

Gender and Ageing Briefs

A series of briefs discussing key issues on gender and ageing, produced in preparation for the Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid in April 2002.

The briefs cover key issues for practitioners and policy makers in ageing, gender and development, in government, international development agencies, non-governmental organisation and older people's organisations.

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HelpAge
International

Leading global action on ageing

HelpAge International gender and ageing briefs

One: **Gender in an Ageing World**

Worldwide, women live longer than men. They make up two-thirds of the global population over 80 – and as life expectancy rises, this proportion will increase.

Men and women age differently, both physically and physiologically as well as emotionally and socially. Yet gender and development debates have tended to neglect the life course impact of gender discrimination on both men and women. The emphasis has instead been on the rights and development of girl children, and the needs and rights of younger 'productive' and 'reproductive' women.

Compared with men, older women are more likely to have had a lifetime of disadvantage. They have more chance of being widowed and losing access to property. Poor education, nutrition and access to services and the labour market in earlier life often leave them with poor health and few resources in old age. But HelpAge International's research findings have suggested that women rather than men are more able to diversify their sources of income and support in hard times, and in these situations contribute substantially to household and family income. Men, on the other hand, tend to suffer from declining capacity to meet their traditional role as breadwinners on entering old age, which can leave them extremely vulnerable.

In April 2002, a new 20-year International Strategy on Ageing will be debated at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid. The draft strategy raises gender issues in a variety of areas including poverty eradication and income security, employment, health, disability, care HIV/AIDS and violence and abuse. It calls for a commitment to gender equality for older persons through the elimination of gender-based discrimination and a commitment to inclusion of older people and older women in the 2015 international development targets for halving world poverty..

At HelpAge International, we are working closely with a number of UN agencies, including the Programme on Ageing, as well as other important stakeholders to ensure the implementation of a comprehensive and resourced strategy for action for older women and men. We strive towards securing lasting improvements in the quality of life for current and future generations of older people.

Our key concerns are that:

- all societies discriminate against people on grounds of old age
- as a result older people are excluded from social and development policy and their contributions go unrecognised
- this exclusion means that older people do not receive an equitable share of national or global resources.

Please join us to ensure a gender sensitive strategy for action on ageing for the World Assembly and beyond and to promote gender equality for all ages.

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Two: Age, Gender and HIV/AIDS

In the last decade, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has had devastating but under-reported impacts on the lives of older people and those who depend on them. HelpAge International (HAI) believes there is now an urgent need to research the effects of HIV/AIDS on older women and men, both as an at-risk group and in their critical role as carers, and to support them as key contributors to community survival and coping mechanisms.

HIV/AIDS is changing the age profile in regions with high rates of infection, putting severe pressures on older survivors and placing multiple burdens upon them at a time of ever-decreasing resources. Older people have become primary carers for their children who are sick with AIDS, and this responsibility falls primarily on older women. In Thailand, two-thirds of all those affected with HIV-related illness are nursed at home by parents in their 60s and 70s. In a study of older carers in Zimbabwe, conducted by HelpAge Zimbabwe with the World Health Organisation, 74 per cent of the older carers in the sample were women.

Older people are also left with the responsibility of supporting their orphaned grandchildren. According to the latest UNAIDS report (*AIDS Epidemic Update* December 2001), the number of African children who had lost their mother or both parents to the epidemic by the end of 2000 - 12.1 million - is forecast to more than double over the next decade. Currently, some eight million children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, are being cared for by older relatives. Yet older people are not recognised or supported in current policy and intervention on HIV/AIDS.

One outcome in countries with high HIV/AIDS prevalence is an increase in the number of chronically poor households headed by older women, with a large number of dependents. Older women generally suffer most from chronic poverty and lack of resources. They are often in need of care themselves, but face, sometimes unaided, the costs and emotional stress of nursing terminally ill relatives, paying for burials and the financial and practical difficulties of bringing up orphans - including payment of school fees.

Older people need to be supported through community care and support programmes to carry out their critical role as carers, for their own wellbeing and that of the children. A key issue here is fighting to break down the shame and stigma still attached to the disease, which inhibits many people including older people from accessing the right services and advice.

Older people are both affected and infected by HIV/AIDS, as outlined in the draft International Strategy for Action on Ageing. In Thailand, national figures for 2000 show nearly five per cent of HIV infected cases were over 60. Yet most efforts to control the spread of the disease and disseminate information concentrate on under-49s.

International data on AIDS infection is not being compiled for older adults. It is rarely acknowledged that older people remain sexually active and thus at risk of infection. In particular, many older men take younger partners and may become infected. Unprotected sex in polygamous marriages makes this situation difficult for women of all ages. Lack of information about HIV/AIDS and its consequences also exposes older women in particular to infection through their role as carers. The exclusive focus on younger people in educational campaigns ignores the need to educate older men and women on HIV/AIDS and the continuing role older people play in the socialisation of children.

HelpAge International is pushing for some of the resources in the Global Fund for HIV, TB and Malaria to be allocated to support the carers and families of people living with HIV/AIDS, and to further research on the incidence and impact of HIV/AIDS which includes gender disaggregated information on the over 49s.

Older people need to be counted, supported and educated in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The different needs, roles and responsibilities of older men and women need to be acknowledged and included in programmes and policies addressing this global epidemic.

HelpAge International is a member of the STOP AIDS campaign, set up by 15 development and HIV/AIDS groups who believe that by working together to demand action from our leaders, we can free the world from HIV/AIDS. For more information see www.stopaidscampaign.org.uk

Three: Participation of Older Women and Men in Development

In January 2002, the World Bank convened an international meeting to evaluate participatory development processes in light of a review of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) and define best practice and lessons learned. But issues of concern to older people, and their direct voices, were strangely absent from their deliberations.

Older women and men¹ constitute the fastest growing age group in developing countries. Many find themselves to be among the poorest, the most vulnerable and most marginalized at a time of life when their physical and material resources are depleted. The barriers they face in active and equal participation in local, national and international fora for decision making and policy formulation is a clear sign of their institutionalised exclusion from processes that affect their livelihoods and wellbeing.

Typical barriers to participation, such as lack of literacy and language barriers, health and physical access have particular implications for older women and men. Older women live on average 2-8 years longer than men, and make up a larger proportion of the 'old old' age group. They are likely not to have had any formal education, not to be literate, to suffer from chronically debilitating and untreated health conditions. A lifetime of gender based disadvantage results in their chronic vulnerability in old age. Despite the fact that many older women of today actively participated in local or national organisations and community based national action when younger, age based discrimination and social mores marginalize them from community and development programmes in later life. It would seem that when women stop producing children they seem to forfeit their 'relevance' for often very child and family oriented development programmes.

I got used to always mixing with local people and having contact with local institutions. But once I got older and started not feeling so well I had to withdraw from my activities. Now I've been left feeling very alone and uncomfortable. It really hit me hard and I got very depressed. I saw myself getting worse because I wasn't participating anymore, so I decided to form my own group, of older women like me, a group for older people. (Older woman, Lima Peru)

Older men experience marginalisation too on account of their age. Status in the household and community is often linked to their ability to bring in income and provide for family members. Age factors, rather than capacity, can deny older men opportunities of participating in community affairs. Again, a lifetime of gender defined roles inhibits older men from shifting their attention to household activities and they often lack the social support networks available to older women.

I asked for credit from the Grameen Bank, but was refused because I wasn't a member of their association. Older people are not accepted as members by anyone, not just Grameen² (Older man, Bangladesh)

New development tools such as the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) are aimed at ensuring development plans are country owned, participatory in process and reflect the voices and needs of the poor. Yet the framework in which these processes are evaluated—namely the international development goals, or Millennium Targets—do not readily tackle older people's issues. HelpAge International believes that the achievement of these goals will be compromised unless both the vulnerability and current and potential contributions of older women and men is recognised and acted on in policy and programme responses.

¹ Over 60.

² 'Uncertainty rules our lives' HelpAge International et al, Bangladesh 2000

In 1991 the United Nations adopted the 'Principles for Older Persons'³. Participation is defined as one of the five core principles to ensure that older women and men's rights are delivered. The declaration states that all older people should remain part of the wider community, take part in the planning and delivery of policies that affect their wellbeing, and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations.

The Second World Assembly on Ageing is a clear opportunity to recognise and address the problems and further the human rights of poor and marginalised older people in the developing and developed world. It also signals the importance of putting in place the mechanisms to ensure participatory policies on ageing. This opens up opportunities to work across generations and sectors to contribute to wider development agendas, such as poverty, health, education and sustainable development targets.

HelpAge International (HAI) has conducted a number of consultations with poor older women and men across the world to ensure that their needs and concerns are incorporated into the discussions of the International Plan of Action on Ageing and related national processes. It is clear that there is way to go before their views are incorporated into national and international decision-making processes. For this reason HAI is urging the removal of barriers for older persons, especially older women to reach decision-making positions.

For HelpAge International, participation is both a desired outcome of programming, and a set of methods and a philosophy to ensure that the human rights of older women and men are respected and acted on. Participation is a necessary prerequisite to ensure older people's inclusion in, and ownership of, the processes of development. The full participation of older men and women in the social, cultural, political and economic life of their communities is not only a development imperative - it is also a matter of basic human rights⁴.

Community-based programmes designed with older people's involvement draw directly on their knowledge, skills and experience. Such programmes are more likely to be effectively targeted, have intergenerational impact, be responsive to change, and of standing the test of time. Involving older people in decision-making is a particularly effective way of tackling the economic and social exclusion often linked with ageing.

³ UN resolution 46/91; there are 18 principles under the headings of Independence, Care, Self-Fulfilment, Dignity and Participation

⁴ Mandy Heslop (2002) A Participation Sourcebook, HelpAge International

Four: **Humanitarian crises - Hearing and understanding older people's gendered needs**

Recent humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters – in Goma, in Afghanistan, and last year in Gujarat – highlight the vulnerability of poor older people in such crises, often strongly linked with individual circumstances related to gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Helping older women and men to survive and cope with disasters is not about creating special services – but about ensuring equal access to services at all stages of a relief effort. This means locating and identifying older people at the outset; assessing needs through direct consultation; and tailoring services to take account of factors like poor mobility, special nutritional needs, or chronic health conditions.

But just as older men and women experience ageing differently and have different gendered social roles, so in a crisis, they respond differently and have different needs. Older women tend to be more numerous in refugee populations, but age and gender barriers are likely to exclude them from decision-making and resources. They are far more likely than older men to be caring for children, and often have long-term responsibility for bringing up orphaned or abandoned grandchildren.

When the crisis strikes, the first issues are practical ones. Older people are less mobile and often in chronic poor health. They need to be able to reach food and water distribution points easily, not have to queue for hours or fight for supplies, and if necessary to be assisted in carrying supplies to their shelter. The food needs to be cookable and edible for people with compromised digestion. In the March 2000 floods in Mozambique, some older people reported that the food provided aggravated diarrhoea.

Social and religious restrictions on the movement, speech and public exposure of women and their bodies increases their vulnerability during emergencies, when they are more likely to be confined to the home in maximum danger. If they become separated from family and community support, the levels of risk increase sharply. Problems of shelter may find older women in particular discomfort. They can end up being excluded from communal shelters where inadequate latrines, mixed sleeping areas and a lack of gender separation break the codes of their faith.

Dress codes of complete cover can restrict mobility, particularly in floods, hurricanes and other natural disasters. On the other hand, older women often find some security and protection in wearing their traditional dress and the aid agencies' habit of providing western clothing is often felt by older women to be inappropriate.

In a lawless situation, gender and poverty together can make isolated older women especially vulnerable to abuse and violence. In the Balkans war, for example, older women were not excluded in the widespread incidences of rape. After the Kosovo war, the anger of Kosovar Albanians at their treatment by the Serbs was sometimes reflected in attacks on vulnerable, elderly Kosovo Serbs.

Older people, and especially older women, also make important contributions in emergencies – as carers, but also as keepers of community knowledge about past crises and current coping mechanisms. UNHCR *notes that older women refugees are often the only birth attendants available, especially for births outside hospitals. In*

*many camps, the health agencies have recognised and accepted the importance of their contribution by providing these midwives with better equipment and training in hygiene.*⁵

After the immediate crisis comes the task of rebuilding homes, livelihood, and communities and dealing with grief and loss. HelpAge International's research shows that, even in the initial emergency, older people's main concern is with the longer-term threat to their livelihoods and homes. This is generally mismatched with relief agencies' focus on short-term welfare.

Older people are rarely considered in recovery or credit packages. Older women suffer a double disadvantage as they often emerge from the crisis with greater responsibilities and fewer resources than men. Older women's place in the informal economic sector leaves them with few marketable skills and no retirement compensation. Older widows are often among the most marginalised in cultures where inheritance codes dispossess them on their husband's death.

Many older women care for orphans, either their own grandchildren or others. Joyce Mukankundiye, 70, lost her husband in Rwanda in 1994. She supports her three grandchildren because her daughter has suffered from psychological trauma since the war. Her husband was killed in the war and she fled with one son to Tanzania. After the war, when she returned, the family land had been divided amongst her sons. Her health is not good because of the poor diet. But she believes older people have a part to play in the community.

Where rehabilitation includes older people, there are many variables including gender which influence the effectiveness of programmes. In the Banni area of Gujarat, older village women, beneficiaries of HelpAge India/HelpAge International's rebuilding and income generation programme after the earthquake have seen more immediate benefits than older men. Some widows now have their own homes, when before they had depended on living with relatives, and their handicraft skills mean that, for example, a sewing machine allows them to earn cash. Agricultural restocking programmes, mainly affecting men, do not give such rapid returns.

Not only are older men and women's needs in emergencies frequently overlooked but the gendered nature of old age and the cumulative impacts of a life of gender-based experiences is rarely acknowledged even by gender and development practitioners, let alone mainstream humanitarian relief organisations. The International Strategy for Action on Ageing, due to be adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in April 2002, is a prime opportunity to ensure the rights of older men and women are respected in humanitarian relief efforts and that the specific gender needs of older women and men are acknowledged and acted upon.

⁵ UNHCR *Older refugees: a resource for the Refugee Community Health and Community Development Division*, Geneva n.d.

HelpAge International gender and ageing briefs

Five: Violence and older people – the gendered dimension

On International Women's Day HelpAge International is bringing you this gender and ageing brief to highlight the ways older women's rights are abused and expose some the forms of violence and abuse they are subjected to throughout the world. A significant body of work exists on the gendered nature of violence against women and a great deal of commendable effort has been made to highlight the abuse of women's human rights. So far however, an age analysis has tended to be absent from this work and the accumulated gender bias and the types of violence affecting older women have been a neglected issue. In fact older women, due to their age and related physical, social and economic disadvantages are often particularly vulnerable to violence-related problems.

Contrary to common belief, older people are being subjected to physical, emotional, psychological and financial abuse and neglect by their families, communities and the institutions responsible for their care and protection. Consultations undertaken by HelpAge International and its partner organisations in the run up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing revealed that violence and abuse come high in the list of concerns older people have for their wellbeing. Older women in eastern and central Europe are increasingly falling victim to street crime. In the Caribbean, several older people reported being beaten by sons or other family members – usually when the abuser was drunk or needed money for drugs. In Latin America older people spoke of violence and abuse related to forced displacement, as well as disrespectful treatment, family and social violence, social discrimination and intergenerational conflicts. In Zimbabwe, where thirty per cent of respondents reported violence related problems, the rise in violence directed against older people deters their participation in community projects.

A number of consultations in Africa highlighted the particular problem of witchcraft accusations to which older women are the most likely to fall victim. In Mozambique older people reported that such accusations lead to physical attacks on older women, at times even resulting in killings. In Tanzania an estimated 500 women are murdered every year and many others harassed after being accused of witchcraft. Many more are driven from their homes and communities, becoming destitute as a result. The victims are women of various ages, but older women form the vast majority as they embody certain characteristics associated with witches such as wrinkles, grey hair, bags under their eyes and red eyes and are more likely to be widowed and living alone. The issue became so serious that it was made the theme for International Women's day in Tanzania in 1999.⁶

The information that exists shows that the perpetrators of violence against older people are more often than not family members or other close acquaintances. According to data collected in the Latin American region it is older women who are the most frequent victims of sexual abuse by family members under the influence of alcohol or drugs. A study among older women in Chile revealed that of the perpetrators of psychological abuse 80.6 per cent were men, neglect and

⁶ *Witchcraft - A violent threat*, Ageing and Development News No. 6, HelpAge International, July 2000

abandonment was reported to have been 100 per cent committed by women. In a study undertaken in the townships of the Cape Flats, South Africa, examples of sexual abuse given outnumbered all other types of abuse.

'When you are a mother...left behind with children who are boys, there is one amongst your children...he wants to sleep with you and wants that you must not talk about it... you are afraid because you do not have the strength. He does that thing as he pleases.' (Older woman, in Keikelame & Ferreira, 2000)

These acts of violence and abuse against older women are usually remain taboo and are therefore underreported out of shame and denial, for fear of reprisals or out of the victim's ignorance of her human rights and of existing mechanisms for assistance and protection. Little data exists on the full extent of abuse against older people, and what does exist is not always disaggregated or analysed by gender. Denial and ignorance, especially in developing countries where cultural systems and the extended family are meant to protect and care for older people, are older people's greatest enemies.

Whilst we cannot assume total passivity nor universal victimhood on behalf of older people they run particular risks or embody particular characteristics that make them more vulnerable and less resistant to violence and abuse. These risks and characteristics are inherently gendered and relate especially to the relative power relations between genders as well as generations. Violence against older people is ultimately the most extreme expression of their relative powerlessness linked to factors of frailty, dependence and disability, as well as issues of gender, race, belief, ethnic origin and class. It is time the abuse of the rights of older women and men be acknowledged and acted upon with the same commitment and political will that violence against younger women and children is addressed by women's organisations, national legislation and the international community.

On February 26th, 2002, the United Nations launched the Secretary-General's report on abuse against older persons commissioned for the preparatory process for the Second World Assembly on Ageing. The report outlines the various human rights conventions and UN commitments that calls for the protection of the rights of older people and outlines the types of abuse older people are at risk of. However, this report does not go far enough in condemning the violence older women and men are being subjected to and does not make strong enough recommendations for action. The draft International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 calls for the elimination of all forms of neglect, abuse and violence of older persons and the creation of support services to address elder abuse. This is an important step but much more effort and commitment is needed to broaden our understanding of elder abuse and its particular gendered impacts, and to carry these recommendations through to concrete actions.

At HelpAge International we are calling for an end to violence against older people and recommend that the office of the High Commission for Human Rights appoint a special rapporteur on older people to seek out and publish data on the violence experienced by older women and men. We support our member and partner organisations to work through specific projects as well as research and advocacy to address the violations of the human rights of older women and men throughout the world.

Six: **Confronting older people's poverty – gender and income security**

Poverty is the main threat facing older men and women world-wide. In developing countries where older populations are growing fastest, they are consistently among the poorest of the poor. In countries in transition where state systems have collapsed and social safety nets have been removed older people are the hardest hit by the transition. HelpAge International believes that tackling poverty among older men and women is both an issue of basic human rights, and a critical next step in the fight to reduce global levels of poverty and attain the Millennium Development Goals.

We are now well versed in the feminization of poverty and gender biases in education and the labour market that place women at a disadvantage in ensuring a secure and stable livelihood. However, the feminization of old age and cumulative gender bias older women are likely to face is seldom acknowledged in poverty or gender analyses. Yet HelpAge International's experience shows that a large proportion of older people in developing countries live below the poverty line and lack basic needs such as food, water, shelter and healthcare. Furthermore this poverty is inherently gendered in old age with older women are more likely to be widowed, live alone, have few assets of their own and be dependent on family members for support. Older men also face gender bias as the ageing process undermines their ability to provide for their families, and discriminates against them in support for agricultural inputs or credit schemes. Their gendered experience of old age must not be neglected.

Consultations with older people in Mozambique showed that 80% of interviewees, both men and women, identified not having a source of income, not having resources with which to generate income, and not having access to credit or other income generating facilities as key constraints to their income security. Families increasingly suffering under the strain of poverty themselves, have few resources left over to support their older parents.

'You can be living with your family but are still isolated and not taken care of. Our children do not have an income, as they are not employed. The little they earn from casual labour is not even enough for their own families.' (Older woman, Kenya)

In many parts of the world older people are discriminated against by moneylenders and micro-credit schemes as they are assumed to not be creditworthy subjects. This discrimination increases their poverty.

"Our old age and sickness is often the biggest factor for the NGOs and the moneylenders to refuse even small loans." Older woman, Cambodia.

In fact, HAI's experience of credit schemes for older people in Peru has found that older people's repayment rate is exceedingly good, with very little pressure required to ensure loan payments are made. Furthermore the income they generate provides them with some kind of security and improves their status in the household.

Most older people work into very old age to secure a minimum income for themselves and contribute to their families in kind through childcare, looking after animals and guarding property, or farm a small plot of land for food. Few, however, have an adequate source of income or livelihood. Pensions systems around the world are grossly inadequate to cater for the needs and constraints of the poor and continue to have inherent gender biases through their insistence on minimum contributions periods and uneven retirement ages. They currently focus entirely on formal sector employed and have a heavy urban bias, when many of today's older people live in rural areas. Only four countries in the world have the equivalent of a non-

contributory pension, and even then the amount is pitiful relative to need. However, HAI's experience suggests that even in these very small amounts a pension of this sort can make a significant contribution to the household and well being of the older person, especially when that person has no other form of income. Non-contributory pensions especially favour women, as they are less likely to have had the possibility of saving or accruing sufficient income to contribute to a pension fund on a regular basis.

Older women face particular constraints in later life, as in most parts of the world they do not have the same inheritance and property rights as men. In many parts of Africa women cannot inherit land. Instead, on the death of her husband the land is passed to her oldest son or back to the husband's family. Similarly, age and gender bias combine to strip the older man of all income earning capacity as employers, moneylenders and small business entrepreneurs repeatedly turn them away. Not only does this impact on their poverty but also on their social status in the family and community. In some countries older men have suffered more from neglect by their families once they fail to produce and income and tend to suffer more often from depression than women.

Older people's tremendous contributions to the household are rarely acknowledged let alone supported in poverty alleviation programmes, despite the many new burdens they face. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has visibilised older people in their critical role as carers for their sick children and guardians of the orphans who remain. In many cases older men, in particular, are forced to sell their meagre assets to pay for medical treatment and funeral costs for sick relatives, as well as the survival needs of remaining family members. The older people are thrown into chronic poverty and remaining younger family members are disenfranchised of their inheritance, perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty. Yet older men and women are repeatedly excluded from intervention programmes tackling HIV/AIDS and its related impacts on poverty.

At HelpAge International we are asking that older people's contributions be recognised and valued and that they be allocated their fair share of national and global resources as an issue of basic rights as well as common sense. All people need to be guaranteed adequate social protection and minimum income in old age. The intergenerational and gendered nature of poverty over the life course needs to be recognised, analysed and acted upon in national and international poverty reduction programmes and targeted in integrated poverty reductions strategies if the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living in poverty by 2015 is to be achieved. We would like policy makers to consider how many men and women will die a death of old age poverty if ageing and older people's gendered needs are not included and addressed in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

HelpAge International gender and ageing briefs

Resources

Gender in an Ageing World

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