If gender ‘makes development and economic sense’, why is social protection gender-blind? The politics of gender and social protection

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Introduction

Influenced by the post-Washington consensus that markets cannot be left unregulated and that concerted efforts are needed to support the poor and vulnerable to benefit from economic growth, social protection has risen rapidly up the policy agenda in international development circles over the last decade (Barrientos and Hulme, 2008). The fallout from the global recession with millions more people falling below the poverty line has further underscored the importance of investing in social protection infrastructure (ADB, 2010). The way in which these broad international trends play out at the national and local levels, however, is often highly political (Hickey, 2007), and this is especially so when one applies a gender lens (Molyneux, 2007; Kabeer, 2008). While there is a robust body of evidence on the gendered patterning of poverty and vulnerability (e.g. Chant, 2010), this knowledge base is seldom reflected in a systematic way in social protection strategy, policy and programme design (Holmes and Jones, 2010). This paper explores the political economy of social protection and its effects on gender relations at the individual, intra-household and community levels so as to better understand why social protection debates and approaches to date have been largely gender-blind. Drawing on empirical evidence from a multi-country study undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and national partners in 2009-2010 funded by DFID and AusAID, it weaves together findings from key informant interviews, household surveys, focus group discussions and life histories from men, women and children across the lifecycle in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Importantly rather than focus exclusively on cash and asset transfers, which have tended to dominate the recent political landscape, the discussion includes a range of other social assistance instruments as well, public works schemes and subsidy programmes for the poor (see Box 1).

Box 1: Programmes covered in ODI Gender and Social Protection Effectiveness Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of social assistance</th>
<th>Programme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cash transfers</td>
<td>• Ghana’s LEAP quasi-conditional cash transfer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Peru’s <em>Juntos</em> conditional cash transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset transfers</td>
<td>• Bangladesh’s Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public works programmes</td>
<td>• India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subsidies (of food and basic services)</td>
<td>• Vietnam’s National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTPPR)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Indonesia’s Raskin Rice Subsidy Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mexico’s community child crèche system, <em>Estancias</em></td>
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Conceptualising gendered political economy

In contrast to scholarship on the welfare state in the developed world, which has long paid attention to the politics underpinning choices about redistribution (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990, Rueschemeyer et al., 1992), until recently discussions about social protection in developing countries have tended to be more technical in nature. However, as different levels of elite and public buy-in, social protection programme design choices, and especially modes of implementation at the grassroots level have become increasingly clear, analysts have started to turn their attention to the political economy challenges that the rollout of progressive social protection strategies face (McCord, 2009). This literature focuses on the so-called “3 ’s” of social protection: i) institutions (e.g. elections, political party systems, informal politics such as patron-client relations, monitoring and evaluation systems) and the opportunities or constraints they present for social protection policy and programme development; ii) interests of key actors (e.g. political elites, bureaucratic agencies, donors and civil society champions) and the relative balance of power between them; and iii) ideas held by elites and the public regarding poverty and its causes, the social contract between the state and its citizens, and the merits of particular forms of state support.

To date, however, the role of gender in shaping these institutions, interests and ideas has been largely overlooked by mainstream development actors. Accordingly, we employ a modified version of this framework (see Figure 1) to assess the challenges involved in integrating a gender perspective into social protection strategy, policy and programme development. We also draw on Hickey (2007)’s emphasis on the need to consider politics at three different junctures: the initial decision to embark on a social protection strategy; the choice of particular social protection instruments; and programme impacts. We argue that in order to incorporate gender into such debates, at least three key questions need to be asked:

1) In what ways is the nature of the social contract between the state and its citizens—so pivotal in defining the parameters of social protection debates in different contexts—also gendered? To what extent are notions of citizenship gender-specific and what implications does this have for sociocultural understandings of the role of social protection?

2) How do the politics around social protection design choices, and the ways in which broader policy objectives – whether it be overcoming food insecurity, reducing poverty or promoting environmental rehabilitation – shape the types of gender dimensions considered and whether or not they are limited to supporting women and girls’ practical gender needs or have the scope to be more transformative for adults and children alike?

3) To what extent do political actors seek to capitalise on their role in cementing or reshaping existing gender norms in order to further wider political goals, such as enhancing the popularity and legitimacy of a new government, fostering social cohesion and promoting reconciliation in fragile and/or post-conflict settings?
Unpacking institutional motivations for social protection

Institutional factors play a key role in shaping the divergent parameters of social protection policy choices across country contexts. Our study found that a range of institutional motivations had shaped social protection approaches in the case study countries. These included: redressing a legacy of political violence among impoverished communities in the case of Peru’s conditional cash transfer programme, Juntos; responding to macro-economic crises in Indonesia’s RASKIN rice subsidy programme; harnessing public works labour to promote environmental rehabilitation in Ethiopia’s combined public works/social transfer Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP); and demonstrating a commitment to poverty reduction in the run up to elections in the case of Ghana’s Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) cash transfer programme. However, only in two cases, Bangladesh’s Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (CFPR) programme, which aims to promote women’s economic empowerment and in turn decision-making power within the household, and Mexico’s subsidised crèche scheme, Estancias, which aims to increase women’s participation in the paid workforce by supporting their care work responsibilities, do tackling gender inequalities feature as primary objectives.

As underscored by a dearth of gender-disaggregated monitoring and evaluation indicators, other initiatives frequently relegate gender-related goals to a secondary status (as is the case with cash transfer programmes which target women so that they can play a greater role in supporting their children’s human capital development and with public works programmes which promote women’s participation in the schemes but fail to tackle gender discrimination in the allocation of ‘appropriate work’)). Alternatively, they neglect to tackle the gendered dimensions of poverty and vulnerability.
altogether. The latter is the case for instance with Viet Nam’s flagship integrated poverty reduction programme, the National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTPPR) and Indonesia’s RASKIN programme, which fails to tackle the gender dynamics of food insecurity.

Key informant interviews suggest that there are a number of explanations for this low prioritisation of gender inequalities. These include an institutional disconnect between the growing body of evidence on the gendered nature of poverty and vulnerability and policy and programme design, in part due to the weak linkages between governmental gender focal points and policy and programme designers; and a largely technocratic approach to gender mainstreaming which does not support tailored and operational approaches to the systematic integration of gender. These are in turn exacerbated by an underinvestment in capacity building for programme implementers, especially regarding the gendered rationale for programme provisions; and the general absence of gender-sensitive indicators in programme monitoring, evaluation and learning systems (see Box 2).

Political economy frameworks also emphasise the important role of informal institutions and the need to pay attention for instance to patterns of patron-client relations. While some programmes in our study were specifically established to correct historical tendencies towards clientelism in the social sector and establish more transparent and accountable modalities of social protection programming (as was the case with the establishment of Juntos in Peru (Vargas, 2010)), implementation practices often continue to be significantly shaped by informal politics. In Indonesia, targeting has been uneven as village heads have faced and often succumbed to pressures from villagers to provide subsidised rice to a much broader sector of the population. In Viet Nam, decisions about how best to invest local infrastructure budgets have on the whole not been approached through a pro-poor lens but have instead been shaped by concerns that all should benefit equally (e.g. through the construction of village meeting buildings). The challenge from a gender perspective in attempting to tackle informal politics is that clientelistic ways of working are typically overlaid with patriarchal ways of relating. Accordingly, without investing in awareness-raising initiatives for programme participants about the gendered rationale for programme provisions, these types of political economy challenges are likely to remain unresolved.
Box 2: Institutional barriers to integrating gender into Vietnam’s flagship social protection programme

While the design of Vietnam’s NTPPR seeks to address poverty in a holistic manner, achieving this in practice has proven more difficult. The programme’s comprehensive approach is a double-edged sword: growing awareness of the multidimensionality of poverty calls for a multifaceted policy response like the one NTPPR envisions (Jones et al., 2009), but striking a balance between comprehensiveness and undue complexity has remained elusive, especially in terms of integrating gender concerns. Key informant interviews suggested that gender-sensitive policies and programmes are hindered by a number of institutional disincentives.

First, although gender statistics are being collected to some degree, their reporting is very weak and not integrated into regular analysis and reporting processes. For instance, neither the Ministries of Education nor Labour and Social Affairs was able to provide gender-disaggregated data on credit provided for education and vocational training to poor households.

There are also some concerns about data quality, adequacy and timeliness. Ministry of Planning and Investment officials complained that Government Statistics Office data are not necessarily reliable and thus it is difficult to request data on the impacts of programmes on male and female beneficiaries. Moreover, survey data are often released too late to be included in annual development plans and planners are therefore compelled to rely on administrative reports from its provincial-level departments. However, ‘even when we request local government officials to collect data on men and women, they don’t respond – so there simply aren’t any beneficiary data at the national level’ (Head of Department of Labour, Cultural and Social Affairs, MPI, 2009). Data are also missing on some important areas such as the informal sector, migrant workers and time poverty – in all of which women are believed to be especially vulnerable (UN Gender Advisor, 2009).

Training is another area consistently identified by key informants as requiring urgent attention. ‘We don’t have experts but staff whose responsibilities are not clearly assigned and trained on’ (DOLISA Head of Social Protection Unit, Ha Giang, 2009). Gender training has been provided quite widely, but there are major problems with quality, relating to limited budget, language barriers for ethnic minority populations and insufficient practical guidance. Programme beneficiaries are often illiterate and commune leaders often have low levels of education, so there is a need for more visual and audio materials for training purposes, including in ethnic minority languages. Language is a particular issue for ethnic minority women: although women frequently perform the main agricultural activities in such communities, men go to training sessions, as extension workers mainly use the Kinh language. Some efforts are being made to find bilingual workers, but ensuring that they also have adequate gender awareness is especially challenging (Programme Officer, UNDP, 2009).

A third institutional shortcoming is the inadequacy of the gender focal point system. Focal points are usually untrained and relatively junior, with little decision-making power. They lack a dedicated budget and are thus often overstretched (Country Programme Manager, UNIFEM, 2009). Despite attendance at gender mainstreaming workshops, few officials know how to integrate gender into their everyday working lives. Practical, tailored guidance is lacking, without which little progress in advancing gender-sensitive programming can be expected.
Interests of key actors

The constellation of actors involved in social protection debates is diverse, including political, social and economic elites who play a key role in setting the terms of the debate; administrative bureaucratic agencies with responsibility for delivering social protection objectives (typically spanning a range of ministries: social welfare, women and children’s affairs, health, food security bureaus and rural development); civil society actors working with or acting on behalf of the poor – both international (e.g. INGOs such as Action Aid, HelpAge, Save the Children, Oxfam) and national; and bilateral donors (e.g. DFID, GTZ) and multilateral agencies (especially the World Bank and UN agencies such as ILO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNIFEM). While increasingly there are good practice examples of cross-agency cooperation (as evidenced for instance by the Joint Statement on Advancing Child-Sensitive Social Protection\(^2\) and the Social Protection in Africa: Where next? A joint statement by ODI, IDS, UEA and RHVP\(^3\) initiatives), not surprisingly these actors have a range of different interests in promoting social protection, and differing degrees of influence and capacities in particular contexts. A careful mapping of this complex landscape, including a recognition that these different actors are themselves not homogeneous and may have varying interests, is critical for assessing both the opportunities for and potential obstacles to the integration of gender into the social protection agenda.\(^4\)

First, as discussed above, political elites often initiate social protection programmes to further their own institutional aims such as demonstrating a commitment to a strengthened social contract between the state and the citizenry (as is the case with India’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which represents a commitment by the state to fulfil the right of all citizens to earn a liveable wage) and promoting social cohesion, especially in times of political flux (see also Box 3 on the evolution of cash transfer programmes in Pakistan). The impacts of social protection programmes are also often harnessed by political elites to advance their own interests. In Ethiopia, for instance, the ruling party has been able to shore up popularity among the rural poor as a result of the highly visible Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (Jones et al., 2010), while Brazil’s successful Bolsa Família programme has helped the PT-led (Workers’ Party) government to cement its role as an emerging global power by providing an effective platform from which to lead an initiative on South-South learning. Furthermore, in many cases, even though gender equality concerns are secondary to overall programme aims, governments have often been happy to claim responsibility for progressive gender outcomes, whether it be the increased participation of women in Ethiopia and India as a result of public works programmes, enhanced capacities of female caregivers to support their children’s development in Latin American cash transfer programmes, or smoothing women’s role in ensuring adequate food consumption in the case of Indonesia’s RASKIN programme.


\(^3\) http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/4884.pdf

\(^4\) Note that while Sam Hickey has done interesting work on mapping actors involved in social protection in Africa, here we expand this framework to consider social protection programmes in multiple regions, and also introduce an important focus on civil society actors which is largely absent from Hickey’s work.
Second, the interests of bureaucratic agencies also influence social protection trajectories to a significant extent, with the lead agency for social protection strategies often playing a key role in shaping the relative priorities accorded to different social protection goals. Where ministries of social welfare, women and children lead, there is generally more scope for attention to gender inequalities, although the ability to operationalise this can be limited by the capacity constraints that these agencies typically face in coordinating with other more powerful government agencies (as has been the case to date in Ghana for example). Where ministries of rural development are the lead agency, gender dynamics tend to be a lower order priority and this is typically exacerbated by the limited integration of a gender perspective into their ways of working, weak linkages to gender focal points and a general dearth of funding for capacity building for programme implementers around these issues (as for instance in Ethiopia, India and Indonesia). How bureaucratic agencies interact with other political players, such as the legislature, may also matter, especially in cases where social protection policies become enshrined in law (as has been the case with India’s MGNREGA).

The third key group of actors to consider is civil society. In the African and Asian contexts, international NGOs have played an important role in influencing social protection discourse, although the focus on gender equality has not been as strong as could be expected, in large part because of the primary focus on age-based (Save the Children, HelpAge) and spatial (e.g. Oxfam’s work on pastoral communities) exclusion and vulnerability. In Latin America and South Asia, domestic civil society actors have been relatively more influential, especially in Bangladesh, where BRAC has undertaken path-breaking work in social protection programming aimed at supporting women’s productive and social capital. However, again, while some gender equality champions (e.g. in Peru, Bangladesh and India) have played a part in ensuring, for instance, equal wages for women, sensitivity to women’s time poverty, and the importance of forging linkages with complementary programmes that tackle socio-cultural forms of gender discrimination, gender equality activists have been much less prominent than in other areas of public debate such as political participation, human and labour rights. This is perhaps because women’s movements have not been sufficiently adept at moving away from their more traditional policy strongholds (e.g. women’s economic empowerment, gender-based violence, political representation) and strategically influencing new programme areas, such as social protection. Possible reasons include a general tendency for gender equality movements to pay relatively less attention to issues affecting the poorest; the too often narrow income and consumption focus of social protection programmes; and funding pressures which have served to keep women’s NGOs siloed rather than facilitating their capacity to engage effectively with cross-sectoral issues such as social protection.

Finally, donors, especially in the sub-Saharan African context, have become critical actors in the social protection field. While the focus has largely been on social protection as a tool to help the poor and vulnerable harness the benefits of economic growth (e.g. DFID, GTZ, ILO, World Bank), UNICEF and UNIFEM have sought to highlight the importance of equity and social inclusion considerations. However, with the exception of UNIFEM, who remains a very small player in the field, gender dynamics have not received a lot of attention to date among donor agencies working on social protection, reflecting a general weakness in gender mainstreaming outside a few key sectors in the donor community. This is gradually changing, especially with regard to exploring the potential of social protection instruments to enhance girls’ educational achievement and girls’ and
women’s reproductive health in the context of the broader MDG agenda, but has yet to receive the resourcing a more systematic approach would demand.

**Box 3: The political economy of cash transfers in Pakistan**

Political motivations have been the main driving force behind the two largest safety net programmes in Pakistan. The Zakat programme, combining a regular monthly cash transfer with fee exemptions for basic services and marriage assistance, was initiated in 1980 by the Zia-ul-Haq government which adopted an overtly religious model of governance. Analysts suggest that the programme was motivated by a desire by the government to shore up its Islamic credentials rather than a specific economic or social objective. The programme was based on the principle that the deserving needy Muslims or ‘Mustahqieen’ require assistance, especially widows, orphans, the disabled and the unemployed. Accordingly, drawing on the Islamic injunction of charity, the government established a Central Zakat fund which was initially funded by a 2.5% tax deducted at source on specified financial assets such as bank deposits, but later following a Supreme Court ruling in 1999, this tax became voluntary. While this programme did target some women – Muslim widows – this was not informed by a concern to tackle gender inequality and thus not surprisingly has had no significant impact on gender relations.

Almost three decades later in 2008 the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme (BISP), an unconditional cash transfer programme, was launched by the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) both as a response to the Food, Fuel and Financial crisis as well as to leverage the political capital of its recently deceased party leader (Benazir Bhutto). Although some civil society activists have criticised the programme, arguing that its rapid implementation reflects its primary aim as that of a ‘vote bank’ for the ruling party, other analysts maintain that the programme is genuinely motivated by a desire to smooth the consumption patterns of the poor in the context of mounting food inflation. Significantly, from a gender perspective, the programme heralds in a much stronger commitment on the part of the government to tackle gendered experiences of poverty and vulnerability with the family being defined as a unit headed by an ever-married woman (whether she is now married, divorced or widowed). How this effects gender relations at the individual, intra-household and community levels in practice will therefore be important to monitor in the coming years.

Source: Khan and Qutub, 2010

**Ideas matter**

Political economy analysts emphasise the centrality of ideas (e.g. Hickey and Bracking, 2005). This is certainly the case with social protection where the divergent contours of national social protection systems reflect a wide range of ideas about poverty and its causes, the purpose of social protection and the role of the state in shaping gender relations, as well as the extent to which these ideas are shared by different social groups (see also Box 4). In Ethiopia and India, large-scale public works schemes have been informed by public distrust of social protection interventions ‘that create dependence’ but backing for the right of all, including female headed households who are often believed to be especially vulnerable, to have access to work to support their families.
Box 4: Understandings of citizenship can shape uptake of social protection programmes

Socio-cultural understandings of citizenship and citizen-state relations often contribute to the challenges in promoting gender-sensitive poverty reduction programming as the example of Vietnam’s NTPPR attests. First, community attitudes towards state-provided poverty reduction efforts are often complex and demand skilful negotiation. For instance, some highland ethnic minority groups have ‘a cultural view of the state whereby they are reluctant to participate in activities belonging to the state – whether or not it feeds their needs. The state belongs to the other and so people tend to look within the community first’ (Deputy Head, Programme 135, Committee of Ethnic and Minority Affairs, 2009). Accordingly, there is need for programme implementers to build up communities’ understanding of the state and of citizenship rights; programme staff need support in developing the appropriate soft skills for such a role.

Language and cultural diversity have not been adequately factored into programme design in many cases. Especially in ethnic minority communities, women in particular are often unaware of programme provisions owing to language barriers. Language hurdles can also be compounded by cultural gender roles and gendered education and literacy gaps, so that women are less likely to contribute to community discussions (Chair, Vietnamese Women’s Union, Lao Va Chai, 2009) and/or are prevented from attending meetings on account of time poverty. For instance, ‘Hmong women wake at 3am and spend the day working. They have no time to go to class’ (ibid). Some programmes have not factored in cultural taboos adequately so as to ensure equal access to services. As one official pointed out with regard to the new law on domestic violence:

‘People are very confused as typically Vietnamese pride themselves on having a non-conflictual family culture. The police and courts are very confused too and don’t have enough practical guidance on how to deal with such tensions. The new law conflicts with customary law too’ (Women’s Rights Coordinator, ActionAid, 2009).

Lastly, Viet Nam’s limited civil society activity, especially in the case of recent social protection initiatives, has meant that any watchdog function in terms of programme oversight has been weak. While Viet Nam’s civil society is relatively underdeveloped, this has arguably been exacerbated by the July 2009 Decree 97, which required that all local NGOs register with the Prime Minister’s office and comply with a list of activities on which NGOs can ‘legitimately work’. This list excludes issues related to human rights, gender, minority rights and access to information, meaning that there is limited scope for NGOs to champion greater accountability in resource distribution, social justice and programme implementation. Moreover, even the government-affiliated mass organisation, the VWU, lamented that it lacked information on the NTPPR mid-term evaluation process and did not receive an invite to be part of the consultation process. While more INGOs are active on such issues, it is not easy to promote greater civil society activity for the time being. It is also worth noting that the INGO Resource Centre, a coordinating body for INGOs in the country which facilitates a number of thematic working groups on various policy issues, lacks groups on issues relevant to gender-sensitive social protection such as gender, poverty, human rights, social protection, health or agriculture (Managing Co-Director, NGO Resource Centre, 2009).
Similarly, both Ghana’s cash transfer programme LEAP and Mexico’s subsidised crèche scheme, *Estancias*, have been framed in terms of harnessing the productive capacities of all citizens, including women, to contribute to broader national economic development goals. Generally, however, support for a more comprehensive approach to tackling gender-specific vulnerabilities has been less forthcoming, as gender relations are often seen as the purview of individual families and/or cultural/religious groups and therefore not an area in which the state should intervene.

**Conclusions and policy implications**

Although the links between gender, economic growth and development sustainability have become increasingly well recognised by mainstream development actors, these insights have yet to gain real traction within social protection debates, policy and practice. Key constraints we have highlighted relate to the gendered politics of social protection, and in particular a general tendency for gender dynamics to be integrated into institutions, actor interests and ideas in only a partial and subordinate way. In operationalising the insights from political economy analysis, Sam Hickey (2007) has argued that “[a] key challenge is to identify and support ‘politically progressive constituencies’ or drivers of change, that might begin to provide the forms of mobilisation required to secure political contracts for social protection” (12). We would add to this that an emphasis on securing political buy-in for gender-sensitive social protection is also essential. In this vein, our multi-country analysis suggests that the following should be considered in developing ‘politically progressive constituencies’ that are gender aware:

- Assist designers of national social protection strategies to creatively source evidence on the gendered nature of poverty and vulnerability so that tackling gender inequalities can be more easily framed as central to social protection objectives.

- Support champions of gender equality—both state and non-state—to forge coalitions with the elite, bureaucratic agency, civil society and donor agencies involved in advancing social protection so as to better integrate context-appropriate understandings of gender dynamics into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social protection policies and programmes. This could include assisting gender equality advocates to strategically frame gender-specific demands so that they resonate with broader ideas about social protection as well as with institutional mandates and the interests of key actors.

- Advocate for a greater investment in tailored capacity strengthening initiatives within social protection strategies and action plans in order to address the imbalance in both general and gender-specific capacities among actors engaged in social protection debates.

- Invest in community sensitisation initiatives so that programme participants as well as non-participants can better understand and support gender-related social protection programme provisions.
References


