

Gender and Safety Nets— Priorities for Building Back Better¹

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06/2021

INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality and economic inclusion is critical for economic growth and prosperity. The pandemic threatens to reverse hard-won gains towards gender equality. Before the crisis, women were more likely than men to be engaged in vulnerable forms of work in low- and middle-income countries, were overrepresented in sectors with the largest economic disruptions, and carried the brunt of increased care work. During the crisis, their income opportunities have taken a big hit. In Ethiopia, for example, women respondents to a phone survey conducted during the early stages of the pandemic were found to be more likely than men respondents to have lost their jobs (15 percent versus 12 percent) (Ambel et al. 2020). In Latin America, women workers were 44 percent more likely than men workers to lose their jobs at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Woman-led microbusinesses, in the hospitality industry, and in countries more severely affected by the COVID-19 shock were disproportionately affected compared with corresponding businesses led by men (Torres et al. 2021). Women and older girls also bear a disproportionate share of the care responsibilities arising because of school closures among family members affected by COVID-19. Reports of gender-based violence have increased around the world.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF SAFETY NETS

A large body of evidence has established that safety nets are an effective tool in the fight against poverty.² They boost household consumption, build resilience, increase human capital, and promote productive inclusion. Safety nets have emerged as the primary policy tool for mitigating the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic crisis and now cover more than 1.3 billion new beneficiaries. Virtually all countries and territories have introduced social protection measures—more than 1,400—in response to COVID-19; social assistance accounts for more than 60 percent of the response (Gentilini, Almenfi, and Dale 2020). The majority of cash transfer programs are new and temporary.

Existing programs have expanded vertically, meaning they are topping up payments and introducing extra payment cycles for existing beneficiaries who were receiving benefits pre-COVID. They have also expanded horizontally, adding new beneficiaries that were previously not covered. Informal sector workers are one of the groups targeted with this expansion, and millions have been reached by cash-based programs, many of which are temporary (Gentilini 2020).

Given tightening government budgets, it is critical that safety nets be designed for optimal impact. The prolonged nature of the pandemic is stretching government resources around the world. While evidence demonstrates that cash transfers and other programs have the potential to close gender gaps and empower women, few programs deliberately set out to do so. Traditionally, many large-scale cash transfer programs do not engage women intentionally beyond their roles as mothers and caregivers. Maximizing the potential of cash transfers to support an inclusive and sustained recovery requires a strategic approach to address gender inequality and the gender differentiated impacts of this crisis.

The recommendations below take into account the difficult fiscal pressures facing many governments, not merely those brought on by this crisis, but also those that existed leading up to the crisis (in terms of the unsustainable public debt crisis that was looming). New approaches to domestic resource mobilization, efficiency in spending, and new technologies are all part of the broader picture to create sustainable financing for safety nets.³

¹The authors are thankful to Loli Arribas-Baños, Ugo Gentilini, Margaret E. Grosh, Caren Grown, and Yuko Okamura for their valuable comments and suggestions.

²This note focuses on social safety nets—also sometimes known as social assistance programs. These are defined as noncontributory benefits provided either in cash or in kind that are intended to support the poor and the vulnerable (households and individuals particularly exposed to idiosyncratic and covariate risks and lacking sufficient coping mechanisms or resources to mitigate the impacts). They are a component of larger social protection systems that also include contributory social insurance, such as pensions and health insurance, as well as labor market policies and programs.

³See the discussion in Chapter 5 of Beegle et al. 2018.

FOCUS AREAS TO MAXIMIZE SAFETY NET INVESTMENTS AND BUILD BACK BETTER

Four priorities among governments and stakeholders are highlighted here to build stronger safety net systems that are inclusive of both men and women. Strengthening safety nets to address gender inequality does not necessarily mean specifically targeting women or making women the primary recipients of the payments. Greater coverage and stronger, more adaptive delivery systems in general can have a disproportionate impact on gender equality outcomes.

Maintain and extend coverage among vulnerable groups, prioritizing women and taking the specific needs of women into account

Since the onset of the pandemic, safety net coverage has increased significantly. In several countries, schemes have extended coverage to informal sector workers, such as street vendors, market sellers, and waste-pickers—occupations in which women are overrepresented. For example, Brazil introduced an emergency cash transfer of R\$600 (US\$107) for adults without formal jobs who live in households with a per capita income below half the minimum wage. Single mothers and woman heads of household receive double the benefit. Similarly, Togo's Novissi scheme supports all informal workers whose incomes have been disrupted by the pandemic, providing higher benefits to women to meet basic needs (about 20 percent higher relative to men). Some countries have forged innovative partnerships with associations of informal sector workers or women's groups to reach and enroll large numbers of new beneficiaries quickly. In the Indian state of Bihar, for example, self-help groups have been critical in reaching vulnerable women during the COVID-19 response.

The most recent data available suggest that, prepandemic, close to 80 percent of the population in low-income countries lacked any social protection coverage.⁴ In lower-middle-income and middle-income countries, the share stood at around 40 percent. To ensure a robust recovery, social protection systems, of which safety nets are one part, need to cover not only the poorest, but also other excluded populations, until economic activity resumes and people can rebuild their livelihoods. Schemes should consider differentiated benefits for groups that are particularly vulnerable.

Invest in adaptive delivery systems that recognize women and girls' specific vulnerabilities

The pandemic has also highlighted the value and importance of investments in adaptive delivery systems for safety nets. For example, those countries relying on social registries that included people beyond the poorest were able to extend the safety net quickly to the previously uncovered. In lieu of an existing registry, some countries resorted to alternative data sources to identify beneficiaries. For example, Morocco was able to tap an existing

health sector database (Ramed) to reach 3 million informal workers. El Salvador used electricity consumption as a proxy to select households for a grant of US\$300 (those with electricity consumption at less than 250 kilowatt-hours). Other approaches for identifying beneficiaries have included a combination of satellite imagery and mobile phone data in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe.

Rethinking social registries from a gender perspective can improve the ability to identify vulnerable individuals more accurately. It is well known that risks do not affect women and men, girls and boys equally and that the ability of people to cope with shocks varies. Moreover, vulnerabilities are often multiple and interlinked. Current social registries often rely on data collected through household surveys, which, because of the effort involved, can only be updated periodically. As countries invest in the expansion of social registries, they should explore links with more dynamic data that allow for the identification of gender-specific vulnerabilities. This would enable the design of better targeted responses in future crises, whether economic, climate, or health related.

In addition to investments in social registries, adaptive delivery systems require robust case management and referrals systems. Resources should be expanded to support social workers in referring beneficiaries to other available services in addition to social assistance. This includes social services such as health and education, mental health, parenting programs, as well as productive economic opportunity programs (trainings, extension agents, etc.).

And underpinning these areas is the need for foundational identification systems for fast, efficient crisis response. Identification is often a precondition to accessing safety nets and other services. Yet, as many as 45 percent of women in low-income countries do not have access to foundational IDs, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia.⁵ Policy barriers, that make it difficult for women to access ID cards, apply for passports, or register the birth of children, remains. Some countries require permission from a male guardian or documentation not required of men, making it more burdensome for a woman than a man to obtain an ID or the foundational documents needed to get one. Other constraints, such as mobility restrictions, care burdens, the inability to use or access information and communication technology (ICT), and lack of agency, compound the gender gap in ID access.

Leverage digital technologies to reach and empower women in safety net programs

Cash transfers that are delivered digitally offer tremendous potential to close the gender gaps in financial inclusion (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation et al. 2020). Direct payments create a gateway to savings, credit, and other financial services provided that payments go hand in hand with training among those with low levels of financial and digital literacy. Depositing payments directly into women's accounts can increase women's control over funds and improve safety. If payments are made through mobile

⁴ See statistics at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/datatopics/aspire>

⁵ See more statistics at <https://id4d.worldbank.org/global-dataset>.

money, women need to own, control, and have the digital literacy to use a mobile phone. Payments delivered through mobile money can potentially be bundled with information and services that are also delivered digitally, enabling scale at low cost.

Safety net programs and digital technologies can be leveraged to close gender gaps in financial inclusion and mobile phone ownership. A women's empowerment cash transfer program in Zambia, for example, provided women with a choice of payment providers, thereby maximizing convenience and accessibility, while also promoting competition among service providers. Crucially, it also provided phones to those women who did not own one and supplied extensive financial literacy training to enhance budget management and encourage saving.

Invest in cash plus approaches to tackle multiple gender gaps simultaneously

Cash plus approaches, whereby safety net payments are combined with information and complementary services, have been shown to deliver on various dimensions of women's empowerment. One promising set of cash plus interventions are those focused on economic inclusion. They bundle cash transfers with other features, such as assets, training and coaching, to ensure beneficiaries can build livelihoods and break out of poverty traps. A recent survey of economic inclusion programs found that the vast majority of participants are women and that a significant share of programs had design features that were explicitly aimed at empowering women by increasing their control over resources and agency (Andrews et al. 2021). Some of these programs seek to address multiple constraints at once, including broader contextual factors, such as engaging with communities to challenge harmful social norms. Increasingly, productive inclusion programs are being implemented at scale through government structures, as in the Sahel region (Archibald, Bossuroy, and Premand 2021). Investment and experimentation can push this model to close the gaps in women's entrepreneurship and labor force participation.

Realizing the potential that social protection holds for women and girls in the context of COVID-19 requires deliberate experimentation, measurement, and learning. In particular, there is promising evidence that cash transfers can reduce gender-based violence. For example, a randomized control trial in Bangladesh found that, if cash or food transfers are provided with behavior change communication on nutrition, a decrease in intimate partner violence was sustained four years after the intervention had ended (Roy et al. 2018). These findings are particularly relevant given the reports of increased violence against women as a result of lockdowns, reduced mobility, economic stress on households, and disruptions in access to services. Schemes should systematically explore design variations and measure impact across a range of outcome areas, so it will be possible to learn, scale the most effective approaches, and go beyond cash.

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, safety net programs have expanded in low- and middle-income countries. There is a large and growing body of evidence showing that these programs are effective at improving the socioeconomic well-being of poor households. It is probably not an understatement to say that such programs are a main pillar in the policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As these programs grow in scope and size, they can become powerful tools in addressing gender inequality and empowering women and girls. This brief outlines four broad entry points to consider toward that goal. The sustainable financing of this ambitious agenda is critical because investments in safety nets should not occur at the expense of or compromise other critical areas of service delivery.

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