

Social protection and the empowerment of rural women in Africa¹

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The second webinar in the ‘Gender-Sensitive Social Protection’ series explored the potential of social protection to contribute to the empowerment of rural women, focusing on the African region. Amber Peterman discussed the evidence behind two common assumptions underpinning the targeting of cash transfer programmes: that targeting women as the recipients of benefits will lead to spending cash in a more ‘family-friendly’ way, and that social protection programmes will necessarily empower beneficiary women. In both instances, where rigorous studies exist, the current evidence is mixed.

Peterman presented the findings from research on two transfer projects that considered the effects of unconditional child grant programmes in Lesotho and Zambia. With regard to gender-differentiated impacts on child-specific outcomes, in Lesotho the programme had a strong positive impact on school enrolment and time spent in school (mainly driven by girls) and on a reduction of farm work (mainly driven by boys) for children aged 13–17. These gendered outcomes were also influenced by the household structure (male- or female-headed), in that the outcomes in female-headed households tended to favour boys (possibly because these households are typically more labour-constrained and relied more on the labour of boys prior to the transfer), and also by who receives the benefit within a dual-adult household (mother or father): receipt by the father was found to have more positive impacts on girls’ schooling and on decreasing the incidence of farm labour among boys, while simultaneously increasing the labour input from boys in domestic tasks.

In Zambia, the cash received by women did not dramatically change intra-household dynamics, including classic ‘bargaining power’ aspects of women’s decision-making, though there were subtle positive changes in women’s empowerment, mostly because they were able to control the cash and use it for saving and income generation purposes. These results highlight that cash transfers have a potential to decrease gender inequality, but further analysis is needed regarding how gender-based targeting matters, how to measure women’s empowerment and how to apply empowerment indicators in different contexts.

Markus Goldstein’s presentation focused on three types of interventions (youth-oriented job training, business development and asset-related programmes) and their impacts on girls’ and women’s empowerment. Randomised controlled trials for job training programmes in Liberia showed that savings grew, while in Uganda there was an increase in income-generating activities, women spent more money on themselves, and fertility and rape indicators declined. Preliminary results from business development programmes in Togo demonstrate that personal initiative training programmes show very promising results compared to standard business training, while

in Malawi business registration with banking information sessions worked well in terms of increasing the number of formal businesses, the use of banking services and in boosting profits for men and women equally. Finally, land registration programmes in Rwanda and Benin also demonstrate that promoting better and more secure asset ownership rights to women leads to a higher investment in land. Goldstein noted the importance of the emerging convergence from social protection stakeholders and business development practitioners on the role of integrated interventions (also known as ‘cash plus’ or ‘training plus’ measures). While this may lead to challenges for donors and governments to coordinate and harmonise these interventions effectively, these innovative approaches present an opportunity to promote resilient livelihoods and gender equality outcomes more sustainably.

The discussant Leisa Perch highlighted the need to situate the gender inequality discussion within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. Important questions arose from the presentation. What is the role of social protection in responding to structural issues of gender inequality? How do we provide the tools and services (including business development initiatives) to promote women’s empowerment? Especially relevant was the question of how to address the issue of women’s empowerment in decision-making within households. The instrumental role often attributed to women in social protection programming does not seem to necessarily lead to the best results for households and the well-being of individual members, as is commonly assumed. Programmes need to ensure that they are not limiting women’s roles to caregiving, but to also promote their economic roles in the household and in the community, expanding women’s rights to economic development. Perch stressed that both presentations provided a wide spectrum of interventions that can address the issue of gender inequality, and that different ‘packages’ of interventions need to be adapted to different contexts, not only at the country level, but also at the community level. These complementary approaches also present opportunities for governments and donors to work together more effectively—not just driven by specific tools, but mainly by establishing common goals and objectives.

Reference:

IPC-IG and FAO. 2016a. “Social protection and the empowerment of rural women in Africa – Presentation.” Social Protection website <<http://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/social-protection-and-empowerment-rural-women-africa-presentation>>. Accessed 29 July 2016.

Note:

1. This webinar 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 of the United Nations (FAO) to foster a community of practice to promote gender equality in social protection. It was held on 23 June 2016 and featured contributions from Amber Peterman (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre), Markus Goldstein (World Bank) and Leisa Perch (UN Women – Mozambique).

This publication is part of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) supported project: “Brazil & Africa: fighting poverty and empowering women via South-South Cooperation”.