

Guiding Principles for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection

SPIAC-B Gender Working Group
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The Social Protection Interagency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) Gender Working Group (GWG) was established to support the shift in practice and approach to gender-responsive social protection across the sector. This group works to foster evidence-informed policy dialogue around gender-responsive social protection, build capacity, and coordinate efforts to amplify gender equality impacts through social protection.

Social protection systems that address gendered risks across the life course and provide support in situations of poverty, vulnerability or crisis, play a vital role in responding to the specific challenges of poverty and insecurity that individuals face due to their gender, particularly women and girls. Gender-responsive and inclusive social protection not only helps people cope with risks and to recover from covariate and idiosyncratic shocks but also serves as a catalyst for transforming women's and girls' outcomes, contributing to sustainable poverty reduction, gender equality and social inclusion.¹

Notable progress has been made in strengthening the coverage, adequacy, sustainability and comprehensiveness of social protection. More than half of the world's population are now covered by some form of social protection², and this in turn enhances gender equality and inclusive outcomes. However, much more remains to be done for social protection systems to realize their full potential. To support this advancement, this document presents **10 Guiding Principles** that form the foundation of gender-responsive and inclusive social protection. These principles should not be seen as an "add-on" to existing social protection systems, policies and programmes, rather, they are the essential foundations of universal and rights-based social protection systems for all.

1 SPIAC-B (2019) Social Protection to Promote Gender Equality and Women and Girls' Empowerment. A joint statement to the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women

2 International Labour Office, World Social Protection Report 2024-2026: Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2024.

Ten Guiding Principles for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection

1

Prioritise universal social protection coverage across the life course to address gendered risks and vulnerabilities

6

Promote gender-responsive and inclusive system-wide approaches

2

Mainstream inclusion, rights, dignity and agency into all aspects of social protection

7

Support decent employment for the social service workforce

3

Set explicit gender equality objectives and progressively tailor social protection systems for gender transformative impact

8

Ensure participation, leadership, representation and accountability across the social protection system

4

Design, reform and adapt existing social protection systems to respond to care and support needs across the life course

9

Invest sufficient financing and promote inclusive governance structures

5

Strengthen gender-responsive social protection to support humanitarian-development-peacebuilding approaches

10

Ensure gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation through collection, analysis and use of gender, disability and age disaggregated social protection data

These principles are designed to assist governments, partner institutions and civil society organisations in ensuring that social protection systems are guided by equity, dignity and inclusivity. They serve as key considerations for designing and implementing social protection systems, policies and programmes that are more gender-responsive and inclusive, leading to transformative change towards more equitable,

just and sustainable societies and economies. This requires attention not only to questions of coverage and adequacy of benefits but also to due process, non-discrimination, accessibility, participatory approaches, and avoiding stigma in the design and delivery of benefits. Additionally, these principles support advocacy efforts to further the inclusiveness and gender-responsiveness of existing systems.

The first part of this document outlines why gender-responsive and inclusive social protection is necessary, before presenting the ten Guiding Principles. The Box below briefly explains some of the key terms

used in this document. An accompanying paper “Key Recommendations” provides further details on how to operationalise these principles.³

Key terms

Adequate social protection: benefit levels, type, duration and timing adequately respond to the needs of populations. Benefit and service entitlements are predictable and anchored in law.

Comprehensive social protection: The combination of schemes and programmes providing rights-based entitlements supporting individuals across the life course, including for children and in case of maternity, care responsibilities, disability, unemployment, employment injury, sickness, poverty, old age, widowhood/orphanhood, healthcare needs, and more.

Coherent social protection: Refers to social protection schemes and programmes that are well coordinated with other social protection schemes and with related policy areas such as health, education, employment etc.

Gender-responsive social protection: Refers to systems, policies and programs designed to address gender inequalities. Gender-responsive social protection aims to prevent and reduce poverty, improve access to services, and enhance the well-being of all individuals, particularly women and girls, ultimately contributing to gender equality.⁴

Gender-transformative social protection: Refers to systems, policies and programs designed to change the structural causes of gender inequality through social protection by promoting gender equality, empowerment and addressing discriminatory attitudes and roles, and unequal rights and access to resources.⁵

Inclusive social protection: Refers to systems, policies and programs designed to meet the diverse needs of populations who face marginalisation or discrimination on the basis of individual or group characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation among others, which can be further exacerbated in crisis contexts or geographic location including rural areas. Inclusive social protection recognises these intersectional inequalities and promotes gender and social equality, inclusion and empowerment.

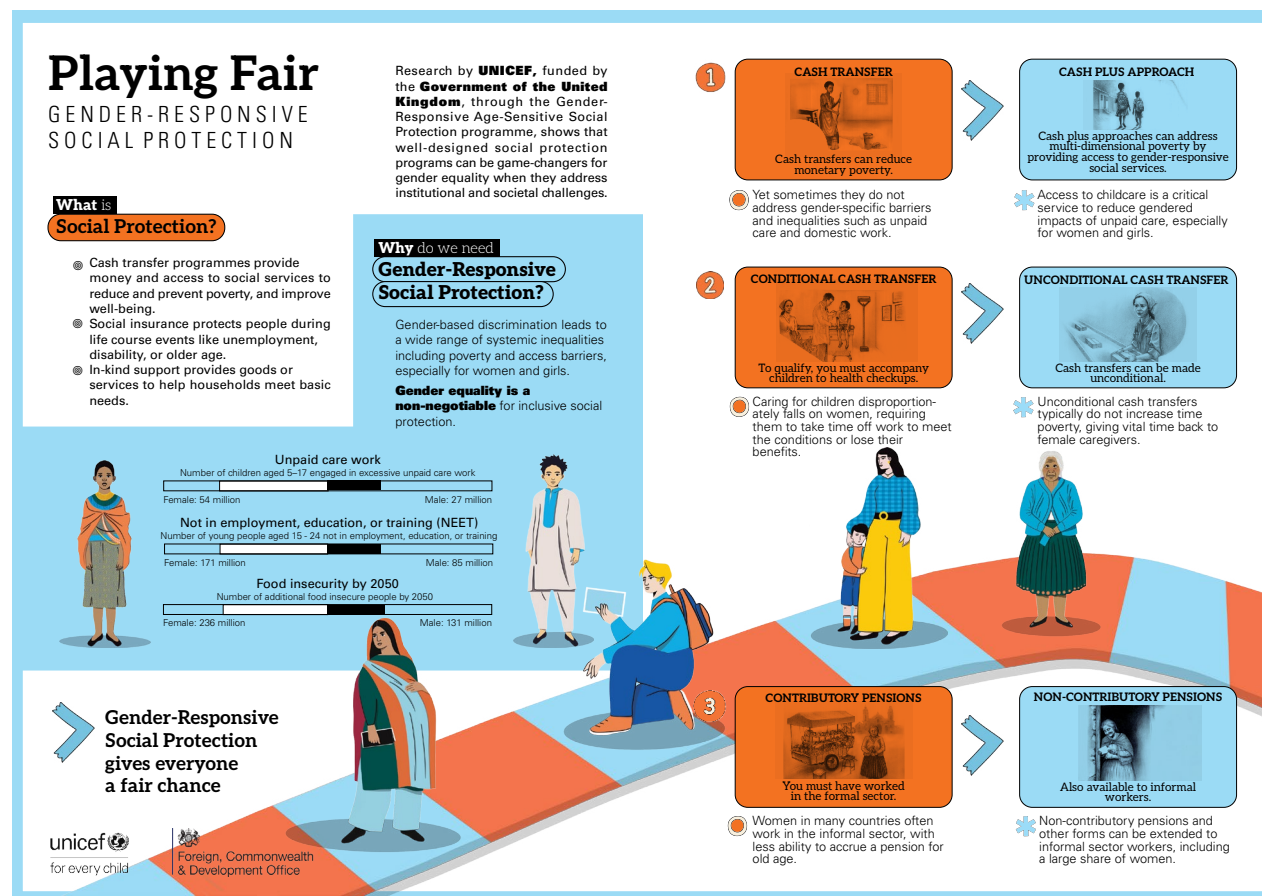
3 SPIAC-B Gender Working Group, Forthcoming

4 UNICEF Innocenti (2020) Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection: A Conceptual Framework. UNICEF Office of Research, Innocenti Working Paper WP-2020-10. See also for further details on the gender continuum, including gender-sensitive social protection which refers to programmes that may conform to existing gender norms (rather than to tackle them) in order to enhance specific programme outcomes.

5 UNICEF Innocenti (2020) Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection: A Conceptual Framework. UNICEF Office of Research, Innocenti Working Paper WP-2020-10.

Why is gender-responsive and inclusive social protection important?

Figure 1:
Gender responsive social protection infographic



Individuals face risks across the course of their lives. Certain life cycle risks, however, are specific – or heightened – as a result of gender inequalities which increases the likelihood that specific populations, particularly women and girls, live in poverty and face increased vulnerability to shocks and violence. Globally, over 24 million more women and girls live in monetary poverty than men and boys, with almost 10 per cent of women and girls struggling to survive

on less than PPP\$2.15 per day, compared to just over 7 per cent of men and boys.⁶ Moreover, women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change across the life course, disrupting girls' education, exacerbating time spent on domestic chores when food, fuel and water are scarce especially in rural areas, and disrupting income opportunities given that women are often more reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods.

6 UNICEF (2025) Measuring What Matters. Capturing Poverty through a Gender and Age-Sensitive Lens.

These risks and vulnerabilities accumulate over time and persist for generations if the cycle is not broken.⁷ They are also compounded by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as age, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation and other characteristics, and are exacerbated in crisis contexts.

At a young age, both boys and girls face barriers to accessing and staying in quality education. Boys are at risk of repeating grades and not completing their education, whilst challenges for girls include accessing education and are more likely than boys to be out of school at primary level.⁸ Girls with disabilities are even more likely to be out of school and the impacts of crises, including climate change, threaten progress made in girls' education. Factors such as domestic work responsibilities, child marriage, and prevailing negative attitudes towards girls' education and girls' life opportunities are key driving forces keeping girls out of school. For instance, globally, girls aged 5–14 spend 160 million more hours every day on unpaid care and domestic work than boys.⁹ These extra hours are taken from education, training, employment, and leisure time, hindering girls' development and future economic opportunities, and reinforcing the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Adolescent girls are at particular risk of early pregnancy, gender-based violence, marriage and

secondary school drop-out. Whilst gender norms put adolescent boys more at risk of child labour, overall, boys tend to have better access to training opportunities, paid employment, assets, and financial institutions. Adolescent girls, in fact, face significant gender inequality and discriminatory norms, and challenges to unlocking learning-to-earning pathways. More than double the rate of young women are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) compared to young men.¹⁰ Moreover, youth NEET rates are higher in rural areas than in urban ones: in Afghanistan, the youth NEET rate among rural women is nearly 70%, whilst it is only 18% for young men.¹¹ Adolescent girls are also particularly vulnerable to malnutrition problems such as anaemia, are at risk of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, and often face limited access to family planning and reproductive health services, especially in rural areas. Nearly one-third of all women in low and middle-income countries begin childbearing in adolescence (19 years and younger).¹² Moreover, social norms and societal expectations significantly affect adolescent girls' voice and agency at this critical age, leading to the discouragement of girls' expressing opinions, making independent decisions and taking leadership roles compared to boys, all which negatively impact girls later in life.

7 UN Women (2024) World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2024: Harnessing Social Protection for Gender Equality, Resilience and Transformation. UN Women, New York.

8 UNESCO (2022) Leave no child behind: Global Report on Boys' Disengagement from Education. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

9 UNICEF (2016) Harnessing the Power of Data for Girls: Taking stock and looking ahead to 2030, UNICEF, New York.

10 ILO (2024) Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024. Decent work, brighter futures, Geneva: International Labour Office.

11 Ibid; ILO (2019) Not in employment, education or training: the reality for many young rural women. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/not-in-employment-education-or-training-the-reality-for-many-young-rural-women/#:~:text=The%20impact%20is%20even%20bigger,market%20realities%20in%20these%20areas>.

12 UNFPA (2022) Motherhood in Childhood: The Untold Story. UNFPA.

Globally, less than 50% of **‘working-age women’** between the ages of 15-64 are in the labour market, compared to 72% of men, signalling a significant gender gap in labour market participation.¹³ Women, particularly mothers with care-giving responsibilities, are more likely to work in precarious and informal jobs – including as they are disproportionately represented in low-skilled jobs; earn lower wages; lack employment protection; have fewer career opportunities; and face interruptions and inequalities in paid work because of disproportionate care responsibilities. This results in a “motherhood pay gap,” essentially a penalty on women’s employment, wages and career opportunities when they are juggling income earning and care for young children.¹⁴ An equivalent penalty is not seen for men. This not only impacts women’s current income and poverty levels but negatively impacts their future income and pension too. Women with disabilities are even less likely to be in employment and earn lower wages than both men with disabilities and women without disabilities. Younger women, specifically, are less likely to work full time than their male counterparts. They account for 90% of the “missing youth workforce” – a term referring to the loss of potential talent and productivity in the labour market among youth.¹⁵ On top of these labour market inequalities, women also

have limited access to and ownership of productive assets and resources, including because of social norms, discriminatory inheritance practices and legal frameworks favouring men.

Women (across all ages) also spend a disproportionate amount of time carrying out unpaid and undervalued care and domestic responsibilities in comparison to men. Women spend about three times more time than men on unpaid care and support work, with unpaid care and domestic workloads often highest among women in rural areas and low-income households.¹⁶ The unequal distribution of labour is a key driver of gender inequality across all spheres of life, limiting women’s access to education, their participation in the labour force, their involvement in political and social life, and can contribute to physical and mental health problems.

In many contexts, women and girls are also vulnerable to high levels of physical, sexual and emotional violence and abuse. One in three women, and one in four girls, will have experienced some form of gender-based violence at some point in their lives,¹⁷ including at the workplace. It is estimated that one-fifth of forcibly displaced women in humanitarian crises have been subjected to sexual violence.¹⁸

13 ILO (2022) The Gender Gap in Employment: What’s holding women back? International Labour Office. InfoStories.

14 UN Women (2024) World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2024: Harnessing Social Protection for Gender Equality, Resilience and Transformation. UN Women, New York

15 Data calculated when global gender parity and regional employment-to-population ration (EPR) parity is modelled. ILO (2024) Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024. Decent work, brighter futures, Geneva: International Labour Office.

16 UNWomen and UNDESA (2024) Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024.

17 Sardinha, L. et al., (2022) Global, regional, and national prevalence estimates of physical or sexual, or both, intimate partner violence against women in 2018. The Lancet Journal, Volume 399, Issue10327, P803-813. February 26, 2022.

18 Vu, A. et al. (2014) The Prevalence of Sexual Violence among Female Refugees in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. PLoS Curr. 2014 Mar 18

Older women live longer and are more likely to have a disability than men. Their economic situation is often worse because of disability-related reduced earning power and continuing to provide unremunerated care work for family members. In low and middle-income countries, one in seven women aged 65 and over continue to work, although their labour force participation is often invisible and not captured in labour market surveys which define working age 15-64 years of age.¹⁹ Globally, the oldest women (and youngest) are more likely than any other age group to be informal workers.²⁰ Throughout their working lives and into older age, therefore, women continue to be engaged in precarious, unrecognised informal work as well shouldering a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and community roles, and are significantly less likely than men to be covered by contributory pension schemes. As such, women are more likely to rely more on non-contributory social pensions in older age which often do not provide adequate benefits.

Women who did contribute to pension schemes often earn lower entitlements due to the gender pay gap. In addition, they have less access to and ownership of productive assets and resources, being in low paid or unpaid work, as well as limited access to quality health care, which contributes to poverty in older age.

Gender-responsive and inclusive social protection systems can reduce these risks and result in improved gender equitable outcomes across the life course when they are intentionally designed and implemented to do so (see Box 1). Evidence shows that positive impacts include poverty reduction and economic security for women and girls, enhanced access to education, reduced risks of gender-based violence, improved decision-making power, better nutrition and access to healthcare, reduced negative coping mechanisms to financial stress such as child marriage, increased shared responsibilities between parents/caregivers, and more (see Figure 1²¹).²²

19 HelpAge International (2022) Contribution of older people to sustainable development. HelpAge International submission to the 12th session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing.

20 HelpAge International (2022) Contribution of older people to sustainable development. HelpAge International submission to the 12th session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing.

21 STAAR (2024) Gender Responsive Social Protection (GSP) Life Course Diagram. Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice, and Resources Facility, STAAR.

22 Perera, C. et al. (2022) Impact of social protection on gender equality in low-and middle-income countries. A systematic review of reviews.

Box 1:

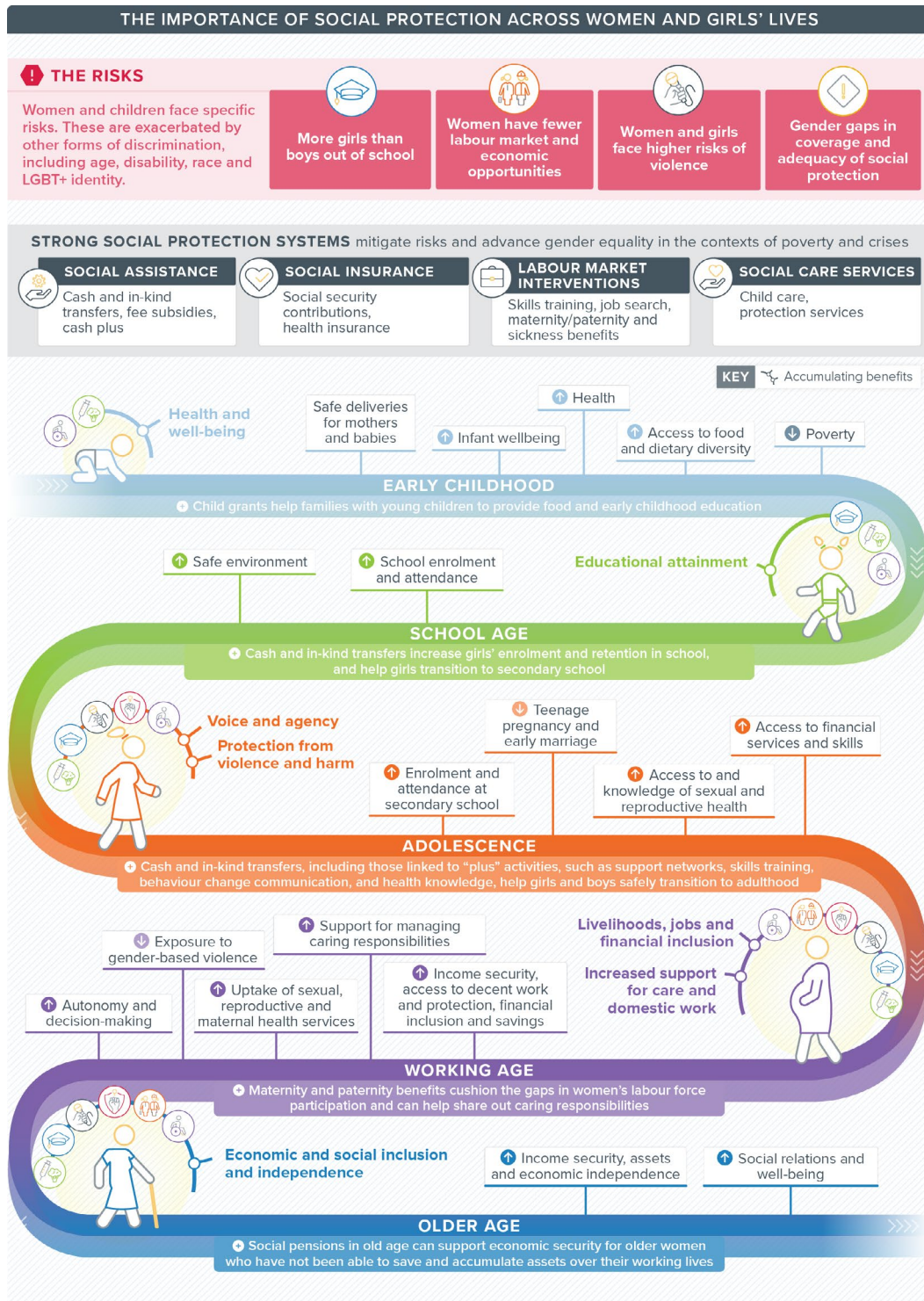
Examples of gender-responsive and inclusive social protection programmes

Intentionally-designed and implemented gender-responsive social protection programmes which integrate the Guiding Principles presented below, can reduce gendered-risks across the life course and improve gender equitable outcomes through:²³

- Regular and adequate social transfers for households with children and adolescents, such as universal child benefits, school feeding programmes, unconditional cash or in-kind transfers, to contribute towards a set of positive outcomes that not only affect the children in the household, but the entire household and female members in particular.
- Adequate family-friendly policies, including paid parental leave (both maternity and paternity paid leave) to promote shared care responsibilities; providing benefits, services, and protections for girls and women of reproductive age, in particular pregnant women and girls, and new mothers.
- Leveraging social protection systems to improve women's and girls' access to quality public services – such as quality education, quality and affordable health care, childcare and long-term care services over the life course, including for those working in the informal economy. Equitable access to these services for both women and men, girls and boys, contributes towards stronger gender equality outcomes.
- Integrated social protection programmes (also known as 'plus' programmes), linking cash or in-kind transfers with access to services (such as health, education and care, financial services), skills training and labour market interventions, social behaviour change communication interventions such as parenting classes, for example.
- Social insurance, such as pensions and health insurance; tailoring insurance schemes to cover economic risks relevant to women's work (e.g. certain types of crops, heat insurance); ensuring that women are able to access and afford social insurance e.g. through subsidised premiums; that pension schemes recognise care work; and that schemes promote decent work and the transition from the informal to the formal economy.

23 SPIAC-B Joint Statement (2019) Social Protection to Promote Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment. A joint statement to the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Figure 2:
Gender-responsive social protection across the life course



Source: STAAR (2025) Gender Responsive Social Protection (GSP) Life Course Diagram. <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/gender-responsive-social-protection-gsp-life-course-diagram>.

Guiding Principles to strengthen gender-responsive and inclusive social protection

1. Prioritise universal social protection coverage across the life course to address gendered risks and vulnerabilities

Social protection systems should aim to provide comprehensive, adequate, and inclusive coverage across the entire life course, in line with the Universal Social Protection (USP) 2030 agenda.²⁴ According to USP 2030, achieving this goal requires strong and inclusive policy and legal frameworks, sustainable and equitable financing, and efficient, reliable delivery mechanisms.

The goals of universal, comprehensive and adequate coverage can be realised progressively, in line with USP 2030 calls for global commitments to expand coverage by an average of at least 2 percentage point per year, focusing on populations with the greatest gaps.²⁵ Efforts should start with expanding coverage of contributory and non-contributory schemes to marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as children,

older persons, pregnant women, single-parent households, individuals with disabilities, migrants, refugees, workers in informal employment and indigenous communities.

Whilst important progress has been made in expanding social protection coverage in recent years, the growing gender gaps in coverage observed between 2015 and 2023 underline the importance of adequately including women and girls.²⁶ In addition to prioritizing closing gender gaps in coverage and adequacy, approaches must also acknowledge gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities at different life course stages. Tailored and comprehensive approaches are therefore essential to ensuring that social protection systems effectively meet the needs of all individuals.

2. Mainstream inclusion, rights, dignity and agency into all aspects of social protection

Social protection systems, policies and programmes must be designed and delivered to be inclusive and responsive to the barriers faced by diverse populations in each context. This requires embedding rights, dignity, and agency at every stage of the policy and programme cycle, from assessment to evaluation.

Social protection systems, policies and programmes must be underpinned by a thorough understanding of the ways in which discrimination linked to gender inequality, age, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation

and other characteristics affect people's access to, and benefits from, social protection. Design and implementation at both national and sub-national levels should reflect values of non-discrimination, community, care, and respect. To ensure social norms do not perpetuate exclusion, consistent training and monitoring are vital to secure effective programme implementation. These efforts must be underpinned by adherence to global and national human rights frameworks, including the SDGs, USP 2030, CEDAW, and the Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202).

²⁴ <https://usp2030.org/>

²⁵ USP2030 (2025) Financing social protection: From pledge to practice. Sevilla Platform for Action (SPA) at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4). ILO and USP2030.

²⁶ UN Women (2024) World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2024: Harnessing Social Protection for Gender Equality, Resilience and Transformation. UN Women, New York.

3. Set explicit gender equality objectives and progressively tailor social protection systems for gender transformative impact

Gender-responsive and inclusive social protection can improve women and girls' access to and control over income and assets, strengthen social networks and improve women's economic, social and political status both within households and in public life. To achieve this, social protection programmes should explicitly state gender-equality objectives that are integrated into both design and implementation. Programmes should aim to address harmful social norms and systemic inequalities by being responsive to the lived experiences of diverse groups.²⁷ This includes tackling intersecting forms of discrimination—such as those based on age, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation—and aligning with broader cross-sectoral efforts to shift power dynamics and resource distribution.

This requires taking an incremental approach to transformative social protection objectives, recognising that contexts are different, and that steps can be taken progressively towards more transformative objectives over time. This approach recognises and aims to tackle intersecting forms of discrimination, such as those based on age, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation and other characteristics, where possible. Social protection should be part of an integrated, cross-sectoral approach that empowers individuals while transforming the systems that contribute to their marginalization and poverty. In this way, inclusive social protection interventions can contribute towards changing unequal power structures and dynamics, unequal resource distribution, as well as pervasive negative social norms.

4. Design, reform and adapt existing social protection systems to respond to care and support needs across the life course

Women and girls perform the majority of domestic, care, and support work globally. Women perform it in different paid or unpaid modalities – including unpaid caregiving within families and communities, working in social services, or (paid) domestic or care work.

Intersecting inequalities and vulnerabilities in delivering and receiving care and support raise issues around gender inequality in paid work, the unequal distribution of care work among women and men, unequal access to social protection, poor working conditions, and lack of access to inclusive and dignified services by

individuals that require care and support. Similarly, current care and support systems in many low and middle-income countries do not address the rights of persons with disabilities across their lifecycle and their diverse layers of identities, nor their different support requirements leading to increased risks of neglect, abandonment, and institutionalisation. These intersecting inequalities, needs and vulnerabilities therefore require care and support systems to be conceived from a life course approach, as well as a rights-based and solidarity approach.²⁸

27 Kuss et al., (2024) Towards Gender-Responsive Social Protection: Evidence on policymaking, programme implementation and impacts for women and girls, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, October 2024.

28 Barrantes, A., Cretney, M., (2024) 'Age Sensitive, Disability Inclusive and Gender Responsive Care and Support Systems', Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources (STAAR) Facility, DAI Global UK Ltd, United Kingdom

Due to insufficient or non-existent quality public care and support services, care work and domestic chores rely on traditional gender norms and expectations that require predominantly women and girls to take on these responsibilities. At the same time this work remains undervalued and invisible.

To address these systemic challenges, the “6Rs” action framework promotes decent care work: Recognition, Reward, Redistribution, Reduction, Representation, and Resources (see Box 1).²⁹ The 6Rs framework is a call for action to ensure that unpaid care and support work is reduced, fairly valued, equitably shared, formalized and adequately resourced to progress towards universal respect for labour rights,

and economic justice for women. The 6Rs framework is also a critical component of the Just Transition framework, ensuring that recognizing and valuing care work is part of a just and equitable society.

Social protection systems, policies and programmes can directly and indirectly support progress towards the 6Rs, whether this is through direct income support for caregivers and care users, the integration of care credits into pension systems, the public provision of quality and affordable childcare, long term care and disability support services, including in public works programmes, and related investments in care infrastructure.

Box 2: The 6R Framework

Recognition: care contributions are recognized, measured and valued. Care jobs should be valued as skilled-labour, formalized and professionalized.

Reduction: the drudgery of unpaid domestic work (also sometimes referred to as indirect care work) needs to be reduced by better investing in household and social infrastructure. Reducing the intensity and volume of unpaid domestic work is particularly critical in low-income contexts where water or firewood collection exposes women to risks and can deplete their health and wellbeing.

Redistribution: Care work should be redistributed fairly within households and between households, the state, businesses and communities through public and private care services. Redistribution is essential to ensure that women do not bear the burden of limited and conflicting choices between time for care and time for personal, educational, or professional development

Reward: Care work is among the least well-paid sectors of the economy, a reflection of gender biases in labour markets. Employers and the State should address this by ensuring fair pay and protection, decent working conditions, and compensation for unpaid care work over the life course.

29 UN (2024) Transforming care systems in the context of the sustainable development goals and our common agenda. UN System Policy Paper.

Box 2: The 6R Framework — *Continuation*

Representation: care givers should have a voice and be represented in decision making. Ensuring care workers' participation is key to designing policies that reflect their needs and interests.

Resources: Investment in care systems remains insufficient in many countries. Expanding and financing care-supportive policies requires a shift in public priorities, recognizing care as a public good.

Source: UN (2024) Transforming care systems in the context of the sustainable development goals and our common agenda. UN System Policy Paper

5. Strengthen gender-responsive social protection to support humanitarian-development-peacebuilding approaches

Across the world, the frequency, scale, and complexity of crises are increasing. Armed conflicts, climate-related disasters, economic shocks, and public health emergencies are contributing to situations of protracted crises, with many of those affected being displaced for more than five years, equating to at least a quarter of children's childhoods. People's livelihoods, security, and social cohesion are increasingly under threat, with the most marginalised groups disproportionately negatively impacted by crises because of existing inequalities, limited resources and lack of access to services.

In line with the SPIAC-B Working Group on Linking Humanitarian Assistance with Social Protection common principles, social protection responses in crisis contexts must be inclusive and gender-responsive, while also contributing to the development of long-term, sustainable systems.³⁰

Social protection systems, policies and programmes must be able to adapt to future risks, including those posed by climate change, pandemics, economic downturns, demographic ageing and conflict. Humanitarian responses should leverage national social protection systems to enhance long-term resilience and locally-led responses. This requires understanding the gendered risks and vulnerabilities of diverse populations and responding to these needs through assessments and responses that are disaggregated by gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion, or other contextually specific marginalized groups; supporting locally-led responses, including women's rights organisations; and strengthening complaints and feedback mechanisms which are particularly important mechanisms to support the inclusivity of social protection systems to vulnerable populations.³¹

30 SPIAC-B Working Group on Linking Humanitarian Assistance with Social Protection (2023) Common Principles for Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection.

31 SPIAC-B Working Group on Linking Humanitarian Assistance with Social Protection (2023) Common Principles for Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection. Heinemann, A. et al. (2024) Accelerating Gender Equality through Social Protection. World Bank, Washington, DC. Pereznieta, P. and Holmes, R. (2023) Gender-transformative social protection in crisis contexts: guidance note', Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resource Facility (STAAR).

6. Promote gender-responsive and inclusive system-wide approaches

Social protection can increase access to services and facilitate linkages to other relevant services and interventions to improve outcomes, particularly for women and girls (Box 3). To maximize effectiveness, promoting coherence and coordination across sectors and institutions is key. Investing in nationally led systems and implementation is important, such as supporting social protection systems with digital and interoperable information management systems and coordinated responses between different types of social protection (non-contributory, contributory, services) and across sectors and actors. For instance, it is important for women to have equal access to old age pensions, employment injury, sickness benefits, disability benefits, and affordable health care. Supporting coordinated approaches – including intersectoral linkages, referrals, and investments in case management – is particularly important to help close gaps in access to social protection and other services, especially in rural areas where it can

be more difficult for women to obtain information, register for social programmes or collect payments.

A gender responsive and inclusive approach also means improving access to social protection and linkages to labour market and skills-building opportunities for women across all life course risks, not only maternity protection or childcare.³² Additionally, linking social protection to other related areas – such as economic empowerment, green and care jobs, climate resilience, and gender-based violence prevention – can further amplify its impact whilst also contributing to women and girls' empowerment, voice and agency.

Cross-sectoral collaboration is therefore essential, particularly involving gender units and focal points embedded in them, and working towards a greater role for women and gender specialists within parliaments and ministerial accountability bodies.

Box 3:

System-wide approaches to social protection

Maximize the impacts of social protection systems, policies programmes through enhancing coordination and linkages to:

- **economic benefits and services**, such as livelihood support, access to financial services, skills training and education, and health and childcare;
- **a suit of social services**, such as through robust cross-sectoral referral pathways, access to case management including for prevention and response to gender-based violence, access to sexual and reproductive health services, and more;
- **employment and care policies**, including to support women's access to new green jobs and create decent care jobs as part of just transitions to sustainable economies and societies;

32 Heinemann, A. et al. (2024) Accelerating Gender Equality through Social Protection. World Bank, Washington, DC.

Box 3: System-wide approaches to social protection — *Continuation*

- **climate change adaptation** policies and programmes, to protect women and girls from climate risks, and promote sustainable and resilient livelihoods;
- **inclusive digitalization** strategies that close the gender gap in access to digital technologies, particularly in rural areas; and
- **measures to prevent and respond to discriminatory norms and gender-based violence** (including child marriage, witchcraft allegations and other harmful practices), for example through mechanisms such as joint planning, awareness raising, training of social protection case workers and robust referral pathways.

7. Support decent employment for the social service workforce

The social service workforce refers to a wide range of professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers, who work in paid and unpaid, governmental and non-governmental roles, with children, youth, adults, older persons, families and communities to ensure their healthy development and well-being.³³

The rights and conditions of social service workers delivering social protection and other related services - who are predominantly women - must be protected. Currently, the social service workforce is characterised by poor working conditions, low (or no) pay, a lack of employment protection and social protection. Priority should be given to addressing these challenges at different levels. For instance, policies should be in place to create a supportive environment for social

service workers, including supervision, incentives, decent pay, social protection and safe working conditions. Dedicated minimum budget allocations should be allocated, ensuring adequate staffing and resources. And support to the capacity development of social service workers through sector specific training. This includes confronting entrenched gendered and racialized hierarchies within the workforce through institutionalized training packages including supporting capacity on gender-sensitive service delivery for all the social protection workforce is essential. Ensuring a motivated and well-trained social sector workforce is important in its own right, as well as being crucial for effective social protection delivery and ensuring the rights, agency and dignity of social protection recipients.

33 Global Alliance (2024) Definition of the Social Service Workforce.

8. Ensure participation, leadership, representation and accountability across the social protection system

Social protection systems should be participatory and inclusive, ensuring meaningful involvement and leadership of actors from the national to the community level. Women's rights organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), informal worker groups, trade unions, and local networks should all play an active role across the social protection system (policy, programme design and implementation).

When social protection systems are strengthened through meaningfully participatory mechanisms, they can often be more gender-responsive, inclusive

and transformative because they better represent the needs of the population that social protection programmes are serving, and provide local solutions for addressing the barriers that local communities face.³⁴

Investments should be made to engage with and learn from civil society and social movements to enhance expertise and leadership on gender and social protection, and to work in coalition around shared interests to strengthen the integration of gender in social protection policy processes, ensuring stronger social accountability dimensions and support to hold duty bearers to account.³⁵

9. Invest sufficient financing and promote inclusive governance structures

Evidence shows that spending on gender-responsive social protection and public services is an investment that results in important returns and multiplier effects, including boosting GDP and creating jobs.³⁶ However, significant funding gaps remain, and predictable, sustainable, diversified sources of financing are necessary to ensure greater predictability of funding and uphold inclusive, gender-responsive social protection systems over the long term. For example, currently, two thirds of the additional government expenditure associated with universalizing old-age benefits is needed for women.³⁷

The foundation of sustainable financing for social protection systems should be provided by public

and domestic, and there is a need for progressive tax reforms and reallocation of domestic resources. It should be complemented where needed with international funding sources to be used as a catalyzer. Given the current financial context, in many low-income countries there is also a need to re-invigorate traditional sources of financing and financing grounded in global solidarity to help fill gaps and provide additional resources to social protection systems where necessary, including through international tax agreements, and increased efforts for formalization, including of new forms of work. Recent proposals by USP2030, for example, include a 0.5% global solidarity tax on corporate profits which could generate over \$50 billion annually, and stronger

34 Kamau, G. and Selby, S. (2025) The Role of Local Actors in Gender Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection Systems. Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice, and Resources Facility, STAAR.

35 UNICEF (2024). We Deserve Better: Unlocking the Power of Social Protection for Women and Girls.

36 UN Women 2019. World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Why Addressing Women's Income and Time Poverty Matters for Sustainable Development. New York: UN-Women. ILO, 2023. "The Benefits of Investing in Transformative Childcare Policy Packages towards Gender Equality and Social Justice." ILO Brief, October. Geneva: ILO. De Henau, J. with D. Budlender, F. Filgueira et al. 2019. "Investing in Free Universal Childcare in South Africa, Turkey and Uruguay: A Comparative Analysis of Costs, Short-term Employment Effects and Fiscal Revenue." Discussion Paper No. 28. New York: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

37 Cattaneo, U. et al. (2024) Financing gap for universal social protection. Global, regional and national estimates and strategies for creating fiscal space. ILO Working Paper 113.

international tax cooperation to curb illicit financial flows, significantly closing financing gaps.³⁸

Budget allocations must reflect gender equality commitments and be implemented with transparency and well-defined institutional roles to ensure their success. The generation of revenue and budget allocation must be underpinned by principles of

fairness, solidarity and redistribution. This requires assessing the distributional impacts of the whole fiscal system, including expenditure (e.g. who benefits from social protection investments) and revenue (e.g. who finances) from a gender and intersectional perspective. Political will - along with cross-sector support - must be cultivated to ensure enduring progress.

10. Ensure gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation through collection, analysis and use of gender, disability and age disaggregated social protection data

Designing and implementing effective social protection systems depends on robust data systems. Investment in the collection, analysis, and application of disaggregated data by gender, age and disability (at a minimum) is vital to inform improvements in coverage, adequacy and accessible delivery structures, based on evidence, and strengthening the gender-responsiveness and inclusiveness of existing social protection systems.³⁹

Efforts should be made at national and international levels to harmonize national data sources on gender and social protection. Building indicators to capture

gender-specific measurements, such as intra-household inequalities, differences in decision-making power and time use, accessibility and adequacy of social protection schemes and programmes is essential to understanding the performance of social protection systems and programmes in promoting gender equality and inclusivity. Data methodologies should include both quantitative and qualitative methods. Strengthening digital infrastructure can also enhance the effective use of data for service delivery, including through registration questionnaires and case worker assessments plus AI-powered data analysis.

38 USP 2030 and UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur (2025) A Call for Action on Financing Social Protection.

39 Razavi, S. et al. (2024) Making social protection work for gender equality: What does it look like? How do we get there? ILO Working Paper 132. Geneva: International Labour Office.

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