

## **Recommendations for the 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women regarding the priority theme “Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”**

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1. The 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW63) will address “Social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”. In doing so, it refers to important elements of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It also touches on key aspects of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that seeks to “leave no one behind”, such as ending poverty, universal health coverage, the recognition of the value of unpaid care and domestic work, access to safe public spaces and public transport, and ending wage inequalities between men and women. This session also brings the opportunity to reinforce the previous sessions’ outcomes and agreed conclusions, particularly those of CSW53, CSW55, CSW60, CSW61, CSW62 and CSW63.
2. The Advisory Council on Gender and Development (ACGD) commissioned a research to assess how the three main provisions to be discussed during CSW63, notably social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure, may contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Following a thorough reflection on the research findings and on other sources and experience, the ACGD recommends to take into account the following elements when drafting the Belgian position paper in preparation for the negotiation and adoption of the CSW63 agreed conclusions.

### **1. Context**

#### ***Gender and social protection.***

3. Social protection systems are **more likely to be successful and gender-responsive** when they are established and operated according to the **principles, standards and obligations** related to **human rights**<sup>1</sup>.
4. **Women encounter barriers and constraints with respect to social protection that are created or reinforced by their roles and positions in the economy, and the society in general** (e.g. the fact that a majority of women (are expected to) carry out the majority of reproductive tasks or that women and their needs are underrepresented at decision making levels). Women also have a

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Expert Group, UN Women, CSW63, EGM/SPS/REPORT, November 2018, p.11. <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/63/egm/63rd%20csw%20egm%20report%202018.pdf?la=en&vs=1850>

higher risk to face multiple **inequalities** (e.g. women from ethnic minorities and indigenous women<sup>2</sup> or international migrant women<sup>3</sup> face more challenges).

5. All these barriers and constraints result in an **important lack of social protection for women, and this throughout their lives**: they face important financial challenges when confronted with health issues, risk losing their job after a pregnancy or feel compelled to return prematurely, and risk facing poverty in old age due to inadequate pension systems. The lack of social protection can thus **reinforce or lead to women's poverty, eroding and nullifying their economic and social rights such as the right to health, adequate housing, food and safe water**. Their unsteady income, on the other hand, reduces women's capacity to pay into contributory social protection schemes, or limits the service package they can afford. Women's lower literacy or education levels makes that they may not be aware of specific programs, as well as of the need for social protection.
6. **A large part of women is active in the informal economy and currently lacks coverage via contributory mechanisms**. The assumption of long-term formal employment to build social protection upon is no longer sufficient<sup>4</sup>. Increased attention for the importance of the informal economy and the growing number of people in non-standard forms of work has led to a number of positive initiatives or developments. Contributory social protection mechanisms have been strengthened and adapted to include people in the informal economy in several countries. This requires both **political will and sufficient (tax based) subsidies to guarantee the same level and quality of allowances and services for all**. Supplementary social assistance mechanisms can be necessary for those women and men without sufficient income to contribute, such as the provision of social pensions, maternity benefits for women engaged in informal or non-standard work, and provisions to make health care physically and financially accessible for all.

### ***Gender and public services***

7. Quite often, **women's and girls' specific roles and situations** are not taken into account during the definition and implementation phases of public services. This can severely limit their access to quality public services that meet their needs. The principle of **gender-responsive quality public services emphasizes both women and men's rights to access quality public services**. It is governments' responsibility to guarantee access to these services for their entire population, to ensure compliance by private providers to the human rights principles and standards<sup>5</sup> and to provide sufficient public financing for them. Essential services like (health) care and education should not be commercialized since a profit seeking logic is often conflicting with universal access.

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<sup>2</sup> Social protection for indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities: Overcoming discrimination and geographic isolation (Social Development Brief #7, November 2018) <https://un4.me/2S4h0EP>

<sup>3</sup> Social protection systems and measures for all? International migrants are left far behind (Social Development Brief #6, October 2018) <https://un4.me/2STnCab>

<sup>4</sup> See ILO Recommendation 204, which calls for a transition from the informal to the formal economy and acknowledges that joining social protection schemes is a first and major step in this transition.

<sup>5</sup> Report of the Expert Group, UN Women, CSW63, EGM/SPS/REPORT, November 2018, pp.14-15.

8. **Gendered norms at the level of households, communities and institutions affect access to, and experiences and outcomes of, public services.** With respect to **health care**, this has important consequences. Inequalities at household and society levels, gendered norms and unequal decision making power hinder women’s and girls’ access to general health care services, specifically to sexual and reproductive health services (e.g. access and use of contraceptives), **undermining their sexual and reproductive rights**. Research in various low-income countries has demonstrated that **female autonomy with respect to health care decision-making is associated with better health outcomes**, and that factors such as ageing, quality education and sufficient income have a positive impact on women’s autonomy.
  
9. An important lever for women’s and girls’ empowerment and gender equality is **education**. Overall, gender disparities have narrowed, but challenges remain, particularly regarding secondary and tertiary education. Key explanatory factor in unequal education opportunities and outcomes are **early marriages and pregnancies, school-related gender based violence and inadequate school facilities**.
  
10. The **number and quality of services available to survivors of gender-based violence remains limited**. A potential positive evolution in the field of public services with respect to gender is the establishment of “gender desks” in order to lower the barriers for victims to denounce physical or sexual violence. Belgium is now conducting a pilot project and has established **sexual assault care centers** within three hospitals where victims of sexual violence find the support of a multidisciplinary team<sup>6</sup>. They do not have to go to the police in first place. If victims wish so then police will come to the care center in order to record a report. This lowers the barriers for victims to denounce sexual violence especially for people in particular vulnerability, e.g. undocumented migrants.
  
11. The **transportation patterns** of women and girls often differ from those of men and boys. They are **disproportionally affected by the lack of or inadequate investment in the transportation means they most frequently use**: public transport, intermediate means of transportation such as animal-drawn carts, bicycles, or motorbikes, and secondary or short-distance roads. As a result, **girls and women’s access to education, public services, social protection provisions and employment opportunities are hampered**. At the same time, women are also often excluded from job opportunities in the transport sector itself. Furthermore, violence against women and girls is a major constraint, especially when using public transportation.

### ***Gender and sustainable infrastructure***

12. **Gender-sensitive infrastructure design and development** can contribute to direct and indirect job creation, including “green jobs”, reduce the risk of violence, promote women’s mobility, facilitate access to markets, reduce women’s care work, enhance productivity, provide increased and more

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<sup>6</sup> More information on sexual assault care centers: <https://www.violencessexuelles.be/centres-prise-charge-violences-sexuelles>

stable incomes, protect communities from disasters, and yield new opportunities by opening up new labor markets for women.

13. With respect to **public spaces, lack of safe infrastructure and secure environments can exacerbate feelings of insecurity as well as the violence women experience**, in particular in urban settings, and even more so in slums. This risk is aggravated by other factors: up to 90% of lesbian women have experienced violence in public areas; girls and women working as street vendors face high levels of sexual harassment. **Lack of gender-sensitive spatial planning may negatively impact women's mobility**, for instance through a lack of investments in rural roads.
14. As the **energy sector** has traditionally been male-dominated, **infrastructure projects have often ignored women's particular needs**. Energy access holds great potential for women, as it is demonstrated that access to electricity substantially reduces the time women spend on collecting fuel, time they can dedicate to income-generating activities instead.
15. Rising rates of urbanization have exacerbated the gaps between supply and demand of **affordable housing**. Women are particularly affected by inadequate housing, as many women in the informal economy work from home, and the **location and conditions thus directly impact their income opportunities as well as their health and that of their families**.
16. Limited **access to water and sanitation** affects women's and girls' lives directly. Not only does it undermine their health and that of their families, it puts an additional **burden on many women and girls to collect** clean water and affects the profitability of women's (informal) enterprises. For school-age girls, lack of water or adequate sanitation facilities are explanatory factors with respect to **lower school attendance rates**, in particular **during their menstruation**.
17. **Access to ICT** can have great potential for women and girls, as it allows them to circumvent other constraints, (e.g. transport) to find access to information, educational opportunities, market opportunities or financial services, yet women remain too often excluded from the advantages of digitalization.

### ***Unpaid care work***

18. Unpaid care work is work that contributes to meeting the basic needs of individuals, families and communities. It includes caring for children, the ill, and the elderly, doing housework, fetching firewood and water, and preparing food. **Up to 75% of unpaid care work is carried out by women and girls. Time spent on care work cannot be spent on other social, economic, or political activities and can restrict women's and girls' lives to the private spheres of their homes.** "Time poverty" becomes all the more important when intersected with income poverty, as it reduces women's opportunities to increase their income, limits them to local markets with limited bargaining power and to informal and insecure employment, and in that way keeps them in a **cycle of insecurity that may well last into old age**. It is important to note that **Belgium has not ratified nor implemented ILO Convention 183 on Maternity Protection**. Safeguarding the health of

expectant and nursing mothers and protecting them from job discrimination is a precondition for achieving genuine equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women at work. Moreover, **paid parental leave for both women and men** can allow for a more equal distribution of work and care responsibilities.

### ***Interlinkages of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure with respect to gender equality and women's empowerment***

19. Social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure are **key instruments** that governments have **to ensure women's rights and to achieve the 2030 Agenda**. However, when they don't go beyond stand-alone, narrowly-targeted programs they can be ineffective or have negative effects on the other domains. Moreover, because of their specific roles and needs, women are more vulnerable to unforeseen consequences of programs in one domain on another domain. When **gender-responsive quality public services** are not embedded within social protection systems, they might not function at full capacity, especially for women. Likewise, without **sustainable infrastructure that takes into account women's situations and needs**, women might lose access to public services and social protection programs.
20. **Single window approaches** create an integrated public service delivery that can reduce barriers and improve access to social protection programs, (public) services and sustainable infrastructure for vulnerable groups, most notably groups that are socially excluded and/or live in physically remote areas. Single window approaches can **promote the empowerment of women** when they take into account the needs and difficulties of women in all the three domains, such as mobility constraints, lack of access to information and ICT, and opportunity costs.

## **2. Policy recommendations:**

21. While recognizing the important role of administrative bureaucratic agencies; international and national civil society actors, including women's organizations, youth-led organizations, feminist groups and trade unions; and bilateral donors and multilateral agencies, the CSW63 Belgian position paper should **recognize and stress that it is the governments' responsibility, as duty bearers, to ensure universality and sustainability in social protections, services and infrastructure** according to established **human rights norms and standards**<sup>7</sup> and urge States **to take the following actions:**

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Report of the Expert Group, UN Women, CSW63 (EGM/SPS/REPORT, November 2018, pp.8-9), these include the principles of substantive equality and non-discrimination advanced by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, and the recognition of multiple and intersecting inequalities articulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In practice, this means attending to accessibility; affordability; adaptability; gender-responsiveness; quality; transparency; participation; accountability; progressive realization, non-retrogression, and utilization of maximum available resources.

## ***Gender-responsive social protection systems, quality public services and sustainable infrastructure***

22. Ensure that social protection, public services and infrastructure policies and programs are **designed from a rights-based approach that promotes the equality of women and men**. This approach requires all actors to perform an ex-ante gender analysis of needs and interests of different stakeholders in order to be able to take into account the specific needs and situations of both women and men, girls and boys, during **the design, implementation and evaluation of all policies and programs**. In all three domains, gender-sensitive programs and policies need to be prioritized and where needed specific, additional programs with a focus on the empowerment of women and girls and the promotion of gender equality should be adopted.
23. Ensure that general **data collection, planning, monitoring and evaluation** is gender-responsive. This includes the generation and use of qualitative and sex-disaggregated quantitative data and of gender-sensitive indicators<sup>8</sup>, relating to social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure. Ensure that the outcomes of gender-sensitive approaches and programs are evaluated and disseminated, including processes of exchange and learning. **Include sex-disaggregated time use data** in qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation so as to assess impacts on paid and unpaid care work. Collect data on where and when **gender-based violence** occurs, and use these data to inform the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social protection programs, public services, and infrastructure investments such that gender-based violence is addressed and prevented.
24. Ensure **participatory and inclusive consultation, planning, design and evaluation processes** to include the practical and strategic needs and interests of all stakeholders, including women and girls and women's and girls' organizations.
25. Ensure **secured budgets** and build expertise for each of the three focus areas, irrespective of political changes, and ensure that **these budgets and the expertise is sensitive to gender related issues and take into account the situation of both women and men**.
26. Enforce the **obligation of both national and international corporations to pay their fair share of taxes and social contributions**. This should enable States to ensure quality social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure and to invest in gender sensitive and gender specific policies.
27. Ensure **the promotion of gender equality in the human resource policies of all institutions and organizations** (e.g. via quota, capacity development with respect to gender).

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<sup>8</sup> Indicators such as impacts on girls' health and education, on women's decision-making power at the level of the household, community and society, on women's mobility, or on women's income, and

### ***Extend social protection***

28. Invest in employment equity programs and legislation to achieve equal access to the labour market for women and other underprivileged groups as the basis for **equal rights in social protection and pensions and ensure portability of social protection for migrant workers**.
29. Invest in gender-sensitive policies and programs to **extend social protection systems to adequately protect both male and female workers in all forms of employment, including informal employment, part-time employment, precarious and temporary employment, self-employment, and rural and domestic work**. Strengthen and adapt contributory social protection schemes to include people in the informal economy and pay specific attention to the position of women.
30. Supplement these mechanisms with non-contributory social assistance, such as social pensions and the provision of maternity benefits to all women. Take steps to **ensure universal health coverage** by making **quality health care physically and financially accessible for all**.
31. **Ratify and implement ILO Convention 183 on Maternity Protection** and promote its ratification by other CSW member states.
32. Avoid according an instrumental role to women and girls in **social allowance or cash transfer programs** (e.g. by focusing on their role as caregivers or exacerbating time burdens for either women or their daughters) and provide universal and rights based allowances or cash transfers instead of conditional cash transfers, since the traditional gender roles don't change overnight with the implementation of a cash transfer. Therefore **gender-transformative measures that actively engage men are needed**, for instance via measures that seek to redistribute unpaid care work. At the same time, these interventions should take into account and address supply-side constraints.

### ***Recognize, redistribute and reduce unpaid care work***

33. Invest in **policies and interventions that redistribute care work between families and the state**, such as the provision of childcare centers and subsidized, affordable and quality paid (health) care for the sick and elderly.
34. **Recognize and attach social protection rights to all care work, including unpaid care work**, through both contributory schemes (attribute equal credits to periods of maternity and family care) and non-contributory benefits. Provide the right to income support for carers and make their pensions more equitable. Provide access for carers to quality public services, including health and care services across the life course.
35. Promote a **better distribution of household tasks and care work between women and men, boys and girls** and actively engage men and boys in questioning and redefining traditional gender roles.

36. **Engage in and support advocacy efforts of civil society**, including women’s organizations, toward national governments regarding the **implementation of national policies that would allow to reduce unpaid care work**, such as access to voluntary family planning, the development of affordable early childhood development centers and the provision of gender-sensitive infrastructure, including water and electricity.

***Invest in programs building on the linkages between social protection in relation to public services and sustainable infrastructure***

37. Ensure that policies and programs in the domain of social protection, public services or sustainable infrastructure **take into account the situation of women and men in the two other domains** in order to create positive results for both women and men in all domains and to avoid that obstacles for women in one domain may limit access to one of the others. This calls for **adequate coordination between relevant institutions and gender machineries** at national and local levels.
38. **Provide single window approaches** that facilitate integrated access to and use of social protection, public service and sustainable infrastructure programs and ensure that they take into account the needs and difficulties of women in all three domains, such as mobility constraints, lack of access to information, and opportunity costs.

For the Advisory Council on Gender and Development,

Sophie Charlier  
President



Lina Neeb  
Vice-President



Recommendations of the Advisory Council on Gender and Development<sup>9</sup> with the support of the CSW working group. This is composed with representatives from ACLVB-CGSLB, ACV-CSC, Ca Varia, IFSI-ISVI, the Institute for the equality of women and men, FOS, Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad, Plan International Belgium, Oxfam Solidarity, Sensoa and Solidarité Mondiale-Wereldsolidariteit.

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<sup>9</sup> The members of the Advisory Council on Gender and Development are 11.11.11, CNCD-11.11.11, Conseil des Femmes francophones de Belgique, Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad, Institute for the equality of women and men, French speaking academics and Dutch speaking academics.