Social Protection for Economic Inclusion in Latin America: the potential of comprehensive programming

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, the fields of social protection and economic inclusion have increasingly shifted from offering standalone support to providing comprehensive programming. Instead of delivering cash transfers, asset transfers or micro-credit as single component interventions, schemes combine multiple elements with the aim of making programming more impactful and ultimately more cost-effective.

Latin America has always been at the forefront of these efforts. In terms of social protection, it pioneered the conditional cash transfer (CCT) approach in the 1990s, and experiences in the region have since served as an example for many other countries. Providing families in poverty with cash in combination with behavioural requirements regarding children's school attendance or health checkups and social work support has proven impactful in improving human capital development. A wide evidence base attests to their effect on family and children's well-being outcomes. The role of CCTs in supporting economic inclusion, however, is less well documented.

Economic inclusion interventions that offer a comprehensive package of support to encourage entrepreneurial activity and promote economic outcomes have grown at a rapid pace in the last decade. Based on a global survey of economic inclusion programmes, the Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI) at the World Bank estimates that 70 interventions have also been implemented across Latin America, albeit to a lesser degree than elsewhere (Arévalo-Sánchez et al, 2024). This is also reflected in the evidence base about what works in economic inclusion programmes, with relatively more information available from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Across those contexts, however, studies point to positive impacts on living standards and economic indicators such as assets, savings, and access to finance.

Despite the relatively limited role of economic inclusion schemes and availability of evidence about their impact in Latin America so far, there is great interest in integrating economic inclusion into social protection programming. This was evident from a high-level regional event organised by Fundación Capital on 22 and 23 February 2024, during which leaders from government and civil society gathered to discuss how to complement large-scale, and in many cases longstanding, social safety net programmes with economic inclusion.

This paper seeks to contribute to this effort by providing a rapid review of evidence on what works for economic inclusion in Latin America, and by placing this in the context of global trends on social protection and economic inclusion. In doing so, it offers an indicative overview of the available evidence, cross-cutting challenges and opportunities, and questions to be explored in future. It provides evidence for the benefits of providing comprehensive support over and above standalone interventions, the need to adequately account for gender, geographical context and ethnicity, and the existence of a substantial knowledge gap in terms of cost-effectiveness.

2. Conceptual framing

Comprehensive social protection programmes offer a combination of support, as a single intervention is often insufficient to achieve the desired change. There is growing recognition that programmes need to move beyond cash transfers to make social protection truly transformative (Molyneux et al. 2016). Two types of interventions offer models for expanding support beyond cash provision (see Carter et al. 2019; Roelen 2021): (i) programmes that primarily aim to improve human development, commonly referred to as 'cash plus', and (ii) schemes geared to enhance productive activities and foster economic inclusion, often termed 'economic inclusion' programmes.

2.1. Cash plus programming

Cash plus programmes combine regular transfers with additional support or linkages to services that seek to augment the income effects of cash transfers, often to promote human well-being or social inclusion. So-called 'plus' components commonly include provision of information, such as through behaviour change communication, provision of additional in-kind benefits (such as supplementary feeding) or psychosocial support (Roelen et al. 2017). Schemes can be unconditional, meaning there are no requirements to engage with complementary services to receive the cash transfer, or conditional, making the take-up of services or participation in additional activities a prerequisite for receiving the cash. The latter model is most widespread in Latin America (Barrientos, 2024).

The bundling of different forms of economic and social support as typically seen in cash-plus programmes has been shown to have many positive impacts, such as improving economic resilience and family well-being (Howard et al, 2024), preventing HIV and facilitating safe transitions to adulthood (Rogers et al, 2024), and reducing intimate partner violence (IPV) (Buller et al, 2023).

Literature examining the effectiveness of cash-plus programmes as a whole compared to their component parts is relatively limited but growing. Evidence points to the power of combining cash and 'plus' support, although the devil is in the detail. Cash plus schemes can have a greater impact than the provision of cash or 'plus' services alone, but rigorous implementation, quality of services and context-relevant provision are key factors in doing so (see Little et al. 2021).

2.2. Economic inclusion programming

Economic inclusion interventions support the establishment of productive activities and creation of new and alternative income sources, helping households move towards a sustainable path out of poverty. These programmes follow a multidimensional approach designed to address the various barriers faced by poor and vulnerable recipients, aiming to sustainably increase their incomes and assets (Arévalo-Sánchez et al, 2024, p. xvii).

Programmes commonly include a package of cash transfers, asset transfers, access to savings and credit, livelihood training and coaching. Programmes tend to be restrictive in terms of the period during which they provide support with many interventions only lasting 18 to 24 months. They are also sometimes referred to as 'graduation programmes', as they provide households with a big push with the aim to 'graduate' them out of poverty. Economic inclusion programming, or any other type of economic activation or labour market intervention, represents a relatively small component of social protection in Latin America (Barrientos, 2024; Arévalo-Sánchez et al, 2024).

A rapidly growing evidence base attests to the impact of these programmes across a wide range of indicators. A seminal cross-country evaluation shows that programmes increase household-level outcomes such as food security, asset holdings and living conditions, and that these impacts are at least partly sustained after the programme has ended (Banerjee et al. 2015). Other studies have pointed to the synergetic effects of economic and non-economic support in generating knowledge and building skills, and providing the ability to act on new knowledge and skills (Roelen and Devereux, 2019).

Evidence of the benefit of additional components over single components within economic inclusion programming is relatively limited. A small number of studies point to the potential of combining interventions vis-à-vis stand-alone interventions. Evidence from pilot programmes in Ghana, South Sudan, and Uganda, shows that a combination of support along the lines of the 'graduation' package significantly improves income, assets, consumption and food security, and women's empowerment (Paul et al, 2021). A review of the evidence across these three interventions shows that the impact of stand-alone interventions is much more limited (see Banerjee et al. 2018; Chowdhury et al. 2017; Sedlmayr, Shah, and Sulaiman 2019 for individual studies). In the case of the 'Graduating the Ultra Poor' (GUP) programme in Ghana, the implementation of a savings intervention led to short-term impacts on assets, income, consumption, and savings. Participants who received the full package of support, however, were able to grow their businesses and sustain change over a longer period (Banerjee et al. 2018, in Paul et al, 2021).

3. Methodology

This report presents findings from a rapid evidence review conducted in January 2024, aimed at exploring the impact and cost-effectiveness of social protection programmes in Latin America. We pay particular attention to gender differences as women are often the primary target group for many interventions.

The primary research questions guiding this investigation were:

1) What works to promote economic inclusion in Latin America?
2) And how do these programmes specifically impact women?

The searches were conducted in English, Spanish, and Portuguese using Google Scholar, RedaLyC[1], and the depository of the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB). Efforts were made to source information from reliable and recent papers, prioritising those published from 2010 onwards. Exceptions were granted to include original evaluations of microcredit and conditional cash transfer programmes in the early 2000s, particularly when those reports were consistently cited by recent articles. Table 1 provides the search strings used in each language.

Table 1 List of search strings in each language

Language	Search string
English	transfer OR programme AND economic asset OR livelihood asset OR graduation OR livelihood development AND impact OR evaluation OR women OR gender AND Latin America
Spanish	transferencia OR programa AND renda OR inclusión económica OR inclusión productiva OR empreedimiento OR activos económicos OR recursos AND impacto OR evaluación AND pobreza OR pobre OR mujeres OR género
Portuguese	transferência OR programa AND renda OR inclusão econômica OR inclusão produtiva OR empreendimento OR ativos econômicos OR recursos AND impacto OR avaliação AND pobreza OR pobre OR mulher OR gênero

The initial search resulted in 94 articles and reports that matched our criteria. A more meticulous selection process ensued to verify that the chosen papers had rigorous methodologies and clear insights into impacts and/or cost-effectiveness. This refined selection culminated in the inclusion of 37 articles.

It became apparent early on that information on cost-effectiveness was lacking in most studies. We undertook a second search, incorporating the term 'cost-effectiveness' (costo/costo-beneficio/rentabilidad in Spanish and Portuguese) without specifying a gender focus. This approach led to an initial pool of 8 studies, from which 3 met the criteria for inclusion in our analysis. However, only 2 of these studies effectively examined the cost-effectiveness of different interventions. The outcomes of all these searches are summarised in a mapping spreadsheet that provides an overview of 40 studies.

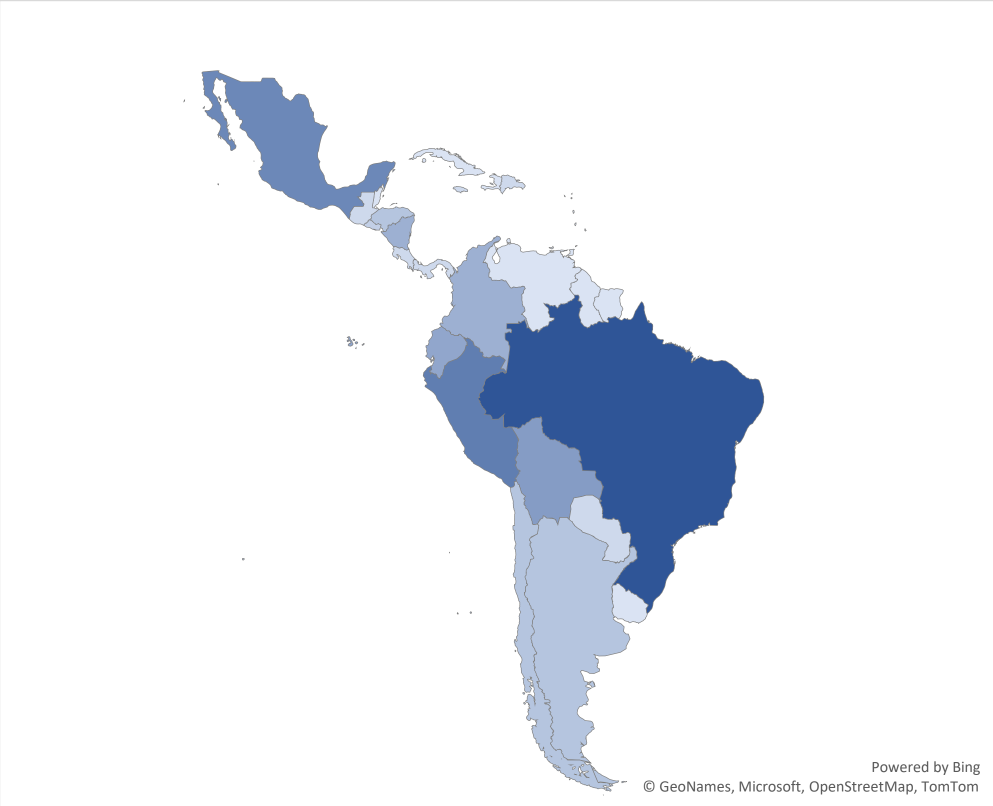
4. Findings of evidence review

Out of the total 40 studies, 20 consisted of programme evaluations, 14 offered qualitative explorations of programme impact and implementation, and 9 were reviews of other studies. Looking at the types of programmes included in the range of studies, cash transfers were the most studied intervention (22), followed by graduation/ economic inclusion programmes (9) and microcredit schemes (9), asset transfers (3) and lump sum (2). In terms of geographical spread (see Figure 1), Brazil is overrepresented (14), followed by Peru

[1] Rede de Revistas Científicas da América Latina e Caribe (Network of Scientific Journals of Latin America and the Caribbean).

(10), Mexico (9) and Bolivia (7). Having used the terms 'gender' and 'women' during the search, the studies included in this review have a relatively large focus on women (32). More than half of the studies in the review also focus on rural workers (24) and people in poverty (15). Studies mostly cover government-led interventions (27), followed by schemes initiated, led or implemented by the private sector (8) and INGOs (6).

Figure 1 Number of studies per country, with a darker colour representing a larger number of studies



In reviewing the evidence available for each type of intervention, the outcome areas can be broadly categorised into household and family well-being and economic well-being. Household and family well-being would encompass food security, children's outcomes, women's participation in household decisions, reduction of domestic violence, and health and productive rights. Meanwhile, economic well-being includes job and income opportunities, asset ownership, financial or technical knowledge and the ability to afford living costs.

To address the research questions underpinning this review, section 4.1 will analyse the impacts and cost-effectiveness of existing social protection programmes in Latin America. Then, section 4.2 will describe the specific effects of these interventions on women.

4.1. What works to promote economic inclusion in Latin America?

This section reviews impacts of existing programmes in Latin America. To improve understanding of their effectiveness, analysis is divided by type of intervention. In addition, we summarise findings from studies that assess the cost-effectiveness of different initiatives.

Cash transfers

In line with global evidence (e.g. Bastagli et al, 2016), our review points to the positive impacts of cash transfers. In Latin America, the evidence is especially strong for conditional cash transfers (CCTs). CCTs not only represent the most common cash transfer scheme, but also the most widely adopted strategy for promoting social and economic inclusion in the region (Barrientos, 2024).

Most studies on CCT impacts tend to focus on programme effects on women and children. This is likely due to the programmes' explicit preference for women as recipients and children as indirect beneficiaries (Molyneux and Thomson, 2011). This targeted approach is deemed crucial for programme success, as it ensures that funds will reach children in recipient households. Empirical support for this premise is found in quantitative studies analysing the positive effects of targeted interventions on children's school enrolment and attendance (De Brauw et al, 2014; Ponce and Escobal, 2019). Qualitative evidence further corroborates these findings, revealing that mothers often view CCTs as a means of supporting their family with costs such as medicines and electricity, and prefer to allocate the funds towards schooling and feeding their children (Ahlert, 2013; Bartholo, 2016; Handa et al, 2009).

A review of eight evaluations of CCT programmes across the region indicated that these interventions improve access to healthcare, including adequate prenatal care, children's immunisation, and adequate growth monitoring of children. No discernible impact was found in the areas of diarrhoea in children, anaemia, immunisation in pregnant mothers, and food consumption (Bouillon and Tejerina, 2006).

However, across the studies included in our review, we find limited impact of CCTs on outcomes of economic inclusion, such as increased asset ownership, improved jobs and livelihood opportunities and increased financial and technical knowledge. This can partly be explained by the fact that CCTs don't have economic inclusion at the core of their objectives, and partly because women – who constitute the large majority of CCT recipients – struggle to take on economic activities due to gendered responsibilities across paid and unpaid work implying they are mostly responsible for meeting the requirements. We discuss these gender dynamics further in section 4.2.

Only one of the studies included in this review looked at unconditional cash transfers. The analysed programme was the Colombian Ingreso Solidario*,* one of the many initiatives providing economic support to vulnerable families during the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Although the study provided valuable qualitative insights on programme implementation, which are discussed further in section 4.2, it lacked quantitative evidence of impact on socioeconomic inclusion (García et al., 2022).

Lump sum transfers

Relatively little evidence is available about the impact of lump sum transfers. Only two studies included in this review cover this type of programme. Sulaiman et al (2016) assessed the impact of 11 lump-sum cash transfers interventions across low and middle-income countries. Among these programmes, only one was based in a Latin American country (Nicaragua). The authors emphasised that these interventions are low-cost and relatively easily scaled. However, they also cautioned that there is limited information on the long-term effects of these programmes on recipients, especially when compared with other types of interventions that measure long-term impacts more regularly. This difference in the methodologies of impact evaluations could distort the comparison of cost-effectiveness among these programmes.

A study of the Maternity Wage in Brazil seems to support the idea that lump sum transfers can have transformative potential, but the effect may differ from what the programme intended. While the Maternity Wage aimed to help rural women build up their assets, Morton (2019) found that mothers often used the cash to purchase assets, such as cows, for their children. Although this practice deviated from the programme's original intention, it still constituted a future positive impact on children. Other unforeseen impacts on women are further detailed in section 4.2.

Asset transfers

Evidence about the impact of asset transfers across Latin America and the Caribbean is also sparse. The three asset transfer programmes included in this review were provided via a partnership between the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) and national governments in three countries: Nicaragua, Ecuador and Peru. These studies reported positive impacts on food security and income opportunities but did not point to positive effects in other areas.

In Nicaragua, the Productive Support for Agri-food Program (APAGRO) was a livestock transfer programme that provided women with a package of livestock commonly including a cow, pig and chickens (Salazar et al, 2018). The intervention improved household income through the sale of livestock and greater reliance on home consumption. This in turn improved food security, also through a greater intake of protein.

The programmes in Ecuador and Peru did not entail a transfer of assets per se, but focused on seeking to improve land tenure security, especially for women. In Ecuador, the intervention consisted of cadastral parcel mapping and the provision of detailed plot maps for informal land owners, which they could then use for seeking formal ownership or land titling (Schling et al, 2023). The intervention led to improvements in women's access to resources, especially with respect to applying for and receiving credit. Food security increased as participants shifted towards production of crops that are more nutritious and higher market value (ibid). In Peru, an intervention promoting self-declaration of informal land ownership similarly led to increases in crop diversity and food security (Schling and Pazos, 2021).

Microcredit

The second most commonly evaluated form of interventions were microcredit, or microfinance. Most evaluations focused on Bolivian programmes, given microcredit schemes were piloted in this country between 1990-2000. The studies included in this review focus on the programmes ProMujer and CreCer, both provided by non-governmental organisations through the creation of communal banks managed by women's associations. ProMujer focused mostly on urban and peri-urban areas, while CreCer had an exclusively rural focus.

ProMujer is not exclusive to Bolivia and operates throughout Latin America. The scheme focuses on facilitating women’s access to loans either through communal banks or individually. Instead of distributing money to individuals, CreCer promoted the creation of village banks, through group meetings and training sessions that helped establish these communal institutions. However, loans were only authorised for groups of at least 10 women who were jointly liable for repayments. Loan amounts varied around USD 60 and USD 1,000 and had an interest rate of 24 percent in 2006 (Maclean, 2012). Repayments were expected every 2 weeks over a 6-month cycle, and include the initial loaned amount, the interest fee, and a percentage of obligatory saving equivalent to 10 percent of the originally requested amount.

Overall, positive effects were observed for both programmes across outcome areas, including the ability to afford living costs, improving children’s outcomes, and strengthening income opportunities and asset ownership. There is also evidence of schemes helping to counter gender norms by supporting women to assume different kinds of work, as further discussed in 4.2. These effects are mediated by microcredit allowing the start-up of new businesses and entrepreneurial activities. Nonetheless, these effects are highly context-specific, and positive impacts in one area (e.g. greater access to credit) are often offset by potentially negative effects in others.

One study of microcredit programmes across Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Peru highlighted mixed results for these interventions (Bouillon and Tejerina, 2006). The programme in Bolivia improved income but did not lead to positive effects on nutrition. In Peru, the programme led to greater income diversification but programme participants, especially the very poor, were more likely to sell off all their assets in case of an economic shock – presumably to repay their outstanding debt. In Brazil, participation in microcredit had a positive impact on household income. However, in Chile, effects on income were either insignificant (for those receiving credit via commercial banks) or negative (for those receiving credit via an NGO).

Maîtrot and Niño-Zarazúa (2017) conducted a comparative review of evidence on various microcredit initiatives and concluded that the available data challenges the effectiveness of these programmes as an antipoverty tool. The study found no evidence of sustained income increases or lasting investments in human capital and assets. Even in the most favourable circumstances, these programmes only managed to introduce some financial dynamism in the lives of vulnerable recipients. The authors also emphasised significant variations in the reported impacts across different studies, depending on the context in which the programmes were designed and implemented.

Graduation/ economic inclusion

Nine studies included in our review looked at graduation-style or economic inclusion programmes, with five studies discussing interventions in Peru and four studies covering programmes in Mexico. Compared to other types of programmes, evidence in this area is relatively new and rapidly expanding. The nine studies included in this review were published after 2016.

Graduation and economic inclusion programmes can have similarities with lump sum transfers, in the sense that they can provide access to a large sum of money that allows recipients to invest in income-generating assets. However, graduation programmes tend to be more complex and include complementary interventions that contribute to the sustainability of outcomes after the end of the programme (Bouillon and Tejerina, 2006). This is evident in programmes designed in collaboration between different national governments and Fundación Capital. In Colombia, Mexico, Honduras and Paraguay, national governments provided a lump sum for CCT recipients who were interested in opening a business. However, this money was complemented by access to financial education and interventions that promoted saving behaviours (e.g. the distribution of piggy banks) as well as coaching on life and entrepreneurship skills. In all contexts, participant families reported remarkable increases in household income and investment in assets (Fundacion Capital, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). Results were mixed in relation to food security and consumption, which may be partly due to measurement issues and partly due to families investing increased income in assets rather than consumption (Fundacion Capital, 2019b). As in the case of CCTs, these examples illustrate that the provision of supplementary services can greatly improve the outcomes of larger cash transfers.

Lump sum payments are also a pivotal component in graduation programmes offered by national governments, such as Haku Wiñay/Noa Jayatai ('Let's grow together' in the Quechua and Shipibo-Konibo languages, respectively) in rural Peru. This programme offers additional support to CCT recipient households, providing a comprehensive range of services, including technical support for skill and technology development, financial literacy training, and improvements of recipients' housing infrastructure. Notably, participants also have the opportunity to access a start-up grant aimed at fostering rural entrepreneurship. However, to qualify for these funds, they are required to draft a business plan and compete for the grant through a competitive selection process.

In Peru, complementing CCTs (Juntos) with a package of entrepreneurial and financial skills training resulted in greater family income, an increase in share of income from agricultural production, improved perceptions of family well-being, health and nutrition (Escobal and Ponce, 2016). When comparing the economic status of programme participants with those of non-participants residing in the same village, a study observed a significant rise in the income of participating households, of approximately USD 500 compared to the control group. This increase was credited to improved agricultural production and higher livestock value, indicating that the technical assistance provided by Haku Wiñay achieved its intended outcomes (Escobal and Ponce, 2016).

These findings are endorsed by a qualitative study of the same intervention, in which participants recognised that the techniques learned via Haku Wiñay were effective (Salcedo du Bois and Zimmerman, 2021). However, they also complained of the difficulties of selling their produce. Given that the programme operates in rural and sometimes remote regions, there are limited opportunities to increase sales, and this led to frustration among farmers who felt that they had wasted time and money on the programme (ibid.).

In line with global evidence (see Banerjee et al, 2015; Paul et al, 2021), studies show promising effects of comprehensive schemes on a range of economic outcomes, including income opportunities, asset ownership, financial knowledge and the ability to afford the cost of living. Various studies also find positive impacts on food security, women's participation in household decisions and health and reproductive rights.

Cost-effectiveness

Across all studies in this review, very little information is available about programmes' cost-effectiveness. This isn't an issue limited to economic inclusion interventions, or to studies in the Latin American region. A study by Brown and Tanner (2019, p.14) estimates that '18.9 percent of the World Bank's impact evaluations include any kind of VFM [value for money] analysis, while the predicted proportion in the 3ie data set is 14.1 percent'.

In terms of the studies included in this review, only two made explicit reference to cost-effectiveness. Sulaiman et al (2016) compared the cost-effectiveness of three types of social protection: lump-sum unconditional cash transfers, interventions they refer to as 'livelihood development' (which include training in new agricultural technologies, business or market skills to improve worker productivity and profit), and the more holistic graduation programmes. Among the analysed programmes, this study indicates that lump-sum transfers have the highest impact per dollar spent. While the benefits of lump-sum transfers were modest, and the authors did not find evaluations looking at the long-term effects of these programmes, their costs are sufficiently low to make them highly cost-effective.

Bouillon and Tejerina (2006) provided a comprehensive review of multiple interventions, including early child development, urban development, CCTs and various formats of graduation programmes. Their more detailed analysis concentrated on two types of economic inclusion programmes: emergency employment provision for low-skilled workers through the financing of public works; and training programmes aimed at improving the skills and employability of those in need of work. In their comparison of these two types of intervention in Chile, the authors found that emergency employment had a very low return on investment (4 percent), whereas training programmes yielded a significantly higher return (18 percent). Data on youth training programmes was particularly promising. For instance, in the Dominican Republic, the Juventud y Empleo programme increased recipients' hourly wages by 10 percent, meaning that within two years their additional earnings exceeded the amount invested in them. The PROCAJOVEN programme in Panama performed even better, achieving a full return on investment 12.6 months after participant graduation, and as early as 3 months for women participants.

Finally, Bouillon and Tejerina (2006) also considered the cost-effectiveness of CCT programmes across the region. Although CCTs are generally believed to be more effective than alternative interventions, such as unconditional cash transfers and in-kind transfers, the authors emphasise that conditionalities add substantial implementation costs. These costs arise from the need to monitor recipients and identify the optimal rules to achieve the programme's objectives in each context. Therefore, the authors call for further studies to compare the cost-effectiveness of CCTs, including their monitoring costs, with other programme types such as unconditional cash transfers.

A study by Paul et al (2021) – not included in this review – found that bundled interventions are more effective than programmes offering single components. However, costs vary substantially across schemes depending on the combination of support provided and their duration. Simpler schemes tend to have costs driven by a single component, such as cash transfers (in the case on consumption support) or lump sums and asset transfers (particularly used for business capital development). With respect to more complex projects with multiple components, human resources and staff are more significant drivers of costs.

The 2024 State of Economic Inclusion report (Arévalo-Sánchez et al, 2024) also emphasised the cost-effectiveness and high-return investment of economic inclusion programming. Citing a recent meta-analysis that highlights evidence from studies conducted in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Nepal, and Niger, cost-benefit ratios range between 121 percent and 379 percent and internal rates of return ranging from 16 percent to 66 percent (J-PAL, 2023).

For policy makers, this robust evidence from diverse settings demonstrates that economic inclusion programs consistently deliver economic benefits that surpass the initial investment, can be considered effective tools for poverty alleviation, and are wise investments with considerable returns, all leading to broader social and economic development. While this evidence is encouraging, more research is required to fill critical learning gaps on how government-led economic inclusion programs can be effectively and efficiently scaled up. In Niger, for example, the program demonstrated a cost-benefit ratio of 127 percent 18 months after implementation, while in Zambia, the program broke even within 12 months, albeit with a slightly lower cost-effectiveness. Assuming sustained impacts, both Niger and Zambia show positive returns on investment, at 73 percent and 36 percent, respectively

In order to broaden the evidence and assess cost-effectiveness of interventions – and thereby inform choices about programme design and their component parts – it is essential for evaluations or studies to consider the following questions:

- What is the cost of programmes disaggregated by their component parts? To make more informed decisions about whether to invest in certain interventions and which components to incorporate, it's vital to have more detailed information about costs – information that is currently often unavailable to those implementing evaluations.
- How do the benefits and costs compare to those of other schemes? In making decisions about investing in one type of programme versus another, it is vital to know how cost-effectiveness of respective schemes compare against each other.
- For how long are benefits sustained? Much of the evidence currently considers short- to medium-term impacts but gives limited insight into long-term effects.

4.2. How do existing programmes impact women?

Among the 40 studies included in this review, 32 focused on the gender effects of interventions. This emphasis can be partly attributed to the review's interest in women's economic inclusion. Yet, it also mirrors prevalent trends in the design of poverty alleviation and social protection programmes in Latin America.

The summary of gendered impacts is categorised below by programme type, following the same order as the previous section. The last subsection reflects on why programmes may have different outcomes for women in rural and Indigenous contexts.

Cash transfers

The targeting of poor women often prompts the assumption that CCTs are a naturally gender-sensitive form of social protection. However, this premise has been challenged by several studies examining the effects of these programmes on women's autonomy. This body of research shows that CCT strengthens traditional gender roles, rather than challenges them (Lavinas et al, 2012; Passos and Waltenberg, 2016). This is likely due to a common feature of these programmes: the requirement for recipients to attend training conducted by health centres on the topic of child development and nutrition, and/or to ensure that children are going to school and being regularly vaccinated (Molyneux and Thomson, 2011). Failure to comply with these rules may result in a penalty, or even in the loss of access to the programme. Given that mothers are the main recipients of CCTs, and are socially perceived as primary caregivers, they are deemed responsible for meeting programme conditionalities (Anzorena, 2015).

A review of the gendered effects of Bolsa Familia in Brazil highlighted that women working in the informal sector were overburdened by the childcare duties linked to the CCT, which limited their availability for generating income (Bartholo et al 2019). Some authors even suggest that CCTs subsidise mothers' domestic work rather than promote their economic empowerment, particularly since fathers do not participate in monitoring children's health and education (ibid; Molyneux and Thompson, 2011). Moreover, in contexts where gender norms prescribe that men should assume financial decision-making roles, simply targeting women may not ensure that they retain control over social protection funds. For instance, in rural Peru, women recognise that entrenched ideas about appropriate gender roles often determine who is the *de facto* head of the household:

> "We still have women (…) who don't [decide]…[they] wait for their husbands to decide, they have to consult them. 'Because these are our customs', they say, don't they? Because (…) men don't expect them to make a decision, and for [women] it's part of their culture that we shouldn't challenge men."(Alcazar and Espinoza Iglesias, 2014, p.83)

In other contexts, the assumption that women inherently understand household needs may lead their partners to designate them as the managers of household funds even when programmes do not specifically target them. This is evidenced by an evaluation of Ingreso Solidario, an unconditional cash transfer provided by the Colombian government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Money was distributed to any member of a household identified as poor or vulnerable by the national government, prioritising individuals with access to mobile banking apps. This resulted in a mixture of genders among the direct recipients of this cash transfer. Despite this, in focus groups conducted by García et al (2022), men who received the money on behalf of their families expressed a preference for delegating financial decision-making to their spouses:

> "We say we are the beneficiaries of Ingreso Solidario, but in reality, this is for the man and the woman. As my mates say […] the money comes to me, but I tell her 'I've received the Ingreso Solitario' and she tells me what's lacking in the house, what we need to do." (ibid., p.22)

These two contrasting scenarios exemplify how the range of impacts of cash transfers on women is influenced by recipients' intrahousehold dynamics and sociocultural contexts. Most studies on CCTs emphasise that gendered outcomes vary widely and critique the assumption that targeting mothers will necessarily benefit them (see Sugiyama and Hunter, 2020). Other studies shed light on specific settings that make CCTs beneficial for certain groups of women. For instance, Handa et al (2019) observed that women who experienced increased autonomy through CCTs were generally those who previously relied solely on their partners' financial support. However, even in these contexts, the provision of CCTs may inadvertently exacerbate gender disparities, as men might choose to decrease their contributions to family expenses, leaving women with the bulk of household responsibilities. Other studies have shown that the requirement for prenatal check-ups increased women's health and awareness of their reproductive rights (Schady, 2010; Couto et al, 2022), but Hunter et al (2021) argue that much of this success is due to recipients' access to public health and social service networks. Similarly, while research suggests that intrafamilial violence may decrease when women receive cash transfers, the same studies noted significant variations in these outcomes depending on family dynamics and whether CCTs were supplemented by other interventions (Rodriguez et al, 2015; Buller et al., 2018).

Molyneux and Thomson (2011) argue that ensuring the provision of ancillary services is key to ensuring that CCTs are gender sensitive. These authors suggest that CCTs should be accompanied by supportive interventions aimed at developing women's capabilities by providing financial education and childcare support. Interventions could also make efforts to transform gendered labour divisions within households by promoting the involvement of both parents in childcare.

Lump sum transfers

While the allocation of CCTs often reinforced gendered stereotypes, an insightful study of the Rural Maternity Wage in Brazil's northeast region suggests that lump sum payments may counteract this trend (Morton, 2019). This is attributed to variations in payment schedules and amounts that influence recipients' spending behaviours. CCTs provide modest monthly stipends that women tend to allocate towards routine household expenses. Conversely, the Rural Maternity Wage disburses a lump sum equivalent to ten times the village's per capita monthly income, allowing women to invest in agricultural assets (e.g., buying cows) that could generate income in the future. It also has the important impact of improving women's reputations in their families and communities. As noted, it is the Maternity Wage that 'enables women to carry out acts of recognised generosity and thus to occupy an enduring place in the history of the household's wealth' (ibid., p. 361).

Asset transfers

All the studies on asset transfers included in this review were interested in understandings if improvements in land tenure security and asset ownership could contribute to reduce rural gender inequalities. Schling et al (2023) evaluated a land mapping programme in Ecuador that aimed to improve recipients' land tenure situation. This study suggests that access to information about their assets increased the bargaining power of women, who became more likely to receive credit from local banks. Consequently, it also impacted women's time allocation, as they became more likely to invest time previously devoted to farming in other income-generating activities.

In Peru, Schling and Pazos (2023) conducted an insightful evaluation of a land titling programme targeting rural workers of both genders. While the study did not find evidence that land ownership empowered women within their households, it did reveal that women who owned plots were more likely to diversify their crop cultivation to meet their families' dietary needs. This, in turn, was critical to enhance household food security. Similar outcomes were observed in a livestock transfer programme in Nicaragua, in which women's participation not only improved household income but also home consumption from production, ultimately increasing the protein intake of their entire families (Salazar et al, 2018).

Microcredit

Microcredit interventions in Latin America tend to have a preference for women as programme recipients. Targeting women is generally intended to bolster their social and economic capital, fostering individual empowerment and contributing to their family welfare (FINRURAL, 2003). Given these objectives, many of the studies included in this review paid special attention to the impacts of these initiatives on women's outcomes.

Gibb (2008) explored the impacts of ProMujer in rural Bolivia through a comparative study of women who had received long-term loans and those who had never participated in the programme. While acknowledging the positive effects of microcredit asset ownership and small business investment, Gibb emphasised that these programmes tend to stimulate informal economies, which are characterised by volatility. Women also reported few changes in intrahousehold dynamics, which often resulted in additional workloads for them. Thus, Gibb cautions against relying on microfinance as a panacea for economic inclusion, since these programmes do not reduce high unemployment rates, deep-rooted gender inequalities nor the allure of urban migration in rural areas.

Geissler and Leatherman (2015) looked at the health components of ProMujer in Bolivia: the offer of free or low-cost health care, and health screening of programme participants. Although rural women were a minority among programme participants, they were the ones with lower or non-existent access to health and financial services. Nonetheless, the programme struggled to reach remote areas due to the cost of providing mobile health clinics and financial services, often mirroring the inequality that already existed among the Bolivian population.

Studies of CreCer's group-based lending model paid attention to the programme's use of individual reputation and collective trust as a form of loan collateral (Maclean, 2010). This loan model overlooks how social dynamics within villages lead some women to feel coerced into taking a loan, even when they feel incapable of paying it back (Maclean, 2010). Moreover, the tight schedules in the repayment plan clashed with the slow-paced nature of rural economies. Since profits from agrarian activities can be modest and uncertain, many participants ended up vulnerable to debt accumulation (Maclean, 2012). Differences in livelihood strategies and importance of reciprocal networks in rural versus urban areas also have a bearing on the extent to which women are able to benefit from engagement with micro-finance (Maclean, 2010), as discussed in more detail in section 4.2.

Graduation/economic inclusion

Graduation programmes in Latin America often complement CCTs with additional income and activities that help recipient households sustain themselves out of poverty after their children age out of eligibility for assistance. However, this review found scant qualitative insight on the gendered impacts of graduation programmes, even though a quantitative evaluation of the Haku Wiñay/Noa Jayatai in Peru did acknowledge that the programme probably affects men and women differently in each component (Escobal and Ponce, 2016).

The impact assessment of Fundacion Capital programmes is more indicative of gendered impacts. In Mexico, Honduras and Paraguay, women represented more than 90 percent of programme participants, except for Colombia where this percentage was 73.2 percent (Fundacion Capital, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). The evidence on these programmes was overwhelmingly positive, suggesting an increase in assets, productive activity, household income and income from different productive activities, savings, and perceptions in well-being and happiness. At the same time, programme participants decreased their access to informal credit and likelihood to be in poverty.

In Mexico, quantitative evaluations did not find statistically significant evidence of women's empowerment within the household, but this is likely because most participants were already heads of household prior to enrolling in the programme (Fundacion Capital, 2019d). The qualitative component of the same evaluation suggests some strengthening of women's agency that could not be captured by the quantitative methods. In Paraguay, the evaluations also indicated that participants became more critical of traditional gender roles after participation in the Fundacion Capital programme (Fundacion Capital, 2019c).

Different outcomes in rural and Indigenous contexts

The disparate outcomes of programmes in rural and urban regions were made evident by several studies in this review. An impact evaluation of a microcredit programme targeting women in Mexico observed that loans are used differently in urban and rural areas, resulting in highly different outcomes in each region (Angelucci et al, 2013). In rural areas, loans increased recipients' investments in income-generating activities or enhanced the revenue of existing businesses. Meanwhile, in urban areas the same money was primarily used to manage risks and debts. Recipients of microcredit who lived in cities also reduced their engagement in income-generating activities. One possible explanation for this is that urban women use the money from microcredit to maintain their income without engaging in challenging 'survival' jobs, such as street vending.

A study of the CCT Bolsa Família in Brazil offers similar insights about the priorities of impoverished urban women. Nanes and Quadros (2018) found that the CCT enabled women in the informal sector to turn down unsafe or demeaning job offers that paid below the minimum wage. Interviewed recipients recounted experiences such as enduring 17-hour work journeys in industrial kitchens or being denied days off as domestic workers, to the extent that they were not allowed to see their children. Under these circumstances, receiving the CCT enabled women to pursue better job opportunities or even afford living expenses while choosing to stay home with their children.

A study disaggregating the effects of Bolsa Família between urban and rural regions found that these significant positive outcomes for women were exclusively concentrated in urban settings (De Brauw et al, 2014). In rural areas, CCTs exacerbate the erosion of women's decision-making power by reinforcing their traditional role as the primary caregivers for children (De Brauw et al, 2014). Rural households also face a disproportionate risk of having their transfers cancelled due to non-compliance with programme rules, despite being overrepresented among the extremely poor (Handa et al, 2009). These unequal outcomes are aggravated in Indigenous communities.

A comparative analysis of CCTs in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia underscored the challenge of reconciling the notion of 'female autonomy' with deeply ingrained gender norms in the Andes (Molyneux and Thomson). In the Indigenous communities in this region, gender roles are perceived as well-established and complementary, and communal well-being often takes precedence over individual autonomy. Furthermore, a series of structural barriers perpetuate the marginalisation of rural and Indigenous women and constrain their abilities to benefit from CCTs as much as urban non-Indigenous women.

Alcazar and Espinoza Iglesias (2014, p.69) note that women who stay informed about current events are more likely to contribute to household economic decisions. However, access to news sources is unevenly distributed between rural and urban areas. Additionally, Indigenous women often face a language barrier when trying to access relevant information to strengthen their negotiation power. Interviews with Indigenous recipients of CCT revealed their frustrations with the lack of access to education and employment opportunities and highlighted the disparities between wages for men and women working in rural contexts (ibid., p. 82).

Structural inequalities can also impact the experience of Indigenous girls within CCT programmes, often resulting in disparate outcomes compared to their male siblings (Molyneux and Thomson, 2011). Gil-Garcia (2016) examination of the Mexican CCT Prospera in a rural village with high rates of parental migration to the US clearly illustrates this phenomenon. He observes a pattern of young Mayan girls assuming the role of household heads when their mothers migrate to the US, given the CCT's requirement for a local point of contact who is also responsible for ensuring compliance with programme conditionalities. Consequently, some girls end up forgoing their education to become caregivers for their siblings. This case underscores how programme design can inadvertently perpetuate gender disparities among children and adolescents as well.

Bouillon and Tejerina (2006) emphasise that although programme rules are crucial for shaping recipient behaviour, they must be designed with caution to ensure positive impacts in diverse contexts.

Ensuring inclusivity in programme implementation is also crucial. The case of Ingreso Solidario, the unconditional cash transfer offered by the Colombian government during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be insightful in this regard. The Colombian government employed various dissemination channels, including WhatsApp, social media platforms such as Facebook, as well as radio and TV broadcasts. Additionally, it offered two payment options: digital wallets or cash withdrawal. An evaluation found that recipients from different backgrounds heard about the programme through different channels and opted for distinct payment methods (García, 2022). Middle-aged participants and rural workers preferred cash withdrawals, while young urban dwellers found the digital alternative more convenient for accessing funds. This program serves as a compelling example of how diversifying implementation strategies can effectively broaden the reach of interventions.

5. Conclusion

The rapid review of evidence in Latin America aimed to present an overview of impacts of social protection on economic inclusion, with special consideration for the role of comprehensive programming and the aspect of gender. It does so against the backdrop of limited evidence but strong policy interest.

Analysis of papers in the review shows that CCTs are effective at improving family well-being and household living standards, but are less impactful in promoting economic inclusion. In contrast, standalone livelihoods interventions, such as microfinance, lump-sum transfers, asset transfers, land titling and skills development programmes show promise in promoting asset ownership, technical knowledge, and income generation. Programmes offering comprehensive support appear to be more effective in promoting long-term economic inclusion and achieving positive outcomes, especially for women.

Both the global and regional evidence base suggest there is great potential in bundling interventions. Evidence indicates that the more comprehensive the programme, the greater their (potential) impact. While bundled interventions may be more expensive and complex, Latin America has a reputation for implementing such programmes effectively, as exemplified by CCTs. This potential can be further harnessed by layering interventions with different objectives to ensure households receive support that is both protective and promotive. Complementing the region's large-scale and effective safety net programmes with interventions that are geared towards economic inclusion could enhance the economic resilience of recipient households. By layering schemes in a mutually reinforcing manner, programmes can build on each other to meet both social and economic objectives in the short and long term. This approach would also provide recipients with a clearer pathway in the social protection system as their needs change and evolve.

To better understand what works for economic inclusion in Latin America, more evidence is needed. While evaluations report many positive impacts of different interventions across national populations, there is a need for more research on what works for whom and under what conditions. Intersecting inequalities and contextual factors influence programme outcomes and suggest that the most effective form of social protection will vary depending on the specific needs of different populations. Additionally, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the cost-effectiveness of existing programmes. Data on intervention costs and returns on investment are limited, and there is a scarcity of studies that consider programme costs alongside impacts to assess value for money. Finally, the relative novelty of schemes seeking to bolster economic inclusion means there is still no evidence of their long-term impacts. To truly answer the question of cost-effectiveness, it is essential to gain insight into the sustainability of change for this generation of recipients and the next.

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