

Unequal treatment

HelpAge

International

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

Country profile: The Philippines



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.

The Philippines 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 the Philippines



5 women
5 men



7 from urban areas
3 not specified



4 aged 60–69
6 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 lockdowns, known as 'community quarantines', across the country, the government introduced specific restrictions for older people:

- People over 60 were not allowed to leave their homes¹
- People over 60 were not allowed on public transport²
- Later in the pandemic, people over 65 were required to stay at home except for essential activities.³

Older people interviewed said restrictions on their movement had had a significant impact on them. Sometimes, the impact was positive. One participant spoke about having more time to do things at home.

"The pandemic has provided me time to spend planting vegetables. I also have a small poultry farm. So, I've been able to take care of my backyard."

75-year-old woman, volunteer and retired bank worker living alone in an urban area

However, most said that being made to stay at home had had a negative impact on them.

“We have not been able to bond as a family since the lockdown. We have not celebrated our grandchildren’s birthdays. Our movements have been restricted. It seems like we’re caged. It’s like we’re imprisoned. Even though we are able and healthy, someone questions us if they see us outside the house.”

74-year-old man, former teacher and overseas worker living with his spouse, child and grandchild in an urban area

One participant said older people had been arrested for going out of their homes.

“Because of the lack of clear guidelines, some older persons were arrested and reprimanded by other local government units. What I can suggest is to have clear guidelines. Implementation of these should be uniform and not according to the local government unit’s interpretation.”

71-year-old woman, volunteer and retired government worker living with her sibling in an urban area

Some said they were anxious about getting sick.

“The pandemic creates fear within me because we’re not sure what will happen. Will this be our end? Will everyone in the world die? I’ve been worrying for weeks because no one can answer our questions.”

71-year-old man, volunteer and retired seaman living with his spouse, child and grandchildren in an urban area

Others said their health had deteriorated or they had been unable to see a doctor.

“I’m afraid to go to hospital because I might get infected with the virus. So I’ve just stayed at home. At first, I had my back checked by a quack doctor who visited me here in our community. Every time the pain attacks, I use herbal medicine. It’s really painful, but that’s all I can do. And my grandchildren massage my back. It helps.”

66-year-old woman, retired teacher living with her grandchildren

Some said they had been unable to worship or attend funerals.

“Our neighbour and his child went back to their province before the lockdown. His wife died around April. He tried to come back to the city to be with his wife but he wasn’t allowed to because he’s a

senior citizen. His child was able to come back, though. It was difficult for the husband. He’s not frail but he wasn’t allowed to travel to be with his wife for the last time.”

76-year-old man, volunteer living with his spouse, child and grandchild in an urban area

Others said they felt isolated as they could not participate in social activities or continue volunteering in their communities. Some had lost income because they could not work.

“Our livelihood has been affected. Though we are senior citizens, we still have a small business. I buy and sell. My source of income was affected because we were not allowed to go out because we’re senior citizens.”

67-year-old man, volunteer and trader living with his spouse and grandchild

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 had mixed views on the provision of services. Some felt they had got better at the municipal level.

“[The municipal authorities] have become more accommodating and responsive to our needs. We can really feel their care. Our mayor distributed wheelchairs to older persons who needed them. I provided them with the names of older persons who could no longer walk, and the action was immediate.”

75-year-old woman, volunteer and retired bank worker living alone in an urban area

A number of participants said that access to health services had got worse. Health volunteers were no longer visiting older people and essential medicines were not available. Others said treatment for non-COVID-19 related conditions was not available.

“We used to get our medication every month from the health centre before the pandemic started. It seems like the government has forgotten about this because the attention has shifted to addressing the pandemic. But for older persons, we already had illnesses before COVID-19. COVID-19 is not our main health issue. A lot of senior citizens are now experiencing pains and illnesses. The government should continue providing services for these and not just for COVID-19.”

71-year-old woman, volunteer and retired government worker living with her sibling in an urban area

Some said older people were unfairly excluded from assistance programmes.

“We’ve received some assistance but we don’t qualify for SAP [Social Amelioration Program]. Some older people have received it, but others have not. It isn’t fair. My pension is only small, yet people with a higher pension have received assistance. If an older person is not known in their community, they will not be included in the programme.”

76-year-old man, volunteer living with his spouse, child and grandchild in an urban area

Others said that being unable to leave their homes meant that most older people were dependent on others to take them to services or go shopping for them.

“Older persons, especially those who are sick, are required to have a younger companion every time they go to the health centre. They’re not allowed to go out without a non-senior citizen companion.”

68-year-old man, volunteer living with his spouse, child and grandchildren in an urban area

“Some of my fellow older persons opted to walk [to the shops] but the ‘frontliners’ [community members monitoring the neighbourhood] asked them why they were outside the house. The frontliners tell us to ask someone else to buy what we need, but many older persons are not happy with this. They want to go into town in person because they still have other things to buy.”

66-year-old woman, retired teacher living with her grandchildren

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.

Most participants said they understood their rights as the limited range of entitlements and preferential treatment that older people enjoyed.

“We get a 20 per cent discount from restaurants and for medicines and other essentials [but] some transport services do not honour the 20 per cent discount. Buses also have a priority seat for older persons, but sometimes, drivers and conductors do not give older persons priority unless they demand their rights.”

74-year-old man, former teacher and overseas worker living with his spouse, child and grandchild in an urban area

A number of participants were aware of their rights to social security and to health, but said they were not being respected.

“It’s stated that healthcare services are free for older persons, yet we’re still paying for laboratory fees. It should be free because universal healthcare has been approved, right? We’ve pushed for the mandatory Philhealth coverage for senior citizens. However, it’s not being implemented well. Some older persons are still required to pay for their stay in hospital when under the mandatory Philhealth coverage, it’s free of charge.”

71-year-old woman, volunteer and retired government worker living with her sibling in an urban area

Some said the government was aware of their rights. Others said that it was not.

“Unfortunately, some implementers like the Office for the Senior Citizens Affairs are not fully aware of what’s stated in the law for older persons. There are many discrepancies in the implementation of the social pension programme.”

76-year-old man, volunteer living with his spouse, child and grandchild in an urban area

Some said their attempts to claim their rights had not been addressed.

“In times of pandemic, older persons have the right to receive assistance, but in our case, this not happened. The Social Amelioration Program has not been implemented well. It’s not fair that senior citizens are disqualified if they have a family member working abroad or receive support from their children. Our reports, complaints and suggestions are filtered at the local level, and only the positive reports go to higher offices. Thus, our complaints are not given attention.”

68-year-old man, volunteer living with his spouse, child and grandchildren 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.

Some participants said older people should not be forced to stay at home.

“Government protocols should be [introduced] on a case-by-case basis, unlike what is being implemented now, with people aged 60 and above being restricted from going out.”

71-year-old woman, volunteer and retired government worker living with her sibling in an urban area

One participant said older people should be consulted and given more information about public health measures.

“To avoid ill feelings, authorities should explain the reasons why older persons are being restricted.”

66-year-old woman, retired teacher living with her grandchildren

One participant said guaranteeing rights in the law would make a difference if people were aware of those rights.

“The difference will be big. Today, many older persons, especially those living in rural areas, do not go to hospital because they are afraid they’ll have to pay a large sum of money. Most of them are not aware of their rights, especially to health services. What we need to do is to make sure that our communications reach them.”

71-year-old woman, volunteer and retired government worker living with her sibling in an urban area

Others said they would no longer have to fight for their rights if their rights were guaranteed in the law, and that those in authority might treat people equally.

“[It’s not fair] that some have access and others don’t. There might be fair treatment if the authorities heard the complaints and plights of older people.”

66-year-old woman, retired teacher living with her grandchildren

Endnotes

1. www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/735791/urges-relaxation-of-community-quarantine-rules-on-elderly/story/ (13 November 2020)
2. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1271069/lrt-mrt-ban-for-elderly-moms-to-be-under-gccq> (13 November 2020)
3. <https://mb.com.ph/2020/10/26/senior-citizens-at-home-are-better-protected-from-covid-19-says-govt/> (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 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.

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