

ESRC-DFID Research for Policy and Practice:

Women, work and social protection

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Foreword

To accomplish the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development it is absolutely mission-critical to unlock and properly account for women's untapped economic potential and their wider contributions to society. This must go hand in hand with promoting dignity and self-reliance. Doing so is of direct and urgent relevance to the ambitions that underpin the Sustainable Development Goals related to: *ending poverty; achieving gender equality; achieving full employment and decent work for all; and reducing inequality.*

When Ela Bhatt founded the Self-Employed Women's Association of India (SEWA) in 1972, she spoke passionately about the need to reframe poverty alleviation. She said, '**What we really are looking for is self-reliance and that is how we should measure success.**'

By adopting a holistic approach to social protection we move beyond an outdated framing of poverty alleviation as being primarily about access to the traditional labour market and cash transfers. To meaningfully tackle persistent poverty – particularly how it manifests for women – social protection *must* encompass a much broader range of considerations. The selection of ESRC-DFID-funded research that follows presents pertinent examples of how this applies in practice.

A study in Bangladesh shows that home-based self-employment, which is overwhelmingly preferred by women, offers considerable advantages despite being excluded from official data and largely overlooked by policymakers. In Rwanda, we see how a national public works programme provides opportunities for significant numbers of women (and by extension their households) to benefit from diversifying their income thus reducing vulnerability to shocks and exposure to risk. A study in Malawi and Lesotho demonstrates that while cash transfers have a role to play in shoring up the living standards of some of the poorest women, they have limited utility with regard to enabling them to contribute in a full and satisfying way to their communities. A study from South Africa demonstrates that basic employment alone is not enough to tackle the lack of dignity that characterises the experience of so many women living in or on the margins of poverty.

While undeniable strides have been made towards gender equality in recent decades, more often than not this has happened in spite of rather than because of the prevailing approaches to economic policy and social protection. Typically, traditional modes of thinking result in missed opportunities and suboptimal outcomes for women because they fail to recognise and address the complexity and nuances of



A single mother, with her three children and one of their friends, South Africa.

women's experiences, needs and contributions to the economy. Until these things are routinely addressed, Ela Bhatt's vision of self-reliance for *all* women and the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will remain elusive.

Mandu Reid
National Spokesperson for the UK Women's Equality Party

Key messages

- Policymakers should use frameworks that recognise and capture the economic impact of all relevant activities undertaken by both genders, including unpaid work and caring obligations, the lion's share of which falls to women.
- Social protection strategies for women surviving on very low incomes must go beyond cash transfers and include measures that uphold dignity and promote self-reliance, such as income-generating schemes.
- Where policy is focussed on providing women with access to the traditional labour market, the quality of employment opportunities must be considered alongside measures that support women juggling household and caring responsibilities for children and other family members.

Public works in Rwanda led to increased female non-farm labour supply

Almost all adults work in Rwanda: females work predominantly in farming while non-farm work opportunities are mostly undertaken by men. Research shows that the public works component of a major social protection programme, Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP), resulted in significant increases in non-farm wage opportunities for both men and women.

The VUP targets the poorest geographic areas (sectors) within each of Rwanda's 30 districts, and within these sectors, the poorest households. The programme has three components: public works, direct support, and financial inclusion.

This research focused on the labour supply impact of the public works component, which mostly involved community-level infrastructure projects and aimed to provide 71 days of work, equally for males and females, paying workers close to the market wage. However, in many sectors a lack of available work meant that substantially fewer days were supplied. The study was a collaboration between researchers at the University of Sussex and the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) in Rwanda.

The researchers used data from two waves of a large-scale multipurpose household survey from 2010/11 to 2013/14 and studied the changes in non-VUP labour supply outcomes for men and women, comparing individuals in sectors where the VUP was highly active with other sectors where the programme was not implemented.

The raw data confirms that almost all adult women and men work, and most have more than one activity. Women work almost exclusively in agriculture, mainly on their family farms, but also as wage labourers. The majority of men also work in farming but many more of them have non-farm wage jobs or non-farm self-employment positions, predominantly in wholesale and retail trades.

In comparing locations that had public works with those that did not, the researchers also controlled for sector fixed effects and household characteristics. The analysis shows no significant impact of the VUP on the overall labour supply of women or men and no impact on the numbers undertaking agricultural work, both of which were already very high. But it does show a significant and quite sizeable increase in the numbers of those undertaking paid non-farm jobs, by 6–13 percentage points for women and 11–20 percentage points for men. While the size of the increase is higher for men, so few women were doing these activities at the baseline that this remains a notable change. There are no significant increases in the number of jobs people undertook, nor in hours worked as a result of the sector's participation in the public works scheme.

Disaggregating the sample by education, these effects are observed for individuals who are more highly educated or come



Women harvesting maize, Nyarusazi, Karongi District, Rwanda.

from households with a higher overall education level, but are not observed at all for those with low or no education. The availability of public works projects at sector level seems to lead better educated women to opportunities to do non-farm wage work. This may be skilled work in education, health or administrative roles, but many more women are employees in construction and domestic work as well as in wholesale and retail trade. In some cases education may enable access to work even if the job does not really require it.

Although the quality of these non-farm jobs is not necessarily or consistently good, it does allow some diversification of economic activities for females and may enable households to cope better with shocks. The work opportunities outside the household for females may be preferable to the agricultural wage labour jobs they did before, but it may also increase the time burden which women face.

These seem to be positive impacts of the VUP public works programme, even if the exact mechanism by which the VUP enables this increase in non-farm wage jobs is less clear. Other aspects of the VUP, notably the financial inclusion component, may also have had beneficial effects though these are not assessed here.



Project title: *Female labour supply and the escape from poverty: New evidence from household data.*

Professor Andy McKay

Professor of Development Economics (Economics)
University of Sussex, UK

This study took place in partnership with researchers including Amalavoyal Chari, Mehtap Hisarciklilar, Iftikhar Hussain and Dr Dickson Malunda at IPAR.

SEE ALSO:

Kindness, H. (2011) *Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme, Rwanda. Local Development Support Fund Annual Report 2009/10*, January

Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC) (2009) *Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP) Public Works Operational Framework and Procedure Manual*, Revised version, 2 January

Pavanello, S.; Pozarny, P.; De la O Campos, A.P. and Warring, N. (2016) *Research on Rural*

Women's Economic Empowerment and Social Protection: The Impacts of Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP), Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

World Bank (2016) *International Development Association Program Document for a Proposed Development Policy Credit to the Republic of Rwanda for the Third Social Protection System (SPS-3)*, World Bank Report 108935-RW, 3 October, Washington DC: World Bank

Protecting dignity with jobs and social security

Dignity is a foundational value in the South African Constitution. However, research involving lone mothers revealed that although some participants viewed employment as conferring dignity, others had experienced it as erosive of dignity. Social security can play an important role in supporting caregivers whether they are in or out of work.

Low-income lone mothers in South Africa are expected to be both the breadwinner of the family, and to provide care for their children. These dual and often competing expectations occur in the context of high levels of poverty and unemployment, amid pejorative discourses around lone motherhood and social security receipt.

A study was conducted in 2011–13 by researchers at the University of Oxford (UK), the University of the Western Cape, and the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa to explore the lived experiences of lone mothers with reference to the role of social security in protecting their dignity. The South African Constitution commits to protecting and respecting dignity and to the progressive realisation of access to social security. Currently, in South Africa there is no social assistance for adults of working age unless they are disabled. However, there is a means-tested benefit for children of low-income caregivers – the Child Support Grant (CSG) – which is payable for children of caregivers with an income below a specific level. Low-income mothers feel especially pressured to work, not only because the CSG is too small to meet the needs of the child (and does not include a component for their own material needs), but because of the dependency culture discourse in communities and the country in general.

Sixteen in-depth interviews were undertaken in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces with low-income female caregivers together with 36 focus groups comprising nearly 200 lone mothers. Interviews were also held with senior policymakers, and social attitudes were explored more broadly in relation to dignity, poverty and social security. Results were widely disseminated to different stakeholder audiences.

The participants gave examples of dignity ‘in practice’ that included being valued and respected, and able to fulfil important roles in life – particularly that of caregiver – and provide for themselves and others. Poverty was described as erosive of dignity.

The CSG helped to protect dignity insofar as it contributed to the cost of raising a child. However, participants raised issues about the burdensome application process, negative attitudes, and its small size.

Some lone mothers with older children said they experienced a modicum of respect from family members with whom they lived because of the CSG income, explaining that they were able to share the food purchased.

Many strategies to survive poverty were described as being detrimental to their sense of dignity, particularly begging, demeaning work for family and neighbours, tolerating precarious employment, and transactional sex: ‘*We endure and persevere, what can we do.*’

SEE ALSO:

Ntshongwana, P.; Wright, G.; Barnes, H. and Noble, M. (2015) ‘Lone Motherhood in South Africa: Some Methodological Challenges and Policy Imperatives’, *South African Review of Sociology* 46.4: 80–99

Wright, G.; Noble, M.; Ntshongwana, P.; Neves, D. and Barnes, H. (2014) *The Role of Social Security in Respecting and Protecting Dignity of Lone Mothers in South Africa*:



Woman and child outside their home in a new housing development, South Africa.

Participants stressed the need for jobs in order to support themselves and their children. They also supported the introduction of social security for caregivers due to high unemployment rates.

The research team argues that comprehensive social security, if implemented in a way that promotes redistribution of wealth in order to protect the dignity of applicants, could play an important role in helping to respect people’s dignity. In parallel with job creation schemes and affordable (or free) high-quality childcare, social security should be provided to low-income adults of working age – the policies are not mutually exclusive. Extending social security would be advantageous from a gender perspective given the plight of many female caregivers, as well as positive from a child rights perspective by reducing the extent to which the CSG is of necessity diluted across other family members.

The team stresses that social security provision for impoverished caregivers with young children should not be linked to an obligation to seek work as they ought to be entitled to choose whether to undertake paid work or do the unpaid work of looking after their child, or a combination of the two. The false dichotomy of independent self-liftment through paid work versus passive social grant receipt also needs to be challenged: raising a family in a state of poverty – whether unemployed or in precarious employment – is itself extremely hard work, and an expanded system of social security could provide vital support for struggling families.



Project title: *Lone Mothers in South Africa: The role of social security in respecting and protecting dignity.*

Michael Noble

Emeritus Professor of Social Policy, *University of Oxford, UK*

Gemma Wright

Research Director, *Southern African Social Policy Research Insights, UK*

Phakama Ntshongwana

Campus Director, *Missionvale Campus of Nelson Mandela University, South Africa*

The study took place in partnership with researchers based in South Africa: David Neves (Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape) and Temba Masilela and Benjamin Roberts (Human Sciences Research Council).

Final Report, Oxford: Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy, University of Oxford

Wright, G. et al. (forthcoming) ‘Lone Mothers’ Accounts of the Impact of Poverty on their Dignity: A South African Perspective’, in B. Roberts and Z. Mokomane (eds) *Family Matters*, Cape Town: HSRC

Choice, constraints and the gender dynamics of labour markets in Bangladesh

Despite steady rates of economic growth across South Asia, female labour force participation rates remain among the lowest in the world. In Bangladesh, official statistics suggest that they went from 24% in 1999 to just 36% in 2010 while male rates remained at 80% or above (Mahmud and Bidisha, 2016). Research led by the London School of Economics set out to explore this puzzle.

Since this is a region of powerful patriarchal constraints that restrict women's activities to the domestic domain, cultural norms clearly had a role to play in the explanation. We wanted to investigate whether economic motivations might interact with these norms to differentiate how different groups of women engaged with market forces. We followed a mixed methods approach, using previously collected quantitative data from a DFID-funded research programme, Pathways of Women's Empowerment (2006–2011), to support new rounds of quantitative and qualitative data collection (2014–2017).

Our survey showed that far more women were economically active than recorded by official statistics which failed to capture market-oriented and subsistence work done by women within the home. We also found that women in paid activity were more 'empowered' according to a range of indicators than those in subsistence work or the economically inactive. This result was most consistent for women in formal employment. Yet most women were not only concentrated in home-based economic activities but also expressed a preference for such work. At the same time, we found that patterns of labour market participation are changing – and that the change has been partly driven by policy. Our research suggests different strands of explanation.

- **Home-based self-employment** has important advantages for women. It is not only considered a more 'respectable' form of work than work outside the home, but it is also more compatible with their unpaid domestic responsibilities. But this generalization has to be nuanced. Women expressed a strong preference for home-based work which earned them an income they could control rather than working as unpaid family labour for male-controlled farms and enterprises. Furthermore, concerns with social status meant that those who were willing to take up outside work could face considerable opposition from their families.
- **Formal employment**, preferably in the public sector, is perceived as a respectable option for educated women from higher status families. It is more secure and more likely to be regulated by government rules offering some protection from the exploitation and harassment they could face in other forms of work. Moreover, the fact that women in formal employment mainly work in teaching, health and community work allows

it to be constructed as a service to the community, justifying their presence in the public domain. But there are not enough of these jobs to satisfy demand and bribes were routinely demanded for them.

- Employment by NGOs provide a less preferred, but nevertheless 'respectable' **semi-formal alternative**. They do not require bribes, but offer less job security. Jobs in export garment factories can be done by women with less education but is only available to those willing to migrate to urban areas and to work long hours subject to harsh discipline. Moreover, women who do these jobs are seen as disreputable because they work alongside men.
- The least preferred jobs are in **informal daily wage labour** – in agriculture, in people's homes or on building sites. These are the only options available to women without education, assets or, in many cases, male support. Wages are low and arbitrarily determined, working conditions are harsh and employers' behaviour can be demeaning. In addition, working in the public domain with no option of veiling themselves leaves these women open to accusations of immoral character and sexual harassment.

While poverty drives many women to work, policy measures have helped to expand the overall demand for female labour. The spread of microfinance has made it possible for many more women to be engaged in income-generating activity at home than had been possible in the past. New economic opportunities are drawing others into less traditional forms of work. NGO work is one such opportunity, garment factory work is another. For poorer women, asset transfer programs are allowing them to withdraw from demeaning forms of wage labour into home-based enterprise while government public works offers them a preferred form of wage labour. More recently, the government has made it easier for women to migrate overseas on short-term contracts, which are a step up from casual wage labour. Increases in women's educational attainment, the spread of electricity and infrastructure, opportunities to migrate within and outside the country, access to television and mobile phone technology are among the broader factors leading to changes in attitudes to women's work. And while the increasing adoption of various forms of veiling is seen by many as an indicator of rising religiosity in the country, it is also an important means by which many women are able to work outside the home while still claiming to be observing cultural norms.



Project title: *Choice, constraints and the gender dynamics of labour markets in Bangladesh.*

Naila Kabeer

Professor of Gender and Development
London School of Economics, University of London, UK

SEE ALSO:

Heintz, J.; Kabeer, N. and Mahmud, S. (2018) 'Cultural Norms, Economic Incentives and Women's Labour Market Behaviour: Empirical Insights from Bangladesh', *Oxford Development Studies* 46.2: 266–289. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13600818.2017.1382464?needAccess=true>

Kabeer, N.; Mahmud, S. and Tasneem, S. (2018) 'The Contested Relationship Between Paid Work and Women's Empowerment: Empirical Analysis from Bangladesh', *The European Journal of Development Research* 30.2: 235–251. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057%2F41287-017-0119-y>

Kabeer, N. (2017) 'Economic Pathways to Women's Empowerment and Active Citizenship: What Does the Evidence from Bangladesh Tell Us?', *Journal of Development Studies* 53.5: 649–663. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220388.2016.1205730?needAccess=true&instName=University+of+Sussex>

Mahmud, S. and Bidisha, S. H. (2016) 'Female Labor Market Participation in Bangladesh: Structural Changes and Determinants of Labor Supply in Selim Raihan (ed.) *Structural Change and Dynamics of Labour Markets in Bangladesh: Studies on Labour and Employment*, Dhaka: South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). <http://sanemnet.org/sanemafeefcontainer/uploads/2016/02/SANEM-labor-book.pdf>

Young women and cash transfers in rural Africa

Young adult women from households and communities that receive poverty-targeted social cash transfers in rural Malawi and Lesotho really want to work. They are grateful to receive cash, but uncomfortable with receiving 'free money' and keen to make a productive contribution to their families and communities.

Since 2006, Malawi has introduced a social cash transfer targeting ultra-poor labour-constrained households and Lesotho introduced the Child Grants Programme for poor households with children. A team of researchers from Brunel University London and other institutions in the UK, Sweden, Lesotho and Malawi undertook qualitative research over a three-year period (2016–18) in rural communities that are receiving these payments. In two case study villages, researchers interviewed all members of households that receive social cash transfers, and also undertook individual interviews and participatory group activities with young people (aged 18–34) from both recipient and non-recipient households. The participatory groups were differentiated by gender.

Of the young women in recipient households, some of those in Lesotho received child grants to support their own children while a small number in Malawi had been targeted as single mothers supporting children. The young people in households receiving cash transfers universally welcomed the additional cash, which enabled them to feel more food secure and buy school essentials for their children. Above all, it meant they were able to feel that they did not stand out in the villages due to their poverty – they could purchase clothes for themselves and their children and soap to keep them clean.

However, young families in receipt of grants almost invariably talked of being resented by those who did not receive money. Often there was little appreciable difference between recipient and non-recipient households, and the situation was exacerbated because the young people were not being expected to work for the money. In Lesotho, the child grants were referred to as *seoa holimo*, meaning 'money falling from the sky', because they appeared to be random allocations of cash that came with no explanation.

Many of the recipients said they would have preferred to work for the money. Some indicated it would have been better directed specifically at productive investment, enabling them to build income-generating businesses, either individually or collectively. They also pointed to the development needs of their communities – for example, having better roads and bridges to enable their children to walk safely to school, and reforestation projects to stop rocks falling onto and damaging houses from the hillsides above. Employment locally was in very short supply but aspired to by all, and there was work that clearly needed doing.

Both cash transfer schemes envisage the ultimate beneficiaries to be children. Money is given to adult household members – generally parents or grandparents – for this purpose.

SEE ALSO:

Brown, C., Ravallion, M., & van de Walle, D. (2018). A poor means test? Econometric targeting in Africa. *Journal of Development Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2018.05.004>

Ellis, F. (2012). 'We Are All Poor Here': Economic Difference, Social Divisiveness and Targeting Cash Transfers in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Development Studies*, 48(2), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2011.625408>



Photo: © Elsbeth Robson 2017

Women participating in the research, Malawi.

The money paid to parents is undoubtedly spent on children, but neither community viewed children as the principal beneficiaries of the grants. Rather, the money was seen to go to parents (male and female) and to entrench their responsibilities for their offspring, representing a shift of caring responsibilities away from extended families toward nuclear households. The parenting role of women, in particular, is reinforced. Yet these households do not conform to the stereotypical Western image of male provider and female caregiver. While young men may have felt greater shame that they (as strong young adults) were receiving unearned income, young women also viewed themselves as providers and not simply nurturers of their children. Both young men and young women were keen to work.

Ultimately, cash transfers are a useful means of supporting impoverished young women materially to fulfil their expectations as parents, and enabling them to experience some level of dignity. But young women also want to play a productive role in their families and communities. Culturally, income earned through work is much more respected, and motherhood is associated with providing for the household and not simply day-to-day childcare. Moreover, young women have ambitions of their own, beyond being able to supply the material needs of their offspring. Rural employment opportunities are sparse, and young women often have fewer prospects than young men of migrating for work, particularly if they have young children. It is important, then, that social protection policies include support for young rural women to access meaningful work or income-generating opportunities, rather than simply providing small amounts of cash in substitution for absent earned income.



Project title: *Social cash transfers, generational relations and youth poverty trajectories in rural Lesotho and Malawi.*

Nicola Ansell

Professor of Human Geography
Brunel University London, UK

Molyneux, M. (2006). Mothers at the service of the New Poverty Agenda: the PROGRESA/Oportunidades programme in Mexico. *Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context: Uncovering the Gendered Structure of "The Social,"* 43–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2006.00497.x>

<http://www.cashtransfers-youth.net/>

THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

This summary highlights the key messages from research focusing on women, work and social protection from the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation and is an output of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research.

It is written in collaboration with research teams and edited by Kelly Shephard, Head of Knowledge Impact and Policy at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The academic reviewer for this paper was Meenakshi Krishnan, Gender and Sexuality Cluster, IDS.

The Impact Initiative seeks to connect policymakers and practitioners with the world-class social science research supported by the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership, maximising the uptake and impact of research from: (i) the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research; and (ii) the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. We seek to identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities, and facilitate mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

Email: info@theimpactinitiative.net

Website: www.theimpactinitiative.net

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Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation: aims to enhance the quality and impact of social science research, addressing the key international development goal of reducing poverty amongst the poorest countries and peoples of the world.



Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme: aims to provide policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning outcomes and to inform relevant policy and programme decision.



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