion

According to a widespread understanding, women's empowerment in marriage is reflected in the five following trends: (1) an increasing age at marriage for girls and a decreasing spousal age gap; (2) a growing ability of married women to initiate a divorce, and to do so earlier and earlier after marriage; (3) a growing ability of women to choose whether to remarry or not and who to remarry after divorce; (4) an improvement in the rights of divorced women to take their children along with them; and (5) a decrease in polygamy.

Our data relating to the above indicators nevertheless attests that there is no necessary convergence between the above trends: whereas we verify trends (2) to (4), trends (1) and (5) are invalidated. In short, our evidence points to an inconsistent pattern of evolution of women's status, making it impossible to decide whether women have accumulated power and raised their status in our study area.

Let us start with polygamy, a practice that has increased over the time period of our study. A challenging finding is that women's own perceptions of polygamous marriage are far from negative: they actually balance advantages and disadvantages of the practice in a rather nuanced manner. Thus, a large majority of women who are currently engaged into a monogamous union (70%) evince a positive perception of polygamy in the sense that polygamy is said to entail more advantages than shortcomings. The proportion turns out to be even higher (90%) among women currently married to a polygamous husband. The proportion of women with a positive perception of polygamy is also slightly higher among wives of rank 2 and more and women engaged in an arranged marriage. When

asked to give more details about their perception, most women mention economic independence as well as the mutual aid and increased labor force provided by co-spouses as major advantages of polygamy. Among shortcomings, the risk of conflicts between co-wives comes foremost. It is still the case that 9 out of 10 women who have co-spouses admit to having good or very good relationships with them. On the specific question of economic independence, our data confirms the perception of the women: polygamous women are 30% more likely to have an independent income-generating activity than monogamous women, and the former are also twice more likely to own small livestock (poultry) or to participate in a village association than the latter. Conflicts among co-wives, which are frequent and often stressed in the literature appear to be only one side of the coin. The other side is that they can simultaneously form a coalition aimed at opposing too strong an intrusion of the husband in their personal, social, and economic life. Incidentally, this helps explain the ambiguous statements on conflicts mentioned above. It is as though a polygamous union enables women to obtain more autonomy compared to monogamy, thanks to the dilution of male authority when there are several wives and to more decentralized decisions in larger households.³⁵

The question of the desirability of polygamy is obviously sensitive and answers provided by women may conceal ex-post rationalization or the desire to suppress cognitive dissonance.³⁶ The fact that marrying an additional wife may be used by a husband to discipline a first wife seems to underline this possibility (see the quote by Loco and Thariat later in this section). But we do not think this is the whole story as a large majority (72%) of sample women confessed that, given the ability to decide, they would agree with their husband taking an additional wife.

³⁵ An apparently rival interpretation would stress that an independent economic activity in polygamous unions, rather than being a sign of economic emancipation, reflects a subsistence constraint faced by women in these unions (as suggested by an anonymous referee). However, since women tend to mention economic independence as a major advantage of polygamy, this alternative interpretation is not necessarily incompatible with a positive appreciation by women of their ability to earn independent income.

³⁶ More sophisticated survey techniques, such as list experiments or implicit association tests may shed a more objective light on this question than the answer we obtained to our direct questions. We need to be careful not to overinterpret positive views on polygamy expressed by women. Yet, we believe that they merit to be analyzed, if only because they run contrary to conventional wisdom and call for a more nuanced view on polygamy..

³⁴ We also extended the analysis by including children who are not anymore living in the household and for whom we have some information. A vast majority of them left the household following marriage: 58% left for marriage, 17% for work, 7% for school, and 18% for other reasons. We again find no substantial gap across mother status whether we consider basic schooling (did the child ever go to school?) or marital outcomes (did the child ever marry and, if yes, what was the age at marriage). Results are available on request.

Although caution is no doubt required on this issue, from our interviews with the sample women and the above evidence, we gain the strong impression that polygamy is not rejected by them and may even be a widely accepted condition.³⁷ In other words, it is hard to interpret the lack of significant decrease in polygamous unions in our sample as unambiguously signaling a stagnation of women's status and power. This point actually resonates with Fenske's fascinating finding that women's modern education fails to cause a reduction of polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa (Fenske, 2015). While for Fenske himself this reveals a failure of modern education to empower women, we submit that women's empowerment is not necessarily impeded by, or incompatible with, polygamy.³⁸ Similarly, recent research on cooperation and efficiency in different types of marriage points does not necessarily confirm the dominant view stressing the adverse effects of polygamy (Fainzang & Journet, 1988). While Barr et al. (2019) concludes that polygamous households are less efficient than monogamous unions, based on experimental public good games, other authors do not find evidence for a difference in efficiency along the polygamy/monogamy distinction (Akresh, Chen, & Moore, 2016; Kazianga & Wahhaj, 2017; Munro, Kebede, Tarazona, & Verschoor, 2019; Gross et al., 2019).

Turning to invalidation of trend (1), one explanation that naturally springs to mind is the following: detecting signs of rising emancipation of women, parents with sons to marry respond by favoring marriages with younger brides in the expectation that they would be more submissive and less prone to threatening marriage stability and male patriarchal authority. The idea is that the parents of both the bride and the groom are keen on counteracting the rising autonomy of women and to act as effective upholders of customary norms of family and marriage. This cannot apparently be a general trend, however. Bear in mind our observation that the procedure of arranged marriage is increasingly flexible, suggesting that at least some women have more say in the choice of their partner. Relatedly, while a growing proportion of women are married early, the average age at first marriage has remained stable, indicating that some women actually marry later than before.

A second explanation better fits our data and it rests on the idea that women act strategically. More precisely, because they anticipate that in the event of an unsuccessful union they will be able to exit it and seize new marriage opportunities, strategic women are ready to accept an arranged marriage at an early age and with a (much) older husband. In other words, a two-step emancipatory process is sparked, that is best reflected in the following statement commonly heard from Mossi women: "while the first marriage serves the function of getting rid of our parents, divorce enables us to get rid of our first husband". Several of our findings support this interpretation. First, most divorces are initiated by women and do not generate serious tensions with their family. Second, the time span between marriage and divorce has become increasingly short, indicating that women do not need to wait long to exert their capacity of ending an unsatisfactory marriage. Third, the time span between divorce and remarriage is also very short, while remarriage and the new partner are increasingly chosen by the women themselves. Five, after divorce, women are increasingly allowed to take some of their children along with them.

³⁷ Of course, this evidence does not imply that women would not prefer marrying in a monogamous society: we ask them to compare monogamy to polygamy within a polygamous society.

³⁸ In his paper, Fenske not only shows that modern education has no effect on polygamy, but also that missionary education caused a fall in its prevalence. In our view, which coincides with some elements brought into the discussion by Fenske himself, the contrasted effect of the two types of education largely arises from the highly prescriptive and morally charged environment that religious schools create. The rejection of polygamy reflects a due compliance with a moral order rather than individual inclinations.

The idea that women may behave strategically is actually supported by precise observations made by anthropologists. Thus, for example, in her work on the Mossi family, Lallemand (1977) describes in detail how women accommodate the prevailing social norms to ultimately impose their own view on marital issues:

In sum, customary law allows only a few motives to justify a divorce demanded by a woman (...). The practice is nevertheless widespread and dissatisfied women know well how to replace blatant signs of misbehavior of their husband by less easily verifiable grievances that have the effect of moving the parents, the only persons entitled to decide whether an union should be maintained or terminated. Adult women are thus able to obtain a freedom that was denied to them by the elders when they were still young brides. To achieve this result, they skillfully play upon existing contradictions between the statutory law and a body of persisting customs, they adroitly oppose the patriarchal authority by stressing the need for affection and understanding of a lonely child living with a stranger, and they exploit any latent antagonism between the lineages allied through marriage. (Lallemand, 1977: 197, our own translation).

In a strategic perspective, as pointed out earlier, divorce needs not occur. Marriage may thus be successful if the threat of divorce from the wife exerts a disciplining effect on the husband. This is precisely the point made by Locoh and Thiriart (1995):

For the girl, the first marriage seems to represent a sort of "rite of passage", a way to acquire her social majority and some autonomy. Divorce appears as a possible step towards emancipation. Indeed, even when it is not actually used, the threat of divorce issued by a woman, like the threat of taking an additional wife issued by a husband, weighs continuously on the relationship between spouses. (Locoh & Thiriart, 1995: p.66, our own translation).

Women's emancipatory strategies are more likely to succeed, or to be less costly, if there is weaker opposition to divorce from elders. Evidence of this is provided by Lallemand (1977) who discusses this issue and emphasizes the general erosion of the traditional marriage institution among the Mossi:

Heads of lineage therefore seem reluctant to exert their right of veto on (second) unions which they have not contributed to form. This is especially so because being fully grown up adults, women would not easily comply with adversarial decisions of their ascendants. In these conditions, the break-up of traditional marriage is manifested neither in its disappearance nor the suppression or shortening of some of the steps involved, but mainly in the marriage mobility of the spouses, women in particular. (Lallemand, 1977: p.201, our own translation).

This second story is also at the heart of anthropological accounts of marriage practices and women's emancipation inside immigrant communities of Western Europe. Thus, the surprising persistence of arranged marriages combined with the rising rate of divorce among Turkish immigrants in Belgium is construed as the outcome of a deliberate strategy of women to gradually emancipate from the erstwhile patriarchal system (Jamoulle, 2009). Guirkinger, Platteau, and Wahhaj (2018) have confirmed this insight on the basis of first-hand data on marriage practices collected in the same Turkish community. They also propose a theory of arranged marriage in which women (and men) bargain with their parents over the choice of a spouse, and in which divorce is explicitly allowed as an exit option for failed unions. They predict that a reduction in the cost of divorce improves the situation of women and yet does not cause a fall in arranged marriages.

If we follow this line of interpretation, a category of women appears to subtly avoid to confront the custom head-on. In order to maintain good relations with their family, which remains important to them, they tend to opt for a roundabout tactic. They do not reject the custom of arranged marriage in the anticipation that they can escape its worst consequences. Under their action, the custom is therefore evolving almost surreptitiously without causing a loss of face for its holders (the elders). Here is an apt illustra-

tion of the theory of custom put forward by Platteau and Wahhaj (2014) and Aldashev, Chaara, Platteau, and Wahhaj (2012), and of the concept of institutional change through accommodation proposed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) and discussed by Baland, Bourguignon, Platteau, and Verdier (2020).

In conclusion, as soon as we adopt a dynamic approach, some indicators such as woman's age at marriage, spousal age gap, and the type of union may be misleading in the sense that they measure intermediate outcomes on the way to women's emancipation rather than final outcomes on which a definitive welfare judgment can be based. Therefore, the path to women's emancipation is not monotonous and does not necessarily involve an immediate and continuous shift of the variables commonly used to measure women's power, status, and influence.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Description of samples

(1) Sample of unions reported by men

- Total number of unions: 1650
- Total number of unions corresponding to the first marriage of the wife (sample used in Table 2, Table 3, Fig. 5 and Fig. 6): 1432
 - On-going unions: 1208 (of which 28 women are not in the household, and thus not in women sample)
 - * Monogamous at marriage: 710
 - * Polygamous at marriage: 498
 - Unions interrupted by divorce: 116
 - Unions interrupted by death: 108

(2) Men marital history: sample size by category of unions

- First unions for the man (sample used in Table 1, panel I and in Figures 1, 3, 4, 7 and 8): 870
 - Earliest in 1940 and latest in 2013; 434 before 1993 and 436 after 1993
 - Still on-going: 746
 - Unions interrupted by divorce: 64
 - Unions interrupted by death: 60
- Second unions for the man: 471
 - Earliest in 1950 and latest in 2013, 213 before 1993 and 258 after 1993
 - Still on-going: 384
 - Remarriage after divorce or death of the spouse: 13
 - Union to additional wife brought in the marriage (polygamy): 458 (earliest in 1950 and latest in 2013; 205 before 1993 and 253 after 1993)

- Higher order unions: 309

(3) Sample of unions reported by women

- Total: 1519
- On-going unions (sample used in Fig. 8): 1341
 - Of which, first unions for the woman (sample used in Table 1, panel II a and Fig. 2): 1163
 - Monogamous at marriage: 727 (earliest in 1943, latest in 2013; 334 before 1993 and 393 after 1993)
 - * Of which 331 are now polygamous
 - Polygamous at marriage: 614 (earliest in 1960 and latest in 2013; 239 before 1993 and 375 after 1993)
 - * Rank 2: 372
 - * Higher order rank: 251
- Unions interrupted by divorce (sample used in Table 1, panel II b): 102
- Unions interrupted by death: 76

(4) Women marital history: sample size by category of unions

- First unions for the woman³⁹ (sample used in Fig. 2): 1341
 - Earliest in 1943 and latest in 2013; 573 before 1993 and 768 after 1993
 - Monogamous at marriage: 767 (earliest in 1943, latest in 2013; 341 before 1993 and 426 after 1993)
 - * Of which 378 are now polygamous
 - Polygamous at marriage: 574 (earliest in 1956 and latest in 2013; 232 before 1993 and 342 after 1993)
 - * Rank 2: 374
 - * Higher order rank: 205
- Second unions for the woman: 178
 - Remarriage after divorce (sample used in Table 4 and in Table 8): 102 (earliest in 1957 and latest in 2013; 39 before 1993 and 62 after 1993)
 - * Monogamous: 32
 - * Polygamous: 70
 - Remarriage after death of the spouse: 76 (earliest in 1956 and latest in 2013; 30 before 1993 and 46 after 1993)
 - * Monogamous: 12
 - * Polygamous: 64

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105512>.

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³⁹ All women in an on-going union reported about their first union, whether it was the current one or a previous one.

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