

As we approach the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17, a sobering **new report from UN Women** reveals that the global fight against poverty is failing women and girls. Despite progress in expanding social protection coverage since 2015, the gender gap has actually widened, leaving women and girls more vulnerable than ever. A staggering two billion women and girls lack access to basic social protection measures like cash benefits, unemployment protection, healthcare, and pensions. This leaves them exposed to greater poverty risks than men—especially in fragile, conflict-prone, and climate-affected regions.

While governments have indeed rolled out more social protection measures in recent years, these gains have disproportionately benefited men, further deepening the gender disparity. The data paints a grim picture: across all stages of life, women are more likely than men to live in poverty. But the most severe gap occurs during childbearing years. Women aged 25 to 34 are 25 percent more likely than men of the same age to live in extreme poverty, a stark reflection of the gendered nature of economic vulnerability.

Nowhere is this inequality more painfully visible than in the realm of maternity protection. While maternity leave and benefits should be essential safeguards for women's health and well-being, more than 63 percent of women globally give birth without access to any maternity benefits. In sub-Saharan Africa, this figure soars to an appalling 94 percent. The consequences are dire—not only for the women themselves, but also for their children and families. Lack of financial support during maternity leave forces many women into deeper poverty, undermining their health and the future prospects of their children, perpetuating poverty from one generation to the next.

The social protection gap is not just a women's issue—it is a global crisis. The gendered impact of poverty and inequality extends far beyond individual lives. Women are disproportionately represented in the informal economy, where social protection is often nonexistent. In times of global crises—like the ongoing economic fallout from the COVID-19

pandemic and rising inflation—women are hit hardest, yet their needs are consistently overlooked. Out of nearly 1,000 social protection measures implemented globally in response to recent economic shocks, a mere 18 percent targeted women's economic security. This is a glaring omission, and it signals a failure of governments to recognize and respond to the gender-specific risks women face.

What makes this report even more alarming is the recognition that women in fragile or conflict-affected regions are 7.7 times more likely to live in extreme poverty than those in more stable environments. The combined forces of war, displacement, and climate change place women at even greater risk. These women are often left to bear the brunt of economic hardship, with few avenues for support or recovery.

However, the report is not entirely without hope. It highlights key examples of progress, proving that gender-responsive social protection policies can be transformative. In Mongolia, the extension of maternity leave benefits to informal workers, such as herders and the self-employed, shows how inclusive policies can begin to address systemic gaps. In Mexico and Tunisia, including domestic workers in social security systems is another step toward greater equity. Senegal's expansion of health insurance services to cater to rural women, with support from UN Women, is a powerful example of how targeted programs can improve lives. These are not just policies—they are lifelines.

But these success stories remain too few and far between. The majority of women across the globe are still left out in the cold. The gap between the needs of women and the reality of current policies is vast. We cannot afford to ignore the profound structural inequities that leave women and girls disproportionately impoverished. Social protection systems must prioritize the unique vulnerabilities women face, especially in times of crisis.

As Sarah Hendriks, Director of the Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division at UN Women, so aptly put it: "The potential of social protection for gender equality, resilience, and

transformation is enormous.” But to unlock this potential, we must place the dignity, agency, and empowerment of women and girls at the center of policy design, delivery, and financing. Gender-responsive social protection isn’t a luxury—it’s a necessity. It is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty, ensuring economic security for women, and ultimately, achieving true gender equality.

The UN Women report is a wake-up call. If we are serious about eradicating poverty, we must recognize that gender inequality is inextricably linked to economic inequality. Governments and policymakers must act now to close the gender gap in social protection. Failing to do so not only condemns billions of women and girls to a lifetime of vulnerability, but it also hinders the progress of entire societies.

The pathway to a more just and equitable world lies in ensuring that every woman and girl has access to the social protections they need—not as a favor, but as a fundamental right.