

Impact of tuition-free education policy on child marriage and early childbearing

About:

This research brief presents key findings from the following article:

Impact of Tuition-Free Education Policy on Child Marriage and Early Childbearing: Does Secondary Matter More? Pragma Bhuvania, Kate Huh, Jody Heymann. Population and Development Review. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12538>

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Background:

- Child marriage and early childbearing have detrimental impacts on maternal and child health as well as long-term economic outcomes.
 - UNICEF estimated that in 2023, approximately 640 million girls globally had been married before they turned 18; every year at least 10 million girls are married before age 18.
 - SDG Goal 5 explicitly targets the elimination of child marriage.
- While laws and policies to eliminate child marriage are a key step, effective approaches need to also address the key drivers of child marriage.
- Reducing barriers to education is a promising approach to eliminating child marriage and reducing early childbearing.
 - Evaluations of programs in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Colombia that provided incentives for girls to stay in school have found that these investments delay marriage and childbearing.
 - However, causal studies of the impact on child marriage of making secondary education universally tuition free have not been previously carried out.
- While most low- and middle-income countries already have tuition-free primary education, there are considerable differences among countries when it comes to guaranteeing tuition-free secondary education.
- This study estimates the effect of tuition-free secondary education policy on the likelihood of girls marrying and bearing children before 15 and 18 years of age.

Methods:

- Researchers combined a dataset that captures educational policies with data on age at marriage and age at first childbirth from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted between 1986 and 2016.

- The three countries selected for the study (Liberia, Tanzania, and Uganda) implemented free secondary education several years after free primary education, allowing researchers to differentiate between women who received only free primary and women who also received free secondary.
- Researchers examined data on three categories of women: those who did not receive tuition-free education, those who received tuition-free primary alone, and those who were exposed to free-secondary as well
- Using a difference-in-difference design, researchers estimated the impact of the policy change by comparing changes in outcomes between women who were exposed to the tuition free policy with women who were not.

Findings:

- Tuition-free secondary had significantly larger effects than tuition-free primary alone:
 - Tuition-free secondary reduced the probability of marriage before 15 by 3.3 percentage points on average and that of marriage before 18 by 3.0 percentage points on average over tuition-free primary alone.
 - Tuition-free secondary reduced the probability of childbearing before 15 by 1.8 percentage points and childbearing before 18 by 4.9 percentage points over tuition-free primary alone.
- When compared to no tuition-free policy, tuition-free secondary:
 - Reduced the probability of marriage before age 15 by 4.1 percentage points
 - Reduced the probability of getting married before age 18 by 5.5 percentage points
 - Reduced the probability of childbearing before age 18 by 8.6 percentage points.

Discussion:

- This study found that tuition-free secondary education policy consistently led to larger reductions in early marriage and early childbearing than tuition-free primary education policy. The greatest impact took place when public policies made both primary and secondary tuition free.
- These findings suggest that policies guaranteeing tuition-free secondary are important for achieving improved population health including maternal, reproductive, and child health outcomes.
- The evidence that making secondary school tuition free delays marriage and childbearing has important policy implications considering that a large number of countries continue to charge tuition for secondary school.
- While costs related to books, school supplies, uniforms, and meals can be great obstacles to education, tuition-fee elimination is a critical first step to achieving universal education.

TABLE Policy effects of tuition-free primary and secondary policies on marital and fertility outcomes of women.

Outcomes	Primary vs. none free policy effect (95% CI ^a)	Secondary vs. none free policy effect (95% CI ^a)	Secondary vs. primary free policy effect (95% CI ^a)
Marriage before 15	-0.75 (-1.51, -0.07)	-4.05 (-4.96, -3.20)	-3.30 (-4.06, -2.54)
Marriage before 18	-2.50 (-4.19, -0.85)	-5.47 (-7.81, -3.23)	-2.97 (-5.16, -0.79)
Child birth before 15	0.30 (-0.27, 0.86)	-1.54 (-2.15, -0.83)	-1.84 (-2.40, -1.28)
Child birth before 18	-3.68 (-5.40, -2.16)	-8.55 (-10.83, -6.34)	-4.87 (-6.91, -2.83)

Sample sizes for outcomes using age 15 and 18 as thresholds are 153,086 and 126,850 respectively.

^a 95% Bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (CI).

All models control for rural/urban residence and sex of the household head.