

Silver splits, Widowhood and Social Support in Later Life: Causal Evidence for Europe

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Short Abstract

This study examines the causal effects of partner loss—through widowhood or silver split—on social support among older Europeans, using nine waves (2004–2022) of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). Combining Propensity Score Matching with a Difference-in-Differences design featuring staggered treatments, it estimates the average treatment effects of partner loss on the received support, compared against the ones who have not experienced such event despite having balanced covariate characteristics. Results reveal that partner loss generally reduces social support, but effects vary sharply by gender and dissolution type. Widowed men experience no change, while widowed women often receive compensatory help from family. After a silver split, women show stable or improved support, reflecting resilient kin-keeping roles, whereas divorced men do not. These findings underscore the gendered nature of late-life loneliness and highlight the need for policies that strengthen social networks and mitigate isolation among older adults, particularly men, following partner loss.

Extended Abstract

1. Aim

The rising prevalence of loneliness among older adults has become one of the most pressing social challenges in ageing societies. While widowhood and divorce have long been recognized as major life transitions leading to isolation, recent demographic transformations have broadened the focus from traditionally bereaved individuals to the so-called “*old lonely*”—a diverse population including both widows and the growing number of silver splits. These individuals share a common denominator: the loss of a partner later in life, a transition that often destabilizes their social networks and emotional well-being.

Building on this evolving perspective, the present study investigates the *causal effect* of the partner loss (through either widowhood or silver split) on the availability of social support among older Europeans. By leveraging the rich longitudinal data of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), this research advances prior national studies by providing a cross-national assessment that integrates robust causal inference techniques.

The analysis is structured around three main objectives: (1) to estimate the causal impact of partner loss on social support; (2) to identify gender-specific differences in these effects; and (3) to contrast the consequences of widowhood and silver splits.

2. Background

The study lies at the intersection of two major demographic trends: population ageing and the diversification of later-life family trajectories. Since the onset of the *Second Demographic Transition*

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(Van de Kaa, 2003), Western societies have witnessed increasing individualism, declining marriage rates, and delayed family formation. These shifts have culminated in the emergence of a “third demographic transition,” within which *silver splits*—the dissolution of unions after age 50—has become increasingly common, also in Europe (Alderotti et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence indicates that late-life divorce rates have more than doubled since the 1990s in most Western contexts (Brown & Lin, 2022), while younger-age divorce rates have simultaneously declined (Greenwood & Guner, 2008). The drivers of this phenomenon include extended life expectancy, women’s economic emancipation, and the redefinition of marriage as a relationship grounded in personal fulfilment rather than social duty (Amato, 2010; Crowley, 2018). These structural and cultural changes have reshaped later-life family dynamics, leading to a complex reconfiguration of emotional and social support systems (Vignoli et al. 2025).

While *silver splits* and *widowhood* both represent events leading to late-life singleness, they differ markedly in their social and psychological implications. Widowhood typically generates *emotional loneliness* (the loss of a primary attachment figure) whereas union dissolution is more strongly associated with *social loneliness*, reflecting the weakening of broader relational networks (Vedder et al., 2024). Moreover, gender plays a crucial moderating role: women tend to retain and expand social ties after marital dissolution, often receiving more instrumental and emotional support, whereas men (especially widowers) display steeper declines in both contact frequency and perceived support (Štípková, 2021; Utz et al., 2014).

3. Data and Methods

The analysis relies on longitudinal data from nine waves (2004–2022) of SHARE, which collects detailed information on health, socioeconomic status, and family networks among individuals aged 50 and older across 25 European countries and Israel. After excluding countries with insufficient cases of marital dissolution, the final analytic sample comprises 152,979 individuals (68,038 men and 84,941 women), among whom 7,345 experienced the loss of a partner: 731 grey divorces and 6,614 widowhoods.

Two complementary indicators were developed to provide proxies of social support. First, the total number of individuals providing personal or instrumental help, derived from SHARE items SP003 and SP021. Second, a latent construct combining (i) the number of helpers, (ii) the size of the household, and (iii) the frequency of contact with children.

Estimating the causal effects of partner loss on social support in observational data poses significant challenges due to non-random selection into widowhood or divorce. To mitigate this bias, the study combines Propensity Score Matching (PSM) with a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) design featuring staggered treatments. Through PSM we construct a matched control group of individuals with similar pre-treatment characteristics who did not experience partner loss, thus balancing observable confounders. Among such characteristics, we included age, gender, education (ISCED categories), number of children, depressive symptoms (EURO-D scale), and self-perceived health (SPHUS). These covariates account for potential confounders known to influence both loneliness and social support (Leopold, 2018; Tosi & van den Broek, 2020), trying to mitigate potential selection biases. Subsequently of the sample selection of balanced covariates, DiD with staggered treatments exploits the longitudinal structure of SHARE to estimate within-person changes in social support before and after the transition to singlehood, while accommodating the fact that these transitions occur at different times across individuals. This integrated quasi-experimental strategy enhances causal inference by addressing both time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity and time-varying selection processes.

4. Results

Preliminary analyses, available in Table 1, reveal substantial heterogeneity in the effects of partner loss on social support. Across the sample with all individuals at-risk of loneliness, partner loss is associated with a statistically significant decline in received support, though the magnitude and direction differ by gender and by the type of dissolution.

Table 1 – Effect of partner loss on received social support, by type of union transition and gender

	Both genders	Male	Female
Widowed	0.122 *	-0.008	0.173*
Divorced	0.077	0.021	0.172*
Divorced and Widowed	0.110*	-0.027	0.179*

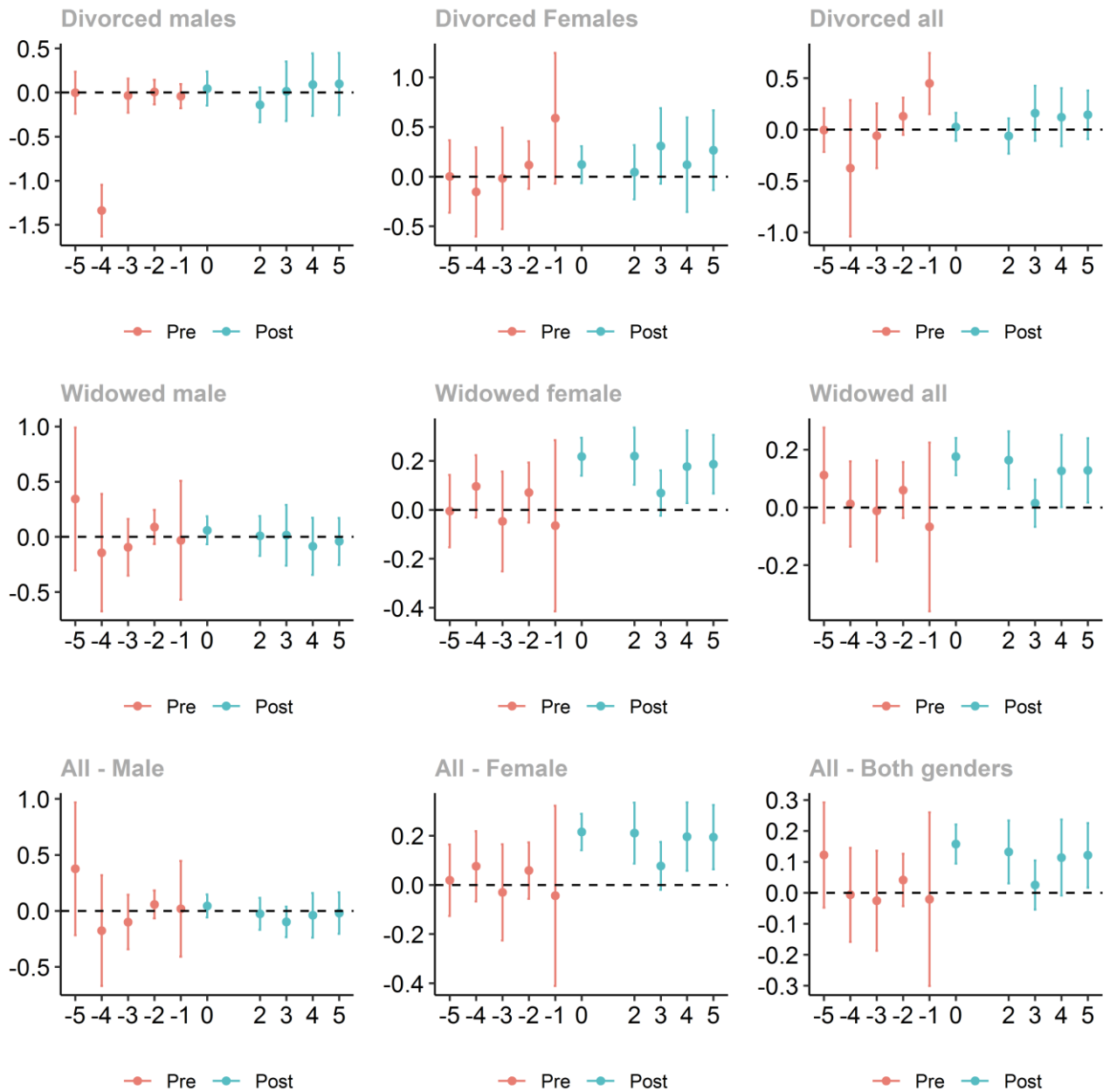
Average treatment effects on the treated. * - p values under 0.05. Control group – never treated.

Widowed males do not present statistically significant effects of social support changes when compared with the ones who did not experienced partner loss. Widowed women, conversely, tend to experience an increase in received help, suggesting compensatory solidarity mechanisms activated following the transition to singlehood.

Patterns are virtually the same after a silver split. Women display improved levels of social support, possibly reflecting proactive relational strategies and the “relational resilience” developed through kin-keeping roles. Such experience is not mirrored by men, whose results were also not found significant for this event.

We present the results by time since event in Graph 2. When disaggregated by time since event, the DiD estimates indicate that the negative effects of loneliness on social support are not immediate but tend to intensify over the medium term (two to four years post-event). This temporal pattern underscores the cumulative erosion of social capital that often follows late-life marital dissolution.

Graph 2 – Aggregate treatment effects of social support after partner loss, by type of union transition and gender



5. References

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