Feminist Priorities for Extending and Adapting Social Protection in AFRICA 2022

FINDINGS FROM A POLICY DIALOGUE & CONSULTATION
Gender inequality is a key dimension of poverty, vulnerability and exclusion. Girls and women are disproportionately likely to live in poverty, particularly adolescent girls and women, who are 25% more likely to live in poverty than men and boys. Living in a female-headed household increases that percentage to almost 50%.

Vulnerability and exclusion are also highly gendered, from gender-based violence (which one in three women experience during their lifetimes, with particular risks for adolescent girls) to rising rates of child marriage. An estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18th birthday. Over 50 million (nearly one third, 32%) of girls and women reside in Eastern and Southern Africa, with the largest share in Ethiopia.

In West and Central Africa, the prevalence of child marriage is 41%, which means that 4 out of every 10 girls (almost 60 million) is married before the age of 18. The continent is home to 140 million girls and women who have undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In West and Central Africa, almost a third of women and girls aged 15-49 have undergone FGM. Health disparities are stark – in West and Central Africa, only 51% of pregnant adolescent girls (15-19) had access to at least 4 pre-natal visits and only 54% gave birth with the assistance of a skilled birth attendant.

Education is one of the most protective factors that an adolescent girl can enjoy, and school enrollment is positively correlated with reduction in unwanted pregnancies, child marriage and many other critical outcomes. Unfortunately,

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the COVID-19 pandemic kept millions of girls from attending school and we are now seeing the impact of containment measures on teen pregnancy. In West and Central Africa almost a third (28%) of adolescent girls are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and the region has not achieved parity in primary education yet. As an example of the barriers that girls face, with only half of the countries in East and Southern Africa having legislation and policies on the management of pregnant students and their re-entry to school, pregnant and adolescent mothers often lose opportunities for education and employment. For example, a study from South Africa suggested that adolescent girls and young women who are the primary caregivers of their children are 77% more likely to drop out of school than their peers without children.

As a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing and protecting people facing poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, social protection is a critical right for every child facing these gendered experiences— and also for women, parents and communities at large. Social protection measures— from cash transfers and school feeding programmes, to pensions and health insurance, to public works programmes and social services – are critical to tackle gendered poverty, inequality, vulnerability and exclusion.

Indeed, there is extensive evidence that social protection can contribute to addressing gendered risks, needs, and inequality, as outlined in UNICEF’s Conceptual Framework on Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection. For example, there is significant evidence that cash transfers and ‘cash plus’ approaches— can contribute to the following:

**Economic security:**
- reducing women’s monetary poverty
- and increasing women’s savings and access to productive assets, such as in social cash transfer programme in Zambia.

**Improved health and education:**
- increasing girls’ access to education, such as in Pakistan’s Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and girls’ and women’s access to health services, such as the Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP) programme in Ghana.

**Women’s and girls’ empowerment:**
- strengthening decision-making about bodily autonomy and contraception, as achieved in Brazil’s Bolsa Familia program.

**Improved psychological wellbeing and protection:**
- including evidence that cash transfer programmes tend to reduce intimate partner violence, and promising findings that social protection may contribute to a reduction in child marriage— such as in Ethiopia’s Productive Social Safety Nets (PSNP) programme.
However, we know that social protection systems are often gender-blind (only 20% of social protection measures implemented during COVID-19 were gender-sensitive), with significant gaps in coverage and adequacy at key, highly gendered points in the lifecycle. For example, families are often left without support in pregnancy and the early years of a child’s life – a time at which paid work can become very challenging due to gender norms relating to care and inadequate policies, issues compounded for young women. Yet more than half of all mothers with newborns are deprived of maternity benefits and face woeful investments in childcare services which impede their ability to generate income and care for their families. This lack of support represents a structural barrier that contributes to the feminization of poverty and the persistent gender wage gap in even the wealthiest countries.

UNICEF is now seeking to support countries to shift towards gender-responsive or transformative approaches to social protection wherever possible, at a minimum so that social protection programmes and systems respond to girls’ and women’s gendered needs by design, and, where possible, designing and implementing programmes/systems that actively seek to shift harmful gender norms and address the structural causes of gender inequality.

We know that ‘cash plus’ – linking cash transfers with information and services – has significant potential to address poverty and gender inequality in a more holistic and effective way, including shifting gender norms. For example, the Government of Tanzania’s cash plus programme focuses on a package of support to adolescents in households reached by the national cash transfer programme, which has shown multiple impacts across a range of outcomes, from reducing sexual violence experienced by adolescent girls, to increasing gender equitable attitudes amongst adolescent boys. What would happen if national social protection programmes – often reaching millions at scale – were intentionally designed to support gender equality outcomes, including on girls’ education, gender-based violence, child marriage and unpaid care?

In June 2022, UNICEF brought together civil society organisations working for and with girls and women on gender inequality from across Africa for a policy dialogue, workshop and discussion on three key themes:

- Analysis of the challenges and opportunities for girls and women
- Feminist priorities for extending coverage and adequacy of social protection systems
- Practical actions to move forwards and opportunities to work together

This short brief aims to simply and concisely summarise the findings of this dialogue and workshop.
The group discussion focused on eight priority themes in relation to challenges for girls and women:

1. **Participation**: One of the challenges in girls’ programmes is lack of meaningful participation of and consultation with girls to design. In the words of one participant in the discussion, “constantly girls are being approached as subordinates to the work that’s being done about them and for their own interests” – we need a conversation WITH girls to define priorities.

2. **Adolescent girls lost in the gap**: between youth and children, adolescent girls are lost in a gap for analysis, programming and advocacy.

3. Decisions about policies and programmes are still plagued by **poor data and lack of disaggregation**. It is seen as ‘too basic to be important’ and yet it is still not happening consistently.

4. **Barriers to girls’ education** are very stark, especially at this point in the pandemic;

5. **Girls’ & women’s sexual and reproductive health rights** are sidelined and undermined, especially in emergencies where they are still not seen as life-saving or priorities.

6. **Addressing harmful practices that girls and women are subjected to need to be prioritized**: especially the most marginalised girls and women. These harmful practices are a key barrier to participation, voice, agency and freedom.

7. **Pregnant teenagers and girls who become mothers are particularly marginalised**: facing stigma, minimal or zero economic, health, nutrition and social support, and barriers to returning to school (including lack of childcare).

8. **Lack of intersectional approaches**: programmes that consider specific needs of girls and women with disabilities for example.

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**Positives and opportunities identified or arising from the discussion:**

1. Perceived shifts in some stakeholders now more ready to speak about feminist priorities and the issue of girls’ rights from a different perspective – this shift needs to be used as a catalyst for change on the ground.

2. Increasing use of gender-responsive budgeting as a tool to see where financial resources are being committed and advocating on the grounds of this concrete analysis.

3. Social protection seen by some as having a comparative advantage in comparison with other sectors for reaching the most marginalised/leaving no one behind and therefore a key opportunity for marginalised girls and women.

4. From some organisations in the room a perceived greater level of trust and accountability from social protection programmes – “change tends to be more visible.”
Feminist priorities for extending coverage and adequacy of social protection systems

The group of organisations participating in the policy dialogue explored key feminist priorities for extending coverage and adequacy of social protection programmes and systems, including key barriers, and recommendations for social protection policymakers and practitioners in national governments, UN agencies, donors, academic institutions and the private sector. These are summarised below.

(A) Key design and operational recommendations

1. **Actively apply evidence on gender-responsive, age-sensitive social protection to programming**, including recent evidence generation – there are many examples where this is not happening.

2. **Assess emerging trends to respond to shifting needs**: for example, people moving from rural settings to conduct FGM in Nairobi with official doctors. We need contextually specific programmes – and for them to be informed by the lived experience of those we are trying to reach. For example, experiences in and within different areas where girls reside can be very different. Gender inequality and its manifestations are not static.

3. **Ensure programmes don’t reinforce gender inequalities** through their design and implementation, from public works programmes to social assistance. However, also designing social protection programmes to contribute to gender-transformative goals such as promoting women’s economic opportunities, girls’ economic security, and access to education.

4. **Take action to remove basic barriers**: requirements for formal identification are still a major barrier. There is a need to remove these hurdles or find alternatives to identify participants in programmes in a dignified, rights-based way.

5. **Prioritise marginalised girls**, including teenage mothers, those in child marriages, survivors of violence, girls with disabilities, heads of households, etc. Consider how the social protection programme or policy is specifically addressing these groups’ needs.

6. **Ensure targeting of benefits and information is inclusive**: participants noted that the benefits and information often still go to the head of the household, due to a combination of issues including: explicit targeting to ‘household heads’ (in itself a problematic concept), low digital inclusion, financial inclusion or literacy of women in some contexts, and because care responsibilities sometimes preclude adolescent girls and women from accessing the schemes.

7. **Support information for girls and women as a right, as part of social protection programmes**: e.g. education on sanitary products, basic information about girls’ hormones and menstrual cycle, etc. In addition, awareness of benefits and accountability mechanisms was identified as still being a major issue that needs addressing through greater communications efforts.

8. **Engage men, boys and community leaders**: they can be barriers to change, or allies for change - programmes need to engage either way, including with cultural and religious leaders.

9. **Step up on integrating gender into shock-responsive social protection**: women and girls’ are made more vulnerable by shocks – but social protection mechanisms often don’t respond quickly enough or reach those in need, including girls and women.
on the move. Shock-responsiveness is key – particularly in light of the current food insecurity crisis, which is highly gendered and also intertwined with multiple climate shocks and ongoing socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Current and future disaster response plans need to take this into account, including tailored needs for psychosocial support, gender-based violence (GBV) response, food, water and firewood.

10. **Apply a human rights-based approach to designing social protection programmes, taking a broader and holistic view**, which will also contribute to better programming/systems overall as well as gender equality outcomes for girls, boys, women and men.

11. **Support voice and agency of girls and women intentionally**, including tackling low self-esteem and confidence which can be a material barrier to accessing social protection provisions.

(B) **Key policy, advocacy, leadership and funding recommendations**

1. **Focus on making a more effective investment case for social protection for girls and women and the population at large**: several participants felt that stakeholders in central positions of power “are yet to realise that social protection is an investment that will build the economy” – and a called for further robust studies that support the investment case for the economy, livelihoods and multi-sectoral outcomes.

2. **Leverage social protection to recognise and respond to the increased oppression of girls and women**, in light of the growing movement of intolerance and backlash in many contexts. Specifically, invest in civic education and addressing harmful gender norms through programming, including working with adolescents.
3. **Recognise the care agenda as central to girls’ and women’s rights and social protection:** participants noted that resistance to the idea of maternity grants/subsidizing childcare is shaped by a fundamental dismissal of care work as valuable, or as work at all - yet that it is critical for women, adolescent parents and children in Africa. Participants highlighted that this requires dedicated people, paid sufficiently, and won’t happen automatically – programmes and budgets must recognise this and be organised accordingly.

4. **Work for long term change** – short term projects, funding and investment is a significant barrier to change particularly as long term results require time and consistency to manifest.

5. **Fund and take action on coordination:** many organisations are doing the same work, working in siloes. To quote one participant, “if we work in siloes we will forever be leaving people behind.” Participants also highlighted the need for strong national and sub-national leadership on social protection to become gender-transformative, including working across ministries and at multiple levels of government and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Participants highlighted that this requires dedicated people, paid sufficiently, and won’t happen automatically – programmes and budgets must recognise this and be organised accordingly.

### (C) Key learning recommendations

1. **Invest in a thriving learning agenda on social protection for girls, cutting across siloes:** including sharing good practice, what is working, and what is not working. Adaptive learning will be key: for example participants highlighted that even some forms of violence are changing. Participants highlighted that gender inequality is not static, and that manifestations shift).

2. **Get better at capturing and sharing case studies** that can inspire others and influence future practice. Including for example working with communities, religious leaders, men and boys, etc.

3. **Advance our knowledge on the priority issues:** we know that resources are finite, so how do we maximise the concentration of resources through multisectoral approaches so we reach as many as we can? Girls’ and women’s rights organisations highlighted this as a key question for UN agencies, researchers and governments to prioritise.
Girls’ & women’s rights organisations’ perspectives on social protection’s role in tackling different sectoral issues

1. Social protection should be informed by analysis of specific needs and always consider whether the programmes are inclusive of those at risk, whether GBV, child marriage or other vulnerability criteria.

2. Using social protection approaches to address barriers to girls’ education and reduce child marriage was identified as key, alongside enhancing access to sexual reproductive health rights services and GBV response services, and information about girls’ and women’s rights. Bursaries, fee waivers, top ups and other design and implementation features related to education were specifically highlighted as measures that might address both girls’ education and child marriage.

3. Economic empowerment, skills and training seen as a critical priority: including responding to migrant women’s needs and those trading across borders, as these groups need specific support and face specific barriers. Skills and training were identified as priorities not just for economic empowerment and security but also wider rights – including life skills, financial literacy, and digital skills. As one participant stated, “There is no social empowerment, no freedom from violence, without economic security.”

4. Social protection should be designed with the evidence in mind on its potential to contribute to reducing intimate partner violence, but: participants recommended it be designed to do so with gender-transformative objectives, and to ensure links are made to response services for survivors of violence who (given the prevalence of GBV) will be part of any social protection programme. Positive impacts should also not be assumed, with robust GBV risk mitigation as a non-negotiable

5. Social protection can and should provide economic support during times of unpaid care work such as for young children: social protection ought to act as “a cushion” at this time where paid economic opportunities may not be feasible.

6. Social protection is also key to address monetary poverty for female headed-households and older women, and participants emphasised the need to consider social protection and gender needs across the lifecourse, and not just cash transfers for one age group.

7. A multi-sectoral approach is needed to help teenage pregnant girls and parents: integrated systems are key. A multisectoral approach is imperative to tackle the direct determinants of adolescent pregnancy and the multiple inequitable outcomes for adolescent mothers, as well as to address the structural normative and systematic issues affecting the health, wellbeing, empowerment, and engagement of rights of adolescent girls and mothers. More broadly, there was consensus on the need for integrated packages of support and multisectoral approaches in general: participants emphasised the need to increase access to services and facilitate linkages to other relevant programmes and interventions to improve women’s and girls’ outcomes in health and education, the labour market, and protection from violence and abuse.
1. **Need greater access to/uptake of existing evidence** (qualitative and quantitative) on social protection’s impacts – and further investment where there are gaps in knowledge relating to gender-responsive social protection. Evidence around different design and implementation choices for social protection programmes seeking to remove barriers to girls’ education or reduce child marriage were particularly highlighted.

2. **Girls’ experiences are important and neglected in the research.** For example, one participant highlighted a poem from a girl that powerfully articulates how she felt about school being a protective factor against child marriage, saying: “if I wasn’t in school, I would have been eaten by the vultures.”

3. **There is a significant amount of evidence-generation from CSOs themselves which is sidelined,** including on GBV and education, psychosocial support as a critical component of support, the importance of information to access social protection and other services (e.g. GBV response services, services for teenage parents), and specific challenges and experiences in reaching marginalised communities – as well as economic exclusion of young women in public and private sectors, economic analysis related to FGM, child marriage and social protection, analysis of policies and responses to COVID, life skills, parenting, and more. Participants highlighted the disconnect and siloes between NGOs, government and UN on how we use data we have and what evidence is generated. xxvii

4. **Other gaps highlighted included poor data on concerns, needs and priorities of girls and women for social protection support,** including barriers to accessing markets, and how they would define their priority needs and preferences – especially in conflict contexts. A key recommendation highlighted throughout was the importance of using disaggregated data when planning and designed programmes, and to consult with girls’ and women in an appropriate, meaningful way regularly throughout a project/policy cycle.

5. **A social protection community of practice for girls’ and women’s rights organisations in the region doesn’t yet exist** – participants shared an appetite to create something like this, and share good experiences and evidence together.
1. **Help ensure evidence generated by CSOs reaches decision-makers in government, civil services and parliament, and ensure CSOs have access to credible data to undertake their own analysis.**

2. **Create partnerships and provide resources, including funding for economic empowerment programmes and not only for perceived “social” issues** such as child marriage or harmful practices. We need to complement these interventions and build multi-sectoral packages of support instead of working in silos.

3. **Cut through power dynamics** between donors, governments and CSOs, including **flexibility and trust for implementation** given the dynamic and changing issues implementing CSOs face on the ground and **bringing in the voices of girls and women into policy dialogue.**

4. **Make supporting Community Based Organisations (CBOs) the first choice:** they are likely closest to the community and less likely to disappear when funding stops.

5. **Support advocacy to increase coverage of programmes so more girls’ and women have access to them,** including new social protection programmes that reach more people (horizontal expansion) and increasing how much recipients receive in existing budget allocation to SP programmes for greater impact (vertical expansion).

6. **Prioritise multi-sectoral packages of support** rather than picking one sectoral priority based on a top-down approach.

7. **Support a social protection community of practice at the CSO level.**

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27 Participation was skewed towards east and southern Africa and did not take place directly with girls, so follow-up policy dialogues and workshops will be considered, including specifically in West & Central Africa and North Africa.
28 For example, no stakeholders in the workshop had heard of the Transfer Project until now.