

Unequal treatment

HelpAge

International

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

Country profile: Argentina



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.

Argentina 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 Argentina



8 women
2 men



1 from a rural area
9 from urban areas



5 aged 50–59
3 aged 60–69
2 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 the introduction of general population lockdowns across the country, the City of Buenos Aires introduced, then cancelled, special permits for people over 70 to leave their homes in Buenos Aires.¹

The majority of the older people interviewed talked about the negative impact of being isolated under lockdown, missing contact with family and friends, being unable to take part in social activities or having no face-to-face contact with their work colleagues.

“It has been a tremendously long quarantine. We’re all very tired. We older people have suffered a lot. What has not been taken into account is the psychological damage this pandemic has caused and the problems we’re going to have in the future.”
64-year-old woman living with her spouse in a rural area

Some said they had mixed feelings about being told to stay at home. They knew this was supposed to protect them but also that their rights were being denied.

“I believe one of the most important rights that any person has is to be able to move freely and walk through the streets without any inconvenience. I think it is even one of the basic rights that are in the constitution. From that point of view, we feel that we’ve been locked up, like in a jail. We understand that a large part of it has to do with taking care of ourselves, and one tries to comply. Still, we feel that somehow our rights have been a little violated.”

58-year-old man, administrator living with his spouse and children in an urban area

Others spoke about the failure of the government to ensure their equal enjoyment of rights during the pandemic, and how their experience depended on their personal contacts.

“We have to order food from a supermarket through the computer, something that we did not do [before]. Nobody cared to know if we could or could not. We were lucky that our family helped us. If we had not had a family, we would be sitting idle. With payment for services, it was the same. What if we hadn’t been able to count on our family?”

58-year-old man, administrator living with his spouse and children in an urban area

However, some participants had found positives in being able to spend more time at home. For one, it was an opportunity to reflect on what life, family, work and society meant to them. Another felt that working from home was a new right she had not had before.

“It seems to me that I’ve gained some rights. For example, I’m doing telework, which I didn’t do before, when I had to go to my workplace.”

58-year-old woman, working for a newspaper and living 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.

Some participants said they had experienced delays and interruptions in their access to health services.

“Both my wife and I have been given appointments with more than a month to wait. When we’ve called the clinics, we’ve found that the appointments have been put much further back, and that some doctors have stopped attending or have moved to another place.”

58-year-old man, administrator living with his spouse and children in an urban area

Some said they had not tried to access healthcare because they were afraid of becoming infected with the virus.

“I have heart problems. My last check-up was in January. The specialist, who put in the pacemaker, saw me in December. I didn’t have any tests until June as I was afraid of going to the clinic.”

72-year-old woman, retired podiatrist living in an urban area with her spouse

Some had found it difficult to access services, such as renewing driving licences or banking services, that were only available online during lockdown.

“Home banking required me to download an application, which I did. I followed all the steps, but it didn’t recognise my password and I was never able to log in. I complained online, I went personally, called by phone, sent emails. I have not had any success.”

58-year-old woman, working for a newspaper and living in an urban area

A number of participants had found interruptions to internet connections or utility supplies a barrier to accessing services.

“We’ve had difficulties at home with the internet. We’ve been cut off many times and practically unable to communicate. We’ve had some problems with the electricity service [being] cut off. It’s even more drastic if you have to be locked up in the house and cannot even turn on the light.”

58-year-old man, administrator living with his spouse and children in an urban area

Rising cost of bills was another problem.

“The gas bill was very high but it’s also because we’ve been locked up for so long, so more gas has been used.”

64-year-old woman living with her spouse in a rural area

However, others said they had family members who could help them, or they were able to adapt, so they did not experience the same barriers to accessing services.

“Despite the fact that I come from a generation that is not used to computer science, it was not difficult to adapt.”

73-year-old man, retired doctor living with his spouse and son 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 of the older people interviewed said they or other older people were aware of their rights, including their rights to health, social security, work, housing and information.

“I believe that older people know about their rights. Nowadays, having everything online has served to universalise knowledge of our rights.”

56-year-old woman, journalist living with her spouse and children in an urban area

Others felt that older people did not know about their rights.

“I think we are not prepared to defend ourselves. Many people do not know what action to take.”

Woman in her sixties living with her spouse in an urban area

Some felt that the government was aware of their rights. One person felt that the government was aware but not doing enough.

“My wife and I feel that there has not been an attempt with the same intensity to find a way for people who, like us, have been locked up for a long time, and want to have a chance to go out or see their grandchildren. We have seen a lot of attention to the other: stay inside, don't go out. So, one feels that one is having a worse time than a young person who can do any of these activities or, if they were to catch the virus, would not be as exposed as we are.”

58-year-old man, administrator living with his spouse and children in an urban area

Others felt that the government was not aware of their rights. If it was, it would provide better services and monitor them more effectively. Older people would not have to make so many complaints about inadequate service provision. One participant felt that the government acted out of fear and ignorance.

“I think that, at the beginning, they acted from fear and ignorance, and later, that inertia was left there.”

59-year-old woman, care worker living alone in an urban area

Another had lost trust in the government.

“What I'm not very satisfied with is the part played by the government. They have deceived us, or not known how to express themselves towards the people. I was at home. I didn't have much contact with anybody. They tell you ‘there are so many people [infected]’. These are lies. They don't give you very specific information. Maybe if we were well informed, that would mortify them.”

72-year-old woman, retired podiatrist living in an urban area with her spouse

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.

One participant felt that it was important for older people to make their own decisions and be consulted in any future pandemic.

“The older population is often treated in a paternalistic way. This is one of the worst things that can be done to this population. No one knows more than yourself about the needs and difficulties you face every day. So, if you can be the voice, and there is no one else speaking for you, at least consensual policies can be made. I'm not saying that only older adults should have opinions or establish those policies, because there will be specialists for each area, but I do believe that older people's voices have to be taken into account.”

56-year-old woman, journalist living with her spouse and children in an urban area

Another felt that such severe restrictions on their right to freedom of movement should not be imposed.

“Seven months of confinement is inadmissible, seven months of families being unable to come together. We're now beginning to see what this is leaving us with. [The country] is full of people with psychological problems, depression, financial problems and illness. Things are beginning to manifest themselves because people have been locked up, feeling that every day is the same and feeling alone and with little outside help.”

58-year-old man, administrator living with his spouse and children in an urban area

The right to a family life and to make social connections in care homes was also important.

“I'm very concerned about people in nursing homes. I know of people who have been isolated from their families. A camera is not the same as a presence. They are two totally different situations.”

73-year-old man, retired doctor living with his spouse and son in an urban area

A number of participants said that guaranteeing rights in law was necessary to protect those rights and enable people to claim them.

“I think [a law guaranteeing our rights] would be very significant. It would bring us peace of mind. It would enable us to claim [our rights] and our complaints would no longer fall on deaf ears.”

73-year-old man, retired doctor living with his spouse and son in an urban area

However, some said that legal guarantees alone were not enough. Political will was also necessary.

“To the extent that the state has the political will to respect people’s rights, their rights will be respected. If not, we will have to petition the authorities to respect our rights.”

63-year-old woman, retired lawyer living alone in an urban area

Endnotes

1. www.perfil.com/noticias/sociedad/coronavirus-para-circular-caba-mayores-70-anos-necesitan-permiso.phtml (13 November 2020) and www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/20/buenos-aires-backs-off-plan-requiring-elderly-to-carry-permits/ (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 two men over the age of 50. Due to COVID-19 public health restrictions, individual interviews were done by phone and WhatsApp 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 ten older people interviewed and are not intended to be representative of the population of older people as a whole.

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