

Tuition-free secondary education and women's attitudes toward intimate partner violence: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa

About:

This research brief presents key findings from the following article:

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Background:

- Intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is devastatingly common. Globally, nearly 1 in 3 women who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse by an intimate partner.
- While interventions to prevent violence and eliminate perpetrators' views that violence is acceptable should be top-priority, it is also critical to study women's attitudes toward IPVAW, which shape women's responses to abuse and their health outcomes.
- Beliefs that violence is acceptable prevent women from seeking support from friends, family, and accessing legal protections even when these exist. These beliefs can be transmitted intergenerationally, which makes changing attitudes even more crucial to successful interventions addressing IPVAW.
- Women's attitudes towards IPVAW have direct impacts on health outcomes and health care behaviors. Women who perceive IPVAW to be justifiable have lower usage of maternal healthcare services such as antenatal care, institutional delivery, and postnatal care services, and are less likely to use contraceptives and family planning services.
- As the first to rigorously examine the impact of changing educational policy on attitudes toward IPVAW, this study estimated the change in women's attitudes in Sub-Saharan African countries that implemented tuition-free secondary education policy compared to those with tuition-free primary alone, as well as countries without any tuition-free education policy.

Methods:

- Information on women's attitudes toward IPVAW and other relevant characteristics was obtained from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in Sub-Saharan African countries between 2000 and 2019, which asked respondents to report their beliefs on whether "a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife if (i) wife argues with husband, (ii) wife neglects the children, (iii) wife goes out without telling husband, (iv) wife refuses to have sex with husband, and (v) wife burns the food."
- DHS data were merged with data from a novel longitudinal database tracking changes in tuition fee elimination across countries, created by the WORLD Policy Analysis Center.

- 8 treated countries introduced tuition-free policy only up to the primary level, along with 11 that made it free all the way up to the secondary level. Both sets of treated countries were compared to 10 countries without a tuition-free policy.
- Using a difference-in-differences approach, researchers estimated the change in women's attitudes toward IPVAV in countries with tuition-free secondary policy compared with countries with tuition-free primary alone and those without any tuition-free policy during the study period.

Findings:

- While tuition-free primary education policy alone did not affect women's attitudes toward IPVAV, tuition-free secondary policy significantly reduced the probability of IPVAV being perceived as justified.
- The probability that IPVAV was perceived as justified under at least 1 circumstance declined by 5.3 percentage points more on average in countries that adopted tuition-free policy up to the secondary level, relative to those that adopted only up to the primary level.
- Tuition-free secondary education policy affected 4 of the 5 circumstances under which IPVAV was perceived as justified: if she goes out without telling the husband, argues with him, neglects children, or refuses sex.

Discussion:

- While nearly all countries have abolished primary-school tuition fees to achieve universal education goals enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals, similarly strong commitments to tuition-free secondary education across all countries have not yet been made.
- Tuition-free secondary education has profound implications for equal opportunity across gender, class, and many other dimensions of equity. Yet economic constraints in countries continue to raise the question of how highly to prioritize the elimination of tuition fees for secondary education.
- Overall, this study provides evidence supporting the substantial role of secondary education in changing attitudes toward and experience of IPVAV, further underscoring the urgent need to make secondary school tuition-free for all globally to improve population health.

Table: DDD regression estimates of the additional impact of tuition-free secondary education policy vs. tuition-free primary education alone on women's attitudes toward intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW).

Outcomes	(1) Model 1 (Full sample)	(2) Model 2 = Model 1 + Control for respondent's age and the sex of household head	(3) Model 2 + Control for exposure to DV Laws
	Policy Effect (95% CI ^a)	Policy Effect (95% CI ^a)	Policy Effect (95% CI ^a)
<i>Panel A</i>			
IPVAW justified under at least one circumstance	-5.13** (-9.46, -0.80)	-5.27** (-10.14, -0.40)	-5.27** (-9.94, -0.60)
IPVAW justified scale (Range 0 to 5)	-0.17*** (-0.29, -0.04)	-0.17** (-0.31, -0.03)	-0.17** (-0.29, -0.04)
<i>Panel B</i>			
Circumstances under which IPVAW justified:			
(a) goes out without telling the husband	-3.85*** (-6.59, -1.11)	-3.96** (-7.13, -0.79)	-3.84*** (-6.57, -1.11)
(b) neglects children	-3.73* (-7.46, -0.00)	-3.85* (-8.05, 0.34)	-3.86* (-7.87, 0.16)
(c) argues with husband	-3.67*** (-6.31, -1.03)	-3.75** (-6.79, -0.72)	-3.60** (-6.35, -0.85)
(d) refuses sex	-3.46*** (-4.96, -1.96)	-3.52*** (-5.54, -1.50)	-3.48*** (-5.36, -1.60)
(e) burns food	-1.89 (-4.59, 0.80)	-1.97 (-4.72, 0.78)	-1.90 (-4.44, 0.64)
Sample Size (<i>N</i>)	683,150	683,150	683,150

^a 95% Confidence Intervals (CI). Standard errors are clustered at the country level.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10. All models control for rural/urban residence.