

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Director-General of the World Health Organisation  
Geneva  
Switzerland

20 April 2020

Dear Dr. Tedros,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Steering Group of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) to express our deepest concern regarding the protection of the human rights of older persons in the context of COVID-19. Pre-pandemic you publicly stated that the right of every individual to basic health services would be your top priority. You also recognised the importance of Universal Health Coverage on the International Day of Older Persons. We therefore request that the WHO significantly raises the visibility and prioritisation of older persons' right to health as one of the groups at highest risk of mortality and severe illness from the virus.

While older persons globally are being affected disproportionately to other groups in society, the international response to COVID-19, including from within the UN system, has consistently failed to identify older persons as a group at particular risk from the virus, and is responding insufficiently to their rights and needs.

The public health, economic and social emergency triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is being intensified by ageism and discrimination against older persons. We see daily reports of alarmingly cruel and ageist commentaries and actions in relation to this crisis that will cause further harm to older persons at a time when they are already facing significant risks, isolation and stress. We see discriminatory policies based on age, including triage protocols that use arbitrary age criteria as the basis for allocating scarce medical resources that violates basic human rights. 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' in society.

GAROP is a network of over 350 organisations worldwide united in our work to strengthen and promote the rights of older persons. GAROP 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.

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

Clear guidance, actions and signposting are needed from the WHO to remind all stakeholders that the health needs and rights of older persons in the context of COVID-19 must be taken into account. For example: in relation to how to best communicate on COVID-19 with older persons; on the importance of triage protocols based on ethical clinical assessment and not chronological age; the importance of supporting effective and safe care in nursing and care homes; and guidance on exit strategies. These types of actions will be crucial in ensuring States and other actors are able to respond to the rights and needs of older persons and budget accordingly.

We therefore urge you to lead a strong WHO response that publicly and explicitly includes the rights of older persons as one of its priorities in its strategic plans and work on COVID-19. Specifically, we would expect the next draft of the WHO's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan to go much further in recognising the impacts on older persons, building notably on the work done by the WHO through the Global campaign to combat ageism. As the WHO prepares to launch the Decade of Healthy Ageing, it needs to make clear how it is taking into account the rights of older persons in its response to COVID-19.

We wish to thank you for the guidance provided so far, including about people living in institutions and how to avoid social stigma during the pandemic. We look forward to receiving the upcoming guidance WHO is developing to support older persons in relation to COVID-19 and hope to see these made visible and easily accessible on the WHO website and through other sources to ensure impact in countries.

To neglect older persons and their rights in the COVID-19 response would risk failing to fulfil the WHO mandate to address this health emergency effectively and ensure healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages.

Yours sincerely



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