



Empowering Women: the forgotten half-billion

Delegates Dining Room, United Nations Headquarters
Tuesday and Wednesday 15-16 March 2016 (1 – 3 pm)

Concept Note

Background

The sixtieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW60) will take place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 14 to 24 March 2016. The session will address two themes this year; a Priority Theme on 'Women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development' and a Review Theme on 'The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls,' both of which are in line with Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.'

Linking women's empowerment with sustainable development is important. Policy responses to date have not always adequately addressed gender concerns and perspectives, therefore ignoring vital connections with inequalities that shape women's participation in and benefit from sustainable development. Women of all ages face discrimination, which is reinforced when gender inequality intersects with other inequalities such as inequality in earning, access to employment and financial tools, access to resources, education and healthcare, and inequality in land and inheritance rights as well as the burden of unpaid care work - all of which are areas still needing urgent attention if all women and girls are to be empowered.

In 2016, the world's women aged 60 and over will reach half a billion. The number of older persons is expected to double between now and 2050 and the majority of them will be women – 54 per cent of those aged 60 or over – and the proportion rises with age, reaching 62 per cent of those aged 80 years and above¹. Not only has ageing become a major development challenge (as recognized in the SDGs), but it is also a gender challenge.

Given the demographic changes that are likely to unfold over the next 15 years and will have a direct bearing on sustainable development, it is clear that the empowerment of older women must include the empowerment of *all* women, if targets for gender equality and ensuring that no one is left behind are to be met. The urgent need to address the issue of violence against older women, which is a key component of the empowerment agenda, is also crucial. A lifetime of inequalities and disempowerment of women often results in the perpetuation of or start of violence against women as they age.

¹ UNDESA Population Division



Themes

Tuesday 15 March 2016: Neglect, Abuse and Violence against Older Women

Wednesday 16 March 2016: Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development

Part I – Neglect, abuse and violence against older women

The second review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) showed that abuse and violence against older persons, and in particular, older women, has now been acknowledged as a growing concern for all countries, regardless of their level of development².

Women can be victims of violence across their lifespan, and yet abuse, neglect and violence against older women has received only modest attention in the gender-based discussions, research, policy and programme developments³. Most studies of violence against women only survey women to age 49, partly due to the fact that the Demographic Health Surveys tool began as a fertility survey and only focuses on women of child bearing age.⁴ However, one estimate by World Health Organization (WHO) lifetime prevalence rate for IPV (physical, sexual and psychological abuse) among ever-partnered women was 22.2 percent in the 65-69 age group.

The problem of violence against older women is further obviated under the assumption that all forms of violence and abuse is "elder abuse" and not connected to gender based violence, or that violence and abuse of older persons only takes place in institutional settings. Yet in reality, what is generally termed as "elder abuse" is quite specific. This results in a lack of focus on recognizing incidence and coming up with solutions.

Older women that become more economically dependent on family members following the death of a spouse or removal of their legal capacity as they grow older lose their independence and can more easily become the target of physical and financial abuse and violence as a result of their enforced dependency.

Older women are also victims of violence through customary practices such as widow cleansing, widow inheritance and witchcraft accusations. Both practices are rarely raised under discussions on the elimination of customary practices, such as female genital mutilation. The growing perpetration of sexual violence against older women in conflict situations also needs to be recognized and addressed. For example, one of the few studies inclusive of older women in situations of protracted displacement was conducted in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It found that over 15 per cent of the people seeking health services for sexual violence were over 55 and women over 49 experienced rates of sexual violence on par with the rest of the population⁵.

² UN General Assembly, 2013

³ Jönson, H. and Åkerström, M. (2004). Neglect of elderly women in feminist studies of violence - a case of ageism? *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 16, 1, 47-63.

⁴ World Health Organization. (2005). WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women: Initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/summary_report/summary_report_English2.Pdf

⁵ Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam International, "Now, the world is without me": An investigation of sexual violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambridge MA and Oxford, 2010, p. 9 in HelpAge International: 16 Days campaign: Violence against older



Part II – Women’s empowerment and sustainable development

Discrimination on the basis of gender and age is still widespread in all regions of the world. Inequalities in income, access to education, employment and health across the life-cycle expose many women to poverty in old age, which is further exacerbated by limitations on pension entitlements, and in some cultures, a lack of control over financial resources and loss of independence.

While the majority of older persons in low and middle income countries lack even a basic pension in old age, the situation for older women is even worse. With old age, accessing sources of income and employment become more difficult in general, particularly when combined with discriminatory financial lending practices. A large number of women work in the home or in family businesses in unpaid labour. Since women generally live longer than men the risks of poverty are higher. Increasing the number and reach of social pension schemes, widows pensions, and adding pension coverage to the years spent out of the workforce on child care are some of the measures that need urgent expansion.

In some cultures, disempowering customary or national inheritance laws or financial abuse by family members leave older women dependent or destitute. Older women can also be further marginalized in developing countries where a large percentage of older women are illiterate. The utility of spending resources on educating older women is often dismissed.

Both older men and women routinely face age discrimination in access to healthcare – be it age-based denial or rationing of medical resources or lack of appropriately trained medical personnel. The situation is particularly pronounced in developing countries. In addition, discussion of, and advancing women’s post reproductive age rights and health is sorely lacking at both the international and national levels.

Objective

To bring the perspective of older women to the gender debate and ensure that women of ALL ages are empowered in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Format

The sessions will be a moderator-driven, interactive panel discussion (Davos style). The chair will invite short interventions of 4-5 minutes each from the speakers in a few rounds of interaction before opening to the floor for questions and comments.