

# **Intimate partnership formation, dynamics, and violence among youth in the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme**

## **Partnership formation during the transition to adulthood**

The transition from youth to adulthood provides an opportunity to influence the wellbeing of both current and future generations (National Research Council and Committee on Population, 2005). This transition is even more precarious for youth living in poverty, who face high stress and uncertainty as they take on roles of workers, citizens, partners, and parents. Recent evidence indicates that young rural women are more likely to transition to adulthood with fewer assets than young men, and family responsibilities frequently limit their opportunities to stay in school or find paid employment. Young men are more likely to stay in school, but face social expectations of earning income to attract partners or support their families (Hamel & Di Nucci, 2019; Heckert et al., 2021).

Almost all countries in Africa have at least one social protection cash benefit, and recent goals from the African Member States aim to increase social protection coverage on the continent to 40 percent by 2025 (World Data Lab & ILO, n.d.). Many youth, who are transitioning to adulthood in environments of high uncertainty and persistent poverty, may benefit from this additional coverage. There is a growing evidence base on the effects of cash transfer programs on various domains of youth wellbeing in Africa. For example, government-led cash transfer programs have been evaluated to assess effects on school enrollment, mental health, sexual debut, early marriage and pregnancy, and a multidimensional deprivation measure, among others (Handa et al., 2015, 2015; Kilburn et al., 2016, 2017, 2020; Lambon-Quayefio et al., 2024; Prencipe et al., 2021). Gender considerations are also incorporated in these analyses.

Partnership formation is a key dimension during the transition to adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Yet, much of the current evidence focuses on risky sexual behaviors and fertility outcomes, and less on what healthy relationships look like for young women and men. Furthermore, our understanding of the role of cash on how youth form intimate partnerships and the dynamics of these partnerships is mostly based on qualitative assessments of cash given directly to girls.

## **Contributions of this study**

Although there has been renewed global interest in promoting youth wellbeing, the quantity and quality of evidence is skewed toward schooling or fails to capture youth's dual productive and reproductive roles. Little is known about how youth choose partners and form relationships, and the dynamics of these relationships such as IPV, in resource-poor settings. We also know little about the role of government-led poverty-reduction interventions such as CTs, in such processes. Relationship quality is fundamental but understudied in understanding IPV risk, especially among youth in ultra-poor households. Furthermore, there are neither any impact evaluations of government-led unconditional CTs on youth's experience of IPV, nor evidence-driven frameworks that characterize how cash may protect young women in ultra-poor households from further vulnerability in intimate partnerships. Our overarching goal is to provide robust evidence on how CTs impact relationship dynamics and IPV

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to formal or informal unions that are recognized as or include marriage.

experience in early life, which can consequently influence healthy transitions of youth to adulthood and affect health and wellbeing throughout the life-course. With the Africa Social Protection Clock ticking closer to the deadline of increasing social protection coverage to by 2025, this work is timely to understand the full scope of social protection benefits for youth and IPV prevention (World Data Lab & ILO, n.d.).

## Research aims

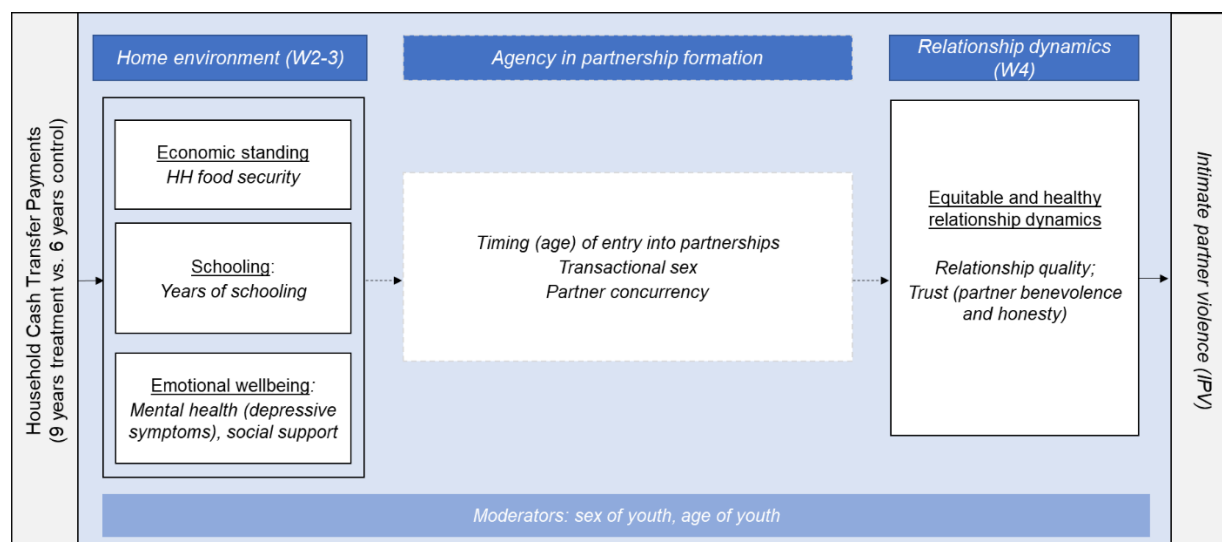
Our research aims to 1) assess the impact of cash transfers on relationship dynamics among young men and women; 2) assess the impact of the cash transfer on IPV and other controlling behaviors among young women; 3) examine youth relationship formation and identify risks for IPV during the transition to adulthood, and 4) qualitatively explore how social networks and support from partners, friends, and family during relationship formation and early in relationships affects relationship quality and IPV.

## Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework guides this study. The conceptual model will be described in detail in the full paper.

Figure 1, read from left to right, shows a simplified version of the pathways linking the household cash transfer, with individual-level factors that influence relationship dynamics and IPV. We hypothesize that the effect of cash on partnership formation for young adults living in beneficiary households is shaped through the household environment, agency in partnership formation and consequently, relationship dynamics. We hypothesize that there are stronger impacts for youth with greater exposure to cash transfers in their adolescent years. The conceptual model will be described in detail in the full paper.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



## Quantitative data and methods

We build on a follow-up study of the Government of Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) cluster randomized controlled trial evaluation. We collected data from youth aged 20-32

years old in 2022, who were first interviewed at baseline in 2013 when they were 13-19 years old. We included measures on trust, relationship quality, and IPV in the long-term post-endline follow-up survey in 2022. We estimate single-difference intent-to-treat effects of the cash transfer on relationship dynamics for young women and men, and IPV for young women. We also assess channels of impact, focusing on the home environment.

### Qualitative interviews and methods

We also conducted 41 interviews with young women to explore norms around relationship formation; characteristics of relationships; support from partners, friends, and family; and experience of IPV.

### Ethical approval

Malawi's National Commission for Science and Technology (NCST), National Committee for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA Institutional Review Board (IRB) and provided ethical approval for this study.

### Cash transfer effects on relationship dynamics and IPV

Estimates in Table 1 show that the SCTP increased benevolence by 0.17 standard deviations and increased relationship flourishing score by 0.19 standard deviations for young women. There were no statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) impacts of the cash transfer on young men's perceptions of partner's benevolence or honesty, or relationship flourishing scores. There were no significant effects of the SCTP on reported controlling behaviors or lifetime experience of IPV among young women (Table 2).

Table 1: Effects of the Malawi SCTP on relationship dynamics outcomes by gender

	Women			Men		
	Benevolence z-score	Honesty z-score	Relationship flourishing z-score	Benevolence z-score	Honesty z-score	Relationship flourishing z-score
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment	0.17*** (0.06)	0.08 (0.07)	0.19*** (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.09)
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)
More than primary	0.07 (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	0.13* (0.07)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.17** (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)
Current romantic partner	0.96*** (0.05)	0.89*** (0.06)	1.05*** (0.07)	1.02*** (0.09)	0.87*** (0.08)	1.02*** (0.09)
R-squared	0.250	0.188	0.276	0.293	0.250	0.277
Control mean	0.0819	0.0449	0.145	0.110	0.0995	0.124
N	1209	1209	1209	812	812	812

Note: Data comes from the long-term evaluation of the Malawi SCTP. All regressions include caregiver characteristics (age, female, marital status, whether literate in English, whether literate in Chichewa), household size and district-TA fixed effects. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Table 2: Effects of the Malawi SCTP on binary IPV outcomes *among young women*

	Any controlling behavior in past 12 months	Emotional IPV (ever)	Physical IPV (ever)	Sexual IPV (ever)	Emotional, physical and/or sexual IPV (ever)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	0.05 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Age	-0.01* (0.00)	0.02*** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
More than primary	0.02 (0.03)	-0.10*** (0.03)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)
Current romantic partner	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.03)
R-squared	0.0326	0.0489	0.0323	0.0399	0.0479
Control mean	0.717	0.462	0.246	0.216	0.533
N	1183	1183	1183	1183	1183

See notes in Table 1

***The full paper will include more details on methods, attrition and balance, channels of impacts, and results from qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews. We will also include a discussion and the program, policy, and research implications of our findings.***

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