

# ADOLESCENT INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS

FINDINGS FROM A SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF DHS DATA IN MYANMAR

MAY 2019

This data brief highlights several myths that may exist in programming around adolescents' experiences of intimate partner violence—or the physical, sexual or emotional abuse from a husband or boyfriend/girlfriend. This data brief explores the answers to these myths by using population-based data. By conducting a secondary analysis of the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) data, the best source of population-based violence and health data, we were able to dig deeper to help inform programming going forward.

This data brief shows that intimate partner violence is prevalent among adolescents and that adolescents still hold negative gender norms that perpetuate these behaviours. Adolescents also experience more severe physical and controlling violence than adults in their relationships. While they often do tell someone, adolescents are less likely to see formal help suggesting additional programming and consultation needs to be done to better understand barriers to accessing help and also to explore the underlying root causes of adolescent intimate partner violence.

## BACKGROUND

Myanmar has undergone rapid changes in the past decade. Now considered to be an 'emerging economy', a number of gradual political and economic reforms since 2011 promoted economic growth and opened the doors to the long-isolated country. As a result, the poverty rate decreased by 33% between 2005 and 2015 and access to education, electricity and technology rapidly expanded. However this has not benefitted the population equally. There are stark disparities in poverty and living conditions between urban and rural areas, where about 70% of the population lives (UNFPA, 2017). The country's long history of conflict and the recent crisis has also devastated certain areas and populations, with over 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees affected by the Rakhine crisis alone (World Bank, 2018).

This complex and dynamic context is crucial to understanding adolescents' (young people ages 10-19) exposure to (and protection from) violence. Children from all parts of society may be exposed to physical, sexual and psychological violence, abuse and exploitation. This is a growing concern due to the negative health and developmental consequences for children and society, both at present and in the future. Adolescents represent the largest demographic in the population, and this data brief explores one type of violence that adolescents may experience – that is violence (physical, emotional and/or sexual) in their intimate relationships (either with their husband/wife or their boyfriends/girlfriends).

# D DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

DHS surveys are available in many low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) globally including Myanmar. Funded by the US Agency for International Development, DHS surveys collect nationally representative data in a number of health-related areas – including maternal and child health, family planning and HIV/AIDS. While the exact nature of the survey design and sampling frame varies slightly between countries, all of these household surveys make use of a clustered and stratified sampling scheme.

Myanmar conducted its first DHS in 2015/16. In this survey, 12,885 women and 4,737 men age 15-49 years participated. This included 1,822 15-19 year old females and 762 15-19 year old males. DHS is the best source of population-based health and violence data currently available in Myanmar.

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The DHS asks a number of questions about violence, including on intimate partner violence and help-seeking behaviours. The surveys also contain a number of variables, which may be used as proxy measures of gender inequality including specific questions on gender norms. We examined beliefs around wife beating and undertook an exploratory analysis of respondents who held these attitudes exploring key variables such as age, gender, urban/rural location, wealth quintile, etc.

All analyses accounted for the sampling and stratification scheme employed in the survey, to produce standard errors corrected for design. Weights related to the probability of selection were used where available to generate point estimates which reflect population prevalence and other estimates.

# A ADDRESSING COMMON PROGRAMMING MYTHS USING EVIDENCE

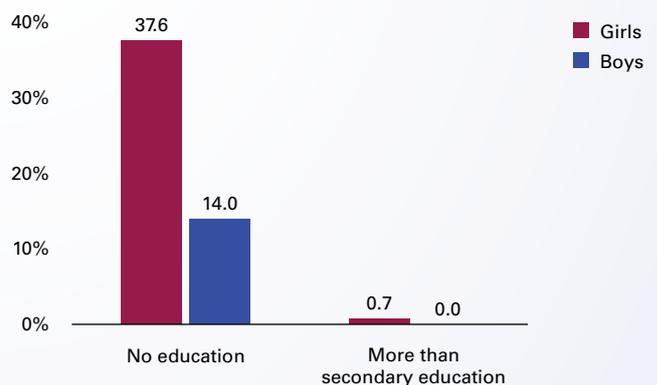
**Myth 1: Adolescents aren't dating or in intimate partnerships in Myanmar**

**False: Approximately 1 in every 7 girls and 1 in every 17 boys has been in an intimate partnership that included having sex at some point before they were 18 years old.**

The DHS asks women and men at what age they first had sexual intercourse. Among all age groups, women were more likely than men to say they had sex before age 18. About 1% of 15-24 year old females and 0.3% of males said they had sex by the age of 15 years. Among 18-24 year olds, 14.4% of women and 5.7% of males said they had sex by age 18 years.

Sex before the age of 18 is more common among young people in rural areas compared to urban areas. The median age at first sex also increases by wealth quintile and by education level among both genders: 37.6% of females who had sex before the age of 18 years had no education compared to 0.7% of those with more than a secondary education (14% and 0.0% among males). Women in Shan and Rakhine and men in Chin and Kachin report the youngest ages at first sex.

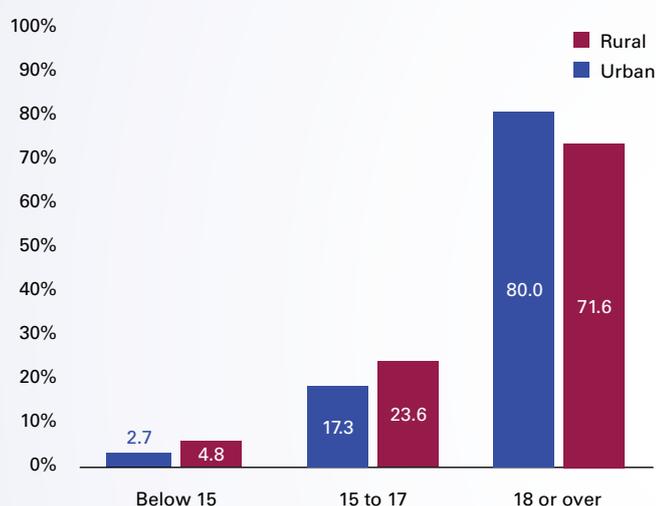
**Prevalence of sexual debut before the age of 18 by level of education, DHS data**



Patterns around sexual debut become clearer when looking at age of first marriage. The age at first sex is higher than age at first marriage among women and lower among men. This suggests that women typically have sex after they are married whereas men do so before they are married. Females may therefore report an earlier age of sexual debut because they marry at a young age compared to men.

In addition, many adolescents are cohabitating with their partners. DHS data shows that under the age of 18, more rural females than urban females cohabit with their partners (4.8% under the age of 15 and 23.6% between the ages of 15 and 17) and nearly 1 in 4 adolescent girls are living with husband or partner (23.6%). At the age of 18 this trend reverses with more urban females (80%) cohabitating than their rural counterparts reflecting the trend that urban youth marry later than rural youth.

### Age at first cohabitation (female) DHS data



**Myth 2: The older generation holds more negative gender norms about wife beating than the younger generation of adolescent girls**

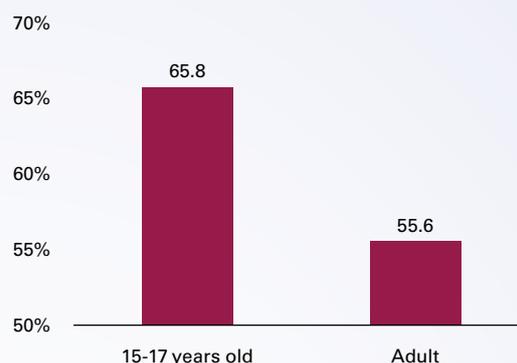
**False: Adolescents hold more negative gender norms around intimate partner violence than adults.**

Participants were asked if they agreed if wife beating was justified in the following instances when the wife:

- Burns the food
- Argues with him (the husband)
- Goes out without telling him
- Neglects the children
- Refuses sexual intercourse

More adolescents also held negative gender norm beliefs around intimate partner violence with 64% of all adolescents agreeing with at least one statement condoning the use of intimate partner violence compared to 52% of adults.

### Percentage of adolescents vs adults who believe in more than 1 negative gender norm related to wife beating



Though a similar amount of adolescents and adults hold multiple negative gender norms (believe in 2 or more statements) about intimate partner violence. Nearly 1 in every 3 adolescents (31.3%) held multiple negative gender norm beliefs about intimate partner violence compared to 30.1% of adults.

**Myth 3: Adolescent girls don't experience much violence within their relationships in Myanmar**

**False: Nearly 1 in every 6 adolescent girls has experienced physical violence since the age of 15.**

DHS collects data on violence experiences among women aged 15-49 years. 15% of 15-19 year old girls have experienced physical violence by their partner since age 15. Of these, 10% have experienced it often or sometimes in the past 12 months. 1% of 15-19 year old girls have ever experienced sexual violence.

Further if we examine the difference between older and younger adolescents we find that more 18-19 year old adolescent girls experienced physical violence only (16.7%) than 15-17 year old adolescent girls (13.1%). In addition, more 18-19 year old adolescent girls (18.8%) experienced physical or sexual violence than 15-17 year old girls (13.4%). And 1.3% of 18-19 year old adolescent girls experienced physical and sexual violence, compared with 0% of 15-17 year old adolescent girls.

DHS also shows that the prevalence of spousal violence (physical, sexual, or emotional) generally declines with women's age, from a high of 28% among women age 15-19 to a low of 20% among women age 40-49.

Intergenerational effects of spousal violence are evident in Myanmar. Women who report that their fathers beat their mothers are twice as likely (35%) to have themselves experienced spousal violence than women who report that their fathers did not beat their mothers (17%).

**Myth 4: Child Marriage is not linked to domestic violence**

**False:** Population-based data from Myanmar shows that child marriages experience more frequently occurring controlling behaviours and more severe domestic violence than those married as adults.

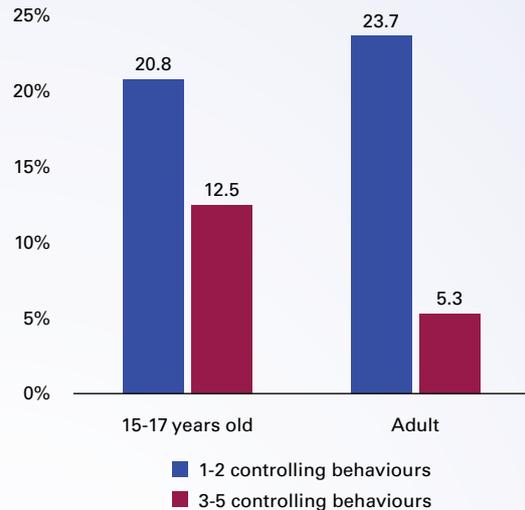
The DHS measured 'marital control' behaviours, defined as: Percentage of women whose current husband (if currently married) or most recent husband (if formerly married) demonstrates at least one of the following controlling behaviours: is jealous or angry if she talks to other men, accuses her of being unfaithful, does not permit her to meet her female friends, tries to limit her contact with her family, and insists on knowing where she is at all times.

Most marital control behaviours are more common in the youngest age group: 10% of women age 15-19 report that their husbands demonstrate three or more marital control behaviours, as compared with 6% of women age 40-49. The most common forms were insisting on knowing where she is at all times (14.9%) and not permitting her to meet female friends (11.6%)

The likelihood of experiencing spousal violence increases sharply with the number of marital control behaviours displayed by husbands: more than 70% of women whose husbands display three or more marital control behaviours have ever experienced spousal violence, compared with 13% of women whose husbands do not display any marital control behaviours.

And Adolescents who are married report experiencing more multiple types of these controlling behaviours in their relationships. Nearly a quarter of married adolescents reported experiencing 3 or more controlling behaviours from their partner (25.9%) their marriages report experiencing multiple controlling behaviours (10%). This is important because coercive control is one of the most robust predictors of physical and sexual domestic violence. compared to adults— where only 1 in 10 adults in their marriages report experiencing multiple controlling behaviours (10%). This is important because coercive control is one of the most robust predictors of physical and sexual domestic violence.

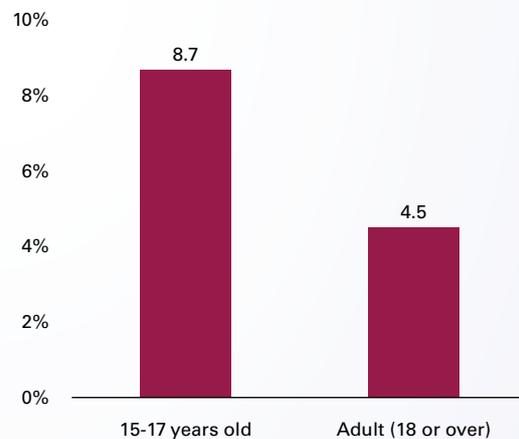
**Percentage of adolescents vs adults who report experiencing controlling behaviours in their relationship**



**Myth 5: Adolescent girls who do experience violence are less likely to experience severe violence than adults**

**False:** 1 in every 10 adolescents who reports physical violence also reported experiencing it often in the past year. Proportionally, adolescents also report more severe (requiring medical attention) violence than adults.

**Experienced any severe violence by husband/partner, DHS data**



The table above shows that more 15-17 year olds experienced any severe violence by husband/partner (8.7%) compared to adults aged 18 or over (4.5%).

**Myth 6: Adolescents girls are less likely to share their experiences of violence than adult women**

**False: Every 1 in 2 adolescent girls who experiences violence DOES tell someone about it, which is higher than for any age group.**

For those that had experienced violence, 50.2% of girls (1 in every 2 girls) age 15-19 years told someone about the violence but they also reported not seeking professional help (higher than all other age groups) for the violence they experienced. This is compared to 36.9% of 20 to 24 year olds, 37.3% of 25 to 29 year olds, 35.7% of 30 to 39 year olds and 44.6% of 40-49 year olds. Despite the fact half of adolescents do tell someone, many adolescents still never tell anyone about the violence they experience. Of those who reported experiencing intimate partner violence during adolescence, 41.8% never sought help and never told anyone about those experiences. This was highest for those adolescents who had experienced sexual violence in their intimate relationships.

**Myth 7: Adolescents girls who tell someone also seek professional help**

**False: Data shows that adolescents are most likely to tell family members and neighbours about the violence they experienced, but despite this, the vast majority of those who tell someone don't go onto to seek further professional help.**

According to the Myanmar DHS, help seeking for violence is substantially lower among females between the ages 15-19 compared to adult females. Only 8% in this age group have ever sought help to stop the violence, as compared with 22-29% in other age groups. Thus, there is a big gap between disclosure and help-seeking. More qualitative data is needed to understand the reasons why. Preliminary findings from an adolescent consultation in Kachin suggest that there may be deeply rooted social norms at play including not wanting to shame the family.

## Conclusion

This data brief has highlighted the answers to several myths –using population-based data – that are still evidence in adolescent programming. By conducting a secondary analysis of DHS data, we were able to dig deeper to help inform programming going forward. This brief shows that intimate partner violence is prevalent among adolescents and that adolescents still hold negative gender norms that perpetuate this. Adolescents also experience more severe physical and controlling violence than adults. And that while they often do tell someone, they are less likely to see formal help suggesting additional programming and consultation needs to be done to better understand barriers to accessing help and also to explore the underlying root causes of adolescent intimate partner violence.

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## About this Data Brief

This data brief was written by Dr. Deborah Fry from the University of Edinburgh.

The **Understanding Violence Against Adolescents in Myanmar Series** aims to contribute to this growing body of evidence to understand better why violence against children is happening and what is driving it. The Series draws data from both nationally representative data as is presented in this report and from the UNICEF-supported interventions where diverse information is being collected as part of programme monitoring. The Series attempts to give it a closer look at the data and information at hand and dig deeper the issue of violence against children in Myanmar. We hope to generate evidence, create deeper understanding of the issue and stimulate discussions – all to better inform programming to address violence against children in Myanmar.

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