

## Why Convergence Fails: Institutional Barriers in Gender-Responsive Social Protection Programs in India

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### Abstract

Convergence in social protection policies has become a cornerstone for reducing program fragmentation and improving access to other complementary forms of support. Social protection policy in India has grown, as have commitments to gender responsive design. Despite these commitments however, actual gender responsive provision continues to be developed within the same segmented institutional structures that limit convergence. This research uses an institutional perspective to examine why convergence has not occurred with respect to India's gender-responsive social protection programs. It examines how convergence was conceptualized within policy, how gender-responsive design was integrated into all the major program areas, and what the institutional barriers are that create impediments to coordination in practice. The findings suggest that the failure to achieve convergence results from the structural attributes of social protection governance including sectorally designed programs, organizational silos, fragmented accountability systems and discretionary implementation practices, rather than solely due to the failure to implement the desired programs. By recognizing that achieving convergence is an institutional issue, this research adds to the body of knowledge regarding social protection and provides insight for increasing the coherence of gender responsive systems.

### Introduction

Over the last twenty years, social protection has emerged as a core component of India's developmental policies. The public sector has grown its coverage in terms of job guarantees, food security, welfare, and health care programs. Kühner and Nakray (2016) state that this increased provision is based on an understanding that social protection can be used as a tool to help address poverty, vulnerability, and exclusion in a society that has large informal sectors and high levels of inequality. In addition to the expanded provision of social protection, the frameworks of the policies have become more inclusive to include gender responsive components such as supporting women's participation in paid labour, increasing maternity benefits and improving the overall well-being of households.

Although numerous social protection programs have been implemented throughout India, there has yet to be an integrated framework for social protection in place. As such, the majority of India's social protection is provided on a departmentalized or sector-specific basis, with each being governed by its own set of eligibility requirements, operational processes, and delivery mechanisms. Coordination among the departments of government and across the various levels of government remains inconsistent. Therefore, social protection programs operate independently to address the overlap and accumulation of risk factors that exist among vulnerable populations (Kühner & Nakray, 2016).

The significance of the separation of gender-responsive social protection from other social protections has its greatest implications for gender-responsive social protection. Although many programs include provisions designed to assist with women's specific needs, both program evaluation data and regional assessment data show that these provisions rarely operate together and as a result women generally do not have sustained access to and control over the benefits they need. This includes gender-related restrictions and barriers to accessing social protection due to social obligations (care), and restrictive mobility, documentation requirements, and through mediation by caste and social hierarchies, socially exclusionary and inequitable social protection program outcomes exist for many social protection programs across South Asia (Javed & Mumtaz, 2024). Thus, this study demonstrates the limitations of a gender-responsive approach to social protection without an overall institutional framework.

The primary concern addressed by policy-makers regarding the limitations of fragmented programs were both the lack of coverage and the limited reach of each program; therefore, in an effort to address these two major problems, policy-makers have used "convergence" as a guiding principle for reforming social protection programs. Convergence refers to the process of integrating or aligning social programs, government agencies, and government processes at the different administrative levels so that people can obtain support from one or more programs and services through coordinated efforts instead of

having to navigate several separate bureaucratic systems. Kühner and Nakray (2016) state that in India, the use of convergence has been seen as a way to improve the efficiency of programs, reduce duplication and increase the overall effectiveness of programs within the areas of employment, food/nutrition, health and social assistance programs.

The objective of this paper was to explain why there has been such limited convergence of programs in India's social protection system - particularly gender responsive ones. Unlike other studies, which view non-convergence (i.e., programs not converging) as only the result of poor implementation or technical incapability, this study views non-convergence as an institutional issue. More specifically, the study examines how the design, coordination and governance of programs can promote either the independence of individual programs or their integration into one large system. As a result, the paper changes the focus from fragmentation of programs at the level of service delivery to structural characteristics that contribute to continued divergence.

The paper contains the following organization. Section 2 explains how social protection research and policy debate understand convergence as well as why the institutional dimensions of social protection matter for convergence. Section 3 offers a brief overview of how gender sensitivity has been embedded in the social protection framework in India. Section 4 identifies the institutional impediments to inter-program coordination based on how programs are designed and implemented (i.e., administrative practices), and how the mechanisms that facilitate coordination among programs (e.g., administration) constrain inter-program coordination. Sections 5 and 6 provide a summary of what this institutional perspective adds to understanding why convergence failed and what insights can be gained from this experience with respect to future social protection reform.

## **2. What is Convergence in Social Protection?**

Typically, convergence is associated with how policy goals, institutional roles and delivery systems are linked together within the same level of the public sector for example, employment, nutrition, health and social services (Ghosh, 2021; GIZ, 2022). The assumption is made that when organizations collaborate, there will be a reduction in the duplication of efforts among organizations, that programs will be administered more effectively and that program recipients will benefit from a greater availability of complementary service options. In general, policy documents refer to this type of collaborative approach to reducing poverty as either an integrated or system-wide approach, which emphasizes both intersectoral collaboration and coordination by all levels of government.

Academic literature varies greatly in how it treats the concept of "convergence". Many researchers have examined how government priorities are aligned and how they manage conflicting interest in their efforts to implement reforms across the social sectors (Kühner & Nakray, 2016). Similarly, there is research about how departments and agencies work with each other to plan—or do not plan—when they carry out their responsibilities for implementing programs and services (APO, 2019). Together, these studies demonstrate that "convergence" operates at multiple levels: It is a governmental aspiration, an institutional mechanism, and a method of administration.

The disparity in application illustrates that the convergence process can occur on multiple levels —policy, institutional and operational level. Although they do not explicitly differentiate between the various levels. As such, convergence is utilized broadly in most contexts as a catch-all term to describe coordination efforts instead of as a specific analytical tool. Studies examining social protection programs have demonstrated that while there is widespread support for the idea of convergence, the scope and mechanisms to achieve convergence remain poorly defined, making it difficult to discern both how and when convergence will actually take place in practice (APO, 2019; Kühner & Nakray, 2016).

In addition to ambiguity about whether convergence can occur in practice, institutional capacity and coordination are typically seen as technical problems by practitioners rather than as a function of how governance systems and the administrative incentive structures within those systems shape these capacities. GIZ (2022) notes that systems-oriented analysis has shown that coordination of programs among multiple government entities or organizations requires not just the establishment of procedural mechanisms for coordination but also that the accountability frameworks, budgetary arrangements, and priorities of the institutions have been aligned. Therefore, unless such an alignment exists, convergence will remain a goal rather than a reality.

In discussions of gender-responsive social protection, convergence is often used as a means of relating different types of interventions intended to support different aspects of women's lives (e.g., their ability to work, take care of children, obtain

food and access healthcare). Javed & Mumtaz (2024) state that while there have been multiple approaches proposed to merge frameworks concerning gender relations and social hierarchies into institutional coordination processes, very few specify these relationships; consequently, while the concept of convergence is frequently mentioned in gender-neutral institutional language, many of the programs that this type of convergence is meant to represent are gender-responsive.

Together, the literature indicates that convergence should be considered an aggregation (composite) term of several alignment types of social protection through all program levels, institutions and levels of governance; It is essential to understand the differences of the many interpretations of convergence, because it will aid in understanding how convergence can work within social protection systems, and also help identify the reasons why convergence is often limited in practice. This Paper will use the difference as a basis for examining the institutional constraints on Convergence in Gender Responsive Social Protection in India.

### **3. Gender-Responsive Social Protection in India**

The interest in gender-responsive social protection has grown recently since it has been increasingly understood in the development community that social and economic risk is socially constructed through gender roles and responsibilities and gendered power relations. As a result, social protection policies and programs are beginning to identify women as priority recipients for social protection and begin developing program components that address the unique needs of women as they relate to childbearing, childcare and employment (Kühner & Nakray, 2016). This represents an increasing emphasis on equity within social protection policy as there is a shift from formally gender-neutral social protection to gender-responsive social protection.

One important aspect of gender-responsive social protection is to assist women in caring for themselves, in obtaining nutritional assistance, and in receiving other forms of maternal support as they reproduce and care for children. These programs aim to provide women with a source of food supplementation; childcare or early childhood development services; and legal entitlements to receive maternity-related services. However, the programs are designed on the assumption that women will be able to rely on a stable place to live; will interact regularly with local institutions; and will have sufficient time to access the services provided — assumptions which may not hold for women whose lives are shaped by precarious livelihoods, migration and/or extraordinary amounts of unpaid care (Srivastava, 2016; Javed & Mumtaz, 2024).

Gender-responsiveness is also evident in another aspect, which is employment and income support. In this area, the focus is generally on supporting women's ability to be involved in wage-earning employment. The gender-responsiveness of employment guarantee programs has been noted for their combination of productive inclusion and consideration of women's care responsibilities. Nevertheless, gender-based research indicates a less consistent picture. Research by ECWG (2021) and Javed & Mumtaz (2024), among others, found that while these initiatives have contributed to increasing women's involvement in paid employment, they have not uniformly alleviated the pressures of caring for others outside of paid work, reduced work burdens for women, or contributed to long-term financial security.

Gender factors are also found in social welfare and income security programs such as pension plans and targeted cash transfer programs. The gender factor can also be seen in how government recognizes women as direct recipients of the benefit (as opposed to recognizing women as dependents) which is a big step forward. However, the way in which entitlements are realized through administrative processes and social norms continues to affect who has access and control over those entitlements. While this represents a significant theoretical shift, there is evidence that access to these types of programs is influenced by administrative processes and documentation requirements as well as by local implementation practices that can create unequal access to programs for women, especially for those women who belong to marginalized social groups (Javed & Mumtaz, 2024).

Several design characteristics cut across different gender-responsive social protection programs. Some common design characteristics include: (i) specifically identifying women as recipients; (ii) using conditions based upon the roles of women as caregivers; (iii) using frontline staff and local institutions to deliver gender-responsive social protection programs. The goals of the design features discussed above are to provide greater inclusivity. However, design features will continue to limit participation for those women experiencing intersectional disadvantages by caste, socioeconomic status, or geographic area (Javed & Mumtaz, 2024; ECWG, 2021).

While many initiatives contain some gender sensitive features, few have created a coordinated system that can address both the cumulative and the multiple disadvantages that shape the lives of women. The gap between gender responsive design and coordinating systems represents the basis upon which to assess the structural impediments that prevent the development of a coordinated approach.

#### **4. Institutional Barriers to Convergence in Gender-Responsive Social Protection**

Although there have been a number of policy statements made regarding promoting a converged approach to Social Protection in India, the current system of social protection is still quite disjointed with regard to programs, agencies, and government levels. This lack of convergence cannot be fully attributed to poor delivery of the programs. Instead, this represents an inherent aspect of the structure of social protection programming and its governing mechanisms. These institutional obstacles influence the planning and delivery of gender responsive approaches to social protection and therefore inhibit the potential for long-term programmatic coordination among programs and organizations.

##### **4.1 Fragmented Program Design and Sectoral Mandates**

One of the primary institutional barriers to achieving a gender-converged welfare system is the way in which social protection programs have traditionally been organized on a sector-by-sector basis. Typically each welfare program has its own specific domain (for example, employment, nutrition, health, or social assistance) with its own governance mandate, objectives, and administration. Each program may now include gender-sensitive features as part of their design, but they are typically embedded within the framework of the specific program rather than being integrated into a broader institutional structure that allows for coordination across sectors (Kühner & Nakray, 2016; Ghosh, 2021).

The limitations to convergence imposed by this fragmentation at the programmatic design level stem from the fact that sector-specific priorities take precedence over intersectoral coordination; programs are very rarely developed with built-in design elements that would allow them to link into other complementary programs or services, leading to the development of a number of isolated "parallel systems" targeting similar populations, but without an integrated approach. Thus, while institutional constraints to convergence do not arise due to lack of gender-responsive intent, they do arise from the absence of design frameworks that treat coordination as a fundamental organizing principle rather than an afterthought (APO, 2019).

##### **4.2 Administrative Silos and Coordination Deficits**

Beyond program design, administrative arrangement also limit the possibility of convergence. Social protection programs are organized in a multilayered bureaucracy at the national, state and local levels. The roles, responsibilities and reporting obligations of each level differ significantly. Mechanisms of accountability vary across levels. Therefore, there are no formalized processes for the coordination of tasks and functions across levels (GIZ, 2022).

The studies on the governance of social protection have shown that in addition to administrative obstacles, budgetary practices, the availability of information systems, and tools for measuring performance, all contribute to bureaucratic silo formation and limit the capacity of departments to cooperate with one another (APO, 2019). Consequently, when coordinating gender responsive programs, deficits in coordination lead to a fragmentation of services; and thus women experience difficulties accessing support through the interface of multiple government departments, which is contrary to the concept of service convergence.

##### **4.3 Frontline Implementation and Discretionary Practices**

Implementation of convergence is impeded by institutional obstacles at the local level as well, particularly through the influence of frontline workers and their respective institutions. Multiple programs are being implemented at the local level at the same time, with each program having its own set of rules or regulations, reporting obligations, and performance expectations (Srivastava, 2016).

Discretionary practices will therefore have a gendered effect. The manner in which frontline workers apply discretionary practices will be affected by social norms and power structures in both the work environment and society as a whole, thus affecting how entitlements to eligibility are determined and which recipients receive preference for assistance (Javed & Mumtaz, 2024; ECWG, 2021). Therefore, the gender responsive provisions may be applied to varying degrees and in addition to the other intersecting negative determinants such as caste, class or mobility, women will experience additional barriers to accessing the services to which they are entitled.

#### 4.4 Data Fragmentation and Information Asymmetries

An additional obstacle to convergence is caused by the lack of integration among the databases and information systems of social protection programs. The shift towards digitalization has led to an increased reliance on management information systems for each program; however, these systems do not have the capability to collect or share information from other programs as well. Thus, institutions cannot track individuals across programs, identify gaps in service among programs, nor coordinate services across programs (GIZ, 2022).

Women typically rely upon documentation and registration processes to gain access to various programs, but also digital literacy, which may be significantly variable depending on the program and/or context. Furthermore, the absence of a single integrated database that supports access to all different forms of benefits will add to the administrative burden for women when they have to access many different benefits. "Hidden barriers", such as those identified in systemic reviews of failed social protection programs, reduce access to social protection programs for women and other marginalized groups (Javed & Mumtaz, 2024).

#### 4.5 Accountability Structures and Incentive Misalignment

Institutional barriers to convergence are also furthered by fragmentation in accountability structures as programs are often monitored and evaluated through sector-specific frameworks with limited incentives for departments or implementing agencies to coordinate across programs. Performance assessment is often carried out at the scheme-level output level rather than on cross-program results which discourages collaboration and reinforces silo behaviour (Kühner & Nakray, 2016; APO, 2019).

Therefore, convergence is everyone's "stated" responsibility; however, it does not represent an institution's explicit mandate. Therefore, this institutional ambiguity limits the capacity of social protection systems to develop from fragmented interventions to integrated support structures.

#### 4.6 Implications for Understanding Convergence Failure

The combination of all of these institutional obstacles lead to the conclusion that failures to converge with gender responsive social protection programs are most likely due to barriers at a level of structure (i.e., program development, siloed departments, discretion given to implementers, fragmented data systems, and accountability structures) rather than the lack of implementation capacity or resources. The way these structures support the transformation of gender responsive intent to action will also limit the ability of the programs to be considered as an integral part of an overall system.

This analysis has placed institutionalized arrangements at the forefront of its consideration of convergence failure and as such has provided the opportunity to transform the issue from a governance issue based on how social protection systems are organized and managed, into a more analytical framework, which will allow for a shift away from simply describing fragmentation toward developing a comprehensive understanding of why, in spite of many efforts to do so, convergence remains limited and creates the foundation for discussion of implications for policies in the next section.

### 5. Discussion

By combining the conceptual understanding of convergence (Section 2) with the mapping of gender-responsive program design (Section 3) and the analysis of institutional barriers (Section 4), the results indicate a pattern of behavior that has been consistent throughout the study: convergence failure can most accurately be defined as a structural/institutional phenomenon, rather than solely due to either a lack of intention to coordinate/program convergence or a lack of capacity to implement programs.

There is a distinction between convergence as a target for a specific policy field and convergence as a type of institution. If the process of convergence is perceived as being a wide-ranging or abstract objective, and such an objective does not include clearly defined institutional structures supporting the achievement of the objective, then we can reasonably expect that the responsibility for supporting the development of a coordinated program (programs) will be spread across sectors and each program will continue to operate based on its own rationale. For this reason, the author of this study believes that it is essential to define the difference between utilizing convergence as a rhetoric and utilizing convergence as a method of governance.

Even though there is a big difference in this approach to gender-neutral welfare, it has been fragmented throughout various policies and the gender-responsiveness component does not form the basis for delivering services as a part of a larger framework for social protection. Therefore, gender-responsiveness primarily exists on an individual program level and not as a general principle of organizing the overall social protection system.

Section 4 describes the ways in which institutional obstacles make it difficult for programs to meet their goals. This includes institutional fragmentation, programmatic separation, discretionary practice by implementers, and uncoordinated accountability mechanisms. These institutional constraints prevent institutions from recognizing and responding to gendered vulnerability in an organized manner. Women, as such, are typically required to go through a number of separate administrative systems to receive various types of assistance. Rather than alleviating disadvantage, this creates a cumulative disadvantage.

Together, this study's results indicate that the limited degree of "convergence" does not necessarily represent a lack of commitment to policy or sufficient capacity at the front-line level; rather, they demonstrate that current governance arrangements still prioritize the accountability associated with individual sectors rather than systemic coordination. As such, when gender responsive program design is added to pre-existing institutional structures without subsequent reforms, it could potentially further exacerbate fragmentation by adding additional components to existing programs that continue to operate independently of each other.

In two ways, this study contributes to social protection research. Firstly, it transforms the understanding of convergence into a matter of institutional issues, moving focus away from implementation gaps and toward organizational forms that determine levels of coordination. Secondly, this study demonstrates how gender responsive program design can be situated within these institutional structures, illustrating how gendered outcomes arise from both the nature of the programming itself as well as the manner in which social protection systems are organized.

The conclusions of this study have implications for many social protection systems in lower- and middle-income countries. These systems face similar challenges related to service fragmentation, sectoral governance, and disparate inclusion of gender-related considerations. Although the institutional configurations will differ among country settings, the challenge of reconciling the expansion of program portfolios with the strengthening of coordination is likely to be common to most social protection systems. Developing a comparative analytical framework that views convergence failures as a function of system design rather than as an isolated implementation problem provides a useful lens for conducting comparative analysis and future research.

Therefore, in order to achieve convergence in gender responsive social protection, it is not sufficient to expand upon program portfolios and include gender-sensitive provisions. Instead, it is necessary to reconsider the institutional arrangements through which social protection is governed, coordinated, and provided. The finding that institutional reform is required to achieve a convergence of gender responsive social protection provides the basis for the examination of the policy implications of an institutional framework for convergence presented in the subsequent section.

## **6. Policy Implications**

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that improving convergence in gender-responsive social protection requires a shift in how policy problems are framed and addressed as opposed to treating the failure to reach convergence as the result of ineffective implementation or insufficient frontline capacity. The research identifies the need to introduce institutional reforms to remove fragmentation in three areas (programs, administration, and governmental responsibility) and thereby establish convergence as an institutional principle. This study's findings indicate that there is little opportunity for the expansion of programs or the redesign of programs as a result of this analysis; therefore, it is the institutional framework of social protection that will require consideration.

Similarly, coordinating at different administrative levels presents similar challenges. For example, coordination between state and local agencies often relies on informal relationships or ad hoc agreements. While such arrangements may function in specific contexts, they rarely ensure continuity. As such, establishing more sustainable forms of collaboration (for example, routine joint planning processes, coordinated reporting structures and standing coordination forums) can diminish reliance on individual initiative and facilitate greater stability over time.

The challenge of developing accountability structures is similarly constrained. As long as performance monitoring is focused primarily on individual schemes, institutional incentives will naturally reinforce siloed priorities. Establishing accountability frameworks that incorporate shared, cross-cutting objectives (for example, sustained access to complementary services) could promote coordination without diminishing program-level accountability. The issue is not the lack of accountability, but rather its fragmented nature.

Additionally, efforts to strengthen convergence must recognize how institutional arrangements influence women's access to social protection in practice. Many times, gender responsive elements are incorporated into existing administrative systems without examining how documentation requirements, delivery channels, or frontline procedures may reproduce barriers associated with care responsibilities, mobility constraints, or social norms.

Similarly, data and information systems exemplify this same tension. Digital platforms are frequently promoted as tools for improving coordination; however, their potential effectiveness is dependent on interoperability, institutional ownership, and safeguards against exclusion. Unless digitalization is carefully designed, it may replicate current fragmentation or exacerbate inequities, especially where beneficiaries have limited access to technology or documentation.

Collectively, these considerations imply that achieving convergence in gender responsive social protection is less about creating new initiatives and more about redefining how systems are organized and governed. Sustainable progress toward convergence will depend on institutional coherence, that is, aligning design, coordination and accountability to reflect the cumulative and intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by women. Unless significant institutional reform occurs, convergence is unlikely to transition from policy language to sustained practice.

## **7. Conclusion**

This research sought to understand why the potential for gender-convergence in the gender-responsive social protection system in India has yet to be realised despite numerous years of governmental efforts to increase the integration and coordination of gender responsive initiatives. Through a consideration of how gender-convergence is defined, how gender responsive initiatives have been developed, and how the governance frameworks in which gender responsive initiatives exist influence their operationalization, this study demonstrates that fragmentation of gender responsiveness exists less in the operation of front-line workers and more in the institutional design of gender responsive initiatives.

There is growing visibility of gender-responsive components across social protection initiatives, however gender-responsive components are most frequently included in separate programmatic structures with little embeddedness into a single integrated structure. As such, these components are implemented within governance structures characterized by specific sectoral mandates, programmatic silos, locally based discretion, fragmented informational systems and lack of accountability at the programmatic level. In turn, these structural conditions shape how coordination functions in practice and how gendered vulnerabilities are identified and addressed.

Ultimately, the implications of this research suggest that while increasing the number of initiatives and/or the inclusion of gender sensitivity provisions in existing initiatives will not effectively address intersectional vulnerabilities without concurrent institutional alignment, strengthening convergence requires greater focus on the governance design of social protection planning and coordination and the distribution of responsibility among programs and governments. Therefore, absent institutional reform, convergence is likely to be much more apparent in formal policy statements than in practical application.

This study is not without limitations. The analysis is based on secondary literature and policy documents and does not draw on primary empirical data. As such, it does not capture variation in convergence practices across states or local contexts. Future research could build on this institutional framework by examining how convergence is negotiated and enacted at sub-national levels, or by exploring how specific governance reforms influence gendered access to social protection over time.

In summary, the study shows that gender-responsive social protection through convergence cannot be viewed simply as a technical addition or an ideal administrative process. Gender responsive social protection through convergence is fundamentally dependent upon the institutionally designed social protection system and its governing structure. Viewing convergence as an institutional issue is the first step toward creating social protection systems that are both intended to be gender responsive and function coherently and inclusively.

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