Social Protection & Gender Equality Outcomes Across the Life-Course

A Synthesis of Recent Findings on Protection from Age- and Gender-based Violence, Exploitation and Neglect
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 protection from age- and gender-based violence, exploitation, and neglect. The full paper can be accessed here or here.

How might social protection support gender equality in terms of protection from violence, exploitation and neglect?

Both within and outside of the home, age- and gender-based violence, exploitation and neglect are linked to stress stemming from economic and physical insecurity and to social norms regarding generational and gender power dynamics. How social protection might contribute to reducing protection risks varies by age and specific risk (see Figure 4). To tackle violence in the household, social protection interventions can contribute to relieving the financial stress that can be a driver of child maltreatment and child labour as well as child marriage and intimate partner violence (IPV) (which harms children as well as women). To reduce women’s risk of IPV, social protection interventions additionally can contribute to ameliorating intra-household conflict and empower women. Many programmes target women as beneficiaries (to shift household gender dynamics) and can include a series of complementary or ‘plus’ components to address drivers of violence, exploitation and neglect—such as, parent-education courses (aimed at shifting discipline strategies and raising awareness about discriminatory gender norms) and/or empowerment sessions (aimed at enhancing girls’ and women’s economic and social empowerment).

To tackle violence in the community, including peer violence and gender-based violence (GBV), programmes can contribute to keeping children and adolescents in school. This reduces the time they spend in risky environments. Programmes can also contribute to economically and socially empowering girls and women, which reduces their need to rely on exploitative/transactional sex or marriage for economic security. Social protection can also contribute to preventing the exclusion and neglect of those with HIV, by ensuring households

Positive protection outcome indicators

- Reduced neglect and maltreatment
- Reduced time spent in risky environments
- Reduced child labour
- Reduced FGM/C (and other HTPs)
- Reduced risky (incl transactional) sex
- Reduced SGBV
- Reduced IPV
- Reduced child marriage
are sufficiently resourced to provide adequate care. Social protection programmes have also worked hand in hand with the social workforce and strengthened case management to ensure that individuals and households can be referred to and access a wider array of critical systems and services, including those that contribute to addressing their protection vulnerabilities.

What does the recent evidence say about how social protection supports protection from violence, exploitation, and neglect?

Early childhood (under 5 years)
Evidence on the relationship between social protection and child protection outcomes in early childhood indicates that reduction in exposure to violence and other harm is generally a secondary or tertiary effect of interventions targeting household poverty and parenting practices. There is emerging evidence that seeks to identify causal pathways where there are correlations between social protection interventions and reduced incidence of violence in early childhood (which is primarily the result of maltreatment by caregivers, often for perceived disciplinary reasons). Additional pathways that emphasise positive parenting practices and improving caregivers’ mental health show strong potential, especially if linked with cash or asset transfers. In South Africa, for instance, parent education programmes developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF were able to reduce young children’s exposure to violence by improving caregiver mental health and reducing household stress by bolstering families’ economic resilience through financial planning workshops. A case management approach, whereby dedicated social workers can tailor social protection to families’ needs, has also shown strong potential for addressing underlying vulnerabilities that contribute to household violence. Chile’s Solidario (a holistic social protection approach that includes cash) collaborates with the Foundation for the Promotion and Development of Women to link families to social services. The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps cash ‘plus’ intervention) in the Philippines employs similar linkages to parenting classes that have shown a positive shift in women’s attitudes toward physical violence, with female participants less likely to agree with any justifications for violence against women (men’s attitudes were not measured).

Middle childhood (5-9 years)
Although exposure to community violence increases with age as children begin spending more time unsupervised outside the home, the majority of protection outcomes in middle childhood mirror those in early childhood, with violence in the household at the hands of caregivers the dominant concern. Social protection entry points are accordingly similar, with programmes targeting economic resilience and caregiver mental health at the household level in order to improve parents’ attitudes and practices. Social protection also contributes to school enrolment, which reduces the time that children spend with peers in more risky contexts as well as their participation in child labour, which emerges as a factor (especially for boys) in middle childhood and increases during adolescence.

Adolescence (10-19 years)
Social protection programmes that aim to contribute to adolescent wellbeing are concerned with a range of child protection outcomes. These include the range of outcomes in the early- and middle-childhood stages (see above) as well as outcomes linked to increased risks associated with the transition to adulthood—including domestic and sexual violence, IPV, exploitative/transactional sex and child marriage. In sub-Saharan Africa, cash and asset transfers (including those specifically targeted at girls) as well as financial planning classes have demonstrated efficacy in reducing young people’s exposure to physical violence, adolescent girls’

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1 We recognise that while school enrolment is viewed as a pathway for reduced exposure to violence, school can also be an unsafe environment for children and adolescents due to peer and teacher violence. However, the literature does not establish strong linkages between social protection and a reduction in school violence.
exposure to GBV as a result of risky sex (including exploitative intergenerational and transactional sex) by facilitating their economic independence. While programming focused purely on poverty alleviation is less effective in mitigating child marriage, targeted support for girls’ secondary education through cash and in-kind transfers has successfully delayed marriage for girls across contexts, from India, Bangladesh and Nepal to Uganda, Colombia, Mexico and Pakistan. Household-level cash transfer programming can also reduce reliance on child labour, both for pay and in the home, by reducing the need for additional income and increasing enrolment, which can offset time spent participating in domestic labour. However, programme design and (individual-level) monitoring is crucial, as interventions focussed on livelihoods have the potential to cause labour substitution effects, leading to the risk of unintended increases of child labour.

Adulthood (20+ years)

The contribution of social protection to violence-, abuse- and exploitation-related outcomes in adulthood primarily involve reduced incidence of GBV, through the same cash and ‘plus’ mechanisms as in earlier life stages. Programmes in LMICs around the world demonstrate potential for primary prevention in the form of economic empowerment through cash transfers (to reduce household stress) in concert with better linkages to services and gender sensitivity trainings delivered through ‘plus’ programming (to contribute to shifting power dynamics). For instance, by combining cash transfers with mentorship trainings, the TASAF cash plus programme in Tanzania was able to reduce violence perpetrated by male youth by 6.3 percentage points. Sensitivity programming that involves women and men, including gender transformative mentorship, group-based trainings and positive gender norms change programming shows strong potential for reducing IPV and while evidence remains limited, the literature suggests that it could be especially effective when paired with cash transfers through three interrelated pathways: (1) economic security and emotional well-being; (2) reduced intra-household conflict; and (3) women’s empowerment. Protection programmes that include case management can also address the social vulnerabilities that contribute to IPV, such as substance abuse.

What does the recent evidence say about how social protection contributes to gender equality outcomes in terms of protection from violence, exploitation, and neglect?

- **Early childhood**: There is limited robust evidence available on how social protection might improve gender equality in terms of protection outcomes in early childhood. Interventions focus predominantly on gender equality outcomes among caregivers to reduce girls’ disproportionate engagement in unpaid domestic labour. Gender-differentiated outcomes can depend on whether households are headed by males or females. While the reasons are not always clear, a likely factor is that female-headed households are more frequently single-parent or skip generation and therefore more labour-constrained. In Lesotho, for example, cash transfers received by male-headed households saw an increase in girls’ schooling compared to female-headed households, with boys’ labour shifting from agriculture to domestic work, possibly to compensate for girls’ reduced labour participation. Education-focused cash transfers have been shown to increase household expenditure on transportation to school, with evidence also suggesting that private transportation to school can reduce violence experienced by refugee children in host communities.

- **Middle childhood**: In contexts where families prioritise boys’ education, social protection that contributes to increasing girls’ enrolment can reduce girls’ disproportionate engagement in unpaid domestic labour. Gender-differentiated outcomes can depend on whether households are headed by males or females. While the reasons are not always clear, a likely factor is that female-headed households are more frequently single-parent or skip generation and therefore more labour-constrained. In Lesotho, for example, cash transfers received by male-headed households saw an increase in girls’ schooling compared to female-headed households, with boys’ labour shifting from agriculture to domestic work, possibly to compensate for girls’ reduced labour participation. Education-focused cash transfers have been shown to increase household expenditure on transportation to school, with evidence also suggesting that private transportation to school can reduce violence experienced by refugee children in host communities.

- **Adolescence**: Social protection can contribute to outcomes in the adolescent life stage by seeking to mitigate a myriad of risk factors for physical violence among peers and GBV, including economic insecurity and harmful gender norms, through economic interventions, life skills trainings and gender-positive mentorship and group classes. The preponderance of programming targets outcomes for girls, who are more vulnerable to violence—especially GBV—given that prevailing social norms normalise such violence in many contexts.
Gender norms also place adolescent girls at particular risk of child marriage in many LMICs, with poverty acting as a risk multiplier when caregivers (or girls themselves) turn to child marriage as a way to ease the household’s financial burden (or improve girls’ own economic status), a coping strategy particularly prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. Although child marriage is seen as a means of achieving security, it puts girls at increased risk of exploitation, gender-based violence and health risks including adolescent pregnancy and (in some cases) HIV. In other contexts where husbands’ families are traditionally responsible for providing for women, caregivers can see child marriage as an expedient way to reduce their own economic burden, though it also puts early-married girls at risk of violence. Life skills and gender equality training such as gender transformative mentoring can support shifting social norms away from this harmful practice, especially when paired with cash and asset transfers and financial literacy trainings. In Bangladesh—which has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world—a financial incentive for delaying marriage, paired with empowerment programming, has had a marked impact on age at first marriage. Finally, programming to reduce violence against adolescent boys, which is most often perpetrated by peers in the community, appears largely ignored by social protection programming, outside of efforts to improve participation in education.

Adulthood: Social protection programming can achieve positive outcomes in reducing adult women’s experience of IPV through improving economic security and mental health at the household level, thereby reducing intra-household conflict, including in polygamous households. A recent systematic review demonstrated that in over 70% of the 22 quantitative and qualitative studies reviewed, cash transfers to poor households reduced intimate partner violence. Only one study in Nigeria has shown average increases in IPV, with an increase in sexual IPV found 12 months after the programme ended in villages receiving only cash (in contrast to decreases in sexual IPV in cash plus livelihood villages), perhaps indicative of the importance of shifting social norms particularly in socially conservative settings. Evidence also shows that ‘plus’ components including women’s empowerment programming, community-based interventions and non-violent conflict resolution trainings can contribute to reducing women’s experience of violence. Masculinities programming is increasingly being implemented as part of cash ‘plus’ programming, and new research-action programmes in Brazil are currently ongoing, premised on evidence showing such programming can shift harmful gender norms and reduce IPV. Women’s and children’s vulnerabilities are magnified in humanitarian contexts, and emerging evidence shows that cash plus programming pairing payments with mental health services can reduce intrahousehold stress and provide support to survivors. Where the situation on the ground is more dynamic and intra-household relationships are under significant stress, programmes must be appropriately sensitive. In Raqqa, Syria, in 2017—where over half of married women had experienced IPV—a short-term cash transfer programme improved women’s decision-making power, but although female recipients valued the transfers, levels of IPV had actually risen by the endline phase of the study, likely because programming did not address the complex intra-household gender dynamics that leave women at risk of violence. The outcomes of this intervention highlight the extent to which outcomes can depend on design features.

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

Across Contexts
Conduct careful risk assessments—attending to age, gender, marginality, and intersections--to inform policy and programming choices.

Household Violence
1. Implement sustained economic support through cash or asset transfers to improve women’s economic security and bargaining power in order to support reductions in the incidence of IPV (which also harms children), as well as reducing economic stressors
A SYNTHESIS OF RECENT FINDINGS ON PROTECTION FROM AGE- AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND NEGLECT

that can lead to violence against children. Ensure that economic empowerment efforts are sensitive to local gender contexts, are properly delivered and monitored to avoid exposing women to risks of male backlash (within households or broader communities).

2. **Pair cash transfers with ‘plus’ components** tailored to the context-dependent risks children face, including:
   - positive parenting training to promote non-violent, gender-sensitive discipline strategies;
   - gender equality training (for women and men) at individual and community levels to raise awareness and shift attitudes around GBV.

3. **Use case management to connect beneficiaries to other benefits and services** that can provide survivors with the support they need (such as emergency housing, psychosocial support and healthcare), and address the underlying social vulnerabilities for adults that increase the risk of household violence (such as substance abuse) as well as provide children with the psychosocial support that can mitigate the negative child behaviours that may reinforce negative parenting behaviours.

**Sexual and gender-based violence outside the home**

4. **Consider pairing empowerment programming with cash or in-kind/asset transfers** for girls and young women to improve their agency, bargaining power and economic standing to reduce their being forced to engage on exploitative/transactional sex as a coping mechanism.

5. **Use cash/asset transfers to incentivise girls’ education and address economic drivers of child marriage**—pairing economic programming with plus components that address the risks of child marriage and support girls to resist marriage through social and legal action.

6. **Target girls and boys, parents, service providers and communities with ‘plus’ programming that broadly addresses gender norms and GBV.**

7. **Implement rapid and flexible cash-based economic interventions** to provide urgently needed relief in the dynamic crisis situations that magnify women’s and children’s vulnerabilities.

**Child labour**

8. **Ensure that cash or in-kind transfer amounts are sufficient to offset the real and opportunity costs of education**, to reduce child labour (as well as to reduce the time the children spend in risky situations outside of school).

9. **Develop community-based interventions, including parenting classes, to shift the social norms** that leave girls responsible for a disproportionate share of domestic and care work.

**Violence in and around school and the community**

10. **Strengthen counselling and support services in schools**, especially where in-kind transfers target educational outcomes, to improve awareness around all forms of violence (including sexual) at school.

11. **Develop ‘plus’ programming for boys and men**, including teachers, aimed at promoting non-violent and positive masculinities.

12. **Engage communities to reduce the stigma surrounding positive HIV status** in order to reduce the risk of peer violence and time spent in unsafe environments.
ENDNOTES

1. Peterman et al., 2017; Buller et al., 2018
2. Peterman et al., 2017; Roy et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2018
3. Buller et al., 2018
4. Cluver et al., 2020a; Ismayilova et al., 2020; Kilburn et al., 2018
5. Peterman et al., 2017; Cluver et al., 2020b; Pundir et al., 2020
6. Sharma et al., 2017; Cluver et al., 2018; Katana et al., 2020
7. Delva et al., 2017; Roelen et al., 2017
8. Cross et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2018
9. Cluver et al., 2020a; Cluver et al., 2020b
10. Orbeta et al., 2021; Roelen et al., 2017
11. The most recent evaluation did not include attention to violence against children, but it did note that 4Ps beneficiaries were more likely than non-beneficiaries to have ever attended a Family Development Session (ADB, 2020).
12. Chakrabarti et al., 2020; Peterman et al., 2017; Cross et al., 2018; Population Council, 2019
13. Peterman et al., 2017; Haushofer and Shapiro, 2016
14. Batomen Kuimi et al., 2018; Sebastian et al., 2019; Dammert et al., 2018
15. Cluver et al., 2019; Cluver et al., 2018; UN AIDS, 2018
16. Chakrabarti et al., 2020; Heinrich et al., 2017
17. Malhotra and Elnakib, 2020
18. Daidone et al., 2019; Palermo et al., 2017; Peterman et al., 2017; ILO, 2021; Sebastian et al., 2019
19. Porter and Goyal, 2016; Ismayilova and Karimli, 2018; de Hoop et al., 2020
20. Malhotra and Elnakib, 2020; Buller et al., 2018; Heath et al., 2019; Leddy et al., 2019; Gibbs et al., 2018; Peterman et al., 2019; Hunter et al., 2021
21. UNICEF 2020
22. Özler et al., 2020; Peterman et al., 2019; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2020; Ranganathan et al., 2019
23. Buller et al., 2018; Peterman et al., 2019
24. Bacchus et al., 2017; Doubt et al., 2019
25. Ismayilova et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2018
26. Cross et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2018
27. Esser et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2018
28. Esser et al., 2019; Sebastian et al., 2016
29. Lehmann and Masterson, 2020
30. Bastagli et al., 2016; Peterman et al., 2017; Bacchus et al., 2017; Buller et al., 2018
31. Özler et al., 2020
32. Bacchus et al., 2017; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2020
33. Cluver et al., 2020a; Cluver et al., 2020b; Pettifor et al., 2019; Buller et al., 2018; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2020
34. Buchmann et al., 2018
35. Buller et al., 2018; Peterman et al., 2019
36. Buller et al., 2018
37. Cullen et al., 2020
Roy et al., 2019; Sarma et al., 2017; Gibbs et al., 2018; UN AIDS, 2018; Ashburn et al., 2016
Tolmen et al., 2019; Promundo, 2021
Falb et al., 2020
Jones and Presler-Marshall, 2019
Falb et al., 2020
RECOMMENDED FIRST READINGS

For readers less familiar with the literature on social protection, child protection, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and gender, the following will provide useful detail and further insights.

- Baranov et al. (2021) for a theoretical and meta-analysis of the impact of cash transfers on intimate partner violence.
- Chae and Ngo (2017) for a global review of evidence on interventions to prevent child marriage.
- Dammert and de Hoop (2018) for how to design programming to effectively reduce child labour.
- De Hoop and Rosati (2014) for a review of evidence on the impact of cash transfers on child labour.
- Devries et al. (2018) for a systemic analysis of child vulnerability to violence, especially regarding common perpetrators.
- Esser et al. (2019) for a review of gender- and child-sensitive design features in cash transfer programmes.
- Malhotra and Elnakib (2021) for an evidence review on effective policies for preventing child marriage, including social protection.
- Peterman et al. (2017) for an evidence review on the linkages between social protection and childhood violence.
- Peterman et al. (2019) for an evidence review on the linkages between social protection in the form of social safety nets and gender equality, including SGBV.
- Pundir et al. (2020) for an evidence review on economic interventions for reducing violence against children.
- Stoebenau et al. (2016) for a literature review and synthesis of transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa including its surrounding social norms and contributory power, gender and economic dynamics.
REFERENCES


Save the Children Sweden (2011) ‘A focus on child protection within social protection systems’. Stockholm: Save the Children


