Does education affect women’s likelihood of experiencing sexual and intimate partner violence?

Global levels of gender-based violence, occurring at all socioeconomic levels, are unacceptably high. However, existing evidence that education can protect against gender-based violence, largely observational in nature, is mixed. A better understanding of the causal link between education and reduced risk of gender-based violence is important to inform the design of promising interventions in this area.

Increased education led to a reduction in women’s likelihood of experiencing violence in Uganda but not in Malawi.

The need for better evidence is particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries, where fewer evaluations have been conducted and where there are substantial gains to be made in improving the level of education attained and the quality of schooling received.

STUDYING THE LINK
To increase the evidence base, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative funded a project looking at this link. The project used the implementation of policies that removed primary school fees in Uganda and Malawi in the mid-1990s as a natural experiment to identify the causal effect of schooling on women’s subsequent experience of sexual violence, both by any perpetrator (first study) and by an intimate partner (second study). The research was intended to inform future policies and interventions in both countries.

The project used quasi-experimental methods and data collected from the Demographic and Health Surveys conducted in Malawi (2004 and 2010) and Uganda (2006 and 2011). It determined the causal relationship between education and violence using a regression discontinuity design approach.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND VIOLENCE
Findings from the first study indicate that, in Malawi, about 34 percent of women in the sample (out of 4 413 women aged 19-31 years) reported experiencing sexual violence, compared with 40 percent of women (out of 1 028 women aged 18-29 years) in Uganda. The study found that an increase in grade attainment reduced the likelihood of ever experiencing sexual violence in Uganda but not Malawi. It also found no relationship between grade attainment and experience of sexual violence in the 12 months prior to the study in either country.
An exploration of reasons why education may help protect against sexual violence revealed that higher levels of education in Uganda led to delays in marriage and increases in literacy and working for pay (proxies for economic standing), which may in turn have decreased the risk of abuse.

Emerging findings from the second study indicate that, similar to sexual violence from any perpetrator, increased education leads to a reduction in intimate partner violence in Uganda. In Malawi, however, results indicate that increases in education among women who have not completed primary education may increase intimate partner violence. This could be due to male backlash.

**BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE**

Keeping girls in school has several benefits; however, it only resulted in lower levels of sexual violence in Uganda. It is possible that overall higher grade attainment, particularly at secondary-school level, is driving this stronger relationship in Uganda and thus a minimum level of schooling may be needed to reduce the risk of experiencing sexual violence. More research on this relationship is needed, including studies that examine the potential for adverse impacts among women with low levels of education, as well as evaluations of specific interventions that increase educational attainment, enrolment or educational quality and the impact of such programmes on gender-based violence.

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