

What is social protection

Social protection systems prevent and protect people – including women and girls if appropriately designed - from poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout the course of their lives.

Increasingly, they are being used to respond to crises, including those caused by conflict, COVID-19 and climate change.

Social protection prevents people from having to use negative coping strategies and empowers them to manage risks and move out of poverty – through enhanced income, opportunities and access to services.

Social protection is a **right and the responsibility of the state**, but in many contexts – especially conflict settings – it is also financed and delivered by non-governmental actors.

A strong social protection system is built on sustainable financing, robust legislation and transparent policy. It incorporates a range of interventions – designed to meet diverse needs through a combination of contributory and non-contributory programmes, delivered through resilient delivery systems.

STRONG SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS mitigate risks and advance gender equality in the contexts of poverty and crises



SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Cash and in-kind transfers, fee waivers, subsidies



SOCIAL INSURANCE

Social security contributions, health insurance



LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

Skills training, job search, parental benefits



SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

Child and adult care and support, protection services

Social protection measures can be combined with **complementary interventions** such as awareness raising, social behaviour change communication, skills training, savings, and nutrition supplements

Why it matters for women and girls

Women and girls face specific risks across the course of their lives. These risks are intensified when they are also subject to other forms of discrimination, including on the basis of age, disability, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. These challenges are exacerbated in the context of crises; entrenched by discriminatory social norms; and compounded as women grow older.

Social protection can contribute to positive outcomes for women and girls, with wider positive effects for men and boys, their households and the societies and economies they form part of. However, **despite progress in expanding social protection, gaps in policy and practice persist** and often fail to consider the specific needs of women and girls or to identify the opportunities that could help transform their lives and opportunities.



More girls than boys are out of school

NEARLY
0.5 BILLION
women and girls over 15 are **illiterate**

ONLY **39%** of rural girls attend **secondary school**



Women have fewer economic opportunities and lower access and control over productive and financial resources and social protection

Women's global labour force participation is

26.5 PERCENTAGE POINTS
BELOW THAT OF MEN



Women and girls face higher risks of violence and have limited power and voice in households and society

27% OF WOMEN have experienced **physical or sexual violence** from an intimate partner

What is gender-responsive social protection

Gender-responsive social protection refers to the systematic integration of gender considerations into a social protection system – including policies, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Gender-responsive social protection aims to mitigate gender-specific risks across the life course and empower women and girls.

Systems can range from **gender discriminatory** - those that may actively exclude women or unintentionally ignore their needs (**gender-blind programmes**) to **gender-responsive systems** that recognise and respond to the gendered needs of women and girls (such as their additional care responsibilities or barriers to education) to **gender-transformative systems** that address the root causes of gender inequality and discrimination through a social protection intervention.

There is mounting evidence that gender-responsive social protection can address pre-existing gender inequalities through well-designed and implemented social protection interventions. Connecting social protection recipients to other gender-focused services and programmes (e.g., through cash “plus” interventions) can also help contribute to catalytic change in women's and girls' lives.



Policy context

The sustainable development goal (SDG) commitments commit to expand the coverage of social protection systems and strengthen their ability to meet the needs of women and girls, including SDG 1 on ending poverty and implementing social protection systems, and SDG 5 on recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and reducing gender-based violence.

Gender-responsive social protection also supports other SDG goals, including: **promoting girls' access to education** and improving uptake of critical reproductive and maternal health services (SDGs 3 and 4); **supporting women's economic empowerment** through increased access to income, jobs and income-generating activities (SDG 8). *For a visual explainer of these links see the infographic in this series.*

To further advance gender-responsive social protection, national and international partners should:

- » Expand social protection systems to reach more women and girls and close the gender gap.
- » Strengthen social protection policies, programmes and systems so that they address gender risks and inequalities.
- » Create opportunities for social protection to empower and transform the lives of women and girls through linkages with complementary services and programmes.



SOCIAL PROTECTION INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION BOARD (SPIAC-B)

The SPIAC-B Gender Working Group (GWG) combines representatives of governments, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, and civil society. SPIAC-B members support national governments to address vulnerabilities to poverty, inequality and deprivation, through more coordinated assistance for the development of adequate, sustainable and rights-based social protection systems. The SPIAC-B GWG focuses on efforts to ensure social protection explicitly promotes gender equality and supports progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals to improve women's and girls' lives.

1. **Support advocacy efforts to advance gender-responsive social protection at national, regional and global levels**
 - » Communicate the importance of gender-responsive social protection with a range of stakeholders: host governments, UN agencies, and development partners.
 - » Take time to understand the country context, priorities and barriers that women and girls face and the opportunities that social protection can offer to meet their needs and transform their lives.
 - » Engage with women's rights organisations and other organisations representing **diverse** identities including age, disability, race and ethnicity, and LGBT+ to understand and build partnerships both on the delivery of social protection and in lobbying for change.
 - » Identify laws and policies relevant to the implementation of gender-responsive social protection at the national level and build partnerships to make linkages across the ecosystem. Commemorate international days (such as Women's Day, Girl Child, Day of Cooperatives) through events or sessions with other partners, linking gender and social protection. Ensure that gender-responsive social protection is part of an influencing agenda in engagements on gender, equalities and the empowerment of women and girls with governments and development partners.
2. **Champion gender-responsive social protection internally within government and organisations**
 - » Include points on gender-responsive social protection in briefings for high-level meetings, for example, highlighting the gender gaps in social protection coverage or benefits or identifying the need for context-specific interventions.
 - » Deliver the top three policy messages on gender-responsive social protection relevant to your context (*see page 2 above and the Thematic Briefs in this series*). Invite your Executives or Directors to learn what can be done to advance the agenda in your country or region or team, and how it links to broader objectives.
 - » Take advantage of high-level visits to talk about and showcase gender-responsive social protection and its role in the country's development.
 - » Raise awareness of gender-responsive social protection within ministries, departments, or teams, and with gender or social inclusion working groups, by sharing information and creating linkages to other sectoral policy objectives.
3. **Work with peers and partners to strengthen social protection policy, programme design and implementation systems.**
 - » Collaborate with gender-focused organisations and those focused on diverse identities to understand how gender inequality affects poverty and exacerbates the impacts of shocks and climate change, and the role that social protection can play in response.
 - » Identify how social protection design and implementation features – such as targeted transfers to women, linking to complementary programmes, or enhancing digital payments to women – can support gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment.
 - » Encourage peer-to-peer learning with other countries in the region.
4. **Generate and disseminate gender-informed data and evidence**
 - » Commission policy-relevant research or access technical assistance facilities (**such as STAAR**) on gender and social protection to generate evidence and support relevant policy processes, and work with partners to support the collection and analysis of gender-focused monitoring and evaluation data.
 - » Disseminate findings of national and international research and host learning events to stimulate discussion and create linkages between stakeholders working on gender and social protection, including other thematic areas such as climate change, education, and health.

Policy and practical tips

Cash and in-kind transfers can **INCREASE girls' school enrolment and attendance**



In Tanzania, a programme aimed at helping families prioritise education over girls' early marriage found that providing adolescent girls with school supplies or a conditional asset increased their odds of enrolment by a third.

Targeted support for girls' secondary education through cash and in-kind transfers can **DELAY MARRIAGE for girls**



as seen in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Uganda, Colombia, Mexico and Pakistan.

Cash transfers can result in **HIGHER INVESTMENT in livelihoods activities and savings among women**



such as higher investment in livestock and agricultural tools. Social protection programmes delivered through debit cards or via other electronic means increase women's financial inclusion.

Social insurance programmes can **INCREASE UPTAKE of sexual, reproductive, and maternal health services**



shift attitudes towards family planning; and increase rates of inclusive and early initiation of breastfeeding among mothers.

Cash transfers are consistently associated with **REDUCED PHYSICAL ABUSE**



and sexual forms of intimate partner violence (ipv)

Social pensions can **IMPROVE women's involvement in household decision-making**



Evidence from South Africa shows that women receiving pensions increases the likelihood of them becoming the primary decision-maker in the household

Further information

- » For the most recent evidence on gender-responsive social protection see [Impact of social protection on gender equality in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review of reviews](#).
- » For a collection of recent resources, news and webinars on gender and social protection see the [database of resources on gender-responsive social protection](#) hosted on socialprotection.org.
- » For a **comprehensive overview** of social protection, including chapters on gender and across the life course, see the [Handbook on Social Protection Systems](#).
- » For further reading on the gaps and opportunities for improving diverse SOGIESC inclusion in cash transfer and social protection programmes, see the report "[We Don't Do A Lot For Them Specifically](#)".