

Briefing: The status of older women

1. The impact of gender inequality in old age

HelpAge believes that empowering older women and older men in a gender and culturally sensitive way will help redress the gender inequalities that have existed throughout their lives and that are exacerbated in old age.

Older women make an enormous contribution to their families and communities. Despite this, they are disproportionately discriminated against, marginalised and excluded because of the combined impact of age and gender-based discrimination and other factors, such as ethnic origin, poverty and literacy levels. The impact of gender-based discrimination against girls and younger women is carried into old age and unless addressed continues from one generation to another.

2. What the data tells us

Data is rarely disaggregated by age and sex. However, what global statistics we do have illustrate the gendered nature of ageing:

- 19% of older women compared to 9% of older men live on their own which can lead to isolation and be a barrier to accessing support and services.
- 80% of men over 60 are married compared to only 48% of older women.
- Women live longer than men with a life expectancy at 60 of 21 years compared to 18 years for men.
- More women than men live into their 80s and beyond: whilst there are 83 men for every 100 women at the age of 60, there are only 59 men for every 100 women at the age of 80¹.

Income security: It is estimated that less than 20% of older people are covered by pensions which suggests that as many as 607 million people aged 60 and above lack income security². Women are far less likely than men to have been able to contribute to formal pension schemes due to working in the informal sector or unpaid care work as government figures from Burkina Faso show: only 1.7% of women compared to 4.8% of men were entitled to a contributory pension in 2009³.

Literacy rates: Literacy rates of people aged 65+ are often lower than those of the overall adult population (aged 15+) and in many cases the female 65+ literacy rates are extremely low and lower than the male 65+ literacy rates. The literacy rate for women 65+ in Nepal is 4% compared to men 65+ at 27%, 5% compared to 33% in Mozambique and 7% compared to 33% in Bangladesh⁴.

Caring roles: Older women often take on most responsibility for caring for grandchildren whose parents have migrated to work or for people living with HIV and AIDS and young children affected by HIV. HelpAge found that 88% of older people caring for grandchildren in a recent study in Tanzania were widows. In a similar study in Ethiopia two thirds were widows⁵.

¹ All data is taken from UNDESA, Population Ageing and Development 2009, <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ageing/ageing2009chart.pdf>

² HelpAge International, *Social transfers: a critical strategy to meet the MDGs*, August 2010

³ Government of Burkina Faso, Sixth periodic report of States parties, CEDAW/C/BFA/6, October 2009

⁴ UNESCO. UIS (Institute for Statistics) Ageing Population (65+) Literacy Rates and Illiterate Population by Country and Territory

⁵ Susan Erb, *One Size does not fit all*, July 2010, unpublished

Violence and abuse: Older women are usually invisible in data on violence against women which is rarely collected over the age of 49. In Central Asia older women report very high levels of shame in being subjected to violence by their children - typically characterised by physical and financial abuse. Focus groups conducted by HelpAge International in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan during 2009 reveal painful and private patterns of abuse experienced⁶.

Witchcraft related killings: Where belief in witchcraft is strong, older women are often targeted with witchcraft accusations and related violence. In Tanzania, for example, police reports from 8 regions between 2004 - February 2009 show that 2,585 older women were killed as a result of witchcraft accusations. In Mwanza region alone, 698 older women were killed during that period, which is two killings every two-three days⁷. HelpAge and its partners have shown that interventions working with those responsible for identifying witches, perpetrators of violence, potential victims and the wider community can dramatically reduce the numbers of older women killed: between November 2004 and December 2007, in nine districts of Sukumaland where interventions were taking place, the number of witchcraft related killings fell from 372 to two⁸.

Older women's health and sexual and reproductive rights: Women live longer than men but also generally live more years in ill health from the age of 60 onwards than men⁹. Health care is too expensive for many poor older women to access. Sexual and reproductive rights of post-menopausal women are rarely considered in reproductive health programmes. According to one doctor working in rural health centres in Nowsherea, Pakistan, 80% of the older women she sees need treatment for illnesses that are either directly or indirectly related to post-menopause: arthritis, osteoporosis, or uterus lapses and vaginal bleeding due to difficult and multiple childbirths¹⁰.

3. Potential areas of collaboration between UN Women and HelpAge International

UN Women can have a significant impact on the lives of older women and their families by:

- a. Ensuring older women and civil society organizations working on gender and ageing have a voice in setting UN Women's priorities at the country and global level. HelpAge would be happy to be part of this process.
- b. Appointing dedicated staff to shape an ageing inclusive approach, consolidating existing research, identifying data and analysis gaps on older women and commissioning new research. HelpAge would be happy to look for funding to support a secondment of a specialist on Ageing and Gender to the UN Women team.
- c. Ensuring that recommendations in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 27 on older women and protection of their human rights are incorporated into States parties' implementation of CEDAW. HelpAge is currently working on this and would be pleased to share findings with UN Women.
- d. Publishing a comprehensive report on older women's issues setting a policy agenda for the next 10 years. HelpAge would be happy to support this process by organising an initial meeting with UN Women.

⁶ Focus group discussions conducted by HelpAge International, 2009, unpublished

⁷ Data from police reports, February 2009, extracted from the media by the Legal Human Right Centre, Tanzania

⁸ HelpAge International, Focus on Older Women, Ageways 75, July 2010

⁹ WHO. Estimated healthy life expectancy (HALE) at birth and age 60, by sex, WHO Member States, 2002. Source: Annex Table 4, World Health Report 2004. <http://www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/gbdwhr2004hale.xls>. (6 August 2010)

¹⁰ *Why is the world ignoring women's health?*, January 26 2011, <http://www.helpage.org/blogs/?bid=231>