

The connection between child marriage and domestic violence

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A new study published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* indicates that women across 34 countries are at increased risk for domestic violence if they marry before age 15.

Globally, 34% of young women (aged 20-24) were married before age 18 and 12% before age 15 during the period 2000-2011, with the highest prevalence found in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

This study used data from Demographic and Health Surveys conducted in 34 low and middle income countries. Women 15-49 were surveyed; typically one ever-married or partnered woman per household was randomly chosen to complete a [domestic violence](#) questionnaire.

Respondents who have ever been married or cohabitated with a man were asked about their experience with domestic violence.

A third of the women surveyed were married as children: 9% were married before they turned 15, another 25% married between the ages of 15 and 17. Among the [countries](#) included, the overall prevalence of child marriage among women 20-24 was lowest in Kyrgyzstan (8%) and highest in Mali (58%). Approximately half (48%) the sample had completed primary education and 64% lived in a rural area.

Over a fifth (22%) of the sample reported experiencing past-year physical violence by their intimate partner; prevalence ranged from 2% in Ukraine to nearly 60% in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Past-

year sexual violence was less prevalent (8%) but had a substantial range. The majority of women who reported experiencing past-year sexual abuse also reported past-year physical abuse.

The study demonstrated that, globally, past-year physical and/or sexual violence was higher among [women](#) who married as children (29%) compared to those who married as adults (20%).

East Asia consistently had the highest odds of domestic violence, particularly when related to child marriage before age 15. Sub-Saharan Africa was on the other end of the spectrum, with odds ratios of comparatively lower magnitude. Europe and Central Asia was unique in showing no evidence of a relationship between early child marriage and any type of past-year domestic violence, though this should be interpreted with caution given the low rates of both early child marriage and sexual violence in the region.

There are a number of potential reasons why child marriages may be characterized by greater violence. Women who marry as children are more likely to be uneducated, live in poverty, and subscribe to traditional gender norms. Child marriages are characterized by spousal age gaps, power imbalances, social isolation, and lack of female autonomy. These factors are demonstrated risk factors for domestic violence. It may be that the same inequitable gender norms that give rise to child marriage also perpetuate violence.

More information: Rachel Kidman, Child marriage and intimate partner violence: a comparative study of 34 countries, *International Journal of Epidemiology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/ije/dyw225](https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyw225)

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