



International
Cooperative Alliance
Asia and Pacific
Committee on Women

ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

ICA-AP COMMITTEE ON WOMEN

May 2025 to April 2026



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Message from the Chairperson



Ms. Chitose Arai, Chairperson, ICA-AP Committee on Women.

Greetings from the ICA-AP Committee on Women. As we move through 2026, we stand at a significant moment for advancing gender equality in the cooperative movement across Asia and the Pacific.

For nearly three decades, since the adoption of the Tagaytay Declaration in 1997, the ICA-AP Committee on Women has worked to advance gender equality across the region. This long-standing effort has been guided by a commitment to regularly reviewing progress and setting strategic directions for each new decade.

This year represents a particularly important turning point. At the end of November, we will convene our statutory meeting alongside the Regional Conference on the Status of Women in Cooperatives in Asia and the Pacific, the Tagaytay Conference. These gatherings will provide a timely opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the past decade while shaping our vision for the years ahead.

According to the latest report by UN Women, women still hold only 64 per cent of the legal rights of men, and full equality may take another 286 years to achieve. In particular, the underrepresentation of women in economic and technological fields remains a pressing global concern.

Our Committee's report, published in March, *Review of Gender-Based Policies in Cooperatives in Asia-Pacific*, further underscores these challenges. It highlights persistent gaps in the implementation of gender policies, women's participation in decision-making, and the enabling environment for women's leadership within cooperatives.

In response, the Committee is advancing its work with a focus on four priority areas: economic empowerment, social empowerment, knowledge, education and training, and solidarity.

Looking ahead, we remain committed to shaping the future together. The upcoming statutory meeting and the Tagaytay Conference will provide valuable opportunities to exchange perspectives, deepen understanding, and strengthen regional cooperation. We warmly encourage all Committee members to attend in person.

By working together and leveraging the strength of cooperatives across the region, we can accelerate progress toward a more inclusive and equitable future, one in which no one is left behind. We look forward to meeting you in the Philippines.

Chitose Arai

Chairperson, ICA-AP Committee on Women

SECTION ONE

RESEARCH, POLICY AND ADVOCACY



The researcher's and secretariat team at the study kick-off meeting, 14 May 2025.

FEATURE

Ten countries, one question

A ten-country review of how gender equality is written into cooperative law and policy, and what it takes to turn those commitments into practice.

The ICA-AP Committee on Women released its study, *Review of Gender-Based Policies in Cooperatives in Asia-Pacific*, on 9 March 2026 to mark International Women's Day. Led by Prof. Rajeshwari C. of the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode with a team of ten country researchers, it examined how cooperatives across Australia, Fiji, India, Jordan, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Vietnam addressed gender equality.

Why the Committee commissioned it

Work on the study began on 14 May 2025 with a kick-off meeting between the lead researcher and the country teams. Since its establishment in the 1960s, ICA-AP has focused on gender issues and advocated for greater participation by women in cooperatives. The Committee had already undertaken two research studies, in 2005 and 2017, to establish the availability of sex-disaggregated data in cooperatives and to determine the level of women's participation in managerial and leadership roles.

That earlier data made it possible to analyse the status of gender equality in cooperatives more effectively, and produced policy-advocacy programmes such as the Regional Workshop on Advancing Women CEOs in Cooperatives in China in 2018 and the Women's CEOs in Cooperatives Summit in Vietnam in 2024.

The third study moved the enquiry from data to policy. It brought a research lens to the policies and practices developed by apex cooperatives and by governments, and asked how they were being implemented in practice. It set out to map how gender equality was conceptualised, institutionalised

and practised across cooperative ecosystems in the region, and, on that basis, to support the development of a regional gender policy framework for cooperatives.

What the study examined

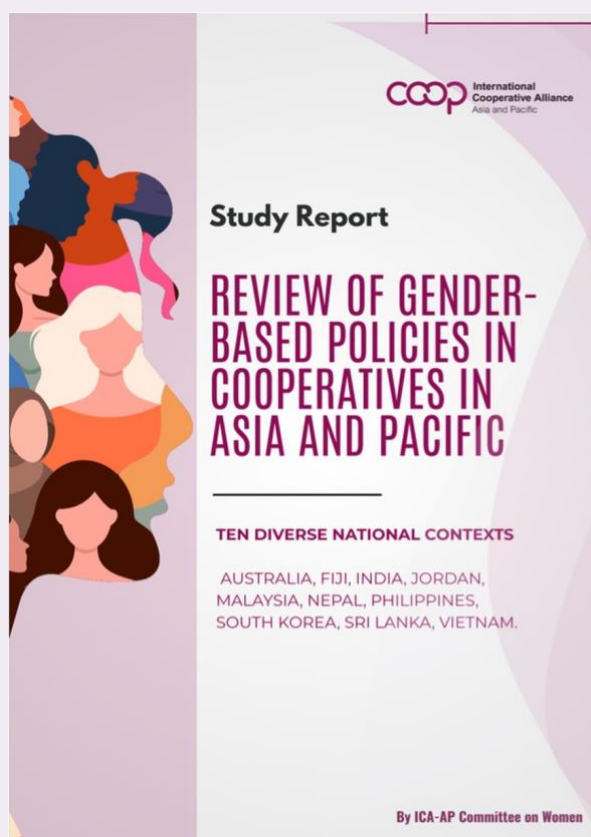
The review worked across three layers of policy: binding national legislation and policies on gender equality applicable to all organisations; binding national legislation and policies specific to the cooperative sector; and non-binding gender provisions within cooperative laws, policies and broader policy frameworks.

What it found

Across the region the study found that rights are strongest where gender equality is anchored in law and policy. In the Philippines, the Gender and Development framework mandates dedicated budgets, structures and reporting. Sri Lanka's National Policy on Gender Integration in Cooperatives, adopted in 2023, provides a clear sector-wide direction. Vietnam aligns its cooperative law with national gender strategies, and South Korea's legal framework reinforces non-discrimination.

Justice and action then depend on how those commitments are carried forward. Nepal's cooperative statute guarantees a 33 per cent quota for women on boards, and provisions in India and Jordan show how representation can be secured in leadership. Where cooperative-specific laws are absent, experiences from countries such as Australia highlight cross-sector measures, including mandatory gender equality reporting for large cooperatives, while Fiji and Malaysia advance change through department-level support and apex initiatives.

Taken together, the study highlights that while most countries in the Asia-Pacific acknowledge gender equality in law or policy, further effort is needed to strengthen cooperative-specific measures that translate these commitments into real outcome.



Review of Gender-Based Policies in Cooperatives in Asia and Pacific, released on 9 March 2026

Rights are strongest where gender equality is anchored in law and policy. Real change comes from connecting legal recognition with representation and sustained implementation.

The report provides a comparative analysis of gender policies across the ten countries, best practices and cooperative case studies from across the region, a summary of the barriers to achieving gender equality, and guiding principles for future initiatives. It was made available on the ICA-AP website, inviting readers and cooperative stakeholders to explore the findings and contribute to discussions on advancing gender equality across the Asia-Pacific cooperative movement.



Ms. Priti Patel, Vice-Chairperson, shared a video message on the release, reflecting on the importance of gender-responsive governance in the cooperative movement Link- [Click here](#)

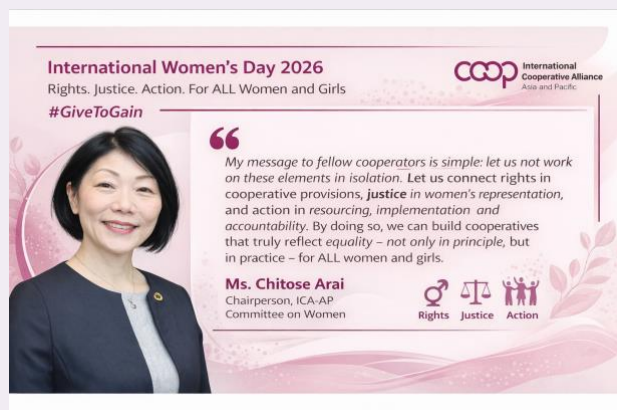
COUNTRY RESEARCHERS

- Prof. Rajeshwari C., (Lead)
- Prof. Sidsel Grimstad, Australia
- Ms. Mahima Parthi, Fiji
- Dr. Shrija Sinha, India
- Dr. Nadia Al-Khasawneh, Jordan
- Ms. Juliana Binti Md Yusop, Malaysia
- Dr. Jyoti Regmi Adhikari, Nepal
- Dr. Dynah Avigail Basuil, the Philippines
- Dr. Jiyun Jeon, South Korea
- Ms. K.W. Kashini Gimhani, Sri Lanka
- Ms. Tran Thi Thuy Tien, Vietnam

[Read the full report on the ICA-AP website](#)

Rights secured in law, justice shown in power

Progress is not achieved in a single step. The Chairperson's solidarity message set out what it would take to move from declaration to implementation.



The Committee's message for the day, carrying the global theme Rights. Justice. Action. For ALL Women and Girls.

This year's theme, Rights. Justice. Action. For ALL Women and Girls, reminds us that progress is not achieved in a single step. Rights must be secured in law; justice must be reflected in who holds power and for whom; and action must ensure that commitments lead to real change in people's lives.

As we conclude the International Year of Cooperatives in 2025 and move decisively from declaration to implementation, it is vital to keep the lived realities of women and girls at the centre of our work. Across the Asia-Pacific, progress toward gender equality is uneven: some countries have statutory measures to boost women's representation, while others have yet to adopt such laws.

This uneven progress is also reflected in the lack of alignment between legal measures,

national gender strategies and voluntary sector initiatives. Ensuring women's representation through law is crucial to closing the gender gap, but laws alone cannot translate it into practice. National gender policies and voluntary, organisation-level initiatives are equally indispensable to turn rights into reality. Challenges remain, from the absence of binding legal frameworks to weak coordination between laws, national strategies and organisational efforts, which together limit effective implementation.

Since 1998, the ICA-AP Committee on Women has worked to advance women's rights within cooperatives through advocacy, capacity development, leadership support and policy dialogue, with a strong focus on rights-based and inclusive governance systems. The Committee carried out its study, Review of Gender-Based Policies in Cooperatives in Asia-Pacific, in ten national contexts.

My message to fellow cooperators is simple: let us not work on these elements in isolation. Let us connect rights in cooperative provisions, justice in women's representation, and action in resourcing, implementation and accountability. By doing so, we can build cooperatives that truly reflect equality, not only in principle but in practice, for all women and girls.

Laws alone cannot turn rights into reality. National gender policies and organisation-level initiatives are equally indispensable.

CHITOSE ARAI, CHAIRPERSON, ICA-AP COMMITTEE ON WOMEN

SECTION TWO

LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

GOVERNANCE

A vote at the Board table

At the 17th ICA-AP Regional Assembly, the chairpersons of the Women's and Youth Committees were formally granted voting rights on the Regional Board.

A significant milestone for the Youth and Women's Committees was reached during the ICA-AP Regional Assembly, where the chairpersons of both committees were formally granted voting rights on the Regional Board.

The update aligns ICA-AP with global cooperative practice and underscores the organisation's commitment to inclusive and participatory leadership. It also strengthens the contributions of young cooperators and women leaders, who have long been integral to the region's cooperative initiatives.

Both committees thank the ICA-AP Board and member organisations for acknowledging the importance of shared decision-making, and look forward to this next chapter as an opportunity and a responsibility to help shape a stronger, more representative cooperative community across Asia-Pacific.

The proposal was carried to the Regional Assembly by the ICA-AP Board and reported to Committee members at the Statutory Meeting on 25 November 2025, where the Chairperson described it as a positive step toward strengthening inclusive governance in the region.

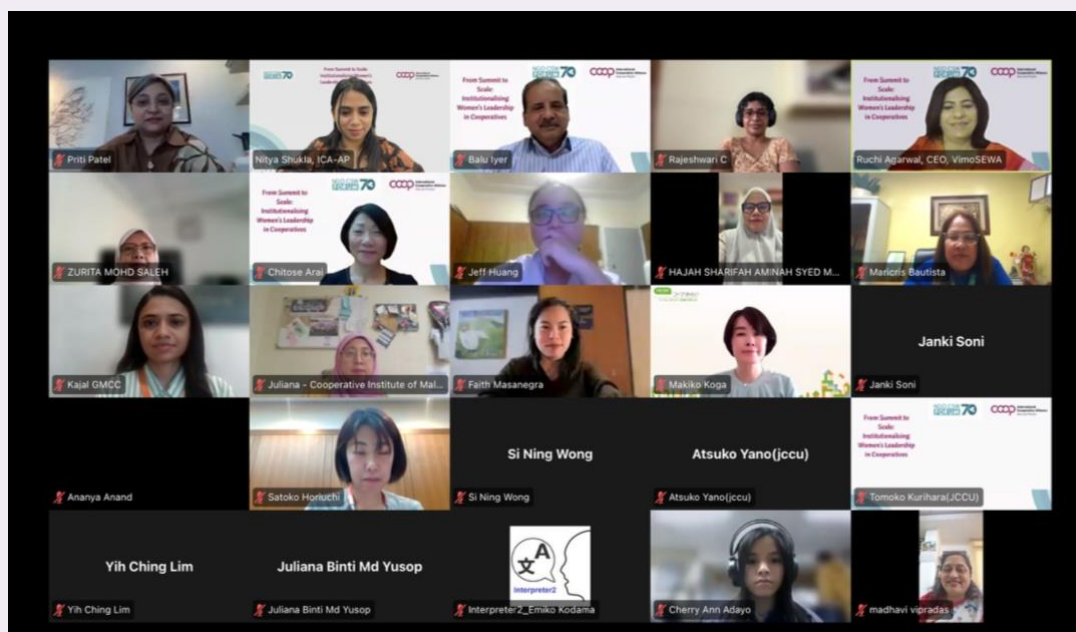


The newly elected Board at the 17th ICA-AP Regional Assembly, Colombo, Sri Lanka, November 2025.

16 MARCH 2026, ONLINE

From summit to scale

How can women's leadership in cooperatives be strengthened in a lasting and practical way? A regional panel took the question from principle to institutional design.



Speakers and participants at the parallel event From Summit to Scale: Institutionalising Women's Leadership in Cooperatives.

At the NGO CSW70 Forum, ICA-AP and its Committee on Women hosted a virtual parallel event titled From Summit to Scale: Institutionalising Women's Leadership in Cooperatives on 16 March 2026. It brought together cooperative leaders, practitioners and researchers from across Asia and the Pacific to reflect on a central question: how can women's leadership in cooperatives be strengthened in a lasting and practical way? The discussion connected the spirit of CSW70 with the cooperative sector's own commitment to inclusion, participation and shared responsibility.

Ms. Chitose Arai, Chairperson of the ICA-AP Committee on Women, opened the forum by setting the global context. She introduced the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, a key platform advancing gender equality where governments, international organisations and civil society come together each year. Referring to the CSW70 priority theme, she underscored the importance of ensuring access to justice for all women and girls, while placing their lived realities at the centre of all actions and commitments.

Ms. Priti Patel, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee, reflected on the qualities that define effective leadership. She spoke about the importance of values-based leadership, collaboration and a continuous willingness to learn, and emphasised the need to build systems-driven organisations that empower many rather than relying on a few individuals.

Ms. Donna Dizon, Vice-President for Administration and Corporate Planning and CEO and Principal of the Co-operative College of the Philippines, stressed the importance of the Education, Mentorship and Inclusion framework, rooted in Cooperative Principle 5. The discussion underscored how

structured mentorship, sponsorship and governance exposure can help emerging women leaders move from participation into decision-making roles.

From Sri Lanka, Ms. Samadanie Kiriwandeniya, Managing Director of SANASA International, described women's leadership as a journey across life stages, highlighting the role of gender-intelligent workplaces, supportive human resources policies and strong mentorship networks. Sharing practice from India, Ms. Ruchi Agarwal, CEO of National Insurance VimoSEWA Cooperative Ltd., demonstrated how women-led cooperative institutions can combine grassroots governance with innovation, including digital insurance systems and community-based outreach models.

Prof. Rajeshwari C., Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resources at the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, presented insights from the ICA-AP gender policy study and drew attention to a persistent challenge across the region. While women's membership in cooperatives is increasing, leadership representation and accountability mechanisms still need stronger institutional support. Her presentation reinforced the need for clear policies that move women from participation to leadership.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Balu Iyer, Regional Director of ICA-AP, reflected on the strengths women bring to cooperative leadership, including empathy, inclusion and community-centred decision-making. He reaffirmed that lasting change will depend on deliberate investment in education, structured mentorship and institutional support.

The event reaffirmed the Committee's continued commitment to strengthening pathways for women's leadership in cooperatives. At a time when global narratives are often shaped by power and competition, the discussion offered a different perspective. Leadership, as reflected throughout the session, is less about authority than about care, collaboration and creating opportunities for younger cooperators to grow.

ORGANISATIONS REPRESENTED ON THE PANEL

- Co-operative College of the Philippines, Ms. Donna Dizon, Vice-President and CEO
- SANASA International, Sri Lanka, Ms. Samadanie Kiriwandeniya, Managing Director
- National Insurance VimoSEWA Cooperative Ltd., India, Ms. Ruchi Agarwal, CEO
- Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, India, Prof. Rajeshwari C.

Reviewing progress, setting the course

Eight Committee members met in person during the ICA-AP Regional Assembly to review the year's work and approve the plan for 2026.



Members, partners and researchers present for the Statutory Meeting, Colombo, 25 November 2025.

The ICA-AP Committee on Women held its Statutory Meeting on 25 November 2025 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, bringing together members from across the region during the ICA-AP Regional Assembly. With eight Committee members present, the meeting opened with remarks from Chairperson Ms. Chitose Arai, who welcomed everyone and shared her appreciation for being able to meet in person.

She thanked the Secretariat and the host organisations for their support, and extended a special welcome to partners and researchers who had travelled to Colombo to present their work. Ms. Arai also reflected on the significance of 2025, marking the second UN International Year of Cooperatives and the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, reminding members of both the progress made and the challenges that continue to influence women's leadership across the region.

Setting the direction for the discussions ahead, she reaffirmed the Committee's strategy built around four pillars: economic empowerment, social empowerment, knowledge and training, and solidarity. Members then approved the agenda and the minutes of the previous statutory meeting. One of the key updates shared was the progress on granting voting rights to Youth and Women representatives on the ICA-AP Regional Board.

The meeting then moved to reports from the Secretariat, followed by a detailed presentation from Ms. Lasalette Gumban of NATCCO on the ongoing Training of Trainers programme on climate change and climate action. Now in its fourth year, the programme has continued to expand climate awareness among women cooperators and build a pool of trainers across several countries. A symbolic exchange of the partnership agreement marked the extension of the ICA-AP and NATCCO collaboration for the 2026 to 2029 cycle.

Preparations for the Tagaytay Conference 4.0 in 2026 were another major point of discussion. The Chair outlined two key regional studies underway, one reviewing gender-based cooperative policies across ten countries, and the other assessing women's leadership and gender-disaggregated data. Lead researcher Prof. Rajeshwari C. shared the study framework, followed by remarks from country researchers from Australia and Sri Lanka. During this segment, the Committee also acknowledged

a thoughtful gesture from Prof. Sidsel Grimstad, who donated a historical piece from the UN Decade for Women, 1975 to 1985, originally received in Zambia in 1985.

Members reviewed and approved the activity plan for 2026, centred on the International Year of Women Agricultural Workers and preparations for the Tagaytay Conference. This was followed by an update on Secretariat changes, with Ms. Nitya Shukla welcomed as the new member supporting the Committee, and Ms. Simren Singh sharing her thanks as she moved to a new role within ICA-AP. Introductions of members and observers rounded off the session.

In her closing remarks, Ms. Arai thanked everyone for their participation and invited members to join the afternoon programme organised in collaboration with the ICA-AP Trade and Business Committee. The meeting concluded with a group photograph, capturing the collective spirit that continues to guide the Committee's work across the Asia-Pacific region.

SECTION THREE

CAPACITY BUILDING AND WELLBEING



Participants at the Training of Trainers on Climate Change and Action for Women Cooperators, Pontianak, West Kalimantan.

7 TO 10 JULY 2025, PONTIANAK, WEST KALIMANTAN

Training trainers for a warming region

Twenty-five women trained as climate trainers in West Kalimantan, spent four days turning lived experience of a changing climate into knowledge they could teach.

The ICA-AP Committee on Women conducted its second Training of Trainers on Climate Change and Action for Women Cooperators from 7 to 10 July 2025 in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Organised with the INKUR Federation and the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATCCO) of the Philippines, the training focused on building women's leadership capacity to address the impacts of climate change through cooperative action.

Indonesia offered a compelling context. With its forests significantly affected by deforestation linked to palm oil production, and communities facing rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, flash floods and other climate-related disruptions, the urgency for action was evident.

The opening ceremony featured remarks from Mr. Mikael, Chairman of the INKUR Federation, Mr. Balasubramanian Iyer, Regional Director of ICA-AP, and Ms. Chitose Arai, Chairperson of the Committee on Women, who joined the proceedings by online message. Sessions were led by two experienced trainers from NATCCO, Ms. Daisybelle Cabal, former Chief Operating Officer, and Ms. Lasalette Gumban, Head of the Advocacy Unit, supported by Committee Secretary Ms. Simren Singh.

Over four days, the training explored the links between climate change and cooperative responsibility, promoted environmental sustainability, and helped women leaders develop practical action plans for their cooperatives and communities. Twenty-five women representing primary cooperatives and credit unions took part.

While many participants shared that they had experienced the visible effects of climate change in their communities, they also acknowledged gaps in understanding its scientific causes. The sessions deepened their knowledge of greenhouse gas emissions, global warming and mitigation strategies, while drawing attention to grassroots efforts already underway, such as tree plantation drives and cleanliness initiatives.

Participants expressed a strong desire to build their capacities further and to act as peer educators in their local networks.

A special session featured two alumni of the first training, held in Bhutan in October 2024. Ms. Sonam Yuden and Ms. Tshering Deki of the Department of Agricultural Marketing and Cooperatives shared their post-training experiences, including awareness-raising sessions and the creation of a compost pit at the National Post Harvest Center using government support. Ms. Tshering also expressed her intention to organise community training programmes in future.

In a cross-country learning exchange, the MSU-IIT National Multi-Purpose Cooperative from the Philippines presented the green practices embedded in its operations. Among these, its initiative to integrate a sixth C of credit, focused on climate change, stood out. The cooperative is also a recipient of the Gold Green Co-op Award from NATCCO, underlining its leadership in cooperative sustainability.

The training concluded on a hopeful and action-oriented note. Participants committed to developing localised climate action plans for their cooperatives, and certificates of participation were awarded. The closing ceremony featured remarks from Ms. Priti Patel, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee, delivered virtually, and a vote of thanks by Ms. Angela Januarti, member of the Committee in Indonesia.

The initiative reaffirmed the growing commitment of women cooperators to champion environmental sustainability, grounded in knowledge-sharing, peer learning and cooperative values.



Certificates of participation were awarded at the close of the four-day programme.

20 JUNE 2025, ONLINE

The harm that is easiest to overlook

A workshop on micro-aggressions and invisible violence drew more than twenty-five participants from seven countries, and a set of reflections from across the region.

On 20 June 2025, the ICA-AP Committee on Women organised an online workshop titled From Awareness to Action: Recognizing Violence Against Women and Building Coping Capacities, in collaboration with Sleepwell Foundation India.

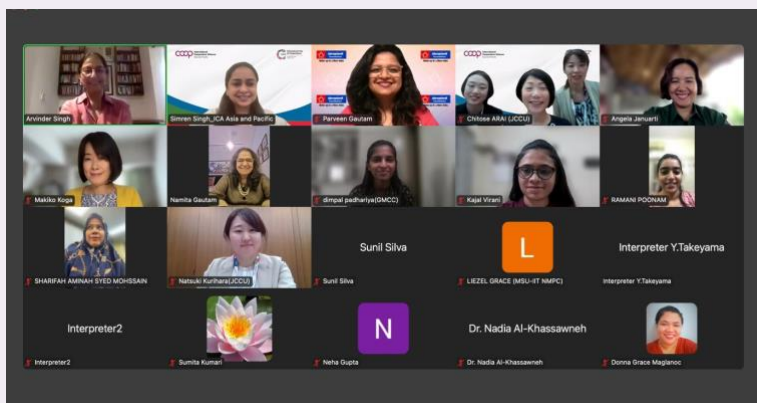
The session was delivered by Ms. Arvinder J. Singh, a psychologist, psychotherapist and consultant to the United Nations. She is the Founder Director of the Ashoka Centre for Wellbeing at Ashoka University and a guest faculty member with the Strategic Leadership Program at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad.

The workshop focused on identifying micro-aggressions and invisible forms of violence experienced by women in workplaces and families, and offered practical strategies to cope with them. Examples included common phrases such as “women can’t take a joke” or “women tend to overthink”, as well as more subtle behaviours such as love bombing, credit-stealing, persistent criticism and emotional undermining that can contribute to an unhealthy environment.

Ms. Singh encouraged participants to pay attention to recurring patterns in negative behaviour, to support themselves and others through solidarity, and to rebuild self-worth by establishing healthy boundaries. She emphasised the importance of recognising what feels uncomfortable, and of speaking up against inappropriate behaviour, both for oneself and on behalf of others.

Over twenty-five participants attended, from India, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, including Committee Chairperson Ms. Chitose Arai, Committee members, ICA-AP staff, and Mrs. Namita Gautam, Managing Trustee of Sleepwell Foundation. Participants described the session as insightful and empowering, and several offered reflections of their own.

The Committee continues to create safe, inclusive spaces to address issues that affect women across the cooperative movement, while promoting resilience, empathy and collective wellbeing.



Participants joining the workshop from seven countries across the region.

SECTION FOUR

ENTERPRISE AND LIVELIHOODS

Closing the International Year of Cooperatives with five women whose enterprises hold traditional craft, rural livelihoods and community tourism together.



Speakers and delegates at the joint programme, Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel, Colombo.

25 NOVEMBER 2025, CINNAMON LAKESIDE, COLOMBO

Cooperatives build a better world for women

The Committee on Women and the Committee on Trade and Business closed the International Year of Cooperatives with an afternoon given over to the women running the enterprises.

As part of the International Year of Cooperatives 2025 celebrations, the ICA-AP Committee on Women and the Committee on Trade and Business hosted a joint programme on Cooperatives Build a Better World for Women. Held on 25 November 2025 at the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel in Colombo, it brought together women cooperative entrepreneurs from across the Asia-Pacific region for an afternoon of learning, exchange and celebration.

The United Nations' proclamation of 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives recognises the role cooperatives play in advancing sustainable development. The programme echoed that message, spotlighting how women-led cooperative enterprises strengthen communities, create economic opportunities and foster resilience.

The session opened with remarks from Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Fattah Abdullah, Chairperson of the Committee on Trade and Business, followed by special remarks from ICA-AP President Dr. Chandrapal Singh Yadav. In his keynote address, Mr. D.M.P. Dissanayake of the Sri Lanka Export Development Board underscored the importance of empowering women entrepreneurs and enabling cooperative products to find a place in wider markets.

The heart of the programme was a series of spotlight presentations featuring five women from diverse cooperative sectors. Each speaker brought forward her personal journey: the motivation to start a cooperative, the challenges faced along the way, and the collective strength that helped their enterprises grow. The programme concluded with closing remarks and a vote of thanks by Ms. Chitose Arai.

The joint initiative stands as a demonstration of the cooperative spirit that the International Year of Cooperatives set out to celebrate, showing how

women, through collective effort, continue to build enterprises that sustain livelihoods and strengthen communities across the Asia-Pacific region.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

- Ms. Abhilasha Bahuguna, Looms of Ladakh, India. A women-owned artisanal cooperative preserving traditional Himalayan woolcraft and creating dignified livelihoods.
- Ms. Thi Minh Hai Pham, Hop Tac Xa Lua Co Chat Silk, Vietnam. Sustaining generations-old Vietnamese silk weaving practices while expanding opportunities for rural women.
- Ms. Emalia Binti Rabin, Koperasi Desa Cinta Kobuni Berhad, Malaysia. A community-driven tourism and agri-based cooperative uplifting local families.
- Ms. Kumiko Matsushashi, JA Zenkoku Joseikyo, Japan. The national women's association within the agricultural cooperative movement, empowering millions of women through collective action.
- Ms. Sahar Farraj, Handicraft and Agro-Food Processing Cooperative Union, Palestine. Providing economic resilience and a creative platform for women artisans across the region.



Members and guests at the joint programme, which closed the International Year of Cooperatives for the two committees.

SECTION FIVE

THE GLOBAL GENDER EQUALITY COMMITTEE

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2026

Equality is not only a goal

The ICA Gender Equality Committee marked the day by restating a claim of right, and by pointing to women in rural and agricultural communities.



The Chair of the ICA Gender Equality Committee delivering the International Women's Day message.

On International Women's Day 2026, the ICA Gender Equality Committee reaffirmed its commitment to advancing the rights, participation and leadership of women across the cooperative movement, under the theme Rights. Justice. Action. For ALL women and girls.

Despite progress, women continue to face structural barriers, including unequal access to economic resources, limited opportunities for leadership and underrepresentation in decision-making. These challenges are particularly significant for women in rural and agricultural communities.

Cooperatives can play a vital role in addressing these gaps. By bringing women together to organise, access resources, build livelihoods and participate in democratic decision-making, cooperatives create pathways for greater economic empowerment and leadership.

As we mark the UN International Year of the Woman Farmer, the Committee continues to emphasise the importance of recognising and strengthening the role of rural women in cooperatives and in sustainable food systems. Through advocacy, knowledge-sharing and collaboration across regions, it remains committed to making gender equality and women's meaningful participation an integral part of the cooperative movement

Manchester, CSW70, and the care economy



Committee members and guests shared their work plan in Manchester on 3 July 2025.

Setting priorities for training

Members and special guests shared their work plan in Manchester on 3 July 2025, focusing on the analysis of needs and opportunities for training women leaders. Results of a survey conducted among member organisations were presented, with responses from 21 per cent of members.

The priority topics identified were leadership, empowerment, public policy and strategic communication. A preference was also shown for in-person workshops and practical experience. The survey asked about potential strategic allies to promote these training processes, and highlighted academic institutions, international cooperation agencies and women's ministries in each country.

The need to focus effort on the care economy was addressed, recognising the importance of valuing unpaid work, and it was proposed that the year's activities centre on that approach. The Committee is also promoting awareness campaigns on the impact of gender equity, one through stories of women and their actions linked to the care economy, and another linked to the United Nations 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign.

A presence at CSW70

In 2026 the ICA Gender Equality Committee participated in the 70th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, contributing to global discussions on women's rights, justice and empowerment. The discussions highlighted a continuing gap between commitments on paper and women's everyday realities, particularly in relation to access to justice, violence against women, economic empowerment and participation in decision-making.

For the cooperative movement, these discussions reaffirm the role cooperatives can play in creating inclusive economic and social spaces for women. Through democratic participation, collective action and access to economic opportunities, cooperatives can strengthen women's leadership and contribute to more equitable communities.

For ICA-AP, this provides an opportunity to connect the work of the global Committee with the regional Committee on Women and its members, exchange experiences and explore practical initiatives. Stronger collaboration, knowledge-sharing and capacity building will be essential to

ensure that gender equality is reflected in the structures, leadership and everyday practices of cooperatives.



The 70th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, where the Gender Equality Committee contributed to global discussions on women's rights, justice and empowerment.

CAMPAIGN

Women transforming cooperativism

Ahead of International Women's Day, the ICA Gender Equality Committee gathered eight stories of women driving economic, social and community transformation through their cooperatives.



Stories from the campaign, spanning forest innovation, community care, dairy cooperatives and cooperative leadership.

Across the cooperative movement, women are leading initiatives that strengthen communities, create decent work, expand access to essential services, and promote more inclusive and sustainable economic models.

From forest innovation in Spain, to community care in the Dominican Republic, women-led dairy cooperatives in Kenya, and future-focused cooperative leadership in Australia, these eight stories show how women cooperators are shaping the future of the movement across continents.

Through their leadership, these women demonstrate how cooperatives can be powerful vehicles for gender equality, social innovation and community resilience.

SECTION SIX

FROM OUR MEMBERS

NATCCO NETWORK, THE PHILIPPINES

Mentors, monthly portraits, and a forum on bias in the age of AI

Three strands of work from the Gender and Development Committee of the NATCCO Network over the year

NATCCO's **Kababaihan ng Kooperatiba** feature highlights women leaders who are contributing to their communities through the cooperative movement. The series shares their experiences, the challenges they face and the ways they continue to break barriers and contribute to cooperative development. Building on stories of women leaders from across the NATCCO Network, the feature provides a platform to recognise and amplify women's leadership in cooperatives.

Women Enterprise Mentors

NATCCO has also strengthened its focus on women's entrepreneurship through its Women Enterprise Mentors initiative. The programme aims to create a multiplier effect across the federation by equipping women mentors with coaching and mentoring tools that they can take back to their primary cooperatives. Through this approach, the mentors can support aspiring women entrepreneurs, strengthen micro-enterprises and contribute to greater economic independence at the grassroots level.

From Bias to Balance

As part of its International Women's Day activities, the NATCCO Gender and Development Committee and GADWE Unit also organised the *From Bias to Balance* Forum, focusing on gender equality and mental health in the age of artificial intelligence. The discussion explored how algorithmic bias and rapid digitalisation are affecting women in the workplace, alongside the psychological pressures associated with increasingly technology-driven work environments. The forum brought together cooperative leaders and resource persons to reflect on these emerging challenges and the need for more inclusive and supportive workplaces.



The Gender and Development Committee highlights published by the NATCCO Network over the year.

From saving to self-reliance



Members recognised at the Women's Day celebration, 8 March 2026.

Shree Gujarat Mahila Credit Cooperative Society Limited organised a Women's Day celebration on 8 March 2026 to acknowledge the role played by women members in agriculture, enterprise and household financial management. Designed around the cooperative principles of gender equality, financial inclusion and member empowerment, the programme set out to highlight women's achievements, promote health awareness and strengthen leadership and confidence among members.

The celebration was built around three activities. In an experience-sharing session titled From Saving to Self-Reliance, selected women members spoke about their journeys of financial empowerment through cooperative services, explaining how access to savings, credit facilities and financial guidance had supported their agriculture, dairy farming and small business activities. The intention was to show other members how cooperative finance strengthens women's economic independence and decision-making capacity.

A Women Entrepreneurs and Farmers Recognition Programme then honoured members who had excelled in agriculture, small business management and responsible financial practices, presenting them with mementos of appreciation. The day closed with a Women's Health and Well-Being Awareness Session, led by a qualified woman health professional, covering nutrition, hygiene, stress management and self-care, and underlining that sustainable development depends on both financial empowerment and physical and mental wellbeing.

The Society expects the celebration to leave members with a stronger awareness of financial independence and cooperative benefits, greater confidence and leadership among women members, formal recognition for women entrepreneurs and farmers, a better understanding of health and wellbeing, and closer unity and participation across the cooperative.

A partnership to scale women-led cooperative livelihoods



Dr. Sudhir Mahajan, then Chief Executive of NCUI, and Ms. Pragya Yadav, Founder of We Shakti Trust, at the signing on 19 December 2025.

The National Cooperative Union of India signed a memorandum of understanding with We Shakti Trust on 19 December 2025, framed around NCUI's vision of prosperity through cooperatives. The collaboration is designed to improve the socio-economic status of women and artisans, particularly in Rajasthan and other states, through structured capacity-building and sustained institutional support, combining traditional skills with modern competencies.

We Shakti Trust is a social organisation working on women's empowerment, child education and youth development, running skill-building programmes, mobile learning platforms and sports-based community interventions. The memorandum was signed by Dr. Sudhir Mahajan, IAS (Retd.), Chief Executive of NCUI, and Ms. Pragya Yadav, Founder of We Shakti Trust, in the presence of officials from both organisations.

Dr. Mahajan pointed to NCUI's role as the apex body of India's cooperative movement and its work in capacity building, policy advocacy and strengthening grassroots and women's collectives. Ms. Yadav described the Trust's work with women and self-help groups in Alwar and neighbouring districts through skill development, exhibitions and market-linkage support, and said the partnership would help scale these efforts through structured cooperative backing.

Under the memorandum, the two organisations will focus on skill training, digital literacy, awareness of social protection schemes, vocational education, and the formation and strengthening of women's cooperatives, while expanding outreach through institutional and corporate social responsibility linkages.

Progress is rooted in generosity



The federation's International Women's Day 2026 message.

MASS-SPECC Cooperative Development Center marked International Women's Day 2026 under the global theme Give to Gain. The Mindanao-based federation affirmed that progress is rooted in generosity, noting that for over sixty years its cooperative movement has shown that giving is not a subtraction but an intentional multiplication. By sharing knowledge, resources and mentorship, the federation said, cooperatives strengthen communities and empower women.

MASS-SPECC linked the day to its broader commitment to invest in women's leadership and visibility, framing this as a step toward its vision that all members enjoy a better quality of life.

Women at the centre of recovery

Between May 2025 and April 2026, ESDC ran a series of women-focused initiatives across food security, protection, health, livelihoods and economic empowerment.

Women's empowerment is a cross-cutting priority for the Economic and Social Development Center of Palestine. Across all humanitarian and development programmes, ESDC works to strengthen women's resilience, protect their dignity, improve their economic opportunities and ensure their meaningful participation in community recovery. Alongside dedicated women's initiatives, women also benefit from family and community-based interventions that place them at the centre of household resilience and sustainable recovery.

Under the project to restore vulnerable households' agricultural livelihoods and food security in Gaza, 25 women established home gardens, enabling them to produce fresh vegetables for their families and improve household food security under extremely challenging conditions. Two women farmers benefited from the rehabilitation of their agricultural land and received essential agricultural inputs, allowing them to restore production and strengthen their livelihoods.

Through the project providing life-saving assistance, integrated food security and protection for vulnerable households in the Gaza Strip, 800 women received integrated protection services, including explosive ordnance risk education, psychological first aid, psychosocial support sessions,

protection kits and two rounds of food vouchers. These interventions enhanced women's safety, dignity, mental wellbeing and access to essential food assistance while reducing protection risks during the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

As part of its water, sanitation and hygiene programmes, ESDC commemorated International Menstrual Hygiene Day by organising interactive awareness sessions for 200 women and adolescent girls. The sessions focused on safe menstrual hygiene management during war and displacement, addressed common misconceptions, encouraged open dialogue between mothers and daughters, and provided a safe space for participants to share their experiences. At the end of each session, participants received hygiene kits containing sanitary pads, soap and wet wipes.

To further strengthen women's resilience and household food security, ESDC launched the Green Spaces Initiative, benefiting 800 women living in displacement settings. Women received vegetable seedlings, seeds, organic fertiliser and agricultural inputs to establish small productive gardens around their tents. The initiative helped improve access to fresh food, created greener and more dignified living spaces, provided psychosocial benefits and promoted sustainable gardening practices despite extremely difficult conditions.

To promote women's economic empowerment, ESDC supported six women in establishing and expanding home-based food processing businesses by providing equipment, tools and raw materials. The initiative created income-generating opportunities, improved household livelihoods and strengthened women's economic resilience.

Despite the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Gaza, ESDC continues to place women at the heart of its response. By integrating protection, livelihoods, food security, water and sanitation, and economic empowerment across its programmes, the Centre supports women not only as recipients of humanitarian assistance, but as active agents of recovery, resilience and sustainable community development..



Left, women participating in an interactive psychosocial support activity. Right, a girl participating in a menstrual hygiene awareness campaign.

Four states, one leadership curriculum

The Women Section of ANGKASA continues to strengthen Malaysia's cooperative movement by empowering women through leadership development, entrepreneurship and capacity building. Under the Women Cooperative Leadership and Entrepreneurship Activities 2026, four state-level programmes were organised in Kedah, Perlis, Negeri Sembilan and Sabah, giving women cooperative leaders opportunities to strengthen their leadership competencies, governance knowledge, entrepreneurial skills and professional networks.

The series commenced in Kedah on 25 April 2026 with the Women's Cooperative Leadership and Entrepreneurship Workshop (Level 2), followed by the Women Cooperative Entrepreneurship Workshop in Perlis on 3 May 2026. The initiative continued in Negeri Sembilan on 22 May 2026, officiated by Hajah Noorizan Abd Latif, State Board Chairman of ANGKASA Negeri Sembilan, before concluding in Tawau, Sabah.

Each programme was tailored to the evolving needs of women cooperative leaders while promoting continuous learning, collaboration and the exchange of best practices. Participants explored strategic leadership, effective decision-making, cooperative governance, integrity, accountability, communication, business planning, marketing strategies and entrepreneurship development. Interactive discussions and networking sessions enabled participants to exchange experiences, build partnerships and identify approaches to strengthen the sustainability and competitiveness of their cooperatives.

These nationwide initiatives reaffirm ANGKASA's commitment to increasing women's participation in leadership and decision-making within the cooperative sector. By equipping women with practical knowledge, confidence and leadership skills, the programmes contribute to more inclusive, resilient and sustainable cooperative enterprises. From an international perspective, they also provide a platform for collaboration with apex cooperative organisations and regional women's cooperative networks, and the Women Section welcomes opportunities for knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practices.



Participants at one of the four state-level programmes organised by the Women Section of ANGKASA, Malaysia.

Eliza's Project, and the women who have led before



Women leaders from the co-operative and mutual movement at the launch of Eliza's Project during the 2025 BCCM Leaders' Summit.

The Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals continues to advance women's leadership and inclusion across Australia's co-operative and mutual sector through research, advocacy and leadership networks. A key initiative is Eliza's Project, a network bringing together current and former women chief executives from across the sector. Named after co-operative pioneer Eliza Brierley, it recognises the longstanding contribution of women to the movement while addressing the continuing under-representation of women in senior executive positions.

Women leaders from sectors including banking, health, housing and agriculture come together through the network to share experiences, support leadership development and advocate for greater gender equality. By creating a space for peer support and collaboration, the initiative helps strengthen leadership pathways for future generations and increases the visibility of women leaders across the movement.

The initiative builds on the Council's longstanding commitment to measuring and promoting gender inclusion. The ICA-AP gender policy study highlighted Australia as an example of accountability and public reporting through workplace gender equality frameworks and the collection of leadership data, and noted the Council's role in monitoring gender representation among leading Australian co-operatives and mutuals.

LOOKING AHEAD

The 2026 activity plan

The activity plan for 2026, approved by members at the statutory meeting in Colombo in November 2025, is centred on the International Year of Women Agricultural Workers and on preparations for the Tagaytay Conference. The activities held between May and August are pictured overleaf.

MAY 2026

Launch of the third regional gender-disaggregated study
'Engendering Cooperative Data in the Asia-Pacific Region: Membership, Leadership and Institutional Enablers'

MAY 2026

Regional Conference on the International Year of Women Farmers
Vietnam.

AUGUST 2026

Training of Trainers on Climate Change and Action for Women Cooperators
Nepal.

SEPTEMBER 2026

Virtual workshop with Committee members, With Sleepwell Foundation.

NOVEMBER 2026

Office Bearers' elections and Statutory Meeting
The Philippines.

DECEMBER 2026

Tagaytay Conference 4.0
The Philippines.

A decade under review

The statutory meeting and the Tagaytay Conference will bring the Committee back to the Philippines, where the Tagaytay Declaration was adopted in 1997. Together they offer an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the past decade and to shape the Committee's vision for the years ahead.

A second study in progress

Alongside the published policy review, a second regional study is underway, assessing women's leadership and the availability of gender-disaggregated data in cooperatives across the region. Both were presented to members in Colombo ahead of the conference

WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

Activity Glimpses

May to August 2026

MAY

Regional Conference on the International Year of Women Farmers

VIETNAM



MAY

Launch of the Third Regional Gender-Disaggregated Study

*'Engendering Cooperative Data in the Asia-Pacific Region:
Membership, Leadership and Institutional Enablers'*



AUGUST

Training of Trainers on Climate Change and Action for Women Cooperators

NEPAL



Full details in next year's edition of annual newsletter.

COVERING

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CONTRIBUTORS

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