

Conditional Cash Transfers: A 'Pathway to Women's Empowerment'?

Maxine Molyneux

Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) are widely seen as an effective means of combating poverty and promoting human development. Programmes of this type provide mothers of school age children in extreme poverty with a cash subsidy conditional on children's attendance at school and health clinics. Whilst studies show that CCTs are usually successful in meeting their principle human development objectives of improving school attendance, nutrition and health of children (including girl children) in beneficiary households, on reviewing the flagship Mexican programme Progres/Oportunidades, claims that CCTs *empower* women are questionable.

Most CCTs centre on mothers as the key to securing improvements in the life chances of their children. Mothers receive the stipend conditional on fulfilling programme duties including taking children for regular health checks, attending health checks themselves if pregnant, ensuring their children's attendance at school, attending workshops on health and nutrition



Photo by Debra Harley

and at times 'voluntary' work.

There are many reasons for focusing scarce resources on children

and for acknowledging gender differences in household responsibility. However, in meeting children's needs by depending upon and



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reinforcing a maternal model of care and household responsibility, these programmes might fall short of their claims to *empower* women.

Empowerment can be defined as the acquisition of capabilities which have the potential to assist women in achieving autonomy (legal and material), equality (social and personal) and voice and influence (over decisions that affect their lives).

The claim that these programmes are gender *aware* is irrefutable. However, of significance is not only whether programmes are 'gender aware' but what gender *impacts* they have, what kind of *gender relations* they promote and whether their claim to 'empower' adult women is borne out by the evidence.

Evaluations show that the majority of women beneficiaries

are supportive of the CCT programme. Whilst children's and households' well-being are clearly a factor in women's positive assessment, women also report that they enjoyed increased status, self-esteem, well being and autonomy as a result of their control of the cash transfer.

Yet, while these gains are important, they are arguably only a small step towards 'empowerment' and do not equate to being 'empowered'. Indeed the situation is far less encouraging particularly if we take seriously what is involved when focusing the responsibilities of the programme onto *mothers*, namely this focus can:

- increase the time burden on mothers both in terms of their participation and replacement of the lost labour of children.

- deepen gender divisions of responsibility and care.

The underlying problem is that the transfers bind women to the household as carers and are conditional on



Photo by CAFOD

maternal responsibility for children's care and welfare. There are no conditionalities imposed on fathers, who are marginalised from the programme and, by implication, from





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childcare responsibilities. This also disregards the consensus that children should be cared for by *both* parents.

For a programme to have some potential to bring about positive changes

- ii. training and resources are allocated to enhance women's capabilities;
- iii. social and economic empowerment of women is an explicit

arrangements, time management;

- v. that transforming gender relations is central to the programme, including involving men where appropriate;
- vi. participants have voice in programme aims, design, evaluation and management.



in terms of women's empowerment the programme must ensure that:

- i. equality principles are built into the design of the programme;

goal (to include definable impacts);

- iv. family friendly policies are promoted—acknowledge caregiving, childcare

While it can be argued that women's empowerment is not a deliberate *aim* of CCT programmes, the failure to incorporate *any* of the above features into their design puts into question the claims that these programmes nonetheless have the effect of empowering women. We might pose another question: - if they do little to promote the empowerment of women might they even be producing the opposite effect?





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About us

Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium mainly funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), with additional funding received from the Norwegian and Swedish foreign ministries and UNIFEM. Co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, the consortium is collectively run by six partners: BRAC University, Bangladesh; the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), Ghana; Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; the Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo; and UNIFEM, who in turn work with partners within their regions. Our research seeks to ground emerging understandings of empowerment in women's everyday lives, trace the trajectories of policies affecting women's empowerment and explore promising stories of change to find out what works and why to advance gender justice and equality for all.

Credits

This brief was summarised by Nardia Simpson.

For further reading see: Maxine Molyneux, Conditional Cash Transfers: A 'Pathway to Women's Empowerment'? Pathways Working Paper 5. This can be viewed at: www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/resources_pathways.html

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Contact:

Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 9RE, UK

E-mail: Pathways@ids.ac.uk Website: www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/

Tel: + 44 (0) 1273 915729 Fax: + 44 (0) 1273 621202

