

Empowering or Reinforcing Traditional Roles: Can CCTs Address Gender Vulnerabilities?

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Most conditional cash transfer (CCT)

programmes in Latin America select a woman as the primary recipient of the transfer. In most cases she is the mother of children in the household or the woman responsible for those children. The rationale behind this is that the money spent by women tends to be concentrated more on goods and services that are more likely to have a positive effect on the children's well-being.

Some CCT programmes also try to address some gender-specific vulnerabilities by means of a variety of mechanisms. These include the provision of higher transfers for school-age girls who might be more likely to drop out of school, particularly when they reach secondary education; the provision of free healthcare for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers; and the attempt to create new forms of sociability for beneficiary women, especially in rural areas, whereby they are offered some options of community interaction through training sessions and/or community/beneficiary events.

Some quantitative evaluations have looked at women's bargaining power through an index based on a combination of variables related to the decision making process within the household. The evaluation of *Bolsa Família* in Brazil, for instance, showed that beneficiaries of the programme were more likely to have a higher female bargaining-power index than non-beneficiary households. But a similar evaluation of *Familias en Acción* in Colombia found no impact on female bargaining power (Soares and Silva, 2010).

As for qualitative studies, there is some evidence from research on Brazil and Chile that CCT programmes have had a significant effect on beneficiary women's identity. In Brazil, this outcome seems to stem from women's new power as "consumers". They no longer depend on their husbands for some of the family's expenditures, and they even feel strong enough to negotiate with their husbands in the decision making process within the household. In Chile, this sense of identity seems to arise from the family-support component of *Chile Solidario*. Beneficiaries are confident enough to perceive themselves as individuals, not only as wives and/or mothers. The fact that the women feel more confident and empowered, however, does not mean that their husbands are now sharing some of the domestic chores with them.

Despite these positive evaluations, some authors dispute the "gendered empowerment effect". Maline Molyneux (2009) and Jane Jenson (2009), for instance, claim that CCT programmes tend to reinforce the traditional role of women within the household, since they are "empowered" only under the label of guardian of the children. In the view of these authors, the "social investment perspective" within which most Latin American CCT programmes are embedded is based on a set of child-centred policies.

It must be acknowledged that CCTs are not meant primarily to address women's needs. In some contexts, therefore, the programmes can entail a trade-off between the needs of women and children's well-being (as perceived by the CCT programme's rationale), and can reinforce traditional gender roles.

To avoid these unintended effects, the language used in CCT initiatives could be revised and the programmes could create an opportunity to trigger discussion within the household on the traditional roles of men and women with regard to their responsibility for children's health and education. Moreover, the social protection frameworks of which these programmes are (or should be) just a component should also provide economic opportunities and childcare facilities for beneficiary women/mothers, so that economic autonomy and increased sociability can also be achieved through a greater participation in the labour market and higher wage potential if the women so desire.

References:

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