

Women's Major Group – Position paper: Sustainable Development Goals

Gender, poverty and the need for a social protection floor

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Defining the post-2015 development agenda has precise implications for women: given the structural gender discrimination that pervades the current system, any 'new' model will be just as gender-unequal as the current one unless there is a concerted and proactive effort to reverse this trend.

The link between gender equality, poverty eradication and social protection is crucial. The current model is characterized by the feminization of both poverty and exclusion from social protection. To be a woman not only means being poorer; it also means being less likely to be covered by social protection in terms of income security, access to essential services, and formal employment-related benefits. As a consequence, women are disproportionately vulnerable in social, economic and environmental terms, and this manifests itself in the form of increased poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

This is why the Women's Major Group considers the extension of social protection for women to be an essential element of the Sustainable Development Goals. Social protection is a core human right under international law,² and an extremely powerful tool for combating poverty, promoting income distribution and building resilient societies.

As a first, urgent step in this process, the Women's Major Group is calling for the implementation of national Social Protection Floors, in order to guarantee that all women in need have the right to income security and access to essential services (such as health, including reproductive health, education, housing, and water and sanitation). Social Protection Floors provide a useful and effective tool to help reverse gender-based power imbalances.

To be a woman means to be poorer and to have lower social protection

The feminization of poverty remains entrenched in our societies. Despite Millennium Development Goal 3's focus on women's empowerment, gender inequality persists, and women are still fighting against poverty and hunger, even there is only three years to go until the 2015 deadline for meeting these goals.³ As the OECD points out, "women account for roughly half of the world's population, but...comprise the majority of the poor and excluded."⁴ Worldwide seven out of ten people living below the poverty line (US\$1.25 per day) are women; the same is true for seven out of ten people dying from starvation.⁵

The feminization of poverty is a direct result of the current economic model which is predicated on power imbalances, making women more vulnerable from the social, economic and environmental points

¹ See www.sustainlabour.org.

² Under human rights law, States are legally obligated to establish social protection systems. This duty flows directly from the right to social security, which is articulated most prominently in Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/EPoverty/HumanRightsApproachToSocialProtection.pdf> (see p20)

³ See UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report, 2012.

⁴ See OECD, Promote gender equality and empower women, 2010, p. 11.

⁵ See UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report, 2011.

of view. From a social perspective, this model perpetuates a system of gender-based stereotypes, which often generates discrimination in terms of responsibilities assigned, access to and control over resources, and decision-making opportunities. From an economic perspective, it produces employment discrimination and segregation, often confining women to reproductive and care-related work, while men are more likely to be in charge of productive, remunerated work. Finally, from an environmental perspective, disparities in access to and reliance on natural resources increases women's economic vulnerability and exposure to environmental disasters.

The feminization of lack of social protection also remains as a critical challenge. Social protection is recognized as a fundamental human right by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),⁶ the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)⁷ and by other major United Nations instruments. With particular reference to women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) explicitly recognizes women's right to social security, including unemployment benefits, occupational safety and health, maternity protection and maternity leave, and the right to social services to enable family-work conciliation.⁸ Yet despite such recognition, only 28% of the global population has access to comprehensive social protection systems.⁹ Within this alarming scenario, women tend to be quantitatively and qualitatively worse off than men. Fewer women are covered by adequate social protection and — even when they are covered — they are usually provided with a lower set of social protection benefits.¹⁰

Worldwide fewer women are employed than men (47.6% and 75.3 % respectively),¹¹ and women's working lives are generally tougher. Women's work is more likely to be in the informal economy, their jobs are less remunerative and more precarious, and their careers are often interrupted for maternity or care responsibilities. As a consequence, their contributive capacity is lower and they may well, as a direct consequence, have less access to contribution-related benefits (which may include sickness, injury, unemployment, family, maternity, old-age, invalidity, and/or survivors' benefits).

Moreover, given that access to social protection usually depends on a formally recognized employment relationship, women — who are more likely to be working in the unrecognised informal economy, as casual labourers or homeworkers, or in care work and/or self-employment — are again more unlikely to be entitled to any social protection coverage.

Overall, unemployment and underemployment affect women's income security throughout life and, as a result, limit their ability to pay for essential services such as health, education and housing, among others. Women face higher financial barriers to access health care and they are more dependent upon their families.¹² In addition, there is continuing gender disparity in access to primary, secondary and tertiary education,¹³ and in accessing clean water and improved sanitation.¹⁴

⁶ See art. 22 and 25 of the Declaration.

⁷ art. 9 of the Covenant.

⁸ See art. 11.

⁹ ILO considers as "comprehensive social protection systems" those covering all branches of social security as defined in ILO Convention n. 102. Data is provided by the ILO World Social Security Report 2010/2011, http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_146566/lang--en/index.htm See p.1.

¹⁰ The last ILO World Social Security Report 2010/2011 shows a significant gender gap everywhere: for instance, in nearly all countries elderly women are covered to a much lesser extent than elderly men. http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_146566/lang--en/index.htm

¹¹ See UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report, 2012.

¹² See ILO World Social Security Report, http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_146566/lang--en/index.htm See p.69.

¹³ See UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report 2012, goal 3, p. 20.

¹⁴ See Human Development Report summary, 2011, Introduction.

BOX 1

CASE STUDY: Lack of decent work and social protection for Bangladeshi women in the garment industry

Many of the world's biggest apparel brands have turned to Bangladesh as a low-cost production base. As a result, 80% of Bangladesh's economy (worth US\$24 billion) is dependent upon the export of ready-made garments. Such revenues are generated at the expense of the three million plus people employed in the sector, which generally fails to meet minimum labor standards such as social protection, occupational health and safety, and freedom of association. Women are particularly affected, as they represent over 70% of ready-made garment workers. The majority of them are poor women from rural areas that, due to the limited options open to them in terms of rural livelihoods and urban formal work, are an easily accessible pool of informal labor that can be exploited in unsafe circumstances. Lack of compliance with basic labor standards has exposed workers to several fatal accidents over the last few years, as exemplified by the fire in Ashulia, an industrial zone north of Bangladesh's capital, on 24 November 2012, when the Tazreen Factory was destroyed and more than 122 workers, most of them women, lost their lives.

Source: Munima Sultana, "Negligent auditing kills over 120 workers in Bangladesh", ITUC Equal times, 26/11/2012. Tripti Lahiri and Syed Zain Al-Mahn Mood, "Bangladesh: how rules went astray", Wall Street Journal, 5/12/12.

As mentioned above, gender discrimination in social and economic roles also exacerbates women's environmental vulnerability. Women are at a higher risk from and are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation, because they have access to fewer resources — including land, credit, agricultural inputs, technology and training services, and participation in decision-making bodies — and this impedes their ability to avoid or adapt to various situations.¹⁵ The lack of basic social protection increases women's dependency on natural resources and decreases the likelihood that they can overcome environmental distress.

Reversing the trend: why social protection is crucial for gender equality

Social protection is a fundamental right that applies to all human beings. At the same time, it is an economic and social necessity for development based on social justice. Social protection is aimed at protecting people from the unexpected contingencies that occur in life, by providing basic income security and access to essential services throughout life. Thus, it constitutes a major driver for poverty

¹⁵ See Aguilar, L., Is there a connection between gender and climate change?, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Office of the Senior Gender Adviser, quoted by ILO, Green Jobs: Improving Climate for gender equality too, p.2.

eradication, because it reduces inequality and social exclusion, and promotes equal opportunities including gender equality.¹⁶

Moreover, social protection constitutes a fundamental pillar of decent work and a core tool for income distribution. In fact, one of the objectives of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda at the national level is "to achieve the extension of social security to all and...to ensure a just share of the fruits of progress", together with promoting rights at work, employment creation and social dialogue.¹⁷ Gender equality is included as a cross-cutting issue within this Agenda, in order to assure its concrete mainstreaming in any program aimed at promoting decent work.

Lastly, social protection contributes to long-term resilience to the current multiple crises, by acting as an automatic social and economic stabilizer¹⁸ and by protecting people in the planned transition to sustainable development, which will imply adjustments in the labor market. Social protection systems can contribute by minimising the risks of change, optimising gains for all workers and their communities, and providing green job opportunities for women.¹⁹ Once more, this function is particularly relevant for women's resilience, as they are among the most affected by these crises and the most vulnerable in terms of facing environmental distress.

Given the alarming picture on social protection coverage worldwide, as described above, and the specific lack of coverage with respect to women, the Women's Major Group strongly supports the urgent implementation of Social Protection Floors (SPFs) at the national level, as promoted by the ILO and the WHO and supported by the European Commission,²⁰ the United Nations, the G20,²¹ numerous governments and civil society organizations.

This global initiative is aimed at guaranteeing the right to basic social protection coverage to all in need. In this sense, the Floor is a strategy for the horizontal extension of coverage on the one hand (that is, to increase the quantity of people covered by basic social protection guarantees, to cover all those in need). On the other hand however, it must also be a first step towards vertical extension (that is, a step towards progressively increasing the quantity and quality of social protection benefits being provided).²²

As agreed in the recently adopted ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No.202, June 2012) guarantees should ensure, at a minimum, that all in need have the right, throughout their lives (youth - old age), to basic income security, as well as the right to access essential services as defined at the national level, including health, water and sanitation, education, food security, and housing.²³

Recommendation 202 makes explicit reference to gender equality as a key principle in terms of implementing social protection floors. National floors can be extremely powerful tools for reversing gender-based power imbalances both in terms of access to resources and in roles assigned. They answer women's specific needs and priorities related to poverty, social and economic exclusion, shifting their

¹⁶ See Preamble of ILO Recommendation 202. http://www.ilo.org/brussels/WCMS_183640/lang--en/index.htm

¹⁷ See ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, 2008.

¹⁸ See ILO Global Jobs Pact, where the role of social protection in economic and social recovery was highlighted.

¹⁹ See Sustainlabour, Background document to the Madrid Dialogue – A new paradigm for employment, social inclusion and poverty eradication in a sustainable planet, 2011.

²⁰ See European Commission, Social Protection in European Union Development Cooperation, 2012.

²¹ See G20 2012 conclusions referring to SPF.

²² See ILO, Social security for all. Building social protection floors and comprehensive social security systems, 2012.

²³ According to R. 202, art. 5, the SPF should comprise at least access to essential health care, including maternity care; basic income security for children, in order to access nutrition, education and care; basic income security for the elderly and for persons of an active age who are unable to earn sufficient income (in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability).

involvement from the informal to formal economy, and providing access to decent and green job opportunities.²⁴

In defining the floor, it is crucial to distinguish between the social protection approach and the safety-net approach. Safety nets are temporary relief programs, aimed at mitigating the transitory adverse effects of certain contingencies. They are needs-based, in the sense that they target the determinate needs of specific groups faced with the contingency; they are not integrated into the whole social protection system.²⁵ On the other hand, the social protection approach is rights-based: its prerequisite is the recognition of social protection as a fundamental right to be guaranteed to everybody, starting from the basic social protection rights included in the floor. Thus, while the net provides temporary relief to target groups because of an emergency, the floor is aimed at guaranteeing basic social protection to all beyond contingencies. Moreover, unlike the net, the floor is conceived as the first step of a comprehensive social protection system; it has to be linked with other social, labour and economic policies within an integrated national development strategy.²⁶

Given these key differences, the Women's Major Group advocates for a rights-based floor based on the social protection approach, rather than the safety-net one. This must be a first step towards developing comprehensive social protection systems that effectively include the gender perspective and promote women's empowerment.

The SPF-Initiative is both fair and feasible. ILO studies show that it is globally affordable at virtually any level of economic development, even if less developed countries need international support to implement it gradually.²⁷ For example, El Salvador, Benin, Mozambique and Vietnam could provide a major social protection floor for as little as 1-2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP); and Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nepal, Senegal and Tanzania could provide a universal basic pension for just over 1% of their GDP. In Brazil, the conditional cash transfer 'Bolsa Familia' already covers 46 million people, at a cost just 0.4% of its GDP (see Box 2).²⁸

Moreover, the cost of *not* acting to extend social protection will be much higher. As pointed out by the European Commission, "the cost of a well-designed floor is small if compared to the cost of failing to provide social protection,"²⁹ in terms of increased social, economic and environmental vulnerability.

²⁴ "The social protection floor provides an opportunity for a comprehensive review of the basic social protection systems in any country, and hence new means of addressing the spectrum of problems outlined above, many of which reflect the traditional power imbalances that have characterized gender relations throughout history". See Social Protection Floor Advisory Group report chaired by Michelle Bachelet (ILO-WHO, 2011), p. 59.

²⁵ An example is given by the social safety nets promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the context of market-based structural reform programs in Latin America and East Europe. See ILO, Bachelet Report, p.13.

²⁶ See Bachelet Report, p. 13.

²⁷ According to ILO costing studies related to low-income countries in Africa and Asia, the cost of a basic set of social transfers (excluding health care) that enable people to access or purchase essential services was estimated to be in the range of 2.3 to 5.7 percent of GDP in 2010. See Michael Cichon, Christina Behrendt and Veronika Wodsak, The UN Social Protection Floor Initiative, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011, p. 9.

²⁸ Data are provided by Michael Cichon, Christina Behrendt and Veronika Wodsak, The UN Social Protection Floor Initiative, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011, p. 9, as quoted by the International Trade Union Confederation- ITUC, The social protection floor: made simple, 2012, p. 2.

²⁹ European Commission, The 2010 European report on development, social protection for inclusive development, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2010, in ILO, Bachelet Report, p. 47.

With respect to financial responsibility for the floor's implementation, on the one side the Women's Major Group recognizes the overall and primary responsibility of the State; on the other side, it calls for the establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection, to support poorest countries in implementing the SPF. Such a position is coherent with ILO Recommendation 202, art.12, which states that, "National social protection floors should be financed by national resources. Members whose economic and fiscal capacities are insufficient to implement the guarantees may seek international cooperation and support that complement their own efforts."³⁰

4. Conclusions and Post-2015 recommendations: social protection for all with gender equality

The global extension of social protection is an essential tool for overcoming women's social, economic

BOX 2

GOOD PRACTICES FROM BRAZIL: the BOLSA FAMILIA¹ Example

One of the most successful examples to show that the Floors are both effective and economically feasible is the 'Bolsa Família' Programme of Brazil. Roughly translated as 'family grant,' it is the largest conditional cash transfer program worldwide. Launched in 2003, Bolsa Família provides income support to poor families, subject to their fulfilling certain human development requirements (such as ensuring child school attendance, take up of vaccinations, nutritional monitoring, and participation in prenatal and postnatal testing). It currently reaches 13 million families — about a quarter of Brazil's population — at a cost of 0.4% of Brazil's GDP (US\$3.9 billion in its 2010 budget). In terms of income distribution, Bolsa Família is estimated to have accounted for 15% of the improvement in the Gini Coefficient for Brazil between 1999 and 2009. Moreover, its positive effects in terms of poverty reduction and income redistribution also helped Brazil cope with the current multiple crises.

Source: ILO Bachelet Report, 2011, p. 13, 38, 47; ILO Social Security Report 2010-2011, p. 76. Official Bolsa Família webpage in Portuguese: <http://www.mds.gov.br/bolsafamilia>.

and environmental vulnerability, including in the light of promoting sustainable development. In this framework, ensuring universal access to basic social protection guarantees constitutes a human right, as well as being a direct and efficient way of reducing gender inequality, and a key tool for building resilient societies.

For this reason, the Women's Major Group strongly supports the ILO-WHO Social Protection Floor Initiative. In such a framework, the Women's Major Group recommends a goal of 'Social Protection for All with Gender Equality', to be reached by 2030, at least at the level of national Social Protection Floors (SPFs).

The national floors have to be right-based (avoiding the safety-net approach based on temporary relief programs), and they have to be designed as part of comprehensive social security systems. This way, the floors will be an instrument to extend protection to all in need (horizontal extension), as well as a first step towards progressively higher protection levels (vertical extension).³¹

³⁰ The proposal is also supported by the Workers and Trade Unions' Major Group. See ITUC Briefing Position paper "Post-2015 UN development agenda: towards decent work for all and universal social protection".

³¹ The reference for the minimum standards of social protection is ILO Convention 102, 1052.

The national floors have to be implemented according to ILO Recommendation 202 principles, which include universality of protection; entitlement to benefits prescribed by national law; special attention to the informal economy; realization with targets and within time frames; accountable financial management; financial, fiscal and economic sustainability based on social justice and equity; coherence with social, economic and employment policies; and high-quality public services to enhance the delivery of social security systems.

In coherence with the principle of “non-discrimination, gender equality and responsiveness to special needs” as recognized by ILO R.202, the Women’s Major Group calls for the inclusion of all women in need among the priority groups covered by the national protection floors, in order to guarantee their income security and access to essential services (health, including reproductive health, and education, housing, water and sanitation). Moreover, the Women’s Major Group calls for the effective crosscutting inclusion of women’s needs and priorities in the design, implementation and evaluation of the SPFs, starting from guaranteeing women’s participation in the related decision-making processes. This is the only way to design floors able to take into account and reverse gender-based discrimination (in access to resources, employment opportunities and social welfare systems) and sexual division of responsibilities (including care and non-remunerated work).³²

Concerning the floors’ financing, again in coherence with ILO Recommendation 202, art.12, the Women’s Major Group recognizes the overall and primary responsibility of the State in guaranteeing the Floor’s affordability; at the same time, the Women’s Major Group calls for the establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection, in order to boost SPF implementation in the least developed countries.

Gender Equality Targets

Accordingly, the Women’s Major Group sets the following gender equality targets:

- 1. Essential services:** universal financial and geographic access to essential services (health, including reproductive health, and education, housing, water and sanitation) for all women in need by 2030.
- 2. Income security:** universal provision of social transfers, in cash and in kind, for all women lacking minimum income and livelihood security, to be established by 2030 (prioritising single parent-households headed by women).
- 3. Vertical extension of coverage:** there should be a 30% increase in the number of women able to access social protection benefits beyond essential services and income security (as set out in targets 1 and 2 above), in accordance with ILO Convention 102 standards (that is, higher levels of protection in the branches of medical care, sickness benefit, unemployment benefit, old-age benefit, employment injury benefit, family benefit, maternity benefit, invalidity benefit and survivors’ benefit), with particular attention being paid to women’s emancipation from traditional job-related roles (such as domestic workers, self-employed workers, and at-home care workers).
- 4. Conciliation policies:** there should be a 30% increase in the availability of work–family reconciliation mechanisms prescribed by national law (such as nurseries/daycare centers for children; incentives facilitating paternity leave; social services aimed at reducing the pressure on unpaid and care work).
- 5. Participation:** there should be a 40% increase in the numbers of women effectively involved in participatory decision-making processes concerning the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection systems, including the national floors.

³² See ILO-WHO Bachelet Report, p. 60.

6. Gender-disaggregated data: the goal should include a target promoting the universal use of gender-disaggregated data, statistics and indicators for the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection systems, including the national floors, in coherence with ILO Recommendation 202, art.21.

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