How Fair Is Workfare? Gender, Public Works, and Employment in Rural Ethiopia

Setting up crèches at public works projects could increase women’s participation. Flexible hours and piece-rate wages could also help women participate, as could locating projects close to home, since women’s domestic responsibilities are so time-consuming.

Public works, or “workfare,” programmes provide temporary, low-wage jobs for unskilled and semi-skilled workers on labour-intensive development projects such as roads, terraces, dams, reforestation, and soil conservation. Workfare programmes have been used across Asia, Africa, and Latin America to provide the poor with income transfers, help them cope with income shocks, and create assets by constructing much-needed infrastructure—which, once built, can continue to generate employment.

Recently, policymakers have begun paying attention to gender issues in workfare programmes. Gender implications of workfare programmes are important from a number of perspectives, including the need to assure women equal access to public safety nets; the fact that women tend to invest their resources in children’s health, nutrition, and education; the possibility that women’s income may improve their bargaining power within the household; and the potential of employment to reduce women’s generally greater vulnerability to shocks.

Public works programmes—typically food-for-work (FFW) with part or all payment in kind—and free food distribution to those who cannot work, together provide virtually the only public safety net in Ethiopia. Yet little research has been conducted on the gender implications of FFW and other workfare programmes.

Research Methodology
The authors of How Fair Is Workfare? Gender, Public Works, and Employment in Rural Ethiopia used the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS) to explore gender dimensions of public works programmes. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has been developing ERHS, a longitudinal household data set, with partners at Addis Ababa University and the Universities of Bath and Oxford. The data set covers approximately 1,450 households in 15 villages throughout Ethiopia, and is roughly representative of the country’s agro-climatic zones and ethnic and religious groups. This study uses four rounds conducted between 1994 and 1997. The 1997 round also included a special module on individual participation in public works. Additional programme data were collected during field interviews in 2003.

The research examines the determinants of men’s and women’s participation in and earnings from public works programmes, and the role of selection criteria, payment mechanisms, and programme design in increasing women’s participation in public works.

Key Research Findings
Analysis of three rounds of data from 1994/1995 shows that participation in labour markets in rural Ethiopia is low for men and even more so for women. Only 26 percent of men and 14 percent of women participate in the off-farm labour market in Ethiopia. In wage labour, 9 percent of men and 2 percent of women participate; 13 percent of men and 5 percent of women participate in FFW. About equal percentages of men and women are engaged in self-employment.

Education levels and other characteristics of men and women affect their participation in wage labour, FFW, and self-employment. Women with more schooling are more likely to participate in the wage labour market, while women who have more livestock participate less, owing to women’s important role in dairy production. Women with more schooling are also more likely to participate in FFW than men with similar levels of schooling.

Once differences in participation between men and women are controlled for in the analysis, there are no significant differences between men and women in days worked and earnings from wage labour and FFW. This means that getting women to participate in public works programmes is the biggest hurdle to overcome to ensure that...
women benefit from such programmes.

Programme data from 1997 provide insights into the hiring process of FFW. It does not appear that FFW administrators discriminate against women workers. Instead, most of those eligible who do not participate simply do not apply for the programme: only 23 percent of men and 14 percent of women applied to work in public works in 1997 (Table 1). The biggest barrier to participation that women cite is lack of childcare, particularly for preschoolers, and other domestic responsibilities. In contrast, the most frequent reason that men give for not applying is that they are needed on the farm. Men and women also reported not applying because they doubted they would be hired owing to the shortage of jobs. However, 75 percent of men and 80 percent of women who applied did get hired.

The type of project also plays a role in the gender balance of public works programmes (Table 2). For instance, men are more likely than women to participate in infrastructure projects. In forestry projects—where the work is lighter and spread out over the growing season—the participation of men and women is more equal. Forestry projects also generate the most workdays for participants, though at lower wages per day. Whether activities are perceived to be “the work of men” in the local culture can also affect women’s participation. Soil conservation and forestry projects also operate for longer periods, on average, which may allow participants greater flexibility in accomplishing tasks, say through piece-rate arrangements. Such flexible arrangements may be more conducive to female participation because of the demands housework puts on their time. Increased distance from home also lowers women’s participation more than men’s.

Like many studies of labour participation, this one finds that investments in human capital yield positive returns—even in the low-skilled labour markets of rural Ethiopia. In both wage-labour and food-for-work programmes, an individual’s earnings rise depending on the number of years spent in school and also his or her height, which indicates investments in nutrition and health in childhood.

**Implications for Food Assistance Programmes**

The ERHS results imply that food-for-work programmes have a number of levers to increase the participation of women. Since childcare, particularly for preschoolers, is cited as a major reason for nonparticipation, setting up crèches at public works projects could increase women’s participation. Indeed, only one out of seven villages had a crèche. Providing early childhood development activities with childcare not only relieves women’s childcare constraints, but also provides an opportunity to invest in the next generation. Flexible scheduling and piece-rate wages could help women participate more in workfare programmes, but relieving time constraints would also require the provision of rural infrastructure. Since women spend many hours fetching wood and water and tending to livestock, food-for-work programmes could help relieve time constraints by setting up community feedlots, woodlots, and water supply. Similarly, proximity to home makes a project more women-friendly. Finally, projects with lighter work and in areas not seen as “men’s work” are also likely to draw more interest from women.