

## **FACTS ABOUT OLDER WOMEN**

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### **SECTION 1: OVERVIEW: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES SINCE 1995**

Older women account for 54 percent of the global population aged 60 years, 61 percent of those aged 80 years and above and 24 percent of the world's women aged 50 and above (in Russia, for example, there are three times more women than men aged 80 years and older).

Despite their numbers older women are too often ignored, uncounted in statistics and invisible, subject to ageism and routinely denied their rights to health, decent work, housing, life-long learning, rest and leisure, social protection, and denied the power to make life choices. Older women suffer due from the stigma and myths of ageing that only paint a picture of frailty and dependence. Gender policy and implementation of SDG 5 must therefore consider not just the needs and concerns of older women but also recognize, value and support their capacities, competencies, and contributions to family, community and society.

The world is ageing at an unprecedented pace, with greater numbers of women living into older age. Globally there were 962 million people aged 60 or over in 2017, making up 13% of the population with most living in low- and middle-income countries. By 2030 this will rise to 1.4 billion. Generally, women live longer than men by an average of five years, but this does not mean they are all living their later lives in good health and with adequate resources. Every person has an equal right to health, food security, housing, decent work, rest and leisure and social protection. For many older women, these basic rights and the power to make life choices have been denied them.

Data collection remains an integral part of evidence based and rights focused policy making and must reflect diversity among older persons, similar to that of other cohorts. Disaggregation of data by age and other dimensions is essential for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Target 17.18 and the Beijing Programme of Action. Inadequate data for women beyond age 49 is a key driver of the denial of older women's rights. Disaggregated data by age, gender and disability by five-year intervals until death beyond age 49 is not routinely collected or available; in many countries, data on intimate partner violence ends at age 49. Few prevalence studies on domestic violence against women within population-based studies include women older than 49 in their samples. Increased participation by and support of National Statistical Offices on age inclusive data processes, including the Titchfield Group on Ageing Statistics, endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission is recommended.

A review of 38 current UNECE Member State reports for Beijing plus 25 highlights governments' concerns about social protection, and retirement issues. But the reports overwhelmingly concentrate on issues of older women's health, frailty and care systems, the high risk of poverty and abuse, and discrimination in old age. Although several mention specific projects for older women, the reports focus on the challenges of ageing and do not recognize how older women's competencies and contributions to the economic and social well-being of their families, their

communities and society as a whole can be enhanced and supported. Such recognition of the resourcefulness of older women is essential to fully implementing the Beijing Platform and the SDGS as sustainable development depends on ensuring girls and women of all ages are recognized as valuable contributors to their societies across the life course.

A life course perspective to economic and social policy is required both to highlight and address cumulative disadvantages faced by women as they age, which include discrimination, ageism, and prevalence of family and intimate partner violence and abuse and how economic and social policy planning will be made more sustainable with the recognition of the contributions of older women, not only as recipients of services but also as a valuable resource.

## **SECTION 2: IMPLEMENTATION OF 12 AREAS OF BEIJING PLATFORM OF ACTION SINCE 2009**

### **1. Older Women and Poverty:**

Poverty is particularly high for older women who are single and live alone. Cumulative disadvantages over the life course for girls and women contribute to high levels of poverty in later life. While interventions at earlier ages can help to mitigate this, it is essential that accessible and adequate social protection floors and affordable health care is available for all older women. Older women are often at the centre of their households and communities. They are not just recipients of care but **also** key providers of care to family, friends and community; services that are uncompensated and unacknowledged as work. Poverty is also due to gaps in pension due to years out of the formal employment sector due to child care and inadequate pay for so called 'womens work' in the care economy. Female carers in nursing homes and home care aides are poorly paid, leading to their own impoverishment in old age. Achieving the Beijing program of action will require affirmative actions to recognize, promote and protect the rights of older women to an adequate standard of living in line with the UDHR and Sustainable Development Goal 5's clear recognition of the importance of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment for all.

### **2. Education and Training of Older Women**

While everyone has the right to education, the low educational level of many older women, particularly those who have not had educational opportunities in their youth because of nationality, class and gender discrimination, inhibits their full participation in everyday activities that require reading, writing and technology skills, and constrains full participation in public and political life. Learning opportunities can be provided to older women through a systematic approach, and support given to pass on their knowledge to young people. An example is to establish the practice of the "Academy of Experience" or "Folk College for Knowledge Transfer." In many countries older women are knowledgeable about natural, sustainable lifestyles and traditions which can be shared with younger women, knowledge which otherwise will be lost. Discrimination in education at all levels based on age as well as gender and/or disability must be eliminated. Life-long learning, which includes knowledge and skills gained in formal education and training, as well as learning that occurs in

informal ways, such as volunteer activity, unremunerated work and traditional knowledge, must be part of adult education policy.

### **3. Older Women and Health**

Older women's quality of life and full participation in society is compromised without responsive actions to their physical, functional and mental health conditions. Non-communicable diseases including dementia, arthritis, diabetes, cognitive decline and other chronic conditions occur disproportionately in older age groups, affecting older women particularly. Post-menopausal conditions including osteoporosis can disproportionately affect older women and without adequate treatment can lead to otherwise preventable disabilities. Health services for HIV prevention should be available to women of all ages, to prevent infection and to alleviate burden on older women providing care to family members ill or orphaned by HIV. Some 50% of older women have a disabling condition and can be assisted to make successful adjustments toward optimal functioning as they age.

### **4. Violence Against Older Women**

Elder abuse and neglect are rampant. One example is that of domestic violence (DV) against older women. Because DV prevalence surveys routinely fail to include subjects over the age of 49, they present misleading findings that suggest older women are not subjected to violence by either intimate partners or family members. Studies by Luoma et al (2011) focusing on older women demonstrate that DV prevalence is as high as 38% in some EU countries. Garcia-Moreno et al (2013) have developed a methodology for estimating life course rates of violence for older women, which are found to exceed 20%. This also considers the trauma that older women are forced to live with when the violence they experience throughout their lives, often perpetrated by family members, is unacknowledged and/or dismissed as negligible or of little consequence.

### **5. Older Women and Armed Conflict**

Older women make up a significant part of every refugee population and are among the most vulnerable groups of displaced persons. Armed conflict as well as conditions created by civic unrest, natural disasters and poor economic conditions may result in forced migration, which comprises significant numbers of older women, often responsible for children, among the most vulnerable groups of displaced persons. Research studies by HelpAge International and other international aid organizations have documented sexual and physical violence against older women, as well as forced homelessness, poverty and hunger resulting from displacement and conflict. There is a misperception that older women are not subjected to the kinds of sexual and physical mistreatment that girls and younger women experience, which is compounded by the stigma older women face by disclosing such acts.

### **6. Older Women and the Economy**

International development programmes, policy and discourse often overlook older women's economic contributions to family and community. The intersectionality of

ageism, sexism and toxic stereotyping particularly disadvantages older women. A glaring example is the denial of employment opportunities because of age. Time and again, including in the reports of governments for this review, we see only the conflation of old age and frailty/dependency, which provides a misleading picture of women in later life. Most older women are active and engaged with their families and communities, providing essential support for primary wage earners, and are primary carers of older and younger dependents. Many perform unpaid care work, allowing other family members to bring in income, some are farmers, have careers, are entrepreneurs, are educators, and are mentors. They contribute to the economies of their countries directly (including payment of taxes) and indirectly (providing essential services that the state does not offer). But their significant informal contributions to their societies are rarely recognized or counted. Properly recognizing the worth of unpaid care work as essential to the economy and to individuals' health and wellbeing has been widely identified as key to tackling the systemic inequalities that constrain all women. This applies equally to older women who, as carers, should be able to live fulfilling, dignified lives as individual rights holders, recognized by governments and the international community as economic contributors who should not be held back by ageism and stereotyping.

## **7. Older Women in Power and decision-making**

Enabling participation of older women in policy making is spasmodic. In the UNECE region there are some examples of good practice at local level, for example, the Irish Nursing and Midwifery Leadership Network's Big Conversation (2017). Overall older women's voices are rarely asked for or heard in national policy development. Given the scale and speed of ageing in all countries of the region and the increasing numbers of older women, this is a significant policy failure.

## **8. Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Older Women's Rights**

Twenty-five years ago, the Beijing Declaration recognized age discrimination as one of the factors contributing to the barriers to women's empowerment and advancement. Older women were specifically mentioned in the Beijing Platform for Action with regard to their poverty, health, violence against them, obstacles they face in entering the labor market, discrimination at work and as a civilian group particularly affected by armed conflict. The need for age-disaggregated data, particularly in light of the increasing numbers of older women, was emphasized. Recommendations for government action were made in each of these areas, resulting in a non-binding CEDAW General Recommendation on the rights of older women (No. 27, 2010). At the same time, gaps were noted, including the complete omission of widows and widowhood.

Even with General Recommendation 27, progress on the rights of older women has been negligible. Despite the growing body of evidence on discrimination affecting women in older age, the challenges older women face and their unrecognized contributions to the national economy were almost entirely absent from the national 25 year reviews of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The focus was mostly on older women as passive recipients of services.

## **9. Human Rights of Older Women**

The gap between the existence of legal rights and the effective enjoyment of them by women in older age derives from lack of commitment by governments – duty bearers - to promoting and protecting older rights holders - older women - and the failure of governments and other stakeholders to inform older women about their rights. The lack of appropriate recourse mechanisms at national and international levels, and the inadequate resources at both levels compound the problem. Age is not one of the forms of discrimination that is explicitly mentioned in the CEDAW convention. General Recommendation no. 27 on the rights of older women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2010 is non-binding, as is the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) adopted by the GA in 2002. The Open-ended Working Group for the purpose of Strengthening the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons, which has held 10 annual sessions since 2010 is mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution 67/139 to propose the main elements that should be included in an international legal instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of older persons. To date no final decision has been reached. The 11<sup>th</sup> session of the Open Ended Working Group for the purpose of Strengthening the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons will be held 6-9 April 2020. UNECE governments, National Human Rights Institutes, UN Women and civil society organizations are urged to actively support a BINDING international legal instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of older persons.

## **10. Older Women and the Media**

Ageism is an invidious structural barrier facing all older people, marginalizing and excluding them in their communities and negatively impacting their health, well-being and dignity; The intersectionality of age and gender portrayed in the media creates an especially challenging and noxious barrier for older women, as it combines stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination not only on the basis of age but also relating to gender. Even though women outlive men and in the main live active and productive lives well into old age, later life for women is largely portrayed as something to be denied and feared, which leads to routine and erroneous conflation of old age with physical and mental decline, incompetence, frailty and dependency. The media have an important role to play in correcting negative stereotypes and not amplifying them. Guidelines can and should be developed with the media on how to tackle issues related to ageism. And given the importance of social media for all generations, older women as a major stakeholder should be involved and included in the development of these guidelines. Along side the media the advertising industry has a major influence in forming opinion and attitudes, including that of the younger generation towards older women, so therefore the industry should also adopt guidelines – with the input of older women - on how to include and portray older women.

## **11. Older Women and the Environment**

Having access to a sustainable environment and decent living conditions is a fundamental human right. However, although older women may play an important role in serving as managers, consumers and producers at the household level, they have been largely absent at the level of environmental policy-making and decision-making. The practical and specialized knowledge they may have about ecological linkages and fragile ecosystems is not routinely sought. Older women who are isolated, living alone or unable to live independently often suffer from lack of basic

housing and clean water. Man-made and natural disasters, as well as the impact of climate change leading to desertification, have a devastating impact on rural older women in particular. Lack of appropriate housing and living environments also creates undue hardships for older women, in spite of efforts such as the age friendly cities and communities movement initiated by the World Health Organization (WHO).

## **12. The Girl Child**

Earlier reports for Beijing state that in 1990 eighty million girls had no access to primary school and without education these girls are doomed to an old age of poverty. These girls are the older women of today and tomorrow, yet there is no mention of how these and subsequent cohorts of women are provided for in government policies and practice today. Interventions for girls is only part of a two-pronged strategy: interventions for older women who were once girls and who experience discrimination and are living with its consequences must also be part of an inclusive strategic plan to achieve gender equity for all. The age cohort-specific section in the member state reports for Beijing elicited significant government comments and focus on the girl child. Adding a section specific to older women (60 years of age and older is the UN designation for old age) will help generate the same attention for older women.

### **SECTION 3: STATISTICAL DATA (DATA ON WOMEN DISAGGREGATED BY AGE AND SEX)**

Data collection remains an integral part of evidence based and rights focused policy making and must reflect diversity among older persons, similar to that of other cohorts. Disaggregation of data by age and other dimensions is essential for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Target 17.18 and the Beijing Programme of Action. Inadequate data for women beyond age 49 is a key driver of the denial of older women's rights. Disaggregated data by age, gender and disability by five-year intervals until death beyond age 49 is not routinely collected or available; in many countries, data on intimate partner violence ends at age 49. Few prevalence studies on domestic violence against women within population-based studies include women older than 49 in their samples. Increased participation by and support of National Statistical Offices on age inclusive data processes, including the Titchfield Group on Ageing Statistics, endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission is recommended.

### **SECTION 4: PRIORITY ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO OLDER WOMEN**

Wellbeing, thriving economies and sustainable development that protect people and planet require the full involvement of and attention to older women, and the full protection of their rights. Older women are not a homogenous group. Some are vulnerable and in need of assistance and care, much like any other social group, no matter their age. Many are active, healthy and vibrant contributors to their families, communities and society. Many lead independent and autonomous lives. Many are active agents of change. It is therefore important that there is knowledge transfer from two perspectives - that of developing the skills of older women to meet up to date requirements, and that knowledge is transferred in a systematic way from older to younger women.

Member States are obliged to uphold universal values shared across continents and cultures and to ensure, in the context of Beijing +25, the equal rights of all women across the life course in line with the principles and standards of international human rights treaties. Older women must therefore be better protected by legislation and public policies that are aligned with human rights principles and standards, that have a life course perspective, are age inclusive, tackle ageism and address older persons' rights and needs.

### **Recommendations for Government action**

1. Recognize and combat ageism. Ageism coupled with gender discrimination is the key driver of social and economic discrimination and inequalities in older age, denying older women their rights and restricting the potential of millions of women now and in the future to contribute to sustainable development.
2. Ensure age, disability and gender-equi. social protection and pension systems for all older women together with affordable, high-quality, person-centered and accessible social services, housing, health and long-term and palliative care adequately funded by gender-equal tax laws and budgets..
3. Ensure older women have presence and voice in all planning and decision-making processes and have information on their rights and entitlements
4. Provide and facilitate the collection of statistics and data collection which is fully disaggregated by age, gender and disability in 5 year cohorts from the cradle to the grave, and use this data for legislation, policies and programmes.
5. Ensure all policies developed to address cumulative and intersectional discriminatory practices and economic, social, civil, and cultural disadvantage and denial of rights have a life-course approach.
6. Affirm intergenerational solidarity as the bedrock of all age-inclusive policy planning and service delivery to improve the lives and dignity of all people, of all ages, everywhere, so that older women are not seen as a burden on the state but as rights holders with equal entitlements to dignity, care and respect.
7. Put in place methodological manuals to provide a Life-Long Learning framework and recommendations for an institutional system on intergenerational knowledge transfer and intergenerational support.
8. Specific action by the UN CEDAW to respond to the dramatic rise in widowhood due to wars and conflicts, diseases, migration and displacement, child marriages, natural disasters, climate change and women living longer across the UNECE region. This can encompass a Committee General Recommendation on widows, a UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Widows and putting in place a UN Independent Expert on Widows.
9. Agree upon and put in place a binding international legal instrument to protect the rights of older persons.

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Further information: Susan Somers [sbsomers5@aol.com](mailto:sbsomers5@aol.com)