

Ms. Michelle Bachelet
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

6 April 2020

Dear High Commissioner,

We are writing to you to express our deepest concern regarding the protection of the human rights of older persons in the context of COVID-19, and to request that the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights makes it clear in its strategic guidance regarding the pandemic, and in the training and capacity building activities of its field offices, that the rights of older persons must be part of the OHCHR's priorities.

As a doctor, you will be aware that older persons are in the highest risk group of mortality and severe illness due to the virus and that they are being affected disproportionately to other groups in society. Nonetheless, the international response to COVID-19, including from within the UN system, has consistently failed to respond to the rights and needs of older persons as a group at particular risk.

The public health, economic and social emergency triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is being intensified by ageism and discrimination against older people globally. We see daily reports of alarming cruel and ageist commentaries in relation to this crisis that can cause further harm to older persons at a time when they are already facing significant risks, isolation and stress. We also see discriminatory policies based on age, including triage protocols that use arbitrary age criteria as the basis for allocating scarce medical resources. We are also witnessing alarming cases of neglect of older persons living in institutions and the failure to provide them with necessary health, social and palliative care.

These practices risk undermining older persons' right to life and, by implication, rank their lives as being of lesser value than others'.

The Global Alliance of the Rights of Older People (GAROP) is a network of over 330 organisations worldwide, united in our work to strengthen and promote the rights of older persons. Our members are witnessing the violation and erosion of the protection of the rights of older persons in the context of COVID-19 globally.

The gaps in the protection of the rights of older persons within the international human rights system are well-documented, particularly through the work of the UN Open-Ended

Working Group on Ageing since 2010, the Human Rights Council, and through the work of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons.

Efforts to address COVID-19 may exacerbate ongoing threats to the rights of older persons, for example isolation and social exclusion, and the challenges of accessing information, health and social care, and social protection. Stay-at-home and no-visitor policies to contain the spread of the virus are putting some older persons at greater risk of violence, abuse and neglect. Other older persons may be affected disproportionately due to their care and support needs, or underlying health conditions. We are concerned that this pandemic has the potential to reinforce the entrenched inequalities and disadvantages that older persons experience daily throughout the world.

In the global response to COVID-19, it is essential that States and other actors protect the rights of older persons on an equal basis with others without exception and in line with international standards.

We urge therefore that the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights identifies older persons as a group at particular risk in the context of COVID-19 and includes them in its prioritises in response to the pandemic. To do anything less would risk reinforcing and exacerbating the discrimination and abuses of human rights that your office was set up to abolish.

Yours Sincerely



Ken Bluestone (Chair) and Nena Georgantzi (Deputy Chair)