

Economic and Psychological Constraints to Women's Empowerment

Mahreen Mahmud*, Kate Orkin and Emma Riley

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Abstract

Across developing countries, women report limited control of household resources and experience high rates of intimate partner violence. Using a cross randomised control trial in rural Kenya, we provide evidence on whether alleviating economic and psychological constraints on their own and in combination can improve these outcomes. Results indicate that a one time large unconditional cash transfer does improve women's control of household resources but not an index of the frequency of physical and sexual intimate partner violence. Combining a light touch psychological intervention targeting self-beliefs with the cash transfer significantly reduces this violence index by 0.14 standard deviations relative to just receiving the cash transfer. We find considerable heterogeneity: women from households that are at high risk of violence experience a large increase in the violence index when assigned to the cash transfer alone while women in the low risk group experience no such increase. In fact, they experience a significant reduction when both economic and psychological constraints are alleviated. Initial conditions in the household that predict risk of violence appear to be an important determinant of the household response to a transfer. From a policy perspective, this highlights the need to pay attention to vulnerable groups in the design of cash transfer, and more broadly, social protection programmes.

*Corresponding author. Email: mahreen.mahmud@economics.ox.ac.uk. Please do not cite or share without consulting the authors.