

# Child marriage and domestic violence: What we found in 16 African countries

June 2 2021, by Anthony Idowu Ajayi

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Credit: Lynn Greyling/Public Domain

The number of girls who marry before their 15th birthday has remained unchanged for 20 years in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The region has the highest rate of child marriage, with [nearly four in 10 girls](#) married before age 18. In [Niger](#), for example, over 77% of girls are married before the age of 18.

This is despite efforts by governments, developmental partners and civil

society organizations to end the practice. There are many reasons [why](#) it continues. These include inequitable gender norms, laws that permit children to be married in some settings in sub-Saharan Africa, inadequate investment in girls' education, poverty and unintended pregnancy. In addition, [child marriage](#) is backed and justified by culture and religion.

The [effects](#) of child marriage on the health and wellbeing of girls are far-reaching and lifelong. It harms their overall health and socioeconomic wellbeing, the survival of their children, and the prosperity of their family and community. Because child marriage harms girls' physical health and [socioeconomic](#) wellbeing, it is considered a human right violation.

The health consequences of child marriage have received significant attention. But only a few studies have examined the relationship between child marriage and intimate partner violence. One study done in [Vietnam](#) in 2013 found that there was a link between the two.

[Our study](#) examined the relationship between child marriage and intimate violence in sub-Saharan Africa. We analyzed the most recent demographic and health survey data of over 28,000 young women in 16 countries in the region. The survey data encompasses several health and wellbeing indicators including domestic violence. We extracted relevant information about domestic violence as well as the background characteristics of the respondents.

We found that girls aged 20-24 years who married before they turned 18 were 20% more likely to experience intimate partner violence than those who married as adults.

## **Our research**

Our principal aim was to assess the association between child marriage and intimate partner violence—physical, sexual or emotional—from a partner. We also compared the rate of intimate partner violence between those who married as adults and those who married as children in the past 12 months.

We analyzed data of countries from all four sub-regions within sub-Saharan Africa. In Central Africa, we included Angola, Cameroon and Chad. From West Africa we included Benin, Mali and Nigeria and from the east Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. Within Southern Africa, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe were selected.

Countries were selected on the basis of the availability of recent survey datasets.

The [demographic and health survey](#) had questions to measure each of the indicators. These questions relate to the experience of:

- Physical violence: women had been asked whether their partners had ever pushed, shaken or thrown something at them, slapped or punched them, kicked or dragged them.
- Emotional violence: women had been asked if their partner ever humiliated them, threatened them with harm, insulted or made them feel bad.
- Sexual violence: questions had included whether the partner ever physically forced the respondent into unwanted sexual acts.

Our analysis of the demographic and health survey data showed that child marriage prevalence ranged from 13.5% in Rwanda to 77% in Chad. Intimate partner violence ranged from 17.5% in Mozambique to 42% in Uganda.

Past year experience of intimate partner violence was higher among young women who married or began cohabiting before the age of 18 (36.9%) than those who did at age 18 or more (32.5%).

This result was consistent for all forms of violence: physical violence (22.7% vs 19.7%), emotional violence (25.3% vs 21.9%), and sexual violence (12% vs 10.4%).

After accounting for the contributions of important socio-demographic characteristics such as educational level, place of residence, wealth status and exposure to mass media, we found that child marriage had a higher association with intimate partner violence than marriage at adulthood.

## **Ways forward**

Overall, our findings reaffirm the link between child marriage and intimate partner violence. We found that there was a higher likelihood of intimate partner violence in 14 of the 16 countries. Angola and Chad stood out as exceptions.

As our results show, child marriage is associated with a higher likelihood of intimate partner violence in most sub-Saharan African countries. This suggests that ending child marriage would result in a substantial reduction.

There is therefore a need to institute policies to support and protect women who marry as children from abusive relationship.

Fighting cultural norms that make men unaccountable is critical to ending both child marriage and intimate partner violence. And this can be done through the creation of strict laws. [Currently](#), 43 of the 55 African Union member states have legal frameworks that put the minimum age of marriage at 18 years old or above for both boys and

girls. However, 27 of these states allow child marriage with parental or guardian consent and the approval of a judge, court or state. Ten countries allow for the marriage of girls as young as 10. One, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, has no law against child marriage.

All countries should have laws. And these should be strictly enforced.

Community sensitisation on the damaging effects of both child marriage and intimate partner [violence](#) is equally critical. This could be implemented with the involvement of various stakeholders, including community and religious leaders.

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