

# Social Safety Nets and Gender:

## Learning from Impact Evaluations and World Bank Projects



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### Background

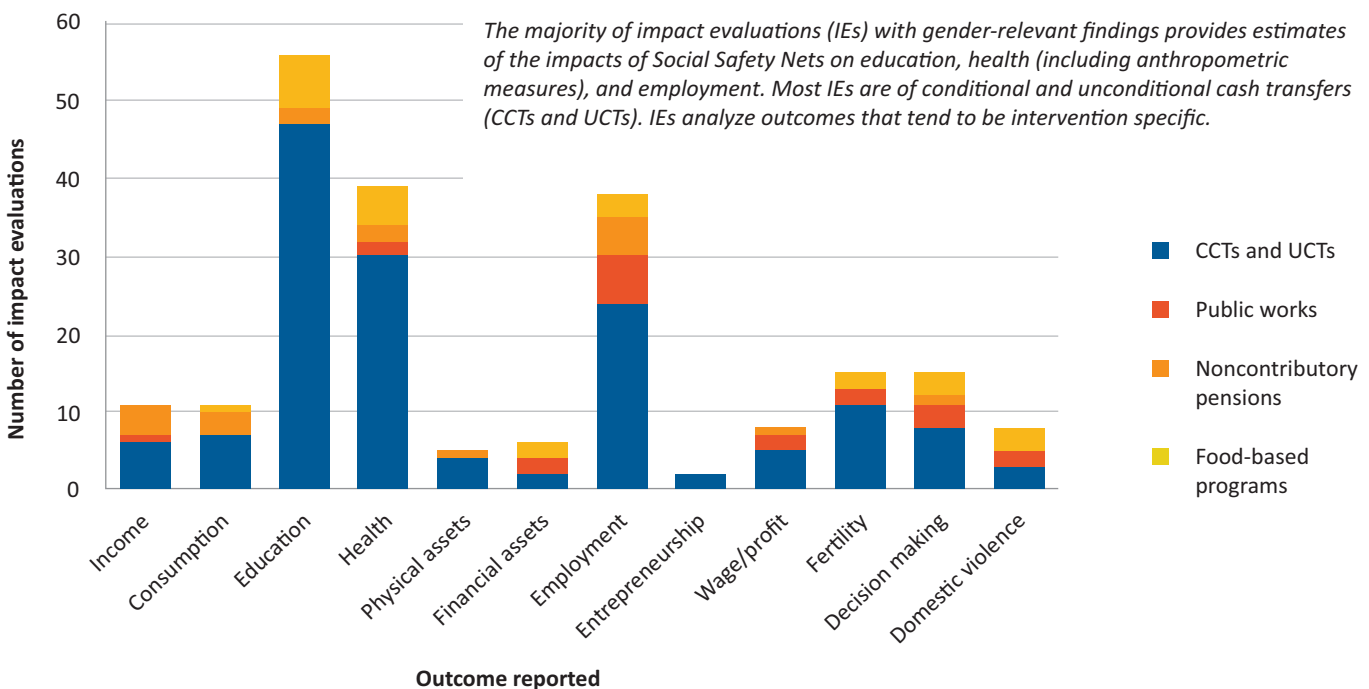
Social Safety Net (SSN) programs aimed at reducing poverty through cash and in-kind transfers and public works are not specifically designed to address gender equality, but they may offer great opportunities to respond to women’s needs. This systematic review analyzes the available impact evaluation evidence on the effect of SSNs on gender-related results such as increasing women’s bargaining power and decision-making, improving education outcomes of boys and girls, and promoting maternal and child health.

The review also analyzes gender integration in the World Bank’s portfolio of SSN interventions. Its findings identify opportunities to strengthen the integration of gender into projects.

### General Findings

Males and females have different roles, responsibilities, constraints, and access to resources, and their options, needs, and response to incentives will be different. The evidence shows that SSN interventions can increase women’s bargaining power by providing more resources to the household and to women in particular. SSNs can potentially strengthen women’s decision making, but their impact on empowerment is less clear.

SSN projects supported by the World Bank would benefit from incorporating the impact of gender differences into their design, but they rarely do. Most project documents include limited discussion of intra-household dynamics and the gender-relevant context of the supported intervention.



Women are generally targeted as a vulnerable group or in an instrumental way, without discussing the costs that the intervention may impose on them. Gender is often missing from monitoring and evaluation frameworks, except for tracking female beneficiaries.

The main goal of SSN interventions is to reduce current and future poverty by increasing household income and consumption and improving children's health and education. However, SSNs also impact many other outcomes—employment, fertility, domestic violence, access to resources—and those impacts are typically gender-specific.

Drivers of gender outcomes are the factors that influence behavioral change and decision making and determine the impact of SSNs. Drivers include, for example, the opportunity cost of children's time and the expected future earnings as adults that contribute to determining the investments parents make in their children's education; the costs and benefits to men and women taking up employment or program responsibilities; and the ability of the transfer recipient to control the transfer and make consumption, investment, and production decisions.

The ability to control and use the resources made available by SSN interventions, and the costs and benefits of subsequent behavioral responses are driven by opportunities and constraints specific to males and females. Opportunities and constraints facing males and females are often distinct and determine how SSN transfers can be used and controlled. And they are influenced by social norms, practices, and regulations.

Impact evaluations of specific interventions tended to focus only on a few selected outcomes. For example, most impact evaluations of conditional cash transfers assessed the intervention's impact on education and health, partly because the conditions attached to the transfer relate to these two variables. Impact evaluations of public works have looked mostly at their effects on employment and wages. These are the most obvious and immediate outcomes to assess. But other outcomes, such as effects on the welfare of children or other household members, also warrant analysis.

## Portfolio Implications

The World Bank Group's recent Social Protection and Labor (SPL) strategy for FY12–22 commits to “work with countries to ensure that programs adequately address the [social protection and labor] needs of both women and men (and girls and boys).” Specifically, the strategy in social assistance programs aims to ensure that women have access to the

transfers given the evidence that “[more] resources controlled by women commonly translate into a larger share of household resources going to family welfare, especially to expenditures on children.”

The strategy recognizes the importance of incorporating into public works program designs “social norms about gender-appropriate behavior as well as gender-specific responsibilities with respect to household and market work.” For old-age pensions programs, the strategy shows the need to recognize women's higher vulnerability because of longer life expectancy and shorter contribution history to formal pension programs.

The analysis of impact evaluation evidence reviewed identifies opportunities for improving gender integration in the spirit of the SPL strategy. Each individual impact evaluation may not be relevant for specific projects because individual results are not automatically transferrable to a different context. However, the body of impact evaluation literature highlights elements that are relevant to understanding and anticipating gender-differentiated effects. The analysis of these elements during project preparation can ensure that projects internalize the potential responses of the household and its members to the intervention.

The potential gender impacts of the intervention can be included more systematically in monitoring and evaluation frameworks. If projects are not explicit about the causal chain and potential impacts, these impacts won't be measured. Forty percent of SSN investment projects do not address gender. The absence of any gender-disaggregated indicators is a missed opportunity to better understand the intervention's impact on different types of beneficiaries, notably by gender.



The Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) is charged with evaluating the activities of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and International Development Association (the World Bank), the work of International Finance Corporation (IFC) in private sector development, and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency's (MIGA) guarantee projects and services.

This is a short summary of an IEG evaluation containing evidence that can inform the realization of the **Financing for Development** agenda and the World Bank Group's engagement therein. Other IEG resources specifically dedicated to the agenda can be found at [ieg.worldbankgroup.org/f4d](http://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/f4d).