

Gender-sensitive social protection in the Caribbean¹

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The fifth webinar in the gender-sensitive social protection series focused on the Caribbean region. Bénédicte Leroy de la Brière's presentation questioned whether adopting a gender-sensitive approach to social protection enhances the poverty reduction effectiveness of programmes, highlighting the state of knowledge regarding several key areas, such as education and labour market outcomes, as well as current knowledge gaps. Mario Esteban Sosa presented the case of the 'Eating is First' (*Comer es primero*) programme in the Dominican Republic and its gender dimensions in terms of food security.

Bénédicte de la Brière stressed that, in terms of the design of social protection programmes, there seem to be more differences in impact depending on the type of transfer (conditional or unconditional) than on the sex of the transfer recipient. While some programmes have led to a decrease in domestic violence, others have had a positive impact on women's decision-making power, yet without fundamentally changing the spheres of decision-making. The presenter also highlighted that we need more evidence of the indirect effects that these programmes may generate, such as increased access to identity cards, access to networks, social capital, and financial inclusion through electronic or mobile payments. Furthermore, we know little about the impact of social protection programmes on key gender vulnerabilities such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Likewise, more research is needed on the impacts on gender gaps in agricultural and enterprise productivity and on female labour supply and adult employment, including occupational choices.

Targeting women as the main recipient of social cash transfers within the household is not enough to consider a programme gender-sensitive. Therefore, it is important to think of the different dimensions of gender equality, such as endowments, economic opportunities and voice and agency. While first-generation programmes focused solely on access to endowments—especially education and health—more recent programmes are also trying to tackle economic opportunities, mostly at the household level. Moreover, a programme can be made more gender-sensitive by taking women's time and mobility constraints into consideration, as well as offering specific skills trainings to build resilience against harassment and to better resolve conflicts within the household. However, as de la Brière pointed out, particularly for households that are non-nuclear, little is known about resource-pooling and risk-sharing among different household members. Furthermore, to really change the distribution of responsibilities regarding child care (but also in terms of economic opportunities) for women, she argues that programmes need to engage men and women equally, especially when trying to change social norms. Several emerging innovations seek to address this by offering group education and family development sessions including both mothers and fathers.

Mario Esteban Sosa presented the results of a participatory evaluation project, which helped to analyse the gender dimensions of the Dominican Republic's 'Eating is First' programme, which provides a monthly food subsidy of about USD18 to be spent on specified food items available at stores authorised by

the programme. The Dominican government implemented the programme in 2004 in response to the financial crisis, which had far-reaching consequences for the country's food security. It currently reaches around 760,000 families.

Considering that two thirds of the beneficiary households are headed by women, a strong focus was placed on highlighting women's perceptions of the programme in its evaluation. Sousa highlighted two main observations that are important to understand the gender dimensions of the programme: gendered mobility and community debt relations. The focus group interviews showed that most women purchase food daily in smaller community-scale shops, which are often more expensive than larger supermarkets further away. There are several possible reasons for women's more restricted mobility, including the need to care for children and elderly people, small jobs near the home, high transportation costs or, in some cases, even safety constraints. To address women's mobility restrictions resulting from their care burden, the Dominican government has recently started to build new day care centres for children and is now also considering expanding the number of care homes for elderly people.

The second important observation presented by Sousa relates to community debt relations. Due to physical proximity, beneficiary families and local shop owners often know each other and have close relationships, which allows for the possibility to buy on credit (also called *fiao*). Although this form of debt relationship is not officially allowed under the programme, it is a vital crisis mitigation strategy in times when beneficiaries have already depleted their monthly subsidy. Sousa pointed out that many women value the option of buying from local shops on credit more than the possible savings they could make at the larger and cheaper supermarkets further away. Therefore, for many women the shops available in the community, even if somewhat more expensive, are highly important in guaranteeing their access to food.

Sosa concluded that for any future pilot projects or proposals to change the current programme design, it is important to acknowledge two issues to avoid further exacerbating food insecurity, especially in women-headed households. First, given women's more restricted mobility, community-scale shops are crucial in guaranteeing physical access to food for women. Second, any attempt to alter the programme must recognise the importance of informal debt relationships for women's food security.

References:

IPC-IG and FAO. 2016. "Gender sensitive social protection in the Caribbean—webinar recording." Socialprotection.org website. <<http://socialprotection.org/gender-sensitive-social-protection-caribbean>>. Accessed 28 December 2016.

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Note:

1. This webinar is part of a series on gender-sensitive social protection, a joint initiative between the 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 12 December 2016 and featured presentations from Bénédicte Leroy de la Brière (World Bank Group) and Mario Esteban Sosa (Technical Directorate of Social Policies Coordination, Dominican Republic).