



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

This publication is one of the outputs of the UN to UN agreement between the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Regional Office South Asia (ROSA).

The International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) is a partnership between the United Nations and the Government of Brazil to promote learning on social policies. The IPC-IG is linked to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Brazil, the Ministry of Economy (ME) and the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) of the Government of Brazil.

Research team

Research Coordinators

Charlotte Bilo (IPC-IG)

Raquel Tebaldi (IPC-IG)

Researchers

Anna Carolina Machado (IPC-IG)

Carolina Bloch (IPC-IG)

Luca Lazzarini (IPC-IG)

Nicolo Bird (IPC-IG)

Pedro Arruda (IPC-IG)

Rafael Guerreiro Osorio (Ipea and IPC-IG)

Wesley Silva (IPC-IG)

Research Assistants

Juliana Bernardino, Nurth Palomo and Lea Smidt

Designed by the IPC-IG Publications team:

Roberto Astorino, Flávia Amaral, Priscilla Minari and Manoel Salles

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

ISSN: 2526-0499

GENDER AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SOUTH ASIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE DESIGN OF NON-CONTRIBUTORY PROGRAMMES

Designed by the IPC-IG Publications team: Roberto Astorino, Flávia Amaral, Priscilla Minari and Manoel Salles



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the first in a series of knowledge products about social protection in the South Asia region that are being produced by a partnership between the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and the UNICEF Regional Office South Asia (ROSA).

We would like to express our thanks to Abdul Alim (UNICEF ROSA) for his support throughout the elaboration of this report. We are especially grateful to Maja Gavrilovic for her valuable feedback on a previous version of this report. Lastly, we would also like to thank Juliana Bernardino, Nurth Palomo and Lea Smidt for their research assistance.

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Introduction

Social protection has received increased attention as a measure to reduce poverty and vulnerability and achieve social transformation, including the reduction of gender inequality. According to the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B 2019), to contribute to gender equality, social protection systems should address life cycle risks, increase access to services and sustainable infrastructure and promote women's and girls' economic empowerment, voice and agency.

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. 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.

Methodology

The assessment of the programmes' design features was based on information publicly available in English, including government websites, programme manuals, and reports published by third parties. The assessment criteria were based on the most up-to-date toolkits and guidelines produced by international organisations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UN Women and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

The assessment of each individual programme tried to answer the following questions:

- Are gender equality issues or awareness of gender-based vulnerabilities reflected in the programme's objectives? If yes, which ones?
- Are gender- and age-specific vulnerabilities taken into account in the targeting process?
- Have specific outreach and/or communications activities been conducted to reach particularly vulnerable groups and inform citizens about the programme?
- Which delivery mechanisms are used?
- Are complementary services (related to health, education or nutrition) or training offered?
- Does the programme collect gender-disaggregated data (e.g. number of male and female beneficiaries)?
- Does the programme evaluate gender-related outcomes?

- Does the programme rely on community monitoring or social audits?
- Is a grievance redress mechanism available?

For cash transfer programmes:

- Are conditionalities part of the programme? If yes, which ones, and are any attempts made to avoid possible negative impacts (e.g. through the use of soft conditionalities)?
- Who is the main benefit recipient (mother, head of household, guardian/caregiver)?

For public works programmes:

- Are quotas for women's participation used? Is the allocation of less physically intense tasks possible for women or for vulnerable groups?
- Are child-care and/or breastfeeding facilities and breaks or flexible working hours offered?
- Are there provisions for equal pay?
- Are there incentives for women to take on leadership roles?
- Do women participate in the decision-making about which community assets to build, or is there a prioritisation of assets that directly meet their needs?

For school feeding programmes:

- Are incentives provided for girls' participation (e.g. take-home rations for girls)?
- Are women involved in the programme? If yes, how (e.g. as cooks)?

The review of the programmes' gender-related impacts was limited to experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations with gender-disaggregated results and/or with specific analysis of gender-related outcomes, including indicators related to health, education and empowerment as well as gender norms. The search was conducted within three weeks (between 22 January and 12 February 2019) using Google Scholar as well as the PEP and 3IE databases.

Gender-based vulnerabilities in South Asia

Despite progress in some countries, South Asia as a whole still faces severe issues in terms of gender inequality. Legal and social discrimination against women prevents the realisation of gender equality. As a result, women still face significant gaps in terms of access to land, autonomous decision-making and mobility. The prevalence and acceptance of **gender-based violence**, including child marriage, still remain high across the region. The region is also the only one in the world that presents statistically significant bias in **poverty** rates against women (Boudet et al. 2018). Moreover, social norms related to **nutrition** (such as the practice of women eating last and least) contribute to some of the worst undernutrition rates worldwide. Sex-selective abortion and a neglect of girls'

health have resulted in a historically **unbalanced sex ratio**. Despite women's educational gains and the economic growth experienced in the region over past years, women's **labour force participation** in South Asia remains one of the lowest in the world. Many women are trapped in low-paid and vulnerable work, and one of the factors keeping women from entering the labour market is their disproportionate burden of unpaid work. As a result, coverage rates of contributory schemes among women remain low, making the need for gender-sensitive non-contributory systems even more urgent.

Key findings

Programme objectives generally did not include specific gender considerations. Where they did, they have been found to more commonly tackle barriers to education, maternity health and/or income-related risks, widowhood or the vulnerabilities of single women and single parents, and barriers to the labour market. However, only limited evidence of significant follow-up on progress in these areas was found within programmes' monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Most countries have programmes that either **target or prioritise** women in general (including female-headed households) or pregnant women, mothers, widows and single women specifically. **Few programmes were found to explicitly target adolescent girls**, which represents a major gap given the particular vulnerabilities of this group. Some programmes were found to have provisions for **outreach and communications activities**; however, there are 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, post offices and other options. Existing assessments have shown that multi-layered and complex payment mechanisms, in combination with capacity constraints, can often increase women's time burden. It is, therefore, important to carry out more in-depth assessments to understand the difficulties that beneficiaries may have in accessing their benefits, as well as their preferences, so that the payment system can be adopted accordingly. In some cases, complementary measures, such as financial literacy training, are a good way to address existing challenges.

Where policies and programmes remain confined in their own sectors, there might be missed opportunities to address gender-based vulnerabilities. Activities that have been identified mostly focus on nutrition and health, but there are also programmes seeking to provide linkages to financial literacy, training in asset creation and productive activities, as well as skills development. Regarding the provision of **complementary services**, it is important not to reinforce gender roles through them—for instance, by also including fathers in activities related to child nutrition. This has rarely been found to be the case in South Asia. Moreover, training in productive activities and skills development can be strengthened to promote women's participation in the labour market. The assessment also showed that it is important that these are adapted to the local context and beneficiaries' needs and that they are designed in a way that they do not further increase women's time burden.

Though most programmes were found to provide gender-disaggregated information on beneficiaries, **monitoring and evaluation** needs to be strengthened to understand programmes' impact (whether positive or negative) on gender outcomes, not only in terms of health, education and nutrition outcomes, but also in terms of women's empowerment and gender norms, including changes in women's decision-making power and mobility. Another area which requires more research is the impact of programmes on women's time use. Different methods, including qualitative research, can be used to assess this.

Social accountability mechanisms, including social audits, community monitoring and grievance redressal mechanisms, 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**, many programmes focus on maternal health-related outcomes. Here it has been shown to be important that these programmes are accompanied by robust grievance redress systems that can capture women's complaints and feed them back into both the demand-side intervention and also to health service providers. Overall, it can be observed that relatively few programmes are attached to conditionalities in the region, though stipend or scholarship programmes are an exception.

In terms of public works, much more can be done to ensure women's participation in work activities on more equal terms. Quotas for women and vulnerable groups, provisions for equal wages, child-care and breastfeeding facilities and breaks and flexible working hours are all measures that can be strengthened. Moreover, incentives for women to take on leadership roles and for women's participation in decision-making about which community assets to build can also promote more positive gender outcomes.

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 typically overburdened with unpaid care work.

The review of the programmes' **impact evaluations**, though with mixed impacts for several outcomes, has also demonstrated the potential for significant impacts in terms of the gender equality of social protection programmes. **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. It is important to ensure that the lessons learned from the growing body of evidence feed back into programme design and implementation. Furthermore, very few studies looked specifically at programmes' impacts on **gender norms and attitudes**. However, there is some promising evidence from Afghanistan and Pakistan. More investment in understanding these issues is needed, as is the inclusion of more qualitative evidence in impact evaluation for a more nuanced understanding of how gender inequalities play out in different contexts.

Conclusion

Gender disparities remain high in the South Asia region, yet at the same time there is growing recognition of the potential of social protection programmes, including for the promotion of gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. This study 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.

One of the **key gaps identified** relates to the lack of comprehensive **grievance and complaints mechanisms**, limiting women's ability to make their voices heard and the possibilities of improving the programme. In addition, programmes' **monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** need to be enhanced, as they currently rarely focus on gender outcomes. The review has also shown the importance of conducting **gender assessments** prior to implementation, as they can be key in making social protection programmes more gender-sensitive by taking context-specific vulnerabilities and needs into account. Finally, while the design of programmes is the first step to make programmes more gender-sensitive, their implementation is also crucial. Future assessments should also focus on programme implementation, which will be key for identifying gaps, informing policy reform and improving programme design and gender-specific provisions.



International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth

SBS, Quadra 1, Bloco J, Ed. BNDES, 13º andar
70076-900 Brasília, DF - Brazil
Telephone: +55 61 2105 5000

ipc@ipc-undp.org • www.ipcig.org