

Gender, politics and social protection

Why social protection is ‘gender blind’

Key points

- Social protection debates are deeply political, especially when viewed through a gender lens
- A political economy approach, integrating gender into the ideas, institutions and interests that shape social protection, is essential for gender equitable outcomes
- Strategic alliances are critical to forge political buy-in for gender-sensitive social protection from elites, programme implementers and participants alike

If tackling gender discrimination ‘makes development and economic sense’, as the World Bank suggests, why is social protection so often gender-blind? Social protection may be high on the policy agenda in international development circles, but the way it plays out in practice at national and local level is deeply political, with significant consequences for gender relations and gender-related outcomes (Molyneux, 2007; Kabeer, 2008). While there is a robust body of evidence on the different ways in which women and men experience poverty and vulnerability (e.g. Chant, 2010), this is seldom reflected systematically in social protection strategies, policies or programmes (Holmes and Jones, 2010).

This briefing paper explores the political economy of social protection and its effects on gender relations. It draws on multi-country research by ODI and national partners funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). It weaves together findings from interviews with key players, household surveys, focus group discussions and life histories with men, women and children across the lifecycle in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Holmes and Jones, 2010). Rather than focus exclusively on cash and asset transfers, our research covers other social assistance instruments such as public works schemes and subsidy programmes for the poor.

Gender and political economy

Scholarship on the welfare state in developing countries has long recognised the importance of the politics behind redistribution (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992). Until recently, however, discussion about social



Involving women in social protection schemes is one step, but changing gender dynamics is harder

protection in developing countries has been technical. Analysts are now turning their attention to the political economy challenges facing social protection strategies (McCord, 2009). Current literature focuses on the so-called three ‘I’s of social protection. The first is institutions (e.g. elections, political party systems, informal politics) and how they shape social protection choices. The second concerns the interests of key actors (e.g. political elites, bureaucratic agencies, donors and civil society champions). The third relates to ideas held by elites and the public about poverty, the social contract between state and citizens, and the merits of particular forms of state support.

The role of gender relations in shaping these institutions, interests and ideas has, however, been largely overlooked by mainstream development actors. ODI uses a modified version of this framework (Figure 1) to assess the challenges of integrating a gender perspective into policy and practice on social protection. Answers to three questions are needed if gender is to be part of such debates:

- 1 How is the social contract between state

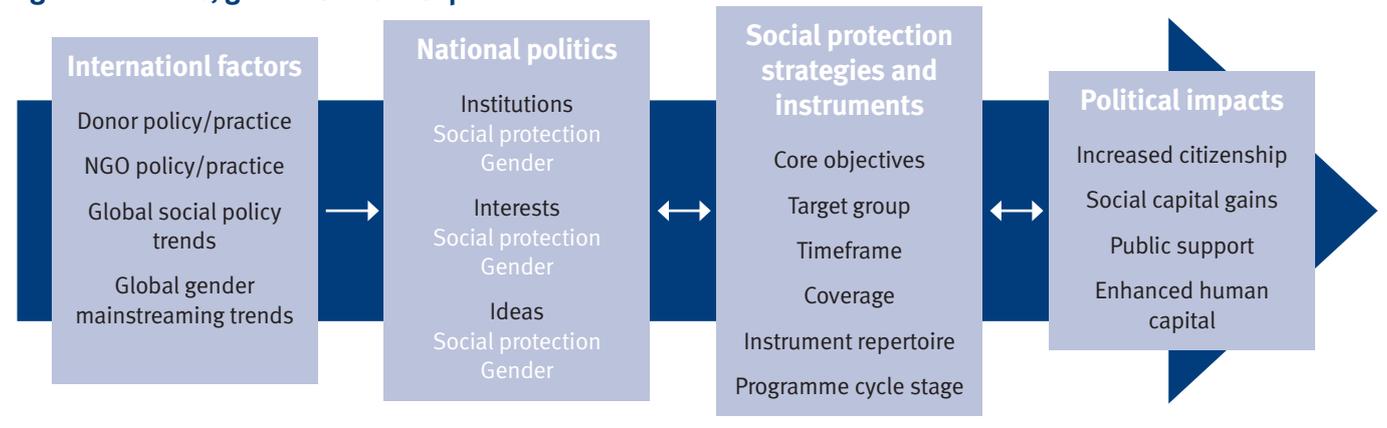
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Figure 1: Politics, gender and social protection



and citizens — pivotal for the parameters of social protection debates — also gendered? Are notions of citizenship gender specific?

- How do the politics around social protection design choices shape its gender dimensions – from food security to poverty reduction? Are these limited to supporting the practical gender needs of women and girls or could they be more transformative for every citizen?
- To what extent do politicians capitalise on their role in cementing or reshaping existing gender norms to further political goals, such as popularity, legitimacy, social cohesion and reconciliation?

Unpacking institutional motivations

ODI studies confirm that a range of institutional factors and motivations shape national social protection policy choices. Peru’s conditional cash transfer programme, *Juntos*, for example, aims to redress a legacy of political violence among impoverished communities, while Indonesia’s Raskin rice subsidy programme responds to macro-economic crises. In Ethiopia, the combined public works/social transfer Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) aims to replace ad hoc emergency appeals for food with more predictable livelihoods support, and the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) cash transfer programme in Ghana was motivated partly by elite concerns to demonstrate commitment to poverty reduction in the run up to elections. However, few programmes have explicit gender-related objectives. Exceptions include Bangladesh’s Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (CFPR) programme, which focuses on women’s economic empowerment and decision-making power in the household as a mechanism to achieve its final objectives, and Mexico’s subsidised crèche scheme, *Estancias*, which supports women’s care work to increase their participation in the paid workforce.

Our findings highlight four main reasons for the low priority given to gender equality in social protection. First, the poor use of evidence in programme design on the different ways in which women experience poverty and vulnerability, compared with men.

Second, a blueprint approach to operations that lacks the flexibility to consider the ways in which gender relations shape programme opportunities and outcomes. Third, a lack of investment in capacity-building for programme implementers about these dimensions. And finally, an absence of gender-sensitive indicators in programme monitoring, evaluation and learning systems.

Political economy frameworks also emphasise the important role of informal institutions and the need to focus on patterns of patron-client relations – a political system based on personal relationships rather than merit. Some programmes in our study were established to correct historical tendencies towards clientelism in the social sector and establish more transparent and accountable types of social protection programming (as with the establishment of *Juntos* in Peru (Vargas, 2010). Elsewhere, however, implementation practices are often shaped by informal politics. In Indonesia, for example, targeting has been uneven as village heads have often succumbed to pressures to provide subsidised rice to the wider population. In Viet Nam, decisions about how best to invest local infrastructure budgets have rarely been based on pro-poor thinking but have been shaped by concerns that everyone should benefit equally (e.g. through the construction of village halls). The challenge from a gender perspective is that clientelistic ways of working are typically overlaid with patriarchal ways of relating. These political challenges will continue unless there is investment in awareness-raising initiatives for programme participants about how gender shapes programme provisions.

Interests of key actors

A wide range of actors are involved in social protection debates. They include political, social and economic elites who set the terms of the debate, and administrative bureaucratic agencies that deliver social protection objectives (such as ministries of social welfare, women and children’s affairs, health, food security bureaus and rural development). There are civil society actors working with or for the poor – both international (NGOs such as ActionAid, HelpAge, Save the

Children, Oxfam) and national; and bilateral donors (e.g. DFID, GTZ) and multilateral agencies (especially the World Bank and UN agencies)). While increasingly there are examples of good practice in cross-agency cooperation, (such as the ‘Joint Statement on Advancing Child-Sensitive Social Protection’ and the ‘Social Protection in Africa: Where next?’ documents developed by various UN agencies, NGOs, research centres and think tanks, including ODI), not surprisingly these actors have a range of different interests in promoting social protection, and differing degrees of influence and capacities in particular contexts. A mapping of this complex landscape, including a recognition that these different actors are themselves not homogeneous and may have varying interests, is critical to assess the opportunities for, and potential obstacles to, the integration of gender into the social protection agenda.

First, political elites often initiate social protection programmes to further their institutional aims, such as demonstrating a commitment to a strengthened social contract between the state and citizens (see Box 1 on cash transfer programmes in Pakistan).

Second, the impacts of social protection programmes are often harnessed by political elites to advance their political interests. In Ethiopia the ruling party has shored up popularity among the rural poor in some areas through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (Jones et al., 2010). Brazil’s *Bolsa Família* programme has helped the Government to cement its role as an emerging global power by providing a platform from which to lead a South-South learning initiative. Gender equality may be a secondary concern, but governments have taken credit for progressive gender outcomes, from the greater participation of women in Ethiopia and India in public works programmes, to their ability to support their children’s development through cash transfers in Latin America, or ensure adequate food consumption through Indonesia’s Raskin programme.

Third, the interests of government agencies influence social protection trajectories, with the lead agency for social protection strategies often playing a key role in shaping the prioritisation of different social protection goals. Where ministries of social welfare, women and children lead, there is generally more scope for a focus on gender inequalities, although action may be limited by the capacity constraints these agencies face in coordinating with more powerful government agencies (as has happened in Ghana). Where ministries of rural development take the lead, gender dynamics tend to be a lower priority, exacerbated by the limited integration of a gender perspective into working practices, weak linkages to gender focal points and a lack of funding for capacity-building for programme implementers on these issues (as seen in Ethiopia, India and Indonesia). How bureaucratic agencies interact with other political players, such as the legislature, also matters, especially where social protection policies are enshrined in law (as has been the case with India’s MGNREGA).

Box 1: Political economy, gender and cash transfers in Pakistan

Politics have fuelled the two largest safety net programmes in Pakistan. The Zakat programme, combining a monthly cash transfer with fee exemptions for basic services and marriage assistance, was launched in 1980 by the Zia-ul-Haq government, which adopted an overtly religious governance model. Analysts suggest the government’s motive was to shore up its Islamic credentials rather than any specific socio-economic objective. The programme was based on the principle of helping deserving needy Muslims or ‘Mustahqeen’, especially widows, orphans, those with disabilities and the unemployed. Drawing on the Islamic injunction of charity, the government established a Central Zakat Fund, funded by a 2.5% tax on financial assets such as bank deposits, a tax that became voluntary in 1999. While the programme targeted widows, gender equality was not a core objective and it had little impact on gender relations.

Almost 30 years later, in 2008, the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme (BISP), an unconditional cash transfer programme, was launched by the Pakistan People’s Party as a response to the food, fuel and financial crisis. Some civil society activists have criticised the programme, arguing that its rapid implementation represented a ‘vote bank’ for the ruling party. Others maintain that it is motivated by a desire to smooth the consumption patterns of the poor amid mounting food inflation. The programme heralds greater commitment by the government to tackle gendered experiences of poverty and vulnerability, with the family defined as a unit headed by a woman. How this effects gender relations in practice should be monitored in the coming years.

Source: Khan and Qutub, 2010

Another key group is civil society. In Africa and Asia, international NGOs have influenced social protection discourse, although the focus on gender equality has not been as strong as hoped, partly because of the focus on age groups by such NGOs as Save the Children and HelpAge, or on communities that face particular exclusion and vulnerability, such as Oxfam’s work on pastoral communities.

In Latin America and South Asia, domestic civil society actors have been more influential, especially in Bangladesh where BRAC has broken new ground in social protection programming to support women’s productive and social capital. Some gender equality champions in Bangladesh, India and Peru have promoted equal wages for women, sensitivity to their time poverty, or linkages to complementary programmes that tackle gender discrimination. However, gender equality activists have been less prominent in social protection than in other areas such as political participation, human and labour rights. Women’s movements may not have moved away from their more traditional policy strongholds sufficiently enough to wield strategic influence over new programme areas, such as social protection. The reasons may include a general tendency for gender equality movements to focus less on issues affecting the poorest; the narrow income and consumption focus of many social protection programmes; and the funding pressures that keep women’s NGOs siloed rather than helping them engage effectively with social protection as a cross-sectoral issue.

Finally, donors, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, are critical actors in social protection. While the focus has been largely on social protection to help the poor and vulnerable harness the benefits of economic growth (e.g. DFID, GTZ, ILO, World Bank) this



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approach has not been couched in a broader equitable framework to date in the same way that UNICEF and UNIFEM, for instance, have highlighted the importance of equity and social inclusion. However, with the exception of UNIFEM, a small player in the field, gender dynamics have received little attention from donor agencies working on social protection as part of either economic growth or social change, reflecting a general weakness in gender mainstreaming outside a few key donor sectors. This is changing in the exploration of the potential of social protection to enhance girls' educational achievement and reproductive health, in the context of the broader agenda of the Millennium Development Goals. But it has yet to receive the resourcing that a more systematic approach demands.

Ideas matter

Political economy analysts emphasise the centrality of ideas (e.g. Hickey and Bracking, 2005). This is certainly the case with social protection where divergent contours of national social protection systems reflect a wide range of ideas about poverty, the purpose of social protection and the role of the state. In Ethiopia and India, large-scale public works schemes have been informed by public distrust of social protection interventions 'that create dependence' but support for the right of everyone to have access to work to support their families. Similarly, both Ghana's cash transfer programme LEAP and Mexico's subsidised crèche scheme, *Estancias*, have been framed in terms of harnessing the productive capacities of all citizens, including women, to contribute to broader national economic development goals. Support for comprehensive approaches to tackle gender-specific vulnerabilities has been rare, as gender relations are often seen as the purview of individual families and cultural or religious groups and not, therefore, an area for state intervention.

Policy recommendations

The links between gender, economic growth and development are recognised increasingly by main-

stream development actors, but have yet to gain real traction within social protection debates, policy and practice. We have highlighted key constraints related to gender and the political economy of social protection – the ways in which women and men experience poverty and vulnerability. And we have highlighted the fact that gender dynamics are not yet integrated adequately into institutions, the interests of stakeholders or, very importantly, ideas on social protection programming and practice.

In operationalising the insights from political economy analysis, Sam Hickey (2007: 12) has argued that a key challenge is to identify and support 'politically progressive constituencies or drivers of change'. We would add the need to secure political buy-in for gender-sensitive social protection and our analysis suggests four critical policy steps:

- Assist those designing national social protection strategies to source evidence creatively on the different experiences of poverty and vulnerability for women and men, so that they can position gender equality as central to social protection objectives.
- Support champions of gender equality in forging alliances with those promoting social protection, to better integrate gender into every aspect of social protection policies and programmes. This could include helping gender equality advocates to frame strategic gender-specific demands that resonate with wider ideas on social protection, institutional mandates and the interests of key actors.
- Advocate for more investment in tailored capacity strengthening within social protection strategies and programmes to address the lack of capacity among social protection actors.
- Invest in community sensitisation initiatives so that everyone – not just those participating in the programme – has a better understanding of, and can support, gender-sensitive social protection programmes.

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