



The impact of eliminating primary school tuition fees on child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa: A quasi-experimental evaluation of policy changes in 8 countries (2018)



This research brief presents key findings from the following article, led by Dr. Alissa Koski while a Postdoctoral Fellow at the WORLD Policy Analysis Center (WORLD):

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BACKGROUND

- Extensive research evidence has shown that child marriage harms girls' health and wellbeing.
 - For example, girls who are married have less control over their reproductive lives and are at greater risk of experiencing violence from their spouses and contracting sexually transmitted infections.
 - Additionally, married girls complete fewer years of schooling, potentially with long-term economic consequences for themselves and their families.
- Child marriage also compromises countries' ability to meet global commitments including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
 - Eliminating child marriage is a target of SDG 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."
- Previous studies have demonstrated that reducing educational costs is associated with lower odds of early marriage.
 - Recent systematic reviews found that financial incentives for girls' school attendance were the only programmatic interventions quantitatively shown to reduce child marriage in low-income countries.
 - In sub-Saharan Africa, studies have shown that girls who received cash transfers and school subsidies were

less likely to be married upon follow-up.

- Eliminating tuition fees may lower rates of child marriage in several ways, including by:
 - supporting girls' ability to complete more schooling, leading them to be perceived as "unavailable" for marriage for longer durations.
 - empowering girls to resist marriage through expanded opportunities for learning and social interaction.
- This study examines how national-level policies eliminating public primary school tuition fees affected girls' probability of completing primary school and of being married before 15 and 18 years of age.

METHODS

- Data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) were used to assemble a dataset of women born between 1970 and 2000 in 16 sub-Saharan African countries, 8 of which were "treated" countries with DHS data on women who had been exposed to tuition fee elimination policies.
- DHS data contain information on:
 - marital status and the age at which respondents first married or began cohabiting as if married.
 - respondents' educational attainment, measured by highest completed schooling levels and highest completed within-level standards.



TABLE 3: Estimates of the effect of eliminating primary school tuition fees on the probability of completing primary school and of marriage before 15 or 18 years of age among the pooled sample and in individual countries

Country	Marriage before 15 RD (95% CI)	Marriage before 18 RD (95% CI)	Primary school completion RD (95% CI)
All countries	-0.02 (-0.03, -0.01)	-0.03 (-0.09, 0.03)	0.01 (-0.03, 0.06)
Cameroon	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.01)	-	-
Ethiopia	-0.03 (-0.04, -0.02)	-0.10 (-0.13, -0.08)	0.03 (-0.01, 0.08)
Ghana	-0.00 (-0.02, 0.02)	-0.06 (-0.08, -0.04)	0.04 (-0.00, 0.08)
Kenya	-0.05 (-0.05, -0.04)	-	-
Malawi	-0.01 (-0.02, -0.00)	0.02 (-0.00, 0.05)	0.00 (-0.05, 0.05)
Rwanda	-0.05 (-0.07, -0.04)	-0.15 (-0.17, -0.13)	0.19 (0.17, 0.22)
Uganda	-0.04 (-0.05, -0.03)	-0.07 (-0.11, -0.04)	-0.01 (-0.06, 0.05)
Zambia	-0.04 (-0.05, -0.02)	-0.05 (-0.06, -0.03)	0.06 (0.04, 0.08)

RD: Risk Difference, CI: Confidence Interval

- DHS data were merged with information on the timing of policies eliminating primary school tuition fees, the duration of primary school, and the expected age at enrollment in each country, available from the UNESCO International Bureau of Education and the World Bank.
- Using fixed effects regression, this study estimated the effect of tuition fee removal by comparing changes over time in the prevalence of child marriage among women who were and were not exposed to policies eliminating tuition fees. Fixed effects for country and birth cohort were included to control for unmeasured time-invariant confounders that varied across countries, as well as temporal trends that were related to the outcomes and shared across countries.

FINDINGS

- Following the elimination of primary school tuition fees, the prevalence of marriage before the age of 15 fell by 2 percentage points on average across the 8 treated countries.
 - In Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia, the prevalence of marriage before age 15 fell by 4–5 percentage points.
- Additionally, marriage before age 18 decreased by 3 percentage points on average across the treated countries.
 - The effects of tuition fee elimination varied considerably across countries. For example, the prevalence of marriage before age 18 fell by 10 and 15 percentage points in Ethiopia and Rwanda, respectively. Meanwhile, no effects of tuition fee elimination were found in Cameroon or Malawi.

- Findings were inconsistent regarding the effects of fee elimination policies on the probability of primary school completion.
 - For example, while the policies boosted the probability of completing primary school by 19 percentage points in Rwanda and 6 percentage points in Zambia, they did not raise primary school completion rates in Malawi or Uganda. In most cases, declines in child marriage were not accompanied by major increases in primary school completion.

DISCUSSION

- These findings show that despite well-documented challenges related to policy implementation, the elimination of tuition fees reduced child marriage on a national scale in most of the countries under study.
- Improving the quality of education that is provided may bolster the effects of tuition fee elimination on child marriage rates.
- Tuition fees are more likely to constitute barriers to school enrollment for girls from poor families. It is possible that fee elimination policies led to increased educational attainment for girls from poor families but not for girls from wealthier families.
- This study highlights one example of how the advancement of educational opportunities can support efforts to eliminate child marriage and achieve other public health and development goals.

PHOTO: “[Education in Uganda \(Girls in class at Makamba Primary School, Uganda, November 2017\)](#)” by [Global Partnership for Education/Livia Barton](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).