

The Impact of Re-partnering on Women's Decision-Making Autonomy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Insights from Demographic and Health Surveys

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Abstract

This paper investigates the influence of re-partnering on women's decision-making autonomy in sub-Saharan Africa, a region where research on this topic is scarce. Leveraging data from Demographic and Health Surveys conducted in 30 countries, we distinguish between formal marriage and remarriage from cohabitation or re-cohabitation. Our analysis reveals that, relative to women in their first marriage, remarried women exhibit a higher likelihood of experiencing elevated levels of autonomy across three dimensions—health-related decisions, visiting family, and major purchases—in 11 out of the 30 countries studied. Furthermore, women in a second cohabitation consistently demonstrate increased autonomy compared to married women, a trend observed across all 30 countries and for each dimension of autonomy examined. Additionally, our findings highlight that these effects are more pronounced within polygamous couples than within monogamous ones. These results underscore the necessity of nuanced attention to the diverse forms of union prevalent across the continent.

1. Introduction

The African family undergoes constant transformation, influenced not only by internal social changes but also by global shifts, resulting in the emergence of new structures and the exacerbation of certain phenomena. While these new mutations are not entirely foreign to African societies (for instance, divorce has historically been present), their interpretations, connotations, manifestations, and consequences can be significantly altered. Consequently, discussions surrounding divorce and remarriage in the African context often center on children, with little attention paid to the implications for women themselves (Clark et al., 2019; Thiombiano, LeGrand, and Kobiané, 2013). This study aims to address this gap by examining how remarriage impacts women's well-being, including their autonomy and decision-making within the household.

Research conducted in developed countries suggests that remarried women typically experience greater autonomy compared to women in their first union (Burgoyne and Morison, 1997; Pyke, 1994). Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, including the remarried woman's potentially enhanced resource pool, her desire for increased autonomy leading to remarriage, mutual

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beneficial experiences within the new partnership, and the partner's willingness to compromise during disagreements (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine, 2000). However, it's important to recognize that separation often arises from an unequal distribution of gender roles, prompting women to seek a future partnership that offers greater independence from their initial circumstances. Whether this dynamic holds true for women in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, warrants further investigation.

The concept of women's autonomy is intricately tied to the specific context in which it is examined (Blanc, 2001; Schatz and Williams, 2012). Its applicability cannot be generalized across different contexts, particularly when analyzing environments perceived as unfavorable to women. Despite this caveat, women's autonomy is commonly assessed based on their ability to control resources and make decisions impacting their lives, free from male or societal influence (Jejeebhoy, 2000; Mason, 1986). For women who have ended their first marriage for various reasons, prioritizing their autonomy in decisions affecting them is paramount (Pyke, 1994). However, entrenched gender norms can compel women to make choices that may not align with their best interests. For instance, Locoh and Thiriat (1995) found that two-thirds of women in Togo remarry within three years of divorce. The swift remarriage rates may reflect the negative norms constraining the lives of separated women. Consequently, the positive impact of remarriage on women's autonomy observed in developed country contexts may not necessarily translate to sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, the aftermath of separation and societal pressures can erode women's confidence in making future decisions and expose them to increased risks.

This study aims to compare the autonomy of women in their first union with that of remarried women, specifically examining the impact of remarriage and exploring its underlying mechanisms. We pay particular attention to the role of polygamy. Utilizing the latest Demographic and Health Survey data from 30 sub-Saharan African countries, we aim to gain insights into the relationship between remarriage and autonomy. While the standardized questions on women's autonomy and marital status offer a broad understanding of this relationship, such generalization may overlook country-specific nuances shaped by laws and practices. To address this, our analysis incorporates various control variables to account for contextual effects. Moreover, we conduct country-specific analyses whenever feasible, avoiding aggregate analysis except when sample size constraints necessitate it.

2. Background

2.1. Partnering in the African context

The notion that marriage is more of a process than a static condition is widely acknowledged, particularly in studies of marriage in Africa. The concept of a first union encompasses various forms, from consensual partnerships to formal marriages. Formal marriage can take shape through customary, religious, or civil ceremonies, or a combination thereof. Consensual union, on the other hand, involves cohabitation as though one or more of these formal acts had been undertaken. Traditionally, the literature has treated these two distinct forms of cohabitation interchangeably. While this approach may have been suitable in the past, contemporary circumstances suggest that these forms of conjugality no longer represent identical realities (LeGrand and Younoussi, 2009). Calvès and colleagues, for instance, demonstrate that financial considerations can impede the formation of couples. Other scholars characterize common-law unions as "marriages in waiting,"

awaiting the fulfillment of certain conditions (Calvès, 2016; W. A. Clark, 2012). In Western contexts, common-law unions have exhibited greater instability compared to formal marriages. Given these circumstances and the focus of this study, we analyze these two phenomena separately.

While numerous studies have explored the context of first marriages, there is a notable dearth of literature on entering into unions following divorce, separation, or the death of a spouse. Similarly, the topic of remarriage encompasses both formal marriages and common-law arrangements. In this regard, the choices made by women hold significant meaning and should not be treated as uniform. While a first common-law union may not align with a woman's initial aspirations, entering into a common-law union after separation may carry distinct implications. It could signify a reluctance to commit long-term, with the option of separation remaining open. Additionally, social dynamics may play a role, with divorced or separated women facing different societal perceptions and opportunities in the marriage market compared to unmarried women. Consequently, formal marriage proposals may not be forthcoming for these individuals. In this study, although the specific reasons behind these choices are not known, we hypothesize that the four union groups under examination (first marriage, first common-law, remarriage, re-common-law) represent varied situations and experiences for women. Specifically, we posit a spectrum of autonomy for women, ranging from those in their first marriage to those in a common-law union. Positioned between these extremes are women who have remarried formally and those in a common-law union following separation.

The process of marriage, including the payment of dowry, symbolizes the respect and consideration that the man and his family extend to the woman and her family, thus forging a bond between the two families. In this traditional setup, the responsibility of orchestrating the marriage falls upon the brothers and sisters of the prospective groom, who act as liaisons between the groom and the bride's family. They serve as messengers, playing a pivotal role in the formation of the new couple. Similarly, the groom's parents hold significance, commanding respect and obedience from the bride. Numerous scholars have highlighted how this structure perpetuates patriarchal norms within society, shaping the expectations for women's behavior in public. However, despite its patriarchal underpinnings, this ritual retains importance for women, as it grants them significance within their own family and society. Consequently, it persists through generations.

2.2. Repartnering and women's autonomy

In this study, we define "women's autonomy" as their capacity to exert control over resources and decisions that impact them, independent of male or societal influence (Jejeebhoy, 2000; Mason, 1986). It extends beyond mere access to resources, encompassing broader control and freedom of utilization in alignment with the woman's own interests or those of her family (Mason). Embodying a broader notion of empowerment, women's autonomy integrates the concepts of "process" and "agency," defined as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 2001, p. 21). However, Malhotra and Schuler (2005) note that its dynamic nature is often overlooked in studies due to the absence of longitudinal data, a lack of consensus on data collection frequency, and uncertainty regarding which indicators to consider for measurement. Consequently, women's autonomy has been predominantly assessed through their agency in surveys such as the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), which focuses on women's decision-making ability without necessarily capturing changes over time or women acting autonomously (Allendorf, 2012, p. 188). While this approach is suitable for monitoring real-time progress in women's autonomy for policy implementation and adjustment, it has its limitations when evaluating the relationship between women's autonomy and their health outcomes (Vissého Adjiwanou and LeGrand, 2014).

Numerous studies conducted in developed countries have indicated that remarried women tend to experience higher levels of autonomy compared to those in their first union (Burgoyne and Morison, 1997; Pyke, 1994). Several mechanisms have been proposed to elucidate this phenomenon. Firstly, women's autonomy may stem from their personal experiences in previous marriages, fostering a desire to maintain the authority they acquired post-divorce. Secondly, remarried women often bring greater resources into their new unions, which can contribute to their autonomy. Thirdly, the decision to remarry is frequently driven by agency, reflecting women's deliberate choices. Additionally, the behavior of the new partner plays a significant role; they may hold different perceptions regarding marital roles and be more inclined to compromise during conflicts, thus fostering a conducive environment for women's autonomy.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the situation may not necessarily mirror that of developed countries. Loco and Thiriati (1995) caution that while divorce may grant some empowerment from the partner, it does not always empower a woman in relation to her family of origin. Remarriage can bring uncertainties about income, potentially limiting women's bargaining power. According to Loco and Thiriati (1995: 88), "such unions (remarriage) have a positive side, promoting women's autonomy, but also a negative side, characterized by the economic instability they may entail." It's important to note that separation often arises from an unequal distribution of gender roles, prompting women to seek a future life that removes them from their initial circumstances. This dynamic may also apply to women in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, although further research is needed to confirm this. Several factors can hinder the autonomy women might expect from their second marriage. Firstly, divorced women may face vulnerability in the marriage market, particularly due to the persistence of polygamy in many contexts. Secondly, social pressure and unfavorable perceptions of divorced women may compel them to hastily choose new partners.

Despite the increasing influence of modern norms in sub-Saharan Africa, polygamy persists as a prevalent practice. In areas where polygamy is common, there is little evidence of a decline in its prevalence (Antoine and Marcoux, 2014). Given this context, what opportunities exist for divorced women to enter new partnerships in a society where separation is often stigmatized? It's probable that for many divorced women, particularly those with children from previous unions, this represents their primary chance for re-coupling. However, this situation may constrain the potential gains in autonomy that married women might typically expect.

Finally, the findings regarding the impact of remarriage on women's autonomy may be influenced by methodological challenges related to selection bias (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine, 2000; Sweeney, 2007). Selection bias occurs when researchers cannot attribute a specific cause to one variable, and when unobserved variables could potentially explain the results. It's highly probable that women with greater autonomy are also more likely to have the agency to separate from their partners in the first place. Thus, the relationship between autonomy and remarriage may be reversed: autonomy might explain the decision to divorce and subsequently to remarry. While longitudinal data can help address issues of selection bias, the cross-sectional data utilized in this study require careful methodological considerations to mitigate selection bias (V. Adjiwanou and Legrand, 2013). To bolster the validity of our findings, we utilize additional information by examining a subset of women who married following the death of their spouse. This unexpected circumstance is less likely to be influenced by the factors of interest in our study. By comparing these women with those in their first union, we can partially mitigate the issue of selection bias. However, it's important to note that this validation process has not yet been conducted in the preliminary results presented here.

3. Methods

3.1 Data

The data for this study are sourced from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in 26 sub-Saharan African countries over the past decade. These countries include Burkina Faso (2010), Benin (2018), Burundi (2016), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2014), Côte d'Ivoire (2012), Cameroon (2018), Ethiopia (2008), Gabon (2012), Ghana (2014), the Gambia (2013), Guinea (2018), Liberia (2020), Madagascar (2009), Mali (2018), Malawi (2016), Mozambique (2011), Nigeria (2018), Niger (2012), Namibia (2013), Rwanda (2020), Sierra Leone (2019), Senegal (2017), Eswatini (2006), Togo (2014), Tanzania (2015), Uganda (2016), South Africa (2016), Zambia (2018), and Zimbabwe (2015). The DHS, initiated in the 1980s, comprises a series of surveys conducted in developing countries, addressing various topics vital to these nations, including nuptiality, fertility, and mortality. These surveys also feature modules on women's autonomy and violence, facilitating the measurement of these phenomena and enabling comparison with marital status data. The total sample comprises women aged 15 to 49 at the time of the survey in each country. It is restricted to women who are in a union at the time of the survey, including those in their first union or in a subsequent union.

3.2 Variables

- Dependent Variables

The dependent variable is assessed through a series of four questions designed to gauge decision-making dynamics within the household across four specific scenarios. Women are explicitly queried about decision-making authority in significant life situations concerning 1) visits to health centers in the event of the wife's illness, 2) major household purchases, 3) visiting family members or friends, and 4) management of the husband's income. For each scenario, respondents are categorized based on whether the woman makes the decision alone, jointly with her spouse, if the spouse solely decides, or if others are involved in the decision-making process. We have dichotomized the first three variables, assigning a value of 1 if the woman makes the decision independently, and 0 otherwise. Similarly, the variable pertaining to managing the husband's income is dichotomized, with a value of 1 assigned if the decision is made solely by the woman or jointly with the spouse, and 0 otherwise. We posit that joint decision-making regarding the husband's income is indicative of women's autonomy.

- Main independent variable

The main independent variable is the woman's remarriage status. It takes four modalities:

1. if the woman is in her first marriage ;
2. if the woman is in her first common-law union
3. if the woman is remarried;
4. if the woman is in cohabitation after a first separation.

The first category serves as a reference modality.

- Moderating variables

We observe that the relationship between marital status and autonomy may be influenced by the presence of co-wives. Since remarried women are more likely to enter polygamous unions compared to those in their first union, and given that such unions often entail separate living arrangements, it is reasonable to assume that this setup may foster greater autonomy for women. In essence, we aim to eliminate the possibility that the increased autonomy observed in remarried women is solely attributed to not cohabitating with their partner, a factor that can be explained by polygamy. This variable is coded as 1 if the spouse has other wives and 0 otherwise.

- Control Variables

We incorporate a set of variables into our analysis to account for potential differences in the factors influencing first-time and remarried women. These variables encompass age, education, employment status, religion, household income, and place of residence. Additionally, we control for spouse characteristics, such as age, education, and employment status.

3.3 Models of Analysis

Logistic regression models are employed to assess the impact of marital status on each aspect of women's decision-making autonomy. Interaction models, whose coefficients are not interpretable directly, will be depicted in the form of interaction graphs for presentation.

4. Preliminary results

4.1. Distribution of the sample

Figures A1 to A3 in the Appendix display the sample distribution based on the independent variables of the model, segregated by women's marital status. Various insights emerge from these figures. It's evident that marital status correlates with polygamous arrangements, as remarried women are more inclined to enter such unions compared to those in their first marriage. This trend is consistent across all countries. Additionally, the data highlight variations among countries regarding the prevalence of cohabitation before the first marriage or following separation.

4.2 Effect of marital status on autonomy

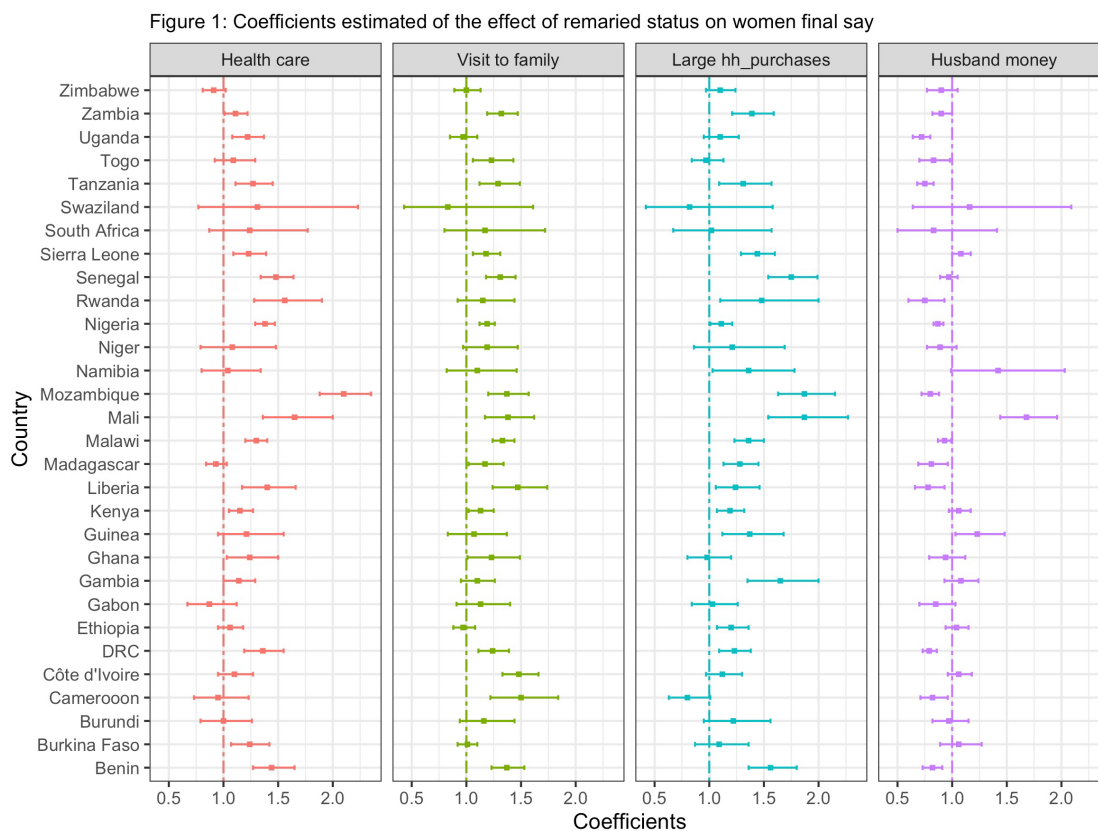


Figure 1 illustrates the odds ratios depicting the impact of remarriage on four dimensions of women's autonomy. It compares remarried women with those in their first marriage across these autonomy dimensions. Overall, the analysis reveals that in nearly half of the cases, remarried women are more likely to report higher levels of autonomy regarding visiting health centers, social visits, and major purchases compared to women in their first marriage. In some countries, this greater autonomy among remarried women in one dimension is consistent across other dimensions, notably observed in Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Zambia. However, concerning decision-making regarding the husband's income, the findings differ. In comparison to women in

their first marriage, remarried women exhibit greater autonomy in only two countries, Guinea and Mali. Conversely, an opposite effect is observed in Benin, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda, spanning 11 countries. Notably, in no country does the data indicate an advantage for women in their first marriage.

Figure 2: Coefficients estimated of the effect of remarried status (re-living together) on women final say

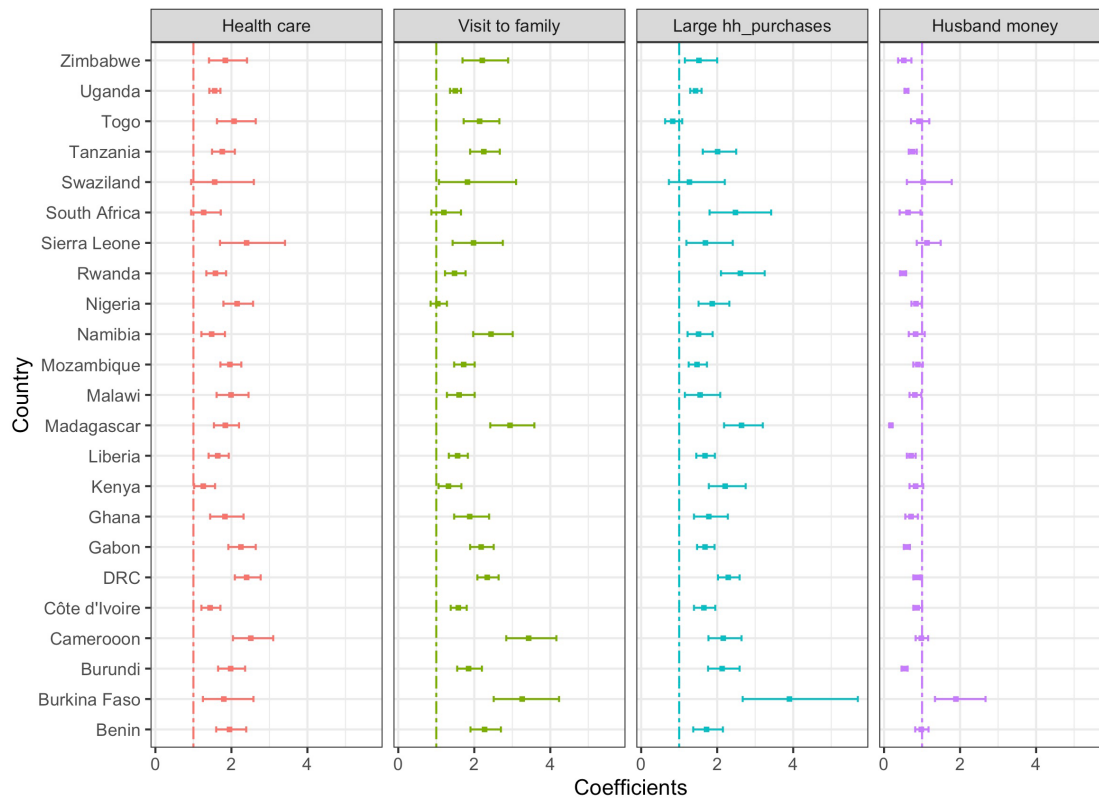


Figure 2 presents the same findings but compares women in common-law unions after separation with those in their first marriage. Across almost all countries, residing in a post-separation common-law union appears to have a more pronounced effect on women's autonomy across all three dimensions of their well-being. The exception is in Swaziland and Togo, where this effect is insignificant concerning decision-making about major purchases. Regarding decision-making concerning spousal income, the results vary. Except for Burkina Faso, where women in common-law unions after separation are more likely to achieve financial autonomy, this effect is not evident elsewhere. However, in Burundi, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, married women in their first union are more likely to exhibit greater autonomy in decisions regarding spousal income compared to women in common-law unions after separation.

5. Conclusion

Cohabitation is increasingly becoming a prevalent aspect of union formation in Africa, no longer merely seen as a precursor to marriage. With high divorce rates in many countries, cohabitation has transitioned from being associated solely with first unions to becoming common in subsequent unions. While existing studies in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to explore this union type, our paper delves into analyzing how different forms of remarriage after separation, including formal remarriage and reunion, are linked to increased autonomy for women. Contrary to expectations, remarriage might be associated with diminished autonomy, as women may feel compelled to remarry to escape social stigma. To investigate this, we utilized data from recent demographic and health surveys across 30 countries. We examined four dimensions of women's autonomy: decision-making regarding visits to health centers, social visits with family and friends, significant household purchases, and management of the spouse's income. We consider a woman to possess a high degree of autonomy in the first three dimensions if she makes decisions independently. Conversely, for the last dimension, we define autonomy as either sole decision-making or joint decision-making with her spouse regarding income management.

Our preliminary findings indicate that in aspects directly impacting women, remarried women are more likely to assert sole decision-making compared to women in their first marriage across the majority of countries under study. Furthermore, when comparing women in common-law unions following separation with those in their first marriage, we observe a more pronounced and widespread effect. These results align with findings from other contexts, suggesting that remarried women tend to exhibit greater autonomy than those in their initial union (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). However, our analysis extends beyond this by delineating the effects based on whether the woman is formally married or in a common-law union.

Since polygamy often characterizes unions formed after separation, we examined whether this relationship persists based on the type of union the woman is in (polygamous versus monogamous). Our results confirm this pattern and further reveal that remarried women or women in subsequent unions, particularly those in polygamous marriages, are more likely to experience greater autonomy compared to married women in similar types of unions. These findings highlight that women in polygamous unions still retain some degree of autonomy within their marriages. However, further comparison between remarried women in polygamous unions and married women in monogamous unions is needed to draw definitive conclusions. Regarding the fourth dimension of autonomy related to spousal income, our findings favor married women in several countries. Specifically, we observed that women married in their first union were more likely to be involved in managing their partner's earned income compared to women who remarried or entered a subsequent union.

6. Références

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Annexe

Fig A1: marital status by country

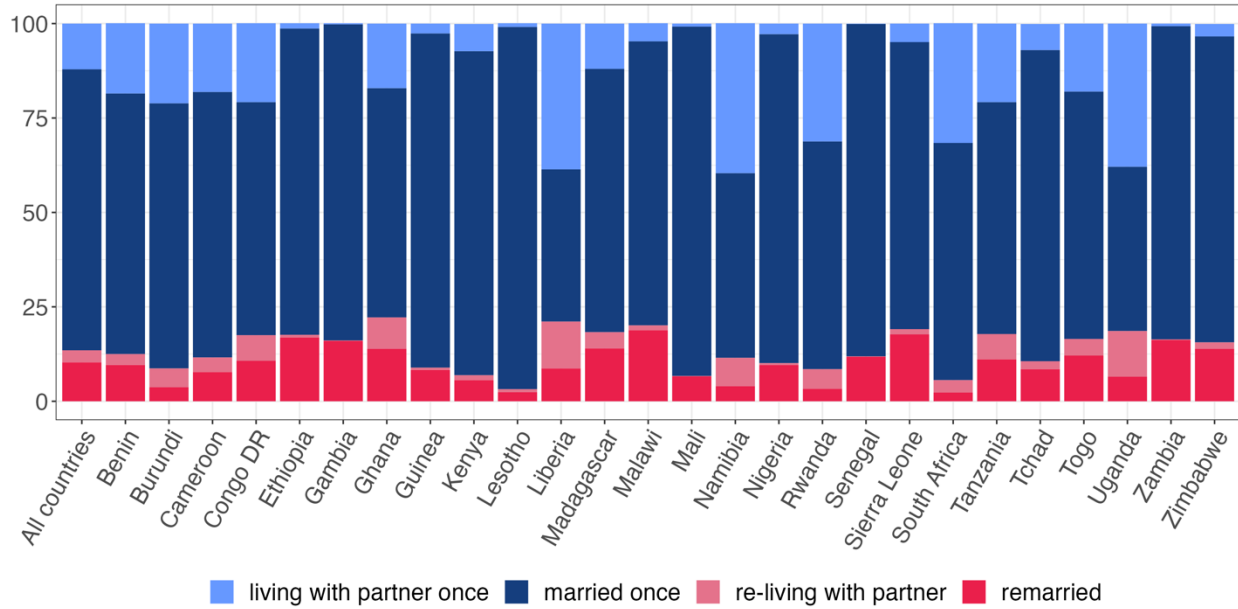


Fig A2: proportion of polygamous union among first union and re-partnering

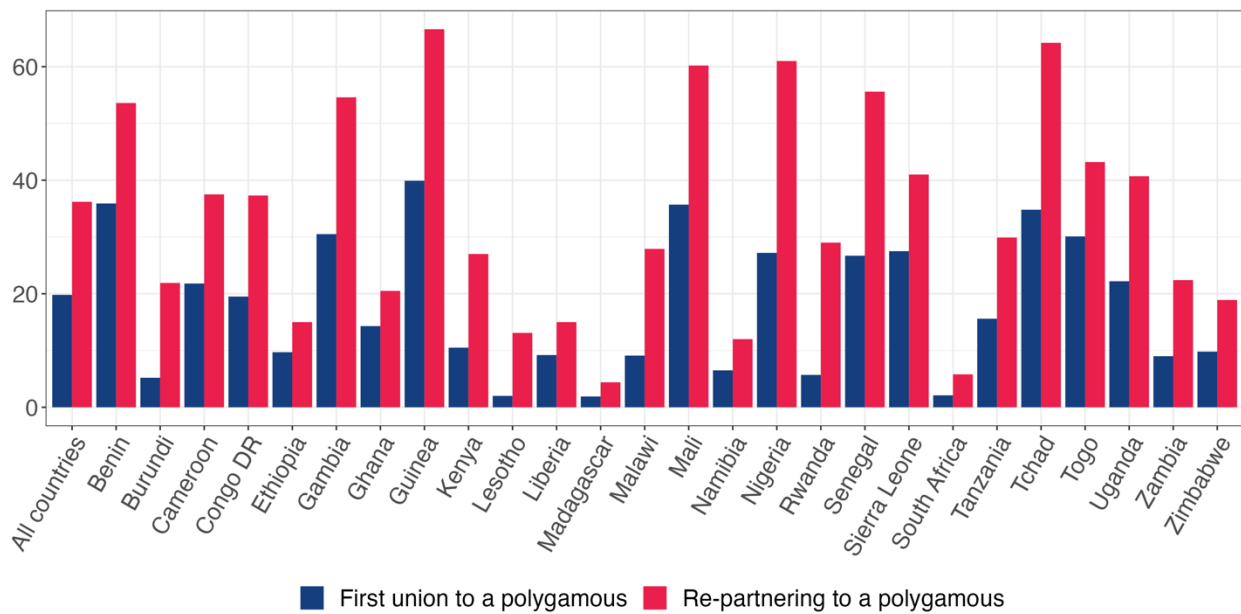
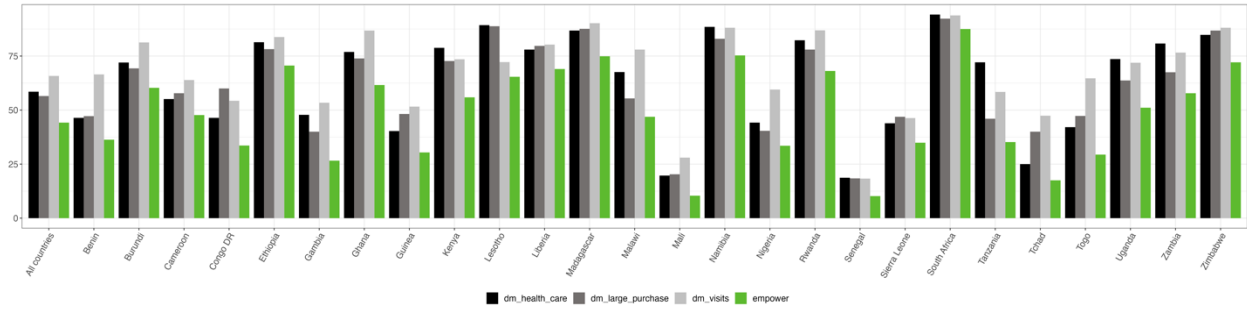


Fig A3: Proportion of women with specific measure of decision-making and autonomy



4.3. Marital Status, Polygamy, and Autonomy

We now turn to how living in polygamy affects the above results. The results presented in Charts 4 through 8 relate only to autonomy in decision making with respect to a woman's care. In general, remarried women living in polygamous unions are more likely to have high levels of autonomy than married (first union) women living in polygamous unions. This effect is also larger than that observed in monogamous couples, with the exception of the results for Rwanda. It is also important to note that, by remaining in monogamous couples, women who have remarried or are in a common-law union after separation are more likely to have autonomy over their health care than women who are in their first marriage.

