

Social Protection Brief No. 40

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Social Protection Working Group

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About this working group:

The working group aims at exchanging information and discussing ongoing research related to social protection. Researchers dealing with social protection and interested in an international exchange are also welcome to join.

New Publications (peer-reviewed)

Kuss, M.K. & Cookson, T.P. (2026). Gender-transformative social protection: returning to the feminist debates. *Policy and Society*. puaf048. <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puaf048> [OPEN ACCESS]

The concept of gender transformative change brings yet another policy objective and aspiration into the field of public policy—one that reflects a growing desire for more ambitious public policy. This aspiration, while proliferating in social policy and the specific sub-field of social protection in recent years, has been embraced with little consensus and critical reflection on the intended object and processes of change. Various conceptualizations exist, shaped by different disciplines and institutional perspectives. This article begs a moment of pause to critically examine the use of the term “gender-transformative” in the social protection literature, including its emergence, ontological roots, and evolution within the scholarship. Through a comprehensive snowball literature review, we show that gender-transformative social protection often remains vaguely defined, is cast as addressing gender inequality and social structures at the micro level, and lacks clarity on what it concretely takes to achieve gender-transformative change. To gain conceptual clarity and move beyond rhetorical commitments, we suggest engaging more deeply with established and robust feminist scholarship in Gender and Development, including debates on reproductive and productive labor, gender norms, and power and agency.

Kuss, M.K., Breimann, L., Stallone, K. Kamlongera, A., Dadari, I. & Rivera-Quiñones, M.A. (2026). Gender and intersectional barriers to child immunization: findings from qualitative research in Nigeria. *Int J Equity Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-026-02802-5> [OPEN ACCESS]

Background: Preventable diseases remain a leading cause of child mortality globally, with routine vaccination critical to saving lives. Research has increasingly examined the reasons behind low child immunization. While gender is recognized as important, most studies treat women caregivers as a homogeneous group, overlooking how intersecting factors like age, religiosity, and marital status shape vaccine access. This study fills this gap by analyzing how different social categories interact with gender to influence caregivers’ experiences with child vaccination in Nigeria.

Method: A novel conceptual approach was used to capture gender-related and intersectional barriers to vaccination across both supply and demand sides, spanning multiple socio-ecological levels. The study employed a qualitative research design, including a desk review, 67 key informant interviews, and 36 focus group discussions. Primary data were collected across six Nigerian states: Lagos, Kaduna, Cross River, Gombe, Ebonyi, and Kwara. Participants were purposively selected to reflect diverse caregiving experiences. Thematic analysis guided interpretation, with findings compared across caregiver groups through an intersectional lens. **Results:** The article shows that different groups of women caregivers – married women, devout women, adolescent mothers, and grandmothers – face different challenges when seeking to vaccinate their children in Nigeria. Married women must negotiate the benefits and costs of vaccination with their husbands. Devout mothers have to balance scientific knowledge with deeply held religious beliefs. Adolescent mothers juggle their limited status as young women, lack of knowledge, and negative experiences with health workers in the process of seeking vaccination for their children. Meanwhile, grandmothers manage to promote vaccination and provide hands-on support but face challenges like overcrowded transport and long waits.

Conclusions: The article concludes that gender-just child immunization requires a care-integral approach that recognizes the inequities different groups of women caregivers experience in accessing and using child vaccination services. However, simply acknowledging their distinct challenges is not enough. Gender-just programming must recognize the critical role and value of women caregivers in child vaccination and ensure a more equitable distribution of resources to support them.

Huntjens, P., Mohamed, N., Hujo, K. & Desai, M. (Eds.) (2026). Eco-Social Contracts for Sustainable and Just Futures. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-99109-7> [OPEN ACCESS]

Project: Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract

Translating Research into Policy and Practice—Bonn Programme

Co-published by Springer Nature and UNRISD, "Eco-Social Contracts for Sustainable and Just Futures," this volume consolidates a decade of UNRISD thought leadership – building on the foundation laid in the UNRISD 2016 Flagship Report, Policy Innovations for Transformative Change and further developed in the UNRISD 2022 Flagship Report, Crises of Inequalities: Shifting Power for a New Eco-Social Contract, as well as through the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract (GRAN-ESC). Contributors of this volume explore how to rebuild the social contract amid climate crisis, inequality, and democratic erosion. It advances eco-social contracts that reconnect people, the planet, and power through solidarity, social protection, inclusive governance, and transformative economic approaches.

Among-Lutz, I. & Kaltenborn, M. (2026). The African Protocol on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security: Prospects for Comprehensive Social Protection Systems. *African Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 33(4), 586-607. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/ajicl.2025.0545>

This article examines the potential contribution of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security to the establishment of comprehensive social protection systems. The Protocol is the first hard-law instrument on the continent specifically enacted to encourage the codification of social protection in domestic law. The Protocol is relatively new (2022) and addresses most contemporary issues in social protection in the Global South. However, there is scant research on the determinants of its potential success or failure in promoting a shift from sporadic projects to comprehensive systems for delivering social protection in Africa. Using a socio-legal approach, the article suggests that the progressive realisation of comprehensive social protection systems as recommended by the Protocol will depend upon the dominant ideologies of member states towards state-led social protection, the financial autonomy of the member states, the political support of the Protocol by the relevant national actors, the legal assessment of the Protocol by regional and national courts and – not least – upon the capacities of civil society for legal mobilisation.

Fischer, A., Hout, W. & Kaltenborn, M. (Eds.) (2026). The Politics of Pro-Poor Policies in the Global South. *Politics and Governance, Special Issue 14*. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i465> [OPEN ACCESS] with 11 articles, including:

Among-Lutz, I. (2026). (Re)Framing Coherence: A Relational Analysis of Social Protection Systems in South Africa and Uganda. *Politics and Governance*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.11298> [OPEN ACCESS]

Coherence is increasingly promoted in international social protection discourse as a remedy for fragmented systems, yet its meaning and application remain unresolved. In many Global South contexts, social protection systems evolve within multi-actor, donor-influenced environments, raising questions about how coherence is framed, negotiated, and applied. This article examines how international–domestic actor relations shape coherence in social protection systems. It reconceptualises coherence as a relational governance practice rather than a binary system attribute. The article develops a legal, policy, and administrative actor-driven analytical framework to trace how coherence is conceived, invoked, and applied in South Africa’s and Uganda’s social protection systems. Drawing on elite interviews and document analysis, the analysis shows that international actors mobilise coherence in mandate-specific ways. Multilaterals frame coherence as a technocratic response to fragmentation; UN agencies invoke it as a normative, rights-based ideal; and bilateral donors deploy it as a pragmatic tool for system-building. These framings do not converge as they enter national discourse; instead, they are translated in line with the domestic political economy and legal constraints. Domestic actors deploy coherence across various operational rationales, producing distinct patterns of (in)coherence. In South Africa, social protection subsystems are legally embedded yet functionally siloed, whereas in Uganda, coherence is mobilised through donor-driven projects that produce parallel, fragmented systems. Overall coherence emerges as a negotiated, context-dependent process, which helps explain why fragmentation persists despite repeated reform efforts.

Reports, Briefs & Other Publications

United Nations Children’s Fund (2025). [A Regional Landscape Mapping of Gender-Responsive Social Protection in East Asia and Pacific](#). UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok.

Social protection advances gender equality and women’s empowerment when it is designed and implemented with a gender-responsive approach. It plays a critical role in tackling women’s economic vulnerabilities, reducing the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and addressing risks of gender-based violence. Well-designed social protection reduces poverty, enhances household well-being and ensures an adequate standard of living while also strengthening community resilience.

Gender-responsive social protection is increasingly recognised as essential to inclusive and equitable systems that enable women, men and gender-diverse people to achieve equal outcomes. This is particularly critical in East Asia and the Pacific, where women face high levels of informal employment, discriminatory labour practices, gaps in health and maternity protection and widespread gender-based violence (GBV). Yet evidence of its implementation in the region remains limited.

Across East Asia and the Pacific, women and girls consistently experience poorer outcomes than men and boys in health, education, poverty and overall well-being. One in five young women (21 per cent) aged 15–24 is not in education, employment or training, compared to one in eight young men (13.2 per cent).¹ In Oceania, one in three women reports experiencing rape or sexual assault during childhood – the highest global prevalence – with six million cases reported between 2010 and 2022.² While boys face disadvantages in some contexts, women and girls remain disproportionately affected overall. For this reason, this report focuses on women and girls.

United Nations Children’s Fund (2025). [Gender-Responsive Social Protection in East Asia and Pacific. Country Case Study: Social protection and women’s livelihood vulnerabilities due to climate change in Fiji](#). UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok.

Underlying gender inequalities and their intersections shape the effectiveness of social protection systems by influencing the risks and vulnerabilities individuals face. Women and girls navigate distinct challenges in education, employment, decision-making and caregiving responsibilities, which affect their access to and benefits from social protection. Many continue to face high rates of informal work, limited access to health and maternity protection, widespread gender-based violence and growing climate-related vulnerabilities. Although social protection systems are expanding, there is still considerable potential to advance gender equality.

Integrating gender considerations into social protection can strengthen women's economic empowerment and progress towards gender equality. Evidence demonstrates that well-designed and well-implemented social assistance can increase women's participation in the labour market, support savings and investments, expand access to healthcare and contraception, and boost school enrolment for girls and boys, which is particularly critical for adolescent girls, for whom secondary school completion can be transformative. Gender-responsive social protection contributes to wider gains, such as poverty reduction, improved household well-being and stronger community resilience. When gender is overlooked or insufficiently addressed, social protection programmes may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes, deepen inequalities and limit their transformative potential for women and girls. Research on the gender political economy of social protection is limited, particularly on how systems address specific gender inequalities and on the roles of different stakeholders, institutions and policy preferences in shaping policy outcomes. Even less is known about how adolescent girls are served or overlooked by these systems, especially during the school-to-work transition. This lack of evidence affects women and girls and undermines poverty reduction efforts, highlighting the need for research in these areas.

This report examines the gender-responsiveness of social protection in Fiji and assesses the political space for advancing this agenda at the national level. It explores how social protection systems respond to specific gender inequalities and identifies opportunities for change. Understanding these dynamics requires both a systems approach and a gendered political economy analysis. This country case study accompanies UNICEF’s regional landscape mapping of gender-responsive social protection in East Asia and Pacific. Together, the two reports link broad policy trends with country-specific analyses of opportunities to advance gender-responsive social protection.

United Nations Children’s Fund (2025). [Gender-Responsive Social Protection in East Asia and Pacific. Country Case Study: Social protection and gender barriers of adolescent girls in the Philippines](#). UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok.

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Integrating gender considerations into social protection can strengthen women's economic empowerment and progress towards gender equality. Evidence demonstrates that well-designed and well-implemented social assistance can increase women's participation in the labour market, support savings and investments, expand access to healthcare and contraception, and boost school enrolment for girls and boys. It can also address economic drivers of protection violations, including child marriage. Gender-responsive social protection contributes to wider gains, such as poverty reduction, improved household well-being and stronger community resilience. When gender is overlooked or insufficiently addressed, social protection programmes may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes, deepen inequalities and limit their transformative potential for women and girls.

Understanding how social protection systems respond to gender inequality issues and the political space for change requires both a systems approach and a gendered political economy analysis. This country case study accompanies UNICEF's regional landscape mapping of gender-responsive social protection in East Asia and Pacific. Together, the two reports link broad policy trends with country-specific analyses of opportunities to advance gender-responsive social protection.

This report examines the gender-responsiveness of social protection in the Philippines and assesses the political space for advancing this agenda at the national level. It explores how social protection systems respond to specific gender inequalities and identifies opportunities for change.

Kuss, M. K., Tirivayi, N., & Van Drooghenbroeck, M. (2026). [Gender Norms and Gender-Responsive Social Protection: Evidence from programme and policy research](#). UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti.

Gender norms shape policies and society, including the design, implementation and impacts of social protection norms on gender equality outcomes. With funding from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), UNICEF Innocenti implemented the multi-year Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP) research programme (2018–2024) to build a robust evidence base on what works, how, and why social protection can advance gender equality.

A key area of inquiry within the research programme examined the role of gender norms as a moderator of social protection programmes. This brief synthesizes evidence from 11 case studies – Angola, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, Mexico, Uruguay and Vietnam – highlighting the role of gender norms in shaping decision at policy level, and also the delivery and impacts of social protection programmes. The case studies investigated policy reforms and diverse social protection programmes, using political economy analysis to examine policy reforms, and mixed-methods impact and process evaluations to generate programme evidence.

Ackzell, A.E. (2026). [Strategic Responses to Backlash Against Gender Justice](#). UNRISD and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bonn.

What is often strategically framed as a "values debate" is, in practice, a coordinated transnational effort to use gender as a lever for civic repression, institutional capture, and the repression of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights. Situated within contemporary democratic decline, backlash against gender justice is not peripheral to democratic erosion, it is one of its key drivers. Drawing on a UNRISD–FES expert group meeting and recent research, this paper shows how anti-gender actors have shifted from reactive mobilization to proactive agenda-setting, becoming deeply embedded in political parties, state institutions, religious networks,

digital ecosystems, and multilateral arenas. It traces how gender functions both symbolically – to mobilize moral panic, nationalism, and resentment – and materially, through legal, policy, and institutional rollbacks that weaken democratic safeguards. The paper concludes with concrete entry points for governments, multilateral actors, civil society, and democratic allies to act in coordinated and politically informed ways, protecting both rights on paper and the conditions that make those rights real in practice.

Blog Series & Blog Posts

Brot für die Welt & IDOS/BMZ. [The Long Shadows of Colonialism on Social Protection](#). Blog Series on socialprotection.org.

The open series **The Long Shadows of Colonialism on Social Protection** explores how colonial legacies and continuities shape today's social protection systems. It aims to deepen the conversation around what must change to achieve social protection for everyone, everywhere and to inspire political action towards this goal. The first blogs are based on the publications *Colonial Continuities in the Area of Social Protection* by IDOS/BMZ and *Change Course Now! Only International Justice Can Create Social Security* by Brot für die Welt. If you would like to contribute a blog to the series, please contact us (contact@socialprotection.org).

Roelen, K. (2026). [Social protection and coloniality: linking past, present and future](#). socialprotection.org.

Social protection is often framed as a forward-looking policy agenda: a mechanism to reduce poverty, protect citizens from shocks, and build inclusive societies. Yet to truly understand why systems and policies look and function the way they do today, we must consider the past and present and how they interact.

This blog post is the first in a series on the role of colonial continuities in social protection, and how the echoes of colonialism and imperialism continue to leave their mark.

In this post, we discuss findings from a recent study about how colonial legacies, post-colonial influence, and domestic political economy dynamics continue to shape social protection systems in Africa today (see Roelen et al, 2025). Based on a review of literature and policy documentation, case studies in mainland Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire, and interviews with international stakeholders, we examine how these forces play out, how they interact, and why recognising them is essential to designing fairer, more effective systems for the future.

Chukwuma, J.N. (2026). [Coloniality, social protection and health in Africa](#). socialprotection.org.

The social protection agenda in Africa has become increasingly narrow in scope over the last few decades (Adésinà, 2015). In particular, cash transfers (CTs) are now central to social protection programming across the continent (Barrientos, 2011). More recently, there has been significant interest in the role that CTs can play beyond reducing extreme poverty. One key avenue is the extent to which CTs can lead to improvements in health outcomes amongst low-income population groups, either through enabling recipients to access healthcare services or by encouraging healthier behaviours through 'cash plus' (CT+) programmes. Applying a coloniality lens, this blog post discusses the colonial legacies and post-colonial dynamics that have shaped the rise and dominance of CT and CT+ programmes, questioning their effectiveness in addressing the social determinants of health in Africa and promoting health equity.

Muangi, W. (2026). [Stakeholder perspectives on social protection arrangements in Tanzania.](#) [socialprotection.org](#).

Social protection is often framed as a forward-looking policy tool to reduce poverty and protect citizens from shocks, yet its present form reflects more than policy design and is best understood through the historical forces that have shaped its evolution. Drawing on stakeholder perspectives analyzed in recent study, this blog explores how colonial legacies, postcolonial influence, and domestic political economy dynamics continue to shape social protection in Mainland Tanzania.

Hujo, K. (2026). [How external actors and mainstream paradigms shape social security systems in the Global South.](#) [socialprotection.org](#).

In this blog, published by the [socialprotection.org](#) under their series, “The Long Shadows of Colonialism on Social Protection,” Katja examines how colonial legacies continue to shape social protection systems. Despite lessons from COVID-19, many countries remain stuck in a residual model prioritizing targeted, donor-driven cash transfers. The blog highlights the limits of means-testing and argues for rights-based, solidarity-driven systems to build resilient social contracts.

Rakhimova, N. (2026) [BRICS and the Second World Summit for Social Development: Alternative Pathways or Structural Contradictions?](#) [UNRISD](#).

This think piece, published under the UNRISD “Beyond Copenhagen: Rethinking Social Development for the 21st Century” series, examines BRICS+ as an emerging geopolitical bloc. Positioning itself as a voice of the Global South and an alternative to Western-led multilateralism, BRICS+ agenda overlaps with the priorities of the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2), including poverty reduction, employment, and access to health. But its approach remains largely state-centric and weak on social protection and human rights commitments. The blog explores, as BRICS+ expands its influence, whether it can contribute to a just global social contract grounded in protection, accountability, and inclusion.

Upcoming and Past Events

[2026 Digital World Conference \(DWC\): Digital Technology for Social Development \(21st April 2026\), Room XI, Palais des Nations, United Nations Office at Geneva.](#)

Conference themes and sessions: MasterMind Dialogue, AI & Data Governance, AI for Social Protection, AI for Just Transition, AI for Art and Culture, AI for Education and Training.

[Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth: A Global Roadmap for a New Economy \(22nd April 2026\), ILO, 4 route des Morillons, CH-1211 Geneva and Online.](#)

The event marks a pivotal step for the Roadmap ahead of its formal presentation to the Human Rights Council in summer 2026. As international deliberations advance on shaping the post-2030 development framework, the event also signals a historic shift in the international community away from the false inevitabilities of growthism, and toward economic systems grounded in the effective realization of human rights, well-being and ecological responsibility.

Kuss, M.K. & Freeman, C. [Programs, pathways, and implementation factors: Exploring linkages between LGBTI+ inclusive social protection and Comparative and International Education](#). Poster Session 9. Tue, March 31, 2:45 to 4:00pm, Comparative and International Education Society Conference 2026 in San Francisco.

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of gender-based repression and backlash worldwide, alongside rising inequality and austerity (Edström et al., 2024; Lewin, 2024). This has acute consequences for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and more (LGBTI+) persons who face heightened risks of income loss, eviction, harassment, violence, and discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, and housing (Madrigal-Borloz, 2019). In today's climate of rising polarization, LGBTI+ inclusive social protection is paramount. In order to re-examine education and foster peace in a divided world, we must challenge deeply held assumptions about who is considered "deserving" of state support. Furthermore, as misogyny, homophobia, biphobia, interphobia, and transphobia intensify, identifying concrete measures within social protection mechanisms such as cash transfers, subsidies, and social insurance are urgent to mitigate vulnerabilities.

Despite the rapid growth of gender-responsive social protection research (Cookson et al., 2023a; Staab et al., 2024), scholarship has largely overlooked LGBTI+ populations. This study addresses this gap in the literature by conducting a comprehensive literature review at the intersection of social protection and LGBTI+ inclusive policy. It also provides comparative insights that can inform international development initiatives, educational programming, policy implementation, and advocacy strategies in addressing structural marginalization. Generating evidence on LGBTI+ inclusion is critical to identifying barriers, generating sustainable solutions, and highlighting effective interventions. This study follows a scoping review methodology (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) utilizing three primary strategies: database searches, reference list reviews, and key stakeholder outreach. From this process, we identified 51 relevant documents: 29 practice-oriented (policy briefs, reports, advocacy papers) and 22 academic resources spanning national, regional, and global focuses.