

Unequal treatment

HelpAge

International

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

Country profile: Pakistan



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.

Pakistan 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 Pakistan



3 women
5 men



4 from rural areas
4 from urban areas



1 aged 50–59
6 aged 60–69
1 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 a national lockdown, the government introduced a specific restriction for older people, not allowing them to go to the mosque during Ramadan.¹

A number of the older people interviewed said the pandemic had made them more aware of their health and the need to take precautionary measures.

“We’ve realised that we need to take care of our health.”

60-year-old woman, government worker living with her children in a rural area

Some said they had experienced a deterioration in their health, loss of income and an increase in anxiety.

“There’s no business. My source of income has been affected. I’m feeling stressed and irritated by the uncertain situation.”

67-year-old man, estate agent living with his children in an urban area

For some, isolation had had a negative impact on their mental health.

“Due to the pandemic, older people faced several issues, especially isolation as they were stopped from going outside. This has impacted their psychosocial health. The government should focus on this, and develop policies accordingly.”

60-year-old woman, government worker living with her children in a rural area

Others had not been able to access goods and services or to travel.

“Due to lockdown and no transportation, we were not able to travel. We heard that police was not allowing this. We could not move from one place to another. There was a strange fear.”

62-year-old woman, housewife living with her children in a rural area

Some felt that responses to the pandemic needed to be fairer.

“Although government has introduced stipend of 12,000 rupees [US\$75] for labourers and deserving people, there was a condition that a person with a passport or house would not be given the stipend. In my opinion, jobless persons also deserve it.”

62-year-old woman, dental 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.

For some participants, services had improved.

“I’ve visited government hospitals during this pandemic and noticed a difference in the services. There was a separate counter for older persons. The rehabilitation centre offered their services free for older persons. Consultation was also free. Arrangements were made, keeping in mind the [requirement for] social distancing.”

62-year-old woman, dental worker living with her children in an urban area

For others, the quality of services was low or had declined.

“We got some rations from a distribution point for affected needy people, but the distribution process was very poor and the quality of food was not good.”

62-year-old woman, housewife living with her children in a rural area

“Because I’m an ex-government employee, we receive an increase in pension every year [but it] was not increased in this year’s budget. It was very disappointing for us, as cutting down on pensions or social security is not a solution to curb the effects of a pandemic or other disaster. The government should devise better policies and systems.”

70-year-old man, retired government worker living with his children in an urban area

Some said the closure of the transport system had prevented those reliant on public transport from accessing services.

“I have my own transportation to get to hospital, go shopping etc, but people who do not have their own transportation suffered a lot in the absence of public transport during the lockdown.”

67-year-old man, estate agent living with his children in an urban area

One felt that access to services was affected by who you knew.

“I’m a heart patient myself. I was unable to find a doctor as most of the clinics were closed. Only telephonic communication was available and that, too, was based on social contacts.”

70-year-old man, retired government worker living with his children 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 participants understood their rights as having their basic needs met during the pandemic.

“Our basic right during the pandemic was to humanitarian assistance because everything was closed and nobody had access to basic things.”

62-year-old man living with his children in an urban area

Some said the authorities were aware of their rights. Others said they were not.

“I know about basic rights, but I’m not sure if the authorities are well aware.”

60-year-old woman living in a rural area with her children

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.

Some participants said they wanted to see better services for older people.

“I think the health sector needs a lot of improvement and the services should be free of cost for senior citizens.”

62-year-old woman, dental worker living with her children in an urban area

“In times like these, older persons need psychotherapy. I believe that providing psychotherapy could relieve their stress. Facilities should be developed, in case of pandemics or other disasters. Every person should have access to shelter, medication and care.”

70-year-old man, retired government worker living with his children in an urban area

Some said everyone’s human rights were guaranteed in the law, but laws protecting the rights of older people had not yet been put into practice.

“Yes, I know our rights are guaranteed in law but these have not been given to us yet. Rights are present in the constitution of Pakistan as every citizen has a right.”

60-year-old woman, government worker living with her children in a rural area

Others wanted to see the law implemented.

“Implementation of the law is a basic thing that needs to be changed. If the law was implemented, everyone would feel secure. The tragedy of our country is that the people who make the laws do not act upon them. That’s why people are suffering.”

67-year-old man, estate agent living with his children in an urban area

Some said that if older people’s rights were respected, attitudes towards older people would improve.

“I’m not sure whether our rights are guaranteed in law. If older people are guaranteed their rights, it will surely change the attitudes and behaviour of society and authorities towards them. In our country, older people who do not get a pension depend on their children to survive.”

62-year-old woman, dental worker living with her children in an urban area

One participant said that older people could claim their rights if they were guaranteed in law.

“We’re confident if our rights exist in the law we can claim them through the court.”

60-year-old woman living in a rural area with her children

Endnotes

1. www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/21/pakistan-records-highest-number-of-coronavirus-deaths-in-a-day (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 three 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 eight older people interviewed and are not intended to be representative of the population of older people as a whole.

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