

Miina Sillanpää Seminar: Gender and Sustainable Development

4 June 2018, 3 pm, Helsinki

Empowering women through reliable social protection systems

Thank you. It's an honour for me to get an opportunity to speak here after President Tarja Halonen of Finland. She is well known within the UN system where she has served in several roles, for instance as Chair of the UN Global Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization.

I am grateful to the Miina Sillanpää Association for inviting me and for Dr. Timo Voipio and his team at THL for making the connections and for facilitating my travels to Helsinki, and later this week to Brussels where I have been invited to speak at the Permanent Mission of Finland, on a related topic: *Gender, Care Economy and Social Protection Systems – Structural transformations for reaching the SDGs*.

The promise of universal income security, which has been recently reinforced in the UN *Agenda 2030*, is still largely unfulfilled. Women face particular barriers to income security given their unpaid care responsibilities and the persistent gender discriminations they face in markets. Given their unpaid responsibilities at home and in their communities, women participate less in the labour market, have lower earnings and enjoy less access to credit and other assets than men. In addition, they make up the majority of informal workers and often interrupt their paid work to care for others, which compromises their access to employment-based (or contributory) social protection. Not surprisingly, they are over-represented among the 71 per cent of the world's population who have only partial or no access to social protection. To narrow the gender gaps in poverty rates, enhance women's access to personal income and provide a life-line, including for single-mother families who are making up a growing share of families in some regions, social protection systems must be created, extended to all, and transformed to become truly universal and gender-responsive.

Social protection, or social security, is a human right and it is defined as the set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout the life course.¹ In the current context of rising economic insecurity, multiple and intersecting inequalities and changing demographic and family structures, the importance of social protection for all is being increasingly recognized by a wide range of actors. **Universal** social protection systems have the potential to contribute to the achievement of a range of goals in the *2030 Agenda*—from eradicating poverty and reducing inequalities to strengthening food security, from enhancing access to education, health and decent work to building resilience in the face of disasters. Well-designed social protection systems can

¹ ILO. 2017. World Social Protection Report 2017-2019. ILO, Geneva. UN CESCR (United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). 2008. General Comment No. 19 on the Right to Social Security: Art. 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2008). E/C.12/GC/19.

support gender equality by narrowing the gender gaps in poverty; enhancing women's access to personal income; and providing a lifeline for poor women, especially single-mothers.²

However, while social protection coverage has expanded over the past decade, the world is still a long way from achieving comprehensive coverage for all. The latest available data from the ILO shows that only 29 per cent of the world's population are covered by comprehensive social security systems that include the full range of protections across the life course.³ Where sex-disaggregated data is available, it often shows that women are overrepresented among those who remain excluded. In most countries, for example, women are less likely than men to receive a pension in old age and where they do, their benefit levels are usually lower.⁴ Women also remain poorly-covered for gender-specific life course risks. Globally, for example, only 41 per cent of mothers with new-borns receive a maternity benefit.⁵ Even where women have become key beneficiaries of new social protection programmes, such as conditional cash transfers, their implications for gender equality and women's empowerment have been far from clear-cut.⁶ Much depends on how specific social protection schemes are designed⁷ and the extent to which they work in tandem with other policies, including public services and sustainable infrastructure.

In fact, while the extension of social protection benefits to women can provide important relief in the face of risks and contingencies, it does not necessarily address the gender inequalities that lie at the root of women's income insecurity, including their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work. **Public services and investments in social infrastructure** are essential for reducing and redistributing this work, and thereby facilitating women's access to income through labour markets. Sufficiently long parental leaves and affordable and universal child care services for preschool children, for example, which are the hallmarks of the Finnish welfare state, can enable women to strengthen and maintain their link to paid employment which remains the main source of income for most working-age adults and their families. At the same time, social care work has provided reliable jobs, independent incomes and employment related social benefits to hundreds of thousands of Finnish women, and men. Extending water, electricity, and sanitation to rural and marginalized urban areas, in turn, is indispensable to free up time that women and girls spend on collecting and processing water, fuel and firewood, which can compromise the effective use they can make of educational and employment opportunities. The historical experience of Finland in using national pension funds to re-build its basic

² UN Women. 2015 *Progress of the World's Women: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights*. UN Women, New York.

³ ILO. 2017. *World Social Protection Report 2017-2019*. Geneva. UN CESCR (United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights).

⁴ UN Women. 2015 *Progress of the World's Women: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights*. UN Women, New York.

⁵ ILO 2017, *op. cit.*

⁶ For overviews see Fultz, E., and J. Francis. 2013. "Cash Transfer Programmes, Poverty Reduction and Empowerment of Women: A Comparative Analysis – Experiences from Brazil, Chile, India, Mexico and South Africa." GED Working Paper 4/2013. ILO, Geneva; Zanker et al 2017. "The impact of cash transfers on women and girls: A summary of the evidence." ODI, London.

⁷ Issues that matter from a gender perspective include: gender bias of contributory schemes; exclusion errors, stigma and gender bias associated with different targeting mechanisms (vs. universal approaches); conditionalities; social accountability.

infrastructure after the war (electricity) is an interesting example of how public goods can be financed for the benefit of all.⁸

Similarly, affordable access to health care, including maternity care, is one of the key pillars of right to social protection, and SDGs. Making health care affordable through universal health coverage reforms is of enormous importance for women who not only command less economic resources but face costly health conditions, such as childbirth, and are often in charge of the health care of family members. Affordability does not, however, guarantee that women's health needs are adequately considered and their rights are respected at the point of service delivery. Universal health coverage, for example, has in some contexts been achieved by mandating a package of 'essential health benefits' that in some cases excludes core sexual and reproductive health services, such as family planning, counselling and contraceptives.⁹

Likewise, without proper training, clear screening protocols and referral mechanisms, social workers and health personnel are often unable to identify and adequately support victims of domestic violence; and where social norms condone violence against women they may fail to respond or blame victims even in the face of obvious signs.¹⁰ Where health centres are far away and adequate and affordable transport is not available, where women fear being exposed to violence on the way or subject to discriminatory practices by service providers, effective access will remain elusive.

Making social protection, public services and infrastructure investments gender-responsive and gender transformative therefore requires that the underlying causes of women's exclusion are comprehensively assessed and measures taken to address the specific risks and vulnerabilities they face.¹¹ In doing so, close attention must be paid to specific risks over the life course and to groups who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as young women and adolescent girls, migrant women, women with disabilities, indigenous women and women with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities among others.

Finally, I want to thank Finland on behalf of UN Women and the UN System. Finland has been one of the most important supporters of UN-Women and one of the leading members in the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board. Finland has been one of our most reliable partners also in the UN Commissions on the Status of Women and Social Development, both of which have selected social protection among the priority topics of their session next year 2019. We very much look forward to your continued support and partnership.

⁸ Kangas, O. E. 2006. "Pension and Pension Funds in the Making of a Nation-State and a National Economy: The Case of Finland". SPD Paper No.25, UNRISD, Geneva.

⁹ Ravindran, T.S. 2012. "Universal Access: Making Health Systems Work for Women." BMC Public Health 12, Suppl 1: S4.

¹⁰ UN Women 2015, op.cit.

¹¹ Sepulveda, M.C. and C. Nyst. 2012. *The Human Rights Approach to Social Protection*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Helsinki, p. 34; Holmes, R. and N. Jones. 2010. *How to Design and Implement Gender-Sensitive Social Protection Programmes*. ODI, London.