

**Empowerment of rural older women and widows and access
to technology and basic human rights**

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Presented at the CSW62 Parallel Event, 2018
Organized by the INPEA

On the Theme

**‘RURAL OLDER WOMEN/WIDOWS: BEYOND POVERTY AND VIOLENCE:
PROGRAMS/POLICIES CSW62 PARALLEL EVENT’, 2018**

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the very outset I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me in this very important discussion session.

Introduction:

UN Secretary-General in his Message on International Women’s Day 2018, said ‘Women’s empowerment is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Investing in women is the most effective way to lift communities and even countries. Women’s participation makes peace agreements stronger, societies more resilient and economies more vigorous.’

But it is evident that in the Asian economy in both urban and rural areas, women are fewer both in the formal and informal employment sectors. Women also tend to be paid less than men for the same work or work of equal value. Moreover, gender-based discrimination in employment throughout their life has a cumulative impact in old age, forcing older women and widows to face disproportionately lower incomes and pensions, or even no pension, compared with men.

Population remains predominantly rural in most of the Asian and African regions and majority of them are women including older women and disabled women.

In Bangladesh rural women/widows play a significantly important role towards bringing change in the social fabric and achieving self-sustained economy through the use of micro finance and micro entrepreneurship mechanism.

But limited access to credit, health care, education and gender-based violence are among the many challenges they face in their day to day life. Empowering them is essential, not only for the well-being of rural communities, but also for overall economic productivity, given women's large presence in the agricultural workforce.

It is also true that many older women/ widows provide care for the family of their migrant children, or sometimes the sole caregivers of their dependent young children, spouses or elderly parents or relatives. The financial and emotional cost of this unpaid work and support are rarely recognised. Women's unpaid work at home or in the agricultural sector also needs to be recognised and valued.

There are four occupational groups of informal workers, such as, domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers, which may be defined as the most important pattern and source of income for poor rural women, older women and widows of all ages. Domestic workers who are mostly rural poor women, who provide essential services, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare and gardening in other peoples' homes. But they are mostly excluded from social security schemes and collective bargaining processes in many countries and the regulatory framework for domestic workers in most countries fails to provide sufficient workplace protection.

Home-based workers, mostly micro entrepreneurs, produce goods or services for the market from within or around their homes. Home-based work represents a significant share of rural and urban employment, especially for women, in many countries. Income of these workers provide crucial support to their households, although they face a range of vulnerabilities, including: inadequate market facilities, instability and insecurity of work, unsafe working conditions, low earnings and lack of collateral free loan facilities.

To accommodate more rural women and widows in the workforce, appropriate fiscal measures, budget allocation, proper planning and gender-based policies are necessary. Such as, access to discrimination and barriers free training and credit facilities, access to land and inheritances, markets and seed money, which need to make available to them. Besides, Part- time work and flexible retirement age may be introduced and wage-pay-gap need to be reduced , so as to protect women's as well as older women's rights to continue their work as they wish to and to accumulate pension benefits, where applicable, at par with men.

Balancing work and family responsibilities, sharing domestic work, technology-based job opportunities, where physical labour is less required and above all violence and discrimination free environment at home and at work are important for larger participation of women in the workforce.

In most of the Asian society older people are unable to work due to vision problem. Low cost cataract operation could bring them back to the workforce again and thus help them to maintain their dignity and economic sustainability.

The increasing demand for care services has been driven by the changing demographics, which needs a clear and appropriate policy support. The soonest the Governments of receiving countries realize these reality and act accordingly will be helpful to maintain workforce in this sector. Bangladesh has witnessed a substantial increase in female employment in labour-intensive export-oriented industries, namely the readymade garment sector after 1990.

Composition, quality and participation of work force depend on the socio economic and cultural background of the country, gender and poverty line distribution of work force, their skills and educational background and above all on the interaction of demand and supply side of labour force. However, challenges relating to different wages based on gender and other aspects of compliance with labour standards, e.g., working hours, safety and health in the work place, collective bargaining and child care facilities still remain as a barrier.

Under employment and unemployment among young people and older people, both men and women are very common due to lack of job opportunities or lack of skills, training, experiences and stereotyped attitude towards age and gender.

Fiscal choices for the investment in skill building, training and technological advancement and collateral free microcredit is necessary for the augmentation of the shrinking workforce. There is a rapid expansion of micro-finance in rural areas in the Asian society, supported women's employment in poultry and livestock sector.

As for example, in rural Bangladesh and in many other Asian countries the traditional birth attendants (TBAs) are still active, who perform almost 88% of deliveries, which occur at home.

These TBAs are mostly older women. They may be trained as skilled birth attendants for safe delivery and quality of care in pregnancy and childbirth for women and could fulfil the need for low cost medical service delivery to pregnant women at their door steps in rural areas. This policy measures could also help older women to maintain their profession.

The role of migration to address perceived imbalances in population structures brought about by population ageing, which arises from declining fertility and mortality is very important in the ageing Asian society.

To compensate the short fall of labour, many Asian countries are welcoming migrant work force. But unfortunately, most of the receiving countries do not have appropriate laws or bilateral agreements with the sending countries to safeguard safety, security and human rights of migrant labour. Women migrant workers mostly fall victim of gender-based violence during transit or in the destination country.

As for example, the increasing demand for social care services and the cost of providing these services has over the years prompted a series of political and policy debates as the migrant work force in this sector are predominantly women and migrant women; who are low paid with low status and not protected by domestic legal support. In the USA and Western part of the world, as the demand for long-term care continues to grow, the societies are facing a shortage of care workers. The role of care giving in these countries has increasingly been filled by immigrants. But present hard-line on immigration of these Governments, may create difficulty and imbalance in this sector.

Many Sri Lankan, Philippino or Bangladeshi women migrant workers who provide care services face difficulties in the destination countries.

Fiscal measures and coordinated policy adaptations and informed choices by the Governments and society based on life course approach and free from age and gender-based discrimination may help to maintain a steady and productive workforce size for the continuous development of the country, which may also ensure stability and social inclusiveness for all ages in the ageing Asian society. Governments also need to create job opportunities for older workers as projected significant increase of older population in the economy and society, older workers both men and women will make up an increasingly sizable part of the labour force.