

Improved child marriage laws and its association with changing attitudes and experiences of intimate partner violence: A comparative multi-national study

About:

This research brief presents key findings from the following article:

Omidakhsh N, Heymann SJ. [Improved child marriage laws and its association with changing attitudes and experiences of intimate partner violence: A comparative multi-national study](#). *Journal of Global Health*. March 2020.

To access additional WORLD publications, please visit worldpolicycenter.org/resources.

Background:

- Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global problem with serious consequences for health and wellbeing.
 - The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual IPV in their lifetime.
 - Violence against women has substantial negative impacts on their health, their economic status, and progress towards gender equality
- Laws banning child marriage have the potential to counter IPV by:
 - Directly reducing rates of child marriage and its associated IPV risks and other health consequences
 - Spurring national campaigns to change unequal gender norms and create a protective environment for girls, with a positive impact on attitudes towards violence against women.
- This multi-national study is the first of its kind to examine whether changes in national child marriage laws improve attitudes about IPV and reduce experiences of IPV across countries.

Methods:

- This study used a difference-in-differences approach to estimate the association between changes in child marriage laws and attitudes towards and experiences of intimate partner violence among women and men in 19 low- and middle-income countries.
- Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data on attitudes towards violence and violence experienced were combined with longitudinal data on child marriage policy from WORLD and MACHEquity databases
- Five treatment countries strengthened their child marriage laws by increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 (Egypt, Benin, DRC, Guinea) or 16 (Mozambique) with no exceptions for parental consent. Fourteen control countries had a constant child marriage policy that allowed girls to marry under the age of 18(during the study period 1995-2012).

- Analyses employed a difference-in-differences approach to compare the changes in IPV outcomes over time in countries that improved their child marriage laws (treatment countries) relative to changes in IPV outcomes in countries that continued to allow child marriage (control countries). All models included fixed effects for country and survey year to adjust for unobserved time-invariant confounders specific to each country as well as temporal normative trends that were shared across countries.

Findings:

- National laws that strengthened protections against child marriage were associated with improved attitudes towards IPV among both women (-0.21 points on a 5-point scale) and men (-0.98 points).
- In every age group, stronger child marriage laws had a significant positive effect on IPV-related attitudes among men. Very young men (ages 15 to 19) in countries that strengthened their child marriage laws experienced the largest mean change.
- Reported physical abuse was reduced by a greater proportion in countries that strengthened protections against child marriage
- Reported sexual abuse was reduced by a greater proportion in countries that strengthened protections against child marriage.
- Reported emotional violence increased in countries that strengthened their child marriage laws.

Table. Association between change in legal age of marriage and changes in violence attitudes scale, MEN aged 15-49 Demographic and Health Surveys

	Univariate* (N= 104,604)	Multivariate† (N=102,034)
Exposure		
Change in policy to 18+ (DID estimator)	-0.71 (-0.86, -0.56)‡	-0.98 (-1.13, -0.83)‡
Individual, household and country level predictors		
Respondent age: 20-24		-0.10 (-0.14, -0.06)‡
Respondent age: 25-29		-0.12 (-0.19, -0.06)‡
Respondent age: 30-34		-0.11 (-0.20, -0.01)§
Respondent age: 35-39		-0.06 (-0.18, 0.06)
Respondent age: 40-44		0.02 (-0.13, 0.17)
Respondent age: 45-49		0.03 (-0.15, 0.21)
Rural residency status		0.06 (0.03, 0.09)‡
Educational attainment: incomplete primary		-0.04 (-0.08, 0.00)
Educational attainment: complete primary		-0.13 (-0.18, -0.09)‡
Educational attainment: incomplete secondary		-0.26 (-0.30, -0.22)‡
Educational attainment: complete secondary		-0.36 (-0.41, -0.31)‡
Educational attainment: higher		-0.49 (-0.54, -0.44)‡
Household SES 2 nd quintile		-0.06 (-0.10, -0.03)‡
Household SES 3 rd quintile		-0.07 (-0.11, -0.03)‡
Household SES 4 th quintile		-0.16 (-0.19, -0.12)‡

Household SES 5 th quintile	-0.26 (-0.30, -0.22)‡
Respondent's currently working	0.09 (0.07, 0.12)‡
Respondent's marital status: married	-0.04 (-0.07, -0.01)§
Respondent's marital status: living with a partner	-0.04 (-0.09, 0.01)
Respondent's marital status: previously married or living with a partner	0.15 (0.09, 0.20)‡
Respondent year of birth	0.01 (0.01, 0.02)‡
Log GDP per capita	0.65 (0.26, 1.03)§

*Univariate model includes country and year fixed effects.

†Multivariate model additionally controlled for measured individual, household and country-level characteristics.

‡ $P < 0.001$

§ $P < 0.05$

Discussion:

- These findings suggest that child marriage laws have positive impacts on attitudes towards IPV among both men and women
 - This is consistent with the notion that laws that promote gender equity have a positive influence on norms and health at the national level.
 - The particularly large impacts among young men suggest that stronger child marriage laws have the potential to support attitude change long-term.
- Findings further suggest that child marriage laws reduce the risks of experiencing IPV. Countries that strengthened child marriage laws experienced a greater reduction in reported sexual and physical violence.
- The adoption of child marriage laws is often combined with widespread community outreach and advocacy, which may also prevent violence by improving attitudes towards IPV.
 - Egypt, Benin, and Mozambique, countries with a decrease on the violence attitudes scale, had strong community outreach and mobilization efforts surrounding the implementation of child marriage legislation.
- The reported increase in emotional violence raises important questions. It is possible that women are more informed about emotional violence, given the strong awareness and educational campaigns at the time of the change in policy. This may lead to increased reporting of emotional violence. Or it is possible that in some cases physical or sexual violence was replaced with emotional violence. Further research is needed to examine these important questions.