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Social Protection and Gender: Policy, Practice, and Research

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ABSTRACT

Gender considerations in the design and delivery of social protection programs are critical to meet overall objectives of reducing poverty and vulnerability. We provide an overview of the policy discourse and research on social protection and gender in low- and middle-income countries, focusing on social assistance, social care, and social insurance. Taking a ‘review of reviews’ approach, we aggregate findings from rigorous evaluations on women's health, economic, empowerment, and violence impacts. We show there is robust evidence that social assistance has beneficial effects across all four domains. In addition, there is emerging evidence that social care has positive impacts on women’s economic outcomes, but scarce evidence of its impacts on other domains. Aggregated evidence on the impacts of social insurance are lacking. Key design elements facilitating positive impacts for women relate to gender targeting; quality complementary programming; replacing conditionalities with soft nudges; ensuring the value, frequency, and duration of benefits are sufficient; and gender-sensitive operational components. We close with a discussion of evidence gaps and priorities for future research.

Keywords: Gender, Social Protection

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1. Introduction

Gender considerations in the design and delivery of programs are critical for social protection to achieve its primary objectives of reducing poverty and vulnerability. First, prevalence and risk factors for poverty differ by gender, as does the nature of vulnerability. Thus, to sustainably reduce poverty for all, strategies must take gender into account. Second, gender shapes the impact of social protection. Not only are the effects of programs mediated by gender norms and intrahousehold dynamics, but gender differences in opportunities, constraints and preferences determine the extent to which different individuals can participate in and benefit from social protection. Third, entrenched societal inequities imply that women and girls are often disproportionately held back from achieving their potential. Addressing these inequities through social protection may be particularly promising to achieve longer-term poverty reduction goals, increase productive efficiency, and promote a better, more sustainable future. Lastly, to the extent that social protection intrinsically aims to increase equity, there may be an implicit mandate to prioritize women and girls.

Recognition of these points has grown over recent decades, and accordingly, program designs and research questions have evolved to explicitly address gender issues. In this chapter, we focus on low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and summarize the policy discourse and research on social protection and gender. We focus on gender dimensions in adulthood to

complement chapters in this handbook on early childhood and youth. We start by discussing gender in social protection policy, practice and research. We then review the existing evidence, taking a ‘review of reviews’ approach, to highlight the current evidence consensus around social protection and gender in LMICs, as well as where narratives diverge. We conclude by discussing high-priority issues for future policy, implementation, and research.

We focus on three categories of social protection: social assistance, social care, and social insurance. By social assistance (hereafter SA), we refer to non-contributory social transfers (including cash, vouchers or in-kind transfers to families or individuals, including elderly), public works programs, fee waivers and subsidies. By social care (hereafter SC), we refer to typically non-contributory family support services, including care for children, elderly, and people with disabilities, in or outside the home. Finally, by social insurance (hereafter SI), we refer to typically contributory health, agricultural, unemployment or disability insurance. Our focus on SA, SC, and SI is motivated by their prevalence in LMICs and their conceptual relevance for addressing specific gender inequities, including access to and control over resources, care burdens, and capacity to cope or respond to shocks. While SA research is the most developed, SC and SI are increasingly recognized as important social protection instruments for women. The prominence of SC was particularly highlighted as a critical policy response during the COVID-19 pandemic, where a global ‘care

crises' contributed to unequal gendered social and economic impacts and differential recovery trajectories (Gavrilovic et al. 2022). In addition, with compounding effects of climate change and other crises, SI offers an increasingly relevant avenue for women to cope with health and economic risks and build resilience. We do not review labor market interventions such as job trainings, placement services, and minimum wages, both because they are less common in LMICs due to greater labor market informality, particularly among women, and because they tend not to target the poorest or most vulnerable populations.

2. Perspectives on gender in social protection

2.1 Policy

Social protection systems introduced after World War II in many LMICs were designed to be linked to labor markets, where men were the sole breadwinners and women were expected to provide care (ILO 1952). These systems were meant to provide protection during unemployment, sickness, old age, accidents, and instances of incapacity or death (Merrien 2013). However, the link to formal employment and traditional family structures left out the majority of the population in LMICs, and in particular women, who were less likely to be engaged in the formal labor market (World Bank Group 2022). Recognizing these gaps, many LMICs expanded their social protection systems at the end of the 20th century and early 21st century, particularly through SA targeted to poor and

vulnerable families with children or to the elderly. The early SA programs tended to view women as caregivers, focusing on their *instrumental* role in achieving program objectives of reducing poverty and improving human capital. Women were often targeted as the main beneficiaries of programming based on early studies that found that income earned by women, as compared to men, was more likely to be used for children's needs (Thomas 1990; Hoddinott and Haddad 1995). Over the last decades, the narrative on gender in social protection has evolved to recognize the *intrinsic* value of women as active economic agents. Nonetheless, gender biases are still entrenched in programming; for example, some forms of SI remain linked to formal sector employment, while women are less likely to hold formal jobs. Thus there are continued calls for social protection to recognize and respond to the needs of women and promote gender equality (UN Economic and Social Council 2019).

2.2 Practice

Although the narrative on gender at the global level has shifted, few social protection strategies or programs have gender equality as an explicit goal or specify actions for reducing gender inequities. For example, although 49 out of 50 recently reviewed national strategic documents mention gendered risks and vulnerabilities, only 26 specify actions for reducing them through SA, and 11 specify actions through SI (Camilletti et al. 2021). Moreover, only 268 of 1,368

(or 19.5 percent) of government social protection responses in LMICs to COVID-19 were considered gender-sensitive, defined as addressing unpaid care or targeting women's economic security (UNDP and UN Women 2022). These figures demonstrate that progress has been limited in putting gender equality into practice within large-scale programs at the national level. The extent to which gender inequities are addressed in social protection programs depends on political economy considerations, and in particular institutions, interests, and ideas that reflect gendered social norms (Holmes, Jones, and Domingo 2019). Nonetheless, recommended practices consistent with the current policy narrative include eliminating barriers that limit women's access to social protection such as requiring identification documentation and reducing the links of insurance to formal labor markets (World Bank Group 2022; Gavrilovic et al. 2022); linking social protection to care systems to reduce women's unequal care burden and ensuring women have access to affordable and quality care services (UN Economic and Social Council 2019; Gavrilovic et al. 2022); promoting system linkages and complementary programming to help women maximize the benefits of programs by increasing their knowledge and skill sets, improving their networks and social capital, or link them to other services and markets; and prioritizing women's leadership and voice at all levels of social protection governance in order for programs to better respond to the needs of women (Gavrilovic et al. 2022).

2.3 Research

The various disciplines that have shaped the policy dialogue and research on social protection have conceptualized gender differently. Development economists have contributed extensively to this literature, generally grounding analysis using intrahousehold models where individuals within the household have different preferences; the decision process, and subsequent outcomes, are the result of bargaining between them (Donni and Chiappori 2011). An exogenous increase in income (such as receiving cash transfers from SA programs) relaxes the budget constraint, whereby changes in consumption and investment depend on individual preferences and bargaining power. Economists test these theoretical models using specific design components that have the potential to increase women's bargaining power (such as targeting women) or incorporating lab-in-the-field experiments to better understand decision-making and bargaining within the household (Haushofer and Shapiro, 2016; Almås et al. 2018). While usually focusing on causality and household-level outcomes, research in economics has played a critical role in expanding the evidence base on gender-disaggregated social and economic outcomes—including individual asset accumulation, labor participation, human capital, and agency.

Other disciplines have also contributed to gender and social protection literature. For example, political scientists tend to focus on institutional factors driving social protection agendas and policy, or how welfare programs affect

political participation and electoral behaviors (Camacho, Conover, and Querubin 2025; Hickey et al. 2020). Gender considerations are reflected in how programs influence women's participation in the political process or the acceptability of programs to voters (Conover et al. 2020; Kjelsrud and Kotsadam 2023). Public health experts use socio-ecological models that focus on women's and girls' (often health-related) risks and vulnerabilities throughout the life cycle and the role social protection can play in reducing these risks and vulnerabilities (Camilletti, Nesbitt-Ahmed, and Subrahmanian 2022). For example, certain individual, interpersonal, community and macro-level factors increase women's risk of experiencing malnutrition, experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) or acquiring HIV; by addressing poverty-related risk factors, some forms of social protection can reduce these risks (Buller et al. 2018; Olney et al. 2022; Stoner et al. 2021). Public health research has played a critical role in expanding the evidence base on social and health-related gender outcomes by including biomarkers in trials to provide evidence of impact and analysis of qualitative data to understand mechanisms and give voice to participants.

3. State of the evidence: Impacts, program design and gaps

3.1 Methods

To summarize the state of evidence on gendered impacts and program design features, we take a multi-pronged approach. We first search for existing reviews

which summarize and aggregate evidence on gender and social protection (SA, SI or SC) in LMICs using Google scholar search strings.¹ Given the quickly moving evidence frontier, we limit the search to reviews published over the last five years (2018 - 2023) to capture the most up-to-date conclusions. We include systematic reviews, as well as non-systematic reviews that rigorously summarize the evidence by providing detailed methodology regarding aggregation of quantitative (experimental or quasi-experimental studies), qualitative or programmatic literature. We further limit attention to reviews that include ten or more papers and consider at least one of the four main categories of outcome domains for adult women: 1) health and nutrition, including sexual and reproductive health and mental health, 2) economic, including labor force participation, productivity, time use and resiliency, 3) empowerment, including agency, social capital, voice, mobility and leadership and 4) violence against women, including violence perpetrated by intimate partners, other household members, community members, in public spaces, or at work. While each review operationalizes its own definitions and methodology for aggregation, we seek to summarize the direction and strength of program impacts by outcome domain and social protection type, classifying impacts as: i) strong and consistent beneficial impacts, ii) moderate or

¹ Google scholar search string for SA: ("social assistance" OR "cash transfers" OR "public works" OR "transfers") AND ("review" OR "meta-analysis") AND ("health" OR "nutrition" OR "empowerment" OR "agency" OR "economic" OR "violence") AND ("gender" OR "women") (*limited to 2018 – 2023).

variable beneficial impacts, iii) weak, mixed or little evidence, iv) adverse impacts or v) insufficient evidence to determine impacts.² In addition, we characterize the strength of evidence for design and operational recommendations originating from each review.

3.2 Search results

In total, we identify nine reviews (8 published in journals or as book chapters and 1 working paper), eight of which reviewed individual studies (Baranov et al. 2021; Bastagli et al. 2019; Buller et al. 2018; Halim, Perova, and Reynolds 2023; Olney et al. 2022; Peterman et al. 2019; 2023; Timu and Kramer 2023) and one review of reviews (Perera et al. 2022) (Table 1). All reviews focus exclusively on quantitative impact evaluations, with two exceptions: Buller et al. (2018) includes qualitative evaluations, and Perera et al. (2022) considers all types of review methodologies. Seven reviews summarize evidence from LMICs, while the

² While reviews summarize the evidence in diverse ways, we generally followed the following guidelines for assessing the strength of impacts. Strong and favorable impacts: authors state explicitly impacts were positive, strong or consistent; there is an overall average positive significant impact in meta-analyses; or $\geq 50\%$ of studies or impacts are positive and significant. Moderate or variable but favorable impacts: authors state explicitly impacts were positive but heterogenous, or studies or impacts have positive results in $<50\%$ but $>20\%$ of those presented. Weak, mixed or little evidence of favorable impacts: authors state explicitly there is weak evidence or studies or impacts occur in $\leq 20\%$ of those presented. Adverse impacts: authors note a trend of adverse impacts, going beyond just a few coefficients or a few studies out of many. Insufficient evidence for conclusions: authors explicitly say they cannot speak to or summarize the evidence for a particular domain because of lack of available studies.

remaining two focus on the Africa region (Peterman et al. 2019) or global evidence (Timu and Kramer 2023). Five reviews focus exclusively on SA programs, while only one review each focuses exclusively on SC and SI. The other two reviews include SA and SC, or all three types of programs. In total 304 papers are included across reviews over the 2000 to 2023 period, ranging from 14 to 93 papers per review. Figure 1 (Panel A) graphs the number of primary and review studies by year of publication, while Panels B and C disaggregate these by region and type of social protection, respectively (the latter include only primary studies). The majority of research investigating impacts on gender outcomes included in the review-of-reviews were published after 2010 (87 percent of all papers). In addition, in terms of social protection type, the literature is strongly dominated by studies exclusively focused on SA (comprising 86 percent of all papers), while SC contributes 12 percent and SI contributes only 1 percent of papers. Geographically, studies in sub-Saharan Africa increasingly dominate the evidence base (46 percent of papers), while studies in Latin America and the Caribbean initially make a substantial contribution, however become less prevalent over time (36 percent of papers). Studies published in East Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East and North Africa, and Europe and Central Asia are few (1, 3 and 4 percent of papers, respectively), while studies from South Asia make up 10 percent of papers.

3.3 Summary of evidence

Five reviews summarize the effects of social protection on women's health. Three out of four reviews focus on SA and find impacts to be strong and positive (Bastagli et al. 2019; Olney et al. 2022; Perera et al. 2022), while the remaining review concludes that SA has moderate impacts on women's health (Peterman et al. 2019). Outcomes for which SA shows strong beneficial effects include those related to uptake of health services, fertility, birth spacing and contraceptive use, risky sex, psychosocial wellbeing, and diets and anthropometry. For example, about half of impacts on women's diet, anthropometry and biochemical outcomes showed positive results (23/45 or 51%) across 12 studies (Olney et al. 2022), with the strongest results on micro-nutrient intake, diets, and anemia, in comparison to those for hemoglobin, body mass index, and mid-upper arm circumference. In addition, among nine studies and 45 indicators assessing psychological wellbeing in the Africa region—including mental health, life satisfaction, stress and worry—56% showed positive impacts (Peterman et al. 2019). For example, studies of government unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) in Malawi and Zambia showed reductions in depression among young women of 15 percentage points (pps) (or 24%) and increases in female caregivers' happiness of 10 pps, respectively (Angeles et al. 2019; Natali et al. 2018). However, in a review of reviews, Perera et al. (2022) report limited and inconclusive impacts on women's mental and psychosocial wellbeing for LMICs more broadly. Overall, very few adverse

impacts on women's health were noted, with the exception of a study showing food rations increased women's BMI in Guatemala (Leroy, Olney, and Ruel 2019), a high overweight setting, and two studies in Honduras showing increases in fertility due to the government cash transfer (possibly due to a loophole that was later closed) (Stecklov et al. 2006; 2007). Available evidence generally does not support the notion that women will become pregnant in order to qualify for or maintain eligibility for SA, a finding which has been demonstrated in the broader literature (Handa et al. 2018). Perera et al. (2022) also summarize evidence on health impacts from SI or SC, concluding there is moderate evidence that health insurance improves service utilization, attitudes towards family planning, and physical wellbeing of mothers. However, no overall conclusions were possible for SC due to insufficient evidence. Timu and Kramer (2023) review evidence on agricultural insurance specifically, finding insufficient evidence on health outcomes to warrant summary.

Seven reviews summarize the effects of social protection on women's economic outcomes. Three out of four reviews focus on SA and find impacts to be strong and positive (Perera et al. 2022; Peterman et al. 2019; 2023), while the remaining review finds SA has weak or inconsistent impacts on women's economic outcomes (Bastagli et al. 2019). Outcomes for which SA shows strong beneficial effects include those related to women's savings, expenditures, investments, asset ownership, labor force participation and productive work

intensity (including earnings). A meta-analysis of SA and SC including 660 effects across 67 studies found strong average impacts on economic outcomes (standardized effect of 0.105, 95% CI 0.08 – 0.13), results which hold for all typologies of programs except conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and in-kind transfers (Peterman et al. 2023). For example, a study in Laos of a female-only public works program implemented over an 18-month period resulted in a 40% increase in monthly income (Perova et al. 2021). Nonetheless, Bastagli et al. (2019) found program impacts for women’s labor force participation and work intensity to be weak or mixed; across 17 studies examining women’s labor force participation and 10 studies examining work intensity, a total of 26% showed positive impacts and 11% showed negative impacts—the latter mostly within CCTs in Latin America—while the majority (63%) showed no impacts. Taken together, the evidence does not support program ‘dependency’ concerns, as negative effects are often attributed to participants reducing sector-specific work (e.g., shifting from undesirable casual labor to work on their own farms) or reductions among certain populations (e.g., elderly) (Baird, McKenzie, and Özler 2018; Handa et al. 2018). Studies also point to limitations in the availability of individual-level outcomes for some economic indicators typically reported at the household level (e.g., expenditures, savings, investments). One additional review examines the effects of SC, finding strong evidence that childcare provision increases maternal labor force participation, with 21 out of 22 LMIC studies

finding significant impacts either on the extensive or intensive margin (Halim, Perova, and Reynolds 2023). For example, a public childcare program for children under five years old in urban Nicaragua increased women's work by 12 pps, making the program highly cost-effective with a benefit-cost ratio of 6.2 (Hojman and Lopez Boo 2022). Only one review examines the effect of SI on women's economic outcomes, focusing specifically on agricultural insurance—finding only one study and insufficient evidence on the potential to benefit women (Timu and Kramer 2023). The review emphasizes that the gender gap in the reach of agricultural insurance and the insufficient demand among women (and men) was an important deterrent to the development of both insurance markets and gender-disaggregated impact results.

Five reviews summarize the effects of social protection on women's empowerment. Two of four reviews focus on SA and find impacts to be strong and positive (Perera et al. 2022; Peterman et al. 2023), with the remaining two finding moderate impacts (Bastagli et al. 2019; Peterman et al. 2019). Outcomes for which SA shows strong beneficial effects include those related to women's financial decision-making, voice, and autonomy, with more moderate or variable assessments of impacts on decision-making. A meta-analysis of 405 effects across 52 evaluations, primarily consisting of SA, found strong average impacts on agency outcomes (including concepts of voice, autonomy and decision-making, standardized effect of 0.103, 95% CI 0.06 – 0.15) (Peterman et al. 2023). For

example, a multi-faceted cash plus psychosocial support intervention implemented by the government of Niger resulted in positive impacts on women's self-efficacy and control over earnings across all study arms, up to 18 months after the intervention ended (Bossuroy et al. 2022). However, not all reviews have strong and favorable conclusions regarding women's empowerment. For example, among 17 studies of SA in the Africa region, across 162 indicators considered, impacts on joint or shared decision-making were significant and positive 24% of the time (and negative 2% of the time), while primary or sole decision-making were significant and positive only 13% of the time (and negative, 6% of the time) (Peterman et al. 2019). Reviews also highlight measurement weaknesses within the empowerment domain, as studies overwhelmingly operationalize empowerment using decision-making indicators, with fewer measuring empowerment or agency in a holistic manner. One review from SC, one from SI, and one from both examined the evidence on empowerment – with all three studies citing insufficient evidence to draw conclusions. Some individual studies hypothesize that, in settings with conservative gender norms, providing SC can lead women to emphasize their traditional female roles in the household to compensate for their reduced caring role, thus 'offsetting' potential agency gains. For example, a mobile creche intervention in Burkina Faso generally found little or no impacts on a range of women's decision-making, freedom of movement or share of domestic work, despite finding strong impacts on women's economic

outcomes over one year later (Ajayi, Dao, and Koussoubé 2022). Thus, authors conclude that either longer time periods are needed for empowerment outcomes to materialize, or complementary programming focused on gender norms and transforming intra-household dynamics are needed alongside SC.

Five reviews summarize effects of social protection on violence against women. Four examine effects of SA exclusively, and all find strong and protective effects of cash transfers specifically (Baranov et al. 2021; Bastagli et al. 2019; Buller et al. 2018; Peterman et al. 2019). Reviews find protective effects related to IPV, including physical and sexual violence, emotional violence, and controlling behaviors. A mixed-method review of 22 quantitative and qualitative studies found 16 (73%) studies showing protective effects, two showing mixed effects, and the remaining four showing no relationship (Buller et al. 2018). For example, an evaluation of a cash and in-kind transfer program in Ecuador targeting Colombian refugees and poor Ecuadorians showed reductions in physical and sexual IPV of 30% and controlling behaviors of 19% (Hidrobo, Peterman, and Heise 2016). These favorable results are reinforced by a meta-analysis of 14 quantitative studies showing average decreases for physical/sexual IPV (4 pps), emotional IPV (2 pps) and controlling behaviors (4 pps) (Baranov et al. 2021). Nonetheless, Baranov and colleagues (2021) flag adverse impacts within subsamples found in several studies, indicating a continued need to monitor and mitigate against potential backlash. In addition, although evidence for social

protection's impacts on violence against women is consistently positive, the available literature covers primarily one type of SA (cash transfers) and one outcome (IPV). Two reviews attempted to summarize evidence of SI and SC impacts on violence against women, finding insufficient evidence to demonstrate effects. Thus, large data gaps exist in understanding whether other types of social protection also have protective effects on violence against women, particularly at work and in the community, as programs encourage women to increase visibility and income generation outside the home.

3.4 Design and operational features

There are comparatively fewer studies that rigorously test design or operational features; hence nearly all reviews emphasize the need for future research to test these factors more systematically. Nonetheless, we summarize findings and recommendations from review studies (Table 1) and complementary evidence on design and operational features (Atkins et al. 2022; Camilletti 2020; Tebaldi and Bilo 2019). Where relevant, we supplement review findings with specific examples from recent impact evaluations.

Targeting women is analyzed in five reviews, however only one review which focuses on nutrition outcomes (Olney et al. 2022) concludes that this is important for delivering positive impacts for women. Other reviews either find weak (Baranov et al. 2021) or mixed evidence (Camilletti 2020; Peterman et al.

2019; Tebaldi and Bilo 2019). This is potentially explained by the widespread evidence that social protection targeting men can also benefit women who live in the same household across a wide range of outcomes (Peterman et al. 2023; Perera et al. 2022). However, rigorous tests of gender targeting have largely focused on impacts for children or households, rather than for women themselves. This focus reflects the early instrumental motivations of targeting women for family welfare (including child health, nutrition and education), rather than emphasizing women's wellbeing as a primary objective. Nonetheless, recent studies have shown that targeting women instead of men or depositing wages from public works programs in women's bank account instead of their spouses leads to improvements in women's empowerment (Almås et al. 2018; Haushofer and Shapiro 2016) and labor force participation (Field et al. 2021). In addition, there is strong intrinsic motivation for targeting women, including to promote their visibility and interaction with other women and program activities at the community-level. Thus, while social protection can benefit women regardless of who is targeted, good practice suggests that targeting women, being mindful about diverse family structures (including polygamous families) and integrating design components to allow them to maintain control over benefits, has high potential for advancing gender equality inside the household (Peterman and Roy 2022).

Reviews also highlight the role of complementary programming (in the form of behavior change communication [BCC], gender sensitization, financial

literacy training, livelihoods training, etc.) in maximizing impacts for women. For example, it is recommended that agriculture-related SI include complementary financial training or be bundled with other services to increase outreach and impact, such as agricultural advisory or extension services, seed or input distribution (Timu and Kramer 2023). However, reviews emphasize that complementary programming needs to be designed and incorporated carefully based on the context and program objectives to create synergies, recognizing the additional cost and implementation challenges. For example, adding group-based nutrition-focused BCC to economic transfers for mothers of young children in Bangladesh was found to be important in delivering beneficial post-program effects on physical IPV (Roy et al. 2019). Authors hypothesize that mechanisms of change include increases in women's bargaining power, social interaction, and visibility, which may be particularly salient in Bangladesh, where female seclusion norms are prevalent. Thus, while there is strong rationale for designing complementary programming which will benefit women, the design and feasibility of implementation at-scale will vary across settings.

Another design feature discussed across reviews are conditionalities or co-responsibilities for program participants. Three reviews conclude there is weak or insufficient support for conditionalities in SA, finding that conditionalities may not be necessary to facilitate favorable impacts on women, and may even dampen beneficial impacts (Bastagli et al. 2019; Peterman et al. 2023; Tebaldi and Bilo

2019). This could be due to the additional time burden or stress that conditions may place on women, potentially reinforcing their roles as primary caregivers in the case of child health or education-related conditionalities. However, replacing conditionalities with soft nudges, labeling and messaging is seen as promising and a beneficial approach (Peterman et al 2019), particularly in times of crisis, including during pandemics when it may be very challenging to comply with conditions (Gavrilovic et al. 2022). Nonetheless, a substantial number of evaluated programs continue to be designed and implemented with conditions, indicating either sector-specific priorities or paternalistic views on participant use of benefits.

Numerous reviews also mention the importance of ensuring a sufficient value of economic benefit, considering the frequency and duration of benefits, as well as the potential of mobile or e-payments modalities in facilitating positive impacts for women. In the case of e-transfers, depending on context, it may be important to offer financial literacy training as a complementary component to ensure women can properly access and benefit from programming. In tandem, it is critical to ensure that e-payment modalities do not exclude women without access to mobile phones or banking systems, or who have disabilities restricting use of technology, who are likely to be the most vulnerable at program outset. In the case of SI, it is important to consider the different risk preferences and willingness to

pay of women and men when designing products, to ensure uptake and equal access across genders (Delavallade et al. 2015; Akter et al. 2016).

Gender-sensitive operational features are also highlighted in several reviews. For example, in public works programs, it may be important to instate quotas for women, child care facilities, toilets, lactation break and space, equal pay, opportunities for leadership roles, and women's representation in choice of public assets built by the program (Tebaldi and Bilo 2019). In case of SC, public provision (as opposed to subsidized private provision), ensuring quality standards, and offering models on a full-time rather than part-time basis are promising operational features (Camilletti 2020; Halim, Perova, and Reynolds 2023). Promising gender-sensitive features for agricultural-related SI include using women extension agents to inform and register farmers, addressing barriers to women's leadership in agricultural structures at the community-level, and marketing products to groups, to facilitate risk-sharing (Timu and Kramer 2023). More broadly, reviews note the importance of bolstering existing health, education and other services, as well as addressing local barriers to women's participation in programs at the outset. Locally adapted approaches around program sensitization, communication and appropriate framing is especially important in contexts where there are highly unequal gender norms to enable public acceptance of programs (Buller et al. 2018).

4. Key issues for future programming, research and policy

Looking forward, we highlight several themes which we believe are important for the future intersection of gender and social protection programming, research and policy. First, we recommend expansion and investment in SC and SI modalities that strive to reach women and families outside of formal employment. While the diversity of SC modalities being adapted and implemented is increasing globally, we still lack context-specific evidence and data to understand how to effectively recognize, reduce and redistribute women's unequal care work at scale through social protection; how SC interventions targeted at young children impact women's empowerment outcomes; and the cost-effectiveness and scalability of diverse SC intervention typologies. Nonetheless the investment case for accessible, affordable and quality care systems is critical: to reap the 'triple dividend' of increasing women's labor market participation, supporting child development and care of elderly, and growing decent jobs in the predominantly female care sector (UN Women 2015). To support evidence-based expansion, four main themes are proposed for childcare specifically: 1) understanding the landscape of childcare coverage and demand, 2) unpacking 'what works' for whom over time, including expanding our understanding of intra-household impacts, 3) building knowledge on implementation of scalable and locally-adapted solutions, including understanding how to best support childcare workers, and 4) answering macro-level questions on policy, financing and sustainability

(Aliga et al. 2023). Addressing basic questions around women's access to and demand for SI, and in particular understanding their risks, preferences, and constraints, is needed for designing effective SI. Moreover, questions on impact, local adaptation, financing, and sustainability also apply to gendered dimensions of SI, particularly beyond the health sector, where rigorous evidence is currently lacking.

Second, there is still a disconnect between the concept of gender-transformative social protection, which seeks to explicitly tackle discriminatory social and gender norms, and implementation realities. One approach taken by programming seeking to amplify transformative effects is to layer gender norms-focused complementary programming over social protection (including through group-based or couples trainings, community mobilization, or engagement with mass media). For example, Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* Companion Program directly tackles masculinities by providing awareness-raising classes with support groups to change men's beliefs about their responsibilities for childcare, cooking and domestic chores. In addition, group-based male engagement activities were layered over the PSNP in Ethiopia, successfully improving gender attitudes (Alderman et al. 2023). However, these efforts are often intensive, requiring a deep understanding of context-specific social norms and specialized expertise outside the social protection sector. Alternatively, it is possible that programming that addresses women's financial or social status can create a virtuous cycle of

women's empowerment which trigger norm change over the longer term. However, gendered attitudes and norms are rarely assessed in rigorous impact evaluations of social protection. Among the few studies examining SA and SC which have quantitatively assessed attitudes or norms across diverse domains, most indicate no impacts (Haushofer et al. 2019; Gazeaud et al. 2023; Ajayi, Dao, and Koussoubé 2022), although in India, depositing public works wages in women's bank accounts and training improved gender norms (Field et al. 2021). Therefore, an open question remains on if, how, and under what conditions social protection should aim to change gender norms.

Third, amidst compound crises globally, we need to better understand how to incorporate gender considerations in the design and implementation of adaptive social protection. The climate crisis disproportionately harms women, yet little is known about how social protection can be leveraged to support their adaptation and build their climate resilience (Costella et al. 2023; Nesbitt-Ahmed 2023). Some evidence suggests that social protection can address root causes of women's vulnerability (Perera et al. 2022) and can reduce maladaptive coping that disproportionately harms them (Christian et al. 2019). However, much less is known about social protection's role in promoting women's adoption of climate-smart practices, and virtually no evidence demonstrates effects of social protection on gendered mitigation of climate change (Hidrobo et al. 2024). In addition, conflict has complex gendered impacts, and social protection programs

are often the first form of response. Yet evidence is limited on gendered effects of social protection in conflict-affected settings, in part due to the challenge of collecting data during conflicts (Brune et al. 2022). A major benefit for women from social protection during conflict may derive from reduced duration or intensity of the conflict itself (Croft, Felter, and Johnston 2016). Effective gender-sensitive and conflict-responsive social protection designs are also likely to include interventions that both include consumption support and provide infrastructure and services. Prioritized infrastructure and services could include those disrupted or damaged during conflict (such as housing or transportation) or essential for recovery (such as mental health services). In these settings, lack of access contributes to women being overrepresented among indirect deaths from conflict, as essential health services are disrupted and exposure to disease increases. A low-hanging fruit is to prioritize gender targets in humanitarian programming and monitor the progress towards them (Malapit and Brown 2023).

Fourth, while extensive evidence shows that social protection can improve women's well-being across a range of domains, we have fallen short on making the economic case for using social protection to reduce gender inequities. By expanding opportunities for women, social protection programming may enhance women's productivity and labor supply in the longer term, strengthening local economies. Understanding the contributions of gender-responsive social

protection to economic growth, alongside the costs, can better inform policy discussions about creating fiscal space for programming that addresses the unique needs of women over their life-course.

5. Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the narrative on gender in social protection has evolved from framing women as care providers to recognizing women as productive members of the labor market, and from women's instrumental role in achieving program objectives of reducing poverty and improving human capital to a focus on the intrinsic value of gender equality. Although the narrative at the global level has shifted, few social protection strategies or programs have gender equality as an explicit goal or indicate specific actions for reducing gender inequalities (Camilletti et al. 2021). Much of this disconnect is a result of the political economy, which depends on institutions, interests, and ideas that reflect gendered social norms and de-prioritization of gender-related goals in practice.

Mirroring patterns in the discourse on gender in social protection, there has been a surge in research over the last 15 years focusing on measuring how social protection impacts women's wellbeing. Findings show overall positive impacts of SA on women's wellbeing across a range of economic, health, empowerment, and violence outcomes. There is emerging evidence on the positive impacts of SC on women's economic outcomes, however, aggregated evidence on other domains

and the impacts of SI are lacking. Promising design features to bolster impacts include: targeting women or ensuring transfers stay in their control, linking programs to other quality services or providing complementary activities, replacing conditionalities with soft nudges, and ensuring the amount, frequency, and duration of benefits are sufficient. Promising operational features include designing programs to take into account the unique needs and preferences of women such as ensuring day care services or lactation breaks in public works programs; ensuring leadership opportunities for women; and using locally adapted approaches in program sensitization.

However, research gaps remain. First there are comparatively few studies focused on SC and SI. These programs and research accompanying them should be prioritized as they become increasingly relevant for enabling women to enter the labor force and protect them from multiple risks. Second, there are geographic gaps, with few evaluations taking place in the Middle East and North Africa, and Asia and the Pacific regions. Third, few studies unpack design components and their contributions to impacts for women. Fourth, more research is needed on how to incorporate gender considerations in adaptive social protection designs. Fifth, although collection and analysis of gender disaggregated indicators and measurement of women's empowerment have improved over time, these are still not collected systematically, and many indicators used have not been validated. Sixth, few studies engage seriously with gender norms and measure the cost-

effectiveness of designing social protection programs to be gender-sensitive or transformative. Lastly, while designing social protection to improve gender equality is recognized to be intrinsically important, the economic case for doing so has not been assessed and may be important for policy discussions.

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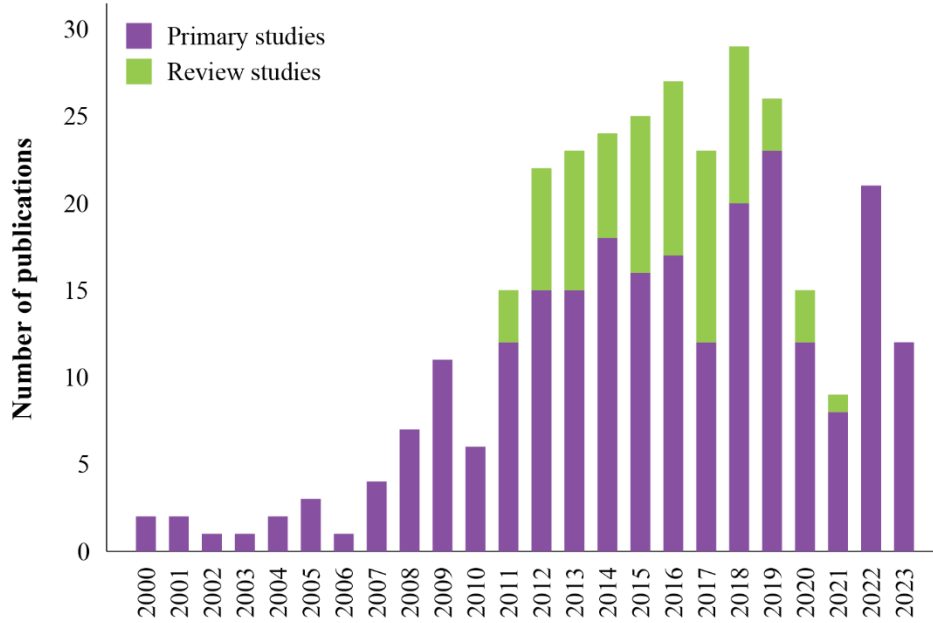
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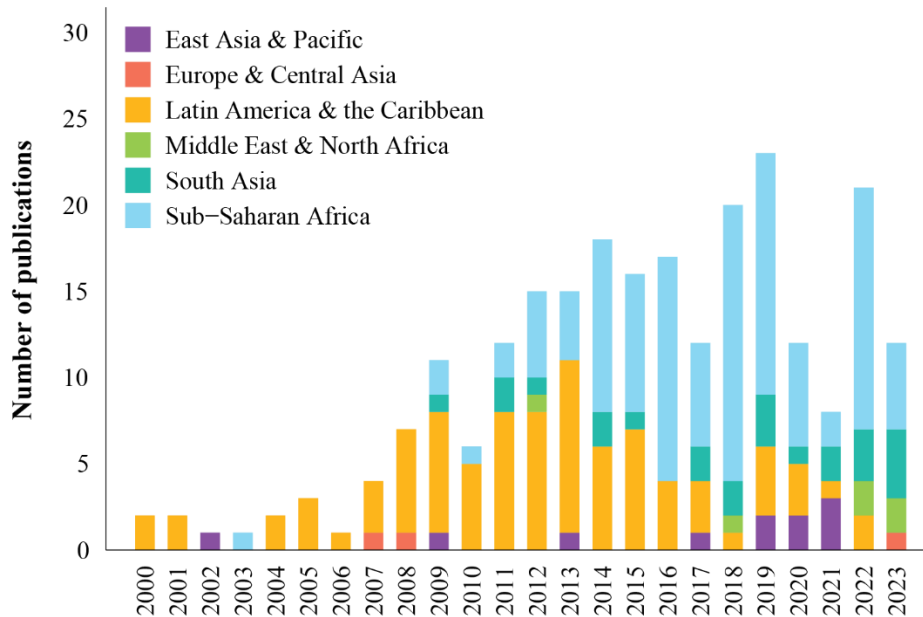
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Figure 1: Gender publications included across all reviews

A. Publications by type of study



B. Publications by region of study



C. Publications by type of social protection

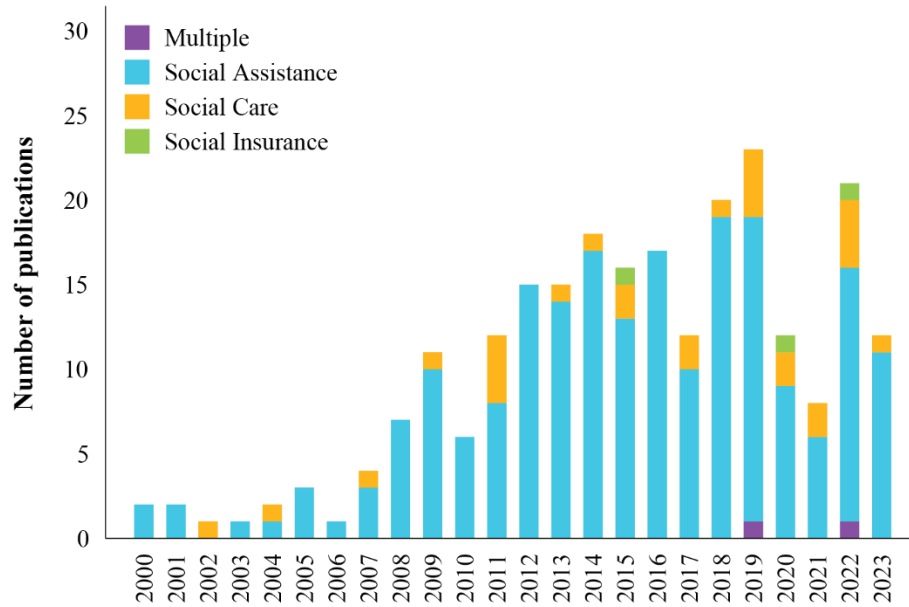


Figure notes: Publications represent all reviews and papers included in the nine reviews summarized in Table 1 (304 publications in total); Panels B and C represent only primary studies, rather than reviews which represent many locations and social protection types. Two studies posted online in 2023 and thus included in reviews, but forthcoming in 2024 are coded as 2023.

Table 1. Summary of recent gender-related social protection reviews (2018 – 2023)

No	Authors (year)	Type of review	Type of SP	Regional focus	Characteristics of papers included				
					Number	Year range	Methods	Impacts by domain	Importance of design features
1	Baranov et al. (2021)*	Systematic; meta-analysis	SA	LMICs	14	2008–2020	Quant	[4] Violence ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conditionalties (+) • Targeting women (+) • Transfer values & frequency (-/+)
2	Bastagli et al. (2019)*	Systematic	SA	LMICs	76	2000–2015	Quant	[1] Health ● [2] Economic ● [3] Empowerment ● [4] Violence ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conditionalties (-) • Transfer values & frequency (+) • Supply side strengthening (+)
3	Buller et al. (2018)*	Systematic	SA	LMICs	22	2008–2018	Quant; qual	[4] Violence ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing & objectives (+) • Transfer values & frequency (+) • Complementary programming (+)
4	Halim et al. (2023)*	Rigorous	SC	LMICs	22	2002–2021	Quant	[2] Economic ▲	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complementary programming (+) • Models focusing on older children (3–8 years) (+)
5	Olney et al. (2022)*	Systematic	SA	LMICs	36	2010–2020	Quant	[1] Health ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual as well as household-level transfers (++) • Complementary programming (BCC) (++) • Targeting women (++)
6	Perera et al. (2022)*	Systematic	SA; SI; SC	LMICs	70	2011–2021	Systematic reviews synthesizing quant & qual	[1] Health ●▲■ [2] Economic ●▲■ [3] Empowerment ●▲■ [4] Violence ●▲■	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address local barriers to women’s participation (++) • Supply side service quality (+)

7	Peterman et al. (2019)* †	Rigorous	SA	Africa region	38	2000–2019	Quant	[1] Health ● [2] Economic ● [3] Empowerment ● [4] Violence ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeting women (+/-) • Conditionalities & labelling (+/-) • Mobile money & e-payments (+) • Complementary programming (+)
8	Peterman et al. (2024)†	Systematic; meta-analysis	SA; SC	LMICs	97	2003–2023	Quant	[2] Economic ●▲ [3] Empowerment ●▲	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conditionalities (-) • Economic plus components (+)
9	Timu & Kramer (2023)*	Rigorous	SI	Global	30	2008–2022	Quant	[1] Health □ [2] Economic □ [3] Empowerment □ [4] Violence □	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complementary programming (+) • Address barriers to women's leadership in the community (+) • Market products to risk-sharing groups (+) • Use of mobile phones for registration & e-payments (+)

Table notes: SA = social assistance [●]; SC = Social care services [▲]; SI = Social insurance [■]; BCC = behavior change communication; * = journal article or published, † = working paper or pre-print.

Domains include: [1] **Health** (including nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, mental health), [2] **Economic** (including labor force participation, assets, productivity, resiliency), [3] **Empowerment** (including agency, decision making, social capital, voice), [4] **Violence against women** (including intimate partner violence, violence outside the home).

Key for impacts:

●▲■□ = strong and favorable impacts
 ●▲■□ = moderate or variable but favorable impacts
 ●▲■□ = weak, mixed or little evidence of favorable impacts
 ⊗⊗⊗⊗⊗⊗⊗⊗⊗⊗ = adverse impacts
 ○□△ = insufficient evidence for conclusions

Key for design features:

++ = strong evidence supporting importance
 + = some evidence supporting importance
 -/+ = mixed evidence supporting importance
 - = evidence refuting importance

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