

ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures

6–8 October • ADB Headquarters, Manila



Disclaimer: The views expressed in this presentation are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), or its Board of Governors, or the governments they represent. ADB does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this presentation and accepts no responsibility for any consequence of their use. Terminology used may not necessarily be consistent with ADB official terms.



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures

ADB

Breaking Barriers: Enabling Gender Equality through Social Protection

Lauren Whitehead
Lead for Social Protection and Gender
Economic & Social Policy Global Practice

6 Oct 2026





ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHY DOES GENDER MATTER IN SOCIAL PROTECTION?

Risks and barriers

are not distributed equally between women and girls, men and boys across the life course.

Social protection must address these **equitably.**





ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHAT RISKS GENERATE ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION?

Different groups face differing realities that determine their economic security and social inclusion.

COMPARISON	WOMEN & GIRLS	VS.	MEN & BOYS
Extreme monetary poverty	- 383 million vs. 368 million living in extreme poverty		
Education and training	- 27% vs. 13% not in education, employment, or training; yet boys lag in secondary edu. in some countries		
Caregiving and time poverty	- 160M more hours per day spent by girls on unpaid care vs. boys		
Child marriage	- 640 million vs. 114 million alive today were married in childhood		
Child labor		- 78 million vs. 69 million engaged in child labor	
Jobs and livelihoods	- 55% vs. 80% engaged in the workforce; and more women in informal sector		
Childrearing		- 94% vs. 40% countries offering maternity vs paternity leave; yet 55% of new mothers lack maternity cash benefits	

Gender matters for men and boys; it just **matters more** for women and girls.



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures

ADB

WHAT IS GENDER-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION?

Gender-responsive social protection directly addresses the needs and vulnerabilities caused by gender inequalities.

Social assistance:

- Child benefits
- Maternity benefits
- Disability benefits
- Tax credits
- Caregiver credits



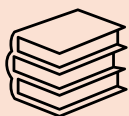
Care and support:

- Paid parental leave
- Paid breastfeeding time
- Subsidized childcare
- Disability services
- Long-term care



Social service

workforce, case management, referrals and linkages to services



Social insurance:

- Health insurance, including maternal and SRH
- Old age pensions
- Unemployment insurance
- Maternity protection
- Sickness benefits



Labor and jobs:

Access to **jobs, skills, and training** including for the learning to earning pathway, particularly for adolescent girls



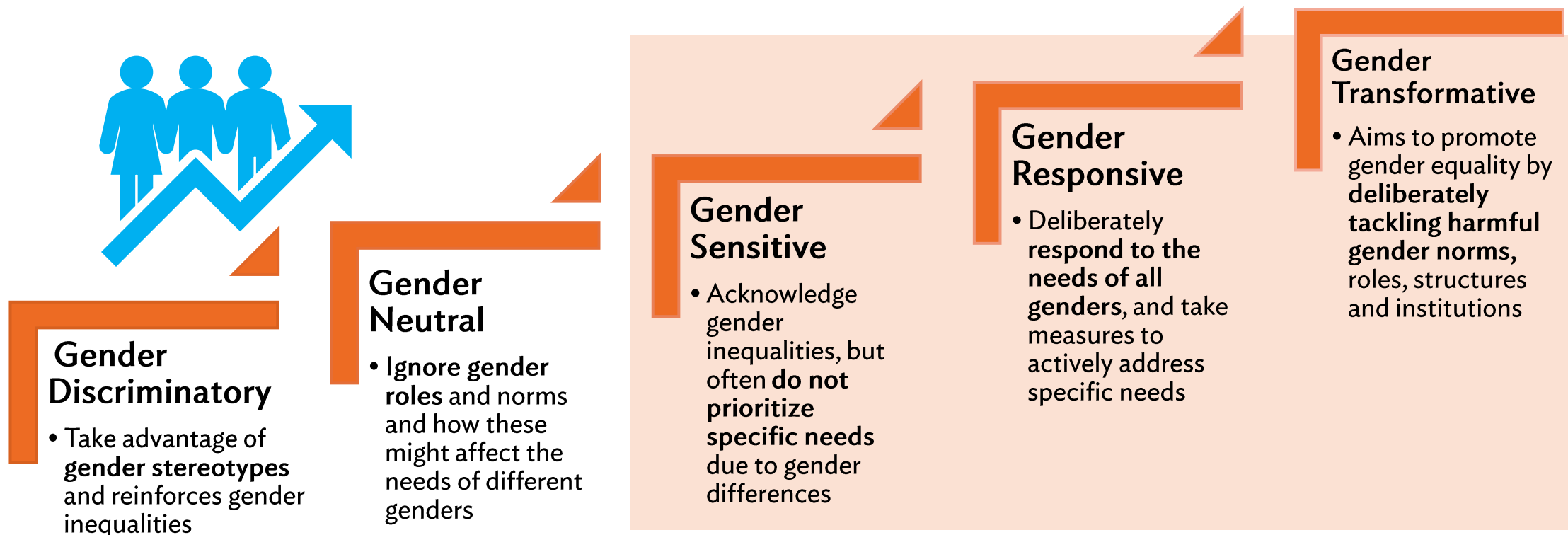
ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures

ADB

HOW MIGHT SOCIAL PROTECTION ADDRESS GENDER OR NOT?

Even programs and policies that aim to ignore gender, often produce unintended gender impacts.





ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHY GENDER-RESPONSIVE & INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION?

✓ To break the cycle of multi-dimensional poverty and its intergenerational transfer

✓ To generate equitable social systems that serve all according to their need

So she does not get pulled from school to **care for her siblings**

So she is not **forced to marry** due to poverty

So they can afford assistive technology for their child **with a disability**

So he can **support caregiving** for his children or ageing parents



Source: UNICEF

So she can access decent work with **job protection** while childbearing

So she can **invest in a pension** for older age

So he can qualify for child benefits despite **their migration status**

So he does not get pulled from school to **engage in child labor**

Social protection is not only social policy. It is an investment in human capital development and resilience.





ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

Evidence shows that well-designed social protection programmes can improve outcomes for women and girls. Yet in Asia Pacific, **fewer than 1 in 5** programmes even identify gender-related barriers in targeting and design; those that do mostly focus on women in their reproductive and caregiving capacities and ignore adolescent girls.

Positive impacts

- Strengthened household **resilience** and **reduced poverty**.
- Increased girls' **school participation** & women's **economic participation**.
- Improved access to health and sexual and reproductive **health services**.
- Contributed to reductions in **sexual violence** and household conflict.
- Enhanced women's agency, **decision-making** and control over their lives.

Persistent challenges

- Men often remain the **primary decision-makers** over finances, assets
- Conditions and labor can increase girls' **time poverty** and unpaid care
- **Gender norms** limit the effectiveness of social protection interventions

Implications

- Gender-responsive outcomes depend on strong programme **design and implementation**.
- **Political commitment** is essential to integrate gender equality objectives into systems.
- **Civil society**, grassroots organizations and women's rights groups are too often excluded or engaged tokenistically.



Source: UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. *A Regional Landscape Mapping of Gender-Responsive Social Protection in East Asia and Pacific*. Bangkok: UNICEF EAPRO, 2025.

Source: UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (2024), *Towards Gender-Responsive Social Protection: Evidence on Policymaking, Programme Implementation and Impacts for Women and Girls*.





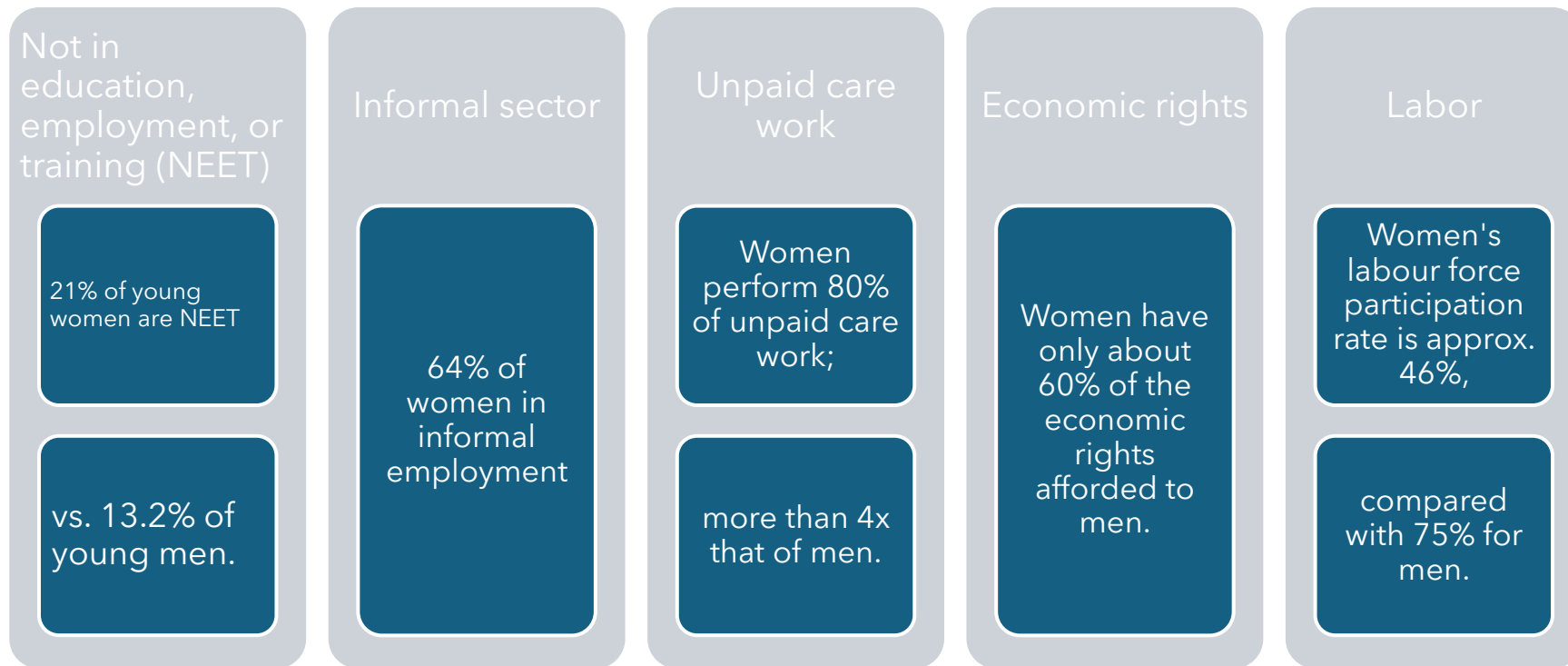
ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHAT ARE IMPLICATIONS FOR ASIA PACIFIC?

Social protection systems designed for yesterday's realities may not be adequate for tomorrow's risks.



This reality is compounded by Asia Pacific facing:

- ✓ Population ageing and demographic transition
- ✓ Climate and disaster vulnerability
- ✓ Rapid labour-market transformation
- ✓ Digitalization and AI



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHAT ARE PROMISING EXAMPLES IN ASIA PACIFIC?

Countries are responding real time.

People's Republic of China

- Family-friendly tax deductions and universal childcare subsidy and services expansion

India

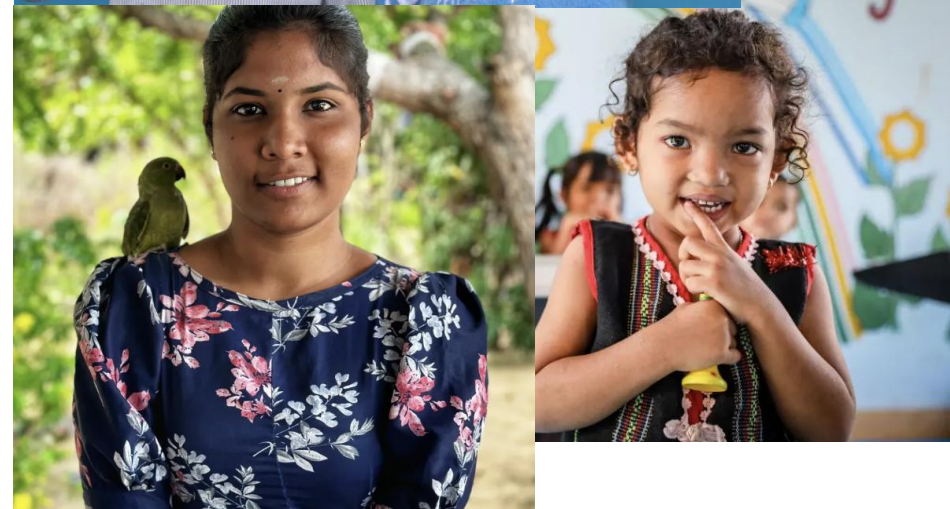
- Girl Child Cash Plus combines cash support with health, education, skills and empowerment services to delay marriage and extend school.

Bangladesh

- Mother and child cash benefit supports maternal and child health and nutrition outcomes, including increasingly adolescent mothers; maternity allowance

Malaysia

- Paid maternity leave and employment protection; and expanded social protection coverage for self-employed and gig workers





ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENTS AND PARTNERS DO?

Consider gender at each stage of the programme cycle—who is most affected, how and why.



Source: UNICEF (2026), *Lessons Learned in Gender-Responsive Social Protection*.



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

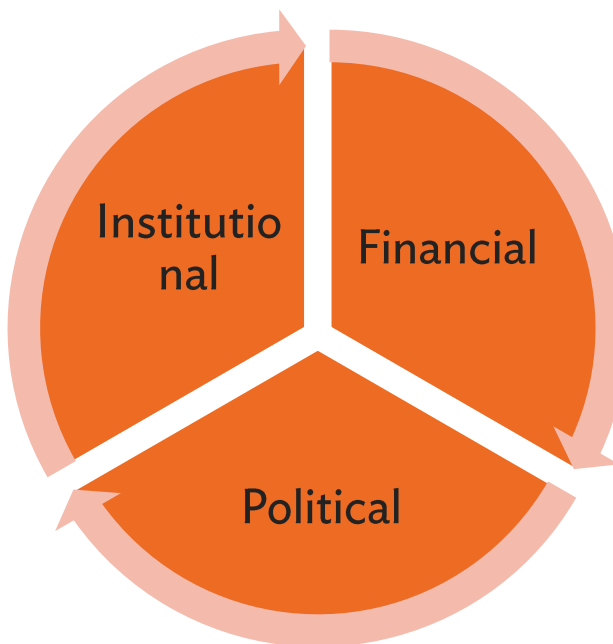
Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENTS AND PARTNERS DO?

Create the enabling environment for change in policymaking, design, and implementation.

- Ensure formal spaces for gender and child rights advocates
- Coordinate across Ministries (social protection, gender, Finance, others)
- Critically examine available evidence in country/region
- Catalyze shift in thinking and political will



- Strengthen legal foundations of social protection
- Protect and enhance resources particularly in crises
- Consider implications in the budgetary and resource envelope
- Embed accountability mechanisms to translate from policy to programming

**GRSP is not about helping women and girls because they are vulnerable.
It is about ensuring that systems do not create or perpetuate vulnerability in the first place.**

Source: UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (2024), *Towards Gender-Responsive Social Protection: Evidence on Policymaking, Programme Implementation and Impacts for Women and Girls*.





ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



ANNEX



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

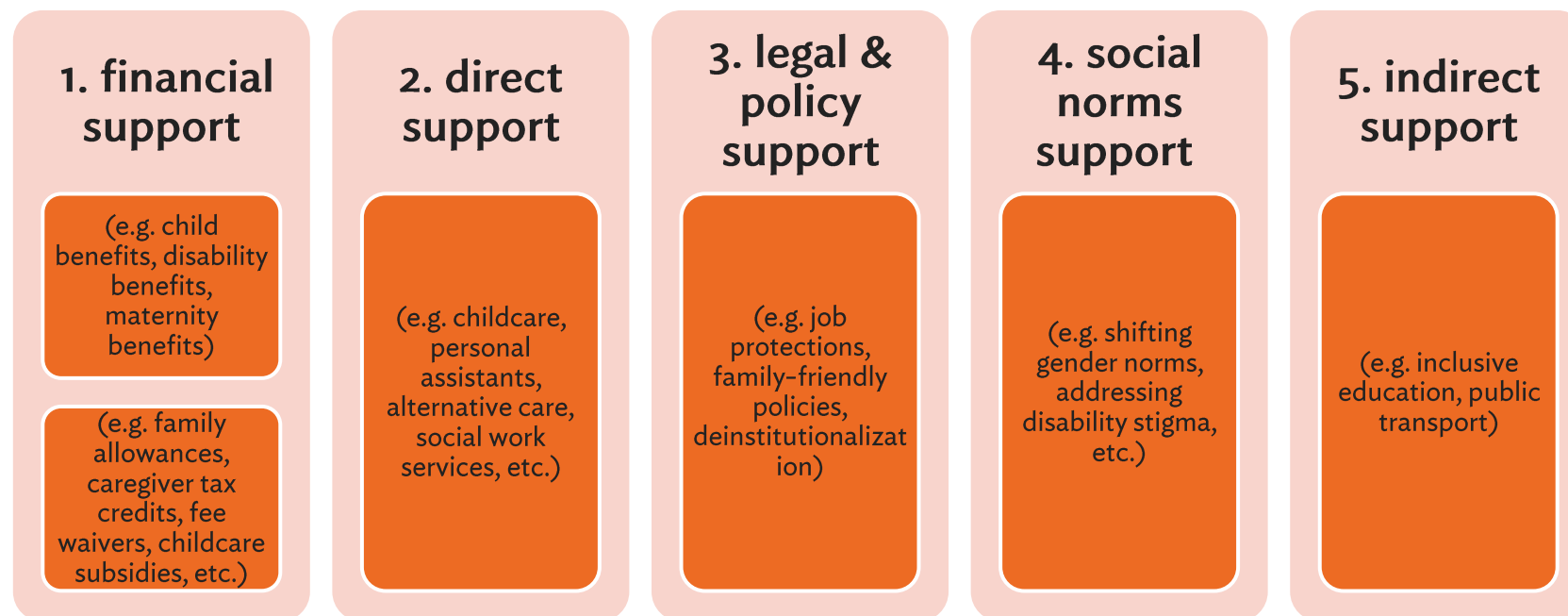
Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures



Care and support requires a multi-sectoral response to a multi-dimensional challenge.

- **Social protection is a fundamental building block of a multi-sectoral care and support system** to meet the needs of care users and caregivers.

- **However multiple sectors and lenses are critical to delivery:** social protection, early childhood development, child protection, disability inclusion, gender equality, and others.



Private sector-
direct service delivery, workplace
policies, and public-private partnership.



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures

ADB

WHAT CAN SOCIAL PROTECTION ACHIEVE?

Financial Support

- Access to **cash benefits**: *child benefits or tax credits, disability benefits, maternity benefits, etc.*
- Access to national/subnational **paid leave**: *caregiver, parental, and sick*
- Access to **affordable** childcare and education, *including subsidies and waivers*
- Expansion of benefits to **informal workers** and **adolescent mothers/parents**

Direct Support and Services

- Access to **disability support services**: *housing, transport, personal assistants, assistive technologies*
- Access to **social insurance**, *e.g. national health insurance*
- Access to **social service workforce** and case management for households

Legal and Social Norms Support

- **Domestic financing** of care benefits, policies
- National **job protection** entitlements and other regulatory/ legal protection
- Integration of **social norms redress** through gender-responsiveness, disability-inclusion

Both parents can provide care; girls can attend school.

Families address increased costs of caregiving.

All children receive ECD and education; women can work; girls attend school.

Family-friendly policies reach informal sector women and young mothers.

Reduced time poverty for caregivers; increased independence and dignity for PwD.

Access to basic healthcare needs and unemployment insurance.

Social service workforce make referrals and case management possible.

Government domestic financing of national care and support benefits

Government sets norms and regulations safeguarding care and support

Addressing social norms around caregiving through policy and sensitization



ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIAL PROTECTION WEEK 2026

Empowered Lives, Resilient Futures

ADB

Playing Fair

GENDER-RESPONSIVE
SOCIAL PROTECTION

What is Social Protection?

- Cash transfer programmes provide money and access to social services to reduce and prevent poverty, and improve well-being.
- Social insurance protects people during life course events like unemployment, disability, or older age.
- In-kind support provides goods or services to help households meet basic needs.

Research by **UNICEF**, funded by the **Government of the United Kingdom**, through the Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection programme, shows that well-designed social protection programs can be game-changers for gender equality when they address institutional and societal challenges.

Why do we need Gender-Responsive Social Protection?

Gender-based discrimination leads to a wide range of systemic inequalities including poverty and access barriers, especially for women and girls.

Gender equality is a non-negotiable for inclusive social protection.

Unpaid care work

Number of children aged 5–17 engaged in excessive unpaid care work

Female: 54 million	Male: 27 million
--------------------	------------------

Not in employment, education, or training (NEET)

Number of young people aged 15–24 not in employment, education, or training

Female: 171 million	Male: 85 million
---------------------	------------------

Food insecurity by 2050

Number of additional food insecure people by 2050

Female: 236 million	Male: 131 million
---------------------	-------------------

1

CASH TRANSFER

Cash transfers can reduce monetary poverty.

- Yet sometimes they do not address gender-specific barriers and inequalities such as unpaid care and domestic work.

2

CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER

To qualify, you must accompany children to health checkups.

- Caring for children disproportionately falls on women, requiring them to take time off work to meet the conditions or lose their benefits.

3

CONTRIBUTORY PENSIONS

You must have worked in the formal sector.

- Women in many countries often work in the informal sector, with less ability to accrue a pension for old age.

CASH PLUS APPROACH

Cash plus approaches can address multi-dimensional poverty by providing access to gender-responsive social services.

- Access to childcare is a critical service to reduce gendered impacts of unpaid care, especially for women and girls.

UNCONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER

Cash transfers can be made unconditional.

- Unconditional cash transfers typically do not increase time poverty, giving vital time back to female caregivers.

NON-CONTRIBUTORY PENSIONS

Also available to informal workers.

- Non-contributory pensions and other forms can be extended to informal sector workers, including a large share of women.

Gender-Responsive
Social Protection
gives everyone
a fair chance