Social protection programmes appear to have higher impacts on women and girls than men and boys

Social protection programmes appear to have higher impacts on women and girls, who more likely than boys and men to save, invest and share the benefit from social protection programmes.

What is this review about?
Gender and age determine how people experience opportunities, vulnerabilities and risks. Social protection programmes, such as cash transfers, pensions and unemployment benefits aim to tackle poverty and adversity, manage risks and improve quality of life from childhood through to old age.

While social protection programmes do not negatively impact women or men, design and implementation features may lead to adverse outcomes. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to design and implementation of social protection programmes and these features should explicitly address gender differences.

This systematic review of reviews contributes to a clearer picture of the differential impact of social protection on women and men, and girls and boys, in low- and middle-income countries. It also contributes to translating this knowledge into policy actions that improve gender equality outcomes across the life-course.

What studies are included?
The review includes 70 systematic reviews, representing a total of 3,289 studies investigating four different types of social protection programmes (defined here as social assistance, social insurance, labour market and social care programmes) in 121 countries.

Social protection programmes with explicit objectives tend to demonstrate higher effects in comparison to social protection programmes with broad objectives.

Social insurance programmes improve the utilisation of sexual, reproductive, and maternal health services, and knowledge of reproductive health; improve changes in attitudes towards family planning; increase uptake of male circumcision; increase rates of inclusive breastfeeding and early initiation of breastfeeding and improve physical wellbeing of mothers.

What are the main findings of this review?
Social assistance programmes improve labour participation, saving, investment, utilisation of health care services and contraception use among women, improve uptake of male circumcision, increase school enrolment among boys and girls and school attendance among girls. Such programmes also reduce unintended pregnancies among young women, risky sexual behaviour, and symptoms of sexually transmitted infections among women.

What is the aim of this review?
This systematic review of reviews summarises the evidence from 70 systematic reviews on the differential impacts of social protection programmes on women and men, and boys and girls in low- and middle-income countries. The authors also reflect on implications for policy, programming, practice and research gaps arising from the evidence.
Labour market programmes improve labour participation among women receiving benefits, improve savings, ownership of assets, earning capacity among young women, and knowledge and attitudes towards sexually transmitted infections.

Labour market programmes also increase self-reported condom use among boys and girls, increase child nutrition and overall household dietary intake, improve subjective wellbeing, economic, social and political empowerment and self-confidence and social skills among women, and increase respect from family members in some settings.

Evidence on the impact of social care programmes on gender equality outcomes is scarce, so it was not possible to find patterns across systematic reviews.

Despite positive effects across multiple outcomes, social protection programmes with explicit objectives tend to demonstrate higher effects in comparison to social protection programmes with broad objectives.

Direct investment in individuals and families via social protection programmes must be accompanied by efforts to strengthen health, education and protection systems.

What do the findings of this review mean?

Important progress has been made on identifying social protection interventions that effectively address gender equality outcomes. Reviews acknowledge the crucial role of addressing gender differences in design and implementation of programmes.

There are substantial evidence gaps on the impact of social care programmes, parental leave and old age pensions on gender equality outcomes, and within the outcome areas of voice and agency, and mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.

There is a clear recognition of the potential negative impact of inadequate and unfit design and implementation features. Questions remain as to how to appropriately design and implement social protection interventions across different contexts and according to each population.

Advancing current knowledge of gender-responsive social protection interventions requires moving beyond effectiveness studies to test packages or combinations of design and implementation features.