

Groups in focus— Going beyond mainstreaming

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Universal social protection should cover everybody.

However, this does not entail that everybody receives the same type of support. Different groups face distinct challenges, which change over the life cycle, as do their circumstances. While there is a standard set of instruments that can be used in social protection systems, they must be designed and adapted so that they pay respect to different risk profiles. [Part IV of the Handbook on Social Protection Systems](#) features discussions around groups in focus and targeting the social protection needs and targeting challenges of each group.

Paying tribute to different groups and needs is more complicated than it might sound. As today's societal trends have changed quite dramatically, gender-sensitive social protection must go beyond a narrow focus on women in their capacity as mothers to rather empower both girls and women. The Iran case study in Schüring and Loewe (2021, 349) illustrates how the 'universal breadwinner' model ignores differences between genders in society and puts higher pressures on women due to their dual responsibilities—in the workplace alongside motherhood and care. A gender-friendly approach must also be sensitive to the power dynamics and calls for both women and men to be involved in decision-making.

The notion of 'disability' has also changed, shifting from a view of people with disabilities as incapacitated members of society towards finding ways towards their actual social inclusion. Therefore, social protection must take a different approach, designing policies that remove or lower the barriers to their full participation, while at the same time ensuring that family members tasked with caretaking are not excluded from protection and opportunities. In addition, disability often entails additional costs, which may vary according to support requirements, barriers and healthcare needs. Therefore, careful consideration is needed at the programme level on how disability-related costs are factored into eligibility and transfer size decisions.

Some group-specific risks and needs will require separate interventions and cannot be mainstreamed into existing programmes. Women need protection during pregnancy and childbirth, people with disabilities may require assistive devices,

elderly people are dependent on specialised healthcare services and unaccompanied refugees need mentorship and counselling. This means that social protection systems must be flexible and adaptive, allowing for generic and specific approaches to be combined through proper case management.

Groups differ not only in their needs but also in terms of visibility. Some groups tend to be more excluded from the social protection agenda than others. Refugees depend on international aid rather than national support—this may lead to a risk of conflict with the host communities, which might also fall through the cracks of national protection. Similarly, the informal sector often lies outside the social protection radar. Those in informal sector are sometimes referred to as the *missing middle*, too poor to participate in formal insurance mechanisms and not poor enough to qualify for social transfers. The Zambia case study (*ibid.*, 481) discusses how social protection systems can be adapted to the informal sector, including in low-and middle-income country contexts.

Social protection interventions should not only be designed [for](#) specific groups but also [together](#) with them. This calls for the empowerment of vulnerable groups to express their specific preferences according to their various needs, and for political spaces and incentives to take up and act on these preferences.

Table 1. Expert voices in Part 2

Chapter	Page	Expert	Video/Podcast
22	66	J. Breuer (International Social Security Association)	Social Protection for the Informal Sector

Note: The videos can be found in the multimedia version of the Handbook.

References:

- Schüring, E. 2021. "Introduction: Groups in Focus" in Handbook of Social Protection Systems, edited by E. Schüring and M. Loewe. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 335-336.
- Schüring, E., and M. Loewe (editors). 2021. *Handbook on Social Protection Systems*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.