

Human Rights Enculturation and Conceptualizations of Abuse

Jeffrey Swindle
Harvard University
jswindle@g.harvard.edu
February 10, 2024

Abstract: I contend that human rights organizations' initiatives to denounce gender violence vary in their portrayal of physical versus sexual forms of intimate partner violence, with sweeping ramifications. To develop the argument, I combine national surveys from Malawi between 2004 and 2016 with new measures of how anti-violence cultural scripts are shared in education curricula, media, and foreign aid projects. Exposure to anti-violence scripts is positively associated with subsequent rejections of physical intimate partner violence, but only when content is explicit in this regard. Intermediaries carrying out human rights initiatives, however, often interpret sexual refusal within heterosexual marriage as a form of abuse given norms about relationships duties. When this happens, people's exposure to such messaging is negatively associated with their support for women's refusal to have sex with their spouse. Understanding how people are enculturated to human rights messages, including what counts as "abuse," is critical for human rights organizations.

Extended Abstract

Temporal trends from cross-national surveys show that the percentage of people that say a man is not justified in beating his wife has increased during the twenty-first century in nearly all surveyed countries, which span across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Latin America (Cools and Kotsadam 2017; Kurzman et al. 2019; Pierotti 2013). However, my descriptive analysis—detailed in the subsequent section—demonstrates that in about two-thirds of the surveyed counties a diminishing percentage of people support the notion that a woman is justified in refusing to have sex with her husband.

What accounts for these divergent trends? I contend that the powerful, sweeping, global social movement promoting gender equality is, somewhat unintentionally, a major contributor. Championed and financed by international organizations like the United Nations and foreign aid agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development, who in turn partner with national governments or nongovernmental organizations, this global movement broadly denounces men's abuse of women's individual rights and personal autonomy (Charles 2020; Htun and Weldon

2012; Merry 2006). This differs somewhat from common moral logics around the world that describe moral behavior as rooted in collective care (Kainja et al. 2022) and thereby consider abuse as the neglect of performing one's relationship responsibilities, in particular providing sex to one's spouse (Karimakwenda 2021; Mandal 2014; Potter 2020; Schneider 2018; Smith 2019; Yllö and Torres 2016). As a result of such relational moral logics, the global movements' condemnation of *abuse* is often "vernacularized" (Levitt and Merry 2009) as denouncing men's physical violence against women, while tacitly and sometimes unambiguously condoning the idea that sexual refusal within committed intimate partnerships is abusive.

In empirically developing this argument, I turn to Malawi, where the global movement to condemn intimate partner violence has been especially far-reaching and in which there is detailed information on movement activities from administrative data sources. I combine nationally-representative surveys with new quantitative measures I construct that capture movement activities over time, namely the incorporation of anti-violence messaging in education curricula and targeted media campaigns, in addition to foreign aid projects designed to combat gender violence. I first document the nature of anti-violence messaging across each type of movement activity, after which I examine their relationship with Malawians' moral declarations on surveys about men's physical violence against women and women's sexual refusal.

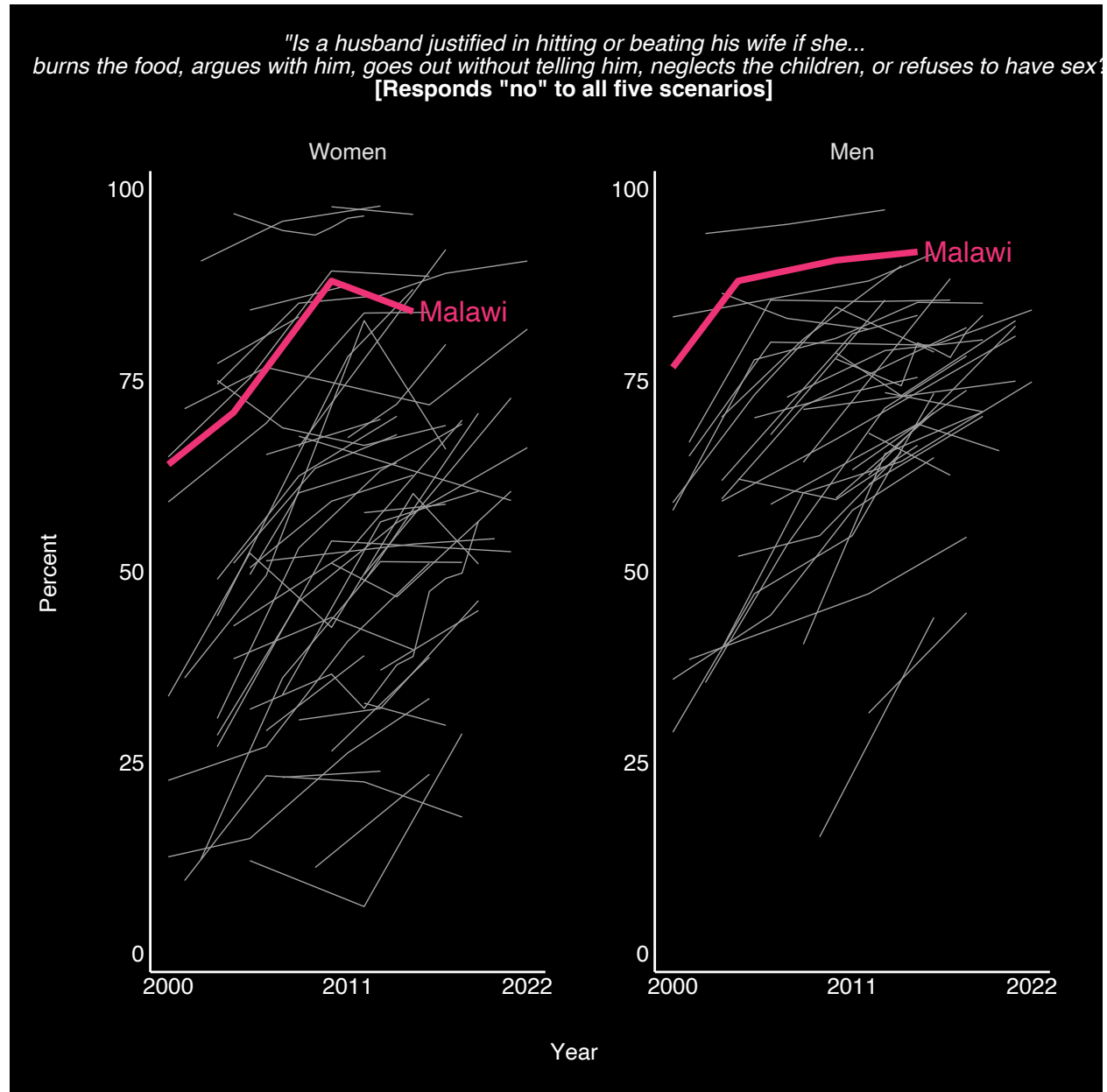
I find that each of these movement activities are positively associated with substantial increases in the probability of Malawians' stated rejection of the idea that a man is justified in physically beating his wife. However, movement activities are only positively associated with people's expressed support for a woman's ability to refuse to have sex with her husband when the intermediaries delivering the movement messages clearly promote sexual consent within marriage. In most cases, intermediaries do not do this and sometimes proactively encourage women not to refuse sex to their partners. I find that such movement activities have either a null or negative relationship

with not only stated support of women's sexual refusal, but also a woman's personal ability to say no to her own husband's sexual advances, and her disclosure of past sexual abuse.

In summary, I show that the global anti-violence movement is powerfully strengthening social norms in Malawi that denounce men's physical violence against women, yet the movement's messaging has been inconsistent on women's sexual autonomy, contributing to distinct outcomes. How teachers, journalists, activists, and community leaders translate and vernacularize anti-violence messages can alter the nature of movements' influence (see Swidler and Watkins 2017). Akin to these dynamics in Malawi, international organizations and their chain of partners are likely similarly contributing to the cross-national temporal trends I observe in moral declarations about men's physical violence toward women and women's sexual refusal, though there are other factors at play. The key takeaway from my analysis is that assumptions that women's physical and sexual autonomy are linked overestimate the prominence and clarity of individual rights principles in many people's moral imaginations and overlook common logics prioritizing relationship responsibilities (see Sikkink 2020; Srinivasan 2021; Tamale 2008). The future success or failure of efforts to expand women's autonomy, therefore, will hinge especially on their level of concentrated and explicit promotion of sexual consent.

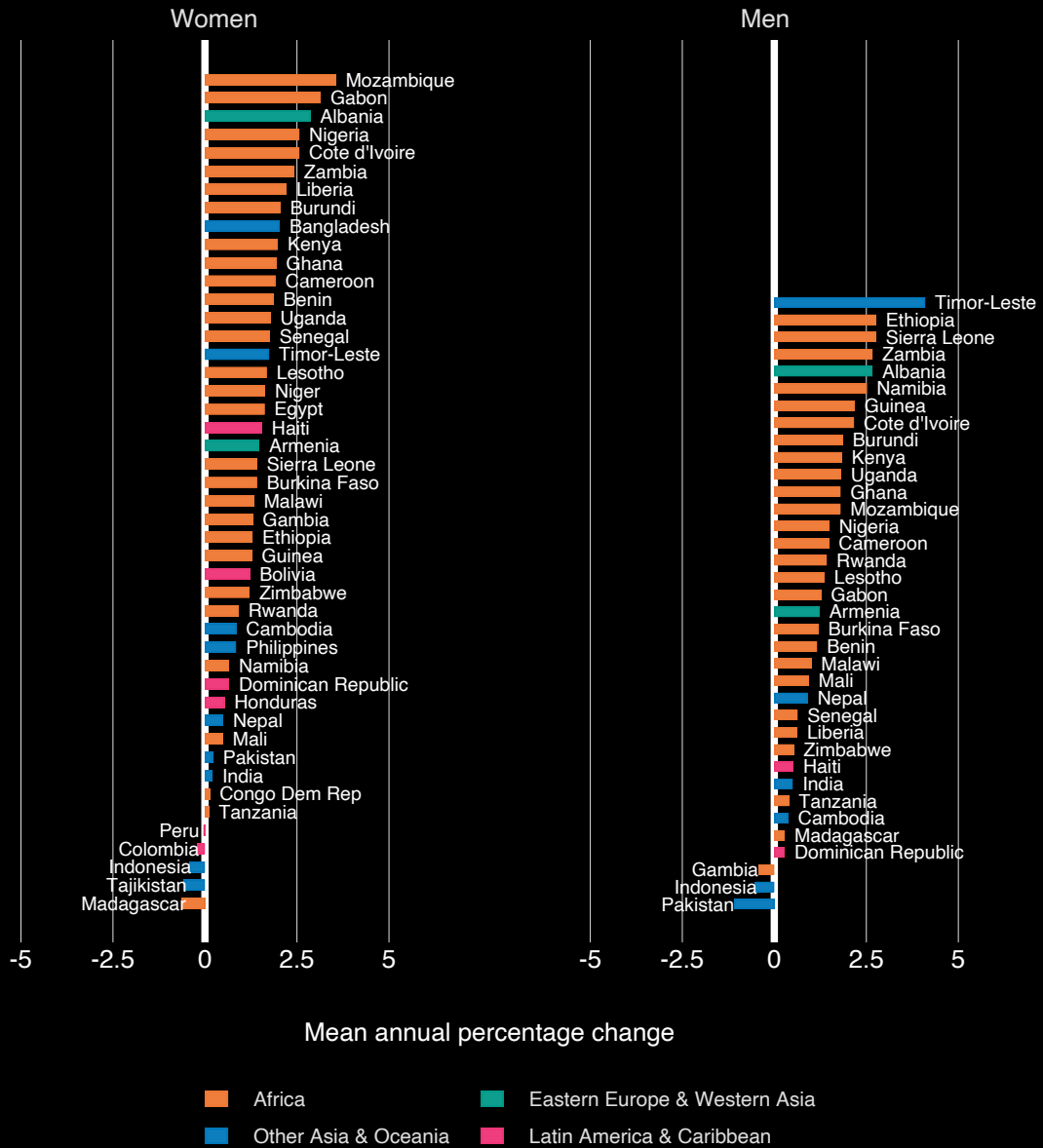
In what follows below, I provide data visualizations that guide the full paper, which is currently under revisions.

Temporal Trends in the National Percentages of People Rejecting Men's Physical Violence against their Wives.

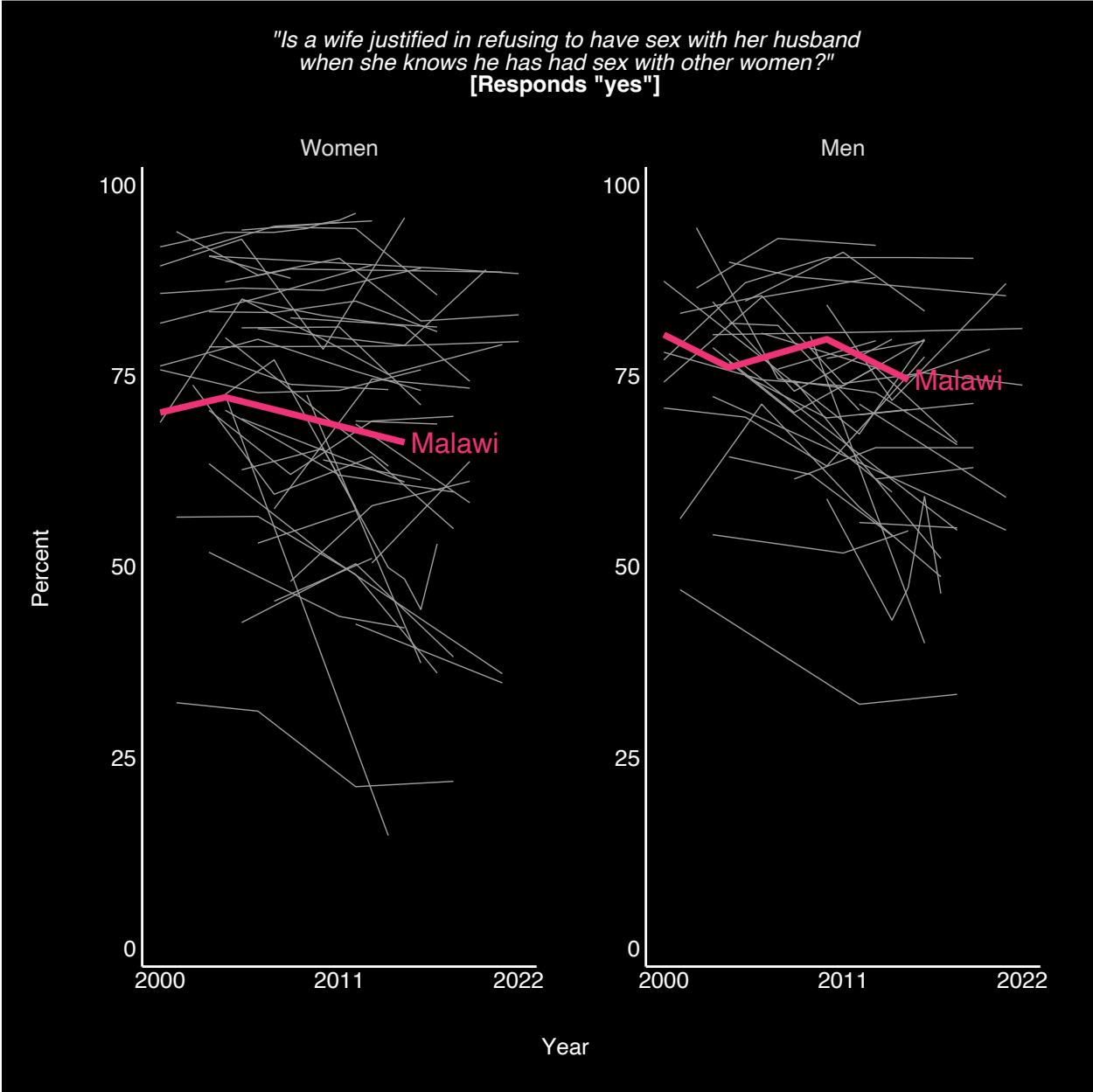


Change Scores in the National Percentages of People Rejecting Men's Physical Violence against their Wives.

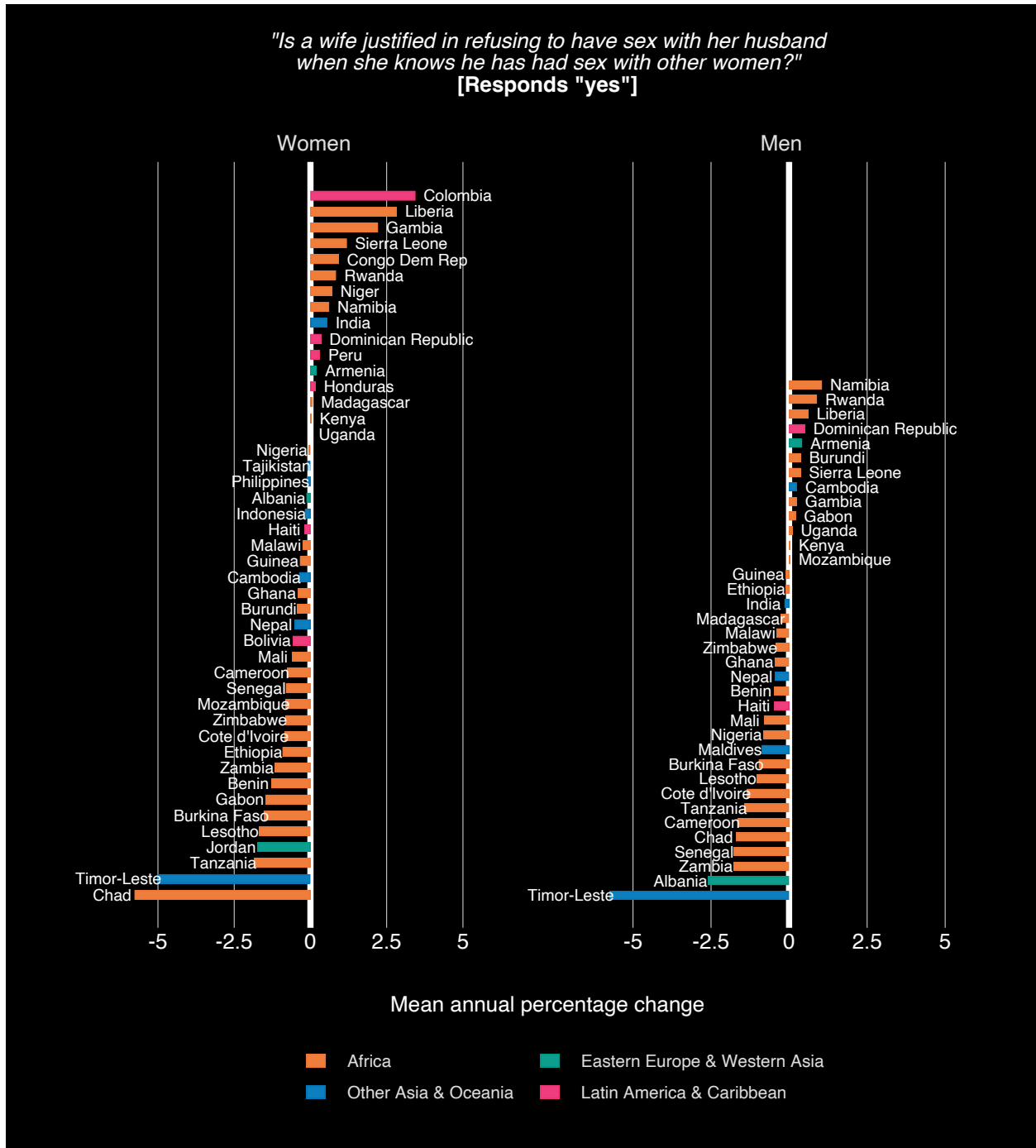
*"Is a husband justified in hitting or beating his wife if she...
burns the food, argues with him, goes out without telling him, neglects the children, or refuses to have sex"*
[Responds "no" to all five scenarios]



Temporal Trends in the National Percentages of People Supporting Women's Refusal to Have Sex with their Husbands.

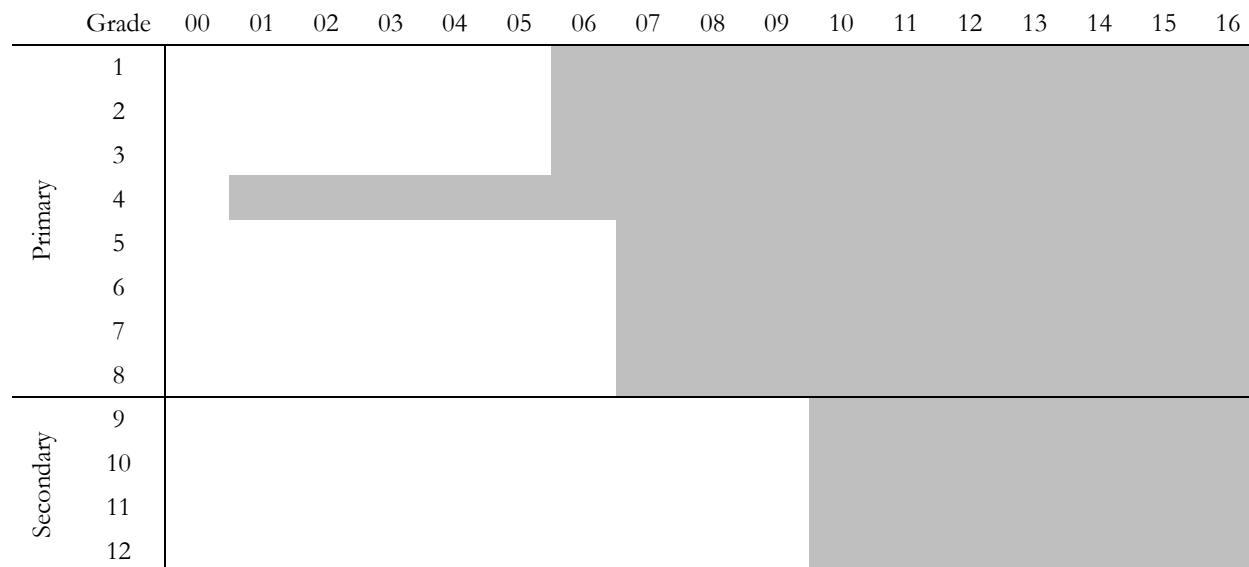


Change Scores in the National Percentages of People Supporting Women's Refusal to Have Sex with their Husbands.

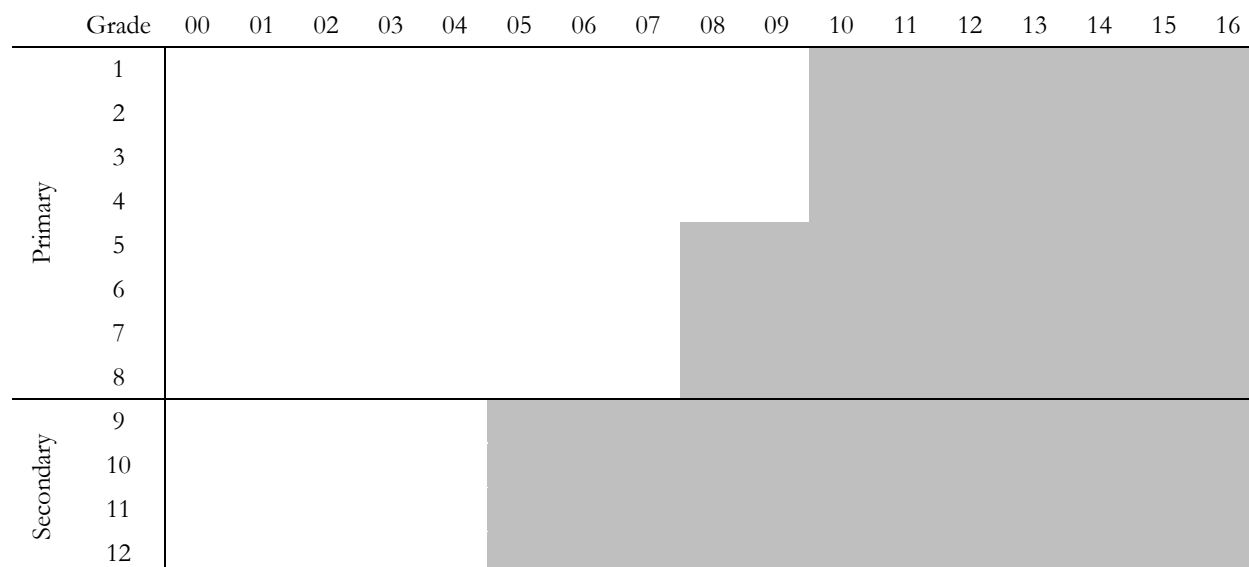


The Temporal Rollout of the Anti-Violence Education Curriculum in Malawi, 2000-2016.

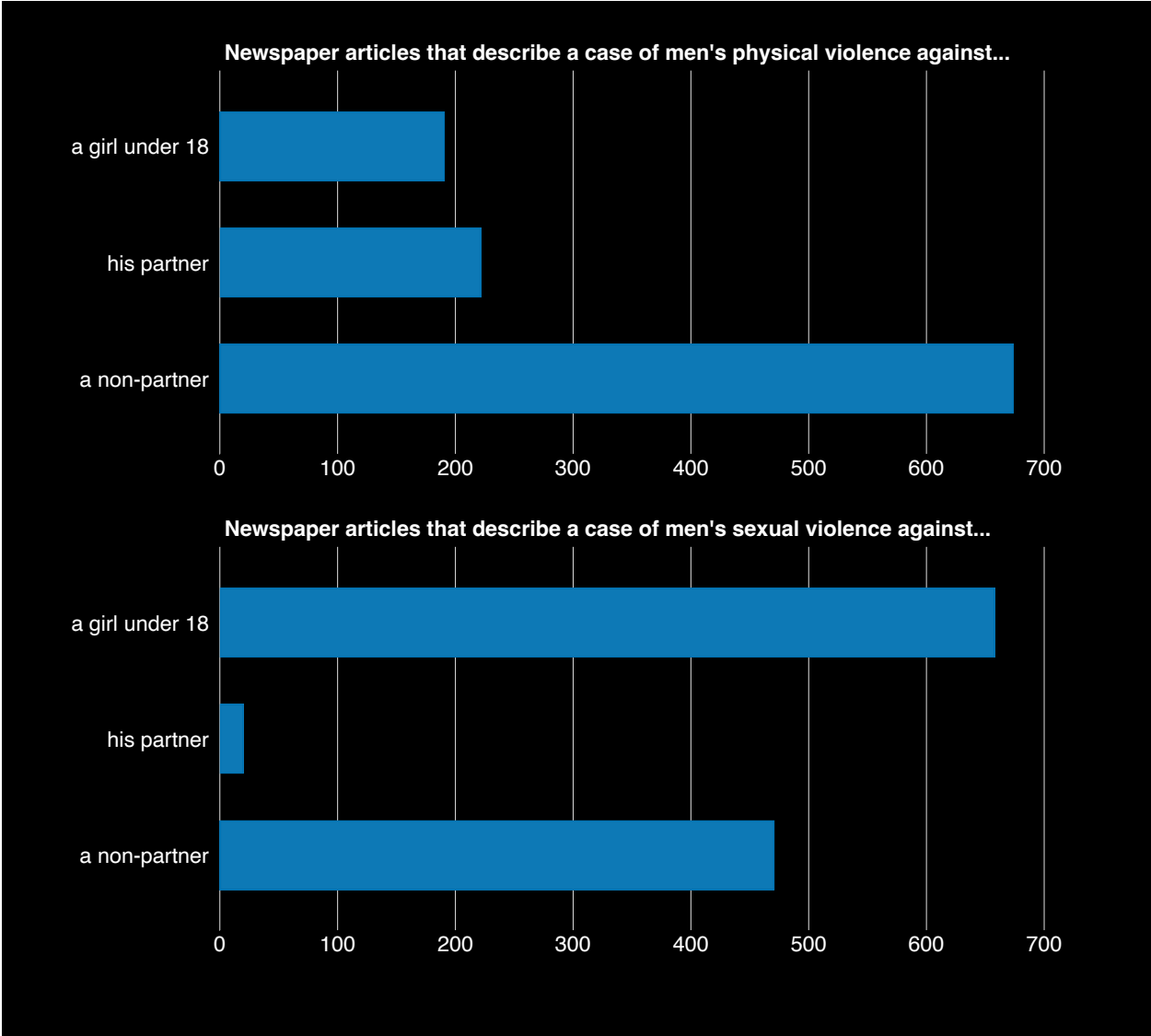
A. Life Skills



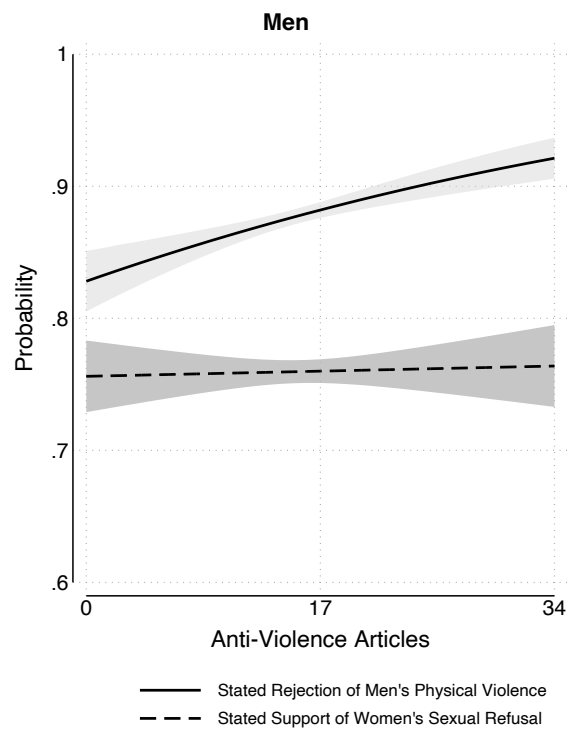
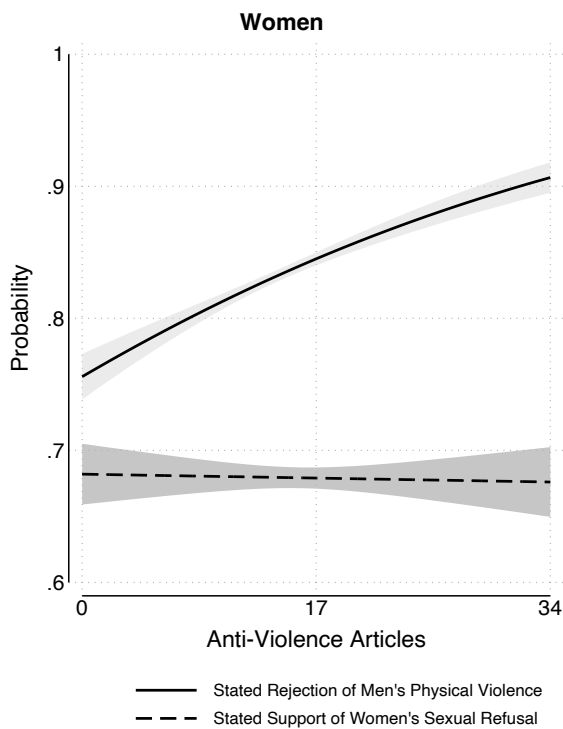
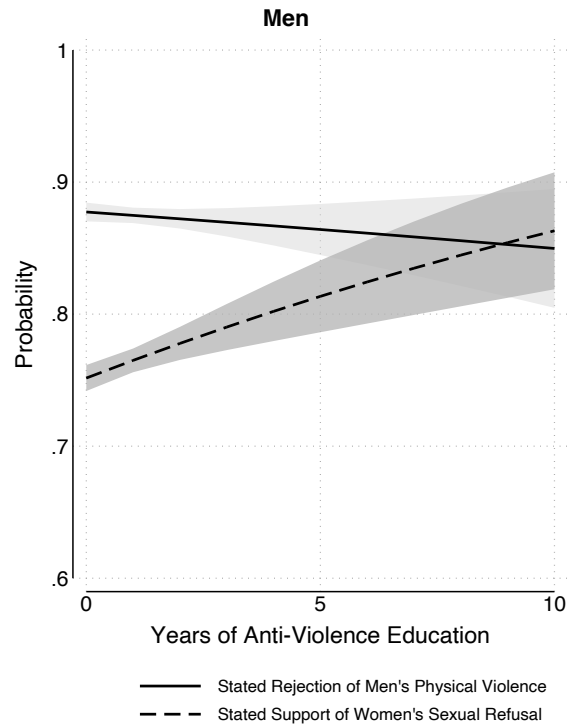
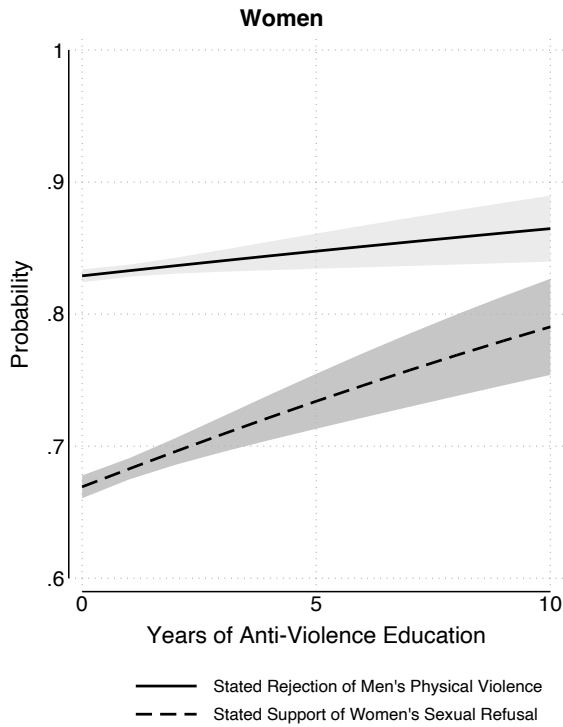
B. Social Studies



Number of Newspaper Articles in *The Daily Times* and *The Nation* on Men's Violence against Women by Type of Violence and Perpetrator-Survivor Relationship, 2000-2016.

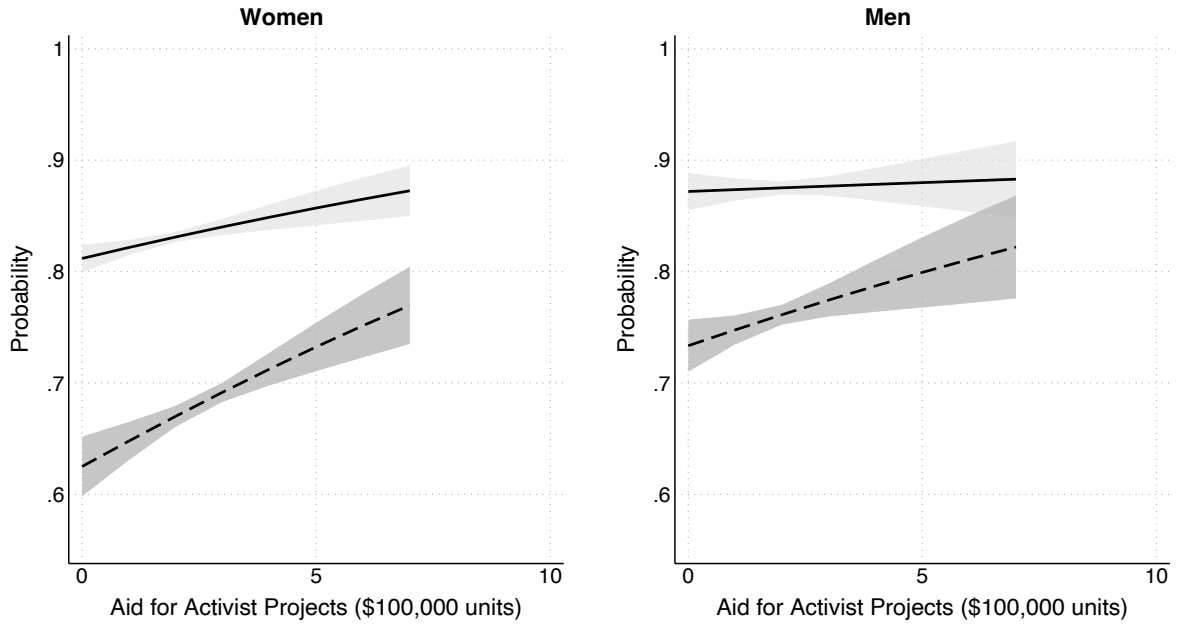


Associations between Malawians' Exposure to Anti-Violence Education Curricula and Newspaper Articles and their Moral Declarations about Men's Physical Violence and Women's Sexual Refusal.

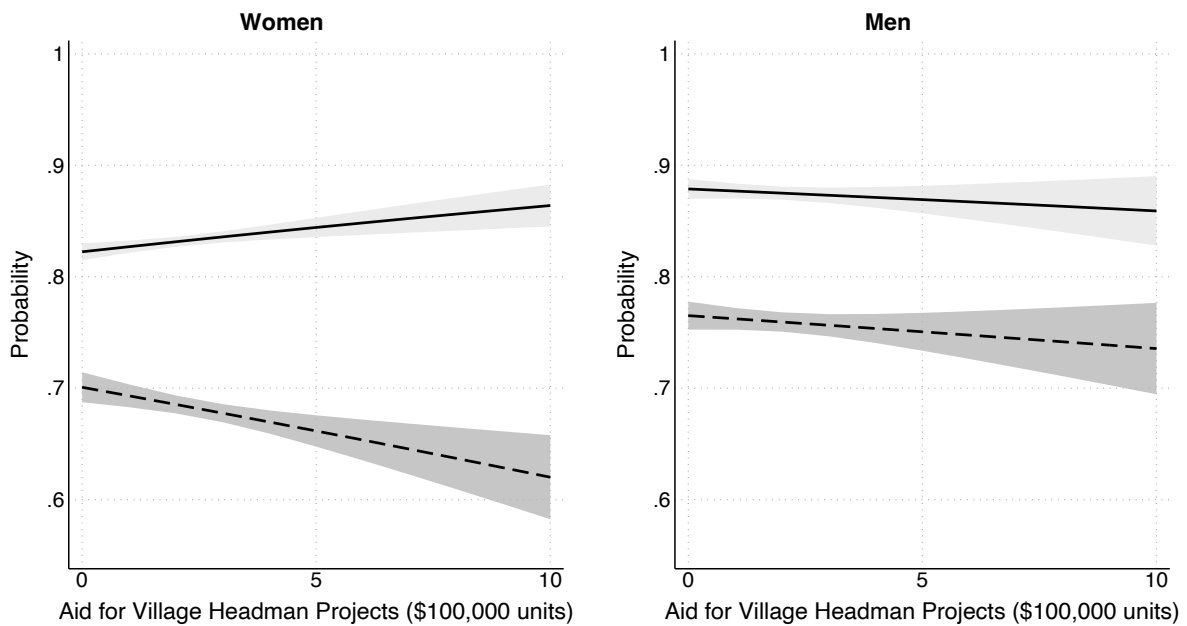


Associations between Malawians' Exposure to Activist and Village Headman Anti-Violence Aid Projects and their Moral Declarations about Men's Physical Violence and Women's Sexual Refusal.

— Stated Rejection of Men's Physical Violence
 - - - Stated Support of Women's Sexual Refusal



— Stated Rejection of Men's Physical Violence
 - - - Stated Support of Women's Sexual Refusal



References

- Charles, Maria. 2020. "Gender Attitudes in Africa: Liberal Egalitarianism Across 34 Countries." *Social Forces* 99(1):86–125.
- Cools, Sara, and Andreas Kotsadam. 2017. "Resources and Intimate Partner Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa." *World Development* 95:211–30.
- Htun, Mala, and S. Laurel Weldon. 2012. "The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975–2005." *American Political Science Review* 106(03):548–69.
- Kainja, Jimmy, Yamikani Ndasauka, Martina Mchenga, Fiskani Kondowe, Chilungamo M'manga, Limbika Maliwichi, and Simunye Nyamali. 2022. "Umunthu, COVID-19 and Mental Health in Malawi." *Heliyon* 8(11):e11316.
- Karimakwenda, Nyasha. 2020. "Deconstructing Characterizations of Rape, Marriage, and Custom in South Africa: Revisiting The Multi-Sectoral Campaign Against Ukuthwala." *African Studies Review* 63(4):763–81.
- Kurzman, Charles, Willa Dong, Brandon Gorman, Karam Hwang, Renee Ryberg, and Batool Zaidi. 2019. "Women's Assessments of Gender Equality." *Socius* 5:2378023119872387.
- Levitt, Peggy, and Sally Merry. 2009. "Vernacularization on the Ground: Local Uses of Global Women's Rights in Peru, China, India and the United States." *Global Networks* 9(4):441–61.
- Mandal, Saptarshi. 2014. "The Impossibility of Marital Rape." *Australian Feminist Studies* 29(81):255–72.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2006. *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pierotti, Rachael S. 2013. "Increasing Rejection of Intimate Partner Violence: Evidence of Global Cultural Diffusion." *American Sociological Review* 78(2):240–65.
- Potter, Sarah. 2020. "'Thou Shalt Meet Thy Sexual Needs in Marriage': Southern Baptists and Marital Sex in the Postwar Era." *Church History* 89(1):125–47.
- Schneider, Luisa Theresia. 2019. "Partners as Possession: A Qualitative Exploration of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence in Freetown, Sierra Leone." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 28(2):127–45.
- Sikkink, Kathryn. 2020. *The Hidden Face of Rights: Toward a Politics of Responsibilities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, Sarah A. 2019. "Gender, Relationships and Sexual Violence in the Lives of Women from Chuuk, Micronesia." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 28(2):146–65.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Swidler, Ann, and Susan Cotts Watkins. 2017. *A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tamale, Sylvia. 2008. "The Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights: A Critical Perspective on Women's Sexual Rights in Africa." *Feminist Legal Studies* 16(1):47–69.
- Yllö, Kersti, and M. Gabriela Torres. 2016. *Marital Rape: Consent, Marriage, and Social Change in Global Context*. New York: Oxford University Press.