

Prevalence and Associated Factors of Permanent Celibacy among Men and Women in Burkina Faso: Findings from the 2019 General Population and Housing Census

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Abstract

Introduction: Permanent celibacy, defined as the enduring—whether voluntary or involuntary—choice to neither marry nor form a conjugal union, is a social phenomenon of growing interest in many countries. This study examines the prevalence and associated factors of permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso, aiming to better understand the social, relational and familial dynamics underlying this lifestyle choice, as well as to foster broader reflections on gender norms and life choices in Burkina Faso. **Methods:** The study relies on individual-level data from the 2019 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) of Burkina Faso. This dataset provides detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics, geographic distribution, family structure, and attitudes toward marriage and family. Both bivariate descriptive analysis (to assess the prevalence of permanent celibacy) and multivariate explanatory analysis (to identify determining factors) were employed. **Results:** Findings indicate that permanent celibacy is uncommon in Burkina Faso. Among men aged 50 or older and women aged 40 or older, only 2.3% remained unmarried. The phenomenon is more pronounced in the country's two major cities, affecting 3.5% of men and 4.5% of women in the respective age groups. In Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, religion, education level, disability, employment sector, and household living standards were significantly associated with permanent celibacy, regardless of gender. Nationwide, in addition to the factors identified in the two cities, occupation and residential setting (urban/rural) were also linked to permanent celibacy, irrespective of sex. **Conclusion:** The study con-

cludes that permanent celibacy is rare in Burkina Faso among men aged 50+ and women aged 40+ and is influenced by a combination of cultural, socio-economic, and individual factors. To obtain more precise and up-to-date insights into this phenomenon in Burkina Faso, further sociological and demographic studies would be necessary.

Keywords

Permanent Celibacy, Associated Factors, General Population and Housing Census, Burkina Faso

1. Introduction

Permanent celibacy, characterized by the enduring—whether voluntary or involuntary—choice to neither marry nor form a conjugal union, is a social phenomenon of growing interest in many countries. This phenomenon can manifest in various forms and is influenced by a multitude of factors, including cultural norms, social pressures, individual aspirations, economic opportunities, education, and others (Antoine, 2002, 2006; Engelen & Kok, 2003; Hertrich, 2007).

In the African context, marriage is normative and nearly obligatory. Culture, through customs and traditions, often contributes to the mental conditioning of individuals, compelling them to form unions (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, African nuptiality regimes are characterized by early union formation for women and delayed marriage for men, rapid and nearly systematic remarriage of widowed or divorced women of reproductive age, widespread polygamy, and the exceptional nature of permanent celibacy for both sexes (Hertrich, 2007). Consequently, the low prevalence of permanent celibacy is one of the distinctive features of African nuptiality. As such, permanent celibacy is virtually absent (Antoine, 2002). Celibacy among adults or the elderly is thus perceived as an anomaly and considered a deviation that disrupts cultural models.

However, profound shifts in demographic and social behaviors have begun to emerge in recent years across African cities, affecting the marriage market. Due to the desire for self-determination, modernism, the increasing entry of women into the labor market, and—above all—economic challenges, marriage norms are now being questioned in Africa, accompanied by a rise in celibacy at all ages, including among the elderly (Dimi, 2018). Although most African women still marry young, the average age at first marriage is gradually increasing (Ononokpono et al., 2022; Rutaremwa, 2014; Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2020b). In most African countries, marriage is being delayed (Hertrich, 2007; Hertrich & Lesclingand, 2007; Hertrich & Locoh, 1999), particularly in urban areas. This trend toward later marriage is linked to education, but changes are also observed among uneducated women.

Recent demographic analyses in West Africa indicate that the proportion of permanently celibate individuals, though low, is slowly increasing across censuses

(Garenne, 2016; Rutaremwa, 2014). This phenomenon remains understudied in Burkina Faso, where literature has focused more on age at first marriage, polygamy, and conjugal transitions (Ononokpono et al., 2022; Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2020b). Yet even a modest rise in permanent celibacy may reflect deeper social transformations tied to urbanization, the growth of female education, and the redefinition of gender roles.

Like many sub-Saharan African societies, nuptiality in Burkina Faso is marked by high union prevalence. Permanent celibacy is rare in Burkinabè societies. Despite its low frequency, it remains poorly explored in scientific literature. Studying this phenomenon also holds demographic and socioeconomic relevance. On one hand, permanent celibacy directly influences fertility trajectories and household composition (Shapiro & Gebreselassie, 2014). On the other hand, it may impact economic security and social well-being, particularly in contexts where the family remains the primary structure for solidarity and social protection (Odimegwu et al., 2020). In countries with limited pension and healthcare systems, living alone at an advanced age can exacerbate economic and social vulnerability. Given these shifting marital behaviors across Africa, what is the prevalence of permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso, and which populations are most at risk of lifelong celibacy?

From a policy perspective, accurate data on the sociodemographic profiles of permanently celibate individuals could inform better-targeted programs, particularly in social protection, economic inclusion, and mental health. It could also enrich debates on evolving gender norms and family models amid demographic and social transitions.

This study thus aims to determine the prevalence and identify factors associated with permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso, to better understand the social, relational, and familial dynamics underlying this lifestyle choice. By examining the sociodemographic characteristics of permanently celibate individuals and their influencing factors, this analysis may provide valuable insights for tailored public policy design and implementation. Furthermore, it could advance understanding of relational and familial dynamics, as well as broader reflections on gender norms and life choices in Burkina Faso.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of celibacy can be analyzed through several theoretical approaches: culturalist, economicist, modernist, and comprehensive (Dimi, 2018). From the culturalist perspective, celibacy is viewed as a deviation from marriage norms prescribed by African cultural values. Thérèse Locoh (1988) emphasizes that the exceptional nature of permanent celibacy in most of Africa stems from African moral values that reject this lifestyle as unacceptable (Locoh, 1988).

The economicist approach posits that marital choices involve cost-benefit analyses of marriage. Economic hardships and the exorbitant costs associated with marriage may explain forced celibacy among less affluent individuals. Moreover, the need to accumulate bridewealth (dowry) and cover marriage-related expenses

may deter potential candidates from marrying (Dimi, 2018; Hertrich & Locoh, 1999; Locoh, 1988). Permanent celibacy may also relate to intergenerational wealth transfer. In elite families, daughters were often encouraged to remain unmarried to preserve family wealth rather than marry someone of lower status (Engelen & Kok, 2003). In working-class urban households where resources are pooled, marriage could mean losing a productive member's contributions, leading parents to discourage early marriages (Engelen & Kok, 2003). Household size and composition also influence marital timing, as the departure of older children may relieve financial burdens in large families (Engelen & Kok, 2003).

The modernist perspective attributes permanent celibacy to the adoption of modern attitudes fostered by education, which promotes individual emancipation. Educated individuals increasingly distance themselves from traditional cultural norms and assert their choice to remain single. Africans thus face contradictory logics: the universal modernity paradigm that valorizes celibacy (especially in urban areas) versus hierarchical traditional systems that prioritize marriage at all costs. Demographers suggest that freely choosing one's partner significantly explains rising permanent celibacy (Dimi, 2018; Le Bras, 1996).

The comprehensive approach frames celibacy as a deliberate choice reflecting hesitation to conform to established norms while avoiding the challenges of coupled life. These explanatory models identify three key factors influencing permanent celibacy among older populations: dominant cultural models, economic conditions, and personal motivations (Dimi, 2018).

Furthermore, beyond these analytical frameworks, individual characteristics are crucial explanatory factors. Gender, education level, vocational training, and migration patterns all affect marital market outcomes. Some women deliberately forgo marriage, viewing their intellectual and professional aspirations as incompatible with traditional wifely subordination (Dimi, 2018; Engelen & Kok, 2003).

Moreover, many studies have examined personal motivations for permanent celibacy, including independence, career dedication, unconventional lifestyle preferences, and disinterest in marriage/romance. Machoko (2013) demonstrates that celibacy was practiced in Zimbabwe as a voluntary choice for material, social and spiritual benefits. This phenomenon was observed among regional and family spirit mediums who were possessed by deceased chiefs' or family members' spirits until death. These mediums occasionally engaged in ritual sexual relations with a relative or chief to strengthen chieftaincy or bring financial and material wealth to their family (Machoko, 2013). Educational attainment shows divergent patterns: in Cameroon, permanent celibacy primarily affects less-educated but non-poor individuals aged 60+ (Dimi, 2018), whereas in Tunisia, higher rates occur among university-educated women aged over 45 (Guérin-Pace & Kassar, 2022). Occupational sectors also matter—in Cameroon, celibacy rates are highest among executives, entrepreneurs, and agricultural workers, possibly reflecting hyper-gamy factors (Dimi, 2018).

Studies examining drivers of change in age at first marriage reveal factors that

may predict permanent celibacy. These factors exhibit gender-specific effects, differentially influencing women and men. Economic constraints and significantly increased female education are frequently cited to explain delayed first marriage in Africa, particularly in major urban centers. Research indicates that improved educational access has equipped women with skills and knowledge that enhance their autonomy and independence. This development has likely influenced their marital decision-making and willingness to pursue alternative life goals. Specifically for women, their growing economic participation and household earnings—combined with expanding educational attainment, especially in urban areas—contribute to postponement of first union formation (Thiriat, 1999). According to Antoine et al. (1995), ethnic and religious affiliations also significantly impact women's first marriage timing (Antoine et al., 1995).

For men, the primary factors influencing marriage are education level and employment history (Antoine et al., 1995). Urban studies conducted in Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou), Mali (Bamako), and Senegal (Dakar) reveal that difficulties in securing employment, particularly stable jobs, lead to delayed union formation and consequently later establishment of family life (Antoine et al., 1995; Antoine et al., 1995; Calvès & N'bouke, 2018; Calvès, 2007). In Dakar and other African cities, barriers to labor market entry and the need to accumulate bridewealth payments compel many young men to postpone marriage. The economic crisis, manifested through employment difficulties and housing shortages, significantly impacts men's marital decisions, as housing provision remains traditionally a male responsibility. Faced with this crisis magnitude, men demonstrate increasing reluctance to enter unions. Securing paid employment proves crucial for first union formation (Becker, 1981; Bocquier & Nanitelamio, 1991). The growing individualization of marriage financing observed across many African countries appears directly linked to employment's pivotal role in initiating first unions (Becker, 1981; Bocquier & Nanitelamio, 1991). Multiple studies highlight that marriage costs-encompassing various ceremonies and bridewealth payments-increasingly fall exclusively on grooms rather than their families (Adjamagbo & Delaunay, 1999; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Van De Walle & Lardoux, 2005). While marriage expenses become more individualized, they also appear to be rising across several African nations (Adjamagbo & Delaunay, 1999; Van De Walle & Lardoux, 2005), including Burkina Faso (Sévéde-Bardem, 1997). Within this context, it follows that gainful employment is perceived as a necessary precondition for first union formation among younger generations of men (Calvès, 2007).

In Africa, permanent celibacy primarily affects individuals with severe disabilities or those whose religious obligations preclude conjugal life (Hertrich & Locoh, 1999). The literature also examines how social norms and expectations influence the choice of permanent celibacy, highlighting variations across cultures and societies. Several studies analyze the familial and social pressures exerted on individuals to marry, along with the coping and avoidance strategies employed to resist these pressures (De Bel-Air, 2008).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Sources

This study utilized individual-level data from the 2019 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH-2019) conducted in Burkina Faso. The dataset provides detailed information on sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age, education level, marital status, etc.), geographic distribution, family structure, and attitudes toward marriage and family. This data source is well-suited for analyzing permanent celibacy and offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this phenomenon in Burkina Faso. The RGPH is a nationwide statistical operation conducted approximately every ten years by the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie, (INSD)). It aims to exhaustively enumerate all individuals and households in the country. Data collection involves preliminary mapping of enumeration areas, a standardized questionnaire administered face-to-face by trained enumerators and quality control measures (supervision, consistency checks, data processing, and anonymization of microdata).

3.2. Study Population

The study population consisted of adult individuals residing in Burkina Faso. This analysis focuses on men aged 50 years and older and women aged 40 years and older living in Burkina Faso. The study population included individuals from diverse sociodemographic groups, stratified by sex, age categories, education level, religion, employment status, disability status, region, and residential setting (urban/rural).

3.3. Study Variables

Dependent Variable

For the purposes of this study, the term “Never married” is defined as having never entered into a legal or formal marriage, thereby excluding those in common-law unions, along with the widowed, divorced, and separated. For contextual analysis, permanent celibacy in women was defined as never having married by age 40, capturing prolonged non-union trajectories in a context where Burkina Faso’s median age at first marriage for women is exceptionally low (~17.6 years, per the 2021 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)) (Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie & ICF international, 2023). Notably, in most sub-Saharan African countries, >90% of women marry before age 30, making first unions after 40 statistically rare.

Furthermore, during the 2019 census, permanent celibacy was defined as follows: a never-married man aged 50 years or older or a never-married woman aged 40 years or older, residing in Burkina Faso. To conform to this definition, never-married men aged 50+ and never-married women aged 40+ residing in Burkina Faso were included in this analysis. For operational purposes, this variable was

coded as follows: 1 if the woman is never-married and aged 40 or above, or if the man is never-married and aged 50 or above; 0 otherwise.

Explanatory Variables

This study incorporated individual and contextual characteristics influencing marital market outcomes to assess the prevalence and identify factors associated with permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso. The explanatory variables examined included: region of residence, urban/rural setting, household socioeconomic status, sex, religious affiliation, educational attainment, employment status, disability status, and economic sector of activity.

The household socioeconomic status is a composite index constructed from variables characterizing dwellings. These include: wall material, roof material, floor material, main lighting type, main cooking energy source, main drinking water source, toilet type, main garbage disposal method, main wastewater disposal method, and household assets. This new variable has the following categories: richest, richer, middle, poorer, and poorest. It effectively serves as a proxy for overall living comfort and socioeconomic status (*Institut national de la statistique et de la démographie (INSD), 2022*).

For the purposes of the 2019 census, persons were considered disabled if they had a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (*Institut national de la statistique et de la démographie (INSD), 2022*).

3.4. Statistical Analysis Methods

Two analytical approaches were employed: Bivariate descriptive analysis to quantify the prevalence of permanent celibacy and Multivariate explanatory analysis to identify associated factors.

Bivariate Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis provided a comprehensive overview of sociodemographic patterns among permanently celibate individuals in Burkina Faso, establishing a foundation for deeper investigation. Key variables (sex, education level, employment status, etc.) were cross-tabulated, with χ^2 (chi-square) tests used to assess potential associations between the dependent variable (permanent celibacy) and independent variables.

Multivariate Explanatory Analysis

The explanatory analysis aims to identify factors associated with permanent celibacy within the study population. Specifically, it seeks to determine which independent variables significantly influence permanent celibacy and quantify their relative effects.

This approach provides deeper insight into the determinants of permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso. We conducted logistic regression analysis to identify significant predictors of permanent celibacy while controlling for potential confounding variables. Adjusted odds ratios (aOR) were calculated to measure the

strength of observed associations. Sampling weights were not applied to the logistic regressions because the data were drawn from the 2019 General Population and Housing Census, which covered the entire Burkina Faso population

4. Results

4.1. Prevalence of Permanent Celibacy in Burkina Faso

The comparative analysis between Burkina Faso's two most urbanized cities, Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, and other municipalities revealed significant differences in permanent celibacy prevalence. This phenomenon was substantially more prevalent in these major urban centers, affecting 3.5% of men and 4.5% of women in the relevant age groups. Nationwide, the prevalence rate was 2.3% for both men and women.

In Burkina Faso, permanent celibacy showed distinct variations by religious affiliation. Among women, Christians exhibited the highest prevalence (2.7%), followed by Muslims (2.1%) and other religious groups (1.9%). For men, Christians and other religious groups showed equal prevalence (2.7% each), compared to Muslims (2.1%). Within the Ouagadougou-Bobo Dioulasso stratum, the highest rates were observed among "other religions," reaching 11.7% for men and 8.2% for women.

Educational attainment demonstrated a strong positive association with permanent celibacy. Among men, prevalence increased from 2.2% in those with no education to 3.4% in those with higher education. The trend was more pronounced among women, rising from 2.0% in uneducated women to 9.6% in those with higher education.

Analysis by disability status revealed notable differences in permanent celibacy prevalence. Among non-disabled individuals, the rate was 2.2% for both sexes. However, disabled women showed a prevalence of 3.3%, while disabled men exhibited 4.3%. The disability gap was less pronounced in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso compared to other regions.

Employment status significantly influenced permanent celibacy patterns. Employed individuals demonstrated lower prevalence rates (1.7% for men, 2.0% for women) compared to unemployed individuals (3.4% for men, 2.9% for women) and those outside the labor force (2.8% for men, 2.4% for women). In Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso, permanent celibacy rates were nearly equivalent between employed individuals and those outside the labor force.

The analysis of household economic status revealed distinct patterns in permanent celibacy prevalence. Among men in the highest wealth quintiles (classified as rich and very rich), permanent celibacy rates were 2.5% and 2.9% respectively. For women in these affluent categories, the corresponding prevalence rates were 2.3% and 4.6%. However, regional variations emerged in urban centers. In Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, the pattern differed significantly: men in the poorest wealth quintiles showed substantially higher celibacy rates, while among women, both extremes of the economic spectrum (very poor and very rich) exhibited the

highest prevalence of permanent celibacy (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Prevalence of permanent celibacy by sex according to selected sociodemographic characteristics.

Socio-demographic characteristics		Sex	
		Men	Women
Religion			
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso	Christian	3.5	5.6
	Muslim	3.3	3.8
	Other religion	11.7	8.2
Burkina Faso	Christian	2.7	2.7
	Muslim	2.1	2.1
	Other religion	2.7	1.9
Education attainment			
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso	No Education	3.6	3.5
	Primary	3.7	5.3
	Post-primary	3.3	7.5
	Secondary	3.4	7.8
	Superior	3.0	9.0
	No Education	2.2	2.0
Burkina Faso	Primary	2.6	4.3
	Post-primary	3.2	7.5
	Secondary	3.5	8.2
	Superior	3.4	9.6
Disability status			
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso	Not disabled	3.5	4.5
	Disabled	4.1	4.9
Burkina Faso	Not disabled	2.2	2.2
	Disabled	4.3	3.3
Occupation			
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso	Working	3.0	5.3
	Unemployed	8.1	7.0
	Excluding labour	3.9	4.0
Burkina Faso	Working	1.7	2.0
	Unemployed	3.4	2.9
	Excluding labour	2.8	2.4

Continued

		Household socioeconomic status		
		Poorest	15.4	5.0
		Poorer	10.1	3.6
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso		Middle	4.1	2.8
		Richer	4.1	3.4
		Richest	3.0	5.1
		Poorest	2.4	1.8
		Poorer	2.0	1.7
Burkina Faso		Middle	1.9	1.8
		Richer	2.5	2.3
		Richest	2.9	4.6
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso		Together	3.5	4.5
	Burkina Faso	Together	2.3	2.3
N			607,088	1,228,360

4.2. Factors Associated with Permanent Celibacy

Permanent celibacy may be influenced by various factors, though it remains fundamentally a personal decision that varies across individuals. Nevertheless, specific social, cultural, and individual determinants can contribute to this marital status outcome.

Factors Associated with Permanent Celibacy in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso

In these urban centers, multivariate analysis identified several significant predictors of permanent celibacy across both sexes (Table 2): religious affiliation, educational attainment, disability status, economic sector, and household wealth. Controlling for covariates, men practicing non-Christian/non-Islamic religions demonstrated 3.31-fold higher odds (aOR = 3.31) of permanent celibacy compared to Christians. A similar, though less pronounced, trend emerged among women (aOR = 1.52).

Our findings further indicate that educational attainment is significantly associated with permanent celibacy in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. Women with higher education demonstrated 2.39 times greater odds (aOR = 2.39) of permanent celibacy compared to those with no formal education. A similar though less pronounced pattern was observed among men with secondary education (aOR = 1.22).

Economic sector also emerged as a significant predictor of permanent celibacy. Both men and women employed in the tertiary sector (encompassing commerce, transportation, financial services, hospitality, real estate, information-communication, and public administration) showed elevated odds of permanent celibacy (aOR = 1.55 for men; aOR = 1.54 for women) relative to their counterparts in the

primary sector (agriculture, livestock, fishing, and extractive activities). Comparable results were found for individuals working in the secondary sector (manufacturing and construction industries).

Disability status emerged as a significant factor associated with permanent celibacy, particularly among women. Women with disabilities demonstrated a 24% higher likelihood of remaining unmarried compared to their non-disabled counterparts (aOR = 1.24).

Table 2. Bivariate odds ratios (OR) and adjusted odds ratios (aOR) for permanent celibacy by selected sociodemographic characteristics among men and women in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso.

Socio-demographic characteristics	Men			Women		
	n	OR	aOR	n	OR	aOR
Religion						
Christian	32,364	1.00	1.00	62,877	1.00	1.00
Muslim	57,618	0.95	0.94	106,715	0.67***	0.82***
Other religion	1,075	3.67***	3.31***	864	1.50***	1.52***
Education attainment						
No Education	49,902	1.00	1.00	119,453	1.00	1.00
Primary	13,355	1.72***	1.17***	19,860	1.56***	1.39***
Post-primary	8,926	2.89***	1.14***	15,707	2.25***	1.99***
Secondary	6,900	3.01***	1.22***	8,830	2.34***	2.05***
Superior	8,696	3.02***	1.11	6,471	2.73***	2.39***
Disability status						
Not disabled	83,764	1.00	1.00	163,846	1.00	1.00
Disabled	4117	1.70***	1.07	6,610	1.09	1.24***
Occupation						
Working	50 131	1.00	1.00	59,366	1.00	1.00
Unemployed	1,473	1.63***	1.18	4,071	1.36***	0.97
Excluding labour	39,453	1.33***	0.56***	107,019	0.74***	0.54***
Sector of activity						
Primary sector	7,103	1.00	1.00	3,637	1.00	1.00
Secondary sector	13,066	2.35***	2.00***	8,931	1.78***	1.54***
Tertiary sector	37,853	2.81***	1.55***	46,462	2.10***	1.54***
Household socioeconomic status						
Poorest	104	1.00	1.00	179	1.00	1.00
Poorer	1,547	0.88***	0.83	3,079	0.71	0.71
Middle	6,456	0.90***	0.33***	11,907	0.55***	0.54***
Richer	21,008	1.18***	0.34***	38,504	0.66	0.64
Richest	61,778	2.02***	0.24***	116,620	1.01	0.78
Constant			0.06***			0.04***

Significance: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%, OR: Odds Ratio; aOR: Adjusted Odds Ratio.

Factors Associated with Permanent Celibacy in Burkina Faso

This analysis of 2019 census data aimed to identify factors associated with permanent celibacy across the entire Burkinabè population. The study revealed that religious affiliation, educational attainment, disability status, occupation, economic sector, and household wealth were all significantly associated with permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso, with consistent patterns observed for both sexes.

The results demonstrate that men with higher education had a 26% increased likelihood of permanent celibacy (aOR = 1.26) compared to those with no formal education. This effect was substantially more pronounced among women in the same educational category, who showed a 3.16-fold higher odds ratio (aOR = 3.16) of permanent celibacy relative to their uneducated counterparts.

Similar to educational attainment, disability status was significantly associated with permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso. Men with disabilities showed a 69% higher likelihood of remaining unmarried (aOR = 1.69) compared to non-disabled men, while women with disabilities had a 49% increased probability (aOR = 1.49) relative to their non-disabled counterparts.

Regarding employment status, the results indicated that unemployed men had a 28% lower risk of permanent celibacy (aOR = 0.72) compared to employed men. A similar pattern was observed among women, with unemployed women demonstrating a 31% reduced likelihood (aOR = 0.69) relative to their employed peers.

Economic sector also showed significant associations with permanent celibacy. Both men and women with undetermined occupational sectors exhibited substantially higher risks of permanent celibacy (aOR = 3.73 for men; aOR = 2.55 for women) compared to those working in the primary sector. Comparable associations were found for individuals employed in the secondary and tertiary sectors.

The analysis revealed significant associations between household wealth and permanent celibacy among women. Women residing in wealthy and very wealthy households demonstrated 7% (aOR = 1.07) and 23% (aOR = 1.23) higher likelihoods of permanent celibacy, respectively, compared to those in extremely poor households.

As anticipated, residential setting emerged as a significant factor associated with permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso. Rural residents showed substantially lower risks than their urban counterparts, with rural men exhibiting 46% reduced odds (aOR = 0.54) and rural women showing 36% decreased odds (aOR = 0.64) of permanent celibacy (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Bivariate odds ratios (OR) and adjusted odds ratios (aOR) for permanent celibacy by selected sociodemographic characteristics among men and women in Burkina Faso.

Socio-demographic characteristics	Men			Women		
	n	OR	aOR	n	OR	aOR
Religion						
Christian	146,715	1.00	1.00	364 345	1.00	1.00
Muslim	367,910	0.77***	0.85***	703 101	0.75***	0.86***
Other religion	92,463	1.00	1.15***	160,914	0.70***	0.90***

Continued

Education attainment						
No education	528,587	1.00	1.00	1,142,563	1.00	1.00
Primary	39,636	1.18***	1.03	42,636	2.22***	1.51***
Post-primary	16,723	1.46***	1.21***	23,443	4.02***	2.44***
Secondary	11,209	1.59***	1.32***	12,181	4.44***	2.66***
Superior	10,831	1.56***	1.26***	7,400	5.31***	3.16***
Disability status						
Not disabled	570,098	Ref.	Ref.	1176 362	Ref.	Ref.
Disabled	36,990	2.01***	1.69***	51,998	1.48***	1.49***
Occupation						
Working	290,842	1.00	1.00	404 904	1.00	1.00
Unemployed	7,765	2.02***	0.72***	18,680	1.45***	0.69***
Excluding labour	308,481	1.67***	0.56***	804 776	1.18***	0.62***
Sector of activity						
Primary sector	227,902	1.00	1.00	308 111	1.00	1.00
Secondary sector	21,997	2.42***	1.81***	23,920	2.27***	1.24***
Tertiary sector	56,731	1.90***	1.39***	77,823	3.52***	1.41***
Household socioeconomic status						
Poorest	145,809	1.00	1.00	264,699	1.00	1.00
Poorer	144,813	0.86***	0.80***	303,216	0.91***	0.95***
Middle	125,960	0.80***	0.69***	269,930	0.97	0.97
Richer	100,863	1.06***	0.74***	214,700	1.27***	1.07***
Richest	88,848	1.23***	0.57***	174,972	2.57***	1.23***
Region of residence						
Boucle du Mouhoun	59,469	1.00	1.00	117,841	1.00	1.00
Cascades	23,585	0.87***	0.95	45,723	1.26***	1.14***
Centre	82,212	1.60***	1.16***	155,944	2.39***	1.06***
Centre-Est	51,150	1.08***	1.02	107,286	1.05	0.98
Centre-Nord	48,272	0.83***	0.74***	92,481	1.21***	1.19***
Centre-Ouest	52,834	1.20***	1.11***	135,027	0.98	0.93***
Centre-Sud	32,922	1.15***	1.09***	70,864	1.00	1.00
Est	43,543	0.72***	0.61***	79,017	1.24***	1.22***
Hauts-Bassins	64,134	1.29***	1.18***	125,010	1.55***	1.07***
Nord	55,352	0.94	0.83***	113,059	0.96	0.92***
Plateau central	36,588	0.88***	0.83***	77,045	0.91***	0.90***
Sahel	29,672	0.82***	0.66***	44,000	1.37***	1.31***
Sud-Ouest	27,355	1.63***	1.41***	65,063	1.76***	1.76***

Continued

		Place of residence				
Urban	146,151	1.00	1.00	287,375	1.00	1.00
Rural	460,937	0.57***	0.54***	940 985	0.42***	0.64***
Constant			0.03***			0.02***

Significance: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%, OR: Odds Ratio; aOR: Adjusted Odds Ratio.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to estimate the prevalence of permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso and identify associated sociodemographic, cultural, and contextual factors. The results indicated a national permanent celibacy prevalence of 2.3% for both men and women. Key associated factors included religious affiliation, educational attainment, employment status, economic sector, disability status, household wealth and residential setting.

While the 2.3% prevalence among both genders may appear modest, it reflects evolving marital practices within an African context where marriage has traditionally been near-universal. These findings align with similar sub-Saharan African contexts where permanent celibacy rates rarely exceed 3% for women aged 40 - 49 years and 5% - 6% for men (Antoine, 2002; Antoine & Marcoux, 2014; Antoine & Nanitelamio, 1991; Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2020a).

Men practicing religious beliefs other than Christianity or Islam demonstrated a threefold higher likelihood of permanent celibacy compared to Christian men. A similar pattern was observed among women. These findings align with Machoko's (2013) Zimbabwean study documenting celibacy among regional and family spirit mediums possessed by deceased chiefs' or ancestors' spirits until death, or those engaging in occasional ritual sexual relations to strengthen chieftaincy or bring familial prosperity (Machoko, 2013). Multiple factors may explain this phenomenon. Within Christian and Muslim traditions, marriage holds sacramental value and social prestige, actively encouraging union formation and family creation. Consequently, permanent celibacy typically represents an exceptional rather than normative practice in these faiths (Antoine, 2006; Antoine et al., 1995; Garrigues, 2024; Maudet, 2024).

Both women and men with higher education levels showed an increased likelihood of permanent celibacy compared to their uneducated counterparts. These findings align with studies by Dimi (2018), Engelen and Kok (2003), and Guérin-Pace and Kassar (2022), which demonstrated that some women deliberately chose celibacy as their intellectual ambitions and professional aspirations conflicted with the subordinate status typically associated with married women (Dimi, 2018; Engelen & Kok, 2003; Guérin-Pace & Kassar, 2022). Several explanatory factors emerge from these observations. First, individuals prioritizing academic and career achievements may elect to focus on educational or professional goals rather than long-term relationships, viewing celibacy as enabling greater dedication to

these pursuits (Guérin-Pace & Kassar, 2022; Hertrich & Locoh, 1999; Lu, 2024). Second, higher education often reinforces values of independence and autonomy. Highly educated individuals may prefer single status to maintain decision-making freedom, pursue personal interests, and preserve independent lifestyles (Bellani & Luppi, 2024; Locoh, 1988). Third, educational attainment frequently elevates partner selection criteria. These individuals often seek intellectual compatibility and shared interests, potentially remaining single rather than compromising on relationship standards (Blossfeld et al., 2024; Hertrich & Locoh, 1999; Locoh, 1988).

Both men and women employed in the tertiary sector demonstrated higher risks of permanent celibacy compared to their counterparts in the primary sector, with similar patterns observed in the secondary sector. Multiple explanatory factors emerge from these findings. First, certain occupational sectors—particularly secondary and tertiary industries—often involve irregular working hours, frequent travel, or constant availability, creating challenges for establishing and maintaining stable partnerships. Individuals in these sectors may opt for celibacy to prioritize career commitments (Cooke, 2008; Deuflhard & Ganault, 2025). Second, professions requiring intensive specialization (e.g., medical, legal, or scientific fields within the tertiary sector) demand substantial professional dedication and extended career development periods. These time and energy investments often limit capacity for romantic relationships, potentially leading to permanent celibacy decisions (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Third, occupations involving frequent relocations or transfers present particular difficulties in sustaining stable partnerships. Workers in such mobile professions may choose celibacy to avoid complications associated with long-distance relationships or recurrent residential changes (Cooke, 2008).

Disability status emerged as a significant correlate of permanent celibacy, particularly among women in Burkina Faso. These results corroborate Hertrich and Locoh's (1999) findings that permanent celibacy in Africa predominantly affects individuals with severe disabilities (Hertrich & Locoh, 1999). Multiple interrelated factors may explain this association. The women with disabilities frequently encounter societal stigma and prejudicial attitudes that substantially constrain their marriage prospects (Callen, 2022; Campbell, 2017). Such negative perceptions and misconceptions about disability create significant barriers to forming stable romantic relationships. In addition, physical accessibility challenges and environmental barriers often restrict social participation, limiting opportunities to establish meaningful connections with potential partners (Imrie & Imrie, 1996). These structural obstacles compound the social exclusion experienced by women with disabilities.

The analysis revealed significantly lower rates of permanent celibacy among rural residents compared to their urban counterparts for both genders. This urban-rural differential may be attributed to several interrelated factors. The urban centers provide greater occupational diversity and enhanced career prospects, which may incentivize residents to prioritize professional advancement over marital

commitments (Antoine & Marcoux, 2014; Calvès & N'bouke, 2018). The concentration of economic opportunities in cities often leads individuals to allocate greater time and energy toward career objectives rather than partner-seeking behaviors. Moreover, urban environments typically feature fast-paced lifestyles with abundant cultural activities, social events, and nightlife options. These dynamic social ecosystems may provide sufficient personal fulfillment for some individuals, reducing the perceived necessity of committed relationships while simultaneously offering ample socialization opportunities without long-term partnership obligations (Antoine & Marcoux, 2014; Nappa et al., 2019).

Our study has several limitations. As a cross-sectional survey with data collected over a short period, it lacks comprehensive marital history information, which restricts the analysis of underlying causes. Furthermore, the operational definition of “permanent celibacy” (women ≥ 40 years, men ≥ 50 years) is an arbitrary approximation that may exclude younger individuals who will never marry or mistakenly include those who will marry later in life. Moreover, census data, often based on self-reported status at the time of data collection, may be subject to cultural or social desirability biases, leading to an underreporting of celibacy status, particularly among women.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the prevalence and identify factors associated with permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso, providing insights into the social, relational, economic, and familial dynamics underlying this life choice. The findings enhance our understanding of relationship and family patterns while contributing to broader discussions on gender norms and life choices in the Burkinabè context.

The analysis revealed that permanent celibacy remains uncommon in Burkina Faso among men aged 50+ and women aged 40+. In urban centers (Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso), significant predictors included religious affiliation, educational attainment, disability status, economic sector, and household wealth, with consistent patterns across genders. Nationally, employment status and residential setting (urban/rural) emerged as additional determining factors, equally relevant for both men and women.

Permanent celibacy in Burkina Faso is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, sociodemographic, and individual factors. Economic constraints, limited access to stable employment, and financial insecurity frequently delay or prevent marriage, particularly among individuals prioritizing financial stability before entering conjugal relationships. Furthermore, higher educational attainment correlates with marital postponement as individuals pursue academic and professional aspirations.

These findings suggest that both the prevalence and determinants of permanent celibacy may evolve in response to socioeconomic transformations, cultural shifts, and individual life trajectories. To maintain accurate understanding of this phenomenon, ongoing sociological and demographic research remains essential.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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