

# Food and Cash Transfers Coupled with Nutrition Behavior Change Communication Lead to Sustained Reductions in Intimate Partner Violence in Bangladesh

Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence  
Research Collaborative



Estimates indicate that one in three ever-partnered women aged 15 years and older has experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) in her lifetime, with regional rates ranging from 16.3 percent in East Asia to 65.6 percent in Central Africa.<sup>1</sup> Significant resources have been invested in understanding what works to prevent IPV, with relatively little evidence of successful interventions that are also cost-effective and scalable. A growing evidence base demonstrates that cash transfer programs, primarily meant to address poverty and vulnerability, are promising interventions to reduce IPV. However, knowledge gaps remain on whether findings generalize across regions and program designs, as well as what mechanisms underlie impacts. Further, little is known about the sustainability of these impacts. In this series of briefs, case studies highlight the potential of cash transfers to affect IPV in diverse contexts.

## What does the global evidence say?

*In a mixed-methods review of rigorous studies from low- and middle-income countries, 11 of 14 quantitative studies (79 percent) and 5 of 8 qualitative studies (63 percent) showed that cash transfers decrease IPV.<sup>2</sup> In explaining these impacts, studies generally hypothesized three pathways through which cash could affect IPV: 1) increases in **economic security and emotional well-being**; 2) changes in **intra-household conflict**; and 3) increases in **women's empowerment**.*

The Bangladesh study draws on a cluster-randomized controlled trial, designed to evaluate the World Food Programme's Transfer Modality Research Initiative. The program ran from 2012 to 2014 and targeted mothers of children aged 0 to 24 months in poor rural households. Rural Bangladesh has high levels of gender inequality, with patriarchal norms and female seclusion prevailing in program areas.

**This case study from Bangladesh summarizes findings from a transfer program that—when paired with nutrition behavior change communication (BCC)—led to a 26 percent reduction in physical IPV that was sustained after the program ended. Pathways of impact include increases in women's bargaining power, social interactions, and visibility, and decreases in poverty and poverty-related stress.**

**The Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence Research Collaborative** brings together an interdisciplinary group of researchers from IFPRI (the host institution), the University of North Carolina, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. The Collaborative has dual goals of expanding the evidence base around the impacts of cash transfers on intimate partner violence and disseminating research to global stakeholders.

## The Transfer Modality Research Initiative

The World Food Programme's Transfer Modality Research Initiative aimed to improve household food security and child nutrition in Bangladesh. Participants received either cash (about US\$19 per month) or the equivalent value in food (rice, lentils, and micronutrient-fortified cooking oil), with or without nutrition BCC. The three BCC components were 1) weekly group trainings, 2) bimonthly visits to participants' homes, and 3) monthly group meetings between program staff and influential community leaders.

To assess post-program impacts on IPV, researchers returned to the study households in 2014-15, six to ten months after the program ended. The final study sample consisted of 2,231 women. In 2014-15, levels of IPV among women in the control group (those who had received no intervention) were high: 27 percent reported experiencing physical IPV in the preceding 6 months. Results showed that, **6 to 10 months after the program ended, women who had received transfers plus nutrition BCC experienced 26 percent less physical IPV than those in the control group.** However, women in groups that had received only transfers showed no sustained reduction in IPV. Although evidence suggests that transfers alone did reduce IPV during the intervention, the addition of BCC was required to sustain these impacts beyond the program period.

What were the mechanisms? Analysis suggests three complementary pathways for how targeting transfers and BCC to women led to sustained reductions in IPV: 1) increases in

women's bargaining power, 2) increases in women's social interaction and visibility, which increased the social cost to men of inflicting violence, and 3) decreases in poverty and poverty-related stress.

This study adds to our understanding of linkages between cash transfers and IPV in several ways. To date, this is the only experimental evaluation of the impact of cash transfers on IPV in Asia, the only evaluation showing post-intervention effects, and the only evaluation that can disentangle the impacts of complementary activities from the impacts of cash. Results indicate that cash transfers can play a role in reducing IPV in the rural South Asian context; however, additional complementary activities may be needed to ensure lasting change. The study also identified mechanisms for sustained impact that operate at the community, household, couple, and woman level.

From a policy perspective, cash transfers and other social safety nets are attractive instruments for addressing violence, as they are rapidly expanding in resource-poor settings (social safety nets reach approximately 1.9 billion people in 136 low- and middle-income countries<sup>3</sup>) and often reach women and the most vulnerable segments of society directly. However, policymakers focused on social protection often do not have IPV on their agendas, nor are they necessarily aware of the growing evidence linking cash transfers to IPV. Building linkages among these stakeholders and expanding the evidence base around what works, where, and for whom will help in designing more gender-transformative programs—including programs that, even if aimed at other objectives, can reduce the risk of violence against women sustainably and at scale.

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The study authors are Shalini Roy, Melissa Hidrobo, John Hoddinott, and Akhter Ahmed. For more information, including author affiliations, study acknowledgments, and funders, see the peer-reviewed article on which this note is based: S. Roy, M. Hidrobo, J. Hoddinott, and A. Ahmed, "Transfers, Behavior Change Communication, and Intimate Partner Violence: Post-Program Evidence from Rural Bangladesh," *Review of Economics and Statistics* (forthcoming, 2019).

<sup>1</sup>K.M. Devries et al., 2013, "The Global Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women," *Science* 340, no. 28 (2013): 1527-1528.

<sup>2</sup>A.M. Buller et al., "Intimate Partner Violence and Cash Transfers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Mixed-Method Review," *World Bank Research Observer* 33, no. 2 (2018): 218-258.

<sup>3</sup>M. Honorati, U. Gentilini, and R.G. Yemtsov, *The State of Social Safety Nets 2015* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2015).

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