

POLICY LESSONS ON SOCIAL PROTECTION

GENDER INNOVATION LAB FEDERATION EVIDENCE SERIES

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GENDER INNOVATION LAB FEDERATION

The Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) Federation is a World Bank community of practice coordinated by the Gender Group that brings together the Bank's five regional GILs: Africa (AFR), East Asia and Pacific (EAP), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Middle East and North Africa (MNA), and South Asia (SAR). Together, they are conducting impact evaluations of development interventions to generate evidence and lessons on how to close gender gaps in human capital, earnings, productivity, assets, voice and agency. With over 188 impact evaluations in 66 countries completed to date, the GIL Federation is building the evidence base for governments, development organizations, and the private sector to increase uptake of effective policies that address the underlying causes of gender inequality.

Several circumstances make women more vulnerable to economic shocks than men. Women are more likely than men to be out of the labor force due to care responsibilities. When they work, women are more likely to have low-paying jobs in the informal sector. Moreover, women have lower access to financial services and other strategies to mitigate shocks.

Social protection systems can enable women to cope with and adapt to economic shocks.¹ In particular, adaptive social protection systems can help identify the differential needs of women to prepare support mechanisms and build the resilience of poor and vulnerable households before, during, and after large shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic occur.² **The GIL Federation is generating rigorous evidence around the world to understand what works, and what does not, in supporting women with social protection interventions.** This note presents evidence on four key findings based on impact evaluations.

FINDING 1. MULTIFACETED POVERTY GRADUATION PROGRAMS CAN FOSTER INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES AMONG THE POOREST WOMEN

Programs that target the poorest women in populations and provide them with a bundle of interventions show promising effects on women's income-generating

activities. Bundles usually include the transfer of a large agricultural asset, a monetary stipend, training support, health support, encouragement to save, and life skills training. A paper combining randomized controlled trials (RCTs) from six countries finds significant effects on women's earning and economic activity (mainly rising livestock),³ and a study in Bangladesh finds that effects are large at the community level and persistent even after seven years.⁴

The SAR GIL studied the effects of a program that offered a one-time "big-push" package to women from the poorest households in Afghanistan.⁵ Women in the treatment group received a package that included a cash transfer plus livestock assets, skills training, and coaching. Control households did not receive any of the program components. The evaluation finds that the program had significant positive impacts on women's time spent working, labor participation, and empowerment. It also had sustained impacts on household consumption, revenue, asset ownership, and psychological well-being.

The Africa GIL led an RCT in Niger designed to unbundle the effects of these multifaceted antipoverty programs. It examined a program that provided women with cash transfers from the government and a core bundle of interventions (coaching, savings groups, entrepreneurship training). Participants were randomly selected to receive either an additional capital package (a lump-sum cash grant), a psychosocial package (socio-emotional skills training and community

sensitization on aspirations and social norms), or both packages. The control group received only the government cash transfers. Results show all treatment arms increased earnings derived from women-led income-generating activities, particularly off-farm self-employment and livestock enterprises.⁶ The packages that included psychosocial interventions were the most cost-effective.

FINDING 2. CHUNKY, LESS FREQUENT CASH TRANSFERS CAN LOWER DELIVERY COSTS

The Africa GIL led an RCT of a cash transfer program in Northern Nigeria to test whether the frequency of cash transfers matters for rural women.⁷ On one hand, smaller and more regular transfers may help smooth consumption and may be easier to hide from others. On the other hand, larger and less frequent transfers have lower administrative costs for the implementer and may foster more productive investment among recipients. Still, if households have highly irregular incomes or face serious food insecurity, these larger, less frequent transfers may not be effective.

The RCT confirms that quarterly transfers cost half as much as monthly transfers to administer and shows no difference in impacts on recipients' outcomes across transfer modalities. Both types of transfers had a similar positive impact on consumption, investment, women's labor force participation, and other key outcomes. This means that chunkier transfers can lower the overall cost of delivering cash, possibly freeing up resources to increase the number of beneficiaries and widen the impact of such programs.

FINDING 3. PUBLIC WORK PROGRAMS CAN HAVE SUSTAINED IMPACTS ON WOMEN'S WELFARE IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Labor-intensive public works programs are a popular policy intended to provide temporary employment opportunities to vulnerable populations. In fragile contexts, the short-term economic benefits of such programs are well documented, but there is no strong evidence of their medium and long-term impacts.⁸

The Africa GIL conducted a study in the Central African Republic to evaluate a public work program that provided temporary employment to men and women beneficiaries in various regions of the country selected through public lotteries.⁹ Having temporary jobs resulted in short-term increases in monthly earnings, the

number of days worked, and productive asset ownership of participating men and women. These effects were sustained even after the program and took place through different channels. Men intensified agricultural production and diversified into small manufacture activities, while women diversified into small trade activities. However, the effects were much weaker for women coming from the poorest households, which indicates this type of intervention needs specific provisions for ultra-poor women.

In Burkina Faso, mothers working on construction sites as part of an urban public works component of a youth employment program often had to choose between bringing their children with them to dangerous work sites or leaving them at home alone or with elderly relatives or younger siblings. After consulting with mothers and listening carefully to their needs, a pilot study trained selected women to provide high-quality childcare and equipped them to run mobile *crèches* that followed mothers as the public work sites changed.¹⁰ An RCT by the Africa GIL finds that the provision of mobile *crèches* tripled the use of childcare centers for children up to age 6, demonstrating high unmet demand.¹¹ Access to the *crèches* combined with the public works program positively impacted child development, as well as women's labor force participation, their psychological well-being, and their financial resilience and savings.

FINDING 4. SOCIAL PROTECTION CAN REDUCE ECONOMIC STRESS FOR WOMEN, BUT PROGRAM DESIGN IS KEY TO REDUCING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Recent global evidence suggests that, on average, cash transfer programs to households experiencing poverty are likely to reduce rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), primarily by reducing economic stress.¹² However, program design matters. The link between the provision of social safety nets and a reduction in IPV is not automatic, and in some contexts, there may be risks of increased household conflict and backlash against some women recipients. This needs to be closely monitored. The GIL Federation has contributed to this literature with studies in East Asia and Africa.

Public work programs provide a source of income to women that can reduce economic stress and, potentially, gender-based violence (GBV). A study by the EAP GIL in the Lao People's Democratic Republic analyzes the impact of a randomly allocated public work program.¹³ The program was targeted at rural women,

who received wages for 18 months. The research finds that the program increased women's income, but it did not affect their self-reported experience of GBV. The study argues that the lack of effects on IPV might be linked to the need of complementary interventions, such as behavioral change components targeted at both men and women.

The Africa GIL conducted an RCT to evaluate an anti-poverty program in northern Nigeria.¹⁴ The study compared impacts across control communities and communities assigned to three treatment arms: a livelihoods program that provided benefits to both men and women in the community, a cash transfer to women, and the combination of the two. Twelve months after the end of the program there was no IPV impact for women in households that received only the community livelihoods program. Cash transfers provided to women alone increased sexual IPV by 6 percentage points, but cash transfers provided to women with the community livelihoods program reduced sexual IPV by 13 percentage points.

These results suggest that in communities where norms are conservative and the broader community is not benefitting, boosting women's bargaining power can lead to an IPV backlash that persists a year after the program ends. When whole communities benefit,

transfers to women may be less threatening to men and can generate significant reductions in IPV.

A quasi-experimental study by the EAP GIL in the Philippines used regression discontinuity design to examine the effects of a conditional cash transfer program on GBV.¹⁵ The study finds no statistically significant effect on IPV or GBV outside of home, but it estimates a decline in emotional non-partner domestic violence. The authors argue that the main channels by which the decrease in violence occurred were stress reduction due to higher income, increase in empowerment and bargaining power, and strengthened social networks. Similarly, a quasi-experimental evaluation by LAC GIL of *Bolsa Familia* conditional cash transfers program in Brazil finds no impact on female homicides.¹⁶

Overall, these studies show that social protection programs reduce economic stress for women, but this does not always translate into reductions in GBV. Complementary interventions may be needed to achieve the desired outcome, and close attention should be paid to possible backlash from men or other community members.





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