

Domestic violence laws and women's unmet need for family planning: Quasi-experimental evidence from Africa

About:

This research brief presents key findings from the following article:

Bhuwania P, Raub A, Sprague A, Martin A, Bose B, Kidman R, Heymann J. [Domestic violence laws and women's unmet need for family planning: Quasi-experimental evidence from Africa](#). *Reproductive Health*. 22, 60 (2025).



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Background:

- Approximately 164 million women report an unmet need for contraception globally. Lack of access to contraception is a key driver of unintended pregnancies, which can have substantial and lifelong health and economic implications. Children of mothers with an unmet need for family planning are found to have an elevated risk of infant and child mortality.
- Women's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) is strongly linked to increased unmet need as IPV likely affects both women's desire for contraception and their ability to access it. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in the past twelve months alone, around 245 million women experienced physical and/or sexual IPV.
- IPV can result in extensive harm to physical and mental health. Women experiencing IPV may also face barriers to working or lose their jobs as a result of the violence, making it more difficult for them to leave a violent relationship or attain economic security and independence long-term.
 - UN Women has estimated that IPV costs the global economy around \$1.5 trillion per year
- IPV also has intergenerational consequences, with children's exposure to IPV associated with higher risks of neurological disorders, mental health disorders, poor nutrition, education disruptions, and barriers to employment in adulthood.
- A wide range of studies globally have found that IPV is associated with unmet need for family planning and unintended pregnancies. Few causal studies have examined the impact of domestic violence legislation, and no causal studies have looked at what works at a national scale to address IPV and its impact on unmet need for contraception in LMICs.

Methods:

- Demographic Health Surveys data on women's unmet need for family planning from 23 African countries were merged with data from a novel longitudinal database on domestic violence legislation, created by the WORLD Policy Analysis Center.
- Unmet need is the sum of unmet need for spacing (women who wanted to delay having another child) and limiting (women who did not want another child) among women of reproductive age who were married or cohabiting, fecund, and/or sexually active.
- Using a difference-in-differences approach, researchers examined whether national laws prohibiting domestic violence affected rates of unmet need for contraception, and how these impacts varied among women with different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The treatment group comprised 11 countries with data on women before and after the adoption of DV laws. The comparison group included 12 countries that either lacked domestic violence laws entirely or implemented them after the most recent available national survey.

Findings:

- Prohibiting domestic violence reduced women's unmet need for family planning by 6.2 percentage points overall, a 20.5% reduction from the mean.
- Women across demographic groups experienced improvements in contraceptive access, except for women with no formal education and younger women (ages 15 -19).
- The impact of DV laws varied according to wealth, education, and age:
 - Impacts among the richest women were over twice as large as impacts among the poorest women (11.4 percentage points compared to 4.5 percentage points).
 - The impact of DV laws increased from 8.0 percentage points for women with primary education to 11.6 percentage points for women with higher education.
 - While DV laws had effects on women ages 20 and older, they had no impact on women aged 15-19 years.

Discussion:

- Intimate partner violence and barriers to women's reproductive autonomy are closely linked. While fully addressing both IPV and unmet need for contraception will require a wide range of legal, policy, and community interventions, laws addressing domestic violence represent one fundamental step that all countries can take.
- Domestic violence laws improve women's household decision-making power regarding healthcare and finances, which is likely to affect women's ability to access and use family planning.
- While women across demographic groups experienced improvements in contraceptive access, impacts were higher for women with higher education and more access to resources. Future research should examine obstacles such as knowledge of laws and implementation barriers, and identify strategies for more effectively reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized women.