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The International Initiative to Promote Women's Right to Social Security and Protection

The right to social security appears in many international, regional and national human rights instruments. Historically, the ILO has assumed the primary responsibility for the implementation of the right through various conventions, the most important of which is Convention 102 of 1952 which sets out minimum standards for social security. In 2007 the UN Committee responsible for the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights produced General Comment (GC) No. 19 to elaborate on the content and meaning of the right to social security. Since then, the importance of this right has become starker with the global financial crisis and deepening poverty for the poorest people, especially women, everywhere in the world. As stated in G.C. No. 19 (para. 68):

The duty to take steps clearly imposes on States parties an obligation to adopt a national strategy and plan of action to realize the right to social security, unless the State party can clearly show that it has a comprehensive social security system in place and that it reviews it regularly to ensure that it is consistent with the right to social security. The strategy and action plan should be reasonably conceived in the circumstances; **take into account the equal rights of men and women and the rights of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups**; be based upon human rights law and principles; cover all aspects of the right to social security; set targets or goals to be achieved and the time-frame for their achievement, together with corresponding benchmarks and indicators, against which they should be continuously monitored; and contain mechanisms for obtaining financial and human resources.[...].

Although we witnessed, since the '90's, a continued roll-back of welfare programs in many developed countries, recent experiences demonstrate a growing interest in poverty alleviation measures, particularly in some of the middle income countries. At the recent 100th session of the International Labour Conference, the ILO's social security department tabled a report on a 'Social Protection Floor' which argues for the need for a basic set of social rights that all people are entitled to enjoy. In October 2011, a high-level panel headed by the former President of Chile, Michele Bachelet, delivered a ground-breaking report to the UN Secretary-General, arguing that a social protection floor could boost economic growth and enhance social cohesion. At the 2012 Conference there will be further discussion of this with the possible adoption of a recommendation on the Social Protection Floor.

According to the ILO, the scope of the future instrument should encourage member States to extend Social Protection to a wider group of the population (horizontal extension) and to ensure higher levels of protection (vertical extension). The Social Protection Floor approach relies on four basic social security guarantees (essential health care services; income security for children at least at the national poverty line level; social transfers in cash or in kind for active age groups

that cannot earn sufficient income; income security for older persons and people with disabilities).

All of these developments make it an important time to advocate for progressive frameworks for the improved provision of women's right to social security and protection.

Women make up the majority of the poor in both developed and developing countries and face significant obstacles to accessing social protection because of their roles as mothers, carers, informal, migrant, precarious and part-time workers. Where social assistance does reach them, it is often inadequate and discriminatory. During the last decade, there has been a growing focus on women's social and economic rights with initiatives such as the *Montréal Principles* (http://www.escri-net.org/actions/actions_show.htm?doc_id=426624). These recognise that women's specific needs and interests must be ensured if social and economic rights are to be fully and equally realised. Some feminist lawyers have given specific attention to women's social security rights. This writing stands alongside significant work by feminists in the fields of social policy and development around women and social security.

It seems timely to bring together expertise across the disciplines and from the developed and developing world to consider both conceptual and strategic questions around the future shape of the right to social security from the perspective of women.

Some of the questions or issues for consideration include:

- Can we think beyond traditional categories of social security and outside of our national experiences towards a more visionary approach that challenges gender inequalities? Can we move beyond ideas of risk to ideas of need and develop normative responses?
- Are poverty alleviation programs answering the requirements of women's rights to social security and protection?
- How do we ensure that women's care work is recognised and remunerated and should this occur through the social security system? How do we avoid reinforcing traditional gender divisions so that policies involve men in care?
- How do we ensure that migrant women, part of the 'transnational precariat', are included in social security policy and rights frameworks?
- How do we ensure that women in the informal sector are included in social security provision?
- Can we define feminist principles to inform a rights framework for social security?

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