

# Gender and social protection: current issues and policy trends<sup>1</sup>

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**Gender matters in social protection** because gender inequalities are a source of risk and vulnerability which are also reflected in the different ways that people experience poverty. This webinar sought to highlight the main issues for policy and research in the area of gender-sensitive social protection, summarising the existing evidence on how social protection empowers girls and women.

Among the research gaps pointed out by Nicola Jones is the question of the gender of the transfer recipients: in which situations should women/girls or female-headed households be preferentially targeted? Which mechanisms can be used to avoid unintended effects of this choice (e.g. increases in domestic violence)? Agnes Quisumbing also questioned: when it comes to the gender of the recipient, is there a counterfactual for targeting women/female-headed households? Does having women as recipients of cash transfers targeted at children reinforce the already gender-differentiated roles in the household and the community? How do we define empowerment, and if it is an objective for social protection, which design and implementation features help to promote it?

Quisumbing pointed out that there is not much empirical evidence on targeting transfers at women versus men, but a new generation of studies randomising by gender who gets the transfer may expand this knowledge base. The studies discussed during the presentation (on the differentiated impacts on women's decision-making among beneficiary families from urban and rural areas of *Bolsa Família*, as well as different studies from Bangladesh to Ecuador regarding programmes' impacts on gender-based violence) contribute to the conclusion that, when it comes to gender-related impacts of social protection programmes, we cannot generalise in absolute terms: the geographical and socio-cultural contexts matter.

On the other hand, when it comes to measuring women's empowerment, there are very few internationally used measures. Quisumbing highlighted the Women's Economic Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) as one potential measure which focuses on the productive sphere. However, the social protection field still lacks a specific measure of women's empowerment, and the presenter suggested that maybe one solution would be to adapt the WEAI to include indicators related to social protection. De la O Campos pointed out that even though social protection is not necessarily meant to empower women, it provides a great opportunity to do so, as it facilitates women's access to resources and can increase their decision-making power. In making social protection more gender-sensitive, De la O Campos argued, the focus needs to be on ensuring that social protection reaches everyone equally throughout their lifecycle as an individual right, then also on empowering women economically.

In particular, Jones highlighted that adolescents "fall through the cracks" in a world of social protection interventions focused mainly on other target groups. This is problematic, given that critical development dividends can take place in this period of life, and today we have the largest generation of youth in history, with 88 per cent of them living in developing countries. A focus on adolescents means that interventions need to take into consideration age-specific health services and opportunities for civic participation, as well as specific channels/networks through which they can be reached. More than 70 million adolescents do not attend secondary school, and many of those who do fail to complete their studies or lack the skills to meet the demands of the labour market—a situation made worse by the recent global economic crisis.

Nevertheless, very few programmes have sought to reach out to this demographic cohort. Among the interventions highlighted are education grants being implemented in Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Kenya aiming at tackling gender disparities in enrolment, combating HIV-related risks among adolescent girls and decreasing school dropout and delaying sexual debut; the differentiated benefit level provided to adolescent girls in Mexico's *Oportunidades*, which sought to address gender discrimination in access to education; and Uganda's *Suubi* economic empowerment programme, which promoted sustainable livelihood measures aiming at increasing the assets of beneficiary families, resulting in positive impacts on the self-esteem and behaviour of adolescent girls.

Moving forward, we need to know why we are seeing positive impacts in certain domains (and adverse effects too), by integrating more qualitative work in quantitative impact evaluations. Regarding the different types of interventions, each social protection scheme will be more or less relevant depending on its context and other factors. Cash transfers, however, seem to be particularly powerful when careful considerations are taken about their design and implementation as well as monitoring of gender-related outcomes. Finally, De la O Campos highlighted the importance of the complementarity of social protection with other social policies such as child care, which facilitates women's participation in the labour market.

## References:

IPC-IG and FAO. 2016a. "Gender and Social Protection: Current Issues and Policy Trends." Socialprotection.org website. <<http://socialprotection.org/gender-and-social-protection-current-issues-and-policy-trends>>. Accessed 30 May 2016.

IPC-IG and FAO. 2016b. "Webinar presentation - Gender and Social Protection: Current Issues and Policy Trends." Socialprotection.org website. Accessed 30 May 2016. <<http://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/webinar-presentation-gender-and-social-protection-current-issues-and-policy>>.

## Note:

1. This One Pager is a summary of webinar, which is part of a series on gender-sensitive social protection, a joint initiative between the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. It was held on 3 May 2016 and featured a presentation by Nicola Jones (Overseas Development Institute—ODI) and interventions from Agnes Quisumbing (International Food Policy Research Institute—IFPRI) and Ana Paula de la O Campos (FAO).