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How social protection can empower women

Apart from employment opportunities, women need social support that accounts for the true extent of their responsibilities

To live in dignity, free from want, is a fundamental human right. Social protection is key to upholding that right, ensuring that people can escape poverty and insecurity. That is why social protection is at the centre of strategies for ending global poverty by 2030, the first of 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. But, if those strategies are to work, they must go further – especially with regard to women.

In recent years, many countries – particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean – have made great strides toward improving social protection. But most policies and initiatives are inadequate, and nearly four billion people still lack any social protection at all. Because women are the leading providers of unpaid labour, they are the most likely to suffer from this failure.

The issue of social protection was at the top of the agenda at the UN's 63rd Commission for the Status of Women, held last month. NGOs, activists, policymakers, and academics called for increased support for women in the labour market, including initiatives to encourage employment and the provision of social support, such as childcare services. Pointing to successful countries like Iceland and Norway, participants agreed that only on a level playing field, with no gender pay gap, can the full potential of girls and women be realised.

The first step toward designing effective strategies is to gain a more nuanced understanding of the struggles many women endure as they attempt to juggle vast responsibilities. Beyond the 'invisible' work of household maintenance and caregiving, women in low-income households often are expected to contribute financially. Women constitute the majority of frontline workers in public-service sectors, for example.

The pressures on women

The pressure on single mothers is particularly intense. Being a single parent is challenging in any context. But it is all the more difficult for a poor woman with limited education or training and little or no access to social protection or support. Add to that the pejorative discourse about single motherhood and 'dependency culture,' and the situation can be overwhelming.

Yet that is the reality women face in many countries. In South Africa, for example, working-age adults receive no social assistance unless they are disabled. While there is a means-tested benefit programme for children's primary caregivers, the Child Support Grant, the funds dispensed are insufficient to meet children's needs. In any case, those who accept social support are often looked down upon by their communities.

Evidence from around the world demonstrates the urgent need for social-protection policies and initiatives that enable women not just to survive, but to thrive.

In Haiti, women seeking employment do receive some support, through initiatives by the local organisation Fonkoze. But little attention is paid to the specific challenges faced by women, who are also expected to continue to act as primary caregivers for their families.

With no social support, poor mothers are often left with an impossible choice: either leave their children without sufficient quality care or forego an income that they badly need. When social security provision for impoverished caregivers is linked to an obligation to seek work, even that choice is taken away.

Better social-protection policies

Addressing these challenges will require governments to expand and rethink social-protection programmes. For starters, it is important to recognise that women are not simply seeking 'free money.' While young men may tend to feel greater shame about receiving 'unearned' income, owing to cultural expectations that men must be providers, young women also tend to view themselves as providers, not simply nurturers.

Evidence from poverty-targeted cash-transfer programmes in rural Malawi and Lesotho reinforces this conclusion. While poor women appreciate much-needed cash, they are often uncomfortable with their status as recipients of state benefits, and are keen to make productive contributions to their families and communities. That is why it is vital to

deliver to women genuine income-generating opportunities, rather than simply distributing small cash payments that keep them close to the poverty line.

Moreover, it is not every woman's goal solely to act as a caregiver. Women have ambitions of their own. Those ambitions may focus on providing for their families, whether as a caregiver or a breadwinner, but that is not always the case. They need support that enables them to choose the contributions they want to make, and access to relevant, meaningful work.

Involving men and other caregivers is vital to build effective social protection systems that work for women, though this must be accompanied by good and affordable health services, schools, and other facilities. Programmes focused on boosting social protection and expanding employment opportunities for women must adjust the language they use, in order to challenge assumptions about women as the main providers of unpaid labour. Finally, efforts should be made to strengthen community relationships, in order to cultivate the trust needed to revive the type of childcare that predominated before the ideal of self-contained households, with one male provider and one female caregiver, took hold.

Evidence from around the world demonstrates the urgent need for social-protection policies and initiatives that enable women not just to survive, but to thrive. This means giving women the support they need to participate in the labour force – including education and training – while taking into account the true extent of their responsibilities. Above all, it means empowering women to choose the balance between employment and caregiving that works best for them.

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