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Making growth work for women in low-income countries

The challenge

Despite recent gains in many areas, globally, women still lag their male counterparts in important measures of income, decision-making power, and participation in their societies and economies. While economic growth is a major factor shaping the incomes and wellbeing of both men and women, various other forces and trends affect women's economic empowerment, and the degree to which they benefit from growth in different settings.

Evidence points to four broad sets of conditions that influence how likely women are to benefit from growth:

- *Factors that affect women's labour market opportunities*
Global market integration and a tide of movement from rural areas to cities, for example, have brought more women into the work force in many low-income countries. But they have also drawn many women into precarious employment and sometimes dangerous conditions.
- *Factors that affect women's caregiving responsibilities*
Many social and economic factors affect what is expected of women in households, and what help they have in caring for dependents. This in turn affects how women engage in the job market. Examples include the availability and cost of childcare, flexible work hours, and cultural norms that shape how much men and women share domestic duties.
- *Factors that shape the rights and status of women*
The scope of laws and social norms protecting women's rights, status, and civil vary from country to country. These rights and norms affect the bottom line for women – including whether or not they can control property, access credit, or demand equal wages.

Through six related studies, research explores how the prospects for women's economic empowerment are shaped by a wide range of factors, from evolving rights and cultural norms to urban growth and market integration.

■ *Unintended consequences of development*

Urban intensification and other forms of development may provide greater economic opportunity. But they can also damage women's wellbeing and autonomy by increasing levels of violence or degrading the environment.

While policymakers seek ways to unlock women's potential in the economy and workforce, too little is yet understood about how their economic empowerment is affected by these macro conditions, and how these vary by country and region. Looking at the effects of globalization and urban development is especially relevant for Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Pakistan, where large populations are rapidly urbanizing and connecting to global markets.

The research

To investigate how these forces affect women's economic empowerment in different contexts and sectors, six studies are being carried out. The research teams aim to draw clear and locally relevant policy implications from these studies.

1. Using micro data from demographic and health surveys in over 80 countries, researchers are assessing how economic growth affects women's overall wellbeing. They will identify non-economic policies and programs, such as laws against underage marriages, that can help women benefit from economic growth.
2. Using time series data from various countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, a second study aims to explain how trade liberalization and other forces affect women's wages and employment in different country contexts.
3. Research in Nigeria and Ghana examines if recent growth of the service sector has led to greater entry and mobility of women in the workforce.
4. A study in Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, and Morocco will explore how different irrigation systems and practices affect women's labour and productivity on the farm.

5. Research in three major cities in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India investigates the effects of environmental degradation on the wellbeing of women in slums or informal settlements.
6. The final study seeks to understand how patterns of urban change and growth and the quality of transportation infrastructure affect women's safety, productivity and economic choices in megacities of Pakistan and Nigeria.

Expected outcomes

Through its six research studies, this project will produce new global knowledge on how growth interacts with other macro trends to shape women's economic opportunities and outcomes. Findings will help countries craft policies that will amplify the positive effects of growth on women's economic empowerment.

The project will build new research and leadership abilities through collaboration between four institutions based in Nigeria, Pakistan and the United States. The project will provide targeted training in research methods, research communication, and other strategies to increase the uptake of policy-relevant findings.

Policy briefs, in several languages, will capture research findings. Results will be shared online, and with policymakers and practitioners at two regional workshops and an international conference. Uptake will also be increased through ongoing engagement between project partners and their local policy networks.

Lead researchers and institutions

- Elizabeth Peters and Nan Astone, The Urban Institute

Other participating institutions include:

- Centre for Public Policy Alternatives- Nigeria
- Egerton University Institute of Women Gender and Development- Kenya
- LEAD Pakistan

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