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Transforming gender constraints in the agricultural sector: The potential of social protection programmes

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality continues to constrain women's opportunities in the agricultural sector, both in terms of achieving food security and increasing agricultural productivity. However, investment in gender-responsive programming which promotes women's empowerment can help to overcome these constraints. This article discusses experiences in social protection programming design and implementation with respect to gender equality, food security and agricultural productivity: we find that while a large part of social protection programming remains focused on supporting women's domestic and care roles and responsibilities, there have also been important advances in thoughtful programming which supports more transformative changes in women's roles as producers. These types of programmes typically recognise the multiple risks and vulnerabilities that women face, both in their reproductive and productive roles, and aim to overcome these through integrated programming combining support for basic needs as well as broader empowerment goals.

1. Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that gender inequality is strongly linked to food insecurity. It is estimated that worldwide, women and girls represent 60% of those who are undernourished, and national hunger rates correlate strongly with gender inequality rates (von Grebmer et al., 2009; WFP, 2009). Moreover, pervasive gender inequality also has detrimental effects on productivity: research shows that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, yields on their fields would increase by 20–30% (FAO, 2011).

Over the past two decades the design and implementation of social protection policies and programmes have increasingly supported food security and agricultural productivity goals for the poorest households. Through different social protection tools – such as public employment programmes, subsidies or transfers (income, in-kind, agricultural inputs) – social protection can play important roles in *protecting* household income and smoothing consumption, especially in times of crisis or seasonal stresses; *preventing or mitigating* the impacts of shocks through social insurance schemes; *supporting productivity* by alleviating financial and productive constraints in the agricultural sector and investing in productive activities; and *transforming or empowering* individuals and households to remove discriminatory barriers to owning productive assets and promoting linkages with complementary services. What is much less understood is how social protection programmes advance women's empowerment and tackle gender inequalities within the agricultural sector. This article seeks to address this gap, drawing on findings from a review of the literature as

well as the authors own primary research in 10 countries across Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (see Holmes and Jones, 2013). We begin by discussing the conceptual linkages between gender roles and responsibilities, food security, agricultural productivity and the mediating role that social protection programmes can have. We then turn to an overview of the evidence base on the strengths and weaknesses of social protection programme design and implementation with respect to gender, food security and agricultural productivity. Due to data availability, this discussion largely focuses on social assistance programmes. We conclude by recommending key areas for further attention if the transformative role of social protection programming is to be realised for women and their communities in the agricultural sector.

1.1. Conceptualising linkages between gender relations, food security, agricultural productivity and social protection

Access to social protection programmes can be particularly important for women given that gender discrimination continues to affect not only women's own nutrition and food security needs, but also their agricultural productivity. Understanding the ways in which gender inequality pervades the agricultural sector means recognising that women and men experience risk and vulnerability differently, they have different coping strategies available at their disposal to manage risks and empowerment is key to increasing resilience.

Women's roles and responsibilities – such as a dominant responsibility for domestic tasks and childcare, women's lower status in the

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household and community and limited decision-making and bargaining power – mean that women and men often experience different levels of vulnerability to the same shocks and stresses (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011). For example, ill health tends to have a disproportionate impact on women as women are affected by their own illness but also have responsibility for looking after sick family members (Ibid.). Women and men are also vulnerable to different types of shocks and stresses (Ibid.). For example, the death of a women's husband can lead to a loss of her assets, such as land, because of discriminatory property rights or laws (Peterman, 2010).

Women and men also have different abilities to withstand shocks and stresses. Women have less access to productive assets and resources, are concentrated in low-wage casual employment and access different social networks which undermines their resilience to cope with stresses and shocks (OECD, 2012). For instance, women typically have less access to irrigation or water-harvesting methods to reduce the effects of drought (World Bank et al., 2009) and fewer women have insurance to mitigate the effects of extreme weather or ill health (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011). As such, women and men employ different coping strategies, and in times of crisis underlying gender biases may mean that assets belonging to women or female-headed households are more vulnerable to distress sale than those belonging to men, having long-term effects on asset accumulation and management over time. Women's assets (such as jewellery or small livestock) may also be sold first, as in some contexts they are more liquid (Dillon and Quiñones, 2010).

The flip side of vulnerability is resilience, and this is strongly interconnected with women's empowerment – a prerequisite for women to be able to reduce their vulnerability to shocks and stresses and build resilient and sustainable livelihoods in the rural sector. Recognising the multiple aspects of empowerment, Kabeer (1999) suggests a three-pronged approach to understanding the complex dimensions of empowerment: changes in women's access and control over resources, improved opportunities for agency, and ultimately enhanced wellbeing outcomes. Women's empowerment is thus central to improving food security and agricultural productivity at the household and community level – from women's improved access to and control over resources, such as access to agricultural inputs and assets, to changes in their ability to exercise voice and decision-making, such as over household food and income. However, it is increasingly understood that simply increasing women's access to economic resources does not automatically translate into greater decision-making or bargaining power (Das et al., 2013). Instead, integrated approaches which increase women's access to economic resources in combination with progress in other areas of women lives, such as legal ownership of assets, decision-making on productive assets and increased tenure security, have important positive effects on women's productivity and empowerment (Santos et al., 2013).

As such, social protection has a potentially important role to play in contributing to food security and agricultural productivity in a gender-responsive way. Social protection can address inequalities in the agricultural sector if adequate attention is paid to the different types of vulnerability and risks women and men face and if they can contribute to empowering women as producers, not simply reinforcing women's reproductive and domestic roles and responsibilities as consumers. Table 1 below highlights the pathways through which social protection can support food security and agricultural productivity in a gender-responsive way, through reducing gender inequalities and/or promoting women's empowerment. The Table highlights that social protection programmes can contribute to the three spheres of empowerment discussed above: *access to and control over resources* (through, for example, cash transfers which increase women's access to income and financial services and targeted inputs), *agency* (through, for example, targeted income transfers and training which increase decision-making and improved nutritional practices), and *outcomes* (e.g. improved household food security and agricultural productivity).

The next section looks at the evidence from programming experience in practice.

2. Gender, social protection and agriculture in programming

While social protection programming has, following Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004), primarily focused on protective and preventive objectives, it has not entirely overlooked promotive and more transformative goals. These include not only an increasingly broad range of factors that fall into the 'resource' component of Kabeer's three-pronged conceptualisation of empowerment, but also efforts to promote her second prong, 'agency'. We discuss here a range of social protection interventions and how these programmes support food security and women's agricultural productivity. We note that unsurprisingly while programme design is becoming increasingly innovative in terms of addressing some of the key vulnerabilities that poor rural women face, implementation often lags considerably due to limited awareness of design provisions, capacity and budget constraints (Holmes and Jones, 2013). Moreover, while many programmes either target women in general or female-headed households as part of their programme design, we also discuss the limitations of such an approach and what other considerations need to be taken into account to ensure gender-sensitive programming.

2.1. Supporting women to smooth household consumption

In urban and rural areas alike, social protection programmes have proven to be an effective way of reducing poverty, increasing household savings, and reducing the need to resort to adverse coping strategies. Given that women hold primary responsibility for day-to-day running of the household, including providing food and arranging for children's education, improving their access to resources is critical to building a sense of empowerment. While the consumption-smoothing approach primarily addresses women as consumers and beneficiaries rather than producers, it has a variety of longer-term implications for women's empowerment – not least the reduction in anxiety and concomitant increase in feelings of hope, happiness and satisfaction reported by many qualitative studies (Handa et al., 2009; OPM, 2013a). For example, Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) – which aims to provide a safety net in the form of an unconditional cash transfer for chronically poor pastoralists in four counties – has increased food consumption, as well as spending on healthcare and education. It has also reduced the likelihood of households falling into the bottom income decile and enabled them to avoid distress sales of livestock by facilitating savings and access to credit (OPM et al., 2013; HSNP, 2014). Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), principally a public works programme that reaches more than 7 million people, has also had important impacts on consumption patterns and coping strategies. For example, Holmes and Jones (2013) report that it has improved food intake and reduced distress sales of assets. Old age pensions are also important to facilitate financial independence and protect rural women from destitution, especially important as women on average live longer than men and widows are at high risk of losing their land and their homes. In India, for example, pensions have enabled widows to contribute to household income (HelpAge India, 2009).

2.2. Increasing women's control over household spending

There is also evidence that when social protection programmes target women as beneficiaries, those women are able to increase their bargaining power within the household and their control over household spending (van den Bold et al., 2013; Bhagowalia et al., 2012; Soares and Silva, 2010). In Mexico, for example, the Oportunidades programme, which targets women as CCT beneficiaries, was found to strengthen women's financial decision-making and financial security

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