

## **“The older you get, the more likely you are to be a woman”**

**Steven Oates** - *Standards and Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Sector*

The UN Independent Expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty is looking at the enjoyment of human rights by older persons living in poverty (UN OHCHR, 2010).

The ILO's Global Jobs Pact (ILO, 2009a) has said that, to recover from the current crisis, adequate social protection should be built for all, including the elderly. And that gender concerns should be integrated in all measures and recovery packages.

### **So what is the link here?**



The particular issue is that, while non-contributory pension schemes have proliferated and play a significant role in the expansion of social protection around the world, they are anomalous in terms of the realisation of universal human rights. More women survive at all ages, but by the time they are of a normally pensionable age, they are worldwide far less likely than men to be entitled to any retirement benefits,

since they are also less likely to have accumulated relevant or adequate earnings or pension rights (ILO, 2009b).



This contrasts starkly with the predominantly female role of caregiver in the discharge of family responsibilities, which typically endures into pensionable age regardless of the health challenges characteristically faced by older women. The importance of this role increases sharply when grandmothers bear a disproportionate share of the job of child raising in families where the middle generation is missing, lost for example to AIDS.

There is contradiction also in the erosion of traditional and informal social protection for older family members on the one hand, and the sustained and even increasing demands made on grandparents by parents - themselves so hard pressed by declining incomes that they are unable to extend life-saving financial and other support to the older generation - on the other.

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The Global Jobs Pact's prescription of adequate social protection for all based on a social protection floor must be correct. But how to fill the prescription? Might a rights-based approach offer some vision?

### Why focus on older women?

The right to social security is well established in international law, along with the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to work and the right to just and favourable conditions of work (UN, 1948). As a response to the present crisis the Global Jobs Pact brings the fulfilment of these four rights together very conveniently. It also coincides with the 2009 Conference's adoption of a resolution and conclusions concerning gender equality. All of this lends new perspective to the question of pension rights and poverty.

- The principle of the interdependence of human rights and the principle that they apply without discrimination on the basis of sex lead us to look at the relevance of the unequal conditions under which women work. As the outcome to be desired, it is respect for the right to work through policies for full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all women and men which will enable the right to social security in old age to be respected.
- One essential element in the employment agenda is just and favourable conditions for both women and men, in particular the right to equal opportunity and equal treatment in employment and

occupation and the right to equal remuneration.

- The Global Jobs Pact has accepted that vulnerable groups most hard hit by the crisis should be helped through social protection systems; and that recovery packages during economic crisis need to take into account the differential impacts on men and women. The crisis is an opportunity to shape new gender equality policies. And strategies should adopt a life-cycle perspective.



- Evidence that the economic empowerment of women benefits their families, and that there are significant differences in household consumption and expenditure according as family income is controlled by a male or a female member, points to the need to enhance not only women's earnings but moreover women's receipt of conditional cash transfers (ILO, 2009b, paras. 152-160; ILO, 2009a, para. 12(1)(i)).
- The case for identifying social protection for older persons as a prime means of addressing extreme poverty reinforces arguments for the implementation of the human rights referred to here. But clearly it has to be balanced by

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the harsh realities of over-stretched social security systems, themselves also in crisis.

- Given, then, the imperative to focus on the most urgent needs, and in fact to make hard strategic choices as to where to target cash transfers, the recommendation would have to be to favour affirmative action by acting to concentrate on pension rights for older women. In some ways, this might resemble the effective affirmative action which is maternity protection.

After all, this is the heart of the family and society. And no section of society stands to gain more than the men and boys for whom women give a lifetime of too often unrecognised and uncompensated support.

## References

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## Further Resources

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*Gender equality and the extension of  
social protection* - [\[pdf 372.46 KB\]](#)  
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## **ILO Labour Standards**

*Income Security Recommendation,  
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*Social Security (Minimum Standards)  
Convention, 1952 (No. 102)*

## **ILO Websites**

ILO Global Job Crisis Observatory:  
Social security  
Campaign on social security and  
coverage for all  
International Labour Standards: Social  
security  
Social Security Department: Areas of  
work