

Social protection programming: the need for a gender lens

Targeting women does not automatically address gender inequality

Key points

- The extent to which gender is integrated into social protection approaches has been uneven
- Harnessing the potential of social protection to transform gender relations requires strategic linkages with complementary programmes and the inclusion of men and boys
- Social protection interventions must invest in disaggregated data and analysis to make gender visible in programme design, implementation and evaluation

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Social protection is an increasingly popular response to poverty and vulnerability, but gender issues have been integrated unevenly at best. Many programmes assume that targeting women will, in itself, address gender inequality, and while this is an important first step, the role of gender in social protection is more complex. The promotion of gender equality is often a secondary or indirect programme objective and social protection has often reinforced the traditional roles of women and girls, men and boys. Few programmes have harnessed the potential for a transformation of gender relations that would improve the impact of programmes on poverty and vulnerability.

This Briefing Paper draws on multi-country primary research on the incorporation of gender issues into the design and implementation of a range of social protection instruments. The research, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), was carried out with national partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A mixed methods approach combined key informant interviews, household surveys, focus group discussions and life histories with men, women and children across the lifecycle (Holmes and Jones, 2010).

Gender, poverty and vulnerability

There is growing recognition that poverty is not only about income, but about social risks such as discrimination, unequal distribution of resources and power in households and limited citizenship (CPRC, 2008). Gender inequality cuts across economic and social risks, influencing how poverty and vulnerability are experienced.

Women are less likely to participate in the



In many countries, such as Ghana, domestic responsibilities prevent women participating in economic activities.

labour force than men and, despite new job opportunities in some countries, they are still represented disproportionately in low-skill, low-wage casual employment, receiving lower salaries than men for the same jobs. Employment and income for rural women tend to be seasonal, and women are often held back by traditional views of what is seen as 'acceptable' work for women and a lack of satisfactory childcare. These challenges are often compounded by environmental shocks that affect women and children in particular, undermining food security and the availability of firewood and clean water that are, in general, collected by women and girls.

Social risks can be even more important than economic sources of vulnerability. Women have less access to services and finances as a result of institutional bias and cultural norms, and own fewer assets than men even where laws entitle them to equal ownership. In India, for instance, women constitute two-thirds of the agricultural workforce, but own less than one-tenth of agricultural land (NAWO, 2008). Time poverty is

another concern. A recent survey in Viet Nam, for instance, found that economically active rural women spent seven hours a day on domestic tasks, while their male partners spent 30 minutes on such chores (Le Anh, 2006).

Household tensions, including physical violence, male control over resources and decision-making are also significant sources of social vulnerability. Women's participation in decision-making at community level is critical, but even where this has been promoted, for example through quotas in local government in south Asia, they have often failed to ensure meaningful and quality participation.

Gender-sensitive programme design

The extent to which gender inequality is incorporated into the design of social protection policies and programmes varies, but is, in general, limited. Two exceptions are Mexico's subsidised crèche scheme, *Estancias*, which aims to increase women's participation in the paid workforce by supporting their care work responsibilities, and Bangladesh's asset transfer programme, Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (CFPR), which promotes women's economic and social empowerment.

Few programmes, however, have the empowerment of girls and women or the transformation of gender relations as primary programme goals. In some cases, the only consideration of gender is the inclusion of women as a target beneficiary group. Other programmes ignore gender altogether. Such sidelining of gender equality has resulted in a narrow conceptualisation of the different vulnerabilities faced by women and men and a focus on supporting the traditional household responsibilities of women (e.g. as the recipients of cash or in-kind transfers). Other programmes have limited their economic participation to sectors with low growth and incomes, rather than promoting opportunities in more remunerative growth sectors, or challenging unequal divisions of household labour and women's low status.

There are, however, gender-sensitive design features in a number of programmes. Cash transfers and some subsidy programmes have supported girls' education and promoted better access to and use of health care and other basic social services. Programmes to support economic participation (public works, asset transfer and subsidised childcare programmes) have tried to tackle gender inequalities by promoting women's participation and equal wages in economic activities.

A number of programmes do also recognise the importance of social risks. For instance, social protection programmes that recognise how domestic responsibilities can prevent women – and in the case of Mexico, also single male parents – from engaging in economic activities, provide alternative childcare arrangements. Both India and Ethiopia's public works programmes include childcare provision, and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)

goes further by providing flexible working hours for women and offers pregnant or nursing women in labour-constrained households direct support (through cash or food transfers) instead of waged manual labour. Efforts are also made to create community assets that reduce women's time poverty, such as developing fuel wood and water collection sources close to villages, or to compensate for the labour shortages characteristic among female-headed households by using public works labour to support agricultural work on land that is owned privately by such households. In the Bangladesh asset transfer programme and cash transfers in Peru and Ghana, important linkages to complementary services and programmes aim to address social risks by raising awareness around gender-based violence and promoting access to civic documentation. CFPR also recognises that women's participation in the programme could exacerbate household tensions and has accordingly sensitised male members of the household to the benefits of women's participation for the entire household.

One challenge faced by many programmes is the assumption that the transfer of economic resources to women will automatically translate into their empowerment in the household and beyond. However, few have prioritised transforming intra-household relations in their design to ensure that increased household income or benefits are allocated equally or to challenge inequalities in decision-making, ownership or divisions of labour in the household.

Peru's *Juntos* and Bangladesh's CFPR programme are exceptions in that they link cash/asset transfers to an explicit focus on economic and social objectives. They do this by situating social protection in a broader social equity framework to enhance women's rights and citizenship at household and community level. Both programmes include links to services and programmes to address gender-based violence and early marriage, while raising awareness about the need for more egalitarian distribution of domestic and care work responsibilities – seen as critical for progress towards core programme objectives. Peru's *Juntos* also includes a birth registration requirement, which benefits female-headed households that have struggled to gain access to services and public programmes because they lack identity papers.

Some programmes have also promoted the participation of women in programme governance structures and community meetings to ensure effective programme implementation. In India, for example, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) guidelines recommend that women are represented in the social audit forum (a grassroots monitoring mechanism), and in Ethiopia, women are supposed to account for 30% of the participants in community discussions about the community assets to be constructed with public works labour. The CFPR programme in Bangladesh encourages women to participate in the specially created Village Poverty Reduction Committees (com-

prised of local elites) which aims, in part, to increase women's social capital. The *Juntos* programme in Peru goes further, promoting women's participation and leadership at community level by promoting women as community facilitators to act as links between programme implementers and beneficiaries.

Translating design into implementation

Given the mixed record in integrating gender into programme design, it is not surprising that social protection has positive and negative impacts on gender equality. The translation of a programme design document into practice is always an imperfect science, as programmes are not implemented in a vacuum but interact with pre-existing socio-economic, institutional and cultural conditions and systems. Our research has highlighted that stable middle-income countries have much stronger institutional capacity, allowing cross-sectoral linkages and rigorous evaluation processes.

A number of programmes generate important individual benefits, including impacts on gender inequality. Women represent approximately 40% of the workers in India and Ethiopia's public works programmes, for example, addressing (in part) their lower economic participation rates. Public works programmes have also provided equal wages for men and women. This has had an impact in India, for instance, where women in private agricultural employment receive around Rs. 30 a day, compared to the Rs. 45 a day received by men. Under MGNREGA, however, they receive the same wage of around Rs. 90 in some parts of Madhya Pradesh.

In Ethiopia and Bangladesh there are small but positive signs of women programme participants entering better paid and less abusive forms of work. Teenage girls and young women in Ethiopia's Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region reported that the social protection programme had reduced their need to work as domestic employees, work that exposed them to abuse and low pay. In Mexico, the subsidised childcare scheme, *Estancias*, has promoted greater labour market participation among women who can now work more hours on a regular basis and thereby secure more stable and better paying jobs. It has also allowed some beneficiaries – particularly young single women – to enter tertiary education.

The challenges in programme implementation can, however, have a negative impact on women and gender relations. Assumptions about 'appropriate' types of work and pay for women and for men means, for example, that men still receive higher wages and that women have fewer days of work in public works programmes. In both Ethiopia and India the provision of childcare facilities is rare, despite its inclusion in programme design. In Bangladesh, Ethiopia and India many women can only access their income through their husbands because they do not have their own bank accounts or because cultural attitudes restrict their mobility to go to the market. As such, prevail-

ing socio-cultural attitudes combined with limited programme officer knowledge and capacities, means that gender aspects of programme design are rarely prioritised or demanded.

At the household level, a wide range of social protection interventions have helped participant households to better meet their immediate needs. Increased income, enhanced social capital and access to loans and credit have smoothed income and consumption, particularly in the face of seasonal risks and vulnerability to natural events, and supported increased expenditure on food, health, education and immediate household items. These have helped to meet women's practical needs, given their responsibility for managing the household (Molyneux, 1985).

The intra-household impact of social protection has, however, been mixed. Interventions have supported children's schooling, health and nutrition. The Raskin programme in Indonesia, for example, shows that the income saved by the rice subsidy is spent on children's schooling and that beneficiary families prioritise children's food needs. The impact on relations between men and women at the household level is more complex. In Peru, for example, women's involvement in the programme and in complementary activities such as awareness raising meetings has increased their mobility, but has, in some cases, exacerbated their time poverty. Elsewhere, some programmes have exacerbated or created tensions in the household, especially where participation has meant a shift in women's roles or responsibilities. In Bangladesh, this tension was anticipated, and programme implementers worked with men to accept women's participation in the programme from its inception.

In Mexico and Peru, male opposition has started to decline as men see the benefits of the programme and are more supportive of women's participation in community meetings. Linking recipients in Peru with complementary programmes and visibly enhancing women's leadership in the community have been critical to reduce gender-based violence and support changes in the household division of labour. This is particularly so among the younger generation, with men taking on more domestic tasks when women attend programme meetings.

At the community level, women report that their participation in social protection programmes has increased their household's participation in informal community activities. However, evidence suggests only limited impact to date on women's active involvement in programme governance structures or community meetings and decision-making. Cultural and social norms still prevent their active engagement in decision-making at the community level, and women are also excluded when meetings are held at times that clash with their domestic responsibilities.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The focus on gender in social protection policy and programming has been uneven, partly as a result of



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complex political economy dynamics (see Jones and Holmes, 2010). To address this, social protection should be informed by a clear analysis of the different ways in which men, women and children experience economic and social vulnerability. Programmes with strong and well-coordinated links to complementary programmes and services are vital. Social protection instruments that are part of a broad package of social and economic policy objectives are more likely to help to transform gender relations among men, women, boys and girls. Strong linkages are needed, for example, across health and reproductive health services, social development and rights awareness training, credit access and employment training.

The implementation of gender-related social protection programme components has to date been weak, undermining the potential of gender-sensitive programme design. Tackling this requires more attention for political economy factors, and developing tailored and ongoing capacity-building for programme implementers as well as sensitising programme participants about gender-related programme aims. It is also critical to promote learning within and across countries about promising practice in gender-sensitive design and implementation. Our research suggests that gender-sensitive social protection for specific instruments can be strengthened as follows.

Public works programmes can be enhanced to achieve desired outcomes through:

- sensitivity to women’s changing needs throughout their lifecycle and their income generation responsibilities, including support for nursing and pregnant women, childcare facilities that are culturally sensitive, and flexible working hours
- equal wages for men and women, and ensuring that women have access to their own income
- providing work in line with men’s and women’s skill sets, as well as household labour availability
- investing in community assets that reduce women’s vulnerabilities, such as time poverty
- encouraging the involvement of women in programme governance, especially in defining community assets to be built via public works labour
- promoting institutional linkages, such as access to agricultural extension and rural financial services
- embedding sex-disaggregated monitoring and evaluation indicators within programme design.

Cash and asset transfers are often assumed to be gender-friendly, but more could be done including:

- links to complementary programmes such as vocational, extension and financial services and awareness-raising, to leverage gains from cash targeted at women and enhance their capacities for, and access to, work that is adequately paid. A single registry database can facilitate such linkages
- capitalising on community interactions to provide awareness-raising opportunities about rights and entitlements to state services and programmes
- careful assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of conditional transfers. Those designed to address girls’ specific vulnerabilities to lower human capital development opportunities and protection deficits can raise public awareness, as can activities to promote women’s skills and community participation. But they may also exacerbate women’s disproportionate time poverty, and need careful monitoring
- promoting the active involvement of men if a conditional and community approach is adopted
- involving women in programme governance and decision-making, backed by mentoring and capacity building to ensure meaningful participation.

Subsidy programmes could be strengthened by:

- a clear assessment of how women and men experience vulnerability to inform the design of subsidy programmes. For example, health care subsidies can be crucial for women, given the different disease patterns, the gender-related barriers to accessing healthcare and the reliance on women’s assets to cover health costs
- combining subsidy programmes with complementary initiatives to tackle non-financial barriers to services, including language and literacy barriers
- monitoring and evaluating the gender impact of subsidy programmes to strengthen programme effectiveness
- ensuring that subsidy programmes that include productive work linkages (e.g. vocational training), invest in high quality trainers and give participants the chance to build skills in areas for which there is solid market demand.

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