



# SOCIAL PROTECTION AND GENDER EQUALITY

A policy brief by Act Church of Sweden and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation.  
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# WHAT IS SOCIAL PROTECTION?

Social protection is a term that covers pensions, child benefits and direct income support across the lifecourse, as well as access to health and social care. It refers to receiving support from the state during all phases of life, especially when we are particularly vulnerable. Although social protection, or social security as it is also called, is a human right, most people in the world still do not have access to it even at a very basic level. The 2030 Agenda, now agreed by all countries of the world, includes agreement on a “minimum package”, called a

social protection floor, that all countries must achieve by 2030 (see box below).

The commitment to implement social protection floors is a specific target (3) in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 End Poverty and underpins achievement of many of the other SDGs.

Evidence and extensive [research](#) show that social protection both directly improves people’s lives and indirectly has positive effects on a societal level. This brief highlights the importance of social protection in the work towards gender equality.

## SOCIAL SECURITY IN THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

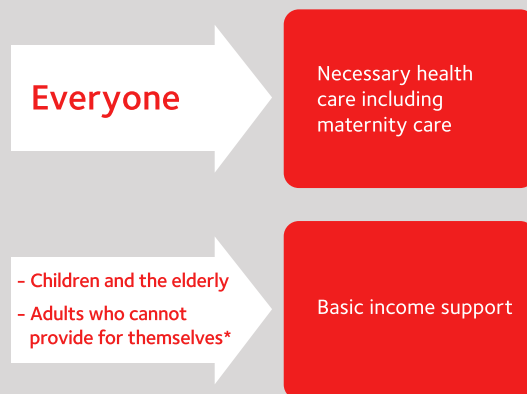
**Article 22.** Everyone, as a member of society, has the **right to social security** and is entitled to realization, ..., of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

**Article 25.1.** Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and **necessary social services, and the right to security** in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

## SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS

The [Social Protection Floors Recommendation \(No. 202\)](#) was adopted by the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2012. The recommendation sets out national floors of social protection, i.e. a minimum level of social security that all countries should introduce as soon as possible. The social protection floor should be a first step on the road to more comprehensive systems, which fulfil the right to social security. This basic level includes access to necessary health care for all, as well as basic income security during crises and fragile phases of life – childhood, illness and disability, pregnancy, parenthood, unemployment and old age.

[Universal Health Coverage \(UHC\)](#) is another political commitment, meaning that everyone in the world should have access to basic health care without financial hardship. This was adopted by the global community with the UN Political Declaration on UHC in 2019 and contained in SDG 3 Health for All.



\*e.g. due to illness, unemployment, motherhood or disability

### SDG TARGET 1.3 IMPLEMENT SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial inclusion of the poor and the vulnerable.

### FINANCING SOCIAL PROTECTION

The state bears the ultimate responsibility for social protection systems, but civil society also plays a key role. Women's rights organisations and other civil society actors can provide knowledge, influence the design and construction of systems, and contribute to the implementation and dissemination of information. Sometimes civil society, not least religious actors, complements the state by providing social services such as education, social care and health care.

Social protection must first and foremost be financed by the countries themselves, through social security contributions and taxes. International aid may also be needed to support the establishment of social protection floors, especially in the countries with the weakest economies. Today, a very small part of all aid is used to support the construction of security systems (just 1.2 per cent before the Covid-19 pandemic). A number of organisations mobilised by

the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors are advocating for the establishment of a [Global Fund for Social Protection](#) that will improve coordination and strengthen international support.

### FOR EVERYONE OR THOSE MOST IN NEED?

Sometimes social protection is only targeted at people who are considered poor and thus particularly in need of support. Unfortunately, the [targeting methods used](#) to identify "the poorest" are often inaccurate. Among other things, it leads to the exclusion of many who are actually entitled to be supported. Moreover, anyone can have an accident, get sick, become disabled or lose their livelihood, as clearly demonstrated by the coronavirus pandemic. Poverty targeted and means-tested programmes are also much more expensive to administer and can do stigmatise recipients.

Means-tested support will always be needed as a complement, but universal systems that include everyone should be the norm, with clear categories of target groups such as children, the sick, persons with disabilities and older persons. Such systems are generally popular, thus increasing the chance of public support both for long-term financing and for maintaining high quality. At the same time, conditions for social trust and a functioning [social contract](#) are strengthened. An important advantage of establishing clear categories for who are entitled to various benefits is that people then can understand for themselves whether they have the right to such benefits or not, which then also reduces the risk of corruption.



Many of the organisations that Kvinna till Kvinna and Act Church of Sweden collaborate with testify that women's exposure to violence increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. The image depicts Act Church of Sweden's humanitarian work in Colombia. Photograph: LWF Colombia

# WHY SOCIAL PROTECTION IS IMPORTANT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

**1. Social protection is particularly important for women and girls.** Women tend to live in poverty more often than men and are also more likely to have informal employment or be in low-paid jobs. In conflict-affected countries, women are particularly hard hit by the consequences of war, since violence against women increases. Women also have less savings of their own, as well as limited access to financial resources and services, such as the possibility to open bank accounts, take loans or inherit property. Discriminatory norms and laws are one of the [main reasons](#) for this, especially religious and traditional family law, which can mean, for instance, that a woman does not have the right to leave her home, work, inherit land or take a loan without her husband's permission.

Risks can arise throughout life in relation to sexual and reproductive health, such as pregnancy and parenthood, which creates a need for social protection. The same applies to, primarily women's exposure to intimate partner violence, which has worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic as people have been isolated in their homes. Particular risks for girls include teenage and early pregnancies, child, early and forced marriages and loss of education, all risks that have been exacerbated during the pandemic.

**2. Women are largely responsible for care work – paid and unpaid.** Public social care is an important part of social protection and is crucial for relieving women of [unpaid care work](#). Globally, women are estimated to perform [three times more hours](#) of unpaid care work than men. Women's workloads in care work have also increased dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic, when schools and pre-schools were closed down, and the need for health care and care in the home has increased. Since women also dominate the labour force in formal care provision, it is especially important for this group that wage levels and working conditions are decent.

## SDG TARGET 5.4 VALUE UNPAID CARE AND PROMOTE SHARED DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES

Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.



Girls and women are particularly vulnerable to many of the risks that social protection helps people to mitigate, such as poverty and violence, as well as risks related to sexual and reproductive health and rights. The image depicts the Church of Sweden's humanitarian efforts in Jordan. Photograph: Josefin Casteryd

# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION ON GENDER EQUALITY

**1. Women's economic empowerment and opportunities to formal employment outside the home is increasing.** Studies show that direct income support, not least when it is paid directly to women, gives recipients increased financial autonomy and opportunities to invest in activities that generate income. For many older women, a pension is the first individual income and provides a new kind of freedom. It shows the importance of individuals being entitled to social security, as opposed to just families or households. Access to child and care in older age reduces women's unpaid care work and is often a prerequisite for women to be able to work outside the home. This was a central issue in the Swedish day care debate in the 1970s, and it is receiving increased attention in the international debate.

**2. Reduced exposure to violence.** Many studies show that social protection leads to reduced intimate partner and domestic violence, even if this was not an explicit goal for the programmes. The reason for this is that the risk of conflicts in households decreases when acute hunger and poverty are alleviated. Moreover, the status and agency of women, including older women and women with disabilities, both in their own as well as other's eyes, are strengthened when they are recipients of financial support. Finally, their economic autonomy increases. It can also simply be about social protection giving women the financial means to leave violent relationships. There have been fears that benefits given directly to women could exacerbate family conflicts and increase women's exposure to violence. However, it has been difficult to find scientific evidence to support this claim.

**3. Stereotypical gender roles change – or are reinforced.** The design of social security systems can help to transform norms about men's and women's responsibilities for the provision of care and domestic work. Programmes designed to encourage girls' schooling can, for example, reduce the pressure for girls' participation in domestic work. The strengthened role of fathers, as seen in shared parental insurance, is another example of social protection policies contributing to the transformation of gender norms.

However, many social protection programmes introduced in developing countries in recent years may have reinforced traditional norms about women's main responsibilities for children and have rather increased the workloads of women. This has happened primarily when cash transfers are made conditional to certain behaviours. Several studies show that regular cash benefits do have positive effects on school attendance and vaccination rates – regardless of whether these are required conditions for receiving support or not. However, if the benefit is conditional on school attendance this can be counterproductive and increase women's workloads.



Social protection improves parents' ability to have their children vaccinated and to ensure that they go to school. It is usually not a lack of will that prevents them from doing this. The image shows Act Church of Sweden's work with mentor mothers in Eswatini. Photograph: Josefin Casteryd

**4. Gender-blind programmes can be discriminatory.** Many benefits are designed to be paid out to women. This is however not enough for said benefits to contribute to gender equality, as they can still be "gender-blind". Social programmes that do not take into account gender roles and the specific needs of women and men can disadvantage women and thereby increase inequality. If, for example, a woman's freedom of movement is limited, social benefits that requires them to obtain the money outside or far away from the homes, can prove to be discriminatory. Similarly, programmes that do not take into account sexual orientation, gender identity, age, [disability](#) or other multiple intersecting forms of discrimination can also limit people's access to social protection.

## ARE WOMEN SPENDING MONEY MORE WISELY THAN MEN?

For a long time, donors have preferred for social assistance be paid to women, as it has been widely considered that it will benefit the children and the whole family more. **There has been a strong perception that women tend to spend money more wisely than men. However, studies have not shown that this is the case.** The biggest difference in how men and women use benefits, seems to be that women tend to spend more on immediate, consumption goods such as food and school fees, while men tend to spend a slightly larger share on longer-term investments.

It is generally good practice to channel income support directly to women and doing so **not because they spend the money better, but rather as it can be an important – but not the only – way to increase equality between men and women.**

Source: IFPRI Discussion Paper 01903 (December 2019) Towards Gender Equality: A Review of Evidence on Social Safety Nets in Africa

## EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES THAT ARE PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Evidence shows that social protection can have positive impacts for gender equality, even if the interventions were not specifically designed with that aim in mind. In addition, there are specific programmes that are particularly important for gender equality:

- Income support and social insurance for informal employees.
- Sexual and reproductive health and rights as part of universal access to health care (see box on social protection floors), including specific interventions against gender-based violence.
- Childcare and care in old age.
- Pensions, since older women and widows are among the most vulnerable groups.
- Child benefits, alimony, family support and support for single parents.
- Free school meals reduce the risk of girls becoming malnourished, as boys may be prioritised in case of household food shortage. At the same time, this reduces the stress on women who are responsible for ensuring good nutrition for the family.

## THE CEDAW CONVENTION

The UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979. CEDAW is one of the strongest legal tools for working with gender equality and it has a good mechanism for monitoring and follow-up. Several of the articles in the Convention can be linked to social protection, including Article 10 on Education and Article 12 on Health Care, but the ones that are most often highlighted are Articles 11 and 13.

### ARTICLE 11 – THE LABOUR MARKET

Countries must ensure that women are not discriminated against in the labour market, especially with regard to employment, remuneration, conditions, benefits and occupational safety. Discrimination against women on the grounds of marriage, pregnancy or motherhood shall be prohibited. States should also promote childcare to enable parents to reconcile family life with professional responsibilities.

### ARTICLE 13 – SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Women must be guaranteed the same rights as men in society and economic life. This applies in particular to the right to family benefits, bank loans and other forms of financial resources, as well as the right to participate in leisure activities, sports and cultural life in all its forms.

For full texts see [CEDAW](#).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Support developing countries' efforts to implement their commitments on social protection floors for all, including basic health care.**

**2. Design support so that it is given to individuals rather than to households.** This includes ensuring that data collection is disaggregated on gender, age, disability and other factors, and that everyone has access to official forms of identification.

**3. When designing social protection systems, always take gender equality into account from the start.** For social programmes to contribute to greater gender equality, the driving and underlying forces of inequality must be counteracted, and the position of women actively strengthened. This entails, among many things, not to implement conditional cash transfers where benefits are paid on conditions that may increase the workload of women.

**4. As a general rule of thumb, pay family support to women** – and do so not because they have and take greater responsibility for the care in families, but do so because it can strengthen women's autonomy.

Moreover, ensure that payments are made through channels that women have access to, whether those channels be digital or not.

**5. Leverage the opportunities to combine social protection programmes with other active strategies to promote gender equality and gender norm changes.** This could, for instance involve supplementing financial support with services (“cash plus”) or creating links to sectors such as SRHR, peacebuilding, climate, humanitarian work and broader efforts for economic and gender equality. Moreover, it can entail working with men, religious or cultural leaders or other actors in positions of power to challenge gender norms.

**6. Invest in public child care and care of older persons.**

**7. Collaborate with others.** Various public authorities, but also civil society organisations and the private sector, have resources and skills that can contribute to well-implemented programmes. Any knowledge about work for gender equality needs to be utilised, regardless of where it may be found.

## SUGGESTED READING

**Act Church of Sweden (2020)** [The right to social security – a precondition for equity, gender equality and empowerment](#)

**EBA (2019)** [Applying a Masculinities Lens to the Gendered Impacts of Social Safety Nets](#)

**IFPRI (2019)** [Towards Gender Equality A Review of Evidence on Social Safety Nets in Africa](#), Discussion paper 01903.

**ODI (2021)** [Have social protection responses to Covid-19 undermined or supported gender equality? Emerging lessons from a gender perspective](#), ODI paper 611.

**Sida (2021)** [What Works? To Reduce Poverty Through Social Protection](#)

**The Church of Sweden, international work (2011)** [Cash in the hand, Rights based social protection as a method of eradicating poverty and hunger an anthology](#)

**UNICEF (2021)** [Protection & Gender Equality Outcomes Across the Life-Course A Synthesis of Recent Findings on Protection from Age- and Gender-based Violence, Exploitation and Neglect](#)

**UNICEF & UN Women (2021)** [Mainstreaming gender into social protection strategies and programmes: Evidence from 74 low- and middle-income countries \(unicef-irc.org\)](#)

*The digital version of this document contains clickable links to reading tips and embedded references.*

## **ABOUT ACT CHURCH OF SWEDEN**

Act Church of Sweden works long-term against poverty, oppression and injustice, and acts quickly when disaster strikes. We work together with churches, organisations and thousands of volunteers. Act Church of Sweden has partners worldwide and is a member of the ACT Alliance, a network of churches, grassroots movements and aid actors.

## **ABOUT THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION**

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation works with over 150 partner organisations in areas affected by war and conflict to achieve lasting peace by strengthening women's influence and power.