

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Designing Cash Transfers and Graduation Programs to Support Women's Economic Activity: Synthesis of Recent Literature



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Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty given inequitable gender dynamics that may limit ownership of productive assets, decision-making, control over money, and access to markets. A number of interventions—including graduation programs and cash transfers—have emerged as effective tools to alleviate poverty and improve well-being. However, less is known about how these interventions can simultaneously enhance household well-being and improve women's empowerment.

To better understand how cash transfers and graduation programs can improve the lives of women, this review summarizes the impact of these programs, as well as variations in design and delivery, on economic and non-economic outcomes among female recipients.

Cash transfers may be provided through graduation programs, alone or in combination with other interventions. As such, we review the evidence for cash transfer programs as a standalone intervention for lessons on improving the lives of women.

These insights may also help to inform the design and delivery of graduation programs for the purpose of improving gender outcomes.

The review builds upon recent evidence on cash transfers and graduation programs and seeks to add nuanced analysis to evidence generated over the last decade. The majority of studies reviewed are randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that target primarily women. All studies take place in low-or middle-income countries. The review examines the impacts of each study across economic outcomes, where measured, including income, consumption, assets, savings, and labor market participation. Non-economic outcomes including health, food security, psychosocial well-being, gender empowerment, and education are also examined, where measured.

This publication is intended to be a resource for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers interested in improvements in particular outcome areas for both cash transfer and graduation programs, as well as those looking to drive impacts more comprehensively across both economic and non-economic outcomes.



# Scope of Review



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The synthesis includes 15 studies (10 programs<sup>1</sup>) assessing cash transfer programs for women. Only four studies (three programs) randomized the cash transfer recipient gender, so while we note differential outcomes by recipient gender when present, we are unable to draw conclusions about the impact of targeting. Twenty-two studies (16 programs<sup>2</sup>) evaluating graduation programs for women were also examined. This includes long-term evidence, where available, as well as short to medium-term evidence on recent innovations and adaptations.

For each outcome area, the full review first presents evidence from standard programs, including long-term follow-ups from [Banerjee et al. \(2015\)](#). Adaptations that test short-to medium-term impacts of individual components of the graduation program or a pure cash component relative to a “standard” or “adapted” program are then presented.

For the purposes of this review, interventions that target women living in extreme poverty and can be understood as graduation programs were considered. This includes programs with at least three of the following five components: cash transfers (consumption support), asset transfers (cash or in-kind), access to savings and credit, training, and coaching. “Standard” graduation models referred to in this review are those that include all five components, while “adapted” models are those that add or remove components.



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# Key Lessons from the Evidence Review

## Cash Transfers

Key findings from the cash transfer studies are summarized below.

Cash transfers provided to women lead to increases in household consumption in all but one of the included studies. Only two studies randomized the recipient gender and neither found a differential impact by the recipient.<sup>3</sup>

Cash transfers provided to women support improved savings, investment, and production outcomes in some contexts. Evidence on the impact of recipient gender is inconclusive.

The gender of the recipient does not seem to have a significant influence on household health or food security outcomes while one study finds mixed evidence of a gender effect on child health and growth.<sup>4</sup>

Cash alone may be insufficient for improving child growth based on two studies that compared cash to a cash plus behavior change communication (BCC) treatment.<sup>5</sup> It is unknown how recipient gender interacts with these effects given limited evidence.

Cash transfers for women may improve measures of psychosocial well-being in some contexts, but the evidence is mixed and draws on a variety of outcome measures.

Evidence on cash transfers' effect on women's empowerment is mixed but suggests targeting women alone is insufficient to reduce gender inequities. Programs should be designed with additional features beyond targeting to enable gender outcomes in addition to poverty reduction goals.

Cash transfers in combination with other interventions that indirectly address inequitable gender norms may be more effective in some contexts for empowerment and reducing violence. Evidence from one study in Kenya suggests targeting women instead of men for transfers may be more effective in reducing violence.

Recipient gender seems to have no impact on education outcomes, while conditional cash transfers linked to school enrollment outperformed unconditional transfers.



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# Graduation Programs

Key findings from graduation studies are summarized below.

## Economic outcomes

The evidence shows that the standard graduation model generates positive impacts across economic outcomes, including increases in consumption, significant and positive long-term effects on labor market outcomes, e.g., including shifts to more stable and productive occupations for participants over time; as well as increases in incomes, earnings, and assets. The standard model also shows positive impacts on savings behaviors and balances.

The review of adapted graduation models shows some promising impacts on economic outcomes, but the evidence is mixed. Adaptations to the graduation model that focus on lighter-touch economic components—including removing the asset transfer or consumption support and/or prioritizing financial training, savings support, and capital over other components – show positive and significant impacts on income, as well as impacts on assets, occupational choice, and labor market participation. It also demonstrates that impacts on savings outcomes can be achieved with fewer components.

Non-economic add-ons that target the household with gender-intentional components such as couples training and child well-being sensitization show promising impacts on incomes and assets.

Adapted models have improved consumption and food security in some contexts but results vary and largely do not outperform the standard model. Adaptations have also not resulted in meaningful impacts on health or education across a range of outcomes.

Reducing the intervention to provide assets or savings only results in limited to no impact on incomes, consumption, and other measures of economic well-being, and impacts are not sustained.

## Non-economic outcomes

The standard graduation model shows significant and lasting impacts on food security in South Asia and promising evidence of impact on infant and young child feeding practices.

Positive impacts can also be seen across a range of psychosocial and mental health outcomes, for the standard model, though long-run evidence is mixed. The model shows limited impacts on health outcomes for participants, while positive child health and nutrition outcomes have emerged in some settings.

Rigorous evaluations of the standard model on measures of female empowerment in non-economic domains—including agency, autonomy, and political participation—show modest short-run impacts that are difficult to sustain. Additionally, standard graduation programs show some effects on school enrollment—especially in settings with relatively low enrollment rates—however, there is no evidence of improvements in learning outcomes.

Adaptations do show sustained impacts on psychosocial well-being in the short run. However, long-term evidence is limited and results diminish when reduced to transfers alone.

Non-economic add-ons that target the household with gender-intentional components such as couples training and child well-being sensitization show promising impacts on measures of female empowerment.



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# Future Directions and Research Gaps

## Cash Transfers

- Further research on women's economic empowerment, taking into consideration household-level measures that may hide gender-based power dynamics that impact expenditure decisions, is needed.
- More evidence is needed on how cash transfer programs can be designed and implemented to optimize economic outcomes for women.
- Future research should explore how recipient gender may impact a range of outcomes including violence reduction, female empowerment, education, as well as child growth and health.
- Targeting women alone is insufficient to reduce gender inequities and impact women's empowerment. Studies examining complementary interventions, such as information and awareness-raising sessions, may be necessary to enhance the impact of cash transfers on women's empowerment outcomes in safe and sustainable ways.
- More evidence is needed on the impacts of cash transfers on women's psychosocial well-being including the use of common measures.

## Graduation Programs

- Further research is needed on the integration of health-focused interventions and the promotion of the use of common measures across graduation programs.
- More evidence is needed to determine the necessary components of a graduation program that secure sustainable impacts on assets and other economic outcomes.
- Further research on long-term impacts of graduation programs on labor market outcomes in contexts outside of South Asia is needed.
- More evidence is needed on the impacts of graduation programs that integrate components targeting social norms change and men's engagement on a range of outcomes.

## References

1. Only one government cash transfer program is included. The remaining programs are implemented and delivered by NGOs.
2. Only two programs are government-led; the remaining are implemented by NGOs.
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Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA designs, rigorously evaluates, and refines these solutions and their applications together with researchers and local decision-makers, ensuring that evidence is used to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

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