

## ***HelpAge International's inputs for the report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons on older persons in armed conflict and peacebuilding***

### ***Introduction***

HelpAge International is an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting the rights of all older people to lead dignified, healthy, and secure lives. It serves as the secretariat of a global network of 199 organisations across 98 countries united in advancing the wellbeing, rights, and inclusion of older people.

### ***Legal and Policy Frameworks***

While the Fourth Geneva Convention and other principles of international humanitarian law apply to older people as to all civilians, older people remain at disproportionate risk of violence during armed conflict. Few international and regional human rights provisions focus specifically on human rights in humanitarian emergencies and conflict situations.

Article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides that governments must take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict. However, this only applies to older people with disabilities and not all older people.

At the regional level, article 29 of the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Rights of Older Persons and Article 14 of the African Protocol guarantee older persons' right to protection in conflict and disaster situations, but these provisions are limited in geographical and substantive scope.

As older people's rights in situations of conflict and disaster have not been specifically addressed within the international human rights framework, a comprehensive international legally binding instrument would secure older people's rights, including those to equality and non-discrimination in humanitarian contexts.

### ***Impact of armed conflict on older people***

#### ***Violence and abuse against older persons in conflicts***

Older people in armed conflict face multiple risks, whether from direct, targeted violence<sup>i</sup>, or the more generalised impact of conflict. Older people who have remained in their homes, shelters, or hospitals in areas of intense fighting face a high risk of being killed or injured, and are likely to have difficulty accessing shelter, as well as essential supplies and services. For example, in the first 19 days of the conflict in Gaza, it was reported that older people made up 8.6% of fatalities<sup>ii</sup> despite only making up approximately 5% of the population in Gaza. By 22 December 2023, reports indicated that 1,049 older people had been killed; the majority of them were killed under the debris of their homes or in shelters following airstrikes, though some were "targeted in killings and field executions"<sup>iii</sup>.

### The barriers older persons face in accessing humanitarian aid

Older people are often unwilling or unable to move from their homes and the long-standing emotional connections to their land can mean that they chose not to move far<sup>ivv</sup>. Limited technological literacy can mean that they often lack access to critical information that is circulated online<sup>vi</sup>. Chronic conditions, multi-morbidity, cognitive impairments, disability and mobility issues can make evacuating away from danger and accessing humanitarian aid difficult. Assistive products may be lost or damaged, limiting independence and the ability to access services. In a 2020 review of needs assessments, 35% of older people said that neglect and isolation, and denial of resources, opportunities or services were risks they faced<sup>vii</sup>. Older people are also more likely to depend on support from caregivers and others<sup>viii</sup>, but in crisis situations, families may be forced to prioritise younger family members<sup>ix</sup>.

Ageism in society is amplified during a humanitarian crisis, reinforcing harmful stereotypes of older people as helpless and undervaluing their contributions<sup>x</sup>. Older people, particularly older women, may be at higher risk of abuse, neglect, or over protection<sup>x</sup> due to pre-existing forms of discrimination, social exclusion and gender-based violence, which may be compounded during conflict. Older people are frequently overlooked in humanitarian responses - 69% of those interviewed by HelpAge did not know how to provide feedback or complaints and 77% had not been consulted by any other humanitarian agency about the support they received<sup>xi</sup>.

An analysis of 27 Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs) and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) from 2021 and 26 interviews with humanitarian actors found that older people are regularly excluded from humanitarian data, despite being recognised as a vulnerable group<sup>xii</sup>. Additionally, there was a lack of incentives and accountability for humanitarian actors to include older people, and comparatively lower numbers meant they were often deprioritised.

### Gender and disability compounding risks for older persons in conflicts

The experiences of older people during times of conflict are diverse, and some older people face disproportionate risks. HelpAge's 2018 research found that older people with disabilities greater difficulties escaping from danger and exercising their right to humanitarian assistance and participation<sup>xiii</sup>. Research in Ukraine also indicated that older women, people over 70, and older people with disabilities were at greater risk of having their rights overlooked during conflict<sup>xiv</sup>. Similarly, recent research found that the risk of exclusion for older people with disabilities is exacerbated by conflict and natural disasters; they are more likely to be overlooked in humanitarian assistance, have limited access to health and care services, and be left behind<sup>xv</sup>.

In HelpAge's 2020 research, it was found that older women were under more strain than older men<sup>xvi</sup>. They accounted for 58% of those living alone, 56% of those caring for others, 56% of those with no access to healthcare, 58% of those with no access to food, and 58% of those with no income.

Violence against women has no age limit. Older women often face violence, abuse and neglect because of their age, gender, or other factors such as

disability or being a widow. These risks are compounded in humanitarian crises; for women of all ages on the move and living in the emergency shelters, there is an increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse<sup>xvii</sup>.

Despite representing a significant proportion of the global female population, only 0.1% of the US\$ 5.7 billion of aid spent on gender equality projects in humanitarian and development settings directly included older women<sup>xviii</sup>.

### *Access to Healthcare Services*

#### Challenges for older persons in accessing medical care and medication in conflict situations

Limited mobility and lack of transportation often prevents older people from accessing health care and essential services. Disrupted supply chains mean that older people often lose access to regular healthcare and essential medications, making it difficult to manage chronic. Fragmented or disorganised healthcare systems also create additional barriers to health and care. Specialised geriatric services are often unavailable in conflict zones, leaving older people without the support they need<sup>xix</sup>. Recent HelpAge research on palliative care in Ukraine reveals that the needs of older people living with serious illness are frequently unmet, leading to significant emotional and existential suffering exacerbated by the conflict<sup>xx</sup>. Compounding these challenges, systemic ageism, ableism and gender discrimination in healthcare responses often result in neglect or underestimation of older people and their complex needs.

#### Instances of discrimination in medical triage or hospital treatment

In conflict settings, older people may be deprioritised in medical care decisions, deemed as "less deserving" of life-saving treatments based on assumptions about their life expectancy or quality of life. Health issues commonly affecting older adults, such as heart disease or cancer, may be dismissed or attributed solely to ageing, rather than being treated as distinct medical conditions that require active intervention. In resource-limited settings, older people frequently face delayed access to treatments, medications, or even basic care. Medical professionals may have unconscious biases about older adults, perceiving them as less capable of benefiting from treatment or assuming that they have lower survival rates. This can lead to undertreatment or insufficient care.

#### How can healthcare services better serve older persons in war-affected areas?

Healthcare services must be designed to be accessible and responsive to the specific needs of older people<sup>xxi</sup>. They must be included in emergency health response plans, with specific strategies to ensure they are not overlooked in triage systems or relief distribution. Community health teams and home-based care services should be established to deliver essential healthcare to those who may be unable to access traditional healthcare settings due to mobility issues, trauma, or the destruction of healthcare facilities. Integrating palliative care for older adults with chronic conditions or end-stage diseases is essential to managing pain, reducing suffering, and improving quality of life. Finally, healthcare professionals must be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to provide compassionate, competent care to older people.

### The impacts of conflicts on the long-term well-being of older persons

The impact of conflicts on older people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing can be severe and compounded by the often-repeated nature of the conflict, loss of family members, disruption and breakdown of normal family and community support structures, multiple displacements, and an endless search for safety. HelpAge found that the impact of crises, coupled with the lack of available support, was doing serious damage to older people's mental health and wellbeing. Only 19 % of older people interviewed said they felt able to cope independently and without support, dropping to 13 % for those over 80. More than a quarter (27%) said that they could not cope at all, with older women (30%) reporting more difficulty than men (23%)<sup>xxii</sup>.

Even prior to the 2023 escalation of conflict in Gaza, 52% of older people felt depressed all or most of the time, and 78% experienced anxiety<sup>xxiii</sup>. While older people develop resilience, coping skills and capacities over the course of repeated conflicts, in Gaza, they are now being pushed to their limit. In Ukraine, the war there has led to a significant increase in isolation and loneliness among older people, with 57% of all older people and 71 % of displaced older people reporting feelings of loneliness. War-related stress and low mood have diminished older people's interest in social activities<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Older people also show their resilience by relying on various coping strategies<sup>xxv</sup>. However, their mental health and psychosocial needs are frequently ignored in humanitarian responses. Mental health services and social support, including peer support groups and counselling, should play a critical role in addressing the psychological impact of conflict.

### *Contributions of older persons before, during, and after conflicts*

Despite the challenges they face, older people play vital roles as caregivers, community leaders, advocates, sources of guidance and support, protectors, and guardians of cultural heritage, to name a few. HelpAge research found that 63% were caring for at least one child, and 44% were caring for another older person. In some camps, older people had set up their own associations to monitor and support their peers and raise issues with camp authorities and humanitarian aid providers<sup>xxvi</sup>. Likewise, in northwest Syria, older people formed 'senior committees' to address challenges like displacement and neglect. In addition, there was a growing caregiving role among older men, alongside the continued significant role of older women in caregiving<sup>xxvii</sup>. In Ukraine, older social care workers support older people across the country, visiting them regularly to provide psychosocial support and information on available assistance<sup>xxviii</sup>.

### *Evacuation of older people*

#### Examples of older persons being left behind during evacuations

In 2024, with the security situation in Eastern Ukraine deteriorating, older people were increasingly at risk and escalating hostilities forced mass evacuations. The key challenges faced by older evacuees included limited awareness of evacuation services, limited access to information on evacuation, financial difficulties in paying for evacuation (despite availability of free

services), insufficient specialised vehicles to support older people evacuating, and inaccessible environments in new locations.<sup>xxix</sup>

### Best practices ensuring older persons' safety during evacuations

Older people should be meaningfully included in the creation of any evacuation plans, with outreach support for those in hard-to-reach locations or most at risk. They should be prioritised when relocating to safer areas, ensuring their rights are upheld through dignified reception at emergency shelters and relief points. Those facing additional risks must receive targeted support<sup>xxx</sup>. If required to relocate, it is critical that older people with disabilities have access to assistive products and assistance. Sensory and cognitive impairments can prevent older people from accessing or understanding critical information, so communication must be via multiple mediums and in a variety of accessible formats. Temporary accommodation planning should consider the requirements of older people to live in a safe and dignified manner. Their rights and needs should also be considered in the provision of essential support services<sup>xxxi</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, [Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed In Ukraine \(1 April – 25 June 2022\)](#), 2022

<sup>ii</sup> Al Jazeera, [Know their names](#), 1 November 2023

<sup>iii</sup> Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, [Shocking testimonies reveal the execution of dozens of elderly people by Israeli army in the Gaza Strip](#), 22 December 2023

<sup>iv</sup> Amnesty International, ["I used to have a home": older people's experience of war, displacement, and access to housing in Ukraine](#), 2022

<sup>v</sup> UN Women, [Gender Alert: The Gendered Impact of the Crisis in Gaza](#), January 2024

<sup>vi</sup> HelpAge International, [I've lost the life I knew: Older people's experiences of the Ukraine war and their inclusion in the humanitarian response](#), 2023

<sup>vii</sup> HelpAge International, [If not now, when? Keeping promises to older people affected by humanitarian crises](#), 2020

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<sup>x</sup> Van Boetzelaer et al, [Involving older people in the preparedness, response, and recovery phases in humanitarian emergencies: a theoretical framework on ageism, epistemic injustice, and participation](#), 2024

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