

# How social protection, public services and infrastructure impact women's rights

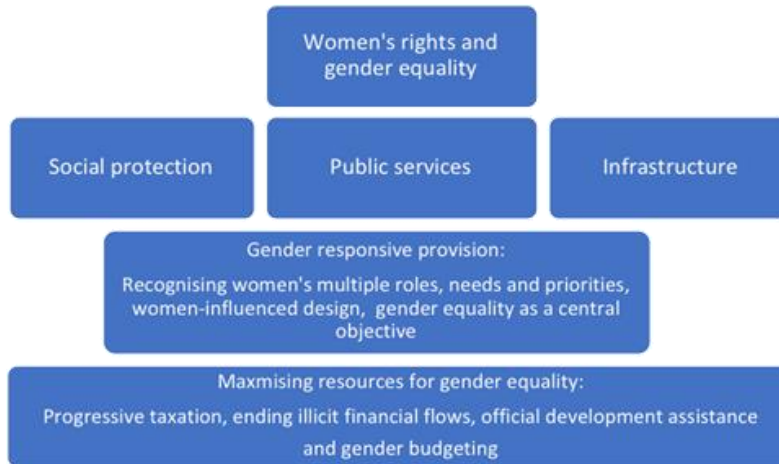
Agenda 2030 echoes calls for the targeted use of government funds for gender equality and women's rights made over twenty years ago in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>1</sup> Yet the relationship between gendered inequalities and public spending continues to receive insufficient attention and commitment from governments.

Because of the discrimination that women face in social, economic and political spheres, as well as structural barriers at local, national and global levels, women—particularly those women facing intersecting discriminations—have less income and assets, do more unpaid care work and are more likely to work in the informal sector. As a result, they are both more in need of state support and less able to access it.<sup>2</sup>

In this briefing we look at the ways that social protection, public services and infrastructure interact with women's rights and gender equality. We conclude that governments should maximise their available resources for spending in these three areas, which can be powerful tools for gender equality and women's rights when implemented in an integrated gender-responsive and transformative way.

Spending on appropriately designed social protection, public services and infrastructure that is gender-transformative can be an efficient and effective way for governments to fulfil their commitments towards gender equality if they carefully target state resources in a way that meets women's, and especially marginalised women's, needs and priorities (see Figure 1). Indeed, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5's fourth target calls on governments to "recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies".<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Achieving gender equality and women's rights through social protection, public services and infrastructure



## 1. Social protection

The term *social protection* is used to describe a set of policies and programmes that are designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion.<sup>i</sup> These are frequently funded by public spending and recognised as a human right. Increasingly, social protection is seen as a crucial element of redistribution of resources, poverty eradication and the promotion of equality under the SDGs. However, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has found major gaps in its provision across the globe.<sup>4</sup>

Social protection takes many forms, encompassing schemes such as pensions, paid maternity or paternity leave, child or family benefit, disability benefit, and unemployment benefit. It can also include public employment programmes, where governments provide paid work opportunities to people who have no income. For example, one such programme in Ethiopia furnished food and cash transfers in return for labour to improve local infrastructure, while provision of childcare and shorter working days was intended to make it easier for women to participate.<sup>5</sup> Social protection is sometimes also called *social security*, while *social policy* refers to both social protection and public services, which will be discussed below.

<sup>i</sup> The ILO has published a useful list of definitions (see ILO 2017, p. 193).

## Box 1: Different forms of social protection

There are three main variables when it comes to how social protection can be provided that relate to whether recipients must make contributions, must pass a means test or must comply with set conditions.

**Non-contributory or contributory.** Under contributory schemes, eligibility for benefits is based on prior financial contributions by individual beneficiaries, usually made through deductions from wages.

*Social insurance programmes* are an example of contributory schemes where employees contribute through their paid work, entitling them to benefits such as pensions. The problem with such schemes is that they tend to presume full-time, long-term, formal employment as the norm, with eligibility criteria based on factors such as minimum number of years' contribution. These assumptions disadvantage women, who are more likely to work part-time, take breaks from paid employment and work in the informal sector, all largely as a result of their socially assigned unpaid care responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> To compensate, some contributory schemes give women credit for their unpaid care work.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, *social assistance programmes* provide benefits that are not dependent on previous contributions. These could take the form of, for example, social pensions, family cash transfers or public employment programmes.<sup>8</sup> Gender gaps in access to pensions have narrowed or closed in Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil and Chile, due in large part to decisions to broaden the reach of non-contributory or social pensions so that women—who may have worked in the informal sector or in unpaid care throughout much of their lives—enjoy some degree of income security in old age.<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of non-contributory schemes like cash transfers for mothers and social pensions has benefitted many women around the world.<sup>10</sup> However, the reality is that social protection systems vary greatly, and the benefits provided are frequently inadequate and often come with conditions (see below). Some experts therefore argue that a combination of methods may be the best way to achieve coverage; thus, in countries such as South Africa and Uruguay, the scope of contributory social insurance has been expanded to include more women and more informal sector workers, suggesting that they may be a helpful part of a context-specific response.<sup>11</sup>

**Targeted or universal.** Under targeted or means-tested schemes, eligibility is dependent on an assessment of need, where the key criterion is often whether income is low enough. For example, the South African Old Age Pension is means-tested based on income criteria<sup>12</sup>; however, in countries such as Bolivia, Botswana, Mauritius and Namibia, pensions are universal—supplied to everyone as a right rather than based on an assessed need.<sup>13</sup>

Universal protection is often criticised as too expensive, but proponents argue that it makes wealthier individuals more willing to pay taxes. Moreover, universal

schemes can be cheaper to administer by scrapping means testing, remove stigma by disassociating the payments from poverty, and are a better way of ensuring that marginalised people do not fall through administrative gaps.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that, in order to be truly universal in provision, universal schemes may require the careful targeting of marginalised and hard-to-reach groups to ensure that they receive their entitlement. Universal coverage may also be achieved by a mixture of contributory schemes plus targeted provision for those who are not otherwise provided for.

**Unconditional or conditional.** Under conditional schemes, eligibility is contingent on recipients meeting requirements or conditions, such as attending health clinics or ensuring children go to school. There has been a significant increase in the use of conditional cash transfers in recent years, amid some controversy.<sup>15</sup> Social protection schemes that provide cash payments—usually to families with children—have had positive impacts on increasing access to health care and education for low-income groups. However, they sometimes come with conditions attached that can increase mothers' unpaid work, such as obligations to take parenting classes or bring children to health clinics, which reinforce discriminatory norms about women's roles in the family and further reduce their time for income-earning activities, thus undermining gender equality. Moreover, such conditions can be particularly difficult to meet for marginalised women who face poor service provision and discrimination in accessing the services.<sup>16</sup> They are also not proven to be necessary: the South African Child Support Grant, for example, has achieved poverty reduction and school enrolment outcomes without the use of conditions.<sup>17</sup>

## Safety nets or universal provision?

Social protection has long been recognised as a right, enshrined in human rights language. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes the right to an adequate standard of living. Similarly, the right to social security appears in article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and in article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<sup>18</sup>

However, particularly in times of crisis, the World Bank and others have taken a narrow view of social protection as only a safety net, there to step in when the market fails to protect those in extreme poverty.<sup>19</sup> More recently, the tide has turned with UN agencies calling for universal social protection in line with the universality of the SDGs and recognising the duty of governments to ensure its provision. Extending social protection to the many low-paid women workers in the informal sector has been identified as a particular priority by the ILO.<sup>20</sup>

As part of advancing universality, the ILO and others promote the concept of social protection floors (SPFs) to encourage governments to agree a national set of minimum guarantees of wellbeing, below which their populations must not fall. ILO

Recommendation 202 calls on countries to implement SPFs by committing to guarantees in four areas:

- access to essential healthcare, including maternity care
- basic income security for children (e.g., family allowances)
- basic income security for persons of active age who are unable to earn sufficient income (e.g., due to sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability)
- basic income security for older persons<sup>21</sup>

Recognising the need for SPFs has been an important step forward in the debate around social protection, although without substantial increases in funding, non-contributory schemes will remain inadequate and/or linked to harmful conditionalities.<sup>22</sup> The SPF concept is also not sufficiently gender-responsive and thus fails to recognise the importance of issues like unpaid care. Moreover, for SPFs to be effective, they must also be accompanied by investments in public services and infrastructure—and especially those that reduce women's unpaid care work.<sup>23</sup>

The major controversy, however, lies in the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has joined the debate with a strong focus on safety nets. The IMF's own Independent Evaluation Office describes the Fund's approach to social protection as highly targeted—and thus at odds with UN agencies using the SDG framework and a rights-based approach who found the IMF dismissive and uncooperative.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the IMF's endorsement of the SDGs has raised questions about consistency with its continued support for targeted (means-tested) social protection schemes.<sup>25</sup> The World Bank approach has also been criticised for not endorsing the concept of SPFs and approaching social protection without an understanding of local contexts.<sup>26</sup>

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty has been more critical, focusing in part on the inefficiency of targeted schemes: “The Fund needs to move beyond its obsession with the ‘targeting’ of social protection benefits to the poorest of the poor. There is increasing evidence that targeting often fails to reach the poorest, and that benefits often end up being given to those who are relatively well-off. Making social protection only about those who are most vulnerable also erodes political support from the middle classes and the rich for the welfare systems”.<sup>27</sup> In a 2017 open letter, seven UN special rapporteurs and independent experts detailed further criticisms, focusing not just on the concept of safety nets but more broadly on the way in which IMF advice on fiscal policy runs counter to governments' obligations on social protection.<sup>28</sup>

## Gender-responsive and gender-transformative social protection

The shift towards universal social protection has opened up an important moment for women's rights advocates to ensure that such initiatives transform gendered power relations—that is, that they are what is often termed *gender-responsive*, or *gender-transformative*. Gender shapes the level and type of income insecurity and other risks

that women and men face, how they cope with these risks, and therefore what programmes they need to mitigate or overcome them.

Because of their lack of access to income and assets, and their disproportionate unpaid care work, women have more need of social protection—but less access to it.<sup>29</sup> In particular, time poverty associated with unpaid work restricts access both to the schemes themselves and to the decision-making processes that determine their design.<sup>30</sup> Conditions on eligibility may also stigmatise or increase the care workloads of women who receive social protection payments.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, access to benefits is often granted at the household level, via a male breadwinner, rather than to women as rights holders in their own right, which reflects and perpetuates existing gendered inequalities.<sup>32</sup> The discrimination is particularly acute for contributory schemes, where eligibility is linked to paid employment, generally with no recognition of the unpaid care work that women do. As Ravazi writes, “gender-based inequalities in the labour market are transmitted, and indeed amplified, in the system of social protection”.<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, gender-responsive social protection recognises the different roles that women play—both paid and unpaid—and takes into account women’s needs and priorities in the knowledge that these will be further influenced by intersecting discriminations.<sup>34</sup> To be effective in the long run, social protection needs to address and transform underlying unequal structures rather than just mitigating the deprivation caused by these inequalities. This will require an increase in the scope of provision and, at the same time, a transformation in the way that social protection is delivered. Gender stereotypes should be challenged rather than reinforced, underlined by the removal of conditionalities from social transfer schemes that increase women’s unpaid care and the introduction of universality to reduce the stigma attached to claiming benefits.<sup>35</sup>

Addressing unpaid care roles lies at the heart of gender-responsive social protection. SPFs, for example, will need to be further developed to recognise unpaid care.<sup>ii</sup> The inadequacy of maternity grants throughout the world is particularly striking, given that only 41 per cent of mothers of new-borns currently receive some kind of benefit.<sup>36</sup> For the many women in the informal sector who have no time off for childbirth, grants are particularly significant. Indeed, recognising the predominance of women working in the informal sector, due in part to their unpaid care roles, is key.<sup>iii</sup> Looking specifically at the needs of informal sector workers, WIEGO prioritises reforms in relation to workers’ health, child care and security of income for older women.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> For further discussion of SPFs and gender, see Tessier et al. 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> More on women working in the informal sector can be found in UN Women 2018b.



**Box 2: World Social Protection Report 2017-19 summary<sup>38</sup>**

In its flagship report, the ILO finds that 55 per cent of the world's population is not covered by any social protection benefits, and only 29 per cent has access to a full range of benefits.

Pension coverage is improving, with 68 per cent of people above retirement age receiving either a contributory or non-contributory pension globally and a range of low- and middle-income countries now enjoying universal coverage. That said, pension income is frequently still too low to support elders out of poverty. There has also been a trend towards the reversal of pension privatisations following disappointing results.

Regional variations are also significant: despite progress, over 80 per cent of Africans receive no social protection cash benefits, although nearly 30 per cent of African older people receive pensions. Coverage is higher in the Americas, where two-thirds of the population is covered by at least one cash benefit, while the corresponding figure for the Asia Pacific region is 39 per cent.

While there has been some progress, the achievement of the SDGs is jeopardised by austerity and fiscal consolidation policies that focus on cost savings rather than the promotion of long-term development efforts.

## 2. Public services

*Public services* are those services necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living, as well as broader social goals, including the provision of water, gas, electricity, health care, education and care services. They are a key way for governments to meet human rights obligations, redistribute wealth and address the discrimination and poverty experienced by marginalised people. Traditionally these services have been funded by governments—primarily through taxation and official development assistance—and delivered by governments and their agencies.

Public services are important for everyone, and are vital for both women and men who are unable to afford private alternatives, but are particularly important for women because of their unpaid care roles – from water collection to elder care. Health needs, for example around menstruation and reproduction, increase women's needs for services such as health care and water.

It has also been increasingly recognised that women's heavy and disproportionate unpaid care burdens are a major barrier to gender equality and the achievement of women's rights.<sup>39</sup> The kinds of cuts in services that are often associated with austerity programmes therefore have a disproportionate impact on women by increasing those burdens.<sup>iv</sup> This recognition brings with it a duty on governments to reduce the drudgery

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, the cuts to services detailed in UN OHCHR 2018b and UN OHCHR 2018c.

of care work, and share the burden of care provision through the adequate provision of basic infrastructure (see below) and care services.

Improved access to water, gas and electricity can decrease the time burden of unpaid care. For households with no nearby water provision, women and girls are the main collectors, spending up to two hours a day walking to standpipes in rural areas, or an hour a day queueing by pipes in urban settings.<sup>40</sup> When piped water systems were introduced in Senegal, research found that women had more time for paid economic activities, while in Morocco improved access to water also allowed women more leisure time.<sup>41</sup> Public services can also be empowering: better education helps to equalise education outcomes for girls and boys while health services, and particularly SRHR services, can support young women's empowerment - and water and electricity provision can support women in setting up businesses.<sup>42</sup> Women are also disproportionately represented among public service employees, so any improvement in delivery of services also supports women's access to decent work.<sup>43</sup>

Even more importantly, accessible public services can challenge discriminatory social norms and restrictive gender roles. By changing the perception of unpaid care as specifically “women's work”, better care services can transform norms and ideas about women's roles in society, recognising care provision instead as the responsibility of governments.<sup>44</sup>

## Gender-responsive and gender-transformative public services

The importance of improving both the quality of public services and breadth of provision has emerged in discussions around SDG implementation—and this includes ensuring that they are gender-transformative or -responsive. As with social protection, public services can mirror existing discriminations in society; expanding and resourcing the public provision of services should therefore be combined with measures to make services more gender-responsive. When done right, gender-responsive public services and especially care services can, argues UN Women, be critical in the advancement of gender equality. A key example is Uruguay: women's rights activists there have succeeded in putting care firmly on the political agenda, with strong input into designing a national care system introduced in 2011 that was framed around gender equality and human rights.<sup>45</sup>

Gender-responsive public services understand and respond to the strategic interests and priorities of women, recognising that women and men have different needs and priorities shaped by intersecting discriminations, both for the type of public services required and the way they are delivered.<sup>46</sup> Policymakers must start by ensuring that women and men have equal access to, use of and control over public services, but they must also go beyond this to ask, “whether the delivery, access and use of public services empowers people to challenge forms of gender inequalities and unequal power relations, while improving women's lack of control over resources and public services”.<sup>47</sup> Recognising the intersectional nature of discrimination, public services will only be truly gender-responsive if they are affordable for all, even the most



marginalised; accessible both physically and socially, without stigma for all users; appropriate for the needs and priorities of the communities they serve while recognising the intersecting discriminations women and men face; and safe for all to use, free of the fear of violence. As Public Services International puts it, universal provision requires both “universal coverage—(when all people obtain the public services they need without financial hardship) and universal access (ability of all people to have equal opportunity to access services, regardless of their social identity)”.<sup>48</sup> Finally, achieving gender-responsive public services will require an increase in women’s power in decision-making processes on public services, alongside an improvement in governance structures making these processes more transparent and accountable.<sup>49</sup>

### 3. Infrastructure

The term *infrastructure* is often seen as basic physical installations like roads, bridges, sewers, electrical grids and telecommunications that enable society to function and services to be provided. Major funding for infrastructure is channelled through large-scale and often controversial projects such as dams and mega-highways that are frequently criticised for ignoring the needs of local communities and contributing to greater inequality with little or no consideration for their impact on the lives of marginalised women. That said, although it remains largely unfulfilled, infrastructure projects do have the *potential* to contribute to gender equality.<sup>50</sup>

#### Infrastructure for gender equality

Appropriate infrastructure can be particularly effective in reducing the time burden and drudgery of women’s unpaid care work, as improved access to clean water, cooking fuels and electricity will all reduce time spent on domestic work. For instance, research in Bangladesh found that access to affordable electricity meant women’s time spent on domestic work was reduced by 70 per cent.<sup>51</sup>

Improved service and safety on public transport is also a frequently cited priority, enabling women to increase their incomes by accessing workplaces and markets, and decreasing the time that they spend taking dependents to health clinics or care centres. As a result of one road programme in Cambodia, women were able to sell more of their produce, while another scheme in Bangladesh enabled women producers and traders to sell their wares in markets themselves rather than having to pay intermediaries.<sup>52</sup> Safety is a critical concern for women in particular, as they suffer high levels of sexual harassment and abuse on public transport and, as a result, often have to pay more for safer methods of travel. Improving transport links can also further support women’s empowerment by allowing women to travel in order to meet and engage in collective action.<sup>53</sup>

Like the social protection and public employment schemes discussed above, infrastructure projects can also support women’s economic empowerment through the

provision of employment while challenging social norms around “women’s work”.<sup>54</sup> In both India and Ethiopia, large numbers of women have been employed in public construction projects, in jobs formerly the preserve of men, through such schemes. Women were also encouraged to work in road maintenance in Peru through a change in job requirements that recognised women’s experience in agriculture and household management as relevant while relaxing literacy requirements.<sup>55</sup>

For investment in infrastructure to make a difference, gender equality goals will need to be included in the initial design of projects and consistently monitored.<sup>56</sup> For example, the Asian Development Bank has successfully involved women in the planning and design of infrastructure projects in rural Bangladesh, ensuring along the way that the process met their needs and that they were included in construction.<sup>57</sup>

## 4. Maximising resources to cover the cost

Private sector involvement in the provision of services and infrastructure is frequently justified by claims that governments are unable to fund the financing gap. There is, however, mounting evidence firstly of the problems associated with private sector involvement, and secondly of the opportunity for governments to increase their *fiscal space*<sup>v</sup> and thus increase available public resources.

### Problems with private sector provision

Many commentators argue that public services should be just that—*public*, meaning publicly funded and publicly run—and question the accountability, efficacy and reach of privately-run services or infrastructure. In the context of the SDGs’ call to leave no one behind, ensuring that the most marginalised are reached is critically important, at the same time as that reach becomes less likely when the private sector is the provider.<sup>58</sup>

Governments have a duty, under human rights treaties and legislation, to provide quality public services such as education and health to all their populations. Research by ActionAid and others shows how user fees restrict access to services for the poorest and most marginalised, frequently disproportionately impacting on women and girls. For example, when user fees are introduced at school, girls are more likely to be withdrawn than boys.<sup>59</sup> Private sector financing also raises issues of accountability, leading Public Services International to argue that services should be publicly funded, publicly delivered by employees who are accountable to governments and publicly governed with transparency, accountability and consultation.<sup>60</sup>

In this arena, the issue of private-public partnerships (PPPs) has caused particular controversy. A PPP is a contract between a government and a private company where the company finances, builds and operates part of a public service and receives payment in return, either through user charges or by the government itself.<sup>61</sup> PPPs are

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<sup>v</sup> Fiscal space is defined as the “room in a government’s budget that allows it to provide resources for a desired purpose without jeopardising the sustainability of its financial position or the stability of the economy”. See Heller 2005.

widely promoted by the World Bank and IMF for infrastructure projects, with multilateral and bilateral donors providing subsidised finance specifically for PPPs. Opponents argue that government money—raised through taxes—is frequently used to subsidise the profits of the private sector partner, while service provision is compromised and accountability to users is minimal. Expecting governments to effectively regulate powerful private sector providers is frequently unrealistic.<sup>62</sup> Others have argued that PPPs have proven highly unreliable when it comes to ensuring that services are delivered in the public interest.<sup>63</sup> Thus, Public Services International concludes based on evidence from the last 15 years that, “PPPs are an expensive and inefficient way of financing infrastructure and divert government spending away from other public services. They conceal public borrowing, while providing long-term state guarantees for profits to private companies”.<sup>64</sup>

## Creating fiscal space

Government budgets are not set in stone—in fact, numerous economists argue that even in the poorest countries there is still space to increase the *fiscal space* that governments have.<sup>65</sup> As the UN High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment noted in its final report, the choices made by governments in terms of macroeconomic policy are a key determinant of the resources available for gender equality.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, article 2 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that each government has a responsibility to progress towards realising rights “to the maximum of its available resources”.<sup>67</sup>

Instead, restrictive macroeconomic policies have limited the resources available to governments to spend on gender-responsive social protection and services. Most governments around the world continue to follow a model that prioritises deficit reduction, debt repayments and low inflation at the cost of a reduction in public expenditure. These are political choices, reinforced by policy advice from international financial institutions.<sup>68</sup> UN Women underlined this point in a 2015 briefing note: “The resources available to governments for implementing policies to advance gender equality and other social goals are not fixed but are determined, in part, by macroeconomic policies, including tax policies, decisions over deficit spending and the management of debt”.<sup>69</sup>

To ensure sufficient resources for gender-responsive social protection, public services and infrastructure, governments have a number of choices. First, they can choose to spend their existing resources wisely through *gender-responsive budgeting*<sup>vi</sup> and prioritising social spending over, for example, military budgets. Second, they can choose to increase their budgets by introducing progressive taxation. As a further measure to expand funding, they can also clamp down on tax dodging and reduce the

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<sup>vi</sup> Gender-responsive budgeting covers a variety of measures to assess the impact of government policies and spending on gender equality, including gender audits of departments and ministries, gender assessments of specific policies and gender training programmes at all levels of government (GADN 2016, 13).

amount of money leaving the country by supporting international regulation to curb illicit financial flows.<sup>70</sup>

## Social spending: an economically viable investment

Another way to raise resources is through borrowing. *Deficit spending*, or borrowing to invest, raises resources as an alternative to austerity measures at times of economic crisis.<sup>71</sup> Traditionally, governments have borrowed to invest in physical infrastructure like roads because these are thought to increase economic growth, and therefore increase government revenue so the loans can be repaid. Social infrastructure, however, brings even greater potential for women's economic empowerment through investment in education, health and care provision. Borrowing for social infrastructure has been discouraged, by the IMF and others, as it was not seen to generate growth—but both UN Women and the ITUC have now produced research showing that this kind of social investment increases productivity and jobs, thus expanding tax revenue so loans can be repaid.<sup>72</sup> In other words, in economic terms, it is eminently sensible to borrow for social investment.<sup>73</sup> Investment in social infrastructure is a win-win scenario. Under the right conditions, this kind of spending: improves the quality of services and ensures that the essential function of care is maintained, boosting wellbeing and productivity for the whole of society; reduces women's disproportionate burden of unpaid work in providing these services; creates more decent paid work for women; and thus increases tax revenues to make the initial investment sustainable.<sup>vii</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Appropriate investment in gender-transformative social protection, public services and infrastructure is a valuable lever to expedite the achievement of gender equality and women's rights. With careful planning, this kind of spending provides secure incomes, ensures minimum levels of health and care provision, reduces the time burden of unpaid care work while challenging social norms around care provision, increases employment and income earning opportunities, and promotes women's safety and ability to engage in political activity.

Moving forward, measures to ensure that provision is gender-transformative will be crucial, and, perhaps most importantly, governments will need to commit sufficient resources in keeping with their obligations to achieve gender equality and women's rights. With all of that in mind, more discussion is now needed on how to integrate provision across each of the three areas—social protection, public services and infrastructure.

## Gender-responsive and gender-transformative provision

Social protection, public services and infrastructure projects should be designed and delivered in ways that meet women's strategic needs and priorities, are governed by

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<sup>vii</sup> Where this borrowing comes from is also important. See Gabor 2018.

women's voices, and seek from the outset to transform underlying unequal power structures. This will require an extension of coverage and equalisation of access, alongside the strengthening of women's voices and agency in the design of programmes. Women's participation has made important differences in the design of cash transfer programmes in Brazil and Egypt, water and sanitation projects in South Africa, and public care services in Uganda and Uruguay.<sup>74</sup> Central too will be recognition of the reality of care provision and women's unpaid roles within it.

## Maximising resources for gender equality and women's rights

In its flagship *World Social Protection Report 2017-19*, the ILO highlights the major gaps still left in provision of social protection globally and argues that all governments, even in the poorest countries, can expand fiscal space to work towards universal provision of social protection as part of their efforts to achieve the SDGs.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, UN Women calls on governments to maximise the resources available for spending on gender equality and women's rights—for example, through progressive taxation, gender-responsive budgeting and the re-prioritisation of public spending towards social protection and services.<sup>76</sup> Private investment is not yet proven as a viable substitute; rather, the answer lies with governments meeting their obligations to maximise available resources for spending aimed at bringing about gender equality and the realisation of women's rights.<sup>77</sup>

## Integration of social protection, public services and infrastructure

For maximum impact, all three forms of intervention will need to be effectively combined and integrated. For example, the provision of social protection measures like conditional cash transfers—which aim to increase uptake and reach of critical public services—is currently undermined by the poor quality of those services and a lack of infrastructure needed to access them.<sup>78</sup>

The reality is that the distinction between the three areas is blurred, particularly for women who work in the informal sector. Adequate public services can provide decent work, either directly through employment in the public sector or indirectly by providing child or elder care that enables women to take up income-earning activities, and they can also reduce household costs by making services affordable—both of which will reduce the need for social protection. Similarly, provision of appropriate infrastructure can reduce women's unpaid care work and provide access to markets, again increasing their incomes and reducing their reliance on social protection. In turn, social protection provides resources to enable the most marginalised to access public services or benefit from infrastructure, while employment schemes may even contribute to improved infrastructure provision. Infrastructure will be necessary for the delivery of both social protection and public services, while public services can complement social protection and reduce reliance on it. The exact relationships will be context-specific, but what is clear is that understanding the positive connections between these three



forms of government intervention is most likely to have a multiplier effect on increasing gender equality and the fulfilment of women's rights.<sup>79</sup>

It should be noted too that investment in these three areas is not a panacea and must be accompanied by complementary macroeconomic, industrial and agricultural policies that generate income and employment, and that secure the resources needed to pay for social protection and public services.<sup>80</sup>

## 6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are to governments to ensure that social protection, public services and infrastructure provision successfully promote gender equality and women's rights. They are general points that should underpin future action, alongside context-specific planning in consultation with women and the organisations that represent them, in order to enact real change<sup>81</sup>:

- Promote the principle of universality, enshrined in the SDGs, as a core value that should underpin governments' provision of gender-responsive social protection, public services and infrastructure.
  - Extend social protection coverage to informal sector workers
  - Recognise and minimise the negative effects of austerity measures
  - Ensure that benefit levels are sufficient to bring people out of poverty and insecurity
- Ensure gender-responsive provision of social protection, public services and infrastructure.
  - Make gender equality and the transformation of gender roles an overriding objective of all interventions
  - Recognise the strategic needs of women, particularly those facing intersecting discriminations, and make their unpaid care work made visible
  - Actively promote the meaningful participation of women and their organisations in the design and delivery of interventions
- Maximise available government resources for gender-responsive social protection, services and infrastructure that promote gender equality through progressive taxation, deficit financing of social investment and gender-responsive budgeting to re-prioritise expenditure.

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<sup>6</sup> Razavi 2011.  
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<sup>22</sup> Razavi and Staab 2018; Staab 2018.  
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The Gender and Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

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