Public Transfers and Domestic Violence:  
The Roles of Private Information and Spousal Control

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Current version: March 2012
First version: March 2006

Abstract: We study whether transfer programs in which funds are targeted to women decrease the incidence of spousal abuse. We examine the impact of the Mexican Oportunidades program on spousal abuse rates and threats of violence using data from a specialized survey. Beneficiary women are 40 percent less likely to be victims of physical abuse, but are more likely to receive violent threats with no associated abuse. This evidence is consistent with a model of decision-makers’ interactions with asymmetric information in the male partner’s gains to marriage, who can then use threats of violence to extract rents from their female partners.