IFPRI *Research Talks* Podcast Series
Episode 8- Safety Nets, Safe Households: How Cash Transfers Can Reduce Intimate Partner Violence

Sivan: Hi and welcome to "Research Talks", a podcast series that explores how research is making an impact on people and policies (with a focus on the 'how'), brought to you by the International Food Policy Research Institute, IFPRI. I am your host, Sivan Yosef. In this episode, we'll be exploring an unlikely connection—cash transfer programs and intimate partner violence or IPV. Many countries have implemented these safety net programs on a large scale to help those in poverty. But, can they actually reduce violence in the home?

Shalini: Because cash transfer programs are scalable and they're globally relevant, they can be used and are used in countries around the world. If we are able to generate evidence on how to most effectively leverage them to reduce IPV, we may really have a promising policy approach to reducing IPV around the globe.

Sivan: That was research fellow Shalini Roy, we'll hear more from her later. Our story starts in 2008 when Melissa Hidrobo, now a Senior Research Fellow at IFPRI, was in graduate school at the University of California - Berkeley.

Melissa: My family is Ecuadorian. So when I went to a seminar and saw a professor in the school of public health present on data she had just collected from Ecuador, I approached her afterwards and I told her my interest in trying to work with her in Ecuador, and use the Ecuador data for my dissertation.

Sivan: Melissa's dissertation looked at how different income shocks affect outcomes like women's and children's wellbeing, early childhood development, and….intimate partner violence. Melissa found something pretty intriguing on this last part.

Melissa: Ecuador had implemented a cash transfer program. It was a government poverty program. It was at a time when countries were just starting to roll out their...maybe not just starting, but their cash transfer programs. A lot of studies just did not collect intimate partner violence questions at the time. We found that the cash transfer program had actually decreased intimate partner violence.

Sivan: Was that an expected finding?

Melissa: While many household bargaining models would predict that a woman's bargaining position would improve, there were also models and thoughts that might actually say that, well her increased position could put her in danger. And this was especially much more of the thinking among implementers who are always a little

more worried that by giving women cash, her partner might try to take it away from her or it might actually put her in danger.

Sivan: Melissa defended her thesis, got her PhD and started working at IFPRI. Right away, she was recruited for a new project with the World Food Program, or WFP. The project was looking at the impact of cash and food transfers on food security in three countries, one of them Ecuador. Melissa worked with another IFPRI colleague, Amber Peterman, to figure out if targeting women with cash transfers increased or decreased IPV.

Melissa: And we found very similar effects in the second study as we did in my dissertation study, where we found that the cash transfers that were given through the WFP did reduce intimate partner violence. At this point, since this was a three-country study, I started working with Shalini, and she was very aware of the results that were coming out of Ecuador and with respect to intimate partner violence.

Shalini: My name is Shalini Roy. I'm a Research Fellow in the Poverty, Health, and Nutrition Division at IFPRI. I work primarily on social protection along with gender and nutrition.

Sivan: In 2012, while Melissa was working with the World Food Program in Ecuador, Shalini was working on the evaluation of a project in Bangladesh called TMRI, or Transfer Modality Research Initiative. TMRI was initiated and led by IFPRI researcher Akhter Ahmed who implemented it with the World Food Program and the government of Bangladesh. Shalini, Akhter, and a colleague named John Hoddinott were interested in TMRI's impacts on household food security and child nutrition.

Shalini: TMRI was designed as a randomized controlled trial, which is considered a gold standard in impact evaluation. We randomly assigned poor women in rural areas in the north and the south of Bangladesh to receive either cash transfers only, food transfers only, or a combination of transfers with an intensive nutrition behavior change communication component.

Sivan: or BCC which is basically nutrition training

Shalani: And what we found in a nutshell was that all of the transfer arms improved food security. We found that only the combination of cash transfers with the training significantly improved child nutritional status.

Sivan: At what point did you realize that you wanted to study intimate partner violence?

Shalini: So, looking at intimate partner violence was really kind of looking at an unintended impact of this program. We actually believed that there was something going on with regard to gender, even if it wasn't an explicit objective of the program. So Akhter and his team had been making regular visits to the field, the World Food Program had been visiting the field and they were reporting that the women who were receiving the BCC simply seemed more empowered. They were more confident; they were more outspoken. The implementers said about the women who had received BCC, *"*The doors to their brains are open*."*
So my colleague Melissa Hidrobo and other colleagues had been working on studies that were showing that cash transfer programs could reduce intimate partner violence, which is quite compelling given that cash transfer programs are feasible to scale. And there was very little – there was actually no work that showed what happened after these programs end. This is a study that we planned that we could go back to look at IPV after the program was over.

Sivan: Had you worked with Melissa before on anything?

Shalini: We were office mates for such a long time.

Sivan: Here's Melissa again.

Melissa: Shalini approached me with respect to thinking about whether or not it made sense to also include the same indicators, the same questions with respect to intimate partner violence in their questionnaire in Bangladesh. I was very excited for them to add the module and the questions into their survey and start looking at it.

Sivan: So, can you take me through the process of how you implemented the study around in the field?

Shalini: Yep. So, we went back about 6 to 10 months after the program ended. This had two objectives. One was to measure child development among children who we had seen child nutrition improvements. And the second was to look at experiences of IPV among their mothers.

Melissa: The intimate partner violence questions basically ask very specific questions with respect to emotional violence, physical violence, and sexual violence. For example, for physical violence, it would ask, "Did your partner hit you in the last six months? Did he pull your hair? Did he throw something at you?" And so the main thing in terms of ethics when you're implementing these questions is that you have to make sure that the woman's safety is the first concern. And in order for her not to be put at risk by answering these questions, she needs to be in a safe place where no one else can hear the interview. In Ecuador, the interviews were still done in the household. In Bangladesh, they were actually bringing children to a testing center.

Shalini: We realized this would actually be a very good opportunity to have women kind of away from household members and hopefully feeling more comfortable to respond to these questions, and also us being able to guarantee that no household members would hear what she was telling us about IPV.

Sivan: Using this method, the team in Bangladesh surveyed over 2,000 women, 6-10 months after the program ended. And the results?

Shalini: What we found was that women that had received transfers – either cash or food – with training, experienced 26% less intimate partner violence than women that had received no transfers. However, women that had received only transfers – either cash only, or food only – looked just like women that had received nothing. So 6 to 10 months later in order for reductions in intimate partner violence to be sustained, adding the training to the transfers seemed to be absolutely critical.

Sivan: Even though the training hadn't touched upon gender relations at all.

Shalini: So, one of the really interesting things about that finding was that the training was not focused on violence or gender explicitly at all. So, in rural Bangladesh, because of female seclusion norms and because these women were so poor, prior to the program, they were really very socially isolated. The seclusion norms meant that women don't leave the home without, usually without the accompaniment of a male family member. And their poverty meant that they were quite socially excluded. Women reported that they were kind of treated like beggars, like pariahs. Now this component is in a very direct way, giving them a peer group that they meet with every single week. On visits, you know, after another, it's reported that women seem to enjoy these sessions. They came early. They stayed late. And so, this in a very direct way, created, kind of, social capital for them.

Sivan: Shalini's team thinks that the combination of transfers with the training improved women's bargaining power in their households. It made women more visible in the community, which might have increased the social

cost of men committing violence against them. Other studies in Bangladesh have found group members confronting other women's husbands when they are violent. Also, one more thing--

Shalini: We find that households that received the BCC are actually more likely to have more livelihood opportunities. And so, they tend to be less poor. And so to the extent that poverty reduces stress in the household, it reduces conflict in the household.

Sivan: This is actually the same conclusion that Melissa came to in Ecuador.

Melissa: We were seeing that by receiving these cash transfers, households were really less stressed, and they had less fights over money.

Sivan: That's interesting. So, it's kind of placing more emphasis on economics rather than cultural or social norms.

Melissa: Exactly. Yes.

Sivan: To be clear, well-off women aren't automatically safe from violence.

Shalini: Economic insecurity is just one among a wide range of risk factors for intimate partner violence. But it does seem that among households that are very poor, reducing poverty can reduce that one trigger.

Sivan: In 2014, Melissa and Shalini took their understanding of intimate partner violence and applied it to evaluating a new cash transfer program across the globe, in Mali.

Melissa: Prior to this, it was mainly a lot of governments in Latin America who were implementing cash transfer programs, and because of the hype and the popularity of cash transfer programs, a lot of countries in Africa were starting to implement it. And so we wanted to see, and the government of Mali, and also the World Bank were all really interested in looking at whether the positive impacts in general of cash transfer programs in Latin America also occurred in Africa, and in West Africa, and in Mali.

Sivan: The Government of Mali wanted to look at the program's impacts on poverty, food security, and child nutrition. They were also interested in gender dynamics, but it was not their main objective.

Melissa: We were interviewing mothers about her child's nutrition, and then we also added some questions related both to depression and intimate partner violence; because we were interested in the outcome on its own, but also because these two outcomes were highly relevant for children's nutrition and health as well. And it was different in the sense that we really focused on the pathways through which cash transfers would affect intimate partner violence; and so, we really focused also on men's mental wellbeing. If men are the perpetrators of violence, we really wanted to get a little more at how cash transfers were impacting them, men. And men's wellbeing as well, mental health.

Sivan: Were women hesitant to talk to the enumerators?

Melissa: No, actually it was one thing that always surprised me, especially with respect to intimate partner violence, especially in Ecuador women were not hesitant, women talked.

Sivan: Here is Shalini reflecting on an interaction she had with a program recipient in the field in Bangladesh.

Shalini: One aspect that was really nice was the woman who had received transfers with training and was really quite enthusiastic and engaged in speaking with us. She was saying, “well, you know, I've seen a lot of people come talk to us about this program. First, some people came and asked us a bunch of really strange questions about how many cows we have and whether we have a latrine. And we asked, are we getting something for this?” And they said, “Maybe, not sure.” “And then somebody came back and asked us even more questions. And this time they asked us even more detailed questions about everything we eat. And all the things we have in our house and everything that we feed our kids. And we asked, are we getting something from this?” And they said, “Maybe, not sure.” “But then we actually did get a program. Somebody came and took our picture and made us a beneficiary card. And then we were so happy.” It just kind of highlighted to me the generosity of spirit that so many people have that they just kind of, you know, are amused but sit and answer all these questions without necessarily having any idea why we're asking them.

Sivan: Shalini and Melissa were interested to see if the program in Mali would have similar impacts on reducing IPV.

Sivan: Can you tell me what were the results of the study?

Melissa: The main intriguing part of Mali was twofold. One is unlike a lot of cash transfer programs in Latin America, the cash transfer in Mali was actually to the head of the household, which is mainly men. In Latin America, a lot of the cash transfers were actually going to women, not men. We really wanted to see if the same impacts we saw when cash transfers were given to women happened when cash transfers were given to men. Or if the opposite occurred when men were receiving the money. And the other interesting thing, especially with West Africa was that we were in a country with really high rates of polygamy, and so we wanted to see whether the impacts were generalizable across different household structures. And what we found was that the cash transfer decreased intimate partner violence in polygamous households, and one thing to say about that is that it's in polygamous households where we also found the highest rates of intimate partner violence, especially among second wives. And we found the main pathways to be similar to the pathways that we were finding in Ecuador and Bangladesh. The cash transfer was reducing stress in polygamous households, and also fights and conflict in polygamous households.

Sivan: The IFPRI team is part of a research collaborative working on cash transfers and IPV and has presented the results widely, including at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The Bangladesh findings have been influential, and were even covered by major news outlets like Vox and NPR. In Mali, the government implemented IFPRI’s recommendations on poverty and food security outcomes. It increased the frequency of cash transfers and it piloted giving the cash to women instead of men. In Ecuador, the results helped convince the World Food Program that giving cash transfers to women does not put them in more danger, but in fact, reduces their chances of being victims of violence. Melissa and Shalini see this work as just the beginning, with plenty of things to figure out along the way.

Melissa: The thing that I think gets a lot less research, and I think it's a lot less research because it's harder to be rigorous about it, is the cost of intimate partner violence, the loss of productivity, from women who are victims of intimate partner violence.

Sivan: COVID is also posing some new challenges.

Melissa: Now that a lot of surveys are moving to mobile phone surveys, it's really highly debated as to how you can ensure women's safety and still collect the same information. And it is something that I think we’re all having to think about, and change and work through.

Shalini: This work is really exciting, both from a research perspective. And because of the really compelling policy implications, because cash transfer programs are scalable and they're globally relevant, they can be used and are used in countries around the world. If we are able to generate evidence on how to most effectively leverage them to reduce IPV, we may really have a promising policy approach to reducing IPV around the globe.

Sivan: A big thank you to Shalini Roy and Melissa Hidrobo for their time. To learn more about cash transfer programs and intimate partner violence, you can google those phrases plus the word IFPRI, and it will lead you to a rich collection of Melissa, Shalini, and other colleagues' publications, presentations, and more. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcasts so you don't miss a single episode of Research Talks from IFPRI. Till Next Time!