

# OTHER PROXIMATE DETERMINANTS OF FERTILITY

# 6

*George Mandere*

This chapter focuses on the principal factors, other than contraception, which affect a woman's risk of becoming pregnant. These factors include marriage, sexual activity, postpartum amenorrhoea and abstinence from sexual activity, and onset of menopause. While it is by no means exact, marriage is an indicator of exposure of a woman to the risk of becoming pregnant. An inverse relationship exists between age at marriage and level of fertility; the level of fertility tends to be high in populations in which age at marriage is low. Postpartum amenorrhoea and abstinence affect the length of the interval between births. The onset of menopause signals the end of a woman's childbearing life. These factors determine the pace and length of reproductive activity and are therefore important for understanding levels and trends of fertility in a population.

## 6.1 MARITAL STATUS

The 2004 DHS collected information on the marital status of both male and female respondents. In this context, the term "married" refers to legal or formal marriage, while "living together" designates an informal union. Marriage is a primary indicator of the exposure of a woman to the risk of becoming pregnant. Table 6.1 shows the percent distribution of respondents by their current marital status according to age. The data in the first panel indicate that 17 percent of women of reproductive age have never been married, 67 percent are married, 4 percent are in informal unions, and 12 percent are divorced, separated, or widowed. Men are much less likely to be married than women; 33 percent have never been married, and 63 percent are married. Few men are divorced, separated, or widowed.

Table 6.1 Current marital status								
Percent distribution of women and men by current marital status, according to age, Malawi 2004								
Age	Marital status						Total	Number of respondents
	Never married	Married	Living together	Divorced	Separated	Widowed		
WOMEN								
15-19	63.7	29.8	3.1	1.5	1.6	0.2	100.0	2,392
20-24	12.0	75.1	4.4	4.5	3.0	1.0	100.0	2,870
25-29	3.4	78.8	5.3	6.1	3.8	2.6	100.0	2,157
30-34	0.9	78.5	4.3	6.2	4.8	5.1	100.0	1,478
35-39	0.7	75.9	4.9	6.9	3.6	8.0	100.0	1,117
40-44	0.4	76.2	4.4	5.9	5.0	8.1	100.0	935
45-49	0.4	69.4	3.3	9.3	3.4	14.0	100.0	749
Total	16.8	66.8	4.3	5.0	3.3	3.7	100.0	11,698
MEN								
15-19	96.8	1.9	0.4	0.1	0.8	0.0	100.0	650
20-24	52.4	42.7	1.5	1.2	2.2	0.0	100.0	587
25-29	18.4	76.7	1.0	1.8	1.2	0.8	100.0	634
30-34	3.4	90.7	1.1	1.9	2.6	0.3	100.0	485
35-39	2.7	94.8	0.3	0.8	0.8	0.6	100.0	294
40-44	1.1	95.8	0.3	1.4	0.3	1.2	100.0	282
45-49	1.8	94.2	1.2	1.5	0.0	1.4	100.0	182
50-54	0.2	95.0	1.7	1.2	0.4	1.5	100.0	148
Total	33.2	62.9	0.9	1.2	1.3	0.5	100.0	3,261

A similar pattern is observed in the 2000 DHS, except that the proportion of women who are living with a man has increased from 1 percent to 4 percent.

The percentage of women who have never married decreases sharply from 64 percent at age 15-19 to 3 percent or less at age 25-29 and older. Less than 1 percent of women age 30 and older remain unmarried. There is a rise in the percentage of women widowed with increasing age. For example, the percentage of widowed women increases from less than 3 percent in age 25-29 to 14 percent in age 45-49.

## **6.2 POLYGYNY**

In Malawi, marriages can be classified as polygynous or monogamous unions. The extent of polygyny in Malawi was measured in the 2004 MDHS by asking married women whether their husbands had other wives, and if so, how many. Table 6.2 presents the percent distribution of currently married women by number of cowives according to background characteristics.

Overall, 84 percent of all currently married women are in monogamous unions, 12 percent are in polygynous unions with one cowife, and 3 percent are in polygynous unions with two or more cowives. In general, women in older age groups, living in rural areas or the Northern Region, less educated, and in the lowest wealth quintile are also more likely to be in a polygynous union. Among the oversampled districts, polygyny is most common in Mangochi and Mzimba (24 percent each). While polygyny in Malawi declined substantially from 21 percent in the 1992 MDHS to 17 percent in the 2000 MDHS, it has since remained at a similar level (16 percent in 2004).

Data on polygynous unions among currently married men are also given in Table 6.2 and Figure 6.1. One in ten married men report being in a polygynous union. However, this proportion varies by age, place of residence, region, and level of education. Polygyny increases with age; whereas only 11 percent of married men age 30-34 are in a polygynous union, the corresponding proportion for men age 50-54 is 16 percent.

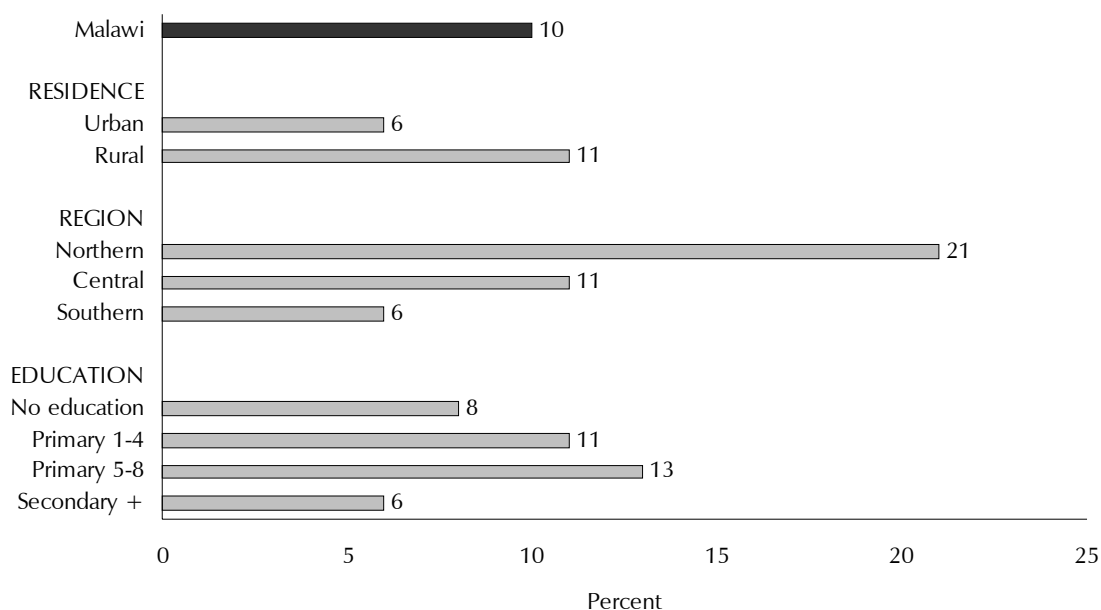
**Table 6.2** Number of cowives and wives

Percent distribution of currently married women by number of cowives, and percent distribution of currently married men by number of wives, according to background characteristics, Malawi 2004

Background characteristic	Women					Number of women	Men			Number of men
	Number of cowives				Total		Number of wives		Total	
	0	1	2+	Missing			1	2+		
<b>Age</b>										
15-19	94.6	4.6	0.4	0.4	100.0	788	*	*	100.0	15
20-24	90.5	8.2	1.1	0.2	100.0	2,283	97.9	2.1	100.0	260
25-29	84.4	12.6	2.7	0.3	100.0	1,814	95.5	4.5	100.0	493
30-34	79.0	15.8	4.9	0.2	100.0	1,225	89.3	10.7	100.0	445
35-39	76.5	18.4	5.1	0.0	100.0	903	86.5	13.5	100.0	280
40-44	73.9	17.9	7.5	0.7	100.0	754	84.1	15.9	100.0	271
45-49	80.1	15.5	4.2	0.1	100.0	545	83.8	16.2	100.0	173
50-54	na	na	na	na	na	na	84.2	15.8	100.0	143
<b>Residence</b>										
Urban	94.3	4.3	1.3	0.0	100.0	1,337	94.5	5.5	100.0	355
Rural	82.2	14.0	3.5	0.3	100.0	6,975	89.1	10.9	100.0	1,724
<b>Region</b>										
Northern	73.7	19.3	6.6	0.5	100.0	1,087	79.3	20.7	100.0	243
Central	84.3	12.6	2.9	0.2	100.0	3,346	88.7	11.3	100.0	885
Southern	86.9	10.4	2.4	0.3	100.0	3,880	93.9	6.1	100.0	951
<b>District</b>										
Blantyre	95.0	3.8	1.1	0.1	100.0	643	97.3	2.7	100.0	199
Kasungu	82.7	14.4	2.9	0.0	100.0	385	90.7	9.3	100.0	103
Machinga	79.2	16.7	3.8	0.3	100.0	317	94.6	5.4	100.0	70
Mangochi	75.5	19.2	5.1	0.2	100.0	437	86.6	13.4	100.0	106
Mzimba	76.2	18.7	4.9	0.1	100.0	570	84.0	16.0	100.0	129
Salima	80.8	16.8	2.3	0.0	100.0	230	89.4	10.6	100.0	58
Thyolo	87.8	10.5	1.6	0.2	100.0	433	93.7	6.3	100.0	116
Zomba	91.5	6.0	2.4	0.2	100.0	436	98.7	1.3	100.0	100
Lilongwe	87.2	10.2	2.4	0.2	100.0	1,175	87.4	12.6	100.0	322
Mulanje	88.1	10.3	1.2	0.5	100.0	359	93.6	6.4	100.0	74
Other districts	82.5	13.3	3.8	0.4	100.0	3,326	88.2	11.8	100.0	802
<b>Education</b>										
No education	77.7	17.6	4.4	0.4	100.0	2,229	92.1	7.9	100.0	329
Primary 1-4	85.2	11.2	3.4	0.2	100.0	2,291	88.7	11.3	100.0	536
Primary 5-8	85.5	11.7	2.7	0.1	100.0	2,850	87.5	12.5	100.0	773
Secondary+	92.9	5.5	1.1	0.5	100.0	940	94.3	5.7	100.0	440
<b>Wealth quintile</b>										
Lowest	77.9	17.5	4.2	0.4	100.0	1,256	90.8	9.2	100.0	271
Second	82.7	13.4	3.8	0.1	100.0	1,787	89.1	10.9	100.0	434
Middle	85.0	12.2	2.6	0.2	100.0	1,851	90.5	9.5	100.0	509
Fourth	83.3	13.0	3.2	0.5	100.0	1,779	88.9	11.1	100.0	465
Highest	90.5	7.0	2.4	0.1	100.0	1,640	91.0	9.0	100.0	400
Total	84.2	12.4	3.2	0.2	100.0	8,312	90.0	10.0	100.0	2,079

Note: An asterisk indicates that a figure is based on fewer than 25 unweighted cases and has been suppressed.  
na = Not applicable

**Figure 6.1 Percentage of Currently Married Men in a Polygynous Marriage, by Background Characteristics**



MDHS 2004

### 6.3 AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE

For most societies, marriage marks the point of a woman's life when childbearing first becomes socially acceptable. Women who marry early will, on average, have longer exposure to reproductive risk; therefore, early age at marriage often implies early age at childbearing and higher fertility for a society. Information on age at first marriage was obtained by asking all ever-married respondents the month and year they started living together with their first spouse.

Table 6.3 shows the percentage of women and men who were first married by exact ages and median age at first marriage, according to current age. The median age at first marriage for women age 20-49 in Malawi has remained constant since 2000 at 18.0 years. Overall, 51 percent of women age 20-49 are married by age 18, and 73 percent are married by age 20. The percentage of women who are married by age 15 declined from 15 percent among women age 45-49 to 6 percent among women age 15-19.

Men enter into first marriage about five years later than women; the median age at first marriage for men is 22.9 years compared with 18.0 years for women. While only 22 percent of men are married by age 20, the corresponding proportion for women is 73 percent.

**Table 6.3 Age at first marriage**

Percentage of women and men who were first married by specific exact ages and median age at first marriage, according to current age, Malawi 2004

Current age	Percentage first married by exact age:					Percentage never married	Number	Median age at first marriage
	15	18	20	22	25			
WOMEN								
15-19	6.2	na	na	na	na	63.7	2,392	a
20-24	10.7	48.9	73.1	na	na	12.0	2,870	18.1
25-29	12.7	47.5	72.4	85.7	94.9	3.4	2,157	18.2
30-34	14.1	52.7	74.1	85.3	93.8	0.9	1,478	17.8
35-39	19.0	54.5	74.9	84.1	92.9	0.7	1,117	17.7
40-44	16.1	54.7	76.2	86.6	93.7	0.4	935	17.7
45-49	15.3	49.2	69.6	81.7	90.8	0.4	749	18.1
20-49	13.6	50.5	73.3	na	na	4.8	9,306	18.0
MEN								
15-19	0.0	na	na	na	na	96.8	650	a
20-24	0.1	7.8	21.5	na	na	52.4	587	a
25-29	0.2	7.4	19.9	44.0	69.2	18.4	634	23.1
30-34	0.0	8.5	21.0	39.7	67.6	3.4	485	23.0
35-39	0.0	11.4	25.2	41.4	68.8	2.7	294	23.0
40-44	0.4	10.3	26.7	47.3	72.4	1.1	282	22.2
45-49	0.0	7.8	15.2	38.2	64.7	1.8	182	23.2
50-54	1.3	5.2	23.4	42.0	71.2	0.2	148	23.0
25-54	0.2	8.5	21.7	42.4	68.9	7.3	2,025	22.9
na = Not applicable								
a = Omitted because less than 50 percent of the women married for the first time before reaching the beginning of the age group								

Table 6.4 examines the median age at first marriage among women age 20-49 and men age 25-54, by age and background characteristics. Overall, Table 6.4 shows small variations in the median age at first marriage across subgroups of women. Urban women tend to marry one year later than their rural counterparts (18.9 years compared with 17.8 years). Education is strongly related to later marriage among women; for example, the median age at first marriage among women age 25 to 29 with no education is 17.2 years compared to 21.6 years for those with secondary education or higher. Wealth status is not closely associated with age at first marriage; women in the highest wealth quintile marry about one year older than women in the lower quintiles.

The median age at first marriage among men age 25-54 is also presented in Table 6.4. The data show that rural men marry one year earlier than urban men. Age at first marriage among men does not vary much by other background characteristics.

Table 6.4 Median age at first marriage

Median age at first marriage among women age 20-49 and men age 25-54, by current age and background characteristics, Malawi 2004

WOMEN							
Background characteristic	Current age						Women age 20-49
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
<b>Residence</b>							
Urban	19.6	19.3	18.1	17.7	18.0	18.3	18.9
Rural	17.8	18.0	17.8	17.7	17.6	18.0	17.8
<b>Region</b>							
Northern	17.8	17.9	17.9	17.8	17.7	17.8	17.8
Central	18.7	18.6	17.9	18.1	18.1	18.4	18.4
Southern	17.6	17.9	17.7	16.9	17.3	17.8	17.6
<b>Education</b>							
No education	16.6	17.2	17.3	16.9	17.3	18.0	17.2
Primary 1-4	17.2	17.8	17.9	17.5	17.4	18.1	17.5
Primary 5-8	17.7	18.1	17.8	17.9	18.1	17.8	17.9
Secondary+	a	21.6	22.2	20.8	20.5	20.0	a
<b>Wealth quintile</b>							
Lowest	17.4	17.9	17.7	17.1	17.6	18.3	17.6
Second	17.7	17.8	17.3	18.0	17.9	18.4	17.7
Middle	17.6	17.8	17.7	17.6	17.3	17.6	17.6
Fourth	18.2	18.0	18.0	17.3	17.5	17.8	17.9
Highest	a	19.5	18.7	18.3	18.0	18.4	19.2
Total	18.1	18.2	17.8	17.7	17.7	18.1	18.0
MEN							
Background characteristic	Current age						Men age 25-54
	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	
<b>Residence</b>							
Urban	24.2	23.8	23.8	22.7	24.2	19.3	23.8
Rural	22.5	22.7	22.8	22.1	23.2	23.1	22.6
<b>Region</b>							
Northern	23.8	22.9	24.8	22.5	22.7	22.8	23.1
Central	23.2	23.2	23.1	22.8	24.0	21.6	23.1
Southern	22.3	22.8	22.7	21.5	23.0	24.2	22.6
<b>Education</b>							
No education	21.1	22.2	23.8	22.0	21.9	22.5	22.1
Primary 1-4	21.4	22.0	20.6	22.1	24.5	23.0	21.8
Primary 5-8	21.7	22.1	22.8	22.0	22.3	22.0	22.1
Secondary+	a	26.5	25.6	22.7	27.4	24.3	a
<b>Wealth quintile</b>							
Lowest	23.3	22.5	22.5	22.4	20.8	22.2	22.5
Second	21.4	22.7	22.6	22.1	22.8	24.4	22.2
Middle	22.4	23.1	22.5	21.6	24.0	23.4	22.6
Fourth	22.5	21.9	22.2	21.9	22.8	22.8	22.2
Highest	24.9	26.4	25.0	23.1	24.7	22.6	a
Total	23.1	23.0	23.0	22.2	23.2	23.0	22.9

Note: Age at first marriage is the age at which the respondent began living with her/his first spouse/partner.

a = Omitted because less than 50 percent of respondents married for the first time before reaching the beginning of the age group

## 6.4 AGE AT FIRST SEXUAL INTERCOURSE

Age at first marriage is often used as a proxy for the onset of women's exposure to the risk of pregnancy. However, since some women are sexually active before marriage, the age at which women initiate sexual intercourse more precisely marks the beginning of their exposure to reproductive risk. Table 6.5 shows the percentage of women and men who had first sexual intercourse by exact ages.

Overall, 17 percent of women age 20-49 have had sexual intercourse by age 15. By age 20, this proportion is 78 percent. The median age at first sexual intercourse for women has increased slightly since 2000 from 16.9 years to 17.3 years in 2004. While nearly half (48 percent) of women age 15-19 have never had sexual intercourse, this percentage drops to 5 percent among women age 20 and older. By age 25, virtually all women have had sex.

Data for men show that 9 percent of men aged 25-54 have had sexual intercourse by age 15, 64 percent have had sex by age 20, and 90 percent have had sex by age 25. As in the case for women, nearly half (48 percent) of men age 15-19 have never had sexual intercourse, compared with 11 percent of men age 20-24. Virtually all men age 30 and older have had sex. The median age at first sexual intercourse decreases from 19.0 years for men aged 45-49 to 18.1 years for men 20-24 years.

Table 6.5 Age at first sexual intercourse								
Percentage of women and men who had first sexual intercourse by exact ages and median age at first intercourse, according to current age, Malawi 2004								
Current age	Percentage who had first sexual intercourse by exact age:					Percentage who never had intercourse	Number of respondents	Median age at first intercourse
	15	18	20	22	25			
WOMEN								
15-19	14.1	na	na	na	na	47.8	2,392	a
20-24	15.5	57.1	79.0	na	na	4.5	2,870	17.4
25-29	16.4	55.5	78.6	86.0	88.8	1.3	2,157	17.5
30-34	17.2	60.0	78.6	84.6	88.2	0.0	1,478	17.1
35-39	20.7	59.5	76.1	81.5	85.3	0.1	1,117	17.2
40-44	18.5	60.3	77.6	83.6	87.5	0.0	935	17.1
45-49	17.4	55.2	71.8	80.9	85.4	0.0	749	17.6
20-49	17.0	57.6	77.8	a	a	1.7	9,306	17.3
25-49	17.8	57.9	77.2	84.0	87.5	0.5	6,436	17.3
MEN								
15-19	18.0	na	na	na	na	47.7	650	a
20-24	9.1	47.7	74.1	na	na	11.2	587	18.1
25-29	10.0	39.9	65.0	80.0	91.9	3.0	634	18.6
30-34	9.7	43.5	67.5	80.4	93.5	0.4	485	18.4
35-39	9.7	42.7	64.5	77.1	87.2	0.0	294	18.4
40-44	6.7	37.0	62.0	77.5	88.5	0.0	282	18.8
45-49	5.2	32.7	55.3	69.6	81.9	1.0	182	19.0
50-54	4.8	29.5	59.2	74.0	89.2	0.2	148	19.0
20-54	8.7	41.2	66.1	79.8	89.4	3.4	2,612	18.5
25-54	8.6	39.4	63.8	77.9	90.0	1.1	2,025	18.6

na = Not applicable  
a = Omitted because less than 50 percent of the women had intercourse for the first time before reaching the beginning of the age group

Table 6.6.1 shows the differentials in the median age at first sexual intercourse for women age 20-49 by background characteristics. While there are small urban-rural differences, women in the Southern Region started having sex at an earlier age than women in Northern and Central Regions (16.7 years compared to 17.7 years or older). The data show that there is a strong inverse relationship between a woman's education and her initiation to sexual activity. Women with secondary or higher education have their first sexual intercourse more than two years later than women with less education (19.2 years compared with 16.5 years). Wealth quintile is also associated with the median age at first sexual intercourse; median age at first intercourse for women in the highest wealth quintile (18.2 years) is more than one year higher than for women in the lowest quintile (16.9 years). The median age at first sexual intercourse varies by district, ranging between 15.6 years in Thyolo and 18.2 years in Lilongwe.

Background characteristic	Current age						Women 20-49
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
<b>Residence</b>							
Urban	18.1	18.2	17.7	17.6	17.2	17.8	17.9
Rural	17.2	17.4	17.0	17.2	17.1	17.5	17.2
<b>Region</b>							
Northern	17.6	17.6	18.1	17.6	17.5	18.1	17.7
Central	18.2	18.2	17.5	17.8	17.5	18.1	18.0
Southern	16.7	16.8	16.6	16.4	16.6	16.9	16.7
<b>District</b>							
Blantyre	17.4	18.2	17.3	18.1	17.7	19.2	17.7
Kasungu	17.7	17.7	17.8	17.8	17.5	17.0	17.6
Machinga	16.7	16.0	16.5	16.1	16.1	16.1	16.3
Mangochi	16.8	16.1	16.5	16.5	17.7	17.9	16.8
Mzimba	17.5	17.9	17.8	17.6	17.7	17.8	17.7
Salima	17.8	17.8	16.9	17.1	17.9	20.0	17.6
Thyolo	15.8	15.6	15.7	15.3	15.7	15.2	15.6
Zomba	16.4	16.5	16.3	15.9	16.4	16.5	16.4
Lilongwe	18.6	18.5	17.2	17.8	17.6	18.3	18.2
Mulanje	16.2	16.1	16.0	16.5	16.0	16.8	16.2
Other districts	17.6	17.6	17.5	17.5	17.0	17.8	17.5
<b>Education</b>							
No education	16.1	16.2	16.4	16.7	16.6	17.5	16.5
Primary 1-4	16.6	17.0	17.4	17.1	16.6	17.5	16.9
Primary 5-8	17.3	17.5	17.3	17.5	17.8	17.4	17.4
Secondary+	19.1	19.2	19.7	18.8	19.7	18.8	19.2
<b>Wealth quintile</b>							
Lowest	16.7	16.9	16.8	16.9	16.6	17.7	16.9
Second	16.9	17.3	16.5	16.9	17.3	17.1	16.9
Middle	17.1	17.1	16.9	17.5	16.8	17.0	17.1
Fourth	17.7	17.7	17.5	17.0	17.0	17.9	17.5
Highest	18.5	18.3	18.0	17.8	17.6	17.9	18.2
Total	17.4	17.5	17.1	17.2	17.1	17.6	17.3

Unlike women, men do not show much variation with regard to their age at first sex by their background characteristics (Table 6.6.2). Among the oversampled districts, the median ranges from 17.2 years in Salima to 19.2 years in Mzimba.



Table 6.6.2 Median age at first intercourse: men

Median age at first sexual intercourse among men age 20-54, by current age and background characteristics, Malawi 2004

Background characteristic	Current age							Men 20-54
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	
<b>Residence</b>								
Urban	18.3	18.5	18.4	18.4	18.0	17.5	18.2	18.3
Rural	18.1	18.6	18.4	18.4	18.8	19.9	19.2	18.6
<b>Region</b>								
Northern	18.3	18.9	18.4	19.6	18.7	19.8	a	18.8
Central	18.5	18.8	18.4	18.4	19.0	20.1	18.8	18.7
Southern	17.4	18.3	18.5	18.3	18.7	18.5	19.3	18.3
<b>District</b>								
Blantyre	18.1	17.3	17.1	18.2	18.4	17.1	a	17.7
Kasungu	18.1	17.3	18.2	20.2	18.0	18.8	19.4	18.3
Machinga	17.0	18.2	18.9	16.6	18.8	17.5	a	18.3
Mangochi	17.1	17.8	18.1	20.1	18.2	19.7	19.3	18.2
Mzimba	18.4	18.7	19.2	19.7	18.8	22.1	a	19.2
Salima	17.5	16.4	16.2	19.2	18.0	18.9	17.4	17.2
Thyolo	17.3	18.4	17.5	17.3	19.2	20.0	18.3	18.1
Zomba	17.0	18.8	18.1	16.7	17.7	18.0	17.5	18.0
Lilongwe	18.4	20.0	18.7	18.1	18.6	19.7	16.9	18.6
Mulanje	16.5	19.2	19.3	18.2	17.4	18.5	18.2	18.2
Other districts	18.3	18.7	19.0	18.7	20.0	20.3	19.8	18.8
<b>Education</b>								
No education	16.9	18.1	18.3	18.5	18.2	21.0	a	18.5
Primary 1-4	18.0	18.5	18.3	18.6	18.5	18.0	18.8	18.4
Primary 5-8	18.3	18.4	18.3	18.0	19.1	18.8	18.9	18.4
Secondary+	18.3	19.0	19.0	18.7	19.7	20.0	19.9	18.8
<b>Wealth quintile</b>								
Lowest	18.4	18.8	17.7	19.5	20.8	16.9	18.9	18.7
Second	17.9	18.4	18.8	18.2	18.4	20.0	19.1	18.4
Middle	17.2	19.2	18.5	17.7	18.8	21.2	18.7	18.6
Fourth	18.0	18.2	18.3	18.0	18.5	18.7	19.4	18.3
Highest	18.5	18.5	18.6	19.4	18.8	18.6	19.0	18.6
Total	18.1	18.6	18.4	18.4	18.8	19.0	19.0	18.5

a = Omitted because less than 50 percent of the men had intercourse for the first time before reaching the beginning of the age group

## 6.5 RECENT SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Although few women age 20-49 have never had sexual intercourse, not all those who have ever had sex are currently sexually active. In the absence of effective contraception, the probability of becoming pregnant is related to the frequency of intercourse. Information on recent sexual activity, therefore, can be used to refine measures of exposure to pregnancy. Women who have ever had sex were asked how long ago their last sexual activity occurred; this allows an assessment of whether they had a recent sexual encounter. Table 6.7.1 shows the distribution of women by their most recent sexual activity. Women are considered to be sexually active if they had sexual intercourse at least

once in the four weeks preceding the survey. Women who are not sexually active may be abstaining for various reasons, such as having recently given birth (i.e., postpartum abstinence).

The data indicate that 55 percent of women had sexual intercourse in the four weeks preceding the survey, another 22 percent had sexual intercourse in the past year, and 9 percent had intercourse one or more years before the survey. Eleven percent of women age 15-49 have never had sex.

Recent sexual activity varies by age, ranging from 28 percent of women age 15-19 having sex within the 4 weeks prior to the survey to 66 percent of women age 25-29. As expected, women who are married or living together are much more likely to be sexually active than women who are not in union (divorced, separated, widowed, and never-married women). While 75 percent of married women were sexually active in the four weeks preceding the survey, the proportion for nonmarried women is 16 percent.

While there is no urban-rural difference in sexual activity in the last four weeks, women in the Central Region are more likely to have had sex in the last four weeks than women in the Southern and Northern Regions (58 percent compared with 55 percent and 49 percent, respectively). There is a negative association between recent sexual activity and the respondent's education. The percentage of women with no education who had sex in the last four weeks is 61 percent compared with 44 percent of women with at least a secondary education.

Women who are using family planning methods are more likely than women who are not to have had sexual intercourse within the past four weeks. Among users of family planning methods, sexual activity is highest among pill users. There are marked variations in recent sexual activity according to wealth index, with women in the middle wealth quintile being more likely to have had sex in the four weeks before the survey than those in the higher and lower wealth quintiles. The percentage of women who were sexually active in the past four weeks increases from 46 percent among women in the lowest wealth quintile to 60 percent for women with the middle wealth quintile, and declines to 53 percent for women in the highest quintile. Among the oversampled districts, the proportion of women who had sex in the four weeks before the survey ranges from 47 percent in Mangochi to 64 percent in Kasungu.

Table 6.7.2 shows that 64 percent of men had sexual intercourse in the four weeks preceding the survey, another 15 percent had sex within the past year, and 10 percent had sexual intercourse one or more years before the survey. Twelve percent of men have never had sex. Men's recent sexual activity increases with age; while 21 percent of men age 15-19 were sexually active in the past four weeks, the corresponding proportion for men age 25 and older is 73 percent or higher. As with women, men who are married or living together are the most active sexually in recent weeks (86 percent), compared with divorced, separated or widowed men (34 percent), and never-married men (23 percent).

The percentage of men who were sexually active in the four weeks preceding the survey increases from 82 percent for men who have been married 0-4 years to 92 percent among those married for 10-14 years. Urban men are less likely than rural men to have had sexual intercourse in the past four weeks (57 and 65 percent, respectively). There are small differentials across regions in men's recent sexual activity.

Table 6.7.1 Recent sexual activity: women

Percent distribution of women by timing of last sexual intercourse, according to background characteristics, Malawi 2004

Background characteristic	Timing of last sexual intercourse				Never had sexual intercourse	Total	Number of women
	Within the past 4 weeks	Within one year <sup>1</sup>	One or more years	Missing			
<b>Age</b>							
15-19	28.4	17.2	4.9	1.8	47.8	100.0	2,392
20-24	60.1	25.1	6.0	4.3	4.5	100.0	2,870
25-29	66.0	23.2	6.1	3.4	1.3	100.0	2,157
30-34	65.1	22.9	9.3	2.8	0.0	100.0	1,478
35-39	60.3	22.8	11.5	5.3	0.1	100.0	1,117
40-44	63.5	17.8	15.1	3.6	0.0	100.0	935
45-49	55.8	17.1	25.5	1.5	0.0	100.0	749
<b>Marital status</b>							
Never married	6.6	16.0	10.1	1.3	65.9	100.0	1,970
Married or living together	74.8	20.5	2.3	2.4	0.0	100.0	8,312
Divorced/separated/widowed	9.0	35.1	44.4	11.4	0.0	100.0	1,416
<b>Marital duration<sup>2</sup></b>							
Married only once							
0-4 years	73.0	22.2	1.5	3.2	0.1	100.0	2,088
5-9 years	75.1	20.0	1.8	3.1	0.0	100.0	1,710
10-14 years	79.2	16.5	2.1	2.3	0.0	100.0	985
15-19 years	72.5	24.3	2.0	1.3	0.0	100.0	687
20-24 years	75.9	19.7	2.8	1.5	0.0	100.0	540
25+ years	77.8	14.3	6.8	1.2	0.0	100.0	532
Married more than once	73.8	22.0	2.4	1.8	0.0	100.0	1,770
<b>Residence</b>							
Urban	55.8	17.2	9.9	2.1	14.9	100.0	2,076
Rural	55.2	22.5	8.4	3.6	10.3	100.0	9,621
<b>Region</b>							
Northern	48.6	20.4	12.2	3.5	15.2	100.0	1,552
Central	57.7	17.8	7.5	3.4	13.6	100.0	4,734
Southern	55.2	25.1	8.8	3.1	7.8	100.0	5,412
<b>District</b>							
Blantyre	59.3	20.9	7.5	3.1	9.2	100.0	914
Kasungu	63.9	15.6	5.9	2.7	11.9	100.0	497
Machinga	53.8	28.9	7.5	2.3	7.5	100.0	427
Mangochi	47.2	30.1	11.4	5.3	6.0	100.0	599
Mzimba	47.9	21.5	12.7	2.8	15.1	100.0	778
Salima	60.3	19.7	7.0	3.0	10.2	100.0	303
Thyolo	58.9	25.3	5.9	3.5	6.3	100.0	618
Zomba	56.1	24.1	9.0	2.4	8.4	100.0	637
Lilongwe	58.5	15.7	7.7	3.5	14.7	100.0	1,705
Mulanje	56.3	25.7	9.2	2.4	6.4	100.0	512
Other districts	54.0	21.5	9.1	3.5	12.0	100.0	4,708
<b>Education</b>							
No education	61.2	22.9	10.3	4.2	1.5	100.0	2,734
Primary 1-4	59.5	22.1	6.8	3.1	8.5	100.0	2,998
Primary 5-8	53.5	20.3	8.2	3.2	14.8	100.0	4,154
Secondary+	43.9	21.4	10.6	2.4	21.7	100.0	1,811
<b>Current contraceptive method</b>							
Female sterilisation	76.2	11.6	9.6	2.6	0.0	100.0	561
Pill	83.2	14.3	1.2	1.3	0.0	100.0	176
Condom	76.6	21.1	0.3	1.4	0.5	100.0	203
Periodic abstinence	(65.0)	(19.5)	(15.5)	(0.0)	(0.0)	100.0	47
Other method	79.9	15.5	2.5	2.0	0.0	100.0	2,006
No method	47.2	23.7	10.4	3.7	14.9	100.0	8,694
<b>Wealth quintile</b>							
Lowest	46.1	27.9	12.0	5.5	8.5	100.0	2,037
Second	58.6	22.5	7.8	3.3	7.7	100.0	2,277
Middle	60.1	21.1	6.3	3.0	9.5	100.0	2,383
Fourth	58.6	19.3	6.8	3.0	12.3	100.0	2,361
Highest	52.5	18.2	10.7	2.1	16.5	100.0	2,639
Total	55.3	21.5	8.7	3.3	11.1	100.0	11,698

Note: Total includes 11 women who are using an IUD. Figures in parentheses are based on 25-49 unweighted cases.

<sup>1</sup> Excludes women who had sexual intercourse in the past 4 weeks<sup>2</sup> Excludes women who are not currently married

Table 6.7.2 Recent sexual activity: men

Percent distribution of men by timing of last sexual intercourse, according to background characteristics, Malawi 2004

Background characteristic	Timing of last sexual intercourse				Never had sexual intercourse	Total	Number of men
	Within the past 4 weeks	Within one year <sup>1</sup>	One or more years	Missing			
<b>Current age</b>							
15-19	20.5	13.8	18.1	0.0	47.7	100.0	650
20-24	52.2	21.8	14.6	0.1	11.2	100.0	587
25-29	72.8	16.1	8.1	0.0	3.0	100.0	634
30-34	84.1	11.2	4.3	0.0	0.4	100.0	485
35-39	81.5	12.8	5.7	0.0	0.0	100.0	294
40-44	85.4	11.6	3.1	0.0	0.0	100.0	282
45-49	84.3	8.5	5.2	1.1	1.0	100.0	182
50-54	87.5	8.8	3.4	0.0	0.2	100.0	148
<b>Marital status</b>							
Never married	22.6	19.0	21.7	0.0	36.8	100.0	1,084
Married or living together	86.3	11.6	2.0	0.1	0.0	100.0	2,079
Divorced/separated/widowed	33.7	26.5	39.8	0.0	0.0	100.0	98
<b>Marital duration<sup>2</sup></b>							
Married only once							
0-4 years	82.2	16.1	1.6	0.1	0.0	100.0	487
5-9 years	85.5	11.4	3.1	0.0	0.0	100.0	381
10-14 years	91.5	6.9	1.6	0.0	0.0	100.0	248
15-19 years	83.9	13.2	2.8	0.0	0.0	100.0	185
20-24 years	87.0	9.6	2.7	0.7	0.0	100.0	140
25+ years	87.7	10.0	1.4	0.9	0.0	100.0	111
Married more than once	88.5	10.1	1.5	0.0	0.0	100.0	528
<b>Residence</b>							
Urban	57.1	16.8	9.9	0.0	16.3	100.0	669
Rural	65.2	13.9	9.6	0.1	11.2	100.0	2,593
<b>Region</b>							
Northern	51.8	17.1	13.5	0.0	17.6	100.0	423
Central	65.0	12.0	9.2	0.2	13.7	100.0	1,370
Southern	65.5	16.1	9.1	0.0	9.3	100.0	1,486
<b>District</b>							
Blantyre	62.1	18.7	9.5	0.0	9.7	100.0	316
Kasungu	65.6	13.5	9.3	0.0	11.5	100.0	156
Machinga	60.8	23.6	4.6	0.4	10.6	100.0	114
Mangochi	71.7	15.2	8.5	0.0	4.5	100.0	150
Mzimba	48.8	18.9	15.5	0.0	16.8	100.0	212
Salima	69.6	18.3	4.5	0.0	7.5	100.0	78
Thyolo	67.6	15.4	8.2	0.0	8.7	100.0	169
Zomba	71.6	12.9	8.7	0.0	6.8	100.0	159
Lilongwe	61.4	13.0	10.0	0.0	15.6	100.0	542
Mulanje	69.8	12.6	10.5	0.0	7.1	100.0	114
Other Districts	63.8	12.5	9.8	0.2	13.7	100.0	1,250
<b>Education</b>							
No education	79.7	11.8	6.0	0.5	2.0	100.0	383
Primary 1-4	66.4	14.6	7.3	0.0	11.8	100.0	798
Primary 5-8	63.8	12.3	8.9	0.0	15.0	100.0	1,220
Secondary+	53.3	18.8	14.6	0.0	13.2	100.0	859
<b>Wealth quintile</b>							
Lowest	63.4	16.5	10.2	0.0	9.9	100.0	412
Second	66.4	13.4	8.2	0.2	11.8	100.0	640
Middle	69.4	13.0	8.6	0.1	8.9	100.0	699
Fourth	64.1	14.2	10.4	0.1	11.3	100.0	709
Highest	55.6	16.0	10.9	0.0	17.5	100.0	802
Total	63.5	14.5	9.7	0.1	12.2	100.0	3,261

<sup>1</sup> Excludes men who had sexual intercourse in the past 4 weeks<sup>2</sup> Excludes men who are not currently married

The level of recent sexual activity decreases with increasing education; 80 percent of men with no education had sexual intercourse in the four weeks prior to the survey, compared with 53 percent of men with secondary or higher education. Variations in recent sexual activity among men by wealth index are similar to those for women, with men in the middle quintile being the most active sexually. With respect to district, the proportion ranges from 49 percent in Mzimba to 72 percent in Mangochi and Zomba.

## 6.6 POSTPARTUM AMENORRHOEA, ABSTINENCE, AND INSUSCEPTIBILITY

Postpartum amenorrhoea refers to the interval between childbirth and the return of menstruation. During this period, the risk of a woman becoming pregnant is much reduced. How long this protection from conception following childbirth lasts depends on the length and intensity of breastfeeding and the length of time before the resumption of sexual intercourse. Postpartum abstinence refers to the period of voluntary sexual inactivity after childbirth. Women are considered to be insusceptible to pregnancy if they are not exposed to the risk of pregnancy either because they are amenorrhoeic or because they are abstaining from sexual intercourse after a birth.

In the MDHS 2004, women who gave birth during the three years prior to the survey were asked about their breastfeeding practices, the duration of amenorrhoea, and sexual abstinence. The results are presented in Table 6.8. The period of postpartum amenorrhoea is considerably longer than the period of postpartum abstinence and is, therefore, a principal determinant of the length of postpartum insusceptibility. The median duration of postpartum amenorrhoea is 11.5 months, median duration of postpartum abstinence is 5.5 months, and the median duration of

Months since birth	Percentage of births for which the mother is:			Number of births
	Amenorrhoeic	Abstaining	Insusceptible	
< 2	93.5	95.3	98.5	327
2-3	91.4	77.7	96.1	430
4-5	76.6	60.9	85.6	382
6-7	76.5	38.9	83.0	439
8-9	63.8	26.1	70.7	417
10-11	53.6	21.3	61.5	393
12-13	45.6	14.0	50.1	408
14-15	38.6	12.8	44.0	419
16-17	27.4	12.2	35.2	388
18-19	22.8	8.2	28.7	399
20-21	14.9	7.7	20.4	390
22-23	12.2	7.2	18.2	305
24-25	9.2	5.5	13.7	333
26-27	4.1	4.2	7.9	298
28-29	3.5	1.8	5.2	328
30-31	2.4	4.0	5.7	334
32-33	4.0	5.5	8.9	310
34-35	2.1	2.9	5.0	305
Total	38.2	23.6	43.7	6,607
Median	11.5	5.5	12.9	-
Mean	13.1	8.4	15.0	-

insusceptibility is 12.9 months. Nearly all women are insusceptible to pregnancy in the first two months after a birth, and both postpartum amenorrhoea and postpartum abstinence are equally important for insusceptibility. Beginning with two months after childbirth, the contribution of abstinence to insusceptibility decreases faster than that of amenorrhoea as a result of the resumption of sexual relations. In the 12-13 month period after the birth of a child, 46 percent of the women are amenorrhoeic, 14 percent are practicing abstinence, and 50 percent are still insusceptible to the risk of pregnancy.

Table 6.9 shows the median number of months of postpartum amenorrhoea, postpartum abstinence, and postpartum insusceptibility for births in the three years preceding the survey, by background characteristics. Women age 30-49 years have more than two months longer postpartum insusceptibility than women age 15-29 years (14.7 months compared with 12.2 months).

Table 6.9 Median duration of postpartum insusceptibility by background characteristics

Median number of months of postpartum amenorrhoea, postpartum abstinence, and postpartum insusceptibility following births in the three years preceding the survey, by background characteristics, Malawi 2004

Background characteristic	Postpartum amenorrhoea	Postpartum abstinence	Postpartum insusceptibility	Number of births
<b>Age</b>				
15-29	10.8	5.4	12.2	4,663
30-49	13.5	5.9	14.7	1,944
<b>Residence</b>				
Urban	9.9	5.3	12.9	895
Rural	11.6	5.6	12.9	5,712
<b>Region</b>				
Northern	9.1	6.2	13.0	810
Central	11.5	4.0	12.2	2,770
Southern	12.1	6.7	13.3	3,027
<b>District</b>				
Blantyre	11.1	6.3	12.4	424
Kasungu	12.5	2.7	12.9	311
Machinga	12.5	6.9	13.5	267
Mangochi	12.4	9.2	13.6	398
Mzimba	10.1	7.8	15.0	407
Salima	9.8	5.1	10.3	198
Thyolo	13.3	7.2	13.4	349
Zomba	10.1	5.8	11.4	333
Lilongwe	9.9	4.5	9.9	930
Mulanje	11.7	7.8	12.2	269
Other districts	11.8	4.7	13.2	2,722
<b>Education</b>				
No education	14.0	6.0	15.2	1,656
Primary 1-4	12.2	5.4	12.8	1,925
Primary 5-8	11.3	5.5	12.4	2,263
Secondary+	8.3	4.8	9.7	761
<b>Wealth quintile</b>				
Lowest	14.2	6.6	16.0	1,304
Second	12.2	5.4	13.0	1,522
Middle	10.4	5.6	11.9	1,474
Fourth	11.2	5.2	12.5	1,261
Highest	9.0	4.8	10.4	1,046
Total	11.5	5.5	12.9	6,607

Note: Medians are based on current status.

While urban women have the same median duration of postpartum insusceptibility as women in the rural areas (12.9 months), women in the urban areas have a shorter median duration of postpartum amenorrhoea than women in the rural areas.

At the regional level, insusceptibility lasts for 12.2 months for women in the Central Region, almost one month shorter than women in the other regions (13.0 months or longer). Women in the Northern Region have the shortest duration of amenorrhoea compared to women in the Southern and Northern Regions (9.1 months and 11.5 months or longer, respectively).

The 2004 MDHS results show that the mean durations of postpartum amenorrhoea, postpartum abstinence, and postpartum insusceptibility are inversely related to a woman's educational attainment and wealth quintile. Women with secondary or higher education have the shortest median duration of postpartum amenorrhoea (8.3 months), postpartum abstinence (4.8 months), and postpartum insusceptibility (9.7 months), while women with no education have the longest median duration of postpartum amenorrhoea (14.0 months), postpartum abstinence (6.0 months), and postpartum insusceptibility (15.2 months).

Similarly, women in the lowest wealth quintile have the longest duration of postpartum amenorrhoea (14.2 months), abstinence (6.6 months), and insusceptibility (16.0 months), while women in the highest wealth quintile have the shortest durations of amenorrhoea (9.0 months), abstinence (4.8 months), and insusceptibility (10.4 months).

There are some variations in the duration of postpartum amenorrhoea, abstinence and insusceptibility among districts in Malawi. The duration of amenorrhoea ranges from 9.8 months in Salima to 13.3 months in Thyolo. Women in Kasungu have the shortest duration of postpartum abstinence (2.7 months), while women in Mangochi have the longest duration of abstinence (9.2 months). The period of insusceptibility is longest in Mzimba (15.0 months) and shortest in Lilongwe (9.9 months).

## 6.7 TERMINATION OF EXPOSURE TO PREGNANCY

The onset of infecundability in a woman is difficult to determine. However, there are ways of estimating the start of the termination of the exposure to the risk of pregnancy. Table 6.10 shows the percentage of women aged 30 years and over who are not pregnant and not postpartum amenorrhoeic, and whose last menstrual period occurred six or more months preceding the survey.

After age 30, exposure to the risk of pregnancy declines with age as an increasing proportion of women become infecund. The percentage of women who are menopausal increases slowly from 3 percent for women age 30-34 to 11 percent of women age 40-41 and to 17 percent for women 44-45. After age 45, the percentage of women who are menopausal increases sharply from 28 percent among women age 46-47 to 42 percent among women 48-49.

Age	Percentage menopausal <sup>1</sup>	Number of women
30-34	2.9	1,478
35-39	4.4	1,117
40-41	11.1	443
42-43	15.9	322
44-45	17.4	338
46-47	28.3	292
48-49	41.9	289
Total	10.6	4,279

<sup>1</sup> Percentage of all women who are not pregnant and not postpartum amenorrhoeic whose last menstrual period occurred six or more months preceding the survey