

The International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth is jointly supported by the Poverty Practice, Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP and the Government of Brazil.

Gender and Old-age Pension Protection in Asia

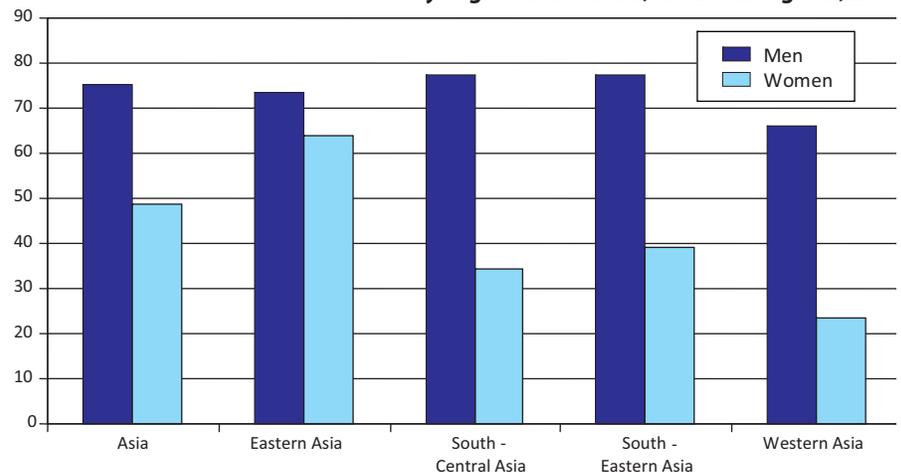
by Dr Athina Vlachantoni and Professor Jane Falkingham, Centre for Research on Ageing and ESRC Centre for Population Change, University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Providing old-age social protection for women is a major policy challenge, as women's working lives tend to be more diverse than men's, often including periods of care-giving and part-time work. In addition, workers in the informal sector, where the majority of women work, are excluded from mainstream contributory pension systems designed for formal workers. Although social pensions can contribute significantly to lifting many women in low-income countries out of poverty, protection systems need to consider much more the diversity in women's life courses and working lives.

Across the world, women are more likely than men to experience poverty in old age, because of behavioural or life-course differences between men and women, and institutional features of modern pension systems. Gender differences in life courses lie in the areas of life expectancy and labour market participation rates. On average in 2009 in Asia, men could expect to live for 67.5 years, and women for 71.2 years. Living longer than men, women are more likely to experience widowhood in later life, to live alone and to face poverty for longer (UN, 2010). In most countries globally, women are less likely than men to be employed in the formal labour sector, and are as or more likely than men to be employed informally (ILO, 2010). Women in Western Asia are the least likely to be employed, and women in Eastern Asia the most (Figure).

Social pensions present several advantages from a gender perspective—for example, they offer a safety net for informal workers with low earnings and few or no pension contributions. Also, as the eligibility criteria of social pension schemes often include conditions that women are more likely to meet than men, such as reaching older age or being widowed, social pensions are more likely to target older women than men—in Asia as across the world. Social pensions may also be used by policymakers and aid organisations as a mechanism for promoting greater gender equality. Finally, in addition to reducing poverty, social pensions can affect intra-family dynamics, gender relations and decision-making processes within the household by affording women greater financial security.

Total Employment Rates of those Aged 15 and over, by Region and Gender, Asian Subregions, 2008



*Note: **Eastern Asia:** People's Republic of China; Hong Kong, China; Macau, China, Japan, Dem. People's Rep. Korea, Rep. of Korea, Mongolia; **South Central Asia:** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan; **South Eastern Asia:** Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam; **Western Asia:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Georgia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Rep., United Arab Emirates, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Yemen.*

Source: ILO, 2010.

But social pensions have limitations. The level of benefits in most countries is low and hardly sufficient to lift beneficiaries out of poverty, while the effectiveness of social pensions depends on the extent to which they fit with contributory systems of social protection, as well as broader systems of protection including health care provision. Given that elderly women in Asia are more likely than elderly men to face poverty, the inclusion of a gender dimension in the design of social pension schemes could enhance their effectiveness in targeting those most at need.

References:

ILO (2010). *World Social Security Report 2010/11*. Geneva, International Labour Office.
 UN (2010). *The World's Women 2010*. New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
 Vlachantoni, A. and J. Falkingham (2012). Gender and Old-Age Pension Protection in Asia. In S. Handayani and B. Babajanian, eds. *Social Protection for Older People in Asia*. Manila, Asian Development Bank: pp. 120-136.

