Social Protection & Gender Equality Outcomes Across the Life-Course
A Synthesis of Recent Findings on Education and Learning
Acknowledgements

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Introduction
This brief is an extract from the paper ‘Social Protection & Gender Equality Outcomes Across the Life-Course: A Synthesis of Recent Findings.’ It is focused on evidence relating to education and learning. The full paper can be accessed here or here.

How might social protection support gender equality in education?
Understanding how social protection can support gender equality in education requires looking at a myriad of factors, in part because the diverse indicators used to measure education outcomes are intricately intertwined and become more so as children grow up and move through school, with what constitutes a measure of success at one age then becoming an antecedent of success at an older age (see Figure 2). In many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), neither girls nor boys have access to quality education. A positive contribution to gender equality in those environments is improving access and uptake—keeping more children in school for more years and supporting them to develop the basic learning competencies and life skills they need for adulthood. Second, the gender patterning of educational disadvantage is highly variable. Globally, despite focused attention on girls’ education as the ‘World’s Best Investment’, girls remain significantly less likely to have access to primary school than boys.1 On the other hand, on a global basis, and despite girls’ historical disadvantage, boys’ enrolment in secondary school now lags behind that of girls.2 Global patterns, however, hide marked regional variation, with boys advantaged over girls across levels in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Central Asia and girls advantaged over boys across levels in Latin America and the Caribbean and East and Southeast Asia.3,4 Also, even within education levels, indicators must often be deconstructed in order to be understood: for example, girls’ poorer completion of primary school may be due to lower initial enrolment, higher dropout rates or both.4 Finally, while globally, poverty and living in a conflict-affected context—rather than gender—are the primary reasons why children are denied an education, interactions between these three factors2 tend to leave the poorest girls most at risk of losing out, even in

Positive outcome indicators for education and learning

1 Improved cognitive and non-cognitive development
2 Improved access to early childhood education
3 Improved on-time primary enrolment and educational expenditures
4 Improved attendance and more time to study
5 Improved learning and grade progression
6 Improved grade/primary completion
7 Improved access to, success in, and completion of secondary school
8 Improved access to, success in, and completion of post-secondary education

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1 In the Middle East and North Africa, boys hold enrolment advantages at the primary and lower-secondary levels, but girls are much more likely to be enrolled at the upper-secondary level.
2 Intersectionality also complicates the picture, with girls from marginalized groups further disadvantaged.
countries that are otherwise making good progress towards equity. Although the learning crisis impacts both girls and boys, in some LMICs (e.g. Jordan and Uganda) girls outperform boys while in others, boys outperform girls (e.g. Ethiopia and India).

What does the recent evidence say about how social protection supports education and learning?

Early childhood (under 5 years)
Recent evidence, primarily from Latin America but also from Africa, suggests that social protection delivered in early childhood can have substantial impacts on educational outcomes—especially cash transfers, and in particular when they are closely paired with a ‘plus’ component that focuses on parenting skills. Critically though, in terms of understanding programme impacts, many outcomes do not become visible until children are older and have entered—or even completed—formal education. Evidence shows that:

- Social protection can improve young children’s cognition and access to preschool—and ultimately children’s enrolment in and progression through primary and secondary school.
- Impacts are derived through improved nutrition, reduced poverty, reduced parental stress, improved caretaking practices, and better access to preschool.
- Non-effects are primarily the result of programmes’ failure to capitalise on the first 1,000 days of life in ways that speak to the varied needs of young children—that is, programmes tend to emphasise nutrition and physical health and ignore the importance of stimulation.

Middle childhood (5-9 years)
The evidence base on the impacts of social protection (especially cash transfers) on children’s educational outcomes continues to grow more robust, as newer programmes are evaluated and older programmes’ longer-term effects become visible. Indeed, drawing on global evidence some researchers have concluded that cash transfers - unconditional and conditional - are one of the two best ways to ensure that children have access to education (the other being building schools). It is important to highlight the caveat that conditions come with various issues and costs—including further disadvantaging those unable to comply; not being possible in many environments due to monitoring capacity and costs; and the incentive effect sometimes being rivalled by simple labelling of cash as for a specific purpose.—That being said, there is a growing body of evidence, primarily from Latin America but also from Asia and North Africa, where programmes are mainly conditional, that conditions tend to improve educational impacts, through incentivising uptake and encouraging families to invest in children’s longer-term futures over immediate household needs. Similar evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa looking at unconditional transfers also show their critical impact in addressing economic barriers to accessing education services. Compared to cash transfers, there is significantly less research on the impacts of public works programmes, school feeding and health insurance. The evidence that does exist touches on both access and learning outcomes and trends towards positive. Looking across social protection modalities, evidence shows that:

- Social protection can improve children’s enrolment, attendance, and eventual educational achievement. It also increases households’ educational spending and the time allotted for children to study. With the caveat that learning outcomes are far more dependent on the quality of education than is access, evidence is also growing that social protection can improve children’s test scores.
- Impacts accrue through relieving consumption constraints (which can offset both the real and opportunity costs of education and shift how caregivers prioritise girls’ versus boys’ education), improving children’s capacity to learn and participate (via reduced hunger, improved nutrition and health, reduced stress and better mental health, higher aspirations, more time to study, etc.), and directly incentivising uptake through conditions or labels.
Non-effects are the result of supply side deficits, inadequate size of benefits and duration of support (especially for the most vulnerable), unpredictable and irregular payment delivery, inequitable access to programming, and overly narrow programme objectives that fail to explicitly frame longer-term educational outcomes (rather than reduced poverty and improved consumption).19

Adolescence (10-19 years)
A growing body of global evidence highlights that the effects of cash transfers on adolescents’ educational outcomes tend to be significantly greater than the effects on younger children. This is primarily because the real and opportunity costs of educating adolescents, who face competing pressures to earn (boys) and marry (girls) are higher.20 The effects of asset transfers (especially bicycles to facilitate school attendance), school feeding and health insurance also appear positive.21 However, public works programmes can be detrimental to adolescents’ schooling because of substitution effects.22 Evidence shows that:

- Social protection can improve transitions to secondary school, reduce absenteeism, encourage parents to allow more time for homework, and improve grade completion, learning outcomes and graduation rates.23 Programming that supports adolescent girls’ education not only reduces their odds of child marriage but can have cascading positive impacts on younger siblings’ education.24
- Impacts are limited by supply-side deficits, poor targeting, transfers that are too small, and a failure to target both parents and adolescents with information about the value of education.26

What does the recent evidence say about how social protection contributes to gender equality outcomes in education?

Early childhood
- With the caveat that education for all is recognised as central to achieving gender equality, there is no evidence that speaks to how social protection delivered in early childhood might directly improve gender equitable learning outcomes, despite some theoretical linkages related to son preference. Instead, concerns centre around the way that programmes focus on women as mothers and caregivers, potentially at the expense of their time and opportunities for individual empowerment.27

Middle childhood
- Outside of humanitarian contexts, most social protection programmes impact girls’ and boys’ educational trajectories in broadly similar ways.28
- However, household (including composition and livelihood), community, and national contexts are critical and can shape social protection programme impacts on primary school-aged girls and boys.29 For example, in some countries, such as Honduras or Bolivia—where boys are not perceived to need education to participate in the ‘brawn’ economy or when the opportunity costs of sending boys to school cannot be borne—social protection has larger impacts on girls’ education than boys’. In other countries, such as South Africa or Lesotho—where girls are more likely to be enrolled and learning than boys—social protection has larger impacts on boys’ education than girls’. Given that globally, girls are more likely to be out of school than boys at primary level, what stands out in terms of social protection’s gendered impacts on childhood educational outcomes is the overall lack of evidence that programmes disproportionately support girls’ access (though as noted above they do support access to education for girls and boys). Though one would hypothesise that gains for girls ought to be easier to capture, this is not borne out by evaluation findings to date. Indeed, of the evaluations that directly compare programme impacts on girls and boys and find a difference, our evidence assessment suggests that boys tend to be advantaged. This is partly because there are too few evaluations, and too few social protection programmes, in the countries in which girls are especially likely to be denied an education.
- Some evidence, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa, suggests that school feeding
Programmes—especially those that provide girls with take-home rations—may be especially effective at closing gaps that disadvantage girls at primary school level (though it should be noted that providing girls with take home rations also improves boys’ enrolment).30

Adolescence

Programme impacts and impact pathways often diverge during adolescence, as children begin to take on (or are prepared by their families and communities to take on) adult roles.31 On the whole, where evidence suggests that social protection impacts adolescent girls’ and boys’ access to education and learning in different ways, that evidence again speaks most strongly to girls’ recent educational progress.32

For boys, the opportunity costs of education grow rapidly during adolescence, due to real trade-offs with paid work.33 Trade-offs are rendered even less favourable where labour market realities limit the value of boys’ continued education (for example, in humanitarian contexts such as Jordan and Lebanon where refugees face labour market restrictions) or where school is perceived as ‘un-manly’ (for instance, in South Africa and the Caribbean).34 Social protection can improve adolescent boys’ access to education—but it becomes increasingly important to take into account boys’ higher opportunity costs, which may require ‘plus’ programming that helps boys and their parents understand the longer-term returns of investing in schooling and directly addresses the ways in which traditional masculinities can truncate boys’ trajectories.

Categorising costs for adolescent girls is more difficult—especially given that in an increasing number of countries (especially in Latin America and the Caribbean and East and Southeast Asia) girls are more likely to be enrolled at secondary level than boys.35 In some contexts, costs are monetary, with families less willing to invest in girls’ education because girls are not seen as future breadwinners.36 In other contexts, costs represent time. While the bulk of research suggests that the opportunity costs of educating girls are lower than those of boys—as domestic work is typically easier to arrange around (and combine with) school than boys’ paid work (albeit at the cost of learning and time for other important activities that support girls’ wellbeing)—this is not always the case (and may be shifting due to the COVID pandemic and climate change, with, for example, spill-over effects on water and fuelwood collection times).37

In many LMICs, pubertal changes begin to limit girls’ access to education, due to both social norms (about appropriate roles for girls) and girls’ limited access to services and support. Some girls drop out due to early marriage or pregnancy, and others drop out to follow social norms that dictate their need to remain ‘honourable’ and thus marriageable.38 Global evidence is clear that programming—especially cash and asset transfers—can protect girls by simultaneously covering the real costs of education and providing them with a social status (that of student) that buys time before the social pressures around marriage become unavoidable.39 The programmes that are most successful in raising girls’ educational trajectories appear to work by generating ‘positive externalities’ that shift gender norms as transfers offset real costs.40

In some contexts, conditions can help offset girls’ (or boys’) educational disadvantage, but must take account of costs, context (such as possibility of further marginalising the less advantaged) and could consider targeting girls and boys—not just parents—in line with their evolving capacities.41

While the bulk of evidence suggests that targeting men versus women as primary beneficiaries does not impact children’s educational outcomes, research from Mexico, Bolivia, and Lesotho has found that targeting women may sometimes harm adolescent girls, because women family members can be even more vested in maximising boys’ future earnings than men, due to patriarchal norms and systems of inheritance.42

Implications of the evidence base for how to use social protection to support education and learning outcomes that contribute to gender equality

1. Start with a vulnerability assessment to identify similarities and differences between
groups of children (for instance, by sex, disability status, ethnic group, LGBTQ). Critically, in terms of gender equality, it is important to carefully map girls’ and boys’ access to and success in education—paying attention to initial enrolment, attendance, repetition, progression, educational attainment and dropout—to identify which children are vulnerable to what factors and when.

2. Given that education is associated with more equitable attitudes and practices, scale up support, reaching more children with more benefits for more time.

Do not ‘silo’ early childhood education (ECE). To ensure that children matriculate into primary school ready to learn, use social protection programming to encourage and incentivise parents to engage and stimulate their young children and enrol them in preschool (where possible). Early learning should be prioritised on a similar footing to health and nutrition objectives—and should be designed to support gender-equitable socialisation.

Ensure that transfers are large, regular and predictable enough to offset both real and opportunity costs—especially as children grow older and as the economic and social costs of education increase and diverge by gender.

Directly address the higher practical and social barriers often faced by the most marginalised, by levelling support so that the most disadvantaged children and adolescents (including girls, minorities, and those with disabilities) get the most support (for instance, higher stipends or solar lights to enable evening study).

Depending on context, as children become adolescents consider supplementing household-level support with adolescent-targeted support—which can have the added advantage of increasing young people’s agency and empowering girls.

Invest in school transport, which in many contexts is especially important for adolescent girls. Where possible, invest in bicycles—which may reap a double dividend in that they improve girls’ access to school (via reduced time and risk of violence) as well as shift gender norms about girls’ mobility.

Scale up school feeding, ideally providing food at the beginning of school shifts to maximise children’s attention spans and offering take-home rations to girls in contexts where their participation lags.

Scale up health insurance for children and their parents—something that has particular implications for girls given that they are more likely to be tasked with the care of ill siblings or to have to take on more domestic responsibilities if their mother is ill.

Where public works programmes are the preferred modality, ensure that programmes provide childcare that simultaneously protects girls’ and women’s time and meets children’s needs for stimulation—and also have monitoring systems in place that limit risks of children participating in public works instead of parents.

Invest in ‘plus’ programming alongside more traditional social protection modalities—starting with inexpensive awareness-raising/information on the importance of education for girls and boys that is targeted at parents and adolescents, including parenting education (for parents) and life skills (for children and adolescents), and ideally incorporating direct attention to harmful gender norms.

Be aware of gender differences and how they shape impacts and impact pathways—designing interventions that address the antecedents of inequality, such as paid work for boys and child marriage and unpaid work for girls. Where possible, interventions should attempt to generate social pressure to support a shift in behaviour towards equal access to education for girls and boys, by using public ceremonies to distribute assets for girls, such as bicycles.

3. Invest in better and more disaggregated data—not only do we know little about how social protection can support the schooling of children with disabilities or children from minority groups, but many evaluations still fail to disaggregate findings by age and sex. There is also scant research on programme modalities beyond cash transfers, and there is too little data available from the countries (e.g. Chad and Guinea) with the largest gender gaps in favour of boys.
ENDNOTES

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2 UNESCO, 2020; Psaki et al., 2021
3 UNESCO, 2021
4 Psaki et al., 2018; Psaki et al., 2021
5 World Bank, 2018
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RECOMMENDED FIRST READINGS

For readers less familiar with the literature on social protection, education and gender, the following will provide useful detail and further insights.

- Arriagada et al. (2018) for an understanding of how social protection and parenting programmes could use synergies to support early childhood development.
- Artuc et al. (2020) for a brief synopsis of how to design social protection programmes for maximum impact, with special attention to the benefits of attaching conditions.
- Cristescu and Giordano (2019) for an analysis of how cash and voucher assistance can support education in emergencies.
- Damon et al. (2019) for a review of how social protection programmes fit in with other interventions in terms of supporting education.
- García and Saavedra (2017) for a thorough review of the impacts of cash transfers on education.
- Glewwe and Muralidharan (2016) for a review of how social protection programmes fit in with other interventions in terms of supporting education.
- Haberland et al. (2018) for a brief review of girls’ programming that includes impacts on girls’ education.
- Handa et al. (2018a) for a brief review of African (unconditional) cash transfers and their impacts on education.
- Ibarrarán et al. (2017) for a review of what the longer-term evidence identifies as good practices for cash transfers in Latin America.
- Jackson et al. (2019) for a review of what works to support early childhood education.
- J-PAL (2017) for an easy-to-read review of what works to support children’s access to education and how social protection can support that.
- Mishra and Battistin (2018) for a review of how cash transfers impact children’s outcomes across a variety of indicators, with very detailed attention to different indicators of education and learning.
- Molina Millán et al. (2019a) for a review of long-term impacts of conditional cash transfers.
- Psaki et al. (2021) for a review of why gender patterning must be explored in detail and how the barriers to girls’ education can be overcome.
- Rawlings et al. (2020) for a review of how to boost the impact of cash transfers on young children.
- Verguet et al. (2020) for an exploration of how school feeding programmes contribute to gains across sectors, including education.
- World Bank (2018) for a review of learning and how it can be supported, including with social protection.
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