



Socialist International Women

**SIXTY THIRD COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN,
NEW YORK, 11 - 22 MARCH 2019**

VISION STATEMENT

**SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS, ACCESS TO PUBLIC
SERVICES AND SUSTAINABLE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR
GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF
WOMEN AND GIRLS**



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The Socialist International Women (SIW) warmly welcomes the priority theme of CSW63 “Social Protection Systems, Access to Public Services and Sustainable Infrastructure for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls” and strongly supports urgent action to resolve the critical issues involved.

The vision of SIW is of a global community of socially conscious and responsible societies where meaningful gender equality is nurtured, supported and maintained. To be fully effective it is vital that gender sensitive change, including integrated and inclusive social protection, appears not only within the wording of laws and policies, but is evident in concrete results and outcomes which address the continuing crisis of disadvantage and suffering affecting the everyday public, working and private lives of millions of women and girls around the world.

SIW is deeply concerned that the human right to social security is currently not a reality for 55 percent of the world’s citizens, amounting to four billion people¹.

It is an unacceptable fact that the majority of women, men and children worldwide have no social protection at all despite their distress. Billions are experiencing extreme suffering without support in times of acute vulnerability such as during childbirth, illness and in old age and struggle alone during sustained periods of severe financial crisis. In addition, only 29 percent of people worldwide have access to the full range of public services required to ensure their safety, health and wellbeing¹. The majority are provided with only minimal levels of basic support, such as one-off emergency cash payments, which means suffering and deprivation are only partially eased.

Sustainable solutions are urgently needed in social protection to provide support and hope for the billions of citizens in desperate need.

Women and girls remain the least socially protected group worldwide and are far more likely to be unable to access public services. In some cases where social resources are available they are fragmented and un-even, meaning many women remain in deprivation. They may, for example, be easily accessible in cities, but impossible to access for rural women. As a direct result women and girls are significantly more likely to experience poverty, ill-health and struggle throughout their lives from un-even access to primary and higher education when younger, to huge inequalities in pay and working conditions as they grow up. This deprivation remains distressingly acute in old age where in some regions the percentage of women receiving pensions is considerably lower than men² and almost 65 per cent of the retirement age population without a regular pension are women³.

In addition, in many regions social protection is culturally regarded as a function of immediate and extended family. This results in a reluctance to acknowledge the essential role that local communities, governments and businesses can have in supporting vulnerable groups including women, children and the elderly.

Despite this there have been impressive improvements in some gender progressive regions, such as improved maternity benefits, equal pay legislation, targeted conditional cash transfer programmes and gender equal pension provisions which recognise the invaluable contribution of women within their societies. Unfortunately, there have also been worrying regressions, particularly in the years since the 2009 financial crisis. It is a deeply concerning trend that when governmental budgets become tight, many of the financial and public institutional support networks which affect women and girls far more than men, such as publicly funded childcare provision and social care support, are often the first areas to have their funding cut.

These regressions must be halted as cuts to social protection support cause immense suffering for women and their families. It is critical that women’s rights and needs are continuously prioritised within government budgeting policies and across political parties as they are far too

important to be pushed aside when the political mood changes. It is also essential that social protection of women and girls is consistently in the global political spotlight and urgently prioritised worldwide.

Where social protection systems exist, one of the reasons women are being failed is that they do not take into account the harsh realities and limitations of many women's daily lives. Women continue to perform the majority of un-paid household, childcare and extended family care duties. In some cases this leaves many women and girls isolated from potential social, educational and healthcare resources because they cannot leave their homes or neighbourhoods, or have no means of travelling anywhere to access them. Many also have little or no money of their own, so even low access costs, such as a bus fare, will automatically exclude many women.

It is vital that social protection solutions address the practical realities of women and girls to ensure that they are reaching those who need it most and are providing the greatest possible improvements and benefits. It is also critical to address the issue of freeing up women's time to enable them to participate in social protection initiatives. It far too often goes un-noticed within societies that for most women household and family care tasks are performed in addition to work done outside the home. For many each day includes tasks such as gruelling agricultural work, walking great distances searching for food, collecting water or performing part-time domestic or office work to help provide income for their families. This means that overall many women work far more hours than men and in some situations, such as widowhood, there may be no alternative. This leaves women little or no time at all to attend to their own mental and physical wellbeing, education and development or to seek out sources of social and practical support.

There are a wide range of potential practical solutions to help women free up their time including the provision of good quality long-term care for elderly people, affordable or free child-care and community social support programmes to help share the burden of un-paid care work tasks. Solutions such as these require governments and communities to commit to investing in strong infrastructures and social protection programmes which recognise that freeing up women's time contributes to the overall sustainable development and wellbeing of the community as a whole, benefitting both women and men.

The other major barriers to social protection inclusion are gender restrictive cultural norms which control women in their movements and activities. Marriage, divorce, becoming widowed or losing the presence of a partner as they leave to find work elsewhere can also result in women and girls becoming extremely isolated and vulnerable. Changes in culture take time but if we work in solidarity, continually pushing against that which binds women, the required changes are achievable. Even small initiatives, such as the creation of women's community collectives where ideas can be shared and friendships nurtured can be the starting point for immense positive change.

Creating sustainable infrastructures is not only an essential component to creating gender equality it is also a vital factor in supporting environmentally responsible use of the earth's resources. Both gender equality and our planet can benefit from the creation of affordable and sustainable sources of energy such as solar and wind power. Environmentally sustainable options are beneficial for all our planet's citizens, but can be immediately life-changing for women in rural, isolated communities who might otherwise be disadvantaged because power for essential support systems such as medical care, computer access and mobile phone access is currently unaffordable.

Another essential element linked to sustainable infrastructure in the progress of gender equality is the availability of easily accessible clean water. As the majority of the world's population cannot simply turn on a tap to get water, this would change the daily lives of millions of women around the world. Women and girls are often expected to make the journey to a distant water source and then carry the water back, sometimes for miles. Not only would it free up time and personal energy for them, a local clean water source would also benefit the health of entire communities.

Governments and communities can and should choose to allocate funding for local clean water supplies to ensure that lives are made easier and healthier for all of their citizens.

Of particular concern to the SIW are the millions of women, girls and children who are caught within fragile and conflict afflicted environments. Formal social protection infrastructures are likely to be fractured and ineffective resulting in painfully distressing suffering leaving women with no support for the effects of gender based violence and no basic health or social care provision. Global governments and NGOs are urged to continue and expand all aid and support which provide much needed social protection provision to ensure that wherever possible human rights are respected and the essential needs of those affected are met.

Pooling of resources, both financial and practical and maintaining healing dialogues which promote peace and reconciliation are just some of the ways the international community can help end the suffering of our defenceless and suffering sisters and children.

Another extremely vulnerable group is migrant women, girls and children. They are not only acutely vulnerable to violence, hunger, poverty and mental suffering but are also often stateless as they flee climate disasters, famine, conflict or persecution in their home regions. Working together in socially compassionate and responsible cooperation, the international community and NGOs are urged to continue to help alleviate the distress of these women, children and men who have been displaced from their homes and have nowhere else to go. Compassionate solutions are urgently required to progress the SIW's vision of a peaceful, sustainable global community where all citizens are treated equally and their human rights and dignity are respected.

The SIW asserts that it is essential that women and girls are actively encouraged to have the collective confidence and solidarity to push for better educational opportunities, equal pay for equal work, supportive development and advancement of women in the workplace and 50 : 50 gender parity within governments. With education and personal confidence women are far better placed to research and understand the social protection resources available to them and be a strong voice in creating tailored solutions which adequately address the issues they face at grassroots level.

Ensuring funding for appropriate sustainable infrastructures, policies and programmes is fundamental to enable women and girls to access social protection and public services easily and affordably in whatever situations they are in and in whichever regions they inhabit. In practice this can take many forms such as mobile medical and maternity units, providing community transport services, increasing childcare provision, or increasing cash benefits. The solutions to gender inclusiveness definitely exist but in far too many cases are not explored or implemented.

The urgent challenge is to push global political will into taking action to fund and implement programmes which give affordable social protection access to all. As well as the tireless work of local groups and NGOs we now have the power of video footage, international media and social media which can all be harnessed to keep pushing forward and ensure that women's voices are heard. This is vital work. When women and girls are broken and un-supported as

millions worldwide today are on a daily basis our global family loses invaluable wisdom, skills, talents and knowledge that cannot be replaced. Women have proven they are crucial in maintaining peace and providing social cohesion and are perfectly capable of governing communities and nations. A balance in the world is urgently needed. This must start right now with honouring our sisters and brothers worldwide as equals.

Without doubt the internet, mobile technologies and social media platforms have revolutionised our global communications and expanded women's abilities to share and learn from each other wherever they live. These technologies have transformed the lives of both urban and rural women allowing them to access essentials such as life-saving medical advice, agricultural knowledge and education. Many women also begin their journeys towards financial independence and personal emancipation using internet services. This can be through accessing seed funding for new businesses, finding jobs, or finding markets for goods and services.

Social media is also a huge catalyst for positive change. It has connected women and girls through text, photos and video so they may tell their stories, share evidence of both abuses and triumphs and feel heard and supported by millions worldwide. The impact is immense affecting the confidence, knowledge and mental wellbeing of individuals and enriching the global community as a whole.

Unfortunately more than four billion people do not have access to the benefits of the internet⁴. They live in isolation from their wider communities, denied full realisation of their potential and remain unaware of the political dialogues in their regions and opportunities for practical and social support that may be available to them. The majority of those who remain unconnected are women and girls who are already, as a group, the most disadvantaged of all our citizens. This is an unacceptable barrier to global gender equality and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

There are encouraging moves in the right direction in accordance with SDG9 «Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure» and the internet communications technology industry is eager to help. The willingness and expertise are available to create gender equality in technology access and training; the challenge is to ensure these are progressed into concrete actions and outcomes.

Women themselves know what would benefit them. The unfortunate fact is too often they are never asked and are never given an opportunity to speak. SIW firmly believes that the root of lasting change is to encourage political participation of women to ensure that gender sensitive issues are raised and social protection systems are fit for purpose for women and girls. When women and men work together as equals, each bringing their unique perspective to the table, we have the beginnings of genuinely meaningful gender equality which benefits the entire global community.

SIW asserts that there is an urgent need to reaffirm commitment to rapid progress on addressing the social protection needs of women and girls. Without gender equality in social protection it is impossible to create gender equal societies which are the foundation of sustainable prosperity and peace worldwide.

In support of improving inclusiveness of social protection systems for all women and girls SIW calls on its members and affiliated groups to:

- Respect the principles of human rights and decent work in the formulation and implementation of social protection and public service policies.
- Incorporate specific, measurable social protection and public services goals and recommendations for inclusion and access of women and girls within local and national

party manifestos to ensure social protection issues remain high on political agendas.

- Challenge accepted norms in social protection systems both locally and internationally which exclude or ignore the needs of women and girls, including issues of provision, access and affordability of essential public services such as maternity healthcare.
- Urge the allocation of sufficient financial resources at government level to ensure all members of society, including women and girls, have adequate social protection and strongly challenge any erosion of such funding.
- Encourage accountability of politicians and governments for the social protection of their citizens, particularly vulnerable groups including women and girls, children in general, the elderly and infirm.
- Remind and educate communities and regions of the invaluable contribution of women and girls to their social and economic prosperity to help change cultural perceptions and create a continuing dialogue of habitually valuing and honouring women and girls.
- Collect qualitative data by gender and quantitative data broken down by gender, in accordance with international standards, which will be used to monitor and evaluate social protection policies, modify them and design new policies that are more gender-sensitive.

1 *World Social Protection Report 2017-2019*

https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_601903/lang--en/index.htm

2 *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016 (UN Women)* page 148

http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf

3 *ITUC Economic and Social Policy Brief: Gender Gaps in Social Protection* page 3 (taken from *Women at Work Trends 2016 - International Labour Organization*)

https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/policy_brief_gender_gaps_social_protection_en.pdf

4 *SDG Goal 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure*

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-9-industry-innovation-and-infrastructure.html>

