

In its preamble, the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) recognizes social security as an important tool to promote equal opportunity and gender equality. It also lists “non-discrimination and gender equality” among the principles that ILO member States should apply in giving effect to this instrument. Specifically, the Recommendation calls for at least an essential level of health care (including maternity care) and income security (including in case of maternity and for children) to be provided to all residents as part of the basic social security guarantees that constitute national social protection floors. Such nationally defined social protection floors can play a key role in enabling and empowering women and reducing gender inequalities. More recently, in its paragraph 18, the ILO Recommendation on Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy, 2015 (No. 204) explicitly states that Members should progressively extend, in law and practice, to all workers in the informal economy, social security, maternity protection and decent working conditions. Complementing other ILO standards, these two Recommendations provide a powerful tool to strengthen women’s social protection in a coherent and coordinated way. Both reflect strong commitments to the progressive narrowing of gender gaps in social protection coverage and adequacy, which will not only enhance access to social protection but also enable women to participate more fully in decent employment.

In order to maximize these potential impacts, a gender dimension should be integrated at every stage of policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation for national social protection floors and systems. In effect, to ensure that gender inequality is properly tackled, social protection schemes should be designed to guarantee equality of treatment between men and women, take into account gender roles and serve as a mechanism for the promotion of gender equality. In addition, social protection floors can and should be a gender-transformative tool by addressing women’s specific life contingencies, such as maternity, and by reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. By adopting this two-fold approach to gender-sensitive social protection (promoting gender equality and addressing women’s specific needs), social protection, and especially social protection floors, offers an effective instrument for reducing poverty and inequality, in promoting equal treatment for men and women, and equitable outcomes which can partly compensate for the effects of discrimination and inequalities outside the social protection system.

Contributory and non-contributory social transfers, social care services and employment guarantee schemes, as yet still somewhat limited, have the potential to address labour market and intra-household inequalities over the life cycle. For social protection systems to contribute to transforming gender relations, they should support women’s reproductive needs, promote a more equitable sharing of family responsibilities and facilitate a more equal division of labour between women and men in the household and at work (Holmes and Jones, 2013). Research shows that social protection programmes can be enhanced to become more gender-transformative by supporting women’s participation and address their reproduction-related risks; tackling multiple forms of discrimination; providing safe, decent and family-friendly working conditions, including maternity protection; supplying the types of infrastructure and services that both reduce women’s and girls’ unpaid care work and increase their access to health care, education and employability services and decent work opportunities (Kabeer, 2013). Health protection is a key priority in ensuring adequate social protection for women (ILO, 2014c). Significant progress has been achieved with regard to maternity care in many parts of the world, yet major challenges remain with regard to women’s broader health needs throughout their lives and achieving universal health protection (ILO, 2015q).

Contributory programmes can also be designed in a way that is sensitive to gender inequalities and addresses the challenges of unpaid care work. Accumulation of pension contributions during leave periods is essential to recognizing and valuing both women’s and men’s care work, ensuring the provision of adequate pensions to all and decreasing gender inequalities in old-age pensions resulting from a parent’s time out of the labour force. In addition to leave periods, many – mostly developed – countries have introduced policies to recognize and reward periods of caregiving through pension credits. Some countries, such as France, have moved forward by extending pension credits to fathers (Fultz, 2011). In the United Kingdom, carers, regardless of sex, who provide at least 20 hours a week of care are eligible for “carer’s credits”, which help to fill gaps in national insurance (Gov UK, 2015). It should be noted, however, that benefit levels are often low when not linked to employment status.

Non-contributory programmes can play a key role in promoting gender equality and empowering women, yet they should be designed in a way that does not reinforce traditional gender roles (box 14). A comparative study of cash transfer programmes in Brazil, Chile, India, Mexico and South Africa has identified areas where Recommendation No. 202 is particularly relevant as guidance in programme structuring and restructuring, in particular with regard to benefit levels, which must be sufficient to enable women (and men) to save and invest in future income generation, and the legal status of benefits, which should be statutory entitlements with explicit provisions regarding transfer amount, eligibility, and appeal rights (Fultz and Francis, 2013).