

Gender Norms and Gender-Responsive Social Protection

Evidence from programme and policy research

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Gender norms and the design and delivery of social protection

Gender norms shape social protection design. Policymakers' beliefs and narratives about gender and the role of social protection are key in determining the extent of gender integration into policy objectives and programme design.

Gender norms also shape how social protection programmes are interpreted and translated into practice. The case studies in Ethiopia and Tanzania showed:

- When the values and beliefs underpinning the gender design features of social protection aligned with prevailing gender norms, the intended policy narratives were more easily adopted, and the design features were more likely to be implemented as intended.
- When the values and beliefs behind gender design features clash with prevailing gender norms, policy narratives were often modified or even resisted during programme implementation.

Gender norms and programme outcomes

Gender norms are a powerful undercurrent shaping the gendered impacts of social protection.

- **Time use:** Prevailing gender norms can undermine the effectiveness of social protection and lead to unintended consequences on labour allocation

within households, particularly increasing women and girls' engagement in unpaid domestic and care work

- **Decision-making:** Prevailing gender norms around women's participation in financial decision-making may hinder efforts to enhance women's financial autonomy.
- **Reproductive Health:** Gender norms around bodily integrity and reproductive health can undermine reproductive health by impeding contraceptive use.

Challenging gender norms: What works?

Changing harmful gender norms is challenging and requires comprehensive programming across all levels, from policymakers to communities

- **Gender-focused CSOs, feminist organizations, academia, and progressive donors** and UN agencies played a key role in promoting gender-transformative social protection to change harmful gender social norms.
- Achieving sustainable gender equality requires a **deliberate and clearly articulated programme design**
- **Comprehensive and well-designed training** can help confront deep-rooted beliefs and change harmful gender norms
- Lasting change requires **long-term efforts**, as gender norms are deeply entrenched in society.

Recommendations

- **Invest in understanding the social and gender norms** that interact with social protection to initiate and sustain gender-transformative initiatives that combat stereotypes and harmful or limiting perceptions and expectations.
- **Actively confront discriminatory gender norms** that reinforce women's and girls' vulnerabilities and affect social protection outcomes.
- **Engage actors at all societal levels**, provide training, and build coalitions to advance gender equality and accountability at scale.

Introduction

Gender norms define the socially accepted roles, positions and expectations for women and men in a society. They shape all facets of society—and influence how policies, like social protection, are designed, implemented, and what outcomes they produce. Policymakers, implementers and recipients tend to interpret programmes through the lens of dominant gender norms which can undermine the achievement of gender equality outcomes. Yet, there has been limited attention to how this plays out in practice.

With support from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), UNICEF Innocenti led a six-year research initiative (2018–2024) on Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP) to generate strong evidence on how social protection can effectively promote gender equality¹. As part of this effort, studies explored how gender norms shape programme design, delivery and outcomes.

Studies examined the interaction of gender norms with policy design processes (in Angola, Ethiopia, Mexico, Uruguay, and Viet Nam) and their influence on programme outcomes and delivery (in Angola, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Mali). The case studies covered a range of social protection reforms and programmes across diverse contexts and employed various research methods – from political economy analyses to mixed-methods evaluations²

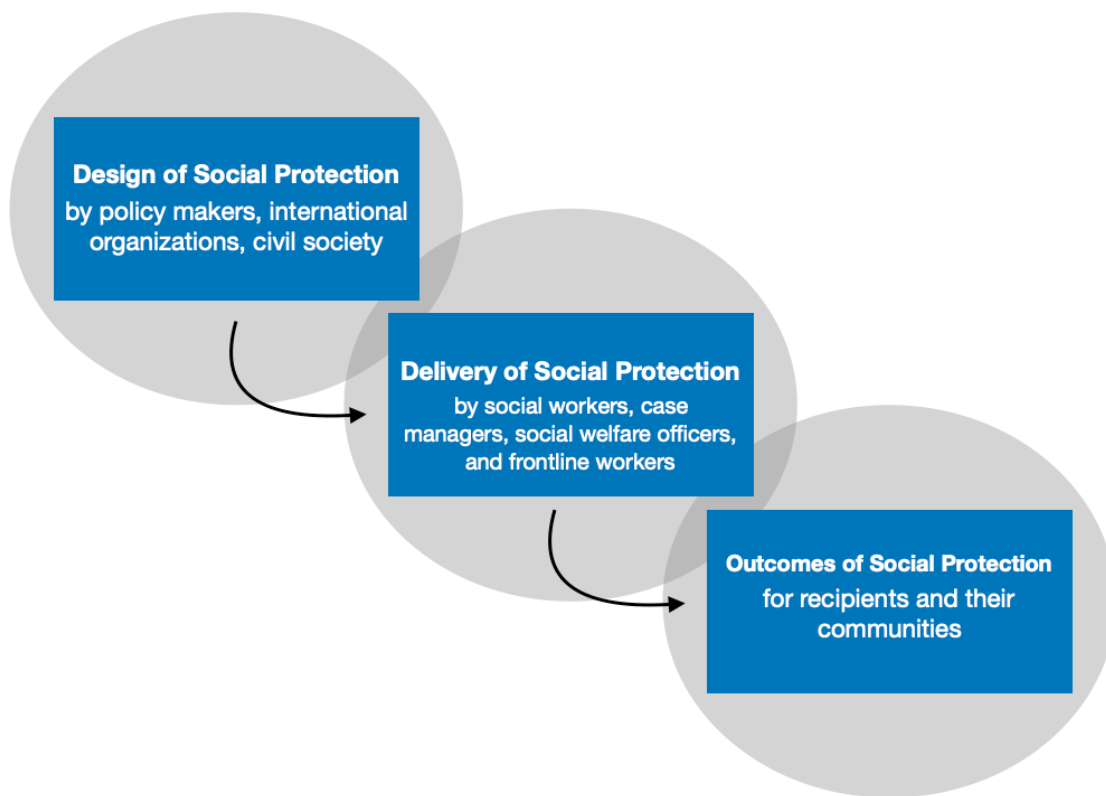
Gender norms in the design, delivery, and outcomes of social protection

Gender norms are reinforced by power relations across all levels of society—from high-level decision-makers to provincial welfare officers, social workers, case managers, social welfare officers, and frontline workers—and shape every stage of the social protection policy process, from programme design to delivery and outcomes (see Figure 1).

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² For the methodologies used in country-studies see [UNICEF Innocenti GRASSP Synthesis Report, 2024](#), Annex 1.

Figure 1. Influence of gender norms and social protection policy processes



1. Gender norms and the design of social protection

Political economy analyses of policy reforms in Angola, Ethiopia, Mexico, Uruguay, and Viet Nam showed that gender norms shape policy-making and social protection design. Policymakers' beliefs about gender and the role of social protection in addressing gendered risks and inequalities are key in determining how—and how far—gender is integrated into policy objectives and programme design. The political economy analyses highlighted the following gender norms and narratives influencing the design of social protection.

- **Ignoring the gendered nature of poverty:** Except for Uruguay's care system, most reforms did not explicitly recognize the gendered nature of poverty. Social protection was primarily framed as a tool to reduce poverty, food insecurity, or support vulnerable or "deserving" populations. In some countries, policymakers explicitly preferred "non-discrimination" in social protection (equal benefits for

men and women), viewing social protection as either unrelated to gender or requiring exact equality in the treatment of men and women. These views, which underpinned gender-neutral approaches to the poverty-targeted cash transfer in Angola and the reforms to social assistance in Viet Nam, effectively reflected a gender-unaware approach as they failed to recognize that pre-existing gender inequalities mean that women are disproportionately affected by poverty and vulnerability.

- **Requiring women to engage in paid work and meet conditions:** Government policymakers were often concerned that state benefits, or ‘handouts’, create idleness and dependency, and social protection should therefore be targeted to the poorest – who must do something in return. These views informed policy approaches such as public works and behavioural conditions (e.g. attending health trainings or ensuring children’s school attendance), which require time and effort from recipients to achieve intended outcomes for children. These responsibilities for the household typically fall to women. Meeting these conditions often requires them to take on additional tasks alongside existing unpaid care and domestic work, increasing their overall workload. On these grounds, actors from women’s rights and feminist organizations in Mexico and Uruguay therefore opposed such policies.
- **Reinforcing women’s responsibility for care work:** Some policymakers viewed women primarily as caregivers, assuming they are the main providers for children and more likely than men to allocate resources toward their well-being. Even when providing cash to women, this perspective tended to unintentionally frame social protection programmes in ways that reinforced traditional caregiving roles, rather than addressing the underlying inequalities in care responsibilities. For example, these beliefs and norms informed many of the measures incorporated into Ethiopia’s PSNP, such as reducing working hours of women public workers to relieve (not redistribute) women’s double burden of economic and care responsibilities. Meanwhile, feminist groups, such as those driving the care reforms in Uruguay, were more likely to express the need to transform unequal gender norms around care.

2. Gender norms and the delivery of social protection

Gender norms shape how social protection programmes are interpreted and translated into practice. The case studies in Ethiopia and Tanzania showed that prevailing gender norms influenced how gender features of social protection were understood and the extent to which they were adapted during implementation. Two main dynamics were observed.

- **Shared gender norms and policy adoption:** Findings from Ethiopia illustrate that when the values and beliefs underpinning the gender design features of social protection aligned with prevailing gender norms, the intended policy narratives were more easily adopted, and the design features were more likely to be implemented as intended. For example, the preferential targeting of female-headed households for participation in public works programmes resonated with prevailing norms around the gendered division of labour and economic opportunities. Female-headed households were widely recognized as more economically vulnerable. Including them as target group in the public works programme thus did not challenge local gender norms. As a result, acceptance of this provision was high, and the policy rationale managed to stay intact throughout the delivery chain—contributing to its relatively successful implementation on the ground.
- **Divergent gender norms and policy modification or resistance:** When the values and beliefs behind gender design features clashed with prevailing gender norms, policy narratives were often modified or even resisted during programme implementation. In Ethiopia, for instance, efforts to increase women's participation in supervisory and decision-making roles clashed with norms that reserve leadership for men. To gain acceptance, the policy rationale was adapted. Rather than framing women's involvement as a matter of rights, the focus shifted to its practical benefits, highlighting how women's participation leads to decisions that better reflect community needs, including those of women and children. This effectively maintained the perspective of women as primary caregivers responsible for the welfare of the household and community. The shift in narrative by staff undermined the transformative potential of the design feature to change limiting social and gender norms. In Tanzania, prevailing norms around adolescent sexual activity conflicted with the Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) trainings offered

as part of the cash-plus programme. Implementers noted that community members, even including older women, did not appreciate the provision of SRH education and contraceptives to adolescents/youth, especially to those who were unmarried. While introductory community meetings sought to address these concerns, uptake and attendance at the training sessions may still have been influenced by prevailing gender norms.

3. Gender norms and programme outcomes

Gender norms are a powerful undercurrent shaping the gendered impacts of social protection. Our case studies in Angola, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Mali showed how gender norms mediate outcomes related to women's and girl's time use, financial autonomy, and contraceptive use and early marriage.

- **Time-use:** The case studies found that social protection programmes had unintended consequences on women's and girls' time use, driven by prevailing gender norms around the allocation of household labour. In several instances, the programmes increased the time poverty of women and girls, and in some cases, increased the unpaid domestic and care work burden for girls. For example, in Ethiopia, public works increased the time poverty of female workers, who were expected to participate in the programme as well as fulfil domestic and care responsibilities at home. Although the programme allowed them to leave the work site earlier, older daughters often stepped in to support their mothers. The lack of child-care facilities, an intended design feature of the public works programme, also contributed to this pattern. In Burkina Faso, the cash plus programme led to improvements in livestock ownership and agricultural investments which may have translated into additional work for the households resulting in changes in labour allocations. In this instance, there was a transmission of domestic work from adults to children, especially girls who ended up doing more unpaid care and domestic work.
- **Women's financial autonomy:** Prevailing gender norms around intra-household financial decision-making may hinder social protection efforts to enhance women's financial autonomy. In some cases, women either did not participate equally in financial decisions (e.g., Burkina Faso, DRC), did not make financial decisions alone (e.g., Angola) or were expected to invest the money they earned in their children

and the family (e.g., Ethiopia). Qualitative findings indicate that such decision-making dynamics were shaped by entrenched gender norms reinforcing male dominance over decision-making. Most studied households were male-headed, and respondents consistently identified men as the main decision-makers on finances, major purchases, assets, and schooling.

- **Contraceptive use and early marriage:** Gender norms around bodily integrity and reproductive health can undermine efforts to improve reproductive health by impeding contraceptive use. In Tanzania, conservative norms regarding contraceptive use and early marriage were deeply embedded through socialization. For example, early marriage remained widely accepted – especially for girls finishing school, who feared remaining unmarried beyond the expected age. In addition, the quantitative findings showed that in villages with more conservative norms, adolescents participating in the intervention demonstrated lower contraceptive use, while in villages with more progressive norms, the intervention had no impact on contraceptive use. Qualitative findings revealed that conservative villages resisted the programme's SRH education for adolescents, particularly females. This pushback likely reduced adolescent participation in training sessions, consequently undermining the programme's effectiveness in promoting responsible SRH practices, including contraceptive use.

Challenging gender norms: What works?

Changing harmful gender norms is an ambitious and challenging task that requires holistic, comprehensive programming that reaches all levels of society — from policymakers to policy managers, frontline workers and communities. Our case studies provide insights into some of the approaches that have been effective in their respective contexts.

What works

- 1. Advocacy to promote gender-transformative social protection:** The political economy analyses suggest that gender-focused or feminist CSOs, academia, and more progressive donor and United Nations agencies played a key role in promoting transformative change. Moreover, some policymakers were also receptive to transformative ideas, especially in Uruguay, where the purpose of the care reform was not just to meet the needs of those requiring care but to redistribute responsibility for care away from the family and from women.
- 2. Explicit intent and multisectoral programme design:** Sustainable advancement of gender equality requires a deliberate and clearly articulated programme design. Various design components exist to influence and challenge harmful gender norms, including engaging women's organizations and the media, community-level behaviour change and communication strategies, community and leadership sensitizations, and building coalitions with religious and political leaders. For example, in Mali, the design of the cash transfer integrated a training on women's rights and leadership, aimed at strengthening women's positions within households and communities.
- 3. Comprehensive training to confront deep-rooted beliefs and change gender norms:** In Tanzania, the programme integrated high-impact behaviour change and communication methods, such as life-skills training, peer support groups and mentorship programmes. Central to these efforts was the comprehensive 12-week face-to-face intensive training, which included training on gender equitable attitudes on topics such as: the distinctions between gender and sex; the influence of gender stereotypes and roles on men and women, families, and community relationships; societal expectations regarding gender roles; and GBV. Consequently,

adolescent boys reported increased participation in household tasks and fewer instances of catcalling.

- 4. Long-term programming for lasting change:** Findings from Tanzania highlight the need for sustaining initiatives to ensure lasting impacts. While the programme initially fostered positive changes in boys' gender-equitable attitudes, these gains did not last after the programme had ended. Similar suggestions emerged from the case study on Mali, which underscored the importance of continuing services over longer periods, as gender norms are entrenched in the local context and can only be shifted in the medium to long term.

Key recommendations

Gender norms shape how social protection is designed and implemented—and whether it delivers on its gender objectives. To make social protection truly gender-responsive, policymakers must understand how entrenched gender norms influence social protection and invest in strategies that can transform prevailing norms.

- 1. Understand the normative context:** More attention and resources need to be invested into understanding the social and gender norms that interact with social protection. Successful integration of gender into social protection requires adequate understanding of prevailing gender inequalities, the normative context in which these inequalities are created and reproduced, and the wider sociopolitical environments that give rise to these inequalities and sustain the status quo of gender inequality. Understanding these factors is essential for policymakers aiming to initiate and sustain gender transformative initiatives.
- 2. Explicitly challenge discriminatory gender norms:** Programmes should aim to transform, at all levels of society, entrenched and discriminatory social and gender norms, especially those that perpetuate women's and girls' vulnerabilities and (inevitably) interact with social protection interventions. Gender norms around the distribution of care work and decision-making remain a powerful undercurrent

shaping the gender outcomes of social protection programmes on women, men, girls and boys.

3. **Ensure that policy making and programming for gender-responsive social protection is participatory and inclusive:** Transformative efforts require careful and explicit policymaking and programming that takes actors at all societal levels into the fold. This can include deliberative approaches that help policymakers reflect on gender and inequality, confront deep-rooted beliefs, and openly discuss tensions between different norms and perspectives. This requires institutionalizing holistic and comprehensive training programmes within government systems, engaging women's organizations and the media to champion gender equality at scale and uphold accountability, and forging coalitions with like-minded political leaders.

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