


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Culture and domestic violence amongst ever-married women in Malawi: an analysis of emotional, sexual, less-severe physical and severe physical violence

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## Abstract

Nearly 42% of ever-married women in Malawi have experienced some form of physical, sexual or emotional violence perpetrated by their current or most recent spouse – higher than the global estimate of 35%. This study used national-level data for ever-married women aged 15–49 years from the 2015 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey to explore the association between cultural factors and the likelihood of women experiencing sexual, physical and emotional violence after controlling for socioeconomic factors using multilevel logistic regression modelling. Key cultural factors found to be associated with violence against ever-married women in Malawi were type of marriage (polygynous or monogamous), age at marriage, religion and ethnicity. Husband's consumption of alcohol also emerged as a very important factor in violence against married women. Interventions to tackle violence against married women in Malawi should aim at promoting monogamous marriages and discouraging polygynous marriages, and address the culture of heavy alcohol consumption amongst husbands. Future studies could explore further if there are key lessons that families can learn from Muslim families and across ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** Violence; Married women; Malawi

## Introduction

Nearly 42% of ever-married women in Malawi have experienced some form of physical, sexual or emotional violence perpetrated by their current or most recent spouse (NSO Malawi & DHS Program, 2017). The estimate of domestic violence in Malawi is much higher than the global estimate of 35% (WHO, 2017). Some customs and cultural practices in Malawi could contribute to the normalization of intimate partner violence. For example, religious institutions in Malawi do not recognize marital rape and it is understood that when a woman signs the marriage contract, she gives consent to sex throughout her married life (Kanyongolo & Malunga, 2011). A recent study indicates concordance between men and women in Malawi in their perception that women do not have the right to refuse sex from husbands (Kaminaga, 2017). A good percentage of women in Malawi think a husband is justified in beating his wife for at least one of the following reasons: if the wife burns food, argues with husband, goes out without telling him, neglects the children or refuses sex (NSO Malawi & ICF International, 2016). Nevertheless, there are regional variations in the reported justifications. The latest national-level study indicates that the highest percentage is in the Northern region (24.9%) followed by the Central region (16.7%) and the lowest is in the Southern region of the country (13.9%). Although the rank and order are not replicated in the regional variation for the level of spousal violence, the Southern region reported the lowest level

of violence at 37% and the level of spousal violence was highest in the Northern and Central regions (47%), vindicating the work of earlier studies that acceptance of intimate partner violence is both a barrier to its reduction and a strong predictor of its prevalence (Alio *et al.*, 2011; NSO Malawi & ICF International, 2016).

Although patriarchy and dependency theories suggest that economic and social processes that support the patriarchal order contribute to women's inferiority and increase their potential for suffering from domestic violence, a study in eight African countries, including Malawi, has suggested that cultural factors/customs such as having multiple partners may be more important to domestic violence than socioeconomic status (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Andersson *et al.*, 2007; Alio *et al.*, 2011; Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2011). Culture can be defined as the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time. It is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts (Hanson, 2013). In Malawi, the importance of culture is enshrined in the Malawi Constitution, section 26, which recognizes that every person shall have the right to use the language, and to participate in the cultural life, of his or her choice (UNFPA, 2012). The strength of culture in supporting and legitimizing gender inequality is a subject of debate in contemporary times. Feminists argue that culture is highly gendered and embeds structural inequalities throughout society (Anderson, 1997; Renzetti *et al.*, 2001). Malawi is no exception, and socio-cultural factors such as polygyny, dowry and male-headed households have been linked to domestic violence (Bisika, 2008). In addition, it has been argued that religion, just like culture, is a powerful institution within a society that plays a major role in shaping gender roles and social rules and behaviours (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

Most women in Malawi accept domestic violence as a family affair and are unlikely to report it (Pelser *et al.*, 2005). A study on attitudes towards wife beating in Benin, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mali, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe revealed that more women than men perceive wife beating as justified (Rani *et al.*, 2004).

One custom that emanates from poor socioeconomic status that is commonly practised in Malawi is early/child marriage. Early marriage is marriage that occurs when one or both partners are less than 18 years of age (UNFPA, 2012). At 47%, Malawi's level of girl child marriage is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> globally (GoM-AFIDEP, 2017; NSO Malawi & ICF International, 2017). In contrast, only 8% of boys marry before the age of 18 in Malawi, which indicates that most girls are marrying men who are much older than themselves (NSO Malawi & ICF International, 2017). A study across 30 countries found that the average age of first abuse for women is 22.1 years, suggesting that women are more likely to encounter their first abuse when they are young adults (Peterman *et al.*, 2015). But the association between spousal age difference and violence against women may differ across populations, showing a protective effect against domestic violence in Nigeria but elevating the risk of women suffering intimate partner homicide in the United States (Breitman & Schackelford, 2004; Adebowale, 2018). In Malawi, most early marriages are forced marriages due to the practice of wife inheritance, or parents using that as an opportunity for improving their poor socioeconomic conditions, and such practices are common in communities that practise polygynous marriage (MHRC, 2006). Early marriage has been linked to domestic physical violence in India (Pallikadavath & Bradley, 2018).

Although polygyny is a common cultural practice across all ethnic groups in Malawi, it is predominant in the Northern region amongst patrilineal communities (Berge *et al.*, 2013; Chikhungu *et al.*, 2014). In polygynous marriages, first wives receive less support and attention from their husbands once their husbands acquire a new wife (MHRC, 2006). The patrilineal communities in the Northern region also practise bride price (*lobola*), which is a cultural practice where the groom's family makes a payment to the bride's family in kind, cash or material goods upon marriage to make the union 'legitimate' (Oguli, 2004). Gray (1960) asserted that bride price payment reduces women to the status of a property owned by the husband such that they are unable to defend and control their own bodies. Most communities in the Central and Southern regions are

matrilineal. A common characteristic of matrilineal societies is higher autonomy amongst women, which leads to higher divorce rates than among their counterparts in the patrilineal societies (Arnado, 2004; Takyi & Gyimah, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the Southern region of Malawi has a relatively larger percentage of female-headed households (28%) compared with the Central region (21.2%) and Northern region (19.9%) (NSO Malawi, 2012).

Although not a cultural factor *per se*, heavy alcohol consumption has been commonly linked to domestic violence across the globe but the impact of alcohol consumption on behaviour varies across societies (SIRC, 1998; Brecklin & Ullman, 2002; Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003; McKinney *et al.*, 2009). Evidence based on cross-cultural research and controlled experiments indicates that the effects of alcohol on behaviour are largely determined by social and cultural factors rather than the effect of the ethanol itself. Societies hold different expectations about the effects of alcohol and social norms regarding the drunken state (SIRC, 1998). It has been established that alcohol is only an enabler of certain culturally given drunken states, with some societies across the world displaying little aggression after consuming alcohol and others showing aggression only in specific drinking contexts or against selected categories of drinking companions (Heath, 1983; Marshall, 1981). In Malawi a modest percentage (14.5%) drink alcohol but significantly more men (27.3%) than women (1.6%) do so (ADD, 2013).

Previous studies on the linkages between gender-based violence or violence against women and culture in Malawi have been limited to a few selected districts with analysis being largely descriptive (MHRC, 2006; Bisika, 2008). No study has investigated the cultural factors associated with various types of violence against married women across the whole population in Malawi. In this study, the latest national data from Malawi were used to explore the association between cultural factors and the likelihood of married women experiencing sexual, physical and emotional violence after controlling for socioeconomic factors.

## Methods

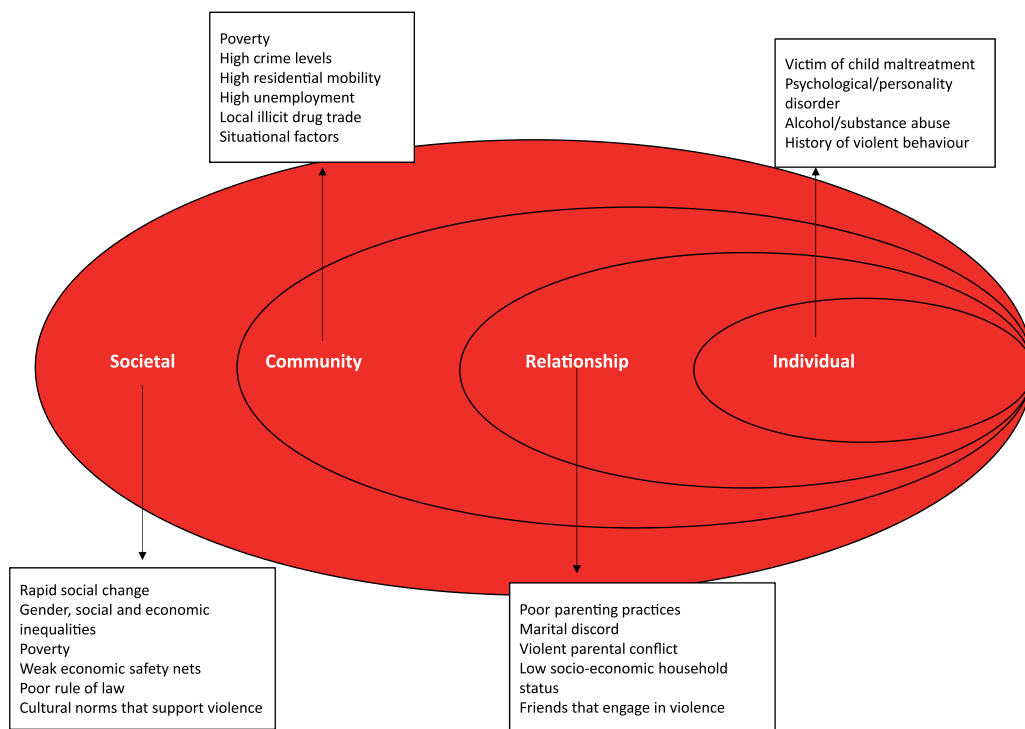
### Data

Data for women aged 15–49 years were taken from the Malawi Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) of 2015. The women's questionnaire collected information from 24,562 of the 25,146 women aged 15–49 years who were eligible for interview, representing a 98% response rate. One-third of the sampled households were asked questions on domestic violence (6379 households). Specifically, constructed weights were used to adjust for selection of only one woman per household to ensure national representativeness. The domestic violence module collected data on different types of violence: physical, sexual and emotional. The survey also provided information on background characteristics, including household wealth status and demographic characteristics of all household members such as age, sex and relationship to household head. Further details of study design and data collection are reported on the National Statistical Office of Malawi website (<http://www.nsomalawi.mw/>).

### Dependent variables

Four types of domestic violence – sexual, less-severe physical, severe physical and emotional – were analysed. The dependent variable was binary: a woman who experienced any of the four types of domestic violence took the value 1 and 0 otherwise.

The four types of domestic violence were defined as follows. A woman was reported to have suffered *sexual violence* if she was ever forced by her partner or husband to have sexual intercourse when she did not want to or been forced to perform a sexual act that she did not want. A woman suffered *emotional violence* if she had ever been insulted or made to feel bad about herself by her husband or partner, been humiliated in front of others, had been threatened or hurt, or if someone that the respondent cared about was harmed. *Less-severe physical violence* was reported if a woman



**Figure 1.** The ecological framework: examples of risk factors for intimate partner violence at each level. Source: WHO (2018). The Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA) approach (<http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/approach/ecology/en/>).

was physically harmed by their partner or husband by being pushed, shaken, slapped or punched with a fist or hit by something harmful, ever had her arm twisted or hair pulled or had something thrown at them. *Severe physical violence* was reported if a woman had ever been kicked, dragged, strangled, burnt or threatened with knife/gun or other weapon by her husband or partner.

### **Independent variables**

The study of associates of domestic violence are best conceptualized through the ecological model of violence (Carson, 1984) commonly used by the WHO Violence Prevention Alliance shown in Fig. 1 (WHO, 2018). Of key relevance to this study is the societal level, which recognizes factors such as gender, social and economic inequalities, poverty and cultural norms.

The choice of cultural and socioeconomic variables was guided by the ecological framework of violence (Fig. 1), and previous literature on the factors associated with domestic violence discussed in the Introduction and data available in the 2015 Malawi DHS. The initial bivariate analysis explored if there was an association between any form of domestic violence and the following respondent characteristics: current age, age at cohabitation, level of education, place of residence, region of residence, religion, ethnicity, spousal age difference, husband's alcohol consumption, age at first sex, current occupation and type of marriage (including respondent's rank among other wives for polygynous marriages). Table 1 presents the independent variables included in the final models.

### **Statistical analysis**

Data were analysed using STATA Version 14.0. Sampling weights were used to account for the unequal probability of selecting a survey respondent. To describe the proportional distribution of

**Table 1.** Distribution of background characteristics of study women, Malawi, 2015

Background characteristic	%	<i>n</i>
<b>Cultural factors</b>		
Ethnicity		
Chewa or Mang'anja or Nyanja	34.74	1878
Tumbuka or Nkhonde or Tonga	14.28	772
Lomwe	18.63	1007
Yao	12.08	653
Sena	4.77	258
Ngoni	12.28	664
Other	3.22	174
Religion		
Christian	88.07	4761
Muslim	11.93	645
Lineage		
Patrilineal	19.74	1067
Matrilineal	80.26	4339
Wife rank		
Only wife	89.42	4834
First wife	4.92	266
Second or higher order wife	5.66	306
<b>Woman's socioeconomic status</b>		
Woman's level of education		
No education	14.06	760
Primary	64.02	3461
Secondary and tertiary	21.92	1185
Woman's occupation		
Not working	27.12	1466
Self-employed in agriculture	42.93	2321
Unskilled employed	15.89	859
Skilled employed	14.06	760
<b>Demographic factors</b>		
Current age (years)		
15–19	7.05	381
20–24	22.42	1212
25–29	21.81	1179
30–39	32.65	1765
40–49	16.07	869

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Background characteristic	%	<i>n</i>
Age at first cohabitation		
≤13 years	5.77	312
14–17 years	45.14	2440
≥18 years	49.09	2654
Age at first sex		
≤13 years	8.45	457
14–17 years	57.99	3135
≥18 years	33.56	1814
<b>Geographical factors</b>		
Place of residence		
Urban	18.41	995
Rural	81.59	4411
Region		
Northern	18.52	1001
Central	34.04	1840
Southern	47.45	2565
<b>Husband's characteristics</b>		
Husband's education level		
No education	10.62	491
Primary	53.89	2491
Secondary and tertiary	35.48	1640
Husband's occupation		
Not working	9.74	450
Self-employed in agriculture	35.68	1649
Unskilled employed	22.54	1042
Skilled employed	32.04	1481
Husband's alcohol consumption		
Doesn't drink	70.05	3787
Drinks sometimes	19.18	1037
Drinks often	10.77	582

the survey respondents, cross-tabulations were performed and Chi-squared test of association was performed to examine the association between the domestic violence variables and the cultural, demographic, geographic, socioeconomic variables and husband characteristics. Chi-squared tests of association were performed instead of correlation tests or other measures of associations because the data were categorical (Rea & Parker, 2014).

The final analysis used multilevel logistic regression modelling to estimate the odds ratios (OR) of a woman experiencing domestic violence for women of particular cultural traits after taking into account background characteristics that were statistically significant in the Chi-squared test

of association. Multivariate analyses are able to identify characteristics associated with experiencing domestic violence net of other factors, whereas multilevel modelling ensures that estimates are robust in hierarchical data such as those used in this study and where the factors being studied vary significantly at a higher level, e.g. community. In the models where significant variation of domestic violence exists at the community level, the fixed effects estimates are representative of the community level and not at the population level. A  $p$ -value of less than 0.05 was used to decide which variables were statistically significant in both the bivariate and multivariate analyses.

### Modelling framework

The following logit link is a function that models the probability that a woman  $i$  in community  $j$  experienced either sexual, emotional, less-severe physical or severe physical domestic violence.

$$\log_e \left( \frac{\pi_{ij}}{1 - \pi_{ij}} \right)$$

A two-level random intercept model was fitted, with the woman as the first level and the community as the second level. The two-level random intercept model for woman  $i$  nested within a community  $j$  may be represented as follows;

$$\log_e \left( \frac{\pi_{ij}}{1 - \pi_{ij}} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{1ij} + \beta_2 x_{2ij} + \dots + \beta_6 x_{6ij} + u_{0j}$$

$$u_{0j} \sim N(0, \sigma_{\mu 0}^2)$$

where  $x_1$  to  $x_6$  represent a mixture of cultural, demographic, geographic, socioeconomic and husband/partner characteristics that are explanatory variables for the probability that woman  $i$  in community  $j$  experiences some form of domestic violence. The term  $\beta_0$  is the overall intercept and  $\beta_1$  to  $\beta_6$  are coefficients for the explanatory variables  $x_1$  to  $x_6$ . The term  $U_{0j}$  is the community-level random effect, which represents the variation of the likelihood of experiencing violence for women from different communities and is assumed to be normally distributed with a mean equal to 0 and variance equal to  $\sigma_{\mu 0}^2$ .

## Results

### Results of the bivariate analysis

A Chi-squared test was undertaken to test the association between the four types of domestic violence and background factors to identify which variables should be included in the multilevel logistic regression analysis. Ethnicity, religion, marriage type, education level, occupation and husband's intake of alcohol were found to be significantly associated with all four types of violence, and the following variables were found to be associated with either one, two or three of the four types of domestic violence: matrilineal/patrilineal lineage, age at first cohabitation, age at first sex, urban/rural residence, husband's occupation and husband's education level.

The study also explored the variation in approval of wife beating across cultural and geographical factors because acceptance of domestic violence may perpetuate its existence and in some cases reduce the likelihood of it being reported (Alio *et al.*, 2011; Andersson *et al.*, 2007; Biswas *et al.*, 2017). Table 2 presents the results of a Chi-squared test of association between cultural and geographical factors and the percentage of women who think wife beating is justified for any reason. The percentage of women that thought wife beating was justified was higher among women who married between the ages of 14 and 17 years than among those who married at less than 13 years or over 18 years of age. It was higher amongst women from rural areas than in those from urban areas, higher in the Northern region than the Central and Southern regions, higher amongst

**Table 2.** Association between women's perceptions on wife beating and cultural and geographical factors

Characteristic	Wife beating is justified % (n)	$\chi^2$ p-value
Age at first cohabitation/marriage		0.02
$\leq 13$ years	13.78 (43)	
14–17 years	16.15 (394)	
$\geq 18$ years	13.34 (354)	
Place of residence		<0.01
Urban	8.84 (88)	
Rural	15.94 (703)	
Region		<0.01
Northern	22.78 (228)	
Central	12.61 (232)	
Southern	12.90 (331)	
Religion		0.02
Muslim	11.47 (74)	
Christian	15.06 (717)	
Ethnicity		<0.01
Chewa, Mang'anja and Nyanja	13.95 (262)	
Tumbuka, Nkhonde and Tonga	24.22 (187)	
Lomwe	11.82 (119)	
Yao	11.03 (72)	
Sena	16.28 (42)	
Ngoni	10.54 (70)	
Other <sup>a</sup>	22.41 (39)	
Marriage type		0.03
Monogamous	14.27 (690)	
Polygynous	17.66 (101)	

<sup>a</sup>Other' comprised of various ethnic groupings that are foreign.

Christian women than Muslim women, highest amongst the Tumbuka, Nkhonde and Tonga ethnic grouping, second highest amongst those classed as 'Other' ethnicity and lowest amongst the Ngoni and higher amongst women in polygynous marriages than among women in monogamous marriages.

### **Results of the multilevel logistic regression analysis**

The results of the multilevel logistic regression analysis are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 shows the results of the random part of the model and Table 4 provides the results of the fixed part of the model. All models showed significant community-level variance. In the fixed part of the model, three variables (urban/rural residence, lineage and husband's occupation) were not significant in the multivariate analysis despite showing a statistically significant association in the bivariate analysis.



**Table 3.** Results of the random part of the model

Model	Variance	$\chi^2$ Wald Statistic	p-value
Sexual violence	0.33	17.02	<0.01
Emotional violence	0.23	12.96	<0.01
Less-severe physical violence	0.18	8.34	<0.01
Severe physical violence	0.23	4.30	0.04

### *Cultural and geographical factors*

The results of the fixed part of the model indicated that type of marriage (polygynous or not) was an important factor explaining the likelihood of a woman experiencing any form of domestic violence. The odds of experiencing violence were higher for first wives than for wives in monogamous marriages: 49% higher for emotional violence, 61% higher for less-severe violence and 82% higher for severe physical violence. In the emotional violence model there was a significant difference in the odds of experiencing violence between women who were in monogamous marriages and those who were second wives in polygynous marriages. The odds of experiencing emotional violence were 34% higher in second or higher order wives than in wives in monogamous marriages. There was a statistically significant interaction between wife's rank and age at cohabitation in the sexual violence model. Compared with women in monogamous marriages aged 13 or less, the odds of experiencing sexual violence were nearly three times greater for first wives aged 18 years above.

The ethnicity variable was only significant for the less-severe physical violence and severe physical violence variables. The odds of experiencing less-severe physical were 28% higher amongst the Lomwe and 45% higher amongst the Sena than among the Chewa. Religion also turned out to be significantly associated with experiencing domestic violence. The odds of experiencing any form of domestic violence were lower for Muslim women compared with Christian women: 33% lower for sexual violence, 34% lower for emotional violence, 39% lower for less-severe physical violence and 41% lower for severe physical violence. The region variable was significantly associated with sexual and emotional violence only. The odds of experiencing sexual violence were 64% higher amongst women from the Central region than women from the Northern region, and the odds of experiencing emotional violence were 57% higher among women from the Central region than in women from the Northern region.

### *Husband's characteristics*

Of the three husband characteristics (husband's education level, husband's occupation and husband's alcohol intake) it was only husband's alcohol intake that was significantly associated with women's experience of domestic violence. Compared with women whose husbands did not drink alcohol, women whose husbands often drank alcohol had higher odds of experiencing sexual violence (4 times), emotional violence (6 times), less-severe physical violence (7 times) and severe physical violence (9 times). The odds of experiencing any form of violence were about twice as high for women whose husbands sometimes drank alcohol compared with women whose husbands did not drink any alcohol.

### *Socioeconomic and demographic variables*

Woman's employment status, woman's education status, age at first cohabitation, age at first sex and woman's current age, which were all included as control variables, were found to be significantly associated with at least one type of violence.

**Table 4.** Results of the fixed part of the multilevel logistic regression analysis

Variable	Sexual violence	Emotional violence	Less-severe physical violence	Severe physical violence
<b>Region (Ref.: Northern)</b>				
Central	1.64 (1.19, 2.29)**	1.57 (1.18, 2.08)**	0.86 (0.65, 1.15)	0.78 (0.53, 1.16)
Southern	1.00 (0.71, 1.39)	1.29 (0.97, 1.71)	0.89 (0.67, 1.19)	0.95 (0.65, 1.42)
<b>Cultural factors</b>				
<b>Religion (Ref.: Christian)</b>				
Muslim	0.67 (0.47, 0.96)*	0.66 (0.48, 0.89)**	0.61 (0.44, 0.85)**	0.59 (0.37, 0.96)*
<b>Wife rank (Ref.: Only wife)</b>				
First wife		1.49 (1.12, 1.98)**	1.61 (1.20, 2.16)**	1.82 (1.25, 2.66)**
Second or higher order wife		1.34 (1.02, 1.76)*	0.80 (0.59, 1.09)	1.21 (0.81, 1.81)
<b>Interaction between marriage type and age at marriage (Ref.: Only wife × ≤13 years)</b>				
Only wife × 14–17 years	1.41 (0.96, 2.09)	—	—	—
Only wife × ≥18 years	1.14 (0.77, 1.70)	—	—	—
First wife × ≤13 years	0.66 (0.14, 3.15)	—	—	—
First wife × 14–17 years	1.74 (0.98, 3.10)	—	—	—
First wife × ≥18 years	2.91 (1.63, 5.20)***	—	—	—
Second or more × ≤13 years	0.96 (0.25, 3.66)	—	—	—
Second or more × 14–17 years	2.17 (1.24, 3.79)**	—	—	—
Second or more × ≥18 years	1.41 (0.79, 2.25)	—	—	—
<b>Ethnicity (Ref.: Chewa, Nyanja and Mang'anja)</b>				
Tumbuka, Tonga and Nkhonde	1.19 (0.83, 1.70)	1.01 (0.74, 1.38)	1.20 (0.87, 1.64)	0.86 (0.55, 1.34)
Lomwe	1.07 (0.81, 1.41)	1.08 (0.86, 1.36)	1.28 (1.01, 1.63)*	1.38 (1.00, 1.90)
Yao	1.36 (0.94, 1.96)	1.04 (0.76, 1.43)	1.36 (0.97, 1.90)	1.28 (0.80, 2.03)
Sena	1.31 (0.87, 1.98)	1.30 (0.92, 1.84)	1.45 (1.01, 2.08)*	1.13 (0.67, 1.89)
Ngoni	1.01 (0.78, 1.31)	0.91 (0.72, 1.14)	0.95 (0.74, 1.22)	1.34 (0.97, 1.85)
Other	1.34 (0.80, 2.23)	0.80 (0.50, 1.28)	1.19 (0.75, 1.88)	1.04 (0.55, 1.96)
<b>Socioeconomic factors</b>				
<b>Occupation (Ref.: Not employed)</b>				
Self-employed agriculture	1.45 (1.19, 1.76)***	1.12 (0.95, 1.32)	0.98 (0.82, 1.17)	1.00 (0.78, 1.28)
Unskilled employment	1.51 (1.19, 1.76)**	1.52 (1.24, 1.86)***	1.44 (1.17, 1.79)**	1.56 (1.17, 2.08)**
Skilled employment	1.37 (1.05, 1.79)	1.10 (0.88, 1.38)	1.15 (0.91, 1.46)	1.21 (0.88, 1.69)
<b>Education (Ref.: No education)</b>				
Primary	1.27 (1.00, 1.61)	1.24 (1.01, 1.53)*	1.24 (1.00, 1.54)	1.15 (0.86, 1.56)
Secondary or higher	0.92 (0.68, 1.25)	0.96 (0.74, 1.24)	0.79 (0.60, 1.04)	0.96 (0.66, 1.40)

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

Variable	Sexual violence	Emotional violence	Less-severe physical violence	Severe physical violence
<b>Demographic factors</b>				
Age at first cohabitation (Ref.: ≤13 years)				
14–17 years		1.19 (0.88, 1.62)	1.13 (0.82, 1.17)	1.31 (0.84, 2.04)
≥18 years		1.15 (0.84, 1.57)	1.06 (0.76, 1.47)	1.21 (0.77, 1.93)
Age at first sex (Ref.: ≤13 years)				
14–17 years	0.77 (0.58, 1.02)	0.78 (0.61, 1.00)	0.88 (0.68, 1.14)	0.85 (0.60, 1.20)
≥18 years	0.87 (0.64, 1.18)	0.81 (0.62, 1.06)	0.72 (0.54, 0.96)*	0.65 (0.44, 0.95)*
Age group (Ref.: 15–19 years)				
20–24	0.95 (0.69, 1.32)	1.06(0.78, 1.43)	1.17 (0.86, 1.60)	1.57 (0.95, 2.59)
25–29	1.04 (0.75, 1.45)	1.42 (1.05, 1.92)*	1.22 (0.89, 1.67)	1.59 (0.96, 2.63)
30–39	0.86 (0.63, 1.24)	1.31 (0.98, 1.76)	1.22 (0.90, 1.66)	1.40 (0.85, 2.30)
40–49	0.71 (0.48, 1.05)	1.27 (0.93, 1.75)	1.09 (0.79, 1.53)	1.93 (1.15, 3.24)*
Husband's characteristics				
Alcohol consumption (Ref.: does not drink alcohol)				
Drinks often	4.42 (3.38, 4.47)***	6.41 (5.24, 7.83)***	7.41 (6.05, 9.07)***	9.10 (7.15, 11.56)***
Drinks sometimes	1.71 (1.42, 2.06)***	1.94 (1.66, 2.28)***	2.42 (2.05, 2.86)***	2.07 (1.63, 2.63)***

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore cultural factors associated with sexual, emotional and physical (both less-severe and severe) violence against married women in Malawi. The findings indicate that marriage type (monogamous or polygynous), age at marriage, ethnicity and religion are important cultural factors that determine the likelihood of a married woman experiencing any form of domestic violence in Malawi. Husband's/partner's alcohol intake also emerged an important determinant of domestic violence encountered by married women in Malawi and its influence may vary across cultural settings.

In all four types of domestic violence, the odds of Muslim women experiencing domestic violence were less than those of Christian women. This finding is interesting and may either indicate that Islamic teachings of wife's obedience to her husband ensures that the likelihood of Muslim women being at loggerheads with their husbands are minimal, or that such teachings increase the acceptability of domestic violence amongst Muslim women such that they are less likely to report (Why Islam, 2015; Biswas *et al.*, 2017; Eidhamar, 2018). In Malawi, Muslim women have higher odds of experiencing controlling behaviour than Christian women, which aligns with Islamic teachings (Chikhungu *et al.*, 2019), but the finding from this study that the percentage of women that approve of wife beating for any reason is higher amongst Christian women than Muslim women suggests that the low levels of violence among Muslim women may not be as a result of acceptance of violence and low reporting level, but that violence is actually lower amongst Muslim women.

The finding that women in polygynous marriages have higher odds of experiencing violence than women in monogamous marriages is consistent with the findings from previous studies in

Malawi and other settings (Bisika, 2008; Jansen & Agadjarian, 2016). Women in polygynous marriages tend to have limited access to land, inheritance and sources of formalized power and are therefore less likely to have an equal relationship with their partners compared with women in monogamous unions (Goody, 1973; White & Burton, 1988; McCloskey *et al.*, 2005). The biggest difference in the odds of experiencing violence between women in polygynous and monogamous marriages was in the likelihood of experiencing severe physical violence compared with less-severe physical violence and emotional violence. The study also found that there was no significant difference in the odds of experiencing less-severe and severe physical violence between women in monogamous marriages and women who were second wives in polygynous marriages, similar to findings from Mozambique (Jansen & Agadjarian, 2016).

Interestingly, the influence of age at marriage/cohabitation on domestic violence depended on the type of marriage (monogamous or polygynous). Women who married at 14 years of age or more were more likely to encounter sexual violence if they were first wives in a polygynous marriage than were women who married at 13 years or less and were in a monogamous marriage, which is not consistent with the expectation that younger women may be more vulnerable and more likely to be abused, but cements the important influence of marriage type over and above age at cohabitation/marriage of the woman. Marrying at 18 years of age or more has been found to be protective for physical domestic violence in India (Pallikadavath & Bradley, 2018).

The ethnicity variable was a significant factor in the less-severe and severe physical violence models only. The Lomwe and the Sena had higher odds of experiencing these two forms violence compared with the Chewa, Mang'anja and Nyanja. Interestingly the Tumbuka, Nkhonde and Tonga ethnic groups, the majority of whom practise bride price (*lobola*), did not have higher odds of experiencing violence compared with the Chewa, Mang'anja and Nyanja, who do not practise bride price (Gray, 1960). The Lomwe follow a matrilineal lineage system but the Sena are patrilineal (Chikhungu *et al.*, 2014). This finding suggests that there are potentially other factors within these ethnic groupings that may explain why they have relatively higher levels of violence compared with the Chewa, Mang'anja and Nyanja.

By the greatest margin, the factor that explained the likelihood of women experiencing any form of domestic violence was whether or not their partner/husband drank alcohol. The difference in the odds of experiencing violence was highest between women whose husbands drank alcohol often and those whose husbands did not drink alcohol; and highest in the severe physical violence model, followed by the less-severe physical violence, then emotional violence and sexual violence models. The difference in odds of experiencing violence between women whose husbands drank alcohol occasionally and those than never drank alcohol was significant but small. The role of alcohol in domestic violence has been reported in numerous previous studies (Brecklin & Ullman, 2002; Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003; Room *et al.*, 2005; McKinney *et al.*, 2009; Bernardin *et al.*, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2016) but socioeconomic status may mediate the relationship between alcohol use and intimate partner violence and different societies may have different expectations about the effects of alcohol and social norms when people are drunk, such that behaviour in a drunken state may vary across societies (SIRC, 1998; Greene *et al.*, 2017). A small percentage of men drink alcohol in Malawi (ADD, 2013). This study was based on cross-sectional data so the relationship between the cultural factors and violence against women should be strictly interpreted as an association, and it was not possible to conclude that cultural factors that emerged statistically significant in the modelling caused violence against women.

In conclusion, apart from socioeconomic factors such as woman's education level and occupation and husband's alcohol consumption, cultural factors are important determinants of the likelihood of women experiencing domestic violence in Malawi. Key cultural factors are type of marriage (polygynous or monogamous), age at marriage, religion and ethnicity. Age at marriage/cohabitation interacts with type of marriage such that those who marry monogamously at a relatively younger age are less likely to encounter sexual violence than older first wives in polygynous marriages. Perceptions that wife beating is justified for various reasons may not explain why

some groups are more likely to experience violence than others; a higher percentage of Christian women perceive that it is justified for a man to beat his wife than do Muslim women, but Muslim women are less likely to encounter any of the four types of violence. Interventions to tackle violence against married women should aim at promoting monogamous marriages and discouraging polygynous marriages, and also the culture of heavy alcohol consumption amongst husbands. Future studies could explore further if there are key lessons that families can learn from Muslim families and across ethnic groups.

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**Ethical Approval.** The study used publicly available anonymized data such that there was no need to seek ethical approval. The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

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