

Gender and social protection in South Asia: an assessment of non-contributory programmes

Charlotte Bilo, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

Social protection has received increased attention as a measure to reduce poverty and vulnerability and achieve social transformation, including the reduction of gender inequality. Although South Asia has made remarkable progress in terms of human development in recent years, the region still faces significant gender disparities. Discriminatory social norms and structural factors lead to the neglect of girls' and women's rights in all areas of life. As a result, girls and women continue to face serious challenges in terms of health, nutrition, education and employment. Social protection systems that respond to these risks are, therefore, of utmost importance in the region.

Against this background, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and UNICEF's Regional Office for South Asia have partnered to analyse the extent to which South Asia's non-contributory social protection programmes have been designed in a gender-sensitive way (Tebaldi and Bilo 2019). A total of 50 programmes were reviewed across the eight countries in South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In addition, the study aims to review the evidence regarding the programmes' impact on gender outcomes.

Programme objectives generally did not include specific gender considerations. Where they did, they are commonly related to barriers to education, maternity health, income-related risks or the vulnerabilities of single and widowed women. However, only limited evidence of the follow-up on progress in these areas was found in the programmes' monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Most countries have programmes that either target or prioritise women in general or pregnant women, mothers, widows and single women specifically. Yet few programmes were found to explicitly target adolescent girls, which represents a major gap given the particular vulnerabilities of this group. There are also still barriers to be addressed to raise people's awareness of these programmes.

A variety of payment mechanisms are used to deliver social protection benefits in the region, including banks, mobile payments and post offices. Existing assessments have shown that multi-layered and complex payment mechanisms often increase women's time burden.

Regarding the provision of complementary services, it is important not to reinforce gender roles through them, by also including fathers in activities related to child nutrition, for instance. However, this has rarely been found to be the case in South Asia.

- Though most programmes were found to provide gender-disaggregated information on beneficiaries, monitoring and evaluation needs to be strengthened to understand the impact (whether positive or negative) that programmes have on gender outcomes, not only in terms of health, education and nutrition, but also in terms of women's empowerment and gender norms.

- Social accountability mechanisms, including social audits, community monitoring and grievance redress mechanisms also need to be improved, as there were many reports of malfunctioning. Moreover, little evidence was found on how complaints and suggestions actually feed back into programme reform.
- Looking specifically at cash transfers, it can be observed that many programmes focus on maternity-related outcomes. Here, it is important that these programmes are accompanied by robust grievance redress systems that can capture women's complaints and feed them back into the supply side.
- In terms of public works programmes, quotas for women and vulnerable groups, provisions for equal wages, child-care and breastfeeding facilities and breaks as well as flexible working hours are all measures that can be strengthened.
- School feeding programmes need to become more accountable in terms of women's involvement in programme implementation. The expectation that mothers will provide supervision in programme implementation without compensation risks putting more pressure on a group that is already overburdened with unpaid care work.

The review of impact evaluations of the programmes analysed showed that maternal health is an area where demand-side programmes have shown to increase service utilisation; however, service quality also needs to be improved. Regarding food security, nutrition, education and employment, findings point to rather heterogeneous impacts, which vary considerably depending on beneficiaries' age and gender. Furthermore, very few studies looked specifically at programmes' impacts on gender norms and attitudes. The inclusion of more qualitative evidence could help gain a more nuanced understanding of how gender inequalities play out in different contexts.

In summary, the review has shown that despite some positive examples, governments in the region still have to invest significantly to make their social protection systems more gender-sensitive, and in turn advance gender equality in the region. In particular, the lack of comprehensive grievance and complaints mechanisms as well as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be addressed. The assessment has also highlighted the importance of conducting gender assessments prior to implementation, as they help ensure that context-specific vulnerabilities and needs are included in the design of programmes.

Reference:

Tebaldi, R., and C. Bilo. 2019. *Gender and social protection in South Asia: an assessment of non-contributory programmes*. Brasília and Kathmandu: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and UNICEF Regional Office South Asia.