The past decade has witnessed a renewed interest in social policies, and some governments have increased social spending to soften the impacts of economic reform. These changes have come in the wake of widespread realization of the failure of the neoliberal economic model to generate economic growth and dynamism, and to reduce poverty. At the same time, processes of political liberalization have opened spaces for social movements in many parts of the developing world to articulate demands for more effective social policies that mitigate the effects of market failures and reduce inequalities.

These contestations have coincided with a rediscovery of ‘the social’ in the policy oriented literature, widely understood to embrace the cluster of social and political institutions, norms, and relationships that define the boundaries of market exchange, reduce transaction costs and enhance social and political stability. Polanyi’s (1957) seminal work that showed the market to be a political and social construct is widely cited today to explain the failure of the structural adjustment packages that narrowly focused on ‘getting the prices right’, and to redirect attention to the institutional underpinnings necessary for successful market capitalism (Ruggie 2003). However despite the movement away from the standard neoliberal approach of the 1980s, and the increasing recognition given to institutions and the state, there is little agreement on a number of critical issues. These include the scope of social policy and the appropriate interface between social policy and macroeconomic policy (Elson 2004; Mkandawire 2004; Tendler 2004); the role of the state, not just as ‘regulator’ but also as a provider of social welfare; and the values underpinning public policy, in particular core values of equality and redistribution which seem to have been displaced by the discourse on poverty (Phillips 2001).

A gender perspective on social policies in the South, as in the North until quite recently, has remained on the margins of these debates. This volume is an attempt to move the gender analytical framework closer to the centre of social policy thinking. From their different regional perspectives, the chapters in the volume map out the complex ways in which social policies are filtered through social institutions – families and communities; markets; care arrangements; health and
education systems; the public sector – that are ‘bearers of gender’. Moreover attention to gender reveals the extent to which inequalities (of class, gender and region) are being intensified as a consequence of shifts in the global economy, and processes of privatization and commercialization taking place within countries. Women’s unpaid care work continues to form the bedrock on which social protection is subsidized, with erosions in state provisioning impacting most strongly on women. Despite women’s increasing participation in paid work, labour markets continue to reproduce gender-based segmentations and inequalities in wages/income, work-related social benefits, and social security. As this book demonstrates, social institutions are by no means homogeneous: economic, institutional and cultural variations across countries and regions shape the nature of both risks faced and forms of social protection available for women.

In this chapter, we root a theorization of gender and social policy in three key, interrelated arenas: the nature of labour markets, the institutional basis for social policy formulation (families, communities, markets and states) and the nature of political contestation around social policy. In the first section, we lay out the gendered nature of economic transformations in the late twentieth century, drawing out the implications for gender equality of shifts in the nature of labour markets and the relationships between paid and unpaid work. In the following section, we link these changes in the structure of labour markets to a discussion of the impacts of social sector restructuring. Here we examine the gender implications of commercialization and privatization of social services and income supports as well as the policy turn to targeting and social insurance as a response to the exclusionary effects of markets. The third section explores the institutional basis for social policy formulation, examining more closely the assumptions about gender roles and entitlements, especially in the key institutions of family and community, and how these interface with the state. The relationship between political democratization and the development of gender equitable social policy is then examined. We are particularly concerned with exploring women’s agency in relation to advocating for social policy change in ways that meet their various needs.

To facilitate our discussion of the chapters, Figures 1.1 to 1.7 (pages 3 to 6) capture some of the standard indicators of relative (or absolute) female status for the countries included in this volume, ranked by per capita GDP (USD PPP adjusted). These include indicators of educational status (gross enrolment rates at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and adult literacy rates), health status (maternal mortality rates), political status (percentage of parliamentary seats held by women), and economic status (economic activity rates). While enrolment rates in primary education (Figure 1.1) provide a generally more egalitarian picture (India being an exception), inequality sets in at the secondary level (Figure 1.2) especially for some low-income countries. Gross enrolment rates at the tertiary level (Figure 1.3) provide a more complex picture with gender gaps being in favour of males in some countries (such as Japan, South Korea, Bolivia, Tanzania), and in favour of females in others (such as Sweden, Argentina, Jamaica), cutting across