

Polygamy and alcohol linked to physical abuse in African marriages

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African women in polygamous marriages or with alcoholic husbands have a significantly higher risk of being physically abused by their husbands than women in monogamous marriages or women whose husbands don't abuse alcohol, new research shows.

A trio of researchers pulled data from the Demographic Health Survey to look at intimate partner physical violence in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. The four countries have high rates of domestic violence. The researchers selected the countries based on the availability of timely data and to represent different regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. They used survey responses from more than 14,000 married women. Depending on the country, 13 to 28 percent of the surveyed women experienced physical violence from their [husbands](#).

The research, conducted by Elizabeth Asiedu, a professor of economics at the University of Kansas; Christobel Asiedu, an associate professor of sociology at Louisiana Tech University; and Tatenda Zinyemba, a graduate student in public affairs at Indiana University, will be presented at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

"It is important for us to know more about the factors that put women at risk for [intimate partner violence](#) because it is a significant risk factor for poor health in women," Christobel Asiedu said.

Contingent on the country, about 10 to 17 percent of the sampled

marriages were polygamous. Women in such relationships were, depending on the country, about 1.3 to 2 times more likely to be at risk for physical violence from their husbands than women in monogamous marriages.

Contingent on the country, women with alcoholic husbands were about 2 to 3 times more likely to experience physical violence compared to women whose husbands didn't abuse alcohol. This was especially concerning since, depending on the country, husbands were classified as alcoholics in 33 to 45 percent of the sampled marriages.

While polygamy and alcohol abuse were universal risk factors for [intimate partner](#) physical violence in the four countries, the researchers found that women's education levels, whether women lived in rural or urban areas, the age difference between husbands and wives, and being employed did not have a uniform effect.

For example, having higher levels of education put wives at less risk for physical abuse from their husbands in Kenya and Zimbabwe, whereas it had no effect in Malawi and Ghana. The risk of physical violence was higher for wives living in urban areas as opposed to rural areas in Ghana and Malawi, but there was not a significant difference in Kenya and Zimbabwe. And, having a job lowered the risk for women in Kenya, but didn't have an effect in Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Malawi.

The results for polygamy didn't come as surprise, Christobel Asiedu said, because women in polygamous marriages tend to have less power and are more likely to be dependent on their husbands. However, she didn't expect to see such a strong connection between alcohol and [physical violence](#) or that women's education levels didn't make a difference in Malawi and Ghana.

"The assumption is that women who are more educated are more likely

to be economically independent and are more likely to have power in relationships," Christobel Asiedu said. "So, you would think a higher education would mean a lower probability of being in an abusive relationship or staying in one. But in Malawi and Ghana that doesn't really make any difference."

One of the study's main goals was to show that risk factors for [domestic violence](#) differ throughout Africa, a point policymakers will hopefully keep in mind when drafting preventive measures, according to Christobel Asiedu.

The research was facilitated through the Association of Advancement of African Women Economists, which was founded by Elizabeth Asiedu, and strives to support the scholarship of African [women](#) economists.

More information: The paper, "Risk Factors of Intimate Partner Physical Violence Among Married Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 23, at 10:30 a.m. CDT in Chicago at the American Sociological Association's 110th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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