

# Unequal treatment

HelpAge

International

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

## Country profile: Rwanda



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.

Rwanda 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](http://www.helpage.org/Unequal_Treatment_report)

### Details of participants in Rwanda



5 women  
5 men



4 from rural areas  
6 from urban areas



1 aged 50–59  
9 aged 60–69



Total number of participants

## 1. Responses discriminating on the basis of age

The government introduced a national lockdown. There were no specific restrictions for older people.<sup>1</sup>

Some participants said they had seen a reduction in their income because of the impact of public health measure on the economy. Some said they had been impacted when other people had lost their jobs and were no longer able to provide services or care and support to them.

*“The fall in the economy has made the people who were helping us lose their jobs.”*

**68-year-old woman, retired farmer living with her children in a rural area**

Some said they had felt more isolated and lonely under quarantine measures. However, one person said that she had enjoyed being able to stay at home more.

“I loved quarantine, since I got time to relax at home, but I was worried about the pandemic since it affects older people more, spreads fast and kills fast too.”

**69-year-old woman, retired company worker living with her children 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 the quality of services had declined during the pandemic. This was in part due to service providers losing their jobs or having to work from home, and being unable to deliver services to them.

“Since many of the service providers were working from home, only a few were available to deal with people. Some people lost their jobs, hence the services they provided were unavailable.”

**66-year-old woman, retired government worker living with her spouse in an urban area**

Others said service providers did not want to deal with older people as they were afraid of becoming infected by the virus.

“They only cater for the youth. There are few workers and they don’t interact with many people due to the fear of corona. A lot stopped. They only like working with younger people, neglecting older people.”

**60-year-old man, retired hotel worker living with his spouse in an urban area**

Some talked about disruption to transport and health services.

“I went to the hospital and was received but I did not get what I had gone for. They couldn’t help me since I have diabetes.”

**68-year-old woman, retired farmer living with her children in a rural area**

Others said older people had been excluded from assistance programmes and services because of their age or disability.

“I didn’t get any help for poor people. They started with those who’d lost their jobs, but we didn’t get anything. We were last on their list. Nothing’s changed. We have a problem of care in hospitals and other institutions. They don’t cater for the old and the disabled.”

**65-year-old man with disabilities, retired businessman living with his spouse in a rural area**

For others, being unable to access services online was a major barrier.

“Service providers did not want to help us avoid getting coronavirus. They were telling us to do everything online. We have no clue how to do that.”

**63-year-old woman, retired government worker living with her children in an urban area**

The majority said they knew how to make a complaint about services that were not adequate but most felt that this would make little difference.

“I know where [to make a complaint] but it doesn’t help me at all because they don’t take care of us older people.”

**67-year-old man, retired private sector worker living with his spouse in a rural 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.

Participants said that if they knew what their rights were, it would change their lives.

“It would help us know what we didn’t get, yet we deserved.”

**68-year-old woman, retired farmer living with her children in a rural area**

None of the respondents thought the government was aware of their rights.

“The local leaders and service providers do not know about older people’s rights. They cater for children, the youth, women and others, but older people are left behind.”

**65-year-old man with disabilities, retired businessman living with his spouse in a rural area**

Some said that if the government was aware of their rights, this would improve the quality of services.

**“If local leaders and service providers knew our rights, they should provide good services.”**

**67-year-old man, retired private sector worker living with his spouse in a rural area**

Government knowledge of older people’s rights would also change attitudes towards older people.

**“Governments would change their conception of how to deal with older people.”**

**66-year-old woman, retired government worker 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 creating more awareness in society about older people and their lives was important. They said older people themselves needed more information.

**“There is need for mass awareness on protection, especially among older people since they are more affected. Authorities at all levels should interact with citizens, paying special attention to older people since they get the least information.”**

**68-year-old woman, retired farmer living with her children in an urban area**

Some wanted to see more local support groups for older people. They wanted older people to better organise themselves and work with others to fight the virus.

**“Older people should work together with the rest [of society] to fight this virus.”**

**54-year-old man, farmer living with his spouse in a rural area**

Others wanted better health services, including a dedicated policy for older people in any future pandemics.

**“There should be a special policy listing how to care for older people during a pandemic. Provision of services should be revisited, since many opt not even to try to get them since they find it useless.”**

**66-year-old woman, retired government worker living with her spouse in an urban area**

Some said older people should be consulted and included in discussions with the government and NGOs on how to address the barriers they faced.

**“Older people should be given the opportunity to talk, and bring to light their ideas and views.”**

**65-year-old man with disabilities, retired businessman living with his spouse in a rural area**

The majority recognised the importance of having their rights guaranteed.

**“The lack of policy results in the rights of older people being ignored.”**

**66-year-old woman, retired government worker living with her spouse in an urban area**

A number of participants said guaranteeing their rights within the law would directly improve their lives.

**“It would make me happy, since I would not be denied my rights, and I could get a job.”**

**60-year-old man, retired hotel worker living with his spouse in an urban area**

Others said they would no longer have to complain all the time when services were inadequate.

**“It seems like older people are begging for their rights when they should be easily provided.”**

**65-year-old man with disabilities, retired businessman living with his spouse in a rural area**

Some said having their rights enshrined within the law would make them feel valued and improve their sense of self-worth and dignity.

**“It would feel good to have equal rights with the rest of the people.”**

**67-year-old man, retired private sector worker living with his spouse in a rural area**

## Endnotes

1. Announcement on enhanced COVID-19 prevention measures, [www.rbc.gov.rw/fileadmin/user\\_upload/guide/announcement%20on%20enhanced%20COVID-19%20prevention%20measures.pdf](http://www.rbc.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/guide/announcement%20on%20enhanced%20COVID-19%20prevention%20measures.pdf) (8 December 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 five women and five 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.

## Acknowledgements

HelpAge International would like to thank all the older people who were interviewed for this consultation. We would like to thank NSINDAGIZA who carried out the consultation.

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Registered charity no. 288180



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