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GENDER, SOCIAL PROTECTION AND LIVELIHOODS: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

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Executive Summary

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Economic liberalisation has been accompanied by the growing informalisation of paid work as countries seek to compete in the global economy through the pursuit of flexible labour markets. These policies have increasingly exposed countries to the volatility of global market forces. The financial crises of the 1990s acted as a wake-up call to national and international policy makers about the need to put measures in place to protect vulnerable sections of their population from the various risks and hazards to which they were exposed.

While markets in insurance continue to be seen by sections of the international community as the first-best option, it is now recognised that such markets have failed to emerge in many developing country contexts. Moreover, as the ILO points out, markets, including labour markets, can themselves be sources of risk and insecurity. While some workers may have opted out of formal employment as a matter of preference, many more are trapped in the informal sector by chronic poverty, social exclusion and lack of voice. Informal workers rarely earn regularly enough to insure themselves and in many contexts, insurance markets either do not reach the poor or simply do not exist. In the context of poor countries with a large informal labour force, it is neither practical nor equitable to restrict social protection efforts to the management of risk episodes. Instead, such efforts should be designed to promote as well as to protect livelihoods, to encourage decent working conditions and to enable all workers to organise for greater voice in the collective arrangements that govern their lives.

Working women from low-income households are an example of the vulnerable poor. Their need for social protection does not only reflect their over-representation in precarious and poorly paid jobs and the immediate hazards these pose but also the variety of gender-related constraints which make it unlikely that they will overcome their labour market disadvantages through their own efforts. Their subordinate status within the family, their socially ascribed responsibility for the care of family members and the specific nature of the barriers they face to mobility within the labour market mean that social protection measures for informal workers need to be designed from a gender perspective.

An institutional framework which draws attention to the interaction between gender inequalities within and outside the home in explaining the nature of risk and vulnerabilities faced by women workers can provide such a perspective. It can also allow better appreciation of the life course variations in women's needs and constraints which are relevant to the gender-aware design of social protection. And finally, it can promote a greater concern with the need to strengthen the voice of women workers and their capacity to mobilise for their rights. Practical implications about gender-aware design of social protection, including the importance of 'joined up thinking' for such design, can be drawn from the experience of these measures in the field using such an analytical framework.

The youngest workers in the informal economy in many developing countries are children. Some combine paid or unpaid economic activities with school attendance. Others do not go to school at all. Hence social protection measures for the informal economy must begin very early in the life course of workers with the aim

of removing children from the labour market and ensuring their attendance at school. A number of measures have been implemented towards this goal. They include conditional cash transfers to mothers to encourage them to ensure their children's education as well as school feeding programs to provide an incentive to send children to school. Scholarships for girls or additional stipends to ensure girls go on to secondary school have also been introduced to attempt to address gender inequalities in school attendance. Evaluation of these programmes show considerable success in achieving their goals but questions are raised about whether women's needs as workers as well as mothers could be better incorporated into these programmes. From this perspective, public provision of child care support to working mothers embodies a recognition of both these roles. It can ensure that children are properly looked after as well as allowing mothers the ability to earn the incomes they need to support their families.

Public works programmes which provide wage employment during slack seasons at wages that are generally below those that prevail in agricultural labour markets have generally tended to draw in younger unmarried women. However, extremely poor women with children who do not have the capacity to set up their own enterprises have also responded to these opportunities. While there has been some attempt to shift from the older centrally designed public works model to a new more decentralised approach in keeping with the new social policy, the evidence that this has led to more gender-responsive outcomes is weak. Nevertheless, there is scope within this approach for flexibility and experimentation and hence for learning from practice.

While contribution-based pensions have benefited workers in regular forms of employment, they have excluded the majority of workers in developing countries who are either self-employed or whose relationships with employers are casual, informal and irregular. Often unable to save, such workers face poverty in their later years. Since women workers are more likely than men to be found in informal work and have intermittent work histories as a result of their care responsibilities, they are also likely to be over-represented among the vulnerable elderly. The adoption of pension schemes based on transfer payments rather than contributions in a number of countries offer some important lessons. They suggest that such social pensions make an important difference to old age security among the poor. Furthermore, pensions to grandmothers are more likely to have positive impacts on the welfare and schooling of grandchildren than pensions to grandfathers. Finally, the receipt of a regular monthly payment has positive spill-over effects on household livelihoods and the wider economy.

The provision of social protection can enhance the voice and bargaining power of workers. In addition, the absence of social protection and decent working conditions has led to various forms of organisation and mobilisation among workers in the informal economy. Unable to rely on the strategies used by the trade union movement, such as use of closed shop, collective bargaining arrangements and the threat of strike, these workers have resorted to a variety of less conventional tactics and strategies.

The design of social protection measures thus has important ramifications for the impacts they achieve. Well-designed measures, which take account of the

possibility of both positive and negative synergies between women's work and children's welfare and which recognise the barriers to women's advancement in the labour market, do not only contribute to their immediate goals of social protection but can also contribute to the wider goals of economic growth, human development and social justice.