

Bachelor's programme in Economics and Business Administration

# Economic empowerment and gender equality: The impacts of cash transfers on intimate partner violence against women in low- and middle-income countries

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**Degree programme** Economics and Business Administration

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**Major** Economics

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**Teacher in charge and advisor** Marko Tervio

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**Date** 30 September 2024

**Number of pages** 33

**Language** English

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**Abstract**

This thesis reviews existing literature on the impacts of cash transfers (CTs) on male-to-female intimate partner violence (IPV) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). It begins with an overview of theories linking IPV and poverty, followed by an exploration of the mechanisms through which CTs can alleviate economic stress and subsequently reduce violence. The core section of this thesis is then a review of quantitative evidence on the effectiveness of CTs in lowering women-targeted IPV across developing countries. While outcomes are mixed, results showed that where positive effects were observed, IPV prevalence was significantly reduced (by 10% to 40%), suggesting CTs' potential in combating gender-based intimate violence. However, policymakers should carefully consider the nuances when designing cash transfer programs, and future research is required to better understand the multi-dimensional relationship between cash grants and male-to-female intimate partner violence.

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**Keywords** Intimate partner violence, Domestic violence, Cash transfer, Women's empowerment, Economic policy

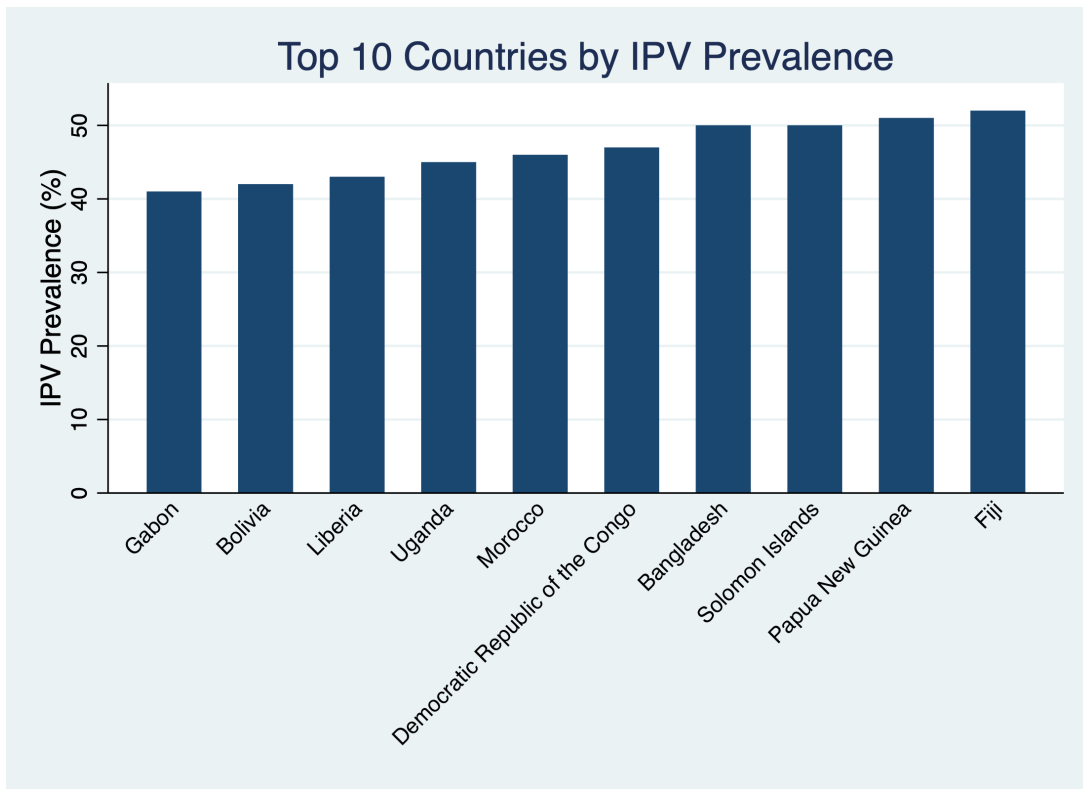
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# 1 Introduction

“We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back”, said the famous education activist Malala Yousafzai<sup>1</sup> during her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech at the age of seventeen. That powerful statement has blazed now and will echo long into the future, as despite centuries of advancements, gender inequality still persists and ravages around the globe. This gender-based imbalance manifests in many forms, yet it is evident in the fact that about 1 in 3 of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (from now on in this thesis IPV) (WHO 2021). Among several low- and middle-income countries, this incidence of IPV even surpasses the staggering rate of 50% (Figure 1). Given the severity and prevalence of this societal ill, understanding how and how much protection schemes can reduce IPV is a practical and imperative task. This thesis, by employing a literature review approach, thus aims to explore the impacts of cash transfers, out of all social interventions, on male-to-female IPV.



**Figure 1:** Percentage of women aged 15-49 ever experiencing IPV during lifetime

<sup>1</sup><https://malala.org/newsroom/malala-un-speech>

In this graph, IPV prevalence is measured by the percentage of females aged 15 to 49 in the same subgroup who have ever experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime. A notable limitation in low- and middle-income countries is the lack of annually updated data on social metrics, including IPV. Consequently, this graph is constructed using the most recent available data<sup>2</sup> from only 141 countries and regions. Notably, all countries with missing data are also classified as low- and middle-income, according to the World Bank classification<sup>3</sup>. This absence of comprehensive data suggests a potential link between poverty and IPV.

Intimate partner violence can result in severe injuries and even death (Abrahams et al. 2009). Meanwhile, survivors incur negative health consequences in all aspects, both physical and mental, many of which can develop into chronic diseases or even permanent disabilities (Coker et al. 2002; Campbell et al. 2002; Plichta 2004). While common mental issues reported by IPV victims include depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), adverse physical effects range from poor functional health, somatic disorders and pains, gynaecological problems, to increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Dillon et al. 2013). These tolls are devastating enough, yet, looking at a broader picture, IPV spurs even further economic costs to society. Such indirect expenditures entail out-of-pocket and sustaining medical costs (Max et al. 2004), service provision, negative impacts on future human capital formation and, most economically relevant, decreased productivity (Duvvury et al. 2013; Peterson et al. 2018). These can all be counted towards social welfare loss, estimated to be at \$4.4 trillion or 5.2% of global GDP (Fearon and Hoeffler 2014). It is also important to note the possible underestimation of effect size due to the data sources' inexhaustible coverage and lack of admittance from female victims for fear of social stigma.

Given the severity of the issue as discussed above, it is a universally urgent mission to combat gender-based violence (United Nations' Goal 5 on gender equality<sup>4</sup> and, more specifically, female-targeted IPV. However, compared to the rich evidence on its consequences, how IPV can be reduced is much less understood. This knowledge gap is particularly pronounced among developing countries (Fearon and Hoeffler 2014), where unsystematic administrative data and a restricted research budget hinder efforts to seriously study and address this social matter. Among concerns surrounding the topic, the question of what protection scheme, out of numerous social intervention

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators.html?orderBy=mostRelevant&page=0>

<sup>3</sup><https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>

<sup>4</sup><https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

programs, would most effectively combat IPV remains the most pressing and demands a clear-cut answer.

Nevertheless, as socioeconomic conditions, especially poverty and education, are often recognized as key risk factors for IPV (Vyas and Watts 2009; Roberts et al. 2011; Cunradi, Caetano, and Schafer 2002), economic policies are expected play a significant role. In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature showing the linkage between various economic empowerment programs and IPV reduction (Bourey et al. 2015; Gibbs, Jacobson, and Kerr Wilson 2017). Among these programs, cash grants (cash transfers, or CTs from now on) have garnered a lot of attention (Vyas and Watts 2009; Buller et al. 2018). This emerging focus can be attributed to the increasing recognition of cash as an efficient tool to combat poverty (Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Bastagli et al. 2016). Hence, there has also been optimism about its indirect effects in reducing violence by leveraging both the couple's overall economic situation and the woman's own financial status. However, some scholars otherwise doubt that more cash, by fostering greed and incentivizing exploitation by the male partner, might increase IPV. Such mixed propositions and followingly ambiguous research findings prevent a universal consensus on the topic (Hidrobo, Peterman, and L. Heise 2016), necessitating an extensive evaluation of past empirical evidence. By examining the ratio of positive to negative outcomes of cash transfer programs, this thesis helps form a clearer understanding of their effectiveness in reducing intimate partner violence. The insights gained will benefit not only cash recipients, especially women at risk, but also policymakers in designing and upscaling cash transfer initiatives more effectively.

Given the economic relevance and practical implications of the issue, this thesis employs a literature review approach to address three key aspects. The first question is: (1) What is the economic relevance of men-to-women IPV and how does increased income affect IPV? While researchers have agreed that economic factors are relevant to IPV, the direction of influence remains ambiguous. Whether violence decreases or increases following a woman's raised income depends on the underlying motive for violence by her partner (e.g., coercion versus frustration release). The second question is: (2) What are the channels through which cash transfers might affect economic conditions, thereby reducing IPV? The thesis focuses on two potential pathways - the alleviation of credit constraints and promotion of labor force. Through both channels, CTs can enhance economic security, reduce financial stress, and thus lower the risk of intimate violence. The final question is: (3) What does empirical evidence reveal about the impact of cash transfer programs on intimate partner violence? Out of nine empirical studies reviewed in this thesis, eight witnessed statistically

significant reductions in IPV, ranging from 10% to 40% compared to the baseline. This observation raises hope regarding the potential of cash transfers to reduce intimate partner violence against female.

To encapsulate, the structure of this thesis is as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical and economic frameworks on the root causes of IPV, answering question (1). Section 3 outlines the mechanisms through which cash can help reduce IPV, addressing question (2). Section 4 presents a synthesis of literature on the effects of cash transfers on IPV, tackling question (3). Final conclusions are presented in the last section, Section 5. On a side note, due to the unique social norms and structures in developing countries, most studies in this area focus on domestic violence as a subset of intimate partner violence (IPV). In these contexts, "household" often serves as an equivalent unit to "couple." To encompass as much relevant literature as possible, this thesis will use these terms interchangeably.

## **2 An economic analysis of IPV**

In this section, I will review theories by sociologists and economists surrounding IPV. The evidence suggests that socioeconomic factors, particularly economic security, are deeply intertwined with both the risks and actual incidences of IPV.

### **2.1 Contributions from sociologists**

Since the nature of IPV spans multiple scientific disciplines, it is challenging to either settle on a singular theoretical perspective or summarize all existing theories in one body of literature (L. L. Heise 2012). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the foundations laid by sociologists in this field. The pioneering and probably most cited paper (Atkinson, Greenstein, and Lang 2005) is one by Goode (1971), applying resource theory first advanced by Blood and Wolfe (1960) to understand the incidence of domestic violence. Adopting a social exchange framework, in which intra-household tensions arise once unequal contributions among members are realized, Good proposed that: (1) violence is more prevalent in families of lower social strata; (2) male figures of poorer families are more likely to call upon physical force due to the lack of alternative conflict resolution mechanisms.

This foundational viewpoint was later extended to include also individual's respective share of income besides household's aggregate wealth. The relative resource theory suggests that, contrary to conventional wisdom, a woman's labor force participation

and thus increasing economic resources may raise the risk of spousal violence if their partner is unemployed (Macmillan and Gartner 1999). This is because, from the male spouse's view, the deprivation of a sole breadwinner status can be seen as a humiliation to his masculine identity. As a result, he might call for violence in order to reassert patriarchal dominance in the relationship. Macmillan et al.'s observation, however, should not be generalized to suggest that increased earnings always lead to greater risks for women. According to gendered resource theorists, the likelihood of violence also depends on the male partner's gender ideology: if his perception of masculinity is not threatened by the providership status, violence should not occur when his partner becomes the main earner (Atkinson, Greenstein, and Lang 2005).

Also building on Goode's framework (1971), the marital dependency theory suggests that fewer resources (more economic dependency) increase a woman's entrapment in an abusive relationship (Gelles 1976; Kalmuss and Straus 2017). Another explanation, based on the family stress framework, posits that resource deficits are virile potentiators for IPV: During times of crisis, the pileup of existing economic hardships diminishes further a couple's coping capacity in the face of excessive demands (Fox et al. 2002), creating a mentally vulnerable environment that fosters violence (Lucero, Lim, and Santiago 2016). In short, no matter how sociological theories branched off, they generally converged on the relevance of economic status to the occurrence of IPV.

## **2.2 Contributions from economists**

Departing from the framing methodologies of sociologists, economists have more recently contributed to the understanding of IPV by focusing on women's bargaining power in marriage and how violence is portrayed within household bargaining models (Hidrobo, Peterman, and L. Heise 2016). Their interest has specifically centered on the impact of increases in a woman's earnings on her experience of IPV.

In fact, it was not until the 90s that the economic theory-laying of IPV proliferated, supported by an increasing amount of empirical evidence (L. L. Heise 2012). One of the first literature to address IPV as a standalone subject in mainstream economics was Tauchen's (1991). Using a simple non-cooperative model (allowing for altruism but also incorporating personal motives) of family decision-making, he examined the pattern of violence in relation to resource distribution in violent relationships. He found that IPV risks depended upon both the level and source of household wealth. For a couple where the wife's utility was held at the reservation level – the minimum level of utility required to stay in the marriage – more wealth reduced the risk of partner violence. On the contrary, for a high-income family where the woman was the main



earner, a rise in her wages was shown to fuel violent acts. This disparity arose because violence in low-income settings is often expressive, while in high-income contexts, it can be both expressive and instrumental, used by husbands to coerce transfers.

Subsequent works in the field echoed more or less similar results. Building on Tauchen's non-cooperative model, Farmer and Tiefenthaler (1997) developed a more math-rigorous theoretical framework and empirically demonstrated that an increase in the woman's income — whether from wages or other exogenous financial support such as divorce settlements or shelter assistance — could reduce the likelihood of violence. A case study later on dowry violence in rural India by Bloch and Rao (2002) reached a relatively similar conclusion: Regardless of wealth status, women paying smaller dowries to their husbands' families were more susceptible to marital violence. Yet, women from wealthier backgrounds were more prone to battering because violence, in this context, could be used by the future husband to extract higher transfers from the bride's family.

In short, the early evidence from economists shows that (1) when violence is expressive (used to release frustration), an increase in a woman's income decreases violence by improving her threat point (reservation utility). In other words, the male partner, or husband, now has to reduce his violent behaviors in an order to maintain the marriage. Yet, (2) increased earnings for the woman might inadvertently induce IPV when violence is instrumental (exerted by the male partner to control or exploit resources) (Hidrobo, Peterman, and L. Heise 2016), with extractive being a subset (Baranov et al. 2021). This implies that conflicting theories and evidence on the direction of violence are context-dependent rather than systematic. There is no linear path through which increased income only increases or decreases a woman's subjectivity to violence, as the violence motives of the male partner are also at play. The challenge of integrating these contrasting dynamics into a single model results in ongoing debates, complicating the development of economic empowerment programs that could effectively reduce IPV. The next subsection will explore how recent theoretical papers have successfully addressed this issue, as well as other progress made and remaining challenges in the economic study of intimate violence against women.

## **2.3 Progress in the economic study of IPV**

The economic study of intimate partner violence has been constantly evolving with a growing number of literature aiming to illuminate the multi-faceted nature of IPV risks. One strand of papers targets the theoretical side of this research field. One notable contribution comes from Baranov et al. (2021), who have developed

a comprehensive mathematical model that capture many of the existing theories (Baranov et al. 2021,pp.6). However, such positive impacts can be counterbalanced by dubious divorce threats (e.g., strong social stigma, lack of institutional support) or strong marital capital (having children). Additionally, if the cash transfer induces feelings of status inadequacy in the male partner or is seen as a resource to be extracted, its potential to reduce violence may be reversed.

This advancement has yet to resolve the need for a sequential bargaining model since intra-family resource allocation, in reality, is hardly a one-period decision-making process (Pollak 1985). Nevertheless, Baranov et al.'s biggest contribution has been in terms of bringing together seemingly conflicting literature on the relationship between improved economic conditions for women and risks for IPV. This helps settle the enduring debate, allowing for an optimistic outlook on the impacts of economic empowerment programs in reducing male-to-female intimate violence. Baranov et al.'s overarching framework also emphasizes the importance in understanding heterogenous factors (e.g., violence motives, social norms) that underpin this complex phenomenon, as these variables may influence the effectiveness of financial programs. As a result, complementary social campaigns are necessary to maximize the impact of economic interventions.

On the empirical side, several studies have tackled the classical problems of endogeneity and reverse causality in quasi-experiment settings. One salient example is Aizer (2010), who studied the impact of the gender wage gap on violence by exploiting exogenous changes in the sex-specific demand for labor in different industrial sectors. Her findings reinforce the importance of rigorous experimental designs, particularly in contexts where randomized controlled trials (from now on RCTs) might be costly and difficult to implement, which is a especially relevant when studying the effect of labor income on IPV incidence. Fortunately, in the case of non-labor income (e.g., government grants, which are central to this thesis), more favorable conditions for RCT implementation have emerged in recent years. These developments will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.

To encapsulate, despite considerable progress in both theoretical and empirical research on IPV, several important questions remain unanswered. Common puzzlement include determining which economic policies are most effective in curbing violence, the extent to which these programs impact IPV, and how they can be optimally designed. The following section on cash transfers, a key form of economic empowerment in contemporary time, will provide valuable insights into these pressing questions and offer clearer motivations for the research topic of this thesis.

## 3 Cash transfers and beneficial pathways

This section focuses on the rationale behind a comprehensive analysis of cash transfers and their effects on IPV.

### 3.1 An overview of cash transfer programs

#### 3.1.1 Design and purpose

This subsection first provides basic information about cash transfers, drawing from Chapter 7.1: Cash and Near Cash Transfers from the book *For protection and promotion: The design and implementation of effective safety nets* (Grosh et al. 2008). According to the book, cash transfer, despite not having a standard definition, can be understood as one kind of social instrument (sometimes called “safety nets”) aiming at mitigating poverty and exclusion among the low-income population segment in society. In better detail, cash transfers are noncontributory grants that formal institutions (states or other public entities) offer to help selected recipients meet minimum consumption needs. This definition helps separate CTs from other forms of social grants such as in-kind transfers (e.g. the distribution of tangible goods such as food) or pension schemes (where upfront payments are required to subsidize payments in the latter period). Nevertheless, beneficiaries can still be subject to specific soft conditions in order to receive CTs.

Cash transfers are commonly categorized by their degree of conditionality (Pega et al. 2022) into unconditional versus conditional transfers. While unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) are granted without specific requirements beyond meeting eligibility criteria (e.g., falling below a particular income thresholds), conditional cash transfers (CCTs) require beneficiaries to meet prescribed conditions, such as ensuring children regularly attend school or participate in educational seminars (Garcia and Moore 2012). Because of different designs, the impacts of these two transfer designs also vary, which is to be explored in the next section. The basic rationale for using cash transfers can be summarized in three points: it is cheap (lower delivery and monitor costs as compared to in-kind transfers (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016)), fast (a comparative edge in emergency contexts), and flexible (reduced risks of distortionary spendings while allowing for a much higher level of flexibility (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016)).

### 3.1.2 A history of cash transfers

Echoing the previous three points, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman stated in his TED Talk<sup>5</sup>: “Time and time again, researchers have shown that free money may be the most efficient, the cheapest, and the most civilized way to combat poverty”. Indeed, the practice of cash transfers dates back to Roman times, with the Alimenta program operating from approximately 98 AD to 272 AD. This program provided various subsidies, including monetary transfers, to impoverished children on small islands within the borders of Italy. Despite scarce evidence on free cash inflow during subsequent eras, in modern times, cash transfers have re-surfaced as a centerpiece in protecting the vulnerable and reducing poverty (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). CTs first witnessed a wide-scale comeback in Latin American regions around the late 1990s. Ever since, they have gained upward popularity around the world (Fiszbein and Schady 2009), especially in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa over the last two decades (Garcia and Moore 2012). By early 2020, cash transfers have been implemented in 203 countries, being of special high demand during times of crisis. Over the Covid pandemic, cash transfers reached nearly 1.4 billion individuals, making a 70% surge compared to before the pandemic) (Gentilini 2022). From the evidence above, cash appears to be an efficient tool in combating poverty. Yet, there is still limited knowledge on its relevance to and impacts on male-to-female intimate partner violence. This leads us to the next section, which delves into the crux of this thesis - the causal linkage between cash transfers and IPV.

## 3.2 Potential pathways

In an effort to shed light on the channels through which cash transfers might affect IPV, I first rely on existing literature. In a 2018 paper, Buller et al. (2018), provided an overview of past quantitative literature on the link between CTs and IPV in low- and middle-income countries. The authors proposed that "as CTs are primarily designed as an economic social safety net, the most generalizable pathway that results in decreases in IPV is through improved household economic security" (Buller et al. 2018, pp.240). Additionally, they identified two other pathways: reduced intra-household conflict and increased women's empowerment

Since this is a thesis in economics, my goal is to focus on the first channel: decreased intimate partner violence through improved economic security, which is mostly explained by a positive intermediate effect on mental wellness. Yet this does not

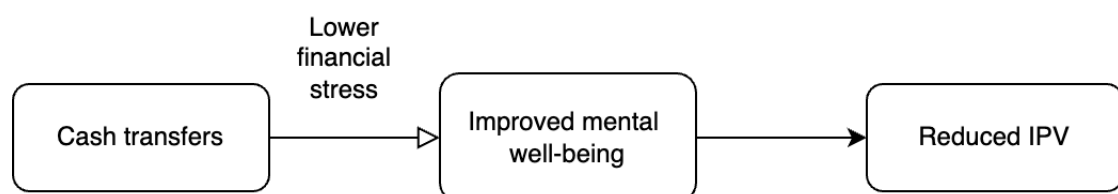
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<sup>5</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydKcaIE601k>

mean a total abandonment of the other two promising pathways. As Buller et al. have thoroughly discussed the channel of decreased conflicts over money, I now abstract from this talk; yet, I will later showcase that reduced conflicts can also be a side effect of increased economic security (increased labor force participation, to be more specific). Meanwhile, the pathway of increased women’s economic empowerment proposed by Buller et al. has the most economic relevance when it is placed in the context of household bargaining and evaluated from a basic game theory perspective (see Section 2.2), or when cash grants exert empowering impact on women also through improved mental well-being. Otherwise, this gender empowerment pathway relates more to the awareness side and other socio-cultural confounders that might distort the effect of free cash. Given that these factors vary across empirical contexts, it is more prudent to set this aside for further discussion in Section 3.

### 3.2.1 A chain model

In general, according to Buller et al’s paper, the increased economic security pathway can be broken down into two stages (Figure 2). This model suggests that cash transfers can alleviate poverty and reduce financial stress, thereby enhancing harmony and happiness within couples, ultimately leading to a decrease in IPV. This relationship is particularly relevant when IPV arises as a by-product of negative mental states (e.g., frustration release) and/or severe poverty (e.g., financial disputes). Consequently, this framework holds particular importance in developing economy contexts. However, the positive effects of cash on IPV may be undermined when violence is instrumental (i.e., used as a means to extract resources) (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3) or when the amount of the transfer is insufficient to meaningfully impact the couple’s economic well-being.



**Figure 2:** A chain model

The authors provided convincing arguments in support of this two-step channel through a thorough review of high-quality research. The first argument posits that improved economic conditions can enhance the mental well-being of couples. Numerous studies have shown that severe mental disorders (such as anxiety, depression, and anger

issues) are more prevalent among lower-income populations. Thus, better economic conditions are likely to lead to a lower incidence of these negative mental outcomes. The second argument is that improvements in mental wellness can subsequently reduce IPV. Given that such symptoms correlate with both the perpetration and victimization of violence, a decreased likelihood of experiencing these mental health issues creates a less favorable environment for IPV to occur. Overall, Buller et al. proposed that economic conditions can mitigate intimate partner violence by improving mental well-being.

Thus, focusing on this economic security pathway of cash transfers, for a more in-depth analysis, I will next explore its two branches: (1) lifting credit constraints and (2) encouraging labor force participation.

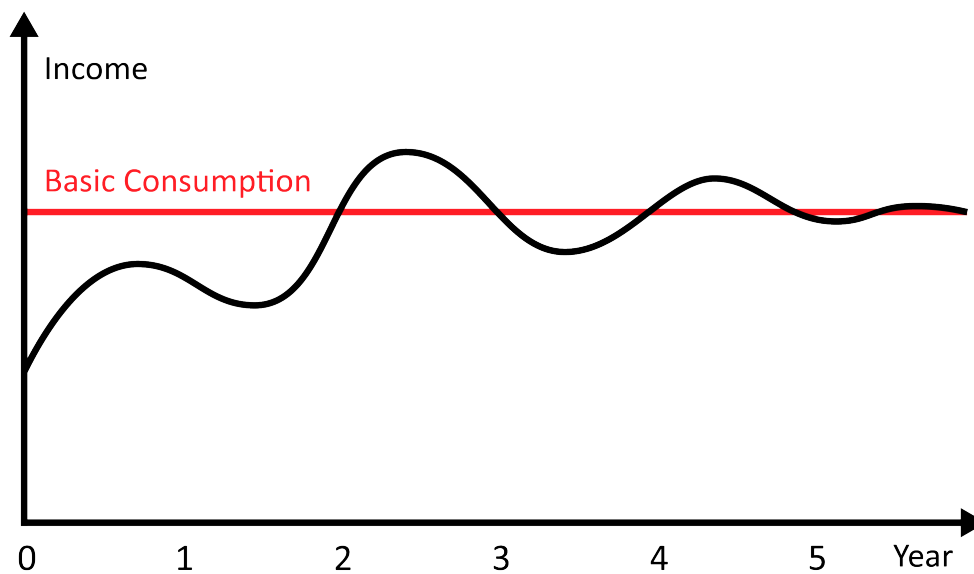
### **3.2.2 Lifting credit constraint**

According to the life cycle hypothesis (Ando and Modigliani 1963), normative individuals seek to smooth consumption throughout their lifetime by borrowing when their income is low and saving when their income is high. In real life, we also witness this saving pattern due to the relative risk-averse attitude of an average person as they seek financial security against economic downturns or external shocks. While middle- and high-income earners can typically employ this strategy with relative ease, low-income individuals face significant barriers. Since lenders often lack sufficient information about a borrower's repayment capability, they must rely on financial proxies such as collateral and expected income (Del-Río and Young 2005). Consequently, due to unstable earnings and limited assets, low-income individuals frequently fail to meet credit requirements and are unable to borrow. As a result, they struggle to smooth consumption and are particularly vulnerable to economic crises. This scenario exemplifies the moral hazard issue arising from asymmetric information and lender biases, leading to the absence of accessible credit markets for low-income earners.

Regular and reliable cash transfers can address this issue. By providing recipients with an additional income source to allocate for future consumption or loan repayment, cash transfers enable the poor to simultaneously save and borrow more effectively. Furthermore, by facilitating borrowing, cash transfers encourage investments in productive ventures (e.g., expanding a household business), which may have previously been hindered by low confidence resulting from inadequate insurance against adverse outcomes. This effect will be elaborated upon in Section 3.2.3. This shift in consumption dynamics can alleviate intra-household financial pressures and reduce the need for violence as a coping mechanism. However, for this credit mechanism to

function effectively, the transfer size must be sufficiently substantial.

Figure 3 illustrates how cash injections can help smooth consumption over time. The black line represents the fluctuations in household consumption across the years before receiving transfers, while the red line shows consumption after receiving cash. Thus, we can see that cash grants allow low-income recipients to maintain consistent levels of consumption even during periods of economic hardship.



**Figure 3:** Cash transfers help smooth household consumption against financial hazards

### 3.2.3 Encouraging labor force participation

As increased employment often represents improved economic status, there is a strong interest in CT's impacts on recipients' labor supply. However, because this topic has not been able to draw much attention from economists, empirical evidence remains limited. Yet, one prominent concern is that when there is free cash flow, the substitution effect could dominate the income effect: eligible recipients might opt to work less while still being able to consume more. However, this viewpoint has been challenged by experts saying that CT should not be considered a mere "unexpected cash windfall". Speculating the impacts of a CT program based merely on its "added income" nature, therefore, can be erroneous (Baird, McKenzie, and Özler 2018). Instead, Baird et al.'s paper pointed to alternative channels through which CTs can motivate adult labor, among which is the positive leakage from increased financial security (as discussed in Section 3.2.2). This motivation for labor results in more income, meaning a bigger



consumption budget and improved well-being for the couple, potentially reducing the incentives for IPV.

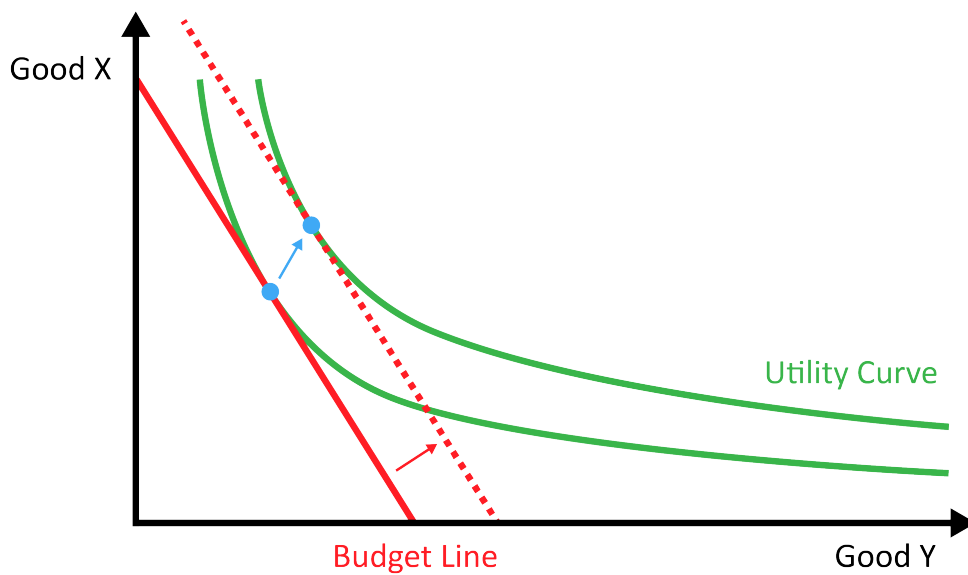
Labor encouragement can be achieved, first and foremost, through a self-employment liquidity effect. With relief from credit constraints (as mentioned in Section 3.2.2), aspiring business owners can expand their operations and work more hours when positive returns are anticipated. Similarly, a steady stream of cash transfers may provide an insurance effect, encouraging individuals to take riskier but more lucrative job-related decisions, such as changing professions or relocating to better job markets. These pathways collectively imply a rise in labor participation following cash distributions.

The relatively new and scant strand of literature exploring this effect of cash transfers on labor market appears to corroborate this hypothesis, as economists either fail to prove that transfers discourage working (Banerjee et al. 2017) or find statistically significant outcomes of increased labor force participation for both spouses (Salehi-Isfahani and Mostafavi-Dehzoeei 2018). This positive shift is not restricted to supply but also the demand side of labor, thanks to spillover effects. As cash transfer programs naturally raise consumption demands among households within beneficiary regions, they can stimulate local economies (Barrientos 2012), spawning more jobs in or within close proximity to these neighborhoods. This dual effect — motivating labor within households and creating real job opportunities — can help mitigate IPV by reducing the amount of time couples spend together (thus lowering the chances for conflict, as noted by Moreira and Da Costa 2020) and alleviating financial stress, a common trigger for violence.

Figure 4 displays a shift in the consumption frontier line as a result of more labor-income, tangent to a new utility curve, indicating higher satisfaction. However, again, it is useful to note the possible perverse effect of increased woman's income on the incidence of male-to-female IPV.

In summary, cash transfer programs offer a promising avenue for enhancing credit activity and labor force participation, which, in turn, may reduce financial stress and the need for frustration relief through IPV. Beyond these two economic pathways, other mechanisms may also contribute to the positive impacts of CTs on IPV. One example is the community effect: as cash transfers create positive externalities in the local economy (Barrientos 2012), they can simultaneously promote social progress. This, in turn, could transform societal perceptions, making intimate partner violence less socially acceptable acts.





**Figure 4:** Cash transfers help shift household consumption budget and utility curve

Nevertheless, in real-world settings, the effectiveness of these pathways can be eclipsed by confounding factors (e.g., the underlying motives behind violence), resulting in mixed or even adverse outcomes in empirical studies. Given such complexities when studying causal relationships, a rigorous evaluation of past empirical research is necessary to provide deeper insights into this thesis’s core question. The next section will delve into existing quantitative studies that examine the relationship between cash transfers and women-targeted IPV.

## 4 Literature review of quantitative studies

This section, inspired by Buller et al.’s review (Buller et al. 2018), offers an overview of previous quantitative literature on the link between CTs and IPV in low- and middle-income countries.

### 4.1 Sourcing methods and research practicalities

I sourced the literature using Google Scholar – one of the most popular academic search engines. Eligible papers are selected based on keywords such as cash transfers, IPV, domestic violence, or other related synonyms. The focus was on male-to-female intimate partner violence. Only peer-reviewed and strictly economic papers were included. Regarding this, I used JUFO<sup>6</sup> to evaluate journals’ quality and selected

<sup>6</sup><https://jfp.csc.fi/en/web/haku/julkaisukanavahaku>

papers from sites rated at least 2/3, then used IDEAS/RePEc<sup>7</sup> to confirm that they belong to the field of economics. Lastly, I did not limit the time and region of studies but restricted the scope of my review to papers written in English. This section of my thesis, therefore, is a contribution to Buller et al.'s mixed-method review. Besides revising significant literature mentioned by the paper, I incorporate more recent works, published after 2018.

A total of nine papers met the criteria outlined above. Table 1 summarizes filtered papers' key aspects: administrative information, program details, experimental design, and main findings. The papers are presented in chronological order regarding publishing years.

It is necessary to clarify the practicalities before delving into each paper and its respective findings. As the topic of cash transfers and intimate partner violence against women falls under the umbrella of development economics, despite not explicitly mentioned, data collection processes are likely similar among RCT papers. First, all studies piggybacked on existing CT programs; the rising popularity of such policies in recent years has given researchers in this field an advantage to carry out RCTs. Regarding randomization, research samples were drawn from transfer-eligible households, often consisting of heterosexual partners. Using statistical software, the samples were randomized into control (e.g., not receiving cash) and treatment (e.g., receiving cash) groups. To minimize ethical concerns, most studies did not entirely deny control groups access to transfers but rather delayed the cash roll-out until after the period of study. Second, regarding data storage and processing, survey responses were digitized, and respondents were assigned unique IDs, allowing for a comparison of baseline and endline data as well as detection of treatment effects. Lastly, although not specified by all studies, most questions related to IPV experiences were based on the WHO guidelines (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005), which categorized IPV into three main types: physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Survey questions asked in the experiments typically covered at least two of these categories (with some studies focusing only on the physical and emotional aspects).

Compared to Buller et al.'s work, my personal contribution lies in assessing whether the findings of these papers align with the economic model proposed by Baranov et al. (2021), since this model is by far the most comprehensive among ones under review in this thesis. My approach can thus offer a critical evaluation of the previous theories' coverage, revealing other channels of impact that require further further consideration.

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<sup>7</sup><https://ideas.repec.org/top/top.journals.simple.html>

Next, I will outline and discuss criteria for comparison across the various studies.

## 4.2 Literature review and analysis

Firstly, regarding administrative details, out of nine studies, four are set in Latin American countries (Mexico, Ecuador), four in African countries (Kenya, Ghana, Mali), and one in South Asia (Bangladesh), all of which are classified as low- and middle-income according to World Bank's ranking. In those areas, gender inequality poses a grand social threat, limiting women's economic dependence (indicated by limited access to property, ownership of household assets, labor force participation), reinforcing unjust social norms and the prevalence of IPV. Social interventions, especially cash transfers, thus started to emerge as a means to combat this issue in the late 90s (Section 3.1.2), providing natural laboratories for RCT and other field experiments. All of the literature reviewed here was published after 2000, reflecting this growing trend.

Secondly, regarding the programs scaffolding studies in this analysis, four out of eight were backed by NGOs, while the remaining four were government-funded. Both conditional (UCTs) and conditional (CCTs) cash transfers, targeted at poor households or mothers of those households, were evaluated. Of the eight, six were CCTs, often bundled with additional services (such as nutrition training or healthcare benefits). Only the Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH) (Hidrobo, Hoddinott, et al. 2014) and GiveDirectly (GD) programs (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Egger et al. 2022) offered purely unconditional transfers.

There was little variation in the size of the transfers, regardless of whether the funding came from governments or NGOs. Cash injections ranged from USD 15 to USD 65, with an average transfer of around USD 45 (all amounts standardized to USD using the IMF's PPP conversion rate for the first year of the program implementation). These transfers amounted to between 6% and 14% of a household's pre-program monthly expenditure. Only GD program (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Egger et al. 2022) offered exceptionally large transfers due to unique evaluation purposes - comparing small versus large transfers (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016) and examining macro-level multiplier effects on the local economy (Egger et al. 2022).

In terms of study design, most papers employed the RCT design and collected data in at least two phases—baseline and endline. Among the RCT authors, only Angelucci (Angelucci 2008) did not need to randomize the sample herself: she relied on the initially random nature of the transfer program - when cash was first offered to a

arbitrary group of villages - to have baseline data of the control and treated. Years after the program's initiation, she collected follow-up data on the same households to serve as her endline data. Out of nine papers, only Peterman et al. (2022) used the difference-in-difference (DID) quasi-experimental approach and Bbonis et al. (2013) conducted a non-experimental analysis. Given the inherent risk of endogeneity, Bbonis and his co-authors narrowed the research sample to reduce possible confounders (e.g. profit-driven matching patterns knowing CTs exist and benefit households with kids).

In respect of timing, except for Angelucci (2008) and Bbonis et al. (2013), most other authors conducted IPV analysis shortly after the last instalment of cash. Therefore, the majority of literature in this section contributed to the knowledge of cash transfers' short-term impacts on violence. Only Bbonis et al. (2017) attempted a long-term evaluation, assessing effects six years after the program's initial phase. There was also not much variation in the sample size across different analyses, with final samples typically ranging from 1000 to 2500 women. Only Angelucci (2008) studied a much larger sample of 12,700 households, and Egger et al. (2022) had 8200 households, though the latter did not specify how many households out of that number eventually informed the IPV analysis.

Finally and most importantly, regarding findings, the impacts CTs had on IPV also differed among papers. This might be owing to several variations in the research designs mentioned above. Seven of the nine papers found statistically significant effects of at least the conventional 5% p-value threshold. Only two Kenya-based program evaluations did not, with Haushofer and Shapiro (2016) observing results at a 10% significance level and Egger et al. (Egger et al. 2022) finding no effects on the female empowerment index containing indicators of IPV. Among the other seven literature where effects were observed, only one recognized a definite positive effect of CTs in curbing violence (Hidrobo, Peterman, and L. Heise 2016). Six other found ambiguous effects, including the bidirectional changes in IPV (violence both decreasing and increasing) (Angelucci 2008; Bbonis, González-Brenes, and Castro 2013; Hidrobo and Fernald 2013) as well as IPV reductions for only a sub-sample or one form of violence (Roy et al. 2019; Heath, Hidrobo, and Roy 2020; Peterman, Valli, and Palermo 2022). Despite these mixed effects, where impacts were observed, CTs led to substantial reductions in IPV, ranging from 10% to 40% or reductions of 0.10 to 0.12 standard deviations in IPV prevalence. Based on these findings, cash transfers show potential as a tool to reduce IPV against women in low- and middle-income contexts.

Yet, regarding external validity, the study designs and methodologies above have not

yet captured all context-variant factors that might distort the estimates. Thus, these empirical results should not be generalized to settings that differ drastically from those studied. Nevertheless, such optimistic outcomes can offer valuable insights for policy-making and future research.

In summary, the first conclusion from this review is that while many observed effects are short-term, there is hope for the lasting impact of cash transfers. However, in order to acquire this scenario, certain conditions need to be met. This is implied, firstly, by the overarching pattern in Table 1 - UCTs are often paired with complementary programs; in those cases, IPV reduction is documented. Secondly, testing changes in IPV occurrence six to ten months after the end of the Bangladesh CT program, Roy et al. (2019) found that cash transfers only led to a reduction in IPV when paired with the intensive nutrition training module. Other unique points from the reviewed literature also merit attention. For example, giving money to women versus men may produce different impacts on IPV through various channels, but the reduction in male stress levels is consistently evident and warrants further analysis (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Peterman, Valli, and Palermo 2022). Furthermore, while different transfer modalities (CCTs vs. UCTs) seem to have little effect on IPV outcomes (Hidrobo, Peterman, and L. Heise 2016), further research is needed to directly compare these two types of cash transfers.

Yet, we also see inconsistencies among the findings above, notwithstanding the studies' similar focus and designs. The first disparity lies in the affected sub-sample in Mali (polygamous households) (Heath, Hidrobo, and Roy 2020) and Ghana (monogamous households) (Peterman, Valli, and Palermo 2022), despite the two studies' shared emphasis on complex marital frameworks. According to Peterman et al., this incongruity could be ascribed to different recipient targets between the two transfer programs (household heads who are mostly male in Heath et al.'s experiment, and female beneficiaries in Peterman et al.'s). The second difference is between the two case studies in Kenya (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Egger et al. 2022) as the latter found no significant effect on the violence index, contradicting the former's outcomes. However, no further arguments can be made since Egger et al.'s paper did not provide details on the measurement of violence index. Thus, I conjecture that different focus, variables, and settings might give rise to different outcomes between the two seemingly similar evaluations. Therefore, as Baranov et al. (2021) noted, a rigorous consideration and incorporation of relevant contextual factors (e.g., local institutions, social norms) is essential when examining the IPV-reduction effects of cash.

### **4.3 Alignment with theoretical frameworks**

Moving away from a close-up assessment and comparison of previous papers' outcomes, in this subsection, I will discuss if the obtained empirical outcomes align with theoretical underpinnings in Baranov's model (Baranov et al. 2021).

Encouragingly, all studies provide evidence supporting this unified framework, which can be summarized in several key points. First, the size of the transfer appears to matter: due to the curvature of the utility function, larger transfers may yield a smaller marginal positive impact compared to smaller ones. Consequently, the income effect could be dampened by the greater disutility from a husband's loss of primary-earner status (Angelucci 2008). This dominance of masculine perceptions over wealth gains may explain the null outcomes observed in the two Kenyan studies (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Egger et al. 2022) as well as the adverse changes in violence levels within the Ecuadorian context (Hidrobo and Fernald 2013). Second, papers reviewed in this section support the importance of distinguishing between violence motives. Following a cash injection, the level of IPV may change differently depending on whether the violence is extractive (Bobonis, González-Brenes, and Castro 2013) or expressive (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Hidrobo, Peterman, and L. Heise 2016; Heath, Hidrobo, and Roy 2020; Peterman, Valli, and Palermo 2022). Overall, the existing theoretical models discussed by Baranov et al. have captured the majority of empirical outcomes within this literature review.

### **4.4 Research gaps and future directions**

Despite the alignment discussed in the section above, knowledge gaps remain in both the empirical and theoretical domains of this research field. Yet, as science means continually correcting and improving upon past findings, spotting the current shortcomings can shed light on fertile areas for future research. This section is thus dedicated to discussing such incompleteness and suggesting respective improvements.

The first area for improvement is in terms of distinction: to accurately understand the effects of cash transfers, we must be able to disentangle their impacts from those of complementary policies. This approach is currently lacking in the existing literature. Therefore, more studies should follow the direction of Roy et al. (2019) and Hidrobo et al. (2016), attempting multiple treatment arms and, ideally, providing a direct comparison between the two types of cash transfers: UCTs and CCTs.

Greater emphasis should also be placed on the accurate measurement of indicators, as the empirical papers reviewed in this section may share the limitation of under-

reporting incidents of IPV. There are two approaches to address this issue: first, by collecting administrative data instead of relying solely on self-reported surveys (Aizer 2010), which may be impractical in cases of remote healthcare access; and second, by employing tactical question framing, such as list experiment<sup>8</sup> (Bulte and Lensink 2019), which can help mitigate biases from social norms and low perceptions of violence that may lead to inaccurate reporting. Last but not least, future studies should investigate not only the temporary effects of cash transfers but also their sustained impacts, as well as distinguish between different violence forms. One working paper that is heading this direction is Haushofer et al. (2019).

## 5 Conclusion

This thesis investigates the potential of cash transfers (CTs) to mitigate male-to-female intimate partner violence (IPV) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Through an in-depth review of both theoretical and empirical literature, I demonstrate that the relationship between economic empowerment and IPV is complex and multifaceted.

My personal contribution lies in revisiting previous conflicting theories regarding IPV in relation to increases in women's wages, as well as reviewing an overarching framework that unifies these diverse opinions. I identify two economic pathways — lifting credit constraints and encouraging labor force participation — through which cash transfers, particularly to women, can enhance financial security, alleviate economic stress, and reduce the need for violence to resolve intra-household tensions over money. However, these pathways may be disrupted by outdated gender ideologies and other psychological motives from the male partners.

The main section of this thesis consists of a literature review of past quantitative evidence on the impacts of cash transfers on IPV. Eight out of nine studies indicated statistically significant reductions in IPV levels and were in line with the overarching theoretical framework. However, conflicting effects were also spotted, highlighting the necessity of a rigorous consideration of contextual factors that may influence IPV. Such findings also underscore the importance of complementary assistance schemes in ensuring the long-term impact of cash transfers.

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<sup>8</sup>In a list experiment, the sample is randomly divided into two subgroups. One subgroup answers all yes/no questions, while the other subgroup answers all questions except those on "sensitive" topics (e.g., "Has your partner ever pushed you, shaken you, or thrown something at you?"). The mean difference in the number of questions answered "yes" between the two groups provides a more objective measure of the true prevalence of IPV

To sum up, while cash transfers alone may not provide a panacea for IPV, they hold significant promise as part of a comprehensive strategy to address IPV and other types of gender-based violence, particularly in developing countries. For policymakers, the key takeaway is that CT programs should be carefully tailored, taking into account local socio-economic conditions, and ideally combined with supportive services that address the root causes of IPV. Future research must also continue to examine the nuances of cash transfer programs, ensuring that they are effectively designed to foster societal and gender progress.



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## 6 Appendix

# CTs and impacts on IPV

Basic information			Program details			Research details			Findings and discussions			
No	Paper's name	Authors	Country	Program	Modality of CTs	Transfer size	Recipient	Study design	Sample size for analysis	Years of data collected	Types of violence measured	Conclusion
1	Love on the Rocks: Domestic Violence and Alcohol Abuse in Rural Mexico	Manuela Angelucci 2008	Mexico	<b>Government-based:</b> Oportunidades	CCT. Transfers conditional on students' school attendance, health checks, and participation in health clinics	An average monthly transfer of 218 pesos (approximately 52 US dollars using 1998 PPP conversion rate), amounting to 10% of average expenditures of beneficiary families (Bbonis et al. 2013)	Wives of poor, rural, and marginalized households in several Mexican states	<b>Cross-sectional RCT.</b> Treatment: cash grants. Transfers were ongoing at the time of study	12,700 households	1998	Aggressive drunken behavior of husband	While <b>small transfers decrease violence by 37% for all households, large transfers increase the aggressive behavior</b> of husbands with traditional views of gender roles and low levels of education
2	Public Transfers and Domestic Violence: The Roles of Private Information and Spousal Control	Bbonis et al. 2013	Mexico	<b>Government-based:</b> Oportunidades	Similar to Angelucci (2008)	Similar to Angelucci (2008)	Similar to Angelucci (2008)	<b>Non-experimental.</b> Problem of endogeneity bias is addressed by the exclusion of some beneficiaries from the analysis sample based on certain criteria. Transfers were ongoing at the time of study	2867 women	2003	Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by husband in the past 12 months	Beneficiary women are <b>40% less likely to be victims of physical abuse</b> non-beneficiaries, but are <b>more likely to receive violent threats</b> with no associated abuse
3	Cash transfers and domestic violence	Hidrobo et al. 2013	Ecuador	<b>Government-based:</b> Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH)	UCT	A monthly payment of USD 15 for all households, which was approximately 6–10% of an average eligible household's pre-transfer expenditure	Households who were in the bottom two poverty quintiles according to the Sistema de Selección de Beneficiarios (SELBEN) index.	<b>RCT.</b> Treatment: cash grants. Transfers were ongoing at the time of study	1250 mothers	2003-2006	Physical violence and psychological violence (categorized into emotional violence and controlling behaviors) experienced in the past 12 months	Transfers <b>decrease violence by 14 percentage points</b> for mothers with more than 6 years of schooling. For mothers with 6 years or less of schooling, the effect is ambiguous, depending on their levels of formal schooling relative to the husbands. When the wife's education is equal to or higher than her husband's, transfers <b>increase violence by 9 percentage points</b>
4	The Short-term Impact of Unconditional Cash Transfers to the Poor: Experimental Evidence from Kenya*	Johannes Haushofer and Jeremy Shapiro 2016	Kenya	<b>NGO-based:</b> GiveDirectly's program	UCT	Average total transfer amounts to USD 709 PPP. For the monthly transfer type, the grant is USD 45 PPP, equaling 15% monthly household expenditure	Poor households with thatched roofs (criterion for eligibility)	<b>RCTs. Treatment arms:</b> lump sum versus monthly transfers; men versus women recipients; large versus small grants. Monthly installments over 9 months, ended on average 4 months before the endline survey	1008 households	2011-2014	Physical, sexual, and emotional violence by husband in the past 12 months. IPV constitutes the women empowerment index	<b>There is a relatively large difference</b> (although significant only at the 10% level) of <b>0.17 standard deviations</b> in female empowerment index between male and female recipient households, roughly equaling the difference in psychological well-being between the two groups, 0.14 std. dev
5	The Effect of Cash, Vouchers, and Food Transfers on Intimate Partner Violence: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment in Northern Ecuador†	Hidrobo et al. 2016	Ecuador	<b>NGO-based:</b> World Food Program (WFP)'s assistance program	CCT. Cash conditional on monthly nutrition training	A monthly payment of USD 40 per month per household	Colombian refugees and urban poor Ecuadorian households	<b>RCT.</b> Treatment arms: Cash, vouchers, and food transfers. Transfer payments in 6 months, ended shortly before the midline survey	1226 women	2011	Controlling behaviors, emotional violence, and physical and/or sexual violence within the last 6 months	Transfers decrease the probability that women experience controlling behaviors and physical and/or sexual violence by 6 to 7 percentage points (or approximately a <b>19 to 30 percent decrease</b> )

Basic information		Program details		Research details		Findings and discussions	
6	TRANSFERS, BEHAVIOR CHANGE COMMUNICATION, AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: POSTPROGRAM EVIDENCE FROM RURAL BANGLADESH	Shalini et al. 2019	Bangladesh	<p><b>NGO-based:</b> The Transfer Modality Research Initiative (TMRI) pilot safety net program</p> <p>UCT (attending training sessions are only a soft condition)</p> <p>A monthly payment of approximately USD 63 (PPP conversion rate 2012) per household</p> <p>Mothers of eligible HHs All beneficiaries with children aged 0 to 24 months in March 2012</p>	<p>RCT. Four treatment arms: Cash, Food, Cash+Food, Cash+nutrition BCC (behavioral change communication training) in the North or Food+nutrition BCC in the South. Transfer payments in 24 months, ended 6 to 10 months before the last (post end-line) survey</p> <p>2012-2015, both during and (6-10 months) after the program ended.</p> <p>2231 women</p> <p>Emotional and physical violence experienced in the past 6 months</p>	<p>IPV did not differ between transfer-only and control groups; however, women receiving transfers with BCC experienced <b>26% less physical violence</b> compared to the control group</p>	
7	Cash transfers, polygamy, and intimate partner violence: Experimental evidence from Mali	Rachel et al. 2020	Mali	<p><b>Government-based:</b> Mali's national cash transfer program (Jigisemejiri)</p> <p>UCT accompanied by training sessions related to nutrition, health, and other topic</p> <p>A monthly payment equivalent to USD 47 (2016 PPP conversion rate), or 9% of beneficiary household's monthly consumption</p> <p>Household heads – <b>who were primarily men</b> – in a context where nearly 40% of the poor and rural households were polygamous</p>	<p>RCT. Treatment: cash grants. Payments were made in 2 years before the control group was also enrolled in the program. No specific information on the last disbursement date in relation to time of the last survey is found, but they are close</p> <p>2014-2016</p> <p>1261 women</p> <p>Emotional violence, physical violence, and controlling behaviors experienced in the past 12 months</p>	<p>For polygamous households, the <b>prevalence of physical violence decreases by 7.2 percentage points, emotional violence by 12.6 percentage points, and controlling behaviors by 16.1 percentage points</b> compared to pre-transfer levels</p>	
8	Government Antipoverty Programming and Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana	Peterman et al. 2021	Ghana	<p><b>Government-based:</b> LEAP 1000</p> <p>UCT including free enrollment into the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS)</p> <p>Transfers range from USD 27 to USD 45 (2021 PPP conversion rate), depending on household demographic composition and amounting to 13.9% of preprogram household consumption</p> <p>Women who are pregnant or have a child under the age of 12 months in households meeting poverty criteria</p>	<p><b>Quasi-experimental: DID analysis.</b> The cutoff applies to a program eligibility index that decides who get the CTs. Payments were made in 2 years around the cutoff threshold</p> <p>2500 households</p> <p>Emotional violence, physical violence, and controlling behaviors experienced in the past 12 months</p>	<p>There are <b>significant decreases in 12-month frequency</b> of emotional, physical, and combined IPV (ranging from 0.09 to 0.12 standard deviations). Among women in monogamous partnerships, there are decreases in 12-month experience of emotional IPV (6.2 percentage points), physical IPV (4.9 percentage points), and combined IPV (7.9 percentage points), translating to <b>decreases of 11%, 15%, and 13% over baseline means</b></p>	
9	GENERAL EQUILIBRIUM EFFECTS OF CASH TRANSFERS: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FROM KENYA	Dennis et al. 2022	Kenya	<p><b>NGO-based:</b> GiveDirectly</p> <p>UCT</p> <p>Total cash transfers worth roughly USD 1000 PPP per household, sent in 3 installments over an 8 month period. Total cash transfers amounted to over 15% of GDP in treatment villages during the peak 12 months of the program</p> <p>Poor households with thatched roofs (criterion for eligibility) in Siaya County, western Kenya</p>	<p>RCT. Treatment: cash grants. Cash disbursements over 8 months, ended before the endline survey</p> <p>2014-2017</p> <p>No detailed information on violence-related index is found</p> <p>8239 households for the main analysis, yet no information on how many women were administered the survey module on IPV</p>	<p><b>Micro or insignificant effects</b> for the female empowerment index. Evidence contradicts Haushofer (2016)</p>	