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**Commission on the Status of Women**

**57th Session,**

**4 – 15 March 2013**

**Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls**

**Joint NGO Statement submitted by HelpAge International and the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA)**

"I was threatened several times and I used to receive letters accusing me of being a witch. The letters said: 'You take your last meal today. You won't survive the night. You will be killed because you are a witch.' Shiduki, 71, Tanzania[[1]](#endnote-1)

**Introduction: the hidden violence against older women**

In 2010 there were 746 million women over the age of 49. By 2020 there will be 970 million.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Surveys on violence against women rarely collect data after the age of 49.[[3]](#endnote-3) As a result the violence and abuse that 746 million women may currently be experiencing is going unrecorded and not being captured in the research.

Population ageing is defining the 21st century. As the numbers of older women increases, so will the numbers exposed to different forms of violence and abuse.

This critical information gap has significant implications. It makes it impossible for States to monitor progress on their human rights obligations on freedom from violence. It conceals patterns of violence against older women. It results in their subsequent exclusion from prevention and rehabilitation policies and programmes.

**Failure to address all forms of violence**

Often data collected on violence against women is limited to that of physical and sexual violence. What little data there is shows that older women, many of whom have experienced violence throughout their lives, are exposed to different types of violence: physical, sexual, economic, psychological and neglect.

The UN Secretary General has cited violence and abuse against older people as a priority concern.[[4]](#endnote-4) Older women are disproportionately affected. In many societies, being widowed or single, either because of divorce or never having married, profoundly changes older women’s status in society. The physical and mental impact on older women of a lifetime of gender-based discrimination and violence can be profound, limiting their capacity to access services, make decisions and participate in their communities, rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation. Gender-based discrimination can also be exacerbated by ageism which can result in violence and abuse against older women in their homes or in institutional care settings. Inheritance laws often deny women the right to own or inherit property. Family members and others often force widows off their land or seize their property.

A study in Kenya showed that 60 per cent of older women were being abused by their daughters-in-law who were preventing them from getting regular food, warm clothes, adequate shelter and medical attention.[[5]](#endnote-5)

A study in Mozambique 2011 showed 62 per cent of women over the age of 50 had experienced violence in the six months before the interview. The most common form of abuse was economic abuse (47%) followed by emotional and psychological abuse (37%), witchcraft accusations (21%), physical abuse (11%) and sexual abuse (5%). Violence was more prevalent in peri-urban than rural areas and tended to increase with the age of the respondents. Relatives were mentioned as the main perpetrators at home while neighbours were mentioned for the community. According to the study only 3 out of 10 older women report such cases.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Violence against older women can occur as a result of harmful traditional beliefs. Witchcraft related killings were condemned in the 2009 report to the Human Rights Council by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (A/HEC/11/2) and the 2012 report on gender-related killings by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and its consequences (A/HRC/20/16). This is an issue of great concern to the many older women, who, because of their age and gender, are accused of witchcraft and, as a result, can be subjected to the most extreme forms of violence and murder, crimes that are often met with impunity. 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 days.[[7]](#endnote-7)

What little data there is on elder abuse across Europe shows that more women than men are victims and being a woman is one of the main risk factors as is being over the age of 74.[[8]](#endnote-8)

A study on intimate partner violence against older women in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and the United Kingdom found that the older the woman is, the harder it is to cope and engage in help-seeking behaviour. Emotional attachment to where they have lived all their lives is the most common factor cited for not being able to leave home. Older women have often experienced a life time, or very long periods of violence. This often results in very low self-esteem and high levels of dependency in older age, making it hard to end a long-term relationship. This older generation has a high level of family responsibility and family violence is considered a private matter. Younger women seem to seek help earlier and more often; older women assume they have to cope with their situation alone and in isolation.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**Exclusion from elimination and prevention responses**

Despite this, older women and the different forms of violence they are subjected to continue to be excluded from the debate and responses on violence against women.

In the Beijing +15 review in 2010, only four out of 121 national responses to a questionnaire sent out by the Division for the Advancement of Women[[10]](#endnote-10) mentioned violence against older women and only a further seven included information on elder abuse more broadly. UN Women does not report that older women are disproportionately subjected to elder abuse in its statistics on violence against women and girls.[[11]](#endnote-11) Other UN agencies also neglect older women in their data. For example the UNAIDS core indicators for Global AIDS response progress reporting, include an indicator on women aged 15-49 who have experienced physical or sexual violence, actively excluding older women. The preparatory expert group meeting and online consultation for this 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women also failed to include violence against older women.

The current international human rights system does little to shed light on violence against older women nor support governments to understand their obligations to protecting and promoting older women’s rights. CEDAW’s General Recommendation No. 27 on older women’s rights is a major step forward in understanding the specific nature of age and gender related violence. However, other existing human rights standards do not adequately cover issues of critical importance for older women, such as violence and elder abuse. Often this is because older women are seen to be covered by inclusive terminology such as “and other vulnerable groups”. The specific nature of the discrimination or violation of rights they experience, therefore, gets lost and, as a result, older women remain invisible in UN human rights mechanisms.

Action at the domestic level varies, resulting in inconsistent levels of protection across different countries. Some countries, for example Kenya, have provisions in their constitutions protecting older people from violence. Others have national legislation protecting older people from violence and abuse, for example, Mauritius, South Africa, China, India, Japan, Nepal and the USA. Others cite older people as specifically vulnerable in their domestic violence legislation, for example Ghana, Malawi, Slovenia and Namibia where elder abuse is implied as a form of domestic violence. This patchwork of protection undermines the universality of human rights and every woman’s right to freedom from violence and abuse throughout every stage of her life.

**Recommendations**

As with all forms of violence, elder abuse and violence against older women is preventable. Coordinated action to improve policy responses at the national and international level on elder abuse, with specific regard to violence against older women, is urgently needed. Education and awareness campaigns are essential to change negative social and cultural attitudes towards older women. However, there is a paucity of quality research on prevalence and prevention, meaning that evidence-based programmes are few and far between.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The following three actions would help to address this:

1. Collect, disaggregate and disseminate data on violence against women beyond the age of 49.

2. Improve measurement of psychological and economic violence.

3. Increase research on under-documented forms of violence against women, including psychological and economic violence.

1. <http://www.helpage.org/newsroom/life-stories/rights/shiduki-71-tanzania/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The majority of surveys on violence against women, eg WHO and DHS, have a cut off age of 49. The IVAWS has a cut off age of 69 but has been conducted in a very limited number of countries. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. UN Secretary General, *Follow-up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing*, A/66/173, 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Nhongo T & Ogonda J, *Age discrimination in Africa*, Age Concern, IFA and DaneAge, May 2006, page 17 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Machafa S, *Violence and violation of rights against older women,* HelpAge International, December 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Data from police reports, February 2009, extracted from the media by the Legal Human Rights Centre, Tanzania [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. WHO, *European report on preventing elder maltreatment*, 2011, page 29 - 30 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Nagele B et al, Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women, 2010, page 62-63 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Questionnaire available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/questionnaires/questionnaire%20english.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/299-fast-facts-statistics-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-.html [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Wood et al, Elder Abuse: A review of evidence for prevention, 2010, page 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)