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Investing in gender equality: Parliaments ensuring social protection, public services and infrastructure deliver for women and girls

A parliamentary event organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women
at the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

13 March 2019, Trusteeship Council Room, UN Headquarters, New York

CONCEPT NOTE AND AGENDA

1. INTRODUCTION

Well-resourced and gender-responsive social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure systems are fundamental to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. By levelling the playing field for women and men in all areas of life, they are also key for promoting economically sustainable and fair societies.¹ Social protection systems are essential for protecting people from poverty and unexpected hardship. Public services like health, education, water and sanitation ensure delivery of basic rights and needs and also promote individuals' well-being and the collective productivity of societies. Infrastructure connects people to these systems and services.²

However, social protection programmes and their extended public services and related infrastructure are not always designed with women's needs, priorities and security in mind. Often, these systems are based upon and perpetuate outdated gender roles of women and men, rather than account for the realities of how most women live and work today.³ Marital, parental, migration and employment status have hugely differential impacts on women and men over time. Reproductive years and care responsibilities overlap with people's most economically productive and income generating years, when women are especially vulnerable to multiple demands on their time.⁴ Women therefore bear the lion's share of unpaid care work and responsibilities over their lifetimes while, on average, earning 23 per cent less for work of equal value than men.⁵ They are more likely to be employed in the informal sector and thus, excluded from contributory and tax-financed social benefit protections, such as pensions, social insurance or parental and care leave. Altogether, this limits women's choices, access and control over their lives and makes them especially vulnerable to poverty in their reproductive and elderly years.

The traditionally male-dominated sphere of infrastructure and related services, especially in the areas of health, water, energy and transport, is not always designed to respond to women's needs and priorities as they relate to their economic activities and care responsibilities. Women tend to interact more frequently

¹ UN Women, Report of the Expert Group, 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 63), *Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls*, New York, New York, 13-15 September 2018.

² Chopra, D. and Campos Ugalde, A.C. (2018), *Initiating women's empowerment; achieving gender equality: Interlinkages amongst social protection, infrastructure, and public services*. Background paper prepared for the Expert General Meeting of the 63rd Commission on the Status of Women.

³ Ibid, UN Women.

⁴ World Bank, *Gender Differences in Poverty and Household Composition through the Life-Cycle: A Global Perspective*, Working Paper, March 2018.

⁵ ILO (2016), *Women at Work: Trends 2016*.

with public services than men for their basic needs and for employment, and are thus disproportionately affected by their disruption or cutbacks.

Redressing these imbalances is imperative not only to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality but to the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including its goals for: poverty eradication (SDG 1); health and well-being (SDG 3); education (SDG 4); decent work and inclusive growth (SDG 8); reducing inequalities (SDG 10); and climate change (SDG 13). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also provides a strong basis for ensuring equality in these areas, particularly through Articles 5 (social and cultural norms, including shared parental responsibility), 11 (equality in the economy), 12 (access to health), 13 (economic and social life) and 14 (needs of rural women and girls).

The essential contribution of women in their multiple roles as heads of household, caregivers and workers, all of which are essential to the social and economic welfare and sustainability of societies, must be valued. That requires well-coordinated and gender-responsive measures by the State, including gender-responsive budgeting and spending on social protection, public services and infrastructure. Parliaments have a vital role to play, including by ensuring adequate resources are allocated in pursuit of gender equality.

Participants in this parliamentary event are invited to share good practices developed by their parliaments to pass laws on, allocate budgets to and conduct oversight of gender-responsive social protection systems, public services and infrastructure that women can effectively access and benefit from over their lifetimes. Participants will discuss how in that effort parliaments can best consider the wide range of needs, priorities and challenges of women in their diverse economic and social functions, circumstances and geographic locations.

2. AGENDA

13 March 2019

10.00 - 10.30 a.m.

Welcome remarks

- Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women
- Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron, IPU President

10.30 - 12.30 p.m.

Session 1: What do gender-responsive social protection policies look like?

Social protection systems in their traditional design have reinforced historical gender inequalities, such as the limited access of women to formal employment and assets. This reinforces paternalistic policies and practices that limit women's choices over how to structure their families and their lives, may force them to remain in jobs they wish to leave and where they experience sexual violence, and leaves women's contribution to the welfare of family, society and the economy unremunerated. By occupying a large portion of the informal sector and of unpaid care and household work, women may be left out entirely from formal social protection schemes. Single-mothers are responsible for the cost and care of raising children in many countries. Limited availability of professional care for children or ageing populations creates additional care burdens for women. Women who migrate to work and support their families back home or to accompany partners abroad, may lose access to their individual social protection and pension schemes in their home countries. Women in reproductive age and elderly women are therefore particularly vulnerable to being left without a social safety net.

This session will examine existing and recommended mechanisms to ensure that all women are accounted for in social protection schemes, regardless of their employment or marital status, reproductive or care roles. Discussions will cover issues such as maternity leave benefits, including for women who are self-employed or in the informal sector, and the provision of fair pension schemes for women who work part-time, interrupt their career, have worked abroad as migrant domestic workers or are fully dedicated to unpaid care and household work. The session will examine innovative policies and programmes that seek to ensure no one is left without income, such as the introduction of a universal basic income, which can be particularly beneficial to women.

Following panellist presentations, a moderated debate will begin in which panellists and parliamentarians are invited to respond to the following questions:

- How can parliaments account for the social protection and financial security needs of all women, including those who do not participate in the formal economy?
- What good practices exist to ensure all women receive adequate social protection coverage over their lifetimes, particularly maternity coverage, regardless of their employment status?
- What are the specific social protection needs of women who migrate or return to their country of origin after having worked abroad? What examples of successful parliamentary responses exist in this area, both by host countries and countries of origin?
- What do experiences on universal basic income tell us about their potential to ensure women's economic empowerment and equal access to social protection?

12.30 – 1 p.m.

Presentation on “Women in parliament”

- Ms. Zeina Hilal, IPU Gender Partnership Programme

1 – 2.30 p.m.

Lunch break

2.30 – 4.15 p.m.

Session 2: Ensuring public services and infrastructure are responsive to the needs of and accessible to all women

Many countries have adopted a legal framework to ensure universal access to education, healthcare, sanitation, electricity and water, among others. Women tend to interact more frequently with public services than men in their gendered role as caregivers, and have historically relied more on public service care jobs for employment. Yet, many obstacles remain for everyone to access these basic services, especially those living in rural areas. Additionally, public services and infrastructure systems are rarely designed with women's needs and security in mind.

Women and girls face additional obstacles related to intersecting forms of discrimination and violence. They need adequate, affordable and safe access to schools, work places, medical services and basic utilities such as water over their lifecycles in order to enjoy the services that are provided to them. This needs to be balanced with strong investment in enhancing the gender-sensitivity of public service personnel such as teachers and health workers.

The specific needs of women in charge of care work, and sexual and reproductive health needs, need to be considered in the provision of such services and in development of related infrastructure. In particular, full-time childcare infrastructure is essential for women to be able to work. Women's economic empowerment also requires ensuring financial services are directly accessible to them.

Following panellist presentations, a moderated debate will begin in which panellists and parliamentarians are invited to respond to the following questions:

- How can the provision of public services and infrastructure (related to transport, electricity, water, childcare, etc.) cover the needs and priorities of all women and ensure women are able to access them?
- What is needed to fulfill promises of universal access to basic healthcare, including for sexual and reproductive health, for all women and girls? What is the role of parliament in delivering on these promises?
- What prevents women and girls from attending and remaining in school or work places and what can parliaments do about it?
- What are the specific concerns and challenges of public service and infrastructure access for women and girls in rural and remote areas, particularly in contexts where people rarely interact with public services? How can financial services be best delivered in these contexts?
- What are the specific concerns and challenges of public service and infrastructure access for women and girls in conflict or disaster settings?

4.15 – 5.30 p.m.

Session 3: Parliament's role in ensuring the money allocated to social protection, public services and infrastructure advances gender equality

Decision-making on budget allocations, taxation and income distribution are crucial to redress existing imbalances in society. Much of public spending and redistribution is channeled through social protection systems and investments in public services and infrastructure. However, while both women and men increasingly have access to social protection—such as through pensions, social insurance or cash transfers—and to their extended public services and infrastructure, many of these programmes around the world are facing cutbacks through government austerity measures. For these sectors to efficiently deliver on gender equality, adequate resourcing, strong coordination and women's participation are crucial. Gender-responsive budgeting is a tool to that end, and requires the collection of sex-disaggregated data on the beneficiaries of services and infrastructure in order to ensure fair allocation of resources, alongside ensuring women and girls' perspectives are chiefly considered when defining public services, determining where investment is most needed and how services should be designed. In particular, State provision or remuneration of services in sectors where women are overrepresented can have a transformative role towards achieving gender equality. For instance, when the state provides childcare as a universal, affordable public service, or when it provides financial compensation and social protection for women who take on household and care responsibilities, it levels the playing field for women and men when it comes to economic opportunities and financial autonomy.

Following panellist presentations, a moderated debate will begin in which panellists and parliamentarians are invited to respond to the following questions:

- What are best parliamentary practices for ensuring that public spending enhances gender equality in society and in the economy, including through gender-responsive budgeting? What are the barriers?
- How can parliaments influence public investment in services and infrastructure from a gender perspective, such as childcare infrastructure, healthcare or transport?
- How can tax policies enhance women's economic empowerment?
- What opportunities exist, including through the SDGs, to make sure investments in gender-responsive social protection, public service and infrastructure systems are both economically sustainable and climate smart?

5.30 – 5.45 p.m. Concluding remarks