

MARITAL STATUS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF FILIPINO WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

In developing countries like the Philippines, little is known about the relationship between continuity and dissolution of marriage and women's psychological health. Using data from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey of 2,009 childbearing women in Metro Cebu, this study examines the relationship between marital status and women's psychological well-being. We classify marital status as: 1) still with first spouse, 2) widowed, 3) separated, and 4) remarried. Well-being is measured in terms of: 1) depressive symptoms experience in the last month, and 2) domestic violence experienced by, or perpetrated by women in the last year. Logistic regression results show that widowhood increases the likelihood of depression but reduces the likelihood of domestic violence. Remarriage increases the odds of experiencing violence but is unrelated to depression or the perpetration of violence.

KEYWORDS: *Marriage, psychological well-being, Filipino women*

INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, studies on women's well-being have gained considerable attention across different disciplines. In the 1980s, investigations into various indicators of psychological well-being started to proliferate and the impetus for almost all of these studies is the hypothesized link between psychological health and physical health (Ryff and Singer, 1998). A number of these studies look into the relationship between psychological well-being and major life transitions, including marriage. However, most of the studies on marital transition and psychological well-being were conducted in developed country settings (e.g., Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Gerstel, Riessman and Rosenfield, 1985; Doherty, Su and Needle, 1989; Horwitz, White and Howell-White, 1996). Few if any such studies have been done in developing countries. In particular, nothing is known about the association between separation, widowhood and remarriage with women's psychological well-being in the Philippines.

To address this gap in the literature, this paper aims to: 1) examine the types and prevalence of marital status changes in a sample of Filipino women, and 2) explore whether and how current marital status relates to psychological well-being. This study is timely and crucial because the Philippines is presently confronting issues that appear to threaten the traditional institution of marriage, such as rising prevalence of cohabitation (Kabamalan, 2004) and initiatives to legalize divorce in the country.

MARRIAGE RATES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Marriage as an institution is viewed with strong reverence in the Philippines. Marriage can be either legal (through church or civil wedding) or through cohabitation, but majority of Philippine marriages are legal. A report by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Philippines (CBCP, 2000) states that over 60% of Filipinos 15 years of age and above have chosen to get married; furthermore, it states that the majority of these marriages (about 85%) are still intact, with only less than two percent having ended in separation and about 5% having ended due to death of a spouse. Divorce is not legal in the country, but the Catholic Church permits annulment, and the Family Code of the Philippines has provisions for the "nullity" and "voidability" of marriage (Sia, 2001; Lopez, 2001).

Data from the 10% Public Use File of the 2000 Census of Population and Housing give estimates of marriage rates in the country as follows: 54% of the population ages 15 years or older were legally married, 4.9% were widowed, 1.2% were separated, and 4.9% were cohabitating partners. Until age 40, women had higher marriage rates than men. Above age 40, however, more men than women were reported as currently married (including remarried); women at these ages were more likely to be reported as widowed or separated.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND MARRIAGE

The literature that can shed light on the nature of the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being in the Philippine context is limited. Nonetheless, studies in developed countries offer some theoretical guidelines that help elucidate this relationship (Doherty, Su and Needle, 1989; Mastekaasa, 1992). A couple of hypotheses have been proposed. One is the social causation hypothesis, which states that social ties like marriage affect and influence psychological well-being. This implies that a good (e.g., continuing) marriage enhances well-being, while poor marital outcomes (e.g., dissolution) impedes well-being. Another hypothesis is the social selection hypothesis which argues that an individual's predisposition determines his or her marital state. The assertion is that those who may be inadequate marital partners due to certain predisposing traits that could lead to an unhealthy state of well-being may be more likely to experience poor marital outcomes.

Of relevance to this study is the social causation hypothesis because it focuses on psychological well-being as outcome rather than a determinant of marital status. However, this study does not altogether discount the recursive nature of the relationship and therefore regards it as correlational rather than predictive. Psychological well-being in this study is measured in terms of the experience of depressive symptoms and domestic violence.

Studies of the effects of marital status on depression symptomology and domestic violence are abundant in Western literature. Pearlin and Johnson (1977), for example, report that those who are married are less susceptible to depression even after controlling for important characteristics such as sex, age and race. Their study also reveals that separated individuals are the most burdened by depression, while widowed

and divorced individuals are troubled with it only to a moderate degree. Gerstel, Reissman and Rosenfield (1985) also found evidence associating marital dissolution with psychological distress and showed gender differences in this association. For women, psychological distress following marital dissolution tends to be associated with material conditions (i.e. loss of income and net increase of expenses due to parental obligations), whereas for men the consequence is strongly felt in the loss of social networks. Horwitz, White and Howell-White (1996), however, do not show similar gender differences for younger cohorts. They report that young married men and women derive equal benefits from marriage and experience increased levels of well-being, in terms of fewer psychosomatic symptoms and less alcohol intake compared to their unmarried counterparts. In a study testing the social causation hypothesis using the two-wave panel of the US National Survey of Families and Households (1987-88 and 1992-93), Marks and Lambert (1998), analyzed the effects of marital history (continuity and transitions in marital status) on well-being and found that, in general, marriage promotes well-being in terms of life satisfaction and self-esteem. They also demonstrated that more women than men are depressed and unhappy following divorce or widowhood. Barrett (2000) investigated the psychological benefits of first marriage and subsequent marriages using the Piedmont Health Survey and confirmed that marriage, in general, produces psychological gains; however, relative to first marriage, second and third marriages provide smaller benefits in well-being.

Relatively few studies have given focus on the effects of marital status on the incidence of spouse or partner abuse. For example, little is known about the prevalence of spousal abuse among separated and widowed women. While it seems reasonable to assume that separated and widowed women are less prone to domestic violence because of the absence of a spouse, Kalmuss and Seltzer (1986) reported that couples in which at least one spouse was divorced had twice the likelihood of violence compared to couples in which neither spouse has been previously divorced. Kurz (1996) also demonstrated the pervasiveness of violence among separated women in the US because apparently violence continues to be perpetrated during the couple's negotiation of marital assets following the dissolution of marriage.

Based on findings from previous studies, this study hypothesizes that widowhood and separation will be associated with reduced psychological well-being among Filipino women in terms of experiencing depressive symptoms. While the association between marital status and violence has yet to be explored in the Philippine context, studies in other countries suggest that they will be associated. Specifically, the study hypothesizes that remarriage will be associated with an increased risk of experiencing depression and violence.

DATA AND METHOD

This analysis uses data from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS), which followed up a cohort of 3,327 women who gave birth between May 1983-April 1984.¹ The study site is Metropolitan Cebu, the second largest metropolitan area in the Philippines with both urban and rural (or peri-urban) sectors. At the time of the baseline survey in 1983-84, the sample women were 15-47 years old. They were interviewed 18 times thereafter. In a more recent survey round in 2005, nine women had reported never marrying. These women are excluded from the analysis because they are too few to yield reliable results regarding their category. Thus, the analysis focuses on the 2,009 ever-married women who were interviewed in the 2005 follow up survey round. At this time, the women were 35-69 years old. Attrition of the sample was mainly due to out-migration from Metro Cebu, which accounted for 80% of loss to follow up.

We examined selectivity due to sample attrition of the CLHNS women on the basis of selected baseline (1983) characteristics. Logistic regression analysis revealed that the women included in the analysis had fewer years of education and were less likely to be residing in an urban community than women who dropped out of the sample. This is not surprising because women of higher education are likely to migrate because of better job opportunities elsewhere or abroad. Women in urban areas are more mobile and tend to have more active schedules and less time to participate in the survey. No selectivity, however, was observed with respect to women's age, household size and asset ownership such as a television set.

¹ Based on the selection criterion of having given birth during a one-year period, the CLHNS sample was selective of high fertility women and consequently women of lower socioeconomic status (see detailed explanation of the CLHNS sample in Gultiano, 1999).

Measures

The primary exposure variable of interest in this study is marital status. As defined in the CLHNS, marriage is a union between man and woman that could be either legal (through a church or civil wedding) or consensual. In this analysis, marital status is defined as: 1) still married and living with first spouse, 2) currently widowed, 3) currently separated, and 4) remarried. Remarriage represents a change in spouse. Although these categories imply transitions from one marital state to another, the analysis focuses only on the current state (at the time of the 2005 CLHNS) and how this relates with the current well-being of the women.

Psychological well-being is the outcome of interest in this study. As in other studies (e.g. Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Gerstel, Reissman and Rosenfield 1985; Johnson 1991; Spanier and Furstenberg 1992; Simon and Marcussen 1999; Wade and Cairney 2000; Kalmuss and Seltzer 1986; Kurz 1996), this paper measures psychological well-being in terms of the experience of depressive symptoms and domestic violence. Specifically, the CLHNS obtains information on: 1) depressive symptoms experienced in the last month prior to the survey, and 2) acts of violence experienced or perpetrated by women in the last year.

On depression symptomology, the women were asked how often in the past month they experienced or felt each of the following 12 depressive symptoms: experience or feeling of headaches, loneliness, worry, difficulty in sleeping, poor digestion, hopelessness about the future, inability to overcome difficulties, wishing one were dead, the idea of taking one's life, thinking that one is worthless, thinking that people are unfriendly, and being disliked by people. Frequency was measured as: none of the time, occasionally, or most or all of the time. The depressive symptoms index included the total number of items for which women selected "most or all of the time." This depressive symptoms index yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. This scale was subsequently dichotomized for purposes of the logistic regression analysis (i.e., 0 representing no depressive symptom experienced most or all of the time, and 1 representing the experience of one or more depressive symptom(s) most or all of the time).

Domestic violence was measured in two ways, that is, woman as perpetrator and as victim of violence. For each measure, an index was constructed from five items in the questionnaire about acts of violence *towards* or *by* a family member or close friend. The index includes the

following items: throwing something at someone, pushing, grabbing or shoving, hitting without anything in hand, hitting with something hard and harming someone enough to need medical attention. The index for “violence perpetration” has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.59, while that of “violence victimization” has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.66. As in the depressive symptoms scale, the violence perpetration and violence victimization indices were eventually dichotomized in the regression analysis.

To control for possible confounders in the hypothesized relationship between marital status and each of the measures of psychological well-being in this study, other characteristics such as current age, age at first marriage, education, number of pregnancies, housing quality (as proxy for household asset), religiosity, work status and place of residence are included in the regression models. Age and education are measured in years and treated as continuous variables, as is number of pregnancies, while the other control variables are treated as dichotomous categories.

RESULTS

A distribution of the sample women by their current marital status and number of times married is shown in Table 1. Nine out of every ten women in the study have been married only once; only one in ten had married more than once (176 women married twice, 21 had married three times, six married four times, and one married five times). Most (96%) of those currently in legal union were still in their first marriage, while the majority (66%) of those currently cohabiting had already remarried. Current marital status, which is the main explanatory variable in this study, does not capture the entire marital transition history of the sample women. For example, it is illustrated that there are women who are currently widowed or separated who have also been remarried, but these women are relatively few in number (18 and 21, respectively). Not shown but implied in the table is that those who are currently married or cohabiting in their second or subsequent marriage (68 and 97, respectively) have been separated or widowed in their first marriage.²

² An analysis of remarriage patterns of the CLHNS women (Gultiano and Hindin, 2006) in fact shows that 30% of the women who had remarried had been widowed in their first marriage, while 70% had separated from their first spouse. This analysis also describes the most common marriage trajectories of these women: 1) consensual first marriage→separation→a church marriage→still together with second spouse (for those married two times), and 2) consensual first marriage→separation→consensual second marriage →separation→consensual third marriage→currently together (for those married three times).

Table 1. Distribution of women by current marital status (in 2005) and number of times married

Marital Status in 2005	Number of times ever married		Total (n=2,009)
	Once (n=1,805)	More than once (n=204)	
Legally married	1523 (95.7)	68 (4.3)	1591 (100.0)
Cohabiting	49 (33.6)	97 (66.4)	146 (100.0)
Widowed	166 (90.2)	18 (9.8)	184 (100.0)
Separated	67 (76.1)	21 (23.9)	88 (100.0)
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,805 (89.8)</i>	<i>204 (10.2)</i>	<i>2,009 (100.0)</i>

About one-third of the women reported experiencing at least one depressive symptom most or all of the time in the last month (Figure 1). The majority of the sample had not committed or experienced violence. Some 55% of the sample reported not having committed any act of violence (Figure 2), while 86% said they had not experienced any act of violence (Figure 3).

Figure 1
Distribution of women on the depressive symptoms score

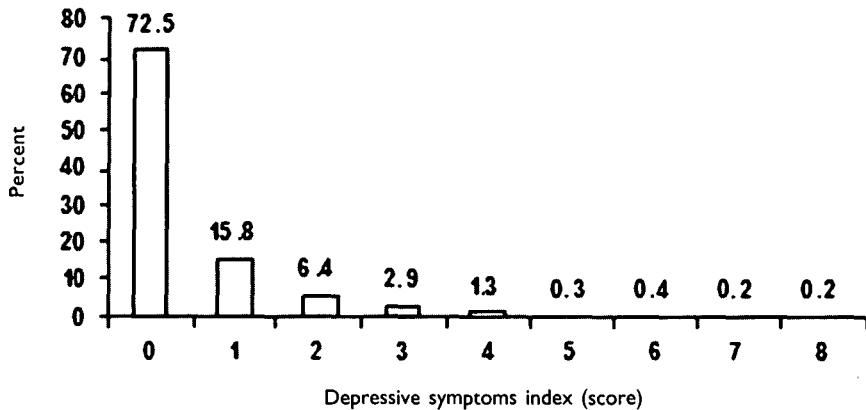


Figure 2
Distribution of women on the violence perpetration score

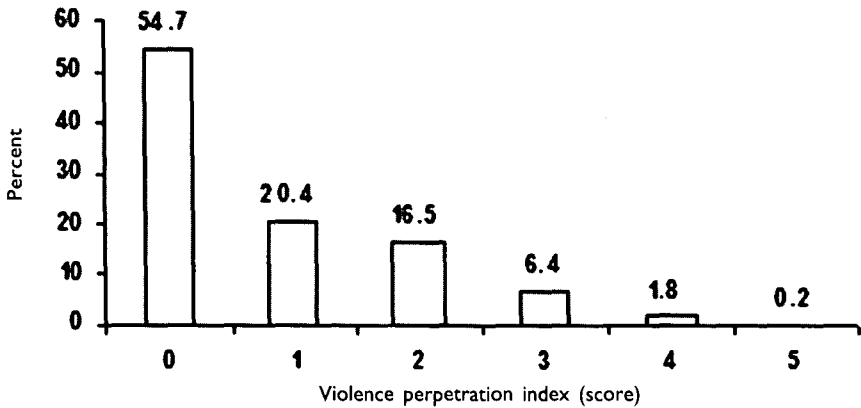


Figure 3
Distribution of women on the violence victimization score

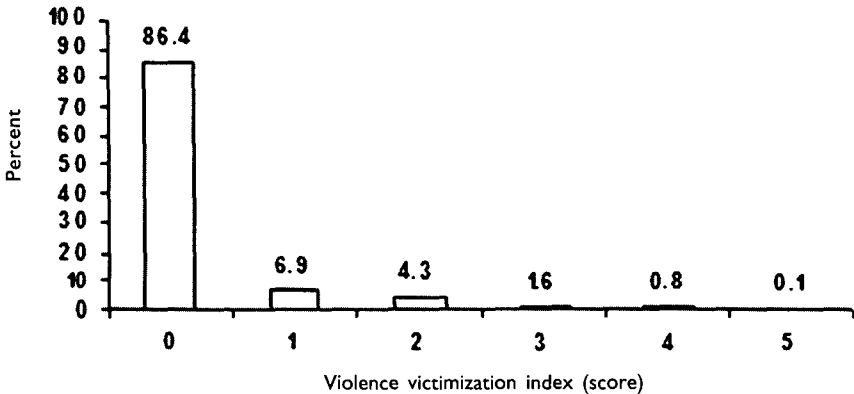


Table 2 presents a profile of the sample women by marital status category. With the exception of work status and degree of religiosity, women's characteristics differ significantly according to their current marital status. On the average, those who are currently widowed are older compared to the currently married and separated women. Women who remarried are the youngest, and had entered their first marriage the earliest. Partly as a function of age, widows have the highest number of pregnancies, while those

currently separated have the lowest. Separated women also have the highest level of education compared to those who are currently widowed or remarried; the second highest are women who are still in their first marriage. A larger proportion of separated women resides in the urban areas and has better quality housing than the rest of their counterparts. Remarried women rank second in urban residence but are the least likely to have quality housing.

Table 2. Characteristics of women by current marital status in 2005

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Marital Status (n=2009)				
	Continuously married with first spouse (n=1572)	Widowed (n=184)	Separated (n=88)	Remarried (n=165)	Total (N=2,009)
Mean age*	47.5	52.0	48.3	46.3	47.9
Mean age at first marriage*	20.4	20.6	21.0	19.2	20.3
Mean number of pregnancies*	6.4	7.5	5.5	6.8	6.5
Mean years of formal education*	7.0	6.1	7.6	6.3	6.9
% with college education*	13.7	10.3	20.5	8.5	13.2
% currently working	72.3	74.5	83.0	72.7	73.0
% religious [@]	66.9	65.8	62.5	61.2	66.1
% with quality housing [#] *	19.5	16.9	20.5	13.3	11.0
% urban *	68.8	67.4	84.1	71.5	69.5
% experiencing severe depressive symptom in past month*	25.5	39.1	29.6	32.7	27.5
% perpetrating violence in past year*	46.6	34.8	32.9	52.1	45.4
% victim of violence in past year*	14.2	4.4	6.8	22.4	13.6
% perpetrator & victim of violence*	12.2	3.3	5.7	20.0	11.7

[@] Attends church services at least once a week

[#] With strong housing materials, 4 rooms or more

* significant at p value<0.05

Table 3. Current marital status and the odds of experiencing at least one depressive symptom

	Unadjusted Model		Adjusted Model	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Marital Status (ref: living with first spouse)				
Separated	1.13 (0.66-1.94)	0.66	1.13 (0.65-1.96)	0.67
Widowed	1.66 (1.19-2.32)	0.003	1.54 (1.08-2.17)	0.02
Remarried	1.39 (0.98-1.96)	0.06	1.31 (0.92-1.86)	0.13
Covariates				
Age			1.01 (0.99-1.03)	0.47
Age at marriage			0.99 (0.96-1.03)	0.61
Number of pregnancies			1.04 (1.00-1.08)	0.03
Education			0.99 (0.97-1.03)	0.98
Religiosity (ref: does not attend church services at least once a week)			0.80 (0.65-1.00)	0.05
Housing quality (ref: weak housing materials)			0.90 (0.76-1.05)	0.17
Place of residence (ref: rural)			1.55 (1.23-1.96)	0.000
Work status (ref: not working)			0.95 (0.76-1.19)	0.66

With respect to psychological well-being, more widows experience severe depressive symptoms but more remarried women experience domestic violence compared to other women. With respect to violence, irrespective of marital status, more women reported committing acts of violence than being recipients of it. Of those who were victims of violence, a large majority had inflicted violence on others themselves.

Results of the logistic regression analyses of marital status on each of the three measures of psychological well-being are shown in Tables 3, 4 and 5.³ The adjusted model takes into account respondent's age, age at first

³ Linear regression models were also run using scores on the indices of depression and violence as outcome variables; the results were not substantively different from those obtained in the logistic regression analysis.

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marriage, number of pregnancies, years of education, religiosity, housing quality, work status and place of residence⁴.

Table 4. Current marital status and the odds of perpetrating violence in the last year

	Unadjusted Model		Adjusted Model	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Marital Status (ref: living with first spouse)				
Separated	0.45 (0.26-0.77)	0.004	0.53 (0.30-0.93)	0.03
Widowed	0.53 (0.38-0.75)	0.000	0.65 (0.45-0.93)	0.02
Remarried	1.24 (0.90-1.71)	0.19	1.10 (0.78-1.54)	0.59
Covariates				
Age			0.91 (0.89-0.93)	0.000
Age at marriage			1.05 (1.01-1.08)	0.01
Number of pregnancies			1.19 (1.15-1.24)	0.000
Education			0.99 (0.96-1.03)	0.69
Religiosity (ref: does not attend church services at least once a week)			0.90 (0.73-1.10)	0.30
Housing quality (ref: weak housing materials)			0.97 (0.84-1.13)	0.68
Place of residence (ref: rural)			1.31 (1.06-1.62)	0.01
Work status (ref: not working)			1.02 (0.83-1.26)	0.84

As shown in Table 3, currently separated women do not differ significantly from those currently in their first marriage as far as the risk of experiencing depressive symptoms is concerned. Widowhood, however, is associated with the increased odds of experiencing depressive symptoms. Relative to women who are still living with their first spouse, the currently widowed are 54%

⁴ A model including control for number of times married (as a measure of previous marital experience) was also tried, but yielded no perceptible differences in the adjusted coefficients or their significance level.

more likely to suffer from depression, despite controlling for the influences of the number of pregnancies, religiosity and place of residence. A similar positive but weaker relationship is observed among remarried women, but this relationship loses significance when other socio-demographic characteristics are accounted for.

Table 5. Current marital status and the odds of being a victim of violence in the last year

	Unadjusted Model		Adjusted Model	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Marital Status (ref: living with first spouse)				
Separated	0.49 (0.20-1.24)	0.13	0.52 (0.20-1.32)	0.17
Widowed	0.23 (0.10-0.53)	0.000	0.22 (0.10-0.51)	0.000
Remarried	1.77 (1.20-2.62)	0.004	1.58 (1.06-2.37)	0.03
Covariates				
Age			0.97 (0.95-1.00)	0.07
Age at marriage			0.99 (0.95-1.05)	0.98
Number of pregnancies			1.11 (1.05-1.16)	0.000
Education			0.98 (0.93-1.03)	0.45
Religiosity (ref: does not attend church services at least once a week)			0.80 (0.60-1.05)	0.11
Housing quality (ref: weak housing materials)			0.91 (0.73-1.12)	0.36
Place of residence (ref: rural)			2.08 (1.50-2.88)	0.000
Work status (ref: not working)			1.17 (0.87-1.58)	0.30

The likelihood of women perpetrating domestic violence in the last year, given their current marital status and other characteristics is examined in Table 4. Those who are currently separated and widowed have a lower risk of perpetrating violence compared to women who are still living with their first spouse. Controlling for other covariates attenuates this relationship

but does not nullify it. Those who are remarried are not significantly more likely to commit violence than those who are in their first marriage. Also, holding marital status constant, older women have a reduced likelihood of perpetrating violence, while women who married at older ages, have had more pregnancies, and are residing in urban areas have an increased likelihood of committing violence.

Table 5 shows violence victimization. Being remarried is clearly associated with being a recipient of violence while widowhood is strongly protective of experiencing violence. Controlling for possible confounders attenuates the association for remarried women, but both associations remain significant. For remarried women, the odds of being victims of violence reduces from 77% to 58% if other characteristics of women are accounted for, but the odds of widows avoiding victimization remains at roughly 77% regardless of these controls. Women who have separated from their spouse are not more likely to have experienced violence than those who have remained with their first spouse. As in violence perpetration, the number of pregnancies a woman has had and urban residence are both positively associated with the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence, while age is negatively associated with it.

DISCUSSION

The analysis presents evidence that, among ever-married, childbearing women in Cebu, Philippines, current marital status is associated with women's psychological well-being. The findings of this study lend support to the social causation hypothesis that social relationships, specifically the marital relationship, can affect an individual's psychological well-being. Specifically, the results suggest that widowhood makes a woman susceptible to depression but safeguards her from domestic violence. One could surmise that when a woman is widowed she assumes the role of father to her children and provider for her family. In a society where there are no measures to protect the family from economic uncertainty, the widow is thus heavily burdened physically, materially and emotionally. She may, however, be shielded from the possibility of domestic violence because of the absence of a spouse who is the most likely person in the family to inflict and/or provoke violence.

Remarried women were most likely to be victims of violence. This observation contradicts a common assumption that remarriage can give women a second chance at happiness, especially if it is seen to correct or compensate for negative circumstances surrounding a previous marriage. For some, remarriage may even be considered a viable option following separation for women who were victims of violence in their previous marriage. But, as the social selection hypothesis would argue, victims of spousal abuse in a previous marriage tend to repeat the same experience in their subsequent marriage. It will be noted that a significant fraction of women who had remarried were in consensual unions.

In this study, almost half of women reported committing at least one act of violence against a family member or close friend in the past year. This proportion appears to be relatively high (see also Ansara and Hindin, 2008; and Fehringer and Hindin, 2009). Similar data from the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study reported violence perpetration by women aged 15-24 in the past three months at 12% (Cruz and Berja, 2004). It is worth noting that the women in the CLHNS were, on average, 48 years of age and generally of high parity and low socio-economic status. Studies about violence perpetration have been done in a number of countries and have yielded varied results. In the US, for example, one in seven men and one in four women reported experiencing some form of violence in their lifetime (Breiding et al. 2008). Among married and cohabiting Hispanics, 6.1% of men and 6.5% of women had reported inflicting violence on their partners (Cunradi, 2009). In a South African community, 35% of boys and 44% of girls in secondary schools reported having physically assaulted their romantic partners (Swart et al., 2002). Studies on the use of violence by women have suggested that while women and men are equally likely to initiate physical violence in relationships involving less serious "situational couple violence" (Swan et al. 2008), women also become violent in response to violence they are receiving (Muftic et al. 2007; Swan et al. 2008).

The case of marital separation and well-being probably merits further scrutiny. This study has provided evidence only on the association between separation and the perpetration of violence but not with the other two

measures of psychological well-being. Perhaps more could have been said about the effects of separation on women's psychological well-being had the analysis applied a marital history or marriage trajectory perspective. Unfortunately, the data did not permit this approach because of inadequate information on the sequencing of marital status transitions vis-à-vis women's psychological conditions before and after each transition.

A further limitation of this study is the measurement of psychological well-being. It is acknowledged that depression and domestic violence, although common indicators of psychological well-being, do not capture the whole gamut of psychological health. Future studies should address and overcome these limitations by using an instrument that can assess a wider variety of mental health conditions. In addition, it is important to recognize that the relationship between marital status and psychological health needs also to be examined from the perspective or experiences of men.

Although the paper did not examine marital history or transitions in detail, and did not include an analysis of the single or unmarried state, it nonetheless provides valuable information and insights that contribute to the understanding of how psychological health of women is related to widowhood, separation and remarriage. Despite the limitations mentioned, this study has addressed a conspicuous gap in Philippine research regarding the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being. It paves the way for a more thorough investigation of the psycho-social consequences, both positive and negative, of marital dissolution due to death or separation (or divorce) and subsequent marriages as experienced in this culture.

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