

# **Gender-based Violence Against Adolescent and Young Adult Women in Low and Middle Income Countries<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

We examine the prevalence of gender-based violence among adolescent and young adult women in low and middle income countries. Data from the Demographic and Health Surveys were harnessed; we provide lifetime and past-year estimates of physical and sexual intimate partner violence, and forced sexual debut, by age group within nation, and summarize results via meta-analysis.

Findings demonstrate a significant burden of gender-based violence among youth in most settings, with over 1 in 4 young married women affected by partner violence, and 1 in 5 sexually experienced adolescents reporting forced first sex. In some settings youth was found to confer risk for abuse; in other settings youth were relatively protected from violence as compared with their older counterparts (ages 25-34).

## **Introduction**

Globally, an estimated one in three women experience gender-based violence; the health implications of which are well-documented and include sexually transmitted infection including HIV, unintended pregnancy, addiction, and mental health issues. Youth are thought to be disproportionately burdened by gender-based violence; developmentally, they are young and may be inexperienced with relationships. Young women, particularly those married to older men, and/or married as children or adolescents, often have little power within marriage. Yet to date, the global prevalence of key gender-based violence indicators including intimate partner violence and forced first sex among adolescent and young adult women remains unclear.

Evidence of the burden of gender-based violence among adult women prompted the development and integration of a violence assessment within the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), a national-level surveillance system that collects data in developing nations on a routine basis. These data enable national-level inferences and a cross-national investigation of both intimate partner violence and forced first sex among adolescent women for the first time to inform the scope of violence among broader populations of adolescent and young women in low and middle income nations.

## **Methods**

Analysis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data was conducted across nations for which data were available to estimate the prevalence of lifetime and past-year intimate partner violence (26 nations) and forced first sex (14 nations) among adolescent and young adult women ages 15-19 and 20-24. Among ever-partnered women, physical intimate partner violence was indicated by a positive response to having been pushed, shook, or had something thrown at, slapped, punched with a fist or something that could hurt, kicked, dragged or beaten up, choked or burned on purpose. Sexual intimate partner violence was assessed by two items: physically forced to have unwanted sex, or forced into other unwanted sexual acts. For both physical and sexual violence, follow-up items assessed experience of these events in the past year. Forced first sex was assessed via a single item, specifically, “the first time you had sexual intercourse, would you say that you had it because you wanted to, or because you were forced to have it against your will?” Within nations, prevalence for each outcome was estimated within age group; meta-analyses estimated the cross-national prevalence; and the prevalence of past-year violence was compared both across age groups, and against that of adult women (ages 25-34).

## **Results**

An estimated 18% of 15-19 year olds, and 58% of 20-24 year olds were married (Table 1). Among 15-19 year olds, lifetime experience of physical partner violence ranged from 8.6% in Nigeria to 46.4% in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Among 20-24 year olds,

lifetime physical partner violence was similarly most prevalent in the DRC at 58.8%, and least prevalent at 9.5% in Azerbaijan. Across nations, meta-analysis estimates a lifetime history of physical partner violence for 25.23% and 25.99% respectively. Lifetime sexual partner violence was somewhat less common, ranging from 3.12% in Nigeria to 32.5% in DRC among 15-19 year olds, and 3.65% in Colombia to 31.4% in DRC among 20-24 year olds. Small cell sized prohibited reliable estimates in many settings, particularly for 15-19 year old women. Across nations, lifetime sexual violence was estimated at 13.39% and 11.41% among 15-19 year olds, and 20-24 year olds respectively. An estimated 28.65% and 28.96% were exposed to either physical or sexual partner violence across the lifetime.

Meta-analysis confirmed prevalent past-year partner violence (Table 2), estimated at 26.16%, 25.11% and 23.06% across age groupings of 15-19 years, 20-24 years, and 25-24 years, respectively. In contrasting adolescent (15-19) and young adult women (20-24) with their older counterparts (25-34 years), findings were inconsistent across nations. Relative to adult women, youth conferred significant risk in Bangladesh, Peru and Zimbabwe, with adolescents and/or young adults at greater risk as evidenced by ORs greater than 1 and 95% confidence intervals not including 1. In contrast, young age was significantly protective in Moldova, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Zambia. Notably, in many of the settings for which young age is significantly protective against past-year violence, the prevalence itself is quite high, e.g., 31.74% among 15-19 year olds in Zambia.

Forced first sex was also prevalent (Table 3), estimated at 20.69% and 14.57% across sexually experienced 15-19 year old and 20-24 year old women, respectively. Wide variation was observed across nations, with estimates over 20% for 15-19 year olds in Haiti, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe, and less than 2% in Cambodia, Ukraine, and Timor-Leste.

## **Conclusions**

Current evidence confirms a high prevalence of gender-based violence among adolescents and young adult women in most settings, with over 1 in 4 young married women affected by physical or sexual partner violence, and 1 in 5 sexually experienced adolescents reporting forced first sex. Given these data, coupled with the demonstrated associations of intimate partner violence with leading physical, mental, and sexual health concerns, adolescent women must be included in global violence prevention and intervention efforts.

**Table 1. Prevalence of Lifetime Physical and Sexual Intimate Partner Violence among Adolescent and Young Adult Women**

Age Group	% (n) Currently Married			% Physical Partner Violence			% Sexual Partner Violence			% Either by Spouse		
	15-19	20-24	15-24	15-19	20-24	15-24	15-19	20-24	15-24	15-19	20-24	15-24
Azerbaijan	8.86(98)	52.38(439)	27.66(536)	*	9.51	9.74	*	*	*	*	9.88	10.09
Bangladesh****			(571)**	37.88	41.64	40.13	20.29	18.22	19.05	46.46	47.73	47.22
Congo Democratic Republic	27.35(176)	63.04(494)	46.97(669)	46.43	58.80	55.56	32.50	31.42	31.70	52.99	64.68	61.61
Cameroon	29.31(241)	66.66(453)	46.23(694)	28.48	38.78	35.21	*	15.74	13.33	32.27	43.66	39.71
Colombia****	13.55(1225)	41.18(3161)	21.67(4420)	27.65	30.13	29.48	3.21	3.65	3.50	28.40	30.52	29.97
Dominican Republic	19.46(408)	49.09(765)	32.10(1172)	15.40	16.79	16.31	*	4.63	3.67	15.63	17.95	17.14
Ghana	10.23(49)	43.99(207)	27.03(256)	*	19.95	19.80	*	*	*	*	21.71	22.27
Haiti	14.16(121)	52.68(343)	30.82(464)	*	14.36	16.64	*	9.54	*	26.54	18.67	20.72
India	27.44(4560)	73.63(11000)	49.68(1600)	24.23	31.82	29.64	12.28	10.26	10.84	29.58	34.78	33.29
Jordan			(486)**	*	16.88	16.10	*	*	*	*	16.88	16.10
Kenya	11.71(169)	59.41(740)	34.47(900)	22.72	31.20	29.70	*	12.93	11.59	25.09	33.79	32.25
cambodia	11.66(65)	53.50(271)	31.51(337)	*	9.62	9.03	*	*	*	*	10.07	9.51
Moldova	9.19(99)	56.27(491)	30.28(589)	*	14.67	14.46	*	*	*	*	15.56	15.21
Mali	49.48(1018)	87.93(1601)	67.57(2624)	18.66	21.67	20.50	7.22	5.41	6.11	21.48	23.61	22.78
Malawi	23.79(311)	78.21(926)	49.66(1236)	18.22	18.22	18.22	15.14	14.17	14.41	26.41	25.58	25.79
Nigeria	33.63(1300)	64.85(2517)	49.27(3817)	8.59	15.31	13.02	3.12	4.07	3.75	9.63	16.36	14.07
Peru	10.75(812)	39.46(2510)	23.88(3322)	16.68	25.76	23.54	*	3.80	3.41	17.25	26.69	24.38
Philippines	13.61(192)	54.62(738)	33.69(930)	*	13.50	13.66	*	5.59	5.86	17.43	15.93	16.24
Rwanda	1.90(18)	41.80(328)	19.87(346)	*	23.57	23.28	*	11.72	11.71	*	27.79	27.29
Sao Tome and Principe	23.80(78)	70.42(215)	46.21(293)	27.36	28.12	27.92	*	9.85	8.16	27.58	28.95	28.59
Timor-Leste	8.93(63)	50.14(257)	26.35(320)	*	29.62	28.60	*	*	*	*	31.00	29.71
Tanzania	17.89(268)	63.79(856)	39.57(1125)	29.51	32.50	31.78	13.08	12.61	12.72	35.75	35.61	35.64
Ukraine	11.57(29)	45.48(183)	32.54(212)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Uganda	19.05(90)	65.96(272)	40.92(361)	41.00	37.40	38.29	30.08	28.02	28.53	50.43	49.10	49.43
Zambia	18.83(203)	63.95(675)	41.05(878)	30.33	43.24	40.23	11.66	16.21	15.15	33.94	46.38	43.49
Zimbabwe***	20.76(288)	61.38(900)	41.64(1188)	23.08	31.86	29.73	16.53	13.06	13.90	30.34	36.10	34.70
Overall	18.12	58.32	37.07	25.23	25.99	25.07	13.39	11.41	11.48	28.64	28.96	28.15

\* Unweighted cell size <25 \*\* Ever married sample \*\*\* Does not have "spouse tried to strangle or burn" item \*\*\*\*Do not have " spouse forced other sexual acts when not wanted"

**Table 2: Prevalence of past-year physical or sexual violence by spouse by age group**

<i>Age group</i>	% physical or sexual violence by spouse (past year)			OR (95% CI)	
	<i>15-19</i>	<i>20-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>15-19 vs. 25-34</i>	<i>20-24 vs. 25-34</i>
Azerbaijan	*	9.41	9.55	1.04(0.45;2.41)	0.86(0.57;1.32)
Bangladesh	35.47	30.11	24.14	1.70(1.25;2.32)	1.33(1.05;1.68)
Congo Democratic Republic	52.99	64.61	56.73	0.70(0.47;1.04)	1.08(0.76;1.53)
Cameroon	27.10	33.63	28.70	0.84(0.61;1.16)	1.15(0.87;1.51)
Colombia	*	30.52	29.05	1.32(0.59;2.95)	0.88(0.77;1.00)
Dominican Republic	14.43	14.38	11.02	1.04(0.68;1.59)	1.31(0.99;1.71)
Ghana	*	20.62	14.61	1.27(0.58;2.80)	1.26(0.85;1.88)
Haiti	26.54	17.92	15.43	1.50(0.77;2.92)	1.01(0.66;1.55)
India	26.63	26.86	24.84	1.07(0.95;1.22)	1.08(1.00;1.16)
Jordan	*	14.58	16.56	0.54(0.12;2.42)	1.01(0.59;1.72)
Kenya	23.56	29.95	29.19	0.73(0.43;1.23)	0.89(0.69;1.16)
Cambodia	*	9.04	8.42	0.72(0.23;2.23)	0.93(0.57;1.51)
Moldova	*	15.56	19.12	0.90(0.48;1.69)	0.76(0.58;0.99)
Mali	20.95	22.28	19.21	1.14(0.87;1.50)	1.15(0.94;1.41)
Malawi	25.83	21.59	22.98	1.12(0.81;1.54)	1.01(0.82;1.25)
Nigeria	8.49	14.51	14.65	0.52(0.42;0.64)	0.93(0.81;1.05)
Peru	12.76	17.08	11.05	1.36(1.07;1.73)	1.50(1.28;1.74)
Philippines	14.37	11.50	9.63	0.59(0.41;0.83)	0.93(0.72;1.20)
Rwanda	*	21.84	20.77	1.11(0.45;2.73)	1.05(0.81;1.36)
Sao Tome and Principe	27.58	24.58	27.56	1.00(0.49;2.02)	0.96(0.63;1.45)
Timor-Leste	*	30.74	33.06	0.76(0.37;1.56)	0.82(0.59;1.14)
Tanzania	32.46	33.86	35.32	0.83(0.59;1.16)	0.89(0.73;1.08)
Ukraine	*	*	6.63	0.23(0.03;1.76)	0.69(0.28;1.71)
Uganda	49.25	43.11	45.31	1.03(0.60;1.76)	0.82(0.60;1.12)
Zambia	31.74	43.17	42.37	0.59(0.44;0.80)	0.95(0.78;1.15)
Zimbabwe	29.55	33.73	28.45	1.07(0.77;1.48)	1.23(1.02;1.50)
Overall	26.16	25.11	23.06	0.89(0.73;1.05 )	1.00(0.92;1.08 )

\* Unweighted cell size &lt;25

**Table 3: Prevalence of Forced First Sexual Experience Among Youth**

<i>Age Group</i>	% (n) Sexually Experienced			% First Forced Sex		
	<i>15-19</i>	<i>20-24</i>	<i>15-24</i>	<i>15-19</i>	<i>20-24</i>	<i>15-24</i>
Azerbaijan	9.15(101)	54.83(459)	28.88(560)	2.2	2.9	2.77
Dominican Republic	40.02(838)	82.81(1290)	58.27(2128)	4.36	4.84	4.65
Ghana	34.63(162)	89.79(422)	62.07(587)	31.0	24.48	26.31
Haiti	37.6(321)	82.36(537)	56.96(858)	22.6	19.95	20.95
Kenya	35.15(480)	86.27(1075)	59.54(1555)	18.02	11.05	13.20
Cambodia	11.9(67)	59.79(303)	34.62(370)	0	2.48	2.03
Malawi	45.12(590)	95.09(1125)	68.87(1715)	25.05	13.2	17.27
Philippines	17.12(241)	63.47(858)	39.81(1099)	10.16	5.33	6.39
Sao Tome and Principe	51.15(168)	96.19(293)	72.81(472)	15.85	5.45	9.2500
Timor-Leste	10.08(71)	53.31(273)	28.35(344)	0.96	1.63	1.50
Tanzania	44.86(673)	91.75(1232)	67.01(1904)	11.89	8.79	9.89
Ukraine	25.54(63)	79.70(321)	59.03(3834)	1.03	3.30	2.75
Uganda	40.39(190)	91.19(376)	64.08(566)	30.51	22.49	25.18
Zimbabwe	30.04(417)	83.91(1231)	57.73(1648)	33.59	23.64	26.15
Overall	32.95	80.84	55.02	20.69	14.57	16.48