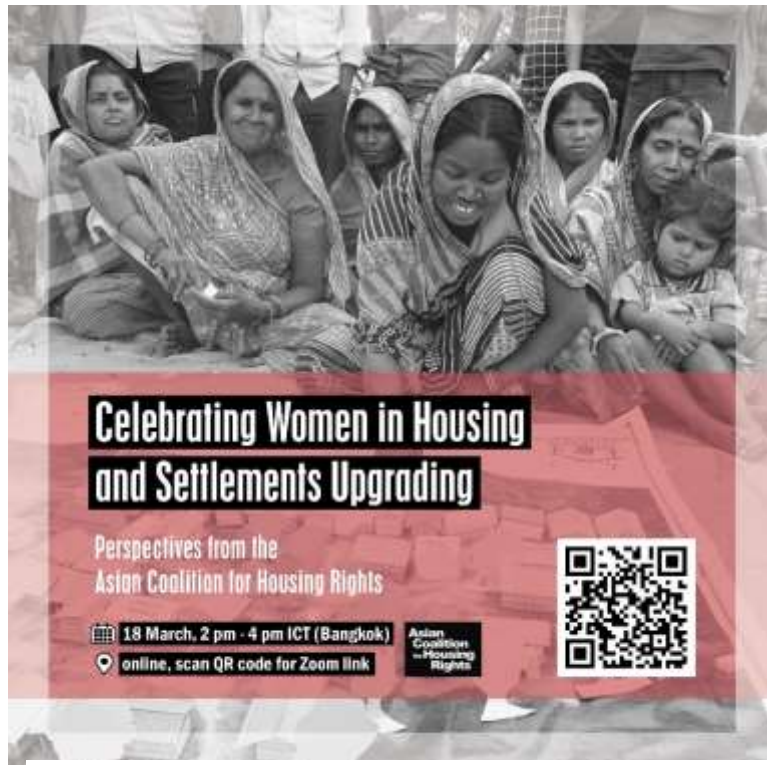


Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

The "Celebrating Women in Housing and Settlements Upgrading" program, organized by ACHR, was a virtual gathering aimed at honoring and amplifying the role of women in housing, community development, and infrastructure improvement. This event, held in celebration of International Women's Day 2025, provided a platform for women leaders from Bangladesh, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to share their experiences, challenges, and achievements in securing safe and sustainable housing for their communities.

The program opened with remarks from ACHR leaders, emphasizing women's leadership in housing movements. Women leaders shared their experiences in advocating for housing rights and fostering collective action, followed by a CAN Leader's insights on co-creation workshops. An open discussion reinforced the importance of networking, policy influence, and knowledge exchange. Habitat for Humanity and urbaMonde reaffirmed their support for community-led housing, concluding with a call to sustain dialogues and partnerships, ensuring women's voices remain central in housing and urban development.

Celebrating **WOMEN** in Housing and Settlements Upgrading



CELEBRATING COMMUNITY WOMEN LEADERS

International Women's Day (IWD), celebrated globally on March 8th, is an important occasion to recognize the invaluable contributions of women across all spheres of life. It serves as a reminder to raise awareness on gender inequality, advocate for gender rights, and celebrate women's achievements. The theme for IWD 2025 is "For All Women and Girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment."

The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) has been at the forefront of advocating for marginalized communities and informal settlers since its inception in 1988. ACHR has worked tirelessly towards securing the right to housing, improving living conditions, and empowering communities through better access to land, housing, and livelihoods. ACHR's community-led development approach has also encouraged collaboration between communities, governments, and partners to find sustainable solutions for urban development.

Throughout ACHR's history, women community leaders have played a pivotal role in advocating for rights, driving negotiations, and leading the construction of homes, infrastructure, and services in their communities. Their dedication, hard work, and leadership have been essential to improving the living conditions of marginalized populations across Asia.

This planned celebration on 18th March 2025 gave an opportunity for the ACHR network to recognize the invaluable role of these women leaders and strengthen their contributions to the collective housing mechanisms, on the occasion International Women's Day 2025. It was the celebration of the contributions of the women leader across Asian countries for the betterment of their communities and cities.

Participants no.: 60

- ACHR Network Members across Asia
- ACHR Senior Members
- Community Leaders
- CAN (Community Architects Network)
- Representatives from Academic Institutions
- Partners of ACHR, urbaMonde, Habitat for Humanity International
- Regional and national community networks

OBJECTIVES

1. Celebrate and recognize the role of women leaders in housing and settlement upgrading.
2. Highlight the importance of gender in inclusive city planning and development to ensure equality.
3. Promote learning and sharing on women-led sustainable community development initiatives across Asia.



PROGRAM PROCEEDINGS

Facilitator: Lajana Manandhar, Secretary of ACHR

Lajana Manandhar opened the program by highlighting its objectives and significance. She emphasized that the event was organized to honor and celebrate the contributions of women in housing, community infrastructure, and development, in line with the International Women's Day 2025 celebrations.

She stated:

"We have gathered here today to celebrate the remarkable women who have been working tirelessly in the field of housing. This event, organized by ACHR, aims to recognize and respect their engagement and lifelong efforts in community infrastructure, development, and empowerment."

She acknowledged the challenges women face in the housing sector but emphasized how these challenges have led to the formation of strong networks that place women at the center of decision-making. She stressed the importance of enhancing women's voices, strengthening partnerships, and increasing engagement at all levels—local, national, regional, and global.

She reaffirmed ACHR's commitment to supporting communities, particularly women-led initiatives, ensuring equitable access to housing and essential resources. She also expressed gratitude to Habitat for Humanity (HfH) and UrbaMonde for their continuous partnership and collaboration and making time to celebrate the contribution of our women leaders' event possible.

Lastly, she acknowledged the six community women leaders from six different countries who would be sharing their inspiring stories and experiences in housing and settlement upgrading.

Welcome Remarks

Somsook Boonyabancha, Chairperson of ACHR

Somsook Boonyabancha warmly welcomed all the women leaders working in community housing process, emphasizing that this International Zoom Meeting was not just a celebration of International Women's Day 2025 but also a tribute to the dedication and contributions of women working at the community level in housing and settlement upgrading.

She highlighted that real change begins in communities, and women play a crucial role in this transformation. Their leadership, resilience, and collective strength cannot be ignored.

"Women symbolize peace and serve as a unifying force, bringing people together—whether young, old, men, or children. Their ability to foster inclusivity and collaboration is what makes community-driven housing projects successful."

She stressed that women do not just build houses; they build secure and sustainable communities. Housing is not merely about shelter—it is about social security, stability, and community strength. Women's

role extends beyond advocating for their rights; they are key agents of community development and social transformation.

Somsook also reflected on how gender roles have evolved, leading to necessary adjustments in community leadership and policies. She pointed out that women, with their diplomatic and adaptable nature, bring a different approach to leadership compared to men, who often follow a more vertical and forceful system.

"Women have the flexibility to drive change in policies affecting both the rich and the poor, at the local, city, and even national levels. Their ability to navigate and negotiate within different social structures makes them powerful change-makers."

She reaffirmed ACHR's commitment to strengthening its network by harnessing the power of collective housing systems, ensuring that women's voices continue to shape housing policies and community development in a meaningful way.



Sharing by Community Women Leaders

Facilitator: Lumanti Joshi, ACHR

The sharing session featured inspiring stories and experiences in housing and settlement upgrading from community women leaders representing six countries: Bangladesh, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Each speaker highlighted their challenges, initiatives, and achievements in advancing community-led housing and settlement upgrading.

To begin the sharing session, Bangladesh was the first to present, followed by the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

1. Bangladesh: Kulsum Begum, Head of Gabtoli Housing Colony (Translated by Rubaiya Nasrin)

Kulsum Begum, the head and resident of Gabtoli Housing Colony, expressed her joy at reconnecting with Lumanti Joshi and all friends from ACHR. And celebrating International Women's Day, even though the event took place slightly later. She shared her journey and the challenges faced by women in low-income communities, emphasizing the critical role of women in housing and community development.

"After engaging with POCCA (Platform of Community Action and Architecture), we were able to identify and address key housing challenges. With their support, we successfully designed 13 houses and even renovated a kindergarten school in our community. Throughout this process, women played a more active role than men—right from the design phase to the construction phase."

She highlighted the political instability and its negative impact on low-income communities, particularly on women, who often faced oppression and economic hardship. However, she stressed the resilience of women: *"We firmly believe that women can take care of both their homes and even their nation. Our housing initiative began in 2020, giving us an opportunity to learn from trainers and designers about construction, masonry, and basic planning. Today, I am confident in my ability to train others, just as I am an experienced trainer with 25 years."*

She also shared an exciting future plan: *"To further support working women from low-income backgrounds, we plan to convert our kindergarten school into a daycare center. This will allow mothers to focus on their work while ensuring their children are cared for."*

As she concluded her speech, Kulsum expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share her experiences: *"Time flies so quickly! Thank you all for this platform to share my journey. May we continue to support and uplift one another. God bless everyone!"*



2. Philippines: Angie Sabanal [president, Nolumville Homeowners Association, Mindanao. Homeless People's Federation] (Translated by Miguelangelo Gaddi)



Angie Sabanal shared her decade-long journey in community development.

"Hello everyone! I am Angie Sabanal from the Philippines, and I am honored to be part of this virtual gathering for International Women's Day. My story goes back to 2015, when we first initiated collective saving within our community. This practice helped us organize ourselves, leading to numerous positive changes."

She recounted how their organized community efforts enabled them to secure basic utilities, which were previously inaccessible:

"In the past, our community had no electricity or lighting. However, because we were already a strong, united group, we became among the first in our locality to receive proper electricity and lighting facilities. Over time, we also gained access to clean water, the internet, and better infrastructure."

Beyond housing, their community remains active in maintenance efforts, including road cleaning, walkway clearing, and community beautification. She expressed deep gratitude to HPEPI and other supporting organizations, particularly for their assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I am grateful to all the organizations that have supported us, and I look forward to continuing our work together. Thank you!"

3. India: Hansaben Vaghela, Bhuj, Gujarat (Translated by Aditya)



Hansaben, a leader from the *Sakhi Sangini* Group in Bhuj, Gujarat, shared a powerful story of hardship and victory in securing safe and well-facilitated housing for her community.

"Namaste everyone! I am Hansaben from Bhuj, Gujarat, and I deeply appreciate the opportunity to share my journey with you today. I represent the Sakhi Sangini Group (SSG), which was established by me and the women in my community. Through this platform, we were able to unite, discuss our problems, and take collective action."

One of their greatest challenges was navigating government policies and bureaucratic processes. Since the men in their community were primary breadwinners, it was the women who took charge of securing proper housing, recognizing its direct impact on their lives.

"We sought support from Hunnarshala, but the men in our community were skeptical, fearing that NGOs were trying to seize our lands and properties. Even our community chief, Premji, initially dismissed our concerns. However, we stood firm in our belief and ultimately won through a community poll."

Once the community was actively involved in planning, they prioritized essential infrastructure such as wastewater management and proper drainage over large housing structures.

"As a result, 125 houses were successfully built in Bhuj through our collective women's efforts. Today, I lead the Sakhi Sangini Group, which has grown to over 4,000 members. My hope is that more organizations mobilize together to expand collective communal housing. Thank you!"

Indonesia: Indri Yuliani, Kampung Susun Kunir Co-operative, Urban Poor Consortium (Translated by Neneng Hanifah Maryam)

Indri Yuliani, head of the Kampung Susun Kunir Co-operative, shared a compelling visual presentation of her community's journey.

"Hello everyone! I am Indri Yuliani, a homemaker and mother of two sons. Previously, I served as the treasurer of Kunir Street, but our country faced a major riot in 2015, which led to widespread destruction and displacement."

By 2017, with support from ACHR, the process of rebuilding homes for the urban poor in Jakarta began. This was driven both by residents and the co-operative.

"The co-operative model played a vital role in this process. We were responsible for building maintenance, organizing community meetings, and collaborating with other co-operatives in Jakarta. The housing contract ensured three years of temporary shelter, after which Kampung Susun Kunir was completed in 2021."

The co-operative model also helped ensure long-term security and stability:

"Our community is based on a collective ownership system, where rent and maintenance fees are pooled together to fund further developments. This approach has given us a greater sense of safety, responsibility, and unity."

Indri concluded by expressing her happiness and gratitude for the opportunity to share her experience.

The visual presentation provided a powerful perspective on the impact of the eviction, the strength of collective resilience, and the achievements of Kampung.



5. Sri Lanka: Ashoka, Women's Housing Network (Translated by Chula)



Ashoka, a leading community organizer and chairperson of Women's Bank in Sri Lanka, shared her experiences of mobilizing women for housing rights and community upgrading.

"I am Ashoka, and I have been working alongside women's networks in Sri Lanka for many years. Our journey has not been easy, but through solidarity and determination, we have achieved remarkable progress in securing safe and affordable housing."

She remembered Nandasiri Gamage, their mentor and guide who helped them form and develop a collective system. She described how Sri Lankan women's groups formed a network to negotiate with local authorities for better housing policies.

"Many women in our communities' struggle with eviction threats and poor housing conditions. However, by organizing ourselves, we have been able to engage with government officials, secure land tenure, and improve infrastructure." One of their major achievements was the upgrading of informal settlements through community-led planning. "We started with small projects—improving sanitation, upgrading roads, and ensuring access to clean water—before moving toward securing permanent housing. Women have led every step of this process, ensuring that the solutions truly address community needs."

Ashoka emphasized the importance of collaborations with international partners, such as ACHR and Habitat for Humanity, which have supported their initiatives through technical assistance and funding.

"We are not just building houses; we are building a future for our families and our communities. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share our journey."

6. Thailand: Koramit Panya, Community Leader of Thai Network (Translated by Samsook)

The final speaker from Thailand shared the country's approach to collective housing and participatory urban development.

"In Thailand, we have a strong tradition of community-led housing movements, especially through the Baan Mankong Program. Women are at the forefront of these efforts, ensuring that the solutions are inclusive and sustainable."

She highlighted how women's cooperatives in Thailand have played a crucial role in:

- Securing land tenure through negotiations with local authorities.
- Developing savings groups that help fund housing improvements.
- Engaging in policy advocacy to ensure that low-income communities have a voice.

"We have seen time and again that when women take the lead, housing projects are more successful. Women ensure that housing is not just about buildings but about creating strong, connected, and resilient communities."

Thailand's housing movement has also demonstrated the importance of partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and international networks.

"We will continue to strengthen our networks and share our knowledge with other communities facing similar challenges. Thank you!"



Open Discussion

After the insightful sharing session, the floor was opened for discussion, allowing participants to reflect on the stories shared and contribute their own experiences.

Reflections from Participants

Laxmi Tara Dongal, Nepal: Inspired by the stories of other women leaders, Laxmi Tara Dongal from Nepal shared her experience of the 2015 earthquake, which caused significant damage to the community of Thecho.

"During the 2015 earthquake, almost 754 houses were damaged, and our women's cooperative, in collaboration with the municipality and Lumanti, managed to rebuild 123 houses. This was a crucial time for us, and women played an essential role in the recovery process. We had the opportunity to work directly in the field, and it allowed us to improve our lives and the lives of others in our community."

She reflected on the challenges women faced during the rebuilding efforts but emphasized the empowerment that came with actively participating in the reconstruction.

Kulsum Begum, Bangladesh: Kulsum Begum, from Bangladesh, sharing that many women were involved in every step of the building process. *"Women were not only participants; they were leaders throughout the process. From planning to construction, women made significant contributions. Our work proved that when women are empowered, they become catalysts for change in their communities. There are still many challenges but they are committed to work together to address those"*

Koramit Panya, Thailand: Boom from Thailand also shared her thoughts on the importance of connection and networking within the community, especially at events like this one.

"Connections and networks like this are very important. Through housing project support, I was able to save my entire family. Today, I believe it is time to give back to those in need, to poor families and communities. This ongoing event helps to create linkages between us, allowing us to inspire each other. It's essential that we keep this network alive, not just within the country but across the borders. Whether we have housing projects or not, networking and community visits are crucial to keep the work moving forward."

She spoke about the value of these networks and how they contribute to collective resilience. Her own experience of loss and recovery was a driving force behind her desire to help others.

"I, too, have experienced damage to my home. But today, I am honored to be a resource person in other communities, guiding them as they go through similar struggles. My family has always been my backup. When women go forward with their families and communities, it brings a sense of pride and happiness."

Open Discussion

Min Chau, Vietnam: reflecting on the importance of knowledge sharing, expressed:

"Knowledge should flow, just like rivers. And the community should act as rivers in their respective society."

Ashoka, Sri Lanka: *"The Women's Cooperative is committed to knowledge-sharing and will continue hosting exchange programs on savings and cooperative management after successfully welcoming the Indonesian team in 2024. Believing it is our duty to share what we have learned, we invite interested groups to participate, with all local costs covered by the cooperative, fostering solidarity and mutual learning."*

Sharing by CAN Leader - Speaker: Rubaiya Nasrin, POCCA

Rubaiya, representing POCCA and CAN/ACHR, shared insights on the power of co-creation workshops and their impact on community-led development. Co-Creation workshop act as a catalyst for change. She highlighted how co-creation workshops serve as a powerful tool to bridge the gap between communities and city authorities.

"Workshops brought together community members, youth, and city officials to co-create solutions for their spaces. When an outsider facilitates these workshops, the community tends to listen more attentively, giving them more power to bring about change." Over five days, the workshop covered various themes, allowing participants to share their aspirations and collectively shape the future of their neighborhoods.

Impact on the Community and Riverbank Development

Rubaiya emphasized how such gatherings helped communities understand their own spaces better. The riverbank development project became a demonstration model, showcasing how collaborative efforts can lead to sustainable urban development.

"Through this project, we have not only transformed spaces but also instilled a sense of ownership among the residents. The youth of our community played a crucial role in planning and development. Their involvement has built their confidence, making them capable of guiding others in similar projects."

In POCCA, the dynamics of gender roles are unique.

"In POCCA, men are the minority, and women take on multiple roles. Women are the driving force behind decision-making and multitasking in community development. Their ability to balance different responsibilities has been key to the success of our initiatives."

Rubaiya concluded by reinforcing the importance of community-driven initiatives and the role of women in shaping resilient, self-sufficient neighborhoods.

Tripti Mahaseth, Habitat for Humanity

Tripti Mahaseth from Habitat for Humanity (HfH) emphasized the profound impact of housing in ensuring security, stability, and empowerment, particularly for women-led communities. Housing is more than just a structure—it provides a sense of safety, a foundation for growth, and a nurturing space for future generations. Secure housing not only protects families but also fosters opportunities for education, employment, and overall well-being. Tripti highlighted the importance of mutual decision-making, where all stakeholders, especially women, are actively involved in shaping housing solutions. Encouraging an open dialogue, she stressed the need to listen to community voices and address their most pressing concerns. By working collectively and inclusively, housing initiatives can become sustainable and transformative, strengthening entire communities. HfH reaffirmed its commitment to supporting communities in their journey toward safe, dignified, and resilient housing.

Nina Quintas, UrbaMonde

Nina Quintas from urbaMonde highlighted the power of collective housing in transforming communities and empowering women. She acknowledged the testimonies shared by women leaders, emphasizing how collective housing initiatives have strengthened their sense of security, belonging, and resilience. Recognizing the vital role of women in caregiving and community-building, she stressed the importance of creating spaces where women can come together, share experiences, and organize collectively. By fostering such environments, women can take active leadership roles, influence decision-making, and drive sustainable housing solutions that benefit entire communities. urbaMonde reaffirmed its commitment to supporting inclusive and community-led housing models, ensuring that women's contributions are recognized, valued, and amplified at all levels.

Vote of Thanks – Lajana Manandhar, ACHR

"We are proud that our community women leaders participated and spoke from their heart and their experience, analysis and insights were just so profound. Many new things we heard and learnt. It was an opportunity to get knowledgeable through the wisdom of the communities and their unwavering spirit to make advancement for better housing, better living condition and secured future for their children, families, communities and the societies.

Thank you all for helping to make the event a successful one. Thank you for the beautiful translation. Without you being there, definitely it is not possible to organize the event. You were always there with the community leaders as a supporter and partner. The bond between the NGOs (as facilitators) and the communities is also visible which is highly appreciated. There is just so much to be done. I hope we can organize similar type of events in the coming days. I would also like to invite your ideas opinions for our next program in organizing such virtual events. "

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Women's leadership in post-crisis recovery has a transformative impact, turning challenges into opportunities for empowerment. Networking and community-building are essential for sustaining progress and sharing resources. Ongoing collaboration between women leaders and organizations is necessary to keep communities strong and resilient. The concept of knowledge sharing as a continuous, flowing process fosters collective growth and empowerment. The discussion emphasized the importance of keeping networks alive and learning from one another, especially during times of rebuilding and growth.

The experiences shared by these women leaders from diverse backgrounds revealed several key lessons:

- 1. Organized communities drive change – Collective self-help initiatives enable communities to access basic services, housing, and infrastructure.*
- 2. Women are central to community resilience – Women's leadership ensures long-term sustainability, as they are often the primary caretakers of housing and communal spaces.*
- 3. Co-operatives and partnerships create stability – Formalized community organizations and collaborations with local and international partners strengthen housing security and governance.*
- 4. Policy engagement is crucial – Understanding government systems and advocating for policy changes can help low-income communities secure their rights.*
- 5. Shared responsibility fosters sustainability – Community-driven housing models ensure collective ownership, financial sustainability, and ongoing maintenance.*

The sharing session successfully showcased the power of women-led community housing movements, reinforcing the importance of collaborative action in addressing housing challenges. The celebration of International Women's Day 2025 by ACHR has been a significant moment to highlight the essential role women play in housing and settlements upgrading. By recognizing and empowering women community leaders, we aim to further promote inclusive and sustainable development practices, ensuring that women's voices continue to lead the way in creating secure and prosperous communities across Asia.

**Asian
Coalition
for Housing
Rights**

CONTACT:

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) office in Kathmandu:
Secretariat: Lumanti Support Group for Shelter
Address: Dhapakhel, Gairi Gaon Marg, Lalitpur Metropolitan City,
Ward No. 23, Lalitpur, Nepal
Telephone: 977-01-5423157
Email: achr@achr.net | shelter@lumanti.org.np
Website: www.achr.net