



**Equality for women of all ages**

## Women over the age of 50 account for 22 per cent of the world’s female population.

Yet they are almost entirely invisible within debates on gender equality in both the developed and the developing world. Development debates and programmes offer little to post-menopausal women. Older women are not being counted, despite the 1995 Beijing Declaration providing a clear mandate for their inclusion.

Data sets both confirm and reinforce the exclusion of older women. For example, DHS data on Gender-Based Violence stops collecting data on women at the age of 49. This is despite documented evidence that older women may be subject to violence, neglect and other forms of abuse, some specific to their age, and may be deprived of basic goods and services.

Older women risk suffering the final indignity of being excluded from the movement to bring about the equality that many have been denied throughout their lives. Global action is long overdue to address this injustice.

### Equality for women of all ages

HelpAge International welcomes the strong focus on women and girls as a global development priority. But we believe older women fall within an unwitting but serious blind spot. In order to achieve substantive equality for all women, we call for increased visibility of older women in national and global data sets, and their inclusion in development planning and programmes. We also call for:

- Commitment to and investment in collection, analysis and publication of data on women beyond reproductive age.
- Building the evidence base around the specific nature and prevalence of violence, discrimination and other rights’ abuses that millions of women currently experience in later life.
- Age-inclusive development and humanitarian planning, policies and programmes, supporting and promoting older women’s health, economic, social and political empowerment and reducing elder abuse.

### Gender inequality lasts a lifetime

The accumulation of gender-based discrimination over a lifetime, combined with discrimination based on old age can have a devastating effect on older women’s lives in multiple ways.

#### Women live longer but live more years in ill-health than men

Multiple pregnancies and poor support in childbirth compounded with disadvantage and inequalities in early life such as lack of access to health care, adequate nutrition, schooling and lower income levels, contribute to poor health outcomes for many women in low- and middle-income countries. As many more women are living decades beyond the menopause, there is an increased risk of hormone-related conditions such as osteoporosis and associated fracture, while other lifestyle factors increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. Reproductive health problems, including incontinence and other conditions specifically associated with FGM, continue into older age.

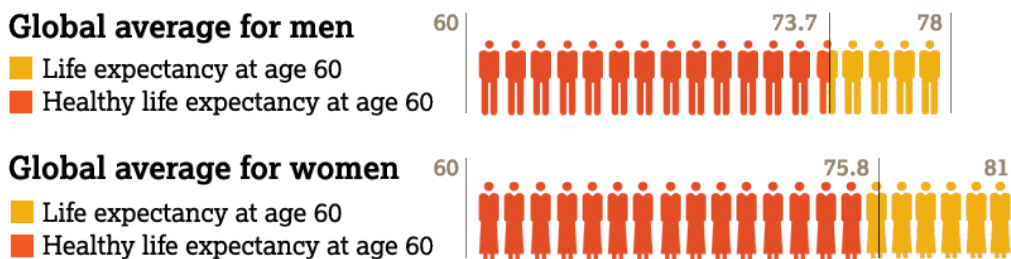


Figure 1: Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy at 60 for men and women

Source: Calculation based on Global Burden of Disease Study 2010, The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation

## **Older women can pay a heavy financial price for the accumulated impact of discrimination that they are subjected to throughout their life course**

Throughout every stage of life, women represent an essential workforce of caregivers and informal sector workers who contribute a vast yet unacknowledged amount to their communities, families and economies. Women are often actually penalised for this role in their social status – a phenomenon referred to as the ‘care penalty’<sup>1</sup>. The impact of this is accumulated throughout the life course and compounded in older age.

Those women who do work outside the home are likely to earn less than men and this gap widens with age. The fact that women often have reduced access to paid work, lower wages and are more likely to work in the informal sector means they have less opportunity to gain an entitlement through contributory pension schemes<sup>2</sup>. Large gender gaps are evident in pension benefits derived from contributory schemes with the largest gaps for women with children<sup>3</sup>.

Women also have less access to land and other assets than men. In India, 60 per cent of women have no valuable assets to their name, compared to 30 per cent of men<sup>4</sup>.

## **Early marriage increases the likelihood and average duration of widowhood for women**

Widowhood can pose a major transitional change for many older women and bring specific material and protection threats. Discriminatory laws, policies and attitudes towards women when they become widows can seriously disadvantage women’s access to material, financial and natural resources in old age in many countries and communities.

The likelihood a woman will experience widowhood is amplified by social norms which dictate marriage at an early age for women in many places, and that the partners of younger women are often significantly older than the women themselves. Global population data sets show women clearly outnumber men in every age category after 49.

## **Older women experience abuse and violence in old age, including sexual abuse**

Violence against older women remains invisible and is a violation of their rights. In Central Asia older women report very high levels of shame in being subjected to violence by their children – typically characterised by physical and financial abuse. Older women can also experience rape in conflict settings<sup>5</sup>. Focus groups conducted by HelpAge International have consistently revealed painful and private patterns of abuse experienced<sup>6</sup> and revealed high levels of mental, financial and physical abuse in a range of settings.

The data systems that record sexual and physical violence against women are most often limited to the age range of 15-49, perpetuating a long discredited notion that sexual violence is perpetrated only on women of childbearing age.

Very little data is collected on post-menopausal women’s experience of financial and emotional violence or neglect. This critical information gap conceals patterns of violence against post-menopausal women, resulting in their subsequent exclusion from prevention and rehabilitation policies and programmes.

## International agreements to shape action on older women's rights

Twenty years ago the 1995 Beijing Declaration recognised age discrimination as one of the factors contributing to the barriers to women's empowerment and advancement. The challenges that older women face were referenced in eight places in the declaration as follows: health concerns, reproductive and sexual health issues, laws against gender discrimination in the workplace, policies and programmes on HIV/AIDS as well as information, programmes and services to assist women to understand and adapt to the changes associated with ageing.

In December 2010 the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reaffirmed the need to address the concerns and rights of older women with the introduction of General Recommendation 27 on older women and protection of their human rights.

But despite this, progress is slow. Substantive equality for older women is far from being a reality. Specific examples of this neglect are:

- Analysis of 131 Member States' national implementation reports for the Beijing Declaration twenty year review, revealed that only 21 reports (16 per cent) made reference to older women or ageing.<sup>7</sup>
- Older women were wholly missing from the debate about the achievements of MDGs for women and girls.
- Discussion on gender equality for the post-2015 framework has largely excluded older women and the current proposal excludes measurement of violence against women after the age of 49 in the indicators framework.

1. UN Women *Transforming economies, realizing rights*, 2015.

2. Kidd S, 'Equal pensions, equal rights: achieving universal pension coverage for older women and men in developing countries', *Gender & Development* 17(3), 2009, pp.377-388.

3. UN Women *Transforming economies, realizing rights*, 2015.

4. Holzmann R et al., *Closing the Coverage Gap: The role of Retirement Plans and Other Income Transfers*, Washington, The World Bank, 2009.

5. *Now, the world is without me: An investigation of sexual violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*, Report by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative with support from Oxfam, April 2010.

6. *Focus group discussions conducted by HelpAge International*, 2009, unpublished.

7. *Joint NGO statement to 59th Commission on the Status of Women, Older Women and Beijing: 20 years on*, March 2015.

HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure and healthy lives.

The HelpAge International network is active in over 65 countries. This

briefing outlines how the debate on gender equality currently excludes older women and outlines the key issues that older women face. It is based on our experience, the experiences of our partners and affiliates and on secondary data, which can be provided upon request.

**HelpAge International**

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