

Impact of laws prohibiting domestic violence on wasting in early childhood

About:

This research brief presents key findings from the following article:

Bhuwania P, Raub A, Sprague A, Martin A, Bose B, Kidman R, et al. [Impact of laws prohibiting domestic violence on wasting in early childhood](#). PLoS ONE 19(3): e0301224. (2024)

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Background:

- Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects an estimated 641 million women and girls globally with far-reaching consequences for the health of women and children.
- A growing literature has linked mothers' exposure to IPV with children's undernutrition outcomes including wasting, defined as low weight-for-height.
 - Wasting is an important early measure of undernutrition in childhood, disproportionately affecting children under two years of age. Wasting also contributes to risks of mortality and stunting later in childhood, with consequences for health into adulthood.
- Through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other international human rights agreements, countries around the world have committed to both ending IPV and reducing child undernutrition.
- There is ongoing debate on the effectiveness of domestic violence laws in improving conditions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries that have limited resources to implement and enforce policy changes.
- This is the first study to examine the intergenerational impact of adoption of domestic violence laws on child outcomes in countries across Africa.

Methods:

- Researchers combined a dataset that captures domestic violence laws from 1990 to 2021 with Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data on nutritional outcomes for children under 5.
- Comparable data was available for 23 African countries:
 - 11 treated countries that have information on children born before and after the adoption of laws prohibiting domestic violence.
 - 12 comparison countries that either did not prohibit domestic violence or did so after the most recent available DHS survey.
- Using a difference-in-difference design, researchers examined rates of wasting among children in countries that passed domestic violence legislation and compared them to countries without such laws.

- Researchers estimated the individual impacts of prohibiting domestic violence on the probabilities of wasting in seven countries (Benin, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia).

Findings:

- Adoption of domestic violence laws reduced the probabilities of wasting among children aged 0–23 months by 5.4 percentage points.
- Even though the impact was not as strong as for children under 2, domestic violence laws also reduced wasting among children ages 2–5. Adoption of domestic violence laws reduced wasting among older children aged 24–59 months by 3.6 percentage points.
- Domestic violence laws reduced childhood wasting across all levels of wealth and for both urban and rural residents. Impacts were stronger among children in the top wealth category, and in urban areas, perhaps reflecting differences in knowledge of the law or differential implementation.
- The laws had an impact on wasting in all 6 countries that criminalized domestic violence. A civil prohibition in the seventh country was not found to be effective.
- Protecting women against domestic violence had positive impacts for women’s autonomy. Adoption of domestic violence laws increased the probability of women’s final say in decisions regarding their own earnings by 5.3 percentage points, visiting family or relatives by 6.3 percentage points, and their health care by 5.5 percentage points.

Discussion:

- This study demonstrates that laws prohibiting domestic violence have an impact on reductions in wasting in early childhood. Even though the greatest impact takes place during the first two years of life, all children under 5 years benefited from these laws.
- As policymakers consider different approaches for improving nutrition in early childhood, this study demonstrates that laws banning IPV represent a critical complementary approach to more immediate interventions like targeted feeding programs.
- Women protected against domestic violence had greater financial, social, and healthcare autonomy. Domestic violence laws might be reducing wasting among children by providing their mothers with greater access to resources and decision-making power within the household.
- Passing laws prohibiting IPV is fundamental to countries’ commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of eliminating all forms of violence against women and ensuring that their legal frameworks promote gender equality. Our findings that these laws also help reduce child wasting demonstrate that they also have a powerful role in achieving the SDG target to reduce child undernutrition.

Table: Impact of laws that protect women against domestic violence on the probability of wasting among their children aged 0–23 months.

Country	Sample Size	Wasting Treatment effects [†] (95% CI)
Pooled	146,136	–5.4*** (–7.6, –3.3)
Benin	73,384	–3.8*** (–6.4, –1.2)
Ethiopia	69,373	–9.3*** (–11.8, –6.8)
Malawi	69,474	–6.0*** (–7.7, –4.3)
Nigeria	81,888	–4.1* (–8.6, 0.3)
Rwanda	67,046	–5.9*** (–7.5, –4.4)
Uganda	64,873	–5.2*** (–6.9, –3.5)
Zambia	71,890	0.6 (–1.8, 2.9)

[†]Treatment effects reported the change in the probability of wasting in percentage points terms with 95% confidence intervals (CI)

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Standard errors clustered at the country-level

TWFE model with birth year fixed effects and country fixed effects.

Controls: Child's age in months, child's sex, child's birth order, mother's age at the time of birth, mother's education, family size, wealth, rural/urban residence, country's GDP per capita growth rate, domestic public expenditure on health (as % of GDP), and country's level of urbanization.