

Reducing child marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evaluating the joint potential of protective marriage and education policies

About:

This research brief presents key findings from the following article:

Kidman R, Raub A, Martin A, Bhuwania P, Bose B, Heymann J. [Reducing child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa: Evaluating the joint potential of protective marriage and education policies](#). Children and Youth Services Review. 24 August 2024.

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Background:

- Child marriage is recognized as a pervasive human rights violation, with harmful impacts on girls' education, health, economic potential, and independence.
- Women who marry before 18 are more likely to have early pregnancies and less likely to have a skilled health care provider present when they deliver, jeopardizing both their own health and that of the infant.
- Child marriage remains prevalent: 1 in 5 women aged 20–24 report marriage before 18. The rates are much higher in sub-Saharan Africa, and the region accounts for an increasing share of the global burden of child marriage.
- International conventions have emphasized the importance of national minimum-age-of-marriage policies to combat child marriage. However, evidence on their effectiveness has been mixed, and their implementation may be lacking without a larger commitment to girls' empowerment.
- National policies that improve access to education may impact child marriage by reducing barriers for low-income students, allowing girls to stay in school longer and delay marriage.
- No prior studies using causal methods have examined whether tuition-free education policies and protective marriage policies complement each other.

Methods:

- This study examined the impact of changes in protective marriage laws (those that establish a minimum age of 18 even with parental consent) and tuition free secondary education on the frequency of child marriage and births.
- Researchers linked globally-comparable data on national policies on tuition-free secondary education and child marriage to multiple rounds of DHS data (2003–2021) from 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Researchers used two-way fixed effects models to evaluate the relationship between policy change and child marriage among women aged 15–26, examining outcomes in the same country before and after this change.

- Countries that did not introduce a protective marriage or tuition-free education policy provided information about trends that were shared across countries in absence of policy intervention.

Findings:

- Neither protective marriage policies or free lower secondary education policies alone had a statistically significant effect on child marriage or early fertility.
- However, implementing both a new protective marriage policy and free tuition had a significant impact on lowering early marriage and births.
 - This impact was more pronounced for outcomes under age 15 as compared to those under age 18.
- The probability of being married before age 15 dropped from 6.6% if there were no policies in place, to 3.6% if both protective marriage laws and free lower secondary education policies were established.
- The probability of marriage before age 18 dropped from 34.8% to 24.3% if both policies were established.
- The probability of giving birth before age 15 dropped from 6.2 % with no policy to 3.9% under both policies. The probability of giving birth before age 18 dropped from 36.3% to 31.5% under both policies.

Discussion:

- This study suggests that both protective marriage policies and tuition-free secondary school are needed in order to effectively reduce child marriage.
- For adolescent girls and their families, decisions around marriage and education are not made independently of each other. The combination of both protective marriage and free lower secondary school policies can make education a viable alternative to marriage.
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- Policies that support continued schooling for girls may be needed to combat child marriage. This study examined tuition-free education only at the lower secondary level since few countries in Africa offer free education all the way through completion of secondary school. Currently, 70% countries worldwide and only 41% in Africa guarantee free secondary through completion. There may be additional reductions in child marriage and early pregnancy as more countries offer tuition-free education through the completion of secondary school, eliminate other educational costs (e.g., books, uniforms) or make secondary school compulsory.
- While international commitments cite the need for multisectoral efforts to combat child marriage, evaluations of national policies tend to be siloed. This study provides a practical example of how to explicitly consider and evaluate synergy between national policies.
- In this case, assessing each policy in isolation would lead to the conclusion that they do not have an impact on child marriage. Yet, when we examine the combined impact of strong marriage laws and free secondary school, we find that this combination brings about a substantial reduction in child marriage.

Figure 1. Changes in probability of early marriage and early childbearing after implementation of minimum-age-of-marriage policies and tuition-free lower secondary education policies in 16 African countries

