

No evidence that anti-domestic violence laws reduce violent child discipline in sub-Saharan Africa

Hanbo Wu

Division of Social Science, New York University Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

hanbo.wu@nyu.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5135-1298>

Luca Maria Pesando

Division of Social Science, New York University Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

lucamaria.pesando@nyu.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1690-7163>

Abstract

Albeit rarely recognized as such in existing legislation, violent child discipline is a clear form of domestic violence (DV), with long-lasting implications for children's health and wellbeing. This study investigates whether anti-DV laws introduced gradually in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since the mid-2000s had any effect in curbing violent caregiving practices. We do so by merging household survey data from 27 SSA countries with time-series information on anti-DV law implementation from World Bank's reports. We compare African caregivers' childrearing practices and attitudes toward harsh parenting in countries with and without anti-DV laws, before and after law implementation. We also test the effectiveness of the laws and conduct

heterogeneity analyses by caregiver, household, and child characteristics, alongside country-level indicators of development and inequality. We document a robust increase in violent child discipline following law implementation—mainly driven by emotional punishment—as well as a significantly higher endorsement of harsh parenting practices. Results are weaker, i.e., the consequences of the laws are less negative, in countries characterized by higher income inequality, where laws have more of a “protective” effect. Findings underscore the unintended consequences of legislation implemented without a clear aim of protecting children.

1. Introduction

Violent child discipline—including physical and emotional punishment of children by parents and caregivers—continues to present a global public health and human rights crisis (World Health Organization 2020) and is particularly widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Data from eight SSA countries indicate that 83% and 64% of children experienced some form of emotional and physical violence from their parents, respectively (Akmatov 2011).¹ A global analysis shows that more than 70% of children in SSA were subject to violent discipline, and this proportion is among the highest in the world (Cuartas et al. 2019). Exposure to multiple concurrent forms of violence during childhood is also common in SSA (Leoschut and Kafaar 2017; Meinck et al. 2015; Pesando et al. 2024).

¹ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child maltreatment is any form of abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Thus, child maltreatment includes violent caregiving practices, as well as sexual abuse and child neglect. The focus of this study is on the former—child discipline practices—yet the broader literature often does not disentangle them all. For the sake of this study, the terms violent child discipline, child maltreatment, and harsh parenting are used interchangeably.

Experiencing any form of maltreatment during childhood has long-term adverse consequences that may persist into adulthood (Currie and Tekin 2012; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Herbert et al. 2023; Norman et al. 2012). In the context of SSA, childhood experiences of violent or even abusive parenting practices have been linked to low academic performance and increased probability of dropout (Pieterse 2015), worse mental health and wellbeing (Adjorlolo et al. 2017; Fakunmoju and Bammeké 2015), and engagement in risky behaviors (Brown et al. 2009; Culbreth et al. 2021). Moreover, parents who themselves used to experience abuse and neglect during childhood have been shown to be more likely to become perpetrators of violence against children when entering parenthood (Crombach and Bambonyé 2015; Smarrelli et al. 2024) and, in extreme cases, commit child homicide (Dekel et al. 2018). The consequences of violent child discipline are detrimental to human and societal development in SSA and have drawn significant public attention, calling for urgent interventions and legislation protecting children from abusive parenting practices (African Child Policy Forum 2014; 2021; Dinarte Diaz et al. 2023).

Despite high prevalence of violent child discipline, public spending on child protection in SSA is among the lowest in the world (Edwards et al. 2024), with reasons for underfunding attributable to complex political economy dynamics in the region (Muchabaiwa 2024). A series of small-scale interventions have been implemented in SSA to prevent violence against children (Edwards et al. 2024), yet substantial limitations remain. First, the scope and coverage of these programs is narrow, as they are typically targeted to small shares of the population. Samples drawn for program evaluations are often non-representative and relatively limited. Second, the majority of interventions target primarily individual- or household-level dynamics, aiming to change aspects related to individual socioeconomic status, communication skills, and normative

beliefs around harsh parenting. As Edwards et al. (2024) indicated, “no research in SSA has examined the impact of policy interventions on childhood victimization or community-level interventions to change norms and values that support violence against children” (p. 605). Finally, previous research and policy efforts have focused mostly on single-country cases, limiting broader understanding of interventions that may effectively target violent child discipline across contexts.

This article contributes to the relevant literature by exploring the following question: can legal provisions criminalizing domestic violence affect violent child discipline in SSA?

Domestic violence (DV) refers to physical, psychological, and sexual violence occurring within the family sphere. Starting in mid-2000s, several African countries enacted legislative reforms including specific wordings to criminalize DV with clearly stipulated penalties, while in other countries no explicit mention of DV in the national legal code was made (Beninger 2014).

Scholars have examined the impact of these anti-DV laws on intimate partner violence (IPV), i.e., violence perpetrated by a person in an intimate relationship and most commonly seen as a paramount component of DV (Beninger 2014; Govender 2015; Medie 2020; Umubyeyi et al. 2016; Usdin et al. 2000; Xu 2024).

Although violent child discipline is another key element of DV—albeit rarely recognized as such—this domain has received less attention among scholars and policymakers. In this article, we make use of large-scale comparative data from nationally representative surveys conducted in 27 SSA countries to assess whether anti-DV laws reduce violent child discipline and/or alter African parents’ attitudes toward harsh parenting. Our identification exploits two sources of variation in the implementation of these laws across SSA: (1) anti-DV laws were enacted in some countries, but not in others; (2) the timing of the implementation varied, i.e., in a

country the law was put into effect before or after a survey was conducted. Following previous research on IPV (Xu 2024), we seek to understand the potential impacts of the laws by comparing parental behaviors and attitudes toward childrearing practices between countries with and without anti-DV laws, before and after the implementation of these laws.

On one hand, there is reason to believe DV-related legislation may affect childrearing practices and attitudes toward harsh parenting. By analyzing progressive anti-DV laws in Ghana, Namibia, and South Africa, Beninger (2014) argued that legislative reforms combating DV are not only “effective” but also “necessary” for “developing normative and legal standards, driving state accountability for protection from violence, and ultimately promoting social change” (p. 75). Drawing on cross-national survey data for 22 African countries, Xu (2024) showed that countries enacting anti-DV laws saw substantial declines in the likelihood of justifying IPV among women after the laws were enforced. As attitudes toward violence are arguably related (or even conducive) to violent behavior, Xu’s finding that anti-DV laws pushed African women to increasingly reject DV is promising, providing empirical and quantitative support to Beninger’s argument. Similarly, anti-DV laws might create normative and legal standards making people endorse the idea that harsh parenting is illicit, unnecessary, and bad for child development, which can help reduce child maltreatment.

On the other hand, anti-DV laws may fail to lower violent child discipline for a range of reasons. First, there has been criticism about the inadequate and inefficient implementation of anti-DV laws and corporal punishment bans in SSA (Lansford et al. 2017; Medie 2020; Smarrelli et al. 2024). For example, the Domestic Violence Act was passed in South Africa in November 1998 and came into force in December 1999, placing legal duties on South African Police to handle DV cases. Through interviews with DV victims and police officials, Govender (2015)

examined complaints filed by the former against the latter. The author found that even though relevant legislation had been made, DV was not being investigated and policed properly in South Africa. Second, the effectiveness of anti-DV laws may be hampered by peculiarities of the local context. For instance, through focus groups in Rwanda with health professionals regularly taking care of DV victims, Umubyeyi et al. (2016) found that, despite the anti-DV law constituted in 2008, gender norms and poverty reduced the potential for abused victims to seek help, thus hindering the legislation's effort to reduce DV.

Third, violent child discipline is rarely framed as a manifestation of DV, neither in scholarship nor in policy discourse, hence individuals themselves may be conceptualizing IPV as the primary and only form of DV. Relatedly, the majority of anti-DV laws in SSA focus on IPV or feature the generic term “domestic violence,” without specifying whether violent child discipline is accounted for by the laws. As a result, the police and the court may fail to treat child maltreatment as a violation of the laws, and harsh parenting may be perpetrated due to caregivers not perceiving it as illegal. Fourth, the success of any law might depend on the availability of effective alternatives to use in disciplinary situations in which violent practices, such as spanking and beating, had been an option traditionally, as well as on caregivers' knowledge of these alternatives. In the absence of such alternatives or knowledge, caregivers may continue or even increase the use of violent disciplinary methods (Larzelere et al. 2013). Lastly, in households that are intrinsically violent and where IPV occurs regularly, we may observe a “substitution mechanism” whereby DV legislation may reduce violence between partners, but parents may turn increasingly violent toward their children given the frequent coexistence—and similar root causes—of the two practices (Bacchus et al. 2024; Pearson et al. 2023).

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Data and child discipline outcomes

To conduct this analysis, we pooled multiple waves of Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for 27 SSA countries. Specifically, we relied on MICS waves 3–6 and DHS conducted after 2005 to ensure that all surveys have a complete child discipline module that inquired about the primary caregiver's childrearing practices. We also limited the sample to caregivers currently in couples so that we can include couple-level characteristics in the model, as recent literature suggests that measures of status consistency between partners (such as similar levels of education) negatively predict harsh parenting practices (Pesando et al. 2024). The countries and surveys used in this study are visualized in Figure 1. In total there are 54 surveys included (44 MICS and 10 DHS), and the survey years range from 2005 for Sierra Leone to 2020 for Liberia and Malawi.

[Figure 1 here]

The child discipline module in MICS and DHS follows the Conflict Tactics Scale, widely adopted in studies of family violence, including child maltreatment (Straus et al. 1998). In the child discipline module, a child aged 2–14 was randomly selected from a surveyed household, and the respondent was asked if they or anyone else in the household used a method to discipline the selected child if the child misbehaved during the month preceding the survey time. The child discipline module consists of 11 child disciplinary methods, and we categorized them into three groups:

- a) Physical punishment, including a1) shook child; a2) spanked, hit or slapped child on bottom with bare hand; a3) hit child on the bottom or elsewhere with belt, brush, stick,

- etc.; a4) hit or slapped child on the face, head or ears; a5) hit or slapped child on the hand, arm or leg; a6) beat child up as hard as one could.
- b) Emotional punishment, including b1) shouted, yelled or screamed at child; b2) called child dumb, lazy or another name.
 - c) Non-violent disciplinary methods, including c1) took away privileges; c2) explained why behavior was wrong; c3) gave child something else to do.

Based on these questions, we created five outcome variables indicating if the respondent used the following methods to punish their misbehaved children: (1) any violent methods (any of a1–a6 or b1–b2); (2) any physical punishment (any of a1–a6); (3) any severe physical punishment (any of a4–a6); (4) any emotional punishment (any of b1–b2); and (5) any non-violent methods (any of c1–c3). In addition to behaviors, the child discipline module also asked respondents if they thought the child needs to be physically punished to be raised properly, and we used this as an additional outcome variable characterizing attitudes toward harsh parenting.

2.2 Anti-domestic violence laws

The World Bank's *Women, Business and the Law* report tracks legal and regulatory changes for several indicators relating to women's empowerment (World Bank 2024), and we gathered information from this report on laws addressing DV in SSA. Through interviews with local law experts and careful review of local law content, the report records which country enacted a specific law that not only criminalizes DV but also stipulates punishment for DV perpetrators. Conversely, if a country has no legislation addressing DV, or the legislation does not specify legal sanction or protective order, this country is considered having no anti-DV law. For countries with these anti-DV laws enacted, the report further documents the names of the laws, as well as the dates of enactment and entry into force. The accuracy of information provided in the World Bank's report

is validated with the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices submitted by the United States Department of State to the United States Congress (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, United States Department of State 2023).

2.3 Statistical analysis

The timing of law implementation in each country is illustrated in Figure 1 (green color). Seven of the 27 countries under investigation had not yet enforced any anti-DV laws, so individuals surveyed in these countries had never been exposed to anti-DV legislation. The remaining 20 countries had all enacted some sort of legislation addressing DV, but seven of them enacted laws following survey collection, meaning that individuals surveyed in these countries were not exposed to anti-DV legislation either. As a result, these 14 countries form the control group. In the other 13 countries in the treatment group, we considered individuals surveyed after law implementation as being exposed to anti-DV laws, and individuals surveyed before as being unexposed.

We examined if outcomes for individual i from country j surveyed in year t were affected by anti-DV laws using the following specification:

$$CD_{i,j,t} = \alpha + \beta Post_law_{i,j,t} + \gamma X'_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where $Post_law_{i,j,t}$ is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 if the individual i was exposed to an anti-DV law when they were surveyed (i.e., blue color in Figure 1), and taking the value of 0 if they were not exposed to such law (i.e., yellow color in Figure 1). Accordingly, β is the coefficient of interest, measuring the impact of anti-DV laws on the outcomes. Linear probability models were used to estimate the coefficients, and in the Appendix we also showed results of logistic regression models.

In all regression models, we controlled for a number of child-, parent-, and household-level characteristics extracted from MICS/DHS, including child's age and sex, mother's and father's

years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother’s marital status and age, respondent’s religion (Christianity vs. Islam vs. other/no religion), household wealth, household size, location of residence (urban vs. rural), and the number of children under age five in the household. We also added country and survey fixed effects to account for unobservable heterogeneity between countries. The fixed effects do not capture some country characteristics—such as socioeconomic development and levels of inequality—that change over time and may affect both law implementation and the occurrence of child maltreatment. To account for them, we included three time-varying country-level variables in our models: (1) (logged) gross domestic product (GDP) per capita from the World Bank, measuring a country’s economic condition; (2) Gini coefficient also from the World Bank, measuring a country’s level of economic inequality (a higher Gini coefficient indicates greater income inequality); and (3) Gender Inequality Index (GII) from the UNDP, measuring a country’s level of gender inequality (a higher GII indicates higher gender inequality). Finally, we included a variable on the number of years elapsed since law implementation (0 for those not exposed to anti-DV laws).

In all regression models, standard errors are clustered at the country level, and survey weights are applied. Heterogeneity analyses were conducted by interacting the post-law dummy with the above individual-, parent-, household-, and country-level variables.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive results

Table 1 presents summary statistics of outcome variables for all 27 countries combined, as well as for the 13 countries in the treatment group and the 14 countries in the control group. Depending

on which outcome is considered, the total sample size ranges from 117,223 to 124,705. The sample size of individuals in the treatment group is 1.9 times that in the control group.

[Table 1 here]

In the total sample, 85% of caregivers reported using some violent disciplinary methods, and the same proportion of caregivers also reported using some non-violent methods. Violent child discipline is highly prevalent in SSA, as 72% and 80% of children were physically or emotionally punished in the month prior to the survey date, with almost a quarter being subject to severe physical punishment. Moreover, 40% of caregivers agreed that a child needs to be physically punished to be raised properly. There is no considerable discrepancy in the sample means of outcome variables between the treatment and control groups.

3.2 Main results

Table 2 Panel a presents the estimated effects of exposure to anti-DV laws on child discipline practices and attitudes using linear probability models. Anti-DV laws in SSA fail to exert a protective effect on children. Although we found some evidence that exposure to anti-DV laws made caregivers more likely to use non-violent methods to discipline their children, such effect lacks statistical significance. Conversely, the laws significantly increased any harsh parenting practice by 7.3 percentage points, corresponding to 8% of the sample mean. This estimate is mostly driven by emotional punishment, as the laws raised the likelihood of children experiencing emotional punishment by 12.7 percentage points, or 16% of the sample mean. Impacts on physical punishment and severe physical punishment are both positive—about a third in size relative to emotional punishment, but latter is not significantly different from zero. These results suggest that, instead of protecting children, anti-DV laws implemented in SSA made children more likely to experience violent parenting, thereby contradicting the purpose of the legislation to lower violence

in the family and domestic sphere. In addition to actual disciplinary practices, we also investigated anti-DV legislation's influence on individual attitudes toward harsh parenting. We show that caregivers exposed to anti-DV laws were significantly more likely to justify harsh parenting by believing physical punishment to be necessary for children to be raised properly.

[Table 2 here]

We also conducted several robustness checks. In the baseline model (Table 2 Panel a), we followed previous research on violent child discipline using linear probability models for estimation (e.g., Pesando et al. 2024; Xu 2024). In Table 2 Panel b, we used logistic regression instead, and the results are numerically the same. In Table 2 Panel c, we replaced country fixed effects with region fixed effects—and, correspondingly, clustered standard errors at the regional level. Doing so does not alter findings from the baseline model.

Since we modeled various child discipline outcomes with the same predictor (i.e., post-law indicator), we may incur into a multiple-comparison problem, which arises when conducting multiple statistical inferences simultaneously—a practice which can inflate the risk of Type I errors. To counteract this problem, we adopted a Bonferroni method to correct p-values for post-law indicator in Table 2 Panel d. Even with the most conservative correction procedure, the positive effect of anti-DV law on any violent punishment is still statistically significant ($p = 0.007$), which is primarily driven by an increase in emotional punishment following law implementation ($p = 0.010$).

In the main analysis, we included six countries (e.g., Benin) where no surveys were conducted prior to law implementation in the treatment group. Following a strategy implemented in a recent study (Richardson et al. 2025), we excluded these six countries and utilized a staggered difference-in-differences model as a robustness check, using the following equation:

$$CD_{i,j,t} = \alpha + \beta Post_law_{i,j,t} \times Treatment_{i,j} + \gamma X'_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where the control group ($Treatment_{i,j} = 0$) remains the same (14 countries), but the new treatment group ($Treatment_{i,j} = 1$) only includes countries where there were surveys conducted both before and after law implementation (seven countries). Table 2 Panel e provides the results, which are virtually identical to the baseline results in Table 2 Panel a.

3.3 Additional results

3.3.1 Attitudes toward intimate partner violence

Next, we explored whether the effects on child discipline are mediated by IPV—a series of proximate outcomes the laws aim to affect—through controlling for caregiver’s attitudes toward IPV in the models. In doing so, we intended to control for individual propensity to use violence in the domestic sphere, presumably correlated with violent child discipline but uncontrolled in the main specification. In MICS/DHS, respondents were asked whether they justified husbands beating wives in five hypothetical situations, e.g., if the wife neglects children or argues with her husband. We created two variables using information on justification of IPV from MICS/DHS: the first one is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 if wife-beating was justified in any of the five situations (dichotomous); the other is the number of situations in which a respondent justified wife-beating (continuous). Table 3 reports results from regression models controlling for attitudes toward IPV (Panel a controlling for the dichotomous measure, and Panel b controlling for the continuous measure). We found that justification of IPV is significantly correlated with higher prevalence of child maltreatment and higher justification of harsh parenting practices. Comparing with the baseline results on the effects of the laws (Table 2 Panel a), adding IPV attitudes has marginal changes to the magnitude of the coefficients. Note that anti-DV laws have been shown to alter individual attitudes toward IPV in Africa (Xu 2024), hence IPV attitudes could possibly

be the outcome of our treatment, thus being a “bad control.” As a result, we left IPV attitudes out in the main specification.

[Table 3 here]

3.3.2 Corporal punishment bans

Three countries in our sample banned corporal punishment against children: Togo in 2007, Congo in 2010, and Benin in 2015 (Pace 2022). Among the three countries, only Benin is in the treatment group because its anti-DV law was entered into force in 2012, two years before the first MICS/DHS survey was conducted. Both Congo and Togo enforced anti-DV laws in 2022, which means at the time of the surveys there was no anti-DV law in either country. Relative to anti-DV laws that are ambiguous on violence against children, corporal punishment bans directly target child protection through legal prohibitions of violent discipline and, in particular, physical punishment. In Table 4, we reran analyses controlling for presence of a corporal punishment ban (Panel a), and excluding the three countries with bans (Panel b). The extra dummy variable $Post_CPB_{i,j,t}$ takes the value of 1 if an individual was exposed to corporal punishment bans at the time of the survey. Results do not alter the main finding: corporal punishment bans worked in the expected direction by reducing harsh parenting, in line with the literature (Smarrelli et al. 2024), yet violent child discipline significantly increased following anti-DV law implementation, even after controlling for the presence of corporal punishment bans targeting violence against children. Furthermore, removing the three countries from the sample delivers analogous results to those presented in Table 2 Panel a, suggesting that countries with corporal bans are not driving the estimates.

[Table 4 here]

3.3.3 Law enforcement and quality of government

The effectiveness of legislative reforms hinges upon efficient enforcement of relevant laws, which SSA largely lacks (Batyra and Pesando 2024; Collin and Talbot 2023; Wilson 2022). In this subsection, we take into account cross-national variation in the effectiveness of law implementation in SSA by controlling for a proximate indicator from the Quality of Government (QoG) data set (Teorell et al. 2024). The QoG synthesizes time-series data on more than 1,900 indicators of governance efficiency from over a hundred sources. The data set covers a large number of African countries, but for a relatively shorter period of time, hence controlling for some QoG indicators substantially reduces sample size. For this reason, we did not control for QoG indicators in the main specifications.

We used an index of judicial independence from the QoG data set as a proxy for the effectiveness of law implementation. The index ranges from 0 to 100, with a higher score indicating that independence of the judiciary is more likely to be guaranteed. Data on this index are available for all 27 SSA countries in our sample, but only for the 2013–2022 sub-period. As a result, MICS/DHS surveys conducted in earlier years were excluded from the analyses.

Table 5 reports the results. A higher judicial independence index is significantly associated with less emotional punishment and more non-violent discipline (Panel a). The effects of the law on the overall violence outcome (i.e., any violent) as well as emotional punishment and attitudes are more adverse in contexts characterized by higher judicial independence (Panel b).

[Table 5 here]

3.3.4 Concurrent child discipline outcomes

So far, we have analyzed non-violent and violent childrearing practices separately, yet modelling them as distinct outcomes overlooks the fact that caregivers can use, and often do use, several disciplinary methods concurrently (Meinck et al. 2015; Pesando et al. 2024). We thus

complemented the main analyses by applying multinomial logistic regression to model childrearing practices. The outcome variable has four categories: those who used (1) neither non-violent nor violent methods; (2) only non-violent methods; (3) only violent methods; and (4) both non-violent and violent methods. The four categories account for 6%, 9%, 9%, and 77% of the total sample ($N = 124,702$), respectively.

We plotted predicted probabilities for each category of the concurrent child discipline outcomes in Figure 2. After the implementation of the laws, we observe moderate declines in the likelihood of a caregiver using neither non-violent nor violent (0.08 to 0.05) or only non-violent (0.12 to 0.07) methods. Conversely, the probability of a caregiver using only violent methods increased slightly (0.08 to 0.09). Relative to those unexposed, those affected by the laws witnessed a substantial increase in the probability of using a combination of non-violent and violent disciplinary methods (0.73 to 0.79), corroborating evidence pointing at increases in violent parenting following law implementation.

[Figure 2 here]

3.4 Heterogeneity

To explore anti-DV laws' potential heterogeneous effects, we started by considering heterogeneity by child's gender (female child as the reference group), child's age, household location (rural as the reference group), household wealth (five quintiles, the middle quintile as the reference group), maternal and paternal education, and caregiver's religion (Islam and other/no religion, Christianity as the reference group). Coefficients on the interactions between post-law indicator and each of these child-, parent-, and household-level variables are reported in Table A1 in the Appendix. The majority of the interaction terms are not statistically significant. We do observe that parental education significantly moderates the impact of anti-DV laws on attitudes to harsh parenting, but

the effect size is small, as a one-year increase in either mother's or father's years of schooling is associated with a less than one percentage-point increase in the probability of justifying harsh parenting among respondents exposed to an anti-DV law (Panels e and f). Besides, relative to Christians, Muslims exposed to anti-DV laws were 6.5 percentage points less likely to believe that harsh parenting is necessary (Panel g), thus halving the overall positive effect of the law.

We then examined heterogeneity by country-level characteristics. Table A2 in the Appendix presents estimates of heterogeneous impacts by GDP per capita, GII, and Gini coefficient. Once again, interaction terms lack statistical significance, with a few exceptions. Anti-DV laws were more effective in lowering severe physical punishment in more gender-unequal countries, i.e., those with higher GII; conversely, emotional punishment is more prevalent in more gender-unequal countries, especially after implementing anti-DV laws (Table A2 Panel b—also see Figures A1 and A2 for visualization of the continuous interactions between law and GII for severe physical punishment and emotional punishment, respectively).

The most significant country-level variable moderating the impacts of anti-DV laws on multiple child discipline outcomes is the Gini coefficient (Table A2 Panel c). To better visualize the results, we plotted predicted probabilities of each outcome against the Gini coefficient in Figure 3. In countries without anti-DV laws, or during the time when anti-DV laws were not enacted, the probabilities of all violent child discipline outcomes and the probability of justifying harsh parenting increase as the Gini coefficient increases (Figure 3a–d and f), while the probability of using non-violent disciplinary methods decreases (Figure 3e). In other words, countries with larger economic inequality saw higher prevalence and justification of child maltreatment yet lower prevalence of non-violent parenting behaviors in the absence of anti-DV legislation. The positive association between Gini coefficient and child maltreatment is reversed by the introduction of anti-

DV laws, as exposure to anti-DV laws made caregivers less likely to physically and emotionally punish their children in more unequal countries (Figures 3a–d).

[Figure 3 here]

4. Conclusions

Comprehensive legislative reforms that aim at changing norms and values justifying violent child discipline and developing normative and legal standards against child maltreatment have not been widely enforced throughout SSA. No research has examined the effectiveness of legislative reforms against violent child discipline in the region (Edwards et al. 2024). This study intended to fill this gap by investigating whether anti-DV laws introduced gradually in SSA since the mid-2000 had any effect in curbing harsh parenting practices. We did so by merging household survey data from 27 SSA countries with information on anti-DV legislation from the World Bank. We compared African caregivers' childrearing practices in countries with and without anti-DV laws, before and after the laws were implemented. We found that the laws had no protective effect on children. Rather, we found evidence for the opposite—a sizeable and robust increase in violent child discipline following law implementation, which is primarily driven by an increase in emotional punishment. Our results are robust to controlling for IPV attitudes, presence of corporal punishment bans, and quality of law enforcement.

An increase in violent child discipline is consistent with our finding on the higher likelihood of justifying harsh parenting following law enforcement, suggesting alignment between attitudes and actual behaviors. Caregivers exposed to anti-DV laws were 7.3 percentage points more likely to report any violent disciplinary practice and 9.0 percentage points more likely to believe in physical punishment as an appropriate tool to raise children. These findings are

completely opposite to the purpose of the anti-DV legislation and inconsistent with recent work by Xu (2024) who, focusing on IPV in a smaller set of countries, found a reduction in justification of IPV among African women exposed to anti-DV laws.

Nonetheless, our results are consistent with three hypotheses and/or potential mechanisms. The first—supported by the finding that the increase is primarily driven by emotional punishment—may suggest a slow shift from very violent to less violent (but still violent) disciplinary practices. In other words, harsh parenting practices do not decline because of the law; quite the opposite, they increasingly shift from spanking and beating to yelling and belittling, in line with arguments made by Lansford et al. (2017). The second aligns with work by Larzelere et al. (2013) in the context of Sweden, who found increases in violence following bans on spanking to be consistent with the idea that parents may not be aware—or lack the knowledge altogether—of any other alternative disciplinary method. In their words, the “success [of the laws] may depend upon parents learning effective alternatives to use in disciplinary situations in which spanking had been an option traditionally” (p. 134). If no other alternative is given, caregivers may preserve the status quo or even increase the use of violent disciplinary methods, which is consistent with our findings. The third mechanism—which we cannot test with the current data, as actual IPV is absent in the MICS and we have no way of knowing which parent disciplines the child in a violent way—would be compatible with a “substitution” mechanism whereby DV legislation could reduce violence between partners, but parents may turn increasingly violent toward their children if they are “innately” violent.

We did not find variation in the impact of the laws by individual or household characteristics, but we did uncover that societal inequality matters for explaining cross-country variation, as the increase in violent child discipline methods following law implementation is

driven by wealthier SSA societies characterized by higher economic equality. In other words, anti-DV laws had some “protective” effect on children in more economically unequal countries, i.e., those characterized by higher Gini coefficients. This finding is relevant from a policy perspective, as child maltreatment is more common in more unequal societies (Akmatov 2011). As such, legislation could be one (minor) factor contributing to reduce violence against children. A qualitative study in Rwanda showed that social inequality hampered legislation’s efforts to lower family violence (Umubyeyi et al. 2016). Our study suggests the opposite: anti-DV legislation’s protective effect on children is more pronounced in more unequal societies. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the protective estimate is limited and, at least for income inequality, the overall effect size remains positive, hence the term “protective” entails that the estimate is “less positive,” but even in unequal contexts laws did increase the likelihood of violent disciplinary practices.

Violent child discipline remains widespread in SSA, with long-lasting implications for children and adolescents within and across generations (Cuartas et al. 2019). This study has shown that anti-DV laws are not an effective tool to curb the practice. To address this social plague from a localized perspective, a small number of programs have been designed to provide education sessions for caregivers and children with regard to parent-child communication and non-violent discipline, such as the Sinovuyo program in South Africa (Cluver et al. 2016, 2020; Lachman et al. 2017; Shenderovich et al. 2020), the REAL Fathers Initiative (Ashburn et al. 2016), the Parenting for Respectability education sessions in Uganda (Wight et al. 2022), and the Parenting for Lifelong Health for Young Children program in Kenya (Murphy et al. 2021). Our recommendation is that some of these parenting interventions could incorporate elements boosting participants’ knowledge of the legal frameworks surrounding child discipline—as well as the

manifold alternatives caregivers can adopt to discipline their children—so to complement and enhance the global reach of existing programs.

On a broader level, findings from the study underscore the unintended consequences of legislation implemented without clear aims of protecting children and raise two broader fundamental questions: (1) which efforts are needed to ensure that definitions of domestic violence shift away from purely *horizontal* dynamics of violence between household members, typically spouses? (2) how should governments redefine existing DV legal provisions in such a way that all vulnerable populations are included as potential beneficiaries of the laws?

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Figure 1 Timings of anti-domestic violence law implementation and availability of surveys

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Benin								Law		MICS5				DHS7				
Burkina Faso		MICS3												Law				
Burundi					Law								DHS7					
Cameroon		MICS3								MICS5								
Central African Republic		MICS3	Law			MICS4								MICS6				
Chad						MICS4				DHS7			Law		MICS6			
Congo								DHS6		MICS5								Law
Congo, DR						MICS4			DHS6					MICS6				
Côte d'Ivoire												MICS5						Law
Eswatini						MICS4				MICS5				Law				
Gambia		MICS3				MICS4							Law	MICS6				
Ghana		MICS3	Law				MICS4							MICS6				
Guinea													MICS5					
Guinea-Bissau		MICS3								MICS5				MICS6				
Lesotho														MICS6				Law
Liberia			DHS5											Law	DHS7			
Madagascar														MICS6			Law	
Malawi		Law								MICS5					MICS6			
Mali											MICS5							
Mauritania							MICS4				MICS5							
Niger								DHS6										
Nigeria			Law				MICS4						MICS5					
São Tomé and Príncipe				Law						MICS5					MICS6			
Sierra Leone		MICS3		Law		MICS4								MICS6				
Togo		MICS3				MICS4			DHS6					MICS6				Law
Uganda						Law							DHS7					
Zimbabwe			Law							MICS5					MICS6			

Figure 2 Predicted probabilities (with 95% confidence intervals) from multinomial logistic regression modelling concurrent child discipline outcomes

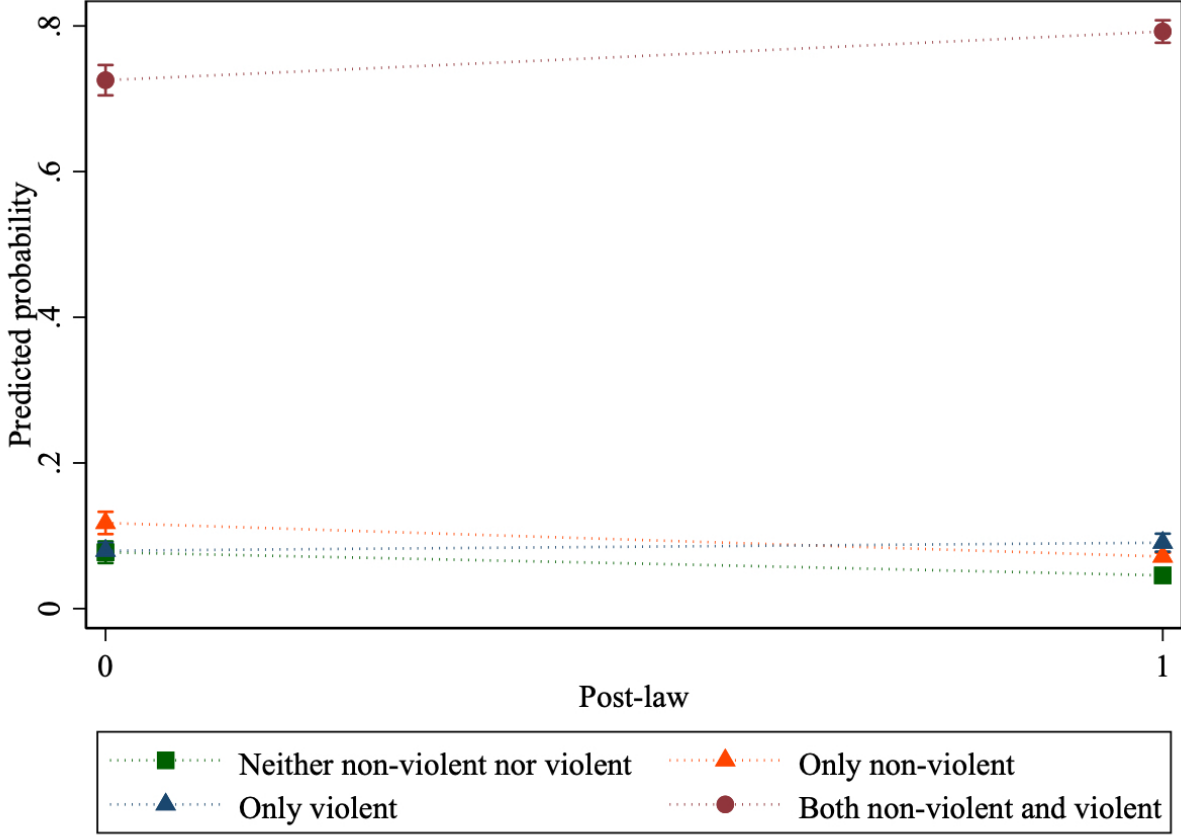


Figure 3 Predicted probabilities (with 95% confidence intervals) of child discipline practices and attitudes against Gini coefficient

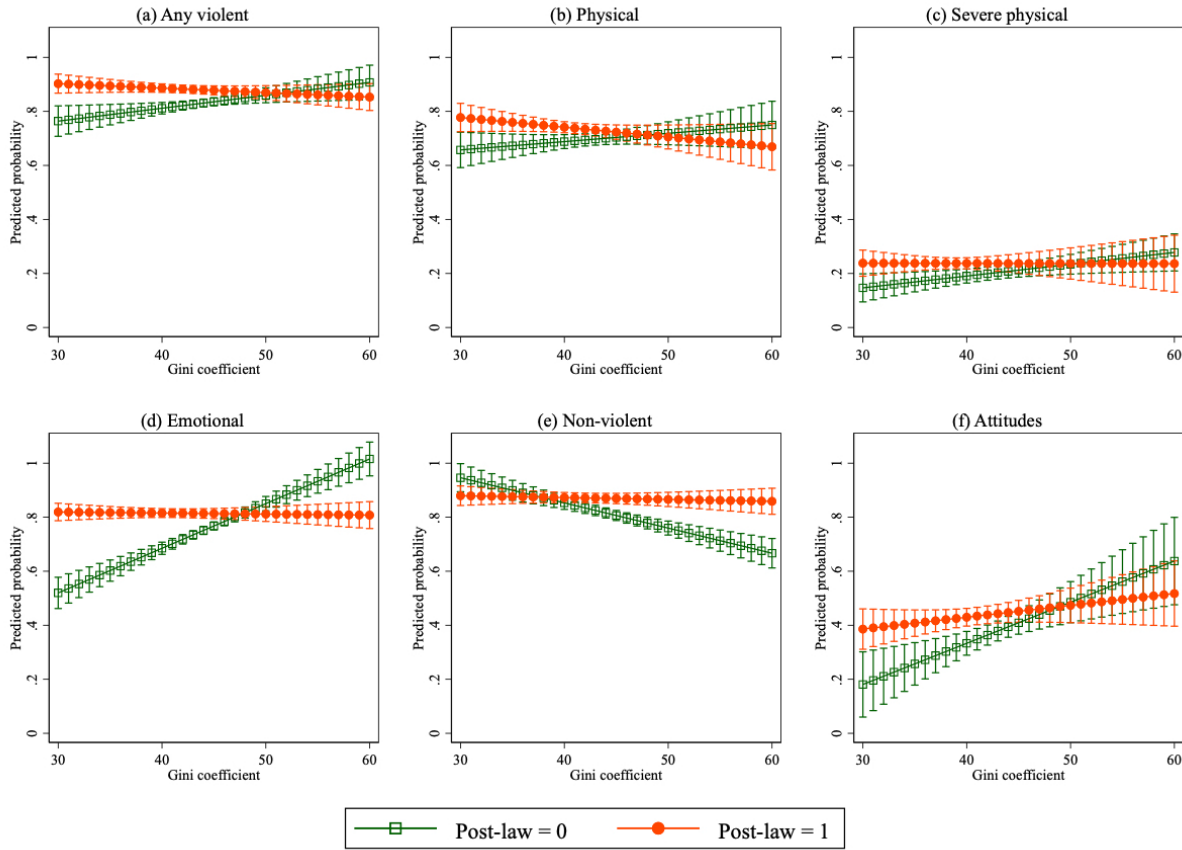


Table 1 Summary statistics of child discipline practices and attitudes

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
All countries						
Sample mean	0.85 (0.35)	0.72 (0.45)	0.22 (0.41)	0.77 (0.42)	0.85 (0.35)	0.40 (0.49)
<i>N</i>	124,702	124,702	124,691	124,700	124,705	117,223
Treatment group						
Sample mean	0.85 (0.36)	0.71 (0.45)	0.21 (0.41)	0.77 (0.42)	0.86 (0.35)	0.41 (0.49)
<i>N</i>	82,158	82,158	82,151	82,157	82,159	78,270
Control group						
Sample mean	0.86 (0.35)	0.72 (0.45)	0.23 (0.42)	0.77 (0.42)	0.84 (0.36)	0.38 (0.49)
<i>N</i>	42,544	42,544	42,540	42,543	42,546	38,953

Table 2 Effects of exposure to anti-domestic violence laws on child discipline practices and attitudes

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
(a) Baseline estimates						
Post-law	0.073** (0.020)	0.052* (0.024)	0.046 (0.024)	0.127** (0.036)	0.021 (0.018)	0.090* (0.037)
<i>N</i>	124,702	124,702	124,691	124,700	124,705	117,223
(b) Logistic regression						
Post-law	0.599*** (0.089)	0.268* (0.106)	0.232 (0.173)	0.690*** (0.143)	0.154 (0.143)	0.343 (0.220)
<i>N</i>	124,702	124,702	124,691	124,700	124,705	117,223
(c) Controlling for region (rather than country) fixed effects						
Post-law	0.102*** (0.028)	0.109** (0.041)	-0.051 (0.043)	0.180*** (0.040)	-0.060 (0.038)	0.157* (0.072)
<i>N</i>	96,030	96,030	96,022	96,028	96,033	88,857
(d) P-values for post-law indicator using Bonferroni correction						
	p = 0.007	p = 0.243	p = 0.371	p = 0.010	p = 1.000	p = 0.133
(e) Staggered difference-in-differences estimation						
Post-law × treatment	0.065** (0.019)	0.053* (0.023)	0.034 (0.021)	0.102*** (0.024)	0.027 (0.025)	0.053 (0.036)
<i>N</i>	91,335	91,335	91,324	91,333	91,338	84,820

Notes: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses and clustered at the country level (except Panel c, wherein standard errors were clustered at the region level). All models controlled for country and survey year fixed effects (except Panel c, wherein region fixed effects—rather than country fixed effects—were controlled for); child characteristics: child's age and sex; caregiver characteristics: mother's and father's years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother's marital status and age, and respondent's religion; Household characteristics: household wealth, size, and location of residence, and the number of children under age five in the household; country characteristics: (logged) gross domestic product per capita, Gini coefficient, and Gender Inequality Index; and time since law implementation (in years).

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Table 3 Effects of exposure to anti-domestic violence laws on child discipline practices and attitudes, controlling for attitudes toward intimate partner violence (IPV)

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
(a) Controlling for IPV attitudes (justified in any situation)						
Post-law	0.073** (0.025)	0.042 (0.033)	0.061 (0.032)	0.128** (0.034)	0.029 (0.015)	0.101* (0.041)
IPV justified (any situation)	0.029*** (0.005)	0.040*** (0.006)	0.032*** (0.004)	0.028*** (0.006)	0.006 (0.005)	0.023 (0.012)
<i>N</i>	118,160	118,160	118,151	118,158	118,163	111,327
(b) Controlling for IPV attitudes (number of situations justified)						
Post-law	0.073** (0.025)	0.041 (0.032)	0.060 (0.033)	0.128** (0.034)	0.030 (0.015)	0.098* (0.041)
IPV justified (number)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.002)	0.010*** (0.002)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	0.008* (0.003)
<i>N</i>	118,900	118,900	118,890	118,898	118,903	112,012

Notes: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses and clustered at the country level. All models controlled for country and survey year fixed effects; child characteristics: child's age and sex; caregiver characteristics: mother's and father's years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother's marital status and age, and respondent's religion; Household characteristics: household wealth, size, and location of residence, and the number of children under age five in the household; country characteristics: (logged) gross domestic product per capita, Gini coefficient, and Gender Inequality Index; and time since law implementation (in years).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4 Effects of exposure to anti-domestic violence laws and corporal punishment bans on child discipline practices and attitudes

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
(a) Adding corporal punishment bans as an additional control						
Post-law	0.064*	0.041	0.034	0.124**	0.021	0.066
	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.039)	(0.020)	(0.041)
Post-corporal punishment bans	-0.031**	-0.038	-0.044**	-0.011	-0.003	-0.071*
	(0.010)	(0.021)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.033)
<i>N</i>	124,702	124,702	124,691	124,700	124,705	117,223
(b) Removing the three countries with corporal punishment bans						
Post-law	0.066*	0.049	0.029	0.130**	0.024	0.079*
	(0.024)	(0.029)	(0.023)	(0.037)	(0.021)	(0.035)
<i>N</i>	113,227	113,227	113,216	113,226	113,230	106,381

Notes: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses and clustered at the country level. All models controlled for country and survey year fixed effects; child characteristics: child's age and sex; caregiver characteristics: mother's and father's years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother's marital status and age, and respondent's religion; Household characteristics: household wealth, size, and location of residence, and the number of children under age five in the household; country characteristics: (logged) gross domestic product per capita, Gini coefficient, and Gender Inequality Index; and time since law implementation (in years).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5 Effects of exposure to anti-domestic violence laws on child discipline practices and attitudes, controlling for judicial independence index

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
(a) Controlling for judicial independence index						
Post-law	0.064*** (0.040)	0.046 (0.059)	0.068* (0.032)	0.141** (0.048)	0.079** (0.020)	-0.003 (0.061)
Judicial independence index	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)
<i>N</i>	82,843	82,843	82,841	82,843	82,843	76,238
(b) Interacted with judicial independence index						
Post-law	0.096 (0.049)	0.065 (0.070)	0.081* (0.035)	0.176** (0.058)	0.062** (0.021)	0.080 (0.064)
Post-law × judicial independence index	0.003* (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	-0.001* (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
<i>N</i>	82,843	82,843	82,841	82,843	82,843	76,238

Notes: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses and clustered at the country level. All models controlled for country and survey year fixed effects; child characteristics: child's age and sex; caregiver characteristics: mother's and father's years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother's marital status and age, and respondent's religion; Household characteristics: household wealth, size, and location of residence, and the number of children under age five in the household; country characteristics: (logged) gross domestic product per capita, Gini coefficient, and Gender Inequality Index; and time since law implementation (in years).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Appendix

Figure A1 Predicted probability (with 95% confidence intervals) of severe physical punishment against Gender Inequality Index

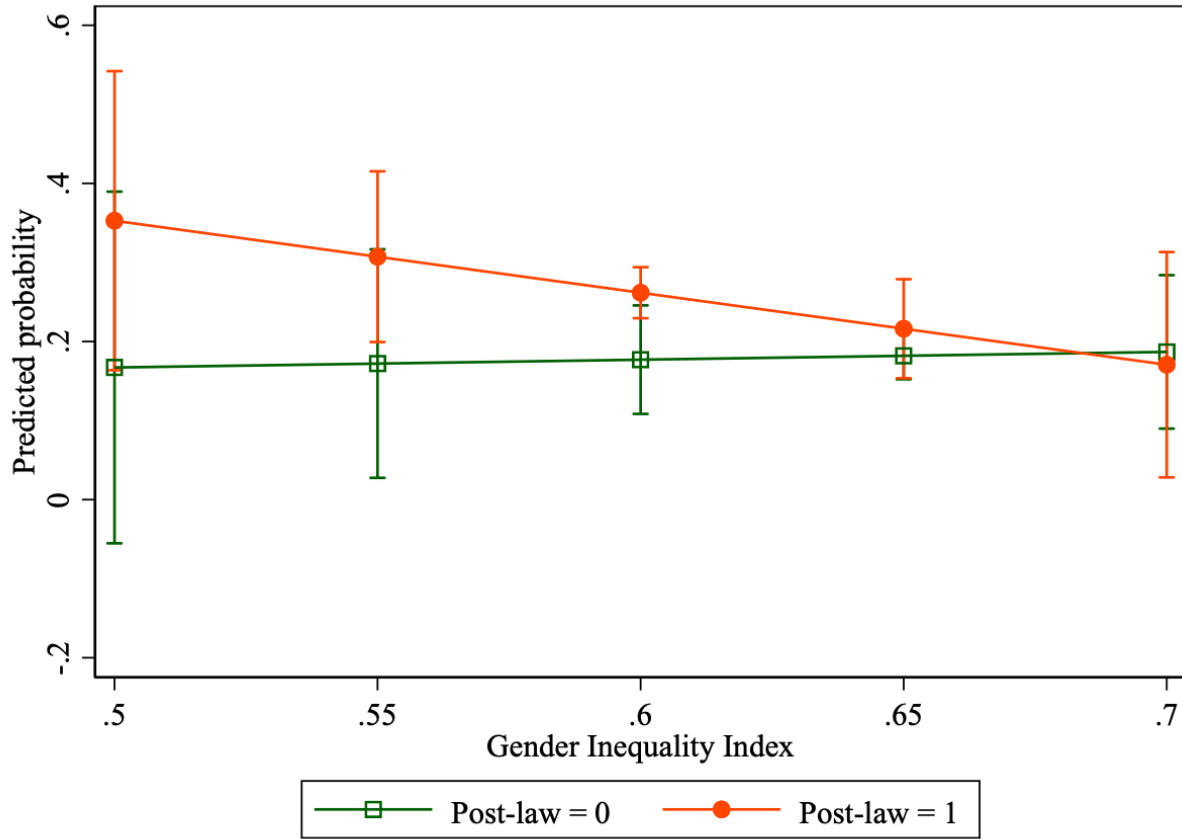


Figure A2 Predicted probability (with 95% confidence intervals) of emotional punishment against Gender Inequality Index

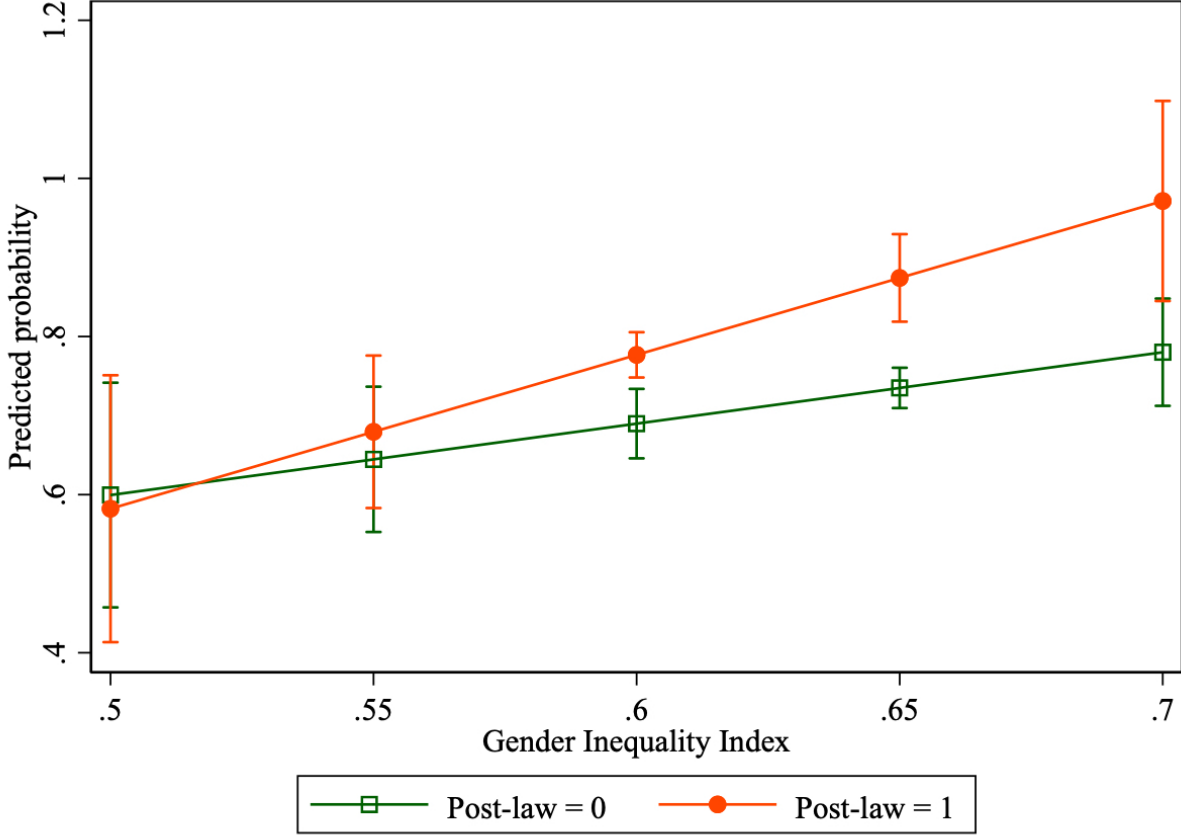


Table A1 Heterogenous effects by child-, parent-, and household-level variables

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
(a) Interacted with child's gender						
Post-law	0.073** (0.022)	0.052 (0.026)	0.049 (0.024)	0.127** (0.037)	0.021 (0.019)	
Post-law × male child	-0.000 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.005 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	0.001 (0.004)	
(b) Interacted with child's age						
Post-law	0.071* (0.026)	0.053 (0.032)	0.035 (0.025)	0.121** (0.043)	0.014 (0.024)	
Post-law × child age	0.000 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.003)	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.003)	
(c) Interacted with urban residence						
Post-law	0.074** (0.021)	0.049 (0.025)	0.048 (0.023)	0.128** (0.037)	0.022 (0.018)	0.089* (0.037)
Post-law × urban	-0.002 (0.011)	0.007 (0.014)	-0.005 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.014)	-0.002 (0.010)	0.001 (0.020)
(d) Interacted with household wealth (ref = middle quintile)						
Post-law	0.078** (0.026)	0.062 (0.032)	0.052 (0.029)	0.130** (0.041)	0.025 (0.020)	0.096* (0.037)
Post-law × poorest	-0.021 (0.013)	-0.026 (0.017)	-0.025 (0.012)	-0.024 (0.013)	-0.005 (0.011)	-0.011 (0.022)
Post-law × poorer	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.018 (0.013)	0.004 (0.010)	-0.018 (0.011)	-0.013 (0.008)	-0.013 (0.014)
Post-law × richer	0.003 (0.008)	-0.004 (0.010)	0.007 (0.013)	0.011 (0.008)	0.005 (0.006)	-0.012 (0.013)
Post-law × richest	0.010 (0.016)	0.004 (0.020)	-0.010 (0.018)	0.020 (0.019)	-0.001 (0.009)	0.009 (0.023)
(e) Interacted with mother's years of schooling						
Post-law	0.071** (0.021)	0.048 (0.026)	0.034 (0.024)	0.120** (0.038)	0.028 (0.017)	0.066 (0.036)
Post-law × mother's edu	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.004 (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)	0.008** (0.002)
(f) Interacted with father's years of schooling						
Post-law	0.065** (0.022)	0.041 (0.027)	0.030 (0.025)	0.118** (0.038)	0.029 (0.017)	0.058 (0.035)
Post-law × father's edu	0.002	0.002	0.004	0.002	-0.002	0.007***

	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
(g) Interacted with caregiver's religion (ref = Christianity)						
Post-law	0.069**	0.054*	0.040	0.118**	0.007	0.110**
	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.035)	(0.021)	(0.034)
Post-law × Islam	-0.001	-0.025	-0.032	-0.001	0.031	-0.065*
	(0.025)	(0.027)	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.015)	(0.026)
Post-law × other/no religion	0.010	0.009	0.032	0.019	0.012	-0.001
	(0.015)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.025)
<i>N</i>	124,702	124,702	124,691	124,700	124,705	117,223

Notes: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses and clustered at the country level. All models controlled for country and survey year fixed effects; child characteristics: child's age and sex; caregiver characteristics: mother's and father's years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother's marital status and age, and respondent's religion; Household characteristics: household wealth, size, and location of residence, and the number of children under age five in the household; country characteristics: (logged) gross domestic product per capita, Gini coefficient, and Gender Inequality Index; and time since law implementation (in years).

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Table A2 Heterogenous effects by country-level variables

	Outcome variable					
	Any violent	Physical	Severe physical	Emotional	Non-violent	Attitudes
(a) Interacted with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita						
Post-law	0.311 (0.729)	0.333 (0.890)	-1.513 (1.005)	1.077 (0.808)	0.042 (0.721)	0.232 (1.599)
Post-law × GDP per capita	-0.031 (0.092)	-0.036 (0.113)	0.201 (0.129)	-0.122 (0.102)	-0.003 (0.093)	-0.018 (0.203)
(b) Interacted with Gender Inequality Index (GII)						
Post-law	-0.182 (0.151)	-0.077 (0.231)	0.690*** (0.233)	-0.539** (0.171)	0.018 (0.193)	-0.542 (0.438)
Post-law × GII	0.400 (0.251)	0.201 (0.378)	-1.009* (0.365)	1.043** (0.288)	0.005 (0.297)	0.997 (0.687)
(c) Interacted with Gini coefficient						
Post-law	0.332** (0.102)	0.320* (0.121)	0.224 (0.120)	0.807*** (0.097)	-0.325** (0.098)	0.530* (0.213)
Post-law × Gini coefficient	-0.006** (0.002)	-0.007* (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.017*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)	-0.011* (0.005)
<i>N</i>	124,702	124,702	124,691	124,700	124,705	117,223

Notes: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses and clustered at the country level. All models controlled for country and survey year fixed effects; child characteristics: child's age and sex; caregiver characteristics: mother's and father's years of schooling, as well as the similarity between them, mother's marital status and age, and respondent's religion; Household characteristics: household wealth, size, and location of residence, and the number of children under age five in the household; country characteristics: (logged) gross domestic product per capita, Gini coefficient, and Gender Inequality Index; and time since law implementation (in years).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.