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Does Keeping Adolescent Girls in School Protect Against Sexual Violence? Quasi-Experimental Evidence From East and Southern Africa

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: We examine the relationship between educational attainment in adolescence on young women's lifetime experience of sexual violence in Malawi and Uganda.

Methods: Exposure to Universal Primary Education policies in the mid-1990s serves as a natural experiment to estimate the causal effect of schooling on women's subsequent experience of sexual violence using an instrumented regression discontinuity design and Demographic and Health Survey data.

Results: We find a one-year increase in grade attainment leads to a nine-percentage point reduction ($p < .05$) in the probability of ever experiencing sexual violence in a sample of 1,028 Ugandan women (aged 18–29 years), an estimate which is considerably larger than observational estimates. We find no effect of grade attainment on ever experiencing sexual violence among a sample of 4,413 Malawian women (aged 19–31 years). In addition, we find no relationship between grade attainment and 12-month sexual violence in either country. Analysis of pathways indicates increased grade attainment increases literacy and experience of premarital sex in Malawi and reduces the probability of ever being married in both countries.

Conclusions: Keeping girls in school results in a number of benefits for young women; however, protects against lifetime experience of sexual violence only in Uganda. It is possible that overall higher grade attainment, particularly at secondary school levels is driving this effect in Uganda. More research on this relationship is needed, as well as on effective interventions, particularly those which can be taken to scale related to enhancing the quality and quantity of education.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

This study used quasi-experimental methods to explore the effects of increased grade attainment on young women's experience of sexual violence in Malawi and Uganda. Increasing schooling resulted in a number of benefits, although it reduced lifetime sexual violence only in Uganda.

Sexual violence against girls and women is widespread—30% of women worldwide have experienced lifetime sexual or physical violence from an intimate partner and 7.2%

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have experienced nonpartner-forced sex [1,2]. Sexual violence is detrimental to individuals' health and well-being [3–7]. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), there is little evidence of what works to prevent sexual violence [8–11], with one of the few interventions proven effective at reducing sexual violence among adolescents being a school-based intervention focusing on empowerment and self-defense in Nairobi, Kenya [12]. Structural interventions, including education, are particularly promising due to their scalability and multisectoral nature.

Education may affect risk of sexual violence, defined as been physically forced into unwanted sex or unwanted sexual acts, through various pathways. Increased education may delay entry into the labor market and improve labor market opportunities including earnings and desirability of occupation. This in turn may increase economic security and reduce financial dependence on males, reducing the need for transactional or age-disparate sex, which are often linked to forced sex [13]. Improved labor force opportunities may also reduce exposure to exploitative or dangerous environments where violence occurs. In addition, increased education may delay premarital sex or partnership formation, which are risk factors for intimate partner sexual violence [14]. Better-educated women have partners that are also better educated and closer in age [15], and partner's increased education and educational parity between partners are both associated with decreased risk of intimate partner violence [16]. Finally, education offers an important opportunity to intervene early in a girl's life to increase self-esteem, aspirations, mental health, and improve sexual education. However, increased schooling may not always be protective against sexual violence, as teachers and school peers may also perpetrate violence, and girls may be at increased risk for violence while traveling to school [17,18].

Existing empirical evidence on the relationship between education and sexual violence is largely observational [17,19]. Thus, studies have been unable to conclude whether education has a causal impact on reducing the probability of experiencing sexual violence or whether education is a proxy for omitted characteristics including parental preferences, socioeconomic status, or other factors, which are correlated with sexual violence. In this study, we examine the relationship between grade attainment and sexual violence among young women in Malawi and Uganda, as well as pathways through which these impacts may work. We address the endogeneity of grade attainment using the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE) policies in the mid-1990s, which removed primary school fees in government schools in Malawi in 1994 and in Uganda in 1997, allowing us to use an instrumented regression discontinuity design (RDD). Other studies have used similar strategies to examine the causal effect of education on human immunodeficiency virus/AIDS, fertility, and fertility preferences in Africa [15,20–23].

Methods

Data

Data come from the 2004 and 2010 Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) in Malawi and the 2006 and 2011 DHS in Uganda [24–27]. DHS are cross-sectional nationally representative household-based surveys collected by ICF Macro (Fairfax, VA) in collaboration with host country governments. DHS implement standard violence modules, including information on experiences of sexual violence from partners and nonpartners, following strict ethical guidelines. The module is randomly asked to one woman per household aged 15 to 49 years in a subset of DHS households. The two countries were chosen based on availability of the violence module, timing of surveys, and expansion of UPE.

Outcomes

The main outcome in this study was sexual violence, created using three questions: (1) have you been physically forced into

unwanted sex or unwanted sexual acts by your current husband/partner in the last 12 months and/or in your lifetime?; (2) have you been physically forced into unwanted sex or unwanted sexual acts by anyone other than your current husband/partner in the last 12 months and/or in your lifetime?; (3) was your first sexual intercourse forced? If a woman responded yes to any of these three questions, she was coded as having experienced sexual violence in her lifetime.

There were minor differences in how sexual violence questions were asked across countries and survey rounds. In the Malawi 2010 DHS, women were asked all three questions; however, question (2) was only asked about the last 12 months (not lifetime). In the Uganda 2011 DHS, women were asked questions (1) and (2) but not question (3). In the Malawi 2004 DHS and the Uganda 2006 DHS, women were asked all three questions.

We also explore pathways through which grade attainment could have affected lifetime sexual violence. First, we examined experience of any sexual violence in the last 12 months to see if attainment affects current experience of violence. To further elucidate pathways based on marriage dynamics, we explored the effect of grade attainment on reporting of premarital sex (constructed based on reported age at first sex and age at marriage) and probability of ever being married. Finally, to understand if grade attainment may have had long-term benefits on human capital accumulation—and thus potential pathways leading to skill accumulation and labor force arrangements—we explored effects on engaging in cash employment in the last 12 months and literacy.

Analytical strategy

In the case of endogeneity bias, where unobserved confounders may simultaneously affect educational attainment and the probability of experiencing sexual violence, ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates of the relationship between schooling and sexual violence are biased. To account for this endogeneity, we used the introduction of UPE policies, as natural experiments (i.e., exogenous shocks to grade attainment).

Historically, primary school fees were obstacles to school access for poor populations in sub-Saharan Africa [28]. Fee removal led to large increases in enrollment, particularly for girls [29,30]. We adopted an instrumented RDD, taking advantage of the fact that UPE implementation could be treated as a random event that allowed girls just below primary school exit age at policy implementation to extend their schooling with zero fees, while having little or no effect on girls just above primary school exit age. On average, girls exposed to UPE in Malawi attained 5.6 grades compared with 5.2 grades for girls not exposed, and girls exposed to UPE in Uganda attained 6.4 grades compared with 5.6 grades for girls not exposed (Table 1). Primary school completion significantly increased for girls exposed to UPE in both countries; however, secondary school attendance significantly increased for girls exposed to UPE in Uganda only (Table 1).

We assume respondents just above and below primary school exit age are similar on observed and unobserved characteristics and differed only in exposure to UPE. A plot of average grade attainment by birth cohort shows that while there are upward trends in education, there is a jump (i.e., a discontinuity) in average years of schooling induced by UPE in both countries (Figure 1). Figure 1 also shows country-level variation in the extent of fuzziness in the regression discontinuity, with Malawi

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