

## Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for CSW 63

### Opening Remarks

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of ESCAP and the UN system in Asia and the Pacific, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting in preparation for the 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission on Status of Women on the priority topic : *“Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”*.

The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing an unprecedented pace of structural change on demographic, economic and technological fronts. By 2050, it is projected that the locus of global economic power would shift to our region, led by China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Russia.<sup>i</sup>

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a stabilizing force in these changing times, with its unwavering commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ in the development journey. Advancing gender equality and empowerment of women and girls is essential for inclusive and sustainable development. In particular, the gender SDG of the 2030 Agenda urges member States to address the issue of unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of social protection policies, public services and infrastructure.

ESCAP research shows that the regional expenditure in Asia and the Pacific on social protection is 6.6% of GDP, well below the global average of 11.2%. Consequently, we risk leaving behind 60% of all women, men and children in the region without adequate social protection. Currently, only 21 of 49 countries offer benefits to children and families and less than 4 out of 10 people have access to any kind of health care. If we raise our expenses on social protection to the global average, then at least 233 million people would be able to live outside of moderate poverty.<sup>ii</sup>

Social protection could be a critical enabler of progressive development outcomes in our region. Today, I would like to focus on four key issues regarding social protection which are crucial to advance gender equality in the region.

- *One, women in the region have lower chances of accessing social protection than men.*

Women in the Asia-Pacific region have significantly lower access to social protection than men. The social protection expenditure for women is equivalent to 2% of GDP per capita, while for men it stands at 2.6% of GDP per capita in our region. This gap is linked to women’s lower rate of participation in formal employment, which for Asia and the Pacific stands at 50%. Furthermore, when unpaid domestic and care obligations constrain access to employment, it could disadvantage women from accessing contributory pension schemes at their old-age.<sup>iii</sup>

- *Two, women are insufficiently covered for gender-specific life course risks*

Efforts should be directed towards protecting women against gender-based discrimination at each stage of their life-cycle. This discrimination could take the form of male child preference, inequities in health and education, workplace discrimination, trafficking etc.

For instance, only three out of ten mothers with babies receive maternity benefits in the region. Such precarity could force women, especially those who are engaged in informal employment, to work very late into pregnancy or return to work soon, which could expose both the mother and baby to health risks.<sup>iv</sup>

Furthermore, at each stage of the life-cycle, steps should be taken to alleviate women's unpaid domestic and care work, thereby freeing up time which could in turn be used to enhance their capabilities. We need to think about ways in which social protection can not only mitigate vulnerabilities, but also create opportunities for women to be empowered through enhancing their capacities.

- *Three, we need to devise ways to extend social protection for women in informal employment*

In Asia and the Pacific, around 1.3 billion people are working informally and about 64% of the women employed are in informal employment, making it pertinent to extend social protection to women in informal employment, including migrant workers and domestic workers.<sup>v</sup>

It goes without saying that building an effective social protection system begins with the establishment of the social protection floors for all, including the poor and the vulnerable, as required by target 1.3 of the SDG 1 on ending poverty.

- *Four, complement social protection strategies with provision of gender-responsive public services and infrastructure*

Social protection strategies that provide relief in the face of distress and contingencies may not address key challenges regarding women's income insecurity and disproportionate share of unpaid work.

Gender-responsive public services and infrastructure investments are key in reducing and redistributing the burden of unpaid work, thereby opening opportunities for women to participate in labour markets, community events, or leisure activities. This would include the provision of affordable child care services, which would free-up time for mothers to engage in activities that are appropriate to their situations. Provision of water, sanitation and clean energy, especially in rural areas, would be another avenue to free-up time that could be used to improve developmental outcomes. Complementing social protection with gender-responsive public services and infrastructure could play a pivotal role in mitigating risks and creating opportunities for women in social, economic and political participation.

**In short**, we need to take action to (i) increase our investment in social protection; (ii) ensure its equitable access; (iii) ensure that it is gender-responsive across the life cycle of women and inclusive of women workers in informal employment; and (iv) complement it with gender-responsive public services and infrastructure.

Distinguished delegates,

Without concerted effort and concrete actions, we risk leaving more than half of our population behind. Development which does not empower women and girls is antithetical to the rights-based approach enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. We must work together to create an enabling environment which supports women and girls of Asia and the Pacific, to unfold their full potential as powerful agents of change.

This meeting serves as a platform to share knowledge, identify policy actions and recommendations to advance gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. Through this, we hope that a unique regional perspective will be forged, which can be brought forward to the global deliberations of CSW to be held in New York next month.

More importantly, we are at the cusp of a significant global event. 2020 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+25) – a progressive and forward-looking agenda on gender equality that the world has ever seen.

Prior to the global Beijing+25 review in New York in 2020, ESCAP will be convening an Asia-Pacific High-level Intergovernmental meeting in November this year, in cooperation with UN Women and with the support of the UN Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, to take stock of the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in our region.

Today's meeting, apart from discussing the priority theme of CSW for this year, will also serve as an opportunity to launch the regional Beijing+25 review. We look forward to hearing from you about the national review process and good practices associated with it and, the challenges and drivers of gender equality in your respective countries. I hope we can capitalize on this meeting to build a strong momentum towards the Beijing +25 Review, thereby bolstering our efforts to advance gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in this region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, I am very pleased to see the representation of government officials from 19 countries, and a large number of CSOs gathering here. Furthermore, I wish to take this opportunity to thank UN Women for their cooperation in jointly organizing this meeting with ESCAP, as well as UNFPA, UNDP, FAO and ILO for their valuable contributions.

I wish you all a productive meeting as you chart forward-looking policies to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in the region.

Thank you!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/economy/the-world-in-2050.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/publications/social-outlook-asia-and-pacific-2018>

<sup>iii</sup> ADB and UN Women. 2018. *Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030*;

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/CSD5\\_social\\_protection\\_E.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/CSD5_social_protection_E.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> ILO. 2018. *Game changers: Women and the future of work in Asia and the Pacific*. See [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_645601/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_645601/lang--en/index.htm)