Impact of divorce on children’s educational attainment: Evidence from Senegal

Juliette Crespin-Boucaud and Rozenn Hotte∗†

January 20, 2019

Abstract

Divorce can be frequent in developing countries, and especially in West Africa. In 2006, in Senegal, 10% of women older than 15 and 13% of women older than 30 have divorced at least once. Despite divorces being common in Africa (Clark and Brauner-Otto [2015]), their effects in developing countries have scarcely been studied in the economic literature. Divorce can have consequences for both ex-spouses as well as for their children, as the economic literature has suggested in the case of developed countries. Some researchers have argued that there is a negative causal effect of divorce (Halla et al. [2016], Gruber [2004]) whereas others suggested that this relationship is due at a high extent to selection into divorce (Björklund and Sundström [2006], Cherlin et al. [1991], Piketty [2003]) or that the impact of divorce depends on the level of conflict prior the divorce (Amato et al. [1995]). Data limitations have been the main factor that prevented the analysis of the effects of divorce in developing countries. For instance, the Demographic and Health Surveys record what the current marital status of respondents is and whether they have been married more than once. However, the reason why the last marriage ended is not known (widowhood or divorce). The date of the end of that previous union is also unknown. In this paper, we rely on the survey Pauvreté et Structure Familiale (PSF) (De Vreyer et al. [2008]), a survey which includes these two pieces of information.

In most African countries, including Senegal, consequences of a divorce for children could be especially significant given the fact that customary divorce rules include neither provision for child support, nor clear rules on child custody (Lagoutte et al. [2014]). In Senegal, while in the case of legal divorces, child support can be provided, in the case of customary divorces or of a repudiation of the woman by her husband, decisions affecting the children are decided

∗Paris School of Economics (PSE); Address: Paris School of Economics, office R6-01, 48 boulevard Jourdan, 75014 Paris; E-mail: juliette.crespinboucaud@psemail.eu ; rozenn.hotte@psemail.eu
†We are grateful to Denis Cogneau, Sylvie Lambert, Annemie Maertens and Paola Villar for their advice and for insightful discussions on previous versions of this paper. We also thank participants to the PSI-PSE seminar at the Paris School of Economics (PSE) and to internal seminar of the Department of Economics of the University of Sussex for their helpful comments. Remaining errors are ours.
by their father. Only legally registered marriages can be legally ended, and women tend to be the ones filling for legal divorce. Several studies, such as Dial [2008] and Lagoutte et al. [2014], conclude that women living in urban areas, and educated women are more likely than their poorer and rural-dwelling counterparts to ask for a divorce, but that poorer women also get divorced. As men should provide for their wives\(^1\), a divorce is likely to decrease a woman's financial resources and hence to be an emotional shock and an economic shock. In that context, consequences of a divorce on children's welfare could differ from consequences of divorces in developed countries. The only paper (Gnoumou Thiombiano et al. [2013]), to our knowledge, to focus on children whose parents divorced in an African country, show that these children are at higher risk of dying before they reach the age of 5, and are less likely to attend primary school than their counterparts.

The key issue is to distinguish between selection into divorce and the causal effect of divorce. As divorce is potentially affecting a specific kind of families, the threat to capture a selection effect instead of a causal effect is particularly accurate. It is difficult to judge ex ante what the impact of divorce could be. On the one hand, in Senegal children whose parents divorce are more often the children of educated parents, and, as such, should be more likely to attend school (Dumas and Lambert [2011]). Women are often the ones initiating a divorce, so it is unlikely that the consequences of a divorce would always be negative for them: Lambert et al. [2017] finds that divorced women are not worse-off than ever-married women in terms of consumption. On the other hand, it is unclear whether women take into account the consequences of a divorce in terms of child outcomes, especially as there is uncertainty over child custody. In our study, we focus on children of divorced mothers as we are sure to match the children to the divorce date of their biological parents. Polygyny is widespread in Senegal, and our data does not allow us to easily identify which children were affected by a divorce when the father divorced one of his wives.

In this study, we use sibling-analysis to document the effects of divorce in Senegal. We use the second wave of the survey PSF (Pauvreté et Structure Familiale), that was conducted in 2011. The quality of the data enables us to have information on all the siblings, including children who are not living with their mother. Residence and custody of the children are outcomes of divorce, hence it matters that we use extensive information not only on household members, but on children living elsewhere. We exploit the variation in the age at divorce among the siblings. This method controls for the potential bias of unobserved and invariant characteristics within the family. Such characteristics include the education levels of the parents, their preferences for their children education: these factors also determine educational outcomes, hence the use of sibling fixed effects.

We find that divorce does not affect the probability to attend formal school. However, it reduces the likelihood to have a secondary education. This effect seem to come from children

\(^1\)Lagoute et al. [2014] stress that the "d\textsuperscript{é}faut d'entretien par le mari" (husband failed to support his wife economically) is grounds for divorce.
that were between 10 and 14 years old when their parents divorced: this age range corresponds to the window during which most transitions from primary to secondary school happen. There is no evidence of heterogeneous effects with respect to gender.

While sibling-level analysis may not allow us to identify a causal effect of divorce, it allows us to control for unobserved selection factors\(^2\). We plan to explore channels that could explain our results. Our data allows us to look at migration decisions and at educational facilities in current and previous place of residence, custody at the time of survey, and at whether the mother has remarried.

This paper makes three contributions to the literature. First, this is one of the first papers to study the impact of divorce on children educational attainment in a developing country, and it also the first one that controls for unobservable family constant characteristics - factors that are likely to explain much of the selection into divorce. This adds to the literature on divorce in Africa that shows how frequent divorce is (Clark and Brauner-Otto [2015]). Second, we contribute to the (broader) literature on marital shocks and the channels that mediate their impact. The impact of widowhood has already been studied in the context of Africa (for instance, Chapoto et al. [2011] (Zambia) and Van de Walle [2013] (Mali)). In the context of Senegal, Lambert et al. [2017] find that widowhood is not neutral for women’s well-being and that poor women are more vulnerable to dissolution and remarriage. Third, this paper also expands the literature on the determinants of children’s educational outcomes in West Africa (Dumas and Lambert [2011], Andre and Demonsant [2014]).

\(^2\)Some studies (Piketty [2003]; Voena [2015]) use the impact of a reform in the divorce law to assess the impact of access to divorce. No major divorce reform has been implemented in Senegal during our study period, and moreover, in a setting in which most divorces take place outside the legal framework, it is unlikely that law changes would inform us on the consequences of divorce for the average divorce in a family.
References


