

Promoting Gender-Transformative Change through Social Protection

An analytical approach

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Introduction

Social protection – the set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life course (UNICEF, 2020) – has expanded across many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Studies found social protection reduced household income poverty and food and economic insecurity, and also promoted positive development outcomes for women and girls in particular. However, whether and how social protection programmes and systems can address pre-existing gender inequalities in the design, implementation and finance of these programmes is yet to be fully explored, especially its potential to move from improving the *condition* of women and girls (such as addressing their daily needs, workloads and responsibilities) to also contributing to broader gender equality outcomes, through addressing structural barriers to gender equality – namely, shifting women and girls' *position* in societies.

To strengthen social protection's role to contribute to gender equality, it is important to continue building a robust evidence base to identify 'what works', 'how' and 'why', to enable social protection programmes and systems to address underlying gender inequalities and promote gender-equal outcomes. This also requires a clear analytical approach to research and evaluations that can help guide the integration of gender considerations into all aspects of social protection systems – from intent and design, through implementation and financing, to monitoring and evaluation. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti's Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP) research programme was established to investigate 'what works', 'how' and 'why', to enable social protection to contribute to gender equality across the life course, including to strengthen the conceptualization and analysis of gender equality in evidence around social protection.

Research objective and methodology

This brief summarizes a UNICEF Innocenti report (Camilletti et al., 2022) that proposes and discusses an analytical approach to generating evidence on gender-responsive social protection¹ for gender-transformative change.² It builds and operationalizes the Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP) conceptual framework, and draws on a select body of theoretical, conceptual and empirical literature across a range of social science disciplines that has conceptualized the linkages between gender and social protection. The theoretical frameworks include feminist economics, neoclassical economics, social norm theories and political economy approaches, from which we tease out insights on how gender inequalities are interlinked with social protection and how the latter should be designed to address gender inequalities. Further, we briefly review the empirical literature to explore if and how it has tested specific change pathways and mechanisms in our analytical approach, as well as outstanding evidence gaps that need to be addressed.

The analytical approach thus operationalizes the GRASSP conceptual framework and seeks to help with filling gaps in existing social protection evidence and enable: (a) the testing of these change pathways and mechanisms in empirical research, across a range of settings and contexts, including fragile and conflict-affected settings where evidence is notoriously lacking; and (b) the identification of implications for future research and evaluations.

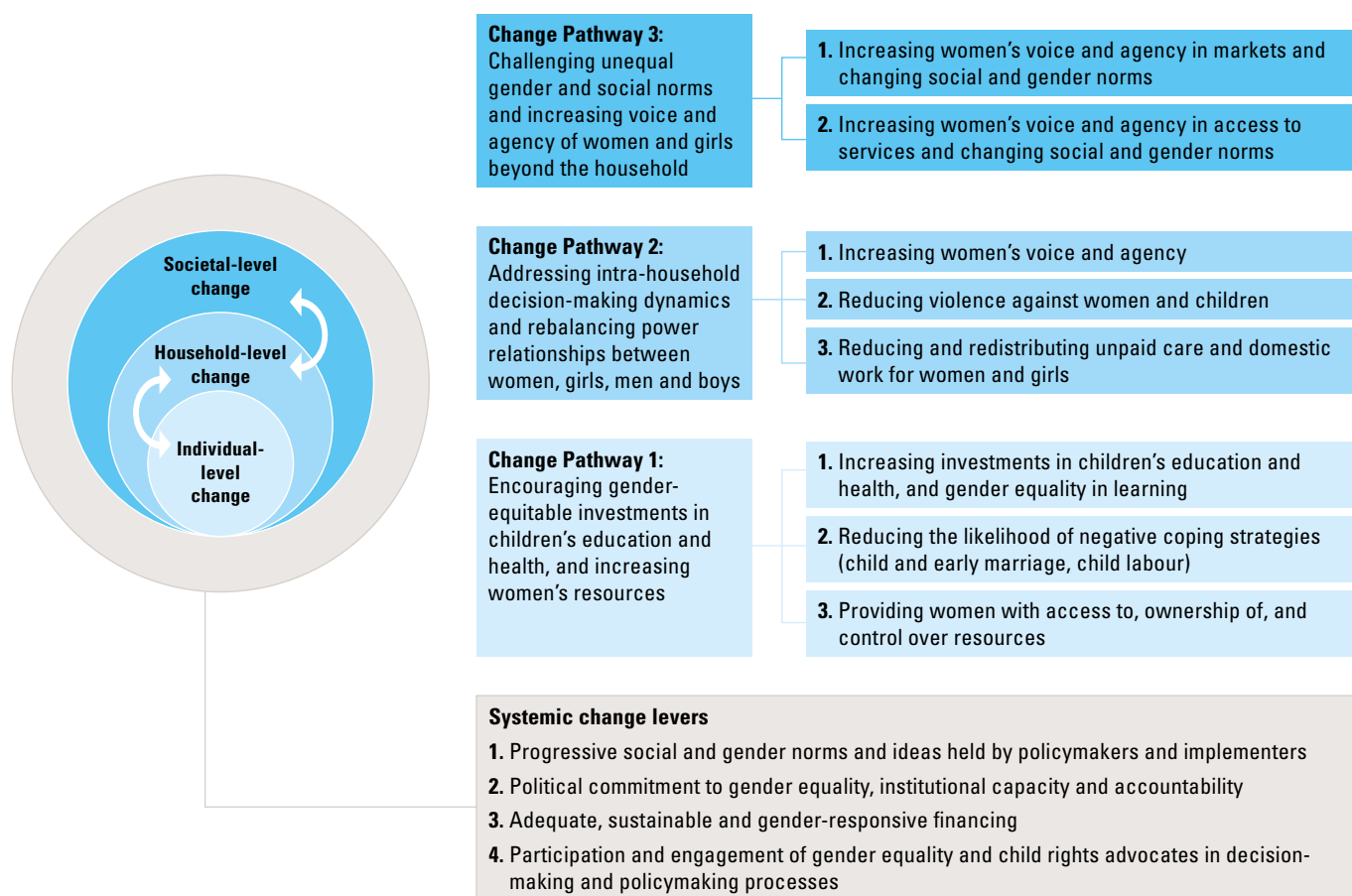
- Gender-responsive social protection** (systems, programmes, policies, strategies) refers to social protection that acknowledges gender dynamics and deliberately responds to women and men's specific needs (FAO, 2018) through gender-equitable strategies. In these interventions, gender equality is a central outcome of development investments (not just a means to achieve other goals) (UNICEF, 2020).
- Gender-transformative change** refers to changes at the individual, household, societal and system levels that explicitly address "unequal gender relations in order to promote shared power, control of resources, decision making and support for women's [and girls'] empowerment" (UNDP, 2019), and achieve gender equality.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE THROUGH GENDER-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The analytical approach is structured as a socio-ecological framework (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979) with three levels – namely, individual, household and societal. While Bronfenbrenner (1979) places the child at the centre of the framework (the individual level), in adapting the framework, we centre both the child and the woman at the individual level, as both women and children face specific, gendered vulnerabilities, discriminations and inequalities which often make them worse off, relative to men. At each of these three levels, there is a corresponding change pathway³ through which gender-responsive social protection can contribute to gender-transformative change, through specific design, implementation and financing features.

It is further underpinned by systemic change levers representing factors that the existing evidence suggests can make social protection systems gender-responsive. These three levels and respective change pathways are interconnected, reinforcing and building on each other. They are also not conceived as necessarily chronologically linear or sequential. Instead, change can happen at different times or simultaneously at various levels, and change at one level can trigger change at another. This interconnectedness also raises implications for evidence generation, as research must be carried out both at each level and at the intersections of various levels.

Figure 1: Gender-transformative change pathways and mechanisms across three levels of a socio-ecological framework, and systemic change levers



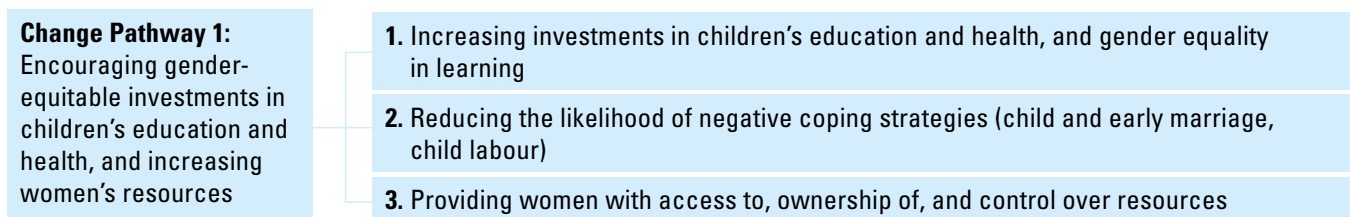
Source: Authors' elaboration, as in Camilletti et al. (2022).

³ **Gender-transformative change** pathway refers to a set of changes happening at one level of the socio-ecological framework. **Gender-transformative change mechanism** refers to one of these changes, happening at one level of the socio-ecological framework, and materializing following specific features of social protection programmes and systems (e.g., design and implementation features).

Change Pathway 1

Individual-level change – encouraging gender-equitable investments in children’s education and health, and increasing women’s access to and use of resources

Figure 2: Change Pathway 1



At the individual level, gender-responsive social protection can contribute to gender-transformative change through three hypothesized mechanisms. First, by increasing gender-equitable household investments in children’s education and health and nutrition, it contributes to intergenerational well-being, breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and supporting safe transitions to adulthood (Change Mechanism 1). Second, by helping households manage risks and withstand shocks, it helps in reducing the risk that households adopt negative coping strategies, such as child labour and child and early marriage, that are gendered in their nature, prevalence and effects on well-being (Change Mechanism 2). Third, by increasing women’s access to, ownership of and control over resources (both material and immaterial), it increases both women’s material condition and strengthens their position within the family (Change Mechanism 3).

Theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence

Social protection programmes, such as cash or in-kind transfers or access to services, can encourage household investments in women and children’s education and health through easing financial constraints – for example, by lowering out-of-pocket costs in education and health expenditures (where these are still a barrier), and by reducing indirect opportunity costs (e.g., the cost of the child attending school instead of performing income-generating activities such as paid or unpaid work) (Change Mechanism 1). Evidence from evaluations of programmes such as cash transfers confirms that they have been successful in increasing children’s school enrolment and attendance, and increasing the uptake of health services by women (including maternal healthcare services), among other outcomes.

Second, theoretical frameworks predict that social protection can smooth consumption and increase income security, especially during crises and shocks, where households may resort to negative coping strategies. These include child labour and child and early marriage, which are gendered in their nature, prevalence and effects on children’s well-being (Change Mechanism 2). Empirical evidence suggests that the relationship is complex and depends on the design of programmes too, which may in some cases inadvertently increase the prevalence of child labour and child marriage.

Third, theoretical frameworks predict that transferring social protection benefits or services directly to women can contribute to their human development by increasing the resources they control, own and have access to, reducing their poverty and improving their well-being (Change Mechanism 3). Specifically, intra-household bargaining models suggest that targeting women directly in social protection can improve women’s condition, through increasing their access to, control over and ownership of (material) resources. Empirical evidence confirms that women benefit from receiving cash or in-kind transfers, access to labour market programmes and social care services, experiencing positive outcomes such as reduced poverty, increased consumption, better access to productive assets and increased labour market participation, among others (see Perera et al., 2022; Camilletti, 2020; Bastagli et al., 2016, and literature referenced therein).

However, two caveats must be kept in mind. First, simply transferring resources (however defined) or providing services to women may not be sufficient to change power dynamics within the household and to improve women's position. This may require increasing women's ability to make and influence decisions within the household. Second, feminist researchers have warned of the risk that social protection programmes – especially those that seek to achieve children's objectives rather than women's objectives or broader household-level ones, and those that impose conditionalities on recipients in order to achieve such objectives – may risk perpetuating gender stereotypes around women's caregiving roles. Change Pathway 2 will unpack further how social protection can contribute to gender-transformative change at the household level.

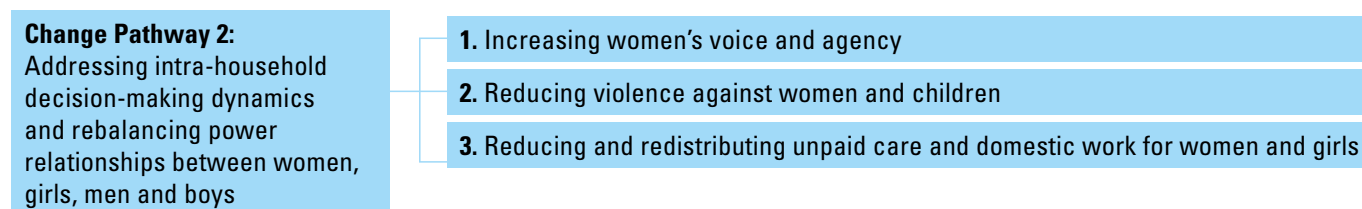
Implications for research

- Measure both the desired outcomes that social protection programmes seek to affect and those related to potentially unintended effects on the target population, as well as spillover effects (positive and negative) on non-beneficiary household members.
- Unpack the role of mediating and moderating factors, such as social and gender norms and attitudes, in reducing the effects that social protection can have on gender equality outcomes at the individual level.
- Adopt both the individual and the household as a unit of analysis to capture change at different levels.
- Consider both quantitative and qualitative research strategies and adopt a variety of research methods to explore the complexities of gender inequalities.

Change Pathway 2

Household-level change – addressing intra-household decision-making dynamics and rebalancing power relationships between women, girls, men and boys

Figure 3: Change Pathway 2



At the household level, gender-responsive social protection can contribute to gender-transformative change by addressing intra-household decision-making dynamics and rebalancing power relationships, through three change mechanisms. First, by providing women with access to, control over and ownership of resources (linked to Change Pathway 1), it can support women in developing, expressing and exercising their voice and agency within the household (Change Mechanism 1). Second, by increasing income security within the household, and linking with interventions that seek to transform harmful social and gender norms, it can contribute to reducing poverty-related stress and triggers for male violence against their partners, and caregiver violence against children. It can 'lessen conflict' by reducing arguments over limited budgets, thereby reducing violence against women and children (Change Mechanism 2). Third, by increasing household disposable income, providing social care services, and linking with interventions that seek to transform harmful social and gender norms, it can contribute to changes

in the division of labour, and reduce and redistribute women and girls' disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work (Change Mechanism 3).

Theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence

Gender-responsive social protection targeted at women may strengthen their position, by increasing their disposable income and thus their relative share of total household income. This can contribute to changing norms around women's control over, access to and ownership of resources, and increase their voice and agency, bargaining power and decision-making capacity within the household (Change Mechanism 1) – especially when linked with interventions that seek to prevent male backlash by promoting positive social and gender norms around women's ownership of resources. This also contributes to strengthening women's 'immaterial' resources – namely, psychosocial well-being and resilience.

Second, the conceptual and theoretical literature around the relationship between gender, violence and social protection predicts that social protection is hypothesized to reduce intimate partner violence by: (a) enhancing “economic security and emotional well-being”; (b) lessening “intra-household conflict”; and (c) increasing women’s empowerment (Buller et al., 2018) (Change Mechanism 2). Similar mechanisms seem to be at play in violence against children (Peterman et al., 2017). It is hypothesized that social protection programmes linked to both violence prevention and response to violence services, including child protection and case management services, can be effective at reducing violence against women and children.

Third, feminist researchers have long argued that internalized social norms related to women’s reproductive roles and power imbalances influence the behaviours of women and men, and drive the unequal gap in time women and men spend on unpaid care and domestic work. Poverty and the limited availability of or accessibility (including financial) of infrastructure and services also increase the unpaid care and domestic workload (Change Mechanism 3). It is hypothesized that social protection in the form of cash transfers, and access to quality social care services, can reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work. When combined with supply-side investments in infrastructure and services (e.g., access to water, electricity and transport), gender-responsive social protection can contribute to reducing the unpaid

care and domestic work within the household. Furthermore, when combined with norm change interventions, such as programming that encourages fathers’ uptake of childcare responsibilities or men’s roles in unpaid domestic work more broadly, gender-responsive social protection is one way to incentivize the redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work within the household.

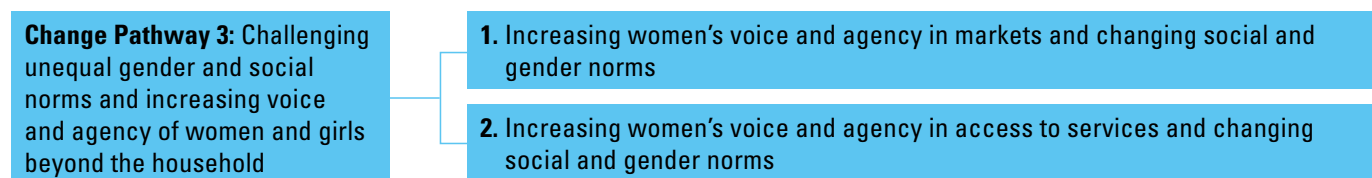
Implications for research

- Measure both the desired outcomes that social protection programmes seek to affect and those related to potentially unintended effects on the target population, as well as spillover effects (positive and negative) on non-beneficiary household members.
- Measure voice and agency directly and across the life course – including children, and girls in particular – in a safe and ethical way.
- Unpack the pathways through which change occurs, including by using mediation analysis.
- Adopt both the individual and the household as a unit of analysis, to capture dynamics between household members of different genders (and ages).
- Investigate the single and cumulative effects of programmatic linkages to advance our understanding of how best (relational) gender equality goals can be achieved.

Change Pathway 3

Societal-level change – challenging unequal gender and social norms and increasing voice and agency of women and girls in their communities

Figure 4: Change Pathway 3



At the societal level, gender-responsive social protection is hypothesized to contribute to gender-transformative change through two mechanisms. First, by supporting women’s safe and active participation in markets, it can contribute to increasing their autonomy, confidence and self-efficacy. This, in turn, leads to increased mobility, voice and agency in their interactions outside the family, such as in their communities, as well as to shifts in the norms,

attitudes and perceptions of market actors regarding women’s participation in markets (Change Mechanism 1). Second, by ensuring women’s safe and meaningful access to and engagement with public and social services, as well as social protection accountability mechanisms (including grievance, feedback and complaint mechanisms), it can contribute to addressing gender inequality by ensuring women’s perspectives are integrated into the design of

available, appropriate and gender-responsive services (Change Mechanism 2).

Theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence

Theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence on gender inequalities show and confirm that gender inequalities within and outside households are interconnected (Agarwal, 1997). The discrimination and unequal power relations that women and girls face in their own households are often accompanied by parallel discriminations in settings outside the household, such as in their communities. Theoretical frameworks suggest that gender-responsive social protection can increase voice and agency for women and girls in the markets and communities by increasing women's labour force participation (including in public works and labour market programmes). This can also shift the norms and perceptions about women's role in the community and economy, and enhance their voice and agency in such settings. It is hypothesized to help women negotiate better employment terms, for example, as well as gain better access to social networks and capital.

Second, gender-responsive social protection can increase women's voice and agency in access to and use of services, such as education and healthcare, as well as social protection feedback and complaint mechanisms, by incentivizing the use of these services and integrating gender-responsive governance mechanisms that encourage women's

participation and ability to have a say in issues and matters that affect them accessing these services. For example, empirical evidence gathered by Molyneux and Thomson (2011), through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with women beneficiaries in Peru's Juntos conditional cash transfer programme, suggests that participation in the programme led to improved interaction between teachers and the beneficiary mothers, due to increased school visits where they asked about the progress of their children.

Implications for research

- Measure voice and agency directly and across the life course – including of children – and in settings beyond their households (e.g., in their communities, labour markets and services), in a safe and ethical way.
- Collect data from social protection implementers, service providers, community leaders and other community stakeholders to explore if and how women – and other vulnerable groups – as social protection beneficiaries are discriminated against when accessing social protection benefits or services.
- Employ a variety of research methods, including process evaluation methods, to explore implementation challenges and bottlenecks (e.g., to explore whether women face discrimination when accessing social protection benefits and services).

Systemic change levers

Figure 5: Systemic change levers

Systemic change levers

1. Progressive social and gender norms and ideas held by policymakers and implementers
2. Political commitment to gender equality, institutional capacity and accountability
3. Adequate, sustainable and gender-responsive financing
4. Participation and engagement of gender equality and child rights advocates in decision-making and policymaking processes

For social protection to be gender-responsive in the first place and to contribute to gender-transformative change, a set of four change levers need to be in place at the level of the social protection system. First, there is a need for a shift and transformation in the prevailing attitudes, ideas and norms around gender equality, poverty and the right to social protection, as held by policymakers, political elites (and their

constituencies and parties), and programme managers and implementers. These factors often shape social protection systems throughout their delivery cycle, from intent and design, through implementation and financing, to monitoring and evaluation (Change Lever 1). Second, it is necessary to strengthen the political commitment to, and institutional capacity and accountability for, gender equality. Commitment

to, capacity for and accountability on gender equality are identified as critical factors for social protection stakeholders to have, to enable social protection systems to be designed, implemented and financed in a gender-responsive way (Change Lever 2).

Third, well-designed and implemented gender-responsive social protection systems should also be adequately and sustainably financed, including by creating the fiscal space needed for social protection (Change Lever 3). Finally, amplifying and expanding the voice and capacity of civil society organizations, including women's and children's rights organizations is essential. Ensuring meaningful participatory consultations with civil society organizations during the social protection system reform processes contributes to making the risks and vulnerabilities of women and children seen and their voices heard during such processes. It also contributes to strengthening accountability for gender equality in social protection system reforms (Change Lever 4).

Theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence

First, insights from political economy analyses from both the social protection and the gender fields highlight the importance of the role played by ideas and norms held by policymakers at national and subnational level, as well as by implementers on the ground, in shaping political behaviour, policy choices and policy outcomes (Holmes et al., 2019; Acosta and Pettit, 2013; DFID, 2009). Second, empirical evidence on social protection system reforms, while not gendered, suggests that political commitment to the introduction or expansion of social protection programmes in Africa has been key behind such reforms (Scarlato and D'Agostino, 2019). Institutional

capacity and accountability are also suggested to be critical factors, albeit the evidence is more limited here.

Third, theoretical frameworks suggest that for social protection systems to be designed in a gender-responsive way and contribute to gender-transformative change, they need to be adequately and sustainably financed, as gender-related provisions are often the first to be scratched from a policy in the case of economic crises or shocks. Empirical evidence presents a range of options for countries to increase their fiscal space for social protection while increasing coverage for women, children and other vulnerable population groups that are often lagging behind in social protection coverage. Lastly, conceptual and theoretical frameworks predict that, where citizens and social movements are actively engaged and participate in the design, implementation and reforms of social protection systems and programmes, this has the potential to enable better design and governance, and build trust and legitimacy in institutions.

Implications for research

- Explore the role of evidence (data, research, evaluations) in informing decision-making around social protection system reform and how gender gets integrated into it.
- Investigate the role that improved accountability for gender equality and social protection plays in if and how gender gets integrated into social protection system reforms.
- Unpack the role of civil society in social protection system reform, and if and how this helps make these reforms gender-responsive.

Concluding remarks and implications for the GRASSP research programme

This analytical approach serves to guide future empirical research and evaluations that can test these change pathways and mechanisms, as well as systemic change levers, across different contexts, including fragile and conflict-affected settings where rigorous high-quality evidence is currently lacking. Appropriately designed research and evaluations will help to unpack if and how different social protection programmes can address different gendered risks and vulnerabilities, and in turn contribute to evidence-informed strategies to deliver sustained gender equality outcomes through social protection. It particularly serves as the analytical foundation to guide the GRASSP research programme in three ways.

First, the GRASSP research programme is working to identify and map existing measures of gender equality outcomes that have been employed in research and evaluations, both in social protection and beyond, to help the research and field of measurement advance. Second, the GRASSP research programme will contribute to filling evidence gaps by rigorously evaluating cash and cash plus programmes against a range of gender equality outcomes employing a mixed-methods approach. Finally, the GRASSP research programme will contribute to filling evidence gaps by exploring if and how gender can be institutionalized within social protection systems, and what factors, including political economy and financial ones, are needed to ensure that such a reform process is enacted and successful.

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A full list of references is available in the Research Report: Camilletti, E., Nesbitt-Ahmed, Z. and Subrahmanian, R. 2022. 'Promoting Gender-Transformative Change through Social Protection: An analytical approach'. Innocenti Research Report. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

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