



## Social protection and women's empowerment

### The issue

Many social protection programmes, including cash transfers, safety-net oriented public works programmes and asset transfers, target women as main beneficiaries. As such, extending social protection to rural populations has great potential for fostering rural women's economic empowerment. However, to tap into this potential, more needs to be done. There is much scope for making social protection policies and programmes more gender sensitive and for better aligning them with agricultural and rural development policies to address gender inequalities and foster sustainable poverty reduction.

### What does the evidence say?

Impact evaluations of cash transfer (CT) programmes indicate these:

- help promote women's economic advancement in agriculture, such as in [Kenya](#) and [Malawi](#) where CT programmes are helping women acquire productive assets such as small livestock;
- help women gain access to [both formal and informal credit](#) when they receive benefits in regular payments;
- increase women's decision-making power and control over income, particularly in managing the extra cash, as shown by evidence from, e.g., [Brazil](#), [Mexico](#), and [Kenya](#); and
- improve financial literacy among women, as well as their [access to financial services](#), especially when cash transfers are paid into bank accounts.

Complementary measures often are needed to ensure that CTs effectively support women's economic empowerment. Brazil, for instance, introduced special legislation for women to have

the legal right to be recipients of the Bolsa Familia programme, Brazil's CT programme. Further, it is important that social protection schemes avoid reinforcing biases in responsibilities for household care by promoting co-sharing of those tasks between men and women. This applies especially in the case of programmes that make benefits conditional on children's school attendance and use of health care services, which are caregiving roles typically handled by women.

Public works provide an opportunity for women to access wage employment and acquire skills, often in agricultural projects. They also promote women's control over their own income, particularly when wages are paid through individual, rather than household bank accounts. In Rwanda, the Vision 2020 Umurenge Program has increased [women's financial inclusion](#) through opening savings and credit cooperatives (SACCO) accounts for all beneficiaries. Public works also expand women's social networks and self-esteem. However, women's participation in public works, and therefore access to social protection, is still a concern in several countries. For example, women may not be able to participate because they have care responsibilities and often do not have other family members who can take on these tasks. In addition, many public works programmes are physically demanding, thereby limiting women's participation. To address these concerns, public works need complementary action aimed at reducing women's work burden and facilitating flexible work arrangements for women participants. Several programmes are offering gender-differentiated tasks, including employment that requires less physically-demanding tasks or that capitalizes on women's knowledge and experience. Other programmes are addressing mobility constraints of women by locating public work sites closer to where beneficiaries live, including using community kitchens and home gardens as public works.



Asset transfers involve the tangible transfer of agricultural inputs, livestock, agricultural machinery and land. These transfers are usually delivered with other intangible transfers, such as training, in order to ensure adequate and effective use of assets. Nevertheless, greater access does not guarantee women's decision-making and control over productive resources or incomes. For instance, asset-transfer programmes may initially benefit women, but subsequently lead to men taking over women's businesses once they become profitable. Also, programmes may not provide assets that take into account women's capacities, their needs and aspirations in agriculture or other rural activities. Asset transfers work best when provided under a comprehensive programme, such as the [BRAC](#), a Bangladesh-based NGO, which combines asset transfers with training, savings and constant support. [Evaluation](#) of the BRAC model shows that it has helped its female beneficiaries move away from piecemeal jobs, such as domestic service and day-wage labour in agriculture, to more productive self-employment in livestock rearing.

## In practice: What FAO does

Linkages between social protection and rural women's empowerment exist but need to be reinforced. FAO fosters the impacts of social protection and rural interventions through knowledge generation, policy support and institutional strengthening.

- Through its [From Protection to Production \(PtoP\) project](#), FAO is generating knowledge and disseminating evidence and information about

the impact of cash transfers and public works programmes on reducing rural gender inequalities and fostering women's economic empowerment. PtoP is undertaking a series of [case studies](#) in Rwanda and Malawi on these issues to assist policy-makers with the design and implementation of gender sensitive programmes. In addition, PtoP is analysing impacts of cash transfers on gender equality outcomes in Lesotho.

- FAO is further providing support to countries on how to strengthen linkages between social protection and agricultural policies that are gender-responsive. For instance, FAO promotes linking cash transfer or public works schemes to extension and rural advisory services that meet the needs of women farmers, enhance financial literacy or promote female-led agribusiness development. Similarly, FAO is providing support to Malawi in linking National Social Support Policy and Programme to existing agricultural livelihood interventions that promote women's economic empowerment.
- FAO supports the roles of rural institutions and organizations in the design and implementation of social protection schemes. In Niger, FAO is creating awareness and generating knowledge on social protection among rural women beneficiaries in the context of the UN Joint Programme for Rural Women's Economic Empowerment. In doing so, FAO plays a role in social integration, disseminating knowledge about the economic and social protection rights of the rural poor and ensuring that social protection benefits reach women.