



IZA World of Labor REPORT: Social protection programs need to consider risks particular to women to be effective

Social protection schemes often fail to adequately protect women as their requirements differ from that of men. But a [revised IZA World of Labor Report](#) finds new evidence that social protection schemes designed with women in mind can successfully mitigate the risks that harm many aspects of their lives.

Women are more likely than men to work in the informal sector and to drop out of the labor force for a time, such as after childbirth, and to be impeded by social norms from working in the formal sector. In low- and middle-income countries, a higher proportion of women are in informal employment than men. This work pattern undermines productivity, increases women's vulnerability to income shocks, and impairs their ability to save for old age. Many developing countries have introduced social protection programs to protect poor people from social and economic risks, but despite women's often greater need, the programs are generally less accessible to women than to men.

Lisa A. Cameron of the University of Melbourne, Australia has found additional evidence that programs can be designed to reach women specifically. Features that help women gain access include accommodating lower levels of literacy; allowing more flexibility in requirements for official documents, like birth and marriage certificates; providing services close to women's homes; accommodating women's family care responsibilities; and allowing small contributions and payments at flexible intervals. Cameron cites a number of targeted programs that successfully mitigate risks specific to women:

For example, India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which guarantees 100 days of minimum-wage unskilled labor each financial year, was designed to encourage women's participation. The Act stipulates that employment be offered within five kilometers of home, and that childcare facilities be provided. Generally, Cameron found that employment guarantee programs can be made more attractive to women by offering work close to home, flexible work hours, and childcare. Another example is Chile's national pension scheme, which despite being a contributory scheme incorporates a flat-rate pension for elderly people from low-income families with no other pension income. Cameron also shows that micro-pension schemes that allowed small, flexible contributions enabled women working in the informal sector to save for old age.

Furthermore, traditional savings and loan products are often not accommodating of women's need for smaller deposits and payments given their lower incomes. Getting to bank branches can be challenging in the face of women's multiple household responsibilities. Therefore, microfinance institutions have made it easier for women to use financial services, making saving or borrowing an ex post form of social protection.

Cameron concludes: *"Employment schemes need to offer flexible work times, services within easy reach of home, and assistance with child and elder care. Pension vesting periods and contribution conditions need to be dropped or lowered. Low levels of literacy need to be accommodated, and documentation requirements eased."*

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Notes for editors:

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