The impacts of economic interventions on intimate partner violence

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Providing greater access to financial resources has shown mixed effects on women's exposure to intimate partner violence. In some instances, increasing women's income reduced violence by decreasing households' financial stress and improving women's bargaining power, while in others violence increased, possibly because conflicts arose on how to use resources or because men decided to use violence to assert their dominance in the household.



A female worker is selling clothes and earning cash.

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Summary

An estimated one in every three women worldwide has suffered physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in her lifetime. [1], Intimate partner violence (IPV) can take many forms, including physical, sexual, economic, and psychological abuse. Some of the consequences of IPV include injuries, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, long-lasting mental disorders, and, in the most extreme cases, death.[2], Achieving gender equality and eliminating violence against women are major global development goals. One popular strategy to reduce IPV is to increase women's access to financial resources as a way to promote their economic empowerment [1]. This includes economic interventions such as cash or in-kind transfers (e.g., food or other essential products), microcredit, savings groups, or employment as well as asset and property rights, financial inclusion, and agricultural programs.

Economic interventions targeted at women may affect IPV through a variety of channels. Increased income may reduce IPV by improving families' economic security, thereby reducing household conflict over limited resources, increasing women's decision-

making power and self-confidence, and/or improving their outside options from marriage. By contrast, women's access to financial resources could also increase the likelihood of household conflict over how to spend resources. Men might also use violence to extract income from their spouses or to assert their dominance in the household.[3], [4]

Figure 1 .



Listed here are different possible mechanisms through which economic interventions could impact intimate partner violence. If more than one of these factors come into play, we may find no impact on average.

A review of 22 randomized evaluations and quasi-experimental studies in low- and middle-income countries found that improved access to economic resources had mixed effects on women's exposure to violence. In nine studies, women who participated in some kind of economic intervention experienced less IPV. On the other hand, two studies found that increasing women's income led to more IPV, while seven studies found no changes in violence. Finally, four studies found differential effects; for example, programs increased IPV for certain women while decreasing it for others. These mixed impacts are consistent with the various channels discussed above. When implementing economic interventions, policymakers should carry monitoring and action plans to identify and protect women at risk of experiencing more violence. Further research is needed to find interventions that minimize the backlash effects of increasing women's income.

Supporting evidence

In some cases, increasing women's income reduced IPV by decreasing households' financial stress and improving women's bargaining power.

Programs such as cash transfers might improve households' overall well-being, particularly by reducing day-to-day conflict and stress over financial resources. Women's increased income can also improve their bargaining and decision-making power within the household. When one or both mechanisms are activated, researchers have observed reductions in IPV [20], [2], [1], [19], [21], [7], [9], . For instance, two randomized evaluations of unconditional cash and/or food transfers found that these programs reduced women's experience of violence within their households by 19–52 percent [1], [2], . Three other studies found that cash transfers reduced IPV for some women but not others [19], [20], [21], . Furthermore, in rural South Africa, young women (aged 13–20) who received a cash transfer, conditional on attending high school, experienced a 34 percent reduction in physical IPV. The results suggest that rather than changing power dynamics within existing relationships, the transfers reduced young women's engagement in sexual relationships, protecting them from abusive partners [5].

In other instances, these programs increased IPV, possibly because conflicts arose on how to use resources or because men decided to use violence to assert their dominance in the household.

Increasing women's income sometimes led to a backlash effect from partners, especially in households where there were strong imbalances in gender roles [19], [21], [22], [10], [11], . An evaluation of the flagship social protection program in Mexico—which directs cash transfers to women—found that the impacts on IPV varied depending on the amount transferred and the husband's cultural beliefs. In households where women received small transfers, domestic violence fell by 37 percent. On the other hand,

large transfers increased the aggressive behavior of some husbands. These differential impacts might be explained by the fact that larger transfers represented a larger increase in the wife's share of the household's total income, which might not have been acceptable for older and less educated men [19].

We have not yet identified complementary interventions that consistently reduce IPV when paired with economic interventions.

One alternative to address the unintended impacts of economic interventions on IPV is to combine women's access to financial resources with programming that purposefully promotes gender equality. These types of activities usually include trainings and family dialogues and seek to encourage participants to actively examine and challenge unequal gender norms that justify this form of violence, such as perceptions of gender roles and notions of masculinity. Several studies have found mixed impacts on this approach [6], [3], [4], [8], [15], [18], [14], [13], [16], [17], . In Burkina Faso, South Africa, and Tanzania, economic interventions reduced IPV when paired with gender-sensitive programming [3], [6], [4], . Similarly, in Liberia, a program that aimed to promote both psychosocial and economic empowerment among vulnerable women found that a combination of intensive psychosocial therapy and vocational skills training reduced emotional and physical IPV by 37 and 58 percent, respectively [8], . On the other hand, evidence from Afghanistan, Colombia, Côte d' Ivoire, DRC, South Africa, Peru, and Uganda show that adding gender-sensitive components to economic interventions did not lead to reductions in IPV [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18]. One potential reason for these mixed results is the varied forms these complementary programs took in terms of curriculum, length, and frequency of meetings; whether they involved only women, men, or both; and context-specific gender and cultural dynamics. Further research is needed to identify design components that consistently prevent the backlash effects of increasing women's income.

Providing women with access to financial resources can be a tool to reduce IPV.

However, in light of the potential adverse effects of economic interventions, policymakers should take precautions to protect women at risk of experiencing more violence. Evidence has shown that programs seeking to improve women's access to financial resources can have differential impacts among participants [21], [19], [22]. When implementing such programs, policymakers should take measures to mitigate adverse effects. For example, they should invest in monitoring and data collection throughout program implementation to identify at-risk women and direct them to support services (e.g., counseling, prosecution, shelters). Future research should work to understand the features of women, households, and contexts in which economic interventions increase IPV.

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