

Unequal treatment

HelpAge

International

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

Country profile: Spain



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.

Spain 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 Spain



7 women
3 men



1 from a rural area
8 from urban areas
1 from other area



1 aged 50–59
4 aged 60–69
3 aged 70–79
2 aged 80–89



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 national lockdown, the government introduced specific restrictions for older people:

- People over 70 allowed outside to exercise for a shorter time than other age groups¹
- Restrictions on visitors to care homes.²

Some of the older people interviewed said part of their lives had continued as before. Having a good relationship with their doctor had ensured that one couple had had no disruptions to their treatment. One woman had continued to work, and found that her work had taken on more importance for her.

“I’ve been working all the time. Something has changed on a personal level because my work has started to have some meaning. I work in the intensive care unit. Our contribution as cleaning staff, being there all the time, has been very important.”

60-year-old woman living with her children in an urban area

However, for others, social isolation and the loss of contact with family and friends had had a negative impact.

“In addition to family contact, contact with friends and colleagues has also decreased. Other activities [have stopped]. I belong to a reading club. I also go to the gym. All this has been lost. Even with friends, the contact has been reduced to smaller groups, and we do not see each other as often as before.”

68-year-old woman living with her spouse in an urban area

Others said they were afraid to go out, or others feared for them, keeping them isolated.

“I know of an older woman who lives with her daughter. She has not left the house. She’s in good health but her daughter is so afraid that her mother will catch the virus that she will not let her go out. In the end, she’s going to die of sadness.”

73-year-old woman 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.

Participants who had used services said there had been a decline in quality, particularly in healthcare services.

“I was hearing very poorly and it was very difficult to get a visit. It took a long time. The quality of services has changed. They are insufficient. There should be more services for older people and they should be more accessible.”

76-year-old woman living alone in an urban area

Others had experienced delays in getting medical appointments.

“There have been changes in dates for appointments but it is understandable, given the situation. During the lockdown, appointments have been postponed and consultations have been relocated. Everything has suffered a delay.”

59-year-old woman living with her son and husband in a rural area

Some said the pandemic had exposed the inadequacy and inappropriateness of services.

“This pandemic shows that the system we have no longer works. We have to reinvent it, perhaps as something much more personalised.”

68-year-old man living with his spouse in an urban area

“We’re not all the same and we do not all need the same care. I’m not saying that you have to do something specific for everyone because this would be impossible. We need studies about how people live. An older person in an urban area is not the same as in a rural area. There have been studies but I don’t see much result from them.”

73-year-old woman living with her spouse in an urban area

As well as healthcare services, financial services had also been affected.

“In my area, due to the pandemic, three bank branches have closed. People have to do everything through the ATM. It’s true that people are good and often help, but we cannot go there. There’s a lot of mistrust. How can this be solved? There are people who cannot exercise their rights.”

73-year-old woman 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 older people interviewed said they had a strong sense of their rights.

“I have spoken with [former] colleagues working in residential care. Perhaps there has been some age discrimination. I don’t think it’s a matter for criticism because having to make a decision between saving the life of a young person or an older person is very difficult. I think that, in the chaos that has occurred with the pandemic and the lockdown, it shouldn’t be a case of choosing between an older person and a younger person. We all have the same rights and there should be no criteria in terms of age, gender, etc.”

59-year-old woman living with her son and husband in a rural area

Some said the government was aware of their rights but was not doing enough to protect them.

“I think the authorities know what our rights are but they have to do a little bit better. For this reason, I believe that the authorities should have more direct communication with us, the older people.”

76-year-old woman living alone in an urban area

One man said he knew he had the same rights as everyone else but did not know what this meant for him as an older person. One woman felt that a key barrier to older people’s enjoyment of their rights was that older people themselves held stereotypes about ageing. Others said it was society more broadly that did not understand older people’s rights.

“I don’t think society knows what the rights of older people are. I have not specifically noticed discrimination towards older people, but one can feel it from time to time.”

86-year-old woman living alone 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.

One participant said they wanted an end to discrimination in responses to the pandemic.

“I think we must act according to the rights of all of us. If it’s necessary to isolate, there shouldn’t be any discrimination. We’re all equal at the end of the day.”

63-year-old man spending time in both a rural and urban area

Some wanted to see better coordination by the authorities and collaboration among politicians.

“I think that, even now, everything is still chaotic and the authorities are a bit lost. In a nutshell, I think it’s all about a lack of coordination. They never agree. There’s been a lack of union between the parties that have to make decisions.”

59-year-old woman living with her son and husband in a rural area

A number felt that health and social services needed to be improved. Improvements should include more and better care and support services.

“I think we have to provide more public services and they should all work better. I don’t know if this can be done or if it’s an illusion. [We should have] better healthcare and social services, and another type of home care. This would give us hope. We could live the time we have left in better conditions.”

76-year-old woman living alone in an urban area

“After the lockdown was over, I met some residents [of a care home] who seemed to have lived four to five years during these three and a half months, from their weight and their appearance. When I saw them for the first time after three and a half months, I was sorry.”

89-year-old woman living in a care home

One participant was concerned that, despite the deaths of older people in care homes, little attention was being paid to how improve the care system.

“Nobody is questioning that this outdated care model should disappear or be changed from top to bottom. This topic only seems to be being discussed very lightly at the moment. We need an open debate about it. For example, there is much talk about public-private management. I’m not saying it’s good or bad, but the results are not the most beneficial. You see that many of the care homes [where I live] depend on large companies that are doing business from this. There’s very little press coverage about this, and I have not heard the topic raised in the Congress or even in the Assembly.”

68-year-old woman living with her spouse in an urban area

The need for hope also came through in some participants’ suggestions.

“Responses should be a little more hopeful for everyone and especially for older people. Older people have already lived a good deal of their lifetime but we still have quite a lot of life ahead of us and we don’t know how it will be. I believe a little bit of hope for older people and for the whole world is needed.”

73-year-old woman living with her spouse in an urban area

Some participants said that guaranteeing rights within the law would make a positive difference to their lives.

“I think if there was any specific legislation that guaranteed the rights of older people, this could improve the quality of their life, especially because it would help to raise awareness. This is absolutely necessary. If something is not talked about, if there is no knowledge of it, little will change.”

68-year-old women living with her spouse in an urban area

Some said that greater regulation would make a difference.

“The truth is that I don’t know if there are any specific rights of older people. I don’t think they exist, because when this pandemic arrived, we saw what happened. I think that through regulation, something can be changed in society.”

89-year-old woman living in a care home

However, others said that the law was not always the answer.

“I don’t think you have to have a law for everything. It’s about education. Those things have to be learnt at home. You have to have respect for older people. It’s about mutual respect. As an older person, I also have to respect the young man next to me, because he’s young and he deserves it, and he has to respect me because I’m older and I deserve it.”

77-year-old man living with his spouse in an urban area

Some said that laws could increase people’s understanding of rights, and of what should and should not happen.

“I think that a law would be important. More awareness could be raised. For example, if they tell you that they can’t save your father’s life because they’re saving the life of a young person, I don’t know to what extent this is allowed. Perhaps a law that protects older people would be appropriate.”

59-year-old woman living with her son and husband in a rural area

Endnotes

1. www.rtve.es/noticias/20200501/asi-podremos-salir-calle-horarios-edades-limitaciones/2013141.shtml (13 November 2020)

2. www.rtve.es/noticias/20200501/asi-podremos-salir-calle-horarios-edades-limitaciones/2013141.shtml (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 seven women and three 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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