

Unequal treatment

HelpAge

International

What older people say about their rights during the COVID-19 pandemic

Country profile: Dominican Republic



Older people's health and lives have been at particular risk from COVID-19. Their rights have also been denied. In October 2020, a consultation was carried out to better understand older people's experience of their rights during the pandemic.

This summary explores themes emerging from the responses. It presents the individual voices of the older people interviewed – voices that, despite the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on older people, have rarely been heard in discussions on the pandemic. It does not represent the views or experiences of all older people.

Dominican Republic is one of ten countries in which the consultation was carried out. A full report from all ten countries is available at www.helpage.org/Unequal_Treatment_report

Details of participants in Dominican Republic



8 women
5 men



2 from rural areas
11 from urban areas



4 aged 60–69
9 aged 70–79



Total number of participants

1. Responses discriminating on the basis of age

Government responses to the pandemic have not treated all older people fairly or equally with others. Besides a general population lockdown, the government introduced specific restrictions for older people:

- Public employees over 60 and with particular health conditions not allowed to leave their homes¹
- Restrictions on when older people could shop²
- Restrictions on visitors to care homes.³

The negative impact of staying at home for a long time was evident. Some participants said they felt anxious and afraid to go out in case they became infected by the virus.

“Because you have to be more careful, you're afraid of going to a place because of your age. You don't want to get sick. It's more difficult for a person my age if they're infected than a young person.”

62-year-old man, mason living with his wife, daughter and grandchildren in a rural area

Others talked about being told what to do by their children.

“I’m not happy sitting here in my house, eating whatever appears, not going out. Even my daughters don’t want me to move. My granddaughter argues with me. I tell her I have to go out and walk around.”

76-year-old man, retired labourer living with his grandchild and great-grandchildren in an urban area

“My son from New York told me not to go out and not to receive visitors. I do not go anywhere from here.”

73-year-old woman living with her child and grandchild in an urban area

Some said their health had deteriorated through long periods at home.

“I have a cardiovascular problem. I’ve had three thromboses. The last one partially damaged my left foot. When I walk, sometimes my legs give way and I feel I will fall. Being locked in a house, unable to go out, means I can’t walk in the street, ride in a bus or whatever. That has made my health deteriorate a lot.”

78-year-old woman, former public health volunteer living with her spouse in an urban area

One participant had experienced a loss of income from her business.

“People are afraid of coming to the beauty salon because most of them know that I’ve had the virus. That has decreased my clients a bit.”

60-year-old woman, hairdresser living with her spouse in an urban area

2. Services failing to reach everyone

The pandemic has exposed the inadequacy of many services, as well as the inequality of access to services among older people and the discrimination they can be subjected to.

A number of participants said that services had stayed the same. However, others said there had been delays in accessing social security and healthcare, and suspensions of some health services.

“I went out to claim a subsidy card issued by the government but I still need to go to the dentist and have a breast examination.”

71-year-old woman living with her spouse, children and grandchildren in an urban area

For others, there were interruptions to the supply of medicines because dispensaries had closed or drugs were not available.

“Most older people go and can’t find the drugs. Why, after two days, are there none? Tell me. Either [the dispensaries] have another business where they take them to sell, or something is happening so that there’s no medicine for older people.”

60-year-old woman, hairdresser living with her spouse in an urban area

One participant said they could only get the healthcare they needed because of who they knew.

“Well, thankfully there’s a girl who’s helping me. She’s a cardiologist, the wife of a cousin of mine. She took me to the place where she works, did the echo test, all the heart studies and analysis. She sent me to the place where a friend of hers works for a stress test. If it weren’t for that girl...”

67-year-old woman living with her grandchildren in an urban area

One person said there was no one to complain to but that services would improve if there were.

“If there was one person you could complain to, maybe things would get better.”

78-year-old woman, former public health volunteer living with her spouse in an urban area

3. Gaps in understanding rights

Older people understand their rights in different ways. They have varying levels of knowledge of their rights, with some having significant gaps.

Some participants knew about their rights to health and to a pension. However, most of those who said they knew what their rights were thought they were limited to various entitlements or to preferential treatment for older people.

“In some places, we have some rights. For example, in banks there’s a special line for older and disabled people. In some public vehicles, older people have preference and a younger person always gives us their seat.”

72-year-old man living with his children in an urban area

Others said they did not know what their rights were.

“No, most do not know [about their rights]. Most believe that their children have to help them, but sometimes their children cannot help, and sometimes they do not have children.”

60-year-old woman, hairdresser living with her spouse in an urban area

Some seemed to confuse rights with regulations related to the pandemic.

“I believe that I have the right to stay in my house, to be at a distance from people who could infect me. I think these are my rights.”

63-year-old woman, vendor living with her husband and foster grandchild in a rural area

The majority said they thought the government and authorities knew what older people’s rights were. However, some felt that, despite this, their government was doing nothing to protect them.

“It seems that the authorities know our rights but they do not put pressure on to put them into practice.”

75-year-old man, teacher living alone in an urban area

“The authorities here talk so much and plan so much, but you never see benefits for older people, unless it’s the little amount for food that they give you every month. There’s no other help. Sure, the authorities know what our rights are, but they focus on something less necessary than caring for older people.”

78-year-old woman, former public health volunteer living with her spouse in an urban area

4. Changes older people would like to see

Older people identified a number of changes they would like to see to the response to the pandemic that would better protect their rights and improve their lives.

A number of participants said that older people must have access to food and affordable medicines in any future pandemic.

“Older people should be able to stop working without having to worry about guaranteeing their needs for themselves. There should be a guarantee of access to food, medical attention and medicines in their last years.”

72-year-old man, social worker living with his children in an urban area

One participant said older people needed opportunities to complain and claim their rights.

“They should try to have a place where older people can go to complain and where the problems they raise can be heard. But here, there’s nowhere you can go to complain. If there was, maybe they could do something for you.”

78-year-old woman, former public health volunteer living with her spouse in an urban area

Some thought their rights were guaranteed under the law, but that laws protecting their rights were not being put into practice.

“The laws exist but they are being not applied. I don’t know where to turn for assistance.”

72-year-old man living with his children in an urban area

Others felt that guaranteeing rights in the law would improve the wellbeing of older people or change attitudes.

“If [our] rights were guaranteed, people should have a better attitude towards older people. There would be respect.”

67-year-old woman living with her grandchildren in an urban area

Endnotes

1. <https://coronavirusrd.gob.do/2020/04/26/listado-de-medidas-rd-vs-covid-19> (13 November 2020)
2. <https://coronavirusrd.gob.do/2020/04/26/listado-de-medidas-rd-vs-covid-19> (13 November 2020)
3. www.conape.gob.do/transparencia/__get_file.cfm?file_id=2082&title=Restricciones%20De%20Visitas%20En%20Centros%20Geri%C3%A1tricos (13 November 2020)

What a convention would do

A UN convention on the rights of older people would:

1. **Be a solid base for a fairer society.** It would help ensure that all older people everywhere are treated in a fairer and more just way.
2. **Result in better services for all.** It would help ensure that governments, the private sector and others design and deliver services that respect older people's rights.
3. **Be a clear guide.** It would be the go-to place to get guidance on what older people's rights are and how to respect them.
4. **Be a driver for change.** It would set in motion a chain of events that would improve older people's lives.

How the consultation was conducted

The consultation was carried out in October 2020 with eight women and five men over the age of 50. Due to COVID-19 public health restrictions, individual interviews were done by phone or in person using non-probability sampling based on convenience and who was accessible to those carrying out the consultation.

The consultation questions were broad to allow respondents to talk about what was important to them. Questions focused on changes in their lives due to the pandemic, their experience of service delivery, knowledge of their rights, rights guaranteed in law and things they would like the government to do differently.

The findings are intended to capture the views of the 13 older people interviewed and are not intended to be representative of the population of older people as a whole.

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