

**The Naked Transaction: Age-Discrepant Marriage as Compensatory Exchange and Strategic Inheritance Planning. A Narrative Analysis**

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**Abstract**

Age-discrepant marriage a union in which spouses are separated by ten or more years — remains prevalent across sub-Saharan Africa, yet its economic architecture and inheritance implications are insufficiently theorised in demographic literature. This study, framed within compensatory exchange theory and the political economy of marriage, examined the structural conditions that drive age-discrepant unions in Uganda, the mechanisms by which bride price functions as a wealth-transfer instrument, and the inheritance outcomes accruing to women embedded in such arrangements. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 600 ever-married women aged 18–49 in three purposively selected districts (Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu), while 32 in-depth narrative interviews and four focus group discussions were conducted with purposively sampled participants. Univariate and bivariate descriptive analyses characterised the sociodemographic profile of respondents, binary logistic regression identified the socioeconomic predictors of bride-price magnitude, and multilevel modelling (MLM) decomposed individual- and community-level variance in inheritance outcomes. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis. Results revealed that younger wives (mean age at marriage 17.3 years) experienced age gaps of 18.4 years on average, substantially larger than the 2.1-year gap among age-matched controls. Logistic regression confirmed that each additional year of age gap increased the odds of a larger bride price by 34% (OR=1.34, 95% CI: 1.21–1.49), while wife's educational deprivation and rural residence further elevated these odds. Multilevel models demonstrated that age gap was a significant positive predictor of land inheritance probability (coeff.=0.18,  $p<0.001$ ) and log-wealth transfer (coeff.=0.09,  $p<0.001$ ), with intra-community correlations of 0.23 and 0.31 respectively indicating substantial contextual clustering. Qualitative narratives disclosed a stratified landscape of economic survival, strategic anticipation of widowhood, power negotiation, and, in some instances, autonomous reclamation of household authority. The study concluded that age-discrepant marriage in Uganda operates as a de facto compensatory contract in which younger women exchange reproductive capital for economic security, and in which both parties — and their respective kin networks — engage in rational, if unequal, inheritance planning. Policy recommendations focus on girls' educational continuity, land title reform for widows, and the recalibration of bride-price regulation.

**Keywords: age-discrepant marriage, bride price, compensatory exchange, inheritance planning, multilevel modelling, narrative analysis, Uganda**

**INTRODUCTION**

The institution of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa has long served functions that extend well beyond the romantic or reproductive. Marriage, in many of these societies, is a profoundly economic event — a mechanism through which land, livestock, labour, and lineage are negotiated, transferred, and consolidated across generations. Within this broader socioeconomic landscape, age-discrepant marriages, wherein a considerably older man takes a substantially younger woman as a wife, have endured as a persistent, though contested, social practice (Choi, 2020; Mark & Moses,

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2025; Popenoe, 2018). Scholars have variously attributed such unions to patriarchal convention, demographic imbalance, or cultural tradition, yet rarely have these explanations been subjected to the rigorous, mixed-methods scrutiny needed to reveal their inner economic logic. This study interrogates that logic using the lens of compensatory exchange the proposition that younger women trade reproductive and domestic capital for material security, social legitimation, and anticipated inheritance gains — and strategic inheritance planning the idea that both the bride's family and the younger wife herself engage in forward-looking, asset-acquisition strategies when entering or accepting a union with a significantly older man (Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018; Shah et al., 2019; Zahra, 2020). The metaphor embedded in the study's title, "the naked transaction," is intentional: it strips away the romantic veneer that frequently obscures the transactional structure of marriage as an institution, particularly where poverty, patriarchy, and property intersect in deeply unequal ways (Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Vincent & Peter, 2023; Yudaya & Aggrey, 2023). Drawing on survey data from 600 women and qualitative narratives from 32 in-depth interviewees across three Ugandan districts, this study offers empirical grounding for theoretical claims that have circulated in feminist economics and demographic anthropology but have seldom been rigorously tested in the Ugandan context. By marrying statistical rigour with narrative depth, the study aims to produce findings that are simultaneously analytically credible and humanistically resonant (Aminiha et al., 2019; Dögüş, 2022).

#### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Uganda presents a compelling, if troubling, empirical context in which to examine age-discrepant marriage (Ivan et al., 2023; Julius & Gracious Kazaara, 2025b; Krishna & Gupta, 2025; Rebecca & Kirisa, 2023). The country's Total Fertility Rate, while declining, remains among the highest globally at approximately 4.6 children per woman, and the median age at first marriage for women stands at 18.4 years — a statistic that conceals considerable heterogeneity across regions, educational strata, and wealth quintiles (Uganda Demographic and Health Survey [UDHS], 2022). Historical analyses of marriage in Uganda have consistently foregrounded the centrality of bride price (locally termed "kwanjula" in Buganda, and analogous practices across other ethnic groups), a payment made by the groom's family to the bride's family that serves simultaneously as a declaration of intent, a social bond, and an economic transaction (Ariho & Kabagenyi, 2020; Baral et al., 2021; Osman, 2019). Critics of bride price argue that it commodifies women and creates conditions of marital subjugation; proponents contend that it elevates the bride's social status and creates enforceable obligations of care on the husband's part (Ariyo Gracious Kazaara & Isaac Kazaara, 2025). What both camps have under-examined, however, is the intersection of bride price magnitude, spousal age discrepancy, and the downstream inheritance consequences for the younger wife — particularly in the context of widowhood, which, given the age gap, arrives with statistical reliability in such unions (. & Philomena, 2022; Faisal et al., 2023; Kok et al., 2023). Feminist political economists, drawing on Becker's (1981) theory of the marriage market and subsequent refinements by Tertilt (2005) and Anderson (2007), have noted that in environments characterised by female economic dependence and restricted land rights, age-discrepant unions may represent rational, if coerced, portfolio decisions on the part of younger women and their families. Land ownership patterns in Uganda further complicate this picture: customary tenure systems historically favour male lineages, and statutory reforms, including the Land Act of 1998 and its 2010 amendments, have attempted, with mixed success, to extend co-ownership rights to wives (Dive & Farota-Romejko, 2020; Ninsiima et al., 2023; Yun et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, understanding whether and how

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younger women in age-discrepant unions ultimately access inherited property is not merely an academic exercise — it is a policy-relevant inquiry with direct implications for women's post-marital economic security and for the intergenerational transmission of poverty and wealth.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite a growing literature on child marriage, early unions, and gender-based economic disadvantage in Uganda and the broader Great Lakes region, the specific nexus between age-discrepant marriage, bride price as a compensatory instrument, and strategic inheritance planning has not been systematically examined (Cebekhulu & Ozor, 2022; Christopher et al., 2024; Dato et al., 2017; Kazaara & Desire, 2025). Extant studies have tended to treat age gap in marriage as either a risk factor for adverse health outcomes or as a proxy for patriarchal dominance, without interrogating the underlying economic rationalities — both structural and agentic — that produce and sustain such unions (Amtu et al., 2021; Julius & Gracious Kazaara, 2025a; Kazaara & Shamirah, 2024a; Muneer et al., 2022). As a result, policy interventions have largely remained confined to legal prohibition of child marriage, without addressing the economic architecture that makes age-discrepant unions attractive or even necessary for families and young women confronting poverty, debt, and asset insecurity (Julius & Audrey, 2025; Shin et al., 2023; Sumardjo & Supriadi, 2023; Tam & Oliveira, 2017). Furthermore, the inheritance dimension of such unions — the extent to which a substantially younger wife benefits from a husband's accumulated assets upon his relatively early death — has been almost entirely neglected, despite its profound implications for women's long-term economic autonomy and for poverty dynamics across generations (Kazaara & Shamirah, 2024b; Mashau & Kgatele, 2019; Syapriillah et al., 2023). This study was therefore motivated by the urgent need to fill this analytical gap, producing empirical evidence that captures both the structural determinants and the lived experiences of women in age-discrepant unions, with a specific focus on the economic logic of bride price and the realities of inheritance outcomes.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

#### **Main Objective**

The main objective of this study was to examine age-discrepant marriage in Uganda as a system of compensatory economic exchange and strategic inheritance planning, using a mixed-methods narrative approach.

#### **Specific Objectives**

1. To identify and analyse the socioeconomic determinants of bride price magnitude in age-discrepant marriages across three districts of Uganda.
2. To examine the inheritance outcomes — including land, household assets, and financial resources — accruing to women in age-discrepant unions relative to women in age-matched unions.
3. To explore the lived experiences, narratives, and agentic strategies of women in age-discrepant unions, with specific attention to economic motivations, power dynamics, and inheritance anticipation.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the socioeconomic predictors of bride price magnitude in age-discrepant marriages in Uganda, and how do these predictors vary by age gap and geographic context?

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2. What inheritance outcomes — in terms of land, assets, and wealth transfers — are experienced by women in age-discrepant unions compared to women in age-matched unions, and what individual- and community-level factors mediate these outcomes?
3. How do women in age-discrepant marriages narrate their economic motivations, inheritance expectations, and experiences of power within these unions, and to what extent do these narratives reflect or resist dominant compensatory exchange frameworks?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data collection and analysis preceded and informed the qualitative strand. The study population comprised ever-married women aged 18 to 49 residing in Mbale (Eastern Uganda), Mbarara (Western Uganda), and Gulu (Northern Uganda) — districts selected purposively to capture regional variation in customary marriage practices, land tenure systems, and economic development indicators. A stratified random sample of 600 women was drawn from household rosters obtained through collaboration with local area council offices, with 200 respondents allocated to each district and further stratified by rural-urban classification at a 70:30 ratio, consistent with the national rural population distribution. A structured interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to collect data on sociodemographic characteristics, marriage history (including age at marriage, age gap, bride price amount, number of co-wives, and marriage type), household economic indicators (land ownership, asset index, and monthly income), and inheritance experiences (assets received, disputes encountered, and legal title status). Univariate analysis was conducted to generate frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations for all key variables, enabling a descriptive profile of the three marriage-type groups: women with a spousal age gap of ten or more years who married before age 20 (younger wives, n=187), women with a spousal age gap of ten or more years who married at age 20 or above (older wives, n=203), and women in age-matched unions with an age gap of five years or fewer (controls, n=210). Bivariate analysis using chi-square tests, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA was performed to assess statistically significant differences across the three groups on key outcome and predictor variables, with a significance threshold set at alpha equal to 0.05. Binary logistic regression was then applied to identify the independent socioeconomic predictors of bride price magnitude (dichotomised at the 75th percentile), controlling for district, household wealth, educational attainment, and land ownership status; model fit was assessed using Nagelkerke's R-squared and the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test. Multilevel modelling (MLM) with individuals nested within communities was employed to decompose variance in two inheritance outcomes — receipt of a land title (binary, modelled using a multilevel logistic regression) and total log-transformed wealth transferred from husband to wife (continuous, modelled using a two-level linear mixed model) — into individual- and community-level components, with the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) used to quantify clustering. Community-level predictors included district, average household poverty index, and customary versus statutory land tenure predominance. Following the quantitative phase, 32 in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with purposively selected respondents from the survey (maximum variation sampling on age gap, education, and inheritance outcome), supplemented by four focus group discussions (FGDs) of six to eight participants each, stratified by marriage type (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Interviews and FGDs were conducted in local languages (Luganda, Runyankore, and Acholi) by trained bilingual research assistants, audio-

recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim before translation into English using back-translation protocols to ensure semantic fidelity. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis following the framework of Riessman (2008), proceeding through stages of familiarisation, structural coding, thematic categorisation, and interpretive synthesis; NVivo 14 software was used to manage coding and facilitate constant comparative analysis across cases. Ethical approval was obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), and all participants provided written or witnessed verbal informed consent prior to participation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Sociodemographic Profile of Study Participants

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the 600 women across the three marriage-type groups: younger wives in age-discrepant unions (n=187), older wives in age-discrepant unions (n=203), and women in age-matched controls (n=210).

**Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics by Marriage-Type Group**

Variable	Younger Wives (n=187)	Older Wives (n=203)	Age-Matched (n=210)	p-value
Age at marriage (mean±SD)	17.3±2.1	24.6±3.4	26.1±3.8	<0.001
Age gap (years, mean±SD)	18.4±5.6	12.3±4.2	2.1±1.8	<0.001
Education: None (%)	44.4%	28.1%	19.5%	<0.001
Education: Primary (%)	33.2%	29.6%	26.7%	0.032
Education: Secondary+ (%)	22.4%	42.3%	53.8%	<0.001
Household income (USD/month)	68±31	112±44	187±62	<0.001
Husband age at marriage (mean±SD)	35.7±6.2	36.9±5.8	27.4±4.1	<0.001
Rural residence (%)	71.1%	58.6%	41.9%	<0.001
Number of children (mean±SD)	4.2±1.8	3.1±1.4	2.3±1.2	<0.001
Bride price paid (%)	89.3%	76.4%	54.8%	<0.001

The univariate and bivariate findings presented in Table 1 revealed statistically significant differences across all measured sociodemographic indicators among the three marriage-type groups ( $p < 0.001$  for all key variables). Younger wives in age-discrepant unions demonstrated the most economically vulnerable profile: they entered marriage at a mean age of 17.3 years ( $SD = 2.1$ ), had the highest proportion of women with no formal education (44.4%), reported the lowest mean household income (USD 68±31 per month), and were most likely to reside in rural areas (71.1%). The mean age gap for this group was 18.4 years — more than three times the mean gap observed in the age-matched control group (2.1 years) and substantially larger than the 12.3-year gap among older wives in discrepant unions. The prevalence of bride price payment was highest among younger wives at 89.3%, declining progressively through the other two groups, suggesting a gradient relationship between youth, bride price payment, and economic vulnerability. These patterns were consistent with predictions derived from compensatory exchange theory, which posits that the perceived reproductive and social value of younger brides elevates the economic stakes of the marital transaction for both the groom's family and the bride's kin.

The bivariate comparisons further illuminated important structural patterns in the data. The significantly higher mean number of children among younger wives (4.2 vs. 3.1 vs. 2.3,  $p < 0.001$ ) corroborated the expectation that longer unions

initiated at younger ages produce larger family sizes, with attendant implications for household resource allocation and women's bargaining power. The finding that 89.3% of younger wives' families received bride price — compared to only 54.8% among age-matched controls — lends empirical weight to the proposition that bride price functions not merely as a cultural ritual but as a substantive economic mechanism that is most intensively activated when the age differential between spouses is greatest. This aligns with Anderson's (2007) competitive bride price model, which theorises that scarcity of young brides in conditions of economic stress drives up payment levels, effectively monetising female youth. The stark educational gradient across groups — where secondary education or above was reported by only 22.4% of younger wives compared to 53.8% of controls — underscored the role of educational deprivation as both a precondition and a consequence of early age-discrepant marriage, consistent with the well-documented school dropout spiral that accompanies early union formation in rural Uganda.

### Logistic Regression: Predictors of Bride Price Magnitude

Table 2 presents the results of binary logistic regression examining the socioeconomic predictors of high bride price payment (defined as above the 75th percentile) across all three groups combined (N=600).

**Table 2: Binary Logistic Regression — Predictors of High Bride Price Payment**

Predictor Variable	OR	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Age gap (per year)	1.34	1.21	1.49	<0.001
Wife's education (none vs. secondary+)	3.12	2.04	4.77	<0.001
Rural residence (vs. urban)	2.87	1.96	4.20	<0.001
Household poverty index	1.89	1.43	2.51	<0.001
Paternal land ownership	2.44	1.67	3.56	<0.001
Number of daughters in family	1.22	1.08	1.38	0.002
Husband occupational status	0.74	0.61	0.90	0.003
Wife's family debt status	2.19	1.51	3.17	<0.001
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.47	-	-	-
Model Chi-square (df=8)	214.3	-	-	<0.001

The logistic regression model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in high bride price payment, with a Nagelkerke R-squared of 0.47 and a statistically significant model chi-square ( $X^2=214.3$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating a good overall model fit. Each additional year of age gap between spouses was associated with a 34% increase in the odds of a high bride price (OR=1.34, 95% CI: 1.21–1.49), establishing a robust positive dose-response relationship between spousal age discrepancy and economic consideration. Women with no formal education had odds of a high bride price that were more than three times those of women with secondary education or above (OR=3.12, 95% CI: 2.04–4.77), confirming that educational deprivation — whether as a cause or co-correlate of age-discrepant marriage — substantially inflates the transactional value attached to the bride. Rural residence was independently associated with nearly tripled odds of high bride price (OR=2.87, 95% CI: 1.96–4.20), reflecting the continued dominance of customary marriage norms in rural communities where statutory protections for women are weakly enforced. The bride's family debt status (OR=2.19, 95% CI: 1.51–3.17) and paternal land ownership (OR=2.44, 95% CI: 1.67–3.56) emerged as significant independent predictors, lending empirical support to the narrative that bride price in such unions functions partly as a debt-settlement and asset-consolidation mechanism — precisely the transactional architecture that the "naked transaction" metaphor was intended to capture.

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These findings carry considerable theoretical significance. The simultaneous positive effects of family debt status and paternal land ownership on bride price magnitude — two indicators that are often inversely correlated in broader economic analyses — suggest that bride price serves different but overlapping economic functions depending on the family's financial position: for indebted families, it functions as a liquidity-generating instrument, while for landed families, it functions as a signal of status and a mechanism for cementing inter-family alliances with wealth transfer implications. Husband's occupational status was the only significant negative predictor (OR=0.74,  $p=0.003$ ), suggesting that higher-status grooms are able to negotiate lower bride prices or are paired with higher-educated brides whose families attach less transactional value to the union — a finding consistent with assortative mating theory in unequal marriage markets. Taken together, the regression results painted a picture of bride price as a highly contextualised, multi-functional economic instrument whose magnitude is shaped by a constellation of supply-side (bride characteristics), demand-side (groom characteristics), and structural (community and tenure) factors, with spousal age gap serving as the single most potent quantitative predictor.

#### Multilevel Modelling: Inheritance Outcomes

Table 3 presents results from two multilevel models estimating the predictors of land inheritance (binary) and log-transformed wealth transfer (continuous) for women in age-discrepant unions, with individuals nested within communities ( $n=390$  women in 26 communities).

**Table 3: Multilevel Model Results — Predictors of Inheritance Outcomes**

Outcome / Fixed Effect	Coeff.	SE	95% CI	p
Land inheritance (binary outcome)				
Constant	-1.43	0.31	-2.04, -0.82	<0.001
Age gap (years)	0.18	0.04	0.10, 0.26	<0.001
Number of sons	0.54	0.11	0.33, 0.75	<0.001
Husband mortality (binary)	1.82	0.29	1.25, 2.39	<0.001
Age at widowhood	0.07	0.02	0.03, 0.11	0.001
Community-level variance (ICC)	0.23	—	—	—
Wealth transfer (continuous, log-UGX)				
Constant	8.34	0.44	7.48, 9.20	<0.001
Age gap (years)	0.09	0.02	0.05, 0.13	<0.001
Bride price (log-UGX)	0.41	0.08	0.25, 0.57	<0.001
District fixed effects (joint F)	F=9.2	—	—	<0.001
Between-community variance	0.31	—	—	—

The multilevel logistic regression for land inheritance yielded a statistically significant positive coefficient for age gap (coeff.=0.18, SE=0.04,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that, net of individual- and community-level covariates, each additional year of age gap between spouses was associated with an 19.7% increase in the log-odds of the wife receiving a land title, translating to a meaningful increase in the predicted probability of inheritance (from 0.12 at a 2-year gap to 0.68 at a 26+ year gap, as illustrated in Figure 3). Husband mortality emerged as the strongest predictor of land inheritance (coeff.=1.82,  $p<0.001$ ), confirming the theoretical expectation that widowhood is the principal pathway through which younger wives in age-discrepant unions access inherited land — a pathway made more probable by the actuarial logic of large spousal age gaps. The number of sons (coeff.=0.54,  $p<0.001$ ) and the wife's age at widowhood (coeff.=0.07,  $p=0.001$ ) were also positive predictors, suggesting that having male offspring and surviving to an older age before

becoming a widow both strengthen women's inheritance claims, possibly through the social authority conferred by motherhood and the accumulation of community standing over time. The ICC of 0.23 for the land inheritance model indicated that 23% of the total variation in inheritance outcomes was attributable to between-community differences, underscoring the importance of local institutional and normative contexts — including the type of land tenure system, the strength of clan authority, and the presence of NGO legal-aid services — in shaping whether women ultimately access inherited assets.

The multilevel linear model for log-wealth transfer yielded complementary findings. Age gap remained a significant positive predictor (coeff.=0.09,  $p<0.001$ ), and the magnitude of bride price (log-transformed) was a particularly strong predictor (coeff.=0.41,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that higher bride price payments were associated with substantially greater wealth transfers at the end of the marriage — a finding consistent with the hypothesis that bride price functions as a forward contract on marital assets. The significant district fixed effects (joint  $F=9.2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and the between-community variance of 0.31 demonstrated that contextual factors, including community norms, tenure regimes, and clan governance, were as important as individual characteristics in determining the magnitude of wealth transfer. Taken together, these MLM findings provided the most direct empirical support yet for the strategic inheritance planning hypothesis: women who enter age-discrepant unions with older, propertied men — especially when this entry is secured through a high bride price — are measurably more likely to receive inherited land and larger wealth transfers, even after accounting for the community contexts in which these transactions are embedded. This does not render such unions desirable from a human rights perspective, but it does confirm that they operate, at least in part, according to an economically rational inheritance logic.

#### Qualitative Thematic Narrative Analysis

Table 4 presents the themes, sub-themes, representative narrative codes, and frequency counts derived from thematic analysis of 32 in-depth interviews and four FGDs with women in age-discrepant unions.

**Table 4: Qualitative Thematic Framework — Narrative Codes from In-Depth Interviews**

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Narrative Code	Frequency (n)
Economic Necessity	Poverty-driven consent	"My father had no cows; an older man paid for my school fees"	47
Economic Necessity	Family debt resolution	"The marriage settled what we owed to the clan"	38
Strategic Planning	Inheritance anticipation	"He is old; I will own this land when God calls him"	52
Strategic Planning	Widow property rights	"His children from first wife fear me; I have the title deed"	29
Social Negotiation	Community legitimation	"Elders blessed the union; nobody questions the age"	41
Social Negotiation	Resistance narratives	"I refused three times but hunger is louder than pride"	33
Power Dynamics	Marital control discourse	"He treats me like a child because I am young to him"	55

Power Dynamics	Autonomy reclamation	"After his death I became the real head of this home"	44
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The thematic narrative analysis yielded four overarching themes that both corroborated and enriched the quantitative findings. The most frequently coded sub-theme — power dynamics and marital control (n=55) — captured women's widespread experience of age-related subordination within their unions, with narratives describing older husbands who exercised authority over household decisions, mobility, and reproductive choices, often invoking the age differential as a naturalised basis for dominance. However, the equally prominent sub-theme of autonomy reclamation (n=44) revealed a countervailing narrative strand, in which women — particularly those who had outlived their husbands or outlasted the period of peak marital subjugation — described a transformation in their household authority and economic standing following their husband's death. These narratives of post-widowhood empowerment were most pronounced among women who had successfully secured land titles and were consistent with the MLM finding that widowhood and age at widowhood were significant positive predictors of inheritance. The strategic inheritance sub-theme (n=52) was the most frequently occurring within the economic motivation cluster, with women employing language that was remarkably explicit about the anticipatory economic logic of their union: several narrated that they had deliberately chosen or accepted a much older man because the prospect of land ownership after his death represented the only realistic pathway to economic security available to them given their educational and financial circumstances.

The resistance narratives sub-theme (n=33) provided a crucial corrective to any overly rational-choice reading of age-discrepant marriage in this context. These narratives documented cases of coerced consent, familial pressure, and structural entrapment — women who narrated their entry into such unions not as strategic choice but as capitulation to economic and social forces that left them without viable alternatives. The co-existence of strategic inheritance narratives and resistance narratives within the same sample illustrated the theoretical complexity of compensatory exchange as an analytical framework: it can simultaneously describe a structural logic that benefits some women while obscuring the coercive conditions under which many others enter the same arrangements. The economic necessity theme (n=47 and n=38 for its two sub-themes) confirmed the quantitative finding that bride price functions as a debt-settlement mechanism for impoverished families, with multiple respondents explicitly narrating scenarios in which their marriage resolved a family financial crisis. The social negotiation theme (n=41 for community legitimation) underscored the role of elder authority and community norms in conferring legitimacy on age-discrepant unions and in governing the inheritance disputes that frequently followed them, highlighting the multi-scalar nature of the transactional framework within which these marriages are embedded.

**CONCLUSION**

This study set out to investigate age-discrepant marriage in Uganda as a system of compensatory economic exchange and strategic inheritance planning, and the findings, drawn from a robust mixed-methods design encompassing 600 survey participants and 32 in-depth narrative interviews, substantially confirmed this theoretical framing while simultaneously revealing the coercive and structurally determined character of many such unions. The quantitative evidence demonstrated that spousal age gap is a powerful and independent predictor of bride price magnitude, and

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that bride price in turn functions as a significant predictor of downstream wealth transfer — establishing an empirically grounded chain of economic causality that links the age differential at marriage to the inheritance outcomes experienced by women in later life. The multilevel models further revealed that these relationships are not uniformly distributed but are significantly shaped by community-level factors including land tenure regime, customary authority structures, and geographic location, indicating that the transactional architecture of age-discrepant marriage is as much a product of institutional context as of individual choice. The qualitative narratives added indispensable texture to these statistical patterns, revealing a population of women who are simultaneously economic strategists and constrained actors, whose inheritance aspirations are real and sometimes realised, but whose routes to these outcomes are frequently mediated by coercion, poverty, and the asymmetric power structures that define age-discrepant unions. The study concluded that addressing age-discrepant marriage in Uganda requires not simply the legal prohibition of early unions but a comprehensive restructuring of the economic conditions — educational deprivation, land tenure insecurity, household poverty, and family debt — that make such transactions rational, and often necessary, for the families and young women who enter into them.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Government and NGO partners should urgently invest in girls' secondary and tertiary education retention programmes specifically targeting rural communities in high-prevalence age-discrepant marriage districts, with conditional cash transfer mechanisms linked to school enrolment and completion, given that educational deprivation emerged as the single strongest modifiable predictor of high bride price and age-discrepant union entry in this study.

The Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development should accelerate the implementation of joint land titling provisions under the Land Act and its amendments, with specific guidelines protecting widows' inheritance rights under both statutory and customary tenure systems, prioritising districts where multilevel analysis revealed the greatest community-level variance in inheritance outcomes and the highest rates of post-widowhood disinheritance.

Policy dialogues on bride price regulation should be reframed beyond cultural abolition discourse toward economic reform: specifically, community-based financial literacy and microcredit programmes targeting young women and their families should be designed to reduce the conditions of debt, asset insecurity, and economic desperation that drive families to leverage their daughters' youth through large bride price transactions, thereby disrupting the compensatory exchange cycle documented in this study.

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