Where We Stand Position Paper: Social Protection Systems

Revised December 2023

Position Summary:

- Inclusive, effective and comprehensive social protection systems are essential to achieve social justice and decent work, ensure sustainable development and contribute to gender equality;
- To be protected when vulnerable, especially as a woman, is a human right as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Where Things Stand:

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines social protection as:

"Social protection, or social security, is a human right and is defined as the set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle. Social protection includes benefits for children and families, maternity, unemployment, employment injury, sickness, old age, disability, survivors, as well as health protection."

According to the United Nations, social protection systems include social assistance (e.g., cash transfers), social insurance (e.g., health insurance), and labour market programmes (e.g., unemployment benefits). They have the effect of empowering all women and girls by enabling their access to education and work.

Social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should enable the fulfilment of basic human rights for all. They would ensure, as a minimum, that everyone has access to essential health care and basic income security throughout their lives, securing effective access to goods and services which are defined as necessary to survival, including the provision of basic public services like shelter, water and sanitation.

Universal Social Protection is a policy objective anchored in global commitments such as Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security," and other international commitments, including the ILO.

Despite significant progress in the extension of social protection in many parts of the world, the right to social security is not yet a reality for a majority of the world's population. Social protection coverage often excludes those who need it most, such as informal workers. In 2022, 58% of the informal workforce globally was comprised of women who had limited access to social protection systems.

According to the ILO, only 47% of the global population is effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, while the remaining 53% – as many as 4.1 billion people – remain completely unprotected. ILO estimates also show that only 29% of the global population are covered by comprehensive social security systems that include the full range of benefits, from child and family benefits to old-age pensions. ILO data highlights that, as of 2021, only 45% of women with newborns worldwide receive a cash maternity benefit. Therefore, inclusive, effective and comprehensive social protection is not only essential to achieve social justice and decent work, but it is vital for creating a fair, sustainable and resilient future.

Where things need to go...

Fundamental Action:

Quality education accessible beyond the primary level can drive positive change by offering all women and girls the opportunity to develop their full capacity; for instance, by engaging in social entrepreneurship or finding meaningful employment, thus enabling an income sufficient to sustain herself and her family. Along with the provision of supportive health systems, adequate housing to meet family needs and the safety of social security financial provisions across the life span, women and girls could be lifted out of poverty and provided with a self-sustaining future.

All States should recognise and implement existing social protection agreements to stem the rising tide of inequality. To be protected is a right stated in Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed by the Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202) of the International Labour Conference in 2012. The implementation of universal social protection system floors is an essential step to alleviating poverty by ensuring that the most basic human rights are fulfilled.

All States should leverage digital technology to expand the foundations on which to strengthen social protection systems. However, greater emphasis must be placed on disaggregated data collection and the need to recognise the future increased use of financial transfers for benefits payments through technology, including electronic banking. This is necessary to ensure that no woman is left behind.

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International recognises that effective and comprehensive social protection is not only essential to achieve social justice, gender equality and decent work, but it is vital for creating a sustainable and resilient future. The meaningful inclusion of all women and girls in all aspects of public life has been statistically proven to advance economies, realise social cohesion, and contribute to sustainable and peaceful communities.

In addition, investments in universal healthcare, including access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, adequate and affordable housing, clean water and sanitation, and low-cost nutritious food are essential to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Such investments, alongside access to quality education, can put all women and girls on a positive footing to empower and enable them to work towards a self-sustaining future.

Soroptimist International pledges to act now, for present and future generations, to turn our world towards a sustainable and resilient path by 2030 and leave no one behind.

Sources:

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