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The Marital Process and HIV/AIDS in
Rural Malawi

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**THE MARITAL PROCESS AND HIV/AIDS
IN RURAL MALAWI**

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THE MARITAL PROCESS AND HIV/AIDS IN RURAL MALAWI

Abstract

Using both qualitative and quantitative data from young men and women in rural Malawi, this paper takes an in-depth look at how youths in an AIDS-afflicted sub-Saharan country – Malawi – attempt to achieve the dual goals of avoiding HIV/AIDS and finding a suitable spouse. For youths in Malawi facing AIDS epidemics, we show that the process leading to marriage, with its concurrent rapid changes in sexual partnerships and sexual behaviors, is integrally related to HIV/AIDS risks. In addition, concerns about HIV/AIDS appear to be influencing adolescents' marital aspirations with respect to the timing of marriage as well as the selection of spousal partners. Many youths are clearly failing to find safe pathways into marriage, indicating a strong need for far greater research and policy attention on the dynamic relationship between HIV risks and the marital process.

Introduction

The number of youths aged 10 to 24 in Africa is expected to rise sharply from 294 million in 2005 to 435 million in 2030 (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2005). Nearly all of these youths will marry and many will do so in the context of high HIV infection rates. These youths will face the dual challenges of finding a suitable marital partner with whom to start a family and also avoiding HIV/AIDS. Meeting these objectives simultaneously is complicated by the reality that heterosexual relations, which are central to the formation and continuation of marital unions, are also the primary transmission route for HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. Advice on the best way to navigate a safe passage into marriage is limited and often contradictory, especially as clinical discourse from public health campaigns—implemented by international organizations and local governments alike—increasingly becomes a main source of information from which young women and men learn about sexuality and sexual risk (Parikh 2005; Stewart 2001). Of these messages, one of the most common is to remain abstinent until marriage. This policy prescription, however, fails to address the complexities intrinsic to the local marital process in most of sub-Saharan Africa, where abstinence is generally not a common pathway to marriage and where the marital process itself may be quite elongated (Bledsoe 1990; Bledsoe and Pison 1997; Zaba et al. 2004). Although researchers have long argued that a better understanding of the formation of marital unions would consequently benefit AIDS research (Boerma et al. 2002; Meekers 1992), surprisingly little is known about how different pathways to marriage affect youths' risk of acquiring HIV or how concerns about HIV risks may be affecting the marital process and spousal selection.

The trajectories adolescents in Africa take with respect to their sexual behaviors and their marital patterns are remarkably diverse, but also quite distinctive for men and women. For both men and women, adolescence is marked by a rapid transition into sexual activity. In eastern and southern Africa, for example, 16.6% of girls will become sexually active by the age of 15, climbing to 76.9% by the age of 20. For boys, 14.1% of 15 year olds and 65.2% of 20 year olds are sexually active (National Statistical Office and Macro 2005). The circumstances of sexual debut, however, vary considerably by gender (Blanc and Way 1998; Gage-Brandon and Meekers 1993; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2005; Singh et al. 2000; Zaba et al. 2004). Despite a clear shift in the context of sexual initiation for females in sub-Saharan Africa from marital to non-marital relationships (Mensch, Grant and Blanc 2006), females remain substantially more likely than males to initiate their sexual activity within marriage. Moreover, although the average age of first marriage for women has been rising steadily across Africa, the average age of marriage remains consistently higher for men than women (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2005; Singh and Samara 1996). In their systematic overview of marital patterns in developing countries, Mensch, Singh and Casterline (2005) report that while more than half of women in sub-Saharan Africa are married by the age of 20, only about 13% of men are married by this age. In contrast, the average age of sexual debut for men and women is much closer, with men initiating sex earlier than women in some countries and later in others. Consequently, the time interval between first sex and first marriage is universally shorter for women than for men across a wide range of countries, ethnicities, and religions in sub-Saharan Africa.

For women this interval rarely exceeds four years (ranging from 0.1 to 4.1 years), while for men this interval ranges from 1.9 years to 8.8 years. In general, the interval between first sex and first marriage is two to twenty times longer among men than among women.¹

While these general trends in the timing of sexual initiation and marriage are well-known and well-documented, considerably less research has explored the evolution of types of partnerships during this interval, despite the obvious links between types of partnerships, sexual behaviors, and marriage. Given the shorter average period between first sex and marriage, it is not surprising that a higher proportion of females than males transit directly from the virginal to the marital state. For other women, however, the process leading to marriage may be a more gradual and elongated proceeding from courtship, to steady dating, to engagement, and finally to marriage. Even less is known about the nature of the sexual partnerships of men. Some men appear to have multiple and often concurrent partners prior to marriage, while others engage in sporadic commercial sex, and still others maintain “serially” monogamous relationships with steady girlfriends. In addition, relationships do not necessarily become progressively more “serious” over time or as the individual ages. For example, a girl may break off her relationship with her fiancé and initiate a new casual partnership with another man.

Much of the previous literature, particularly with respect to HIV/AIDS risks, treat these pre-marital partnerships (and the sexual behaviors that occur within them) as distinct and even disjointed from the marital process. While certainly other motivations, such as sexual gratification, power, social status, and money (Poulin 2007), may underlie some of these premarital sexual partnerships, in this paper we argue that marital aspirations are a key influence and warrant greater understanding and recognition. Indeed, others have pointed out that some changes in sexual activity and partnership types reflect a deliberate movement toward marriage (Caraël et al. 1995; Gage-Brandon and Meekers 1993; Zabin and Kiragu 1998). This period of partnership “exploration” may be becoming more important in determining whom young men and women will marry, as arranged marriages throughout Africa become less common. Several researchers have noted a shift away from more traditional practices, where parents and other kin-elders historically had greater authority over their children in spousal selection (Smith 2000). For example, while retaining their symbolic importance, the role of traditional marriage mediators—typically non-parental relatives such as aunts and uncles—may be decreasing, as young couples more often decide secretly to become “engaged”, and only announce their intentions to their relatives when they are able to fix a date for a more formal or public wedding ceremony.

Thus, one of the primary objectives of this paper is to examine these changes in partnership types and sexual behaviors through the lens of *marital aspirations*. Considering the role that marital aspirations may play in shaping sexual partnerships and behaviors could help us better understand and interpret the distinctive pattern of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. In sub-Saharan African countries with generalized epidemics, women typically become infected at much younger ages than men. The common pattern in eastern and southern Africa is to see a sharp rise in HIV infections

among women between the ages of 15 and 24. For men, HIV rates rise gradually during adolescence, with the greatest increase occurring in their late twenties and early thirties (Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Health and ORC Macro 2004; Glynn et al. 2001). In Malawi, for example, the HIV prevalence rate of 3.7% among females ages 15 to 19 climbs to 13.2% among females 20 to 24 years old. For men in these same age groups, HIV prevalence only increases from 0.4% to 3.9% (National Statistical Office and Macro 2005). Consequently, HIV/AIDS prevalence rates among adolescents (ages 15-19) are typically two to eight times higher among females than among males (Laga et al. 2001).

The second objective of this paper is to explore how concerns about HIV/AIDS in high prevalence areas may be altering marital aspirations, especially the desired timing of marriage and selection of specific marital partners. For many young people, their spouse will be their primary lifetime sexual partner. Thus, concerns about HIV/AIDS are likely to factor into at least two important marital decisions: when to marry and whom to marry. Attitudes regarding the optimal age at which to marry may be changing, although the direction of this change may depend on perceived risks associated with marriage. Characteristics of the ideal spouse may also change. In the absence of an HIV epidemic, older and wealthier men may be considered preferable husbands, but concerns about HIV risks may diminish their appeal, particularly if they have lived elsewhere while acquiring their wealth. In short, concerns over one's own health and mortality may have altered the process of searching for a spouse, the desired timing of marriage, and the preferred characteristics of an ideal spouse.

This paper combines exceptionally rich qualitative interviews with unique quantitative data from young men and women in Malawi to develop a more nuanced understanding of 1) how the process of marriage, with its concurrent rapid changes in sexual partnerships and sexual behaviors, may be related to HIV/AIDS risks and 2) how concerns about HIV/AIDS may be shaping marital aspirations. We speculate that the dynamic relationships between HIV and marriage will differ substantially for men and women and, consequently, examine these groups separately.

Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Data from Malawi

The context in which we examine these complex relationships between the marital process and HIV/AIDS is rural Malawi. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in southern Africa and has the ninth-highest HIV prevalence rate in the world (UNAIDS 2001; UNAIDS 2006). Yet its diverse ethnic groups and multiple spoken languages make its rural areas similar in many respects to other rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa which are also facing an HIV/AIDS epidemic. In Malawi, sexual initiation begins at slightly earlier ages for women than for men (17.3 vs. 18.5) (National Statistical Office and Macro 2005). Marriage occurs considerably later for men. The average age of first marriage for women is 18.0, while men marry about five years later at the age of 22.9. Marriage tends to occur earlier in the rural areas than in urban settings (National Statistical Office and Macro 2005). This marital pattern is typical for many African countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, but the age of first marriage for women is lower

in some countries (e.g. Mali and Chad) and higher in others (e.g. Kenya and South Africa).

The quantitative survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews come from young married and unmarried men and women ages 15 to 24 in rural Malawi. These highly complementary data allow us to use a mixed-method approach to examine not only general premarital and marital partnership patterns and sexual behavior, but also, with considerable detail, individuals' perspectives and outcomes pertaining to such partnerships. Survey data used in our analyses come from the third wave of the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) conducted in the summer of 2004. While the previous two waves of the MDICP interviewed ever-married women (aged 15 to 49) and their spouses, the third wave added two important innovations. First, the project added a sample of unmarried adolescents and young women and men aged 15-24, in part to glean more detailed information about AIDS and sexual relations during transitions to adulthood. A total of 504 young men (396 unmarried and 108 ever-married) and 584 young women (250 unmarried and 334 ever-married) are included in our quantitative analyses.² Second, all respondents were offered the opportunity to be tested for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (Obare et al. 2006). Over 90% of contacted respondents agreed to be tested. In our sample, we find an HIV prevalence of 1.8% among men and 4.3% among women aged 15 to 24. Between a quarter and a third of men and women expressed some concern that they might be infected with HIV.

These survey data come from three sites, in southern (Balaka), central (Mchinji) and northern (Rumphi). Married and unmarried youths (ages 15-24) received slightly different questionnaires, but questions contained in both survey versions were identically stated. Unmarried young men and women were asked a series of questions about marital aspirations, including the age when they expected to get married and the ideal characteristics of the spouse they hoped to marry. They were also queried about their sexual behaviors and reported detailed information about their two most recent sexual partnerships. Married respondents provided information about their current marriage as well as detailed information on their three most recent sexual partnerships (including their spouses). As expected, a higher proportion of females (57.2%) than males (21.4%) in this age group are married, but among those unmarried, 68.0% of males and 39.8% of females report having ever been sexually active. Table 1 shows that married females report having an average of 1.7 lifetime sexual partners, while sexually active, unmarried females report having had 1.4 partners. Married males reported having had 4.6 sexual partnerships compared to 3.3 partners reported by unmarried, sexually active males.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The much higher number of sexual partners reported by young men than young women is typical among studies relying on self-reported sexual behaviors. Some differences are expected since the age groups (15-24 for men and women) do not represent each others' mating pool. For example, women aged 15-24 may often have partners who are older than 25 years old. Many men, on the other hand, report acquiring sexual partners when they travel to larger trading centers and cities for work. Urban areas also contain a higher

concentration of sex workers and bar girls. Since none of the rural adolescent and young women in our sample reported more than eight sexual partners, the absence of commercial sex workers in our sample is evident. Some of this difference, however, may be attributable to underreporting of sexual partners by female respondents, who want to provide “socially acceptable” responses regarding their sexuality in these face-to-face interviews. One study conducted in the southern region of Malawi, however, found that adolescents’ responses about their sexual behaviors gathered using a similar questionnaire instrument were as reliable as those using audio and computer assisted methods (Mensch et al. 2006).

To complement the survey data and to add greater understanding in the complexities of the marital process, we draw heavily upon ethnographic information consisting of in-depth interviews from a sub-sample (N=133) of the list of survey respondents, from northern Rumphu and southern Balaka.³ The in-depth interviews focused on six general topics including the following three that are relevant for the present paper: partnership beginnings and endings, sexual behaviors, and marriage values and expectations. The topic ordering was left to the trained interviewer, so as to circumvent an atmosphere of formality, considered important given the sensitivity of the subject of sexual behavior. Specific themes for interviewing and analysis include preferred characteristics of spouses, reasons given for marrying, motivations for ending partnerships, duration of partnerships, and premarital courtship practices. Married respondents were asked about current spouses as well as any premarital partners. Previous analyses show the qualitative sample to match well with the survey sample on key background characteristics (Poulin 2006).

Measuring Marital Expectations

Ideally, to study how partnerships, sexual behaviors, and HIV risks evolve and change as men and women approach and cross over the marriage threshold, we would have longitudinal data that followed these individuals yearly over a five to ten year period. Unfortunately, such data are typically unavailable. Indeed longitudinal studies of unmarried adolescents are currently quite rare since they pose considerable challenges in data collection due to the fact that young adults are highly mobile, with moves often related to work or marriage. In this paper, however, we can overcome important limitations of cross-sectional data by examining how *expectations about the timing of marriage* relate to partnership selection, sexual behaviors, and HIV risk perceptions. For these purposes, we construct a “synthetic life-course” around the time of marriage by combining data on the expected time until marriage for unmarried respondents, and the duration since marriage for married respondents. In particular, the “expected time until marriage” was calculated by taking the difference between unmarried respondents’ expected age of marriage and their current age.⁴ For married respondents, we estimate the marital duration in our sample using the reported age and/or year of marriage. While married males in our sample had been married for three years, married females had been married for five years, on average. We find that the average expected time until marriage among unmarried girls was 5.1 years and among unmarried boys was 6.6 years (Table 1). The measurement of “expected time until marriage” allows us to observe how

partnership types, sexual behaviors, and HIV/AIDS concerns and risks change as young men and women approach their ideal age at marriage.

Although these youths' expectations about their age of marriage will undoubtedly differ from their actual date of marriage, marital expectations may play a critical role in determining sexual behaviors and partnerships. Expectations about marriage are certainly important for those who select their own spousal partners. In our sample of unmarried persons, over 97% reported that they expected to choose their own spouse. However, even among those whose spousal partners are chosen for them by their parents or other relatives, expectations about marriage are likely to incorporate perceptions about parents' (or relatives') plans regarding their marriage.

Patterns in Sexual Debut, Marriage and HIV Status with Respect to Age

Figure 1 depicts the rapid changes, which are common in this age group, with respect to sexual debut, marital status, and HIV infection. This graph, which is shown on a logarithmic scale to reflect the substantial differences in the prevalence of these three life-course transitions, reveals several trends that are typical across many parts of eastern and southern Africa. First, the proportion of sexually active adolescent and young men and women by age is roughly similar, although the proportion ever sexually active increases more sharply for females than for males, mainly due the lower level of sexual activity at age 16. In comparison, the proportion of married males and married females differ substantially at all ages under 24. Overall, during this age period the proportion of married men lags the proportion of married women by about three years. Approximately 30% of Malawian females are married at age 18, while 30% of men are married at age 21. Consequently, as discussed earlier, the interval between first sex and marriage tends to be longer for men than women. Figure 1 also exhibits a familiar pattern with respect to HIV prevalence rates among men and women in this age group in Africa. In rural Malawi, the comparable rise in prevalence rates among males is about three years later than for females. The sharpest up-turn in HIV-prevalence among women occurs around age 18 for women and around age 21 for men.

(insert Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1 therefore suggests that the link between sexual debut and HIV risks is importantly mediated by the type of sexual partnerships formed, the sexual behaviors within these partnerships, and the partner's characteristics. For both men and women the ages between 15 and 24 are characterized by considerable variety in the types of partnerships formed, ranging from "one-night-stands" (colloquially called "hit-and-runs") to casual partnerships, to steady boyfriends/girlfriends (*chibwenzi*), to fiancé/fiancée (also called a PTM ("promise-to-marry"), or *chitomelo*).

Examining Premarital Partnerships with Respect to Marital Aspirations

To view these non-marital or pre-marital partnerships through the lens of marital aspirations, Figures 2 and 3 examine changes in these partnerships with respect to the

expected time until marriage for unmarried men and women. Girls transit rapidly from sexual inactivity into sexual relationships shortly before marriage (Figure 2). Almost 80% of girls who do not expect to marry in the next five years are sexually inactive, while only a quarter of girls who anticipate marrying within the next year report being virgins. As girls move toward their expected time of matrimony, the proportion with steady boyfriends or fiancés grows, though there is also an increase in casual or “other” types of partnerships

(insert Figures 2 and 3 about here)

For men of the same age cohort (under 25 years), very few (8%) expect to marry within a year. Like women, men show a clear decline in virginity rates as they approach their expected age of marriage, but this decline is much less pronounced due to the higher initial levels of sexual activity more than five years prior to marriage. In contrast, the rise in the relative proportion of men reporting having a steady girlfriend or fiancée rises monotonically as they approach their anticipated age of marriage. Among men who do not expect to marry in the next five years, only 6.2% are engaged and 18.1% have a steady girlfriend. Almost 60%, however, are sexually active, in sharp contrast to the low levels of sexual activity five years prior to marriage for women. For men who believe they will marry within the next year, fully 56.2% are engaged or in a steady relationship, somewhat higher than the respective value for women. The extent to which these observed changes in partnership types are driven by marital aspirations is unknown. Qualitative reports, however, suggest that marital expectations may be important considerations both at the time of partnership formation and in determining whether a particular partnership will continue or dissolve.

Marital Expectations and Partnership Formation

In rural Malawi, men almost always “propose” to women, with both men and women considering it unseemly for women to initiate contact. These “proposals” are not necessarily marriage proposals. The term is used more loosely, and typically refers to an invitation given by a young man to a young woman to be his girlfriend. Young women and men meet each other in schools, in nearby villages, at their churches or mosques, at the borehole, or at football games. Instead of directly approaching women themselves men will use their friends as ambassadors, having them inform their potential partner of their interest in her verbally or via a written letter delivered by the friend. Gifts are often also offered or promised along with proposals. At the time of the proposal, expectations about marital prospects are typically left undefined as are other aspects of the relationship with the exception of sexual relations. In the southern region of Balaka, both men and women regard the acceptance of the proposal (as well as accompanying gifts) as tacit consent to sexual relations, which are expected to occur shortly thereafter, usually within the following two weeks. In the northern region of Rumphi, possibly because girls there are more educated and wealthier, they are sometimes perceived as “dragging out” the interval between accepting a proposal and first sex by making boys wait longer.

Although most of these initial proposals do not make direct reference to the type of partnership they are seeking, they often allude to the individuals' degree of sincerity and the strength of his or her emotional feelings. The type and amount of gifts given and accepted may also signal both individuals' level of commitment. Proposals from men often include flattering comments about the woman's beauty. They may also allude to the intensity of his feelings for her. Women too may signal their expectations and feeling in their response.

After proposing to a young Malawian female, a 20 year old male was asked:

I: What did she write [back]? **R:** The letter was full of love flowers and words like kiss to kiss, our love will not end until Jesus come and take one of us.

(Man, age 20)

Both men and women specifically identify this dating period as a time to gather critical information about a prospective spouse. Some men explicitly state that they currently have two or more girlfriends because they are trying to decide which one will make the better wife. One formerly married female respondent stated that before taking another husband she would first accept him as a *chibwenzi* (boyfriend). Only after learning about his behavior and character would she agree to marry him. As one young female respondent commented:

I: Do some people first have *chibwenzi* (boyfriend) or *chitomelo* (fiancé) and then marry that person? **R:** Yes. **I:** Why? **R:** Because they know each other well and love each other.

(Woman, age 21)

In several interviews, girlfriends are reported to even nudge their partners toward marriage.

I: How do you know that she is a right girl for marriage? **R:** She keeps on talking of marriage each time we are together. She says *chibwenzi* is the beginning of marriage.

(Man, age 24)

Partnership Progression or Dissolution

Whether a particular partnership transitions toward marriage or dissolves depends on several factors. The qualitative data point to two prominent common reasons for dissolution: failure to provide economic transfers and sexual non-exclusivity. For some women, lack of emotional commitment, as assessed by the level of financial support and gift giving, are tied to the termination of a relationship. For both women and men, building trust in the relationship and testing a partners' sexual fidelity appear to be very important in determining whether a particular relationship will end or transform into something more serious, as noted in the following:

I: Now that your *chibwenzi* is still on, what are your plans with your girl?

R: I want to marry her when we finish school for I trust her, even though she learns very far from here. I have not heard of her having another boyfriend and I see no obstacles that can make me fail.

(Man, age 20)

In contrast, if infidelity is suspected by either partner in premarital relationships, the partnership will often end. The example below reflects an absence of both trust and gift-giving.

I: What about gifts? **R:** I didn't give her any. **I:** Why? **R:** We promised to marry and there was no need for me to give her gifts as I was to pay Lobola⁵. Sometimes gifts can make a girl refuse to have sex when [they] are not given as they will take [gifts] as an exchange [for sex]. **I:** What made you not marry her? **R:** I found her with another boy under a certain tree that is on the way here. **I:** What were they doing? **R:** I don't know, but I saw them very near to each other but she couldn't recognize me. I had put on a hat and the next day I wrote her a letter ending the relationship and to my surprise, she didn't reply and I did believe that [he] was her boyfriend as well.

(Man, age 22)

The quantitative data shown in Tables 2 and 3 reinforce the important differences in levels of gift-giving and economic transfers as well as sexual exclusivity by partnership type. We find large differences in the level of self-reported sexual exclusivity as well as expectations about partner's exclusivity by type of partnership. In Table 2, we find that women in any form of non-marital partnership (casual, steady boyfriend, and PTM) are twice as likely as those in a marital union to report having another sexual partner in the last year (7.5% vs. 3.6%). Women who are currently engaged are least likely to suspect their partners of infidelity (14.3%), while those in casual relationships are most likely (40.9%). Men (Table 3) are least likely to suspect their wives (8.2%) followed by their fiancées (12.1%). A third (33.8%) suspects their casual partners of having other sexual partners. More than half of women involved in premarital sexual relationships received some form of gift transfer at last sex, while men in this age group report lower levels of gift-giving, particularly to their casual partners.

(insert Tables 2 and 3 about here)

Sexual Behaviors Within Partnership Types

Sexual behaviors with respect to condom use, frequency of intercourse, and sexual exclusivity vary tremendously by partnership type. Indeed, the type of partnership may be partially defined by sexual activity (i.e. how frequently sex occurs and whether a condom is used) as well as the duration of the relationship, the degree of sexual exclusivity, and the level of economic support. In Tables 2 and 3, we therefore examine

variations in sexual behavior within specific types of partnerships. Although the sample sizes within partnership categories are small, they point to clear and interesting differences, as well as similarities, by gender. Most notably, both men and women use condoms more commonly with *chitomelo*, and least frequently with spouses—both to prevent STI transmission and to avoid pregnancy.

The quantitative data show frequency of sexual intercourse between spouses-to-be dramatically higher compared to any non-marital relationship types. Table 2 indicates that almost half (44%) of all married women had sex more than three times per week with their spouses, as compared to 14.3% with fiancés, 5% with steady boyfriends, and 7.6% with casual partners. Married men also report the highest levels of sexual frequency (Table 3). Unmarried men are also closer in age to their sexual partners, while unmarried young women have on average older male partners.

Our in-depth interviews further support these survey findings. As relationships become more “serious”, involving a greater level of commitment, sexual frequency within couples increases. Indeed, women with “steady boyfriends” report a surprisingly low number of sexual contacts, often due to geographic distance, or to lack of privacy and related norms of maintaining secrecy about non-marital relationships (Haram 1995; Setel 1999; Wight et al. 2006). One respondent, Ruth, explains:

I: Ruth did you have sex with this boyfriend? **R:** Yeah, we had sex but it was only twice and then it ended. **I:** For how long did you stay with him? **R:** We stayed together for two years in friendship and we then promised to marry in future, but nobody knew this, it was our own agreement. **I:** Ruth, two years in friendship and had sex only twice, why so? **R:** The problem was that I was staying in Zomba with my sister who is staying with her husband there, so we did not see each other a lot.

(Woman, age 19)

Interestingly for men, we find that nearly half report having sex with their fiancée less than twice per month. Refusal of sexual relations appears to be more tolerated within engaged couples than among any other type of partnership, as is illustrated below.

R: I have a girlfriend whom I will marry and the other is for pleasure. **I:** So why have the other partner while you are engaged? **R:** She [the fiancée] most of the time refuses to sleep together. She says we will do more when we get married, so I cannot be just staying without sex until the marriage.

(Man, age 22)

Sexual Behaviors and Perceived HIV Risks Before and After Marriage

Not surprisingly, then, as partnership types change prior to marriage, so too do sexual behaviors. To trace the evolving nature of sexual behaviors with respect to marriage,

Figure 4 plots the probability of having had sex last year by the respondent's expected time until marriage (for unmarried respondents) and duration since marriage (for married respondents). Figure 4 suggests that levels of sexual activity and marriage processes are closely linked. The probability of being currently sexually active (defined as having had sex in the last year) increases as the respondent approaches his or her ideal age of marriage, especially during the years just before and after marriage. For both men and women, there is a sharp jump in sexual activity between those expecting to get married soon (within the next year) and those recently married (within the last year). Nearly 90% of recently married women and 95% of recently married men report having had sex in the last year. After this dramatic increase at the point of marriage, however, rates of sexual activity tend to plateau for both men and women.

(insert Figure 4 about here)

Figure 5 examines how the cumulative number of sexual partners changes as women and men cross into marriage. On average, we find that before and after marriage, men report substantially higher numbers of sexual partners than women. For women, the sharpest rise in the total number of sexual partners occurs in the few years immediately preceding marriage. Nearly all women who intend to marry within the next year report having had at least one partner (average 1.4). Married women report only slightly more lifetime partners (average 1.6), perhaps indicating a reluctance on the part of married women to report non-spousal partnerships, as discussed above. In contrast, married men in our sample report, on average, about one more partner than men who intend to marry within the next year.

(insert Figure 5 about here)

As noted in Table 1, married men perceive themselves to be at slightly lower risk of having HIV compared to unmarried men, while married women believe they are more likely to be infected than unmarried women. In contrast, our data indicate that both married men and married women are more likely to actually be infected with HIV (1.5% unmarried men vs. 3.1% married men; 1.4% unmarried women vs. 6.8% married women). Unfortunately, given our sample size and an overall HIV prevalence rate below 3%, we are unable to examine how HIV prevalence rates vary as individuals approach their ideal age of marriage. In Figure 6, however, we explore how levels of perceived risk change with respect to marital aspirations. Figure 6 shows that for women, there is a steady rise in their belief that they are infected until they reach their ideal age of marriage. After reaching the peak of their concern in the first year after marriage, perceptions of HIV risk tend to level off, and even decline slightly with each additional year of marriage. For men, the perception of HIV risk is more volatile, peaking 2 to 3 years prior to marriage and being relatively constant during the transition to marriage and the first years of marriage.

(insert Figure 6 about here)

To further examine the trends in sexual behaviors depicted in Figures 4, 5 and 6, as well as to control for the effects of age, we employ logistic regression to examine changes in the probability of having had sex in the last year and OLS regression to model the total number of lifetime sexual partners. We model the variables “expected time before marriage” as well as “duration since marriage” linearly to explore trends both before and after marriage, as well as to allow for a discontinuous change at the time of marriage by including a dummy variable indicating that a respondent has married. These models are found in Appendix A. For both men and women, the probability of sexual activity in the last year increases as they approach their ideal age of marriage and at the point of marriage, but then levels off after marriage. Interestingly, we find that youths’ expectations about the timing of marriage appear to be more important than age in predicting sexual activity within the last year. Similarly, consistent with the results presented in Figure 5, we find that anticipating marriage and getting married coincide with significant increases in the number of sexual partners for both men and women. While the duration of time since marriage is not associated with marked increases in the reported number of sexual partners. Older men report significantly more sexual partners than younger men, but the age of women has no independent effect on their number of sexual partners. Finally, we employ similar logistic models to explore changes in HIV risk perception. After controlling for respondents’ age, however, we find no discernable pattern in HIV risk perception with respect to marital aspirations.

Concerns about AIDS and the Timing of Marriage

Thus far we have examined how marital aspirations may be related to changes in partnership types, sexual behaviors, and HIV risk perceptions. In Table 4, we examine how concerns about HIV risks may be altering marital aspirations. About four-fifths of the men and women in our sample said they planned to get tested for HIV prior to getting married. This high proportion of respondents intending to get tested prior to marriage is somewhat surprising given the fact that VCT services were not yet readily available in the survey areas in 2004. Interestingly, roughly half of the women and men also reported in the survey they would remain with their PTM even if their partner was found to be HIV-positive.

(insert Table 4 about here)

Both unmarried men and women were deeply divided about whether they thought marriage offered protection from infection. Roughly half of the respondents in our sample believed that it was possible to avoid getting AIDS by marrying, while the remainder were not convinced, perceiving marriage as an unreliable form of protection. This ambiguity is reflected in our qualitative data. In-depth interviews revealed that participants’ perceptions depended on assumptions of faithfulness within the pre-supposed marriages. For instance, one respondent commented:

I: Do you then think marriage can prevent a man/ woman from getting AIDS? **R:** Yes I believe so as when some one is married there is no way

you can propose love or have another sexual partner as you always have everything you want from your wife like sex.

(Man age 24)

Yet others did not think marriage could offer protection, based on beliefs that no one can completely avoid infection:

I: Do you think a woman or man can avoid AIDS by getting married? **R:** No! Not at all! Prevention of AIDS doesn't [have anything to] do anything with marriage. It's a person's heart that makes a decision and not marriage. One can be married but not honest to his/her partner.

(Man age 23)

The in-depth interviews also show that married women perceived themselves to be particularly vulnerable to infection in cases where husbands may have other sexual partners, as this young woman explains:

I: Do you think a woman can avoid AIDS by getting married? **R:** A woman can not avoid AIDS by getting married because she can not be sure, maybe [her] husband will have other partners so she can get AIDS while she is married.

(Woman, age 17)

In addition, respondents were asked whether they thought getting married at older or younger ages would be more protective. Again, we find that both men and women are divided about this question, with unmarried respondents slightly more likely to perceive early marriage as a risk than married women and men. Interestingly, we also find a clear correlation between beliefs about whether early marriage is protective and respondents' ideal and actual ages of marriage. Unmarried women who believe that early marriage is riskier want to get married later. Similarly, married women who perceived that early marriage to be risky tended to have married at older ages. While the correlation among married respondents between their beliefs and their behaviors may reflect post-hoc justification for their timing of marriage, such an argument is unlikely to apply marital aspirations given by unmarried respondents, particularly since questions about ideal marital age and relative HIV risks were asked under separate sections of the survey instrument and presented at different stages of the interview process.

Concerns about AIDS and Characteristics of Spouses

During the survey interview, unmarried respondents (after affirming that they wished to marry in the future) were asked to name the three most desirable characteristics they sought in a prospective spouse. These results, presented in Table 4, indicate that the majority of women are seeking husbands who are well-educated and HIV-negative. Being employed and faithful also stand out as important characteristics. These same desirable spousal characteristics are echoed by respondents in the in-depth interviews. As described by an interviewer who chatted with a 17-year old, school-going respondent:

R: I hope to get married after I finish school, and I should be almost twenty-five years when I get married. I hope to get married with a man who will respect my parents, not be movious [i.e. promiscuous], and a man who will not have another partner [and] who will be cool. In addition, he should be educated.

(Woman, age 17)

For men, finding a wife who was HIV-negative was the single most important characteristic. Men also sought future wives who were attractive, educated, skilled at cleaning and cooking, and faithful. One young man from northern Rumphu chose his wife because of her work ethic:

I: How did you choose your wife? **R:** I chose her because she was always hard working as I could see her working in the fields. I also found out that she had no boyfriend and she was from a very near village of the Nyasulu. **I:** Why did you choose her? **R:** I had found out that she was the right girl I was looking for, a wife as she had everything I wanted.

(Man, age 22)

Finding an HIV-negative partner, however, may be a challenge, as expressed by this young man:

I: So who will you marry? **R:** Someone with good behavior in the sense that she should be respectful to elders, and even myself, and should be a hardworking wife both in the field and at home. **I:** Do you foresee any obstacle? **R:** Yes, there is AIDS that I fear the most, as nowadays many are with AIDS.

(Man, age 23)

When given a choice between two hypothetical, contrasting spousal characteristics, both men and women expressed clear views about perceived HIV risk associated with each (Table 4). A series of questions with dichotomous responses were asked of all survey respondents, designed to ascertain the relative risks of contrasting spousal types. For instance, when asked whether younger or older spouses posed greater HIV risk, all groups of respondents believed older spouses were the greater risk. An even stronger consensus emerged that city-dwellers were riskier than village-dwellers (over 85%). Over 90% of both married and unmarried women believe that a wealthier spouse is more likely to have HIV, while over three-quarters of men held a similar view about wealthy wives. For the majority of men and women, being married to a spouse who attended religious services regularly was perceived as less risky than marriage to a less religious spouse. Interestingly, over 80% of both men and women said that polygamous unions carried greater risk, as compared to monogamous unions. Many of these perceptions reflect empirical findings that HIV prevalence tends to be higher among individuals who are older and live in urban settings. Wealth is often, though not always, associated with

higher rates of HIV—particularly among men—while polygamous men are typically equally as likely to be infected as their monogamous counterparts.

Discussion: Safely Crossing the Marriage Threshold

While we are not able to sort out the causal links, both quantitative and qualitative data suggest there are important associations between the marital process and HIV risks and perceptions. This paper aims to provide greater understanding of these intricate relationships by examining 1) how the process of searching for and finding a marital partner alters sexual behaviors and, consequently, HIV/AIDS risks and 2) how concerns about HIV risks may be affecting when and whom to marry. This study offers several unique features. First, by combining both qualitative and quantitative information about relationship formation and marital goals and intentions, we obtain a fuller picture of this complex process. Second, by framing adolescent sexual transitions from the perspective of marital aspirations, we draw attention to what we believe is an important motivating factor of these behaviors-- gaining information about and experience regarding potential spousal partners. Third, by comparing both male and female experiences in relation to their marital status and expectations, we can more clearly identify the similarities and the differences in the pathways towards marriage for men and women.

To many the argument that marital aspirations play a central role in pre-marital sexual partnerships may seem self-evident, but often this key motivation is ignored by researchers and policy makers alike. Instead, much of the previous research and program interventions focus on “riskier” sexual relations such as commercial or transactional sex. Stark differences in HIV prevalence rates among adolescent males and females, for example, was typically attributed to the role of “sugar daddies”—older men who solicit sex from adolescent girls whom they have no intention of marrying. Yet, more recent research argues that the prevalence of “sugar daddy” relationships is overblown and casts doubt on whether these relationships can account for the magnitude of the differences in HIV prevalence commonly found (Luke 2005).

In this paper we present evidence of a strong association between marital aspirations, sexual behaviors, and HIV risk. Moreover, individuals appear to be aware of these links and of the dilemmas they face when trying to find a marital partner, while simultaneously avoiding HIV/AIDS. Recent academic debates have focused on the timing of marriage. The results seem to indicate that while early marriage may be particularly dangerous for young women, late average ages of first marriage may help fuel the epidemic (Bongaarts 2006; Clark 2004; Clark, Bruce and Dude 2005). These findings point to the difficulty of identifying which pathways into marriage afford men and women the greatest protection not only before marriage, but also afterward. The safest pathways may not be self-evident nor may they necessarily follow the simple prescription to remain abstinent before marriage. For example, a 14 year old female with no prior sexual experience who marries a 30 year old man may experience little risk prior to marriage but substantial risk subsequently. In comparison, a 17 year old female who ends one sexual partnership because she believes he has been unfaithful and marries another man with whom she has

established more trust may enter the marriage with greater risk, but then remain protected.

These complexities of balancing marital aspirations with HIV protection are evident in individuals' mixed responses about whether marriage is protective, the ideal age of marriage, and the characteristics of their ideal spouse. There is widespread disagreement about whether marriage is protective and, if so, at what age one should marry. These findings suggest that concerns about HIV are unlikely to have an aggregate effect on the average age of first marriage, although they may affect individuals' decisions. Concerns about HIV may play a larger role in shaping the selection of spouses. For both men and women, one of the most important characteristics of a potential spouse is that he or she is HIV-negative. Yet, these youths are also looking for spouses who are attractive, hard-working, well-educated, financially secure, and trustworthy. While a full 80% of unmarried youths report that they want to be tested along with their partners at the time of marriage, over half contend that they would still marry their partner even if he or she was HIV-positive. Thus, there is little doubt that finding an HIV-negative spouse, who will remain uninfected, is an important, though not the only, marital objective.

Since marriage is nearly universal, the challenge to researchers and policy makers is to assist these youths by offering realistic marital strategies and helpful services, such as voluntary testing and couple counseling for unmarried youths. Changing norms around the dating and courtship process, particularly encouraging youths to "get to know each other" before commencing sexual relations, could also enable youths to better identify suitable marital partners without putting themselves at risk. Nearly all studies on marriage in sub-Saharan Africa recognize that marriage is an often fluid and extended process and that pre-marital sex is often linked to marital aspirations (Bledsoe and Pison 1997; Meekers 1992; Walle 1993), but most quantitative analyses and programmatic interventions continue to use marital status as a dichotomous construct. With the onset of the AIDS epidemic, these static comparisons of married and unmarried youths are no longer adequate: viewing and modeling marriage as a complex, extended, and malleable process has become imperative.

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¹ Author's calculations using Measure DHS STATcompiler software to assess available data from sub-Saharan African countries surveyed by DHS in the last five years.

² The lower number of men in our sample is primarily due to the greater absence of young men who are away for schooling or work.

³ For further information on sampling procedures, see www.malawi.pop.upenn.edu.

⁴ Note that a relatively high proportion of unmarried females (about 17.7%) and some males (6.6%) stated that they did not want to get married and are excluded from the measurement of "expected time until marriage". These individuals differed from those who wished to marry in that they were younger, but did not differ significantly with respect to other observed characteristics.

⁵ Lobola refers to bridewealth payments, commonly given among the Tumbuka in Rumphi.

Table 1. Characteristics, sexual behaviors and HIV perceptions for men and women aged 15-24.

| | MEN | | WOMEN | |
|--|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| | Never Married | Ever Married | Never Married | Ever Married |
| N | (396) | (108) | (250) | (334) |
| Demographic characteristics | | | | |
| Age (mean years) | 18.6 | 22.2 | 16.8 | 21.0 |
| Level of education | | | | |
| Some primary | 74.2 | 71.1 | 77.8 | 89.5 |
| Some secondary | 25.8 | 28.6 | 22.2 | 10.5 |
| Sexual Behaviors | | | | |
| Sexually active (%) | 68.0 | 100.0 | 39.8 | 100.0 |
| Sex in the last year (%) | 39.0 | 92.6 | 22.3 | 89.7 |
| Number of lifetime partners (mean) | 2.2 | 4.6 | 0.6 | 1.7 |
| Number of lifetime partners among sexually active (mean) | 3.3 | 4.6 | 1.4 | 1.7 |
| Marriage | | | | |
| Want to get married (%) | 93.4 | na | 82.3 | na |
| If want to marry, expected time till marriage (mean years) | 6.6 | na | 5.1 | na |
| Married only once (%) | na | 86.1 | na | 85.0 |
| Time since marriage (mean years) | na | 3.0 | na | 5.0 |
| HIV/AIDS concerns and risks | | | | |
| Chance have HIV/AIDS | | | | |
| No likelihood | 62.6 | 70.7 | 76.2 | 67.2 |
| Low | 29.0 | 21.7 | 16.3 | 17.4 |
| Medium | 4.6 | 4.4 | 3.5 | 6.5 |
| High | 3.8 | 3.3 | 3.9 | 8.9 |
| HIV positive | 1.5 | 3.1 | 1.4 | 6.8 |
| HIV positive among sexually active* | 1.4 | 3.1 | 2.4 | 6.8 |

*Excludes two HIV positive men who did not report whether they were ever sexually active. There are no HIV positive men in our sample who report never having had sex.

Table 2. Sexual behaviors and HIV perceptions by most recent partnership type (Women)

| | Casual partner | Steady boyfriend | Promised to be married | Spouse |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| (N) | (26) | (41) | (28) | (288) |
| Any gifts or money exchanged at last sex | 60.0 | 55.0 | 59.3 | -- |
| Respondent: | | | | |
| Had other partners | 8.0 | 7.3 | 7.1 | 3.6 |
| Suspected partner of having other partners | 40.9 | 18.2 | 14.3 | 18.7 |
| Ever Used Condoms | 30.8 | 39.0 | 53.6 | 22.7 |
| Still in Relationship | 40.9 | 42.9 | 75.9 | na |
| Frequency of Sex | | | | |
| > 3 times per week | 7.6 | 5.0 | 14.3 | 44.0 |
| couple times per week | 15.4 | 25.0 | 19.1 | 39.6 |
| couple times per month | 34.6 | 22.5 | 28.6 | 12.0 |
| < 2 times per month | 42.3 | 47.5 | 38.1 | 4.4 |
| Partners' age differences | -3.3 | -2.9 | -2.5 | na |

Table 3. Sexual behaviors and HIV perceptions by most recent partnership type (Men)

| (N) | Casual partner (94) | Steady girlfriend (83) | Promised to be married (38) | Spouse (91) |
|---|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Any gifts or money exchanged at last sex | 28.3 | 43.2 | 40.5 | na |
| Respondent: | | | | |
| Had other partners | 14.3 | 21.7 | 18.9 | 16.2 |
| Suspected partner of having other partners | 33.8 | 23.9 | 12.1 | 8.2 |
| Ever Used Condoms | 42.4 | 41.0 | 62.2 | 29.4 |
| Still in Relationship | 30.3 | 50.0 | 70.3 | na |
| Frequency of Sex | | | | |
| > 3 times per week | 18.9 | 16.9 | 22.9 | 47.8 |
| couple times per week | 28.9 | 30.1 | 8.6 | 35.8 |
| couple times per month | 28.9 | 30.1 | 22.9 | 11.9 |
| < 2 times per month | 23.3 | 22.9 | 45.7 | 4.5 |
| Partners' age differences | 2.3 | 2.5 | 2.3 | na |

Table 4. HIV/AIDS concerns, timing of marriage, and ideal spousal characteristics

| (N) | Women | | Men | |
|---|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|
| | Unmarried | Married | Unmarried | Married |
| | (250) | (334) | (396) | (108) |
| | % | % | % | % |
| A: Marital aspirations and the timing of marriage | | | | |
| Plan to get tested for HIV before marriage* | 83.6 | | 88.5 | |
| If spouse HIV positive would refuse to marry him/her | 55.6 | | 59.6 | |
| Men can avoid HIV through marriage | 46.4 | | 57.9 | |
| Women can avoid HIV through marriage | 55.6 | | 59.9 | |
| HIV risks are higher if you marry later in life | 43.0 | 59.9 | 41.2 | 62.3 |
| HIV risks are higher if you marry earlier in life | 57.0 | 40.1 | 58.9 | 37.7 |
| B: Important characteristics of future spouse (up to 3)* | | | | |
| Attractive | 18.5 | | 40.0 | |
| Educated | 52.4 | | 36.5 | |
| Employed | 35.0 | | 7.6 | |
| Wealthy | 11.7 | | 6.0 | |
| Live in same district | 18.0 | | 27.0 | |
| Skilled at cleaning and cooking | 25.2 | | 35.1 | |
| HIV negative | 51.9 | | 50.0 | |
| Faithful | 35.9 | | 38.7 | |
| Good personality | 24.3 | | 21.4 | |
| Older | 6.8 | | 2.7 | |
| Younger | 3.4 | | 1.0 | |
| Same Age | 3.9 | | 6.8 | |
| C: HIV risks are higher if you marry someone who is: | | | | |
| Young | 32.5 | 43.2 | 35.7 | 25.4 |
| Old or older | 67.5 | 56.9 | 64.4 | 74.7 |
| From the nearest city | 91.8 | 88.8 | 86.2 | 90.9 |
| From your village | 8.2 | 11.2 | 13.8 | 9.1 |
| Poor | 9.9 | 6.2 | 22.2 | 11.1 |
| Wealthy | 90.1 | 93.8 | 77.8 | 88.9 |
| Not religious | 72.8 | 70.2 | 76.2 | 74.3 |
| Religious | 27.2 | 29.8 | 23.8 | 25.7 |
| Polygamous | 84.8 | 83.5 | 83.2 | 90.9 |
| Monogamous | 15.2 | 16.6 | 16.8 | 9.1 |

* Among those who wish to marry

Figure 1: Percentage of Men and Women Sexually Active, Married, and HIV-positive, by Age

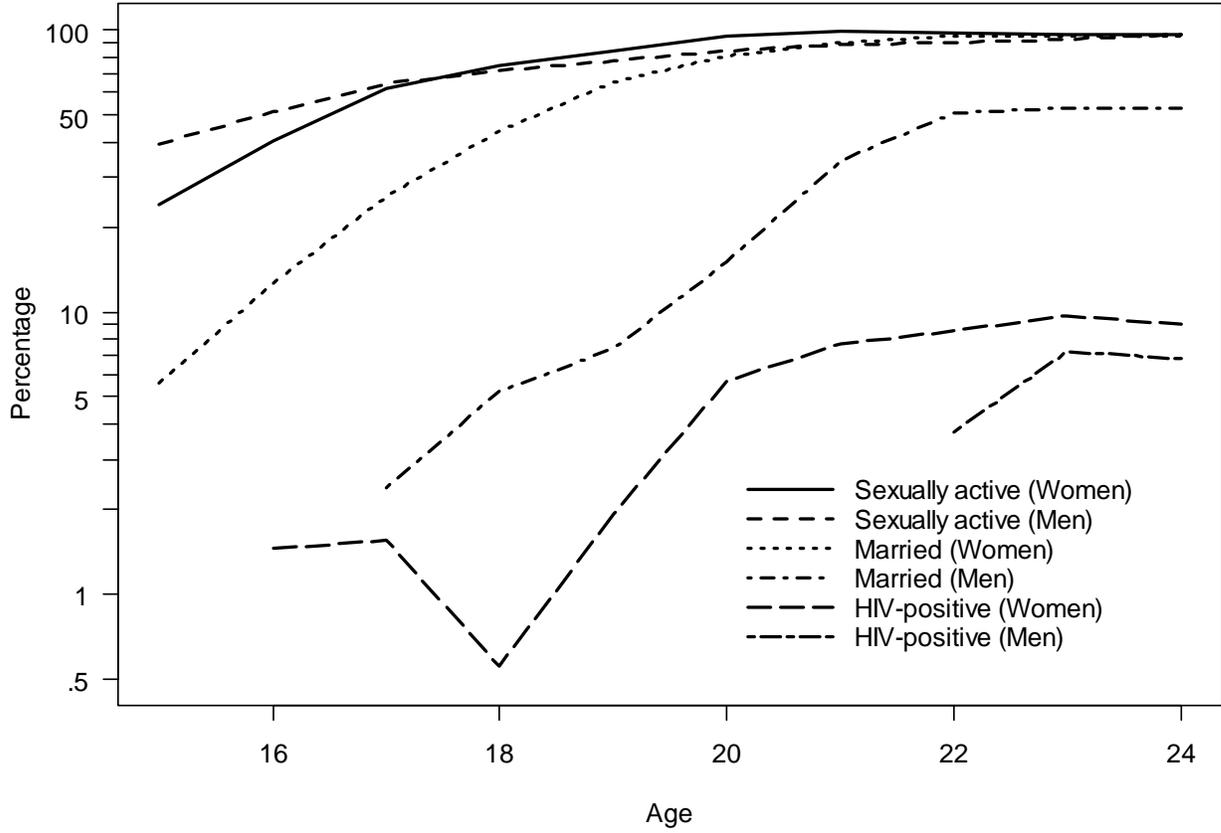


Figure 2: Type of Partnership by Expected Time Until Marriage (WOMEN)

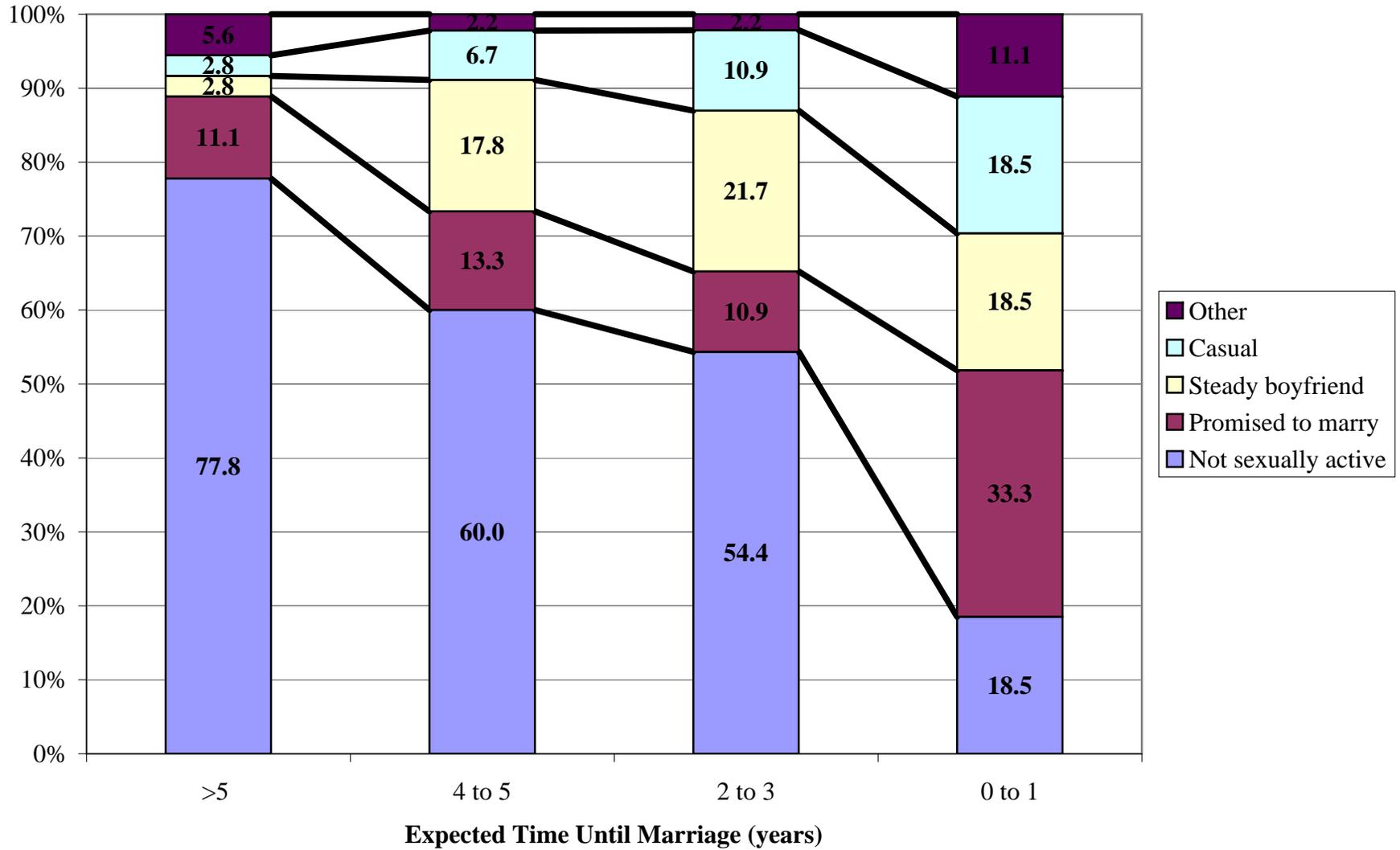


Figure 3: Type of Partnership by Expected Time Until Marriage (MEN)

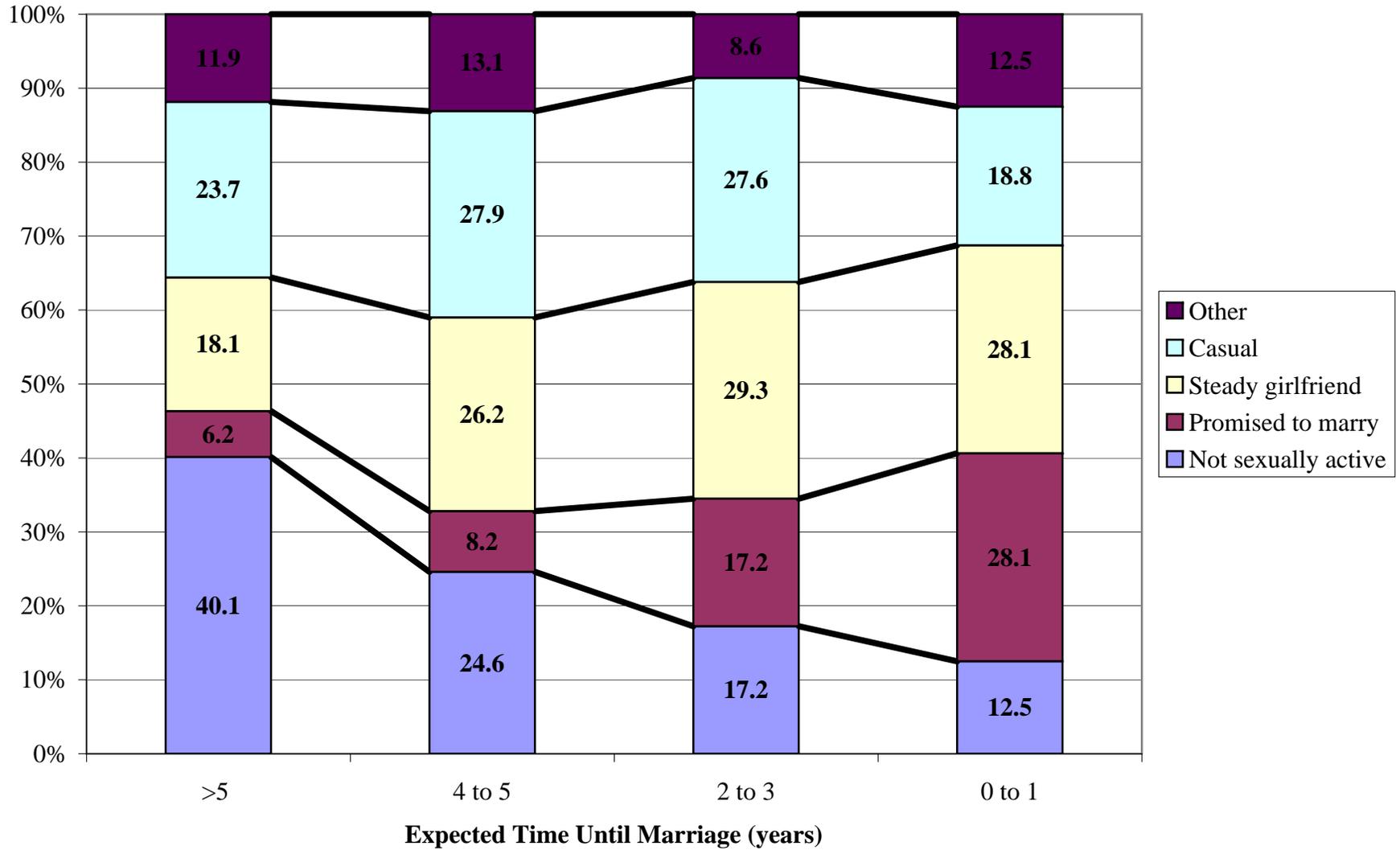


Figure 4: Had Sex in the Last Year by Time Until and After Marriage

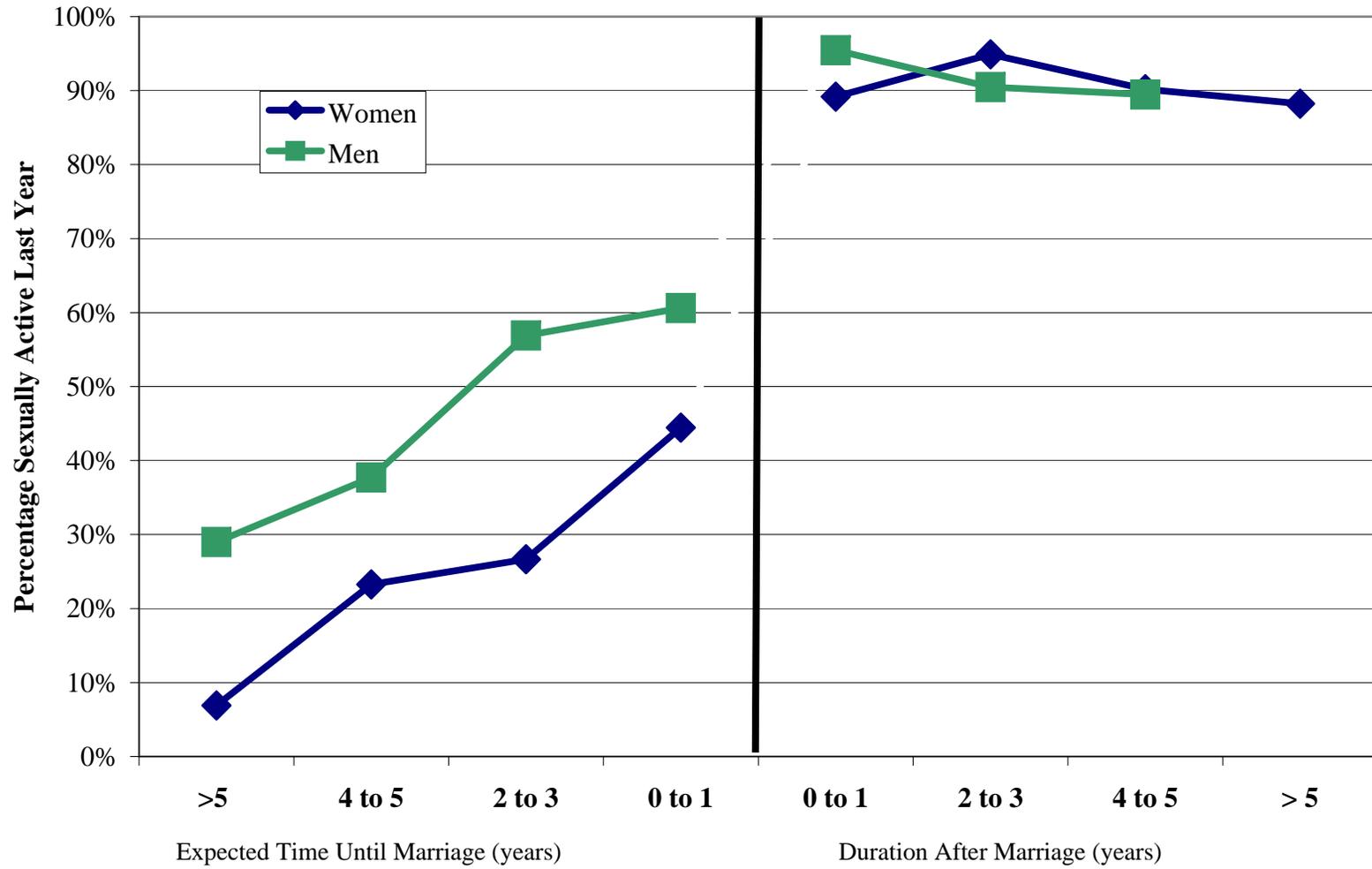


Figure 5: Number of Partners by Time Until and After Marriage

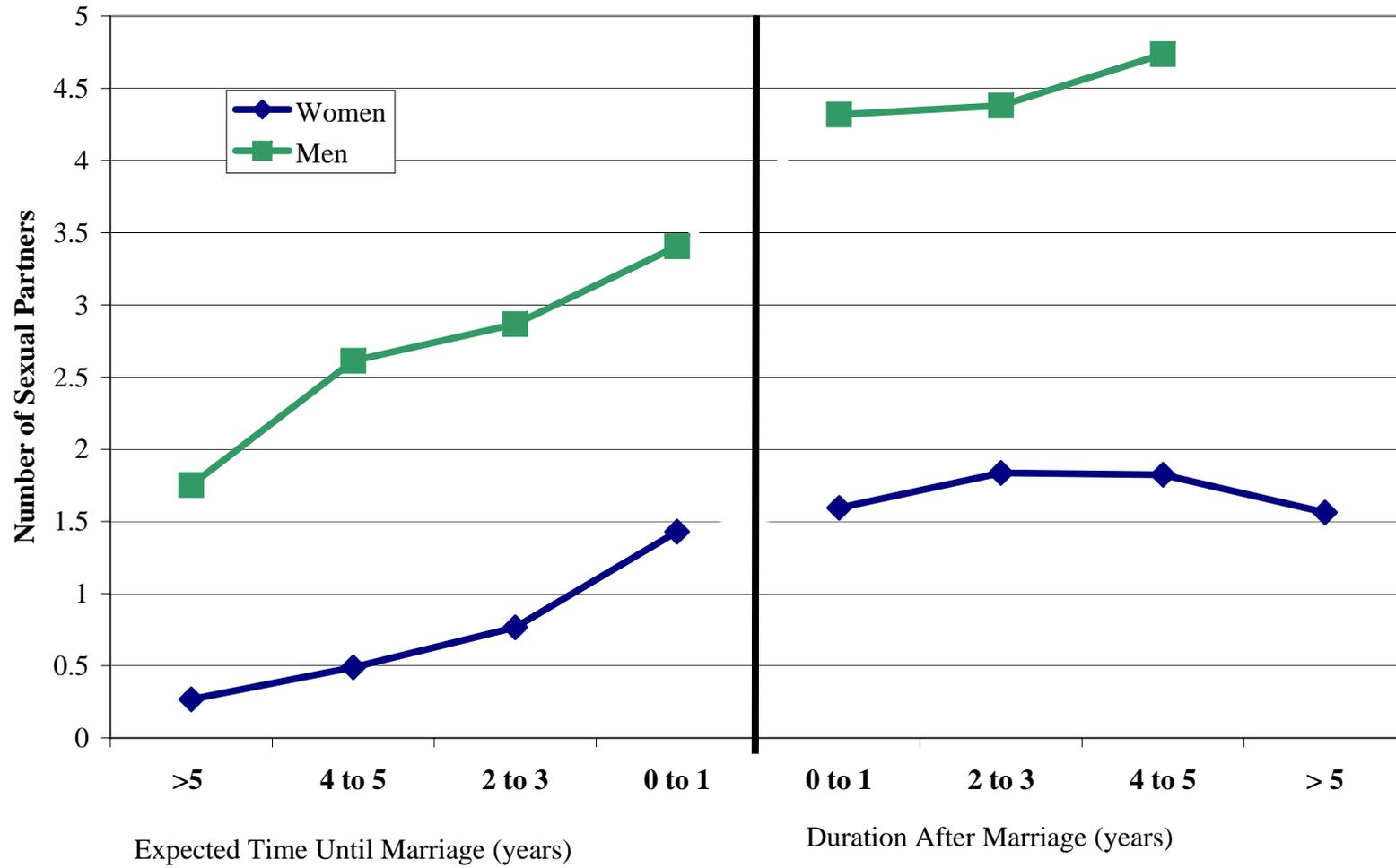
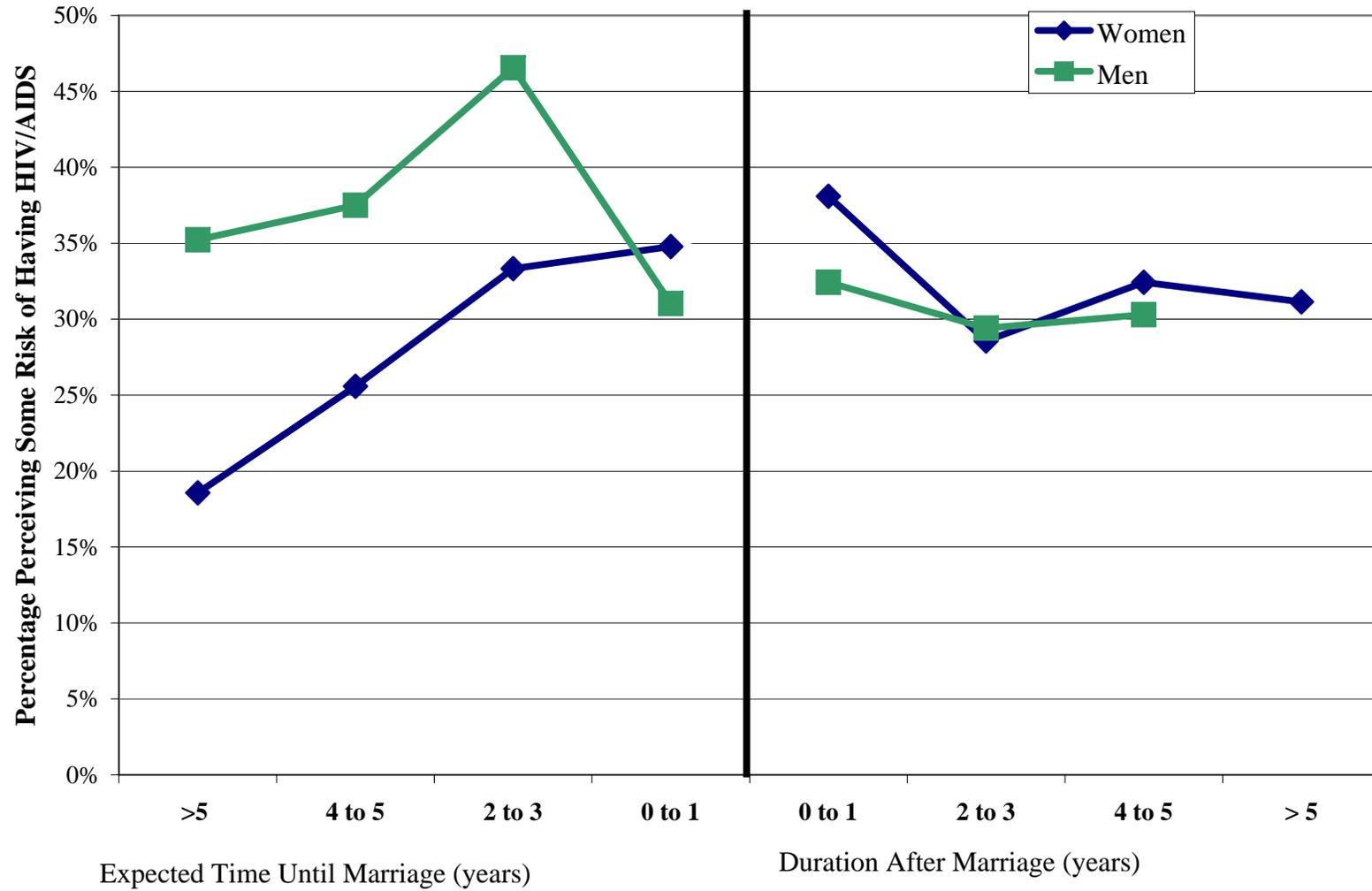


Figure 6: Perceived Risk of Having HIV/AIDS by Time Until and After Marriage



Appendix A. Changes in Sexual Behaviors and Perceived HIV Risk Before and After Marriage

| | Had Sex Last Year | | | No. Partners Ever | | | Chance Have HIV | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------|-------|-------------------|---------|-------|-----------------|---------|-------|
| | (Logit) | | | (OLS) | | | (Logit) | | |
| | Coef. | St. Er. | Sig. | Coef. | St. Er. | Sig. | Coef. | St. Er. | Sig. |
| WOMEN | | 493 | | | 516 | | | 465 | |
| Expected time til married (-) | 0.29 | 0.08 | 0.000 | 0.08 | 0.02 | 0.000 | 0.08 | 0.05 | 0.147 |
| Married | 2.43 | 0.46 | 0.000 | 0.62 | 0.14 | 0.000 | -0.20 | 0.37 | 0.593 |
| Time since marriage (+) | 0.00 | 0.05 | 0.935 | -0.02 | 0.02 | 0.172 | -0.07 | 0.04 | 0.078 |
| Age (years) | -0.03 | 0.08 | 0.721 | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.189 | 0.12 | 0.06 | 0.038 |
| Constant | 0.36 | 1.42 | 0.800 | 0.53 | 0.42 | 0.202 | -2.75 | 1.11 | 0.013 |
| MEN | | 431 | | | 443 | | | 406 | |
| Expected time til married (-) | 0.13 | 0.03 | 0.000 | 0.09 | 0.04 | 0.032 | 0.06 | 0.03 | 0.078 |
| Married | 2.16 | 0.56 | 0.000 | 1.03 | 0.51 | 0.044 | -0.09 | 0.41 | 0.823 |
| Time since marriage (+) | -0.05 | 0.10 | 0.601 | -0.03 | 0.10 | 0.742 | -0.10 | 0.09 | 0.287 |
| Age (years) | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.490 | 0.19 | 0.07 | 0.004 | -0.07 | 0.05 | 0.135 |
| Constant | -0.27 | 1.05 | 0.794 | -0.69 | 1.37 | 0.615 | 1.21 | 1.03 | 0.239 |