

Cash Transfers in Raqqa Governorate, Syria

Changes Over Time in Women's
Experiences of Violence & Wellbeing

Policy brief



WhatWorks

TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

Violence Against Women and Girls
in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises



Jacob Russell/IRC

Humanitarian cash transfer programming has become one of the most widely used modalities of aid in humanitarian crises. This International Rescue Committee (IRC) study is among the first to explore the potential impact that cash transfer programming may have on violence against women and girls (VAWG) in acute settings. In conflict and emergency settings, women and girls are vulnerable to increased violence, exploitation, and harm to their physical and mental health.

With such emphasis being put on delivering aid through cash, this timely study seeks to understand whether cash can improve protection outcomes for women and girls in acute settings – or whether it may put them at further risk. At present, there is a distinct gap in evidence on this area. Closing that gap, through studies such as this, will be crucial for improving government policies, donor commitments and for funding and designing effective responses to support women and girls.

The research

The study is one of the first to link experiences of VAWG to those of acute cash programming. The IRC's aim was to begin to address the gap in evidence. It conducted a mixed-methods assessment of a multi-round unconditional cash transfer for non-food items (NFIs) in Raqqa Governorate in northeast Syria including a pre-post test design combined with

qualitative interviews at endline. The transfer targeted heads of household, regardless of sex, between March and August 2018, with the objective of supporting households to meet immediate basic needs.¹ No complementary programming was offered.

The researchers interviewed 456 women before and after their households received three rounds of cash transfers from the IRC over a three-month period; in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 women at end of the programme. The interviews also provide systematic documentation of the experiences of women inside northeast Syria, where there has been little research.

The study was carried out as part of the *What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls* programme funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development.

Timeline of data collection and cash transfers



A snapshot of the crisis in Raqqa Governorate

Seven years of war in Syria – both the ongoing civil conflict and the recent ISIS occupation – have exposed its population to extreme violence and deprivation. More than 2 million individuals are in need of assistance. There is great displacement and little access to livelihoods. Women in particular face high levels of distress, violence and economic hardship in Raqqa Governorate in northeast Syria. Nine out of 10 women included in the study had been displaced at some point in their lifetimes; one in four had a family member killed in the crisis; and one in five had a family member go missing. The status of women within society is low, especially divorced or widowed women. At the beginning of the study, more than half of married women reported having experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime. Faced with a lack of livelihoods and unstable markets, women shoulder significant debt. In some cases they resort to coping strategies such as begging or having their children engage in child labour.

¹ This project was funded by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). As such, beneficiaries received messaging before distributions that the cash was intended to be used for non-food items and was not for food, medicines or other restricted items.

KEY FINDINGS

Women reported increased food security and reduced negative coping

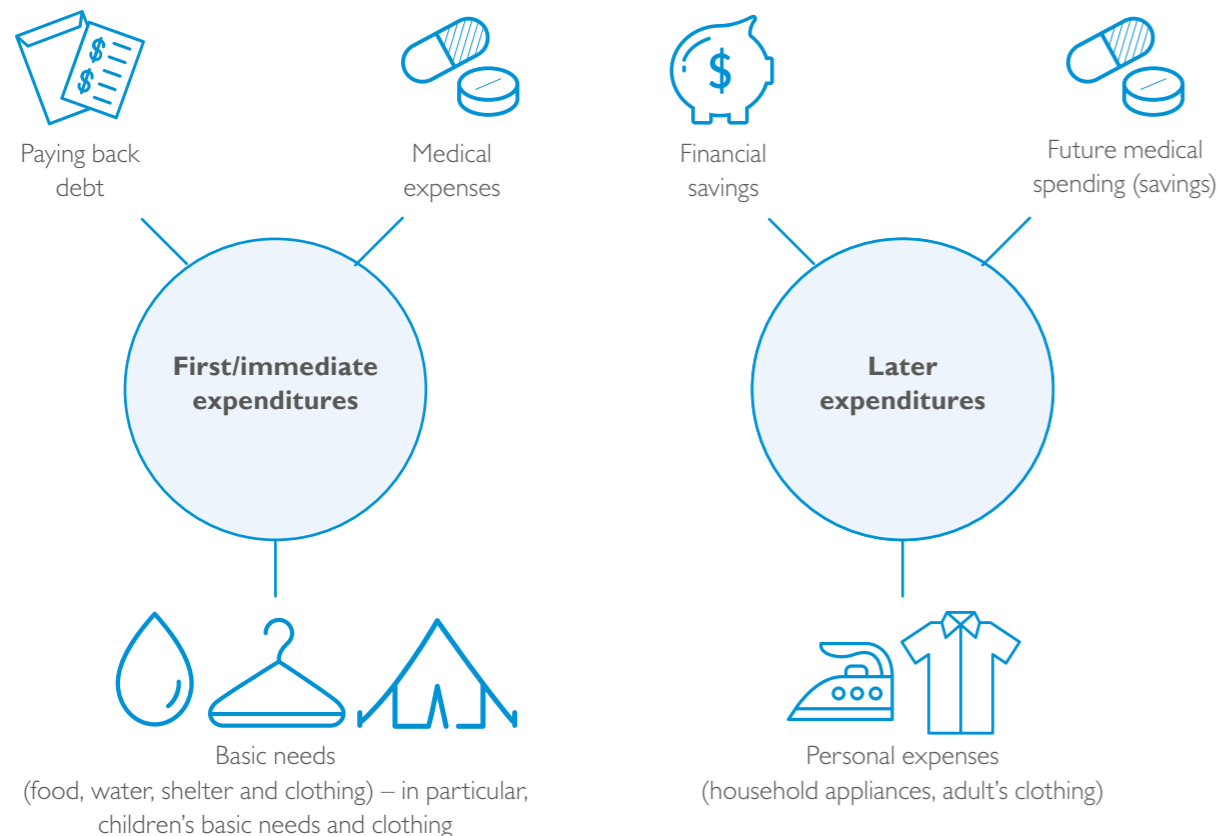
After receiving the cash transfers, food security consistently improved for women, including those who experience more stigma and vulnerability such as divorced or widowed women. Most recipients reported spending cash on basic needs such as food and clothes, family medical expenses or paying back debts. Some women interviewed reported spending cash to meet their family's basic needs, rather than their own.

As women became better able to meet basic household needs, they relied less over the three months on negative coping strategies, including incurring debt, begging, selling assets and skipping rent. However, longer-term strategies to meet basic needs, such as engagement in exploitative work or child labour, did not change.

Perceived household needs and stress did not change for women, but depressive symptoms increased









Women reported appreciation for the cash transfers, but they expressed anxiety over how to meet their basic needs once the cash transfer period ended. They pointed to a lack of long-term livelihood opportunities as a driver of stress. The uncertainty created by the short-term nature of the programme may have contributed to women's reported increase in depressive symptoms. Women did not report a reduction in perceived serious household needs,² which was meant to capture the overall stress on the household.

Diagram of cash transfers and common expenditures



² Respondents were asked about their perceived serious needs using an adapted Humanitarian Emergency Settings Perceived Needs Scale (HESPER). This included a series of 20 questions about social, psychological and physical problem areas relating to needs felt by populations in humanitarian settings. Higher scores indicate higher perceived needs.

How have cash transfers potentially changed women's lives? Positive, negative and mixed insights

Key constructs	Before and after cash programming
 Food insecurity	↓
 Economic-related negative coping	↓
 Employment-related negative coping	→
 Perceived household needs and stress	→
 Depressive symptoms	↑
 Joint decision-making among married women and their husbands	↑
 Independent decision-making among unmarried women	↑
 Sexual IPV and economic abuse	↑

Women reported an increased role in household spending decisions

Unmarried women reported increased independent decision-making after receiving the cash transfers and married women reported more joint decision-making. For married women, this change primarily related to decisions over inexpensive items such as food and general household assets. It is important to note that although married women defined decisions as 'joint', some women in the qualitative interviews described that men largely defined when they could play a role in decision-making.

Married women reported increased overall intimate partner violence, with significant increases in sexual violence and economic abuse

Baseline findings demonstrated that violence against women is normalised in Raqqa. Women reported common experiences of IPV before, during and after the conflict. The increase in reporting of sexual and economic abuse from baseline to endline could be a result of male household members reasserting power and control over their wives in households where women were perceived to have control over economic resources. However, the increased abuse could also be due to greater disclosure during endline as women became more comfortable in reporting their experience of violence with the research team.

It is not possible to determine whether the changes from baseline to endline were the direct result of the cash transfer programme because the study design did not include a comparison group. Other factors unrelated to the programme may have caused these changes. Further research is needed to better understand these findings.



Jacob Russell/IRC

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings point to an urgent need to better integrate gender analysis into emergency cash programming for basic needs and to consider women's longer-term economic needs when designing short-term cash programmes. Donors, policymakers and UN agencies should do the following:

1 Plan for a protracted crisis and longer-term recovery needs

Recognising the duration of conflict and displacement, donors should increase multi-sector and longer-term funding at the early stages of an acute crisis. They should finance economic programming that includes short-term emergency cash programming as well as longer-term livelihood opportunities for women. This type of planning that bridges the humanitarian–development divide will increase programming efficiency, reduce the stress and uncertainty that women experience, support the movement towards gender-transformative programming while also helping to create an environment of stability and lasting success.

2 Commit to and drive the agenda on integrating a gender-sensitive and, where possible, transformative approach in cash transfers and wider humanitarian programming

Donors should utilise key international moments, such as reviews of global policy initiatives and statements, to pledge to define and further a gender-transformative

approach to cash programming, to review progress and to make new, evidence-based commitments to tackle VAWG. Key moments include the Grand Bargain, the Call to Action on Protection from Gender Based Violence in Emergencies and the G7 Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action.

3 Ensure adherence to commitments outlined in humanitarian best practice standards and VAWG policy frameworks

In order to fulfil their obligations under international standards, donors, UN agencies and policymakers should deliver and be held accountable to pledges made on the protection of women and girls. Promoting women's rights in conflict settings, funding best-practice programming and addressing structural inequalities are all critical to prevent and respond to VAWG, including where these actions intersect and apply to cash transfers. Humanitarian funding for cash programmes should be contingent on adherence to the *IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*.

4 Support and fund gender-sensitive and transformative cash transfer programming

The research highlights how cash may influence power dynamics in the household, women's use and control of resources, and their risk of experiencing violence. Cash programming needs to be designed and delivered with this in mind. In practice, this means assessing gender-specific needs, impacts and risks prior to implementing cash programming. Particular attention is needed to VAWG as well as to opportunities for increasing women's use and control of resources. Collaboration is essential between cash and VAWG practitioners from design through to implementation of programming. Guidance for mainstreaming gender-based violence response, such as the Women's Refugee Commission *Toolkit for Optimizing Cash-based Interventions for Protection from Gender-based Violence*, should inform cash programme design and monitoring. Wherever possible, funding should also require the meaningful inclusion of women and women's groups in programme design and implementation.

5 Ensure investment in cash is linked to VAWG response programmes and services

The research confirms that there is an urgent need for cash programming to be linked with VAWG prevention and response services. Donors should therefore provide funding for VAWG services alongside cash programming

as standard in humanitarian settings. This includes functional referral pathways and mechanisms to VAWG response services, such as VAWG case management, mental health services and safe spaces for women and girls.

6 Fund research on cash transfer approaches with the potential to mitigate and prevent VAWG – and to empower women

This research underlines the substantial gap in evidence on how to maximise the potential positive impact of cash on the lives of women, and on mitigating and preventing VAWG during cash transfer programming in humanitarian settings. Adequate investment into such research, including complementary programming, is needed in acute emergencies to understand fully the potential impact of cash transfers on VAWG, and to explore how intersecting identities, such as marital status, and power imbalances influence women's experience of cash transfers. Donors and researchers should prioritise and fund research into the unintended consequences related to cash, and to develop best practices for cash programming in order to mitigate and prevent such negative consequences and VAWG within emergencies.



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