Hypatia (2025), **40**, 186–205
doi:10.1017/hyp.2024.72

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Conditional Cash Transfer Programs and the Sustainable Development Goals: Problematizing the Empowering Potential of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs

Kerry Ellen O'Neill

Department of Philosophy, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada
Email: Oneillke@mcmaster.ca

(Received 26 April 2022; revised 18 March 2024; accepted 19 April 2024; first published online 12 November 2024)

Abstract

Purportedly in line with the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) commitment to end poverty and gender inequality by 2030, conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) provide poor households with cash contingent on parents making human capital investments in their children. Advocates claim CCTs empower and so benefit women and girls. Critics worry the programs reinforce gendered expectations by tying social protection to "good mothering." The aim of this paper is to assess whether CCTs are compatible with the SDGs' stated aims with regards to Goal 5 on gender equality and empowerment. I argue that CCTs run contrary to the stated aims of SDG 5. CCTs rely on and perpetuate sexist ideology about women while simultaneously policing women's behavior to ensure they fulfill the state's conception of a "good mother." Notwithstanding the potential benefits women receive from CCTs, the programs prevent the disruption of power relations by reinforcing norms that incentivize women to engage in self-subordinating ways in exchange for cash. Given that the programs re-entrench and police gender norms, CCTs thwart progress towards SDG 5 and so move us no closer to a gender equal world.

Introduced in 2016, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) consist of a series of goals aimed at ending poverty and gender inequality, amongst other things, by 2030. In recognition of the difficulties associated with simultaneously ending poverty and gender inequality, the SDGs require nations to develop nationally appropriate social protection programs while also ensuring those programs are compatible with a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Much discussion has thus taken place on the usefulness of cash transfer programs in meeting these ends, especially with regards to whether cash ought to be provided conditionally or unconditionally. Due to different socio-political contexts conditional cash transfer programs have historically gained

popularity in Latin America whereas unconditional cash transfers have been more popular in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hanlon et al. 2010).

The primary focus of this paper is whether conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) are compatible with the SDGs' stated aims with regards to gender equality and empowerment. CCTs of the sort under analysis are part of an anti-poverty strategy intended to combat current and future poverty by providing cash to mothers[1] on the condition that beneficiary households make prespecified investments in the human capital of their children. These programs are primarily, though not exclusively, found in Latin American countries. CCTs might reduce the feminization of poverty and empower women and girls because these segments of the population are already more likely to live in poverty and, as a result, are perhaps set to benefit the most from the targeted programs and the attached conditions. Still, despite advocates claiming CCTs promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Bartholo 2016, Sugiyama and Hunter 2020; Atkins et al. 2022; Hunter et al. 2021), disagreement exists about the empowering potential of the programs with some worrying that policymakers may be pursuing poverty eradication at the expense of women and girls (Molyneux 2006; Chant 2016; Cookson 2018; Bradshaw et al. 2019; Nagels 2021).

Thus, the overall task of this paper is to demonstrate how CCTs run contrary to the stated aims of SDG 5—to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls—by failing to empower women. This occurs through problematic program design that often reinforces patriarchal structures and unjust power relations, thereby sustaining gender inequities. To reach this conclusion, I argue that reliance on different conceptions of empowerment can explain the divergent conclusions about the empowering potential of CCTs and, moreover, that there are good reasons to conclude that CCTs rely on and perpetuate sexist ideology about women while simultaneously policing women's behavior to ensure they fulfill the state's conception of a "good mother." In short, across the world there is already a social expectation that women perform unpaid care and domestic work. States reinforce this social expectation by conditioning cash on the performance of highly gendered labor. Moreover, given the conditional nature of the programs, removing or sanctioning households for noncompliance reinforces the social expectation of gendered labor and, consequently, polices gendered responsibilities. This enables one to call CCTs both sexist—because policymakers tend to rely on essentialist views of motherhood to sustain the programs—and misogynistic—because women who do not, for a variety of reasons, perform the patriarchally prescribed behaviors required to fulfill program conditions are punished for noncompliance. This conflicts with the stated aims of the SDGs on gender equality and women's empowerment by reinforcing sexist and misogynistic social policy.

In light of the international community's commitment to end poverty and gender inequality, social protection programs designed to end poverty must be carefully evaluated to determine whether such programs pursue poverty eradication at the expense of women and girls. Alternative programs which better address gender inequities and are just as effective as CCTs in combatting poverty are often preferable to conditional ones. In the case at hand, cash transfers are a necessary component of social protection policies but not, as I argue, if that cash comes with gendered and disempowering strings attached.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 1, I outline the international community's commitment to poverty eradication, gender equality, and women's empowerment. In section 2, I introduce conditional cash transfers programs. In section 3, I explain how public policies designed to police women's behavior reinforce the subordinate status of women, thereby upholding the patriarchy. Section 4 demonstrates how CCTs contribute

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to gender oppression and, in doing so, pose serious problems for meeting SDG 5. Women are incentivized to fulfill gendered responsibilities to remain program compliant. Conditioning cash on gendered labor authorizes the state to police gender expectations to punish so-called bad women for failing to be good mothers. In the conclusion of this paper, I briefly consider whether unconditional cash transfer programs might be an effective alternative given the problems raised by CCTs in terms of SDG 5.

1. In pursuit of poverty eradication, gender equality, and women's empowerment

In 2016 the international community committed itself to becoming a poverty-free and gender equal world via Resolution 70/1, thereby establishing the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015). The crosscutting theme of the SDGs is poverty eradication, gender equality, and women's empowerment, with specific goals aimed at these ends also contained within the Sustainable Development Agenda. Poverty eradication is pursued through Goal 1 which seeks to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" while ensuring development strategies are gender sensitive (15). A central component of SDG 1 requires states to implement nationally appropriate social protection programs for all so no one falls beneath the international poverty line.

SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. Comprised of six targets, SDG 5 requires states to (1) end all forms of discrimination against women and girls; (2) eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including exploitation; (3) eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage; (4) recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of social protection policies; (5) ensure women's participation in all aspects of political, economic, and public life; and (6) ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive rights (United Nations 2015, 18).

To this end, the Sustainable Development Agenda contains language characteristic of gender equality and empowerment initiatives. With regard to the former, Resolution 70/1 states "[t]he achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full rights and opportunities." Additionally, the Resolution asserts, "women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels" (United Nations 2015, 6). Regarding the latter, Resolution 70/1 states "[w]e will work for significant increases in investments to close the gender gap and strengthen support for institutions in relation to gender equality and the empowerment of women at the global, regional and national levels" (United Nations 2015, 6). Explicitly, the document later specifies women's economic empowerment as key to achieving a gender just world (United Nations 2015, 8).

Economic empowerment is, however, but one manner of thinking about empowerment. More broadly, empowerment is most often conceptualized in two ways: (i) as transforming power relations (Batliwala 2007; Khader 2011); and (ii) as increasing agency or expanding choice (Kabeer 1999; Narayan 2005).[2]

As detailed by Srilatha Batliwala, the concept of women's empowerment grew out of the discontent of women's movements, especially those in the Global South, with the status quo of popular development approaches in the 1980s such as "women in development," "women and development," and "gender and development." Women's empowerment came to be conceptualized as "a more political and transformatory idea

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for struggles that challenged not only patriarchy, but also the mediating structures of class, race, ethnicity—and, in India, caste and religion—which determined the nature of women's position and condition in developing societies" (Batliwala 2007, 558). Empowerment, Srilatha Batliwala contends, was a socio-political process where "the critical operating concept within empowerment was *power*" (e.g. power-over or the power-to-do something). Empowerment reflected a desire to radically redistribute power across social groups and individuals (Batliwala 2007, 559).

By the 1990s, the concept of empowerment had begun to shift and was used as a catch-all phrase for any development project focused on women.[3] Over time, empowerment increasingly became recognized as "a magic bullet for poverty alleviation and rapid economic development, rather than a multi-faceted process of social transformation" (Batliwala 2007, 561). Empowerment is now largely conceived of as increasing agency. Naila Kabeer, whose views the World Bank endorses, defines empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 1999, 435). This definitional shift contributed to the World Bank largely dropping the relational component of empowerment to target assets and opportunity structures instead of power structures (Cornwall 2016).

Empowerment is now well linked to policy interventions aimed at poverty eradication, including conditional cash transfer programs. Indeed, many anti-poverty programs focus on empowering women and girls insofar as doing so is the considered the most effective way of combatting poverty. For example, in 2007 the World Bank, a prominent supporter of CCTs, endorsed the slogan "Gender Equality is Smart Economics" resulting in another definitional shift in the way empowerment was viewed in development (World Bank 2012). Gender inequality, it was argued, was bad for economic growth since it leaves roughly half of the world's population as an untapped resource. On the "Smart Economics" approach, states should empower women by increasing their access to the formal market, as doing so will result in benefits to the economy and enable women to lift their households out of poverty. Neo-liberal approaches to empowerment such as "Smart Economics" have been heavily criticized for further distorting the concept of empowerment, failing to account for the structural injustices women face, upholding unjust global processes of capital accumulation, and holding indivduals responsible for lifting themselves and their families out of poverty (Bedford 2009; Wilson 2015).

The meaning of empowerment was altered in ways that have allowed states to commit to empowerment without necessarily disrupting any existing power structures that limit women's position in society. The SDGs are prone to this particular concern as when Valeria Esquivel argues that, despite commitments to transform our world, the SDGs attempt "to get there without substantially opposing the powers that be," making power relations "the elephant in the room of the Agenda 2030" (Esquivel 2016, 12). In particular, some feminist theorists raised concerns about the provisos of *nationally appropriate* and *shared responsibility* contained within SDG 5.[4] These sorts of caveats attached to the SDGs may allow nations to defend social policies that reinforce gender inequalities on the grounds that these policies align with cultural norms around gender divisions of labor (O'Manique and Fourie 2016; Razavi 2016). In doing so, women's continued oppression may be concealed or go unchallenged. The question must thus be asked whether CCTs are subject to similar concerns and whether such programs attempt to end poverty at the expense of women and girls.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2. Conditional cash transfers, equality, and empowerment

Conditional cash transfer programs of the sort under analysis are anti-poverty programs targeted to those living below the poverty line that provide regular cash payments to mothers on the condition that prespecified program requirements be fulfilled. The conditions or "co-responsibilities" are envisioned as a way of both ensuring that targeted children are invested in *and* that their parents act responsibly (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). Program conditions vary, but typically involve educational and health requirements aimed at children—such as sending children to school, bringing children to health clinics, and having children be up-to-date in vaccinations—and primary caregivers (i.e. mothers)—such as attending prenatal health checks, workshops, and classes and, in some cases, engaging in domestic labor for the program by cooking and cleaning for health centres and schools, amongst other things (Molyneux 2006, 2008; Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Bartholo 2016; Cookson 2018). Program conditions may be aimed at different ends and be hard, soft, or flexible in nature (Cecchini and Martínez 2012). For example, some CCTs, such as the Mexican program, attempt to alter parental behavior when it comes to investment in the human capital of children and does so via strict enforcement mechanisms and sanctions that halt benefits immediately when noncompliance occurs. Other CCTs, like Brazil's program, are aimed at increasing household consumption levels and so have weaker enforcement mechanisms as compared to the Mexican program and, in doing so, allow for some noncompliance before benefits are halted. Others offer more flexible conditions, like Chile's program, such that conditions are negotiated with beneficiaries and only when households are repeatedly noncompliant are benefits halted. Despite these differences virtually all CCTs specify that households can and will, at some point, be removed for noncompliance.[5]

While CCTs were implemented prior to the establishment of the SDGs, the programs might nevertheless support the Sustainable Development Agenda because (i) the program origins, at least initially, were tied to poverty eradication and gender equality objectives and (ii) the Agenda requires nations to adopt social policy that advances the goals contained within the Agenda.

Regarding the former, Mexico's Progresa[6] was one of the first CCTs established.[7] The program, as originally conceived, aimed to combat poverty and gender inequality by providing eligible households, typically mothers, with a small cash stipend contingent on parental investment in their children's human capital (Molyneux 2008; Lavinas 2013). In terms of its first objective—poverty eradication—Progresa would break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by raising the consumption levels of poor households and encouraging investment in children (Fiszbein and Schady 2009, 31). In brief, conditionalities, it was argued, would ensure parents made the proper investments in their children's health and education.

In terms of Progresa's second objective—gender equality—daughters would benefit from their household's enrollment in the program by being healthier and better educated because of the conditions around schooling and health visits. The program paid a higher cash stipend for girls' attendance at school as compared to boys' attendance in order to encourage parents to send girls to school. This stipend also increased as the children aged to discourage girls from dropping out of school (Molyneux 2006). Additionally, by designating mothers as payees, women would be empowered by virtue of having cash to use as a bargaining chip in intrahousehold negotiations (Fiszbein and Schady 2009, 59). Having access to cash would enable

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mothers to make decisions that best aligned with their discrete preferences—namely, benefitting their children.

Emerging evidence, however, soon demonstrated that Progresa was not meeting the gender equality objective. This reality, coupled with the desires of program designers at the international level, such as the World Bank, to create standardized programming, resulted in the gender equality objective being dropped from the Mexican program altogether and no longer included in new CCTs (Jenson and Nagels 2018, 324). Despite gender-based shortcomings, international organizations hailed the Mexican program as "a model for the rest of the world" at combatting poverty (World Bank 2014), highlighting the tension that poverty eradication is often pursued at the expense of gender equality. Other countries, especially those in Latin America but also some in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, have subsequently rolled out their own conditional cash transfer programs given the relative success of Mexico's program (Fiszbein and Schady 2009) and the World Bank's overall endorsement of the programs. Supporters continue to point to the benefits the programs have on women and girls even if gender equality is no longer a primary objective.

Given existing concerns about gender equality and empowerment being sidelined by poverty eradication efforts and economic growth strategies (Khader 2014; Chant 2016; Esquivel 2016), one question to ask is whether in their pursuit of ending poverty those advocating for the use of CCTs advance or hinder progress towards SDG 5. Before answering this question, some clarification is needed.

Although CCTs were first introduced in the 1990s, well before the establishment of the SDGs, it remains crucial to determine the gendered impacts of this sort of social policy precisely because the international community explicitly committed itself to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.[8] According to the SDGs, social protection programs must be gender sensitive even while leaving room for the development of "nationally appropriate" schemes.[9] The reality is that no country has achieved gender equality or empowerment, with some estimates indicating that closing the gender gap in political participation will take 82 years, the economic gap 170 years, and achieving gender parity in lower secondary school 95 years (UN Women 2017). Social policies that hinder progress towards SDG 5 mean it will take far longer to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Social protection programs that better advance gender equality should be opted for to avoid maintaining the status quo and to make substantive progress towards the realization of a gender equal world.

Furthermore, while the primary focus of CCTs is to break the cycle of poverty by investing in children—and not to empower women and girls *per se*—advocates have been quick to point out the empowering effects the programs have on women and girls to defend the continued use of CCTs (Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Bartholo 2016; Sugiyama and Hunter 2020; Hunter et al. 2021; Atkins et al. 2022;). Both the cash and the conditions attached to it are said to empower mothers who will then lift their households out of poverty. Giving cash to mothers increases their bargaining power which can improve children's wellbeing (Fiszbein and Schady 2009, 59). As articulated in a World Bank Research Report, "[i]n nearly all [CCTs] where the adult is the payee, payments are made to the mother of the children" and this is recognized as an important feature of program design (82). Through CCTs policymakers dispense cash to mothers who can then use the money as they see fit. Policymakers assume women's agency increases precisely because the woman is the designated payee. On this line of thinking, access to cash via social protection programs makes women economically empowered,

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which in turn benefits their households and the economy. It is mothers—not fathers—who are responsible for lifting their households out of poverty.

Attaching conditions to the cash guarantees parents, especially fathers who are presumed to be self-interested, cannot pursue their own interests at the expense of their children. Conditions ensure mothers use the cash to benefit their children and also strengthen the woman's bargaining power enabling her to make household allocative decisions (Fiszbein and Schady 2009, 59). Program conditions, such as mandatory workshops, grant women a greater sense of independence and offer women educational opportunities to become overall better mothers and informed citizens. Other benefits accruing to women because of CCTs include improved self-esteem/self-confidence and social status within their community (Bartholo 2016). Critics of CCTs, however, remain steadfast in their concerns about the inability of CCTs to advance gender equality given how the programs bolster troubling gender norms and glaze over important structural considerations (Molyneux 2006; Cookson 2018; Bradshaw et al. 2019; Nagels 2021). What might account for such a large discrepancy in the perspectives on the empowering potential of CCTs?

3. A different conclusion about the empowering potential of CCTs

Many feminist theorists worry CCTs reinforce gendered expectations (Molyneux 2006; Cookson 2018; Bradshaw et al. 2019; Nagels 2021). These concerns are well founded, given policymakers' tendency to pursue poverty eradication at the expense of women and girls. Sylvia Chant, for example, argues women are often forced to fill social policy gaps thereby shouldering the burdens of development (Chant 2016). Others like Maxine Molyneux worry social policies retraditionalize gender relations because women are treated as conduits through which resources flow to children (Molyneux 2006, 2008; Molyneux and Thomson 2011).

Building on these theorists, I argue that CCTs are problematic in a further dimension because the programs often not only rely on sexist ideology to justify the conditions placed on individual mothers but take this one step further by making the policies misogynistic through the policing of gendered expectations via conditionalities. Simply, women whose households are enrolled in these programs and who fail to satisfy program conditions may be deemed "bad mothers" for failing to fulfill their socially prescribed roles, resulting in their households being removed from the program altogether.

Women's subordinate status in society often involves compounding social pressures relegating women to unequal status compared with men. While the specific relationship between the dominating and subordinating groups is context specific and dependent on the patriarchal structures in place in a society, sexism and misogyny nevertheless work together to prop up male dominance (Manne 2018), making it crucial to challenge unjust power relations.[10]

Sexism, Kate Manne argues, acts as patriarchy's justificatory branch appealing to ideology around social relations. Sexist ideology consists of "assumptions, beliefs, theories, stereotypes and broader cultural narratives that represent men and women as importantly different in ways that, if true and known to be true, or at least likely, would make rational people more inclined to support and participate in patriarchal social arrangements" (Manne 2018, 79). Thus, sexism takes a quasi-scientific role by rationalizing and naturalizing patriarchal gender relations. The claim that women, for example, ought to be responsible for care work because they are naturally skilled

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

caregivers is a sexist one. As is the belief that mothers are inclined toward selflessness—a belief that also reinforces classist, racist, and colonial ideas around gender and mothering (Khader 2017; Segato and Monque 2021).

As a structural phenomenon largely, but not exclusively, perpetrated by social institutions, policies, and cultural values, misogyny has a different role to play. Unlike sexism, misogyny appeals to moralistic language (e.g. good versus bad). Sexist ideology props up essentialist views of women but becomes misogynistic when moral language attaches to gendered behaviors to distinguish good women from bad ones. So-called "bad women" are often punished for disrupting patriarchal norms or failing to comply with such norms whereas "good women" embody their prescribed gender roles and so deserve reward (Manne 2018, 2020). Good women become mothers who engage in reproduction for the state and comply with the state's conception of mothering. Good women are also expected to be selfless, altruistic, and submissive caregivers who serve their households out of love (Freibach-Heifetz and Stopler 2008; Manne 2018). Such characterizations use sexist ideology to reinforce the social expectations that women ought to sacrifice their own wellbeing for others and ensure women remain responsible for engaging in care and domestic labor. As a result of these problematic norms, women spend three times as many hours performing unpaid care and domestic work compared with men (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2019, 11–12).

This misogynistic phenomenon need not only occur when individuals police gender norms, but also when states enact policies compelling women to perform socially necessary labor, thereby reducing women to selfless mothers who possess a seemingly infinite capacity to labor. Consider Serene Khader's self-subordination social recognition paradox which highlights how women are sometimes coerced into the performance of patriarchally prescribed behaviors to access much needed government support—support that may be considered *nationally appropriate*.

According to the self-subordination social recognition paradox, anti-poverty programs sometimes claim to empower women even while paradoxically reinforcing gender oppression (Khader 2014). The self-subordination social recognition paradox, Khader argues, means "women can often gain welfare by complying with and internalizing oppressive norms." According to this paradox, "[a]ccess to many goods depends on social recognition, and, under patriarchy, women often have to subordinate themselves to achieve social recognition" (Khader 2014, 224). Program design may be such that women are incentivized or otherwise coerced into complying with patriarchal behaviors to access funds disbursed via anti-poverty programs. Furthermore, the instrumentalization of empowerment discourse means women's agency is seen as the solution to many of the problems in the Global South, obfuscating women's systemic oppression (Hickel 2014; Wilson 2015; Khader 2018; Moeller 2018). This begs the question of whether CCTs rely on empowerment discourse to alleviate poverty in a way that results in women enrolled in the programs having to subordinate themselves in order to gain access to much needed resources.

In Latin America where CCTs originated and have gained the most popularity, social policy has tended to endorse conceptions of social needs that are familial, patriarchal, and paternalistic (Molyneux 2006). Motherhood is perceived to be the basis on which women have staked their claims to citizenships rights. Consequently, states endeavor to mobilize female constituents in a trend known as civic maternalism. At the heart of civic maternalism lies the belief that women's social and biological role of mother must be recognized and protected (Jenson and Nagels 2018, 333). Consequently, mothers receive government support because they need assistance in fulfilling their maternal

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

responsibilities (Molyneux 2006, 427), resulting in the recognition of mothers as social policy claimants for the sake of their children. Women's poverty is not the problem *per se*; rather, women's poverty is problematic insofar as children suffer from their mother's inability to fulfill her maternal obligations because she lacks the cash needed to provide adequate care.

Making mothers responsible for combatting poverty is especially concerning given that poverty and gender inequality are largely caused by structural, rather than individual, failures and so require structural solutions. In treating mothers as both responsible for their household's circumstances and program conditions, the women are forced to demonstrate their deservingness by displaying a willingness to improve their lives of their children via compliance with program mandated activities. Program conditions are envisioned by policymakers as a "part of a social contract whereby society (through the state) supports those households that are ready to make the effort to 'improve their lives'—*the deserving poor*" (Fiszbein and Schady 2009, 60; emphasis in original). This places the burden of childcare and social development squarely on the shoulders of the family—the mothers explicitly—rather than on the state, thereby enabling states to rely on women's unpaid labor to subsidize the cost of more expensive social protection programs and resulting in the overburdening of women (Luccisano 2004; Bedford 2009; Wilson 2015).

Moreover, CCTs often implicitly and explicitly invoke essentialist views of women. Namely, that women, as mothers, will invest any resources they receive into the wellbeing of their children, including their time, labor, and finances. The Mexican program, for example, "centres on mothers as the key to securing improvements in the life chances of their children, born and unborn" (Molyneux 2006, 427). But under the heading of household or community responsibilities, program compliancy becomes yet another set of tasks for mothers to complete. The social expectation is that mothers ought to act self-sacrificingly to promote their child's interests by investing in the child's human capital no matter the personal cost. Policymakers may claim activities intended to improve the wellbeing of children should not be considered burdensome to mothers, especially if such activities are tied to social norms. Any costs borne by mothers are simply a natural component of being a mother. Perhaps fulfilling one's motherly responsibilities just requires one to make sacrifices.

And yet program mandated activities are often time- and labor-intensive, especially in Mexico, Uruguay, and Peru, making it difficult for mothers to remain program compliant if they are not in a nuclear household with a breadwinner partner (Corboz 2013; Budlender 2014). This is partly because program conditions sometimes extend well beyond parental investments in children's human capital into activities intended to further benefit households, as demonstrated in the CCTs in Mexico and Peru. As mentioned above, mothers are often required to attend parenting workshops (on hygiene, preventative care, cleanliness, food preparation, and housework) and prenatal health appointments. But they may also be required to maintain personal gardens, cook for school lunch programs, contribute to school parties, clean buildings (including schools and health clinics), and clear garbage in the community (Molyneux 2006; Cookson 2018). Other time and labor burdens include those associated with ensuring program managers record women's compliance as well as the time women spend in lines waiting for their cash disbursements (Cookson 2018). In this way, it becomes clear that CCTs rely on essentialist views of women in ways that may be detrimental to their own social position by requiring women to subordinate themselves to be recognized as social policy claimants deserving of government assistance.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But CCTs take this one step further by monitoring women's behavior through the program conditions in order to ensure that the state's conception of good mothering practices is followed. Attaching conditions to the cash ensures that so-called bad mothers—mothers who behave in ways contrary to the state's idealized conception of mothering—become good ones or, at least, that bad mothers do not receive stipends. Mexican and Peruvian women who failed to comply with program conditions, either because they chose not to or were unable to, have been reprimanded by program managers as well as other members of their communities (Luccisano 2008; Cookson 2018). Moralizing gendered labor reinforces patriarchal expectations of motherhood and encourages program beneficiaries to report other women who do not complete program requirements. This reinforces existing gender divisions of labor and thwarts progress towards gender equality and empowerment by leaving unjust power structures largely unchallenged.

When governments implement CCTs, they often do so based on the belief that mothers act in the best interests of their children—this is, after all, the rationale for providing cash to mothers in the first place—while at the same time asserting that conditions are necessary to ensure mothers fulfill their maternal obligations. It is paradoxical to assert mothers must be the payees because they act in the best interests of children while simultaneously attaching conditions guaranteeing mothers act in selfless and self-subordinating ways. Hinging social assistance on women's altruism is problematic as no similar expectation is outlined for fathers—or the state for that matter. Fathers are presumed to be selfish (Fiszbein and Schady 2009), so the state does not expect nor require them to participate in program activities. The few men taking a more active parenting role are denigrated as feminine or are excluded from the programs altogether if no woman lives in the household (Molyneux 2006). Strict gender norms and patriarchal expectations hurt men and women albeit in different ways (Jenson and Nagels 2018). Women become the solution to the so-called bad behavior of men when policymakers wholeheartedly endorse the perspective that women are better carers than men (Bradshaw 2008) further institutionalizing women's survival strategies as an inexpensive state welfare strategy (Luccisano 2004; Corboz 2013; Budlender 2014; Nelson and Sandberg 2016; Cookson 2018).

In conditioning cash policymakers police gender norms to make mothers discharge their gendered responsibilities. The conditional nature of the programs means the state punishes mothers, and their households, for noncompliance through sanctions or expulsion. It does not matter why households are noncompliant (Cookson 2018). Policymakers endorse sexist ideology by enacting CCTs through which women are compelled to perform gendered labor before using state powers to enforce gendered expectations.

It is true that CCTs may increase "welfare agency" by enhancing women's welfare through choice expansion and this can perhaps be used to explain how some reach the conclusion that CCTs are empowering. However, the programs maintain sexist conditions for social recognition by tying social status, self-esteem, and access to cash to the performance of gendered labor as dictated by the state. This welfare agency must, Khader argues, be distinguished from "feminist agency" which enables a person to identify, challenge, and change sexist norms impacting their lives (Khader 2014, 124). Poverty gives women a reason to question patriarchy (225), but CCTs may facilitate the internalization of oppressive norms by preventing women from overcoming social constructs around traditional gender roles and, instead, coerce women into engaging in patriarchally prescribed behaviors in exchange for cash by increasing the rewards for

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

engaging in gendered labor while decreasing the force of the reasons for challenging patriarchy. Centering individual agency through a welfarist approach to empowerment promotes a thin conception of empowerment and hides the reality that CCTs as designed are ill-equipped to address unjust power structures including the disruption of patriarchal norms at the individual and structural level.

4. CCTs, gender oppression, and SDG 5

Having outlined some concerns associated with CCTs and gender equality and empowerment, it is now time to answer the question of whether such programs help or hinder progress towards SDG 5. I argue that CCTs hinder progress towards SDG 5 by examining some of the targets contained within the gender equality and empowerment objective. While it might be true that not all the concerns discussed below apply to each and every conditional cash transfer program, these concerns are nevertheless worrying given that social policies are meant to be gender-sensitive to advance the status of women and girls and that other social policies may better promote SDG 5.

To reiterate, SDG 5 requires states (1) to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls; (2) to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including exploitation; (3) to eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage; (4) to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of social protection policies; (5) to ensure women's participation in all aspects of political, economic, and public life; and (6) to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive rights (United Nations 2015, 18).

When it comes to CCTs, it's not clear that the programs help to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls. As discussed above, CCTs make mothers responsible in problematic ways that re-entrench essentialist views of women—views that have been and continue to be used to relegate women to the private sphere. Program mandated workshops, for example, tend to focus on the importance of hygiene, housework, and cleanliness without addressing women's concerns about accessing appropriate medical care, making the workshops patronizing rather than empowering (Molyneux 2006; Molyneux and Thomson 2011; Nelson and Sandberg 2016; Cookson 2018). Additionally, a failure to comply with program conditions has resulted in at least some women being subjected to discriminatory views about their parenting abilities (Jenson and Nagels 2018). Even mothers complying with program conditions may be subject to the charge of bad mothering and mistreatment. As detailed by Tara Cookson, mothers enrolled in Peru's Juntos, for example, report being called names ("dirty" and "pigs") whilst attending program mandated activities (Cookson 2018). Particularly vulnerable to the charge of bad mothering and mistreatment are poor and racialized women as a direct result of racism, heteronormativity, and neocolonialism (Jenson and Nagels 2018). The programs do not appear to have sufficiently challenged discriminatory attitudes about women, especially poor and racialized women, in their respective societies. Instead, women are required to subject themselves to continuous mistreatment at the hands of program managers and health care staff affiliated with the CCT. SDG 5.1 seeks to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls but CCTs force women to place themselves in situations where they may face discrimination.

With regards to SDG 5.4, nations are required to implement public services and social protection programs while also recognizing the value of unpaid care and domestic work. Countries must also promote shared responsibility within the household and the

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

family (United Nations 2015, 18).[11] Above, I demonstrated how CCTs reinforce existing gender divisions of labor by compelling women to act altruistically while punishing women who cannot or choose not to endorse a model of parenting rooted in the selfless mother ideal.

Moreover, remaining compliant with the program conditions is a full-time job, making it difficult for women to generate incomes, thereby impacting their ability to participate in political, economic, and public life. The cash stipend provided to mothers is insufficient to support the household which reinforces women's dependence on male breadwinners who may or may not be abusive to meet their household's needs. Evidence from Julienne Corboz's analysis of Uruguay's CCT (PANES) suggests that some women actually paid their ex-partners for childcare from the cash stipend so they could seek casual employment because the stipend was insufficient. And yet, despite a clause in the program requiring women search for employment or engage in volunteer work,[12] the programs did not actually increase women's labor market participation. In fact, the program resulted in a "negative effect on individual wages, particularly for women" (Corboz 2013, 70). Escalating neighborhood crime rates in targeted areas also meant some women "reneged on [their] contract with the state by purposefully not looking for work or participating in community activities" (74). Some women even removed their sons from school, despite the program requiring children attend school, to protect the family home from criminal activities.

Given the time- and labor-intensive nature of some CCTs, some women are forced to unenroll from the programs to maintain paid labor while others report leaving income-earning labor to remain compliant (Corboz 2013; Budlender 2014). The working poor are thus sometimes excluded from the programs because they are unable to set aside the time needed for the selection and enrollment processes (Budlender 2014) and/or program compliance. This means that in at least some cases the poorest households in a region may be inadvertently excluded from the programs because the women are unable to fulfill the conditions, further reinforcing the notion that women's proper place is at home. Hence, CCTs may at times undermine women's economic participation (Bradshaw et al. 2019).

In terms of women's political participation, CCTs may also have some negative consequences. Studies by Óscar Gil-García (2016) and Corboz (2013) highlight the negative impacts CCTs have on women's political participation in Mexico and Uruguay respectively. In Mexico, for example, local government officials viewed spaces where women could engage in political action with distrust. Women's political mobilization was deemed a threat to current community authorities. As a result, officials prohibited women from addressing political matters during program gatherings (Gil-García 2016). Stifling women's political participation contradicts the broader commitment to advance gender equality by empowering women. The practice also contributes to the disenfranchisement of women's voices in the political arena.

In a similar vein, the targeted and conditional nature of CCTs may also impact one's sense of community and belonging. Targeted social protection programs are prone to targeting errors and program leakage (i.e. inclusion and exclusion errors), with CCTs being no exception (Fiszbein and Schady 2009, 75–80). And while there can be many reasons that lead to such errors, exclusion could have individual and community level impacts such as sowing discontent and resentment between those enrolled in the programs and those who are not and between neighbors who are expected to report on whether others are complying with program conditions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conditional cash transfer programs may also infringe upon women's rights to sexual and reproductive health through conditions around birth spacing and contraceptive use, as well as requiring women to give birth in a medical institution (Laszlo et al. 2019; Gil-García 2016; Nagels 2016), even while encouraging uptake of public resources aimed securing sexual and reproductive health. As Kalpana Wilson argues, poor and racialized women in the Global South are criticized for being excessively reproductive because they are perceived to lack the ability to regulate decisions around reproduction (Wilson 2015, 813–815). Longer lasting or permanent reproductive interventions, such as sterilization, are often offered to poor and racialized women because of this perception (Gil-García 2016; Laszlo et al. 2019). Gil-García studied the effects of the Mexican CCT on Indigenous Mayan refugees from Guatemala. His study revealed mothers were subject to contraceptive surveillance, with Indigenous women at risk of increased surveillance (Gil-García 2016).[13] Indigenous women faced intensified social monitoring by healthcare professionals regarding contraceptive use and experienced external pressures to become sterilized. Beneficiary women had "less autonomy compared to women without the program" since "a larger proportion (30%) of non-recipient women made the independent decision to seek sterilization whereas a smaller number (13%) of recipient women did so" (454).

Negative impacts on women's sexual and reproductive rights extend beyond the Mexican CCT. The Bolivian CCT, for example, enforces a strict policy of birth spacing as a condition for receipt of cash (Molyneux and Thomson 2011, 205). The birth spacing policy prevents women from claiming a second cash transfer should they become pregnant again within two years of a previous pregnancy. This condition aims to deter households from having more children to receive a higher stipend. Those who violate the birth spacing condition are penalized and ineligible for additional grants. But so too are women who have undergone abortions or miscarried.[14] Women who undergo an abortion or miscarry are ineligible for program supports for three years because they violated the birth spacing policy by nevertheless becoming pregnant too soon after the birth of their previous child even though no live birth occurs (Molyneux and Thomson 2011, 205). Birth spacing policies, while well intentioned, can nevertheless result in an unnecessary policing of women's bodies. This is especially concerning given that poor and racialized women are often portrayed as excessively reproductive and yet were punished for being inadequate reproducers. Violations of women's sexual and reproductive rights hinder progress towards SDG 5.

One final way proponents of CCTs might argue the programs advance SDG 5 is by examining the positive impacts bestowed upon girls from beneficiary households in terms of their empowerment. Girls, whose households enrolled in CCTs, may experience both short- and long-term benefits. While access to education and health centres may result in healthier and more educated girls, the long-term benefits to girls remain dubious. Returning to Gil-García's study on the Mexican CCT, girls were no better off with respect to gender equality or empowerment despite their family's participation in the program. Gil-García posits that this stems from the program's reinforcement of gender hierarchies across generations (Gil-García 2016, 458–62). Despite being more educated and healthier, many young women reported becoming the beneficiary for their households once their secondary education was complete. These young women faced a clash between their own educational aspirations and their caretaking obligations because many became responsible for ensuring their household complied with program conditions.[15] The young women were forced to embody the selfless mother ideal, before

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they become mothers, because this social expectation was spread through the programs reinforcing gender divisions of labor.

Furthermore, additional work by Gil-García demonstrates how program enrollment and thus higher levels of education did not translate into improved job prospects for young women (Gil-García 2021). Even though the program created more educated and healthier young women the array of life choices available to young women did not improve and did not enable the women to challenge power relations within and outside the home.

CCTs hinder progress towards the targets contained within SDG 5 on gender equality and empowerment. I argued that the programs reinforce and exacerbate gender inequalities by relying on and perpetuating the selfless mother ideal which requires women sacrifice their own wellbeing for that of their children. This stark conclusion is alarming given the continued insistence that CCTs empower women despite much evidence to the contrary. My worry is that empowerment continues to be instrumentalized and that policymakers continue claiming CCTs empower and so advance the aims of SDG 5, and that in the end we move no closer to a gender just world.

5. Charting a path forward

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate how CCTs are incompatible with the SDGs' stated aims with regards to gender equality and empowerment. CCTs run contrary to SDG 5 by failing to empower women as evidenced by the ways these programs tend to reinforce the patriarchal structures and unjust power relations that sustain gender inequalities. Though individual women may experience benefits because of their enrollment in CCTs, the structure of the programs nevertheless strengthen existing gender norms and enforce gender expectations by tying receipt of cash to the performance of highly gendered labor. In doing so, CCTs may thwart women's attempts to challenge unjust power relations because the programs incentivize women to embody a selfless mother ideal in exchange for cash. Women are made complicit in their own continued subordination. CCTs are further problematized because the programs do not enable the realization of the targets articulated in SDG 5.

Part of the problem with reconciling the extent to which CCTs empower is bound up in questions around the measurability of empowerment. Policymakers face pressures to ensure policies are evidence-based. A hyperfocus on quantifiability led to the widespread use of indicators in development in the first place.[16] But geopolitical factors shape which targets and indicators are selected during global negotiations (Merry 2011) and can lead to undesirable outcomes like gaming the indicator (Merry 2011; Mills 2017).[17] As articulated by Nora Nagels, "[t]he measurement obsession is conspicuous in evidence-based policies such as CCTs, but render invisible unintended gender effects" (Nagels 2021, 681).[18] The mere fact that girls become healthier or more educated does not mean they will have access to additional or adequate life opportunities (Gil-García 2016), just as measuring school attendance does not imply children receive an adequate education (Cookson 2018).

Social protection programs must incorporate holistic approaches to gender equality and empowerment so as not to ignore the role of patriarchy in gender oppression by promoting purely agent-centric approaches to empowerment. Other social policy options exist when it comes to combatting poverty and empowering women. Indeed, other policies may prove more fruitful in achieving both ends. A growing body of literature reveals that both cash and in-kind goods such as public education, healthcare,

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and childcare are important components of social protection programs which may also combat gender inequality.

One possible alternative to conditional cash transfer programs worth considering is unconditional cash transfer programs (UCTs). UCTs are found primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa and share many of the same features as their conditional cousins, including making women the beneficiaries, but differ in that the cash is provided unconditionally. Proponents of UCTs argue that households can and should be trusted to act in their best interests—in contrast to CCTs which provide conditions to ensure households act responsibly. Advocates further note that the cyclical nature of poverty can be especially difficult to overcome when conditions are placed on household behavior. Indeed, many of the same benefits associated with CCTs are found with UCTs (Forget et al. 2013; Banerjee et al. 2017; Cookson 2018; Handa et al. 2018). However, given their unconditionality, such programs do not require women to perform patriarchally prescribed behaviors in exchange for cash, giving us good reason to suspect that such programs may be better suited to advance the aims of SDG 5. While the existence of gender norms may result in UCTs reinforcing such norms (i.e. that women will still perform most of the unpaid care and domestic labor within the home), the key difference is that the state does not require women to subordinate themselves to remain eligible for the program. In short, UCTs may be preferable because, by design, they lack the enforcement arm that enables a state to police gendered responsibilities as is done with CCTs. In theory, UCTs need not reinforce essentialist views of women and, in practice, do not police women's behavior to ensure they fulfill the state's conception of a "good mother."

Still, one might worry that UCTs do not go far enough in challenging unjust systems of oppression. In patriarchal societies, UCTs may reinforce gender roles and social expectations about women by relying on maternalist assumptions in the design and implementation of the program, especially as cash is provided on a household rather than individual basis. The provision of cash to women may not necessarily stem from a recognition of their rights but rather as a way of fulfilling their gendered responsibilities of care and domestic labor.

Moreover, arguments advanced by decolonial feminists and post-development scholars may provide broader critiques of development discourse that are necessary to explore. Decolonial feminists, for example, critique universalizing approaches to feminism, including the way race, gender, and sexuality have been shaped by colonial powers (Lugones et al. 2021), while post-development theorist Arturo Escobar argues we should be wary of economic development and that development itself is defined by Eurocentrism (Escobar 2012). Such critiques are important and must be explored in determining the usefulness of unconditional cash transfers and, perhaps more crucially, the framing of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially with regards to SDG 5 on gender equality and empowerment. These concerns are ones that must be addressed so that public policy does not continue to reinforce inequalities and oppress social groups.

However, given the scope of this paper, my objective is not to demonstrate that UCTs are the *best* way to advance gender equality in society or that such programs are free from criticism. My objective is more minimal. I mean here to only suggest that, given the arguments contained within this paper, UCTs appear to be better than conditional cash transfers as the former do not police gendered responsibilities. It is possible that, while UCTs may be better than CCTs in that the program do not mandate women comply with patriarchally prescribed behaviors, they are still not fully compatible with SDG 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It may thus turn out that UCTs are not an ideal pathway towards gender equality and that some other policy is preferable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences including the rolling back of progress made for women and girls over the last few decades (Copley et al. 2020; UN Women 2020). While disheartening, the pandemic grants us a unique opportunity to change how our social, political, and economic systems work. UN Women recommends nations "put cash in women's hands" by expanding current cash transfer programs and by introducing new cash transfer schemes for women to address their care responsibilities and combat deepening gender inequalities in unpaid labor (UN Women 2020, 9). Cash transfers are a necessary component of social protection policies but not if cash comes with gendered and disempowering strings attached.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Vida Panitch, Lisa Mills, Douglas MacKay, Allauren Forbes, and Alexander Leferman for their generous comments on drafts of this paper. The author would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their helpful insights on this project.

Notes

1 Throughout this paper I use binary gender language (e.g. women, girls, mothers, fathers). The use of this terminology is limiting given that gender is not binary. However, such language is widely employed in the literature on the Sustainable Development Goals, empowerment, and conditional cash transfer programs. The impacts of CCTs on gender diverse and non-heterosexual people requires further consideration but is beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Empowerment is sometimes also explained as expanding a person's ability to shape their own life. See Drydyk 2008.

3 For a rich discussion on the evolution of the concepts of gender equality and empowerment and their uptake in development see Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009; and Bedford 2009.

4 According to SDG Target 5.4, countries must "[r]ecognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate (United Nations 2015, 18). See also Kate Bedford's (2009) on how the language of "shared responsibility" renders gendered divisions of labor and so the crises of social reproduction an individual problem rather than a social one. Poverty and gender divisions of labor are treated as individual or household problems—even personal failings—rather than being addressed as the structural issues they are.

5 Programs that do not remove households for noncompliance act as *de facto* unconditional cash transfer programs. For more on the different types of conditionalities see Pérez-Muñoz 2017. See also Cookson 2018 on shadow conditions, sometimes also called informal conditions. These are conditions that are not officially mandated by the state but are implemented by local managers. Failure to comply with shadow conditions can result in sanctions or expulsion from the program.

6 Later rebranded as Oportunidades and subsequently Prospera before ending in 2019.

7 There is some debate about whether Mexico or Brazil was the first country to implement CCTs. Brazil's Bolsa Familia is, however, the largest CCT in Latin America.

8 CCTs were also hailed as a way of meeting the Millennium Development Goals (the predecessor of the SDGs). See Fiszbein and Schady 2009.

9 The exact wording contained within SDG 1.3 and 1.b. SDG 1.3 asserts the following: "[i]mplement *nationally appropriate social protection systems* and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable."

SDG 1.b asserts the following: "Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional, and international levels, based on pro-poor and *gender-sensitive* development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions." (emphasis added).

10 For Manne, a social environment is a patriarchal one

> insofar as certain kinds of institutions or social structures both proliferate and enjoy widespread support within it . . . These patriarchal institutions will vary widely in their

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> material and structural, as well as their social, features. But they will be such that all or most women are positioned as subordinate in relation to some man or men therein, the latter of whom are thereby (by the same token) dominant over the former, on the basis of their genders (among other relevant intersecting factors). (Manne 2018, 45).

11 The target has the proviso of nationally appropriate and so one might argue CCTs do indeed meet target 5.4. For example, one might argue that intra-household inequalities are the result of complementarian worldviews in which men and women have different but complementary roles in the household, with men being the head of household and women being responsible for household tasks. Drawing on the work of Serene Khader, however, we can make the case that the norms supporting intra-household inequality contribute to women's deprivation because these "norms and practices can be construed as interfering with men's ability to discharge complementarian responsibilities to track and promote women's welfare" (Khader 2015, 353). Specifically, Khader goes on to argue that "patriarchal risk and gender schemas that devalue women's labor, hinder men's discharging of complementarian duties" (362). Additionally, it would be erroneous to claim CCTs are payment for and recognition of women's traditionally unpaid labor. The rationale for the cash transfer is to compensate households for the opportunity cost borne by children having to attend school and health checks instead of engaging in labor for the household.
12 It is worth noting the irony in compelling women to perform volunteer work, which is counterintuitive to the very idea of voluntariness.
13 Work by Vania Smith-Oka (2009) echoes similar concerns around Mexico's CCT pressuring Indigenous women into using contraceptives, thereby undermining their sexual autonomy.
14 Presumably the prohibition on abortion is due to that fact that abortion is largely illegal in Bolivia. Abortion is only permitted if a woman's physical health is threatened by pregnancy, or she has been the victim of rape/incest.
15 Mothers who work outside the home or community routinely rely on their adult children to fulfill program conditions and other caretaking obligations in their place.
16 The SDGs themselves are designed to be SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timebound (United Nations 2015). And indeed, it is important that we can track progress towards global goals. But some goals are harder to track than others because the meaning behind the goal can easily become distorted by attempts to measure its progress.
17 Consider how political consensus had to be achieved on the goals, targets, and indicators contained in the SDGs and how different worldviews may have impacted what was ultimately agreed to in Resolution 70/1.
18 For example, having more women participate in politics or leadership roles, while certainly good, may not translate into a more equitable society if those women are still subjected to sexist and misogynistic views.

References

Atkins, Kaitlyn, Catherine MacPhail, Suzanne Maman Nomhle Khoza, Rhian Twine, F. Xavier Gomez-Olive, Audrey Pettifor, and Kathleen Kahn. 2022. "The sky is the limit; I am going there": Experiences of hope among young women receiving a conditional cash transfer in rural South Africa. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 24 (8): 1–17.

Banerjee, Abhijit, Rema Hanna, Gabriel E. Kreindler, and Benjamin A. Olken. 2017. Debunking the stereotype of the lazy welfare recipient: Evidence from cash transfer programs. *World Bank Research Observer* 32 (2): 155–84.

Bartholo, Leticia. 2016. Bolsa Familia and gender relations: National survey results. *Policy Research Brief* 55, Brasília, Brazil: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

Batliwala, Srilatha. 2007. Taking the power out of empowerment: An experiential account. *Development in Practice* 12 (4/5): 557–65.

Bedford, Kate. 2009. *Developing partnerships: Gender, sexuality, and the reformed World Bank*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bradshaw, Sarah. 2008. From structural adjustment to social adjustment: A gendered analysis. *Global Social Policy* 8 (2): 188–207.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bradshaw, Sarah, Sylvia Chant, and Brian Linneker. 2019. Challenges and changes in gendered poverty: The feminization, de-feminization, and re-feminization of poverty in Latin America. *Feminist Economics* 25 (1): 119–44.

Budlender, Debbie. 2014. *Conditional cash transfers: Learning from the literature final report*. New York: UNICEF and UN Women.

Cecchini, Simone, and Rodrigo Martínez. 2012. *Inclusive social protection in Latin America: A comprehensive, rights-based approach*. Santiago de Chile: UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Chant, Sylvia. 2016. Women, girls and world poverty: Empowerment, equality or essentialism? *IDPR* 38 (1): 1–24.

Cookson, Tara Patricia. 2018. *Unjust conditions: Women's work and the hidden cost of cash transfer programs*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Copley, Amy, Alison Decker, Fannie Delavelle, Markus Goldstein, Michael O'Sullivan, and Sreelakshmi Papineni. 2020. COVID-19 pandemic through a gender lens. *Africa Knowledge in Time Policy Brief*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Corboz, Julienne. 2013. Third-way neoliberalism and conditional cash transfers: The paradoxes of empowerment, participation and self-help among poor Uruguayan women. *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24 (1): 64–80.

Cornwall, Andrea. 2016. Women's empowerment: What works? *Journal of International Development* 28 (3): 342–59.

Cornwall, Andrea, and Althea-Maria Rivas. 2015. From "gender equality" and "women's empowerment" to global justice: Reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development. *Third World Quarterly* 36 (2): 396–415.

Drydyk, Jay. 2008. Durable empowerment. *Journal of Global Ethics* 4 (3): 231–45.

Escobar, Arturo. 2012. *Encountering development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Esquivel, Valeria. 2016. Power and the Sustainable Development Goals: A feminist analysis. *Gender and Development* 24 (1): 9–23.

Eyben, Rosalind, and Rebecca Napier-Moore. 2009. Choosing words with care? Shifting meanings of women's empowerment in international development. *Third World Quarterly* 30 (2): 285–300.

Fiszbein, Ariel, and Norbert Schady. 2009. *Conditional cash transfers: Reducing present and future poverty*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Forget, Evelyn L., Alexander D. Peden, and Stephenson B. Strobel. 2013. Cash transfers, basic income and community building. *Social Inclusion* 1 (2): 84–91.

Freibach-Heifetz, Dana, and Gila Stopler. 2008. On conceptual dichotomies and social oppression. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 34 (5): 515–35.

Gil-García, Óscar F. 2016. Gender equality, community divisions, and autonomy: The *Prospera* conditional cash transfer program in Chiapas, Mexico. *Current Sociology* 64 (3): 447–69.

Gil-García, Óscar F. 2021. The *Prospera* conditional cash transfer program and its impact on education, labor, and migration in an Indigenous Mayan community in Chiapas, Mexico. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community* 49 (1): 60–80.

Handa, Sudhanshu, Silvio Daidone, Amber Peterman, Benjamin Davis, Audrey Pereira, Tia Palermo, and Jennifer Yablonski. 2018. Myth-busting? Confronting six common perceptions about unconditional cash transfers as a poverty reduction strategy in Africa. *World Bank Research Observer* 33 (2): 259–98.

Hanlon, Joseph, Armando Barrientos, and David Hulme. 2010. *Just give money to the poor: The development revolution from the global south*. Sterling: Kumarian Press.

Hickel, Jason. 2014. The "girl effect": Liberalism, empowerment and the contradictions of development. *Third World Quarterly* 35 (8): 1355–73.

Hunter, Wendy, Leila Patel, and Natasha Borges Sugiyama. 2021. How family and child cash transfers can empower women: Comparative lessons from Brazil and South Africa. *Global Social Policy* 21 (2): 258–77.

Jenson, Jane, and Nora Nagels. 2018. Social policy instruments in motion: Conditional cash transfers from Mexico to Peru. *Social Policy and Administration* 52 (1): 323–42.

Kabeer, Naila. 1999. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change* 30 (3): 435–64.

Khader, Serene J. 2011. *Adaptive preferences and women's empowerment*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Khader, Serene J. 2014. Empowerment through self-subordination? Microcredit and women's agency. In *Poverty, agency, and human rights*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
Khader, Serene J. 2015. Development ethics, gender complementarianism, and intrahousehold inequality. *Hypatia* 30 (2): 352–69.
Khader, Serene J. 2017. Women's labour, global gender justice, and the feminization of responsibility. In *Fair work: Ethics, social policy, globalization*, ed. Kory P. Schaff. Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield International.
Khader, Serene J. 2018. Passive empowerment: How women's agency became women doing it all. *Philosophical Topics* 46 (2): 141–63.
Laszlo, Sonia, Muhammad Farhan Majid, and Laëtitia Renée. 2019. Conditional cash transfers, women's empowerment and reproductive choices. *GrOW Working Paper Series*. Montreal, Canada: Institute for the Study of International Development.
Lavinas, Lena. 2013. 21st century welfare. *New Left Review* 84 (84): 5–40.
Luccisano, Lucy. 2004. Mexico's Progresa program (1997–2000): An example of neo-liberal poverty alleviation programs concerned with gender, human capital development, responsibility, and choice. *Journal of Poverty* 8 (4): 31–57.
Lugones, María, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso. 2021. *Decolonial feminism in Abya Yala: Caribbean, Meso, and South American contributions and challenges*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Manne, Kate. 2018. *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Manne, Kate. 2020. *Entitled: How male privilege hurts women*. New York: Crown.
Merry, Sally Engle. 2011. Measuring the world: Indicators, human rights, and global governance. *Current Anthropology* 52 (S3): S83–S95.
Mills, Lisa Nicole. 2017. *The limits of trust: The Millennium Development Goals, maternal health, and health policy in Mexico*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Moeller, Kathryn. 2018. *The gender effect: Capitalism, feminism, and the corporate politics of development*. Oakland: University of California Press.
Molyneux, Maxine. 2006. Mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda: Progresa/Oportunidades, Mexico's conditional transfer programme. *Social Policy and Administration* 40 (4): 425–49.
Molyneux, Maxine. 2008. The "neoliberal turn" and the new social policy in Latin America: How neoliberal, how new? *Development and Change* 39 (5): 775–97.
Molyneux, Maxine, and Marilyn Thomson. 2011. Cash transfers, gender equity and women's empowerment in Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. *Gender and Development* 19 (2): 195–212.
Nagels, Nora. 2016. The social investment perspective, conditional cash transfer programmes and the welfare mix: Peru and Bolivia. *Social Policy and Society* 15 (3): 479–93.
Nagels, Nora. 2021. Gender, the World Bank, and conditional cash transfers in Latin America. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23 (5): 676–97.
Narayan, Deepa. 2005. *Measuring empowerment: Cross disciplinary perspectives*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
Nelson, Moira, and Johan Sandberg. 2016. From perspective to policy contingencies: Conditional cash transfers as social investments. *Global Social Policy* 17 (1): 21–37.
O'Manique, Colleen, and Peter Fourie. 2016. Affirming our world: Gender justice, social reproduction, and the Sustainable Development Goals. *Development* 59 (1): 121–26.
Pérez-Muñoz, Cristian. 2017. What is wrong with conditional cash transfer programs. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 48 (4): 440–60.
Razavi, Shahra. 2016. The 2030 Agenda: Challenges of implementation to attain gender equality and women's rights. *Gender and Development* 24 (1): 25–41.
Rosche, Daniela. 2016. Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals: Gender equality last? An Oxfam perspective. *Gender and Development* 24 (1): 111–26.
Segato, Rita Laura, and Pedro Monque. 2021. Gender and coloniality: From low-intensity communal patriarchy to high-intensity colonial-modern patriarchy. *Hypatia* 36 (4): 781–99.
Smith-Oka, Vania. 2009. Unintended consequences: Exploring the tensions between development programs and indigenous women in Mexico in the context of reproductive health. *Social Science and Medicine* 68 (11): 2069–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sugiyama, Natasha Borges, and Wendy Hunter. 2020. Do conditional cash transfers empower women? Insights from Brazil's Bolsa Familia. *Latin American Politics and Society* 62 (2): 53–74.
United Nations. 2015. *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. A/RES/70/1. New York: United Nations General Assembly.
United Nations Economic and Social Council. 2019. *Report of the Secretary General*. Special edition: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, E/2019/68, May 8, 2019. New York: United Nations Economic and Social Council.
UN Women. 2017. *UN Women strategic plan 2018–2021*, UNW/2017/6/Rev.1. New York: UN Women.
UN Women. 2020. *Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women*. New York: UN Women.
Wilson, Kalpana. 2015. Towards a radical re-appropriation: Gender, development and neoliberal feminism. *Development and Change* 46 (4): 803–32.
World Bank. 2012. *The World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
World Bank. 2014. *A model from Mexico for the world*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Kerry Ellen O'Neill is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at McMaster University. She holds a PhD in Ethics and Public Affairs from Carleton University. Her work explores the topics of exploitation, cash transfers, and the gendered impacts of policy.

Cite this article: O'Neill, Kerry Ellen. 2025. Conditional Cash Transfer Programs and the Sustainable Development Goals: Problematizing the Empowering Potential of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs, *Hypatia* **40**, 186–205. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.72