

COVID-19, SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSE AND GENDER EQUALITY: A CALL TO ACTION

Working Recommendations from the SPIAC-B Gender Working Group¹

We acknowledge the enormous contribution of women to mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, as well as to its recovery. From care givers to decision makers, farmers, doctors and cleaners, women have been at the frontline of the COVID-19 response. Women constitute 70% of all health providers worldwide and have borne most of the unpaid work associated with lockdowns.

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to erase decades of progress for women and girls. While men are suffering higher mortality rates, the economic and social fallout has exacerbated gender inequalities and disproportionately affected women's employment security: as the majority of vulnerable workers who are losing their jobs and incomes at an alarming rate; as victims of increased rates of domestic violence; as unpaid caregivers in families and communities, picking up the majority of additional care responsibilities where schools, childcare and other services are shut down or scaled back. Adolescent girls face particular risks, with concerning reports of increases in child marriage, teenage pregnancy and increased care work. Containment measures have created new challenges for rural women in their roles in maintaining household food security, agricultural production, farm management, trade and wage labor. [New estimates](#) hold that, by 2021, there will be 118 women in poverty for every 100 poor men globally, and this ratio could rise to 121 poor women for every 100 poor men by 2030.

We commend the champions supporting women and girls and advancing gender equality during this crisis. Following data from the UNDP/UN Women [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#), 58 countries have adopted social protection measures that target or prioritize women as the main recipients. 36 countries have strengthened family and paid sick leave provisions for parents and other caregivers. 20 countries have introduced labour market measures to support women workers and 12 have introduced payments or vouchers to compensate parents for school and childcare closures.

We celebrate that governments and the wider international community have recognised social protection as a core pillar of the COVID-19 response, whilst highlighting the need to learn lessons and build social protection systems. Social protection is a core sector that every society and individual needs: no person, and no country, will be without change or shocks at some point during the lifecycle. The COVID-19 crisis makes all too visible the gaps in social protection systems, which have a direct impact on girls and women, and require immediate attention. Where governments are taking gender-sensitive or gender-responsive approaches to social protection, we celebrate and call on others to emulate this practice.

We consider that more significant efforts are urgently needed, as a large proportion of social protection responses have been blind to women's and girls' needs. Just 18% of the global social protection and jobs response (238 out of 1,310 measures) has been gender-sensitive², targeting either women's economic security or addressing the rise in unpaid care work.

¹ SPIAC-B is composed of 25 intergovernmental agencies and 10 government bodies. 11 civil society organisations act as observers. For more information see: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@nylo/documents/genericdocument/wcms_644769.pdf.

² Social Protection interventions fall on a spectrum from gender-discriminatory to gender-transformative. For more information see the UNICEF Office of Research [Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection Conceptual Framework](#)

We reaffirm that gender-responsive social protection is critical to the socio-economic security and safety of women and girls; to ensure an equitable recovery; and to contribute to the creation of resilient societies and economies. Social protection is not only a key instrument in the event of crisis or emergencies, it is also part of the social contract that defines how redistribution and social justice are understood. The COVID-19 crisis has made evident and exacerbated pre-existing structural social and economic inequalities and injustices, including unequal pay, gender gaps in social security provision, the persistent undervaluing and unfair distribution of care work, and continued low levels of social protection coverage. As such, this crisis is an opportunity to recognise social protection as a human right, and to redouble our efforts to ensure that all people are able to access social protection to cover all lifecycle and employment vulnerabilities as well as climate, health or other crisis – and to reduce poverty and promote productive investment. This is an opportunity to redefine social protection as an entitlement as well as a critical investment that is essential to healthier, fairer and more productive nations and to gender equality.

We, representatives of governments, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, and civil society gathered within the SPIAC-B call for a moment of serious reflection in light of the evidence indicating that only 18% of social protection measures are gender-sensitive in the COVID-19 response to date. We have an opportunity and an obligation to adapt and build anew, with social protection systems that have gender at their heart. We call for greater action to utilise and strengthen social protection systems in recognition of the contribution social protection can make to transform societies and economies for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

We reaffirm the SPIAC-B [joint statement](#) to the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women and the [joint statement](#) on the role of social protection in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic, and call for renewed action:

In the Rapid Response to COVID-19:

1. **Provide** social protection support based on an analysis of gender-specific needs, as part of an intersectional analysis of vulnerability and marginalisation, and where possible and appropriate provide these at the individual level to promote women’s agency.
2. **Ensure** information on social protection entitlements is available to women and men, in a format and language that is accessible.
3. **Coordinate** with other national and international social protection, humanitarian and gender stakeholders to share gendered analysis, maximise coverage and minimise duplication of effort.
4. **Promote** the prioritization of categorical or universal approaches where possible, recognising the need to respond to specific vulnerabilities, and acknowledging contextual and budget considerations. This includes universal access to basic services such as health and education, ensuring continued access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.
5. **Waive** conditionalities that may increase women’s time burden or reinforce gender stereotypes and potentially increase COVID-19 risks; waive requests that may be difficult to be met by women, such as land titles for rural women and stringent identification requirements; simplify processes and ensure they are safe, accessible and convenient for women. Prioritise choice, recognising that women will know the best delivery option for their circumstances.
6. **Improve** access of women to social insurance and ensure schemes are designed or adapted in a way to accommodate women’s work biographies.

7. **Monitor** and evaluate gender-related impacts through age, sex and disability disaggregated data where possible, and use this data to inform future adaptations in design and implementation of social protection programs.
8. **Adequately equip** social protection responses with accessible and easily understood grievance and feedback mechanisms that respond to the needs of women, men, girls and boys. Where possible, equip staff with the knowledge to refer participants to available services, including quality prevention and response services to gender-based violence.
9. **Consider** the specific needs of women throughout the life cycle, from girls to the elderly, and ensure that all women, irrespective of disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or other status are included in social protection responses.
10. **Engage** local organisations, including women’s rights organisations and disabled people’s organisations, in a contextually appropriate manner. This may include engagement to assist in the design, targeting, implementation and/or monitoring of social protection response and strengthen accountability of systems.

To build back better in expansion of social protection systems:

1. **Develop** shock-responsive social protection systems that focus on rights and dignity and that effectively contribute to women’s economic independence and agency. For this, prioritize work towards categorical or universal measures in employment and social protection.
2. **Expand** fiscal space for gender-responsive social protection and economic recovery measures.
3. **Support** development of strong care systems that share the costs of care with society as a responsibility of all, including support to unpaid carers. This will require investments in services and infrastructure that should be based on gender analysis.
4. **Eliminate** the burdens that limit women’s access to both contributory and non-contributory social protection benefits through targeted initiatives to address gendered divisions in access to decent work, technology, information and identity.
5. **Promote** transformative outcomes through social protection systems, including through scaling up ‘cash plus’ approaches that support women’s productive investments and labour-market participation and can contribute to addressing prevalent social norms that perpetuate violence, discrimination and inequality, including for girls.
6. **Extend** social security protection to previously uncovered groups, including informal workers and contributing family workers, recognising that women are concentrated in the worst paid, most vulnerable sections of the informal economy and often fail to access schemes designed on male dominated patterns of employment.
7. **Ensure** women’s active leadership in decision-making, including through meaningful partnership with local organisations, including women’s rights organisations, disabled people’s organisations, indigenous peoples’ organisations, humanitarian and development actors and national governments.
8. **Invest** in data generation for inclusive and gender-responsive strategies, monitor the gender equality outcomes of all social protection programs regardless of their objectives and targets, and strengthen the capacity to collect, analyse and use gender data to inform decision making.

The SPIAC-B Gender Working Group would like to develop, in a consultative process, recommendations for a gender-transformative way forward on social protection during and after COVID-19. The above recommendations reflect emerging thinking rather than policy of SPIAC-B gender working group members, and we welcome feedback and collaboration from interested individuals and organisations. Please contact Clare.McCrum@fcdo.gov.uk to get involved.