

Statement for the 68th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 68), March 2024



HelpAge International, Ageing Nepal, Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS), Organización de Entidades Mutuales de las Américas (ODEMA), non-governmental organisations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The statement was submitted by HelpAge International and is supported by three non-governmental organisations member of the HelpAge Global Network with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: Ageing Nepal, Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS), Organización de Entidades Mutuales de las Américas (ODEMA). The HelpAge Global Network is a unique worldwide alliance dedicated to promoting the rights of older people to lead dignified, healthy, and secure lives in low and middle-income countries (LMICs).

In line with our 2030 Strategy, we prioritise the well-being, dignity, and voice of older people in their diverse identities. Achieving gender equality is critical to the fulfilment of our mission, as it plays a central role in fostering social justice, protecting human rights, and supporting sustainable development for all. HelpAge International commends the 2023 Gender Snapshot, prepared by UN Women and the UN Division on Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), for highlighting the importance of leaving no one behind, including older women, in the pursuit of real progress on gender equality.

The interconnectedness of ageing populations, gender equality and poverty

The demographic shift towards an ageing global population is undeniable. According to UNDESA, by 2050, 55 per cent of the world's 2 billion older people will be female, and 59 per cent of people will be aged 80 and over, primarily residing in LMICs, including the countries most affected by conflict and the climate change crisis. Despite their significant presence, older women often remain marginalised in gender equality policy discussions and excluded from development assistance. HelpAge International's research reveals that older women receive minimal attention from donors in gender equality spending.

Despite the call made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for reliable data disaggregated by age and sex, among other

characteristics, there are few cross-country comparable estimates of the prevalence of poverty among older women and men. Yet, according to UNDESA, older women experience higher levels of poverty than older men. This disparity can be attributed to various factors, including the accumulated impact of a lifetime of gender-based discrimination and inequality.

Women are more likely throughout their life course to be engaged in unpaid caregiving responsibilities, live alone, experience widowhood, and encounter disadvantages and discrimination in access to education, healthcare, and the labour market. Their income insecurity is exacerbated by increasingly frequent shocks and stressors, as evidenced in a recent study conducted by HelpAge International.

Social protection for tackling old-age poverty and gendered inequalities

For women of all ages to access their economic rights, it is imperative they can access gender-responsive comprehensive social protection throughout the life course. This includes appropriate cash transfer programmes and social pensions, universal health coverage, and long-term care and support. Comprehensive social protection systems play a fundamental role in addressing poverty and economic and social vulnerabilities and marginalisation, while enabling a life in dignity and wellbeing for all at all ages.

Pensions, including social pensions, stand as the most prevalent form of social protection for older people. In places where they are available, pensions safeguard the capacity of older people to fulfil their basic requirements and enhance their ability to address healthcare needs, especially as their other sources of income diminish gradually over time. We strongly support the establishment and strengthening of sustainable and government-owned social pensions and comprehensive social protection floors with no or limited ties to employment history, which are able to deliver gender-equitable outcomes and that are responsive and adaptive to increasingly frequent shocks and stressors.

The coverage and adequacy of social protection targeting older people remains limited in most LMICs. According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) World Social Protection Report 2020-22, while globally 77.5 per cent of older people are reported to benefit from at least one form of social protection, the coverage in low-income and lower-middle-income countries is more limited (23.2 per cent and 38.6 per cent, respectively), with considerable geographical variation. The lowest levels

of coverage for older people are reported in Sub-Saharan Africa (19.8 per cent) and in the Arab States (24.0 per cent).

The ILO report also shows that, across a small selection of countries, the proportion of the female population above statutory retirement age receiving an old-age pension tends to be consistently lower than the proportion of the male population receiving an old-age pension. Striking examples are Mauritania, where 2.5 per cent of the female population receives a pension, compared to 33.4 per cent of the male population, and Ghana, where the proportions are 7.2 per cent and 21.2 per cent, respectively.

Existing social protection programmes also carry the risk of replicating gendered inequalities if they are not adequately designed and implemented. Older women are less likely to receive a pension and, if they do, their benefits tend to be lower. The multiple and interconnected disadvantages that women and girls experience over the life course tend to have a knock-on effect in their access to social protection at an older age.

HelpAge International and some of its network members are currently undertaking a study to assess the opportunities for strengthening some social protection programmes towards greater gender responsiveness. In addition, in Kenya, for example, HelpAge International and some local partners have been supporting older women in a pilot project to access universal pension.

Removing barriers to decent work for older women and recognising their unpaid work

A study conducted by Age International shows that older women remain economically active, especially in LMICs, engaging in significant amounts of both paid and unpaid work. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 1 in 7 women aged 65 and above were part of the workforce in these countries, although there are geographical differences. In Sub-Saharan Africa this figure rose to 2 in 5 older women. This is reflective of a long-term trend that has witnessed an increase in the proportion of older women engaged in the labour market since 1990, while the trend has declined for older men.

In the poorest contexts, women are disproportionately represented among informal workers when compared to men. In addition to experiencing discrimination based on their gender, older women also experience specific discrimination based on their age, being regarded as less capable, one of the barriers that may affect their working lives.

Recent research on decent work conducted by HelpAge International and some partner organisations in Indonesia also suggests a generally low quality of employment among older workers.

Nevertheless, for older women who do remain economically active, their decision is often driven by economic necessity, as well as the need to remain active, fulfilled and connected, and to avoid dependency. Older women in all their diversity must be supported to continue to do the work that matters to them; this approach aligns with the ILO's decent work principles.

Older women contribute substantially to care and support. According to a study conducted by Age International, before the COVID-19 pandemic, older women globally dedicated an average of 4.3 hours per day to unpaid care and domestic work. The unpaid care that older women do supports the economic empowerment of younger generations of women and girls, but often creates barriers for older women to access their own rights. This unpaid work often goes unrecognised and is invisible, leading older women to be excluded in policies or programmes that aim to support carers and this may mean they do not benefit from the reduction, redistribution, and reward of unpaid care and cannot sustain this work.

Universal health coverage and long-term care and support

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Health Observatory, on average, older women outlive men by five years globally but spend a greater proportion of their lives in ill health or with a disability, in part due to their longer lives. While failures to collect and disaggregate data on older women's health and care needs means a paucity of evidence globally, available data indicates older women may face greater unmet health and long-term care and support needs than men in some contexts, particularly where they face multiple and intersecting inequalities, including higher rates of poverty which has a profound impact on health and wellbeing and access to services. HelpAge's own research highlights these and other barriers faced by older women in accessing care, including, for instance, those related to the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of services, as well as experiences of discrimination, including gendered ageism.

At the same time, women of all ages, including older women, are the main providers of health and care. Women make up 70 per cent of the formal healthcare workforce. Alongside action to address factors that shape women's health and wellbeing across the life course and tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality, investing in comprehensive universal health coverage systems that are age, gender, and disability

responsive and address people's health and care needs across the life course and promote healthy ageing is fundamental to achieving a more gender equal world. This means investing in services that address people's needs across the full continuum of health promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, palliative care, and long-term care and support; promoting access to vaccines, medicines, and assistive products that support healthy ageing; and investing in the people and communities that deliver health and care.

Conclusions

HelpAge International and the co-signatories strongly support the focus of the 68th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68) on tackling gender inequality by addressing poverty and on social protection.

There is a pressing need for a renewed commitment to the Agreed Conclusions of the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW63). Nonetheless, we emphasise the importance of focusing on the perspectives, voices, and needs of women across all age groups, including older women. Acknowledging the agency, rights, and capacities of older women is essential for their participation in social, political, and economic spheres, contributing to healthier societies.

The Agreed Conclusions promote the participation of older women in the design and implementation of normative and political frameworks. An inclusive and participatory approach is necessary to ensure that policy measures can be reflective of and able to address the specific needs and realities of women of all ages and deliver gender-equitable outcomes. The lack of disaggregated data based on sex, age, and disability poses a significant challenge for policymakers. This requires enhanced collaboration among the UN, Member States, private sector, and civil society.

The Agreed Conclusions also endorse policy measures that strengthen social protection, including measures aiming to preserve the income security of older women. Ensuring that these measures are independent of employment trajectories, encompass unpaid and caregiving roles, and can effectively address gender gaps in coverage and benefit levels is of utmost importance.

We support the adoption of gender-responsive strategies in mitigation and adaptation to climate change to support the resilience and adaptive capacities of at-risk communities. Investing in climate resilient infrastructure is one of many ways to reduce gender inequalities and empower women by responding to diverse needs in society. We support

the need for coordinated approaches, financing, and policy coherence at different levels to ensure that social protection, public services and infrastructure policies complement one another.

We strongly support the integration of a gender, age, and disability perspective in the planning and use of public spaces, cities, communities, rural areas, and mobility planning processes. This approach is crucial to fostering inclusivity and empowerment for all individuals. By embracing this perspective, we aim to enhance participation and ensure the enjoyment of full human rights for women of all ages.