

## SDC 2019 Annual Meeting Abstracts

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**Title: Towards Gender Equality: A critical assessment of evidence on Social Safety Nets in Africa**



Over the last decade, social safety nets (SSNs) have rapidly expanded in Africa, becoming a core strategy for addressing poverty and vulnerability, responding to shocks, increasing productivity and investing in human capital. Poverty, vulnerability and well-being have inherent gender dimensions; thus gender considerations have historically motivated design features of SSNs. Women were targeted as transfer recipients for their instrumental value in helping the program achieve its objectives of household food security and child human capital. More recently, the narrative has expanded to acknowledge SSNs as policy instruments to increase gender equality and facilitate women's empowerment. Despite this recent attention to gender equality and women's empowerment, it is worth reflecting on the dearth of rigorous evidence available to guide programming to achieve these goals. Much of the current evidence consists of case studies, rather than a comprehensive understanding of impacts.

This study contributes to a broader understanding of the evidence on how SSNs in Africa affect gender equality and women's empowerment. We motivate and take stock of how gender is factored into the SSNs in Africa. We summarize evidence from rigorous impact evaluations of SSNs on women's wellbeing across five key domains from 35 studies on 25 SSNs programs across 17 countries in Africa. If deemed feasible we will also undertake a meta-analysis of the studies reviewed.

We find strong evidence that SSNs can decrease intimate partner violence and increase psychological wellbeing for women. In addition, there is moderate evidence that SSNs can increase economic standing for women, however changes in labor force participation are minimal. There is weaker evidence that SSNs can improve food security, dietary diversity and nutrition, as there are few studies which measure these outcomes for women. Evidence on the impact of SSNs on women's intra-household bargaining power or empowerment is weak. Finally, there is little research that rigorously identifies the design features and impact pathways from SSNs to gender equality and women's wellbeing. Our findings suggest that impacts at the household level often do not automatically imply individual level effects and conclusions from global evidence reviews do not necessarily translate to Africa-specific findings.